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Using technologies to commemorate International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers in the North East of England

By Angelika Strohmayer¹

Abstract

This article explores the use of digital technologies at the commemoration of International Day To End Violence Against Sex Workers in the North East of England in 2016 and 2017. Learning from sex work research and Human-Computer Interaction literatures, this feminist exploration of the day provides opportunities for more nuanced and contextualised discussions of digital technologies that are used with, and for sex workers and sex work support services. In the paper, I provide an overview of how this day is commemorated internationally before providing a detailed overview of a hyper-localised day organised by Changing Lives, a charity supporting sex workers, people who have experienced sexual exploitation, and those engaged in survival sex. I focus on the ways in which they use digital technologies throughout an activist march and a reflexive commemoration event to better understand the ways in which novel digital technologies could be designed and implemented for these kinds of commemorations in the future.

Introduction

People of all genders both provide and pay for sexual services. In the UK, these services are legal, providing that all involved parties are consenting adults working from private premises. Many aspects of the industry however, are criminalised. For example, although working in groups is often safer, sex workers are not able to do this due to brothels being illegal (two or more sex workers working under the same premises), nor are they allowed to solicit on the streets. The everyday use of digital technologies has played an increasingly centralised role in the lives of sex workers and in the facilitation of sex work support services and rights advocacy. For example, sex workers may use technologies to communicate amongst themselves, with support services, or clients. As a result, researchers are gradually exploring the roles these technologies can play in relation to working conditions (Sanders et al., 2016; Connelly, 2014), as well as their use by sex workers more widely (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Larsen, 1996; Sanders et al., 2018).

As an interdisciplinary field of research, Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) explores the practices through which humans and digital technologies interact, frequently focusing on the methods and design processes involved in the development or use of technologies for digital interaction. Topics such as justice (Fox et al., 2016; Dombrowski

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et al., 2016), feminisms (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2011; Bardzell, 2010a), and sex work (Wall et al., 2015; Strohmayer et al., 2017) are beginning to be embraced by HCI researchers to develop digital technologies. Despite being male-dominated, there has recently been a push in HCI research towards more inclusive, diverse, and even feminist research areas, such as engagement with charities who support homeless women (Le Dantec, 2010), or street harassment in various cultural contexts (Weiss, 2016; Wånggren, 2016; Dimond et al., 2013b; Grove, 2015). Further to this, HCI scholars are beginning to build interpretations of feminist theories (Bardzell, 2010b; Rode, 2011) and research methodologies (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2011) not only through papers, but also through more interactive venues such as workshops (e.g. Bardzell et al., 2011; Fox et al., 2016; Bellini et al., 2018). Alongside this, there has also been a move towards more civic-oriented (DiSalvo & Dantec, 2017), justice-oriented (Dombrowski et al., 2016), and intersectional feminist design and research (Schlesinger et al., 2017) that aspires to address the needs of underrepresented groups, including sex workers (Strohmayer et al., 2017). This work sits alongside and within the evolving space of feminist HCI, and also incorporates elements of sex worker positive feminist theory and practice from interdisciplinary developments in sex work research to explore digital technologies (e.g. Sanders et al., 2018; Cunningham & Kendall, 2011) and digital research methods (e.g. Roberts et al., 2013).

As sex work research provides both expert knowledge and a history of theoretical debate, and HCI literature provides an account of tangible developments in digital technologies, this paper draws on both these areas to explore the use of digital technologies with, and for, sex workers and sex work support services. In this paper, I describe my involvement in commemoration events for International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers (IDEVASW) in 2016 and 2017, which took place in Newcastle Upon Tyne in the UK. I engaged in a collaborative Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) project with a local social care provider that caters directly to sex workers, people who have experienced sexual exploitation, and those engaged in survival sex². I worked alongside staff and service users of a charity to reflect on the ways in which they use digital technologies on IDEVASW. Although part of this involvement was to help design novel digital interactions to facilitate reflections of the day, in this paper I focus on different ways in which mundane and novel technologies were already being used by service providers. The combination of work carried out by the sex work researchers mentioned above and the work some HCI scholars have engaged in allowed me to build a more complicated understanding of the role digital technologies can play in the commemoration of IDEVASW, and service delivery more widely. Ultimately, this paper contributes to both sex work research and HCI literatures, providing a nuanced discussion of the use and potential use of digital technologies in this research space.

