

Signage System Analysis in Dubai Marina Walk Building

Lojain Abu Naser

Department of Communications, Canadian University Dubai

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Dr. Fanan Al Madi

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Introduction

The Dubai Marina Walk, built in 2008, is a 7 km pedestrian walkway that follows a canal. Along the way, visitors can stumble across different restaurants, shops, events, coffee shops, grocery stores, and more. Furthermore, the Marina Walk is filled with smaller buildings that include more shops and restaurants for everyone. The building that will be analyzed today is located in The Marina Walk near the Al Mass Tower.

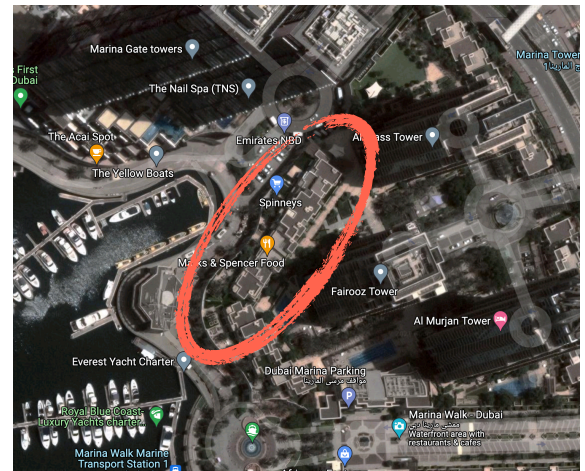


Image of location through Google Maps

Unfortunately, this small building does not have a specific name, which is automatically a disadvantage as it would be hard to locate it on a map. The building is one floor but contains a grocery store (Spinneys), bathrooms, a pharmacy (Life Pharmacy), a coffee shop (Marks and Spencers Cafe), a restaurant (Itsu Sushi), and more. This essay will analyze the signage of this building through the lens of the visitors and residents, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of each sign.

Need Analysis

I chose to analyze this building because it is near my house and because I have always wanted to explore it but have never gotten the chance to. I think this building would be so useful if I knew more about it because it contains all the essentials, for example, a grocery store and a pharmacy. This assignment made it possible for me to be more comfortable with the area. It has also made me appreciate each detail more as I had to analyze each little section to draw out the blueprint. I also wanted to learn more about the signage of this area since I do not pay attention to them very often. Moreover, I wanted to know what the people in my area thought about the building through the quantitative research/questionnaire. Lastly, I picked this building because it was crucial for me to pick an area that I can visit often to take pictures, draw the blueprints, examine the people in the building, and conduct the questionnaires/interviews.

Importance of Signs

Signs are an important part of buildings that most of us do not notice, especially if you are used to the area, however, these signs can be an integral part of navigating and informing a visitor/tourist. Signs can only be impactful if the visual images are effectively combined with written language or other visual aids to create an intended message or action. A sign and graphic symbol that is seen frequently and is recognized worldwide is the “no-smoking” sign due to its’ effectiveness. According to a study found on the National Center for Biotechnology Information, research has shown that clear signs are effective in changing the behaviour and actions of people (Meis & Kashima, 2017).

There are also two main types of signs that will be discussed in this essay. The first type of sign is called a formal sign. Formal signs are signs that are permanently set in the signage system and were meant to be there by the creators of the system. The second type of sign is an informal sign. Informal signs are temporary signs or elements added to the original system for short-term communication purposes. For signs to work, they have to be easy to understand and read to anyone no matter the language or cultural barrier.

Methodology

Before I tackled the blueprint portion of this project, I decided to interview the head officer of the area to understand the history, trends and functional elements of this building. Furthermore, I also wanted to know the opinions of the visitors themselves, which is why I have conducted a quick questionnaire too.

After gathering all my results, I will use an Excel sheet to create pie charts and bar graphs to visually see the responses. This way I can understand more about what is good about the signage system and what needs extra work.

Due to all of this qualitative and quantitative research, I will understand the logistics of this building and its' signage. It will also help me understand what next steps should be conducted to make a clearer and more effective signage system.

Interview with Head Officer

The head officer in this area has been working there for about four years now. I was lucky enough to understand more about this building by asking him multiple questions. I have listed the questions and then his response in quotation marks below.

When was this building built?

