

WHY ARE ADOLESCENTS GETTING SO AGGRESSIVE? EXPLORING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF PARENTING STYLES, PERCEIVED STRESS, AND MEDIA EXPOSURE

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated parenting styles, perceived stress, and media exposure as predictors of adolescent aggression. Three hundred and ninety-four (394) secondary school students participated in this study in Nsukka geographical areas. A convenient sampling method was employed in selecting the participants. Four instruments were used in the study: the Parenting Style Inventory II (PSI II), the Perceived Stress Scale, the Content-Based Media Scale, and the Aggressive Behavioural Scale. Three hypotheses were developed. Data generated were analysed using Hierarchical Multiple Regression. The result of the study shows that only the permissive parenting style positively and significantly predicted aggression ($\beta = .16, p = .021$), whereas authoritative and authoritarian did not. Moreover, the result also indicated that perceived stress positively and significantly predicted aggression ($\beta = .31, p < .001$). The result also shows that the antisocial content dimension of the media exposure positively and significantly predicted aggression ($\beta = .26, p < .001$), whereas the prosocial content dimension did not significantly predict aggression. The implication of the study was discussed, and recommendations were made.

Keywords: Aggression, Media Exposure, Parenting Style and Perceived Stress

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence, which spans the ages of 10 to 19, is a time for developing knowledge and skills, learning to regulate emotions, and acquiring traits and abilities essential for enjoying adolescence and adult roles (Sidhu et al., 2019). Teenagers worldwide have many mental health problems because they are in a crucial and formative stage of development marked by significant biological and social changes (Ughasoro et al., 2022). Over the years, adolescents' aggressive behaviour seems to have assumed gargantuan dimensions. Increasing numbers of students are engaging in physical and verbal violence, using abusive language, making fun of others, calling them names, arguing over trivial matters, and refusing to speak after an argument (Chopra & Devdutt, 2021). Because of the pervasive impact of emotions on behaviour, personality, and health in today's fast-paced world, research is needed to tackle this growing problem and significant public health issue.

In social psychology, aggression refers to behaviours designed to harm another individual (Thakur & Grewal, 2021). There are two categories of aggression: instrumental aggression and hostile aggression. While instrumental aggression is used to achieve a goal or accomplish a purpose, hostile aggression is intended to harm others. Hostile aggression includes physical and verbal overt aggression as well as social aggression. Physical violence is the intentional infliction of pain to cause distress, such as punching, pushing, or hurling objects. Verbal aggression is using offensive language, such as shouting and screaming, that harms a person's emotions and reputation and diminishes their worth. Social violence is the act of undermining the social standing and friendships of others. Heavy silence and neglect are examples of forms of social aggression.

Ellis (2004) categorizes aggression into healthy and unhealthy. He described healthy aggression as the aggressiveness that tends to abet the goals of remaining alive, being relatively happy, living successfully in a social group, and relating intimately with some selected group members. It could also mean decisively, vigorously, and persistently pursuing a goal. On the other hand, he conceptualizes unhealthy aggression as a form of aggressiveness that tends to undermine fundamental human goals. These behaviours are based on what he calls irrational masturbatory cognitions that block the fulfillment of the laudable values, goals, and aspirations of an individual and a group. Irrespective of the way aggression may be grouped, it serves as a utilitarian value for the aggressor (Franzoi, 2000). The deliberate nature of aggressive behaviour makes it a violation of social norms (Agbonlue, 2022).

Teen psychological discord is primarily caused by strained relationships with parents, teachers, seniors, and peers, academic underachievement relative to high expectations, the desire to investigate sexual practices and substance abuse (Sidhu et al., 2019), genetic factors and the environment closest to the child (Loukas et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2000). The impact of aggressive behaviour among adolescents has resulted in several disturbing outcomes both within the home and outside. Aggressive behaviour in adolescence can be indicative of future dysfunction, including antisocial behaviour and substance abuse (Fergusson et al., 2007; Gruenwald, 2017; Schaeffer et al., 2003), may impede family or peer relationships as well as academic performance (Dou et al., 2015; Renda & Edward, 2011), and is on the front line of the causes of global adolescent morbidity and mortality (Muarifah et al., 2022). The solution to the problem of aggressive behaviour and other social problems among adolescents in Nigeria could be sought in so many ways, such as constitutional amendment, national orientation programmes, and redesigning of the school curriculum and programme, among others. However, the researcher felt that the answer might lie in another field – parenting styles since the behaviour of individuals stems from orientation (Bandura, 1986).

