



Heart of the Story: Connecting Digital Storytelling to Sociology of Emotions

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based upon a paper delivered at the 'Create, Act, Change': The 5th International Digital Storytelling Conference in May 2013, in Ankara, Turkey². It aims to put forward a connection between digital storytelling and the sociology of emotions. For this purpose, it briefly gives a picture of the field of sociology of emotions. The paper sets out to offer some self-reflection, because the aim of this piece is closely related to the academic interests of the writer. Following the path of self-reflection, it introduces common points between digital storytelling and the sociology of emotions.

Keywords: emotions, sociology of emotions, digital storytelling

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² http://www.digitalstorytelling2013.hacettepe.edu.tr/documents/program_web.pdf

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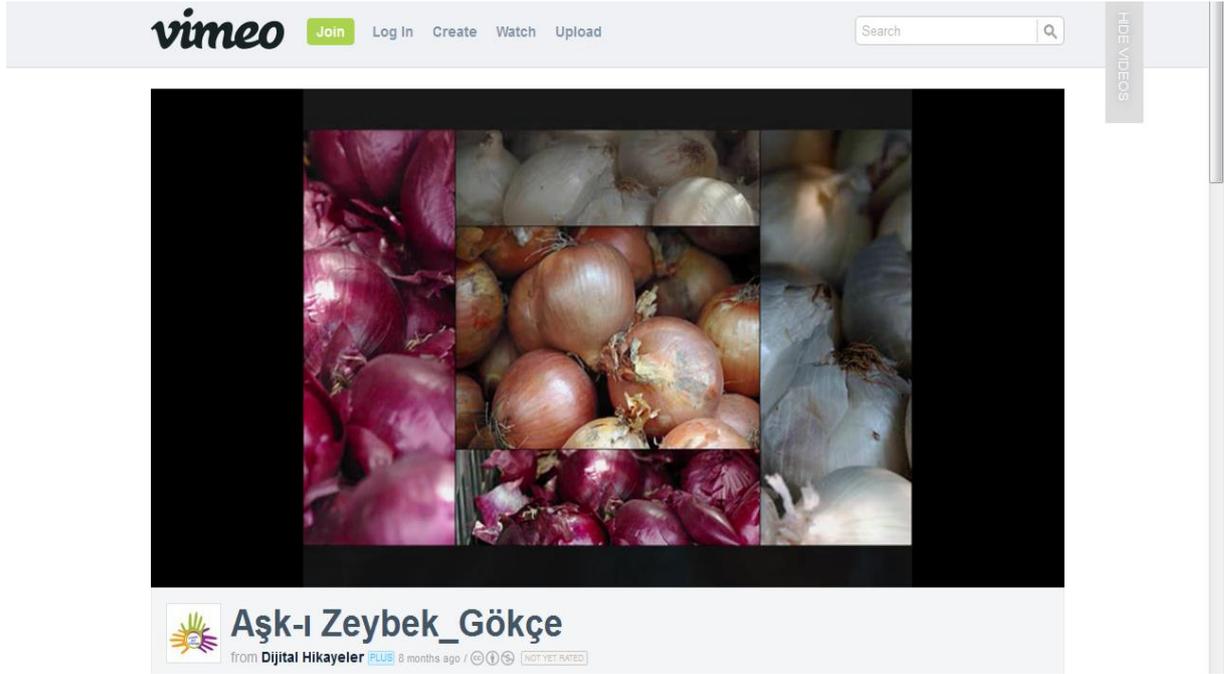
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First Adventures with Digital Storytelling

Towards the end of 2009, I joined a facilitator-training workshop³ which was run by Burcu Şimşek at the Hacettepe University, Faculty of Communication, in Ankara. Until then, I had not even heard of digital storytelling and had never encounter this notion. This was a totally new experience for me. With the encouragement of Burcu, my journey began. In this workshop, Burcu asked us to bring an object and be prepared to tell a story about it. I brought an onion. Everyone was surprised. In the eyes of other participants I was able to see this question: “What could Gökçe tell about an onion?” My response was simple: “Love”. So, in the course of this workshop I made a digital story about my mother and father’s love, called *Love of Zeybek*⁴. For me, the onion symbolized a moment of deep understanding between my parents and a way of showing their feelings to each other.

