

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Return to Work (RTW) Challenges and Mental Health Issues Among Unemployed Persons in Selangor

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Inability to find a job for a long time due to Covid-19 factor may lead to mental health issues in individual due to many reasons. Objective: This research aims to explore the association between return-to-work (RTW) challenges and mental health issues among 166 unemployed workers in Selangor.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted using snowball sampling method. A self-administered questionnaire to measure RTW challenges, anxiety (GDA-7) and depression (PHQ-9) was used in this study.

Results: Majority of the respondents is male (61.4%), aged between 20 to 34 years old, and have SPM (29.5%) and bachelor's degree (29.5%). Most respondents experienced moderate levels of RTW challenges. The most claimed challenges for them to RTW are lack of work experiences (92%), followed by lack of social support (86%), lack of skill (85%), current commitment (e.g., taking care of elderly/studying) (74%), and distances to workplace (72%). The prevalence of anxiety and depression were 81.3% and 71.1% respectively. There were significant correlation between RTW challenges with both anxiety ($\tau = .343$, $p < 0.001$) and depression ($\tau = .343$, $p < 0.001$). In multivariate analyses, RTW challenges, level of education, and gender accounted for a significant 35.7% of the variability in anxiety and 24.2% of the variability in depression. **Conclusion:** The prevalence of mental health issues is high among respondents and is proven to be associated with RTW challenges. Hence, prompt intervention strategies need is needed to support mental health of unemployed workers by all related parties including government, policy makers and employers.

Keywords: Return-to-work; Mental health; Anxiety and depression; Unemployed persons

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INTRODUCTION

The unemployment rate in Malaysia increased during pandemic from 3.3% in 2019 to 4.5% in 2020, 4.6% in 2021 and falls to 4.0% in 2022 [1]. With a 3.8% unemployment rate in June 2022, Malaysia's jobless rate is at its lowest level since the Covid-19 epidemic whereas around 630,000 unemployed people in June as opposed to 637,700 the month prior, this represented a 0.1% decline from May 2022 [1]. According to the Malaysian statistics, the number of unemployed people in Malaysia decreased by 30.2 thousand people, or negative 4.7 percent, during the third quarter of 2022, to 611.8 thousand people (Q2 2022: 642.0 thousand persons). More and more people were trying to return to work to get back to their normal life.

Return to work (RTW) can be defined as the process of going back to work after being out of work due to

illness or unemployment [2]. The difficulty in returning to work or finding a job may commonly be attributed to the interaction between personal situations, such as a lack of stable housing, transportation restrictions, and mental health issues like depression and anxiety, and external surroundings, such as employer expectations of ideal job candidates having relevant work experience and formal qualifications.

According to Durjadin and Goffette-Nagot, being unemployed might lower individual's self-confidence and the subsequent effects [3]. Those unemployed had lower self-confidence, overwhelming issues related to unemployment and significantly poorer health compared to their employed counterparts [4]. Also, in another study they were having increased anxiety and depression, and various physical symptoms including loss of appetite, sleep, and sexual interest [5].

Plentiful studies conducted previously have observed a consistent link between unemployment and all-cause mortality, cardiovascular diseases and suicide, mental issues, substance abuse, depression, and anxiety [6]. A study found that unemployment affect interpersonal relationship and social life that have an impact on

their social wellbeing [7]. Both unemployment and mental health issues might make it more difficult for someone to find or keep a job. Inability to find a job for a long time due to Covid-19 factor may lead to anxiety and depression. It is important for job-seekers to have a healthy mental health state for them to secure job in this challenging world.

In Malaysia, mental health issues are not uncommon, but there is little information about unemployed persons and little access to resources. The problems and challenges associated with unemployment in Malaysia found to be related to salaries, educational levels, the categories of jobs vacancies, transportation, the mismatch between skill and job opportunities, and poor communication skills [5]. Plenty of studies examine the factors that determine unemployment which mostly related to fresh graduates but very few studies specifically focused on return to work. The mental health status of people who used to be employed but lost their job due to various reasons and struggles in returning to work are rarely being appraised. These population usually have commitments, people to take care of, and many other responsibilities before losing their job. It is important to have a better understanding of this aspect, and to understand their struggles in getting back to work.