Parenting style can be defined as how a person parents (Horner, 2000), which includes the interaction between the person (as father or mother or guardian) and his/her children. There are four distinct parenting styles: authoritarian, permissive, authoritative, and neglectful (Baumrind, 1991). These four parenting styles are determined by the emphasis a parent puts on responsiveness (the warmth and attention the parent gives to the child) and demandingness (how much control the parent places on the child's behaviour). According to (Baumrind, 1991), authoritarian parents have high demandingness but low responsiveness. These parents are very demanding, uncompromising, and physical. They set strict rules and expect complete obedience from their children. Permissive parents have high responsiveness but low demandingness. These parents want their children to be creative and to explore the world to such an extent that they never place any limits on their children. Authoritative parents have both high demandingness and high responsiveness. These parents set high goals for their children and give large amounts of emotional support. They set limits for their children but explain why they should do so. For neglectful parents, they have both low demandingness and low responsiveness. These parents are uninvolved and uninterested in their children. They set no limits for their children and offer no support (Baumrind, 1991).

Cole & Cole (1989) opined that adolescents with authoritative parents tend to be withdrawn, moody, obedient, fearful of new situations, and have low self-esteem. They also have trouble socializing with others. They also stated that adolescents with permissive parents tend to be more creative but are behaviorally and verbally impulsive and aggressive and have trouble with school-imposed limits. Such adolescents also believe that their parents do not care about them or how they behave. Adolescents with authoritative parents are likely to foster positive development. They have high self-esteem, are socially confident, inquisitive, self-assured, and

self-reliant, and they also have high respect for their parents (Cole & Cole, 1989). Adolescents with neglectful parents are in the most danger of engaging in antisocial behaviour. Drug and alcohol use is exceptionally high in adolescents raised by neglectful parents (Baumrind, 1991).

Numerous studies have linked parental variables and adolescents' aggressive behaviours (Akinnowo et al., 2019; Álvarez-García, 2016; Osiesi, 2023). Aroyewum, Adeyemo, and Nnabuko (2022) found that the authoritarian parenting style was positively related to aggressive behaviour; Masud et al. (2019) found that authoritative parenting styles influence children's psychological behaviour positively, whereas authoritarian and permissive parenting styles result in aggressive and hostile behaviour. Some studies, however (García et al., 2018; Perez-Gramaje et al., 2020) reported that aggressive and non-aggressive adolescents shared a typical pattern: indulgent and authoritative parenting styles were consistently associated with better outcomes than authoritarian and neglectful parenting, but indulgent parenting was associated with the best outcomes across all criteria. In contrast to previous evidence suggesting that parental strictness and imposition may be advantageous for raising aggressive adolescents, their findings demonstrate the positive influence of parental warmth on aggressive adolescents. The environment a child grows in can equally determine how the child responds to negative experiences and incredibly stressful experiences.

Generally, stressful life experiences are regarded as an essential environmental contribution to the chance of developing psychiatric issues in teenagers (Lindholdt et al., 2021). Among the daily stresses faced by school-aged children are being away from home, worrying about peer relationships, worrying about schoolwork, changing bodies, dreading being different (Widnall et al., 2022), divorce of their parents, relocating to a new school, a severe illness of a parent, or academic failure (Jewett & Patterson, 2003). Researchers have found developmental differences in coping with stress. Older adolescents tend to use a more excellent array of coping strategies, especially cognitive-oriented strategies, to reduce the impact of the stressor compared to younger adolescents (Williams & McGillicuddy-De, 1999). Several studies have linked perceived stress with aggressive behaviours among adolescents (Estévez et al., 2018; Izuchi & Anetoh, 2014; Shalani et al., 2018).