³ This workshop was the first workshop which was held at the Hacettepe University. Through this, the facilitators of future workshops were trained. Thus it was made possible to institutionalize within the body of Hacettepe University, Faculty of Communication.

⁴ <http://vimeo.com/album/2850921/video/93386568>



Thanks to this training, and especially to Burcu and her illuminative PhD thesis⁵, from that day on, digital stories have stolen my heart. With each story that I listen to or watch I feel that I grasp a chance to touch the hearts of others. For me, the crucial point of digital storytelling is the encounter with different people and their voices and the human touch, which may occur during the story circle. Due to this reason I am interested in workshop-based digital storytelling and in this paper I will use digital storytelling in this conventional meaning. However, although the story circle process is the key to the connection between the sociology of emotions and digital storytelling, we cannot ignore the importance of the 'digital' aspect: without the possibilities offered by digital media, we could not reach so many stories from all over the world.

After the institutionalisation⁶ of *Digital Storytelling Workshop* at Hacettepe University, Faculty of Communication as a unit, I ran three workshops for Erasmus students (see our website, www.digitalstoryhub.org and our vimeo account, <http://vimeo.com/dijitalhikayeler> to view the stories). Although these workshops occurred in the Faculty of Communication and I was positioned as an academic, I realized that the hierarchical relationship between the students and myself was easily broken down right from the beginning because I also shared my own story in the story circle that I had experienced when I was an Erasmus student. This taught me how important it is to

⁵ Şimşek, B. 2012. Using Digital Storytelling as a Change Agent for Women's Participation in the Turkish Public Sphere. Ph.D., Creative Industries Faculty, Australia.

⁶ In the field of digital storytelling, *Digital Storytelling Unit* at Hacettepe University, Faculty of Communication is the first and only corporate structure in Turkey which is a part of the international digital storytelling community. Besides Hacettepe University Faculty of Communication provides a master course called *Digital Storytelling: Co-Creative Media* which is taught by Burcu Şimşek and assisted by Gökçe Zeybek Kabakçı. This course also functions as a training workshop.

share the same experiences with other participants in order to provide an environment of trust and ease in a workshop.

Path to Sociology of Emotions

When I encountered digital storytelling, I was writing my Master's thesis, which was concerned with the discourse of *Republic Protests*⁷ in Turkey and their representation in the Turkish press. This meant that I was mostly concentrated on macro issues. After taking some PhD courses relating to everyday life, I realized that micro issues and emotions are crucial in order to understand society. Thus I discovered the sociology of emotions and my academic interest turned towards this.

The sociology of emotions has been working to establish itself as a scientific field over the last 40 years. The struggle for recognition as an academic field is largely because of the hegemony of positivism in science, which focuses on rational and macro issues, which are considered as prominent and thus scientific. This perspective pushes the significance of emotions aside in terms of approaches to social sciences. A quick search on the Internet will rapidly reveal that emotions are mostly considered a psychological matter.

The main reason for this is the dichotomy between emotion and rationality derived from Western philosophical thought, which proposes that emotions are seen as irrational, physical, natural, particular, private and female. In return, reason is read as rational, intellectual, cultural, universal, public and male. Due to this dichotomy, especially with the advent of the Enlightenment and modern science, there has been a tendency in the social sciences to disregard the role of emotions within the cyclical dynamics of societies. Thereby, emotions are widely considered to be individual and private phenomena as emotions are in human biology. Besides emotions are associated with the body and considered ahistorical. However, "a cultural studies approach", from which I write this paper, "views emotions as social, cultural, political, as well as individual phenomena, and views a repertoire of possible emotional responses as culturally and historically produced" (Harding and Pribram, 2002: 411). In other words, "culture and social structural conditions will have large effects on the emotions that humans experience, and how they express these emotions" (Turner, 2009: 343) because as Gordon said "emotions are inherently social and only have meaning when designated with labels provided by culture" (cited Turner, 2009: 341). Sara Ahmed (2004a: 117) also points out that "emotions are not simply within or without individuals but they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds. They move and circulate between bodies and signs". Rather than asking, "what emotions are", she asks, "what emotions do" (Ahmed, 2004b: 4). According to her, "emotions do things and they align individuals with

