

KEVIN'S DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOPATHOLOGY PORTRAYAL IN THE MOVIE "WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN"

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Abstract: "We Need to Talk About Kevin" is a movie that tells the story of Kevin's life starting from infancy to adolescence, which shows various psychopathological symptoms. Since childhood, Kevin has had various behavioral disorders and has difficulty building a good relationship with his mother, Eva. These behavioral issues worsened until finally, Kevin committed murder against his father, younger sister, and his peers. There are various interactions that can be explained using a perspective from developmental psychopathology to explore every factor in Kevin's life. This research is qualitative research with a phenomenological approach to understand and interpret every aspect of Kevin's life from his childhood and analyze them using theories of developmental psychopathology. The result of this research shows that there are a few factors of developmental psychopathology depicted in the film such as genetics, environmental factors, attachment style, symptoms of maternal depression and stress during pregnancy, as well as parenting styles that play a role in each stage of Kevin's development. In the end, there are also solutions presented to minimize psychopathology in children, namely improving the quality of relationships, family communication, and good co-parenting between father and mother. Through this research, it is hoped that there will be a deeper understanding of the factors in the developmental psychopathology depicted in the film "We Need to Talk About Kevin".

Keywords: movie analysis; phenomenological approach; developmental psychopathology

Introduction

"We Need to Talk About Kevin" is a psychological thriller drama film that centers on the perspective of Eva Khatchadourian as she endeavors to navigate her life while seeking to comprehend the reasons behind the problematic actions of her son, Kevin. The film employs a non-linear narra-

tive approach, utilizing a back-and-forth timeline between the present and Eva's past, interspersed with flashbacks depicting Eva's past traumas. Bolewski (2012) explains that the non-linear narrative approach showcases the progression of the story in a non-chronological manner through the incorporation of flashbacks and forwards. This approach is common-

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ly utilized to engross the audience physically and emotionally as new information regarding the characters unfolds, thereby reducing the audience's tendency to become bored.

In the realm of filmmaking, Barsam and Monahan (2010) explain that every element displayed in a film serves a specific role and meaning aimed at conveying messages within the narrative. These elements encompass set decoration, lighting, spatial arrangements, costumes, facial expressions, and the acting performances of the film's cast. In the film "We Need to Talk About Kevin", these elements carry their own significance, reflecting the dynamics of relationships between characters and reinforcing depictions of psychopathological symptoms exhibited by the main character.

At the beginning of the film, Eva is depicted as leading a bleak, isolated life, and estranged from her community. As the narrative progresses, Eva's past begins to unfold gradually, starting from her youth when she led a free and happy life, to her eventual pregnancy and the birth of Kevin. Eva is depicted as someone who often experiences various negative emotions and stress from the early stages of her pregnancy. This condition persists throughout Kevin's growth and is reflected in their interactions, which are characterized by coldness, indifference, and minimal physical contact. On the other hand, Kevin also exhibits various problematic behaviors from a young age such as inconsolable cries, tantrums, irresponsiveness, and disinterest in playing with Eva. Kevin's behavior further exacerbates Eva's stress and frustration.

Ever since infancy, Kevin is depicted as a baby who always cries and is unable to establish a close relationship with Eva. As a toddler, Kevin exhibits destructive behavior such as destroying food and toys, vandalizing Eva's office with paint, and

displaying extreme animosity towards Eva. However, Kevin is able to maintain a good relationship with his father, Franklin. The stark contrast in Kevin's demeanor towards Eva and Franklin played a pivotal role in exacerbating Eva's frustration and significantly strained the marital bond between Eva and Franklin.

Throughout Kevin's developmental stages, Eva consistently found herself on the receiving end of his cold and hostile behavior, characterized by cold glances, a flat tone of voice, and endless taunts. In contrast, Kevin often smiles, laughs, acts happily, and shows affection towards Franklin. The difference in Kevin's treatment of his parents not only highlighted the strained relationship between Eva and Kevin but also underscored the emotional turmoil within the family dynamics. As Eva handles Kevin's antagonistic behavior, she finds herself increasingly isolated and overwhelmed which ultimately led to the deterioration of the marital relationship between Eva and Franklin.

