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Research

PERCEPTION AND UNDERSTANDING OF MERANAW MARRIED WOMEN ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: AN EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Background: Violence against women (VAW) remains a persistent issue shaped by intersecting social, cultural, and religious factors. Among the Meranaw, perceptions of VAW are deeply influenced by Islamic values, patriarchal traditions, and the cultural construct of *maratabat* (honor), which collectively inform how women recognize and respond to abuse.

Methods: An exploratory–descriptive qualitative design was used involving twenty-two (22) Meranaw married women from Marawi City. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between August and September 2025 and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework. Ethical approval was secured from the Mindanao State University Research Ethics Committee (REC Code: 2025-019).

Results: Three major themes emerged: (1) Broad and Contextualized Understandings of VAW) participants perceived violence not only as physical harm but also as emotional, verbal, and economic abuse situated within marital and social expectations; (2) Religion and Culture as Lenses of Meaning)—Islamic principles were interpreted through patriarchal norms, often promoting endurance and silence to preserve family honor; and (3) Awareness of Abuse Typologies)—while women recognized multiple forms of abuse, many normalized psychological and economic control as part of marital duty.

Conclusion: VAW among Meranaw women is rooted in intertwined religious, cultural, and socio-economic structures. Addressing it requires culturally attuned, faith-sensitive interventions that promote women's empowerment and reinterpret faith in support of equality and justice.

Keywords: Violence against women; Meranaw married women; Religion and culture; Abuse typologie, BARMM

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women (VAW) remains a pervasive global issue that transcends cultural and socio-economic boundaries. The World Health Organization (2021) estimates that one in three women worldwide experiences physical and/or sexual violence, predominantly from intimate partners. Beyond immediate harm, VAW inflicts long-term psychological trauma, restricts women's social participation, and undermines economic stability.

In the Philippines, despite progressive legal frameworks, VAW persists as a public health and human rights concern. The 2022 National Demographic and Health Survey reported that 17.5% of Filipino women aged 15–49 have experienced intimate partner violence (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). However, cultural and religious beliefs continue to shape women's perceptions and responses to such experiences (Alexander, 2020). Within the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), the issue is further complicated by underreporting—only 5.6% of women disclosed intimate partner violence, a figure likely reflecting strong social stigma and communal taboos against public disclosure (Bangsamoro Women Commission, 2025; Philippine Information Agency, 2023). Although mechanisms such as Barangay VAW Desks exist, access and functionality remain inconsistent across communities (Bangsamoro Women Commission, 2025).

Among the Meranaw, one of the largest Muslim ethnolinguistic groups in BARMM, cultural and religious norms deeply influence marital roles and gender relations. While Islamic teachings uphold respect and justice for women, patriarchal interpretations interwoven with clan traditions may inadvertently normalize control or abuse. Consequently, subtle forms of violence—psychological, emotional, or economic—often go unrecognized as violations (Seid-Mekiye & Kreitzer, 2021). Societal expectations tied to maratabat (honor) further deter women from seeking help due to fear of shame or family dishonor (Balahadia et al., 2022).

Despite the enactment of Republic Act No. 9262, the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act of 2004, gaps in awareness, recognition, and reporting persist, particularly in traditional Muslim communities. Previous studies on VAW in the Philippines have largely focused on quantitative or policy analyses, leaving limited qualitative inquiry into the cultural and religious dimensions of violence in BARMM (Gee, 2016). This study addresses this gap by exploring how Meranaw married women perceive and interpret violence within their sociocultural and religious contexts. Through qualitative interviews, it seeks to illuminate how cultural beliefs, religious teachings, and lived experiences shape their understanding and responses to VAW. Findings aim to inform culturally grounded interventions and policies that empower Meranaw women and strengthen community-based mechanisms toward a VAW-free BARMM.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed an exploratory–descriptive qualitative design to examine how Meranaw married women perceive and interpret violence against women (VAW) within their cultural and religious contexts. This approach was appropriate for exploring an underexamined phenomenon where limited prior research exists, allowing the researcher to uncover meanings, beliefs, and interpretations rather than measure frequency (Babbie, 2021).

