The Use of the 'Face with Tears of Joy' Emoji on WhatsApp:
A Conversation-Analytical Approach

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Abstract

'Face with tears of joy' (1F602), a face laughing so hard that it cries, is one of the most popular emojis on many platforms. This paper analyzes the use of this pictograph in a corpus of dyadic WhatsApp chats using digital conversation analysis. In particular, it compares the use of this emoji on WhatsApp with the sequence organization of laughter in face-to-face interaction. Two patterns of use are found: when placed at the end of the utterance, the emoji 'face with tears of joy' usually signals the 'laughable' and indexes an invitation to laugh, while the acceptance of the invitation is usually performed by repeated 'face with tears of joy' emojis standing alone. Besides contributing to literature on the interactional functions of emojis, these findings have implications in training automatic emoji classifiers or in improving social media marketing and chatbot systems.

Introduction

'Face with tears of joy' (😂 codepoint U+1F602) is one of the most well-known emojis: in 2017 it was voted as the most popular emoji of all time by Twitter users, and, despite recent criticism (see Burge 2021), it is the most used pictograph on almost every platform. It was so popular that Oxford Dictionaries named it the Word of the Year in 2015,[1] acknowledging the wide use of this yellow face: according to data analyzed by the institution, it made up between 17% (in the US) and 20% (in the UK) of the emojis used, rising sharply from the 4-9% of the previous year. *Emojipedia* describes this emoji as:

> A yellow face with a big grin, uplifted eyebrows, and smiling eyes, each shedding a tear from laughing so hard. Widely used to show something is funny or pleasing.[2]

This description suggests that, visually, this pictograph reproduces laughing to the point of tears, and its function is considered a response to something funny. We usually think that laughter occurs as a response to jokes and humor (Provine 1996). Nevertheless, studies in neuropsychology and conversation analysis (henceforth CA) have long attested that the main function of laughter is not reacting to something funny, but rather inviting to laugh, showing understanding, remediate offence or trouble telling, and emotion regulation (Scott et al. 2014; Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1977; Jefferson 1987). The present paper analyzes the use of the highly popular 'face with tears of joy' emoji, comparing its use with laughter in face-to-face interaction, thus contributing to literature on digital CA (Giles et al., 2015).

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, I will review literature on emojis, focusing on linguistic research. I then argue that digital CA is a suitable method to analyze the functions of 'face with tears of joy,' in comparison with face-to-face laughter. Thus, I review some of the main findings of conversation-analytical studies on laughter in face-to-face interaction, which I employ to explain the patterns of use of the selected emoji in the corpus. Subsequently, I describe the methodology (the corpus of WhatsApp chats and the two analytical steps). The presentation of the results consists of two phases: first, I analyze the corpus in its entirety, and I find general patterns of use of the emoji 'face with tears of joy;' in the subsequent section, I analyze these patterns drawing on excerpts from the corpus. Lastly, the research questions are answered, the results are discussed, and the limitations of the study are highlighted. The conclusions

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[1] 'Word of the Year 2015.' Accessed March 21, 2021, from languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2015/.
[2] 'Face with Tears of Joy Emoji.' Accessed March 16, 2021, from emojipedia.org/face-with-tears-of-joy/.

of the paper underline possible applied implications of the findings for automatic emoji classifiers, social media marketing, and the improvement of chatbot systems or virtual assistants.

Background

Despite circulating since the 90s, research on emojis did not take off until the last decade, in part due to the confusion between 'emoticon' (referring to smileys composed by ASCII characters) and emojis (Tang and Hew 2019). Most research on emojis is based on two premises. First, like ASCII emoticons (see Derks, Fischer, and Bos 2008), emojis are considered as a tool to express emotions (Riordan 2017a; Jaeger and Ares 2017) in CMC. This has justified a consistent body of research on the sentiment of emojis (see, for example, Novak et al. 2015; Wijeratne et al. 2017). Second, many studies have analyzed the semantic functions of emojis, considering the meaning of emojis and their interpretation in isolation from the textual context in which they are embedded (Wiseman and Gould 2018; Barbieri, Ballesteros, and Saggion 2017). Although it has been found that these pictographs can be successfully used in a wide variety of situations and publics, such as surveys, consumer research or health communication (Jaeger and Ares 2017; Jaeger, Roigard, and Ares 2018; Das, Wiener, and Kareklas 2019; Barros et al. 2014), emojis are usually embedded in conversations. Linguistic studies analyzing the use of emojis in naturally occurring contexts found that, beside indexing emotional content, they carry out different linguistic, pragmatic, and structural functions.

