

## Representation of Imperfection in TikTok’s Trend *Wabi-Sabi*: A Thematic Analysis

Fiella Widya Rahma Aprillia<sup>1</sup>, Silvy Adelia<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

\*Correspondence: [fiellawidya.22017@mhs.unesa.ac.id](mailto:fiellawidya.22017@mhs.unesa.ac.id)

### ABSTRACT

*Social media has become an influential platform in shaping beauty standards by often promoting idealized and unattainable representations of physical appearance. In response to this phenomenon, the wabi-sabi trend on TikTok has emerged as an alternative narrative that celebrates imperfection, incompleteness, and authenticity. This study aims to examine how imperfection is represented in the wabi-sabi trend on TikTok and to identify the themes through which users reinterpret characteristics commonly perceived as flaws. This research uses thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework. Data were collected from TikTok videos under the hashtag #wabisabi that utilized the original King of the Hill audio associated with the trend. From an initial dataset of 100 videos, 20 videos met the engagement criteria. The findings reveal five major themes: feature deviations from beauty ideals, body imperfections as beauty, biological uniqueness, interpersonal relationships, and nature’s imperfection. These themes demonstrate that users celebrate various forms of imperfection. The study concludes that the wabi-sabi trend functions as a space that challenges beauty standards by embracing authenticity, diversity, and appreciation of imperfection.*

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Wabi-Sabi, TikTok, Thematic Analysis, Imperfection, Beauty Standards.

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### 1. Introduction

The growth of social media has reinforced the practiced of social comparison in digital life. Digital experiences influence how individuals view themselves, including negative social comparison such as comparing oneself to others who are perceived as better, as well as excessive focus on their appearance in social media (Tierney et al., 2026). The comparison is showing through constant exposure to other people’s lives, leading individuals to judge themselves based on the standards presented on social media (Khan, 2026; Rahman et al., 2019; Yaumi et al., 2023). Social media is ever-present in modern society and has changed the way people communicate with those around them (O’Day & Heimberg, 2021; Al-Obaydi et al., 2022; Pratiwi et al., 2026). Accessibility and immediacy have transformed how we exchange knowledge, share personal experiences, and connect with a worldwide audience (Barone et al., 2023; Ko et al., 2025). Social media is a powerful tool that connect users across the world. There are some of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (Weda et al., 2022; Yaumi et al., 2024; Andini et al., 2026). Subsequently, TikTok is a social media platform chosen for this research.

A study states in a lockdown situation, social media platforms like TikTok flourish alongside traditional video-streaming platforms because they provide a way to resolve several difficult conflicts that relate to the state of lockdown: conflicts between freedom and limitation, between staying home and being entertained, and between the collective efforts of civic duty and the solipsistic pleasures of digital connectivity and performative play (Kendall, 2021). According to Global Statistics, TikTok reached 1.59 billion monthly active users in 2025, reflecting 6.8% annual growth rate (*TikTok Global Users Statistics 2025 | TikTok Demographics – The Global Statistics*, n.d.). Machine learning techniques are used by social media sites like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok to tailor content feeds depending on user interactions, hence enhancing visually appealing and emotionally charged content (Suh et al., 2025).

As technology advances, beauty standards are no longer influenced solely by the surrounding environment but also constructed through social media. Social validation has now been digitized and standardized globally. Research suggests that excessive engagement with social media negatively affects body image confidence through the internalization of beauty norms, which increases self-comparisons and sensitivity to perceived judgments from others (Yang et al., 2020). Among various forms of media, social media is considered especially influential because of its pervasive use among young

women and its capacity to spread idealized beauty standards that are often unrealistic and unattainable (Pryde et al., 2026). This condition is also exacerbated by filters and editing, a study shows that edits commonly enhance baby schema features such as softened facial shapes and enlarged eyes, highlighting the significance in shaping beauty standards (Song et al., 2025).