Therefore, this study is conducted among unemployed persons who have lost their job to explore the relationship between socio-demographic background, return-to-work challenges with mental health including anxiety and depression. The present study will provide a supportive data in the scope of RTW and mental health among unemployed workers and to further understanding the challenges faced by them. This information is important as our country requires a continuous resource of a quality workforce to ensure the positive economy development of the country.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design and sampling method

This was a cross-sectional study among one hundred-and-sixty-six unemployed person selected using the snowball sampling method. Respondents helps to recruit other respondents that have the same criteria for the study. The snowball sampling was chosen because the study of unknown or marginalised populations can benefit from. The estimation of sample size was determined by formula according to objectives of the study. The largest sample size from all calculation was selected for this study. The one-proportion formula by Kirkwood was used to assess mental health status among unemployed workers [8]. Based on the study by Mokona et al., the reference prevalence of depression among unemployed young adults is 30.9%, thus the calculation showed 168 participants. [9]. However,

since the study uses self-administered questionnaires, it is important to consider the 10% nonresponse rate. Thus, final sample size estimation needed in this study is 185 participants.

All the participants were recruited within Selangor state, based on inclusive and exclusive criteria. The inclusive criteria are the respondent must be currently unemployed because they have lost their job. The exclusive criteria are the respondent is medically diagnosed with mental illness. Before the respondents answering self-administered questionnaire, they were required to fill in a few questions to ensure they fulfil the inclusive criteria of the study.

Instrumentation

The self-administered questionnaire used in this study was in English and Malay version that consists of three sections including Section A (7 items) includes socio-demographic information like age, gender, education level, ethnicity, district of living, height and weight. In section B, RTW challenges items (10 items) was used to assess the return-to-work challenges of the respondents. RTW of the respondents were classified into five categories based on the total averaged score of 50-items. Total averaged score of 0 to 10 indicates very low, 11 to 20 indicates low, 21 to 30 indicates moderate, 31 to 40 indicates high and 41 to 50 indicates very high.

Meanwhile, section C assessed mental health status of the respondents using standardised General-Anxiety-Disorder-7 (GAD-7) for anxiety and Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) for depression [10,11]. The Malay version of the GAD-7 questionnaire has a good level of internal reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.74. [12]. With a Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 and 87% sensitivity, the PHQ-9 Malay Version employed in this study likewise has good internal reliability [12].

The GAD-7 Anxiety Questionnaire asked how frequently they have experienced issues like "feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge" and "not being able to stop or control worrying" over the previous two weeks. They must respond to all seven questions by selecting the appropriate answers on a scale of 0 to 3, where 0 is "not at all," 1 is "a few days," 2 is "more than half the days," and 3 is "almost every day." The scoring system involves adding up the total score from each scale (0, 1, 2, and 3), which will fall between 0 and 21. The PHQ-9 Depression Questionnaire asked participants to rate their level of depression based on how frequently in the previous two weeks they had experienced issues such "little interest or pleasure in doing things," "feeling down, gloomy or hopeless," and other seven issues. In order to respond to all nine questions, participants must select the options on a four-point scale from 0 to 3, where 0 equals "not at

all," 1 equals "many days," 2 equals "more than half the days," and 3 equals "almost every day." The score obtained by adding up all of the selected numbers (0, 1, 2, and 3), with a total score that ranges from 1 to 27.

The reliability of the questionnaire was tested via pre-test prior to the actual test. Specifically, reliability for return-to-work challenges were good which the Cronbach Alpha are 0.94 with 10 number of items. For anxiety (GAD-7) has produce results of 0.88 which also good with 7 number of items. Lastly, depression (PHQ-9) has produced result of 0.83 which the reliability was good with 9 number of items.

The link of an online self-administered questionnaire in Google Form was distributed among unemployed workers through WhatsApp, Telegram, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn before they shared the link to their acquaintance that fulfilled inclusion and exclusion criteria. The questionnaire was provided with brief information regarding details of the study in the Google Form. Informed consents were distributed to the participants in both English and Malay to get their agreement to take part in the research through Google Form, to assure there will be no potential risks or costs and to ensure the confidentiality of the information provided. The participants were invited to participate voluntarily and that their identities and responses remained anonymous. The questionnaire took approximately less than 10 minutes to be completed. The participation in this study was voluntarily and participants may withdraw at any time without any loss of benefits or penalty.

