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FROM RELATIONSHIP MARKETING TO RELATIONSHIP QUALITY: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Relationship marketing is a novel marketing paradigm that is here to stay. In the annals of business history, it has ushered in a new era of marketing wherein firms can capitalize on their matchless and irreproducible strength in the form of high quality exchange relationships with other business firms and/or customers. Relationship marketing was introduced in the B2B sector, but over the years, it is seen gaining foothold in the B2C sector as well. This paper introduces the concept of relationship marketing and summarizes the overtime transition from relationship marketing to relationship quality. It then dwells on the concept of relationship quality and its dimensions. The review of literature suggests that trust, relationship satisfaction and commitment are the three widely-acknowledged dimensions of relationship quality. Keeping in view the importance of exchange relationships in business dealings, firms should try to not only create exchange relationships but also nurture them by ensuring that the exchange partner holds a positive opinion on these three dimensions (namely, trust, relationship satisfaction and commitment) in his/her relationship with the firm.

Keywords: Relationship marketing, Relationship quality, Trust, Relationship satisfaction, Commitment.

INTRODUCTION:

Marketing has gone through a paradigm shift with the momentous advent of the relationship marketing model. Even though business relationships were in existence since yesteryears (Gummesson, 1995); their importance was duly acknowledged in the marketing world (both academia and practitioners) by the seminal work of Leonard L. Berry who coined the term 'relationship marketing' in the context of services marketing. His definition of relationship marketing as "attracting, maintaining and enhancing customer relationships" (Berry, 1983) pronounced the formal beginning of the relationship marketing era in business history.

Gronroos (1990) has given a relationship definition of marketing stating that "marketing is to establish, maintain, enhance and commercialize customer relationships (often but not necessarily always long term relationships) so that the objectives of the parties involved are met. This is done by a mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises." Morgan and Hunt (1994) posit relationship marketing as "establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges." Sheth and Parvatiyar (1998) view relationship marketing as an "ongoing process of engaging in cooperative and collaborative activities and programs with immediate and end-user customers to create or enhance mutual economic value, at reduced cost." As relationship marketing was at the vanguard of marketing philosophy during the 1990's, this decade has been referred to as the "relationship marketing decade in business history" (Jap et al., 1999).

The relationship definition of marketing does not rule out the importance of traditional elements of marketing mix, viz. product, price, place and promotion nor does it maintain that they are less important than earlier. All the same, it simply shows that so much else may be of relevance to marketing than the mere marketing mix. It is founded on how to develop and accomplish good marketing performance, rather than what decisions to make to do effective marketing (Gronroos, 1990). Relationship marketing is unique in its own way. It is a one-to-one relationship between the seller and the buyer. Besides, it is an interactive process and not an episodic exchange. Moreover, it is a value-added activity done through interdependency and collaboration between sellers and buyers (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2002).

Relationship marketing recommends recognizing the buyer first as an individual, then as a member of a community or affinity group, and only later as an anonymous member of a segment or an infinitesimal percentage in a large anonymous mass (Gummesson, 1998). As a result, relationship marketing assists service providers in becoming better informed about the customer's requirements and needs. Knowledge about the buyer together with social bonding developed over a series of satisfactory service encounters help customize the offering as per buyer's specifications. Social bonding, however, cannot compensate for a non-competitive core product (Crosby and Stephens, 1987); nevertheless, it can call forth customer loyalty when there are minor competitive differences. A social relationship may also psychologically compel the customers to be more tolerant of an inadequacy in performance by the seller or to give him an opportunity to respond to enticing competitive offerings (Berry, 1995).

An exchange relationship flourishes when the goals of both the customer as well as the business firm are accomplished by virtue of that relationship. Relationship marketing helps the firm in building and sustaining a base of regular customers that make steady purchases thereby preserving the profitability of the firm. Such customers are less price-sensitive and are inclined to spend more than the non-regular customers. They are less inclined to turn to competitors (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). Relationship customers also spread positive word-of-mouth communication to their friends and family, thus becoming firm's inherent brand ambassadors. Moreover, it is more economical to serve existing customers than to acquire new customers (Berry, 1995).

