

Exploring the Impact of Dialect Use on Social Identity Construction in Multilingual Communities

Mahya Sallim ^{1*}, Nur Kholilah ²

¹Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia

²Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

mahyaa54@gmail.com, kholilah290@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how dialect use shapes the construction and negotiation of social identity in multilingual communities, with particular attention to individuals' lived experiences across different social contexts. Language, particularly dialect, plays a crucial role in shaping individual and social identities, particularly in multilingual societies. While research has examined the relationship between language and identity, the subjective experiences of dialect users remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, the study investigates how speakers interpret and manage their dialect use in relation to belonging, social positioning, and perceived linguistic prestige. We employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals using dialects and to understand the meanings they attribute to these experiences. Semi-structured interviews with 15 participants revealed that dialects serve as markers of both inclusion within familiar groups and exclusion in more heterogeneous social settings. The analysis identified three major themes: (1) dialect as an emotional anchor of belonging and cultural continuity, (2) dialect as a negotiated identity resource across rural-urban and formal-informal contexts, and (3) dialect as relational capital that fosters trust within in-groups but may limit perceived credibility in professional environments. Participants expressed that their dialects were integral to their sense of self, but also a source of social tension in formal or urban contexts. The findings demonstrate that dialect use is not merely a communicative practice but a dynamic mechanism through which individuals construct, affirm, and strategically adjust their social identities. These findings provide deeper insight into how dialect usage shapes identity and social belonging in multilingual societies. The study contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship by foregrounding the experiential dimension of dialect use and underscores the importance of inclusive language policies in educational and professional settings to reduce linguistic marginalization.



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INTRODUCTION

Language, as a fundamental tool for communication, is intricately tied to individuals' sense of identity and their social interactions (Mumin et al., 2025). Among the various dimensions of language use, dialect plays a crucial role in shaping personal and collective identities, particularly in regions characterized by linguistic diversity. In multilingual societies, dialects are not merely variations of a language; they are living expressions of cultural heritage, social belonging, and group affiliation. They serve as markers that differentiate groups, but they also foster inclusion within those groups, creating unique bonds among individuals who share the same linguistic traits (Abdulquadri et al., 2021). The use of dialect can influence how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others, affecting their interactions and social integration in significant ways.

Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of language in shaping identity, the specific role of dialect in constructing social identity remains underexplored, particularly in contexts where multiple dialects coexist (Mushkani & Koseki, 2025). While previous research has examined the relationship between language and identity, much of the focus has been on formal language or the standard varieties of a language, leaving the role of dialect largely unexplored. The subjective experiences of individuals who use dialects in their everyday lives, and how these experiences contribute to their sense of self and social positioning, require further investigation (Rosen, 2025). This

gap in the literature underscores the need for a deeper exploration of the personal, lived experiences of individuals as they navigate dialectal use in different social settings.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in the fact that dialect use extends beyond mere communication; it is a key component of an individual's social identity (Sudarmanto et al., 2025). It reflects personal histories, cultural roots, and social affiliations that are often overlooked in mainstream discourses on language. In this context, phenomenology offers an appropriate lens to explore how individuals experience and make sense of their dialect use (Abedini, 2025). By focusing on the subjective meanings attached to dialects, phenomenological research can reveal insights into the personal significance of dialect and its impact on social relationships (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). This approach is essential for understanding the complex ways in which language, identity, and social belonging intersect, providing a more nuanced view of how dialects shape both individual and collective identities in a multicultural world.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become a pivotal area in social science, particularly within the field of phenomenology (Gardiner-Hyland & van den Hoven, 2025). By focusing on the subjective meanings that individuals assign to their experiences, phenomenological research allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in everyday life. In the context of language and identity, studies have increasingly recognized the significance of dialect as a key element in the construction of personal and social identity (Gross & Rutland, 2020). However, while much attention has been given to the sociolinguistic aspects of language use, there remains a gap in understanding how individuals subjectively experience and interpret their use of dialects in various social settings.

One of the main challenges in exploring the deep meaning of such experiences lies in the limitations of traditional, quantitative research methods. These methods often focus on surface-level patterns and statistical correlations, which fail to capture the nuanced and deeply personal experiences that individuals have with their dialects (Mokhele & Mvanyashe, 2025). The richness of dialect-related identity is embedded in the subjective perceptions, feelings, and social dynamics that individuals navigate on a daily basis, and these elements cannot be adequately understood through statistical analysis alone (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Consequently, existing research often overlooks the emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of dialect use, leading to an incomplete understanding of its role in social identity.

