Vol 11 – no 3

Revue phénEPS / PHEnex Journal

Thin for the Win:
Aesthetic Bias and Body Image Dissatisfaction in Aesthetic Sports

Leah J. Whitten
Acadia University
Wolfville, Nova Scotia
CANADA

Jason Holt
Acadia University
Wolfville, Nova Scotia
CANADA

Author Biographies

Leah J. Whitten is a recent graduate of the kinesiology programme (Bachelor of Kinesiology with Psychology) at Acadia University. She is pursuing a career in health care.

Jason Holt is a Full Professor of Kinesiology at Acadia University, where he teaches courses in philosophy of sport and leisure as well as communication. His research interests include a variety of topics intersecting aesthetics, philosophy of sport, and philosophy and popular culture. His most recent books are the scholarly *Kinetic Beauty: The Philosophical Aesthetics of Sport* (2020) and the literary *Poems for Another Time* (2021).

Abstract

Aesthetic sport athletes tend to be predisposed to aesthetic biases created by their sports and are subsequently at a greater risk of developing serious issues of mental health that include body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders. This paper discusses why athletes in some aesthetic sports are a cohort of increased risk for such issues, as well as how this could be remedied through positive aesthetic sport cultures. We explore the focus on physique in aesthetic sports and how it relates to larger societal issues and norms, especially for the female athlete. Additionally, we consider the benefits of having a thinner body in many aesthetic sports, where such ideals tend toward harmful extremes. Though it is difficult to change inherent biases in aesthetic judgment, such biases can be challenged by creating positive growing environments for athletes and more broadly by advocating for change in aesthetic sports themselves.

Keywords: Aesthetic bias; aesthetic sport; athlete; body image; thinness.

Résumé

Les athlètes évoluant dans des sports dits « esthétiques » tendent à être prédisposés à des biais de cette nature créés dans leur sport; par conséquent ils seraient plus à risque de développer de sérieux problèmes de santé mentale tels qu'une insatisfaction face à leur image corporelle et des troubles de l'alimentation. Ce texte présente une discussion des facteurs qui créent ces biais chez des athlètes dans ces sports esthétiques, les rendent plus à risque de souffrir de ces problèmes de santé mentale et ce qui peut être fait pour changer cette culture. Nous explorons la centration sur le physique dans ces sports et comment cette centration est en relation avec des normes et des problèmes dans la société, plus particulièrement pour les athlètes féminines. De plus, nous aborderons les avantages d'un corps plus mince dans de nombreux sports esthétiques, où de tels idéaux tendent vers des extrêmes dangereux. Bien qu'il soit difficile de modifier des biais inhérents dans un jugement esthétique, de tels biais peuvent être remis en question par la création d'environnements de développement positif, et de façon plus large en réclamant un changement dans les sports esthétiques eux-mêmes.

Mots-clés : biais esthétiques; sport esthétique; athlète; image corporelle; minceur.

Aesthetic bias - sport - body image - thinness.

Introduction

It is clichéd that in the digital age we are bombarded more than ever before by media portrayals of body ideals. Not only is the picture-perfect body simply a touch of a screen away, we are made to believe that it is something that can and should be strived for. Being constantly inundated with reminders that one's body will never be good enough can easily foster a negative body image, where body image can be defined as "the picture we have in our minds of the size, shape and form of our bodies; and our feelings concerning these characteristics and our constituent body parts" (Veale et al., 1996, p. 717). It is no secret that an altered sense of body image can potentially lead to serious issues of mental health, including eating disorders among many others. What is often not considered, however, are the aesthetic and weight biases that may underlie these propagated body standards. In a physique-focused society, an individual's size and aesthetic quality of appearance can affect how they are treated and judged by those around them (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Individuals' bodily sense of self is often constructed based on the incoming messages received from people and images in their environment, and this directly comes from the cultures to which they are exposed (Rice, 2007). Bodies exist not simply as biological entities, but also in the context of a sociocultural world (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This problematic externally focused body mindset can be extrapolated and examined in a sport culture where it can be amplified in the face of desire for athletic prowess.

