

An Analysis of Figurative Language in the Album Nicole by NIKI

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the types and meanings of figurative language used in NIKI's album Nicole and to explain how figurative expressions contribute to the interpretation of song lyrics. The research employed a descriptive qualitative design using document analysis as the main method. The data consisted of song lyrics taken from 12 tracks in the album Nicole. Data collection was conducted by listening to the songs repeatedly and examining the official lyrics to ensure accurate interpretation. The analysis was guided by Perrine's theory to identify and classify types of figurative language, while Leech's theory of meaning was applied to interpret the semantic meanings conveyed in the lyrics. The findings reveal that the album contains six dominant types of figurative language, namely metaphor, personification, symbol, hyperbole, irony, and allusion. Among these, metaphor was found to be the most frequently used type. The use of figurative language allows the songwriter to express abstract emotions and complex experiences in a more vivid and engaging way. Through figurative expressions, the lyrics portray themes of love, heartbreak, nostalgia, and personal growth, reflecting emotional struggles and life transitions commonly experienced by young adults. Furthermore, the analysis shows that figurative language enhances the emotional depth of the songs by conveying connotative, affective, collocative, thematic, and reflected meanings. These meanings help listeners connect the lyrics with their own personal experiences, making the songs more relatable and meaningful. The findings suggest that figurative language is not merely decorative but plays a crucial role in constructing meaning and emotional impact in song lyrics. This study contributes to the field of linguistics and literary studies by demonstrating how semantic and stylistic analysis can deepen the understanding of meaning in contemporary music. It also provides useful insights for students and researchers interested in figurative language, semantics, and popular song lyrics.

Keywords: Figurative Language; Nicole

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Introduction

This study focuses on analyzing the types and meanings of figurative language used in song lyrics, with particular attention to NIKI's album Nicole. Figurative language is a fundamental element of artistic expression that allows writers and musicians to communicate emotions, experiences, and abstract ideas indirectly yet powerfully. In contemporary popular music, lyrics serve as the primary medium through which songwriters construct personal narratives and express emotional states. As popular music increasingly functions as a global cultural product, the linguistic study of song lyrics becomes important for understanding how meaning is constructed and how listeners engage emotionally with musical texts (Moore, 2016; Tagg, 2019).

Recent developments in stylistics and discourse studies emphasize that language style is not merely decorative but plays a central role in shaping interpretation and emotional response. Jeffries and McIntyre (2018) argue that stylistic choices influence how audiences perceive meaning by guiding attention, emotion, and perspective. In song lyrics, figurative language such as metaphor, personification, symbolism, and hyperbole enables songwriters to represent complex emotional experiences in concrete and relatable forms. These figurative devices help translate internal feelings, such as love, heartbreak, longing, and self-reflection, into linguistic expressions that resonate with listeners across cultural contexts (Kövecses, 2020; Stockwell, 2020).

From a linguistic perspective, figurative language is closely connected to semantics and pragmatics, particularly in the interpretation of non-literal meaning. Contemporary semantic theory emphasizes that meaning is not fixed within words but emerges through interaction between language, context, and emotional association (Cruse, 2018; Hurford et al., 2022). In song lyrics, meaning is often implied rather than explicitly stated, requiring listeners to interpret figurative expressions based on personal experience and cultural knowledge. This makes semantic analysis essential for uncovering how figurative language contributes to emotional depth and interpretative richness in music (Radden & Dirven, 2017).

A growing body of recent research has examined figurative language in song lyrics and confirmed its importance in meaning construction. Wang and Zhang (2023) found that metaphors and symbols in English pop songs play a key role in expressing emotional intimacy and personal vulnerability. Similarly, Zhang (2021) demonstrated that figurative language allows song lyrics to remain open to multiple interpretations, which strengthens listener identification and emotional engagement. Research by Liu and Liu (2021) also shows that figurative expressions significantly enhance emotional involvement by encouraging listeners to connect lyrics with their own life experiences. Album-based studies further highlight the importance of examining figurative language beyond individual songs. Burns (2019) argues that albums often function as coherent narratives, where recurring figurative patterns contribute to thematic unity and emotional progression. Stern (2019) supports this view by suggesting that popular music albums frequently tell emotional stories across tracks, using figurative language to connect past experiences, present emotions, and future reflection. These perspectives indicate that analyzing figurative language at the album level provides deeper insight into how meaning is developed and sustained.