Statistical analysis

All the data obtained were analysed by using the IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Version 26. The descriptive analysis was used to determine the distribution of socio-demographic background, return-to-work challenge and mental health status of the respondents. The Pearson-chi-square, fisher exact test was used to test the association between socio-demographic factors with mental health. Aside from that, Spearman's correlation was used in this study to determine the relationship between return-to-work challenges with anxiety and depression.

Ethical issues

This study was submitted and approved by the Ethics Committee, Universiti Putra Malaysia (reference number: JKEUPM-2022-385). The agreement was obtained from the respondents who were selected to participate in this study through written consent in Google Form before the study was conducted. All information given was confidential and the privacy of identity will be ensured and remain anonymous.

RESULTS

From the calculation of sample size, 185 respondents should be recruited after considering 10% of non-response rate. But the minimum sample size required for this study was 168 without additional 10% non-response rate. However, this study only succeeded in recruiting the minimum sample size with total respondents of 166 which is 91% due to lack of resources and limited time. This response rate is 89.73%. Male respondents outnumbered female respondents, accounting for 61.4% and 38.6% respectively. Majority of respondents are aged 25 to 29 years old (63.3%), Malay (80.7%), bachelor's degree and SPM holders (29.5%) respectively, with most of the respondent lives in Gombak (18.1%). The detailed socio-demographic information of the respondents is shown in Table I.

Return-to-work challenges

Results shows that the most claimed challenges (agreed to strongly agreed) for them to return to work are lack of work experiences (92%), followed by lack of social support (86%), lack of skill (85%), current commitment (e.g., taking care of elderly/studying) (74%), and distances to workplace (72%). Table II shows the details of the response from the respondents.

Mental health status

Based on Table III, it shows that unemployed workers are facing anxiety that ranges from minimal to severe level and depression from mild to severe level. Roughly, Table VI shows 81.3% of the respondents experiencing anxiety and 71.1% of the respondent's experienced depression.

Anxiety

Based on Table IV, 135 (81.3%) of the respondents had a score of GAD-7 ≥ 8 that indicates the respondents experience anxiety. The data in Table III revealed 81 (48.8%) of the respondents experienced moderate anxiety and 75 (45.2%) of the respondents experienced mild anxiety. Meanwhile, the remaining respondents faced severe and minimal anxiety which 8 (4.8 %) and 2 (1.2%) respectively.

Depression

Table IV shows that 118 (77.1%) of respondents were having depression (PHQ-9 ≥ 10). From Table III, there are 98 (59.0%) have moderate depression and 48 (28.9%) have mild depression, another 18 (10.8%) and 2 (1.2%) experienced moderately severe to severe depression. It also stated that there is no respondent who experienced minimal depression in this study.

The relationship between socio demographic and RTW challenges with mental health

This study found that none of the socio-demographic

Table I : Socio-demographic of unemployed workers (N= 166)

Socio-demographic	Information	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age	20 – 24 years old	28	16.9
	25 - 29 years old	105	63.3
	30 - 34 years old	33	19.9
	Total	166	100
Gender	Male	102	61.4
	Female	64	38.6
	Total	166	100
Ethnicity	Malay	134	80.7
	Chinese	21	12.7
	Indian	11	6.6
	Total	166	100
Education Level	UPSR	4	2.4
	SRP/PMR/PT3	6	3.6
	SPM	49	29.5
	Pre-University	42	25.3
	Degree	49	29.5
	None	16	9.6
	Total	166	100
District of Living	Sabak Bernam	3	1.8
	Kuala Selangor	19	11.4
	Hulu Selangor	12	7.2
	Gombak	30	18.1
	Petaling	27	16.3
	Klang	28	16.9
	Hulu Langat	16	9.6
	Kuala Langat	9	5.4
	Sepang	22	13.3
Total	166	100	

factors were associated with anxiety ($p > 0.05$) except for gender and education level ($p < 0.05$) factors that were significantly associated with both anxiety and depression. The results of the chi-square test for socio-demographic factors with anxiety and depression are shown in Table V.