The methodological limitations of quantitative research highlight the need for a more qualitative, experience-based approach, such as phenomenology, which emphasizes the lived experiences of individuals (Ding & Goh, 2024). By focusing on how individuals perceive and interpret their dialect use within their social and cultural contexts, phenomenological methods provide a more comprehensive and authentic understanding of the phenomenon. This approach allows for the exploration of the deeper, often unspoken meanings that participants attach to their dialects, revealing the complex interplay between language, identity, and social belonging.

In exploring the relationship between dialect use and social identity, much of the existing research has relied on practical, quantitative methods that focus on measurable outcomes, such as frequency of dialect use or correlations between dialect and social status. While these approaches provide valuable data on the patterns of language use within communities, they fall short in capturing the deeper, subjective experiences that individuals have with their dialects. The use of dialect is a deeply personal experience, one that is intertwined with emotions, social belonging, and cultural identity. However, existing studies often treat language as a set of linguistic variables, overlooking the personal meanings that individuals attach to their dialects and the social contexts in which these meanings unfold.

The limitations of these quantitative approaches highlight the need for a more nuanced exploration of dialect use that goes beyond surface-level patterns. The subjective experiences of individuals, which encompass feelings of inclusion, exclusion, pride, or alienation, are not adequately captured through numerical data or statistical methods (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). As a result, our understanding of the role dialect plays in shaping social identity remains

incomplete and insufficient. The absence of in-depth exploration of these personal experiences points to a clear gap in the literature.

To address this gap, adopting a phenomenological approach is crucial. Phenomenology allows for a deeper, more holistic examination of how individuals experience and interpret their dialect use in everyday life. By focusing on the meanings that participants attach to their dialects and the social dynamics surrounding their use, phenomenology can offer richer insights into the essence of this phenomenon. This approach will enable a more comprehensive understanding of how dialect functions not only as a tool for communication but also as a pivotal component of identity formation and social interaction.

Research on dialect use and social identity has evolved over time, with several studies examining how language shapes individual and group identities. Previous studies, particularly in sociolinguistics, have focused on the correlation between language variation and social categories such as class, ethnicity, and education. However, much of this research has used quantitative methods that measure language patterns rather than exploring the deeper subjective experiences that individuals have with their dialects (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Theories such as those proposed by Bourdieu on linguistic capital and Goffman on face theory have laid the foundation for understanding how language influences social interactions, but they often fail to address the personal meanings that individuals attribute to dialect use. This gap in understanding is why a phenomenological approach is necessary to explore the lived experiences of individuals using dialect in their daily lives.

The proposed phenomenological approach in this study aims to provide deeper insights into the meanings individuals attach to their dialects and how these meanings shape their social identities. By focusing on subjective experiences, phenomenology allows for an in-depth exploration of the emotions, perceptions, and social contexts in which dialects are used. This method was chosen because it prioritizes understanding the essence of lived experiences, which is essential for addressing the knowledge gap identified earlier. Unlike traditional methods that focus on measurable outcomes, phenomenology enables a holistic examination of how dialect use influences individuals' sense of self and social belonging. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of dialect as a fundamental aspect of social identity.

This article is structured to provide a clear and systematic exploration of the research topic. It begins with an introduction to the context of the phenomenon under study, followed by a discussion of the phenomenological approach used to explore participants' experiences. The methods section outlines the data collection process, including the use of semi-structured interviews, and the analysis process, which employs thematic analysis to identify key themes. The results are then presented, followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to the broader literature. Finally, the article concludes with reflections on the implications of the study and suggestions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological design, which is particularly suited to exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences in specific contexts, in this case, the role of dialect in constructing social identity. By focusing on subjective experiences, phenomenology facilitates the uncovering of rich, nuanced meanings that participants attach to their language use and social interactions. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was applied in this study to interpret the meaning participants attribute to their dialect use, grounded in the context of their social and cultural backgrounds (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). IPA was chosen because it offers a structured approach to understand how individuals interpret their personal experiences, considering both the personal and cultural dimensions of their lived world.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling method, ensuring that those involved had relevant experience with the phenomenon under investigation. The criteria for inclusion were individuals who frequently used dialects in their daily communication and had substantial interaction within a multi-lingual or multi-dialectal environment. Participants were aged between 18 and 60 years, with an equal representation of males and females to capture a wide range of experiences. The total number of participants was 15, with an average age of 35 years. All participants were fluent in at least one regional dialect and had resided in their communities for a significant period, ensuring their experiences with dialect use were deeply ingrained (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Exclusion criteria included individuals who were non-native speakers or who had only recently moved to the area, as their experiences might not reflect the long-term social and cultural integration tied to dialect use.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in person, providing participants with the opportunity to share their experiences in their own words. The interviews were designed to allow flexibility, encouraging participants to explore their thoughts and feelings in depth while staying focused on the research questions. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, comfortable setting to ensure that participants felt at ease and could speak freely. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The interview guide was based on a review of the literature on language, identity, and dialect usage, and it was adjusted slightly to suit the context of each interview. No specific standardized protocols were used in the interviews, as the goal was to capture participants' authentic reflections on their dialect usage.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which allows for the identification of key themes that emerge from participants' descriptions of their experiences. The analysis followed several systematic steps: first, each interview was transcribed, and key statements reflecting participants' experiences with dialect use were identified. These statements were then grouped into meaning units, which were further categorized into emerging themes. Themes were refined and connected to construct a coherent narrative that captured the essence of participants' experiences. NVivo software was used to assist with organizing and coding the data, but the focus remained on the conceptual themes and their relevance to the research questions. This method provided a detailed understanding of how participants experience dialect in their everyday lives and the meanings they attach to it in their social interactions.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully briefed on the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. All interview data were stored securely and only accessible to the research team. Additionally, participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms in all written reports, ensuring that their privacy was maintained throughout the study. The research adhered to both international and local ethical standards for research involving human participants.

