EFL TEXTBOOKS: EXPLORING THESUITABILITY OF TEXTBOOK CONTENTS FROMEFL TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT. *The present study is a case specific attempt to explore the impact of English textbooks (New Headway Plus Special Edition) on Saudi EFL learners' cultural attitudes their English proficiency outcome. It reviewed literature on the significance of target culture in ESL/EFL settings and its influence on learners' learning outcomes. The current research underpinned a mix-method approach which led to qualitative and quantitative data collection through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was built on both close and open-ended questions which were comprehensively analyzed separately. The findings revealed that the textbook fails to foster the element of intercultural understanding mainly due to nonexistent Islamic or Saudi depiction; however, on the contrary, its impact on learners' performances was not much dispiriting. Moreover, learners with good English proficiency achieved better mastery in not only the linguistic aspects of the language but absorbed its cultural elements as well in comparison to those who were less proficient. Given the findings it can be recommended that with the inclusion of the students' own culture, learners may broaden their horizon and general outlook towards their own and other communities represented in the textbook. Therefore, the curriculum designers and practitioners should bear in mind the crucial role of EFL learners' cultural aspects while designing textbooks.*
Keywords: EFL; Textbooks; Culture; EFL Teachers; Suitability of Teaching Material.

1.   Introduction: Textbook is a primary and imperative teaching aide for language learning in an academic context and EFL/ESL teachers draw on them as a core foundation for their teaching. Learners feel influenced by the textbooks they exercise for learning English language and in the process they come across social, religious, cultural, and linguistic diversities. In a similar vein, learners extend familiarity with the target culture and through the contents of the book institute a positive attitude towards L2 culture offered in these books which is vital for language learning that leads to enhanced acquisition and cultural understanding. Analogous to various other EFL/ESL contexts, in Saudi Arabia too, textbooks are incessantly adapted and customized to meet the cultural sensitivity and the ever-growing and changing demands of learning English as a foreign language. As a result, students attain their first interaction with the target culture through these expressly adapted and customized textbooks.

Textbooks are at the heart of the language learning and teaching process and they are the gateway not only to the linguistic elements of a specific language but also to its cultural norms. (Azizifar, Khoosha&Lotfi, 2010). Textbooks also play a crucial role in shaping cultural and social attitudes and molding the behaviour of the learners. However, there exist opposing views regarding the cultural and social contents of the EFL courses which, sometimes, give rise to unconstructive feelings towards target culture (Sardi, 2002). Tomlinson (2008) argues that many global ELT course books play a significant role in the failure of learners because their main focus is on linguistic substance rather than on the provisions of acquisition and development. Building on these arguments it is safely assumed that teaching English should be carried out with a practical focus on the learners' culture and context rather than mere instilling western standards to all individuals in all circumstances and places.

The motive behind this study is to ascertain the connection between the textbook materials and the learners' attitude and outlook towards the target culture. Research reveals that budgets worth £5,455 billion around the world are allocated to buying English commercial textbooks (Mahboob, 2011). Saudi Arabia is no exception and the government has awarded a special status to English language teaching and learning (Syed, 2003) which is a clear testimony to the ever growing significance of English language in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This study will investigate the appropriateness and usefulness of 'New Headway Plus Special Edition' that is being applied in the English language institute of a Saudi Arabian universities. This study will not only contribute to the existing body of knowledge but it will also help the curriculum designers to consider the students and teachers' preferences while designing course contents. Similarly catching upon the perceptions of teachers and students would be of immense benefit for educators, trainers, institutions and on top of all publishers in other parts of Gulf States. In order to quantify the research and assimilate this phenomenon in depth, this study would attempt to acquire answers the following questions:

1.   How do EFL teachers perceive the relationship between studying New Headway Plus Special Edition and probable variations in the cultural attitudes of Saudi EFL learners?
2.   From EFL teachers' perspective, to what extent does English proficiency impact the cultural attitudes of Saudi EFL learners?

2.   Literature Review: This section focuses on digging out all the relevant literature to sophisticate on the issue up front. Firstly, it highlights the importance of target culture in relation to learning a foreign language. Secondly, it brings forth opposing opinions on the issue of target culture and language learning in EFL classrooms. Thirdly, it looks into the matter of ELT textbooks from the lens of cultural appropriateness. Lastly, major studies conducted on the topic in ESL and EFL contexts are reviewed to unearth the gap in existing literature.

