

The ‘Imperfect Victim’: A Qualitative Analysis of Victim Blaming

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ABSTRACT:

This present study explored victim blaming in criminal cases involving imperfect victims through a qualitative multiple case study design and it took four cases = Trayvon Martin, Shannan Gilbert, Tina Fontaine and Nicole Brown Simpson. Data was collected from secondary sources like published research articles, books, media reports, documentaries and publicly available case materials. For the data analysis, thematic analysis was used to identify the recurring patterns in public reaction and victim blaming narratives across the selected cases. The analysis revealed five major themes: conditional victimhood, moral character as a measure of victim worthiness, the transformation of vulnerability into responsibility, retrospective reconstruction of choice, and hierarchies of sympathy. The findings suggest that public responses to victims are often shaped by perceptions of morality, social acceptability, and conformity to societal expectations rather than by victimization alone. Victims who deviated from the traditional image of the ideal victim frequently experienced greater scrutiny, skepticism, and blame. The study contributes to victimology and forensic psychology literature by shifting attention from why people blame victims to how society determines who is considered worthy of sympathy and recognition as a victim.

INTRODUCTION:

Victims occupy a central position within the criminal justice system and yet not all victims receive the same level of sympathy, support or recognition and also the public reactions to the crime are often influenced not only by the nature of the offense but also the perceptions of the victim involved. While some victims are viewed as innocent and deserving of compassion while others may be subjected to criticism, blame or skepticism regarding their victimization. This phenomenon is commonly known as victim blaming and has become an important area of study within forensic psychology and victimology. Victim blaming is any response that explicitly states or implies that the victim is to blame for any abuse that they have experienced and it often revolves around actions that a victim could have taken or not taken to avoid experiencing abuse but in reality, violence and abuse will happen regardless of victim's choices. Whether intentional or unintentional, victim blaming can cause serious harm to the survivors of domestic violence and sexual violence, leaving them feeling responsible for their abuser's actions and therefore increasing guilt and feeling of shame.

The scars left from abuse are not just physical but also emotional and psychological impacts like low self esteem and self doubt and that's why having a supportive response to a disclosure of abuse is so important on the journey of recovery. Victim blaming can also discourage a survivor from seeking any form of justice or support but also discourage them for speaking up again through the fear that they won't be believed.

One of the influential concepts within victimology is the idea of ‘ideal victim’ introduced by the criminologist Nils Christie and this says that victims are more readily recognised as legitimate victims because they fit societal expectations of innocence, vulnerability and blamelessness. Individuals who do not conform to these expectations may receive less sympathy and greater level of blame even when they have experienced genuine victimization. As a result, society often creates an informal hierarchy of victimhood in which some victims are perceived as more deserving of support than others.

The concept of the ideal victim has contributed to growing interest in what may be described as the ‘imperfect victim’. Imperfect victims are the individuals whose characteristics, lifestyles, personal histories or social identities deviate from the conventional expectations of victimhood. These may include victims with criminal records, histories of substance abuse, involvement in sex work or personal circumstances that are viewed negatively by society. Although these individuals experience harm and victimisation, they are often subjected to increased scrutiny and blame due to perceived moral shortcomings or lifestyle choices. Research suggests that such perceptions can reduce empathy, influence judgements of credibility and shape public responses to victimization.

Leigh Goodmark published a book named ‘imperfect victims’ represented abuse survivors for years and noticed something troubling and that is the women who fought back against their abusers often end up arrested and jailed themselves while the system only sympathizes with the ideal victim and the overall conclusion from this book is that the system isn't failing and its working is designed to punish anyone who doesn't conform and she also argues for abolition feminism and moving away from policing and prison towards things that actually prevent violence and this all was backed up by real stories from her clients.

Despite extensive research on victim blaming and most of the existing literature has focused on specific forms of victimization, particularly sexual assault and domestic violence. Comparatively less attention has been given to understanding how different forms of perceived imperfection influence public reactions across a variety of criminal cases and examining victims who do not fit the traditional image of the ideal victim may provide deeper insight into the psychological factors that shape victim blaming attitudes.