Motivated partly by personal experience and investment, this paper will focus on the increased predisposition of aesthetic sport athletes to these body image–related ideals. More specifically, aesthetic bias and aesthetic judgement—two major components of aesthetic sports—will be explored as they relate to considerations of physique. The question we are asking is why athletes in some aesthetic sports suffer a significant increased risk of body image dissatisfaction. We argue that certain biases, specifically aesthetic biases, are all but endemic to so-called aesthetic sports as currently practiced, and that it is nonetheless possible to overcome these biases to some extent, and consequently to promote more positive aesthetic sport cultures.

This is broadly speaking a philosophical essay, one belonging to the increasingly popular trend of so-called empirical philosophy, which draws on empirical research so as to inform both philosophical analysis itself and the practical implications of that analysis for those involved in the relevant fields of endeavour, whether as participants or otherwise. Drawing on both previous research in the philosophical aesthetics of sport and significant background experience in certain aesthetic sport activities (i.e., figure skating and dance), the present authors hope to uncover and help resolve certain aspects of long-understood if not perfectly grasped issues of aesthetic bias in aesthetic sports. The intended readership, then, is broad, and includes not only philosophers of sport and physical activity but researchers in other disciplines along with those participants in aesthetic sports most at risk of suffering from or perpetuating implicit aesthetic bias and who can therefore play an active role in ameliorating the conditions of such sports.

Theoretical and Experiential Background

To begin, the distinction between aesthetic sports and purposive sports must be made clear. Aesthetic sports include, for example, figure skating, diving, and gymnastics, whereas purposive sports include ice hockey, swimming, and track and field events (Holt, 2020). A purposive sport can be characterized as a sport whose outcome is *not* determined by the quality of movement

execution, whereas the outcome of an aesthetic sport *does* rely directly on this characteristic of quality (Best, 1978). Aesthetics, though present to some degree in purposive sports, is incidental to athletic success except as by-product of effective technique. In other words, the outcome of a purposive sport is not directly impacted by a subjective judgement based on aesthetics. In some purposive sports, such as rugby for example, there is an implied or expected "look" that players subscribe to that gives them a sense of status in the sport (Light & Kirk, 2000). Although their appearance may seem to indicate physical prowess in the sport, it will not, in itself, gain the team additional points in a game. In aesthetic sports, by contrast, the aesthetic properties of performance are necessary means to scoring and winning, with judges to award style points on the basis of standardized aesthetic criteria.

One common concern about judged sports generally is that they can seem intuitively to lend themselves more than purposive sports to subjective, arbitrary, or biased results, as judges are in effect *arbiters* of scoring (Holt, 2020). This more general issue can be set aside, not only because it tends to be overblown, but also because the concern here is not with *dishonest* judging but rather with biases built into the rules and cultures of aesthetic sports themselves. In this respect, although the essay is concerned with implicit aesthetic bias permeating throughout many aesthetic sports, contextual variation and potential cultural bias should be acknowledged. For one thing, some aesthetic sports are far more conducive than are others to the type of body image dissatisfaction at issue. Sports that emphasize leanness of physique, such as gymnastics, figure skating, and diving, lend themselves more to body image dissatisfaction than do aesthetic sports such as aerials skiing where, for obvious reasons, athletes' body characteristics are not as evident to judges' observation. In the realm of dance competition, too, there seems to be greater potential for body image dissatisfaction among, say, ballet dancers than among dancers in other genres of competitive dance, hip-hop and salsa, for instance, which seem not only more tolerant but even appropriately celebratory of physical variation.[1] In any aesthetic sport, however, some athletes will be more internally than externally focused, more resistant than susceptible to biases of the sort underwriting body image dissatisfaction. Although the related context of gender bias is discussed below, the possible role of cultural bias should also be acknowledged not only as reinforcing the aesthetic biases diagnosed here but also perhaps paradoxically as informing if unobtrusively the diagnosis itself.

Our approach here can be seen as complementing certain feminist analyses of sport. For example, Young (1995) champions female participation in sport as a means to overcome social barriers to full embodiment and agency. Likewise, English (2003) promotes sports where women have "natural hegemony" (p. 228) along with the creation of various new sports that encourage or allow for athletes to excel with a variety of different body types. However, whereas females participating in purposive sports—or what Postow (1995) calls "masculine" sports—may flout gender stereotypes in a useful way, their participation in aesthetic (or "feminine") sports might merely, at least to some extent, reinforce those stereotypes. Rather than seeing sport as it is, or the possibility of entirely new sports, as sufficient for such progressive purposes, the focus here is on diagnosing particularly problematic sports, specifically aesthetic sports, for the underlying aesthetic biases that reinforce and exacerbate larger societal problems, ultimately with an eye to

[1] The authors thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point about Latin competitive dance.

helping these sports evolve into something better. Our discussion point is the complex aesthetics of the athletic physique in aesthetic sports.