During preschool age, Kevin has a younger sister named Celia. When Eva gives birth to Celia, Kevin seemingly displays jealousy and attempts to get closer to Eva. However, Kevin's relationship with Celia becomes increasingly negative as they grow older. Upon entering school age and adolescence, Kevin frequently exhibits aggressive behavior and causes harm to Celia. This behavior persists until Celia has to wear a prosthetic eye. As he matures, Kevin's relationship with Eva also becomes increasingly distant and cold.

Kevin's behavioral issues escalated during his teenage years when, at the age of 15, he decided to kill his father, sister, and school peers on the same day. The film concludes with a conversation between Eva and Kevin, during which Eva asks Kevin to explain the reasons behind his actions. The film also invites viewers to

contemplate the dynamics of interactions between Eva and Kevin, Kevin's developmental stages from birth to adolescence, and the various factors underlying each of Kevin's behaviors. Like Eva, viewers undoubtedly have one central question: "Why did Kevin decide to commit murder against his father, sister, and his peers?"

Several previous studies have analyzed the film "We Need to Talk About Kevin" from the perspective of Eva as Kevin's mother, focusing on aspects such as the mother-child relationship (Muller, 2008), patriarchal motherhood (O'Reilly, 2016), maternal work (Messer, 2013), and maternal shame (Slobodin, 2018). However, these studies primarily focus on Eva's viewpoint as a parent who nurtures and shapes Kevin's personality.

However, it is also necessary to conduct an analysis from the developmental psychopathology perspective by exploring Kevin's developmental stages to understand the processes and mechanisms occurring within Kevin himself. This analysis also integrates aesthetics and film theory to demonstrate how psychopathological phenomena can be depicted in the film. Developmental psychopathology is a perspective within the field of psychology that focuses on the events occurring throughout the life journey of individuals, ultimately resulting in developmental differences between those who are deemed normal and those who exhibit psychological disorders (Rutter, 2014). This perspective considers various causal factors contributing to the emergence of psychopathology in individuals, ranging from genetic predispositions, environmental influences, parental upbringing patterns, family dynamics, and peer interactions from infancy to adulthood. This paper considers the influence of attachment styles, the dynamics of the relationship between Eva and Kevin, interactions among family members, personality development, and various markers at each developmental

stage that ultimately shape Kevin's character. Therefore, this film analysis will incorporate various theoretical foundations from the perspective of developmental psychopathology and correlate these symptoms to every interaction, utterance, expression, and gesture, both explicitly and implicitly portrayed in the film "We Need to Talk About Kevin".

Methodology

The method utilized is qualitative analysis employing a phenomenological approach. Creswell & Poth (2018) expound that this approach is employed to analyze various expressions and narratives captured in conversational videos, interviews, everyday stories, diaries, written works, films, dramas, poetry, novels, and so forth. This approach is deemed most suitable for analyzing the film because it employs the film as the primary source of data. Furthermore, this film analysis also meets the criteria for phenomenological analysis outlined by Creswell & Poth (2018), namely, a holistic analysis of a medium, delving into specific statements or phrases relevant to the discussion, and emphasizing particular sentences in detail. In this particular study, the medium used in this study is film, with an analysis focused on the dialogues, explicit and implicit interactions among characters in the film, and *mise-en-scene*. All findings are subsequently analyzed using various relevant theories, leading to conclusions regarding the interpretation of the data

Result

Based on a thorough analysis of the film "We Need to Talk About Kevin," several recurring themes emerge regarding Kevin's development of psychopathology. The movie vividly portrays Kevin's aggressive behavior, difficulty in anger control, antisocial tendencies, and lack

of empathy, aligning with the diagnostic criteria for conduct disorder. Through various stages of Kevin's life, from infancy to adolescence, the film illustrates his escalating behavioral issues and the environmental, familial, and psychological factors contributing to his condition. The nuanced depiction of Kevin's interactions with his mother, Eva, and the overall family dynamics provide a rich context for understanding the complexity of his psychopathological development. This analysis underscores the significance of early indicators, attachment styles, parenting approaches, and sibling relationships in shaping Kevin's behavioral trajectory, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of conduct disorder.