Background and Related Work

Social science researchers have explored the ways in which the Internet has affected working practices and experiences of sex workers (Sanders et al., 2018), for both male (Ashford, 2009) and female (Veena, 2007) sex workers specifically, though there is less work on how it has affected trans sex workers (Laing et al., 2018). Some research has been carried out to explore specific elements of the sex industry such as pornography (e.g. Tyson

² This is the language that my research collaborators use to describe their service users.

et al., 2013; Smith, 2015; Liu et al., 2012, though the relation to sex work is not directly addressed), but beyond that HCI has had little work addressing sex work directly. Despite this, there are many papers that have addressed the use of digital technologies for storytelling and activism within sensitive spaces, such as addressing street harassment (Dimond et al., 2013a; Wånggren, 2016), or, through exploration of human values in curating a human rights media archive in post-genocide Rwanda (Durrant et al., 2014). More recently, I have worked on the design of digital technologies in sex work support services directly (Strohmayr et al., 2017) and what designers can learn from this context to better contextualise social justice-oriented interaction design (Strohmayr et al. 2019). I stress the importance of technologies for harm reduction, as well as the value of commonly used or mundane technologies. I also address the importance of technologies to facilitate activism or advocacy in this space, and conclude that any technologies implemented in sex work support services must also address what Dombrowski et al. call ‘just sustainabilities’ (2016). This calls for researchers to work towards ethical, sustainable and just improvements in the use of mundane technologies, for both individual service users and charities more widely.

International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers

December 17th marks the annual International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers (IDEVASW). The commemoration was initiated by the Sex Work Outreach Project USA (SWOP-USA) in 2003 as a response to Gary Ridgeway (the ‘Green River Killer’), who confessed to having murdered 90 women in the Seattle area in the US over 27 years. Annie Sprinkle, one of the initiators writes in an open letter (Sprinkle, n.d.):

When Ridgeway was finally caught, I felt a need to memorialize my whole sisters that had died so horribly and needlessly. I cared, and I knew other people cared too. So I got together with Robyn Few, Founder of the Sex Worker Outreach Project, and SWOP members Stacey Swimme and Michael Fowley, and we claimed Dec. 17th as the International Day to End violence Against Sex Workers.

To commemorate this day, many organisations host remembrance services or march through cities to advocate for the decriminalisation of sex work, the promotion of judgement-free harm reduction services, and sex worker rights. Often, this day is commemorated through a ‘red umbrella march’, where the ‘red umbrella’ functions as a recognised symbol of resistance to discrimination for sex workers (International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE), 2015). Other commemorations may take place privately or semi-privately at remembrance vigils or other events. While supporting an international cause, events that take place on this day are often organised and carried out in highly localised settings, which in turn are often also contextualised in the specific experiences and aims of those who organise and participate in the activities. One element of this activism is the call for the decriminalisation of sex work. Work exploring the use of digital technologies, or any other research in this space, should address its links to sex worker rights activism (Strohmayr et al. 2017; Sanders 2005) and be contextualised in current political and legal climates.

Research Context

In the North East of England, IDEVASW is organised by service users and staff of Changing Lives' 'Girls Are Proud' and 'Male Action' Projects (GAP/MAP), and is supported by other Third Sector and Public Sector organisations in the region.³ GAP/MAP are services that reach out to men and women who have varied experiences and identities in relation to sex work, survival sex, and/or sexual exploitation. Sex workers often face stigma and discrimination in all areas of their work (Jones, 2015; Williamson & Folaron, 2003; Lazarus et al., 2012; Zarhin & Fox, 2017), which is also sometimes referred to as 'whore stigma' (Zarhin & Fox, 2017). This can result in barriers to access health and social care, reporting of crimes, as well as wider social exclusion. There are peer-led services that have developed strategies for reducing the risks of sex work (Neame & Heenan, 2003; Aimee et al., 2015), as well as creative approaches to challenging stigma (Chateauvert, 2013) and improving harm reduction services (Aimee et al., 2015).