Linguistic research on emojis

The popular press and some researchers have claimed that emojis can be considered a new universal language (Azuma and Ebner 2008; Danesi 2017; see Thurlow and Jaroski 2020 for a recent analysis of the linguistic ideology expressed in the press around these pictographs). Linguistic research on emojis has found that these pictographs can be used to replace words, entire phrases, or speech acts (Siebenhaar 2018; Herring and Dainas 2017), and that emoji sequences display some sort of syntax (Ge and Herring 2018). Nevertheless, they are far from being considered a language (Herring and Dainas 2017; McCulloch 2019), a new writing system (Albert 2020; Sergeant 2019), or even a pidgin.[3] Pragmatic research on the use of emojis in naturally occurring interactions found that they carry out a wide variety of functions, such as signaling or changing the illocutionary force of the utterance they are attached to, indexing playfulness, and as hedging devices (Zhang, Wang, and Li 2020; Herring

and Dainas 2017; Beißwenger and Pappert 2019; Al Rashdi 2018). They are helpful to build rapport or create a sense of community, even when used idiosyncratically (Sampietro 2019; Pérez-Sabater 2019; Riordan 2017b).

Research on the interactional functions of emojis is still in its infancy. In studying the placement and position of emojis in conversation, researchers have mainly compared these pictographs to punctuation marks (Sampietro 2016b; Pappert 2017). Previous research suggests that ASCII emoticons help manage a conversation, such as signaling turn completion, giving the floor to the interlocutor, and closing out topics or entire conversations (Vela Delfa and Jiménez Gómez 2011; Markman and Oshima 2007). Recent studies indicate that emojis can also help manage the conversational flow. Beside 'punctuating' textual messages, pictographs can be used in openings and closings (Cantamutto 2019; Al Rashdi 2018), or as backchannel devices (Choe 2018; Sampietro 2016a).

Studies that apply methods drawn from what has been called 'digital CA' (see Giles et al. 2015) to emojis or other icons are scarce. Three of these studies consider the sequence organization of laughter. Using CA and discursive psychology, Flinkfeldt (2014) examined how humor is used in an online forum thread to legitimize gender equality and housework during extended sick leave. The author observes that smileys and laugh particles (such as *hahaha*) were used by participants to signal the humorous stance and to manage sensitive matters. Gibson, Huang, and Yu (2018) examined the functions of the 'face-covering hand' emoji available on WeChat. They found that its 'communicative actions' were related to the use of laughter in interactions in Chinese culture. The third study (König 2019) is based on a corpus of WhatsApp chats and found that the emoji 'face with tears of joy', used in combination with laugh particles, help to contextualize a specific laughing stance, shared laughter ('laughing with'), while other emojis, such as 'squinting face' or the emojis showing the tongue sticking out are used to signal that the person is teasing. In sum, König's (2019) study found that emojis are useful at making the laughter stance explicit, while the interactional functions of laughter are better performed by laugh particles (König 2019; Petitjean and Morel 2017). This paper aims to contribute to this body of research by exploring the use of a specific type of emoji, 'face with tears of joy'. This emoji displays a face blatantly laughing, and its previously quoted description from *Emojipedia* suggests that it is used to show amusement. Research on the pragmatic meaning of emojis confirms that one of the functions of this emoji is signaling or acknowledging humor (Sampietro 2021; König 2019), assuming some of the functions of laughter in face-to-face dialogues (Glenn 1989). This does not mean that there is a

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[3] Stockton, N. 2015. Emoji - Trendy Slang or a Whole New Language? Available at wired.com/2015/06/emojitrendy-slang-whole-new-language.

straightforward equivalence between emojis and laughter. In CMC many of the non-verbal cues which are usually available face-to-face are not accessible. Some reactions, such as laughter, should then be 'typed' by participants, thus becoming intentional. Nevertheless, online interactions can still be considered an adaptation of oral exchanges, with specific differences and adjustments aimed at achieving specific actions (Paulus, Warren, and Leister 2016). In order to analyze the specific actions carried out by 'face with tears of joy' on WhatsApp, this paper will first review the organization and functions of laughter in oral exchanges.