By examining Kevin's behavior across different developmental stages, this analysis will be divided into six parts. The first section will explore Kevin's symptoms of conduct disorder, followed by an examination of environmental stress factors that contribute to his behavior. The third section will analyze how Kevin forms his attachment style. The fourth and fifth sections will focus on familial and individual factors, respectively, that influence his psychopathology. The final section of the discussion will present potential solutions from the aspect of family communication that could mitigate Kevin's developmental psychopathology.

Utilizing film theory and specific cinematic techniques, this study aims to illuminate how visual storytelling can effectively portray the complexities of conduct disorder. Through this cinematic lens, the article seeks to enhance the understanding of early indicators, underlying causes, and potential interventions for conduct disorder, offering valuable insights into the portrayal of psychological conditions in media and their real-life implications.

Discussion

Conduct Disorder

Before discussing the factors involved in Kevin's behavior, it is necessary to establish a fundamental understanding of the psychopathology exhibited by Kevin. Biermann & Sasser (2014) explain that conduct disorder is characterized by aggressive behavior such as fighting and animal cruelty, difficulty in anger control, antisocial behavior such as lying, destructive behavior such as damaging property, arson, and rule violations. In terms of emotions, children with conduct disorder also tend to be insensitive, show little or no expression of emotions, have low levels of empathy, and lack guilt.

In this film, Kevin is depicted as exhibiting various symptoms of conduct disorder at different stages of development from infancy to adolescence. In early childhood, Kevin often displays expressions of anger towards Eva, using coarse and impolite language towards her.



Figure 1. Kevin's Vandalistic Behavior
(Source: Rotten Tomatoes Trailer on Youtube)

Moving into preschool age at the 41:08 minute mark, Kevin is seen engaging in vandalistic behavior by damaging the walls of Eva's office with red and black paint. In the theory of *mise-en-scene*, Lathrop and Sutton (2014) explain that every visual element in a film serves to reinforce the meaning or message of the story. In the scene depicting vandalistic behavior, Kevin's choice of paint colors, portrays the impression of blood, violence, and aggression, aligning with Kevin's

in's homicidal actions.

As Kevin enters adolescence, his relationship with his sister deteriorates further, evidenced by his use of foul language and binding his sister with Christmas decorations. Kevin also kills his sister's pet hamster by placing it in the garbage disposal in his kitchen and injuring his sister's eye, causing her to use a prosthetic glass eye.

Conduct disorder is also characterized by low empathy and an inability to feel guilty or remorseful for one's actions (Biermann & Sasser, 2014). This symptom becomes evident, particularly at the 1:35:43 minute mark after Kevin commits the murders, where he shows no remorse or guilt for killing his family and friend. Lathrop and Sutton (2014) elucidate that the expressions and gestures exhibited by characters in a film are crucial elements to underscore the narrative, themes, and messages conveyed by the film. Based on the expressions and gestures displayed by Kevin, it can be inferred that Kevin is portrayed as a cold and mysterious character who never expresses his emotions.

From a physiological standpoint, Biermann & Sasser (2014) divide conduct disorder into two models namely reactive and proactive. The proactive model features physiological characteristics such as hypo-arousal, where individuals tend to lack enthusiasm or passion and exhibit flat emotions. Both of these traits are clearly depicted in Kevin's behavior. Kevin's hypo-arousal is evident from early childhood, manifested in his facial expressions, tone of speech, and cold demeanor when interacting with Eva. In one of the scenes, Eva gets angry and throws Kevin onto the wall, causing him to break his arm. At the 44:55 mark, Kevin is shown holding his arm and staring at Eva with a flat expression, without any signs of pain or tears, contrary to what one would typically expect from someone experiencing

injury. This hypo-arousal becomes more apparent as Kevin grows older. In a teenage scene at the 1:27:36 minute mark, Kevin accidentally overhears that his parents are getting divorced. However, he shows no sadness or anger and remains expressionless.

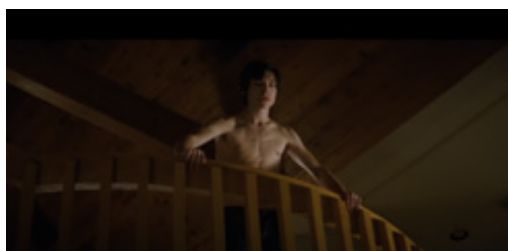


Figure 2. Kevin overhears that his parents are getting divorced
(Source: Rotten Tomatoes Trailer on Youtube)

In this scene, the film director also utilizes a lighting technique that showcases a stark contrast of shadows between Kevin's face and the background. Lathrop and Sutton (2014) explain that the lighting technique employing high-contrast shadows creates a mysterious, intense impression, emphasizing the character's expression as the main focal point of the scene.