Despite this growing interest, most existing studies still focus on Western artists or analyze figurative language in selected songs rather than complete albums. Research on contemporary Asian musicians who produce English-language music remains relatively limited. This gap is particularly notable given the increasing global visibility of Asian artists in the international music industry (Oh & Lee, 2020). NIKI, an Indonesian singer-songwriter with global recognition, represents a valuable case for linguistic analysis. Her album *Nicole* presents reflective lyrics that explore themes of love, heartbreak, memory, identity, and personal growth through emotionally nuanced language. Although *Nicole* has received significant public attention, scholarly analysis of its figurative language and semantic meanings is still scarce. Existing studies rarely integrate figurative language classification with semantic interpretation to explain how emotional meaning is constructed across an entire album. According to Semino (2017), combining figurative analysis with semantic interpretation allows researchers to move beyond surface description and examine how language shapes emotional experience and narrative coherence. This integrated approach is particularly relevant for music lyrics, where emotional meaning is central.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on a contemporary Asian pop album analyzed through a comprehensive linguistic framework. By integrating Perrine's figurative language classification with semantic interpretation informed by recent linguistic theory, this research does not merely identify figurative expressions but explains how their meanings contribute to emotional interpretation and narrative unity across the album. This approach responds to recent calls in stylistics and discourse studies for holistic and context-sensitive analysis of artistic texts (Toolan, 2018; Simpson, 2019). Analyzing figurative language in NIKI's *Nicole* album is important for understanding how language style and meaning interact in contemporary music. This study contributes to linguistic and literary research by expanding the scope of figurative language analysis to include full-album interpretation and non-Western artists within global popular music discourse. By doing so, it highlights the role of figurative language in enhancing emotional expression, listener engagement, and narrative depth in modern song lyrics.

Literature Review

Figurative language has been extensively examined in studies of song lyrics because of its crucial role in expressing emotions and constructing layered meanings. Recent research in stylistics and cognitive linguistics agrees that figurative expressions such as metaphor, personification, symbolism, and hyperbole enable songwriters to communicate abstract emotions and personal experiences in more

vivid and engaging ways (Kövecses, 2020; Stockwell, 2020). In musical discourse, figurative language does not merely function as an aesthetic ornament but serves as a central mechanism for meaning construction and emotional engagement. Through figurative expressions, song lyrics are able to evoke emotional responses, memories, and personal associations that extend beyond literal interpretation, thereby strengthening listener involvement (Forceville, 2016; Toolan, 2018).

A growing number of empirical studies have explored figurative language in song lyrics using qualitative and discourse-based approaches. Zhang (2021) found that figurative language in contemporary English pop songs plays a significant role in creating emotional identification between singers and listeners. Similarly, Wang and Zhang (2023) reported that metaphors and symbols are frequently employed to convey emotional intimacy, vulnerability, and inner conflict in modern song lyrics. Research by Liu and Liu (2021) also demonstrates that figurative expressions contribute substantially to emotional engagement by allowing listeners to connect lyrical content with their own lived experiences. These findings suggest that figurative language is a key linguistic strategy for shaping emotional narratives in popular music rather than a purely decorative feature.

Recent album-oriented studies further support this view by emphasizing the narrative function of figurative language across multiple songs. Burns (2019) argues that albums often operate as cohesive emotional narratives, in which recurring figurative patterns help establish thematic continuity and emotional progression. Stern (2019) similarly notes that figurative language enables individual tracks to be linked into broader emotional storylines, encouraging listeners to interpret albums as unified artistic works. In addition, Moore (2016) highlights that meaning in popular music emerges through the interaction of lyrics, emotional themes, and listener interpretation, with figurative language playing a central mediating role.

