

The Current Status of Middle Class Internet Use in China: An Analysis Based on the Chinese General Social Survey 2015 Data and Semi-Structured Investigation

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Abstract—In today's China, the well-educated middle class, with stable jobs and above-average income, are the driving force behind its Internet society. Through the analysis of data from the 2015 Chinese General Social Survey and 50 interviewees, this study investigates the current situation of this group's specific internet usage. The findings of this study demonstrate that daily life among the members of this socioeconomic group is closely tied to the Internet. For Chinese middle class, the Internet is used to socialize and entertain self and others. It is also used to search for and share information as well as to build their identities. The empirical results of this study will provide a reference, supported by factual data, for enterprises seeking to target the Chinese middle class through online marketing efforts.

Keywords—China, internet use, middle class, network behavior, online marketing.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE 21st century is the era of the Internet. With the rapid development of information technology, the Internet is fully integrated into various fields of social production and life. On February 28, 2019, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) released the 43rd statistical report on the development of China's internet network, which showed that as of December 2018, China had 829 million internet users and 817 million mobile internet users [10]. According to the CSS survey data of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2015, the main activity in China's online world comes from the middle class, and the middle class population uses the Internet much more frequently than the working class and peasantry [11].

After the reform and opening up of the Chinese economy, with the development of commercialization, urbanization, and industrialization; the increase of national income; the popularization of higher education; and the entry of foreign-funded enterprises, the middle class in China has gradually grown under the support of government policies as the companion and result of modernization.¹ As an emerging social class, the Chinese middle class exhibits many characteristics

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¹ Before the reform and opening up of the economy, due to the socialist transformation, land reform, and a series of class struggles, the middle class was regarded as the object to be defeated.

that are different from other classes in daily life, especially regarding consumption [1]. Thus, what are the characteristics of middle class internet use? In order to answer this question, this study analyzes CGSS2015 data and conducts semi-structured interviews with 50 interviewees to investigate the status quo and characteristics of internet use among this specific group [12]. Through such an empirical investigation, this study hopes to provide a reference, supported by factual data, for enterprises aiming to promote online marketing efforts targeted at the Chinese middle class.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Before investigating the current situation of internet use among the middle class in China, this study distinguishes between the following two bodies of research.

A. Research on Network Behavior

At present, the research on network behavior involves sociology, communication, psychology, anthropology, ethnology, political science, economics, management, cultural studies, and many other disciplines. Common topics related to this body of research focus on 1) characteristics of cyberspace, 2) characteristics and types of network behaviors, and 3) influencing factors and consequences of network behaviors.

Among them, the research on the characteristics of cyberspace reveals basic characteristics such as immediacy, decentralization (democracy, grassroots, and pluralism), interactivity, anonymity, virtuality, extension, and compression of space and time [2]. Research on the characteristics and types of network behavior includes empirical investigation and quantitative research on network use mode, habits, tendency, frequency, time, motivation, place, and behavior patterns (e.g. World Internet Project 1999-2019). When investigating the influential factors driving internet behavior, researchers have focused on analyzing the relationship between social structure factors, such as gender, age, education, income, and occupation, and internet behavior [3]. In the analysis of the consequences of network behavior, researchers have mainly discussed the changes brought by the network to interpersonal communication in real life, the changes brought by the network to the public domain and organizational models, and the crimes caused by the network [4]-[6].

Since this study is a quantitative analysis and empirical investigation on the current status of internet use among the

middle class in China, this study belongs to the second type of network behavior research mentioned above.

B. Research on the Middle Class and the Internet

With its rapid development in recent years, China's middle class, with certain social resources, mastery of network skills, and a high level of knowledge, has become the main force behind China's network society [7]. Therefore, researchers have begun to explore the middle class and the internet-related proposition. So far, researchers have mainly examined the online opinions and interests of the Chinese middle class. They have found that the Chinese middle class uses the Internet to follow public issues related to the rule of law and democracy [8], and to express their opinions on livelihood issues linked to "individual rights", "social security", and "quality of life" far more than other social issues [9]. In addition, consulting companies have also started to carry out relevant market surveys. For example, in 2018, iResearch released a report on the attitudes and network financial security behaviors of the "new middle class" [13]. However, these relevant studies and market surveys did not clarify the current situation of internet usage among the middle class in China before they started to analyze the expression of opinions and interest appeal of this segment, as well as their attitudes and financial behaviors. This study first seeks to understand the status quo Internet usage of China's middle class using quantitative and qualitative investigation to establish a basic premise upon which to build an empirical analysis to fill the existing research gap. This study aims to promote a greater understanding of the current practices of the Chinese middle class among the academic and business communities, as well as society as a whole.