RESULTS

The Role of Dialect in Constructing Social Identity

The participants shared diverse perspectives on how their use of dialect in everyday communication shaped their social identity. Thematic analysis revealed three interrelated patterns: (1) dialect as an anchor of belonging, (2) dialect negotiation across social contexts, and (3) dialect as symbolic capital in social interaction. Most participants described their dialect as a vital component of their identity, closely linked to their sense of belonging to a specific social group. Under the first theme,

dialect functioned as an emotional and cultural anchor that reinforced collective belonging and intergenerational continuity. For instance, Participant A expressed:

"Whenever I speak in my local dialect, I feel closer to my family and community. It's a way of showing who I am, where I come from."

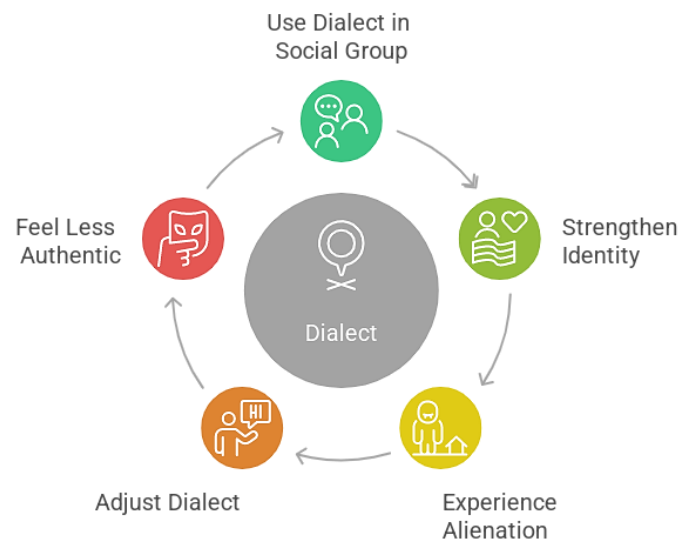
This statement illustrates how dialect operates not merely as a linguistic code but as a symbolic marker of origin and kinship ties. Across interviews, participants consistently associated dialect with authenticity, heritage, and emotional security, suggesting that dialect contributes to a stable sense of self rooted in shared history.

However, a few participants noted feeling alienated when they used their dialect in more formal or urban settings. Participant B reflected:

"In the city, I try to adjust my dialect to sound more like the others. It makes me feel less self-conscious, but it also feels like I'm not being completely myself."

This excerpt reflects the second theme—dialect negotiation across contexts—where identity becomes fluid and situational. Participants described consciously modifying or suppressing their dialect in urban or professional environments to avoid negative judgment. This adaptive strategy demonstrates the tension between maintaining authenticity and seeking social acceptance. The data indicate that identity construction through dialect is not fixed, but continuously negotiated depending on power relations and perceived prestige norms.

Dialect and Identity Cycle



Dialect as a Marker of Group Inclusion and Exclusion

Participants highlighted that dialect serves as both a marker of inclusion within their own social group and a tool of exclusion in interactions with outsiders. The analysis shows that dialect functions as an in-group boundary mechanism, strengthening solidarity while simultaneously distinguishing “insiders” from “outsiders.” In rural communities, the use of a local dialect is seen as an in-group identifier, fostering a sense of solidarity and unity. For example, Participant C described:

"When we speak our dialect, it creates a bond among us. It's a signal that we belong together, that we understand each other in ways that outsiders can't."

