
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Between Liberation and Oppression: Muslim Women, the Hijab, and the Liberal Feminist Gaze

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| ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explores how Muslim women interpret the hijab as a form of empowerment, challenging liberal feminist discourses that often frame it as oppressive. Through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 23 Muslim women in Fez, Morocco, this research centres their lived experiences and personal narratives regarding hijab-wearing. The study employs Islamic feminism and postcolonial feminism as theoretical frameworks to analyse how participants construct agency, identity, and resistance within their religious and cultural contexts. Findings reveal three primary themes: the hijab as a spiritual and personal practice, resistance to external narratives of oppression, and the hijab as empowerment in public spaces. Results demonstrate that participants view their veiling practices as deliberate choices that enhance their spiritual connection, protect their autonomy, and assert their identity in both private and public spheres. These narratives directly challenge Western feminist assumptions about Muslim women's agency and highlight the importance of epistemic justice in feminist discourse. The study contributes to decolonizing feminist theory by privileging Muslim women's voices and experiences, offering implications for educators, policymakers, and scholars engaged in cross-cultural feminist research.

| KEYWORDS

Agency, epistemic justice, hijab, Islamic feminism, postcolonial feminism

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The hijab, worn by millions of Muslim women worldwide, has become one of the most contested symbols in contemporary feminist discourse. Liberal feminist scholarship has frequently positioned the hijab as emblematic of patriarchal oppression, viewing it through a lens that assumes its removal as synonymous with women's liberation (Mahmood, 2005). This perspective, while claiming to advocate for women's rights, often perpetuates colonial narratives that position Western feminism as the standard for measuring women's freedom and agency. Such interpretations fail to acknowledge the complex ways in which Muslim women themselves understand and experience their veiling practices, reducing their choices to binary categories of oppression and liberation.

Existing feminist scholarship demonstrates significant deficiencies in its treatment of Muslim women's agency and voice. Mohanty (2003) argues that Western feminist discourse has historically marginalized non-Western women's experiences, creating what she terms "Third World women" as a homogeneous category defined primarily by their perceived victimhood. This epistemic violence is particularly evident in discussions of the hijab, where academic literature and popular discourse alike often prioritize external interpretations over the lived experiences and personal narratives of hijab-wearing women themselves. The result is a body of scholarship that speaks about Muslim women rather than with them, perpetuating colonial patterns of knowledge production that position Western perspectives as authoritative and universal.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the decolonization of feminist discourse by centring Muslim women's own voices and experiences. By privileging their narratives and interpretations, this research challenges the epistemic authority of liberal feminism to define liberation for all women. Furthermore, the study has practical implications for educational institutions, policymakers, and social service providers who work with Muslim communities, offering insights that can inform more culturally sensitive and inclusive practices. The research also contributes to broader discussions about religious freedom, cultural identity, and women's agency in increasingly diverse societies.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore how Muslim women interpret the meaning and personal significance of wearing the hijab and how these interpretations challenge dominant liberal feminist discourses that frame it as oppressive. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, this research seeks to understand the complex ways in which participants construct their identity, agency, and resistance through their veiling practices.

The central research question guiding this study is: How do Muslim women interpret the meaning and personal significance of wearing the hijab, and how do these interpretations challenge dominant liberal feminist discourses that frame it as oppressive?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study employs two complementary theoretical frameworks: Islamic feminism and postcolonial feminism, alongside insights from scholarship on piety and agency. Together, these lenses help analyse how Muslim women navigate between religious tradition and contemporary gender politics, while asserting their agency and challenging dominant narratives about veiling.

2.1 Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism recognizes the compatibility between Islamic sources and gender justice, challenging both patriarchal interpretations of scripture and secular assumptions that religion is necessarily oppressive to women (Badran, 2009). Key Islamic feminist scholars develop gender-egalitarian readings of the Qur'an, hadith, and fiqh, arguing that many restrictions on women derive from historical, cultural, and patriarchal exegesis rather than core religious mandates (Ali, 2006; Barlas, 2002; Mir-Hosseini, 1999; Wadud, 1999).