Before analysing the association between return-to-work challenges with anxiety and depression, a normality test was done to assess whether the collected data were distributed normally. This study had a significant Shapiro-wilk value less than 0.05 indicates the data

were not normally distributed. The relationship between return-to-work challenges and mental health was assessed using Spearman’s rank-order correlation. Spearman’s correlation indicated the correlation between return-to-work challenges with both anxiety and depression was moderate and positive, $\tau = .343$, $p < 0.001$ and $\tau = .343$ respectively, $p < 0.001$. A higher score on the return-to-work challenges correlated with a higher score on mental health.

The association between RTW challenges with mental health issues adjusting for socio-demographic factor

Multiple linear regression (MLR) was used to predict the association between RTW challenges and mental health status adjusting for sociodemographic characteristics. The purpose of doing MLR is to test whether the association between RTW and mental health status are still significant after controlling for socio-demographic factor. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of assumption for normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity. Results shows that gender is the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.52$), RTW challenges ($\beta = 0.209$) and level of education ($\beta = -0.208$) accounted for a significant 35.7% of the variability in anxiety which $R^2 = 0.357$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.345$, $F(3, 382) = 29.968$, $p < 0.01$. Results indicates that female had higher level of anxiety compared to male. Those who experienced more RTW challenge, and lower level of education had higher level of anxiety.

Also, RTW challenges, and gender accounted for a significant 24.2% of the variability in depression which $R^2 = 0.242$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.228$, $F(3, 162) = 17.226$ $p < 0.01$. RTW challenges and gender remained significant with gender was the strongest predictors ($\beta = 0.364$), followed by RTW challenges ($\beta = 0.294$). Results indicated that female had higher level of depression. Those experienced more RTW challenges had higher level of depression. See Table VI.

DISCUSSION

The present study found 81.3% of the unemployed workers in Selangor are experiencing anxiety while 71.1% of the unemployed workers are experiencing depression. This result was supported by a previous study that which revealed that the effects of unemployment include impairment in intrapersonal social interaction, mental health issues and a negative influence on subjective well-being [7]. Findings of the present study also consistent with those results from previous study in several populations in the United State of America which found that a higher score in unemployment rate, have a higher GAD-7 anxiety scores [13]. The likeness of the result shows that unemployment gives a significant effect on mental health. Reversely, poor mental health also may further

Table II : Return-to-work challenges among unemployed workers (N=166)

Items (RTW Challenges)	Strongly Disagree, N (%)	Disagree, N (%)	Neutral, N (%)	Agree, N (%)	Strongly Agree, N (%)	Total, N (%)
Health status – present of comorbidities, preinjury disabilities	110 (66.3)	20 (12)	8 (4.8)	22 (13.3)	6 (3.6)	166 (100)
Physical disability	131 (79)	8 (4.8)	15 (9)	8 (4.8)	4 (2.4)	166 (100)
Injury types	118 (71)	15 (9)	12 (7)	16 (10)	5 (3)	166 (100)
Current health treatment	96 (58)	9 (5)	12 (7)	39 (24)	10 (6)	166 (100)
Current commitment; taking care of elderly/studying etc	63 (38)	9 (5)	20 (12)	63 (38)	11 (7)	166 (100)
Social support	34 (20)	18 (11)	28 (17)	72 (42.8)	14 (8)	166 (100)
Lack of skill	34 (20)	8 (4.8)	39 (24)	71 (43)	14 (8)	166 (100)
Transportation	42 (25)	32 (19.3)	22 (13.3)	54 (32.5)	16 (9.6)	166 (100)
Distances to workplace	35 (21.1)	19 (11.4)	40 (24.1)	60 (36.1)	12 (7.2)	166 (100)
Lack of work experiences	28 (17)	17 (10)	29 (17)	74 (45)	18 (11)	166 (100)

Table III : Level of anxiety and depression among unemployed workers (N=166)