2.1.   **Culture and ELT:** This section highlights some of the arguments in support of developing second language learners' intercultural competence while passing through the language learning experience. This is in line with the target culture where second language learners are increasingly exposed to the Anglo-American culture.
 Studies divulge that there is a common consensus among scholars on language over the significance of target culture in English as a foreign language context. As Irvine (1998) states that language ideologies are cultural paradigms of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, henceforth, Saudi English language learners necessitate to learn about the target language culture coupling their own in order to communicate effectively for acquiring communicative competence. Without understanding the target culture thoroughly, it is not possible to master communicative competence. Conversely, a learner's failure to appreciate and understand the culture of the target language leads to the breakdown of communication which is a vital part of language learning. Additionally, learners who get hold of the language are usually those who are affably aligned with the culture of the target language. It leads to a harmonious association with the target language since they embrace the essence of the language (Tang, 1999).
Learning a language is closely related to the attitudes of learners towards a particular language (Starks &Paltridge, 1996). A learner's affirmative attitude towards the target language culture is one of the factors that augment cross-cultural understanding. In other words, before the learners embark on the learning of a second language, they must be receptive to cultures other than their own. According to Karimpur (2000) negative attitude, i.e. looking at everything through the prism of our own culture and its values leads to stereotyping and undue ethnocentrisms. Similarly, Gardner (1985) believes that motivation to learn a foreign language is determined by basic predispositions such as learner's attitude towards the target language culture. Thus EFL learners' negative attitude towards the target language culture may give rise to decreased motivation and, as a result, may yield into unsatisfactory attainment of L2 proficiency.

Based on Adaskou,Briiten. andFashi. (1999), culture is divided into three categories for the purpose of language teaching. Firstly, culture in the aesthetic sense refers to music, literature and fine arts. Secondly, culture in sociological sense signifies diverse moors, lifestyle and culture of the target community of a specific language. Thirdly, culture in pragmatic sense involves the social skills necessary for learners to communicate with other members of the society according to setting, audience and purpose. The above categories, thus, are significant for our purpose as they incorporate topics which are normally integrated in general English Language courses.

Consequently, what seems to be of great significance is the fact that the study of different cultures helps students in getting to know diverse people and distinct perspectives of life. Studies have found that it is effective for learners to study ideas related to the culture of the study and unfamiliar to their native culture (Elizabeth & Bronwyn, 2003). Incorporating the target language culture enables learners to broaden their worldview about their own culture. Similarly, Kincholey and Staley (1985) emphasize the significance of cultural awareness. Firstly, perceiving about different cultures makes learners aware of different people and places; secondly, the learners foster increased tolerance towards the opposing elements of different cultures; and thirdly, the feeling of ethnocentrism and self-righteousness are mitigated in learners.

*2.2. **Opposing Views on the Cultural Content of EFL Courses***: Some ELT course books have alienating effects on language learners and such textbooks result in the learners' disengagement from learning English language (Gray, 2000). Phillipson (1992) maintains that British global course books promote government backed enterprises which promote the economic and ideological agenda aimed at boosting commerce and dissemination of ideas. Although the educators in the Middle East especially Saudi Arabia have tried to neutralize the cultural elements in the textbooks, however, many a student and parent have registered complaints about the inculcation of culturally inappropriate materials in the textbooks produced for the region.

These challenges regarding the cultural influences of English on the foreign societies in EFL settings have led to the debate that culturally neutral form of English should be promoted in the textbooks, readings and other supplementary materials. According to Jenkins (2000), global language utilization for communication purposes would enable the nonnative speakers to retain their own cultural characteristics as much as possible. Another perspective is that instead of focusing entirely on the culture of the target language, the material planners should consider a cross-cultural approach to ELT teaching. According to Byram and Grundy (2003), in order for the students to develop cultural sensitivity, the students should be allowed to internalize different cultural outlooks and perspectives as well as the fundamental aspects of cultures.

