



Scrolling Away Ubuntu: Social Media’s Silent Disruption of Communal Ethos among Young People in Limuru, Kiambu County in Kenya

John Herman Kimboi, Violet Nekesa Simiyu & Jennifer Wangari
The Catholic University of Eastern Africa
Email: barakakimboicm@yahoo.com

Abstract: *This study explored how social media is silently but significantly disrupting Ubuntu—a core African value system grounded in community, respect, and human interconnectedness—among young people in Limuru, Kiambu County, Kenya. Guided by Cultural Globalization, Cultivation, and Uses and Gratifications theories, the research adopted a phenomenological design to examine how the frequency, content, and style of social media use are reshaping moral and communal behaviors. Data from focus group discussions and interviews with 52 youth revealed that platforms like Facebook and TikTok are fostering individualism, promoting superficial content, and replacing respectful, communal communication norms with informal, fragmented interactions. Traditional expressions of Ubuntu, such as respectful greetings and interdependence, are being displaced by the pursuit of online validation and personal branding. While some youth demonstrated conscious efforts to preserve Ubuntu values through intentional use of platforms like WhatsApp, the overall trend points to a weakening of social bonds and communal ethos in favor of digital convenience. The study concludes that social media is not inherently destructive but exerts a silent, cumulative pressure on Ubuntu through altered communication practices and value priorities. To reclaim this cultural foundation, the study recommends integrating Ubuntu into digital literacy efforts, recalibrating social media algorithms to highlight culturally meaningful content, and encouraging youth-led and intergenerational initiatives that reinforce communal identity in digital spaces.*

Keywords: *Scrolling Away Ubuntu, Social Media, Disruption, Communal Ethos, Young, Limuru, Kiambu County and Kenya*

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1. Introduction

The philosophy of Ubuntu—centered on interconnectedness, communal identity, and mutual care—has long defined African cultural values, particularly among Bantu-speaking communities (Quan-Baffour et al., 2019; Mukwedeza, 2022). Emphasizing collective responsibility over individualism, Ubuntu promotes empathy, compassion, and communal cohesion through

shared customs, rituals, and social structures (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019; Ramagoshi, 2019). It is grounded in close-knit interpersonal relationships, where personal well-being is inherently tied to the welfare of the community (Mkhize, 2020; Mukgoro, 2020). This traditional ethos, while deeply embedded in African societies, is increasingly under threat from modern digital technologies—particularly social media.

Globally, Ubuntu has gained recognition beyond Africa, influencing discourses in leadership, ethics, and social justice (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Metz, 2018). Yet, the rise of social media—characterized by rapid information sharing, self-promotion, and individualistic culture—poses challenges to Ubuntu values, especially among the youth. While platforms like WhatsApp can foster belonging (Pang, 2020; Chen & Li, 2017), many young users prioritize personal branding, materialism, and Western-centric lifestyles (Bernett & Segerberg, 2012; Kalu & Mavhungu, 2022). Social media encourages brief, surface-level interactions that weaken community bonds and reduce intergenerational respect, leading to cultural misinterpretation and erosion (Turkle, 2011; Kraut et al., 2002).

Across Africa, Ubuntu has shaped conflict resolution, social support systems, and development efforts, serving as the moral compass in communities for generations (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019; Ramagoshi, 2019). In East Africa, Ubuntu-like values are embedded in indigenous concepts such as *utu* in Swahili-speaking communities, reflecting shared responsibilities and communal cohesion in both rural and urban settings. In Kenya specifically, traditional societies such as the Kikuyu, Luo, and Luhya have long practiced communally centered life through extended family systems, collective farming, and age-grade structures that emphasize respect for elders, solidarity, and mutual aid (Purcell, Muhingi, Akelo, 2023).