Another variable that has been linked to the aggressive behaviour of adolescents is media exposure. According to Slater (2003), media exposure could be selective exposure to violent media content on television, videos, movies, and video game. According to Anderson (2016), media violence simply refers to situations and narratives in which at least one character acts aggressively towards at least one other character. Even if there is no blood, gore, or screams of agony, television, movies, and video games in which characters fight, for example, in boxing or wrestling, or say mean things about each other (often referred to as relational aggression), or kill bad guys, are all examples of media violence. Media exposure could have far-reaching effects on adolescents. Adolescents prone to watching violent media programmes are often desensitized to violence; thus, they see it as a way of resolving conflict. According to Hogan (2005), continuous exposure to media can result in increased acceptability of violence as an acceptable means of problem-solving and goal attainment. While television movies and music videos normalize the carrying and use of weapons, it also glamorizes them as sources of personal power (Federman, 1998). Media exposure seems to have a more significant medium of shaping young people's attitudes and actions than parents' or teachers', replacing them as educators, role models, and primary sources of information about the world and how one behaves (Strasburger, 2006). Famous actors and actresses in current soap operas are often models and mentors for adolescents. They tend to copy their hairdo, clothing styles, swaggers, and even their speech and conduct. Some even try to copy their harmful and contrary behaviour, like sagging their trousers, taking hard drugs, and even being aggressive.

Almost every household possesses a form of audio-visual media device. Even when parents try to regulate what their adolescents watch, it is pretty challenging because their peers can expose them to unwholesome materials at school and other gatherings. Such a scenario makes the fight against exposure to unhealthy media content daunting. As the Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1977) posited, individuals learn by observing, imitating, and modelling the behaviour of others. As they keep watching screen models engage in aggressive behaviours, they may want to imitate them. It has been observed that prolonged exposure to media can have profound health implications such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, nightmares, social isolation, and post-traumatic stress (Anderson et al., 2003; Huesmann et al., 2003), and has been linked to aggression among adolescents (Adjeketa, 2022; Onuigbo et al., 2019). Research on the effects of violent content on interactive media, such as video games and the Internet, is considerably more recent, and studies on its effects on viewers are fewer. Few existing correlational studies did not concurrently check the influence of parenting and perceived stress and media exposure on aggressive behaviour among adolescents (e.g., (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Ojewola, 2014). However, there is a need to understand the role of these variables in predicting aggressive behaviour using a Nigerian population. The following research questions would guide the study: Which parenting style will be significantly associated with adolescent aggression? Will perceived stress significantly predict aggression among adolescents? Will media exposure significantly predict aggression among adolescents?

Furthermore, several empirical pieces of research discussed showed a relationship between Parenting style and aggression (Gülseven et al., 2018), stress and aggression (Shalani et al., 2018), while there was also a relationship between media exposure and aggression (Nazari, 2013). However, many of the studies on these variables were among undergraduates. The findings will be relevant to equip mental health providers with data to plan some interventions early enough to prevent these adolescents from growing into aggressive adults. The following hypotheses were stated to guide the study:

Hypotheses

1. Parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive) would significantly predict adolescent aggression.
2. Perceived stress would significantly predict aggression among adolescents.
3. Media exposure (antisocial and prosocial content) would significantly predict adolescent aggression.

METHOD

Participants

Three hundred and ninety-four (394) secondary school students participated in this study in Nsukka geographical areas. The participants were drawn from six schools including Community secondary school, Isieniu, Nsukka (N=64, SS1-34, SS2-30), Inland secondary school, Opi (N=63, SS1-30, SS2-33), Opi High School, Opi (N=63, SS1-35, SS2-28), Nsukka High School Nsukka (N=62, SS1-32, SS2-30), Model Secondary School, Nsukka (N=73, SS1-38, SS2-35), and Urban Girls Secondary School, Nsukka (N=69, SS1-30, SS2-39). A convenient sampling method was employed in selecting the participants. The participants comprised 205 males and 189 females with an age range of 11-17 years and a mean age of 14. They were predominantly Igbos and Christians.

Instruments

Four instruments were used in the study, namely: the Parenting Style Inventory II (PSI II) developed by Darling and Toyokawa (1997); the Perceived Stress Scale developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983); the Content-Based Media Scale developed by Den et al., (2017) and Aggressive Behavioural Scale developed by Orpinas and Frankowski (2001).

