

Exploring the Darker Side of Motivation: A Qualitative Inquiry into English Learning Demotivators

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to explore potential demotivators that enervate students' motivation in learning English. This qualitative study included a total of twelve college students to garner their overall experiences in English learning. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which lasted 15 to 20 minutes each. The knowledge extracted from these interviews provided deep insight into the demotivation mechanism of Pakistani English learners. The recorded interviews were transcribed and organized for final analysis. The recordings were listened to and re-listened to ensure the authenticity of the transcriptions. To establish themes and sub-themes, the text was coded through thematic analysis to determine categories of demotivators. The steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed to analyze the data. The findings revealed that there were four major themes leading to students' language learning demotivators: lack of interest, experiences of failure, characteristics of classes, and classroom environment. The emerging themes also complemented the findings on the causes of demotivation explored in different social and learning contexts. The implications of the study are also discussed.

Key Words

English Language Learning Motivation, Demotivation, Qualitative Research

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Introduction

Motivation has been researched as one of the critical factors that facilitate learners to learn foreign languages successfully. It fosters language learners' persistence, academic engagement, and language learning excitement. Besides, motivated learners involve themselves in numerous language learning strategies and are willing to actively participate in language learning activities. Motivation is simply an impetus for attaining proficiency in the target language (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). To inculcate language learners' motivation, research should also focus on the forces that weaken language learning motivation. Sole reliance on motivation only garners learners' responses to the brighter aspects that motivate them in learning English and ignores the darker aspects that halt their learning process, i.e., language learning demotivators. In this regard, Falout et al. (2009) also argue that demotivation has a debilitating impact on students' L2 motivation and learning outcomes. Underscoring the negative impact of

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demotivation on students' learning, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013) also refer to 'demotivation' as one of the leading causes of language learning failure in classrooms.

Demotivation is the flip side of motivation and is a salient phenomenon that discourages students from learning a second or foreign language. It is caused by both external and internal factors. Prior studies conclude that external demotivating factors are more influential than internal demotivating factors. The teacher factor has turned out to be the most influential external demotivating factor in these studies (Bahramy & Araghi, 2013; Li & Zhou, 2017). Additionally, teacher characteristics, such as teaching competence and the use of defective teaching strategies, were also reported as leading causes of ESL/EFL demotivation (Li, 2011; Li & Zhou, 2017; Unal & Yanpar, 2016). However, the findings of studies by Hamada (2008) and Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) contradicted these results, suggesting that the teacher factor was not as strong as other factors. Other factors reported as sources of demotivation among students included lack of confidence and interest, grammar-based teaching, experiences of failure, teaching and learning materials, negative societal attitudes toward the English language, lack of facilities, and classroom environment (Çankaya, 2017; Ghonsooly et al., 2017; Meshkat & Hassani, 2012; Sahragard & Ansaripour, 2014). Given that demotivators can lead to academic burnout (Jahedizadeh et al., 2016) and are common in language classes (Dörnyei, 2001), identifying them can improve English language teaching and learning (Kikuchi, 2011). Therefore, research in diverse social contexts is necessary. This study investigated demotivators in Pakistan's context with the following objective:

1. To explore the possible English language learning demotivators experienced by intermediate college students in Quetta.

Literature Review

Past Studies

Meshkat and Hassani (2012) investigated the causes of demotivation among 421 Iranian high school students using Sakai and Kikuchi's (2009) model of demotivation, which consisted of both external and internal motivating factors. The data was collected with the administration of a questionnaire comprising 25 Likert Scale items. The findings suggested that a lack of facilities and overemphasis on grammar were the potential sources of demotivation for Iranian students. This study concluded that inadequate facilities at schools negatively influenced learners' motivation levels. This study recommended the integration of Information and communications technology (ICT) in classrooms to cater to students' learning needs.

Another demotivation research was conducted by Hosseini and Jafari (2014) among 604 secondary school students in Iran. In addition to the lack of facilities, related demotivating factors, teaching materials, and a lack of intrinsic motivation were identified. This study concluded that the provision of adequate facilities, such as computers, internet access, and other IT-related facilities, could diminish L2 demotivation among Iranian school students. This study also suggested that education policy makers of Iran introduce authentic learning materials in the school syllabus, addressing the needs of students. These demotivating factors were found to be related to students' resistance to and low participation in ESL learning tasks. Taken together, the findings of these studies indicate that demotivation contributes to language learning failure.

