

Gender and Sexuality:  
A Look at the Sexuality among Partners of Transgender Individuals

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## **Introduction**

Sexuality and its fluidity are just now hitting mainstream research. For a majority of American society, sexuality is seen as a concrete part of one's being. The sexuality of a person is not known to change, be fluid, or flip-flop. If a person feels that they are attracted to the two acknowledged genders then they are labeled bisexual; however, when the gender scale widens, the chart for measuring sexuality begins to blur.

It is important to acknowledge that gender conformity and non-conformity may challenge the existing construction of sexuality. This paper begins by examining the existing structure of sexuality and the problems this structure faces when gender non-conformity is inserted, while rising awareness about the construction of sex, gender, and sexuality to exemplify the often overlooked complexities within each. Gender non-conformity is explained while the issues faced by partners of transgender individuals are examined. The primary focus is on the shifting sexualities among female partners of female-to-male transgender individuals. As indicated in this text, research illustrates that partners of gender non-conforming individuals often feel a sense of lost identity, in that many of the partners must re-visit their constructed sexuality. Due to the lack of academic resources pertaining to partners of transgender individuals, some of the analysis among transgender partners will be a comparison of the female partners of male-to-female transgender individuals to the wives of male cross-dressers. Another piece to the essay will be personal experience on the topic and personal feelings relevant to issues raised. Wives and partners of transgender persons and cross-dressers experience similar situations as they both struggle with the effects of the construction of sexuality as well as the perception of their sexuality by others; however, the struggle with language and membership to the queer community is a battle fought by the partners of transgender individuals.

### **Understanding Sex and Gender:**

#### **The Truth behind Years of Assumptions**

The terms sex and gender can no longer be used synonymously. Gender has historically been understood as the automatic gender based on an infant's apparent sex. Doctor's base a child's determined "sex" on the existence, or lack thereof, of *appropriate* genitals. The mere existence of genitals that do not fit the socially accepted norm (intersexed genitals) are then reconstructed (mutilated). Although many individuals are skeptical about the existence of such practices, researchers have acknowledged that "recent estimates indicate that approximately one or two in every two thousand infants are born with anatomy that people regard as sexually ambiguous," (Preves, n.d., p.2). Genitals are not the only indication of sex ambiguity;

chromosome makeup and secondary sex characteristics can illustrate the variability within sex. Research has also shown that the difference between males and female bodies are actually "more on a continuum rather than a dichotomy," (Preves, n.d., p.3). Sex is no longer simplistic and absolute; the categories of male and female are not inclusive. The essentialist model of sex, gender, and sexuality does not include everyone.

The variability among sex causes one to question the variability among gender and wonder if one is causal of the other. It is obvious that many children that have male genitalia practice male gender behavior, however, because a child is male bodied does not necessarily mean the child must practice male behavior; the two have been socially linked in society, but they are not biologically linked. Gender is a social construction; this social construction relies on the expectations society has of children in regarding gender. Gender is "a social status usually based on the convincing performance of femininity or masculinity," (Devor, 2004, p.3). With the separation of sex and gender comes a myriad of gender expression.

### **Tossing the Gender Binary**

Cross-dressers<sup>1</sup>, gender benders<sup>2</sup>, gender queers<sup>3</sup>, transmen<sup>4</sup>, tranny boi's<sup>5</sup>, FtM's<sup>6</sup>, MtF<sup>7</sup>'s, transgender individuals<sup>8</sup> and other gender non-conformists<sup>9</sup> defy the social construction of gender and challenge our societal norms regarding sex and gender. Individuals are now "coming out" and dressing in clothes of the "opposite sex," changing one's name to be understood as androgynous, or having different surgeries to pass as a desired sex. Tre Wentling (2005) notes in "The Medicalization of Transgender," that many individuals are able to receive hormone therapy without a desire to undergo sex reassignment surgery (15). A person can obtain a deep voice and a beard while keeping their "sex" characteristics. Whether an individual

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<sup>1</sup> Cross-DresserIdentity label replacing the medicalized "transvestite," (Wentling, 2005, p.5).

<sup>2</sup> Individuals that desire to "bend" the existing gender rules and roles.