The present study aims to explore the victim blaming in criminal cases involving imperfect victims through a qualitative analysis of selected case studies. By examining cases involving different forms of perceived victim imperfection, the study seeks to understand how public perceptions, moral judgements and social expectations contribute to the attribution of blame and the distribution of sympathy among the victims of crime.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Victim blaming has been widely studied within forensic psychology and victimology because of the public perception of crime, attitudes towards victims and responses within the criminal justice system.

Research has consistently shown that victims are not always viewed equally and that certain characteristics can influence how much sympathy or blame that they receive and the existing literature suggests that the perceptions of victimhood are not only shaped by crime but also by social expectations, moral judgements and beliefs about personal responsibility.

One of the most influential contributions to victimology was done by Christie (1986), who introduced the concept of ‘ideal victim’ and they argued that society is more likely to recognize and sympathize with victims who fit particular expectations such as innocent, vulnerable and blameless compared to the individuals who do not fit the expectation often struggle to receive the same level of recognition and support. This theory challenged the assumption that all victims are treated equally. The concept remains

highly influential in contemporary victimology and has provided a foundation for understanding why some victims are more likely to be blamed than others.

Building on these ideas, Grubb and Harrower (2008) examined the factors that contribute to victim blaming attitudes and this review found that perceptions of victims are influenced by various psychological and social factors including gender stereotypes, rape myths, substance use and belief about personal responsibility. The authors suggested that the people often engage in attribution processes that attempt to explain why a victim experienced harm. Their work demonstrated that victim blaming is not simply a personal opinion but is often influenced by broader social beliefs and cognitive processes.

Research has also highlighted the role of just world beliefs in shaping attitudes towards victim and according to this perspective, individuals are motivated to believe that the world is generally fair and that people outcomes they deserve and also the studies reviewed by van der Bruggen and Grubb found that victim blaming can function as a way of preserving this belief system. As a result, victims who are perceived as engaging in risky, irresponsible or socially undesirable behaviour are often blamed more heavily for their victimization.

More recent research has continued to examine how victim characteristics influence blame attribution. Witte and colleagues (2024) found that stereotypes, social attitudes and perception of victims can significantly affect the judgments of responsibility. Their findings suggest that victims are often influenced by preconceived beliefs about what a good victim is and when the victim doesn't meet those expectations, observers may be more likely to assign responsibility to them and these findings support the argument that victim blaming attitudes are closely connected to broader social judgments about morality and credibility. Similarly, Inzunza and colleagues (2022) examined the significance of victim ideality and found that perceptions of how closely a victim aligns with the ideal victim image can influence responses towards them and the findings suggest that victim status is not determined solely by the experience of harm but also by how observers interpret the victim's characteristics and circumstances. This research reinforces the idea that the victims who deviate from social expectations may encounter reduced empathy and increased blame even when experiencing genuine victimization.

Although existing literature has provided valuable insight into victim blaming and much more specific forms of victimization like sexual assault and domestic violence and comparatively, less attention was given to examining how different forms of perceived imperfection influence public reactions across various criminal cases. Therefore, the present study seeks to explore victim blaming among imperfect victims by examining how perceived flaws, lifestyle choices and social identities influence public perceptions of blame and sympathy in criminal cases.

METHODOLOGY:

The present study uses a qualitative research approach to explore victim blaming attitudes towards imperfect victims in criminal cases. This study aimed to understand how public perceptions, moral judgements and social attitudes contribute to attribution of blame towards victims who do not fit the traditional image of the ideal victim. Rather than measuring victim blaming attitudes quantitatively, the study focused on examining patterns of thought, beliefs and social narratives surrounding selected cases. A multiple case study design employed to investigate victim blaming across different categories of imperfect victims and the case study method gives an in depth examination of how victim characteristics influenced public reactions and perceptions of responsibility and by analyzing cases involving different

forms of perceived victim imperfection and also these study sought to identify common themes underlying victim blaming attitudes across diverse contexts.

The study relied on secondary sources of data and the information was collected from academic research articles, books, news reports, court records, documentaries publicly available interviews and the media coverage related to the selected criminal cases and also these sources provided insight into public discussions, societal reaction and the narratives surrounding each victim and their victimization. The four cases that are used in this study are Trayvon Martin, Tina Fontaine, Shannan Gilbert and Nicole Brown Simpson and these cases were selected because they illustrate how different forms of perceived imperfection may influence public sympathy, credibility assessments and blame attribution.