Complementary to this, scholarship on piety and agency shows that agency may be realized through religious devotion and ethical self-formation. Mahmood (2005) argues against equating agency with resistance or "empowerment," demonstrating how pious practices—such as embodied modesty and scriptural study—cultivate capacities and subjectivities within religious norms. We draw on this insight not to label veiling as "empowerment" in a general sense, but to attend to how participants themselves may understand hijab as part of ethical self-making, devotion, and social identity.

The concept of agency within Islamic feminism differs significantly from those of liberal feminism. While some liberal frameworks equate agency with autonomy from tradition, Islamic feminist and piety-oriented approaches illuminate how agency can be articulated through religious frameworks and virtuous self-cultivation. This is crucial for analysing how participants may describe hijab as religiously meaningful and personally consequential, even when such meanings are misread as mere submission in secular-liberal frames.

2.2 Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism provides the second theoretical lens, offering tools to critique the colonial underpinnings of liberal feminist discourse about Muslim women. Ahmed's (1992) historical work provides crucial context for contemporary hijab debates. Ahmed documents how "colonial feminism" cast the veil as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression to justify intervention, a trope whose echoes can be heard in some later liberal and popular discourses. She and others also show that the meanings of veiling are historically contingent and politically inflected rather than monolithic (Ahmed, 1992, 2011).

Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "Third Space" becomes particularly relevant here, as it describes the in-between space where colonized subjects negotiate between imposed Western values and their indigenous traditions. Muslim women who wear hijab often occupy this Third Space, creating hybrid forms of identity that resist both conservative religious pressures and liberal secular demands. Spivak (1988) famously asked, "Can the subaltern speak?" highlighting how colonized subjects, particularly women, have been systematically silenced by dominant knowledge systems. This question is particularly relevant to discussions of the hijab, where Muslim women's voices have often been marginalized in favour of external interpretations of their experiences.

To analyse how veiled women's testimonies are discounted, we turn to Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice (credibility deficits due to prejudice) and hermeneutical injustice (gaps in interpretive resources that render experiences unintelligible). These concepts clarify why claims such as "hijab is meaningful or empowering to me" are sometimes dismissed or reinterpreted through external frames.

Postcolonial feminism challenges the universality of Western feminist categories and emphasizes the importance of understanding women's experiences within their specific cultural, historical, and political contexts. Majid's (2000) *Unveiling Traditions* provides important insights into how postcolonial Islamic feminism can offer alternative modalities of liberation that do not require abandoning religious tradition. Majid's work demonstrates how Muslim feminists have theorized emancipation in ways that honour both gender equality and cultural authenticity.

Mohanty's (2003) concept of "Third World women" as a discursive construction is particularly relevant to this study. She argues that Western feminist scholarship has created a composite image of Third World women as uniformly oppressed, uneducated, and lacking agency. This construction serves to position Western women as the standard of liberation while justifying interventions in the name of saving their "oppressed sisters." Abu-Lughod's (2013) critical question "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?" directly challenges this salvage narrative, demonstrating how the assumption that Muslim women require rescue reflects colonial attitudes more than genuine concern for women's welfare. Abu-Lughod's ethnographic work shows how such narratives erase Muslim women's own strategies for navigating gender inequality and achieving empowerment within their cultural contexts. The hijab has become a particularly potent symbol in this discourse, with its removal often viewed as a necessary step toward women's liberation. Postcolonial feminism challenges these assumptions by insisting on the importance of local knowledge, cultural specificity, and women's own definitions of empowerment.

Finally, Ahmed's (2014) *Willful Subjects* helps conceptualize how a hijab-wearing woman who refuses liberal expectations of unveiling may be cast as "willful" or obstinate in public discourse. Ahmed (2004) examines how emotions such as fear, anger, and pity circulate around such figures. These concepts clarify the affective and normative dynamics that shape epistemic judgments about Muslim women's credibility and agency. Ahmed's affect theory helps us understand how emotions such as anger and resistance become attached to figures like the veiled Muslim woman who refuses to be saved, and how these affective responses shape epistemic judgments about Muslim women's credibility and agency.