Teaching and learning materials, defective teaching methods, and teacher behaviours related factors also demotivate English language learners. For example, Bahramy and Araghi (2013) studied 60 non-English major university students who were studying English as a compulsory subject. Using the retrospective method, researchers asked the participants to write essays by recalling their past experiences that discouraged/demotivated them to learn the English language at their previous schools, language institutes, or the current university. The findings revealed that teacher-related factors, such as teachers' strict nature, bad behaviour

towards weak students, and incompetence in teaching the English language, demotivated language learners. In addition, course book-related factors, such as boring textbooks, irrelevant learning materials to the practical aspects of language learning, and undue focus on grammatical components in the text, were also reported as the second leading source of demotivation. These findings are also supported in the study by Li and Zhou (2017).

Li and Zhou's (2017) study primarily aimed at investigating the possible causes of demotivation among Chinese EFL learners. A self-made 33-item questionnaire was administered to 128 tertiary students, and the data were analyzed in SPSS (version 20). The overall findings of this study showed that students were demotivated due to boring and ineffective learning materials. Additionally, teacher-related factors, such as defective teaching methods, giving incomplete explanations of difficult terms, dividing students according to their proficiency level, and making excessive criticism of students' mistakes, had a negative impact on students' L2 motivation.

Unal and Yanpar (2016) developed a scale to investigate the darker aspects of motivation. Initially, thirty freshmen in English preparatory classes at the School of Foreign Languages, Mersin University, were asked to write an essay mentioning their experiences that negatively affected their motivation and impacted their English language learning. Based on the data extracted from the essays and past literature, a 50-item questionnaire was designed and administered to 454 Turkish students. Sophisticated statistical analysis tools, such as the Bartlett test, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test, and exploratory factor analysis, were performed in SPSS to extract the potential factors that had a pernicious impact on students' language learning motivation. The findings revealed that demotivating factors, such as teacher characteristics, lack of interest in the English language, classroom features, and lack of success, negatively affected learners' motivation.

The studies reviewed above delineate the fact that English language learning demotivators are mostly context-specific; therefore, the present research was carried out in the context of Pakistan to gain firsthand knowledge about the potential factors having negative effects on language learning motivation.

Research Method

To explore possible language learning demotivators, the present research employed qualitative research, which involves 'the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual (i.e., non-numerical) data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest' (Gay & Mills, 2015, p. 7). In qualitative research, researchers interpret and analyze the meanings of the responses that participants provide (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Unlike quantitative research, which heavily relies on numeric data, qualitative data is collected through classroom observations, journal entries, interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and texts written by participants (Creswell, 2014). Researchers then analyze and categorize these data into different themes to draw appropriate conclusions (Cohen et al., 2013). This approach provided in-depth knowledge of the factors causing demotivation in English language learning.

Given the nature of the research questions, the present study followed a qualitative research approach to answer the first research question of the study. This method was deemed appropriate for the proposed study because qualitative research collects a wealth of data in a naturalistic setting (Creswell, 2012) that can be used to understand the demotivation phenomenon across Pakistani English language learners. Additionally, prior research has also explored the causes of ESL/EFL demotivation using a qualitative research design (Aydin, 2012).

Interviews

The current study used semi-structured interviews because they represent 'a compromise between two extremes: structured and unstructured interviews' (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 136). Similarly, Newby (2010, p. 340) argues that semi-structured interviews fit between questionnaires and evolving interviews, having known goals without expected

endpoints. For this research study, the interview protocol was developed by reviewing past studies on EFL/ESL demotivation (Bahramy & Araghi, 2013; Dörnyei, 2001; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009; Kikuchi, 2011). The interviews were conducted in Urdu due to the students' limited English language proficiency. All interview questions were primarily aimed at exploring the factors that demotivate students in learning English.