The design emphasized understanding participants' lived experiences and interpretations, providing insight into how Meranaw women conceptualize various forms of violence—physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, and economic and how these perceptions are shaped by cultural expectations, gender norms, and Islamic principles (Patton, 2015). By privileging participants' voices, the study illuminated how certain behaviors are recognized, rationalized, or normalized within the Meranaw sociocultural framework.

Locale

The study was conducted in Marawi City, Lanao del Sur—the cultural, educational, and spiritual center of the Meranaw people, one of the largest Muslim ethnolinguistic groups in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Recognized as the Islamic City of the Philippines, Marawi is deeply shaped by Islamic faith, customary law (adat), and kinship-based social structures that influence gender relations and community life.

Within this sociocultural setting, values such as maratabat (*honor*), *sabar* (patience), and *qadar* Allah (divine will) strongly inform women's perceptions of marriage and conflict (Sultana et al., 2022). While these values promote harmony and moral integrity, they may also contribute to the normalization of silence or endurance in the face of abuse, framing certain forms of violence as private or acceptable within familial and religious contexts.

Population and Sampling Method

The study involved 22 Meranaw married women from Marawi City who were at least 18 years old, of Meranaw ethnicity, married to Meranaw men, and in marriage for at least five years. These criteria ensured participants had adequate marital and cultural experience to provide meaningful insights into Violence Against Women (VAW). A purposive sampling technique was used to intentionally select women with relevant lived experiences, aligning with the study's qualitative and culturally grounded focus (Etikan & Bala, 2023; Gentles et al., 2022). This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of how Islamic beliefs, traditional norms, and gender expectations shape Meranaw women's perceptions of VAW.

Instrument, Validity and Reliability

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed to elicit Meranaw married women's perceptions and understanding of Violence Against Women (VAW). Individual in-depth interviews were conducted to ensure privacy and create a safe space for discussing sensitive and personal experiences (Etikan & Bala, 2023).

Rigor and trustworthiness were established through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, member checking, and researcher reflexivity. The researcher's shared Meranaw background fostered trust, while participant validation ensured accurate representation of perspectives (Aguirre & Bolton, 2022). These measures upheld methodological integrity and strengthened the authenticity of findings (Nowell & Norris, 2023).

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were collected over three months (August–September 2025) through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 22 Meranaw married women. This method enabled participants to share their perceptions of Violence Against Women (VAW) in a confidential and culturally sensitive setting. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Mindanao State University Research Ethics Committee (REC Code: 2025-019), ensuring adherence to ethical standards of confidentiality, informed consent, and participant well-being.

Prior permission and endorsement were secured from local leaders and religious authorities to maintain cultural appropriateness and foster community trust. Each participant provided written informed consent and was briefed on voluntary participation and confidentiality. Interviews, lasting 60–90 minutes, followed an open-ended guide exploring perceptions of physical, emotional, and economic abuse, as well as cultural and religious interpretations of marriage.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Data collection continued until saturation was reached when no new themes emerged confirming the adequacy and representativeness of the data.

Methods of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis, which offers a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed alongside audio recordings to preserve linguistic and emotional nuances (Castleberry & Nolen, 2021). Each transcript was anonymized using participant codes to ensure confidentiality.

Coding followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. A coding framework was developed around four core areas—perceptions and definitions of Violence Against Women (VAW), types of abuse, coping and empowerment strategies, and barriers to help-seeking.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail to ensure that the themes authentically reflected participants' perspectives (Nowell & Norris, 2023). This analytic process yielded a culturally grounded understanding of how Meranaw married women interpret and respond to VAW within their socioreligious context.

Ethical Consideration

The study adhered to established ethical standards to safeguard participants' rights, dignity, and well-being. Ethical clearance was granted by the Mindanao State University Research Ethics Committee (REC Code: 2025-019), ensuring compliance with institutional, national, and international guidelines for research involving human participants.

