

Perceived Negative and Positive Impacts of Redefining Older Persons in Thailand

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“Older” in many countries has been defined as a chronological age of either 60 or 65 years or older. Due to a rapidly growing aging population in Thailand, as well as state welfare payments and improved health, this study aims to explore how Thai people define “older person” and what perceived psychosocial and health impacts may occur if “older person” is redefined. Forty-five focus group discussions were conducted using working-age groups and older-persons’ groups from major occupations in all regions. The findings reveal that the perceived current definition of “older persons” is those aged 60 and older, and it carries with it negative and positive connotations. Most participants felt that it would be appropriate to consider a revised definition of “older person” if the following criteria were taken into consideration: (1) chronological age only, but raised to age 65 or 70; (2) chronological age and positive attributes; (3) positive attributes only; and (4) no criteria at all. Rival patterns were also discussed. The perceived positive impacts included better mental health, longer employment and increased value of older people. Reduced job opportunities for younger people and a shortage of home care providers for grandchildren were reported as the negative impacts. The challenge is how to incorporate a suitable multidimensional definition into a new concept of older person.

Keywords: *chronological age, definition of older person, positive attribute, qualitative research*

Background

Defining older persons is a challenge since it is a multidimensional concept related to demographic, health, functional, socioeconomic and cultural perspectives (Freund & Smith, 1999; Orimo et. al., 2006; Roebuck, 1979; Uotinen, 2005). Negative stereotypes are usually associated with the image of older persons (Levy & Banaji, 2002). The concept of ‘older,’ is evolving and, therefore, it is difficult to reach a consensus. Chronological age is, however, commonly used as a criterion in two ways.

One way is to use a government’s pension age or retirement age as the dividing line between adulthood and old age (Anthony, 2010; Roebuck, 1979; Thane, 1978; Uotinen, 2005). The reason for classifying the older segment of the population this way stems from the consideration that this age group represents persons who are generally more vulnerable than

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younger cohorts and thus most likely to require care during their later years. There is a challenge if retirement age is used as a guideline because retirement ages are not the same in all countries. For instance, among 34 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the ranges of official retirement age are 60-67 years for men and 58-67 years for women (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). Retirement ages have increased in many countries in recent history. Additionally, in developing countries many people are engaged in the informal sector (e.g., farming, selling in the market), which has no official retirement age. Older adults in this sector are likely to stop working not merely when a particular age is reached, but rather when they are no longer physically able to work. Thus, other criteria, such as no longer being able to make an active contribution to family or society, have been used, particularly in many developing countries (Gorman, 1999).

A second method for defining older persons is to use age definitions as recommended by international organizations. The United Nations (UN) has not established a standard age threshold for defining “older person,” but accepts the conventional practice of classifying individuals 60 and older as “older persons.” This threshold is consistent with the age threshold set by the World Health Organization (WHO). Most industrialized nations, however, use age 65 as the threshold for “older person” while most developing countries use age 60 (World Health Organization, 2013).

Although an age criterion commonly used by organizations or experts working with older adults is either 60 or 65, chronological age is no longer specific enough, given the increase in life expectancy and the burgeoning population of older adults. Perhaps it should be up to individuals to define themselves as “old” or not. Research has shown that subjective age has as much or more of an impact on dispositions concerning cognitive aging as does objective age. Also, cognitive aging dispositions are important aspects of aging since the maintenance of cognitive functioning sustains engagement in life activities and social relationships (Schafer & Shippee, 2010). Setting a standard age to define older persons may actually be detrimental to health. Research shows that people who feel younger than their chronological age tend to report better physical health (Westerhof, Barrett & Steverink, 2003). And it was found that more positive perceptions of aging contribute to longevity (Levy, Slade, Kunkel & Kasl, 2002). The question of how to determine who is an older person is not easy to answer, though.

Nowadays, people tend to have better health and thus live longer. This fact, coupled with the demographic transition from high to low birth and death rates, means that the proportion of older people is increasing while that of the working-age population is declining. These demographic changes lead to workforce shortages and a higher ratio of older persons needing support relative to the number of younger people, through state pensions and welfare payments. In Japan, a country experiencing extraordinarily rapid population aging, a proposal has been made to raise the official threshold age criterion for “older persons” from age 65 to 75 (Hinohara, 2006; Orimo et al., 2006; Tokuda, & Hinohara, 2008a, 2008b).

