

SECOND EDITION

GENDER,
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AND
CLASS
IN
MEDIA
A TEXT-READER

GAIL DINES

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 SAGE Publications ²⁰⁰³
International, Educational and Professional Publisher
Thousand Oaks ■ London ■ New Delhi

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—Companies with full-page advertisements in the fall 1998 issue of *Out*, a national lesbian and gay magazine

If the struggle for legal and social equality for lesbians and gay males is still being fiercely fought (and often lost), the struggle to treat them as full and equal citizens in the republic of postscarcity, postmodern hyperconsumption is all over but the shouting. The good guys (and some of the girls) and gay males in terms of their sexual identities, with their emergence in recent years as economic subjects—self-conscious identities produced within the structure of commodity relationships—they have achieved an equality far greater than that found in the political or social realm. Indeed it seems the acceptance of lesbians and gay males as sexual/political subjects is predicated on their acceptance and importance as consuming subjects. While in the past other marginalized groups have attained political power through the marshaling of economic resources, for lesbians and gay males it is not in their role as producers or controllers of capital, but in their role as consumers, particularly as a defined market niche attractive to advertisers, that they are offered the surest route to equality. Perhaps in the history of social movements this represents a pioneering strategy in which pulling out the American Express Card has replaced the raised fist. An additional irony is that even while the commodification of lesbian/gay identity represents a pioneering

political strategy, in many ways it reproduces the same old gender disparities. Lesbians and gay males may have achieved equality, but because of their more attractive income profile, advertisers decided early in the game that gay males are more equal than lesbians. Even in the Republic of Hyperconsumption governed by advertisers and marketers the iron law of politics still applies: *plus ça change, plus ça rest le même.*

Although at the birth of the gay liberation movement in 1969 homosexuals were perhaps one of the most marginalized, stigmatized minorities in the United States, it did not take long for advertisers to ask about the potential of selling to the homosexual market. Mindful of the stereotypic image of gay men as upscale, high-spending consumers interested in the latest in fashion (then as now, lesbians figured very little in these discussions), *Advertising Age* in the early 1970s began running periodic reports about the possibilities of marketing to gays. The first report in 1972 was not very hopeful. Noting that most advertisers were reluctant to have their product identified with a gay market, many media outlets would not use the word "gay" in an advertisement, and in any event most gay men were very closeted (Baltera 1972). Three years later *Advertising Age* reported that advertisers were becoming more aware of

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ADVERTISING AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF LESBIAN/GAY IDENTITY

Free Press

Homosexuality is "a pathetic little second-rate substitute for reality, a pitiable flight from life. As such it deserves fairness, compassion, understanding, and when possible, treatment. But it deserves no encouragement, no glamorization, no rationalization, no fake status as a minority group, no sophistry about simple differences in taste—and, above all, no pretense that it is anything but a pernicious sickness."

—"The Homosexual in America," *Time*, 21 January 1966

IBM, DKNY, American Express, Waterford, Dockers, Tattinger, Nieman Marcus, Circuit City, Virgin Atlantic, Smirnoff, Mouado, Rockport, Bacardi, Versace, New York Times, Air New Zealand, Calvin Klein, Hennessy, Camel, Grand Marnier, British Airways, Eyeworks, Chivas Regal, Armani, Stolichnaya, Parliament Lights, Doc Martens, Finlandia, Seiko, Freixnet, Lindermann's Graham's Port,

NOTE: From *Sex & Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media*, edited by Eileen R. Meehan and Ellen Riordan, 2001, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 196-208. Copyright © 2001.

gay men as a separate market niche, yet, fearing a backlash from heterosexual consumers, they still were very reluctant to have their product identified as a "gay product." Moreover, they argued that they could reach the gay consumer through the regular advertising aimed at the straight market (Baltera 1975).