Given the sensitivity of Violence Against Women (VAW) as a research topic, particular care was taken to minimize psychological risk and uphold confidentiality. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants after a thorough explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without repercussions, consistent with the principle of autonomy and the World Health Organization's (2021) ethical guidelines for gender-based violence research.

RESULTS

Table 1
Profile and Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Participant	Socioeconomic Category	Educational / Occupational Background	Years Married / No. of Children	Notable Description
Raima	Low income	College graduate, housewife	10 years / 6 children	Family supported by in-laws
Ana	Low income	Elementary graduate, housewife	9 years / 4 children	Dependent on family support
Aisah	Low income	Ustadh (Arabic teacher)	5 years / 8 children	Religious educator, limited income
Hamida	Low income	Undergraduate, housewife	10 years / 5 children	Financially dependent on spouse
Naira	Low income	College graduate, housewife	5 years / 3 children	Supported by family
Sumaida	Low income	College graduate, housewife	8 years / 5 children	Supported by in-laws
Ara	Middle income	DepEd teacher	13 years / 4 children	Professionally employed
Hanna	Middle income	College graduate, NGO worker	5 years / 2 children	Balances work and family
Johana	Middle income	College graduate, NGO worker	9 years / 3 children	Dual role: caregiver and worker
Nami	Middle income	College graduate, NGO worker	11 years / 1 child	Working mother
Nur	Middle income	College graduate, NGO worker	14 years / 3 children	Active in community work
Raida	Middle income	College graduate, businesswoman	6 years / 2 children	Entrepreneurial role
Mickey	Middle income	College graduate, office worker	5 years / 1 child	Urban employed woman
Rema	Middle income	College graduate, office worker	8 years / 4 children	Balances family and career
Participant	**Socioeconomic Category**	**Educational / Occupational Background**	**Years Married / No. of Children**	**Notable Description**

Baida	Middle income	College graduate, staff nurse	8 years / 3 children	Healthcare professional
Yasmin	Middle income	College graduate, government employee	16 years / 2 children	Stable government worker
Raini	Middle income	Arabic teacher (Ustadh)	20 years / 9 children	Long-term marital experience
Fatima	High income	Lawyer, government employee	17 years / 3 children	Professional in public service
Lablab	High income	College faculty	5 years / 2 children	Academic professional
Nimay	High income	College faculty	8 years / 1 child	Higher education professional
Hayya	High income	Professor, Arabic teacher	11 years / 2 children	Academic and religious educator
Daya	High income	Assistant Executive Director, NGO	7 years / none	Career-oriented leader

Note. Data reflect participants' self-reported socioeconomic, educational, and familial profiles during the interview period.

The participants of this study consisted of twenty-two (22) Meranaw married women residing in Marawi City. They represented a diverse range of socioeconomic, educational, and occupational backgrounds, which provided rich contextual insights into how cultural, religious, and economic factors shape the perceptions, recognition, and responses of Meranaw women toward Violence Against Women (VAW). The participants' ages, lengths of marriage, family sizes, and employment status varied, reflecting the multifaceted nature of women's experiences in Meranaw society.

The results are presented according to three major thematic domains that emerged from the data analysis: (1) Broad and Contextualized Understandings of VAW; (2) Religion and Culture as Lenses of Meaning; (3) Theme 3: Awareness of Abuse Typologies.

Theme 1: Broad and Contextualized Understandings of VAW

This theme captures how Meranaw married women perceive violence against women through a multidimensional lens that extends beyond physical aggression. Participants consistently emphasized that VAW includes psychological, emotional, economic, and cultural forms of harm that threaten a woman's dignity, security, and self-worth. Within the Meranaw worldview, violence is intricately linked to maratabat—a deeply rooted cultural value signifying honor, dignity, and respect—making any form of abuse not only a personal violation but also a communal affront.