*2.3. **Textbooks and Cultures:*** Bartram (2010) indicates that there are three types of influences that affect the learners' motivation towards modern foreign language learning: teacher-related influences, school-related influences, and curriculum (textbooks). The infusion of culture in EFL textbooks has always been a heated discussion. Some believe that course books should be primarily based on the source culture and its values. On the contrary, the textbooks should include materials taken from the respective cultures of the learners. However, it is crucial to decide whether the ELT materials should focus on the regional cultures or the general international cultures introduced and the unfamiliar contents are compared with the learners' culture (review grammar- confusing) (Byram& Grundy, 2003).

*2.4. **Related Studies***: As the topic encompasses sociolinguistics in general and language and power in particular, which is a new area of research, few studies have been conducted regarding either of the variables in this research. For instance, Karahan (2007) conducted a study attempting to investigate Language attitudes of Turkish students towards the English language and its use in Turkish context. The findings underlined that the positive language attitudes led learners have positive orientation towards English Language.

Abidin, Mohammadi andAlzwari. (2012) investigated the Libyan EFL students' attitude towards learning the English Language. The findings indicated that most of the students showed negative attitude towards learning English. Similarly, studies have been carried out in Iranian EFL context. For example, the study carried out by Kafi, Hamid andMotallebzadeh (2013) under the title: *English Textbooks and Cultural Attitudes of Iranian EFL Learners: Investigating a relationship.* The researchers asked EFL learners to complete an evaluation questionnaire regarding the students' cultural attitudes towards the Top-Notch series. Findings exposed that English textbooks, Top-Notch have had a significant impact on learners' cultural attitudes. Since there has been a serious dearth of literature on the given topic in Saudi EFL context, this study would fill the gap to understand learners' attitudes towards English culture presented in the course book that is predominately used by Saudi universities.

3.   Context of the study: The current study is conducted in the English Language Institute (ELI) of a Saudi university. The ELI runs the Preparatory Year Programme (PYP) catering to the English language learning needs of about 6000-7000 students each year. The faculty of the ELI comprises around 200 language teachers from 25 different countries with various L1 backgrounds. The PYP consists of four modules with duration of seven weeks each. In each module, a level-based student textbook and workbook are covered followed by a weekly pacing guide. Ahead of the enrollment in the PYP, students have to take the Oxford Placement Test designed by the University of Oxford following the Common European Framework (CEF) which helps stream the students into suitable levels starting from Beginner (A0) to Intermediate (B1). After successful completion of a module, students are promoted to another level. The ELI has adopted the New Headway Plus (Special Edition) as main syllabus resource.

4.   Methodology: The current study is naturalistic and exploratory in nature, considering the experience, perceptions, and multiple socially constructed realities of EFL teachers at a Saudi Arabian university. To understand how the EFL teachers perceive the suitability of the textbook applied in their context and how it impacts EFL learners' attitudes towards English language, an interpretive paradigm was adopted to underpin this inquiry. The interpretive research paradigm reflects naturalistic, constructivist, and qualitative features (Robson, 2002). Smith (1987) argues that "for interpretive approaches, the object field to be studied is the acts and meanings ascribed to events by actors in a particular social context" (p.140). This correlates with Marshall and Rossmans' (1999) argument that "for a study focusing on individual lived experience, the researcher could argue that one cannot understand human actions without understanding the meaning that participants attribute to these actions, their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive worlds" (p. 57).

4.1.   **Methods of Data Collection:** The study applied a mixed-method approach. A two-part instrument, comprising closed ended questionnaire and open-ended questions, was used for data collection. The instrument was partly adapted from the 'Guidelines to evaluate a textbook for cultural information from an intercultural dimension' prepared by Kilickaya (2004). This instrument was designed on the basis of vast literature review on the chosen project title. It embraced some of the most current themes, being debated by specialists in the subject of cultural studies and TESOL. The questionnaire comprised ten statements to be evaluated on a Likert scale. The participants were requested to indicate their level of agreement by adding comments in the appropriate box. The last question was an open-ended question on the research topic and was an opportunity for the participants to comment on the subject.