<sup>3</sup> An individual that "does not feel that s/he fits onto the traditional binary," (Wentling, 2005, p.5).

<sup>4</sup> A genetic female who wishes (at any level) to be perceived or pass as a male, with or without hormone therapy or surgery.

<sup>5</sup> Multiple definitions, see text.

<sup>6</sup> Female to male transsexual man- person born/ Assigned Gender at birth as female/girl transitions to live and identify full time as male/man (Gunner, 2005)

<sup>7</sup> Male to female transsexual woman- person born/ Assigned Gender at birth as male/boy transitions to live and identify full time as female/woman (Gunner, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Meaning to 1) change, 2) go across, or 3) beyond or though. "A term used for gender variant individuals," (Wentling, 2005, p.5).

<sup>9</sup> Those who identify their gender outside the gender binary system of male and female, maybe fluid with gender presentation or not conform to gender stereotypes and may use gender neutral or choose to use the pronoun closest to the end of the masculine or feminine spectrum they are presenting. Some may do some or all of medical transition or none at all (Gunner, 2005).

maintains a desire to “pass” as an opposing gender, or claims an identity in the middle, gender expression and performance has challenged traditional roles of male and female.

There are many names and identities for gender non-conformists, and there are lists of different meanings defined by individuals, culture, and geography. Terms that will be used throughout this paper include Cross-dresser, transgender individual, transman, and tranny boi. Cross-dressers are commonly defined as persons that “enjoy wearing clothing of the other sex on occasion,” (Wysocki, n.d., p.2). Transsexuals often choose to alter their bodies to pass as persons of the “opposite” gender, or even pass as androgynous. Gender non-conformists such as transgender individuals may not feel comfortable in their own body or not feel comfortable in either designated gender (Devor, 2004, p.3). Transgender originated in the 70’s as a term that identified individuals living in the gender *opposite* (Devor, 2004, p.3). In the 90’s the term transgender was used to identify an individual that “transgressed usual sex and gender expectations,” (Devor, 2004, p.3). Pre-transition transgender is an individual that has not undergone any sort of hormone therapy or surgery. An individual that identifies as transgender, but has not undergone any transition may still switch pronouns, get rid of pronouns, dress in the attire of the *desired* sex, and choose a name other than the birth given name.

There are other terms that acknowledge individuals that “transcend the binary gender categories: i.e. androgynyne<sup>10</sup>, berdache<sup>11</sup>, gender queer, pangendered<sup>12</sup>, and two spirited,” (Wentling, 2005, p.5). The term tranny boi is also used in the gender queer community. The depth of this term has taken on several meanings. In an article from U.S. Life, MSNBC (2005), a young genetic male uses the term tranny boi deliberately to show ambiguity “reflecting the gray area in which Polanco exists, where gender is blurred and he feels no obligation to choose female over male — or vice versa,” (Boi or grrl?). Another young person uses the same term to show how he has transformed from a gender queer identity to a transman identity. The young person mentioned writes transmen/tranny boi within his online forum (Anonymous, 2005.) In the text, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*, Pat Califia (2005) uses the term *transmen* to designate individuals that are female bodied but believe themselves to be boys that have grown into men (Califia, 1997, p.2). Transman can also be defined as a genetic female who wishes (at any level) to be perceived or pass as a male, with or without hormone therapy or surgery.

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<sup>10</sup> “Any individual who is indeterminate of gender and characteristics of gender which require gender value,” (Wentling, 2005, p. 5).

<sup>11</sup> “Native American tribal culture describing people who are considered *two-spirited*,” (Wentling, 2005, p.5).

<sup>12</sup> “Any individual who exhibits and/or embodies many forms of gender expression in their daily activity,” (Wentling, 2005, p.5).

Not only is language changing and shaping our identities, but meanings are ever-progressing. Although many researchers continually initiate exact definitions, gender non-conformists have their own ways to express their identity just as gender conforming individuals do. There is an incredible spectrum of identities that will be mentioned in the text; however, it is important to note that each person varies and these identities may be consistent with some gender queer individuals, but there are many identities not listed. The available literature on this topic does not discuss the high rates of individuals defying the expected heterosexual, gender conforming identities of transsexual and transgender, that are living a life where full transition may not be the end goal. For the purpose of this paper the term *Trans-identified individual* will be used to designate transgender.