Many GAP/MAP service users experience not only whore stigma, but also an intersection of stigmas in relation to homelessness, addiction, offending, or having children in care. GAP/MAP have organised their version of IDEVASW to meet the particular needs of their service users, opting for a closed and private commemoration rather than public engagement. The charity have organised a commemoration of this day for several years, to which only service users and trusted individuals from other organisations were invited. In 2016 however, service users and staff worked together to extend this private service of remembrance to also include a more public-facing red umbrella march. Despite their use of international symbolisms (the red umbrella) and actions (such as marching through the centre of town), the march was also contextualised in the hyper-localised experiences of those involved in its conception.

With this change in their commemoration, they opened up an element of their private remembrance service to members of the public, while also providing a more openly activist stance to this day. June Freeman argued that "people who possess a written history in our society are accorded a different level of respect from those who lack one" (Freeman, 2007). With this in mind, service users, support workers, and researchers worked together to collate the experiences, voices, and histories of those who took part in the march, in order to begin to build an oral history of those who are too often stigmatised and not often enough listened to. Technologies can help to contextualise the research space through in-situ collection of experiences in a way that words alone may not. We worked together to develop a living archive of the experiences of this day. In this paper however, I focus on the use of digital and non-digital technologies and do not describe the building or development of this archive, to better understand the nuances of the purpose of digital technologies on this day.

Methodological Framing

When working to design digital technologies for justice-advocacy and harm reduction for sex workers in the current political, legal, and social climate, building "effective alliances" (Ferris & Allard, 2016, p.192) with actors across sectors such as

³ Changing Lives are a national social care provider in the UK. They provide services for various groups such as sex workers, people engaged in survival sex, and those who have experienced sexual exploitation in their Girls Are Proud and Male Action Project.

academia, sex work support services, and sex worker rights groups can be important. This becomes particularly important when working towards improved safety for sex workers through justice-oriented research and harm reduction service delivery (Rekart, 2005). Working in this way requires embrace the socio-political and socio-technical complexities (Bødker, 2015; Vines et al., 2013; Le Dantec & Fox, 2015; Fitzpatrick, 2003) of GAP/MAP service delivery, as well as wider debates surrounding the use and design of digital technologies with and for sex workers (Sanders et al., 2018; Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Strohmayer et al., 2017). Taking into account the histories and experiences of sex work and HCI research as outlined above, I approach the evaluation, use, and implementation of digital technologies for the commemoration of IDEVASW within a particularly localised setting in the North East of England through social justice-oriented interaction design (Dombrowski et al., 2016) and Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Reid, 2006), which has also been addressed in HCI literatures (Hayes, 2011). This methodology allows all stakeholders to become active participants in the research process, with a focus on reflexivity and multiplicity, as well as a feminist understanding of power disparities in this process.

The framework of ‘action’ oriented research provides collaborators and myself with the opportunity of mutual learning. Through planning, acting, and reflection (Reid, 2006; Kindon et al., 2007), we are able to build on previous ideas and considerations. Simultaneously, we are able to bring together lessons learnt by both charity staff and service users (for example from the implementation of previous IDEVASW commemorations) as well as previous work in this space by myself as a researcher.⁴ This kind of methodology relies on mutual respect, kindness, and requires the researcher to acknowledge and reflect on their privileged position. This project took place over two years and across two commemorations, which allowed us to learn from one FPAR cycle to the next.

HCI has addressed these issues in methodological writing separately, where different authors have explored feminisms (Rode, 2011) and social justice-oriented interaction design (Dombrowski et al., 2016), the role of reflection in research with charities (Durrant & Kirk, 2018), and participatory research (Dindler & Iversen, 2014). Here, however, I want to bring these approaches together, and also develop this further to incorporate learning from FPAR (Maguire, 2008; Reid, 2006) and methodological writing from sex work research (Penfold et al., 2004; Sanders, 2005). Converging these areas, four key values necessary for researchers engaging in this research become apparent: (1) the role of polyvocality and the ways in which we address this through the research design and analysis; (2) participation of participants and researchers throughout the process; (3) the understanding of and commitment to a discussion of politics within the research area; and (4) the importance of reflexive researcher self-disclosure towards collaborators, participants, oneself, and academia.

