

## Sports and the Pursuit of Gender Equality: The Role of Female Students' Participation Intentions at Universiti Putra Malaysia

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### Abstract

This study explores the role of personal attributes in shaping the intention to participate in sports among female students at Universiti Putra Malaysia. The research aims to determine the level of women's involvement in sports, identify factors that drive or hinder their participation, and examine the relationship between stereotypes and sports involvement. A total of 214 female students from the Faculty of Human Ecology participated in the study, providing data through a self-administered questionnaire. The Personal Attributes Questionnaire was used to measure individual masculinity and femininity, while Intention to participate were assessed using Cassidy and Shaver's scale. The findings indicate that the personal attributes are a significant driving factor for women's sports intention to participate. The study found that level of representation does not play a significant role in influencing an individual's intention to participate in sports, and it does not affect the relationship between personal attributes and sports participation intention. Overall, the research suggests that personal attributes have a stronger influence on women's sports participation intentions than the level of representation alone. It is recommended that future studies explore additional factors that can motivate women to engage in sports and consider a larger sample size to enhance the research methodology.

**Keywords:** Personal Attributes, Participation, Masculinity, Femininity, Sports

### Introduction

The realm of sports, traditionally dominated by men, has seen a transformative shift over the last few decades with an increasing involvement of women (Metcalf & Lindsey, 2020). From the local playgrounds to the glitzy global arenas, women athletes have been pushing boundaries, shattering stereotypes, and demonstrating that the playing field recognises talent, perseverance, and dedication above all else. The rising participation and influence of

women in sports is not just a triumph in athletics, but also a milestone in the pursuit of gender equality and women's empowerment (Staurowsky et al., 2020; Steenkamp, 2019). From the historical breakthroughs to the present scenario, and a look at what the future holds, we embark on an exploration of the dynamic role of women in sports, in the process, celebrating the spirit of athleticism, grit, and resilience. The sports world has been marked by a significant rise in the participation of women over the years, contributing to the growth and diversity of competitive athletics globally (Bowes et al., 2021). This upward trend is also noticeable in Malaysia, where women's participation in various sports has increased noticeably, reflecting the shifting socio-cultural landscape and promoting gender equality in the country. Malaysian women have showcased significant growth in sports at both domestic and international levels (Kotschwar & Stahler, 2016). At the global front, female Malaysian athletes have marked victories in a wide array of sports, including badminton, boxing, weightlifting, swimming, football, and more. For instance, in badminton, athletes like Goh Liu Ying have astounded the sports world with their performances. Goh, in tandem with her partner Chan Peng Soon, clinched a silver medal in the mixed doubles event at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, marking a significant achievement for Malaysian sports and for female athletes in the country.

At the domestic level, various programs and initiatives are launched by the government and other sports bodies to encourage women's participation in sports. For example, Malaysia's Ministry of Youth and Sports often hosts special events and programs designed to promote women's involvement in sports. Looking to the future, it is anticipated that women's involvement in sports in Malaysia will continue to rise, given the increasing opportunities and support provided for women to engage in sports and physical activities. This trend is not only beneficial from a health perspective, but it also contributes to the empowerment of women and promotes gender equality. However, it is also important to address persisting barriers to women's participation in sports, such as gender stereotypes, lack of access to resources, or societal and family pressures. Continued efforts in policy-making, education, and advocacy can help ensure the sustained growth of women's participation in sports in Malaysia.

While the importance of sports and physical activity for physical health and well-being is well established, growing evidence suggests that engagement in sports may also positively influence academic performance. This article aims to explore this multifaceted relationship, shedding light on the mechanisms underlying this association and the potential implications for educational strategies and policy development. Participation in sports involves the regular exercise of both the body and mind. The cognitive demands of learning and practicing new skills, implementing strategies, and quick decision-making in sports activities naturally lend themselves to the enhancement of various cognitive functions, such as attention, memory, problem-solving, and executive functions. These cognitive functions are crucial for academic success, underpinning a wide array of scholastic tasks like reading comprehension, mathematical problem-solving, and logical reasoning. Recognizing the importance of sports in academic performance, educational institutions and policy-makers should strive to integrate regular physical activity and sports into the school curriculum. Sports programs can be designed to be inclusive and engaging, catering to a diverse range of interests and abilities, ensuring that all students reap the cognitive, physical, and psychological benefits.