A more practical reason why advertisers and marketing companies were hesitant to take the gay market seriously was lack of reliable marketing data about gay men. If gay media were serious about attracting mainstream advertising dollars, they first had to construct a statistical picture of the gay consumer. The first marketing survey of gay men was conducted in 1977 when the *Advocate*, at that time the only gay publication with a national audience, hired an independent marketing research firm to conduct a survey of its readers in an attempt to attract major national advertisers. According to results, the typical *Advocate* readers were gay professional men between the ages of twenty and forty with above-average incomes. Free of the financial burden of supporting a family, they could afford to spend their large incomes on themselves, particularly on high-priced liquors, clothes, and travel. According to the magazine's publisher, gay men were not merely trying to prove that we can "live as well as the Joneses, (but) we live a damn sight better" (Stabner 1982). By picturing the gay market as one composed of upscale gay men with high-priced habits of consumption, the survey seemed to confirm what was thought about the gay market, and by extension, the gay community. By 1980 *Advertising Age* noted that national advertisers such as Seagrams, Simon and Schuster, and the major film companies were beginning to place ads in national publications like the *Advocate* and in local gay newspapers (Pendleton 1980). Advertisers were also becoming aware of how, particularly in urban areas, the consumption habits and fashion tastes of gay men were being imitated by straight men, particularly in clothing designs that emphasized a

highly eroticized masculinity. Rather than being an isolated marginalized niche, gay men were seen as both hyperconsumers and powerful trendsetters for new designs and products (Stabner 1982).

Yet reaching the gay market was problematic. In the early 1980s there was as yet no slick glossy publication that explicitly targeted gay men. Publications that did exist, such as the *Advocate* and local gay newspapers and magazines, did not have the high production quality required by major national advertisers, particularly fashion advertisers, and their content—heavy with photos of half-dressed or nude handsome young men and advertisements for erotic, pornographic videos and sexual services—was too explicitly sexual for most mainstream advertisers. Moreover, many advertisers, particularly fashion advertisers, were still reluctant to have their products too closely associated with the gay market. Some fashion designer advertisers such as Paco Rabanne, Marlboro, Levi Strauss, and Calvin Klein got around this problem by utilizing the "gay window advertising" approach, constructing ads with homosexual subtexts very obvious to gay readers but unnoticed by straight readers and then placing these ads in mainstream men's fashion magazines (Stabner 1982; Holland 1977; Merret 1988; see also Sender 1999).

In order to attract national advertisers, gay publications like the *Advocate* in the late 1980s and early 1990s upgraded their production quality and changed their format and editorial focus. The *Advocate*, for example, cordoned off its classified and other sexually explicit material into a separate publication—"We wanted the magazine to be something gay men could leave on the coffee table when their mothers came over" noted the publisher (Pogrebin 1996)—and redesigned itself as a news magazine with a focus on national events of interest to the gay community and cultural and feature stories about art and entertainment. Its strategy was successful and its ad revenue doubled from \$1.9 million to \$3.8 million between 1990 and 1992 (C. Miller

1992). In the early 1990s a number of new gay national magazines, including *Out*, *Game*, *10 Percent*, *QW*, and *Déjà vu*, appeared. With the exception of the lesbian magazine *Deneuve* (which later changed its name to *Curve*), these publications were aimed at gay males. In an effort to attract national advertisers, particularly fashion advertisers, they all had the similar strategy of printing on high-grade glossy paper and emphasizing "lifestyle" content of general feature stories about fashion, celebrities, travel, and current events to target the upper-income segment of their markets. As these new publications were competing among themselves, and with the *Advocate*, for national advertising dollars, most had short lives. Among these new lifestyle entrants, *Out* emerged as the clear victor and by 1996 was the leading gay magazine with its 119,000 circulation topping the *Advocate*'s 74,000 (Wilke 1996).

With the explicit sexual material gone and market-survey data about gay consumers beginning to appear, by the mid-1990s most advertisers had overcome any reluctance about advertising in gay publications. As *Advertising Age* reported in bold headlines on its front page in 1997, "Big advertisers join move to embrace gay marketer" (Wilke 1997b). As the head of Rivendell Marketing, a gay and lesbian media placement company, noted, "Ten years ago we had a tough time getting an appointment at any agency. Now everybody will see us" (Pogrebin 1996). In addition to fashion designers such as Gucci, Versace, and Yves St. Laurent, traditional major advertisers like Aetna Life and Casualty, General Motors, Chase Manhattan Corporation, Johnson and Johnson, United Airlines, Merrill Lynch, and American Express began to take pages in gay publications. More recently even advertisers like Chesebrough-Pond's (Mentadent toothpaste), Bristol-Myers Squibb (Excedrin), and McNeil Consumer Products (Morrin) began advertising in gay media (Wilke 1998).