Together, these theoretical frameworks provide a robust foundation for analysing how participants in this study construct their identities as empowered Muslim women who choose to wear hijab. They offer tools for understanding forms of agency that may not conform to liberal feminist expectations while challenging the epistemic authority of Western feminism to define liberation for all women.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological research design, which was particularly appropriate for exploring the lived experiences and personal meanings that Muslim women associate with wearing the hijab. Phenomenology, as described by Creswell and Poth (2018), seeks to understand the essence of human experiences through detailed descriptions of those who have lived them. This approach enabled researchers to move beyond surface-level observations to understand the deeper meanings that participants ascribe to their experiences.

The phenomenological approach was especially suited to this research because it prioritizes participants' own interpretations and meaning-making processes rather than imposing external frameworks or assumptions. Given the contested nature of hijab discourse and the tendency for external voices to dominate discussions about Muslim women's choices, phenomenology offered a methodology that centres participants' voices and experiences. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of how participants constructed agency, identity, and resistance within their religious and cultural contexts, particularly regarding how they navigated dominant discourses that portray veiling as oppression.

3.2 Researcher's Role and Reflexivity

The researcher is a Muslim veiled woman who shares cultural and religious affiliations with the participants. This insider positionality offered several advantages for the research process. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) note, insider researchers often enjoy greater access to communities, enhanced trust from participants, and deeper cultural competence that can facilitate more authentic and nuanced data collection. The shared experience of wearing hijab enabled the researcher to understand subtle aspects of participants' narratives that might have been missed by outsider researchers.

However, this positionality also required careful attention to reflexivity and potential bias. The researcher maintained an ongoing reflective journal throughout the research process, documenting personal reactions, assumptions, and potential areas where her own experiences might influence data interpretation. Particular attention was paid to power dynamics in interviews and focus

group settings, especially given the personal nature of discussions about identity, faith, and gender. The researcher employed bracketing techniques, as recommended by Moustakas (1994), to set aside personal beliefs and assumptions while remaining open to participants' diverse experiences and interpretations.

3.3 Sampling

Participants were Muslim women aged 19 and above residing in Fez, Morocco, who currently practiced veiling. The study employed purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 23 participants. This number aligned with Creswell's (1998) recommendation of 5 to 25 participants for phenomenological studies, and recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached, meaning that new interviews were no longer generating novel insights or themes (Guest et al., 2006).

To ensure maximum variation, the sample spanned:

- Age (ranging from 19 to 58 years), education level (from university to doctoral level), and neighbourhood within Fez
- Types of veiling, including hijab, isdal/jilbab, and niqab
- Religious orientation and institutional roles, explicitly including murshidat (female religious guides) and Qur'an teachers

Participants were recruited from:

- Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University (students from English departments)
- Religious associations and Qur'anic study circles
- Snowball referrals from initial participants

This diversity in recruitment contexts ensured representation of women from different social and economic backgrounds while maintaining focus on the shared experience of hijab-wearing.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, methods particularly suited for eliciting both personal narratives and interactive meaning-making around the experience of wearing the hijab. Individual interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured format that allowed for flexibility while ensuring coverage of key topics related to identity, autonomy, spirituality, and external perceptions.

Two focus groups were conducted, each with 6–8 participants, lasting approximately 2 hours each. Focus groups enabled participants to engage in dialogue with one another, often revealing shared experiences and collective meaning-making processes that might not have emerged in individual interviews. The interactive nature of focus groups also allowed participants to build upon each other's narratives, providing richer and more nuanced data.

All interviews and focus groups were conducted in Arabic and Darija (Moroccan Arabic), ensuring participants could express themselves in their preferred language. Sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed and translated for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, facilitated by NVivo software. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, the process began with familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts. Initial codes were generated inductively, staying close to participants' own language and meanings. These codes were then organized into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined through iterative analysis.