One of the most obvious benefits of participating in university-level sports is the enhancement of physical health and fitness. Regular physical activity through sports helps to maintain overall health and fitness, providing a much-needed boost to cardiovascular health,

strength, flexibility, and endurance. This can help students manage their weight, boost immunity, and significantly reduce the risk of various chronic diseases. In addition to physical health, participation in sports also contributes to psychological well-being. Physical activity has been linked to reductions in stress, anxiety, and depression, and can even lead to improvements in self-esteem and body image. Thus, sports participation plays a significant role in promoting overall mental health and psychological resilience among university students. Furthermore, sports at the university level often involve a significant degree of social interaction and teamwork. Sports foster a sense of belonging and friendship among teammates, which can greatly enhance the university experience. Moreover, participation in sports teaches valuable life skills such as cooperation, communication, leadership, and conflict resolution. Contrary to the belief that sports might detract from academics, research suggests that the opposite may be true. Athletes often have higher grade point averages (GPAs), better attendance, and lower dropout rates than non-athletes. It appears that the skills enhanced by sports participation, such as focus, discipline, and time management, can also be beneficial for academic success. Despite the many benefits, participating in university-level sports also presents some challenges. Time management can be a significant issue for student-athletes who are trying to balance academic responsibilities, sports commitments, and personal life. The time-intensive training schedules required for competitive sports may interfere with study time, potentially leading to academic stress. Participation in sports is an essential component of an all-rounded education, offering numerous physical, mental, and social benefits. However, a pervasive issue that continues to hamper the full integration of sports in education is the negative perception of sports, especially among female students.

Negative perceptions of sports among female students can be a multifaceted issue, with concerns often differing based on cultural, socio-economic, and personal contexts. One prevalent concern pertains to body image. Some female students worry about how participating in sports might affect their physical appearance. Certain sports have erroneously been associated with a more muscular physique, which doesn't always align with traditional beauty standards and societal expectations of femininity. This misconception can create apprehension among female students, discouraging them from engaging in certain sporting activities. Moreover, gender stereotypes can exacerbate these negative perceptions. Sports have traditionally been viewed as a male-dominated domain, and the fear of being perceived as 'masculine' or receiving social disapproval may deter female students from participating. These stereotypes have deep roots in society, and their effects are far-reaching. Female students, in an attempt to align with traditional gender roles, may abstain from sports, thereby missing out on the numerous benefits that sports participation can provide. Another factor that contributes to the negative perceptions of sports among female students is the lack of visible female role models in the athletic world. Successful female athletes are often not given the same level of media attention and recognition as their male counterparts, which can reinforce the belief that sports are not for women. This lack of representation can discourage female students from pursuing sports, believing that their gender inhibits their potential for success in the sports field.

Additionally, concerns about skill level can also impede female students' involvement in sports. Due to societal norms that discourage girls from engaging in sports from a young age, many female students feel they lack the necessary skills to participate in sports. This perceived skill gap can serve as a significant barrier to sports participation. Research supports these observations. For instance, a study by the Women's Sports Foundation found that girls drop

out of sports at two times the rate of boys by the age of 14. The reasons cited for this disparity include social stigma, lack of access, safety, and transportation issues. Furthermore, a study published in the *Journal of Physical Activity & Health*, which surveyed adolescent girls, found that body image concerns, fear of judgment, and lack of confidence in their athletic abilities were significant barriers to sports participation. This article aims to delve into the multi-faceted aspects of women's involvement in sports, highlighting the victories and challenges, while underscoring the societal implications of this upward trend. Hence, the objective of this study is to determine the personal attributes and intention to participate in sports among the female students in Universiti Putra Malaysia.