Population aging is a global phenomenon, but it varies internationally as fertility and longevity are not uniform. Asia in general and China in particular will be at the forefront of global aging in terms of number of older people in the next couple of decades. Sub-regionally, Thailand is an interesting country. In Thailand, the proportion of population aged 60 and older is higher than many other countries in Asia, such as China, and ranks the second highest among ASEAN countries, after Singapore (Gray & Chamrathirong, 2009). The population in Thailand is rapidly aging while it is still a middle-income country, while Singapore and Japan are two of the wealthiest nations in the world. Similar to the situation in Japan, in Thailand it

has been proposed that the threshold age criterion for “older person” be raised from 60 to 65 (vs. 75 for Japan) due to longer life expectancy (Prasartkul & Vapattanawong, 2010) and the fact that three-fourths of the population aged 60-64 are still working (Thongthai, 2006). However, society needs to accept any such change, particularly one that may affect benefits for older persons, since social resistance is quite possible. Thus, the objectives of this qualitative study are to investigate how Thai people define “older person” and what perceived psychosocial and health impacts may occur if “older person” is redefined. Although this qualitative study alone may not be adequate to redefine the official definition of older persons, a systematic review of public opinions is needed as a starting point to inform policies and programs addressing the needs of future older populations in changing demographic and socioeconomic circumstances. Thus, this study can inform not only policymakers in Thailand, but also those in nations that are already or about to be aged societies.

Aging, Defining Older Persons and Cultural Aspects in Thailand

In Thailand, the impacts of rapid fertility decline and substantially improved survival rates for older persons have led to an increase in the number and proportion of older persons. Since the average number of children per one woman has remained below two and is expected to decline further, the proportion of older persons will continue to increase in the future (Prasartkul, Vapattanawong & Thongthai, 2011). In 2013, the population aged 60 or older reached 13 percent (over eight million) and in three decades from now, it is projected to increase to almost a third of the total population (over 20 million) (Knodel, Prachuabmoh & Chayovan, 2013). By 2015, life expectancy at birth will have increased from the 1937-1938 figures of 39.4 years for males and 40.8 for females (Rungpitarangsi, 1974) to 71.6 and 78.4, respectively (National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013).

Thailand has long considered “older person” to denote a person aged 60 and older. Historically, ever since the Ayutthaya period (before 1782), although there was no official definition, it can be inferred that anyone age 60 and older was considered “old” because under the corvée system at this time, the monarchy required male commoners to serve in the military or in other labor such as agriculture or construction until age 60 (Feeny, 1989; Sukpanich, 1976). In accordance with this tradition, the Act on Older Persons B.E. 2546 (2003 A.D.) stipulated “older person” to denote a Thai citizen of age 60 or over (Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, 2005). This is also currently the starting age for receiving government old-age benefits such as a monthly allowance for all older persons who have no pension or any other form of income benefit from the government (Foundation of Thai Gerontology Research and Development Institute & College of Population Studies, 2013). Since 1951, age 60 also has been the official retirement age for government employees (Kanchanachitra, Jarassit & Kanchanachitra, 2012). In the private sector, however, persons legally reach “old age” at 55, when they qualify for the old-age allowance from the Social Security System (Ramesh & Asher, 2000).

Thai society is culturally homogeneous as manifested by a common ethnicity, language and religion shared by the vast majority. About 95 percent of population is Buddhist. The predominance of Theravada Buddhism is considered an important aspect of the Thai setting since it influences Thai people’s attitudes, thoughts and way of life (Knodel, Debalaya & Chamrathirong, 1987). Most older persons in Thailand are poor and rely on traditional, informal sources of support, primarily family and, in particular, adult children (Knodel, Prachuabmoh & Chayovan, 2013). Since the majority of Thai people are Buddhist, it is possible

that care and respect for older persons can be provided via the teachings of Buddhism. The cultural ideology of parent repayment is certainly observed, and this also adds value to older persons (Asis, Domingo, Knodel & Mehta, 1995; Caffrey, 1992; Knodel, Chayovan, Graiurapong & Suraratdecha, 1999). Thus, positive attitudes toward older persons could be expected.