“This building was built in 2008 but has gone through different changes throughout the years. For example, this [Spinneys] was renovated recently and the positioning of it in the building changed too. It used to be inside in the middle of this building but now it is located on the left side of this building.”

Why was Spinneys relocated to a different part of the building?

“I think it was decided for this to happen since it would be clearer for people to spot the market from outside instead of it being hidden inside this building. Also, now Spinneys old location can be used to open more shops and restaurants in the future. For now, it remains unopened and under construction.”

What is the function of the building?

“The building mostly functions as an indoor place for people in the Marina Walk to go eat at and shop. This is especially helpful during the hot weather months since most of the Marina Walk is outdoors. It is also particularly helpful for the residents who live around here since they can get their groceries at Spinneys or medicine from the pharmacy.”

Do you think the type of visitors you get are mostly people who live close to here?

“I would say 70% of our visitors are people who frequently come back to shop. The rest are tourists since the Marina Walk gets visited by foreigners frequently. Even though most of our visitors are residents, they are from all over the world. For example, the UK, India, China, Europe, the Middle East, and so on.”

So do you think most of the visitors speak other languages? And which one do you think is the most frequently spoken?”

“Yes, of course, they speak other languages. Mostly English, but, I also hear French, Arabic, Hindi, and more.”

How long does this building stay open?

“The stores close in their own respected times (example, Spinneys is open from 7 AM-11 PM), however, this building is open 24 hours.”

Are there a lot of employees here?

“There are employees who work for the building itself, for example, the cleaners and security, and then some employees work for the stores [e.g. Spinneys, Life Pharmacy, etc].”

After this interview, I decided to write down what I learned from the information I was given. The first thing I learned was that people from around the world come to visit and live around this area, meaning there might be a lot of foreign speakers who might not be familiar with English or Arabic. I also learned that most of the people who come to this building are frequent visitors since they live around the area. This might mean that the signs are not as useful for the majority of the people who come into this building (since they are already familiar with the place).

To solidify my predictions, I decided to conduct a questionnaire to gather some quantitative data.

Questionnaire

I prepared a ten question questionnaire and printed it. I asked ten people who happened to be walking inside the building to take it. I made sure I got a range of ages and equal amounts of females and males. Here are the questions asked:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. Are you a frequent visitor of this building?
4. How many times have you visited this building?
5. Are you a resident or are you just visiting?
6. Have you gotten lost in this building before? If so, how?
7. Do you face difficulties finding the bathroom in this building?
8. Do you face difficulties finding Spinneys in this building?
9. What is your first language?
10. Do you understand the English and Arabic signs well?

The **results** can be found on this excel sheet, alongside pie charts and a bar graph:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/11wI6OC7qnpNw6dZq0mq3CKALbqniJna7unL2uWsBYo4/edit?usp=sharing>

I asked these specific questions because this way I can understand if the signage system in this building is difficult to follow or if it is successful. From this questionnaire, I learned that the signage is only half successful since 50% of the respondents have gotten lost before, meaning the signs either did not help them or they did not read the signs at all. Furthermore, the bathrooms were the most difficult area to find since 40% of the respondents answered “yes” when asked if they have faced difficulties finding the bathroom before. Most of the respondents speak a different first language from English, however, only 20% of the respondents were either not able to read or were only sometimes able to read the English/Arabic signs that were in the building.