In Limuru, Kiambu County, this digital influence has accelerated value shifts among youth, with studies showing increased emulation of celebrities, loss of traditional greetings, and preference for individual gain over community wellbeing (Mpofu et al., 2020; Chasi & Rodny-Gumede, 2019). As such, the unchecked spread of social media silently disrupts Ubuntu's communal ethos, calling for urgent cultural re-engagement and digital literacy rooted in African values.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Social media usage has significantly altered communication patterns and cultural values among Kenyan youth, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp fostering cross-cultural interaction while simultaneously undermining traditional philosophies such as Ubuntu, which emphasizes empathy, community, and mutual care (Statista, 2023; Mahlangu, 2022). Studies have shown that these platforms often promote consumerism and individualism, weakening collective identity and social cohesion (Ngcobo & Makgoba, 2021). However, limited research has focused on how specific behaviors—such as frequency of use, preferred platforms, and content

engagement—directly contribute to the erosion of Ubuntu values.

Existing literature has primarily explored the broader cultural impact of social media, especially Western influence, with little attention paid to localized experiences or specific socio-cultural settings like Limuru, Kiambu County (Muriuki et al., 2022). This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how youth in Limuru engage with social media, exploring how their digital habits affect the expression and sustainability of Ubuntu values. It investigates usage patterns, shared content, and evolving communication styles, aiming to generate actionable insights on safeguarding communal ethics in the face of rapid digital transformation.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The impact of social media on Ubuntu values among young people in Limuru, Kiambu County, Kenya can be comprehensively understood through the combined application of Cultural Globalization Theory, Cultivation Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory. Cultural Globalization Theory (Robertson, 1992) provides a macro-level explanation of how digital media facilitates the exchange of global cultural norms that often challenge local traditions. This theory is justified for use in the study because it contextualizes how exposure to globalized, often Western, content via platforms like Instagram and TikTok can dilute or hybridize traditional communal values such as Ubuntu (Appadurai, 1996). Its relevance lies in highlighting the structural transformation of local identity systems in an increasingly interconnected digital world.

Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1976), on the other hand, helps explain how long-term exposure to media content reshapes individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and values. Its inclusion is justified because it illustrates how continuous consumption of content centered on materialism, individual success, and digital celebrity culture gradually influences youth to internalize values that conflict with Ubuntu's emphasis on collective well-being and respect (Signorielli, 2017). Meanwhile, Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) offers a micro-level view of individual agency in media consumption. This theory is particularly appropriate as it sheds light on the motivations behind youth engagement with social media—for entertainment, identity expression, and social validation—which may inadvertently shift focus away from Ubuntu values of humility and social harmony (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Together, these three theories form a robust and complementary framework for examining both the structural and behavioral dimensions of how social media use is disrupting traditional African communal ethos.

2. Literature Review

The growing body of empirical research reveals a troubling trend: social media is contributing significantly to the erosion of Ubuntu values—particularly interdependence—among young people in African contexts such as Limuru, Kenya. Ubuntu, rooted in communal wellbeing, shared identity, and mutual respect, is being challenged by the increasing dominance of social media platforms that promote self-centered and individualistic ideals (Nyamnjoh, 2017; Mwangi, 2020).

Frequent engagement with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter exposes youth to globalized content that emphasizes self-promotion, competition, and personal success, often at the expense of communal cohesion and collective responsibility (Nyamnjoh, 2017; Mwangi, 2020). For example, Mwangi (2020) found that Kenyan students heavily involved in social media exhibited diminished community-oriented values and increased prioritization of social status and personal branding. This underscores that social media functions not merely as a tool for communication but as a powerful medium for cultural transformation.

However, the focus of existing studies on usage frequency as a single metric has limited their ability to unpack the complex dynamics through which social media shapes cultural values. There is insufficient attention to the nature of the content consumed, the intentions behind usage, and the engagement patterns that contribute to value shifts. Studies that integrate content analysis and user behavior are urgently needed to understand how specific forms of digital interaction—especially those celebrating wealth, fame, and materialism—erode values like humility, empathy, and generosity, which are foundational to Ubuntu (Mbatha, 2019; Nyabwari & Gichure, 2019).