Methodology

This study used qualitative methods of data collection from September 2012 through February 2013. Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted in Bangkok (the capital city) and all four regions of the country, in both urban and rural areas. As mentioned, in Thailand the definition of “older person” has been made official by law and determines the age at which one can begin to receive government old-age benefits, so establishing a new threshold age criterion could be politically sensitive and will take time to be accepted. Similar to people in other developing countries, the majority of Thai people work in the informal sector, where there is no pension after they stop working. Statistics in 2014 revealed that 57.6 percent of employed people work in the informal sector (National Statistical Office, 2015). Thus, the majority of this study’s participants are the working-age population engaged in both the formal and informal sectors.

The selection of study sites involved convenience sampling. For practical purposes, it was important to choose sites where the research team had contacts that could act as intermediaries in the recruitment of participants. First, in each region, one province was selected: Chiang Mai in the North, Khon Kaen in the Northeast, Songkhla in the South and Nakhon Pathom in the Central region. Each province was divided into urban and rural areas, and each area consisted of five groups, four of which were comprised of working-age participants from the formal and informal sectors. Both were included in the study because those who work in the formal sector have a mandatory retirement age which is closely related to the definition of old age, while those who work in the informal sector do not. The final group was comprised of participants aged 60 or older regardless of working status. Thus, each region consisted of ten groups (five groups in both urban and rural areas), and Bangkok consisted of five groups since all of Bangkok is considered urban. Thus, there were 45 FGDs in this study with five to eight people in each group. Each group consisted of participants in the same occupation, except for the group of older participants. Males and females were included together in the groups since the retirement age in Thailand is the same for both sexes (Table 1). All data were collected by the key investigators. The discussions followed the questions listed in Table 2.

The FGDs were tape-recorded and transcribed, and notes were taken to supplement the tapes. Each FGD lasted approximately one hour. Transcripts were reviewed several times before they were utilized, coded and analyzed for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The content was reviewed for similarities and differences in ideas and sorted into categories and subcategories. Then, classifications for redefining older persons were generated. A brief report was made available by the first author. Interpretation of data was checked and verified by coauthors. The ethical issues of this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University.

Table 1: Focus group composition

Occupation	Bangkok (Urban)	Central (Urban)	Central (Rural)	North (Urban)	North (Rural)	North- east (Urban)	North- east (Rural)	South (Urban)	South (Rural)
Working age population (Age range; Males / Females)									
1. Government sector	49-58; 4M/3F	44-57; 1M/5F	40-58; 4M/2F	40-51; 4M/4F	40-51; 3M/3F	48-55; 4M/4F	36-53; 4M/4F	40-56; 4M/4F	43-59; 4M/3F
2. Private sector (employee)	40-55; 4M/4F	45-56; 1M/6F	43-54; 2M/6F	43-59; 4M/4F	40-54; 4M/4F	41-50; 4M/4F	33-55; 2M/5F	35-59; 6M/3F	42-51; 4M/4F
3. Self-employed	40-58; 4M/4F	42-59; 2M/8F	43-59; 2M/5F	39-57; 4M/4F	45-59; 4M/3F	40-56; 4M/4F	42-58; 4M/4F	40-55; 4M/4F	40-55; 4M/3F
4. Agricultural sector	40-51; 2M/3F	40-56; 0M/6F	45-58; 4M/3F	45-55; 4M/4F	42-56; 4M/4F	45-53; 4M/4F	40-57; 4M/4F	35-58; 4M/5F	42-57; 4M/4F
Older persons (Age range; Males / Females)									
5. Regardless of work status	61-77; 4M/4F	63-77; 2M/6F	59-63; 3M/5F	60-67; 4M/4F	60-64; 4M/4F	62-73; 4M/4F	60-73; 4M/4F	60-65; 4M/4F	61-70; 4M/4F

Table 2: Guidelines for focus group discussions

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1. What kind of things do you consider when deciding who is an older person?
 2. Are there any positive attributes of “older persons”? If yes, what are they?
 3. Since people live longer, their health is improved, and the proportion of older persons is increasing while the proportion of children and working age people is declining, do you think we should redefine “older person”? Why?
 4. If yes, what should be the new definition? Why?
 5. If redefined, what should be psychosocial and health impacts?
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Results

The results of the FGDs are similar in all aspects regardless of age, gender, occupation and geographical location. It will be mentioned if any significant difference in participants’ ideas emerged.

