

GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND MANIPULATION IN GILLIAN FLYNN'S *GONE GIRL*

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Abstract

This research analyzes Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) to explore the construction of gender identity through manipulation in modern marriage. Marriage is presented not merely as a personal relationship, but as an institution shaped by social expectations and gender norms. This study examines manipulation not only as a behavioral tendency, but also as a form of gender performativity through which femininity may be strategically enacted within a patriarchal context. The research employs a qualitative method using two types of data: primary and secondary. The primary data source is Flynn's novel, while the secondary data consist of journals, articles, and other relevant references. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study suggests that gender performance can function as a means of negotiating power within intimate relationships rather than merely as a repeated social practice. The findings reveal that marriage in the novel frequently operates as a social performance, in which maintaining appearances becomes more important than the relationship itself. When this performance can no longer be sustained, conflict emerges, and manipulation becomes a strategic mechanism for negotiating control and public legitimacy. Thus, manipulation is effective because gender performance has already been socially accepted and normalized. Furthermore, the findings indicate that modern marriage can be understood as a space in which gender identity is continuously shaped and negotiated through social expectations and relational dynamics, suggesting that women are not merely passive participants, but also possess agency to influence and control the direction of the relationship.

Keywords: *feminism; gender identity; gender performativity; manipulation; modern marriage.*

1. Introduction

Amid the struggle for equality, women still face external barriers and internal stigmas that limit their opportunities and potential (Cin, 2026; García-Cid et al., 2025). These constraints persist not merely because of structural inequality, but because gender roles are continuously reproduced through socially accepted performances that normalize inequality (Aisyah & Prautomo, 2025). In many cases, women are often belittled, objectified, and seen as weak. This condition becomes more complex within marriage, women are seen as an

inferior object, obligated to obey their husband's authority and limited to domestic roles (Ali, McGarry & Maqsood, 2022). As a result, inequality operates subtly, often disguised as normative marital roles rather than explicit oppression.

Feminism is fundamentally concerned with dismantling gender-based oppression and advocating for women's rights, autonomy, and freedom of expression (Mohajan, 2022). It further seeks to promote gender equality by challenging social, cultural, and institutional forms of discrimination that perpetuate unequal power relations between men and women (Myesha & Puspitasari, 2025). Rather than approaching feminism solely as a historical or political movement, this study adopts Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which conceptualizes gender not as a fixed or innate identity but as a socially constructed effect produced through repeated acts, behaviors, and discursive practices shaped by prevailing social norms and expectations (Utami, Siwi, & Suryani, 2022). From this perspective, gender is continuously constituted and reinforced through performance, whereby individuals repeatedly enact behaviors associated with culturally prescribed notions of femininity and masculinity. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to the study of marriage, as marriage functions as a performative social institution in which gender identities, roles, and expectations are not merely expressed but actively negotiated, reproduced, and contested through everyday interactions.

Within literary studies, feminist criticism has long been used to explore how text reflect and challenge gender inequality. However, contemporary analysis increasingly shifts toward examining how gender identities are constructed and performed within specific social contexts, rather than merely portraying women as victims of oppression. Previous studies have examined female characters in literature as representations of resistance against patriarchy, such as in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Bekler, 2022), *Jane Eyre* (Widiatmi, 2017), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Calvi, Rankin, Clauss, & Byrd-Craven, 2020). These works highlight women's struggle for autonomy and agency within restrictive systems. However, such approaches often emphasize resistance and victimhood, rather than exploring how women may also actively navigate and manipulate these systems.

Besides the novels that have been mentioned earlier, there is another work that addresses women's identity and gender equality. *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, published in 2012. The novel also portrays oppression against women, but it especially explores how marriage can function as a shield through which women may seek equality. Unlike conventional feminist narratives, this novel presents a complex portrayal of marriage, where manipulation, performance, and gender expectations intersect in ambiguous ways.

Previous studies primarily position Amy Dunne as either a psychopathic manipulator or a femme fatale figure. However, limited attention has been given to how her manipulation functions as a performative strategy within patriarchal gender structures. This study argues that manipulation in the novel is not merely an individual psychological trait, but a strategic enactment of gender roles that are already socially normalized.