### **Shoving Sexuality into Sex and Gender**

As we have seen the gender scale widen it is important to note how this affects the social construction of sexuality. For decades individuals have been aware of homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality. As noted in the article written by Tamsin Wilton (1996), “Which One’s the Man?” it is obvious that the effects of heterosexuality are constantly seen as the norm and used as the guidelines for other sexualities (1996). A secondary sexuality is always regulated by the norms of heterosexuality, in modern American society. Transgender and transsexual individuals were victim to these regulations. Historically a trans identified person was *granted* surgery and hormone therapy if end results were to be a heterosexual gender conforming individual (Wentling, 2005, p.17). Transsexuals were *granted* surgery in order to normalize their bodies and sexualities and fit into the essentialist notion that sex determines gender which then determines sexuality (Wentling, 2005, p.17). In current society, a man and a woman create a sexual relationship. Two women and two men can create intimate relationships but only if one of them takes on the roles of the “other gender”. This construction leaves little room for gender non-conformists; after all, transsexuals of the “fifties and sixties...were supposed to become normal men or women,” (Califia, 1997, p.198).

How does one deal with the labeling of sexuality when met with a partner of gender non-conformity? When a young woman meets a transgender male pre-transition, how does this affect her sexuality? Does the individual feel a need to change her sexuality if her partner completes a transition? Is she a lesbian or is she a heterosexual, and what if her partner chooses not to complete a transition and remain androgynous? Does homosexual encompass these individuals? What does it matter? Quite frankly all of these questions exist and are important, how they are answered is what this research is about.

As previously stated, unfortunately, due to the lack of academic resources, there are only a few texts that address the issues of partners in gender queer relationships. The majority of these resources also only address the partners in cross-dressing relationships discussing the temperament of wives of cross dressing men. Within the texts discussing issues pertaining to partners of cross-dressers, there are correlations and relating issues to partners of transgender persons. Of the four text resources and one journal article resource, only two texts, *Transmen and FTM's* and *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* and one journal article, "Loving Outside of Simple Lines," distinctly offer information regarding the sexualities of partners of transgender identified individuals. Of these texts most of the material mentions, briefly, the feelings of partners in trans relationships. The second text, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (1997) actually mentions the simple truth that this material does not exist (p.198). Although sporadic, there are a few authors that are partners of trans individuals that have written about their experiences (blogs, online chat rooms, articles within the Gender Queer text). There are very few resources or writings on the partners of transgender individuals.

### **Understanding Sexuality:**

#### **Differences and Similarities among Partners of Transmen and Cross-dressers**

The differences among cross-dressers and transmen may bring similarities among the partners of both. A male cross dresser is more likely to only dress in certain circumstances where a transsexual or transgender individual may live their lives trying to pass as the desired gender. It is also important to note the sexual arousal behind cross dressing. "The average transvestite might find it pretty frustrating to routinely wear feminine clothing since it's considered lewd and indecent behavior to gratify the arousal triggered by these garments in public view," (Califia, 1997, p.202). A cross dresser is not purely wearing the female attire to pass as a female bodied individual, there is sexual desire involved. There is a distinct difference in the acts of cross-dressers and trans individuals. Partners of cross dressing males are sometimes only affected or "exposed" to the "abnormal" behavior when their husbands are in *female* attire only because cross dressing is generally a secret (Boyd, 2003, p.59). Oppositely, partners of transgender identified individuals must see their partners in the life of the "other" gender at all times. This dissimilarity points out that the distinction between wives of cross-dressers and partners of transmen is "exposure": a closet life vs. living in the "desired" gender.

Partners of cross-dressers mention that they come to a place where they begin to question their sexuality. One woman acknowledges that her husband is making her open a box [sexuality] that had been closed for many years; she also mentions that being sexually attracted

to her husband *en femme* did not help, (Boyd, 2003, p.61). Boyd (2003) discusses the emotions these women have when their husbands ask them to perform sexually while the husband is dressed in female attire. Some of these women are fearful of finding arousal when performing while their husbands present *femme*. Sexuality is only questioned in the act of sex.