Behind the demand for perfection on social media, *wabi-sabi* has become one of the shifts in values regarding conventional beauty. In Japanese culture, a smile with crowding upper front teeth may be perceived as *kawaii* (cute or charming), reflecting the aesthetic principles of *wabi-sabi*, which emphasize the appreciation of beauty in natural imperfections (Tsallas et al., 2026). *Wabi-sabi* is an aesthetic philosophy that celebrates imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness. It advocates appreciating natural simplicity and the beauty found in flaws, encouraging people to move beyond external appearances and value the subtle, atmospheric qualities of objects and experiences. Through the acceptance of aging, wear, and transience, *wabi-sabi* shows harmony, authenticity, and serenity in everyday life (Fallahnejad, 2025).

Some studies show on TikTok video trends, such as the study that found that TikTok fitspiration content predominantly promotes gendered ideal body standards. Women were more often portrayed as thin and fit ideals, while men were associated with muscular ideals (Pryde et al., 2024). Another study found that TikTok skin-lightening content often reinforces beauty ideals associated with fairness and whiteness (Santoso et al., 2025). Another study also found that trending thinspiration videos on Douyin not only promote the thin ideal but also the fit and beauty ideals, often through gendered representations of the body. Female-focused videos emphasized smaller body sizes, attractiveness, and objectification, whereas male-focused videos focused on highlighting muscularity and informational content (Tao et al., 2026).

While previous studies have shown that social media trends often reinforce idealized beauty standards, limited research has explored emerging trends that challenge these standards. This study addresses this gap by examining the *wabi-sabi* trend, which shows resistance of beauty standards. *Wabi-sabi* is derived from the word *wabi* 侘, which indicates simplicity, tranquility, and a peaceful life, as well as *sabi* 寂, which indicates maturity, solitude, and naturalness (Wilkinson & Basho, 2022). Therefore, the *wabi-sabi* trend on TikTok may be understood not only as a form of digital content but also as an expression of a philosophy that values imperfection on social media. To explore how this trend challenges beauty standards on social media, this study addresses how the philosophy of *wabi-sabi* is represented in TikTok videos under #*wabisabi* as a challenge to dominant beauty standards?

## 2. Methodology

This study focuses on analyzing the *wabi-sabi* trend emerging on TikTok. To understand how users portray and interpret this imperfection in their videos, this study will employ thematic analysis. This method was chosen because it is highly effective for categorizing, analyzing, and identifying patterns or overarching themes emerging from the videos and text within this trend. By combining the concept of *wabi-sabi* with thematic analysis, this study aims to answer the question of what themes of imperfection users celebrate within this trend, while also examining how these themes redefine the conventional beauty standards that have long dominated social media.

The data for this study were collected from the TikTok platform using the keyword and the hashtag #*wabisabi* during the period October 1, 2025, until December 31, 2025. Data collection was conducted manually by documenting the 100 top videos under the hashtag *wabi-sabi* that used the original *King of the Hill* (1997-2010) audio which transcribe as follows:

Bobby Hill: "This one is pretty."

Hank Hill: "Not according to the book, if you go by the checklist, this one is perfect."

Bobby Hill: "But I like how mine's a little off-center. It's got *wabi-sabi*."

These videos were then screened based on engagement relevance. To ensure that the analysis focused on the most prominent and influential content, only videos with a minimum of 1,000,000 views, 100,000 likes, and 500 comments were retained. This selected process resulted in a final dataset of 20 videos, which were subjected to thematic analysis.

Using thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006), researchers will identify and interpret recurring themes within the data. Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning or themes within qualitative data. Thematic analysis provides accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Data analysis was conducted through six phases of thematic analysis as

described by Braun and Clark (2006). In the first phase, researchers familiarized themselves with the data by repeatedly watching selected videos, transcribing captions and on-screen text, also noting initial impressions and emerging patterns. In the second phase, researchers assigned brief codes to each data point. In the third phase, these codes were grouped into broader themes based on shared meaning. In the fourth stage, the themes were reviewed, and the core meaning explained. In the sixth stage, researchers documented analysis results, including supporting evidence such as on-screen text (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout this study. The data analyzed consisted of publicly accessible posts under the hashtag #wabisabi. Usernames are displayed because the accounts and content analyzed are publicly available, and including usernames is necessary to preserve the authenticity and context of the data. Nevertheless, the researchers prioritize ethical principles by not disclosing any personal information beyond what is already publicly available and by striving to minimize any potential negative impact on users.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Results

The first 100 videos that appeared under the hashtag #wabisabi with audio from *King of the Hill* were collected as initial data. Subsequently, a selection was made to obtain data with high levels of visibility and interaction based on engagement, with a minimum criteria of 1.000.000 views, 100.000 likes, and 500 comments. Following this process, 20 videos were selected for further thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach.