### **Literature Review**

Engaging in sports is crucial for promoting physical, mental, and emotional well-being. It plays a vital role in maintaining a healthy lifestyle, fostering social connections, and cultivating a sense of achievement. However, various factors can influence an individual's decision to participate in sports. Age and gender are influential personal factors that significantly impact an individual's engagement in sports. For instance, children and adolescents tend to be more active in sports due to their higher levels of energy and enthusiasm (Seabra et al., 2008). In contrast, older individuals may face physical limitations or health concerns that can hinder their participation in certain sports or physical activities (Franco et al., 2015).

In the context of gender, it is observed that fewer women than men actively engage in sports. This disparity can be attributed to various reasons, including discriminatory practices, low self-esteem among women, limited opportunities and access to sporting facilities, cultural factors that discourage female participation, and competition with other activities that may be prioritized over sports (Widdp et al., 2018). These factors discouraging female participation in sports, lack of funding and resources for women's sports, and gender biases that prioritize men's sports. Besides, societal norms and stereotypes can contribute to lower self-esteem among women in relation to sports participation. Cultural expectations or perceived gender roles may discourage women from taking part in sports due to concerns about body image, societal judgment, or the fear of not meeting gendered expectations of femininity (Wartel, 2021). These factors can undermine women's confidence and limit their willingness to engage in sports. Cultural factors, including societal norms and expectations, can influence women's participation in sports. Some cultures may place greater emphasis on traditional gender roles, where women are expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over sports involvement (Thein, 2015). Cultural stigmas or stereotypes that associate femininity with being physically less capable or sports being more suitable for men can discourage women from actively participating in sports. Stereotypes are often associated with the involvement of women in sports. Gender stereotypes, which are constantly normalized, also exist in sports. The term "gender" in relation to sex refers to the biological fact of being born male or female. Meanwhile, the concept of gender as a social role refers to a set of appropriate social roles for men and women, as well as the meaning of being male and female in the given context (Ricardo & Barker, 2008). This definition is also in line with the study by Pulerwitz et al (2010), which defines gender as a concept that refers to the widespread expectations and norms in a society regarding the behaviors, characteristics, and roles suitable for men and women. Gender norms can be defined as a socially constructed set of rules that determine the ideals, scripts, and expectations regarding how a woman and a man should behave, as well as the responsibilities held by a man compared to a woman in any given culture or society (Mueller, 2012). Ryle (2011) defines gender norms as a set of ideal characteristics for masculinity and

femininity within a cultural context. Ryle also believes that a set of expectations about how a man should behave or how a woman should behave will always exist in any culture.

Ability and skill level can also significantly impact on people's participation in sports. Those who are naturally talented or have acquired skills through practice and training may feel more comfortable and confident engaging in sports (MacNamara et al., 2010). Skillful individuals often experience a greater sense of enjoyment and fun while participating in sports. Their ability allows them to fully engage in the activity, execute complex movements, and experience the thrill of performing well. This enjoyment factor can act as a positive reinforcement, motivating them to continue participating in sports.

Personal interest is a significant factor that affects an individual's participation in sports. People are often drawn to sports that align with their personal preferences and values. For instance, individuals who value teamwork and social interaction may be inclined towards team sports like soccer or basketball. On the other hand, those who prefer solitude and self-discipline may gravitate towards individual sports such as swimming or tennis (Garn et al., 2011). According to Statista (2023), a notable percentage of the population in various countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Brazil, Turkey, India, and Japan, engage in sports and exercise on a daily basis. This suggests that personal interests and motivations are influential in driving people to participate in sports. Staying healthy, weight loss, and improving and maintaining physical strength are among the primary reasons individuals engage in sports and exercise. Personal health and well-being serve as strong motivators for many people to participate in sports, as they recognize the positive impact of physical activity on their overall fitness and quality of life. It is important to acknowledge and respect individual interests and motivations when promoting sports participation. Providing a diverse range of sporting options and opportunities that cater to different preferences can help individuals find activities that align with their personal interests, increasing their engagement and enjoyment in sports.