⁷ The Republic Protests were a series of mass rallies which took place in various cities of Turkey in 2007. The intention was to oppose the candidature of Abdullah Gül who was a former prime minister and a parliamentarian of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), for the presidency of republic; to protest anti-secular policies of AKP and to support state secularism.

communities - or bodily space with social space - through the very intensity of their attachment” (2004a: 119). That is to say, emotions are what move us and what connect us to this or to that and what hold us in a place (Ahmed, 2004c: 27). She mentions that, “rather than locating emotions in the individual or the social, we can see that emotionality - as a responsiveness and openness towards the world of others - involves an interweaving of the personal with the social” (2004c: 28). In short, emotions “are about the intimate relationship between selves, objects and others” (2004c: 28).

In fact, since the early ages of philosophy, emotions have been at the heart of public issues. Many philosophers, such as Aristotle, Kierkegaard, Hobbes, Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari saw the importance of emotions. Even precursors of sociology had paid attention to emotions in their own works, although they did not engage with them directly. Marx’s conceptualization of alienation; Durkheim’s work *Suicide* and his theory of the totemic basis of social solidarity; Weber’s works on authority, bureaucracy and *the Spirit of Capitalism*; and Simmel’s readings on money and fashion and his analysis of conflict; Pareto’s views on sentiments and derivations; Cooley’s view of pride and shame are all prominent examples that early sociology was not devoid of concern for emotions. But these concerns were secondary, implicit and under-theorized (Turner, 2009: 340).

However, the actual recognition and conceptualization of emotions as a social and public phenomenon emerged in the 1970s with the rise of sociology of emotions⁸. According to Jonathan Turner, “with each decade since the 1970s the study of emotions has expanded and can now be considered the cutting edge of micro sociology and to a lesser extent, some macro sociologies” (2009: 340). The sociology of emotions is based on the idea that emotions affect the individual and the social; because not just what we think, but also how we feel and our bodily response to feelings shapes our actions (Gorton, 2007: 345).

In the first part of their book, *The Sociology of Emotions*, Turner and Stets (2005) reveal the crucial role of emotions on social structure and culture:

[...] emotions are the glue which binds people together and generates commitments to large-scale social and cultural structures; in fact, emotions are what make social structures and systems of cultural symbols viable. Conversely, emotions are also what can drive people apart and push them to tear down social structures and to challenge cultural traditions. Thus,

⁸ Preliminary works of the sociology of emotions: Heise, D. R. 1979. *Understanding Events: Affect and the Construction of Social Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Hochschild, A. R. 1975. The Sociology of Emotions: Selected Possibilities. *Another Voice*, eds. M. Millman & R. M. Kanter (Eds.), 280–307. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press; Hochschild, A. R. 1979. Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure. *American Journal of Sociology*, 85, 551–575; Hochschild, A. R. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Kemper, T. D. 1978a. A Social Interactional Theory of Emotions. New York: Wiley; Kemper, T. D. 1978b. Toward a Sociology of Emotions: Some problems and some solutions. *The American Sociologist*, 13, 30–41.

experience, behaviour, interaction, and organization are connected to the mobilization and expression of emotions. Indeed, one of the unique features of humans is their reliance on emotions to form social bonds and build complex sociocultural structures (Turner and Stets 2005: 1).

As a result, sociology of emotions looks for answers to questions such as those denoted by Turner and Stets (2005: 23):

- *How do emotions influence the self?*
- *How is the flow of interaction shaped by emotions?*
- *How do people develop emotional attachments and commitments to social structures and cultural symbols?*
- *How do social structures and cultural symbols constrain the experience and expression of emotions?*