In case of goods as well as services, long-term relationship of the customers with the business firm reduces their level of uncertainty regarding the latter's performance of its part in the exchange transaction. However, especially in the service context, many customers wish to be 'relationship customers' for the services that are personally important to them, variable in quality, highly technical and complex in nature, and demand high-involvement. These typical attributes of services manifested by some services like medical, banking, insurance, hairstyling and so on, spur many customers to look forward to continuing with the same service provider. The intangible, credence and heterogeneous nature of services encourages customers to lend their loyalty to the service firm whenever excellent service is experienced (Berry, 1995).

It is interesting to note that market share can be increased in three ways: attracting new customers, doing more business with current customers, and reducing loss of customers. By directing marketing resources towards existing customers, relationship marketing directly caters to tapping two of these possibilities: enhancing relationships and minimizing customer defections. As many customers have a tendency to become relationship customers, relationship marketing also helps firms in attracting new customers (Berry, 1995).

It is worth comprehending that customer relationships are just not there; they have to be garnered (Gronroos,

1990) and maintained. They are impacted not only by the full-time professional marketers in the marketing department but by everyone working in the organization. Ranging from front-line staff members such as a receptionist or a telephone operator giving the initial first impression about the company, to the CEO making big contracts thus becoming an ambassador of good will to customers, all employees are essentially 'part-time marketers'. Thus, the task of creating and maintaining customer relationships is performed by the full-time professional marketers in the marketing department as well as the omnipresent 'part-time marketers' (Gummesson, 1987).

Relationship marketing is an evolutionary and dynamic phenomenon that happens over a period of time (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2002). It has led to a shift in the firm's focus from single transactional exchange to long-term, symbiotic, relational exchanges. This shift in focus demonstrates the recognition of lifetime value of a customer, as opposed to a single sale, as firms today cannot afford to depend upon a business based on one time sales only (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996, cited in Kandampully and Duddy, 1999). Marketing in a service context, i.e., taking into account both service firms as well as service operations of manufacturers, can be regarded as revolving around relationships, positioned on a continuum. Some of these relationships are singular transactions, narrow in scope and do not involve much social relationship (such as marketing of toothpaste or bread). On the other hand, there are other relationships that are broader in scope, involve substantial social contacts, and are continuous and lasting in nature (such as marketing of financial or medical services). Figure 1 below shows the marketing strategy continuum. Short-term relationships, where the customers come and go, are generally costlier to develop. This, however, does not mean that new customers who make one time purchase only would be undesirable; rather it means that the focus should be on developing as well as maintaining long-term relationships with the customers. If enduring customer relationships can be established, there is a high possibility that it will lead to long-term exchanges needing lower marketing costs per customer (Gronroos, 1990).

Figure 1: The marketing strategy continuum

The strategy continuum	Transaction marketing	Relationship marketing
Time perspective	Short-term focus	Long-term focus
Dominating marketing function	Marketing mix	Interactive marketing (supported by marketing mix activities)
Price elasticity	Customers tend to be more sensitive to price	Customers tend to be less sensitive to price
Dominating quality dimension	Quality of output (technical quality dimension) is dominating	Quality of interactions (functional quality dimension) grows in importance and may become dominating
Measurement of customer satisfaction	Monitoring market share (indirect approach)	Managing the customer base (direct approach)
Customer information system	*Ad hoc* customer satisfaction surveys	Real-time customer feedback system
Interdependency between marketing, operations and personnel	Interface of no or limited strategic importance	Interface of substantial strategic importance
The role of internal marketing	Internal marketing of no or limited importance to success	Internal marketing of substantial strategic importance to success
The product continuum	Consumer packaged goods → ← Consumer durables →	← Industrial goods → ← Services

Source: Gronroos, C. (1994), "From marketing mix to relationship marketing: towards a paradigm shift in marketing", *Management Decision,* Vol. 32 No. 2, pp. 4-20.

