ATTITUDES OF DISTANCE LEARNING STUDENTS AT UKM'S FACULTY OF ISLAMIC STUDIES TOWARDS LEARNING ARABIC LANGUAGE SKILL COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Attitude is the most important element in determining one's achievements in learning the Arabic language either as a full or part-time student. This study is based on the Gardner's socio-educational model, and focuses on two types of motivational orientation, which are integrative and instrumental, and attitudes toward the learning conditions.

The main purpose of this study is to identify the level of integrative orientation, attitudes toward the learning conditions and instrumental orientation among students in a Distance Learning (DL) program at the Faculty of Islamic Studies (FPI), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM, The National University of Malaysia).

This study used a quantitative research design. Data were collected through questionnaires and analyzed descriptively. A total of 170 distance learning students were selected using the simple random sampling technique. Findings show that the students possessed a high level of integrative orientation and their attitudes toward learning environment were positive. The level of instrumental orientation, on the other hand, was very high with the instrumental orientation obtaining the highest mean score. One of the implications that can be drawn from this study is that teachers and students need to take into account and emphasize integrative orientation, attitudes toward learning conditions and instrumental orientation in order to develop a positive attitude in students who aim to master the Arabic language. Other than that, educational institutions should provide support and carry out other related activities and programs in order to ensure that students consistently have positive attitudes whilst achieving excellent results in learning the Arabic language.

Keywords: Attitudes, Arabic language, instrumental, integrative, learning, Arabic language skills.

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INTRODUCTION

In a distance learning program, research has shown that attitude is a contributing factor that influences student learning. Attitude also plays a part in learning a second language, and studies have shown that it can determine how efficiently a student masters a second language (Gardner et al., 1985; Baker, 1992; Parilah, 2002; Ghazali et al., 2010; Zulkifley et al., 2010; Natsue, 2012). According to the Gardner's theory, there are three aspects that affect learning a second language. They are integrative motivation, instrumental motivation, and attitudes toward learning conditions. A student is said to have an integrative orientation if he learns a second language to better integrate himself into a community acquainted with the language. In other words, integrative motivation refers to a positive attitude towards elements that are in the target language. On the other hand, a person is said to have an instrumental orientation if he, by mastering the second language, aims at achieving other goals such as passing exams, improving their career, and being able to read that second language, etc. (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). According to Asmah (1982), students who possess a higher integrative orientation believe that they should know the background or culture represented by the other language group in order to make learning the second language easier. Those with a higher instrumental orientation believe that learning a second language is important as the language may be used as a medium of instruction not only in learning, but also in life (Mohd Firdaus, 2003).

When it comes to learning situation, Azizeh et al. (2010) suggests that teachers, the curriculum, the syllabus, textbooks and school activities must continuously be improved so that students can maintain a positive attitude and the process of teaching and learning remain effective. In the context of Malaysia, many researches have been done related to the improvement of students teaching and learning including the incorporation of learning styles into technology in Arabic and Islamic education (Mohd Nawi et al., 2013; Mohd Nawi et al., 2012). This is in addition to the improvements in learning conditions and facilities such as the aids from the government to Islamic religious schools, whose students later make up most of the DL's students of Arabic Language (Umar et al., 2012a; Umar et al., 2012b; Umar et al., 2012c; Umar et al., 2012d).

Despite the improvements in learning conditions and facilities, it remains to be seen whether students' attitude has improved towards learning Arabic and Islamic education at higher learning institutions in Malaysia generally and UKM specifically. Overall, if a student possesses a positive attitude, learning the Arabic language will be easier for them, and their language skills can be improved. Thus, a student's attitude correlates directly with the learning and teaching of the Arabic language, and studies have shown that it can affect how well they learn the Arabic language.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Based on the status of Arabic as a second language, Arabic language skills are the most important aspects emphasized in the learning process. Oxford (1990) states that a person is proficient in a language when he can use the language proficiently with the correct grammar, sentence formation, word formation, usage of prefixes and suffixes and so on. A student's proficiency and mastery of a language depends on his or her listening, reading, writing and speaking skills which are the four basic skills that must be taught and learnt (Radha et al., (2008).However, the learning of Arabic language skills has its own challenges.