**Table 1. Data of Wabi-sabi**

Theme	Subtheme	Data	Frequency	Interpretation
Feature Deviations from Beauty Ideals	Facial structure and facial asymmetry	Nose bump (V3), Asymmetrical side profile (V39), Asymmetrical hairline (V49), Widow's peak (V64)	4	Facial characteristics that differ from conventional beauty standards are reframed as unique and worthy of appreciation.
		Crooked teeth (V18), Overbite/Open bite (V42), Tooth gap (V44), Underbite (V72)	4	Dental and jaw irregularities are presented as distinctive features rather than defects requiring correction.
Body Imperfections as Beauty	Skin characteristics	Back acne (V2), Moles (V24)	2	Visible skin imperfections are portrayed as natural bodily features rather than flaws.
	Body shape and bodily appearance	Belly fat (V57)	1	Body forms that deviate from thin-body ideals are embraced as part of self-acceptance.
Biological Uniqueness	Hair irregularities	Cowlick eyebrows (V11), Ginger hair (V46)	2	Distinctive hair characteristics are reinterpreted as attractive and unique.
		Physical and genetic differences	Crooked finger (V4), Polydactyly (V43),	3

		Heterochromia (V65)		markers of uniqueness rather than abnormality.
Interpersonal Relationship	Personality traits	Clumsy personality (V7), (V12)	2	Personality/habit interpreted as endearing aspects of human identity.
	Family circumstances	Incomplete family (V61)	1	Non-ideal family situations are accepted as life realities.
Nature's Imperfection	Imperfection in nature	Abandoned building (V22)	1	Nature serves as an example of beauty emerging from irregularity and imperfection

Based on a thematic analysis of 20 TikTok videos that met the criteria, five main themes emerged: facial deviations from beauty ideals, body imperfections as beauty, biological uniqueness, interpersonal relationships, and nature's imperfections. The most dominant theme was facial deviations from beauty ideals, as seen in eight videos that covered facial features such as teeth, nose, jawline, and hairline that differed from conventional beauty standards. Next, the theme body imperfections as beauty consisted of five videos depicting skin characteristics such as acne and moles, hair, and fat body shape that are generally perceived as physical imperfections.

Meanwhile, the theme of biological uniqueness was found in three videos that showcase biological and genetic variations such as crooked finger, polydactyly, and heterochromia. While the theme of interpersonal relationships also consisted of three videos depicting personality and family dynamics. The nature's imperfection theme appeared in one video depicting beauty through natural processes in the environment, such as abandoned buildings. Overall, the results show that the representation of *wabi-sabi* in TikTok videos is dominated by an acceptance of various forms of human imperfection, which then extends to aspects of interpersonal relationships and nature.

### 3.2 Discussion

This section provides an in-depth interpretation of the five themes identified in the results. Each theme is illustrated through one representative video selected to exemplify the patterns observed across the themes and to examine their meaning within the context of *wabi-sabi* philosophy.

#### 3.2.1 Facial Differences from Beauty Ideals



Figure 1. *Wabi-sabi* Representation of Feature Deviations from Beauty Ideals of Tooth Gap



Figure 2. *Wabi-sabi* Representation of Feature Deviations from Beauty Ideals of Tooth Gap

The first theme consists of eight videos featuring physical characteristics that deviate from dominant beauty standards. This theme illustrates how *wabi-sabi* content on TikTok portrays facial features that deviate from conventional beauty standards as something that valuable and worthy of appreciation. Features such as a bump on the nose, an asymmetrical facial profile, a widow's peak, crooked teeth, an overbite, an underbite, and gaps between the teeth are openly displayed without any attempt to hide or conform to dominant beauty standards. Rather than being positioned as flaws, these features become the main focus of the videos, demonstrating that they are not a type of abnormality. This finding reflects the core principle of *wabi-sabi*, which values imperfection as a natural part of human existence and rejects the notion that aesthetic value can only be achieved through physical perfection.