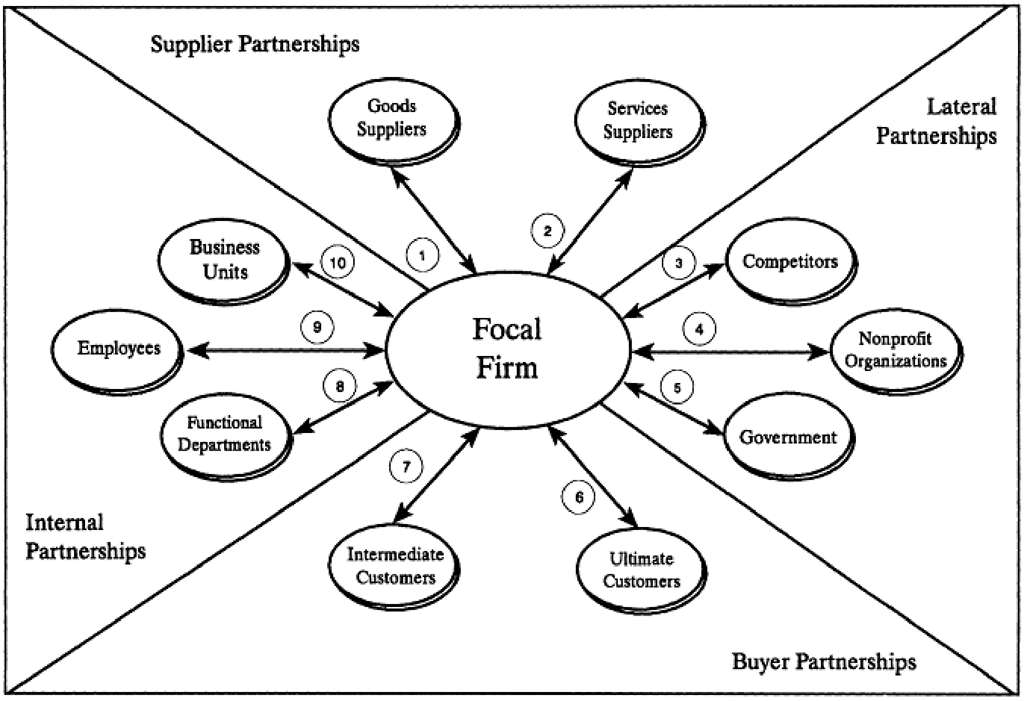
Relationships with customers once achieved, should be maintained. Instead of always seeking new customers, it is more advantageous to serve the existing customers because the sales, marketing and setup costs can be amortized over a longer customer lifetime (Clark and Payne, 1994, cited in Gwinner et al., 1998). Relationship customers are a source of competitive advantage for the firm (Palmer, 2002). Firm's marketing strategies should, therefore, aim to retain the existing customers. The acquisition of new customers should be reckoned as an in-between step in the marketing process (Berry, 1983). Servicing the existing customers is regarded just as important to long-term success of the firm as is acquiring new customers. Gluing the relationship and converting indifferent customers into loyal ones are also covered under the definition of marketing. Berry delineated "five strategy elements for practising relationship marketing: developing a core service around which to build a customer relationship, customizing the relationship to the individual customer, augmenting the core service with extra benefits, pricing services to encourage customer loyalty, and marketing to employees so that they, in turn, will perform well for customers" (Berry 1983; Berry, 2002).

However, relationship cultivation is neither desirable in all situations nor should it be pursued in an all-embracing manner. Berry (1983) clearly points out that "in the context of services, the application of relationship marketing may be most appropriate when: (1) there is an ongoing or periodic desire for the service on the part of the customer, e.g., telephone or janitorial service versus funeral home service (2) the customer controls selection of the service provider, e.g., selecting a dry cleaner or dentist versus entering the first taxi in the airport waiting line, and (3) there are alternative service providers and customer switching from one to another is common e.g., patronizing various restaurants or airlines versus buying electricity from the one electric utility serving a community."

It is important to recognize the fact that customers may wish to engage in quite different types and degrees of relationships with different service providers or with firms in different industries (Wong and Zhou, 2006). Selnes (1998) asserts that the customer too, has to decide whether or not a relationship be established (first time purchase), whether or not a relationship be continued (repurchase), and whether or not a relationship be enhanced in scope (increased commitment with the supplier). Gwinner et al. (1998) have given a qualitative research finding that customers may remain in a relationship even if they perceive the core service attributes to be less than superior provided they are receiving important relational benefits viz. confidence benefits, social benefits and special treatment benefits.