III. METHOD

This study adopts a research method that combines quantitative analysis with qualitative analysis. First of all, in order to further demonstrate the relationship between the middle class and the network, this study makes use of CGSS2015 data for statistical analysis. According to the sociological definition of the Chinese middle class [3] and the CGSS2015 data used by the professional code table, this study will investigate questionnaire A59 in the following career types: "a1 boss (or partner)," "a2 individual industrial and commercial household," "a3 employed by others (with fixed owners)," "a6 working/helping in their own businesses/enterprises (getting paid)," and "a8 freelancers" as the middle class professional standards. The educational standard of the middle class designation, based on A7a in the questionnaire, is higher than junior college (adult higher education). In terms of income-based metrics, according to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China in 2015 [14], 17,630-51,000 RMB is considered to be the annual income standard for the middle class. Based on the three criteria of occupation, education, and income, the data were filtered to obtain an initial group of samples representing the middle class segment. Then, the missing values and invalid data of key variables were removed to obtain 497 effective analysis samples. Based on the 497

effective analysis samples, a quantitative analysis can be conducted on the network use of the middle class.

Secondly, this study used semi-structured interviews as a qualitative method of data collection. 50 middle class individuals were interviewed from May 2018 to February 2019 (Appendix A). Interviewees were selected based on sociology-defined indicators of middle class occupations and education levels. In order to increase the diversity of samples, we also interviewed two housewives with a bachelor's degree or above. Prior to the interviews, the investigator identified the main questions and frameworks to guide the interview process (Appendix B). During the interviews, surveyors actively listened to and responded to the interviewees' narration, and at the same time, they consciously modified the questions as needed to help clarify or expand the interview content. In order to protect the privacy of the interviewees, they were given subject numbers. Table I summarizes the basic characteristics of the interviewees.

TABLE I
 BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWEES

Characteristics	Distribution			
Gender	Male	48%	Female	52%
Age	25-63	Mean		40.2
Marital status	Married	76%	Unmarried	24%
Final degree of education	BA	30%	MA	52%
Position	Dr.			18%
	Top manager			22%
	Middle manager			12%
	Ordinary employee			50%
	Freelancer			6%
Industry or sector	Other			10%
	Financial			10%
	Commerce			52%
	Education			14%
Nature of employer	Other			24%
	State-owned enterprises (SOEs)			2%
	Privately-owned or operated enterprise			32%
	Foreign-funded enterprise or joint venture			10%
	Educational institution			14%
	Public institution			20%
Place of residence	Other			22%
	Beijing			50%
	Shanghai			50%
Housing area	50-300 square meters, average area = 133.7			

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Middle Class Internet Usage

Based on the responses to Question a28-5 in the questionnaire, "What has been your internet usage (including mobile phone) in the past year?", we are able to make an analysis of the use of the Internet by the middle class (Table II).

According to the data analysis results, the middle class in China uses the Internet (including mobile phones) 81.1% of the time. This proves that the daily life of the middle class is closely

connected to the Internet. Through the semi-structured interviews, it was found that the middle class interviewees all had more than one smartphone, and they all had internet-accessible devices in their homes and offices. They would browse websites or receive news feeds on their phones daily to learn about various news items. The middle class uses the Internet in their daily lives to gain information, share knowledge, enjoy entertainment, socialize, and build their identity.

TABLE II
 MIDDLE CLASS NETWORK USAGE

	Frequency	Percentage	Effective percentage	Cumulative percentage
Every day	403	81.1	81.1	81.1
Several times a week	48	9.7	9.7	90.7
Several times in January	20	4.0	4.0	94.8
A few times a year or less	11	2.2	2.2	97.0
Never	15	3.0	3.0	100.0
Total	497	100.0	100.0	

B. Interviewee Responses

Below, we present direct quotes from the interviewees to present the current situation of the middle class's use of the Internet in daily life.