In a video posted by the user (@jessicaxo051), which has been viewed by 1.6 million viewers, received 215,4K likes, and garnered 2,262 comments, she is seen smiling, revealing a gap in her upper teeth. The on-screen text reads, "You need to get that gap closed," highlighting the societal pressure faced by individuals whose physical characteristics are deemed inconsistent with ideal beauty standards. This statement reflects the expectation that an ideal set of teeth must be straight and gap-free, leading to the perception that a tooth gap is something that needs to be corrected. However, rather than conforming to these demands, the creator confidently displays her tooth gap by smiling widely. This action demonstrates a process of reinterpreting a physical feature constructed as a flaw into a unique and valuable aspect. This representation can also be understood as a form of resistance against the beauty standards that have long dominated the media and popular culture. Dominant beauty standards generally idealize a symmetrical face, a proportional nose, and neatly aligned teeth.

### 3.2.2 Body Imperfections as Beauty



Figure 3. *Wabi-sabi* Representation of Body Imperfection as Beauty of Belly Fat



Figure 4. *Wabi-sabi* Representation of Body Imperfection as Beauty of Belly Fat

The video uploaded on November 13, 2025 by username (@mixedprincess0) with 1.3M views, 156.6K likes, and 773 comments shows a woman lifting the bottom of her shirt to reveal her stomach. The focus is on the fat in her stomach, which, in popular beauty standards, is often constructed as a flaw because it does not conform to the ideal body image of being flat and slim as shown in figure 4 with the text "This one is perfect." However, her facial expression appears confident and relaxed as she confidently displays this part of her body. She also clearly states this through the caption that reads, "I love my little belly." This statement shows that the creator does not view her stomach as something to be hidden or fixed, but rather as a natural part of herself that deserves acceptance and appreciation.

In the United States, female beauty is often associated with a slim figure. The media reinforces this standard by portraying slim figures as the ideal and attractive body type, while bodies that do not conform to this standard tend to be considered less attractive (Poloskov & Tracey, 2013). As a result, many women feel pressure to achieve a certain body shape in order to be socially accepted. These standards not only influence society's perception of women's bodies, but also shape the way women view and evaluate their own bodies. This video illustrates how the *wabi-sabi* trend on TikTok is being used to challenge beauty standards that idealize slim, fat-free bodies. Instead of showcasing body transformations or efforts to improve physical appearance, creators are celebrating body features often considered flaws, such as an fat

stomach. Within the wabi-sabi framework, beauty arises not because the body meets an ideal standard, but because it reflects authenticity and the human condition as it is. Thus, this video demonstrates that physical features long positioned as imperfections can be reframed as a form of beauty.