Moreover, much of the current literature lacks cultural specificity and longitudinal depth. Nyamnjoh (2017) and Mutsvairo (2016) caution that the erosion of Ubuntu may manifest differently in various settings, with factors such as urban-rural differences or ethnicity playing significant roles. Yet, few studies focus specifically on regions with deep Ubuntu heritage or conduct long-term assessments to track these shifts. The reliance on self-reported data further weakens the reliability of findings, as young people may not fully recognize or may misreport how their values have changed over time (Nyabwari & Gichure, 2019).

Platform-specific studies offer some insight. For example, Instagram's emphasis on visual material and personal branding appears to contradict Ubuntu's values of respect and humility (Mwangi, 2020). Gallagher (2021) showed that while WhatsApp initially supports group-based

communication aligned with Ubuntu, usage still trends toward individualistic expression. Yet, few studies examine how different platforms' design and community structures affect Ubuntu values in nuanced ways. This gap highlights the need for comparative and experimental research to assess how each platform either undermines or can potentially support communal values.

Despite these challenges, a few scholars offer a more optimistic perspective. Kamau and Muturi (2022) suggest that social media, when used intentionally, can promote Ubuntu by fostering digital communities centered on social justice, cultural preservation, and mutual support. However, this potential remains underexplored, as the dominant narrative still revolves around social media as a driver of cultural erosion rather than as a possible space for revitalizing communal ideals.

In summary, while it is clear that social media is accelerating the “scrolling away” of Ubuntu—particularly among youth in contexts like Kenya—the complexity of this erosion demands more culturally specific, longitudinal, and content-sensitive research. Addressing the gaps in platform analysis, regional diversity, and engagement patterns will be essential in developing strategies that can resist the tide of individualism and reimagine digital spaces as sites for sustaining Ubuntu.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the methodological framework employed to explore the influence of social media on the erosion of Ubuntu values among young people in Limuru Town Ward, Kiambu County. The study is rooted in a qualitative phenomenological approach, enabling an in-depth examination of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and social interactions as shaped by digital media.

The methodology details research design, target population, sampling techniques, data collection instruments, analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. This structure ensures that the study remains systematic, credible, and aligned with the research objectives. By using focus group discussions and interviews, the study captures rich narratives that reflect the complex interplay between digital communication and traditional African value systems, particularly Ubuntu.

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative approach, utilizing a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of young people regarding social media use and its impact on Ubuntu values. This

design allowed for a rich, in-depth understanding of subjective experiences, offering flexibility and contextual insight into behavioral shifts and value erosion related to digital engagement.

3.2 Target Population

The target population consisted of youth aged 18–34 years who were involved in church groups within Limuru Town Ward, Kiambu County. This age group represents a transitional phase marked by identity exploration, autonomy, and value development (Kinaro, 2002). The selected youth were active social media users, aligning with findings by Kinyanjui (2021) and Mwaura (2022) on youth digital behavior. These churches were purposively sampled due to their diverse youth population, involvement in social sciences, and active digital engagement for academic, social, and spiritual activities (Kamau & Wambugu, 2020).

3.3 Sample and Sampling Procedures

Purposive sampling was used to select 52 participants from five churches. Participants included church youth officials and elders familiar with Ubuntu values and digital practices. Churches were selected for their moral grounding and cultural diversity, making them ideal settings for examining the interplay between social media and Ubuntu. This sampling approach ensured the inclusion of individuals with relevant lived experiences and perspectives on the study's theme.

3.4 Research Instruments

The study employed Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data. Each FGD comprised six participants, while each interview session involved approximately eight individuals. Representation across churches was balanced to ensure diversity of perspectives on Ubuntu values and social media influence.

3.4.1 Piloting of the Study

A pilot test involving 10 participants from Holy Cross Parish was conducted to assess the clarity and effectiveness of research instruments. Feedback from this process guided refinements to improve question structure, reliability, and usability.

3.4.2 Reliability of the Instruments

Reliability was enhanced by standardizing interview and FGD procedures across all sites. The instruments were

revised post-piloting to remove ambiguity and ensure consistent interpretation.

3.4.3 Validity of the Instruments

Content and face validity were ensured through expert reviews and participant pretesting. Triangulation through multiple data sources (interviews and FGDs) enhanced the depth and credibility of the findings.