Sample and Data Collection

In this study, twelve participants were included in the interviews (Creswell, 2012), chosen purposefully. This study considered only students who showed high demotivation to learn English. Such information helped to discuss quantitative results in detail. After obtaining informed consent from the participants, we recorded all the interviews, which lasted 15 to 20 minutes each. The knowledge extracted from these interviews provided deep insight into the demotivation mechanism of Pakistani English learners. All participants were assured of confidentiality regarding their responses to the interview questions. Additionally, efforts were made to make all interviewees feel at ease to garner honest responses. All interviews were conducted in quiet and well-ventilated rooms at the students' preferred timings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research refers to summarizing data accurately and presenting results in a way that conveys 'an air of undeniability' (Gay & Mills, 2009, p. 448). In this study, the recorded interviews were transcribed and organized for final analysis (Creswell, 2012). The recordings were listened to and re-listened to ensure the authenticity of the transcriptions. To establish themes and sub-themes, the text was coded through thematic analysis to determine categories of demotivators (Creswell, 2014). The steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) for qualitative data analysis are illustrated in Table 1:

Table 1

Six Steps by Braun and Clarke (2006) for Analyzing the Qualitative Data

Steps	Description
Familiarise yourself with the data	All the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed manually. The transcriptions were read recursively to understand the different patterns of the data.
Generate initial codes	The different patterns of the data were coded. The codes were based on the theoretical concept of demotivation propounded by Dörnyei (2001) and Kikuchi (2011). Additionally, the data were collated according to the relevance of each code.
Search for themes and subthemes.	Following the coding of data, the codes were collated into themes. Moreover, the relevant data was also sorted to support each theme.
Review the developed themes.	At this stage, it was ensured that the themes were relevant to the coded extracts. In addition, it was also ensured that the extracted themes were related to the entire data set. All the themes were also reviewed to check if any theme could be collapsed with another theme.
Define themes	Each theme was clearly defined.
Write up	Vivid and compelling excerpts were selected to support each theme and sub-theme.

After generating initial codes, all codes were reviewed to identify and eliminate redundancy. Redundant codes were collapsed into a single code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once the list of codes was finalized, all codes were collated with relevant data extracts. Table 2 describes the generated codes based on the concept of demotivation propounded by Dörnyei (2001) and Kikuchi (2011).

Table 2*Coding Scheme for the Qualitative Data*

Codes	Description
Lengthy English Syllabus (LES) Irrelevant learning and teaching materials (ILTM) Uninteresting topics and textbooks (UTT)	These three codes explain students' demotivation caused by learning and teaching materials. These three codes were used to generate a theme (i.e., Class Materials) (Kikuchi, 2011).
Compulsory nature of English (CNE) Overcrowded Classrooms (OC) Lack of learning facilities (LLF)	These three codes referred to the overall classroom environment, which led to students' demotivation. These codes formed a theme (i.e., Class environment) (Kikuchi, 2011).
Over-emphasis on Grammar (EG) Lack of group work activities (LGA) Decontextualised vocabulary (DC)	These codes explain how the learning and teaching of the English language is carried out in English classrooms. These codes formed a theme (i.e., Characteristics of classes) (Kikuchi, 2011).
Complicated Grammatical rules (CGR) Low Proficiency (LP)	These two codes described why students' interest in learning the English language diminished. These codes formed a theme (i.e., lack of interest) (Kikuchi, 2011).
Low Grades (LG) Difficulties in Memorizing Words (DMW)	These codes referred to students' lived experiences that contributed to their demotivation. They were put under a theme (i.e., experiences of failure) (Kikuchi, 2011).

Results

The qualitative data identified several demotivators that had pernicious effects on students' motivation to learn English. The extracted factors were classified into seven themes, which are discussed below:

Theme Related to Lack of Interest

The theme 'lack of interest' included complicated grammatical rules and low Proficiency.