Based on the various behaviors exhibited by Kevin from childhood to the final act of murder, it is evident that Kevin displays various symptoms of psychopathology. There are several factors that may serve as predictors of the psychopathology displayed by Kevin. The following section will discuss each of these factors individually, starting with environmental stress, attachment, parenting style, and family dynamics.

Environmental Stress & Developmental Psychopathology

Jones & Johnson (2017) explain that symptoms of psychopathology can be identified early on, within the first three

years of birth. One early indicator is increased maternal stress during prenatal periods. Prenatal stress alters hormones in the mother, causing discomfort in the unborn child and leading to excessive stress hormones. This condition persists postnatally, making it difficult for the child to regulate behavior as they age (O'Connor et al., 2014; Moleenar et al., 2019). During Eva's pregnancy, Eva is depicted as constantly gloomy, sad, and unenthusiastic. One clear example illustrating this is when Eva attends a prenatal yoga class at the 17:41 minute mark. In this scene, Eva is seen wearing fully covered clothing and displaying expressions of annoyance, discomfort, and feeling isolated. Meanwhile, in the background, several other pregnant mothers are seen laughing and chatting happily. This scene starkly contrasts Eva's negative expression with the positive expressions of the other mothers. Allen et al. (1998) also found that poor maternal emotional health during pregnancy is significantly associated with disruptive behavior in children during adolescence. This aligns with Kevin's development, showing various disruptive behaviors as he matures.

Additionally, various scenes suggest that Eva was not ready to have a child. This is evident from the unplanned pregnancy and flashbacks of Eva's expressive, carefree, and joyful youth. These expressions are starkly contrasting with Eva's expressions since becoming pregnant. Furthermore, at the 32:28 minute mark, Eva tells Kevin that she was happy before his arrival and that every day she wishes she was in France.

Attachment Style

Bowlby (1969) defines attachment as a biological need manifested in behaviors aimed at seeking closeness in relationships established between individuals. In the infant developmental stage, Wilson et

al. (2015) explain that attachment styles are based on the interactions between baby and their caregivers. According to Papalia & Martorell (2021), attachment is a two-way relationship that first occurs between infants and their caregivers and is an essential stage for infants to continue to develop well.

There are four types of attachment styles classified by Ainsworth et al. (1978) based on how children respond to their caregivers which is secure attachment style characterized by feelings of safety and comfort in the presence of the caregiver; anxious attachment style characterized by excessive anxiety and a desire to always be close to the caregiver; avoidant attachment style characterized by indifference and avoidance of closeness with the caregiver; and disorganized-disoriented attachment style characterized by inconsistent desires to approach and withdraw from the caregiver. Based on Kevin's behavior, the most suitable attachment style is disorganized-disoriented attachment style. From the toddler development stage, it can be observed that Kevin has an inconsistent attachment to Eva, often depicted as staring at Eva with anger and hatred. However, when Eva gives birth to her second child, Kevin shows facial expressions seemingly jealous of his sibling's presence. This indicates Kevin's desire for attention from Eva. After that, Kevin falls ill and seeks comfort from Eva, hugging her and asking her to read him a bedtime story. However, the next day, Kevin behaves as if he hates Eva again and drives her out of his room.

Ainsworth et al. (1978) explain that this type of attachment is the least commonly found in children and generally occurs when children grow up with caregivers who are insensitive, frightening, or use violence. This also aligns with Eva's behavior towards Kevin, which tends to be indifferent and never expresses affection in a warm manner. Since infancy, it

is shown that Eva has difficulty building a warm relationship and almost never physically touches Kevin. This is evident from the way Eva holds Kevin using both hands without embracing him warmly, unlike the way Kevin's father, Franklin, carries him. Additionally, Eva is never shown to engage in skin-to-skin contact or breast-feed Kevin. This undoubtedly also plays a role in the formation of the cold dynamics and disorganized-disoriented attachment style between Kevin and Eva.