Bringing together these different-but-similar literatures as outlined above, I am able to work in a way that is respectful to those involved, participatory from conception to completion of the project, and sustainable once I as a researcher leave the field. As such, working in this justice- and action-oriented space provides me with the opportunity to not

⁴ For example, a project I carried out with GAP/MAP to develop a touch-interactive quilt (Strohmayer & Meissner 2017), research with other sex work support services (Strohmayer et al. 2017), and work with charities in different sectors (Strohmayer et al. 2018; Strohmayer et al. 2015).

only contribute to academic debates, but also to facilitate direct action alongside my research collaborators, which ultimately leads towards the development of human rights approaches for service delivery (Rekart, 2005).

In practice, the FPAR cycle I engaged in took place in four stages: (1) the planning of the activities alongside GAP/MAP staff and service users; (2) attending the red umbrella march; (3) taking part in the private commemorative service; and (4) reflecting on the actions that took place to improve on these activities the following year. This cycle was carried out twice, and is envisioned again for 2018. Data was collected in the form of photographs taken throughout the day by myself and members of GAP/MAP staff, as well as field notes and a transcribed 1.5-hour reflection of the day in 2016 recorded by myself and my colleague. Ultimately, the interdisciplinary analysis of taking part in the march and the creative elements of the data collection and analysis offer purposeful knowledge, or understanding as praxis, (O'Neill, 2012) alongside academic understandings of the use of digital technologies on this day.

Describing the commemoration in the North East of England

Putting this sex worker positive and justice-oriented FPAR into practice, and learning from the historically contextualised history of IDEVASW globally and locally, I now provide a description of the commemorations of IDEVASW in the North East of England in 2016 and 2017. Throughout the two years, discussions have been taking place between charity staff and myself to explore how these activities could be carried out in the most ethical and useful way possible, but also to make the developments sustainable for the charity once I leave the field; to ensure its *just sustainability* (Dombrowski et al., 2016; Strohmayer et al., 2017). Based on this fieldwork, I now provide a description of two ways in which digital technologies were used across the three types of activities that were carried out: (1) the public-facing activist march; and (2) the private service of remembrance for service users, staff, and other invited guests.

Before attending the march, I met several service users and members of staff at a large crossroad in the middle of Newcastle. While there, both staff and service users used mobile phones to communicate with others through phone calls or text messages. Questions like 'when is x going to arrive?' and 'is y going to join us too?' were common, and often answered after a look at a phone screen. Members of staff and service users were standing together hugging one another upon arrival, making it clear that the relationships that are built through service delivery are relationships between people, bringing to life the people-centred approach that Changing Lives promotes through their website (which in itself is another use of digital technologies).

After a small group had come together, umbrellas and pins were handed out for people to hold onto until the march started. In our reflection from 2016, it was said: "We were standing there and we were just holding the umbrellas and meeting some of the other people and there was more handing out of umbrellas and more handing out of the buttons." Once everyone that was expected had arrived, we started to walk towards the starting point of the march. Here we met others, and the group continued to grow. More umbrellas and pins were handed out, and there were more hugs and handshakes.

After a while, the following occurred: "there was like 'okay, now we are going to take this group photo with the umbrellas covering our faces so nobody can be recognised.'

[...] At the same time, this served also as an official starting point. So that was actually quite a smart way of actually getting the group really moving.” Taking a picture of people holding red umbrellas in front of their faces is a common occurrence at other red umbrella marches across the globe. In this particular case however, it also functioned as a catalyst for the march. In a way, it also created an ‘air of officiality’ and could be seen as a “trigger for ‘okay, now we’re all together, let’s start. Let’s get going’ that that was triggered by a camera; a really mundane technology.”

After the picture was taken, we progressed to march through the main shopping street of the city (see Figure 1). We walked down the street with red umbrellas held high, handing out flyers with pins of red umbrellas attached to them, and discussing the importance of ending violence committed against sex workers and sex worker rights more widely with interested onlookers. In 2017 the route of the march was lengthened, covering a second busy street in the middle of town.