Complicated Grammatical Rules

Students' negative attitude towards 'complicated grammatical rules' emerged as the first salient sub-theme of 'loss of interest' in the English language. The data revealed that students held a negative attitude towards complex grammatical rules, with many expressing frustration:

I do not like English grammar owing to its difficult rules to follow in writing. For instance, I always find myself in a difficult situation to choose appropriate tenses in writing paragraphs. (Participant 2)

Additionally, it was found that students' motivation to gain command over English grammar was low. One student echoed the sentiments of many others:

I always felt discouraged for failing to use appropriate 'verb agreements' in a sentence. (Participant 12)

In addition to 'verb agreement' related difficulties, maintaining coherence and cohesion was also a salient problem that demotivated language learners:

My marks in assignments were deducted for not maintaining coherence and cohesion among sentences in essay writing. I was disappointed in failing to master this element despite putting in a lot of effort. (Participant 10)

Low Proficiency

The second sub-theme of lack of interest was 'low proficiency' in English. It was found that low proficiency in English also caused demotivation among students. Due to this reason, students felt anxious, nervous, and scared to communicate in English:

Although I know the ABC of the English language, I am always nervous to communicate in English. (Participant 7)

It was also reported that due to a lack of English language proficiency, giving presentations in English in front of classmates was a daunting problem:

I can present confidently in Urdu, but presenting in English makes me sweat because my English proficiency is low. (Participant 5)

Theme Related to Experiences of Failure

Experiences of failure were another salient demotivator among language learners, consisting of two sub-themes: low grades and difficulties in memorizing words.

Low Grades

L2 demotivation also emerged when students obtained low grades or marks in final examinations. Experiencing failure due to poor results negatively influenced learners' motivation. As one participant shared:

I had burnt the midnight oil to pass the English compulsory course with flying colors. I was disappointed and started disliking the English language when I secured a 'C' grade in my former exam. (Participant, 5)

Similarly, it was found that students developed a sense of inferiority when their close friends obtained higher marks than they did:

I wasn't happy with the English class when many friends were awarded higher marks than I was in the final examination. (Participant, 11)

Difficulties in Memorizing New Words

The second sub-theme of experiences of failure was 'difficulties in memorising words'. The data revealed that students were demotivated by memorizing long lists of vocabulary. For example, an undergraduate student reported:

In the final examination, there's always a question on the meaning of different idioms. I was expected to memorize English idioms that I never use in writing or speaking, which made it challenging. (Participant 3)

Theme Related to Characteristics of Classes

Demotivators related to characteristics of classes included over emphasis on grammar, lack of group activities, and decontextualized vocabulary.

Overemphasis on Grammar

The data identified 'overemphasis on grammar' as the first sub-theme of the characteristics of classes as a cause of students' demotivation in learning English. It was found that students lost their L2 motivation due to teachers' overemphasis on grammar. The student echoed the say of many other students that cramming hard and fast grammatical rules had debilitated their interest in the English language:

It was tiresome and challenging for many students to memorize grammatical rules. I had to cram the grammatical rules to attempt grammatical exercises in the final examination. (Participant 1).

My teacher always lectures on English grammar. I am not interested in it because grammar is helpful for writing, not speaking. (Participant 4)

Additionally, students were also demotivated due to their English language teachers' emphasis on the spelling differences between American and British English:

It was discouraging to study things that don't help you enhance your foreign language skills. For instance, my teacher used to emphasize the spelling differences between American and British English (Participant 6)

Lack of Group Work Activities

Another sub-theme of characteristics of classes was 'lack of group work activities'. The data showed that L2 demotivation also emanated when teachers largely relied on one-way explanations of grammatical components and did not organize communicative group activities:

I wasn't comfortable with the way we used to study English. The teacher was the active agent in the classroom, and we would merely listen and take notes (Participant 8).

However, another student also expressed that communicative group work activities were essential to motivate those learners who are either shy or less proficient in communicating in the English language:

In group work learning activities, each student, regardless of being shy and less proficient, has an equal opportunity to communicate in the English language with their peers. (Participant 1)

Additionally, it was also reported that the classroom teacher seemed to put more focus on students' writing accuracy rather than speaking fluency. However, the student expressed the point that teachers were not solely accountable for ignoring the speaking skills, but they were following what was prescribed in the syllabus:

Our syllabus included the aspects that solely covered writing skills. The concerned authorities should also include aspects of speaking skills. (Participant 9)

Decontextualized Vocabulary

The third sub-theme of class characteristics included 'decontextualized vocabulary'. This refers to teaching vocabulary out of context, where students merely know the meaning of words but lack the knowledge to use them appropriately.