Laughter in face-to-face interaction

In contrast to the lack of studies on laughter in CMC, laughing face-to-face is a key issue in CA research. Laughter is organized in laugh units (syllables such as *ha*), placed with precision (even if unintentionally) in the interaction (Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1977). Laughter rarely interrupts the stream of speech, but rather occurs at the end of a spoken phrase (Provine 1993; Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1977), a phenomenon described as the 'punctuation effect' (Provine 1993). One of the reasons is that laughter and speech compete for access to the vocalization channel, and speech usually wins (Provine 1996, 42). Conversation analysts also found that laughter regularly follows the completion of a laughable utterance (Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1977), to explicitly signal the humorous referent. Another crucial finding about laughter is that it is an indexical phenomenon, which means that it refers to something (Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1977). It can refer backwards (showing appreciation), or forward (projecting the course of talk). As for the response, in conversations between two people, the recipient of the invitation to laugh can accept it by laughing or remaining silent or rejecting it by speaking (Glenn 1989). Usually laughter is followed by laughter: Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff (1977) even consider laughable/laughter an adjacency pair, i.e., a basic unit of interaction composed by two-parts in sequence (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974).

The purpose of this study is to analyze if these interactional rules valid in face-to-face interaction (laughter does not interrupt the stream of speech, laughter can index an invitation to laugh, the recipient should accept or decline it) are also valid in CMC, by studying the use of the emoji 'face with tears of joy' in a corpus of dialogues that took place on a popular instant messaging mobile application, WhatsApp. This research seeks to find and study the patterns of use of 'face with tears of joy' in this application with regard to placement, functions, and response. The research questions, thus, are as follows:

- RQ1: How is the emoji 'face with tears of joy' placed in WhatsApp interactions?
- RQ2: How do users index an invitation to laugh using the emoji 'face with tears of joy'?

- RQ3: How do users respond to an invitation to laugh performed by 'face with tears of joy'?

Methods

Data

Data for this study consist of a corpus of dyadic WhatsApp chats compiled around 2015. Although the use of the emoji 'face with tears of joy' is widespread in different social media platforms, WhatsApp is especially suitable for analyzing laughter in conversation, as humans laugh more with people they know, and this instant messaging application is considered a private channel of communication (see Karapanos, Teixeira, and Gouveia 2016) used to connect with friends or acquaintances. Participants were recruited among university students and colleagues from the author's former institution, as well as among acquaintances. They provided demographic information (age and gender), signed informed consent, and sent a log of the WhatsApp chats they were willing to share by email. The corpus included around 50 dyadic WhatsApp chats written by 120 subjects aged 16-65 (42 males, 77 females, 1 other). As the focus of this study is the use of 'face with tears of joy,' the analysis presented in this paper will focus only on conversations containing this emoji. In this paper, I will consider excerpts of the transcripts framed by openings and/or closings or those that can be considered thematically independent as 'conversations.'

Method of Analysis

The data was analyzed in two steps. Like the analysis of laugh particles on WhatsApp carried out by Petitjean and Morel (2017), the first step was to identify general patterns regarding the use of the emoji 'face with tears of joy,' specifically its position in the message (standing alone, placed at the beginning, middle, or end of the string of text), and how many times it was repeated. Two recurrent patterns of use of the emoji were then found, which were thoroughly analyzed in the second step of the analysis. This consisted of examining excerpts of the corpus containing 'face with tears of joy' using digital CA (Giles et al. 2015). In particular, I compared the use of this emoji in the corpus with the main findings of studies on laughter in face-to-face dyadic conversations with regard to its placement in the utterance, its purpose, referents, and responses (Glenn 1989; 2003; Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1977; 1987).