Moreover, many local and regional gay periodicals, noting the success of the

Advocate and *Out*, have undertaken a similar strategy of getting rid of sexually explicit material, improving production quality, and using market research to produce a statistical profile of their readership in an effort to attract nongay local and regional advertisers. For example, to improve their marketability to nongay advertisers, the ten major gay newspapers of the National Gay Newspaper Guild commissioned Simmons Market Research Bureau in 1991 to undertake a major market study of their readership. Data were produced about the gay readership in Miami, Los Angeles, Boston, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Dallas, New York, Houston, and Chicago that matched the results of the studies done for the national gay publications (Fejes and Lennon 2000).

There is little mystery as to why advertisers are very interested in the gay market. As the advertising director of *Out* explained, "Imagine going to an advertiser and saying 'above average income, highly educated, travels a lot, buys all the new electronic toys and gadgets'" (Rosen 1994). In 1994 the major marketing research company Yankelevich Partners conducted what was at that time the most sophisticated study of the gay and lesbian market. In contrast to previous studies, which were based on the readers of various periodicals who voluntarily responded to mail-in questionnaires, this study was based on a random sample of the general population, taking from that sample those who had voluntarily identified themselves as lesbian or gay. Interestingly, this study did not find lesbian and gay consumers to have incomes significantly greater than the general population. However, what was significant was the way the income was spent. The study, which received attention on the front page of the business section of the *New York Times* and the results of which were incorporated later in a book on how to reach the gay consumer, showed gay males and lesbians to be more educated, more technologically oriented, and more likely to be

controlled for profession, education, and region (Klawitter and Flatt 1998; Badgett 1995).

In spite of the problematic aspects of these studies, one can argue that they still represent a marketing process that culminates in more media representations of lesbians and gay males. To lesbians and gay males, after decades of invisibility and marginality and stigmatization, being aggressively courted by advertisers and the media can be a sign of progress. Rather than being portrayed as pathetic, mentally ill sex perverts and child molesters who are threats to religion, home, family, and the state, they are now portrayed as young, healthy, fun to be with, and having a lot of disposable income. Although this marketing campaign is not explicitly political, it fits very well into the broader "assimilationist" strategy advocated by major mainstream lesbian and gay political organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign. Indeed, gay writers about media and marketing—for example, Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen, authors of *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the '90s* (1989), and Grant Lukenbill, author of *Untold Millions: Positioning Your Business for the Gay and Lesbian Consumer Revolution* (1995)—see the proliferation of "positive" (read young, healthy, attractive, mainstream, affluent) gay and lesbian images in the media, be they on television shows or in advertising, as the surest route to political equality and power.

Yet the political benefits of this marketing attention are not all that clear. As Urvasi Vaid noted in her critical study of the problematic nature of the assimilation strategy, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (1995), being highly valued by marketers means nothing politically unless there is also a strong political movement that presses for political rights and equality. In the 1970s and 1980s the single woman with her own income and life became a standard image in advertising and the

many of the pre-Stonewall (pre-1969) generation, the preferred term is "homosexual"; to some of the younger generation, the term is "queer." Furthermore, such studies totally ignore emerging bisexual and transgendered identities.

