



Strengthening participatory governance for Generation Z: A case study of Karang Taruna Meruya Selatan, West Jakarta

Devid Putra Arda

Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Ganesha, Jakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the participatory governance practices of Generation Z in Karang Taruna Meruya Selatan, West Jakarta, focusing on their role in improving organizational transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, and responsiveness.

Design/methodology/approach – A descriptive and interpretive qualitative approach was used, with data collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participatory observation, and document analysis. Thematic analysis supported by triangulation of sources and methods was used to ensure data credibility.

Findings – Findings show that Generation Z actively utilizes digital platforms, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Google Forms, to express ideas, coordinate activities, and collaborate in program design. However, their participation is still limited by hierarchical structures, limited decision-making authority, and weak follow-up mechanisms. Digital literacy significantly shapes the effectiveness of communication and influences the depth of participation.

Research limitations – This study is limited to one youth community organization, namely Karang Taruna Meruya Selatan Jakarta Barat; therefore, these findings may not be widely applicable.

Implications – This research has implications for youth studies and participatory governance by highlighting patterns of digital participation and proposing youth empowerment practices relevant to the local community context.

Originality – The uniqueness of this research lies in the integration of generational theory with Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, offering a unique analytical framework for understanding youth involvement in community organizations in Indonesia's digital era.

Keywords: Generation Z, Participatory Governance, Digital Literacy

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***Correspondence Author:**

davidardazhaqy@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

At the grassroots level, participatory management models often fail to yield optimal results (Shin et al., 2024a). Citizen engagement frequently remains limited to ceremonial events, lacking a systematic framework and a transparent, impactful feedback process (Lipton, Bailie, et al., 2025; Shin et al., 2024a). In this digital era, various participation platforms offer significant potential to facilitate communication between the public and the government (Anderson et al., 2024). Unfortunately, this potential remains largely untapped due to three fundamental weaknesses: weak monitoring systems, unsustainable evaluation practices, and limited inclusive reach. Consequently, aspirations, particularly from young people, often fail to materialize into

concrete policies (Anderson et al., 2024). Research on youth councils across various city governments confirms similar issues. The quality of participation heavily depends on institutional design, where constraints such as narrow representation, ambiguous mandates, and unclear follow-up mechanisms hinder youth from driving substantive change (Hagemann et al., 2024), (Ramlan, 2020). This pattern is also evident at the national level: although youth participation in public policy formulation has increased, their influence remains constrained by bureaucratic structures and procedures not designed for authentic participation (Hagemann et al., 2024), (Setyawan & Chrisna Suhendi, 2025).

Generation Z perceives this gap acutely. Born and raised in a digital world, they possess a strong desire to contribute, yet face a complex reality: rampant disinformation, digital literacy gaps, and a sense of alienation from decision-making institutions (Álamo-Bolaños et al., 2024). This situation channels much of their participatory energy into online activities that are not necessarily linked to effective policy channels (Álamo-Bolaños et al., 2024). However, if properly harnessed, the potential of Gen Z could become a driving force for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Grace et al., 2024). The key lies in the ability to identify priority issues, design collaborative mechanisms involving various stakeholders, and ensure that local actions have pathways to influence broader policies (Grace et al., 2024). This is why building a participatory governance system adaptive to this generation's characteristics through strengthening youth institutions and inclusive digital platforms has become imperative.

Recent findings emphasize that for organizations like *karang taruna* (youth associations), the role of youth must be elevated from mere "participants" to active partners in agenda-setting, decision-making, and program evaluation (Tsouparopoulou et al., 2025), (Siti et al., 2024). A comprehensive study of city youth councils demonstrates that their contributions can enhance policy quality, provided they are supported by solid institutional structures from clear mandates and appropriate representative composition to accountable follow-up mechanisms (Lipton, Dickinson, et al., 2025), (Lohmeyer et al., 2024). This co-design approach shows that when the technical capabilities of young people are synergized with equitable dialogue spaces and professional mentoring, their sense of ownership grows, ultimately improving the quality of the resulting programs (Firdaus et al., n.d.; Jäntti et al., 2023), (Lipton, Dickinson, et al., 2025). In the context of urban planning and community programs, engaging teenagers as equal research partners has proven to yield policies more responsive to local needs and attentive to principles of spatial justice (Fathussya Adah et al., 2025; Prianti, 2025).