Aggressive Behavioural Scale

The Aggressive Behaviour Scale is a self-report measure containing 11 items. It is an inventory designed from 0 to 6 or more times to measure behaviours that could cause psychological or physical harm to other students. The instrument has two dimensions physical and verbal aggression (1-10 items) and anger (11-12). The items on the scale include the following: I teased students to make them angry; I fought back when someone hit me first; I got angry very quickly with someone. Orpinas and Frankowski (2001) reported a Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient for each subsample, ranging between .86 and .88. The internal consistency scores, estimated with Cronbach's alpha coefficient, were high .87 for the total sample. The present researcher conducted a pilot study involving Senior Secondary One (SSI) students of Annunciation Secondary School, Nike, and reported a reliability coefficient of .82.

Parenting Style Inventory II (PSI II)

Parenting Style Inventory II was developed by Darling & Toyokawa (1997). It consists of fifteen (15) items that measure three forms of parental relationship with their children such as authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting. It is an inventory designed in a Likert-type response format ranging from strongly disagree (S.D.) to agree (S.A.) strongly. The fifteen items are subdivided into three factors: authoritative, permissive, and authoritarian parenting styles. Items 1, 2, 6, 9, 12, and 15 are reverse-scored. The reliability result reported by Darling & Toyokawa (1997) yielded an acceptable level of Cronbach alpha reliabilities as follows: authoritative = .74, authoritarian = .74, and permissive = .75. The present researcher conducted a pilot study involving Senior Secondary One (SSI) students of Annunciation Secondary School, Nike and reported the following reliability co-efficient: authoritarian = .65, authoritative = .60, and permissive = .73.

Perceived Stress Scale

The PSS-10 is a self-report measure of 10 items purported to measure "how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded respondents find their lives" (Cohen & Williamson, 1988, p. 34). The scale was measured using a 5-point Likert scale (0 = never, 1 = seldom, 2 = occasionally, 3 = reasonably frequently, and 4 = frequently). Six of the items are negatively worded (e.g., "How often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?"), and four are positively worded (e.g., "How often have you felt that you were on top of things?"). A total PSS10 score is obtained by reverse scoring the four positively worded items, such as Items 4, 5, 7, and 8, then adding the scores for all ten items. A high score on the PSS10 indicates a higher level of perceived stress. The reliability of the overall measure by the developer was .84. The present researcher conducted a pilot study involving Senior Secondary One (SSI) students of Annunciation Secondary School, Nike, and reported a reliability coefficient of .78.

Content-Based Media Scale

The Content-Based Media Scale is a self-report measure containing 22 items. The scale measures the frequency and differential exposure to a wide variety of media content, particularly antisocial (1-12 items). An example of an item on the scale is how often do you watch (on the Internet/T.V./games/mobile phone/DVD) people who fight? While prosocial content (13-22 items),

an example of an item on the scale is how often you watch (on the Internet/T.V./games/mobile phone/DVD) people who are nice to another person. It is an inventory designed in a Likert-type response format ranging from 1 = Never to 5= = Very often. Den et al. (2017) reported that both the antisocial media content factor and the prosocial content factor were internally consistent (Antisocial: Cronbach $\alpha = .89$; and Prosocial: Cronbach $\alpha = .88$; Total: Cronbach $\alpha = .90$). The present researcher conducted a pilot study involving Senior Secondary One (SSI) students of Annunciation Secondary School, Nike and reported the following: (Antisocial: Cronbach $\alpha = .84$; and Prosocial: Cronbach $\alpha = .90$).

Procedure

With the permission of each school administration, four hundred (400) copies of the questionnaires were administered to participants individually in their classrooms. The nature of the study was explained to the participants, and their sincere responses were sought. They were sufficiently guided after eliciting informed consent from them. The instruments were collected immediately after completion. They received no monetary reward for participating in the study, and the researcher thanked the participants in groups after they completed the instruments. However, out of the 400 questionnaires administered, six had some irregularities and were discarded. Thus, three hundred and ninety-four questionnaires were used for data analysis.