Nonetheless, in spite of these difficulties, studies of the lesbian and gay consumer continue, as advertisers, marketers, and gay media try to get an accurate picture of what they are dealing with. In the process, advertisers construct identities for lesbians and gay men. As can be discerned, the results of the various studies provide odd and often conflicting information. Studies based on the readership of lesbian/gay periodicals that generally set the pattern have produced a picture of the lesbian/gay market as one consisting of affluent, well-educated individuals with upscale consumption patterns. For example, a 1996 study done by Simmons Market Research Bureau utilizing a sample of almost 4,000 respondents found that 28.6 percent had annual incomes exceeding \$50,000 and 21 percent of the households had incomes above \$100,000. Close to 60 percent of the respondents held management positions, 48 percent were college educated, and 61 percent had taken a foreign trip in the twelve months preceding the study (Wilke 1997b). However, the sample was drawn from subscription lists of gay periodicals and direct-mail lists. The studies based on samples other than subscription lists for lesbian/gay periodicals, such as the 1994 Yankelovich study and a 1998 study by the New York marketing consultants Spare Parts, tend to show lesbians and gays as having only marginally higher incomes than heterosexuals (Wilke 1998). The two scholarly studies of income among lesbians and gay males—the first using data from the 1990 census, which counted households with unmarried partners of the same sex, and the second using data from the General Social Survey of the National Opinion Research Center—both found that lesbians and gay males actually made less money than their heterosexual counterparts, even when the sample was

with a 66 percent African American population, again only 5 percent of the readers identified themselves as African American (Fejes and Lennon 2000). In contrast, in what is the most comprehensive study of sexual behavior in America, the sociologist Edwin Laumann and his colleagues found that the ratio of gay males to lesbians was 2:1 (Laumann et al. 1994, 303-05) and that more African American males engaged in same-sex behavior and more Hispanics/Latinos identified themselves as homo- or bisexual than Anglos. (Comparable data for females were not given.)

Beyond these technical problems, a basic conceptual problem is involved in these surveys. There is no established method or standard for defining a lesbian or gay person. For example, Laumann and his colleagues found it necessary to break down the category of homosexuality into three dimensions: desire, behavior, and identity, each yielding a different number of homosexuals (Laumann et al. 1994, 292-97). Generally the most common method of categorization is self-identification—it is also the most conservative one. According to Laumann, only 2.8 percent of the men and 1.4 percent of the women identified themselves as homosexual or bisexual. Given the fact that same-sex acts are still outlawed in most states and open disclosure of one's homosexuality can often lead to job loss and other harmful consequences, many lesbians and gay males are reluctant to respond to questions about sexual orientation posed by a census questionnaire, telephone marketing survey, or interviewer. Perhaps it is no surprise that marketing and consumer surveys often show lesbians and gay males as having higher incomes, being self-employed, having higher levels of education, and living in major urban areas. These individuals most likely enjoy a greater sense of personal, professional, and economic security and are thus more willing to be open about their sexual orientation. Finally, the terms "gay" and "lesbian" themselves are not without ambiguity. To

self-employed than the average heterosexual consumer. As a group they were seen as far more "cutting edge," more likely to spend their money on new products. To advertisers, they were a very desirable group of innovative consumers (Elliott 1994; Lukenbill 1995). But while advertisers and marketers talked of a "lesbian and gay" market and lifestyle, the picture generally called to mind was that of a gay male. In advertising the results of its readership study to advertisers, the National Gay Newspaper Guild used the photo of a young white man in a business suit (Fejes and Lennon 2000). For a moment in the early 1990s it seemed that a "lesbian chic" was achieving a mainstream currency, that in terms of style and fashion lesbians would perform the same function for heterosexual women that gay men do for heterosexual men, and that lesbians would be "broken out" as a separate market category (Clark 1991). Yet that moment quickly passed as the advertisers decided that lesbians were not an attractive, identifiable market niche and could moreover be reached through ads aimed at women generally.

Trying to reach a "gay" market is not easy. The effort to construct a market profile of lesbians and gays is fraught with a number of major problems. As with all surveys, the construction and size of the sample determine how representative the results are of the population being measured. The one survey that used a randomly selected sample had a sample size of less than 150 (Wilke 1996). Many of the studies that utilized larger sample sizes obtained their respondents from subscription lists of gay periodicals and direct-mail lists. As a result of this process of self-selection, the samples were highly skewed. A good example of this was the 1991 Simmons study of the readership of major lesbian and gay newspapers. The sample was predominantly male (9:1) and predominantly white-Anglo: in Miami, with a 50 percent Hispanic/Latino population, only 5 percent of the gay readership identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino; and in Washington, D.C.,

media. Yet this did nothing to abate the growth of a strong conservative religious movement demanding that women be "restored" to their traditional role as subservient to their husbands. Racist media images are for the most part a thing of the past, and the inclusion of images of African Americans, Asians, and other people of color in advertising and media products is so common as to be unnoticed. Yet the efforts to scale back affirmative action programs and deny social benefits to immigrants are just one example of how racism is still very much a part of American life. For lesbians and gay males, all the attention that advertisers began to accord them in the late 1980s did little to temper the virulence of the opposition to giving lesbians and gays the right either to serve in the military or to have their relationships legally sanctioned.