The theoretical frameworks of Islamic feminism and postcolonial feminism guided the interpretation of themes, helping to understand how participants' narratives related to broader discussions about agency, resistance, and empowerment. NVivo software facilitated the management of complex qualitative data through efficient coding, pattern recognition, and theme mapping, enabling systematic analysis of the substantial dataset.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from transcripts and published materials.

Given the personal nature of discussions about veiling and the potential sensitivity of topics related to religion and gender in the Moroccan context, particular care was taken to respect participants' cultural and religious sensitivities. The researcher's shared cultural background facilitated this process while also requiring ongoing attention to ethical considerations. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee prior to data collection.

4. Findings And Analysis

Analysis of interviews and two focus group discussions revealed three primary themes that illuminate how participants interpret the meaning and significance of wearing the hijab. These themes directly challenge liberal feminist assumptions about hijab as oppression and demonstrate the complex ways in which participants construct agency and empowerment through their veiling practices.

4.1: The Hijab as a Spiritual and Personal Practice

Participants consistently described their hijab-wearing as fundamentally rooted in their relationship with Allah and their personal spiritual journey. This theme emerged as the most prominent across all interviews and focus groups, with women emphasizing the deeply personal and voluntary nature of their choice to veil.

A 34-year-old murshida (female religious guide) explained: "When I put on my hijab in the morning, it's like putting on my identity as a Muslim woman. It reminds me of my connection to Allah and my commitment to live according to Islamic principles. It's not something imposed on me—it's something I choose every day because it makes me feel complete and spiritually centred." This narrative exemplifies what Mahmood (2005) describes as pious practices that cultivate capacities and subjectivities within religious norms, demonstrating how hijab functions as part of ethical self-making rather than mere submission. This participant's description aligns with Islamic feminist perspectives that recognize how gender-egalitarian interpretations of Islamic sources can support women's spiritual autonomy (Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999).

A 26-year-old English department student described her decision to begin wearing hijab during university: "I wasn't raised wearing hijab, but as I learned more about Islam and developed my own relationship with my faith, I felt called to wear it. My family was actually surprised by my decision, but they supported me. For me, it represents my growth as a Muslim woman and my commitment to following what I believe Allah wants for me." This narrative illustrates how agency can be articulated through religious frameworks and virtuous self-cultivation, contradicting liberal assumptions that equate agency with autonomy from tradition (Mahmood, 2005). The participant's autonomous religious decision-making reflects the Islamic feminist argument that many restrictions on women derive from cultural rather than religious mandates (Ali, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 1999).

A 42-year-old Qur'an teacher reflected on the personal transformation she experienced through wearing hijab: "Before I wore hijab, I felt like I was always performing for others—worried about my appearance, trying to fit in. When I started wearing hijab, I found a kind of freedom. I could focus on my character, my work, and my relationships with people based on who I am inside rather than how I look. It's been incredibly liberating." This case demonstrates how participants understand hijab as religiously meaningful and personally consequential, even when such meanings might be misread as mere submission in secular-liberal frames. The participant's experience of liberation through religious practice challenges liberal feminist assumptions that position tradition as necessarily constraining.

4.2: Resistance to External Narratives of Oppression

A second prominent theme involved participants' explicit resistance to external narratives that positioned them as oppressed because of their hijab-wearing. Women described feeling frustrated by assumptions made about their intelligence, education, and agency based solely on their choice to veil.

A 29-year-old doctoral student from the English department who received a scholarship to study abroad shared her experience: "I have a master's degree in cultural studies, I am pursuing my PhD, and I make my own decisions about every aspect of my life. But when people see my hijab, suddenly they think I'm oppressed, that I can't think for myself. It's insulting and it shows how limited their understanding is. My hijab doesn't make me oppressed—it makes me strong." This narrative illustrates what Fricker (2007) describes as testimonial injustice, where the participant's credibility is deflated due to prejudice about hijab-wearing women. The dismissal of her claims about empowerment reflects the gap in interpretive resources that renders her experiences unintelligible within dominant epistemic frameworks. Her assertion also challenges the colonial feminist trope documented by Ahmed (1992) that casts the veil as a symbol requiring Western intervention.