The participants' accounts further illustrate how educational background, social awareness, and life stage influence their conceptualizations of violence. Women with higher education or exposure to advocacy and community programs tended to define violence more broadly, recognizing emotional and economic abuse as serious issues, while those with limited education or traditional upbringings were more likely to associate violence primarily with physical acts. Collectively, these insights underscore that the Meranaw understanding of VAW is shaped not only by gender and culture but also by access to education, generational perspectives, and moral interpretations of respect and harm.

Participants expressed an expanded conceptualization of violence, challenging conventional understandings that equate abuse solely with physical harm. As Participant 7, Lablab, explained:
Participant 7, Lablab, reflected this perspective clearly when she stated,

> *"For me, simple disrespect for a woman can be considered violence against her. Psychological violence is harder to cure than physical violence. In our context as Meranaws, psychological violence is more common here than physical violence. – Lablab*

Her insight reflects how non-physical forms of violence—such as verbal insults or emotional neglect—are normalized within marital life yet deeply wounding. Similarly, Ara (Participant 2) highlighted the gendered nature of household labor, stating:

> *"When a woman struggles with household chores and her husband doesn't help, that's also a form of violence because household work isn't just for women."*

Such accounts reveal that the unequal division of domestic work, often justified by cultural norms, is perceived as a subtle form of structural violence. Economic deprivation also emerged as a key dimension. Aisah (Participant 12) noted, "*One form of violence that often goes unnoticed is not providing financial support for the children,"* underscoring how financial neglect constrains women's agency and perpetuates dependence.

Cultural practices, particularly unannounced polygamy, were also viewed as emotionally violent. Lablab described, *"When men marry a second or third time without informing their wives, that can cause severe psychological trauma."* Such practices, though socially tolerated, were interpreted by participants as violations of emotional fidelity and respect.

Beyond individual suffering, participants framed violence as a violation of *maratabat*—the moral fabric that upholds dignity and family honor. As *Hanna* (Participant 4) articulated:

> *"In the context of Meranaw, using hurtful and abusive words is a major form of violence against women, because in Islam and Meranaw, women are highly respected and valued in every aspect."*

This perspective illustrates that verbal and emotional harm extends beyond the self, tarnishing the collective reputation of the family and community. *Daya* (Participant 22) affirmed this communal view, noting that *"when a woman suffers violence, it is not only an attack on her but also on her family's honor and the community's sense of respect."* In a society where identity is collective, public humiliation or disrespect disrupts not only personal dignity but also the social balance rooted in *maratabat*.

Education and social exposure significantly influenced how participants interpreted and responded to violence. Women with higher educational attainment demonstrated broader awareness of VAW typologies and a stronger inclination toward self-advocacy. As Lablab (Participant 7) reflected:

> *"The higher your educational attainment, the more you will recognize and understand gender-based violence. Less educational attainment usually correlates with low self-esteem—they don't value their self-worth that much."*

Similarly, Naira (Participant 16) emphasized the empowering role of awareness, stating, "*Today, increased awareness enables most women to clearly recognize what violence in a marriage is… this awareness strengthens my personal view not to allow any form of abuse."*

Collectively, these narratives underscore that Meranaw women's understanding of VAW is deeply contextualized by cultural values, moral expectations, and educational exposure. Interpreted through Heise's ecological lens, violence is sustained by patriarchal norms and societal acceptance. From Leininger's perspective, culturally congruent interventions must honor Meranaw values while confronting harmful traditions. Meanwhile, Gelles' resource theory highlights that education and economic independence serve as protective factors that reduce vulnerability to abuse.

Theme 2: Religion and Culture as Lenses of Meaning

Religion and culture emerged as interwoven forces shaping how Meranaw married women perceive and interpret VAW. Participants described Islam as both a spiritual guide and moral safeguard that upholds women's dignity, while simultaneously recognizing that patriarchal interpretations of religion and cultural traditions can distort these teachings to justify control or silence.