Current Meaning of Older Person

The interpretation of the term “older person” takes into consideration: (1) chronological age or, generally, age 60, in accordance with the government’s criteria; (2) external appearance (e.g., wrinkles, white hair); (3) failing health and memory, and increased dependency on others for daily functioning; (4) reduced ability or inability to work; (5) change in behavior and moods such as increased irritability or repetitive speech and behavior; and (6) change of social status in being referred to as a grandparent or great-grandparent.

At the beginning of discussions, participants reported negative connotations with old age, citing physical and mental problems and the inability to care for oneself. As a result, the FGD moderators had to probe a bit in order to elicit examples of positive attributes of “being old.” The following excerpts reveal positive attributes, including older persons’ experience and traditional wisdom, from which younger generations can learn, as well as senior family members’ ability to maintain familial or community harmony.

The worth of older persons is like a library of valuable books. They serve as examples for teaching the young generation.

(Male, working age, private employee, rural South)

If there is a dispute in the family, the elder members of the household help mediate and calm things down so that there is a peaceful resolution. The same is true when problems arise in the community. Older persons help to work out a solution.

(Male, working age, private employee, rural North)

Redefining “Older Person”

Most of the FGD participants felt it is appropriate to consider a revised definition of “older person,” taking into consideration the following criteria, in order of the most frequently mentioned: (1) chronological age; (2) chronological age combined with positive attributes; (3) positive attributes only; and (4) no criteria at all.

Defined Solely by Chronological Age

Defining “older person” solely by age is unambiguous and objective and is more easily applied to groups of populations. Most participants felt the age threshold for older persons could be raised from 60 to 65 or 70 given the improved health status and life expectancy of the Thai population and the loss of a valuable source of labor due to a retirement age of 60 for those in the government sector. There is one quote that illustrates these views:

Older people’s health is better today and they live longer. If too many people retire when they can still work, then the country loses a valuable source of labor. The organization loses out on the transfer of skills and experience for the younger generation of workers. So I think the age [used to define] “older persons” [retirement age] should be increased to 65 years.

(Male, working age, government civil servant, Bangkok)

However, participants stipulated that any increase in the age criterion for defining “older persons” should not adversely impact welfare or other benefits, which those aged 60 or over currently receive.

By contrast, farmers and others who worked in hard labor occupations said that 60 years is an appropriate cut-off point since farming and intensive labor occupations are hard on the body and adversely affect health. They felt that they deserved and needed a rest by age 60.

Sixty years is appropriate for farmers. The body can’t take the arduous labor any more. By age 60, we farmers would suffer too much if we had to continue this labor.

(Female farmer, working age, urban North)

This opinion also emerged from other occupational groups. For example, a female government official said:

There should be differences by type of occupation. Those who just sit at a desk, without having to exert [themselves] physically, can continue to work beyond 60... However, farmers should [retire at] 60 years, while those who aren’t doing physical labor could work until 65 until considered old.

(Female, working age, government civil servant, rural South)

Defined by Chronological Age Combined with Positive Attributes

This perspective holds that chronological age is important, but so is being viewed as a respected member of the community since this may help instill a sense of self-worth and pride. For example, one member of a FGD noted:

It should include age too. Any expanded definition of older persons should improve the self-esteem of the older generation.

(Male, working age, private employee, rural South)

A more positive definition may influence not only how society views older adults, but also how older adults view themselves, which may open new possibilities in their lives.

By contrast, some FGD participants objected to combining age and positive attributes as the defining criteria for older person since they felt this would cause confusion and difficulty in practice, and that it would not be possible to standardize the criteria for positive attributes as illustrated by the next excerpt:

I don't think it is feasible to combine age and positive attributes in an expanded definition of older person. Who will judge who is worthy or not? I'd prefer the numerical approach.