The study utilized publicly available secondary data and did not involve direct interaction with human participants and all the information was obtained from publicly accessible and ethically appropriate sources and efforts were made to present each case respectfully and objectively while acknowledging the sensitivity of victimization experiences and this study is purely for academic purposes and to gain awareness and the analysis focused on the societal reactions and perceptions rather than assigning responsibility to the victim themselves.

DATA COLLECTION:

For this present study, four case studies were taken to understand and analyze this study in more efficient way and the detailed explanation about the four cases studies are given below =

1. TRAYVON MARTIN -

Trayvon Martin was a seventeen year old African American teenager who was fatally shot by neighbourhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman on 26 February 2012 in Florida. Martin was returning from the convenience store when George reported him as suspicious to the police and later confronted him and then a physical altercation occurred during which George shot and killed Martin. The case attracted widespread national and international attention generating debates regarding race, profiling, self defense laws and the criminal justice system. The shooting ultimately became one of the most discussed criminal cases in the US and played a significant role in the emergence of black lives matter movement.

Although Martin was the victim of a homicide, public discussions frequently focused on aspects of his personal life and character rather than solely on the circumstances of his death. Media outlets and public commentators highlighted photographs, school disciplinary records and social media content and assumptions regarding his behaviour and these characteristics contributed to the portrayal of Martin as something other than the ideal victim and shifted attention towards evaluating his character rather than examining the crime itself. Researchers have argued that racial stereotypes and perceptions associated with young black males influenced how Martin was viewed by a portion of the public.

Evidence of victim blaming emerged through public statements suggesting that Martin's clothing, behaviour or presence in the neighbourhood contributed to his death and the commentators argued that his hoodie made him appear suspicious or threatening, while others implied that his actions increased the likelihood of the confrontation and such narratives shifted partial responsibility away from the offender and to the victim. Victim blaming attitudes were also reflected in the attempts to portray Martin as dangerous, delinquent or responsible for provoking the events that led to the shooting.

2. SHANNAN GILBERT -

Shannan Gilbert was a twenty four year old woman from New Jersey who worked as an escort. On 1st

May 2010 she disappeared after leaving a client's residence in Long Island. Before her disappearance, she called 911 in which she repeatedly expressed fear and stated that someone was after her and her disappearance prompted an extensive search operation that ultimately led to the discovery of multiple human remains along Gilgo beach, exposing what later came to be known as the Gilgo beach serial killings case. After her disappearance played a crucial role in uncovering the border investigation, authorities were initially slow to respond and her case received limited attention compared to other missing person cases. One of the primary factors influencing public perception of Shannan was her involvement in sex work and society often associates sex work with negative stereotypes, moral judgements and assumptions regarding personal responsibility because Gilbert worked as an escort. Discussions surrounding her disappearance frequently on her victimization and this positioned her outside the traditional image of the ideal victim and contributed to perceptions that her lifestyle placed her at risk. Victimology research has consistently shown that sex workers are often viewed as less credible and less deserving of sympathy than other victims.

Victim blaming attitudes emerged through suggestions that Gilbert's occupation made her victimization predictable or unavoidable and rather than focusing exclusively on the actions of the offender, some narratives implied that involvement in sex work exposed her to danger and partially explained what happened to her. Such perspectives shift attention away from the offender and towards the victim's lifestyle choices. This reflects a common pattern identified in victimology, where individuals who engage in stigmatized occupations are often viewed as responsible for the risks they encounter.

3. TINA FONTAINE -

Tina Fontaine was a fifteen year old indigenous girl from Sagkeeng first nation in Manitoba in Canada in 2014, her body was discovered in Winnipeg's Red River wrapped in a duvet cover and weighed down with rocks. Prior to her death, Fontaine had experienced significant personal challenges, including family instability, involvement with the child welfare system and the periods of homelessness and her death attracted national attention and became a catalyst for discussions regarding violence against indigenous women and girls in Canada. The case ultimately contributed to increased public pressure for a national inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

One of the factors that influenced public perceptions of Tina was her history of vulnerability including reports of substance use and her involvement with social services rather than being viewed solely as a child victim, discussions about Tina usually talk about her personal circumstances and struggles. victimology research suggests that individuals who are associated with substance use, homelessness or social marginalization are often viewed as less closely aligned with the image of ideal victim and as a result, these characteristics may influence the level of sympathy and support they receive from society.