Holt (2020) proposes a five-level analysis of sport aesthetics, which includes physique at its most basic level. The athlete's body as an object of aesthetic appreciation can be conducive to positive evaluations both in and out of the sporting context. This athletic ideal tends to be presented as lean but muscular, while achieving high levels of flexibility and overall capability (Holt, 2020). Although achieving this ideal may not have a direct impact in some sports, it is this analysis of body proportions, made more intense by the revealing attire that showcases the body, that could affect the score in aesthetic sports (Holt, 2020). It is not surprising, then, that athletes in aesthetic sports are seemingly forced to care more about their "look" than athletes in other types of sport. Speaking from experience with figure skating, it is the constant focus on outward appearance that becomes not only a concern in the sporting context, but also quickly spirals into everyday life.

It was the experience of one of the present authors that in her time as an athlete, she began to engage in a behaviour called body checking, a "repeated critical scrutiny of one's body size, shape and weight" (Shafran et al., 2007, p. 113). By using her reflection in the glass on the boards around the arena, there was a constant need to look at her body when skating to ensure it met an acceptable internalized standard. If the imagined "perfect" body was not reflected, skating performance decreased due to lack of confidence, and the body began to feel foreign. The fact is, when an activity or exercise is interrupted due to a directed focus of attention to the body, there is a loss in the flow experienced from the exercise itself and ultimately, a negative connotation is given to something that should be an enjoyable activity (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The dissociation was indicative of a fear of weight gain, and it became something that was assessed daily. In a society where weight loss is often applauded and associated with success (Aphramor & Gingras, 2008), any mirror or reflective surface, such as a store window, was used to assess the body at all angles and at all times. As a figure skater, you are all alone on the open ice, and tight clothing is required for maximum air resistance and success in the sport. This is a vulnerable position for any person, not to mention an impressionable young girl. If all eyes are on you, then it becomes necessary to ensure that your body is not a factor in the scrutiny and judgement from those watching. Again, based on experience, without the proper knowledge and mental skills training, this feeling of vulnerability was not only easily transferred to social situations, but also became problematic when alone. It was the internalization of the need for the body to be smaller that led to a constant dissatisfaction with the body and a decrease in self-confidence.

Aesthetic Bias and Body Image

Another important distinction to be made is between aesthetic preference and aesthetic bias. On the surface, aesthetic preference does not pose an issue because it does not dictate value or hierarchy. Conversely, when bias is introduced, a clear right and wrong is determined, thus undermining the validity of any straying preferences (Holt, 2020). This presence of bias is what can cause aesthetic injustice, a term that expresses the problematic and sometimes implicit aesthetic or broadly prejudicial criteria used to assess an athlete or performance in itself or in terms of aesthetic qualities (Holt, 2020). Consider, now, the aesthetic judgement of physique: if a less athletic looking body performs, objectively, the same quality of movement as an athletic body, it is not likely that both individuals will score equally. This can be represented by the hyperathletic model, including the assumption that a harder working athlete will have a more athletic appearance and vice versa (Holt, 2020). Although this assumption is obviously flawed, aesthetic athletes are

known to go to excessive measures so their bodies will fit this prescribed mold. At one of the present authors' personal athletic peaks, these measures, not uncommonly, included overtraining and undereating, a combination that was not healthy either mentally or physically. Going to the gym was no longer only for athletic benefit, but became a way to burn extra calories. Essential food was consumed, but any additional snacks were not considered, even when hungry, because of the risk of weight gain. It was all too easy to find friends in the sport experiencing similar issues at comparable and even more extreme levels. Years after being competitive in the sport, it was the discussions with the other athletes that illuminated the similarity in struggles faced both during peak participation and after involvement was long finished. Although the sport was over, the distorted body image remained. Vocalizing these deeply rooted and personal issues was not easy and often occurred in the form of jokes about one's own body. It was also noticeable that these skaters tended to have an ever-present body-focused lens clouding their vision, frequently commenting on their own or other peoples' bodies before commenting on their abilities.