### 3.2.3 Biological Uniqueness

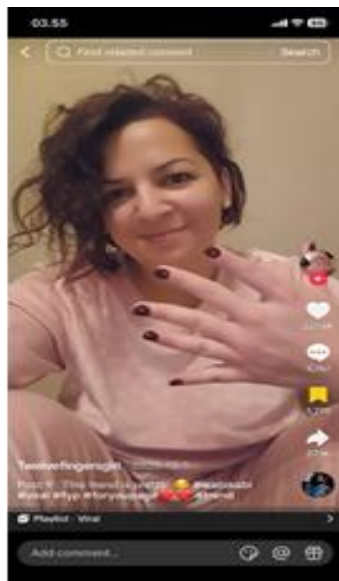


Figure 5. *Wabi-sabi* Representation of the Biological Uniqueness of Polydactyly

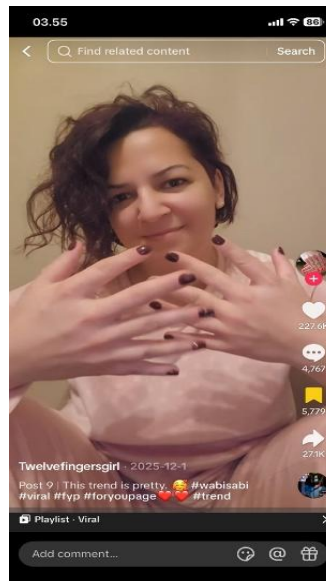


Figure 6. *Wabi-sabi* Representation of the Biological Uniqueness of Polydactyly

The biological uniqueness theme illustrates how the *wabi-sabi* trend on TikTok celebrates the biological and genetic characteristics that make individuals stand out from the crowd. Unlike the “Body Imperfections as Beauty” theme, which focuses on physical features often considered imperfect by beauty standards, this theme highlights natural biological variations that are relatively rare in the general population. Data in this theme includes individuals with crooked fingers, polydactyly, and heterochromia, which a condition in which a person has eyes of different colors. One of the biological uniqueness variations shown in the data is radial polydactyly, a congenital condition in which a person has an extra thumb. This condition is one of the most common congenital anomalies of the upper extremities (Sun et al., 2024).

A video uploaded on December 1, 2025, by user (@twelvefingersgirl) has garnered over 2.9M views, 227.6K likes, and 4,769 comments. It features a woman with polydactyly who has a total of 12 fingers. In these videos, biological characteristics that are typically viewed as abnormalities or physical differences are not portrayed as something that needs to be hidden or corrected. Instead, the creators deliberately embrace these conditions as part of a unique and valuable sense of themselves. Through this representation, the videos in the biological uniqueness theme challenge social constructs of the normal body by shifting the focus from uniformity to biological diversity. Characteristics such as heterochromia, extra fingers, or unusual finger shapes are portrayed not as signs of imperfection, but as evidence that beauty can be found in naturally occurring differences.

In society, the concept of a “normal” body is often constructed through uniform physical standards. Individuals whose biological characteristics differ from those of the majority are frequently viewed as deviating from these norms and may face stigmatization or social pressure to conform. However, this video presents a different narrative. Unconventional biological characteristics are not positioned as flaws that need to be corrected, but rather as a natural part of human diversity that deserves acceptance and appreciation. Through such representations, videos under the theme of biological uniqueness challenge social constructs regarding what constitutes a normal and ideal body. The focus is no longer on physical uniformity, but on biological diversity as part of human diversity. Thus, the *wabi-sabi* trend on TikTok broadens the definition of beauty by showing that biological characteristics that distinguish a person from the majority can also be a source of beauty, identity, and self-pride.

### 3.2.4 Interpersonal Relationship



Figure 7. *Wabi-sabi* Representation of the Interpersonal Relationship of Incomplete Family

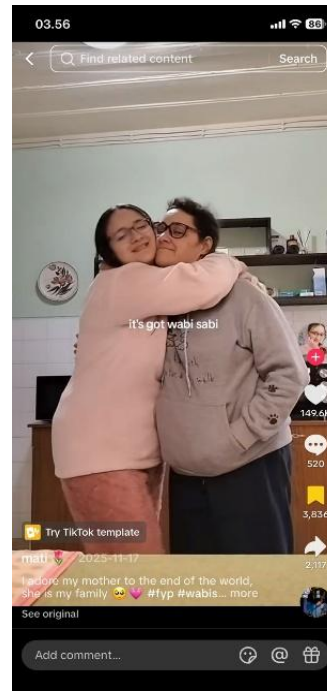


Figure 8. *Wabi-sabi* Representation of the Interpersonal Relationship of Incomplete Family

A video uploaded by user (@.atild) on November 17, 2025, received significant engagement, with 1.3 million views, 149.6K likes, and 519 comments. The video shows two women standing side by side, holding hands. In the middle of the video is a family photo showing several family members with the text "This one's perfect" on the screen. Meanwhile, the video creator only features one woman which is her mother as her family. She also wrote the caption, "I adore my mother to the end of the world; she is my family 🥺💕."

Unlike videos that highlight an individual's physical characteristics, this video focuses on family relationships as the subject of appreciation. The family photo displayed above the mother and child draws the viewer's attention to the creator's family members. In society, a family consisting of a father, mother, and children is often portrayed as the ideal family structure. As a result, families with different structures, such as single-parent families, are often viewed as incomplete or less than ideal.