I always felt low to memorize words from the word lists without knowing their appropriate usage. (Participant 7)

Additionally, it was found that memorizing words from word lists was not only boring, but students would easily forget the meaning of words due to not knowing their appropriate usage:

It was really boring and disappointing to cram words. I would often forget their meanings during examinations because I did not know their appropriate usage. (Participant 2)

The student also reported that he knew many words but was unable to use them in the sentences that enervated his L2 motivation:

I know the meaning of numerous English words, but I can't use them in sentences. Our class solely focuses on English vocabulary without teaching its proper context, which is bad for many of us. (Participant 8)

Theme Related to Classroom Environment

The classroom environment was another demotivator identified in the data. This theme included three sub-themes: compulsory nature of English, overcrowded classrooms, and lack of learning facilities.

The Compulsory Nature of English

The first theme associated with the classroom environment as a source of demotivation was the compulsory nature of the English course. The student was not content studying a course in which she wasn't interested.

Functional English language is compulsory for all students, whether they need it or not. We have to pass this course as a requirement for our degree. It's discouraging to take a course without wanting to. (Participant 12)

Additionally, due to the compulsory nature of the English language, students were anxious about obtaining passing marks in the final examinations. Besides their major subjects, they had to devote a considerable amount of time to covering topics essential for the final examinations. It was revealed that if English were an optional subject, students would have taken it for fun and would have rendered satisfactory performance:

The word compulsory is dreadful for me. I have to maintain 80% of the total classroom attendance to earn merit to sit for the final examination. English had been fun for students if it had been offered as an optional course. (Participant 10).

Overcrowded Classrooms

The second source of demotivation related to the classroom environment was 'overcrowded classrooms'. Teachers often face numerous challenges in organising learning activities in overcrowded classrooms. For example, it was reported that the concerned English language teacher did not have sufficient time to comment on each student's assignments:

Due to the excessive number of students in the classroom, the teacher would often use general comments to point out deficiencies in students' assignments. (Participant 6).

It was also mentioned that teachers were not able to arrange communicative learning activities due to the excessive number of students in classrooms. The student expressed her experience of how she would sit at the back of the class and listen to the lectures. Most of the students did not have an opportunity to ask the classroom teacher about the difficulties they had in understanding topics:

I felt neglected in the classroom. Sitting at the back of the classroom, I used to listen to the lengthy lectures. To know whether we grasped the lecture, teachers used to ask us to raise our hands if we comprehended the topic. (Participant 3).

Students were also demotivated when they did not receive any corrective feedback on their classroom or take-home assignments. The student showed the grievance that he could improve his English language skills if the teacher had provided him with feedback on his work:

Due to a large number of students in the classroom, the teacher did not have enough time to spend on each student. Therefore, due to a lack of feedback, I could not attain English writing accuracy. (Participant 11)

Lack of Learning Facilities

The third sub-theme related to the classroom environment as a source of demotivation was "lack of learning facilities". It was found that the classroom did not have an alternate in case of an electricity breakdown. Electric power supply would often go off during class hours, and the college did not have standby generators:

It is really discouraging when there is no electricity in the classroom. The college should have standby generators to address this problem. Although we open classroom windows to let light come in, it is sometimes very hot in the classroom, particularly during summer days. (Participant 8).

In addition to the issue of electricity, it was also found that the classrooms were not equipped with computers, multimedia, or the internet.

Despite the widespread use of technology, our classroom did not have any learning facilities, such as computers, the internet, or multimedia. The provision of these facilities would have motivated many students to participate enthusiastically in learning activities. (Participant 1)

When asked about the importance of learning facilities, it was reported that the availability of computers and the internet could pave the way for students to browse online learning materials and further their understanding of different topics.