On the other hand, the digital proficiency of Gen Z presents a strategic opportunity to bridge local action with global goals like the SDGs. Social media, e-participation, and online collaboration platforms can become powerful tools, provided their management is genuinely inclusive so that youth voices are not only heard but integrated into policy processes (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025; Sala-Torrent & Planas-Lladó, 2024). Various studies prove that well-designed digital channels can expand participatory reach, reduce response times, and provide rich data for decision-makers (Minazzi & Grechi, 2025; Widiatmaka et al., 2023). Digital spaces also play a vital role in strengthening participatory democratic networks and cross-border solidarity, which are crucial for linking local issues like social entrepreneurship or the environment with global SDG targets (Minazzi & Grechi, 2025), (Sawitri & Kisworo, 2014). However, we must also be cautious of the attitude-behavior gap phenomenon, where Gen Z's concern for sustainability issues is not always followed by concrete action.

As a dynamic youth organization in West Jakarta, the South Meruya Karang Taruna represents an ideal empirical context for examining Gen Z participation phenomena. The majority of its membership consists of digital-native individuals, while the decision-making structure is still dominated by senior figures. Although it regularly organizes various programs from sports activities and entrepreneurship to social and environmental initiatives the

polarization of power between the younger and older generations creates a space of productive tension worth studying. With these characteristics, this organization offers a relevant case study to capture how Gen Z negotiates its participatory space within an established institutional framework while remaining rooted in local community values.

The significance of this research lies in its attempt to address the need for strengthening the governance of community organizations to involve youth substantively. On one hand, the Indonesian government continues to promote youth participation in development through youth programs and SDGs frameworks; however, on the ground, their involvement is often symbolic and limited (Zahra et al., 2025). Through a contextual and evidence-based approach, this research is expected to formulate a participation model that is not only democratic and responsive but also aligned with the characteristics of a technology-savvy generation.

From an academic perspective, this research aims to fill a gap in existing literature. While various studies have extensively discussed youth participation, few have juxtaposed generational theory with Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation" framework. By integrating these two perspectives, this research offers a more comprehensive analytical lens to examine Gen Z participation patterns in community-based organizations like Karang Taruna. Thus, this research not only contributes to academic discourse but also enriches the understanding of how digital-based participation can be accommodated within traditional organizational structures.

The expected contributions of this research are twofold. Theoretically, it enriches youth studies discourse by highlighting the interaction between digital generational characteristics and conventional organizational dynamics. Practically, the research findings can serve as a reference for youth organization administrators and local policymakers in designing inclusive, accountable, and technology-adaptive empowerment strategies. In other words, this research has dual relevance: it is significant not only academically but also applicably in the context of strengthening community organization governance.

METHOD

The implementation of this research with the title "Youth Participation Dynamics in the Digital Era: A Study of Generation Z Engagement in the Governance of South Meruya Karang Taruna" involved various stakeholders. Parties who were actively involved came from the research team, the management and members of the South Meruya Karang Taruna, and the academic community, including thesis advisors and fellow researchers. The methods used in implementing this research are:

1. In-depth Interviews. The process began with semi-structured interviews to explore participants' personal experiences, motivations, challenges faced, and perceptions of the organization's governance system. Interviews were conducted by appointment, using a prepared interview guide. For every answer given, the researcher probed more deeply if the response was deemed insufficiently comprehensive.
2. Focus Group Discussions (FGD). A total of 21 participants were divided into three discussion groups, each consisting of seven members with a heterogeneous composition (core management, active members from various divisions, advisors, and local community figures). Each FGD session lasted 60-90 minutes, facilitated by a main moderator and assisted by a note-taker. Open-ended questions were used to encourage spontaneous sharing about reasons for joining, challenges in participation, the role of digital media in supporting interaction, and organizational decision-making mechanisms.

