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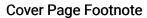
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# "Moral Panic" in the Sixties: The Rise and Rapid Declination of LSD in American Society



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## "Moral Panic" in the Sixties: The Rise and Rapid Declination of LSD in American Society

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I think that I'm coming back to being myself now, whatever that means, but I hope that some of the joy which I have felt in just existing can stay with me and help me through the humdrum world which I fear I am going to fall back into shortly. <sup>1</sup>

In 1966, Dr. Sidney Cohen provided a narrative report, from which the above quote is sourced, of a psychology student's experience under the influence of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD). Dr. Cohen conducted extensive research of the drug's effects, as at the start of the 1960s. LSD had emerged as a topic of great speculation within the medical community due to rumors that it held a variety of benefits for psychotherapeutic treatments. <sup>2</sup> Swiftly, physicians began to explore the effects of LSD on treating personality disorders, addiction, and in some labs, cancer. Shortly thereafter, however, word spread among mass media of LSD misusage by physicians, drawing negative attention to leading researchers and especially to the drug itself. Throughout the sixties, the portrayal of psychedelics in the media shifted to the negative extreme, and by the end of the decade, the federal government classified LSD as a Schedule 1 drug, declaring no potential medical benefit from its consumption. Although LSD became revered as a miracle drug upon its introduction into American society, its misuse by overzealous physicians, paired with a dramatic portraval in mass media, curated a perception negative surrounding psychedelics that led to a string of regulatory measures which ultimately declared no medical use for the drug by the end of the 1960s.

Although historians have chronicled the rise of LSD usage in the United States extensively, the rapid decline of the drug's reputation is largely overshadowed in popular histories by the ever- evolving events of the sixties. In current scholarship, the ascension of LSD to popularity and public interest at the beginning of the decade is evident, as is the strict regulation of the drug at the decade's conclusion; however, the period between these developments is less documented due to focus on other social turning points in the

American sixties. <sup>3</sup> To fill this historiographic gap, this paper will describe the creation of LSD and its entry into medical use and research, assess the public view of the drug from multiple perspectives, and reveal climatic turning points in its rapid rise and fall.

Albert Hofmann synthesized LSD in 1938 with no intended purpose; however, he did not discover its mind- altering properties until he consumed a miniscule amount by accident in 1943.<sup>4</sup> In his notebook, he documented experiencing a "not unpleasant delirium which was marked by an extreme degree of fantasy," followed by "fantastic visions of extraordinary vividness accompanied by a kaleidoscopic play of intense coloration." Upon suspicion that LSD might have been the cause of his intoxication, Hofmann decided to repeat his experience, this time using higher dosage. He described this second trip as follows:

It was characterized by these symptoms: dizziness, visual distortions, the faces of those present appeared like grotesque colored masks, strong agitation alternating with paresis, the head body and extremities sometimes cold and numb; a metallic taste on the tongue; throat dry and shriveled; a feeling of suffocation; confusion alternating with a clear appreciation of the situation; at times standing outside myself as a neutral observer and hearing myself muttering jargon or screaming half madly.<sup>6</sup>

The most revolutionary aspect of the discovery of LSD's mind-altering abilities came to be its unprecedentedly miniscule dosage. According to Dr. Cohen, one ounce of LSD could reap three-hundred thousand adult doses.<sup>7</sup>

In 1953, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began secretly funding LSD research after the alleged "brainwashing" of American prisoners during the Korean War by means of "some drug or 'lie serum." Due to the lack of prior knowledge regarding dangers of the drug, the subjects of CIA experiments were primarily soldiers, mental patients, and prisoners. Early researchers concluded that the subjects had entered temporary psychosis—commonly categorized as schizophrenia or paranoia—when they "performed poorly on tests, made