Family Factors

Davies & Sturge-Apple (2014) explain that parenting styles are one of the risk factors that can predict the emergence of a child psychological problems. The parenting style provided by Eva falls into the rejecting/neglecting pattern, characterized by a low level of demand and responsiveness. In every interaction, Eva appears as a mother who is indifferent and tends to have difficulty building a good relationship with Kevin.

Moreover, Eva also tends to show low concern for Kevin's well-being. This is depicted in a scene where Kevin is already a teenager, and they decide to spend time together. Eva is shown wearing thick clothing with a leather jacket, while Kevin is only wearing a white T-shirt. Lathrop and Sutton (2014) elaborate that costume selection is a crucial aspect of mise-en-scene, aiming to underscore the narrative and demonstrate the social position of characters in the film through the choice of clothing style, fabric, color, and texture. In this scene, Eva's costume portrays a firm and reserved impression, implicitly indicating a higher status compared to Kevin. The distinct contrast between Eva's and Kevin's clothing styles further highlights the dynamics of their relationship, revealing a gap between mother and son, and indicating that Eva holds a higher status and is the primary controller of the in-

teraction between Eva and Kevin.

At the 1:10:54 minute mark, Kevin and Eva are caught in heavy rain, and it is shown that Eva still wears her jacket while Kevin is already soaking wet. Typically, parents with high levels of concern and sensitivity toward their children would immediately take off their jackets and prioritize their child's comfort and well-being.

In terms of verbal interaction, Eva also tends to lack a warm communication style. This is evident from an incident where Eva cannot control her emotions and throws Kevin, causing him to suffer a broken bone in his left hand. On the way home from the hospital, Eva tries to apologize to Kevin. However, when apologizing, Eva shows a flat expression and uses a third-person perspective in her sentences. Eva's exact words were "what momma did was very very wrong, and she is so, so sorry."

In a longitudinal study conducted by Dietz et al. (2009), it was found that maternal negativity acts as a mediator in the relationship between maternal depression symptoms and externalizing behavior in toddlers. Maternal negativity refers to negative feedback and unconstructive criticism whenever a child tries to do something like saying no, blaming, and imposing their own will.

When Eva teaches Kevin how to count, it turns out Kevin can already count from 1 to 50. After knowing Kevin's ability, Eva immediately gives him difficult mathematical problems and challenges him to solve them. From this, it can be seen that Eva is unable to appreciate Kevin and intentionally gives him difficult questions so that Kevin cannot succeed. However, despite Eva exhibiting various negative behaviors towards Kevin, it cannot be denied that some negative behaviors from Eva are a result of Kevin's behaviors that trigger Eva's anger in the first place. This

also aligns with the transactional model described by Davies & Sturge-Apple (2014), where every interaction that occurs is a two-way relationship caused by both parties. Parental responses to children can indeed influence children's behavior, but conversely, children's behavior will also affect parental responses in subsequent stages. Therefore, this also needs to be considered before drawing conclusions to blame Eva's parenting style.

On the contrary, the parenting style provided by Kevin's father, Franklin, tends to show characteristics of permissive/indulgent parenting. This is evident from Franklin's behavior of always praising, pouring affection, giving gifts, and saying that Kevin is a good child. Franklin also always defends Kevin whenever Eva tries to tell him about Kevin's negative behaviors. According to Davies & Sturge-Apple (2014), rejecting /neglecting and permissive/indulgent parenting styles are found to have an influence on the formation of insecure attachment styles, an increase in negative behaviors and externalizing problem symptoms, and low levels of self-regulation. Therefore, the interaction factors formed between Kevin and his parents can also be predictors of his behavioral and psychopathological symptoms.

Regarding sibling relationships, Davies & Sturge-Apple (2014) explain that sibling relationships filled with anger, violence, and rivalry tend to predict externalizing and internalizing behaviors. When his sibling is born, Kevin appears to be jealous of his sister's presence. Kevin also has a negative relationship with his sister, such as using foul language to tease his sister and engaging in various acts of violence ranging from small acts like tying up and pulling his sister's hair to a more significant act like damaging his sibling's eye.