Partners of transgender individuals can also find themselves questioning their own sexuality; however, many of these women were dating their transmen as lesbians (Cromwell, 1999, p.132). This acknowledges that the partners of transmen are often faced with a decision to completely transform their own sexuality. The common feeling for partners centers around a fear of being seen as heterosexual. The transgender and cross dressing communities have very different identities and desires, but some of the fears among their partners seem to be similar.

Theoretically much of the research on wives of cross dressing males can pertain to partners of transgender individuals. Partners of male cross-dressers may have a “fear of being a lesbian” which entails a fear of competing with their partners for the “female” role (Boyd, 2003, p.60). This is not necessarily a fear of being a lesbian, but can be a fear of being viewed as a lesbian. As Helen Boyd (2003) mentions in “My Husband Betty,” the female in this circumstance might feel that there is not room for two women in bed and feel a sense of competition (p.61). The women may not feel comfortable with taking on the dominant role within the intimate setting of sex. The cross dressing husband often wants to experience the act of being seduced and the wife must take on the role of being the seducer, “a role she is unfamiliar with,” (Boyd, 2003, p.61). Boyd clarifies that this fear lies in a woman’s need to maintain the female/male balance in the desired heterosexual relationship. Leslie Feinberg (1998) mentions in “Trans Liberation” that many heterosexual cross-dressers feared losing their female lovers “because of the societal assumption that they are gay,” (p. 8). Just as the woman mentions in “My Husband Betty,” “I am convinced that when I go to a lesbian bar, the women there think that I’m a closet case. I wonder if my friends think the same,” (2003, p.61). The sexuality of these women is shaken because they often feel that they cannot “separate” their own sexual reactions from the husbands cross dressing (Boyd, 2003, p.61).

In the very same manner women of trans relationships experience the same loss of identity. Sonya Bolus (2002) expresses her feelings regarding her identity in the article “Loving Outside Simple Lines.” Bolus (2002) shares, “How dare you throw my universe into disarray! Just when I think I finally know myself! When I think I know you! Am I really a lesbian? What does this mean? How can I be a femme if you are a man?” (p.116). Frequently, transmen have been butch lesbians before transition to trans or male (Cromwell, 1999, p.133). Thus lesbian

women meet their butch partner and then come to terms that their lesbian lover is transgender; not a woman at all. The roles in sexual relations change, the perception of the relationship change, pronouns begin to change. Just as mentioned previously, the strict definitions of heterosexuality and homosexuality do not allow for fluidity. Much of these strictures pertain to the common disillusion that homosexuality is purely based on sex. A lesbian woman could never be attracted to a transman because she is “not attracted” to the sex characteristics of males. In the anonymous live journal (2005) [mentioned in the definitions portion of the piece], the young transman feared that his partner may not “transition” with him and like his male identity; “she fell in love with a girl,” (anonymous, 2005). The identity of the partner is challenged. Much like the partners of cross-dressers “fear being a lesbian,” partners of transmen often fear being seen as heterosexual (Boyd, 2003, p.60). There is not much research on this topic; however, I imagine the identities of these women are being challenged, not the actual acts of sex defining their sexuality.

The author of “Loving Outside of Simple Lines,” Sonya Bolus (2002) and the partners mentioned in Jason Cromwells’s text “Transmen & FTMs,” acknowledge the sexual experience with their trans partners. These women articulate the change in sex, taking their partner as if they were male bodied. Bolus artistically formulates her sexual experiences with her trans partner as if the act is second nature, but the body transformation and the questioning of sexuality is the difficult piece for the partners (as is of course for the gender queer individuals as well). The fear is in being stripped of the queer identity she has worked so hard for (Bolus, n.d., p.116). “Just don’t ask me to be straight...It took me too much pain and time and struggle to come out as queer, lesbian, and femme proud. I can’t go back,” (Bolus, n.d., p.116). Unlike the partners of cross-dressers, previously lesbian identified partners of transmen are facing abandoning an identity that took time and struggle and pain to construct. It is not that all heterosexual women avoid the battles of sexual identity; however, identifying with a hegemonic sexuality is less a struggle than identifying with a sexuality that is the brunt of much hate justified under the blanket of religion.