Beyond identifying types of figurative language, recent linguistic research has increasingly focused on semantic and pragmatic interpretation of meaning in artistic texts. Cruse (2018) emphasizes that non-literal meaning depends heavily on contextual knowledge, emotional association, and cultural background. Hurford, Heasley, and Smith (2022) further argue that meaning in creative discourse is often experiential rather than propositional, requiring active interpretation from audiences. Radden and Dirven (2017) also point out that figurative meaning emerges from conceptual associations rather than dictionary definitions, making semantic analysis essential in studies of song lyrics. These perspectives reinforce the idea that figurative language in music should be analyzed not only structurally but also semantically to capture its emotional depth.

Despite the growing body of literature on figurative language in song lyrics, most existing studies continue to focus on Western artists or analyze isolated songs. Research examining complete albums by contemporary Asian artists who use English as a medium of expression remains limited (Oh & Lee, 2020). Moreover, relatively few studies integrate figurative language classification with semantic interpretation to explain how meanings are developed and sustained across an entire album. According to Semino (2017), combining figurative analysis with semantic interpretation provides deeper insight into how language shapes emotional experience and narrative coherence. Therefore, this study addresses the identified research gap by analyzing both the types and meanings of figurative language in NIKI's album *Nicole*. By integrating figurative language classification with semantic interpretation, this research offers a more comprehensive understanding of how figurative expressions function not only as stylistic devices but also as tools for conveying emotional depth and narrative continuity in contemporary popular music.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to analyze the types and meanings of figurative language used in the song lyrics of NIKI's album *Nicole*. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the data consisted of words, phrases, and expressions that required interpretation rather than numerical analysis. This approach allowed the researcher to explore how figurative language functions in conveying meaning and emotional expression within song lyrics. The data source of this study was the lyrics from all 12 songs included in the album *Nicole*, namely *Before*, *High School in Jakarta*, *Backburner*, *Keeping Tabs*, *The Apartment We Won't Share*, *Facebook Friends*, *Anaheim*, *Milk Teeth*, *Autumn*, *Oceans & Engines*, *On the Drive Home*, and *Take a Chance with Me*. The lyrics were obtained from official and reliable sources to ensure accuracy. The songs were selected

because they represent the complete body of work in the album and provide a comprehensive view of NIKI's lyrical style. Data collection was conducted through document analysis. The researcher listened to each song repeatedly while carefully reading the lyrics to understand the context and emotional tone of the songs. During this process, lines containing figurative language were identified and recorded. This step helped ensure that figurative expressions were interpreted in relation to the overall meaning and theme of each song.

The data analysis process involved several stages. First, the collected data were coded and classified based on Perrine's theory of figurative language, which includes metaphor, personification, symbol, hyperbole, irony, and allusion. Next, the meanings of the identified figurative expressions were analyzed using Leech's theory of meaning, focusing on connotative, affective, collocative, thematic, and reflected meanings. The classification and interpretation were carried out by comparing each expression with established theoretical definitions and considering its lyrical context. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, theoretical triangulation was applied by combining Perrine's framework for figurative language and Leech's framework for semantic interpretation. Repeated reading and careful comparison across all songs were also conducted to minimize subjective bias and maintain consistency in the analysis.

Result

This section presents the findings of the study concerning the types of figurative language used in NIKI's album Nicole and the meanings expressed through these figurative expressions. The analysis was conducted using Perrine's theory of figurative language and Leech's theory of meaning.

Types of Figurative Language

Based on the analysis, six types of figurative language were identified across the 12 songs in the album, namely metaphor, personification, symbol, hyperbole, irony, and allusion. Table 1 summarizes the frequency and percentage of each figurative language type found in the album.

Table 1. *Types of Figurative Languages*

No	The Types of Figurative Languages	Total	Percentage
1	Metaphor	24	23.76%
2	Personafication	18	17.82%
3	Symbol	19	18.81%
4	Hyperbole	15	14.85%
5	Irony	20	19.80%
6	Allusion	5	4.95%
Total		101	100%

Table 1 shows that a total of 101 instances of figurative language were identified. Metaphor was the most dominant type, with 24 occurrences (23.76%). This finding indicates that metaphor is the primary stylistic device used by NIKI to express emotions and experiences. Metaphors allow abstract feelings to be conveyed through imaginative comparisons. For example, in the song Oceans & Engines, the line "You were the ocean, and I was just a stone" metaphorically represents emotional distance and imbalance in a relationship. Irony appeared 20 times (19.80%) and was often used to express emotional contradiction and disappointment. In Backburner, the lyric "You keep me waiting like I'm nothing new" reflects ironic tension between expectation and reality. Symbol was the third most frequent type with 19 occurrences (18.81%), indicating that objects and situations in the lyrics often represent deeper emotional meanings. For instance, in High School in Jakarta, the setting symbolically reflects youthful memories and emotional growth.