In recent years, athletes in the media have been coming forward to share their own experiences, and one specific story from Olympic figure skater Gracie Gold is a prime example. In an interview, Gold describes her struggles with both body dysmorphia and an eating disorder, and vocalizes a "pressure to be perfect" in the sport (Olympic Channel, 2019). She describes feeling that at one point her appearance seemed to be *more* important to her than her athletic performance. If she felt that she wasn't thin enough or pretty enough compared to the other skaters, she was not satisfied no matter the outcome of her skating (Olympic Channel, 2019). Another perfect example of the pervasiveness of this problem can be seen in the recent TSN documentary called *Disorder*. The documentary helps athletes tell their stories of physique-related issues rooted in their sport participation, as well as eating disorders that developed as a result. One of these athletes was Olympic pairs figure skater Kristen Moore-Towers. In the interview, she said "I'm always striving to be better. When that's your mindset, you'll do whatever it takes to win" (TSN, 2020). This meant that when she was told that "if [she] was really trying, [she] would stick [her] finger down [her] throat" (TSN, 2020), she thought the only way to the top was by not allowing food to stay in her body—and she did not see anything wrong with that. At this elite level especially, such issues are magnified through social and mainstream media, but at many levels this unfortunately is a reality for many aesthetic sport athletes who subject themselves to the biases informing their chosen sport activities.

A useful cognate concept is that of aestheticality, which as a parallel to musicality is a phenomenon described by Veale et al. (1996) as a "sensitivity of aesthetic perception" (p. 718). The idea here is that there is a large variability of aestheticality among individuals, with higher degrees of the trait leading to higher levels of disordered and distorted body image perceptions. Elsewhere, Veale (2004) refines this theory to describe the self as an object of aesthetic scrutiny. In this case, extreme levels of attention to detail in relation to the face and body could lead to a distorted self-image. This aesthetic judgement of oneself is said to be activated by external ideals surrounding the importance of an individual's appearance (Veale, 2004). If this is extrapolated to an aesthetic sport context, there is a direct link between the perceived aesthetic significance of how an athlete looks, and the increasingly negative self-perception that often results. In the sporting world, the aesthetic athlete is not only judged on their body, but they tend to be rewarded both with praise and higher scores if they approach the implied extreme standard. The institution of sport introduces an outcome of winning and losing to one's own conceptual body image, which implicates aesthetic judgement as a matter not of what one prefers, but of what is considered *best* (Holt, 2020).

One of the unintended consequences of the winning mentality in aesthetic sports is the concept that "thin is going to win" (Krentz & Warschburger, 2011, p. 308). According to Krentz and Warschburger (2011), the most prominent determinant of disordered eating and altered body image in aesthetic athletes is the desire to improve sport performance and sport capabilities by being leaner. It is interesting that this possibility of enhancing athletic performance was found to be stronger than more direct social pressure on the athletes. Logically, if an athlete is seeing leaner individuals getting rewarded in sport, it makes sense that they would want to attain a similar look. It is known that athletes tend to compare themselves to who they believe are their superior others—peers who are above their skill level or who are having more success (Vani et al., 2020). The fact is, many aesthetic sports do require a thinner body to be more successful in achieving the necessary flexibility and movement patterns for the sport (Krentz & Warschburger, 2011). The problem arises when athletes believe they must take excessive or even extreme measures to reach those body standards and, consequently, end up idealizing a much smaller body than is necessary or healthy to reach. There is a fine line between needing a certain level of athleticism to find success in a sport and believing that the only way this can be attained is by fetishizing a physique that is as thin as possible. In the documentary *Disorder*, the scary truth was revealed when an eating disorder specialized psychologist stated that "what makes a great athlete actually makes an eating disorder patient" (TSN, 2020). The perfectionistic and all-or-nothing tendencies of athletes, noted particularly in aesthetic sports, can actually be quite harmful when experienced in extremes. Because of this fact, the 1-5% of the general population that has an eating disorder can be observed at an alarming rate of up to 30% in many body-focused elite sports (TSN, 2020). The aesthetic bias toward a thinner body creates an exclusion of other possible body types that could also achieve success, a preclusion of a phenomenon known as "multiple realizability" (Holt, 2020, p. 70). For example, a stockier, more muscular individual may in principle be able to achieve massive success when practicing an aesthetic sport, but the lack of long, clean lines created by their body may not be considered beautiful by conventional aesthetic standards in general or in the sport itself. Realistically, only about 1 in 40,000 women fit into the prescribed model requirements, indicating that the propagated female body ideal is almost impossible to even obtain (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). It may be difficult to root out these inherent biases altogether, although it should be possible to start changing the conversation to minimize the damage they cause.