Data collection through questionnaires is one of the most frequent instruments in educational research (Oppenheim, 1992), and this method is primarily for establishing opinions (Cohen, 2007). However, questionnaires are not always reliable and they usually present an in-complete picture of the phenomena (Davidman, 1991). Therefore we prepared and included an open-ended part to understand the teachers' perspective in further depth .As Pintrich and Schunk (2002, p. 11) believed in the value of qualitative research 'for raising new questions and new slants on old questions', we collected the data through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Thus, the mixed method is considered more appropriate and reliable in this complex and multifaceted study, as Jerome (2011) points out that mixing methodology is of value to complex and multiplex social phenomena that are not easily comprehended by a single frame approach.

We would have surveyed students from the institute and taken onboard their perspectives on the research topic as well but subject to our limitation to ensure their availability during the data collection time, we could not make it happen. However, we managed to get an adequate number of participants in order to make generalized and dependable conclusions from our findings.

Multiple choice questions for both of the surveys were framed. The questions were devised in this manner in order to make it easier for the participants to answer, evade any sort of confusion, and aim at getting all questions answered to avoid any inconsistencies (Bell, 2005).

In order to adhere to the ethics of research practice, I abided by all the ethical conventions of data collection. I obtained permission from the relevant authority on conducting the research on the site. The participants were aware of the objectives and other necessary details of the research project. The data-collection process was voluntary and a complete anonymity and confidentiality of all the participants were assured besides a withdrawal from the research at any time.

4.2.   **Participants:** The project participants were selected from among the male teachers working at the English Language Institute of a Saudi Arabian University. They were all qualified and experienced professionals in the field of EFL. Their minimum experience in Saudi EFL context was at least three years; however, their total TESOL experience ranged between 5 to 15 years approximately. The participants were 30 teachers from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Pakistan, India, US and UK. We used *purposive sampling* for the current project in order to access all those teachers who have good ranking in the institute in terms of their delivery in the classroom and experience in the field of TESOL, good rapport with students, and adequate knowledge of both Saudi and Anglo-American cultures. They were also supposed to have good understanding of the English textbooks used for the research purposes. Purposive sampling is an informant selection tool used in the field of educational research which selects informants based on their knowledge, experience and willingness to assist in the progression of the subject under research. Therefore, we considered purposive sampling the most suitable for this project, as Tangco (2007:147) elaborates that it is the most effective technique when it comes to finding cultural domain with knowledgeable experts.

Patton (2002) describes various sampling strategies that serve purposes other than representativeness or randomness. Basic to all these attributes is the importance of selecting 'information-rich' cases from which one can derive most about pertinent issues that are important to the study. It is the researcher's responsibility to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience (Bernard 2002, Lewis & Sheppard 2006). Such informants are called *good informants*. For the purpose of this study, Morse's criteria (cited in Flick, 2009) of a 'good informant' were used as a guide to select information-rich cases (p.123). These criteria require participants (a) to have the necessary knowledge and experience of the issue or object at their disposal for answering the questions in the interview (b) to have the capability to reflect and articulate (c) to be ready to participate in the study (d) to have time to participate in the study. It is particularly important to be clear on informants' qualifications when using purposive sampling (Allen, 1971) which save much time and effort that can be brought about by misunderstanding (Allen, 1971). Although, purposive sampling reserves its own strengths, however it is criticised by scholars for its shortcomings too. Unlike random sampling, purposive sampling is not free from bias. Informants may be chosen out of convenience or from recommendations of knowledgeable people (Lopez *et al.* 1997; Smith 1983).

5.   Results and Discussions: The first part of this section presents the findings of quantitative data collected through a questionnaire, whereas the second section explains and describes teachers' perceptions on the course book, its cultural appropriateness in the current context and its impact on learners' attitudes towards the target culture.