Relationship marketing began in the business-to-business context; however, it is getting equally popular and relevant in the business-to-consumer context also. Further, relationship marketing applies to various stakeholders, namely suppliers and distributors, customers, employees, government, to name a few (Kandampully and Duddy, 1999). Morgan and Hunt (1994) have compiled and categorized ten discrete forms of relationship marketing with reference to a focal firm and its relational exchanges in supplier, lateral, buyer, and internal partnerships. Figure 2 depicts these ten forms of relationship marketing that reflects the pervasiveness of the relationship marketing phenomenon in almost all areas of business. This ubiquitous nature of the relationship marketing thought grants it the status of a new marketing paradigm and makes it a buzzword that every firm strives to incorporate in its marketing practices and strategies.

Figure 2: Ten forms of relationship marketing



Source: Morgan, R.M. and Hunt, S.D. (1994), "The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing", *Journal of Marketing,* Vol. 58, January, pp. 20-38.

From relationship marketing to relationshipquality:

Relationship marketing philosophy has evolved over the years and has underscored the importance of quality relationships between the dyadic partners. The relationship marketing strategies of a business firm should aim at building, strengthening and sustaining quality relationships with customers. This is accomplished by determining the strength and depth of the relationship thereof. This intangible yet very vital phenomenon is referred to as 'relationship quality' in the marketing literature. Relationship quality is nested within the broader relationship marketing framework. The essence of relationship marketing lies in building quality relationships with the stakeholders. Over time, emphasis has shifted from relationship marketing to relationship quality. The likelihood of a buyer-seller relationship being sustained in the long-run is evaluated by measuring the *quality* of such dyadic relationship. Relationship quality, that determines the extent of lastingness of a business relationship, thus lies at the core of relationship marketing.

Relationship quality and its Dimensions:

Although intermittent references to relationship quality were made by marketing scholars (Levitt, 1983), it received formal attention in the year 1987 when Evert Gummesson, in his seminal work in the context of an Ericsson quality programme, presented the concept of 'relationship quality'. The concept of relationship quality is still nascent and in the early stages of development. Relationship quality may be easy to visualize, but it is difficult to define. Relationship quality is per se about an interaction assessment (Vieira et al., 2008). There is no clear-cut definition of relationship quality and unanimity on its components. The amorphous nature of the relationship quality construct, which may be due to its context-dependency (i.e. business-to-business or business-to-consumer), continues to elude researchers as far as its measurement is concerned. Over a period of time, multi-item scales have been developed to assess relationship quality.

"Relationship quality is a higher-order construct comprised of a variety of positive relationship outcomes that reflect the overall strength of a relationship and the extent to which it meets the needs and expectations of the parties" (Smith, 1998). It is the "cognitive evaluation of business interactions by key individuals in the dyad, comparatively with potential alternative interactions" (Vieira et al., 2008). Relationship quality centres on "the overall nature of the relationship" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002) and is conceptualised as the "customer's assessment of the interpersonal relationship with the contact person" (Macintosh, 2007). Relationship quality is also defined as the "degree of appropriateness of a relationship to fulfil the needs of the customer associated with the relationship" and is comprised of "three components viz. the customer's perception of service or product-related quality, the customer's trust in the relationship partner, and the customer's commitment to that partner" (Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997). While Kumar et al. (1995) have viewed relationship quality as a higher-order construct encompassing five constructs: conflict, trust, commitment, willingness to invest in the relationship, and expectation of continuity; it has been conceptualised as a six dimensional construct (viz. trust, satisfaction, commitment, minimal opportunism, customer orientation, and ethical profile) by Dorsch et al. (1998), a three dimensional construct (viz. trust, commitment and satisfaction) by Walter et al. (2003); a four dimensional construct comprising of commitment, satisfaction, trust, and service quality by Rauyruen and Miller (2007); and also as a four-dimensional construct (trust, conflict, expectations of continuity, and disengagement) by Jap et al. (1999).