perceptual errors, and exhibited loss of concentration and regressive behavior." When subjects experienced euphoric effects, scientists defined them as "manic and hebephrenic," despite the researchers' anticipation of "deleterious" effects.<sup>10</sup> The Harold A. Abramson lab in New York presented the questionnaire responses at the conclusion of the experiments in a negative light and, by the time the first occurrence of LSD research reached the public in mass media, it portrayed LSD usage as a harrowing experience.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Cohen himself believed that under the effects of LSD he would feel catatonic or paranoid, however when he took the drug in 1955, he stated to have been surprised at the lack of confused, disoriented delirium. Instead, he reported feeling an elevation of peacefulness, "as if the problems and strivings, the worries and frustrations of everyday life vanished; in their place was a majestic, sunlit, heavenly inner quietude... I seemed to have finally arrived at the contemplation of eternal truth."12 Immediately, Dr. Cohen sponsored three doctoral dissertations by students at UCLA measuring the effects of LSD on eighty-one members of the academic community. The project produced a replica of previous studies: "subjects showed impaired intellectual ability, lowered IQ, inability to concentrate, and breakdown of ego functioning," and reported feeling "emptiness, loneliness, and breakdown of ego functioning" by the end of their trip. 13 He concluded that "the core of the LSD situation remains in the dark, quite untouched by our activities."14 These studies produced inconsistent and contradictory results which were often reported as negative results as opposed to inconclusive ones.

To make the public more receptive to LSD, Dr. Cohen's colleague Aldous Huxley sought to relabel the drug, stating that "it will give that elixir a bad name if it continues to be associated, in the public mind, with schizophrenia symptoms. People will think they are going mad, when in fact they are beginning, when they take it, to go sane." Huxley, alongside Canadian psychiatrist Humphry Osmond, coined the term "psychedelic" at a conference in 1956, and they declared that the effects of LSD were not a model psychosis, but rather a psychedelic experience. He described them as "not escapes from but enlargements, burgeonings of reality." 16

Alongside this shift in terminology came a shift in the end goal of LSD research. Dr. Cohen believed that instead of using LSD to replicate psychosis in order to replicate mental illness, he would explore whether the drug might have a therapeutic or healing effect, specifically in facilitating psychotherapy, curing alcoholism, and enhancing creativity.17 In particular, by the end of the 1950s, LSD had become known as a miracle cure for alcoholism and reached a peak in acceptance among the medical community.18 However, experts such as Dr. Cohen raised concern as researchers grew more lax in handling the drug; in fact, some researchers such as Aldous Huxley began hosting

"LSD-25 social parties," demonstrating a new aspect of LSD usage for recreation.<sup>19</sup>

Although he utilized LSD in social and recreational manners that extended past the drug's intended purpose, Huxley led the investigation into potential use for psychedelics in cancer research. In 1959, an article published in *The Courier-Journal* of Louisville, KY claimed that the presence of LSD blocked cancer cell growth, opening the question of whether the drug could cure cancer.<sup>20</sup> Huxley then proposed investigation into the administration of LSD to terminal cancer cases, not out of hope that it would cure the patient, but the hope that it would make the process of dying less physiological and more spiritual. In fact, Huxley suffered from laryngeal cancer and had his wife inject him with LSD on his deathbed in 1963.<sup>21</sup>

Toward the end of the 1950s, media coverage of LSD experiments began to take not only the positive portrayal of the drug's medical and therapeutic benefits but proposed social benefits as well, to an extreme. In June 1958, Dr. Cohen and Betty Eisner spoke at the American Medical Association Convention, presenting their findings on LSD-assisted therapy. In their article, published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, they wrote that five LSD sessions were "more effective than the standard sessions of psychoanalysis, which often require hundreds or thousands of hours, and many thousands of dollars," and claimed the LSD treatments typically ran at a dollar per session. <sup>22</sup> In 1959, British-American actor Cary Grant told a gossip columnist in Hollywood that he had taken LSD over sixty times and bragged that "young women have never before been so attracted to me."