This quote demonstrates how dialect operates as shared symbolic knowledge, reinforcing mutual understanding and collective identity. Participants frequently emphasized the implicit trust and familiarity embedded in dialect use, indicating that language functions as social glue within homogeneous communities.

Conversely, dialects also acted as boundaries between groups. Several participants shared experiences where they felt their dialect marked them as "different" in broader, more cosmopolitan contexts. Participant D stated:

"When I'm in a mixed group, and I speak in my dialect, I sometimes notice others distancing themselves. It's like they don't understand me, or they feel uncomfortable."

Here, dialect becomes a visible marker of difference, potentially triggering subtle social distancing. This pattern reveals the ambivalent power of dialect: while it consolidates internal cohesion, it may also reinforce social hierarchies and marginalization in heterogeneous settings. Thus, dialect simultaneously produces inclusion and exclusion, depending on the sociolinguistic landscape.

The Impact of Dialect on Social Relationships

Participants' use of dialect was frequently linked to the dynamics of social relationships. The third theme highlights dialect as relational capital—facilitating trust in intimate contexts yet constraining mobility in formal domains. Many participants identified the dialect as a key factor in establishing trust and rapport within close-knit communities, while its usage in larger, more diverse settings sometimes led to misunderstandings. Participant E explained:

"In my hometown, speaking our dialect is a sign of trust. It's like an unspoken way of saying, 'I trust you,' because we both know the language."

This statement underscores how dialect functions as an implicit trust-building mechanism, strengthening interpersonal bonds through shared linguistic identity. In this context, dialect enhances relational depth and mutual recognition.

On the other hand, in more formal settings, some participants struggled with their dialect's perceived lack of sophistication, which they felt affected their professional relationships. Participant F reflected:

"At work, I try not to use my dialect too much. I feel like it's not professional enough. It's like I need to speak 'properly' to be taken seriously."

This excerpt reflects the internalization of dominant linguistic norms, where "standard" language is equated with competence and professionalism. Participants' narratives suggest that dialect may be perceived as lacking symbolic prestige in institutional contexts, influencing self-confidence and perceived credibility. This demonstrates how linguistic choices are intertwined with broader social power structures.

The findings from this study reveal the multifaceted role of dialect in the construction of social identity. Across themes, dialect emerges as (1) an emotional anchor of belonging, (2) a negotiated identity resource shaped by context, and (3) a relational and symbolic capital that both empowers and constrains speakers. Dialect acts as a key marker of group inclusion, strengthens personal identity, but also introduces social boundaries, particularly in cross-group interactions. These patterns demonstrate that dialect use is not merely communicative but deeply embedded in processes of identity negotiation, social positioning, and power relations within multilingual communities.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that dialect use plays a significant role in shaping individual social identity, serving both as a marker of in-group inclusion and a potential barrier in more heterogeneous social contexts (Wei & Lee, 2024). Participants consistently described how dialect acted as a crucial element of their sense of self, either strengthening their connection to their community or creating tension in situations where their dialect was seen as less socially acceptable. This aligns with the central research question concerning how dialect influences individuals' perceptions of their identity and their social relationships, particularly in multi-dialectal settings.

The study's findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how dialects function as powerful symbols of identity within both in-group and out-group dynamics (Kang, 2025). The use of dialect emerges not only as a linguistic tool but also as a crucial component of the social fabric, linking

individuals to their cultural heritage while simultaneously influencing their social positioning. By focusing on the subjective experiences of participants, this research highlights how dialects facilitate a sense of belonging within familiar communities but also expose individuals to challenges when interacting with broader, more diverse social groups (Choi, 2025). This finding significantly enhances our understanding of dialect as a multidimensional element of social identity, one that goes beyond linguistic variation to encompass emotions, relationships, and cultural significance.