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Furthermore, many studies have shown that the real goals and objectives of learning the Arabic language have not yet been achieved, which is a growing concern, particularly for teachers (Abdul Rahim, 1993; Kamarulzaman et al., 2002; Ainon & Abdullah, 2005). According to research, a variety of factors that affect the learning of the Arabic language include the teachers themselves, their pedagogy, the educational system and educational technology, the learning environment, and other factors. A major contributing factor to the decline in learning and failure of learning second languages is the attitude (al-Tamimi & Munir, 2009; Asmah, 1992; Gardner, 1985; Mobashshernia & Aghaahmady, 2010; Jamaliah, 2007; Jamali, 1992). This is also the case with students who are pursuing distance learning education (DL). The students who are affected do not care about the assignments given to them, do not prepare for classes by failing to read modules beforehand, and they also procrastinate. They reason their behavior with having insufficient time, lack of learning materials, and, perhaps most worryingly, they feel that learning Arabic is not important. If these negative attitudes persist, these DL students will face a bigger problem concerning their academic achievements in the future (Zamri & Hakim, 2010; Idris, 2000; Rozmi, 2000; Zuraini, 2000). Thus, in order to master a second language, a student must continuously work hard to practice applying the skills that they learn. They must also continue to possess a positive attitude in learning a language that is foreign to them.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

> To determine the level of integrative orientation in DL students learning Arabic language skills.
> To identify DL students' attitudes towards their learning conditions.
> To determine the level of instrumental orientation in DL students learning Arabic language skills.

METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

This study used a quantitative research design involving students at the FPI, UKM, Bangi, Malaysia. Participants involved were 3rd Year DL students in their 5th semester (2012/2013 session) under the supervision of the Education Development Centre (EDC). Research data were collected through questionnaires distributed to 170 students who were selected using a simple random sampling technique. The researchers picked 170 students based on Krecie and Morgan's (1970) recommended sample size. According to Krejcie and Morgan, a sample size of 140 individuals is enough for a population of 220 students.Three parts of the questionnaire were designed so as to ascertain the students' response with regards to the integrative orientation, attitudes towards learning environment and the instrumental orientation respectively. The questions or statements are detailed out in the analysis of findings section for ease of reference. Students answered the statements in the survey by giving them a rating between 0 and 5 as an indication of the extent of agreement to the statement, with 0 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. The answers to the questionnaires were rated as to their level according to Table 1 below:

Table: 1
Scores and Level Rating of Statements/Questions in the Survey

Answer	0 - 1.5	1.5 - 2.5	2.5 - 3.5	3.5 - 4.2	4.2 - 5.0
Level Rating	Very Low	Low	Medium	High	Very High
Colour Rating					

Scores for each question or statement were totaled and their mean scores were calculated to find the average response of the sample.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