### **Coming To an Identity: Somewhere Between Gay and Straight**

Being perceived as non-queer is difficult for many. Bolus mentions in “Loving Outside of Simple Lines” that ignoring the struggle to become a lesbian and walking away from the fight is too much. A queer identity can be lost in perception if a couple is to pass as a heterosexual pair. I can not fathom being perceived as a heterosexual. I understand, that in certain instances, I am perceived as a passing heterosexual woman; but to think that I am looked at as heterosexual

woman when I defy all of the boundaries of what sexuality is “supposed” makes me feel “too normal.” To be unaware of my fluidity and sexual freedom puts me in the category of not understanding the complexity of sexuality. Defining my person as *heterosexual* means that I do not love “outside of simple lines”.

“It is my hope that in a future world, queers will not question the validity of calling oneself “queer” even if no one can see the difference. It is my hope that hetero-normative culture will be made to account for its oppressive function and will stop insisting on robbing all of us who don’t fit in of our rights to self-love, sexual freedom, and community,” (Holmes, n.d., p.226).

The complex dynamic of “identity” includes a partner’s respect for their trans lover. Although the societal perception of heterosexual is devastating to the lesbian femme, the thought of confining their partner in a box by using the term lesbian is also devastating. Through personal experience, I can defend this notion. After coming out as a lesbian three years before coming out as queer, it still makes me cringe when I am identified as a lesbian. My heart races when I hear the word lesbian being referred to me. My partner is not female, he never was and he never will be. My butch lover has always been my tranny boi. Defining my love as lesbian means that I reject the gender queer person I call my love. It was important for me to change my label from lesbian when the definition became restrictive; however, my motivation in changing my label was to give my partner freedom, and to try my best never to push him into any decision regarding his gender transition without feeling one hundred percent ready. The first step is realizing that an identity no longer fits; the next step is finding a language that does. Wives of cross-dressers are not acknowledged in this portion of the paper because their partners are likely to dress in clothing of the opposite sex for sexual pleasure, and not either live full time as the opposite gender or queer the gender boundaries<sup>13</sup>. Generally the behavior of cross-dressers maintains the binary gender categories and these performances do not reject gender constructions.

### **Coming to an Identity: Cat Got Your Tongue?**

A struggle for partners of transmen is a lack of vocabulary. In a language where the only pronouns are for males and females and the only identifiers of sexuality regard these existing pronouns, gender benders remain on the outskirts and their partners have a lack of linguistic identity. There is a need for pronouns that define and identity trans people, but there is also a

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<sup>13</sup> Wives of cross-dressers may struggle with identities such as heterosexual and bisexual; however, the identities of their partners maintain the gender boundaries and are not necessarily in need of other language or inclusive language.

need for language surrounding partners. Partners are reduced “significant other of a transgender individual.” That’s a mouth full. Kathy Bobula shares her experience with language in the text, *Sex changes: the politics of Transgenderism* (1996), “sometimes I am reduced to the category of ‘partner of FtM’,” The idea is not to create a term, such as bisexual, that perpetuates the gender binary of only male/female, but to allow a term that supports the existence of all people and all genders. No different is the lack of resources on this topic is the lack of “flattering” language.

There are a few labels that suggest an acceptance of all sexes/genders including pansexual and queer. Johnson, a writer for an online queer website discusses the usage of the term queer. Queer was historically used as a negative term used by heterosexual individuals when demeaning homosexuals; however, queer was ameliorated and is currently used in the queer community (Johnson, n.d.). ‘Queer’ has history and has made it to mainstream; however pansexual is not as well known.

Many might even ask why the term is needed and what it truly means. The term pansexual refers to individuals that feel sexual attraction to an array of individuals regardless of sex, gender or gender identity. Bisexual was the previously accepted label for individuals attracted to either gender or gender identity, but the term pansexual allows for the fluidity of sex/gender. In acknowledging pansexuality one is recognizing that there may be more than two sexes/genders and their partners may be free in identifying themselves. An online dictionary states that adjective pansexual is defined as “equal acceptance of all major human sexual orientations and identities, including homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, as well as transgender, transsexual and Intersex people,” (Free Dictionary 2005). The second use of the term is “a sexual orientation towards basically everybody, without the two-gender restriction implied by bisexual,” (Free Dictionary 2005). This term allows fluidity among gender identity and sexuality as well as sex.