Drawing on Judith Butler's framework of gender performativity, gender is understood not as an inherent identity but as an effect of repeated and socially regulated acts that become normalized over time. These repeated performances create the illusion of a stable identity, making certain behaviors appear natural and unquestionable within society. Because these norms are already internalized and socially recognize, they can be strategically reproduced which allows individuals to operate within expectations while subtly negotiating power and control. Within the context of marriage, gendered behaviors are not

just maintained but also used to shape identity and enable manipulation within patriarchal systems.

In general, this novel tells the story of a marriage filled with manipulation, lies, and gender roles. More importantly, it reveals how marriage operates as a performative institution in which both partners must continuously enact idealized gender identities to sustain social legitimacy. Within this framework, manipulation becomes a tool through which individuals negotiate power and control. Therefore, this study focuses on examining manipulation as a performative strategy within modern marriage, particularly in relation to gender identity construction.

In doing this research, three research questions are proposed. The research questions are: How is modern marriage portrayed in *Gone Girl*? How does manipulation function within marital relationships in the novel? How is gender identity constructed through performative acts in the novel?

2. Literature Review

Several studies focus on Nick and Amy's marriage as merely a staged performance used to satisfy social expectation (Aditya, 2016; Kaushik, 2025; Osborne, 2017; Tyas, 2022). However, these studies tend to treat marriage primarily as a social façade without fully examining how such performances function as a strategic act that enable power negotiation within the relationship. In addition, other scholars interpret the novel through psychological and narrative lenses, framing manipulation as a deception used to construct false identities and gain public sympathy (Abdulrahman & Al-Abbasi, 2023; Bain, 2023; Kumar, Shukla, & Tiwari, 2025; Sutrisno, Ayuningsih, & Rachmawati, 2025). While insightful, these perspectives often reduce manipulation to individual pathology or narrative technique, overlooking its embeddedness within broader gender expectations. Besides that, studies examining Amy's charm and intelligence highlight her as a classic femme fatale figure (Subbi, 2019; Couch, 2022). These scholars frequently position her actions as deviant rather than as calculated responses shaped by patriarchal norms.

Taken together, previous studies predominantly interpret Amy's manipulation as psychological deviance, narrative strategy, manipulation, or archetypal femininity. However, these interpretations remain limited because they do not fully address how manipulation operates as a gendered performance rooted in socially constructed expectations. This creates a theoretical gap in understanding how gender norms themselves can be mobilized as tools of control rather than merely constraints imposed on women.

This study offers a different perspective by examining marriage as a strategic space in which gender roles are not only performed but deliberately manipulated to negotiate power, autonomy, and identity within a patriarchal framework. Rather than positioning women solely as victims of patriarchal oppression, this study argues that gender norms can be appropriated and reworked as instruments of agency. In doing so, it shifts the focus from resistance against patriarchy to the strategic utilization of its structure.

To gather enough data for this study, Judith Butler's feminist theory in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993) will be used. In general, Butler examines the idea of gender performativity and argues that gender identity is not something innate, but a series of repeated acts that create the illusion of a stable gender. Through this repetition, gender becomes intelligible within society, meaning that individuals must align their behavior with regulatory norms to be socially recognized as "normal" or acceptable. In this

sense, gender functions as a social script that structures behavior while simultaneously masking its constructed nature.

Butler also emphasizes that because gender is constituted through repetition rather than essence, it always contains the possibility of variation and subversion. This opens space for gender performative agency, where individuals may strategically repeat or manipulate gender norms to produce certain effects or advantages. Gender is therefore not only constraint but also a site of negotiation. In this regard, this study argues that Amy's action in *Gone Girl* demonstrate how femininity can be performed in ways that align with dominant expectations while simultaneously being used as a strategy of control, showing how gender norms can be appropriated rather than merely resisted.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach within the framework of literary criticism to analyze the selected data. Qualitative research enables researchers to examine an object comprehensively and holistically, allowing for an in-depth understanding of its underlying meanings and complexities (Putri, 2018). Rather than relying on numerical measurement, qualitative inquiry seeks to explore and interpret phenomena in relation to real-world issues and social contexts (Usman, Al-Hendawi, & Bulut, 2025). This approach is particularly appropriate for the present study, as the primary data consist of textual representations found in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*.