In this study, all three objectives were achieved through the descriptive analysis of the data gathered from the study. Thus, the findings are divided into three parts as follows:
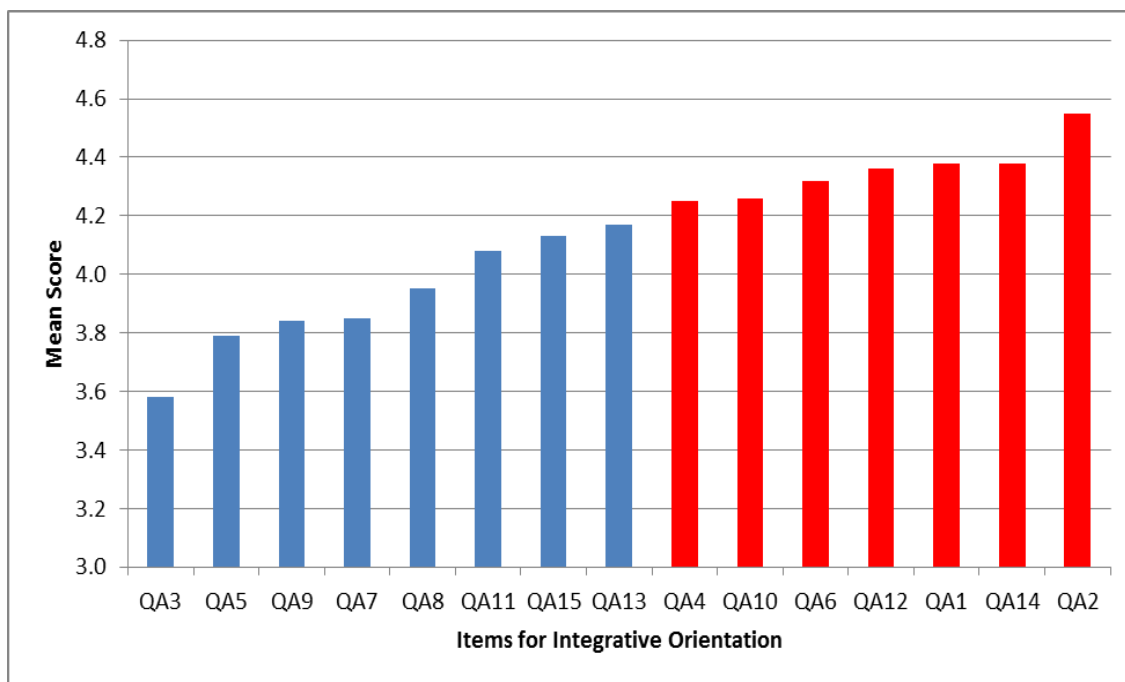
Level of Integrative Orientation

The statements/questions to determine the students' level of integrative orientation are coded and tabulated in Table 2.

Table: 2
Items to Determine Student's Integrative Orientation

No.	Item
QA1	I want to know more about Arabic speakers
QA2	To me, Arabic speakers should be proud that they have mastered the Arabic language as it can benefit society
QA3	I have experience with Arabic-speaking friends
QA4	It is a waste not being able to speak with Arabic speakers after learning the language.
QA5	It is very easy to start a conversation with Arabic speakers, and this has helped me to excel in Maharat Al-Muhadathah
QA6	I hope to have many friends who speak Arabic
QA7	Arabic speakers are very friendly and nice
QA8	The more people I know who speak Arabic, the more I'm interested in the language
QA9	I can trust people who speak Arabic
QA10	Learning Maharat Al-Muhadathah is important as it can help me to interact more easily with people who speak Arabic
QA11	Learning Arabic language skills is important for me to better understand and appreciate the Arab way of life
QA12	Using Arabic more often will not cause the loss of my identity
QA13	Mastering the Arabic language can strengthen my relationship with other communities
QA14	Speaking in Arabic will never lead me to lose my national identity
QA15	I'm not ashamed to speak in Arabic with other people of my race

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Figure: 1 below shows the mean scores of the items in the survey on the integrative orientation of the students. As seen from the figure, the students, in general, possessed a high (blue) – very high level (red) of integrative orientation. Close to half of the items asked were answered highly positively indicating that the students are very much motivated by the integrative orientation to study Arabic. More importantly, the sense of pride of being able to speak Arabic for the benefit of society scored the highest mean value, suggesting that these two elements (pride and society's benefit) play a very important role in motivating the students to learn Arabic. The lowest mean score was by QA3. A stark difference exists between QA3 (3.58 - high) and QA6 (4.32 – very high) which suggests that an improvement can be made to further improve the students' experience in practicing their language speaking skills with native or frequent Arabic speakers. Meanwhile, the very high mean values of QA12 and QA14 indicate that students do not think that speaking Arabic more often would not affect their national identity.