Indeed, one can argue that the marketing media attention have hurt the lesbian and gay community politically. While these marketing studies do not present a realistic or representative portrayal of the lesbian/gay community, what they have done—lacking any comprehensive demographic information—is to present a picture of the lesbian and gay community that has become very much part of the political discourse about that community. Indeed, in the various political debates about the political and legal status of lesbians and gays that form part of the ongoing "culture wars," the information provided by these marketing studies is often used as an objective description of lesbians and gay males. The professional, affluent image of lesbians and gays created by market research conforms well with the notion that the "homosexual lifestyle" is a choice made mostly by white, well-educated, middle-class males. More important, a claim frequently made by religious and conservative opponents of measures to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is that lesbians and gay males are not victims of discrimination; rather, if anything, they represent a privileged minority, particularly in terms of

are coming out search both the interpersonal and media environment for clues to understanding their feelings and sense of difference. Thus media images, whether in advertising or other media products, become very powerful in helping one to develop a sense of identity.

In the past the images available to lesbians and gay males in the mainstream media were highly negative. Since the late 1960s, however, the lesbian and gay community began to develop its own community media, which presented alternate and affirmative images (Streitmatter 1995). The pages of these community media tended to be open to a diversity of viewpoints and experiences. For young lesbians and gay males coming out and beginning to define themselves both individually and as members of a community, the community media were very important in providing information and images that they used to construct their identities. However, in the 1980s this community-based nature of the media began to change as various publications decided to pursue the advertising dollars of mainstream advertisers. The publications became more professional and their focus became less the expression of the community's diversity than the shaping of a readership that would attract advertisers.

Today, if a gay male who is coming out will find it that to be a homosexual in today's society is to be a masculine young white male, with a well-muscled body and handsome face, a good education, and a professional job. Moreover, he will learn, all the members of the gay community are alike. There may be a few African Americans or Asians, albeit with very Caucasian features, and a few women, but aside from their race or gender, there is very little difference. They all live in a gay-friendly environment where there is no sexism, racism, homophobia, or poverty. To be "gay" in this sense the gay male needs an annual income of at least \$50,000 so that he can drink top-brand liquors, wear designer clothes, vacation in exotic places, go to the

gym, and ride in an SUV. Whereas in the past coming out was chiefly about sex, today it is as much about consumption.

For a young woman coming out, the situation is even more problematic. While the major national magazines like *Out* and the *Advocate* define themselves as serving the entire lesbian and gay male community, in practice the gay male market is their target audience, and thus women are marginalized, if not made invisible. This was made clear in late 1997 when the female editor and cofounder of *Out* magazine was dismissed; the major complaint was directed at her strategy of taking the magazine in a "multifaceted direction . . . which [was] very inclusive of both gay and lesbian issues . . . [but was] not working in the eyes of money people." The new editor was expected to steer "the magazine toward gay men's issues at the expense of coverage of lesbians," as the men have higher incomes (Pogrebin 1997b). Because of their smaller readership, the few publications geared primarily toward lesbians, like *Carme* (formerly known as *Deneuve*), have to try even harder to attract an upscale audience in order to attract mainstream advertisers. These magazines also experienced the need to move away from sexually explicit and political subject matter. The West Coast magazine *Girlfriends* did away with its centerfold and began to concentrate on stories dealing with parenting and breast cancer. The erotic lesbian magazine *On Our Backs*, which symbolized a rebellious assertion of female sexuality, went out of business (Pogrebin 1996). And as is true with the other gay magazines, the concerns and images of the white, upper-middle-class Anglo woman strongly shape the construction of lesbian sexuality.