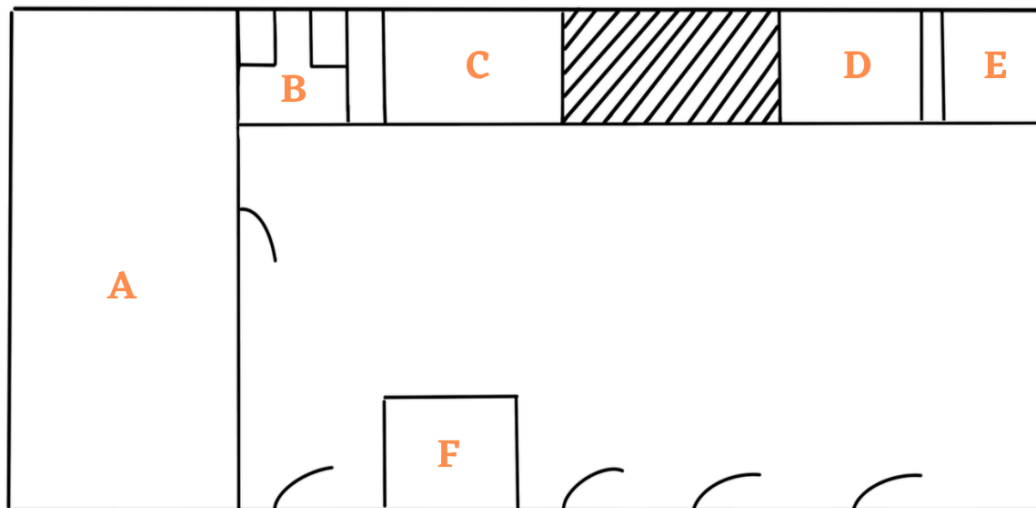
These results cause some concern since the signage in this building can’t facilitate all the

visitors. The signs need to be more clear for the visitors to see. Also, if the signs have only English and Arabic text, then foreign speakers will not be able to understand them.

Blueprint

I have created two blueprints to help visualize the area and the signage system more clearly. The first blueprint, Plan 1, showcases the main building with a legend of all the shops in this area. Each letter corresponds with the shop found below, for example, A is where Spinneys is located. Next, we have the continuation of Plan 1. This is where all the signs are located and what the signs look like. I have decided to split these two blueprints because it makes it less overwhelming for the viewer to see what is going on.

Plan 1 - Dubai Marina Walk Building - Marina Walk



Legend:

A - Spinneys **C - Life Pharmacy** **E - Itsu Sushi**
B - Bathrooms **D - Marks and Spencers Cafe** **F - Al Ansari Exchange**

Image of Plan 1

Plan 1 Cont. - Location of Signs

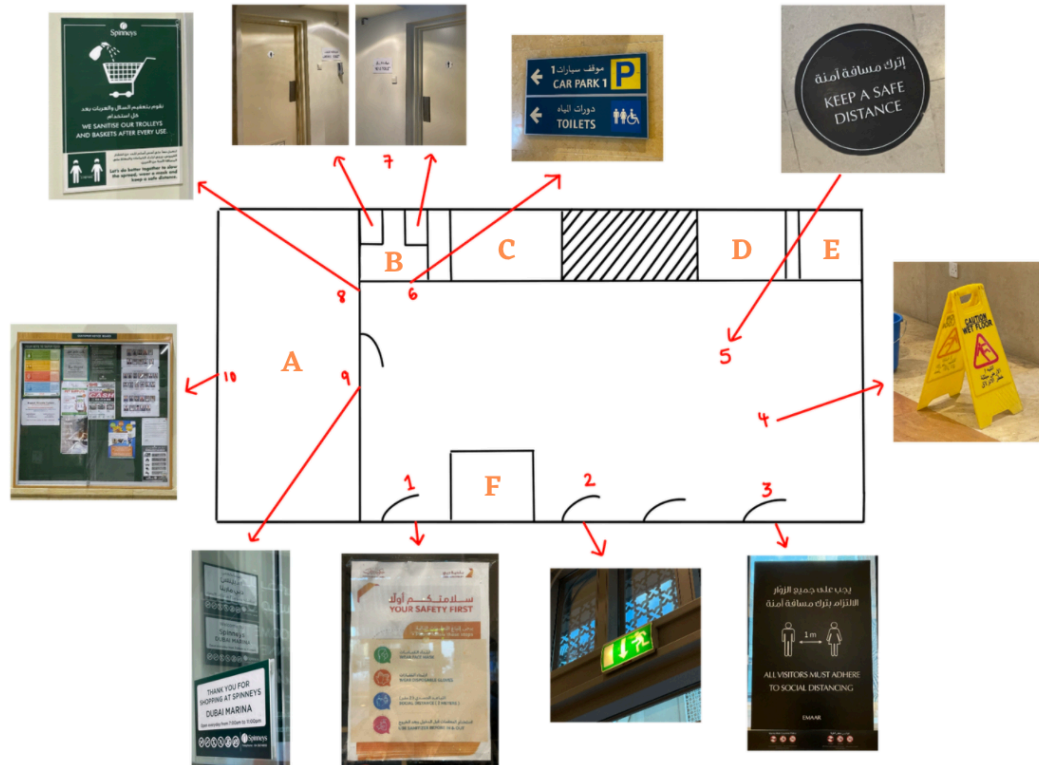


Image of Plan 1 Cont.