It may be noted here that in the past studies a few of these dimensions have not been found to be having empirical support. Moreover, a few of the dimensions have been used as antecedents of relationship quality (Roberts et al., 2003) probably because of different research contexts i.e., business-to-business or business-to-consumer. However, the majority view seems to be that relationship quality is a multidimensional concept and is comprised of three core dimensions viz. trust, satisfaction and commitment (Vieira et al., 2008; Athanasopoulou, 2009). The three dimensions of relationship quality namely trust, satisfaction and commitment have been used in many recent studies (Dorsch et al., 1998; Roberts et al., 2003; Walter et al., 2003; Rauyruen and Miller, 2007; Wu and Li, 2011) and have been validated in different contexts (Athanasopoulou, 2009). "These three related constructs have stood the test of time and scrutiny" (Macintosh, 2007). A brief discussion of these three constructs is as follows:

Trust:

Relationships are built on the foundation of trust. Trust is an essential ingredient for good relationships. Trust has been considered as a component of relationship quality by most researchers (Crosby et al., 1990; Kumar et al., 1995; Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997; Parsons, 2002; Roberts et al., 2003; Rauyruen. and Miller, 2007; Macintosh, 2007; Roy and Eshghi, 2013).

According to Moorman et al. (1992) "Trust is defined as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence." Morgan and Hunt (1994) theorize that "trust is central to all relational exchanges." They conceptualize "trust as existing when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity."

Trust is of two types, namely, trust in a firm's credibility (or honesty) and trust in a firm's benevolence (Ganesan, 1994; Kumar et al., 1995). Trust in a firm's credibility is the customer's belief that the firm's word can be relied on, that they are sincere, and that they will perform their role effectively and reliably that will result in positive outcomes for him/her (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Ganesan, 1994; Kumar et al., 1995). On the other hand, trust in a firm's benevolence is the customer's perception of the extent to which the firm is concerned about the welfare of the customer (Kumar et al., 1995). Trust increases as the buyer-seller relationship matures. Doney and Cannon (1997) have outlined the five cognitive processes through which trust can be established in business relationships. It is shown in Figure 3 below:

Figure 3: Trust-building processes, generic drivers and factors that invoke each process

Trust-Building Processes, Generic Drivers, and Factors that Invoke Each Process

Trust-Building Process	Generic Driver of the Process	Factors that Invoke the Trust-Building Process
Calculative: Trustor calculates the costs and/or rewards of a target acting in an untrustworthy manner	Costs are higher when a target makes larger and/or relationship-specific investments	•supplier firm reputation •supplier firm size •supplier firm willingness to customize •supplier firm confidential information sharing •length of relationship with supplier firm •length of relationship with salesperson
Prediction: Trustor develops confidence that target's behavior can be predicted	Trustor learns more about the target through repeated and broader experience	•length of relationship with supplier firm •salesperson likability •salesperson similarity •frequent social contact with salesperson •frequent business contact with salesperson •length of relationship with salesperson
Capability: Trustor assesses the target's ability to fulfill its promises	Evidence of the target's ability to fulfill its promises	•salesperson expertise •salesperson power
Intentionality: Trustor evaluates the target's motivations	Target's words and/or behavior indicates concern for the trustor	•supplier firm willingness to customize •supplier firm confidential information sharing •salesperson likability •salesperson similarity •frequent social contact with salesperson
Transference: Trustor draws on "proof sources," from which trust is transferred to the target	Identification of trusted sources closely associated with the target	•supplier firm reputation •supplier firm size •trust of supplier firm •trust of salesperson

Source: Doney, P.M. and Cannon, J.P. (1997), "An examination of the nature of trust in buyer-seller relationships", *Journal of Marketing,* Vol. 61, April, pp. 35-51.

In services marketing, Berry and Parasuraman (1991, cited in Morgan and Hunt, 1994) find that "customer–company relationships require trust". This is because the customers buy the service before actually experiencing it. Intangible products are completely absent before being purchased and therefore, not available for prior inspection. Moreover, they are inherently people-intensive with regard to their production and delivery (Levitt, 1983). So, trust plays a crucial role in marketing of services.