The study adopts feminist literary criticism as its principal analytical perspective and combines it with qualitative textual analysis to investigate the construction of gender identity, manipulation, and marital power relations within the novel. The analysis was conducted through a close reading of the text, which enabled a detailed examination of narrative elements, character interactions, and discursive representations of gender. Relevant textual passages were systematically selected based on their significance to the research focus, particularly those illustrating gender performativity, manipulation strategies, and the dynamics of power within marriage.

Following data collection, the selected textual evidence was coded and organized into thematic categories through an inductive analytical process. This procedure facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, themes, and narrative structures that contribute to the representation of gender relations in the novel. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity served as the primary interpretive framework, guiding the analysis of how repeated gendered acts and performances construct identity and function as mechanisms of manipulation and control within marital relationships.

The primary source of data is Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, while secondary data consist of scholarly books, journal articles, and other academic sources that provide theoretical and contextual support for the analysis. The research instrument employed in this study was an observation sheet used to record textual data in the form of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs relevant to the research objectives. Data collection was conducted through intensive reading, textual observation, and interpretive examination of the novel. Passages deemed relevant to the research questions were identified, documented, and classified according to their thematic significance.

The analytical procedure consisted of four interrelated stages: close reading, data selection, categorization, and interpretation. These stages functioned as an integrated process designed to reveal meaningful textual patterns associated with gender performance,

identity construction, and manipulation strategies within the narrative. The interpretation stage focused on examining how these patterns generate broader meanings and ideological implications within Butler's framework of gender performativity.

To ensure analytical rigor and interpretive consistency, continuous comparison was conducted between the coded data and the emerging thematic categories throughout the analytical process. Furthermore, theoretical triangulation was applied by relating textual findings to Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. This strategy enhanced the credibility, validity, and coherence of the interpretation by ensuring that the findings were consistently grounded in an established theoretical framework.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Portrayal of Modern Marriage in *Gone Girl* (2012)

In the novel *Gone Girl* (2012), Gillian Flynn presents marriage as one of the novel's central themes. It reflects the complexity of relationships in modern life, especially in marriage. Through the main characters, Nick and Amy, Flynn shows how marriage in modern society is often shaped by social expectations and cultural ideals that extend beyond the private sphere. This section conceptualizes marriage as a performative and regulatory institution, where identity is continuously produced through public visibility and gendered norms.

4.1.1 Marriage as Social Performance

In the novel *Gone Girl* (2012), marriage is not based solely on the mutual desires of both partners but also structured by the demand for public recognition. Both Nick and Amy actively construct and sustain the image of an ideal couple in the eyes of society, demonstrating a persistent drive to align with social expectations and gain public validation. As a result, their relationship is no longer fully private but instead becomes a visible and regulated performance that is continuously monitored and judged.

"...the need to remind people I wasn't a dick, I was a nice guy despite the affectless stare, the haughty, the douchebag face." (Flynn, 2012, p. 80)

That dialogue shows how Nick strategically regulates the public's perception of himself by producing a more socially intelligible persona. He becomes aware that his emotional expressions must correspond to culturally recognizable signs of grief in order to be accepted. Rather than expressing his true self, he repeatedly cites normative scripts of masculinity. Particularly the figure of the remorseful husband, in order to stabilize his identity within public discourse (Flynn, 2012, p. 9). This reflects Butler's notion of performative repetition, in which identity is constituted through the reiteration of socially sanctioned acts rather than originating from an internal essence. This aligns with Judith Butler's idea that individuals often project a socially acceptable version of themselves by performing certain identity frames in public (Butler, 1993, p. 257). Nick's behavior can therefore be understood as a citational practice, where he reproduces pre-existing gendered scripts that render him socially recognizable and legitimate. In this sense, marriage functions as a regulatory site in which identity is not merely expressed but materialized through repeated performances, producing the illusion of a stable and coherent self that is validated by public scrutiny.