1. Acquiring Information and Sharing Knowledge

Interviewees expressed that they could not live without daily access to the Internet because it served as a source for various types of information.

I need to access information on the Internet every day, anytime and anywhere. This information can enrich my knowledge base and also create something for me to talk about and help me to socialize. (M48)

I download a lot of apps on my smartphone that help me keep up with current events. For example, TouTiao.com is a comprehensive source of information. If I want to know about economic current affairs, I will check Caixin.com; if I want to know about technology news, I will look at 36kr.com. (M09)

In addition to looking at some current affairs information on the Internet, I will look at some relatively deep articles promoted by the WeChat public number. Sometimes I will read the app and quickly browse some books along with interpretative commentary. I need to broaden my thinking and solve problems in new ways. (M22)

From the interviewees' responses, it can be found that they have higher requirements for self-improvement, have the ability to collect and process information, classify information, and choose different tools to obtain information according to different purposes. Interviewees also said they like answering questions on bulletin board sites (BBS), sharing and contributing their knowledge.

Sharing knowledge and experience lets others know I exist. Helping others is also a very pleasing thing. Through discussion with other "net" friends, I can also

enrich my knowledge. I like to write articles on BBS, which can not only exercise my writing ability, but also improve my knowledge base. On the one hand, I can help others, and on the other hand, I can find my own shortcomings, which can make me improve. (M08)

I participate in discussions on knowledge network platforms, like zhihu.com, every day. Answering questions together with other "netizens," contributing knowledge to each other, can produce satisfaction and happiness. In addition to zhihu.com, I often participate in discussions and share my experience in the photography knowledge community (fengniao.com) and tourism community (mafengwo.com). (M06)

For the interviewees, their main motives for sharing knowledge online are "enjoying helping others" and "knowledge self-efficacy." "Enjoying helping others" refers to the satisfaction that interviewees get from helping other "netizens." "Knowledge self-efficacy" refers to the willingness of interviewees to contribute their knowledge when they feel they are capable of helping others. At the same time, their motivation to share knowledge also includes realizing their self-worth and improving their abilities. On the other hand, interviewees actively participate in BBS also because they can find a sense of belonging there.

In this big city, I feel very small because I am busy every day. I am under great pressure at work. Sometimes I am not in a good mood. Every night back home, in accessing the Internet and connecting to the zhihu.com BBS, it is possible for people to see so many others like themselves in there speaking out freely, see that their own post has been followed by others, including the top moderator...they will temporarily forget any painful feelings and feel that they found a collective. I think this is the so-called sense of belonging. That's a big reason why I joined BBS. (M07)

It can be seen that under the pressure of the rapid pace of urban living, middle class interviewees will look to cyberspace for spiritual sustenance. Even though BBS participants have never met in real life, they can exchange information with each other to gain some kind of recognition and sense of belonging.

2. Shopping and Enjoying Entertainment Online

Interviewees also said they rely on the Internet to shop online and order food delivery. For them, online purchases save time, effort, and money.

Compared to brick-and-mortar stores, online shopping makes it easy to shop around and find the best value for money. The variety of goods on the Internet is very rich. Even goods from overseas can be bought. Online payment is also convenient, as well as home delivery. Overall customer service is better than in brick-and-mortar stores. That's why I love shopping online. (M33)

[Online] shopping is about saving time and money. If you go shopping, how much time and how much running around is involved? How many times a week? Now that Jingdong.com has achieved the "211 Project," delivering orders either on the same day before 11pm or by 11am the

next morning in first-tier cities, which is extremely time-saving. In addition, with [online] shopping, you can sit at home and compare a wide range of prices in a short time. (M39)

Interviewees also said they have downloaded delivery apps on their mobile phones, and ordering food online has become a regular part of their lives. For those who are busy at work, as long as they can make a phone call, enter a mobile order, or place the order directly on the computer, their food will be delivered directly to the door. This saves time, there is a lot of variety among the meal options available for order, and the pricing is favorable.