The advent of the internet has transformed students' lives, allowing them to access numerous learning materials at their fingertips. (Participant 8)

Discussion

The qualitative findings of the present study showed that teachers' behavior was the least source of demotivation for students. A plethora of previous research supports the findings of this research (Kukichi, 2011; Li & Zhou, 2017). Falout et al. (2009) underscore that 'ultimately, teachers have the greatest potential to influence the external contexts in the classroom and the internal conditions of the learner, for better or worse' (p. 412). Likewise, Pakistani teachers seemed to have positively influenced the external contexts in the classrooms and the internal conditions of learners. The analyses showed that teachers did not pose a threat to language learners' L2 motivation, and they appeared to treat their students fairly. However, this finding contradicts the results of previous research (Bahramy & Araghi, 2013; Kim & Seo, 2012), in which teacher-related factors were among the potential causes of L2 demotivation. This contradiction can be attributed to cultural norms in Pakistan. Students might have avoided criticising teachers due to the privileges and authorities teachers have in making decisions regarding students' learning, and the societal expectation for students to respect teachers and avoid blaming them. These factors might have influenced students' responses toward teacher behaviors.

There are also internal demotivators that discourage students from learning English. The results showed that college students were demotivated due to their lack of interest and negative experiences of failure in learning the English language. These results support the findings of past studies (Sahragard & Ansaripour, 2014). This finding also aligns with Kikuchi (2011), who expanded Dörnyei's (2001) definition of demotivation by adding the notion of 'internal' forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or ongoing action. However, regarding internal demotivating factors, Dörnyei (2001) asserts that L2 learners' demotivation associated with internal factors often stems from the influence of external factors. For example, irrelevant and complicated learning materials pose learning challenges to language learners, causing them to lose interest in language learning. Additionally, experiencing difficulties in comprehending classroom materials and receiving low grades in final examinations discourages students from putting maximum effort into learning the target language. Hence, both external and internal demotivating factors seem to be intertwined. Therefore, addressing external demotivating factors may also mitigate learners' demotivation related to internal factors.

Large class sizes and inadequate learning facilities as demotivators have also been reported in previous research conducted in Malaysia (Dinius, 2013) and Iran (Sharififar & Akbarzadeh, 2011). In contrast, Hamada (2011) did not find class environment-related demotivation among Japanese high school and junior high school students. The contradictions in findings can be attributed to a country's stage of development. As Dinius (2013) postulates, 'audio-visual equipment serving as a pedagogical tool in a developed country like Japan may be better and more widespread than in a developing country like Malaysia' (p. 123). Furthermore, class sizes in developed countries like Japan are typically smaller (average of 20 students per class) compared to those in Malaysia and Iran (Dinius, 2013; Sharififar & Akbarzadeh, 2011). Given Pakistan's status as a developing country, it can be inferred that Pakistani students likely face similar language learning environment challenges.

Implications

Based on the findings, Pakistani English language teachers are recommended to avoid using uninteresting class materials that drive demotivation among language learners. Instead, teaching and learning materials should be tailored to EFL students' learning needs. Materials that promote students' communication abilities and foster their interest in communicating with one another in English can help reduce demotivation stemming from class materials and a lack of interest. Incorporating affective class materials can be more effective when learners' voices are included. According to Saraceni (as cited in Tomlinson, 2012, p. 152), learners should have a significant role in adapting and selecting class materials. Tomlinson suggests that materials should be learner-centered, flexible, open-ended, relevant, universal, and authentic, giving learners' choices. Additionally, the results revealed that EFL students were demotivated due to inadequate language learning facilities, such as multimedia, internet, and computers. These findings call for the attention of educational authorities to invest in providing language learning resources. Learners' facilities-related demotivation can be significantly reduced if authorities equip public educational institutions with language learning laboratories to promote e-learning. Highlighting the benefits of e-learning, Mohammadi et al. (2011) assert that e-learning improves attendance, boosts motivation, and enhances language learning engagement.

Conclusion

This study aimed to familiarize English language educators with the demotivators that affect Pakistani EFL students' learning experience. This information can guide educators and syllabus designers in avoiding practices that undermine students' interest in English language learning. Furthermore, such knowledge can provide new insights for educators, syllabus designers, and language policymakers to consider individual needs when adopting teaching methods, selecting materials, and developing language policies to enhance English language teaching and learning.

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