Signage System

The building contains many signs throughout, however, I will be discussing the ten main signs that visitors will see when they enter. I will be starting in order of when I encountered the signs.

Sign #1: COVID-19 Protocols

Location: On the Door

This paper of protocols contains many signs. According to Wileman's Typology (Degrees of Visualization) (1993), this is an example of a graphic/pictorial symbol frame with verbal cues to explain the meaning (type 5). This is because the paper contains symbols, like the person wearing a face mask, along with text to give the viewer extra context



Sign #1: COVID-19 Protocols

(e.g. “wear face mask”). This sign contains both the English and Arabic language, which most of the people I spoke to can understand.

When I was conducting the questionnaire, I noticed that everyone wore a mask and was socially distanced. This could be due to this sign reminding them, or they are just conditioned to do so since it is mandatory everywhere. I did notice that no one was wearing disposable gloves which means this sign isn’t very effective and might be outdated. It is outdated since the guidelines for COVID-19 have become less strict, so wearing extra protective wear (like gloves) is not needed.

This sign is also an example of an informal sign since it is temporarily placed on the door during this time (of COVID-19). It is not designed to be placed on this door, like, for example, a permanent plaque.

When it comes to design, the sign contains a good hierarchy (it is ordered in an organized manner), clear font, and a simplistic look. This makes it easy for the viewer to understand what message the sign is trying to portray.

Sign #2: Exit Sign

Location: Indoors Above the Doors

This is a universally known sign as it is used worldwide to indicate where the exit is. It is also used in case of an emergency in the building to help people exit as fast as possible. According to Wileman’s Typology (Degrees of Visualization) (1993), this is an example of an emphasized pictorial/graphic symbol frame (type 6). This is because an arrow is used to point out or signal a direction. It also uses bold style to emphasize the graphic and to catch the viewer's attention. There is no text used since



Sign #2: Exit Sign

most people understand that this is an exit sign due to its universal use. This is an advantage since the message can be understood by everyone, even if they speak a different language.

This sign was found at every door in this building, meaning the exit should be easy to find. It is also neon green, which makes it easy for the viewer to see in case of an emergency. The design of this sign is simplistic because not a lot of text or detail is used to explain it.

Sign #3: Social Distance Sign

Location: Indoors on the Doors

This sign would be considered a recently learned universal sign due to COVID-19. Many of us, no matter what language we speak or where we come from, can understand that this sign indicates to social distance just by looking at the graphics. Furthermore, according to Wileman's Typology (Degrees of Visualization) (1993), this is another example of a graphic/pictorial symbol frame with verbal cues to explain the meaning (type 5). The graphics of the people social distancing are accompanied by a description in both Arabic and English.



Sign #3: Social Distance Sign

This sign was repeated multiple times throughout the building to remind visitors to always social distance when shopping and walking around. Moreover, it is an informal sign as it was just recently implemented in the building for COVID-19.

The sign uses good use of contrast as the font and the pictures are in white while the background is dark. This makes the sign stand out and easy to read. Also, the typography is clear since it is in all capital letters, emphasizing the message.

Sign #4: Caution Wet Floor SignLocation: Inside the Building Near Marks and Spencers Cafe

This wet floor sign is another sign universally known as it can be found worldwide. This sign indicates that people should be aware of their surroundings as the floor is wet. According to Wileman's Typology (Degrees of Visualization) (1993), this is another example of a graphic/pictorial symbol frame with verbal cues to explain the meaning (type 5). This is because the graphic symbol of the man falling is accompanied by both English and Arabic verbal cues.



Sign #4: Caution Wet Floor Sign

Again, since this is a sign that is known by most people no matter their background, it is easy to understand without verbal cues. Even if someone did not understand the meaning of this sign, they will naturally avoid the wet area due to how the sign takes up space and acts as a barrier. Moreover, the sign itself is designed well since bright yellow is typically a cautionary colour, along with red (which is the colour of the graphic). The black text is a good contrast against the bright yellow sign. This is also an informal sign since it is not permanently a part of the building and can be moved to multiple places when needed.