As a result of the increased dramatization of LSD, as well as its rising recreational use, researchers such as Dr. Cohen began launching investigations into the safety of the drug's usage. He sent a questionnaire to LSD researchers and received forty-four responses.24 The results displayed that the researchers had administered LSD over twenty-five thousand times to nearly five-thousand subjects, and there were no deaths as a direct result of poisoning by the drug.<sup>25</sup> However, Cohen had learned of five suicides potentially as a result of LSD usage, concluding that two of the cases had been "directly due to LSD."26 From these figures, Cohen asserted that complications were "surprisingly infrequent" and instead offered advice for physicians on how to screen for unfit subjects, as well as how to potentially terminate an LSD session in an emergency.<sup>27</sup> However, Cohen's data was vague and rounded off, and this assertion was later cited by studies declaring LSD "exceptionally safe," the reports even being used in congressional testimonies in the late 60s.<sup>28</sup>

At the beginning of the 1960s, the rumored effects of LSD usage intrigued ordinary people and scholars alike. In 1961, Nathan Kline, revered psychiatrist and developer of antidepressant medications, wrote that the use of psychopharmaceuticals such as LSD "have brought about a major

revolution in the care and treatment of the mentally ill."29 Scientists sought to use LSD as a means of inducing model psychosis and temporarily replicating the effects of mental illness, similarly to mescaline, a less popular but earlier-researched hallucinogen.<sup>30</sup> In fact, tenured reporter Emma Harrison authored an article in The New York Times, in November 1963, describing a series of studies done on mentally ill children which reported an overall improvement in their autonomic responses to various communication and social tests as well as in overall behavior. Specifically, the children exhibited more alertness, greater attempts at communication, improved sleep, and better eating habits. All these effects transpired, Harrison explained, without "any of the acute psychotic symptoms observed in adults—" a primary concern of those opposed to LSD usage, even for therapeutic benefits. 31

The use of LSD in the earlier half of the decade was not simply restricted to physicians and researchers, despite the passage of the Kefauver-Harris Drug Amendments by the United States Congress in 1962. This legislation established that a drug had to be proved "safe and effective for the proposed conditions of its use" in order to be marketed commercially.32 The only group granted jurisdiction by The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to produce LSD, for investigational use only, was Sandoz Pharmaceuticals of Basel, the laboratories of Albert Hoffman which supplied the drug to investigators, psychiatrists, and clinical psychologists.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, it became evident that some professionals had been providing LSD to parties Time Magazine described as 'unqualified buddies."34 According to the article, psychiatrists and other physicians at this time found themselves "solidly arrayed against non-medical application of such potent drugs," as they "report many cases of mental illness precipitated by their unwise, unprofessional use."35

One of the most chronicled and controversial LSD researchers was Dr. Timothy Leary. Harvard University hired Leary in 1959 to "introduce existentialtransactional methods for behavior change."36 Leary argued that to treat their patients, doctors should "throw away" their statuses as physicians and join their patients to figure out the solution to his or her problem collaboratively.<sup>37</sup> Leary "saw the role of the doctor as that of a coach in a game in which the patient was a star player. The coach can help, can point out mistakes, can share his wisdom, but in the last analysis, the guy who does the job is the guy out there in the field, the so-called patient."38 This hands-on involvement approach of healthcare, particularly medical research, largely influenced Leary when he experienced a profound trip after he tried psychedelic mushrooms on an excursion to Mexico in 1960.<sup>39</sup> When he returned to Harvard, Leary, joined by Assistant Professor Richard Alpert, created a research program called the Harvard Psilocybin Project, sponsored by the university's Center for Research in Personality.<sup>40</sup>

Harvard consistently pressured Leary and Alpert to keep any psychedelic drugs away from undergraduate students. Instead, the pair administered the drug to prisoners in rehabilitation, where they reported a decrease in threat of repeat offenses.<sup>41</sup> In the fall of 1961, the pair gave LSD to several graduate students at Harvard. Soon after, Leary and Alpert started a group referred to as the "International Federation for Internal Freedom" (IFIF) and invited university undergraduates to join. Upon entry into the group, students were allowed to form research cells and obtain hallucinogens.<sup>42</sup>

Around 1962, members of the Harvard administration began to express concerns about the research of Leary and Alpert, and more specifically, about their students' enthusiasm toward LSD. The two often defended themselves in the university's student newspaper, the *Crimson*, who uncovered internal criticisms of the study by the Center of Research in Personality at a campus meeting, which quickly spread in mass media.<sup>43</sup> Just five days after the publication of the *Crimson* article, the state Food and Drug Division announced an investigation into Leary, once major Boston newspapers published the story. While this investigation did not result in the end of Leary's research, the article's popularity exposed him and his experiments to inescapable public scrutiny.<sup>44</sup>