Informant Code	Focus Group Discussion	Age (Years)	Position/Role	Length of Membership	Educational background
P1	FGD 1	19	Sports & Youth Division	3 years	SMA
P2	FGD 1	20	Entrepreneurship Division	3 years	SMK
P3	FGD 1	20	Social & Environment Division	2 years	SMK
P4	FGD 1	21	Sports & Youth Division	2 years	SMK
P5	FGD 1	26	Chairperson	5 years	S2
P6	FGD 1	21	Entrepreneurship Division	2 years	SMA
P7	FGD 1	23	Education & Literacy Division	3 years	SMA
P8	FGD 2	25	Vice Chairperson	5 years	S1
P9	FGD 2	23	Arts, Culture & Events Division	2 years	SMA
P10	FGD 2	20	Arts, Culture & Events Division	3 years	SMK
P11	FGD 2	23	Social & Environment Division	3 years	S1
P12	FGD 2	19	Arts, Culture & Events Division	2 years	SMA
P13	FGD 2	22	Social & Environment Division	2 years	SMA
P14	FGD 2	26	Treasurer	5 years	S2
P15	FGD 3	22	Education & Literacy Division	2 years	SMK
P16	FGD 3	25	Secretary	5 years	S1
P17	FGD 3	22	Media, Public Relations & Digital Division	3 years	SMK
P18	FGD 3	19	Education & Literacy Division	2 years	SMK
P19	FGD 3	20	Media, Public Relations & Digital Division	2 years	SMA
P20	FGD 3	23	Entrepreneurship Division	2 years	S1
P21	FGD 3	24	Sports & Youth Division	2 years	S1

3. Participant Observation. The researcher was directly present in various forums such as organizational meetings, deliberations, field activities, and observed interactions in digital spaces like WhatsApp groups and the organization's Instagram account.

4. Document Review. Organizational documents such as the Bylaws (AD/ART), meeting minutes, and work programs were analyzed to complement the data from interviews and observations.

The implementation of this research is divided into two main phases: (1) the Pre-Implementation Phase, and (2) the Data Collection and Analysis Phase.

1. Pre-Implementation Activity Stage

Research activities were preceded by coordinating with the organization and relevant academic parties. External coordination was carried out by meeting the leadership of the South Meruya Karang Taruna to explain the research objectives and gather a list of potential participants who met the criteria. Leaders then explained to their members the importance of participation in this study. Meanwhile, internal coordination was carried out with thesis advisors to ensure the research design was sound and ethically compliant, with the aim that the implementation of the research could be conducted systematically and documented properly. From the preliminary survey and initial discussions, the main problems and focus of the research were identified, namely:

- a. The pattern of youth participation is still often limited to operational implementation without significant involvement in strategic decision-making.
- b. The utilization of digital platforms has not been fully optimized to support transparent and accountable governance.
- c. There is a potential gap in digital literacy among members, which affects the quality of their participation.
- d. The governance principles of transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness in organizational management need to be further strengthened.

The identified focus explains the research needs, namely to deeply explore the dynamics, constraints, and potential of Generation Z's participation within the framework of community organization governance. To support the smooth running of the research, coordination was carried out with all research team members, such as finalizing interview and FGD instruments, dividing tasks, and preparing a timeline for implementation.

2. Data Collection and Analysis Implementation Stage

The second stage is the core phase of the research, which is a continuation of the preparatory stage. Activities in this phase were carried out throughout August 2025. Data collection employed the methods mentioned above (interviews, FGDs, observation, document review). FGDs and observations were conducted at the South Meruya Karang Taruna secretariat and various activity locations. In this study, the participants involved totaled 21 people from the initial list that had been compiled. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, where the information obtained began to show repetition and no new significant themes emerged.