Social and sexual identities that do not match the desired audience profile are minimized or made totally invisible in these publications. With improvements in printing technology making the publication of small magazines relatively easy, and now with the proliferation of specialized web pages, marginalized desires and identities

are allowed some exposure. There is, for example, a magazine for people—primarily gay males—with AIDS (POZI); a magazine for African American gay males (BLK); *Transgender Tapestry* for transvestites and transsexuals; and numerous magazines for the different sexual communities existing within the lesbian and gay male community, such as the leather and S/M community. Yet the existence of these other publications also reflects the fact that these identities have little place in the dominant gay and lesbian publications. The centuries-old underground gay and lesbian culture—in which people with strongly stigmatized identities blurred class and race boundaries and risked much to affirm their own desires—has been repackaged with its “rough edges” trimmed away. The commodification of gay and lesbian identity has resulted in the construction of a “straight” gay/lesbian identity. As Sarah Schulman notes, “A fake homosexuality has been constructed to facilitate a double marketing strategy: selling products to gay consumers that address their emotional need to be accepted while selling a palatable image of homosexuality to heterosexual consumers that meets their need to have their dominance obscured” (1998, 146). Updating Foucault, it would seem that today the consumer-based media, and not the state, the church, or the scientific professions, are the far more effective creators and regulators of identities and desires.

Furthermore, the consequences of such narrow representation in ads can go beyond the issue of images and identities. With the introduction in the 1990s of protease inhibitors, which significantly slow the progress of the AIDS virus in the body, pharmaceutical companies marketing these new drug therapies became big advertisers in magazines with large gay male readership. Typically their ads showed young, healthy, handsome, affluent, mostly white males engaged in strenuous physical sports or activities like mountain climbing or cross-country biking and encouraged readers with the HIV virus to talk to their

doctors about trying the advertised drug. According to drug companies, ads that put such a healthy and happy face on AIDS “motivat(ed) patients to talk to their doctors about treatment options.” What the ads did not show was that the drug therapies did not work for all patients and that, for people for whom the drugs did work, there were often significant side effects, such as liver damage, increased cholesterol, reshaped facial structure, and redistribution of body fat, resulting in bulging stomachs and necks and fatless legs and arms. In reality very few people taking the drugs resembled the men in the ads. Such ads minimized the consequences of AIDS, according to a spring 2001 survey by the University of California, San Francisco, of gay men in health clinics. The overwhelming majority of those surveyed thought the ads promoted unsafe sex. Following the study’s release, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration ordered the pharmaceutical companies to change their ads to reflect more accurately the consequences of contracting the AIDS virus (Kirby 2001).

In spite of advertising’s open welcome to lesbians and gays, the “gays in the military” and “gay marriage” political firestorms of recent years show how tenuous is the political position of lesbians and gay males. Virulent homophobia is still very much a part of today’s landscape, as witnessed by the October 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard, the young gay college student in Wyoming who was ferociously beaten, his skull literally cracked, and then tied to a fence, in a manner similar to ranchers displaying slain wolves, as a warning to others of his kind. Or as witnessed by the February 1999 murder of Billy Jack Gaither, a thirty-nine-year-old ritral Alabama gay man who was lured to a deserted spot by two men who bludgeoned him to death with an axe, handle and then set his body afire on top of a pyre of old tires. The charred remains of Gaither and the crucified figure of Shepard stand in stark contrast to the images of happy and healthy gay men and lesbians found in

heavily ad-saturated magazines like *Out* and the *Advocate*. Homosexuality ignores class, race, ethnic, and regional boundaries; most lesbians and gay men are not twenty-six years old and do not live charmed, protected, and carefree lives in trendy urban centers, earning high incomes in glamorous white-collar professions, going to the gym daily, wearing the latest fashions. The situation of typical lesbians and gay males is much closer to that of Matthew Shepard or Billy Jack Gaither—living in an environment quietly antagonistic at best or at worst openly hostile to their existence, being careful as to whom they disclose their sexual identity, and often at risk in the expression of their sexual desire. To these people, the advertising-filled magazines now filling the lesbian/gay magazine sections of chain bookstores like Borders and Barnes & Noble represent a reality in which their lives and experience are once again invisible.

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