Evidence of victim blaming emerged through narratives suggesting that Tina's lifestyle circumstances contributed to her victimization. Discussions about substance use, homelessness and her absence from the stable supervision were sometimes presented as explanations for why she became vulnerable and such perspectives risk shifting responsibility away from the offenders and broader systemic errors by implying that the victim's circumstances played a significant role in the harm she experienced.

4. NICOLE BROWN SIMPSON -

Nicole Brown Simpson was the former wife of former professional football player O.J Simpson and throughout their relationship, numerous incidents of domestic violence were reported and included the responses from the police to the allegations of physical abuse. On 12 June 1994, Nicole and her friend

Ronald Goldman were found murdered outside her house in Los Angeles. The subsequent criminal trial became one of the most widely publicized cases in American history and brought national attention to the issues of domestic violence. Evidence presented during the investigation revealed a long history of abuse, threats, stalking and intimidation within the relationship.

One factor that influenced public perceptions of Nicole was her continued relationship with O.J Simpson despite repeated incidents of abuse. Following her death, discussions frequently focused on why she remained connected to him and why she interacted with him after divorce and also why she didn't separate herself from the relationship permanently. These questions reflected a common societal expectation that victims of domestic violence should simply leave abusive situations and as a result, some observers viewed her decisions as contributing to her victimization, placing her outside the image of the completely blameless ideal victim.

Victim blaming attitudes were evident in questions and comments suggesting that Nicole could have avoided victimization if she had left the relationship earlier or made different choices. Such perspectives imply that the victim had greater control over the situation than she actually possessed. Research on domestic violence has shown that the victims often remain in abusive relationships due to fear, emotional attachment, financial independence, concern for children and the hope that the abuse will stop and by focusing primarily on the victim's decisions and these narratives shift the attention away from the offender and place undue blame on the person experiencing abuse.

DATA ANALYSIS :

The analysis of the selected cases revealed several recurring patterns in how victims who did not have the traditional image of ideal victim were perceived and treated. The analysis was done through the thematic analysis and five major themes that were identified and it has been explained below in detail =

Conditional Victimhood =

One of the most prominent findings was that the victimhood was often treated as conditioned rather than automatic. Across the selected cases, public sympathy was influenced not only by the harm experienced by the victim but also by the perceptions of the victim's personal background, lifestyle and behaviour. This suggests that many individuals evaluate whether a person deserves sympathy before fully recognizing them as a victim.

The case of Shannan and Tina particularly demonstrated this pattern. Discussions surrounding their lifestyle, occupation and personal circumstances often influenced public reactions indicating that victim status was frequently judged through expectations rather than solely through the experience of victimization.

Moral Character as a Measure of Victim Worthiness =

A second theme involved the tendency to evaluate victims based on perceived moral character and rather than focusing exclusively on the actions of the offenders, public discussions frequently shifts the judgement towards the victim's choices, lifestyle and personality, in many instances, the level of sympathy extended to the victims appeared to depend on whether they were viewed as morally acceptable. This pattern is evident in the case of Trayvon Martin, where public discussions often focused on his character and personal history and similarly, Shannan's involvement in sex work and Tina's experiences with social vulnerability became central points of discussion and these findings suggests that perception of morality may significantly influence judgements of victim worthiness.

Transformation of Vulnerability into Responsibility =

Another finding was the tendency to reinterpret vulnerability as responsibility and the characteristics that increased a victim's vulnerability were often used to explain or justify the victimization they experienced. Instead of being viewed as factors that placed individuals at greater risk, these circumstances were frequently treated as evidence that the victim had contributed to the outcome.

For example, Tina's social vulnerability and the history of substance use were sometimes discussed as the explanation for her victimization. Similarly, Shannan's occupation was portrayed as the reason for the dangers she encountered. These reactions demonstrate how vulnerability can be transformed into perceived responsibility resulting in increased victim blaming.