Questions of Gender

In considering body image ideals, it is imperative to address existing gender differences. As reinforced by the media, the lean and muscular ideal is considered more masculine, and thus creates a consistency between the athletic and cultural ideals for males (Holt, 2020). For females, however, body ideals are much more complex. Although the male athlete will indeed have struggles of his own, the female athlete may experience more unequal cultural and social pressures (Monaghan & Malson, 2013). In terms of size, there is a socially accepted standard of bodily "bigness" that exists for males but not for females (Monaghan & Malson, 2013). Men are more often considered "big" rather than "fat," whereas women do not experience this same inclusivity. This concept of "bigness" for males is often associated with masculinity and the ability to take care of oneself and others, and although it differs greatly from the lean/muscular sporting ideal, it proves that there is a greater variety in socially acceptable body types for males. In the media, women are portrayed as thin but curvy, with emphasis on the chest and hips. Women are taught that they should be petite (Monaghan & Malson, 2013), and from a young age are subject to the

sexualized male gaze (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This body type, however, diverges in some respects significantly from lean and muscular athletic ideals (Holt, 2020). In some cases, female athletes reported a fear of becoming excessively muscular because they did not want to be seen by society as too masculine (Howells & Grogan, 2012). Although having an athletic body is beneficial in the sporting context, it is less appreciated socially and culturally in certain respects. However, having a curvy body may get social and cultural acceptance at the expense of athletic performance. The resulting dissonance creates a constant battle in the female athlete's mind, leaving them confused and unhappy regardless of the body type they possess. For female aesthetic athletes who desire the lean and linear figure prescribed by their sport, growing into female secondary sex characteristics can be disheartening and lead to unhealthy perceptions of their body (Gay et al., 2011). According to Gay et al. (2011), female athletes in individual aesthetic sports rated the highest on social physique anxiety compared to other sport groups. This directly stems from messages from judges, coaches, teammates, parents, and peers who emphasize ideals of thinness that cannot match their growing bodies. It is widely noted that pressure and messages from coaches can have a significant impact on an athlete's mental health (Kong & Harris, 2015). Since an athlete's environment plays a key role in their success in sport, the words exchanged here between coaches and athletes are of considerable weight (TSN, 2020). The higher levels of social physique anxiety found were related to an increased risk of developing disordered eating behaviour and, consequently, dropping out from sport (Gay et al., 2011). Further, in leanness-focused sports, including aesthetic sports, the rates of eating disorders are significantly increased (Kong & Harris, 2015).

This discussion, however, should not exclude male athletes. Voelker and Reel (2018) explored weight-related pressures in male aesthetic athlete experience and found that while some males in these sports are happy with their athletic bodies, many men are also hard on themselves for not achieving the "correct" look. Men tended to idealize being lean but muscular and deceptively strong (Voelker & Reel, 2018). In some cases, an unattainable muscular standard for men can lead to steroid use (Calzo et al., 2013), and magazines such as *Men's Health* can promote a false reality that it is the responsibility of the "healthy" male to maintain this aesthetically pleasing body (Crawshaw, 2007). Overall, though, men seemed to be more afraid of losing weight than gaining weight, and many, in fact, attributed positive self-image to their participation in aesthetic sport, a finding that is not replicated for females (Voelker & Reel, 2018).