When compared with existing literature, the findings from this study resonate with theories of linguistic capital and social identity. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital, for instance, suggests that language serves as a tool of social stratification, with certain dialects being valued more highly than others in different social contexts. This research supports Bourdieu's theory, showing that participants who used dialects associated with lower prestige often felt a sense of exclusion in urban or formal settings (Bhowmik et al., 2025). Additionally, the findings complement Goffman's (1959) work on face theory, where dialect use is seen as part of the presentation of self in social interactions. In this study, participants' negotiation of their dialects in different settings reflects their awareness of social expectations and their desire to maintain or enhance their social image (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). Thus, the study bridges the gap between linguistic theory and lived experience, offering valuable insights into the complex relationship between dialect, identity, and social interaction.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for both theoretical understanding and practical applications in the fields of sociolinguistics and social identity (Ancil, 2021). The research highlights the complex relationship between dialect use and personal identity, underscoring how dialects serve as powerful tools for both inclusion and exclusion in different social contexts. From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches existing frameworks of social identity by demonstrating how linguistic choices are deeply intertwined with individuals' self-perception and social positioning (McCormack et al., 2025). On a practical level, the findings emphasize the importance of acknowledging dialect diversity in educational, professional, and social settings, as individuals' experiences with dialect can influence their social integration and sense of belonging. By recognizing the value of dialects as part of cultural heritage, policymakers, educators, and employers can foster more inclusive environments that respect linguistic diversity and promote social cohesion.

From a social and cultural standpoint, the study's findings suggest that dialects are not merely communication tools but vital components of individuals' lived experiences, contributing to the construction of social boundaries and group identities (Moghimi et al., 2022). These insights are particularly relevant in multicultural and multilingual societies, where dialect use can signal group membership and cultural affiliation. Understanding the role of dialects in shaping identity offers valuable insights into the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion, helping to inform strategies that promote diversity and mitigate social stratification based on language.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of dialect in social identity, it also has several limitations that must be acknowledged (Xu et al., 2023). The sample size was relatively small, with only 15 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. The participants were primarily selected from a specific region with a distinct dialectal variation, meaning the results may not fully reflect the experiences of individuals in other linguistic or cultural contexts. Additionally, the study focused solely on self-reported data from interviews, which, while rich in detail, may not capture the full complexity of participants' experiences. Future studies could expand the sample size, incorporate diverse linguistic communities, and use additional data collection methods, such as participant observation, to deepen the understanding of dialect use in social contexts.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings from this study open several avenues for future research in the fields of sociolinguistics and social identity (Antunovic & Bruce, 2025). One promising direction would be to explore how dialect use interacts with other identity markers, such as ethnicity, gender, and class, in shaping individuals' experiences in social interactions. Longitudinal studies could also provide insights

into how dialectal identity evolves over time, particularly in response to changing social, cultural, or professional environments. Additionally, future research could investigate how dialects function in online spaces, where language dynamics may differ from those in face-to-face interactions (Alqhtani et al., 2025). This would help to understand the role of language in digital identity formation, a growing area of interest in contemporary sociolinguistics.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of dialect in shaping social identity, focusing on the lived experiences of individuals who use dialects in multilingual communities. The findings revealed that dialects are powerful tools for constructing both personal and social identities, serving as markers of inclusion within in-groups and exclusion in more heterogeneous social settings. Participants expressed how dialects significantly influence their sense of belonging, social relationships, and self-perception, offering a deeper understanding of the emotional and social dynamics tied to language use. These results address gaps in previous research that overlooked the subjective experiences of dialect users, providing a more nuanced perspective on language and identity. The study contributes to the sociolinguistic field by emphasizing the importance of recognizing dialects as integral to cultural heritage and social interaction.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study offers several practical implications. First, educational institutions in multilingual contexts should adopt inclusive language policies that recognize and value dialect diversity rather than implicitly privileging standardized forms of language. Integrating dialect awareness into curricula can reduce linguistic stigma and strengthen students' cultural identity.

Second, workplace and organizational communication policies should promote linguistic inclusivity by encouraging respect for dialect variation, particularly in multicultural and urban environments where dialect-based marginalization may occur. Training programs on linguistic diversity could help mitigate bias and foster more equitable professional interactions.

Third, policymakers should consider dialect preservation initiatives—such as community-based language documentation, media representation, and intergenerational transmission programs—as part of broader cultural sustainability strategies. Recognizing dialects as cultural assets rather than linguistic deficiencies may strengthen social cohesion in multilingual societies.

For future research, scholars should examine how dialect-based identity negotiation operates across different socio-economic strata and institutional power structures, particularly in education and employment sectors. Longitudinal studies could also explore how dialect attitudes shift over time due to urbanization and globalization. Additionally, investigating dialect use in digital communication spaces such as social media platforms may provide insight into how online environments reshape identity expression and linguistic prestige. Comparative cross-cultural studies would further enrich understanding of how dialect functions within varying political and sociolinguistic frameworks.

By moving beyond descriptive analysis toward applied and policy-oriented considerations, this study underscores the need to position dialect diversity as a strategic resource for social inclusion, cultural continuity, and equitable communication practices in multilingual communities.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this study.

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