In consideration of these issues, a variety of theoretical approaches have been developing. According to Turner (2009), these approaches can be classified as evolutionary/biological theories, symbolic interactionist theories, dramaturgical theories, ritual theories, power and status theories of emotions, stratification theories of emotions and exchange theories of emotions. Each theory explains different dimensions of emotional dynamics. For example, evolutionary theories focus on biological mechanisms, which arouse emotions as a result of natural selection. In contrast, symbolic interactionist, dramaturgical, ritual and exchange theories emphasize the importance of interaction processes as well as the significance of culture. For instance, dramaturgical theories of emotions are derived from the notion that society is like a play on a stage. This means that the behaviour of people in particular situations is often a strategic performance that can be likened to a performance on stage in front of an audience composed of 'others'. This performance involves a cultural script of beliefs, values, and norms about the appropriate attitudes, feelings and emotional responses in particular situations. According to the symbolic interactionist theoreticians, human emotionality is based on whether people confirm and sustain their self-conception of themselves or not. On the other hand, stratification theories and also power and status theories both focus on the structural dimension of emotions - in other words, the location of individuals within social structures influences the flow of emotions. In terms of power and status theories, the relative power and status of individuals at different locations in social structures have significant effects on their emotions. For theories of stratification, emotions are also distributed unequally – just like power, money, or prestige - across social classes in societies (Turner and Stets, 2005: 23-25; Turner, 2009: 343-351).

This theoretical diversity in the field of sociology of emotions leads to various studies where political, cultural, gender, media, everyday life and memory studies intersect. As Kristyn Gorton (2007: 345) mentions, “work on emotion [...] allows us [...] to reconsider

the importance of feelings in everyday life, politics, the media, and in formulating notions of citizenship”.

Digital Storytelling and the Sociology of Emotions – Meeting Points

Just as the sociology of emotions has been applied across a range of academic areas of inquiry, the field of digital storytelling is also fruitful terrain for application to a wide range of studies such as education, health care, oral history, journalism, gender and so on. As Joe Lambert notes “digital storytelling is offered as a technique for increasing understanding across generations, ethnicities and other divides, and as a tool in activist organizing, education, professional reflection and corporate communication” (cited in Couldry, 2008: 54).

The starting point of digital storytelling is, “the idea that each person has a voice and a story and that there could be a place where that story is gathered with other stories for exchange and reflection” (Couldry, 2008: 58). Similarly, Jean Burgess (2006: 207) mentions that, “the personal narrative, told in the storyteller’s unique voice, is central to the process of creating a story”. In fact, together with the literary voice of a person, the collaboration between facilitator and storyteller that can be experienced through the workshop are the crucial features, which differentiate, “Digital Storytelling” from other digital stories. In this direction Lambert asks, “in the twenty-first century, what storytelling is not intermediated by a digital device” (2013: 37). In fact, Alexander Bryan defines digital storytelling broadly as, “narratives built from the stuff of cyberculture” (2011: 3). In accordance with this broad definition, any kind of storytelling and self-representation from social media narratives are also named as digital storytelling. However the *Center for Digital Storytelling* (CDS) refers to a specific practice which consist of seven steps: (1) owning your insights, (2) owning your emotions, (3) finding the moment, (4) seeing your story, (5) hearing your story, (6) assembling your story, (7) sharing your story (Lambert, 2010). All these steps together give a CDS definition: a digital story is a personal reflections about a lived experience which is conveying emotions, told by personal or first person voice ideally between 2-3 minutes with the accompaniment of images and most of the time soundtrack (2013: 37-38). From a similar perspective Burcu Şimşek (2012: 32) identifies digital storytelling as a workshop-based, “collaborative exercise where the very basic everyday life practice of storytelling is valued as a means of exchanging experiences”. According to Burgess (2006: 210) this is a process of remediation, which transforms everyday experience into shared public culture and provides an effective social communication in terms of the affective practice of the social.

John Hartley and Kelly McWilliam (2009: 3) state that digital storytelling, “puts the universal human delight in narrative and self-expression into the hands of everyone”, thus, “it bringing a timeless form into the digital age”. If we trace the origins of this specific practice of digital storytelling, which began in the 1990s, it has been described as a response to the exclusion of ordinary people’s stories in broadcast media. That is why

the main focus of digital storytelling is to help participants to *listen* to voices from diverse backgrounds and identities, as well as to give voice to, “ordinary people” and, of course, to vulnerable, disadvantaged, underestimated or marginalized groups, to enable them to tell their stories in their own words. It also emerged as a part of broader cultural shifts, including a profound change in models of media communication. Changing technologies and the evolution of peer-to-peer communication networks have generated an explosion of user-created content in digital media. Sharing platforms like YouTube, social networks like MySpace and Facebook are prominent examples of this user-created content (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009: 4).