The main theoretical framework discussed in this study is social role theory. According to Eagly's (1987) social role theory, gender stereotypes develop based on the division of labor within a society. In Western societies, men tend to hold positions of power and status, while women are often assigned nurturing roles. This division has led to stereotypes associating agency with men and communion with women. Additionally, the different tasks assigned to men and women result in distinct skill sets. When gender stereotypes are prominent within a group, either due to mixed-sex membership or a culturally associated task or context, they directly influence behavior through the expectations formed for each other's actions. However, when individuals assume social roles that are closely tied to the specific context, such as manager and employee in the workplace, these roles have a greater impact on behavior than gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, even in situations where gender stereotypes do not dictate behavior, men and women may still exhibit slight differences due to their distinct skills shaped by gender. Social role theory applies to interaction in various contexts and encompasses both assertive, power-related behaviors and supportive or emotion-related behaviors.

### **Methodology**

The data for this paper was gathered using a random sampling method. A total of 214 female from Faculty of Human Ecology, University Putra Malaysia were selected as the respondents.

This study employed a quantitative approach and self-administered structured questionnaire through a survey method since it was an effective way for a researcher to measure the variables and interests. The questionnaire was adapted based on previous research and modified according to this study. To achieve the objective, the instrument will be delivered in Malay language. The questionnaire consists of three sections which are Section A, B and C. Section A is the socio-demographic respondents' section consisting of 3 items. Section B is personal attributes variable encompassing 10 items that have been adopted from (Spence et al., 1973). The statements were evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with a reported Cronbach's Alpha of 0.661. Section C is the intention to participate in sports consisting of 10 items adapted from (Cassidy and Shaver, 1999). The statements used for measuring intention to participate were evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with a reported Cronbach's Alpha of 0.786. Descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage were used to fulfill the determined objective. Meanwhile, PLS-SEM analysis was used to test the relationship between personal attributes and intention to participate participation on sports.

### Results and Discussion

Table 1 below explained the socio-demographics of respondents involving age, years of education, and level of participation in sports. The majority of respondents were in the second year of education (34.6%) followed by the third year of education (33.6%) and the first year of education (31.8%). In terms of level of participation in sports, 76.6% of the surveyed population indicated that they have never participated in any sports. The second-highest level of participation is at the university level, with 10.3% of the surveyed population stating that they have participated in sports at this level. State-level participation represents the third-highest level of engagement, with 8.4% of the surveyed population participating in sports at this level. The lowest level of participation mentioned is at the national level, with only 4.7% of the surveyed population having participated in sports at this highly competitive level. Overall, the data indicates that most of the surveyed population (76.6%) has never participated in any sports, while smaller percentages have engaged in sports at the university, state, and national levels.

Table 1  
*Socio-demographic respondents*

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Age</b>		
19-20	62	29.0%
21-22	88	41.1%
23-24	64	29.9%
<b>Years of education</b>		
1	68	31.8%
2	74	34.6%
3	72	33.6%
<b>Level of participation</b>		
Never participate	164	76.6%
National level	10	4.7%
State level	18	8.4%
Universiti level	22	10.3%

**Measurement Model**

Table 2 portrayed the Cronbach Alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR) results for the Intention to Participate (INT) and Personal Attributes (PA) constructs. The reported CA and CR values, which were 0.829 and 0.880 for INT and 0.720 and 0.826 for PA, respectively, were considered acceptable as they exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.7 recommended by (Hair and Ringle, 2011). To evaluate convergent validity, the researcher also computed the average variance extracted (AVE) values, which were 0.595 for INT and 0.543 for PA. All AVE values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.5 suggested by (Henseler et al., 2016). To assess discriminant validity, the Fornell-Larcker criterion and heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) were utilized (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The Fornell-Larcker test indicated that the values were greater than the intervariable correlations. Additionally, the HTMT values in Table 3 were all below the threshold of 0.900 recommended by (Kline, 2011). These results indicate that the reflective measurement model has satisfactory levels of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Table 2

*Measurement Model*

Constructs	Loadings	$\alpha$	Rho_A	CR	AVE
<b>Intention to Participate (INT)</b>					
INT3	0.820				
INT6	0.773				
INT7	0.773	0.829	0.832	0.880	0.595
INT8	0.777				
INT10	0.710				
<b>Personal Attributes (PA)</b>					
PA1	0.755				
PA2	0.722				
PA9	0.726	0.720	0.720	0.826	0.543
PA10	0.745				