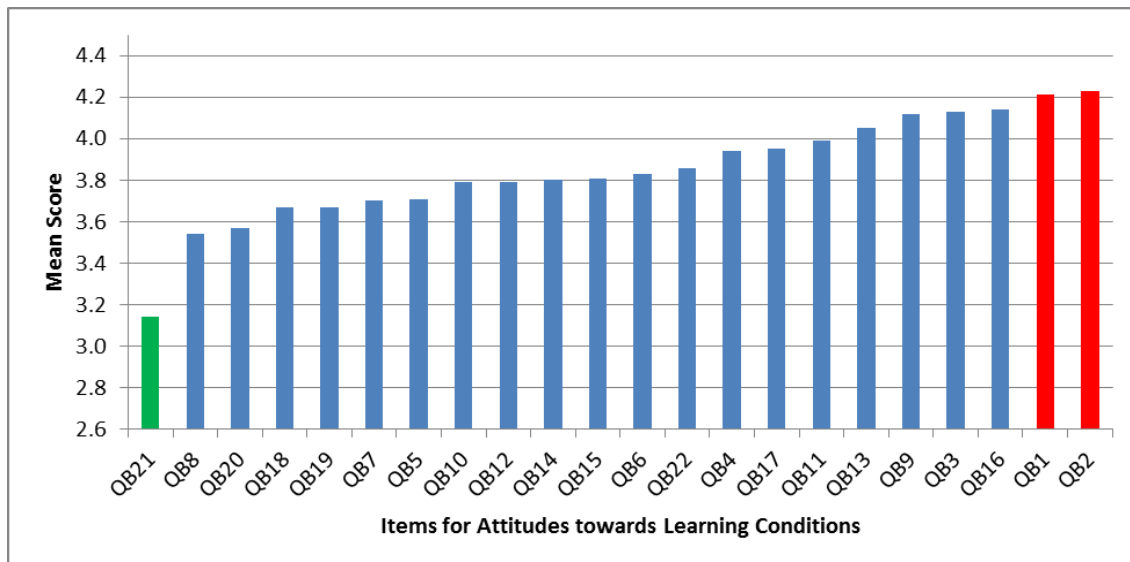**Figure: 1
Mean Scores of Integrative Orientation Items**

From the integrative orientation, the research shows that respondents agreed that the use of the Arabic language will not cause them to lose their personal or national identities. Findings related to the integrative orientation have justified Gardner's socio-educational model (2001) that states that attitudes towards second languages are closely related to social and cultural factors. The students in this study had an overall positive attitude towards the Arabic language and have an integrative orientation. They believed that learning Arabic would help them better understand the way of life of Arab societies (Kreamer, 1993; Saadiah, 1995). However, as seen from the lower mean score for the item QA3, they did not have much experience with Arabic-speaking friends. Therefore, the authorities need to take initiatives and provide the students with opportunities to communicate with people who speak Arabic so that they may better understand the Arab culture. This will encourage them to learn Arabic in depth.

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The Level of Attitude Towards Learning Situations

To determine the level of attitude towards learning conditions, items in the following Table 3 are the statements used in the survey.

Table: 3
Mean Scores for Attitudes Towards Learning Situations

No.	Item
QB1	All students should be involved in the Arabic Language Skills programs
QB2	Learning Arabic language skills is fun
QB3	Discussing Maharat Al-Kitabah makes me happy
QB4	Learning Arabic language skills is never boring
QB5	I immediately do my Arabic language skills homework.
QB6	I love to complete Arabic language skills exercises given by the lecturer
QB7	I do my Arabic language skills homework according to a schedule
QB8	I am active in the Arabic language skills class
QB9	I strive not to fail in the Arabic language skills class
QB10	I prefer Arabic Language Skills than other subjects
QB11	I focus on Arabic language skills questions that are expected to come out in the exam
QB12	I never delay doing Arabic Language Skills assignments
QB13	Activities in the Arabic Language Skills enhancement program should be held at least once a semester
QB14	I'm going to take the Arabic language skills course although it is not compulsory
QB15	The number of hours in Arabic language skills classes should be extended
QB16	I like all the lecturers who teach Arabic language skills
QB17	I can easily understand the subjects taught by all the Arabic language skills lecturers
QB18	The textbooks for Arabic language skills are very interesting
QB19	I can easily understand Arabic when reading Arabic Language textbooks
QB20	I like reading Arabic textbooks
QB21	I can learn Arabic using textbooks without the help of a teacher
QB22	I love the way my Arabic lecturer teaches

Figure: 2
Mean Score of Items for Attitudes towards Learning Conditions

Figure 2 above shows the mean score of items in the survey with regards to the students' attitudes towards learning conditions.