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

Three trained research assistants facilitated data collection using standardized schedules. FGDs and interviews were conducted in accessible church venues, lasting approximately 15 and 20 minutes respectively. Sessions were audio-recorded (with consent) and supplemented by detailed field notes to ensure comprehensive data capture.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed qualitative thematic processes. Transcripts were coded into categories such as "platform preference," "frequency of use," and "content influence," later consolidated into overarching themes like "individualism" and "erosion of communal values." NVivo software facilitated the management and analysis of data, supporting theme validation and the mapping of relationships between social media use and Ubuntu value erosion.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Participants were briefed on the study's aims and provided informed consent. Ethical clearance was obtained from CUEA and NACOSTI. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymization and secure data storage. Cultural sensitivity was respected by aligning engagement methods with local norms and values.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study based on the data collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews with young people aged 18 to 34 years affiliated with selected church groups in Limuru Ward, Kiambu County. The findings are organized thematically in alignment with the study objectives, which sought to explore how social media use influences Ubuntu values, particularly focusing on communication patterns, content sharing and consumption, and platform-specific behavioral transformations.

Using a phenomenological approach, the study captured participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward their social media engagement and how it intersects with traditional values such as communal identity, respect for elders, humility, and empathy. Data were analyzed through thematic coding using NVivo software, which enabled the identification of recurring patterns and emergent themes.

The results are presented under thematic headings, supported by direct quotes from participants to retain authenticity and illustrate the depth of their narratives. Where applicable, comparative reflections on urban-rural dynamics, gender differences, and generational shifts are

also included. This chapter, therefore, provides a comprehensive view of the sociocultural implications of social media use, offering insight into how Ubuntu values are either sustained or eroded in the digital age.

4.1 Social Media Platforms' Role in Ubuntu Decline

The study examines how certain social media platforms result in the decline of the Ubuntu values among the young people in Kenya, based on the general research on the fair side of digital individualism versus the traditional collective thinking.

Table 1: Examining Social Media's Role in Eroding Ubuntu Values- NVivo Analysis

Theme	Codes
Influence of Specific Platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - WhatsApp – normalized disrespectful communication - TikTok – promotes Western norms - Instagram – image over community - Facebook – less used by youth - Twitter – political and tribal division
Behavioral Differences by Usage Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Highly active youth – individualism and rudeness - Less active youth – value respect and empathy - Peer pressure – desire to 'belong' online
Observed Erosion of Ubuntu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disrespect in language and tone - Loss of communal responsibility - Disconnection from elders and traditions - Normalization of selfish behaviors

The study also demonstrates how particular social media platforms can be understood as the tools of cultural change that can connect the youth to the scale of the world community, but also alienate them to the ethos of the communal morale. The results present a mixed image of the process of technology adoption that allows seeing the interaction of platform designs, usage structures, and behavior transformation as redefining the core features of social relations.

Platform-Specific Influence on Ubuntu Values

Digital platforms were found to restructure social behavior and interpersonal values in ways that challenge Ubuntu. Each platform introduces unique disruptions that transform how community, respect, and identity are experienced.

WhatsApp: Normalizing Disrespect Through Informal Interactions

WhatsApp, despite its popularity for family and group chats, often erodes respectful dialogue expected in Ubuntu. The casual and fast-paced communication style fosters conflict rather than harmony. As one 24-year-old noted, "*in*

a family WhatsApp group, cousins who could never express their outrage than a whisper in real life were suddenly banging out insults all caps." The platform's instant messaging, anonymity, and group dynamics accelerate disputes, undermining the traditional face-to-face conflict resolution central to Ubuntu (Adebayo, 2022).

TikTok: Platforming Individualism and Cultural Displacement

TikTok emerged as the most transformative in displacing traditional cultural norms. Its algorithm promotes individualism, consumerism, and globalized identities, privileging novelty over depth (Nyabola, 2020).

A participant observed:

"My little sister knows all the TikTok dances but cannot dance our dances."

This illustrates how TikTok prioritizes viral content over local traditions, contributing to a generational and cultural disconnect.