The same doctoral student elaborated on her study abroad experience: "When I was studying abroad on my scholarship, people would look at me with pity, like they felt sorry for me. Some professors even suggested that maybe I would be more comfortable removing my hijab now that I was in a 'free' country. They assumed that because I came from Morocco, I must be oppressed,

despite my academic achievements and the fact that I had earned a competitive international scholarship. They couldn't understand that I was already free—that my hijab was part of my freedom, not a barrier to it." This extended narrative powerfully demonstrates Abu-Lughod's (2013) critique of the "salvation" narrative—the assumption that Muslim women need rescuing from their culture and religion. The participant's experience also exemplifies Ahmed's (2014) concept of "willful subjects"—how Muslim women who refuse liberal expectations of unveiling are positioned as problematically resistant to their own liberation.

Participants also described resistance to pressure from both conservative and liberal sources regarding their veiling choices. A 31-year-old member of a religious association explained: "I face pressure from different directions. Some people think I should wear niqab to be a proper Muslim woman. Others think I should remove my hijab to be a modern, liberated woman. But I know who I am and what works for me. My hijab is my choice, and I don't need anyone else's approval." This narrative demonstrates what Bhabha (1994) describes as the Third Space—the in-between space where Muslim women negotiate between multiple pressures while creating their own hybrid forms of identity. The participant's resistance to both conservative religious and liberal secular pressures illustrates how Muslim women must assert agency against competing definitions of proper womanhood, each claiming epistemic authority over their choices.

4.3: The Hijab as Empowerment in Public Spaces

The third major theme involved participants' descriptions of how their hijab actually enhanced their ability to navigate and succeed in public spaces, contrary to assumptions that it would limit their participation or authority.

A 35-year-old murshida who also runs a small business explained: "In business settings, my hijab actually commands respect. People know I'm serious, that I have principles, and that I'm not someone who can be easily manipulated or distracted. It gives me a kind of authority and gravitas that helps in negotiations and professional relationships." This narrative demonstrates how pious practices can enhance rather than diminish women's agency in various social contexts, supporting Mahmood's (2005) insights about the cultivation of capacities through religious devotion. The participant's strategic use of hijab challenges secular assumptions that religious symbols necessarily limit women's professional authority.

Participants also described how their hijab provided protection from unwanted attention and harassment in public spaces. A 28-year-old graduate student from the English department shared: "When I walk down the street wearing hijab, I feel protected. Men treat me with more respect, and I don't have to deal with the kind of harassment that my non-hijabi friends sometimes experience. It creates a kind of boundary that protects my dignity and allows me to move through public spaces with confidence." This account illustrates how participants strategically navigate public spaces through hijab, contradicting liberal feminist assumptions that position religious practices as necessarily limiting women's participation in public life. Rather than viewing veiling as constraining, this participant describes it as enabling fuller participation by providing protection and respect.

A 22-year-old English department student described how her hijab became a source of strength during difficult periods: "When I was going through a difficult time in my studies, feeling overwhelmed and insecure, my hijab reminded me of my strength and my connection to something larger than myself. It was like wearing my faith on the outside, and that gave me courage to keep going even when things were hard." These instances underline how participants construct meaningful identities through hijab-wearing that extend beyond individual choice to encompass spiritual strength, professional authority, and social navigation strategies. They illustrate the Islamic feminist argument that religious practice can be a source of empowerment rather than oppression when understood within its proper context.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study directly address the central research question by demonstrating that Muslim women interpret the hijab in complex and meaningful ways that fundamentally challenge liberal feminist narratives of oppression. Participants' narratives reveal three interconnected dimensions of agency: spiritual self-cultivation, resistance to external definitions of liberation, and strategic navigation of public spaces.