Note: INT: Intention; PA: Personal Attributes

Table 3

*Fornell-Larcker & HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio)*

Construct	Fornell-Larcker Criterion		Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)	
	INT	PA	INT	PA
INT	<b>0.771</b>			
PA	<b>0.697</b>	<b>0.737</b>	<b>0.900</b>	

Note: INT: Intention; PA: Personal Attributes

### Assessment of Structural Model

The structural model's purpose is to evaluate how well the empirical data supports the underlying concept of the path model used in the research framework. It helps researchers to test the suggested relationships among the constructs. In PLS-SEM, the structural model is evaluated based on several criteria, including collinearity issues assessment (Step 1), path coefficients' significance (Step 2),  $R^2$  value level (Step 3),  $f^2$  effect size (Step 4), and predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) (Step 5). The structural model in this study was evaluated using 5000 bootstraps. Results from Table 4 show that the construct in the structural model had VIF values ranging is 1.011. These values are well below the recommended threshold of  $<10$  considered acceptable to indicate that there is no significant collinearity (Hair et al., 2017). Table 4 presents the results of the path analysis conducted in this study, indicating Personal Attributes (PA) had a positive and significant relationship with Intention (INT) to participate in sports with path coefficients of  $\beta=0.702$  ( $p<0.01$ ). However, the results indicated an insignificant relationship between the Level of Representation (LOR) towards Intention (INT) to participate in sports with path coefficients of  $\beta=0.06$  ( $p>0.05$ ). For indirect effect, Level of Representation (LOR) does not moderate the relationship between Personal Attributes (PA) and Intention (INT) to participate in sports with  $\beta=-0.041$  ( $p>0.05$ ).

Table 4

*Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) of all constructs*

Exogenous Variables	PA
INT	1.011

Table 5

*Path Coefficient Result (Direct and Indirect Effect)*

Relationship	Beta	Standard Error	t values	p values	Decision
PA→ INT	0.702	0.034	20.623	0.000	Significant
LOR→INT	0.060	0.052	1.134	0.257	Not significant
PAxLOR→ INT	-0.041	0.036	1.136	0.256	Not Significant

Note: INT: Intention; PA: Personal Attributes; LOR: Level of Representation

Referring to the findings in Table 6, the  $R^2$  value for Intention (INT) was 0.491, indicating that Personal Attributes (PA) explained 49.1% of the variance in Intention (INT) to participate. In term of effect size, it can be observed that Level of Representation (LOR) have no effect on Intention (INT) to participate as the  $f^2$  was 0.007 which is less than 0.02 while Personal Attributes (PA) indicate a high effect size on Intention (INT) to participate with  $f^2$  recorded is 0.957 which is higher than 0.35. The  $Q^2$  value of Intention (INT) were found to be 0.286. These values suggest that the research model has good predictive relevance, as both  $Q^2$  values are greater than zero.



Table 6

*Indices of structural model*

Relationship	Coefficient Determination (R <sup>2</sup> )	Effect size (f <sup>2</sup> )	Predictive relevance (Q <sup>2</sup> )
PA → INT		0.957	
LOR → INT	0.491	0.007	0.286