Toward a Solution

There is ample evidence to support the presence of significant aesthetic bias in certain aesthetic sports, and the negative effects it can have on athletes' body image. Coming back to our guiding question, however, why are athletes subject to this in some aesthetic sports? Our answer to this question is threefold: first, the thinness ideal does seem to be beneficial to some aspects of aesthetic sport performance, though not to the harmful extent it often reaches. Second, the thinness ideal is magnified and complicated by social and cultural standards outside the sport. And third, the major societal shift that would be necessary to change people's inherent aesthetic biases means that these biases can still largely affect one's judgement, both inside and outside the sport arena, even if it is at a largely subconscious level.

Our second question was one of how we as participants, parents, coaches, or more broadly, administration, can work toward overcoming these biases. Part of the answer involves changing the attitudes of participants in these sports by integrating mentally beneficial standards into

sporting programs. Bar et al. (2017) followed ballet students after an eating disorder prevention program was put in place, and found that dancers following the program had lower lifetime rates of throwing up to control their weight than those who lacked the intervention. Though intervention programs appear to be effective, the fact that they are needed in the first place indicates an inherent problem with the aesthetic sport/dance system. In our opinion, it would be more effective to create positive growing environments for aesthetic athletes, engaging in positive talk and open, healthy discussions about food and weight. If coaches engage in "body-talk"—a body-focused type of language—they may be perpetuating the idea that there are only certain bodies that should belong in sport (Vani et al., 2020). By restructuring the language used, feedback can be given based on ability and strength, rather than the appearance of the body (TSN, 2020). Some institutions such as Skate Canada are already attempting to make these changes now that many figure skaters have come forward with their own stories concerning body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders (TSN, 2020). It is true that most coaches do not have training that includes eating disorder expertise and should not be giving their athletes advice in this regard. However, providing resources for athletes and having a safe space for difficult conversations in sport culture may be crucial to athlete wellbeing (TSN, 2020). The athlete should not feel they must meet unrealistic and potentially unhealthy body standards that are placed on them by the overarching biases in their aesthetic sport institutions and practices.

Beyond changing the attitudes of participants, an alternative would be altering the nature of aesthetic sports themselves, having them evolve in positive ways reflected both in the practices of aesthetic sport athletes and in the institutions overarching these sports. It may be hard to envision such a utopia clearly, but certain desirable elements may be outlined. We might imagine the rules and implicit norms of aesthetic sports that are currently problematic being adapted to place less emphasis on those aspects of performance that reward *extreme* thinness as a fetishized ideal, perhaps with corresponding allowance for, at least within a certain range, a greater variety of physiques. This would ultimately require a principled change in aesthetic taste and judgment, which currently and paradoxically punishes athletes by rewarding them at unhealthy extremes. Instead of fetishizing unhealthy extremes, these should be discouraged in the subcultures and under the suitably modified rules of aesthetic sports. These interventions can be guided by the principle that aesthetic standards should be subordinated to prioritizing athletes' health and wellbeing. Here we agree with Rice (2007) who suggests a "body equity" approach that promotes inclusivity of many body types and ultimately enhances body image (p. 171). Aesthetics might be rooted in nature, but it is cultivated in culture and remains alterable by design, especially in domains like aesthetic sports where judgment is standardized for scoring purposes.

In conclusion, aesthetic sports may provide an outlet or opportunity for enjoyment and activity for athletes, yet there are some underlying physique-related biases present that need to be acknowledged and reduced. While *exercise* in itself is known to have a positive effect on body image, the implications of *sport* do not provide this same benefit (Howells & Grogan, 2012). Although one of the present authors valued their time as a figure skater, the environment provided many mental challenges that we believe should not have been a factor in anyone's participation in that or any sport. Young athletes are raised to train in a competitive social environment (Kong & Harris, 2015), not simply a sporting one. It is for this reason that the safety of athletes should be guaranteed not only physically, but also mentally. This is not going to change overnight. However, the evidence and argument presented illustrates the importance of understanding how aesthetic bias can operate in what appears to be objective aesthetic judgement, and hopefully, the discussion that follows will inspire action to decrease the negative effects of such bias in future incarnations

of these sports. When an athlete is healthy and *feels* good, they perform better—and this should be the ultimate goal in well-designed sports. If we think of sport generally as already living up to these ideals, why is it that so many people are so surprised—almost apoplectically shocked—when someone "unathletic"-looking performs an act of great skill and athletic prowess? Beyond the above gesture toward a solution, what would currently problematic aesthetic sports look like in an ideal world?

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