(Male, working age, government civil servant, Bangkok)

Defined Solely by Positive Attributes

Exactly when a person accepts oneself as an “older person” varies from person to person and does not depend on chronological age. Indeed, classifying someone as an older person solely by age may have adverse psychological implications and may make a person *feel* old, typically something undesirable since the prevailing image of an older person is negative.

Emphasizing older persons' positive attributes without regard to age will help improve their self-image; they will not feel old.

(Male, working age, self-employed, urban South)

However, some participants recognized the impracticality of not using an age criterion since using only positive attributes would be hard to administer.

Defining older persons solely on positive attributes is too extreme. We do not age at the same rate. There is a lot of individual variability, so many factors need to be considered in defining older persons.

(Male, working age, government civil servant, Bangkok)

Do Not Define Older Person

Only a small minority of the FGD participants felt there was no need to define “older person.” This group felt that defining oneself as “old” should be up to the individual. Using age as a criterion could make a person feel old prematurely, and using positive attributes was not something that could be standardized, as illustrated by the following examples:

Classifying this person as old and that person as not old would harm morale. I don't want to hear about raising the age criterion for “older person” to 65 years.

(Female, working age, government civil servant, urban Central)

You can use age as a criterion but it is not necessary. There is no need for a specification.

(Female farmer, older age, urban Central)

Positive Impacts of Extending the Definition of Older Person to a Higher Age

A favorable outcome of adjusting the age definition of “older person” upward may be the psychological benefit for those between age 60 years and the new old age threshold of not *feeling* old. Since better mental health leads to better physical health, the improved mental health state could contribute to improved morale and determination to work longer. It also may enable people to continue to be gainfully employed, reducing over-dependence on children and other younger relatives while allowing more time for financial savings. Those aged 60 and older could also contribute to the economy by continuing to be productive members of the workforce to a later age. The following excerpts illustrate these points:

This should be a positive impact. Mental health will improve. They will not feel old at age 60. They may still be strong. It is a motivating and energizing force.

(Male farmer, working age, rural South)

It is a kind of psychology if we say that 60 years is not old. This can increase the value of the population since people will slow down if we call them elderly at age 60 when they actually could continue at the same pace. If we say that 65 is an older person, then those aged 60-64 will feel younger and be motivated to continue to contribute to the society, community, and family. This would have an aggregate positive effect on the country.

(Male, working age, private employee, Bangkok)

Accordingly, some participants expected that if the age criterion for “older person” is increased, the retirement age should also be increased. However, those doing hard labor, such as farmers or construction workers, may feel trapped, as if they were being forced to work even harder at a stage when hard labor may be more difficult for them.

Negative Impacts of Extending the Definition of Older Person to a Higher Age

The small proportion of respondents who pointed out not only positive impacts but also negative impacts of increasing the age definition mostly were concerned about the link between the age used to define “older persons” and the retirement age. This could have an impact on job opportunities and career advancement for younger people, as the following participant noted:

Increasing the age of ‘older persons’ might reduce the availability of vacant positions in the job market for younger cohorts since older persons are continuing to fill those positions.

(Male, working age, private employee, urban North)

Others observed that if older persons continued to work outside the home, then there would be a shortage of home care providers for their grandchildren:

This could change aspects of the culture since the grandparents won’t be available to take care of the young ones. More older persons will seek opportunity outside the household.

(Male, working age, private employee, Bangkok)

Discussion and Conclusion

This study takes a qualitative approach to investigate whether the current official definition of “older person” in Thailand should be changed from the chronological age of 60. It is of importance to modify the definition of older person due to a longer life expectancy, a growing aging population, burgeoning welfare payments and workforce shortages. The findings from our FGDs from all regions in Thailand reveal that the perceived current definition is the same as the official definition and carries with it negative and positive connotations.

Most participants felt that it would be appropriate to consider a revised definition of “older person” if the criteria of chronological age – raised to a higher age (e.g., 65 or 70) – and positive attributes were taken into consideration. The perceived positive impacts, if redefined, include better mental health, longer employment and increased value of older people. Reduced job opportunities for younger cohorts and a shortage of care providers for grandchildren were reported as possible negative impacts.