Figure 1: A snapshot of some of the marchers

Mobile phones and smartphones were used for personal reasons by individuals throughout the march. At the same time however, the red umbrellas and the pins also functioned as important technologies.

The red umbrellas were used to bring attention to the march, similar to how they were used during the ‘Prostitutes Pavilion’ (International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE), 2015) in Venice in 2001. Since the march took place on a busy December Friday, the umbrellas brought about much attention in the form of looks and questions from onlookers and shoppers on the busy street: “People were handing out the pins and explaining and there were people who came up and asked.” Based on my experience: “the awareness raising actually worked quite well. Some [passers-by] were really eager to find out.”

While the umbrellas were a useful tool for getting attention, it is unclear whether passers-by understood their purpose. Many are often unaware of the symbolism, even if it is a well-known international symbol for sex worker rights. This was made clear through some of the interactions we had with pedestrians while on the march: “there were also a

couple of people that you, like, many just realised when they got the flyer and then read the capitalised ‘Sex Work and Sexual Exploitation’ where they were like ‘Oh, Okay! But it’s a pin, so that’s nice’.” It was through interactions similar to this that it became clear that having the flyer with an attached pin was very important: “I think it was quite good that they had the pin on it as well as a little gimmick, because that probably makes a couple of people that would shy away otherwise, you know still keep the set of the pin and the paper.”

After this element of public protest, and to a certain extent public education, the commemoration of IDEVASW took a more introspective turn. We headed into the venue where the service for remembrance took place. For the next few hours, various activities supported personal reflection and remembrance, as well as collective action to support one another. This was achieved through a multi-media experience that incorporated various different digital and non-digital technologies into what I have called “a smart church”. Through the use of activities, music, and a slide-show, GAP/MAP were able to structure an interactive, service user-led, people-centred, remembrance service for the lives of service users from GAP and MAP who had lost their lives in the previous year. Activities included poetry readings, the lighting of candles, or the writing of messages to people we were missing or had lost. Throughout the service, the style of music being played would change based on whether an activity was introspective or a collective space for memory.

Many of the activities contained an element of moving around in the space or producing creative output. For example, in one of the activities, we were asked to fold a piece of paper into the shape of an Angel after writing a brief message to someone we missed or had lost in the last year. It became clear that this activity had been used by other church users previously, as we were asked to hang up our paper angel on the large Christmas tree at the front of the church – where others were already looking down at all of us.

One activity however, did not include a creative output: the part of the service where we directly commemorated those who had died in the last year. The multi-media suite of the church was used to share a slideshow of the names of those who had been lost. Contrary to the previous audio-cues for introspection through changes in music or reading of poetry, at this point there was some quiet music playing while names appeared in white writing on a black screen. In 2017 the format of this was altered slightly. Instead of appearing one after the other, the names appeared on the screen and remained there until the complete list of names was seen all together.

Discussion

This section focuses specifically on the ways in which sex workers, sex work support services, and researchers have worked together to organise and facilitate public advocacy (e.g. through the red umbrella march), and a private hyper-localised remembrance (e.g. through the service of remembrance) to collectively commemorate IDEVASW.

Learning from this very local context, discussions can bring about more nuanced understandings of the use and meanings of digital technologies with, in, and for sex workers and sex work support services. The FPAR process has facilitated the production of knowledge that is embedded in both practical purpose, and academic understandings

(O'Neill, 2012) of the use of digital technologies for IDEVASW. That is, the learning from this project has pragmatic effects on how digital technologies could be (and are) included in future commemorations (and other events) planned by GAP/MAP. At the same time however, it also opens up academic discussions on the meaning of IDEVASW, particularly related to questions of public advocacy and private remembrance.

There were elements of the day that were clearly demarcated as public advocacy events (e.g. the red umbrella march) and others that were clearly only for the community developed through GAP/MAP (e.g. the invitation-only commemorative service). At the beginning of the service, the speaker drew attention to this fact, addressing the audience with: "you've been out, you've done the thing for outside, you've raised awareness. You've shown people what you've done, but now this is for us, and this is for the community, and for togetherness, and for you as an individual."⁵ Here however, I want to look at this demarcation of public-vs-private more directly, as there were elements of both throughout both days. For example, while we were gathering to commence the march, there was a feeling of solidarity among attendants that felt almost private. During the commemorative service, there were also activities that contained elements of public-ness as note cards we had written about those we missed or had lost remained in the publicly accessible church. Bringing together the learning across these three separate but connected events on the day, I now want to address the ways in which technologies, and to a certain extent activities and 'action' in research (Reid, 2006) more widely, functioned in different ways to commemorate IDEVASW in this particularly local context.