However, this video offers a different perspective. Rather than highlighting the loss or lack within her family structure, the creator instead expresses gratitude, love, and appreciation for the relationship she shares with her mother. Right at the audio says "It's got wabi-sabi," she shows her affection by hugging her mother as a symbolic statement that her family is still seen as whole, meaningful, and valuable even though it doesn't conform to societal constructs of the perfect family. This representation expands the meaning of *wabi-sabi* from the physical context to the relational realm by showing that imperfections in interpersonal life can also be accepted and appreciated.

### 3.2.5 Nature Imperfection

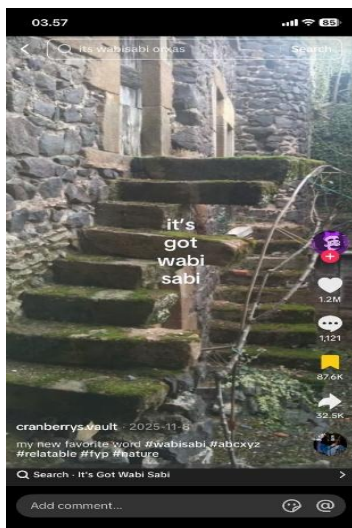


Figure 9. *Wabi-sabi* Representation of the Nature Imperfection of an Abandoned Building

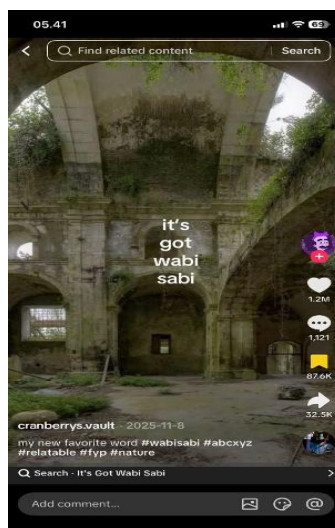


Figure 10. *Wabi-sabi* Representation of the Nature Imperfection of an Abandoned Building

Unlike previous themes, which focused on individuals or people, this video uploaded by username (@cranberry.vault) with 1.7M views, 1.2M likes, and 1.121 comments, features an old, seemingly abandoned stone building with a set of stone stairs that are no longer maintained. The surfaces of the stairs and walls are covered in green moss, while the stairs appear uneven due to long-term weathering. The text in the center of the screen reads “it’s got wabi-sabi,” which directly links the visual object to the concept of *wabi-sabi*. The building shown does not meet the architectural characteristics generally considered ideal, such as cleanliness, symmetry, orderliness, or a well-maintained condition, yet its beauty embodies the essence of *wabi-sabi*.

This representation expands the meaning of *wabi-sabi* from the physical realm to the relational realm by showing that imperfections in family life can also be accepted, appreciated, and viewed as a meaningful part of human life (Herrmann-Pillath et al., 2023). This nature representation reflects one of the core principles of *wabi-sabi* as an appreciation for impermanence and the natural changes that occur over time. In the philosophy of *wabi-sabi*, beauty is not always found in something new, perfect, or impeccably maintained. Instead, the signs of aging and natural change are viewed as a beauty.

### 4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the *wabi-sabi* trend on TikTok functions as a digital space where users reinterpret imperfection as a source of value, authenticity, and beauty. Through thematic analysis, five major themes were identified, which are feature deviations from beauty ideals, body imperfections as beauty, biological uniqueness, interpersonal relationships, and nature’s imperfection. These findings suggest that the representation of imperfection within the trend extends beyond physical appearance and encompasses personal, social, and environmental dimensions.

Rather than reinforcing dominant ideals of perfection commonly found on social media, *wabi-sabi* content promotes appreciation of diversity, incompleteness, and natural variation as meaningful aspects of human existence. The study contributes to understanding how a Japanese aesthetic philosophy is adapted within contemporary digital culture and used to challenge conventional beauty standards. Furthermore, the findings indicate the potential of social media trends to encourage more inclusive representations of beauty and self-acceptance. Furthermore, future research could examine *wabi-sabi* representations across multiple social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, or X, to explore whether similar themes emerge across different digital environments and user communities.

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