The data analysis process was carried out interactively during and after data collection. All interview and FGD recordings were transcribed verbatim. The researcher then conducted open coding to identify initial codes, which were then grouped and linked through axial coding into broader thematic categories, such as "Digital Space as an Aspiration Channel," "Structural Barriers to Participation," and "Challenges of Participatory Governance." The selective coding stage was used to integrate these categories into a coherent core narrative that answers the research questions. To ensure the validity of the findings, triangulation of sources and methods was performed, and member checking was conducted by reconfirming the interpretation of the data with several participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Generation Z, synonymous with the digital environment since birth, does not merely adopt new ways of communicating but also drives transformation in the participation patterns of community organizations. Referring to Arnstein's (1969) participation theory known as the "Ladder of Citizen Participation," there are eight rungs of participation, starting from manipulation and therapy (forms of non-participation), then informing, consultation, and placation (as tokenism), up to partnership, delegated power, and citizen control (which reflect citizen power). Generation Z's characteristic familiarity with digital communication drives their preference for more collaborative and equal participation models, conceptually aligned with the partnership level (Reinikainen et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). This is possible because digital platforms facilitate active involvement from the planning, execution, to evaluation stages, rather than being passive recipients of information from senior management.

In the context of the South Meruya Karang Taruna, the use of applications like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Google Forms by Generation Z members indicates a level of participation that goes beyond mere consultation. They are not only asked to provide input but are also directly involved in designing event concepts and marketing strategies. However, the structural reality of the organization proves that the dominance of senior management remains a barrier for Generation Z to achieve the level of delegated power, let alone citizen control, a condition where young people have full formal authority. Thus, their position in this organization is still in a transitional phase, between tokenism and substantive partnership.

The integration of generational theory and participation theory is important as it shows how Generation Z's adaptive character towards technology can be a catalyst for changing organizational culture towards a more participatory management model (Zhang et al., 2024). However, the success of this transformation highly depends on the organization's commitment to institutional reform, for instance by granting formal authority to young members, establishing systematic follow-up mechanisms for every proposal, and reducing the dominance of senior management in strategic decision-making (Zhang et al., 2024) Through these steps, social organizations like Karang Taruna can optimize the role of Generation Z as drivers of innovation and agents of change at the grassroots level.

Based on analysis from in depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD), it was found that Generation Z's participation in the South Meruya Karang Taruna has distinct characteristics compared to previous generations. These findings can be grouped into three main patterns.

First, digital spaces have become the primary medium for Generation Z to channel aspirations. Through WhatsApp groups, the organization's Instagram account, and Google Forms used for idea collection and evaluation, they express their ideas more dynamically, efficiently, and interactively. This pattern reflects Generation Z's tendency to choose communication media perceived as more egalitarian and aligned with daily habits, compared to face to face forums which are still seen as laden with hierarchy (Surugiu et al., 2025)

Second, Generation Z's involvement is evident in the collaborative process of planning activities, especially in entrepreneurship and sports programs. Several young members reported being involved from the early stages of concept development, including in determining event themes and formulating social media marketing strategies. Such involvement not only strengthens their sense of ownership towards the organization but also indicates a shift in Karang Taruna's governance towards a model that is more participatory and responsive to fresh ideas from the younger generation.

Third, despite showing progress, Generation Z's participation is still constrained by several structural barriers. The minimal formal authority granted to young members in decision-making, the absence of clear follow up mechanisms for submitted proposals, and the strong influence of

senior management in determining organizational policies are the main inhibiting factors. These barriers impact the under-optimization of emerging creative ideas, which ultimately has the potential to lower Generation Z's motivation to participate.

Within the framework of participatory governance, this study's findings reveal a number of fundamental challenges related to the principles of transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, responsiveness, and digital literacy. Although there are efforts from the management, the governance practices implemented still face significant structural and cultural constraints.

Transparency stands out as the most prominent issue. Most members, particularly young ones, feel that access to the organization's strategic information remains very limited. Social media is indeed used, but more for promoting events and visual documentation, not for revealing details such as budgets, meeting minutes, or program evaluation results. As expressed by a 20-year-old participant, "We often only find out about an event when the announcement is already shared in the WhatsApp group. Budget details are also rarely explained openly." This statement confirms the existence of one-way transparency practices, where young members act more as information recipients, not as subjects with data access rights to participate in organizational oversight. This finding aligns with the research of (Hagemann et al., 2024), which asserts that a lack of information transparency in community organizations can weaken the sense of belonging among young members and erode the organization's social legitimacy.