4.1.2 Marriage and Gender Expectation

Modern marriage is not only shaped by social expectations but also by internalized gender norms that regulate individual behavior and define relational roles. However, in real life marriage, it often falls short of the ideal because of the conflict within individual interest. In *Gone Girl* (2012), the conflict that comes up within their marriage does not merely arise from personal incompatibility. But rather from Nick and Amy's failure to maintain the gender roles they built from the very beginning of their relationship.

"Men always say that as the defining compliment, don't they? She's a cool girl...Cool girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their man do whatever they want." (Flynn, 2012, p. 280)

"Do not blame me for this particular grievance, Amy. The Missouri grievance" (Flynn, 2012, p. 3)

The first dialog shows Amy who's having a conversation with herself, she shows critique with the stereotype of "Cool Girl", where woman is expected to be pleasing, passive, and shaped to fit male desire. The "Cool Girl" monologue illustrates how femininity is produced through discursive regulation that redefines which behavior are considered desirable and intelligible within patriarchal culture. Amy's reflection exposes how this identity is not natural but constituted through repeated acts that align with male desire, demonstrating the citational nature of gender performance. In the second dialogue, Nick's response reflects his reluctance to accept responsibility. His refusal to take full accountability signals a disruption in masculine intelligibility, particularly his inability to sustain the provider role that structures patriarchal expectations. Taken together, these moments reveal a breakdown in gender intelligibility, where both partners fail to align with dominant norms that define recognizable identities.

Since the beginning of their relationship, neither of them has fully been themselves. Instead, they have adjusted to their partner's expectations. Amy performs the role of the "Cool Girl", always pleasant and accommodating. While Nick, performs the image of a stable husband who can provide for the family. However, this performance begins to break down when both lose their jobs and face economic instability. Nick's inability to fulfill the provider role destabilizes his position within gender hierarchy, exposing the fragility of masculine identity. Simultaneously, Amy's shifting position disrupts normative femininity, revealing how gender roles are contingent rather than fixed. When these performative roles collapse, the conflict extends beyond interpersonal tension into a structural crisis of gender performance.

This kind of behavior is linked directly to Judith Butler's view on gender performances. Butler claims that gender arises from repetitive actions carried out to fit an acceptable social framework (Butler, 1993, p. 60). It regulated by dominant discourse that determine what is socially recognizable. Thus, the failure to sustain these repeated performances results not only in emotional dissatisfaction but also in the destabilization of identity itself. In this sense, gender identity becomes materialized through repeated and regulated performances, producing identities that appear natural while remaining structurally constrained by patriarchal norms.

4.2 Manipulation Represented within Modern Marriage in the Story

Flynn presents manipulation as a central element in shaping the dynamics of modern marriage. Through this couple, marriage is understood not only as an emotional relationship

but also as a space where strategic performance and discursive control are mobilized to achieve particular desires. Manipulation here does not operate in isolation but is closely tied to how identity and gender roles are constructed, performed, and regulated. Thus, manipulation in *Gone Girl* (2012) must be understood as a performative practice through which identity and social reality are actively produces rather than merely distorted.

4.2.1 Narrative Manipulation through Amy's Diary

One of the primary strategies used in this book to influence perception and construct social reality in marriage is through narrative manipulation. Through Amy, Flynn shows how a story can be strategically constructed to create a certain image and influence how others understand a relationship. This is most clearly demonstrated through Amy's diary as a discursive instrument.

"Well, now might be the right time. To start a family. To try to get pregnant" (Flynn, 2012, p. 239)

"He shoved me. Hard. Two days ago, he shoved me, and I fell and banged my head against the kitchen island, and I couldn't see for three seconds." (Flynn, 2012, p. 250)

Both dialogues illustrate how Amy deliberately constructs the narrative to influence public opinion regarding their marriage. In the first dialogue, Amy creates an image of herself as a wife who desires motherhood, reflecting the culturally intelligible image of the ideal woman shaped by social expectations. However, this desire does not originate from an internal essence but is performatively produced to align with normative expectations of femininity. In the second dialogue, she constructs Nick as an abusive husband, positioning herself as a recognizable victim of domestic violence. This narrative gradually leads the reader to see Nick as the one at fault. Amy manipulates both the facts and the public's perception through the repetition of carefully constructed personal narratives, demonstrating how repetition produces credibility. In this instance, Amy mobilizes dominant gender norms, where men are positioned as perpetrators and woman as victims, making her story more believable.