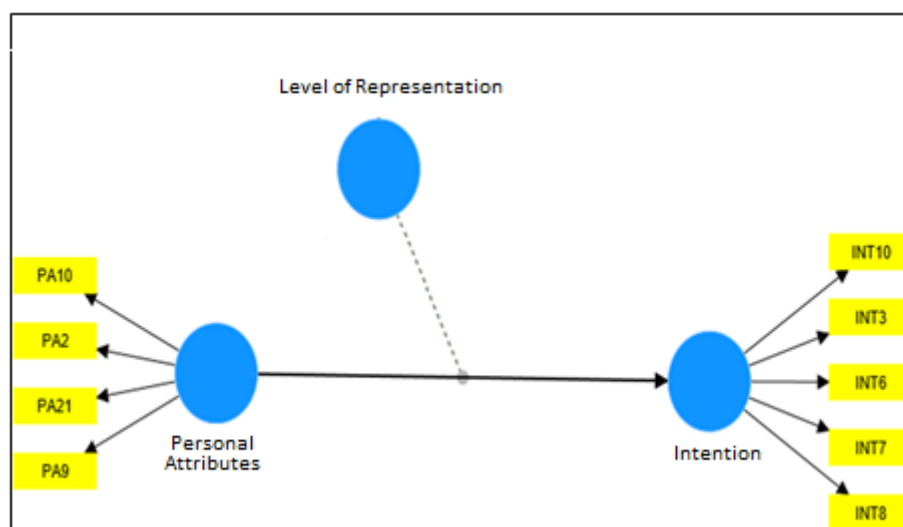


Figure 1: Structural Model

**Discussion**

In this study, it was found that personal attributes (PA) play a significant role in shaping an individual's intention (INT) to participate in sports. For female participants, these attributes can be particularly influential due to societal norms and gender stereotypes associated with sports (Xu et al., 2021). However, the study found that despite these challenges, personal attributes still play a substantial role in shaping their intention to participate. Personal attributes encompass various characteristics such as self-confidence, self-efficacy, motivation, determination, and physical abilities. These attributes are closely linked to an individual's perception of their own capabilities and their belief in their capacity to succeed in sports-related activities. When females possess positive personal attributes, they are more likely to overcome societal barriers and defy gender stereotypes, leading to a higher intention to participate in sports. The interaction between these attributes and societal norms and gender stereotypes creates a complex landscape for women's sports participation (Barchi et al., 2021; Zenker, 2022). Societal norms and gender stereotypes often influence the perception of women's sports, leading to challenges and barriers that limit their participation. Traditional gender roles and expectations may discourage women from engaging in certain sports or pursuing athletic aspirations. These norms can perpetuate stereotypes suggesting that sports are primarily for men, or that certain sports are more suitable for women based on perceived feminine qualities.

The research findings suggest that level of representation does not play a significant role in influencing an individual's intention to participate in sports. Besides, it also does not moderate the relationship between personal attributes towards an individual's intention to participate in sports. This finding provides a justification for the conclusion that representation alone may not be a determining factor in motivating individuals to engage in sports. While representation is important for promoting inclusivity and diversity in sports, the research suggests that it may not directly impact an individual's personal intention to participate. The research findings contribute to a broader understanding of the complex factors that influence sports participation. They suggest that personal attributes, such as individual motivations, interests, and perceived abilities, may have a stronger influence on an individual's intention to participate in sports than the level of representation alone. The findings emphasize the importance of nurturing and supporting these personal attributes to promote sports engagement effectively.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant role of personal attributes in shaping an individual's intention to participate in sports, particularly for female participants who may face societal norms and gender stereotypes. Despite these challenges, positive personal attributes, including self-confidence, self-efficacy, motivation, determination, and physical abilities, play a substantial role in overcoming barriers and defying stereotypes, leading to a higher intention to participate in sports. The study also concludes that the level of representation does not significantly influence an individual's intention to participate in sports and does not moderate the relationship between personal attributes and sports participation intention. While representation is important for promoting inclusivity and diversity, the research findings suggest that individual motivations, interests, and perceived abilities have a stronger impact on participation intentions. These findings contribute to a better understanding of the complex factors influencing sports participation, emphasizing the importance of fostering positive personal attributes and addressing societal barriers. By promoting self-confidence, self-efficacy, and motivation, individuals, especially females, can overcome societal norms and stereotypes and have a higher intention to engage in sports activities.

One limitation of this study is its focus on only one gender. By only examining one gender, the study may not provide a complete picture of the influence of personality on sports participation intentions for both genders. Including both genders in the study would offer a more comprehensive understanding and account for potential differences in the impact of personality on sports participation intentions. Additionally, this study specifically focuses on late adolescents. This narrow age focus is also a limitation because the factors influencing sports participation intentions may vary across different age groups. Investigating the influence of personality on sports participation intentions among a broader age range, including young adults or older adults, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of this relationship in a broader context. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that this study has limitations in terms of gender inclusivity and a narrow focus on a specific age group. To gain a more comprehensive and holistic understanding, future research should aim to include both genders and encompass a broader range of age groups.

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