Accountability is also an issue, where the system of responsibility remains informal and lacks documentation. Activity reports are generally only delivered verbally in internal forums, without measurable performance indicators. A 22 years old management member admitted, "Reports are usually only discussed in meetings; there's no written version or in-depth evaluation. As a result, it's difficult to assess whether a program was truly successful." The absence of an indicator based evaluation system makes objective assessment of programs difficult. This indicates a weakness in formal accountability, which should be the foundation of the organization's reputation. This result is consistent with the findings of (Hagemann et al., 2024; Lipton, Bailie, et al., 2025), which emphasize the importance of a structured and documented assessment system for maintaining the legitimacy of community organizations.

Inclusiveness shows positive development, albeit not yet uniform. The involvement of women and non-core members is increasingly visible in operational activities such as entrepreneurship and social events. However, their participation remains limited when entering major meeting forums or strategic decision-making processes. A 19-year-old female participant stated, "Women are indeed more involved now, for instance in business activities. But in big meetings, the speakers are usually still the core management or men." This phenomenon reflects partial and somewhat symbolic inclusion. Prianti (2025) asserts that youth organizations will only achieve sustainable social legitimacy if they can build inclusive institutional mechanisms, allowing equal participation unrestricted by gender or membership status.

The management's responsiveness to member input also shows an inconsistent pattern. Suggestions tend to be selectively addressed: ideas that are easy and practical, such as sports competitions, are quickly acted upon; while proposals that are complex and require more resources, such as entrepreneurship training or environmental programs, are often merely recorded without further follow-up. As explained by a 21 years old participant, "Suggestions for sports activities are usually immediately followed up. But for environmental programs, they are usually just noted, then there's no continuation." This condition indicates bias in decision-making, where short-term interests are prioritized over long-term strategic programs. This finding aligns with research by (Sala-Torrent & Planas-Lladó, 2024), which highlights that the consistency of an organization's response to member expectations is a key element in building trust and maintaining youth engagement.

Digital literacy emerges as both a strength and a challenge. Generation Z in the South Meruya Karang Taruna is generally highly proficient in utilizing digital technology for organizational coordination and communication. WhatsApp is used for daily discussions, Instagram for publication, and Google Forms for idea collection. However, this study reveals a digital skills gap among members. Individuals skilled in content design or social media strategy tend to be heard more, while those with less proficiency are often overlooked in online conversations. A 19 year old participant conveyed, "Those who are good at designing Instagram content are more easily listened to, while others are rarely involved in online discussions." This situation creates a new hierarchy based on digital ability, which ironically has the potential to cause exclusion within participatory spaces. This result aligns with the findings of Tsouparopoulou et al. (2025), which emphasize that the level of digital participation is heavily influenced by an individual's technical ability to utilize technology.

Overall, this study confirms that Generation Z has significant potential to strengthen participatory governance at the community level. However, this potential cannot be optimized due to weak transparency, low formal accountability, inconsistent responsiveness, and digital literacy gaps. These findings support the research of (Shin et al., 2024a), which emphasizes the importance of collaboration between institutional support and digital capacity building to create effective participatory governance. From a practical standpoint, this study recommends several strategic steps: (1) strengthening transparent digital feedback mechanisms, (2) publishing budgets and program reports through official social media channels, (3) developing an indicator-based performance evaluation system, and (4) organizing digital literacy training for members with limited skills. Through the implementation of these steps, Generation Z can be positioned not merely as symbolic participants, but as genuine partners in the organizational co-design process, as suggested by (Lipton, Dickinson, et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the research exploring the participation dynamics of Generation Z within the community organization of South Meruya Karang Taruna has effectively illuminated the interplay between digital-native characteristics and traditional governance structures. The findings confirm that while Generation Z possesses a strong drive and the digital capacity for collaborative, substantive participation, aligning with higher levels of Arnstein's ladder, this potential is significantly constrained by institutional barriers such as hierarchical decision-making, lack of formal authority delegation, and weaknesses in transparency and accountability. This scoring of the participatory landscape illustrates both the transformative potential and the current limitations in harnessing Gen Z's energy for community governance.