This narrative structure is consistent with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), which emphasizes that gender is constituted through performative repetition, where identity emerges not from an internal essence but through the reiteration of socially regulated norms. The diary operates through performative repetition by continuously reproducing the two identities of 'The Ideal Wife' and 'The Victim of Violence'.

Rather than simply constructing a narrative, Amy engages in a process of reiteration that stabilizes these identities as socially recognizable forms. Demonstrating how gender intelligibility depends on conformity to dominant expectations of femininity. By aligning her narrative with these norms, Amy ensures that her identity becomes intelligible within a discursively regulated framework that determines what can be accepted as truth. These norms function as mechanism of discursive regulation, shaping not only how her story is interpreted but also which identities are validated or dismissed within social field. Consequently, manipulation in modern marriage exceeds the distortion of facts, as it reveals how truth itself is produced through rather than merely represented. Through this process, Amy's repeated narrative and embodied performance contribute to the materialization of

identity. Where 'The Ideal Wife' and 'The Victim of Violence' cease to function as mere representations and instead appear as stable and culturally intelligible identities.

4.2.2 Manipulation through Female Stereotypes

In *Gone Girl* (2012), Amy manipulates the public by relying on established stereotypes about women in society. Flynn demonstrates how Amy deliberately regulates how her identity is perceived by appealing to stereotypes of women as helpless, sensitive, and victimized. In this way, these stereotypes do not function merely as social representations but rather become an effective tool for building a narrative that benefits her.

"Desi Collings took me. It was the morning of our anniversary" (Flynn, 2012, p. 465)

"I still have Desi's semen inside me from the last time he raped me, so the medical examination goes fine. My rope-wreathed wrist, my damage vagina, my bruised, the body I present them is textbook" (Flynn, 2012, p. 468)

Both dialogues show how Amy frames Desi as her kidnapper and rapist, even though her story is a deliberate construction she creates herself. She arranges the details of the story and her physical condition to fit a "convincing" victim image that is easy for the public and authorities to believe. In this case, Amy cites and reiterates the normative construction of women as inherently vulnerable. A framework that enables her identity to be immediately acceptable. As a result, her narrative becomes difficult to contest, since it aligns with dominant discursive expectations. Thus, stereotype functions as a mechanism of discursive regulation, shaping not only perception but also what is accepted as truth.

This aligns with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed biological substance, but a material effect produced through repeated actions and regulatory discursive practice (Butler, 1993, p. 9-11). In Amy's case, she engages in performative repetition by continuously reproducing the identity of the female victim through narrative, language, and bodily representation. Through the deliberate inscription of physical wounds and detailed narrative construction, she materializes an identity that conforms to patriarchal expectations. Women are often perceived as weak and defenseless; this is a stereotype that ingrained social patterns and accepted as socially accepted as truth. This form of manipulation exceeds factual distortion, as it exploits structures of gender intelligibility that determine which identities are recognized as legitimate. Therefore, manipulation through female stereotypes does not only shape perception, but actively produces and stabilizes identity. It also allows the victim narrative to be accepted as real while directing how truth itself is constructed.

4.3 Gender Identity Represented within Modern Marriage in the text

Gender identity can be described as a person's deeply felt sense or inner understanding of their gender. In relationships, it can also be seen in the way men and women perform and reproduce their roles within socially intelligible frameworks. Rather than functioning as a fixed essence, gender works as a performative and regulatory mechanism that individuals use to manage power and control the direction of the relationship, in this case, their marriage.

In traditional marriage, patriarchal systems still tend to be strong, where men are the ones who determine the direction of the relationship. This is different from modern marriage, where women and men are no longer placed in rigid roles as in traditional constructions. Both have equal opportunities to shape the direction of the relationship, whether in maintaining it or breaking it. This suggests that marital dynamics are not determined by gender itself, but by the ability to sustain socially intelligible performance.