5.1.   **Quantitative Data**

The findings of the quantitative data

#	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	The Saudi EFL learners' attitude towards English language and its target culture is positive.	5%	15%	5%	70%	5%
2	Studying New Headway Plus Special Edition brings probable changes in the attitudes of Saudi EFL learners towards the target culture of the textbook.	0%	15%	10%	75%	0%
3	There is a significant relationship between English proficiency and the cultural attitudes of Saudi EFL learners.	0%	65%	8%	18%	10%
4	The Saudi EFL learners get exposed to global culture through New Headway Plus Special Edition series.	0%	65%	10%	17%	10%
5	The Saudi English language learners learn about the target culture together with the Saudi culture through New Headway Plus Special Edition.	0%	18%	10%	64%	10%

6	At the final stages of their English studies, the learners realize the status of English as an International Language (EIL).	0%	70%	10%	20%	0%
7	The learners prefer using the Special Edition textbooks instead of the International ones.	0%	27%	27%	27%	18%
8	The course books promote students' awareness of intercultural understanding (e.g. Islamic culture vis-à-vis Western culture).	10%	10%	7%	65%	10%
9	All activities in the course books are culturally appropriate.	0%	65%	7%	10%	18%
10	At the final stages of their English studies, the learners develop a positive attitude towards the target culture of the textbooks	0%	17%	7%	66%	10%

70% teachers did not agree that Saudi EFL learners have positive attitude towards English Language and its target culture. 75% teachers disagreed that the course book brings changes in the learners' attitudes towards the target culture which nullified my first hypothesis. On the other hand, 65% of all teachers agreed with the statement that there is a significant relationship between English proficiency and the learners' cultural attitudes which testified my second hypothesis. The results about the students' exposure to the target culture via these textbooks were no different; with 65% teachers agreed with the statement while 17% disagreed with the issue. As far as the equitable presentation of the Saudi and Western cultures is concerned, 64% disagreed and 18% agreed, which reflects that the Western culture is dominant in the materials. 65% teachers were in favor of the statement that the course books promote students' awareness of intercultural understanding. Similarly 70% of teachers believed that at the final stages of their studies, the learners realize the importance of English as an International Language. Conversely 66% of the teachers did not agree that learners develop a positive attitude towards the target culture of a textbook. Despite of accepting the importance of English it indicates that the students seem to have negative attitudes towards English language and particular native speaking communities. This dichotomy implies that there exists something fundamental and influential factor in the learners' own culture that does not permit the positive attitude of the students towards the target culture. Interestingly, the majority of the teachers (65%) believed that the course contents are culturally appropriate which shows that teachers and students do not see any offensive material in the books.

5.2.   **Qualitative Data:** In terms of the Saudi EFL learners' attitude towards English language and its target culture, 75% of the teachers' responses indicate that students bear negative attitude. Morgan (1993, p. 15) posits that students' attitude towards foreign language or foreign culture with which it is associated are recognized 'as crucial to language learning process'. Among the factors contributed to the negative attitudes of the learners are the unawareness of the importance of English and negative attitudes of English teachers (Alkhairy, 2013). Moreover, let me opine that Saudis are affluent and some of them exhibit languid attitudes towards studies in general consequentially they focus less on learning English and more on getting a job oriented certificate. Another reason for the unfriendly attitude towards the English language could be that they consider it the biggest obstacle in the way of getting degrees. What I could extract from my personal observation is that the drop out ratio of students is on the higher side at the preparatory years wherein English is a compulsory subject. Above all, the syllabus greatly influences the students' perception and attitude as it is the first window into the target language and its culture.

When teachers were enquired as to whether the New Headway Plus Special Edition brings any change in the learners' attitude towards the target culture, 75% of them disagreed which delineates upon fact that the contents of special edition are different than the international edition. As Karmani(2005) maintains that the material and contents of English textbooks are culturally inappropriate in the Arabian Gulf, the publishers of these textbooks are sensitive to marketability of their textbooks in this region. The attempts to modify the textbooks' cultural elements such as pictures and habits make them acceptable; however, the learners fail to understand and appreciate the target culture. As one of the teachers comments:

> *"I don't think the learners' attitude change because of their exposure to the target culture content with the help of new Headway Plus. Efforts have been made to make the book culturally appropriate" (T9).*

Another teacher comments on the general culture of the Saudi youth as follows:

> *"They don't get exposed to the target culture through the books. They have easy access to the social media such as internet and twitter which have great impact on their attitude. This is what I have learnt after discussing with the students about different cultural questions. Students love to watch football match with English commentary and Hollywood movies. This has changed a lot their attitude towards English/Western culture. (T18)*

However, one teacher expresses his views in the following words:

> *"To some extent it does change the learners' attitude, but most of them want to learn English language in the context of Arabic culture and they are indifferent to the target culture" (T6).*

It is evident from the teachers' opinions that the textbook serves the language needs of the learners and the acceptability of the book is due to its neutralized cultural content. Therefore, it is deduced that it is time to eliminate the grand narratives of British, American and Australian English (Holliday, 1994). I believe if a textbook respects the learners' culture and context, it will motivate them and, in turn, make them more proficient English language learners and respective of the target culture as well.