Throughout the remainder of the school year, the Crimson kept close documentation of Leary's experiments, and the supply of hallucinogenic drugs on Harvard's campus became a major concern to government officials. The university began to investigate Leary and Alpert after suspicion that the pair encouraged students to experiment with LSD and other psychedelics. One senior claimed that in 1962, Alpert had given him hallucinogenic drugs, an offense considered intolerable Harvard to the administration that resulted in the termination of both Leary and Alpert.<sup>45</sup> Following their dismissal from Harvard, the pair attempted to open a "combined resort and psychic drug research center" in Mexico, where they were expelled for engaging in activities not permitted to tourists.<sup>46</sup>

Leary and Alpert's departure from Harvard in 1963 made national headlines and caused an overall increase in reporting on LSD in the media. Marjorie Simon, a Louisville woman who, while in New York City, paid three dollars to try LSD under Leary's watch, referred to him in *The Courier-Journal* as "the messiah of the LSD cult and its martyr."<sup>47</sup>

Instead of the previous popularity of the potential miracle drug, contributors to the media connected LSD use with "psychic terror, uncontrollable impulses, delusion, and hallucination."<sup>48</sup> As a result, the perception of LSD usage became linked to insanity as the media shifted its attention to the idea that the drug should be feared and avoided.<sup>49</sup> Instead of speculation regarding what ailments this drug might be able to improve or cure, mass media became filled with stories of "bad trips," fueling a growth in public concern over LSD usage.<sup>50</sup>

One of the more popular rumors that emerged regarding LSD usage was the speculation that the drug's potential ability to induce temporary psychosis could lead to selfdestructive tendencies in its users.<sup>51</sup> As the LSD research movement migrated to the university setting, college students became viewed as vulnerable to the effects of ingesting LSD, striking fear in concerned parents.52 Stories began appearing in newspapers, describing college students eating bark off of tree trunks or expressing belief that they could fly.53 One story depicted a man who, while on an LSD trip, believed that he had turned into an orange; the man would not let anyone come near him for some time out of "fear of degenerating into orange juice."54 At Harvard, Dean John U. Monro addressed the 1967 freshman class and stated in a warning that "if a student is stupid enough to misuse his time here fooling around with illegal and dangerous drugs, our view is that he should leave college and make room for people prepared to take good advantage of a college opportunity."55 Members of Harvard's administration distributed a five-page pamphlet to students outlining the chemical properties of LSD and its effects, stating that using it was "a dangerous form of drug roulette" that puts users at risk of psychotic breakdown.<sup>56</sup> Throughout this period, however, Timothy Leary presented lectures, gave interviews, wrote books, and promoted slogans supporting the use of LSD; indeed, at this time he developed the slogan "turn on, tune in, drop out." 57

In reaction to growing disapproval of LSD usage among the public, the United States Narcotics Bureau initially stated that it was unable to act against hallucinogenic drugs because they were not "classified as addictive in federal narcotics statutes."58 However, in 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed a bill into law that first defined depressant and stimulant drugs, and granted the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare the authority to use federal resources to enforce the illegalization of making, selling, and using LSD as well as other depressant and stimulant drugs in the United States. Specifically, the bill limited "any drug found to have...potential for abuse because of its depressant or stimulant effect on the central nervous system or its hallucinogenic effect."59 The act, called the Drug Control and Abuse Amendments of 1965, explicitly laid out not only the definition of the illegalized drugs but also procedures that could be followed to enforce said illegalization.60 In response to the act, Sandoz Pharmaceuticals, the only laboratory authorized by the FDA to distribute LSD to physicians and researchers, took the drug, which they had marketed as "Delysid," off the market.<sup>61</sup> In a 1964 Sandoz catalog, the company described the drug's use "in analytical psychotherapy to elicit release of repressed material and to provide mental relaxation, particularly in anxiety states and obsessional neuroses."62 Presently, the Sandoz company does not mention its history with psychedelic pharmaceuticals.