Results

Step 1: Finding patterns

'Face with tears of joy' was the second most used emoji in the corpus after 'face throwing a kiss.' It appeared 194 times in 65 messages relating to 36 conversations.

As illustrated in Table 1, this emoji was mainly standing alone (i.e., the message was composed only of this emoji) or placed at the end of the message, this is in final position.

Table 1

Position	Number of emojis 😂	Messages with emoji 😂
Alone	116 (60%)	31 (49%)
Final	61 (31%)	25 (38%)
Middle	13 (7%)	5 (8%)
Opening	1 (1%)	1 (2%)
Sequence	3 (2%)	2 (2%)
Total	194 (100%)	65 (100%)

Number and position of the emojis in the messages (count and relative frequencies). Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

As for repetitions, it was usually repeated once (22 messages, 34%) or twice (13 messages (20%) and to a lesser extent 3 or 4 times (8 messages each, 12%).

Table 2 interrelates the position of the emoji 'face with tears of joy' with the number of repetitions.

Table 2

	Position					
Rep-eti-tions	alone	fi-nal	mid-dle	open-ing	se-quence	Tot.
1	9%	17%	5%	2%	2%	34%
2	6%	12%	0%	0%	2%	20%
3	9%	3%	0%	0%	0%	12%
4	9%	2%	2%	0%	0%	12%
5	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%
6	8%	0%	2%	0%	0%	9%
7	2%	3%	0%	0%	0%	5%
8	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%
10	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	2%
Tot.	49%	38%	8%	2%	3%	100%

Repetitions of 'face with tears of joy' in the message depending on the position (percentages)

Two patterns of use of 'face with tears of joy' in the corpus emerge: when the emoji is placed at the end of the message, it is usually repeated once (11 instances, 17%) or twice (8 instances, 12%), while when standing alone it is typically repeated once (6 instances, 9%) to four or six times. These patterns are analyzed in detail in the following section with the help of excerpts from the corpus.

Studies in CA have found that when an invitation to laugh in face-to-face interaction is performed, laughter is placed after the utterance or within it (Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1977). The position of 'face with tears of joy' partially follows this pattern, as it is usually located at the end of a message or standing alone. Indeed, even in the 5 cases in which the emoji is placed in the middle position, it does not break the utterance. The only case of interruption (transcribed in example 1) is when it is employed for 'metalinguistic' uses, that is, the user is talking about the emoji itself.

Example 1:[4]

[…]
1. M: Está entre éste 😂 y éste 😴
   He's between this one 😂 and this one 😴

Step 2: Explaining the patterns

Quantitative data in the previous section shows that 'face with tears of joy' is placed at the end of the message, repeated once or twice, or when standing alone in a message, it is usually repeated 1 to 4 times. The analysis of the corpus shows that these two positions correspond to two different patterns of use, as I will discuss in detail below.

First pattern: final position, repeated once or twice

In two-party conversations, laughter can be used by the current speaker to index what has been said as humorous (Glenn, 1989). When 'face with tears of joy' is placed at the end of a message, it usually fulfils this function of signaling the 'laughable.' Let us consider, for example, the following excerpt (example 2). Manu and Pau are two teenage cousins who enjoy going out together. L and S are their mothers.

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[4] Examples are transcriptions of excerpts from the corpus. Names have been changed or anonymized to ensure privacy. The original data were written in Spanish. A line-to-line translation into English is provided. Although original data referred to versions 6.0, 6.1, and 7.0 of the Unicode standard,

the emojis included in this paper have been inserted using the emoji keyboard available on Windows 10. The pictographs displayed in Example 1 are 'face with tears of joy' (1F602) and 'sleeping face' (1F634).