But a rival pattern also emerged from the FGDs. Some farmers and others who worked in hard labor occupations suggested that the definition should remain the same. In addition, a few respondents mentioned that there should be no criteria at all, and that defining oneself as “old” should be up to the individual. Setting a standard age to define who is an older person may make one feel old prematurely.

This project underscores the fact that a range of opinions on the topic exist, making it difficult to reach a consensus. The finding that the sole criterion of age should not be used to define older persons is similar to previous research (Macia et. al., 2009). The challenge remains how to incorporate a suitable multidimensional definition into the concept of old age. This qualitative study, however, contributes to research in the field finding that the concept of “old” can be influenced by social norms and cultural values.

It is not surprising that the current definition of “older persons” according to most FGD participants is aged 60 or older, in accordance with Thai tradition and its cultural homogeneity. These findings reveal prevailing negative and positive attributes associated with old age. Older adults may be viewed in a less positive light than one might expect in a country where filial piety is a norm. This study’s results are similar to previous research on attitudes of young Thai adults toward older people, which demonstrated that young Thai adults were somewhat more negative about older people than their American and Swedish counterparts. Unlike Thailand, the U.S. and Sweden are countries where filial piety is not a norm (Runkawatt, Gustafsson & Engstrom, 2013; Sharps, Price-Sharps & Hanson, 1998).

Negative connotations about old age in the Thai context are may be due to the fact that caregiving for aged family members is expected as a matter of duty and responsibility. Perhaps it is the stress and burden of caregiving that fosters a negative connotation of older citizens (Luo et. al., 2013; Runkawatt, Gustafsson & Engstrom, 2013; Sharps, Price-Sharps & Hanson, 1998) and tends to overshadow younger generations’ positive attitudes and feelings towards them.

It seems that concerns regarding redefining persons as “older” reported by participants are related to practical, tangible considerations regarding retirement and old-age welfare payouts. For instance, if the age is increased, should old-age benefits still be dispensed at age 60? It is, however, inevitable that as Thailand’s population continues to age, welfare payments will

become an increasing strain on the national budget. In addition, the older population of the future will be more educated and with higher income histories (Knodel, Kespichayawattana, Wivatvanit & Saengtienchai, 2013). Thus, the amount of welfare for older persons may need to be adjusted accordingly. This will require careful long-term planning.

Concerning social policy implications, older adults' positive attributes should be highlighted to offset negative stereotypes that may lead to age discrimination and ageism, particularly in the workplace (Roscigno, Mong, Byron & Tester, 2007; Snape & Redman, 2003). This is necessary due to impending economic implications of changing demographics, increasing retirement age, workforce shortages, and the need and desire for older adults to continue working.

Encouraging older citizens to continue to work productively should be a priority. Doing so may stimulate a sense of pride and self-esteem, as revealed by the FGDs. In addition, international research has clearly shown that not feeling old contributes positively to self-efficacy in managing illness (Boehmer, 2007), life satisfaction (Westerhol & Barrett, 2005), reduced risk of disability and hypertension (Demakakos, Gjonca & Nazroo, 2007) and reduced mortality (Uotinen, Rantanen & Suutama, 2005). Those who perceived aging more positively reported better functional health (Levy, Slade & Kasl, 2002). Among women, feeling older was associated with more pessimistic views about cognitive aging (Schafer & Shippee, 2010). Thus, not *feeling* old may lead to better health among Thai older people. Modifying the definition of "older people" may also allow older adults to continue working and be able to support themselves financially. At the macro level, they may also contribute to the country economically due to workforce shortages.

Some limitations of this study should be mentioned. First, this is a qualitative study and with a convenience sample of participants. Thus, the results cannot be generalized. But despite some limitations, a key message that can be immediately conveyed to the larger society is that, at the age of 60, not all people are automatically "old." Many still have an internal energizing force and can continue to contribute to society. In addition, this study suggests some interesting topics for further research in Thailand, such as whether the official retirement age should be increased, how to address the problem of "ageism" in society and the dilemma of how grandparents can continue to raise grandchildren (a common phenomenon) if more older people continue working, which is vital, particularly for a country experiencing fertility decline and facing the possibility of pro-natalist policies in the years ahead.

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