Following the Drug Control and Abuse Amendments of 1965, the *New York Times* published an article criticizing

the nature of publicity distributed regarding LSD. It referred to anti-LSD publications as "gruesome recent aberrations" that have "touched off panic" throughout the nation and argued that this publicity is "hardly the sensible reaction."<sup>63</sup> The article specifically criticized Sandoz Pharmaceuticals, claiming that "it was not constructive for the only legal distributor of LSD in this country to halt most scientific experimentation...to accredited researchers."<sup>64</sup> According to the *Times*, as long as the federal government continued to recognize the validity of responsible research use of LSD, it should be assured that authorized researchers continue to receive the supply they need.<sup>65</sup>

In 1966, the first criminal laws against unlawful possession of LSD were introduced by California and New York. 66 Upon the passage of the laws, the focus of mass media on LSD continued to grow in negativity. Another article in Time Magazine again drew attention to LSD misuse by college students:

The disease is striking in beachside beatnik pads and in the dormitories of expensive prep schools: it has grown into an alarming problem at UCLA and on the UC campus at Berkeley. And everywhere the diagnosis is the same: psychotic illness resulting from the unauthorized, nonmedical use of the drug LSD-25.<sup>67</sup>

A major turning point in this "media assault" on LSD occurred in April 1966, as the FDA granted permission for media reporters to access its files on LSD research.<sup>68</sup> James L. Goddard, Director of the FDA in 1966, claimed the administration acted under drug control laws passed by Congress, and was "training personnel to track down illegal sources of the drug."69 Goddard revealed that from May 1966 to April 1967, the Bureau of Drug Abuse Control (BDAC) had "seized approximately 1.6 million doses, had arrested ninety-four people, and had an additional 460 investigations underway."70 While Goddard acted to permit access to government files on behalf of Congressional legislation, he went on record in May 1966 to state he did not believe Congress should pass legislation making use of LSD a criminal offense.<sup>71</sup> His primary defense for this stance was that criminalizing the drug would "automatically place maybe ten percent or hundreds of thousands of college students in the category of criminals... I would hate to see them charged with a crime."72 Following the lead of the national level, local police began to open their LSD-related files to reporters. Historian Jay Stevens described the result as "an almost geometric intensification of LSD's negative image."73

In August 1967, Bill Davidson, of the Saturday Evening Post, published an article which suggested that LSD usage "irreparably damaged human chromosomes."<sup>74</sup> He supposedly concluded this upon observation that in test tubes, LSD destroyed white blood cell chromosomes. Instead of other similar studies, which diagnosed other causes for white blood cell damage, this article in

particular made front-page headlines across the United States.<sup>75</sup> This piece of evidence, in addition to others, was utilized in anti-LSD campaigns that emerged during the 1960s, despite the research being, "extremely shoddy, based on few cases, and poorly conducted."<sup>76</sup> Sociologists Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, who have published extensive scholarship regarding moral panic in society, claimed that this anti-LSD panic "reveals the gullibility of the media and the public in believing patently outlandish, false, or exaggerated claims."<sup>77</sup> Nachman and Ben-Yehuda question why the "careful, detailed factual refutation of the LSD chromosome study greeted with the same media attention that the original study received."<sup>78</sup> Their explanation:

LSD use in the 1960s was a moral panic precisely because the heated concern it stirred up was disproportional to its physical threat. We submit that its threat was more panic-driven than materially real; what with the supposed threat of cosmic revelations and an alternate world-view—which never panned out to begin with—the use of LSD seemed to possess a *distinctly deviant potential*<sup>79</sup>.

Soon thereafter, in 1968, the Drug Abuse Control Amendments were altered, making the possession of LSD a misdemeanor and the sale a felony. The scientific community, and particularly the medical community, commonly opposed the act as they feared losing the opportunity to research and develop their work. According to sociologists Benjamin Cornwell and Annulla Linders, this culminating legislation "drove the final stakes into the heart of LSD."