Example 2:[5]

1. L: Hoy tienes huésped otra vez 😛
    Today you have a guest again 😛
2. L: A venido Manu a x el
    Manu's gone to look for him
3. S: 👍
→ 4. S: Lo que ellos no saben es que mañana a las ocho menos cuarto hay repique de campanas hasta morirse😂
    What they don't know is that tomorrow at a quarter to eight there will be church bells ringing to the max 😂
5. L: 😂😂😂
[…]

The emoji 'face with tears of joy' placed at the end of message 4 is used as an invitation to laugh. In message 5, the invitation is accepted. Like other adjacency pairs, laughter is the immediate and adjacent response to a laughable (Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1977). Message 5 in example 2 shows an instance of a repeated 'face with tears of joy' emoji, standing alone in a message, that can be considered a response to the invitation to laugh. This is the second pattern found in the corpus.

Use of 'face with tears of joy' standing alone
As the last message in example 2 demonstrates, 'face with tears of joy' can also be used to communicate a response to humor. In this case, the emoji is frequently repeated, probably to mirror the repetition of the laugh unit (for example, *ha ha ha*) in face-to-face laughter (Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1977). The following example (3), for instance, reproduces a short lighthearted conversation about the Christmas lottery. J, the receiver of the humorous message number 2, simply laughs at the remark by repeating the emoji 'face with tears of joy' 4 times.

Example 3:[6]

1. E: Oé, oé, oé.
    Hey, hey, hey.
2. E: Si tienes un pálpito sobre el número de la lotería de navidad, dímelo por favor
    If you've got a hunch about the Christmas lottery number, please tell me
→ 3. J: 😂😂😂😂

The use of 'face with tears of joy' in this example can be interpreted as accepting the invitation to laugh expressed in the previous message. The conversation then ends. This

short humorous sequence reveals several important differences from face-to-face communication. In oral interaction, sequences of shared laughter constitute a time-out in the conversation (Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1977): after the laughing sequence, interactants resume the dialogue. Moreover, openings and closings (such as greetings and farewells) usually frame in-person interactions (Goffman 1971; Laver 2011). By contrast, the above example shows that openings and closings are not compulsory on WhatsApp. Example 3 illustrates that short humorous conversations can end with laughter, such as a series of emojis. In other words, 'face with tears of joy' emojis can be used as a quick response to show listenership and appreciation of humor without engaging further in the conversation. Ending the conversation with a string of emojis instead of proper closing formulas not only shows a change in how interactions on WhatsApp can be framed comparing to face-to-face communication, but also highlights new functions of 'silence.' Face-to-face interactants can show acceptance of an invitation to laugh by laughing or remaining silent (Glenn 1989); indeed, silence does not terminate laughter's relevance and can be interpreted as an opportunity to further pursue shared laughter (Glenn 1989). On the contrary, on WhatsApp, by ending the conversation, silence seems to be a way to decline pursuing shared laughter. In sum, silence in these dyadic chats can be a way to either end the laughing sequence or to decline to engage in a prolonged one. In the corpus, I found many such short conversations composed by a laughable followed by laughter, which can be considered a simple and quick way to stay connected to the interlocutor at a distance, like sharing and appreciating a meme (Shifman 2014; Yus 2018).

Discussion

The responses to the research questions are as follows:
• RQ1: 'Face with tears of joy' is placed at the end of the message or standing alone. It does not break the utterance as such, like laughter in face-to-face interactions. These two positions correspond to two different functions of laughter.
• RQ2: 'Face with tears of joy' can be used to signal humor, i.e., that a message should be interpreted humorously. This means that the emoji helps to signal the illocutionary force of the utterance, a finding already noted for ASCII emoticons and other emojis as well (Herring and Dainas 2017; Dresner and Herring 2010; Sampietro 2021; Markman and Oshima 2007; König 2019). For this purpose, the emoji is usually placed in the final position (at the end of the message) and repeated only once or twice.

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[5] The emojis displayed in Example 2 are 'face with stuck-out tongue and winking eye' (1F61C) in message 1, 'thumbs up'(1F44D) in message 3 and 'face with tears of joy' (1F602) in messages 4 (displayed once) and 5 (three

times). At the time of data collection, it was still not possible to change emojis' skin tones.
[6] In message 3 four 'face with tears of joy' emojis (1F602) are included.