Several participants affirmed that Islam, when rightly understood, promotes compassion, justice, and equality between spouses. Fatima (Participant 3), a lawyer and government employee, stated:

> *"Islam being a complete way of life gives woman full respect and protection of her rights. The rights of women are expressed in the Quran and Hadiths."*

Her reflection represents a broader view among educated Meranaw women who consider Islamic principles as inherently protective, offering women both moral dignity and social rights within marriage.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that cultural and patriarchal distortions of Islamic teachings perpetuate inequality. Lablab (Participant 7) noted:

> *"There are misconceptions about our religious beliefs that cause GBV. Like… 'you will only get into heaven if you are obedient to your husband.' Misconceptions like those can cause violence for women as they can be manipulated".*

Similarly, Hayya (Participant 9) remarked, *"The duty of a woman to obey her husband… sometimes it becomes normal even though it is referred to as emotional violence."* These statements highlight how religious rhetoric can be co-opted to normalize control and silence, masking emotional or psychological harm as religious duty.

Conversely, participants who had undergone religious education recognized Islam's authentic emphasis on equality. Nimay (Participant 8) aptly summarized: *"Religion can either support or silence women facing abuse, depending on how it's understood and taught."* She and others stressed that accurate religious understanding fosters empowerment rather than submission.
Cultural principles such as *maratabat* (honor) and *kaya* (shame) emerged as powerful moral regulators defining what constitutes harm and respect in marital life. Violence was thus understood not only as a personal offense but as any behavior that dishonors a woman or her family, diminishing moral worth. While Islam and Meranaw culture together uphold respect and restraint, patriarchal practices have, at times, distorted these ideals to justify women's endurance and silence.

Overall, this theme underscores that religion and culture serve as both protective and constraining lenses, affirming women's rights in principle yet at times perpetuating their subordination in practice.

Theme 3: Awareness of Abuse Typologies

Physical abuse emerged as one of the most overt and recognizable forms of violence identified by the Meranaw married women in this study. Participants consistently described visible harm, such as bruises, cuts, or injuries, alongside the pervasive fear these injuries instilled, shaping their day-to-day behaviors and interactions.

Hanna (Participant 4) emphasized: *"Physically, it can be beating, slapping and hurting… you may notice bruises on her body".* This statement highlights the dual impact of physical abuse—not only the immediate bodily harm but also the emotional consequences that often accompany these acts.

Similarly, Nimay (Participant 8) described the subtle indicators of abuse that manifest through behavioral changes: "*Unexplained bruises, cuts, or injuries… Fearfulness or nervousness around the husband… always asking for permission or approval before speaking*."

Emotional abuse emerged as a subtle yet pervasive form of violence that profoundly affects the psychological well-being and self-perception of Meranaw married women. Participants described a range of emotionally abusive behaviors, including constant criticism, humiliation, threats, intimidation, and silent treatment, which collectively eroded their sense of self-worth and agency.

Johana (Participant 5) explained, "*Emotional abuse shows up when a woman is always insulted, blamed, or made to feel small,"* highlighting how persistent verbal and non-verbal actions can diminish a woman's confidence and sense of dignity.

Ana (Participant 11) illustrated the insidious nature of neglect and emotional unavailability: "*When your husband ignores you no matter what concerns you express... when you are exhausted from household work, and when he stays silent whenever you speak, you are being neglected.* Such neglect, combined with ongoing criticism, communicates devaluation, fostering feelings of powerlessness and emotional dependency.

Economic abuse emerged as a significant form of control within Meranaw marital relationships, restricting women's autonomy and ability to make independent decisions. Participants highlighted various manifestations of economic abuse, from the denial of financial support to restrictions on employment, which collectively entrenched dependence on husbands and limited women's capacity to protect themselves or their families.

Fatima (Participant 3) explained: *"Economic abuse arises whenever the wife is deprived of financial support from her husband... an obligation hence mandatory for the man to give her wife all her necessary expenses,"* underscoring that financial provision is not merely a preference but a culturally and religiously reinforced expectation in marital obligations.

