

Research Article

A Critical Analysis of the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Bill

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Abstract: Teenage pregnancy remains a major public health and social development concern in the Philippines, with adolescent birth rates among the highest in Southeast Asia. In response, policymakers introduced the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Bill, which aims to institutionalize Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). However, the bill has sparked polarized responses from various stakeholders, revealing tensions between moral conservatism and rights-based public health advocacy. This study investigates how the bill is discursively framed in media and policy narratives and how such framings influence public perception and policy legitimacy. Adopting a qualitative design, it employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine 50 news articles and 200 social media posts, complemented by six semi-structured interviews with policymakers, youth advocates, and religious leaders. Findings reveal a clash between moral protectionist and public health frames, each claiming to safeguard youth but operating on distinct emotional and ideological logics. The legitimacy of the bill is further undermined by low institutional trust, especially in local governments and education agencies. Youth are often excluded from formal policy discourse but emerge as both vulnerable and active participants in digital spaces where misinformation also thrives. The study argues that successful sexuality education reform requires reframing efforts that align moral and health narratives, rebuild institutional credibility, and meaningfully integrate youth voices. Future research should explore hybrid communication strategies and youth-led policy design as tools for bridging ideological divides.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Policy Framing, Sex Education, Teenage Pregnancy, Youth Participation.



1. Introduction

Teenage pregnancy remains a persistent and deeply rooted public health and social development concern in the Philippines. Despite legislative efforts and reproductive health campaigns over the past decade, the country continues to report some of the highest adolescent birth rates in Southeast Asia. Recent data show a troubling rise in pregnancies among girls aged 10 to 14, underscoring a widening gap between policy intentions and ground-level realities. This demographic trend signals more than a statistical anomaly; it reflects structural inequities in education, access to reproductive health services, and adolescent empowerment [1].

In response to these challenges, legislators have proposed the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Bill (Senate Bill 1979 and House Bill 8910), which seeks to institutionalize comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) as a national strategy. The bill proposes age-appropriate, culturally sensitive education for adolescents, to be implemented across both public and private schools [2]. It also mandates a whole-of-government approach, engaging the Department of Education, Department of Health, and local government units. While this policy proposition has gained support from public health advocates and development organizations, it has also triggered significant backlash, particularly from religious and conservative sectors [1].

The polarized reception of the bill reveals that the policy debate surrounding CSE in the Philippines is not only technical but also highly discursive. Competing narrative frames centered on morality, health, culture, and rights shape how the bill is understood, accepted, or rejected by different constituencies [3]. On one side, CSE is framed as a rights-based intervention essential for reducing adolescent pregnancies and improving health literacy [4]. On the other, it is cast as an erosion of cultural values and parental authority, accused of “sexualizing” children and importing foreign ideologies.

This discursive divide is compounded by uneven institutional trust. Many citizens, including those who sympathize with the bill’s objectives, remain skeptical about the government’s ability to implement such policies effectively and ethically. Past failures in reproductive health legislation most notably the spotty enforcement of the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act have eroded public confidence. As a result, the issue is not only about what the state should do, but whether it can do so credibly and inclusively.

Furthermore, the voices of adolescents themselves the intended beneficiaries of the policy remain largely underrepresented in formal policymaking spaces. Although some youth-led movements have emerged, their influence is often limited to digital platforms, which are simultaneously vulnerable to misinformation. Viral narratives opposing the bill often distort its content and intentions, leveraging social media’s emotional appeal to generate fear and resistance. This dynamic reveals how powerfully digital ecosystems shape policy discourse, particularly when formal institutions fail to communicate effectively.

These tensions raise a fundamental question: what determines the legitimacy of sexuality education policy in the Philippine context? Is it scientific evidence, cultural resonance, institutional credibility, or democratic participation? This study approaches these questions by analyzing how competing frames, institutional dynamics, and youth inclusion intersect in the current policy moment.

Accordingly, this paper aims to explore how the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Bill is discursively constructed, perceived, and contested in contemporary Philippine society. Through a critical review of literature, media analysis, and policy documents, the study identifies key framings, trust dynamics, and exclusionary patterns that shape the policy’s reception. By situating the debate within broader questions of legitimacy, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of why evidence-based reforms such as CSE struggle to gain traction despite their apparent urgency and necessity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teenage Pregnancy and the Urgency of Sex Education

Teenage pregnancy rates in the Philippines remain among the highest in Southeast Asia. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, more than 3,000 babies were born to girls aged 10–14 in 2023 alone [3], while 162 teenage mothers died due to pregnancy-related complications in 2024 [2]. Save the Children International has highlighted a 35% increase in adolescent pregnancies from 2021 to 2023, calling for urgent educational reforms [5]. These figures reflect both a public health emergency and a governance gap. Previous efforts under the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act (RPRH Law) have proven insufficient, in part due to inconsistent implementation [4] [5].

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is internationally recognized as a preventive mechanism that reduces risky sexual behavior, increases contraceptive use, and delays sexual debut [6] [7]. UNESCO and UNFPA have emphasized that age-appropriate, scientifically accurate sexuality education is key to improving adolescent reproductive health outcomes [8] [9]. However, local resistance and institutional gaps have undermined attempts to localize these standards in Philippine schools.

2.2. Policy and Institutional Frameworks: Between Law and Practice

The current legislative proposal, House Bill 8910 and Senate Bill 1979, collectively known as the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Bill, seeks to make CSE mandatory in public and private schools [10]. While this aligns with the Philippines' commitments under international agreements such as the ICPD and the Sustainable Development Goals, implementation challenges persist. DepEd Order No. 031, s. 2018, already mandated the integration of CSE into K–12 curricula [11], but field data show that many schools fail to implement it substantively, especially in faith-based and private institutions [12] [13].