Retrospective Reconstruction of Choice =

The analysis also revealed a tendency for individuals to evaluate victims using hindsight and after the crime occurred, observers often assumed that the victim could have made different decisions to avoid harm. This process created an illusion that the outcome was predictable and preventable. The case of Nicole clearly reflected this pattern and the public discussions frequently questioned why she remained in contact to an abusive partner.

Similar attitudes occurred in other cases where the victim's action were evaluated based on the information that became available only after the crime had occurred, this suggests that hindsight judgements play an important role in victim blaming attitudes.

Hierarchies of Sympathy =

The final theme identified was the existence of informal hierarchies of sympathy and the findings suggest that society does not respond equally to all victims, some victims are perceived to be seen as more deserving of empathy, support and credibility than others.

Victims who closely resembled the traditional image of perfect victim generally received greater sympathy while those who were associated with criminal records, substance use, sex work or controversial personal circumstances. Across the selected cases, sympathy appeared to be distributed unequally based on the perception of victim's worthiness rather than the severity of victimization alone.

DISCUSSION:

The present study aimed to explore victim blaming in criminal cases involving imperfect victims. Through the analysis of selected case studies, five major themes were identified: conditional victimhood, moral character as a measure of victim worthiness, the transformation of vulnerability into responsibility, retrospective reconstruction of choice, and hierarchies of sympathy. Together, these findings suggest that public responses to victims are influenced not only by the harm they experience but also by how closely they align with societal expectations of what a victim should be.

One of the most significant findings of the study was the concept of conditional victimhood. Existing literature has shown that certain victims are more likely to receive sympathy than others, particularly when they fit the characteristics of the ideal victim described by Christie (1986). The present findings support this perspective by demonstrating that victim status is often socially negotiated rather than automatically granted. Across the selected cases, victims who possessed characteristics viewed negatively by society were more likely to face scrutiny and blame. This suggests that public recognition of victimhood may depend on perceptions of innocence, respectability, and moral acceptability.

The findings also revealed the importance of moral judgments in shaping public responses to victims. Previous studies have found that victim-blaming attitudes are often influenced by beliefs regarding

personal responsibility and social norms. The present analysis extends these findings by showing that moral evaluations frequently become a basis for determining victim worthiness. In several cases, public discussions focused on the victim's character, lifestyle, or personal decisions rather than the actions of the offender. This indicates that perceptions of morality may significantly influence the amount of sympathy and support a victim receives.

Another important finding was the tendency to transform vulnerability into responsibility. Characteristics that increased a victim's vulnerability, such as substance use, involvement in sex work, or experiences of abuse, were often reinterpreted as evidence that the victim contributed to their own victimization. This finding highlights a psychological process in which vulnerability is viewed not as a condition requiring empathy and protection but as a justification for assigning blame. Such reactions may reduce public understanding of the structural, social, and psychological factors that increase victim risk.

The study also identified the role of hindsight judgments in victim-blaming attitudes. Public discussions frequently involved assumptions that victims could have prevented their victimization by making different choices. This pattern was particularly evident in cases involving domestic violence and social vulnerability. These findings support previous research suggesting that individuals often evaluate victims with knowledge that was unavailable before the crime occurred. As a result, victims may be judged according to unrealistic expectations regarding their ability to predict or avoid harm.

The existence of hierarchies of sympathy emerged as another significant finding. The analysis suggests that society does not respond equally to all victims and that perceptions of victim worthiness influence the distribution of empathy, credibility, and support. Victims who closely resemble the ideal victim are often granted greater compassion, whereas those associated with stigmatized identities or behaviors may face increased skepticism. This finding reinforces the argument that victimhood is influenced by social perceptions as much as by the experience of harm itself.

Taken together, these findings suggest that victim blaming extends beyond simple judgments of responsibility. Rather, it reflects broader psychological processes through which society evaluates who deserves sympathy, protection, and recognition as a victim. The study contributes to existing victimology and forensic psychology literature by highlighting how perceptions of victim worthiness influence public reactions to criminal victimization. By focusing specifically on imperfect victims, the present research demonstrates that victim-blaming attitudes are often rooted in social expectations, moral evaluations, and assumptions about personal responsibility.