I often order food online. There are many advantages to ordering food online. Type in the desired environment, dish, etc., and I'm immediately offered a variety of restaurants to choose from, which is much more informative than my own wandering around the streets. Also, a good restaurant can be booked in advance. When the time comes to go directly, I'm not afraid of not getting a seat. All kinds of group buying, bonus points...it's so convenient. (M34)

Interviewees also said that they book travel products online when planning trips. It includes flight reservations, hotel reservations, tour guide browsing, and other links to tourism products or services. They think online travel booking is convenient, fast, and abundant in resources.

I love using travel apps. Apps for Qunar.com, Ivmama.com, Qyer.com, and Ctrip.com are available for download. Travel APP allows you to book air tickets, select destinations, book hotel rooms, check reviews, book travel packages, book restaurants, rent cars, and access other services. These apps make it easy to travel without carrying cash. Sometimes I use the app to track flight status, share information with other app users, and reschedule or cancel travel plans anytime, anywhere. (M43)

In their spare time, interviewees also use the Internet to listen to music, watch videos, and play games. Interviewees said the entertainment function of the Internet helps them relax and improve their quality of life.

My daily happiness is mostly based on music and video, because the pace of life is so fast. With limited break times, listening to music and watching short videos can help me relax quickly and become happy. It can be said to delight the body and mind and add interest to life. (M04)

I sometimes play online games. In my opinion, the essence of online games is the experience, which allows people to transcend the constraints of real material conditions and experience what they cannot experience in the current space and time. It also allows me to escape from reality for a while. However, I will not overindulge in online games, because I decide whether to play them, how much time to play them, and how much money to spend to play them. I have self-control. After all, playing games is only one part of leisure. (M45)

Online entertainment is an active break from work. Work is not only an activity that reflects one's own value,

but also the ability to obtain life capital. Network entertainment is a necessary experience to obtain pleasure. You can't have one without the other. (M32)

3. Social Interaction and Constructive Identification

Interviewees said they cannot live without social media, which they use to write blogs, post photos, and post and read comments. They use social media to socialize and build identity.

I think social media has become an indispensable part of life. There's no real awkwardness across the computer or phone screen. Even if you don't want to reply to a message, you can also send an emoji out of politeness. I think social media can beautify each other's feelings, facilitate the establishment and maintenance of self-image, and facilitate the establishment and maintenance of various social relations. (M05)

Online society provides low-cost and open communication channels to maintain and expand real social relationships. I think social media is a tool, but whether it can be used well depends on the individual. I don't think people with less education will be able to use it well. Maybe for them, social media is just a time-waster. (M29)

Therefore, in the opinion of middle class interviewees, how to use and take the advantages of social media is also one of their differences from other classes. In addition, the interviewees also revealed their intention to express themselves and construct an identity in the process of describing how they use the Internet.

I hope my Weibo user name, profile picture, and content can convey my interests, education level, temperament and personality. I think the Internet provides a way to rebuild your image and gain recognition from others. (M17)

Every time I post a post or update my status, I read the comments below and interact with the commenters. I reflect on my comments and keep improving myself. (M12)

I called on my followers and friends on social media to join the charity activity called "On the Way to School" to choose books and stories together, record them into audio, convert them into MP3, or donate 5 RMB in order to help disadvantaged children's spiritual growth. This kind of online public service can strengthen our mutual identity. (M49)

It can be seen that interviewees project their self-image on the Internet in order to gain recognition from others and expand social contact. This not only allows them to reflect on and reshape themselves, based on the reactions of others, to achieve self-identity, but also increases collective cohesion through online and offline joint action, thus realizing a collective identity.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through quantitative and qualitative investigation and analysis, this study demonstrates the

inseparable relationship between the middle class, as the main force behind China's online society, and the Internet. Today's middle class in China cannot live without the Internet in their daily life. They use the Internet to obtain information, share knowledge, enjoy entertainment, socialize, and build identity.