Personification occurred 18 times (17.82%), showing that NIKI frequently attributes human qualities to abstract ideas or objects to intensify emotional expression. An example can be found in Autumn, where emotional change is described as if it were a living entity that arrives and leaves. Hyperbole appeared 15 times (14.85%) and was used to exaggerate feelings, such as deep sadness or longing, to strengthen emotional impact. Allusion was the least frequent type, with 5 occurrences

(4.95%), often referring to shared cultural or musical references, such as “Snow Patrol playing on the radio”, which evokes nostalgia and shared memory.

The meanings conveyed through figurative language were analyzed using Leech’s theory of meaning. Five types of meaning were identified in the lyrics: connotative, affective, collocative, thematic, and reflected meaning. Connotative and affective meanings were the most dominant, as many figurative expressions carried emotional associations beyond their literal meanings. For example, the metaphor “I’m giving up the ghost” in *Oceans & Engines* conveys emotional exhaustion and acceptance rather than physical death. The results show that figurative language plays a significant role in expressing the album’s central themes of love, heartbreak, nostalgia, and personal growth. The combination of dominant metaphors and emotionally driven meanings enhances the depth of the lyrics and strengthens listeners’ emotional engagement with the songs.

Discussion

This study set out to analyze the types and meanings of figurative language used in NIKI’s album *Nicole* and to explain how these linguistic elements contribute to meaning construction and emotional expression in contemporary song lyrics. The findings demonstrate that figurative language plays a central role in shaping the album’s lyrical narrative, allowing the songwriter to convey complex emotions, personal experiences, and reflections on relationships in a subtle yet powerful manner. Rather than functioning as mere stylistic ornamentation, figurative language in *Nicole* operates as a core mechanism for expressing meaning and engaging listeners emotionally.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the dominance of metaphor as the most frequently used type of figurative language in the album. This suggests that metaphor is a primary strategy employed by NIKI to translate abstract emotional states into concrete and relatable images. In song lyrics, emotions such as heartbreak, longing, and emotional distance are often difficult to express directly without sounding repetitive or overly explicit. Metaphor allows these emotions to be conveyed indirectly, enabling listeners to interpret the lyrics through their own experiences. This finding supports previous studies that highlight metaphor as a crucial element in song lyrics. Astuti and Astuti (2020), for example, found that metaphor was a dominant feature in Coldplay’s *Parachutes* album, functioning as a means to intensify emotional expression. Similarly, Rusdiyanto and Astutik (2018) emphasized that metaphors help transform personal feelings into universal experiences that listeners can easily relate to.

In the context of *Nicole*, metaphors often reflect emotional imbalance, separation, and personal vulnerability. For instance, metaphoric expressions that compare relationships to physical objects or natural elements illustrate emotional dynamics in a vivid manner. Such metaphors do not provide direct explanations but invite listeners to reflect and draw meaning based on personal interpretation. This open-ended nature of metaphor aligns with the function of popular music as a space for emotional identification rather than factual explanation. Therefore, the frequent use of metaphor reinforces the idea that figurative language is essential in constructing emotional depth in song lyrics.

Irony emerged as the second most frequent type of figurative language in the album. The use of irony reflects emotional conflict, disappointment, and contradiction, particularly in the context of romantic relationships. Irony allows the songwriter to express feelings of unmet expectations and emotional tension without explicitly stating them. This finding is consistent with Purba et al. (2021), who found irony to be a prominent feature in Maher Zain’s song lyrics, where it was used to express conflict between hope and reality. In *Nicole*, irony often appears in lyrics that contrast emotional investment with emotional neglect, highlighting the imbalance within relationships. Through ironic expressions, the lyrics communicate a sense of quiet frustration and emotional resignation, which may resonate strongly with listeners who have experienced similar situations.