From a forensic psychology perspective, these findings emphasize the importance of recognizing how stereotypes, biases, and social judgments can shape responses to victims. Greater awareness of these processes may contribute to more equitable treatment of victims within the criminal justice system and encourage a broader understanding of victimization that is not dependent on perceptions of moral worthiness or social acceptability.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY :

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study relied exclusively on secondary sources of data, including research articles, books, media reports, documentaries, and publicly available case materials. As a result, the researcher did not have direct interaction with participants and was dependent on the accuracy and availability of existing sources.

A further limitation is that the study did not use a standardized sampling procedure for selecting media reports, public statements, or other secondary materials. Consequently, the sources available for each case

may differ in quantity, type, and perspective, which may influence the themes identified during analysis. Second, the study examined a limited number of case studies. Although the selected cases represented different forms of perceived victim imperfection, they may not reflect the experiences of all victims who are subjected to victim-blaming attitudes. Public responses to victimization can vary across cultures, social groups, and types of crime, which may limit the broader applicability of the findings.

Another limitation relates to the selection of high-profile cases. Because the cases received substantial media attention, public reactions may have been influenced by extensive media coverage and public discourse. Victim-blaming attitudes toward lesser-known victims may differ from those observed in widely publicized cases.

The study also focused specifically on criminal cases involving imperfect victims. Other forms of victimization, such as workplace victimization, cybervictimization, or victims of non-criminal harmful experiences, were not included within the scope of the research. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the context of criminal victimization.

Additionally, the study examined victim-blaming attitudes through qualitative thematic analysis. While this approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of public perceptions and social narratives, the interpretation of themes may be influenced by the researcher's understanding of the selected cases and available literature. Different researchers may identify alternative patterns or interpretations within the same data.

Finally, the study focused primarily on public perceptions and social responses rather than directly measuring individual attitudes through surveys, interviews, or experimental methods. Future research may benefit from incorporating primary data collection to further explore how perceptions of victim worthiness influence victim-blaming attitudes.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into the psychological processes underlying victim blaming and highlights how perceptions of victim worthiness influence public responses to imperfect victims in criminal cases.

CONCLUSION:

The present study aimed to explore victim blaming in criminal cases involving imperfect victims through a qualitative analysis of selected case studies. By examining cases involving different forms of perceived victim imperfection, including criminal history, substance use, sex work, social vulnerability, and relationship-related circumstances, the study sought to understand how public perceptions influence blame attribution and sympathy toward victims of crime.

The findings revealed five major themes: conditional victimhood, moral character as a measure of victim worthiness, the transformation of vulnerability into responsibility, retrospective reconstruction of choice, and hierarchies of sympathy. Together, these findings demonstrate that victim-blaming attitudes are influenced by more than judgments of responsibility alone. Public reactions to victims were often shaped by perceptions of morality, social acceptability, personal behavior, and conformity to the ideal victim image.

A key finding of the study was that victimhood was frequently treated as conditional rather than automatic. Individuals who did not fit societal expectations of innocence and respectability often faced greater scrutiny and blame despite experiencing genuine victimization. The analysis further demonstrated that characteristics associated with vulnerability were often reinterpreted as evidence of responsibility, while hindsight judgments encouraged assumptions that victims could have prevented their victimization

through different choices. Additionally, the findings highlighted the existence of informal hierarchies of sympathy in which some victims were viewed as more deserving of empathy, credibility, and support than others.

The study contributes to existing literature by shifting attention from the question of why people blame victims to the broader psychological processes through which society determines who is considered worthy of sympathy and recognition as a victim. By focusing specifically on imperfect victims, the research highlights how social judgments and perceptions of victim worthiness can shape responses to criminal victimization.

From a forensic psychology perspective, the findings emphasize the importance of understanding the role of stereotypes, moral evaluations, and cognitive biases in shaping attitudes toward victims. Greater awareness of these psychological processes may help reduce victim-blaming attitudes and promote more equitable responses to victims within society and the criminal justice system.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that victim blaming is not solely a matter of assigning responsibility for a crime but is also closely linked to societal perceptions of victim worthiness. The experiences of imperfect victims demonstrate that sympathy and recognition are often distributed unevenly, reflecting broader social and psychological processes that influence how victimization is understood and responded to. Understanding these processes is essential for developing a more inclusive and empathetic approach to victims of crime.

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