Based on the empirical results, this study suggests that enterprises targeting the middle class in today's China should pay attention to the following six points when promoting online marketing:

- 1) The Chinese middle class needs to access all kinds of information through the Internet in their daily lives. Therefore, enterprises can adopt event marketing modes to design their marketing programs, and take hot news topics as a program entry point.
- 2) The Chinese middle class has a high demand for self-improvement. They are keen to share and acquire knowledge. Therefore, enterprises can use this as an effective route of transferring knowledge. Enterprises can present what they have that is beneficial and valuable to consumers (e.g. research achievements, brand culture, product knowledge, business management thinking, etc.). This can eventually lead to increased recognition of the enterprise's brand or products and drive consumer behavior.
- 3) Due to the fast pace of life and busy work of the middle class in China, their consumption psychology is to seek speed and convenience. Therefore, enterprises need to design web pages that can quickly attract consumers at a glance (including the overall color of the page, product introduction and recommendation, inquiry, interaction, etc.). Web pages are crucial to enhance the brand image of enterprises and "user stickiness." Particularly, information on special offers, discounts, and promotional products needs to be placed in the most prominent positions of the web page.
- 4) Given the pressures of work and life among the Chinese middle class, they often use the Internet to enjoy entertainment in their leisure time. Therefore, enterprises can use entertainment as a vehicle to establish an intimate connection between the brand and cultural products, so that consumers can receive brand information while enjoying entertainment, and even spontaneously help market the enterprise. This kind of entertainment marketing includes

- IP marketing, celebrity spokesperson marketing, variety show marketing, film/TV marketing, and new media marketing.
- 5) The Chinese middle class cannot live without social media. Therefore, it is necessary for enterprises to be familiar with Chinese social media platforms, interact with consumers in real time through lifestyle marketing strategies, realize conversational marketing, and create business opportunities. Since the data of registered users on Chinese social media are all real, enterprises can also segment the middle class consumers according to region, income, occupation, age, education, and other indicators, so as to develop more targeted promotions and interaction. In addition, enterprises can use relationships with the middle class on social media to build their reputations and attract more consumers from their target segments.
- 6) The Chinese middle class wants to find a sense of community and construct identity through the Internet. Therefore, enterprises can also launch online and offline collective activities (through official websites, microblogs, and WeChat official accounts) and give rewards to consumers. They can even ask consumers to provide some assistance to the brand through the activities, so that enterprises and consumers can create brands together. Through consumers' participation in such activities, enterprises can simultaneously promote their products and their brand culture, as well as build a collective identity among consumers. These activities can also lessen the boundaries between consumers and enterprises and enhance consumers' sense of attachment to the brand, thereby increasing brand loyalty.

Finally, this study believes that the empirical results can provide a point of reference and enlightenment, based on data and facts, for related businesses seeking to target the Chinese middle class through online marketing efforts. At the same time, this study also acknowledges that both the middle class and the Internet in China are constantly changing and evolving. Therefore, researchers and related businesses need to pay close attention to the trends affecting the life of the middle class and what makes effective online marketing strategies. They should always approach this research subject with a dynamic perspective in the future.

APPENDIX

A. Summary of Interviewees

TABLE III
 SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWEES

No.	Sex	Age	Employer-occupation	Academic degree	Place of residence	Marital status
M01	Female	29	Foreign- enterprise-Office worker	Bachelor's	Beijing	Married
M02	Female	31	Bank-Clerk	Bachelor's	Shanghai	Married
M03	Female	38	Market investigation company-Investigator	Bachelor's	Shanghai	Married
M04	Female	34	Advertising company-Designer	Bachelor's	Beijing	Married
M05	Female	48	Travel company-Manager	Bachelor's	Shanghai	Married
M06	Male	35	IT enterprise-Engineer	Master's	Beijing	Married
M07	Male	44	Securities company-Analyst	Master's	Shanghai	Married
M08	Male	41	Middle school-Teacher	Master's	Shanghai	Married