The theme of hijab as spiritual and personal practice reveals how participants exercise agency through religious devotion and ethical self-formation, supporting Mahmood's (2005) analysis of piety as a form of capacity-building rather than submission. This finding aligns with Islamic feminist scholarship that demonstrates the compatibility between religious practice and women's autonomy (Ali, 2006; Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999). Participants describe their hijab-wearing as enhancing their spiritual growth and authentic self-expression, challenging liberal feminist tendencies to equate liberation solely with freedom from traditional constraints.

The second theme, resistance to external narratives of oppression, demonstrates how participants actively contest dominant discourses that position them as victims requiring rescue. Their narratives reveal sophisticated understanding of how their choices are politicized and their determination to maintain authority over their own definitions of empowerment. This finding

supports Mohanty's (2003) argument about challenging colonial constructions of "Third World women" and illustrates Fricker's (2007) concepts of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice in practice. The participants' experiences also exemplify Ahmed's (1992) analysis of how colonial feminism continues to echo in contemporary liberal discourse.

The third theme, hijab as empowerment in public spaces, reveals how participants strategically use their veiling practices to enhance their professional authority, protect their dignity, and strengthen their spiritual resilience. Rather than limiting their participation in public life, participants describe their hijab as enabling fuller and more confident engagement with professional, educational, and social environments. This supports the Islamic feminist argument that agency can be articulated through rather than against religious frameworks.

These findings contribute to broader discussions in feminist theory by demonstrating the limitations of liberal feminist frameworks for understanding diverse forms of women's agency. They support arguments made by Islamic feminists about the compatibility between religious practice and women's empowerment while challenging the epistemic authority of Western feminism to define liberation universally. The study also illustrates how postcolonial feminist insights about Third Space identity formation and epistemic injustice help explain the complex navigation required of Muslim women in contemporary contexts.

The research has important implications for educational institutions, policymakers, and social service providers working with Muslim communities. Understanding how Muslim women themselves interpret their veiling practices can inform more culturally sensitive and inclusive policies and practices. Rather than assuming that hijab-wearing women require intervention or rescue, institutions can better support their full participation by recognizing their agency and respecting their choices.

The research contributes to what Santos (2014) describes as "epistemologies of the South"—alternative ways of knowing that challenge the dominance of Western knowledge systems. By centering Muslim women's voices and experiences, the study participates in the broader project of decolonizing feminist discourse and creating space for multiple definitions of empowerment and liberation.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Muslim women's interpretations of hijab-wearing fundamentally challenge liberal feminist assumptions about oppression and liberation. Through phenomenological analysis of 23 participants' narratives, the research reveals that women construct agency through their veiling practices in three primary ways: as spiritual and personal practice, as resistance to external narratives of oppression, and as empowerment in public spaces.

The findings contribute to the decolonization of feminist discourse by privileging Muslim women's own voices and experiences over external interpretations of their choices. They demonstrate the importance of epistemic justice—allowing women to define liberation and empowerment for themselves rather than having these concepts imposed by others, regardless of their intentions.

For educators, the study suggests the importance of avoiding assumptions about hijab-wearing students and instead recognizing their agency and diverse motivations. Policymakers should consider how their decisions about religious symbols in public spaces may inadvertently silence the very women they claim to protect. Scholars engaged in feminist research should examine their own assumptions about religion, tradition, and women's empowerment.

Future research should explore how hijab experiences vary across different geographical and cultural contexts, examining how local political conditions, majority-minority dynamics, and cultural traditions shape women's interpretations of their veiling practices. Additionally, intergenerational studies could illuminate how younger Muslim women navigate contemporary debates about hijab while maintaining connection to their religious and cultural traditions.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Muslim women are not passive victims awaiting rescue by liberal feminism, but active agents who construct meaningful and empowering lives within their chosen religious and cultural frameworks. Their voices and experiences must be centred in any feminist discourse that claims to advocate for all women's liberation and empowerment.

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