As seen in the figure, the result is entirely different from the integrative orientation of the students. Generally, their attitudes are positively high with all but one item (QB21) scored high or very high.

That means only 4.5% of the attitude items scored less favorably. Interestingly, items QB18-21 are in the left region of the graph indicating that some improvement can be done on Arabic textbooks to increase the students' attitude towards them. A similar attitude is observed among the students in relation to doing assignments. Items concerning assignment and homework in Arabic Language Skill courses scored in the low-high region of the graph.

When it comes to students' attitudes toward the learning situation, the study shows that FPI's DL students still relied fully on lessons given by the lecturers in class.

This is likely due to the fact that outside of classes, the students are not motivated enough to work hard to understand and learn the Arabic language individually.

This coincides with Lin & Yin's opinion (1997) that Asian students still adhere to their stereotypical attitudes when learning second languages. They are usually quiet and less active. Overall, the students had a positive attitude towards their teachers, the Arabic Language activities and programs held, as well as the curriculum.

However, some students agreed that Arabic language programs and courses should be held at least once per semester so that they could further enhance their Arabic language skills. Other than that, they suggested that the basics of the Arabic language, like syntax and morphology should also be emphasized in the teaching of Arabic language skills.

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The Level of Instrumental Orientation

Table 4 shows the items for instrumental orientation of DL students studying Arabic language skills.

Table: 4
Items for Instrumental Orientation

No.	Item
QC1	Arabic language skills are essential for furthering studies at a higher level
QC2	Having the skill to speak in Arabic is a characteristic of an educated person
QC3	I can expand my knowledge through reading Arabic newspapers if I master Arabic language skills
QC4	Arabic is becoming increasingly important as an international language
QC5	Job opportunities will increase for me if I master Arabic language skills
QC6	It is important for me to have Arabic language skills to communicate with Arabic communities if I further my studies in an Arab country
QC7	Having Arabic language skills is essential for my future education
QC8	Having Arabic language skills is necessary to broaden our interactions with people from other countries
QC9	Having Arabic language skills is important when I go on vacations in Arabic-speaking countries
QC10	Arabic language skill is useful for Muslims who want to understand religious rulings
QC11	Mastering Arabic language skills enables me to understand Arabic documentaries
QC12	I have a better understanding of the Qur'an by learning Arabic language
QC13	It is a necessary to learn Arabic language skills to facilitate learning about Islam

Figure 3 below shows the mean scores of instrumental orientation items. An analysis of the findings shows that most of the items (92.3%) received "very high" scores (between 4.26-4.49). Only one item scored "high", and that was item QC5 regarding job opportunities as an instrumental motivation.
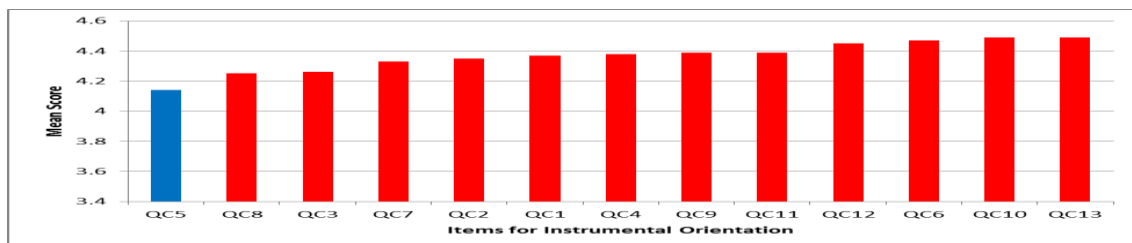
Figure: 3
Mean Score of Instrumental Orientation Items   181

This suggests that instrumental motivation remain the largest factor that drives the students to take up learning Arabic language skills. Apart from item QC6, religious sentiments (QC10, QC12 and QC13) scored the highest mean values. This is understandable since the students are affiliated with the study of Islam in the Faculty of Islamic Studies. However, these sentiments certainly outweigh the job prospects factor (QC5) as the driving force behind the motivation to learn the language.

In relation to instrumental orientation, the students agreed that Arabic is becoming increasingly important as a lingua franca, and possessing Arabic language skills is essential for communicating with other Arabic speakers.