All these developments are not apart from the changes in academic agendas. Since the 1970s with the cultural turn, academic interests have shifted toward the analysis of consumer-generated content production, distribution and consumption. Generally speaking, the focus has shifted from political economy of large-scale practices to more micro issues such as everyday life. Hence, understanding and dignifying ordinary people’s lived experiences and cultural practices have gained importance (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009: 4; Burgess, 2006: 202).

This shift can be seen as one of the meeting points between digital storytelling and the sociology of emotions. Sociology of emotions also highlights the importance of human experience and focuses on partiality and subjectivity of the self (Baker, 2010). That’s why methodologically many studies on emotions require a field study, participant observation and an emic perspective.

Another meeting point between digital storytelling and sociology of emotions is their contribution to the issue of the division of the public and private sphere. Over the past two decades, Habermas’s conceptualization of public sphere has been questioned. The focal points of critiques are the exclusion of women and non-propertied classes, ignorance of the presence of multiple public spheres and being too large and amorphous (Papacharissi, 2002: 11). Sociology of emotions gets involved in these critiques by highlighting the fragility of the border separating the private and the public. On one side of this imaginary border, the public sphere is the world of work and life outside the home; it is symbolized with rationality and masculinity. On the other side, the private sphere is the world of family, life within home and it is symbolized with emotionality and femininity. In spite of this gendered division, emotions, which permeate all levels of personal and social experience, undermine any clear and fixed division between the public and private (Harding and Pribram, 2002; 408-409). Hence, one of the central concerns in works on emotion is the intrusion of the private into the public sphere, what Lauren Berlant refers as, “the intimate public sphere”. She explains this concern via national politics of the US:

The intimate public of the US present tense is radically different from the “intimate” sphere of modernity described by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas

portrays the intimate sphere of the European eighteenth century as a domestic space where persons produced the sense of their own private uniqueness, a sense of self which became a sense of citizenship only when it was abstracted and alienated in the nondomestic public sphere of liberal capitalist culture. In contrast, the intimate public sphere of the US present tense renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere (Berlant 2002, 4-5).