Instagram: Performance over Community

Instagram's emphasis on visual aesthetics was linked to performative morality. Youth increasingly stage actions for visibility rather than genuine communal intent.

One 21-year-old female revealed:

"I even deleted Instagram after I realized I was posing to take pictures of helping neighbors simply to gain online glory."

This aligns with Bosch (2021), who describes the "aestheticization" of social life, where appearance trumps ethical action.

High vs. Low Social Media Use: A Cultural Divide

A sharp contrast was observed between frequent and infrequent social media users. High users exhibited detachment from Ubuntu ideals— *"hating waiting on wisdom of the elders"* and craving individual attention. In contrast, low users reported stronger ties to communal responsibilities and traditional respect structures. This suggests that digital immersion reshapes not only behavior but also consciousness—how young people structure identity and interaction.

Language and Ritual Disruption

Language use has also degraded. A teacher remarked,

"Proverbs were used to fight, and nowadays, ignorant people are emojis to insult."

Furthermore, sacred cultural practices, such as funerals, have been trivialized. In one incident,

"young people were posing with the coffin to take selfies."

Such actions exemplify how digital culture displaces embodied, respectful rituals with performative acts, undermining Ubuntu's spiritual and communal depth.

Pockets of Ubuntu-Conscious Digital Use

While most trends point toward cultural erosion, pockets of resistance emerged. Some youth used platforms like WhatsApp for community clean-ups and cultural preservation. One participant shared how her group used it to

"Organize trips to visit old neighbors."

However, these practices required intentional effort to override the default individualistic tendencies of digital platforms.

A New Cultural Crossroads

Despite generational frustrations, some youths are aware of the cultural trade-offs they are navigating. A 19-year-old confessed,

"I am conscious that I have to pay more attention to my grandmother, but TikTok calls me too much."

This tension reflects not just cultural loss but the emergence of hybrid identities, shaped by both tradition and technology.

Towards Ubuntu-Aligned Digital Engagement

The findings suggest the need for multi-level interventions. These include:

- Digital literacy programs to foster critical consumption;
- Content creation initiatives that promote Ubuntu-aligned narratives;
- Policy advocacy to hold platform designers accountable in culturally sensitive regions.

As the study concludes, this is not a rejection of digital tools but a call to redesign them in service of African values. One respondent aptly summarized this challenge:

"We must teach our phones how to speak Ubuntu and not teach them how to forget about it."

This delicate balancing of culture and technology may define the future of Kenyan and African identity in the digital age.

4.2 Sharing and Consumption Weakening Ubuntu Principles

The third objective of the study was to examine how the nature of shared and consumed content on social media affects perceptions and representations of Ubuntu values among young people in Limuru. Findings indicate that content trends and digital engagement patterns significantly contribute to the erosion of Ubuntu-based cultural norms and behaviors.

Predominant Content Types and Superficial Engagement

Analysis revealed that most content consumed by youth consists of memes, humorous videos, trending challenges, fashion, music, and gossip. These were largely entertainment-driven and lacked depth. One 19-year-old male participant noted,

"My feed only contains funny videos and dance challenges, but nothing that made me a better community member."

Such content promotes individualism rather than collective identity, aligning with global trends observed in algorithm-driven platforms.

Absence of Ubuntu Values in Content

Participants consistently identified a lack of Ubuntu-aligned values in their social media experiences. They cited instances of disrespect, vulgarity, bullying, and the glorification of materialism and self-promotion, which contradict Ubuntu principles such as dignity, empathy, and mutual respect. As one 21-year-old female observed,

“People hurl insults online daily—something unimaginable in our community.”

Anonymity and lack of accountability online were seen to foster a culture of digital rudeness.

Undermining Traditional Values

Exposure to Westernized lifestyles through social media was seen to affect youth behavior, particularly in dressing styles, language use, and attitudes towards elders and traditions. A 22-year-old male participant stated,

“Our style of wearing, talking and even thinking is evolving due to what we witness online.”

This cultural shift fosters alienation from local norms and weakens intergenerational respect and transmission of traditional wisdom.