This proves that the students were aware that Arabic is a significant language in the international arena, and that they felt that it is important to learn Arabic so that they may be able to communicate with Arab communities if they further their studies in an Arab country. Thus, the students' experience and surroundings do help the students in mastering the Arabic language.
These experiences are important and can be applied if they further their studies in an Arab country and mingle with Arabic communities.

The overall levels of attitudes

Figure 4 shows the level and the mean scores received in the three domains in the questionnaire. The three domains are integrative orientation, attitudes toward the learning situation, and instrumental orientation. Based on the analysis, instrumental orientation obtained the highest mean score (4.36-Very high), while integrative orientation received a mean score of 4.12 (High).

The mean score for attitudes towards the learning situation was also high (3.84). It is clear from the graph that the instrumental motivation does not have a clear effect on the attitudes towards Arabic learning for FPI's DL students.
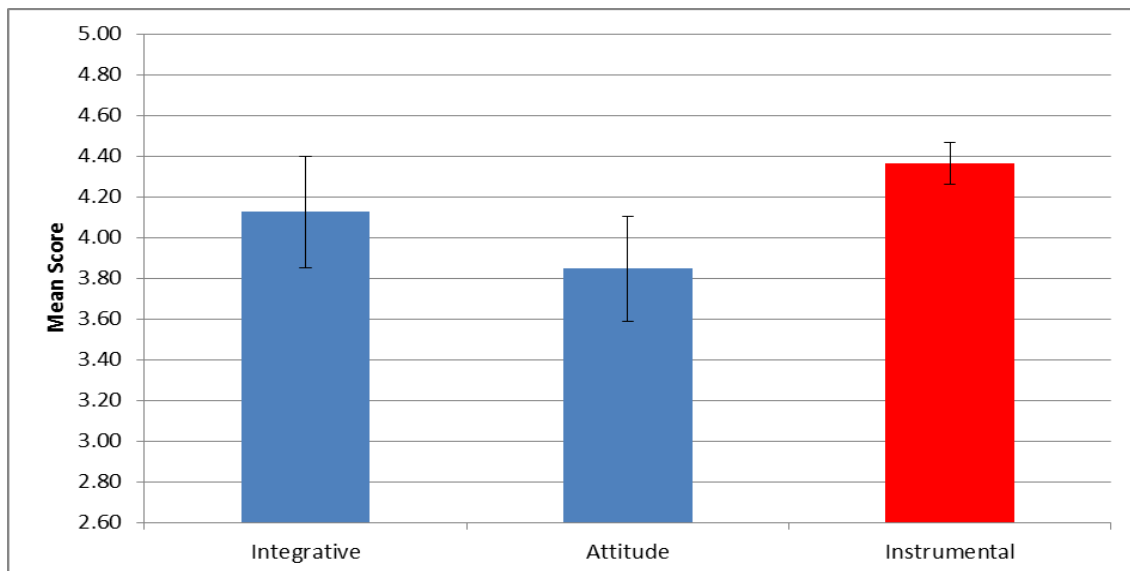
Figure: 4
Overall Level and Scores of Attitude and Orientation

It is also clear that students have similar integrative and instrumental orientation. However they are more consistent with regards to their instrumental orientation. Even though their motivation is high, their attitudes towards learning are not as positive as their motivational orientation. This seems to suggests that an improvement in the learning environment, situations and conditions is a certainly a must to further improve their attitudes. These improvements have been identified in the previous section.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the study found that the level of attitudes in integrative learning situations and the attitude towards the learning situations are at a high level, whilst the instrumental attitude is exceptionally high. This shows that distance learning students have a positive attitude towards learning Arabic language skills courses at FPI. Overall, the students have a positive attitude towards the Arabic language and an integrative orientation. They also have a very high instrumental orientation, realizing the significance of the Arabic language in international arena and in bettering themselves in religious matters. Several improvements have been identified from this study. Among those is the need to expose the students with more interaction with Arab-speaking individuals so that they can improve their communication skills. Other aspects which need to be looked at are the textbooks and ways to improve the students' attitudes towards homework and assignment. More studies can be carried out to improve DL students' attitudes towards Arabic language skill courses.

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