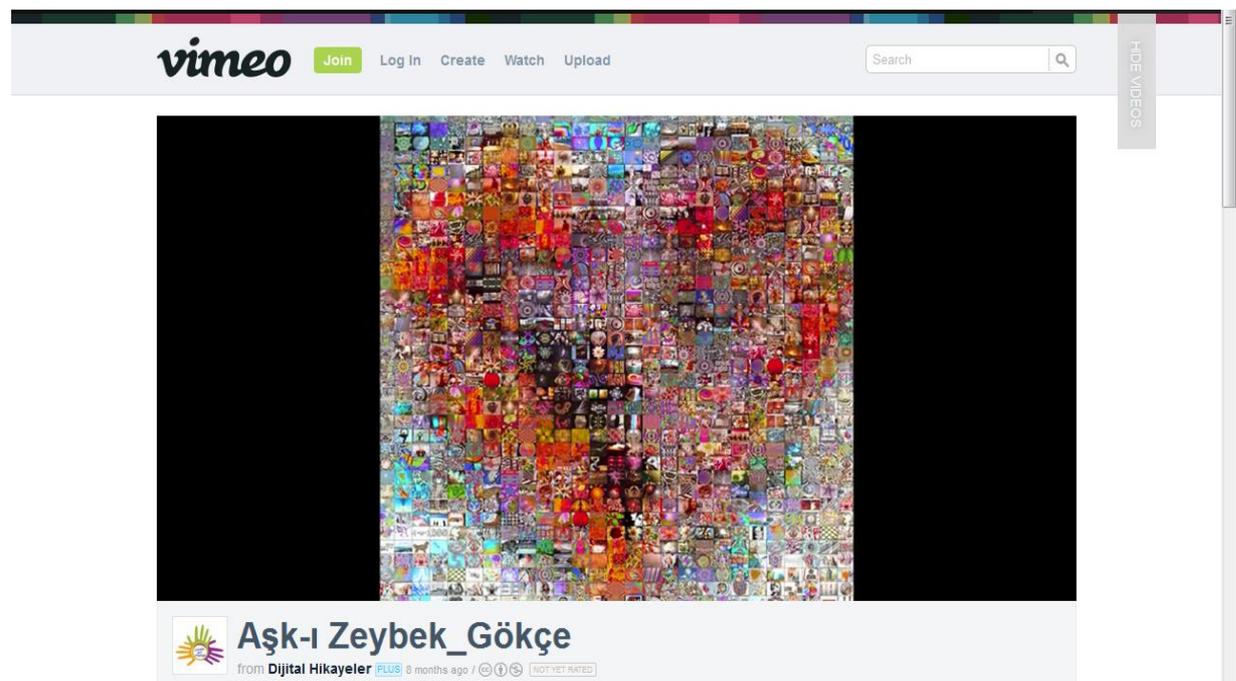
The ever-growing changes in technology and the rapid penetration of the Web into daily life alter the notion of privacy. Now we are talking about, “digitally equipped private sphere” which enables publicly oriented activities, like posting a blog, sharing a political opinion, voting on or signing a petition to support a cause, or uploading exclusive news content on YouTube, as Zizi Papacharissi (2010: 21) remarks. According to her, “via the affordance of technological environments, individuals fraternize from the privacy of their own spheres, practicing a form of networked yet privé sociality that is formulated within a private social sphere” (2010: 21). Digital stories are located in this digitally equipped private sphere. These stories are personal narratives, but they are produced and distributed through the use of digital tools. Thus, everyday communicative practices, which are the basis of digital storytelling, transform publicly accessible culture (Burgess, 2006: 210). In other words, digital stories may, “contribute to the diversification of voices in the (elite) public sphere where structural political change occurs” by creating an ‘intimate public sphere’ (Poletti, 2011: 80). As Joe Lambert (2013: 7) states that to, “tell a story at least creates an emotional connection between us. An intimacy”, because, “the digital story is a means of becoming real to others on the basis of shared experience and affective resonances” (Burgess, 2006: 211). This intimacy starts to settle down with the story circle, which is dialogical structurally and expands into the public with the use of digital tools. Due to the intimacy of sharing experiences in the story circle and the circulation of stories outside of the workshop, digital stories may function as a discussion expander, a facilitator for dialogue and thus a change agent (Şimşek, 2012: 41).

An Intro Rather Than Conclusion

To sum up, as it is discussed above, sociology of emotions and digital storytelling might be connected with each other in many aspects. The prominent common ground for both is the emotion itself. Sociology of emotions engages with emotions as a research issue. In terms of digital storytelling, emotional content is one of the seven elements of digital stories as Joe Lambert (2010) remarks and this provides an intimacy. For digital storytelling as well as sociology of emotions the intimate relationship between selves is important. Correspondingly, both fields deal with human experience and expression of emotions. As intimacy, experience, expression are principal notions, they focus on ordinary, marginalized, neglected first-person voices rather than the authoritative, seemingly neutral, obscure stances of the third person-voice. In addition, both of them

question the Habermasian idea of public sphere and try to overcome dichotomies such as rational/emotional, public/private. In short, they both give priority to experience itself and the narratives of everyday life because, “the personal is political” and emotions are not free of power relations, culture and history. Due to these reasons, even hegemonic understanding of social sciences tends to underestimate the role of emotions, experience and personal stories, both fields can be used as a tool in order to understand society.

This paper which aims to put forward a connection between digital storytelling and the sociology of emotions is just an introductory effort. My intuitional and heartfelt motivation for both fields provoke me to study out the connection between them. All these meeting points described in this paper give me a reason to think about the prospective togetherness of two fields in order to try to understand society. Therefore this paper is supposed to be considered as an intro for the future studies which would like to bring together sociology of emotions and digital storytelling. I hope this coupledness will evolve into a marriage throughout my academic journey.



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