The Controlled Substance Act subsection of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970 classified LSD, heroin, marijuana, and a few other drugs, as having "a high potential for abuse, no current medical use, and a lack of safety for use under medical supervision," defining them as "Schedule 1" substances. With this, perception of LSD had undergone a transformation over the span of a decade from an essentially harmless miracle drug to, as the chairman of the New Jersey Narcotic Drug Safety Commission called it, "the greatest threat facing the country today." 85

As for Timothy Leary, he was arrested on a possession of marijuana charge in 1970. Although it was not LSD that put him in prison, the judge seized the opportunity to criticize Leary; a reporter in *The New York Times* reported that Superior Court Judge Byron McMillan referred to him as "an insidious menace" to society and a "pleasure-seeking, irresponsible, Madison Avenue advocate of the free use of LSD." Although Leary never faced a prison sentence for his involvement with LSD, his role in researching and promoting the drug made him a key piece in the rising argument against psychedelic drug usage in the sixties.

Stanley Cohen, a Nobel-winning biochemist, not to be

confused with LSD researcher Dr. Sidney Cohen, first introduced the concept of "moral panic" in 1972, in which he argued a societal tendency to seek, identify, and affiliate causes of emergent social threats.<sup>87</sup> He asserted that when faced with developing social problems, collective members of society interpret and distribute information in a way that resembles how actual social movements arrive at "interpretive frames," resulting in mobilization.88 Benjamin Cornwell and Annulla Linders contended that whether or not an object becomes deviantized as a result of this call to action depends on "a complex process of social construction involving active, not merely reactive, efforts by social actors."89 In the case of LSD, this mobilization was "a social response to heightened media attention devised by distinct social groups who had arrived at similar interpretations regarding LSD."90

Cornwell and Linders chronicled the prohibition of LSD through the conceptualization of moral panic and insisted that "social problems like LSD emerge as social threats not because they are inherently dangerous but because of concerted social efforts to present them as dangerous." The pair asserted that influential members of the media played key roles in selecting and distributing information about the emergence of LSD, and therefore they became the largest contributors to the "moral panic" surrounding the drug. This argument is evident throughout LSD's chronology as extreme headlines first inflated the potential benefits of the drug, labeling it a miracle; however, negative headlines sought to strip the drug of any positive contribution to society throughout the sixties.

Stanley Cohen argued that it is escalated control efforts by "societal control culture," such as law enforcement agencies, legislative bodies, and the judicial system, that demonstrate a moral panic might be underway. The illegalization of LSD emerged gradually, beginning with restriction of the drug's distribution to physicians and other medical professionals in 1962, then the introduction of legislation targeting recreational LSD use, and finally the complete illegalization of LSD and redaction of its medical potential by the conclusion of the sixties. Legislation passed at any given period provides insight into the major concerns of the federal government at the time, and it is evident through the amount of psychedelic regulation in the late sixties that LSD was a high priority of concern for the legislative branch.

Despite the great promise shown by research about LSD in the late fifties and early sixties showing that it might have unprecedented medical and therapeutic benefits, its distribution among unqualified physicians and recreational users, alongside extreme depictions in the media, resulted in a moral panic by concerned, misinformed Americans resulting in the drug's ultimate prohibition by the end of the decade. In the context of an ever-changing United States during the era of fights for civil rights, the space race, and war abroad, among many others, LSD rapidly emerged as a plausible contribution to reoccurring societal issues due to its extreme nature

portrayed in news media. Researchers such as Timothy Leary administering LSD to undergraduates and Aldous Huxley throwing recreational social parties under the drug's influence provided a clear opportunity for the drug to be characterized in two radical directions—the direction of moral opposition emerging dominant.

The timing of this dramatic shift in public perspective of LSD is fundamental to understanding the broader context of the psychedelic movement of the seventies. Although the drug itself was illegal by the end of the sixties, LSD impacted the following decade through the rise of the Hippie movement. This counterculture movement heavily influenced American popular culture through art, music, fashion, politics, etc. Specifically, the counterculture movement was adamant about legalizing recreational drugs that had been prohibited in the sixties.

Further research of this topic might uncover potential demographic information, providing deeper insight into the major players of the changing public perception of LSD. A distinct separation is evident in the portrayal of psychedelics by large national news publications such as The New York Times as opposed to smaller, more localized publications such as The Courier-Journal of Louisville, KY. Furthermore, analysis of the contrast between articles based on location of publication, gender of author, and age of author would provide a crucial basis for understanding the demographic spread that existed in the media of the time.

#### **ENDNOTES**

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