Changing Cultural Narratives

A major theme that emerged was the redefinition of cultural narratives. Social media content increasingly promotes instant gratification and personal success, overshadowing Ubuntu’s emphasis on community well-being and interdependence. One 18-year-old female participant reflected,

“When I mention community values, my friends laugh and say it’s for old people.”

Such sentiments highlight a generational disconnection fueled by digital influence.

Peer Influence and Identity Conflict

Participants expressed being under pressure to conform to online trends, driven by fear of missing out (FOMO) and the need for validation. This created inner conflict, with some describing a split between their online personas and real-life identities.

“I feel like two people—online and real,” shared a 20-year-old male.

This duality reflects a broader crisis of cultural identity in navigating between digital modernity and traditional African values.

Signs of Resistance and Cultural Adaptation

Despite the negative trends, some youth demonstrated resilience and adaptive strategies. One 18-year-old female reported following accounts that post traditional proverbs, while others used social media to promote community projects and cultural content. These acts reflect an opportunity to repurpose digital tools for cultural preservation, if deliberately and thoughtfully engaged.

Implications for Cultural Preservation

The findings underscore the urgent need to address how content consumption trends dilute Ubuntu values. Without intervention, digital media may continue to fragment communal consciousness. However, the study suggests that reimagining digital spaces—through culturally relevant content creation, ethical algorithm design, and digital literacy programs—could align online engagement with African philosophies.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study set out to examine the impact of social media on the erosion of Ubuntu values among young people, focusing specifically on those affiliated with church groups in Limuru, Kenya. The findings indicate a clear and concerning shift in cultural orientation, whereby traditional communal values—such as respect for elders, empathy, shared responsibility, and interdependence—are increasingly being replaced by individualistic, performative, and often superficial behaviors fostered by digital media platforms.

Through qualitative inquiry using focus group discussions and interviews, the study revealed that platforms like WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram not only alter communication styles but also reshape value systems. The erosion of Ubuntu is most evident in the normalization of disrespectful language, the glorification of self-promotion, the rejection of traditional authority, and the decline in community-based practices. Particularly troubling is how digital spaces reward virality and visibility over communal integrity and moral grounding.

However, the study also uncovered moments of resistance, where some youth actively used digital tools to sustain and promote Ubuntu-oriented values, demonstrating that technology itself is not inherently incompatible with African values. Rather, the current trends reflect an uncritical adoption of platform logic without adequate cultural mediation or guidance.

Overall, this study affirms that while social media offers opportunities for expression and connection, it simultaneously poses a significant threat to the continuity of indigenous value systems like Ubuntu, especially in rapidly digitizing societies. The Kenyan youth stand at a cultural crossroads, navigating tensions between traditional values and digital modernity.

5.2 Recommendations

To address the complex dynamics between social media and the erosion of Ubuntu values, this study proposes the following interventions

Digital Literacy and Cultural Awareness Campaigns

There is a need for targeted educational programs, especially within church youth groups and schools—to equip young people with the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate digital spaces. These programs should integrate cultural education, helping youth understand how digital habits influence their value systems.

Promotion of Culturally Aligned Digital Content

Content creators, influencers, and media practitioners should be encouraged and supported to produce material that reflects and promotes Ubuntu principles. Such content could include storytelling, proverbs, community stories, and intergenerational wisdom that resonate with African cultural heritage.

Platform Accountability and Local Content Regulation

Policymakers and regulators should engage with social media companies to ensure their platforms do not disproportionately favor content that undermines cultural norms. Algorithmic transparency and the promotion of regionally relevant, positive content should be part of regulatory discussions.

Community-Led Digital Initiatives

Community institutions, especially churches, can play a central role in fostering Ubuntu-aligned online engagement by supporting digital projects such as virtual community

support groups, online mentorship, or intergenerational storytelling forums.

Further Research on Platform-Specific Effects

Given that each social media platform has distinct effects on youth behavior and values, more localized and platform-specific research should be conducted. Longitudinal studies could also help track how sustained digital exposure influences cultural orientation over time.

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