The capacity for more meaningful participation, as identified, is foundational for increasing the professionalism, adaptability, and social legitimacy of community organizations like Karang Taruna. Moving forward, this enhanced engagement model is able to position youth not as passive recipients but as active co-designers of programs, ultimately leading to more innovative, responsive, and sustainable community initiatives. It is hoped that, by addressing the identified governance gaps, South Meruya Karang Taruna can strengthen its internal democracy and serve as a more effective vehicle for youth-led community development.

The advice given for the progress of participatory governance in such organizations is to implement a structured intervention framework. This includes: (1) establishing formal digital feedback and transparent reporting mechanisms, (2) developing clear indicators and systematic evaluation for program accountability, (3) creating inclusive forums and delegated roles for youth in strategic decision-making, and (4) conducting regular digital literacy training to bridge skill gaps. It is hoped that consistent mentorship and possibly a facilitation role from external

actors such as local universities, government youth agencies, or civil society organizations can help institutionalize these reforms and solve the day-to-day challenges of transitioning to a more participatory culture. Consultants or academic partners can be sought to provide ongoing guidance on monitoring the integration of digital tools with governance principles, ensuring that the evolution of the organization is both strategic and sustainable.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that need to be noted, even though it provides in-depth information about Generation Z's participation in participatory governance within community-based organizations. (Butti, 2025) Initially, this study was conducted at Karang Taruna Meruya Selatan, West Jakarta, a single youth organization. The results may not necessarily be the same as those found in Karang Taruna organizations in other locations or youth communities with different sociocultural, institutional, and regional characteristics due to the limited empirical scope. (Prabhu, n.d.) (Fierheller et al., 2024) Different dynamics of involvement may arise due to differences in local government situations, organizational maturity, and leadership styles.

Second, qualitative descriptive techniques were used in this study, which prioritizes in-depth understanding over the measurement of causal relationships. This approach does not measure the strength or statistical significance of correlations between factors such as digital literacy, transparency, and participatory outcomes, although it allows for a comprehensive study of experiences, perceptions, and power relations. Fikri et al., (n.d.) As a result, the findings of this study are more contextual and exploratory than predictive.

Third, most of the data were obtained from self-reported opinions through focus groups and interviews. Although member verification and triangulation were used to enhance credibility, there is still the possibility of social conformity bias, in which participants may have minimized internal problems within the organization or exaggerated the positive elements of participation (Bispo Júnior, 2022)

Finally, interactions between Karang Taruna and external stakeholders such as local government agencies, non-governmental organizations, or private sector actors were not explored in this study, which focused primarily on internal organizational governance (Zikargae et al., 2022) As a result, the broader institutional ecosystem that influences youth engagement and policy impact is not adequately represented.

Research Implications

Implications for Theory

By combining Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen involvement with generational theory to describe how Generation Z's digital-native traits might change involvement from tokenism to partnership, this work enhances participatory governance and youth studies. (T Sulistyaningsih, 2022) The results highlight how power dynamics, corporate culture, accountability systems, and digital literacy all have a significant impact on digital engagement, which is not just technological. This study emphasizes the necessity for participatory governance theories to take into consideration digital skill differences as a source of new inclusion and exclusion dynamics by identifying digital literacy as a moderating factor that can both facilitate and restrict participation (Sadat, 2025)

Practical Implications

Practically, the results offer direction for local stakeholders and youth organizations to go beyond symbolic involvement by institutionalizing explicit authority delegation, transparent decision-making, and methodical follow-up procedures. Through budget disclosure, documentation, and program evaluation, digital platforms can be improved for accountability in

addition to communication. Additionally, to guarantee broad participation and avoid the concentration of influence among members with digital skills, formal training in digital literacy and cross-generational mentoring are crucial (Shin et al., 2024b)

Implications for Future Research

In order to improve comparative and generalizable insights, future study should expand the empirical scope by looking at several youth groups in various locations. It is advised to test the links found in this study and track the long-term effects of participatory governance reforms using mixed-methods, quantitative, or longitudinal methodologies (Fetters et al., 2013) Furthermore, a deeper knowledge of how young engagement can be successfully converted into long-lasting organizational and policy outcomes would result from investigating the role of external actors, such as local governments, academic institutions, and civil society organizations.

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