Relationship Satisfaction:

The basic principle of relationship marketing is to create and retain customers who are happy that they chose a firm and who think that they are getting value and feel valued (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991, cited in Dorsch et al., 1998). Profits are earned through customer satisfaction. In fact, profitability is boosted by focusing on present customers because satisfaction leads to lower costs, higher customer retention and higher revenue (Storbacka et al., 1994). "Satisfaction refers to the degree to which interactions between the buyer and the seller meet their expectations for performance and can be based on evaluations of the tangible product or non-product related attributes such as delivery, service, or communication" (Wilson, 1995, cited in Parsons, 2002). In relationship quality research, satisfaction has been taken as a dimension of relationship quality by numerous researchers (Crosby et al., 1990; Parsons, 2002; Roberts et al., 2003; Rauyruen and Miller, 2007; Macintosh, 2007; Roy and Eshghi, 2013).

Zeithaml (1981) contends that customers tend to maintain relationship with the service provider in a bid to obtain "optimum satisfaction" from the latter. Becoming a "regular customer" allows the service provider to gain knowledge of the customer's tastes and preferences, ensures better treatment and encourages more interest in customer's satisfaction. Several research studies (e.g. Crosby and Stephens, 1987; Singh, 1991, cited in Macintosh, 2007) have established that service customers often make several distinct assessments of satisfaction, including satisfaction with the core service, the service personnel and the service firm.

Relationship satisfaction is conceptually different from product- or transaction-specific satisfaction, for which the backbone of research has been the expectancy-disconfirmation framework (Oliver, 1980). While product- and transaction-specific satisfactions deal with a customer's experiences with specific episodic product or transaction encounters with an exchange partner, relationship satisfaction has to do with the customer's experience with the sum-total of product and transaction encounters over the life span of the relationship (Alhassan, 2005). Satisfaction or more specifically relationship satisfaction is thus a cumulative construct that captures the customer's global evaluation of fulfillment in the relation (Dwyer and Oh, 1987) based on all experiences with a service provider (Storbacka et al., 1994).

COMMITMENT:

Parties identify commitment among exchange partners as key to achieving valuable outcomes for themselves, and they endeavour to develop and maintain this precious attribute in their relationships. Therefore, commitment has been theorized as "central to all the relational exchanges between the firm and its various partners" (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In studies on buyer-seller relationship quality, commitment has been considered as a dimension of relationship quality by many researchers (Kumar et al., 1995; Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997; Roberts et al., 2003; Walter et al., 2003; Rauyruen and Miller, 2007).

Moorman et al. (1992) have defined commitment to the relationship as "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship." Commitment refers to "an implicit or explicit pledge of relational continuity between exchange partners" (Dwyer et al., 1987). Storbacka et al. (1994) define commitment as "the parties' intentions to act and their attitude towards interacting with each other. High relationship value will affect commitment positively." Morgan and Hunt (1994) propose that "relationship commitment is central to relationship marketing." They define relationship commitment as "an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely."

Commitment is categorized into two types viz. emotional and calculative. *Emotional (or affective) commitment* is where the customer's attachment to the business firm is focused on long-term co-operation and is based on feeling, rather than any rational consideration of the facts (Moorman et al., 1993, cited in Hennig-Thurau, 2000). *Calculative commitment* is based on those cost/benefit considerations which drive the immediate continuation of the customer–company relationship, such as sunk costs or the costs associated with a change of supplier (Hennig-Thurau, 2000). Of the various kinds of commitment, only affective commitment influences the degree to which the customer wants to maintain a relationship with the firm (Roberts et al., 2003).

Thus, it may be seen that relationship marketing is a new marketing paradigm which bears the potential of leveraging exchange relationships to bring about increased profitability for the firm in the form of repeat sales and positive word-of-mouth communications by the exchange partner. Trust, satisfaction and commitment have been referred to as the building blocks of relationship marketing (Vieira et al., 2008) and appropriately reflect the quality of exchange relationships. The focus of the relationship marketing strategies of the firm should, therefore, be on the enrichment of the quality of the exchange relationships over time.

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