Taken together, the three themes reveal that Meranaw married women conceptualize violence as a moral, relational, and cultural violation rather than merely a physical act. Their understandings are shaped by intersecting influences of education, religion, and cultural values particularly *maratabat*. Violence against women, in this context, is viewed as both a personal affront and a collective breach of moral order. Addressing it thus requires culturally sensitive interventions that integrate Islamic ethics, community honor, and women's empowerment.

DISCUSSION

The present findings reveal that religion and culture serve as both protective and constraining forces in shaping women's perceptions of violence against women (VAW). While Islamic teachings emphasize respect, compassion, and justice toward women, patriarchal interpretations often distort these values, normalizing obedience and endurance in abusive relationships. Similar to the observations of Rahman et al. (2022) and Abdullah et al. (2023), these results demonstrate how gendered interpretations of religious texts perpetuate inequality and silence among women in Muslim communities. In the Maranao context, religiously sanctioned but socially insensitive practices, such as non-transparent polygamy, were experienced as emotional betrayal, reflecting violations of culturally embedded expectations of fairness and respect. Consistent with Leininger's Culture Care Theory, these findings highlight that cultural practices, though accepted, can become harmful when they breach moral and relational boundaries (Al-Dossary, 2022; Almutairi & McCarthy, 2023).

Economic dependency further exacerbates women's vulnerability, as control over financial resources limits their capacity to resist or leave abusive circumstances. The study aligns with recent research identifying economic abuse—manifested through financial restriction, employment control, or deprivation of basic needs—as an underrecognized yet pervasive form of domestic violence (Fawole et al., 2022; Yount et al., 2023). These dynamics mirror broader patterns across patriarchal and collectivist societies, where men's economic dominance reinforces power imbalances and perpetuates cycles of abuse (Evans et al., 2021; Patel & Khan, 2022). In this context, women's silence is not merely compliance but a survival strategy within socio-religious systems that intertwine dependence with moral obligation.

The notion of maratabat (honor) also emerged as a central theme, symbolizing the moral and social dimensions of violence. Similar to findings by Al-Adawi and Ismail (2021) and Mendoza and Natividad (2022), violations such as verbal denigration or public humiliation were perceived as moral wounds, reflecting not only personal harm but communal shame. This underscores that violence, within this cultural frame, transcends physical acts—it is a disruption of social balance, respect, and dignity. Education, however, was identified as a transformative factor. Consistent with Alvarez and Reyes (2022) and Rahman et al. (2023), the study found that higher educational attainment enhances women's recognition of non-physical abuse and strengthens their agency to reinterpret religious teachings toward compassion and equality (Al-Darmaki, 2021).

Finally, physical abuse remains the most visible yet socially normalized manifestation of violence, often coexisting with economic and psychological control. Women's coping behaviors—concealment of injuries, seeking permission before speaking, and social withdrawal—reflect adaptive responses to constrained autonomy. Similar findings from Southeast Asian contexts reveal that fear and behavioral compliance are entrenched coping mechanisms within patriarchal environments (Hossain et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2022). Moreover, as Nguyen et al. (2023) emphasized, physical injuries frequently conceal deeper emotional trauma, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive, trauma-informed interventions that address both the visible and invisible dimensions of abuse.

CONCLUSION

This study illuminated how Meranaw married women perceive and understand Violence Against Women (VAW) within their cultural and religious contexts. The findings revealed that while Islamic teachings advocate respect and equity, sociocultural norms such as *maratabat* (honor), *sabar* (patience), and communal expectations often shape women's acceptance, silence, or reinterpretation of abusive experiences. These insights underscore the importance of culturally sensitive and faith-informed approaches in addressing VAW in traditional Muslim communities.

By grounding the discussion in the lived realities of Meranaw women, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how gender, culture, and religion intersect in shaping women's perceptions and responses to violence. The results call for strengthening culturally appropriate advocacy, legal awareness, and psychosocial support systems in the Bangsamoro region. Future research should expand this inquiry to include men's perspectives and community leaders' roles in transforming local norms that perpetuate silence around violence.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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