No.	Sex	Age	Employer-occupation	Academic degree	Place of residence	Marital status
M09	Male	25	Newspaper-Reporter	Bachelor's	Beijing	Unmarried
M10	Male	46	Local government-Public servant	Master's	Shanghai	Married
M11	Female	26	Real estate company-Staff	Bachelor's	Beijing	Unmarried
M12	Female	33	Consulting company-Consultant	Master's	Shanghai	Married
M13	Male	46	Five-star hotel-General manager	Master's	Beijing	Married
M14	Male	43	Television station-Minister	Master's	Beijing	Married
M15	Male	51	Law firm-Lawyer	Master's	Beijing	Married
M16	Female	28	Primary school-Teacher	Bachelor's	Shanghai	Unmarried
M17	Female	32	Foreign- enterprise-Secretary	Master's	Shanghai	Unmarried
M18	Female	45	Private enterprise-General manager	Master's	Beijing	Married
M19	Female	40	Publishing company-Editor	Master's	Beijing	Married
M20	Male	42	Private enterprise-General manager	Master's	Shanghai	Married
M21	Male	45	Securities company-Investment adviser	Master's	Shanghai	Married
M22	Male	36	University-Research fellow	Doctorate	Beijing	Married
M23	Male	33	Freelance-Writer	Master's	Shanghai	Unmarried
M24	Female	36	Housewife	Bachelor's	Beijing	Married
M25	Female	37	Foreign- enterprise -Project manager	Master's	Beijing	Married
M26	Female	30	District government-Public servant	Bachelor's	Beijing	Unmarried
M27	Male	48	Insurance company-Manager	Bachelor's	Shanghai	Married
M28	Female	41	Architecture company-Designer	Doctorate	Shanghai	Married
M29	Male	39	Private enterprise-Deputy general manager	Master's	Beijing	Married
M30	Male	43	State-owned enterprise-Project manager	Bachelor's	Beijing	Married
M31	Male	27	Real estate development company-Designer	Master's	Shanghai	Unmarried
M32	Female	36	Real estate company-Manager	Bachelor's	Beijing	Married
M33	Female	28	Middle school-Teacher	Bachelor's	Shanghai	Unmarried
M34	Female	49	Television station-Producer	Master's	Beijing	Married
M35	Male	52	IT enterprise-Advisors	Doctorate	Shanghai	Married
M36	Male	54	Administration-Minister	Doctorate	Beijing	Married
M37	Female	28	Housewife	Master's	Shanghai	Married
M38	Female	43	Foreign- enterprise-Department manager	Master's	Shanghai	Married
M39	Male	36	Local government-Public servant	Master's	Shanghai	Unmarried
M40	Female	52	Freelance-Translator	Doctorate	Shanghai	Married
M41	Female	27	Newspaper-Journalist	Master's	Beijing	Unmarried
M42	Male	45	Restaurant-Owner	Master's	Shanghai	Married
M43	Male	41	Foreign- enterprise-Personnel manager	Master's	Shanghai	Married
M44	Female	44	Advertising agency-Owner	Master's	Beijing	Married
M45	Male	30	Freelance-Web page designer	Bachelor's	Beijing	Unmarried
M46	Male	58	University-Professor	Doctorate	Beijing	Married
M47	Female	59	University-Professor	Doctorate	Shanghai	Married
M48	Female	38	University-Lecturer	Doctorate	Shanghai	Unmarried
M49	Female	56	Hospital-Doctor	Master's	Beijing	Married
M50	Male	63	Administration-Minister	Doctorate	Beijing	Married

Note: Age data are as of the final interview in February 2019

B. Interview Outline

Personal profile and middle-class consciousness:

- 1) Can you tell me something about your personal and family background (age, education, occupation, work unit, family composition, etc.)?
 - 2) What is your industry and work? If not currently available, please describe your previous job.
 - 3) In terms of your current job, income, and education, which class do you think you belong to? What class do you feel most people around you are in?
 - 4) What kind of people in China can you call middle class (income, education, occupation, consumption, lifestyle, etc.)? Do you consider yourself middle class? Why is that?
- The use of the Internet and the WeChat microblog:

- 1) How much time do you spend online every day? Is wireless internet available at home?
- 2) What do you usually do online (work, study, socialize, read news, search information, send and receive email, play games, shopping, finance, video, online class, etc.)? Why is that?
- 3) Do you use social media (Weibo, WeChat, etc.)? What do you do on social media (retweet information, share mood, follow news, interact with people, etc.)? Which people do you interact with when using social media (family, friends, former classmates or teachers, current colleagues, leaders, business partners, etc.)? How do you interact with others (likes, retweets, comments, etc.)?
- 4) Do you publish content online? What aspects of your

content will be covered? When you post something online, do you care how people react? How do the reactions of others affect you?

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