Symbolism was also found to be a prominent figurative device in the album. The frequent use of symbols indicates that objects, places, and situations in the lyrics often carry meanings beyond their literal sense. Symbolic references allow the songwriter to compress complex emotional experiences into simple images that can be interpreted in multiple ways. For example, references to places, seasons, or music from the past often symbolize memory, nostalgia, or emotional transition. This symbolic approach encourages listeners to actively engage with the lyrics and assign personal meaning to the symbols presented. As noted by previous researchers, symbolism in song lyrics enhances interpretative

depth and emotional resonance, as it does not impose a single meaning but allows for multiple interpretations.

Personification also appears frequently in the album, indicating that abstract concepts such as emotions, memories, or time are often given human characteristics. This technique helps make intangible feelings more concrete and emotionally accessible. By attributing human qualities to abstract ideas, the lyrics create a sense of intimacy and emotional closeness. This finding aligns with Rusdiyanto and Astutik (2018), who reported that personification was a dominant figurative device in the songs of Adele and Taylor Swift. In Nicole, personification contributes to the emotional tone of the lyrics by allowing listeners to perceive emotions as active agents that influence the songwriter's thoughts and actions.

Hyperbole, although less frequent than metaphor and irony, plays an important role in intensifying emotional expression. Hyperbolic expressions exaggerate feelings such as sadness, longing, or regret to emphasize their emotional weight. In popular music, exaggeration is often used to dramatize emotional experiences and make them more impactful. The presence of hyperbole in Nicole suggests that the songwriter intentionally amplifies emotional states to ensure that listeners can feel the intensity of the experiences being described. This supports the view that hyperbole in song lyrics functions as an emotional amplifier rather than a literal statement.

Allusion was the least frequent type of figurative language identified in this study, yet it remains significant in terms of meaning construction. Allusions in the album often refer to shared cultural or musical references, such as mentions of specific songs or artists. These references create a sense of shared memory and emotional familiarity between the songwriter and the listener. Although limited in number, allusions serve as powerful tools for evoking nostalgia and establishing emotional connection. Their presence suggests that NIKI's lyrics are not only personal but also socially and culturally situated.

In addition to identifying types of figurative language, this study analyzed the meanings conveyed through these expressions using Leech's theory of meaning. The findings indicate that connotative and affective meanings are the most dominant in the album. This suggests that the lyrics rely heavily on emotional and associative meanings rather than literal interpretation. Connotative meaning allows words and expressions to carry emotional and cultural associations, while affective meaning reflects the speaker's emotional attitude. In Nicole, these meanings work together to create an emotionally rich lyrical experience that encourages empathy and personal reflection.

The dominance of affective meaning highlights the emotional nature of song lyrics as a form of artistic communication. Unlike informational texts, song lyrics aim to evoke feelings rather than convey factual information. This finding is consistent with Handayani and Indah (2022), who emphasized the importance of affective meaning in persuasive and expressive texts. In the context of music, affective meaning allows listeners to feel the emotions embedded in the lyrics, even when the literal meaning is ambiguous. This emotional engagement is one of the reasons why listeners can connect deeply with songs that reflect their own experiences.

The thematic meaning identified in the album further reinforces the narrative coherence of Nicole. The arrangement of lyrics, repetition of emotional themes, and progression across songs contribute to a unified emotional journey. This thematic structure allows the album to be interpreted not only as a collection of individual songs but also as a cohesive narrative about love, loss, and personal growth. Such thematic consistency enhances the overall impact of the album and demonstrates how figurative language contributes to larger narrative structures in music.