Variables	Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean ± S. D
Anxiety	Minimal Anxiety	2	1.2	
	Mild Anxiety	75	45.2	
	Moderate Anxiety	81	48.8	
	Severe Anxiety	8	4.8	
	Total	166	100	2.57 ± 0.606
Depression	Minimal Depression	0	0	
	Mild Depression	48	28.9	
	Moderate Depression	98	59.0	
	Moderately Severe Depression	18	10.8	
	Severe Depression	2	1.2	
	Total	166	100	2.84 ± 0.651

Table IV : Mental health status of unemployed workers (N = 166)

	Cut-Off	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
GAD-7 (Anxiety)	Yes (GAD-7 ≥8)	135	81.3
	No (GAD-7 < 8)	31	18.7
PHQ-9 (Depression)	Yes (PHQ-9 ≥ 10)	118	71.1
	No (PHQ-9 < 10)	48	28.9

increase the RTW challenges among unemployed workers and thus making it more difficult for them to find a job.

While in terms of depression level, more than half of

the respondents had moderate symptoms of depression (59.0%). These values were higher compared to a study among young adults in Ethiopia that used the same study instrument, PHQ-9. In that study, nearly one third has moderate depression due to unemployment

Table V : The association between socio-demographic factors with anxiety and depression

Socio-demographic	Information (166)	Anxiety, N (%)		p-value	Anxiety, N (%)		p-value
		Yes (n= 135)	No (n= 31)		Yes (n= 118)	No (n= 48)	
Age	20-24 years old (28)	22 (78.6)	6 (21.4)	0.846 ^b	17 (60.7)	11 (39.3)	0.399 ^b
	25-29 years old (105)	85 (81.0)	20 (19.0)		76 (72.4)	29 (27.6)	
	30-34 years old (33)	28 (84.8)	5 (15.2)		25 (75.8)	8 (24.2)	
Gender	Male (102)	72 (70.6)	30 (29.4)	0.00 ^{b*}	55 (53.9)	47 (46.1)	0.00 ^{b*}
	Female (64)	63 (98.4)	1 (1.6)		63 (98.4)	1 (1.6)	
Ethnicity	Malay (134)	108 (80.6)	26 (19.4)	0.256 ^a	94 (70.1)	40 (29.9)	0.182 ^b
	Chinese (21)	16 (76.2)	5 (23.8)		18 (85.7)	3 (14.3)	
	Indian (11)	11 (100)	0 (0.0)		6 (54.5)	5 (45.5)	
District of Living	Sabak Bernam (3)	3 (100)	0 (0.0)	0.471 ^a	3 (100)	0 (0.0)	0.499 ^a
	Kuala Selangor (19)	16 (84.2)	3(15.8)		16 (84.2)	3(15.8)	
	Hulu Selangor (12)	12 (100)	0 (0.0)		10 (83.3)	2 (16.7)	
	Gombak (30)	21 (70.0)	9 (30.0)		20 (66.7)	10 (33.3)	
	Petaling (27)	21 (77.8)	6 (22.2)		17 (63.0)	10 (37.0)	
	Klang (28)	22 (78.6)	6 (21.4)		13 (46.4)	15 (53.6)	
	Hulu Langat (16)	13 (81.3)	3 (18.8)		14 (87.5)	2 (12.5)	
	Kuala Langat (9)	7 (77.8)	2 (22.2)		7 (77.8)	2 (22.2)	
Education Level	Sepang (22)	20 (90.9)	2 (9.1)	0.00 ^{a*}	18 (81.8)	4 (18.2)	0.01 ^{a*}
	UPSR (4)	4 (100)	0 (0.0)		4 (100)	0 (0.0)	
	SRP/PMR/PT3 (6)	6 (100)	0 (0)		6 (100)	0 (0)	
	SPM (49)	45 (91.8)	4 (8.2)		36 (73.5)	13 (26.5)	
	Pre-University (42)	38 (90.5)	4 (9.5)		31 (73.8)	11 (26.2)	
	Degree (49)	28 (57.1)	21 (42.9)		25 (51.0)	24 (49.0)	
None (16)	14 (87.5)	2 (12.5)	16 (100)	0 (0.0)			

^a = Fisher Exact Test, *p-value is significant at p < 0.05

^b = Pearson Chi-Square, *p-value is significant at p < 0.05

[14]. The high prevalence is rather expected due to devastating effects of unemployment to psychological, economic, and social well-being of individuals and communities.