In the novel, we can see this dynamic play through how Nick and Amy both resort to manipulation, just in very different ways. Nick conceals his infidelity and puts on this 'devoted husband' act for the cameras once Amy goes missing and it puts up into a huge story. His acts of manipulation tend to be defensive and unstructured. On the other hand, Amy's manipulation is more structured and calculated.

"I don't think he does this to be mean, it's just how he was raised." (Flynn, 2012, p. 201)

The quote above comes from Amy's diary, which is intentionally written to build her image as a patient and understanding wife. Through this narrative, she slowly leads the reader of her diary to see Nick as a troubled husband, while placing herself in the position of the victim. However, the diary doesn't function as a personal reflection, but as a narrative tool designed to control how their marriage is understood by others.

Amy's actions in this story shows that she is able to manipulate people because she uses normative expectations of femininity that define what is recognizable and acceptable. She repeatedly performs the identity of the loyal yet victimized woman, an image people are already familiar with. Amy is using this image to shape what people think of her. This aligns with Butler's descriptions as a 'regulatory norms that materialize the gender body' (Butler, 1993, p. 12).

Amy is not merely performing a role, but reiterating gender norms through continuous repetition, making her identity appear natural and convincing. This repetition enables her identity to be stabilized within dominant discourse, making her narrative difficult to challenge. A crucial illustration of this dynamic emerges in Amy's accusation of abduction and sexual violence (Flynn, 2012, p. 458-477), which should be read not as narrative content but as a strategic occupation of culturally intelligible victim position. Thus, what is produced is not merely a story, but a materialized reality, where repeated performative acts stabilize the narrative as socially accepted truth. In contrast to inconsistent performances that fail to meet normative expectations, this controlled repetition enables the subject to maintain coherence within dominant structures of gender intelligibility.

This highlights how an individual could use their gender as a weapon to get what they want in marriage. Such agency does not exist outside discourse but is enacted through the reiteration of socially sanctioned norms, employing Butler's idea of performativity "There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that is identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions'" (Butler, 1993, p. 2). This can be understood as a process of performative repetition, in which the continuous enactment of victimhood stabilizes Amy's identity over time. Through this repetition, her identity becomes gender-intelligible, as it aligns with dominant norms that define femininity through vulnerability. This intelligibility is shaped by discursive regulation, which determines what is recognized as believable or true. As a result, the repeated performance becomes materialized as reality, rather than perceived as construction. Thus, power operates through

the ability to sustain identities that conform to these normative frameworks. Ultimately, this reveals that what is accepted as “truth” in the relationship is not discovered but produced through successful repetition of socially regulated gender performances.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that in *Gone Girl*, marriage functions as a performative social institution in which gender expectations, public image, and manipulation significantly shape relational dynamics. The findings reveal that marriage is not merely a private emotional bond but a socially regulated space where individuals continuously negotiate their identities in accordance with prevailing cultural expectations. These expectations extend beyond public appearances and become embedded within the relationship itself, influencing how spouses construct, perform, and sustain gendered roles.

Through the character of Amy Dunne, the novel illustrates how socially recognizable forms of femininity can be strategically performed to establish credibility, gain social legitimacy, and shape dominant perceptions of truth. Amy's actions demonstrate that manipulation operates not solely as an act of deception but as a performative practice that derives its effectiveness from widely accepted gender norms and cultural assumptions. The study further reveals that power within marriage is closely linked to the capacity to control and manage these socially intelligible performances.

Viewed through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the findings suggest that gender identity is not a fixed or essential characteristic but is continually produced and reproduced through repeated acts and behaviors. Moreover, these performative acts can serve as mechanisms through which individuals negotiate, maintain, and contest power within intimate relationships. Consequently, *Gone Girl* presents modern marriage as a dynamic arena in which gender identity, social expectations, and relational authority are continuously constructed, performed, and renegotiated. The study contributes to feminist literary criticism by highlighting how gender performances not only shape individual identities but also function as strategic instruments in the exercise of power and manipulation within contemporary marital relationships.

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