Sign #5: Safe Distance SignLocation: Throughout the Inside of the Building on the Floor

According to Wileman's Typology (Degrees of Visualization) (1993), this informal (temporary) sign is an emphasized reader frame (type 2). This is because the sign only uses upper case letters to convey a message. The text on this sign is in both English and Arabic, which does not help foreign visitors who cannot understand these languages. To add, the lack of graphics also does not help these foreign speakers. Therefore, this sign means nothing to a handful of people since they cannot decipher the message, which makes the sign weak.



Sign #5: Safe Distance Sign

When it comes to the design, the typography is clear due to the all capital-lettered text. Like the past signs, the contrast between the black background and the white text makes it clear to read. However, again, if the visitor cannot read these languages, the design does not make the sign any clearer to them.

Sign #6: Car Park 1 and Toilets Sign

Location: Near the Bathrooms

According to Wileman's Typology (Degrees of Visualization) (1993), this is an example of the verbal/visual balanced frame (type 4). This is because the viewer can understand the message by looking at the visual components (the arrows pointing). This sign is easy to read since if the viewer did not understand English or Arabic, they could use the graphics/symbols to help them out. Again, these graphics/symbols are universally known since they are used worldwide to indicate where the car park or toilets are. This sign is also a formal sign since it is permanently attached to the building to indicate where certain areas are.



Sign #6: Car Park 1 and Toilets Sign

A downside to this sign is that it is hidden and does not give clear direction to where both of these areas are. This is especially apparent when looking at the quantitative data I collected since 40% of the respondents answered “yes” when asked if they were unable to find the bathroom easily. Also, the design of this sign is not the best since the symbols are very small and are not clear to the viewer.

Sign #7: Bathroom Signs

Location: On Each Bathroom Door

These formal (permanent) signs indicate which bathroom is for what gender. The women's bathroom has the universally known ladies' sign on the door, while the men's bathroom has the universally known men's sign. The symbol itself is a pictorial or



Sign #7: Bathroom Signs

graphic symbol frame (type 7) according to Wileman's Typology (1993), however, if you look closely on the side you will see that there is a sign with English and Arabic writing indicating which toilet is for who.

The design of this sign is confusing since the writing is not found near the symbols on the door. A respondent even mentioned that they accidentally went to the wrong bathroom once since the signs were not clear enough. Also, the symbols are very small and barely visible and the text would not help a non-English/Arabic speaker.

Sign #8: Cart Sanitization Sign

Location: Entrance of Spinneys

This informal sign is used to remind Spinneys customers about the safety methods Spinneys uses to stop the spread of COVID-19. According to Wileman's Typology (Degrees of Visualization) (1993), this is an example of a graphic/pictorial symbol frame with verbal cues to explain the meaning (type 5). This is because the sign contains a graphic that is accompanied by text explaining it. Like the other signs, people who cannot read English and Arabic might have trouble understanding the meaning of this sign since this symbol is not used very often. However, a plus point is that the symbol is very detailed and can help these customers understand without verbal cues.



Sign #8: Cart Sanitization Sign

Sign #9: Spinneys Bulletin Board

Location: Near Entrance of Spinneys

This is a collection of different informal signs and pieces of information to help the shopper stay up-to-date. These are all informal signs since the Spinneys staff changes the signs and posters found inside this bulletin board every few days.



Sign #9: Spinneys Bulletin Board

Sign #10: Spinneys Thank You SignLocation: Exit of Spinneys

This formal sign is used to thank the customer for entering the grocery store. The sign is considered an emphasized reader frame (type 2) according to Wileman's Typology (1993). This is due to the purely text-based sign that has a few design elements that make it stand out, for example, the use of hierarchy to make important words (like the "Dubai Marina") stand out more than the rest of the text (e.g. the times of operation in the bottom).



Sign #10: Spinneys Thank You Sign

This sign also has mini symbols in the bottom with things visitors are prohibited to do, however, the design is flawed since they are too small to look at. This sign is also all in English which puts Arabic readers and other foreign readers at a disadvantage.