Design/Statistics

The design of the study is a cross-sectional design. Multiple regression analysis was applied to analyse data in the study.

RESULTS

The mean, standard deviation, and correlations between the variables of the investigation are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: **Study Variables' Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations**

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Gender	—	—	—								
2 School type	—	—	.18***	—							
3 Age	—	—	-.07	-.00	—						
4 Authoritative	11.62	4.34	.06	-.03	-.03	—					
5 Permissive	13.18	4.88	.07	.02	-.05	.66***	—				
6 Authoritarian	12.16	5.06	.07	-.05	-.01	.72***	.65***	—			
7 Perceived stress	18.53	4.33	.08	.17***	.04	-.04	-.02	-.02	—		
8 Antisocial content	33.07	8.41	.03	-.01	.18***	.22***	.30***	.34***	.20***	—	
9 Prosocial content	31.98	8.15	-.03	-.01	-.03	.46***	.43***	.52***	-.03	.34***	—
10 Aggression	19.25	13.14	.02	-.01	.28***	.04	.12*	.10*	.31***	.35***	.01

Note: $N = 394$, * = $p < .05$ (two-tailed), *** = $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed). Gender was coded 0 = male, 1 = female; education was coded 0 = SSCE, 1 = OND/NCE, 2 = HND/ Bachelor's degree, 3 = Master's degree and above; age was coded in ranges, such that higher scores represent older age.

The results of the correlations in Table 1 indicated that gender and school type were not significantly correlated with aggression. Age was, however, positively and significantly correlated

with aggression ($r = .28, p < .001$). Of the three parenting styles, only authoritative was not significantly correlated with aggression, whereas permissive ($r = .12, p = .014$) and authoritarian ($r = .10, p = .041$) positively and significantly correlated with aggression. The correlation between perceived stress and aggression was positive and significant ($r = .31, p < .001$). Of the two dimensions of media exposure, antisocial content was positively and significantly correlated with aggression ($r = .35, p < .001$), whereas prosocial content was not significantly correlated with aggression.

The results of hierarchical multiple regression appear in Table 2.

Table 2: Hierarchical Multiple Regression for Predictors of Aggression

Variable	Step 1 β	Step 2 B	Step 3 β	Step 4 β
<i>Controls</i>				
Gender	.04	.03	.01	.00
School type	-.02	-.02	-.07	-.05
Age	.29***	.29***	.28***	.23***
<i>Predictors</i>				
Authoritative		-.12	-.10	-.06
Permissive		.16*	.16*	.13*
Authoritarian		.08	.07	.03
Perceived stress			.31***	.25***
Antisocial content				.26***
Prosocial content				-.11
Adjusted R^2	.076	.094	.185	.233
ΔR^2	.084	.024	.092	.051
ΔF	11.849***	3.528*	44.286***	12.953***

Note: * = $p \leq .05$, *** = $p < .001$.

The results of the hierarchical multiple regression in Table 2, in which aggression was the criterion variable, indicated that the demographic variables entered as controls (i.e., gender, school type, and age) in Step 1 of the equation collectively accounted for a 7.6% variance in aggression. However, only age made a uniquely positive and significant contribution to the prediction of aggression ($\beta = .29, p < .001$), whereas gender and school type did not. When the three dimensions of parenting styles were entered in Step 2 of the equation as predictors, they accounted for an additional 2.4% variance in aggression below that of the control variables. However, only permissive parenting positively and significantly predicted aggression ($\beta = .16, p = .021$), whereas authoritative and authoritarian did not. The introduction of perceived stress in Step 3 of the equation as a predictor contributed an additional 9.2% variance in aggression, over