The term queer also has the ability to move beyond the hegemonic ideologies of the construction of sex, gender and sexuality.

“As transgender does for transgressively gendered people, the term queer provides a social location for people whose sexuality may be transgressive because of their sex, because of their gender, because of their sexuality, or because of any combination of the above,” (Devor, 6).

Devor identifies the fluidity in terminology. Queer has broken boundaries and become a political term identifying individuals that represent transgressive sexuality. The obvious

difference here is that pansexual acknowledges heterosexual where as queer is defined as “deviating form the expected or norm,” (Free Dictionary 2005).

Language does exist; however, very little and what does exist becomes blanket terminology lumping all individuals in one or two categories. The question remains whether or not partners of transmen are shifting their sexualities and when. There is not conclusive evidence or a substantial amount of research that shows any shift. Heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, lesbian, queer, and pansexual individuals may be “transitioning” their identities or they may be holding on. Does a woman shift her identity if her partner remains androgynous? When newly immersed into a trans relationship how does one deal with the changes? How does a woman know that a change in identity is even possible? Where can these women turn for support?

### **Late Nights in front of the Computer**

The partners and wives of transgender persons may find it difficult to find resources for themselves. Although there are a number of texts, research findings, and personal internet journals of trans people, the number of support groups for significant others are limited. In the hunt for literature through use of internet, books, and online journals I found fifteen sources for this research and only six of these resources acknowledged the partners of gender queer persons or cross-dressers. Partners have a vast array of material regarding their partners and the transition. One could stay online for weeks looking at pictures showing every step of a trans persons transition (both MtF and FtM) and learning ways that different trans people deal with the transition. A partner has the opportunity to learn about transition, but not about how she is to deal.

A woman trying to find information about how other partners of transgender person’s deal with the transition may end quicker than she expected. There are resources online, a few chat rooms, a few online journals, and a few forums; however, these come few and far between and do not necessarily carry the information a partner could be looking for. I hunted on some of these websites and I found many more entries (proportionately) for the support of partners transgender women (male to female) than partners of transgender men. More often, significant others of transgender women are represented. The evidence shows that there is a lack of resources and support groups for partners if FtM’s to have the knowledge. I attended a support group with my partner. I was the only partner of a transman, and he was the only transman.

There are several possibilities as to why there are not many support groups or resources available. The lesbian, bisexual, and gay movement has struggled with the inclusion of

transgender individuals. Doctors encourage heterosexual behavior post transition. The movement to remain androgynous or to live sexually free is just surfacing.

### **Conclusion**

Partners of transgender individuals and wives of cross-dressers have only two common processes: questioning their sexual identity, and dealing with the stigma of being perceived as “heterosexual” or “lesbian.” Differences among these two groups arise when we see that one set of partners share intimate relations with individuals of gender-nonconforming identities; and the other set of partners share intimate relations with individuals that only temporarily shift between existing and recognized genders.

Partners of trans individuals may not fit inside the neatly constructed box of heterosexual or gay. Partners are often faced with the difficulties of redefining their sexual identities if their partner identifies as gender queer. Although there are two mentioned labels that allow partners to take on a sexual identity not restricted by gender boundaries (queer and pansexual), the question is whether or not they wish to change their sexuality at all. This paper mentions the struggle partners face when being perceived as heterosexual, and how one wishes to hold on to their “queer” identity; however, there is no research indicating how this shift in sexuality works. The fluidity of sexuality among the partners of transgender persons is unknown. As previously indicated there are partners that may choose a queer or pansexual sexuality; however, whether or not a woman chooses this identity while with a transman, who may be pre-transition, post-transition, or remain androgynous indefinitely, is unknown at this time.

The meanings of sex, gender, and sexuality have been discussed as well as the problems faced when boxes no longer fit. The complexities of sex, gender, and sexuality allow various labels and identities for each category to exist. People are “coming out” and claiming androgynous gender identities and pansexual sexualities. The binaries of sex, gender and sexuality are being challenged as individuals redefine what it means to have each of these identities.

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