Strengths and Weaknesses

According to both the interview with the head officer and the questionnaire, some of the people who come to this building are from many countries and speak/read different languages. Also, some of the visitors have gotten lost before due to poor signage. We need to keep this in mind when discussing the strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths

One of the strengths of the signage system in this building is the high amount of visual/graphic signs accompanied with text compared to just purely text-based signs. This makes it possible for everyone to understand what the signs mean no matter their background and what language they can read. Furthermore, the graphics used in these signs are typically universally well known since it is used all over the world. Most of the designs found in all of the signs have been very good due to the different elements they used to emphasize the message. For example, most of the signs used contrast, hierarchy, and simplicity to convey the meaning of the sign.

I found that the stronger signs were the ones that can be understood just by looking at the symbol presented, for instance, the exit sign (sign #2) and the social distance sign (sign #3). These signs do not need any context for what they mean since they can be visually explained rather than textually.

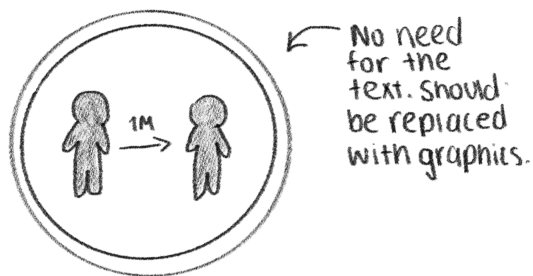
Weaknesses

The weaknesses of the signage system in this building is that all the signs that did have text only used the English and Arabic language. This makes sense since those are the two main languages spoken here, however, it does not help other speakers. The questionnaire shows that 20% of visitors either sometimes understand English/Arabic or they do not understand it at all.

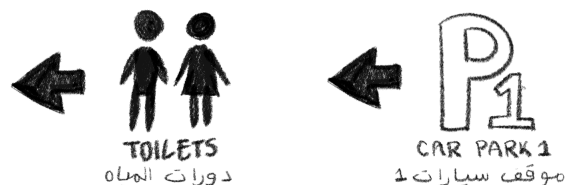
Another weakness is that some of the designs have location and design flaws. Around 50% of the respondents have gotten lost, which is most likely due to a poor signage system. For example, getting to the right bathroom has been a struggle for some of the respondents (around 40%) since the location of the sign is hidden and not very helpful. Also, finding the new Spinneys has gotten 20% of the respondents lost before due to the lack of signs explaining the grocery store's recent relocation/renovation.

Sketches of Some Signs Reimagined

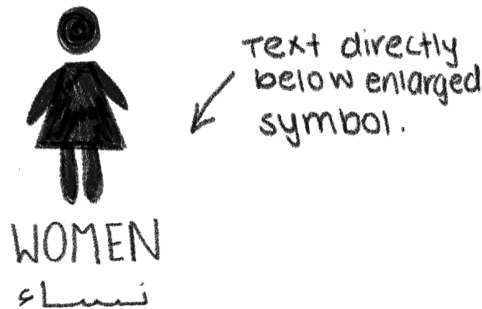
Sign #5 Safe Distance Signs



Sign #6: Car Park 1 and Toilets Sign



Sign #7: Ladies Toilet Sign Example



Solutions

The solution to all of these weaknesses is to focus on signs that can be understood universally and that are designed and placed in areas that are clear (not hidden). This way all speakers can understand the sign by visually looking at it and no one will be lost.

However, some signs will need text since visually describing it might not be possible. For this case, there should be an information desk in the building to help people who do not understand the meaning of signs and need extra assistance.

The building could try an innovative approach and create an app that can translate the signs found in the building. If the user is confused, they can take a picture of the sign and the app will translate the text to whatever language the user wants.

Conclusion

The Dubai Marina Walk building, located near the Al Mass Tower, has shown both strong and weak signs in its' signage system. The quantitative and qualitative studies conducted for this report show that some of the people who visit this building are unable to speak English or Arabic and have gotten lost before. There should be more signs in this building that should be explained through graphics and symbols. Alternatively, there could be an information desk located for

visitors who need additional help understanding the signs. The signs should also be located in areas where they can be visible to reduce the number of visitors who get lost. Overall, this report has taught me the importance of signs in everyone's daily life. Newcomers would not be able to navigate an area or know how to behave in one without these signs.

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