and above that of the previously entered variables. Perceived stress also positively and significantly predicted aggression ($\beta = .31, p < .001$). Finally, when the two dimensions of media exposure (i.e., antisocial and prosocial content) were entered in Step 4 of the equation as predictors, they accounted for an additional 5.1% variance in aggression below that of the demographic variables and perceived stress but above that of parenting styles. However, only the antisocial content dimension positively and significantly predicted aggression ($\beta = .26, p < .001$), whereas the prosocial content dimension did not significantly predict aggression.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated parenting styles, perceived stress, and media exposure as predictors of aggression among adolescents. The result of the study shows that only permissive parenting style positively predicted aggression ($\beta = .16, p = .021$), whereas authoritative and authoritarian did not. This finding is consistent with Lokoyi (2015), who revealed that a permissive parenting style contributed most to aggressive behaviour among in-school adolescents with mild intellectual disability. There could be various reasons why the present study has revealed such research findings. According to Baumrind (1991), authoritarian parents have high demandingness but low responsiveness. These parents are very demanding, uncompromising, and physical. They set strict rules and expect complete obedience from their children, while authoritative parents have high demandingness and responsiveness. Authoritative parents set high goals for their children and give large amounts of emotional support. They set limits for their children but explain why they should do so. No wonder authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles were not significantly associated with aggressive behaviours. However, a permissive parenting style predicting aggressive behaviour could be attributed to high responsiveness but low demandingness. These parents want their children to be creative and to explore the world to such an extent that they never place any limits on their children. Adolescence seems to be a volatile age, and they are susceptible to many external influences as they try to find their identity. Without strict limits, adolescents may be unable to regulate their emotions while dealing with others and may feel entitled. When they are not getting what they asked for, they may express their displeasure by being aggressive.

Moreover, the result also indicated that perceived stress positively and significantly predicted aggression ($\beta = .31, p < .001$); thus, H_2 was confirmed. This means that students who perceive stress more exhibit more tendencies toward aggressive behaviours. The study is consistent with Olutunde (2017), who found that perceived stress was positively associated with aggression. In addition, Compas, Orosan, & Grant (1993) suggested that stress is positively correlated with aggression among adolescents. Generally, if young people's coping mechanisms are weak, they tend to be aggressive in the face of stress. These adolescents being away from home, worrying about peer relationships, worrying about school work, changing bodies, and some of the daily stressors among teenagers may influence aggressive behaviour. This could be explained by the stress vulnerability model, which shows that stress is an inevitable human factor, and the rate at which individuals are vulnerable differs. Students with a high vulnerability to stress may resort to aggressive behaviour to cope with their stress. In contrast, others with a low vulnerability may cope with the stress they face in their academic pursuits.

The result also shows that the antisocial content dimension positively and significantly predicted aggression ($\beta = .26, p < .001$), whereas the prosocial content dimension did not significantly predict aggression. Therefore, H_{3a} was confirmed, whereas H_{3b} was not confirmed. The finding suggests that students' aggression was positively associated with watching movies in the action genre, where they view their revered cartoon heroes and heroines engaging in aggressive acts, albeit to protect the citizens. The results of this study reveal the need for further attention on television program production to protect adolescents from antisocial behaviours and interventions for violence-exposed children to reduce adverse outcomes. The result could be explained using the social learning theory that emphasises observing and imitating role models' behaviour, attitudes, and emotional reactions. This theory shows that when students watch people displaying aggressive tendencies, they tend to imitate them. These forms of exposure may increase the aggressive tendencies of students.

One implication derived from the findings of this study is the need for parents to give prompt attention to their preferred parenting style since that could predispose their children to maladaptive behaviours. Parents and guardians also need to monitor the exposure of their wards to violent media content as a preventive measure. It may not wholly shield adolescents from academic and other related stresses. However, they can be equipped with stress management skills, instilling the value of resilience, assertiveness, and other coping strategies helpful in their environment.

The present research is limited in that only in-school adolescents were sampled. There may be a need for further research into the lives of out-of-school adolescents and how they fare in the issue of aggressive behaviours.

Summary and conclusion

The present study investigated parenting styles, perceived stress, and media exposure as predictors of aggression among adolescents. The result of the study shows that only the permissive parenting style positively and significantly predicted aggression ($\beta = .16, p = .021$), whereas authoritative and authoritarian did not. Moreover, the result also indicated that perceived stress positively and significantly predicted aggression ($\beta = .31, p < .001$). The result also shows that the antisocial content dimension positively and significantly predicted aggression ($\beta = .26, p < .001$), whereas the prosocial content dimension did not significantly predict aggression. The study concluded that monitoring and placing limits on what children do is the best form of parenting that can serve as a buffer on aggressive tendencies of children.

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