As, Al-Hajailan (2003) believes that teaching a foreign language to learners enables them to acquire the knowledge and science of that particular community and comprehend its culture. Interestingly, the survey for the current study reveals that 65% teachers agreed with the statement that there is a significant relationship between English proficiency and cultural attitudes of the learners. However, one teacher voices his concern in the following words:

> *"The relationship between English proficiency and the learner's cultural attitude is an established fact, but how much this relationship is visible in the case of Saudi EFL learners is still debatable" (T1).*

Additionally, the lack of intercultural understanding and improper representation of Arab (Saudi) culture in the New Headway Plus Special Edition is one of the factors that lead to the students' demotivation.

Some Saudi parents and students feel that the brazen representation of Western values to Saudi students and alienating them from their own cultural values through the non-representation of their context will result in eroding their identity. Therefore 65% of the teachers disagreed that the course books provide any intercultural understanding. Mohd-Ashraf (2005) portrays that Muslims in Malaysia felt that the indoctrination of Western ideas happens through the textbooks which resulted in the resentment towards English language in some quarters in Malaysia. The comments of the following teacher confirm this situation:

> *"I don't believe that the books promote the intercultural understanding of our learners, as it does not give ample space to the Saudi or Arab culture. As a result, the contents of the book fail to activate the schema of the students." (T2)*

Moreover, English teachers are often encountered with the dilemma of teaching Western values if they are opposed to the Muslim values (Mohd-Ashraf, 2005). Therefore, if intercultural understanding has to be accomplished, the teachers as well as the textbook designer will have to shoulder the responsibility of offering an equitable share to various cultures around the world.

6. Conclusion: This study is an analytical attempt to underscore the affiliation between studying English textbooks (New Headway Plus Special Edition) and the probable changes in cultural attitudes of Saudi EFL learners. It also has investigated to address the relationship between English proficiency and the cultural attitudes of the learners.

The researchers found out through this study that New Headway Plus Special Edition does not bring any significant change in the attitudes of Saudi EFL learners towards the target culture of the above mentioned textbooks. The reason behind the unchanged attitudes of the learners is the mono-cultural and Eurocentric approach adopted in terms of the book's contents with slight cosmetic changes to make it Saudized. Another reason could be the learners' disinterestedness in understanding any foreign culture which is antithesis to their own, as Fairclaough (1989, p. vi) describes that language is a social practice rather than an 'independent construct' that 'creates and created by certain forces and structures forming our functions in the society'. Moreover, the study also revealed that the textbook under study fails to foster the element of intercultural understanding due to the absence of sufficient Islamic and/or Saudi depiction.

Moreover, this study has investigated and revealed that there is a significant relationship between the English proficiency and the cultural attitudes of Saudi EFL learners. Findings indicate that learners with good English

proficiency achieved better mastery in not only the linguistic aspects of the language but absorbed its cultural elements as well in comparison to those who were less proficient. Confirming our findings, Fairclaough (1989) asserts the importance of language and society by saying 'linguistic phenomena are social phenomena of a special sort, and social phenomena are linguistic phenomena' (p. 23).

To sum up, the researchers came up with most cases in which the cultural attitudes of the learners have not changed for the better at the final stages of their English studies. This is a point indicator and an inherent message to the policy makers that alienating students from their own culture may lead to a lower performance of the students both linguistically as well as socially. Conversely, through the inclusion of the students' culture, learners can develop a thorough outlook towards their own and other communities represented in the book. Moreover, the curriculum designers and practitioners should bear in mind the crucial role of textbooks in EFL learning and teaching contexts, as McKay (2004) states that being an International Language, English needs to describe one's own culture and concerns rather than being linked to the culture of those who speak it. Subsequent upon this school of thought, Talbot, Atkinson and Atkinson affirm that language is part of people's cultural identities.

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