- RQ3: Sequences of several 'face with tears of joy' emojis are used to reproduce laughter, showing acceptance of an invitation to laugh. In this case, the emojis are usually standing alone and repeated multiple times.

Additional findings discussed in the previous sections include the role of silence and conversational closings. Contrary to face-to-face interaction, silence (that is, no response) can be interpreted as a way to reject laughter. Moreover, in contrast to face-to-face encounters, 'face with tears of joy' can be used to close a conversation (thus without bracketing it in the usual opening and closing formulas, like in face-to-face interactions).

In this study, only responses to verbal jokes or humorous remarks have been considered. The typology of the laughable (such as jokes, personal anecdotes, teasing, self-deprecation, memes, pictures, etc.) may trigger different responses from the audience or the interlocutor. König (2019), for example, analyzed an instance of teasing in a group chat, where the receiver did respond. It is possible that silence is not considered as an appropriate response in the case of teasing. Future research on the pragmatic functions of laughter on WhatsApp could study the relevance of silence as a response to humor.

The limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, this research has only focused on dyadic WhatsApp chats. As König (2019) has already affirmed, laughing sequences can be different in group conversations. On WhatsApp, several factors can influence the dynamics of laughter, such as the number of participants in the group (in large group chats not all users may respond with laughter to a humorous input) and specific dynamics of the group. For example, a recent in-depth analysis of a very active WhatsApp group chat among seniors found that their members usually acknowledged every single humorous posting (Cruz-Moya and Sánchez-Moya 2021). Other studies have compared group chats between males and females (Al Rashdi 2018; Pérez-Sabater 2019) and found differences in the use of emojis. These socio-demographic factors could be taken into account in future studies on the interactional dynamics and emerging conversational norms in private CMC settings.

Second, the corpus was retrieved in 2014-5, when emojis were rather new and there were only half the emojis available nowadays. When the corpus was compiled, there were only two laughing emojis, 'face with tears of joy' and 'grinning face with closed eyes.' In 2016, the emoji 'rolling on the floor laughing' was added to the list; this emoji also sheds two tears.[7] It would be interesting to consider if 'face with tears of joy' and 'rolling on the floor laughing' are used to index different laughing stances on WhatsApp. As new emojis representing smileys and people are among the most requested (see Feng et al. 2019), studying how these emojis are used in real conversations can also help update the design of extant emojis or advise on new additions. Further research could also validate these findings in other platforms or non-dialogical settings. Moreover, future studies could extend the analysis to other emojis, GIFs, and stickers reproducing laughter.

Finally, although 'face with tears of joy' was the second most used emoji in the entire corpus, the total number of instances found (194) is still limited. Nevertheless, this number is considerably adequate to perform digital CA, as this method adopts a micro-analytical approach (Giles et al., 2015). Furthermore, other studies using the same method are along the same lines: König (2019) found 109 instances of laugh particles, Petitjean and Morel (2017) 132 laughter tokens, Gibson (2018) 153 'face covering hand' emojis. Instead of considering big datasets as opposed to micro-data, microanalysis of interaction can yield highly relevant results for applied research.

Conclusions

This paper analyzed the use of the emoji 'face with tears of joy' in a corpus of dyadic WhatsApp chats. Methodologically, it contributes to conversation-analytical studies of emojis and their interactional functions in digital dialogues. The results of this study can have implications for the automatic interpretation of the popular emoji 'face with tears of joy.' Although findings from one platform do not transfer directly to others, the two patterns found in this study ('face with tears of joy' in final position to signal humor and invite laughter *vs* repeated several times and standing alone as a response) can be tested in other platforms and eventually used to train an automatic classifier. The findings of the present research can also have applications in the fields of social media marketing, by providing clues on how to create more authentic posts using this specific emoji on social media or they can be used to improve chatbot conversations, by convincingly simulating a human's use of emojis to signal or respond to humorous remarks.

Acknowledgments

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[7] 'Rolling on the Floor Laughing Emoji.' Accessed March 16, 2021, from emojipedia.org/rolling-on-the-floor-laughing/.

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