Technologies functioned as catalysts to specific points of action on the day. Pictures were taken at the beginning of the march to start the protest, adding "a little bit of this kind of 'officialness' in some way", as well as throughout the march itself. Furthermore, technologies such as the playing of different kinds of music were used to provide different layers of experiences and to move along the schedule of the day. This was particularly felt in the way the names of those who had passed away in the previous year were displayed on the projector. During this time, only quiet music and the occasional sound of crying were heard.

Moreover, digital and non-digital technologies also functioned as tools to facilitate reflection and remembrance. An example of this would be the angel activity briefly explained earlier. In this case, the activity was very quiet and introspective – each individual created their own message, which would not be read by anyone else. At the same time however, the angel remained in the publically accessible church for the rest of the Christmas period. In a way then, this functioned as a very personal reflexive activity, while simultaneously tying in with a larger (and more public) narrative of remembrance by adding each individualised angel to the collection already present on the Christmas tree in the church. This is also a very physical manifestation of including individuals from a group that is historically excluded and stigmatised.

Ultimately, when designing technologies or actions to support the commemoration of IDEVASW or other forms of public and private advocacy, it is important to keep in mind that while a particular action can have specific personal meanings in one instance, their later use may contain different layers of locality, context, history, or experience. While interventions or technologies can be used to facilitate bridging private reflection

⁵ This is not a direct quote from the speaker – it was taken from an audio recorded personal reflection from myself and one of my collaborators.

with public advocacy, it is also important to remember the potential this has in linking up hyper-localised and contextualised spaces with wider debates on justice and rights. For example, Freeman argues that those who have a history are afforded more respect in society (2007). In this particular project, the personalised production of the physical artefacts (like in the angel activity or when taking photos), the expressions of experience that are embedded within them, and their exhibition and potential wider use (eg. photos that are used in the slideshow at the commemoration in the following year) provide GAP/MAP and their service users with highly political digital and non-digital artefacts to fight for the rights of those involved in the sex industry.

While in this paper I have focused on the ways in which (digital) technologies were used throughout the commemoration, I want to highlight that this discussion can also contribute to the design and organisation of other actions or activities to observe IDEVASW. It is also possible to further extrapolate this discussion towards interventions as they may be carried out by sex work support services, activist groups, or FPAR projects more widely, and can also be applied in wider contexts as long as the importance of the localised socio-cultural histories of practices are taken into account. Ultimately, when designing, evaluating, or exploring the role of technologies or actions to support the commemoration of IDEVASW or other forms of public and private advocacy, it is important to keep in mind that while a particular action can have specific personal meanings in one instance, their later use may contain different layers of locality, context, history, or experience.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to provide an interdisciplinary and justice-oriented account of the use of (digital) technologies on IDEVASW in the North East of England. Using data gathered from a two-year FPAR project, it aims to develop the discussion of the use of digital technologies by sex workers (sex work research) and the potentials for the use of digital technologies with and for sex workers or sex work support services (HCI research). In doing this, it is one of the very few contributions to literatures explicitly seeking to discuss the use of digital technologies in sex worker rights advocacy.

I advocate for a more nuanced and rounded discussion of digital technologies, sex work, and service delivery. Technologies provide affordances that should be collectively weighed up by individuals and organisations within FPAR collaborations to determine to what degree they can be useful within a particular context. Sometimes the simple addition of mundane technologies such as the inclusion of music can provide entirely different experiences of a day, while other times, the use of technologies can facilitate entirely new interactions and affordances surrounding a particular activity or experience. Particularly when designing novel interactions in this space, these mundane aspects of digital technologies can be important. Having a contextualised understanding of the ways in which digital technologies already function in this space can ultimately open up new spaces to design design digital technologies for multi-layered reflection and activism.

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