The top RTW challenges was lack of work experience followed by lack of social support, lack skill, current commitment, and distances to workplace. These findings shows that work experience is an important factor to get a job even for those who had work experience. Employers prefer to recruit those with

work experience specific for the job they applied due to their high productivity and low training expenses [15]. Apart from work experience, social support is reported to be an important RTW challenge. Unemployed people with low social support had higher incidence of physical, emotional and functional impairment after controlling for age, income and education [16]. Moreover, a study in Malaysia identified that lack of skill was among the significant RTW challenge besides demanding attitude and unstable economy. These skills include technical

skills, problem-solving skills and communication skills, particularly in English, the main language in private sectors [17]. Moreover, referring to the unemployed peoples' current commitment, another main RTW challenge found in the present study, the existing knowledge on work-family interface is limited. Current knowledge is limited to people who work full-time and usually among working parents with young children [18]. As for distance to workplace challenges, it may reflect many things including the accessibility and affordability of public transport and financial constraints to meet end needs including food and housing.

Furthermore, the association between the variables shown in this study was slightly different with the findings from study in Scotland [19] where analysis demonstrate significant association between anxiety and depression with sociodemographic like age and gender. Also, another study in Hebei province shows that the low mental health status had significant associations with female gender, lower education and annual household income levels, presence of major medical conditions and family history of psychiatric disorders [20]. But the result of the present study shows only gender was found significant apart from RTW challenges. In this context, gender is crucial and has a variety of implications for the relationship between mental health and unemployment. Paul and Moser [21] discovered that men are more distressed than women owing to unemployment. However, according to another research, unemployed women miss work just as much as men do, and as a result, they suffer just as much as unemployed males [22]. The nature of this association, nevertheless, is still a matter of ongoing controversy [23].

Additionally, this study found a significant relationship between RTW challenges with mental health after adjusting for sociodemographic. The result was consistent with previous study survey where unemployed persons had a significantly poorer mental health compared to the employed and the significant predictor was a job loss [7]. There are psychological consequences associated with unemployment, such as the potential loss of life meaning, damage to one's sense of self, and loss of the self-esteem that one generally derives from one's job. Losing all of these benefits is a part of unemployment [24].

Given the fragility and uncertainty of the recovery, broader policy support continues to be needed, including measures that target the most vulnerable youth.

Study limitation

This study involved a limited sample size due to a limited time of cross-sectional study and current situation of post covid-19 pandemic. This causes the

questionnaire to be distributed substantially via online platforms. The sample was collected from only one state in Malaysia which is Selangor. Therefore, results are not suitable to generalise the result to all jobless workers in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

The present study showed respondents experienced moderate level of RTW challenges. This study also revealed that unemployed respondents were having anxiety that ranges from minimal to severe level and depression from mild to severe level. The positive direction of moderate relationship between RTW challenges with anxiety and depression has also been revealed in this study. Therefore, this study demonstrates that higher RTW challenges associated with poorer mental health status. To lessen the severity of mental health issues among unemployed workers, it is recommended that the predictors of the RTW challenges problem be addressed including lack of social support, lack of skill, current commitment, and distances to workplace that was found in the current study. Campaign is needed to increase awareness that support from family, friends and community is important to help ease the pressure suffered by those unemployed workers in the process of finding job. Supports can be in the form of emotional, instrumental, informational, appraisal and many more. Since female was found to be having more RTW challenges and anxiety and depression among respondents it is important to do intervention targeted to gender differences. More detail studies are needed to understand the reason of the gender differences.

Also, the study also claimed that it was possible to investigate more detail determinants of RTW challenge through in-depth interview. Employers and employees and those who are unemployed are encouraged to join the program RTW provided by the Social Security Organisation (SOCSO) to achieve maximum benefits. Findings on this research urge support from community and every non-profit-organisation (NGO) or government bodies, including SOCSO, on mental health of unemployed people.

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