When compared to previous studies, this research offers several important contributions. While many earlier studies focus on individual songs or selected lyrics, this study examines an entire album, providing a more comprehensive view of figurative language use. This album-based approach allows for the identification of recurring patterns and dominant stylistic tendencies that may not be visible in single-song analyses. Moreover, unlike many studies that focus on Western artists, this research highlights a contemporary Asian artist who writes English-language songs for a global audience. This broader cultural perspective contributes to the diversification of linguistic research on popular music.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies on textual interpretation, which may involve subjective judgment. Although theoretical frameworks were applied to minimize bias, different researchers may interpret figurative expressions differently. Second, this study focuses solely on lyrics and does not consider musical

elements such as melody, rhythm, or vocal delivery, which may also influence meaning interpretation. Third, the study does not include audience reception analysis, which could provide insight into how listeners interpret and respond to figurative language in the songs.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating listener perspectives through surveys or interviews to explore how figurative language is perceived by different audiences. Researchers could also adopt a multimodal approach that examines the interaction between lyrics and musical elements. Additionally, comparative studies involving artists from different cultural backgrounds could further enrich understanding of figurative language use in global popular music.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the types and meanings of figurative language used in NIKI's album *Nicole* and to explain how these linguistic features function in expressing meaning and emotion within contemporary song lyrics. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the research applied Perrine's theory to identify figurative language types and Leech's theory to interpret the meanings conveyed through these expressions. The analysis of all 12 songs in the album provides a comprehensive understanding of NIKI's lyrical style and the role of figurative language in shaping the album's emotional narrative.

The findings demonstrate that figurative language is a central element in the construction of meaning in *Nicole*. Six types of figurative language were identified, namely metaphor, irony, symbol, personification, hyperbole, and allusion. Among these, metaphor was the most dominant, indicating that indirect comparison is the primary strategy used to express abstract emotions such as love, loss, emotional distance, and self-reflection. The frequent use of metaphor allows the songwriter to communicate personal experiences in a subtle yet powerful way, enabling listeners to interpret the lyrics based on their own emotional experiences. This confirms that metaphor plays a vital role in transforming personal feelings into universally relatable expressions.

Irony and symbolism were also found to be prominent in the album. Irony reflects emotional conflict and unmet expectations, particularly within romantic relationships, while symbolism allows objects, places, and situations to represent deeper emotional meanings. The presence of these figurative devices suggests that the lyrics often communicate meaning implicitly rather than explicitly. Personification and hyperbole further contribute to emotional expression by making abstract feelings more concrete and intensifying emotional impact. Although allusion appeared less frequently, its use strengthens emotional connection through shared cultural or musical references, especially in evoking nostalgia.

From a semantic perspective, the analysis reveals that figurative language in *Nicole* predominantly conveys connotative and affective meanings. This finding indicates that the lyrics rely heavily on emotional associations and personal interpretation rather than literal meaning. The dominance of affective meaning highlights the expressive nature of song lyrics as a form of artistic communication, where the primary goal is to evoke feelings rather than convey factual information. The presence of thematic meaning across the album also shows that *Nicole* functions as a coherent emotional narrative, reflecting a journey of love, heartbreak, memory, and personal growth.

This study contributes to linguistic and literary research in several important ways. First, it provides a detailed analysis of figurative language across an entire album, rather than focusing on isolated songs. This album-based approach allows for the identification of dominant patterns and recurring stylistic features that may not be visible in single-song analyses. Second, this research highlights a contemporary Asian artist who produces English-language music for a global audience, thereby expanding the cultural scope of studies on figurative language in popular music. Third, by integrating figurative language classification with semantic interpretation, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is constructed and experienced in song lyrics.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The analysis relies on textual interpretation, which may involve subjective judgment, even though established theoretical frameworks were used to minimize bias. In addition, this study focuses solely on lyrical content and does not consider musical elements such as melody, rhythm, or vocal delivery, which may also influence meaning interpretation. Furthermore, the study does not include listener responses, which could provide valuable insight into how figurative language is perceived by different audiences.

Future research may address these limitations by incorporating audience reception studies to explore how listeners interpret figurative language in song lyrics. Researchers may also adopt a multimodal approach that examines the interaction between lyrics and musical elements to gain a more holistic understanding of meaning in music. Comparative studies involving artists from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds could further enrich the discussion of figurative language use in global popular music. This study confirms that figurative language plays a crucial role in expressing emotional depth and constructing meaning in NIKI's album *Nicole*. Through the use of metaphor, irony, symbolism, and other figurative devices, the lyrics effectively communicate complex emotional experiences and invite listeners to engage personally with the songs. Understanding these linguistic features not only enhances appreciation of contemporary music but also reinforces the importance of figurative and semantic analysis in the study of artistic language.

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