Manipulative Behavior

One highly dominant behavior that emerges during Kevin's developmental stages from preschool to adolescence is manipulative and deceitful behavior, such as lying or tricking others to achieve his desires. Salihovic & Stattin (2017) conducted a 5-year trajectory study on adolescents aged 13-15 and found that manipulative behavior is a symptom of psychopathology that predicts antisocial personality disorder at age 18.

Ever since preschool, Kevin is depicted as if he has two personalities, one that is aggressive and resentful towards Eva, and one that is cheerful and pleasant in front of Franklin. Kevin also often shows a stark contrast in expressions when looking at Eva and Franklin. In terms of speech tone, Kevin always sounds cold and uses a low tone when speaking to Eva, and uses a high, cheerful tone when speaking to Franklin. This can be observed at the 50:41 and 1:20:27 minute marks.



Figure 3. The stark contrast of Kevin's expression towards Eva and Franklin
(Source: Rotten Tomatoes Trailer on Youtube)

Based on these differences, it can be seen that Kevin seems to be wearing a sweet persona and acting in front of everyone except Eva. There is a symbolic scene that vividly illustrates this at the 1:40:20 minute mark when Kevin ascends to the

stage of his school's auditorium after committing the murder of his friends.

On stage, Kevin is seen performing a final salute like an actor who has just finished a theater performance. This depicts Kevin's belief that all pretense and acting are done, and he can return to being himself in front of Eva.

Family communication & interparental-subsystem

The final discussion from this analysis revolves around one potential solution that Kevin's family could undertake to prevent Kevin's psychopathological outcomes. As elucidated by Davies & Sturge-Apple (2014), the quality of the bond between parents and their ability to navigate stressors and conflicts significantly influences a child's psychological well-being. Moreover, the alignment of parenting styles between the mother and father is an important factor for effective child-rearing. However, in the depicted scenarios within the film, Eva and Franklin often use a different approach and parenting styles toward Kevin. This leads to discord rather than cooperation. These disagreements not only increase the tensions between parents but also hinder the implementation of cohesive parenting strategies.

Furthermore, Schoppe et al. (2001) shed light on the importance of parental collaboration and adaptive family structures in mitigating behavioral issues in children. A harmonious parental partnership, along with a flexible family framework that embraces change and confronts challenges, can significantly reduce externalizing behavioral problems in children. Additionally, fostering a nurturing and affectionate atmosphere within the family unit further bolsters positive outcomes for children, reinforcing the notion that a supportive familial environment is conducive to healthy psychological development.

In essence, the pivotal role of parental harmony and consistency cannot be overstated in addressing behavioral challenges in children. By fostering open communication, mutual understanding, and shared responsibility in child-rearing, Eva and Franklin can work towards a unified approach to managing Kevin's behavioral issues. This collaborative effort not only promotes a supportive family environment but also lays the foundation for Kevin's emotional and psychological well-being. Therefore, prioritizing the cohesion and cooperation between parents may possibly be one of the solutions in navigating the complexities of Kevin's behavioral struggles from an early age.

This analysis has both strengths and limitations that are acknowledged. One strength of this analysis lies in the phenomenological approach used to examine all aspects of Kevin's developmental stages and link them to the branch of developmental psychopathology. Through this analysis, readers are expected to observe the trajectory and development of Kevin from infancy to adolescence and all the factors involved in various psychopathological symptoms in Kevin's behavior.

A limitation of this study is related to the fact that the film is based on a fictional story, and there are scenes that are not fully depicted in the film. This differs from qualitative research which can be supplemented with additional interviews. Therefore, this analysis is limited to the events explicitly shown in the film.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the film "We Need to Talk About Kevin" has various psychopathological aspects that can be analysed one by one, from Kevin's behaviour displaying symptoms of conduct disorder to the factors in Kevin's development that ultimately result in behavioural

outcomes. In this analysis, it is evident that environmental stress, attachment style, symptoms of depression and stress during pregnancy, as well as parenting styles of both father and mother play a role in every stage of Kevin's development. One possible solution that could be undertaken by the family is to improve the quality of their relationship, family communication, and good co-parenting between father and mother to minimize the psychopathological impact on the child. Therefore, perhaps "we need to talk about Kevin" should be a conversation topic that Eva and Franklin should have since the beginning of Kevin's problematic actions.

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