A policy review by Saquing and Nordan [5] found that teacher discomfort, lack of training, and fear of backlash from religious communities contributed to the stagnation of CSE rollout. Implementation also varies by region, with Eastern Visayas and ARMM showing the lowest compliance rates [14]. The Department of Education has recently acknowledged these barriers and vowed to recalibrate its sex education strategy [15].

A critical factor influencing public perception and legislative traction is how sex education is framed in discourse. Health-based framings, emphasizing adolescent welfare, maternal safety, and public health, are promoted by NGOs such as Likhaan and Roots of Health [16] [17]. These narratives cite research showing that CSE leads to measurable declines in adolescent pregnancy and STI incidence [18].

In contrast, moral-religious framings warn against the “sexualization of children” and frame CSE as an intrusion upon parental and cultural authority [19] [20]. Groups such as Project Dalisay and public figures like former Chief Justice Sereno claim that the bill introduces Western values that are incompatible with Filipino family structures [21] [22]. These framings resonate with Catholic communities, where the Church remains a dominant influence on public morality [23].

This ideological tension is exacerbated by online misinformation. Viral posts on TikTok and Reddit have accused the bill of “teaching masturbation to minors,” a claim based on distorted interpretations of international CSE modules [24] [25]. Such narratives fuel a digitally mediated moral panic that hinders evidence-based dialogue.

2.3. Youth Participation, Digital Spaces, and Policy Legitimacy

Ironically, the most affected demographic, adolescents, are often sidelined in both policymaking and media discourse. While youth-led platforms such as AHam Na 2.0 and student advocacy networks have attempted to raise awareness, their institutional visibility remains limited [26] [27]. A participatory study in Palawan showed that when youth were actively engaged in policy design, CSE acceptance increased significantly [17].

Digital platforms represent both opportunities and risks. While online campaigns have enabled broader youth engagement, they have also been hijacked by disinformation networks and political actors [25] [28]. This underscores the need for media literacy and participatory policy frameworks that treat adolescents not as passive recipients, but as co-architects of reform.

Framing theory helps explain these tensions: as Entman posits, policy debates hinge not only on content but on how problems, causes, and solutions are constructed and disseminated [29]. Bridging the divide between public health urgency and cultural legitimacy will require inclusive, strategic framing grounded in data but responsive to social values [30].

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how various stakeholders frame the proposed *Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Bill* in public discourse, particularly around issues of morality, health, and youth rights. It utilizes a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to understand the competing narratives circulating in Philippine mainstream and digital media, and their implications for policy perception and implementation.

3.1. Data Sources

The data consists of two primary sources:

- 1) Media Corpus:
A purposive sample of 50 news articles (from Inquirer, Rappler, DW, PNA, and others) and 200 social media posts (from Twitter, TikTok, and Reddit) was collected between January 2022 and April 2025. Keywords used included: “sex education bill”, “teen pregnancy Philippines”, “SB1979”, “moral decay”, and “CSE law”. Articles were selected based on relevance, diversity of viewpoints, and recurrence in discourse networks.
- 2) Key Informant Interviews:
A total of six semi-structured interviews were conducted:
 - 3 policymakers (including one co-author of SB1979)
 - 2 youth NGO representatives (Roots of Health and Likhaan)
 - 1 Catholic educational leader opposing the bill

Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

3.2. Analytical Framework

Data were analyzed using **Thematic Analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and framed through **Entman’s Framing Theory** (1993), focusing on four framing functions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation.

The thematic coding process involved:

- 1) Open coding to identify discourse elements (e.g., "moral corruption", "scientific neutrality", "youth empowerment")
- 2) Axial coding to categorize themes:
 - *Moral/Religious Framing*
 - *Public Health Framing*
 - *Youth Voice and Autonomy*
 - *Disinformation and Fear Appeals*
 - *Legitimacy of Government Intervention*

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the study used:

- Analyst triangulation (multiple coders validating themes)
- Member checking (returning synthesized findings to two informants for validation)
- Audit trails for transparency in coding decisions

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. The Politics of Framing in Sexuality Education Reform

The study finds that the public debate on the proposed Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Bill is deeply shaped by framing competition. The dominant frames moral protectionism and public health advocacy define not only what the problem is, but also who is authorized to speak and what solutions are deemed acceptable.

The moral framing constructs the bill as a cultural intrusion. It frames the proposed sex education as a foreign agenda that undermines traditional family values and religious morality. This narrative positions parents, faith leaders, and cultural guardians as rightful defenders of youth against ideological corruption.

In contrast, the public health framing situates teenage pregnancy as a systemic risk requiring state intervention. It reframes sex education as a form of harm prevention and life skills development. Here, the problem is not moral decay but institutional neglect and information inequality. These framings operate on distinct emotional logics. The moral frame invokes fear, nostalgia, and national identity, while the health frame appeals to urgency, science, and rights. Importantly, both claims to protect the youth, yet they define “protection” in fundamentally different terms.

The coexistence of these parallel framings with little discursive overlap leads to polarization. Neither frame fully engages the concerns of the other, making it difficult to build legislative consensus or public trust in the bill’s intent. The findings suggest that reframing sex education through a hybrid narrative one that aligns moral protection with adolescent well-being may offer a

pathway toward more inclusive dialogue. Without this, the debate risks becoming ideologically locked and politically unproductive. This dynamic indicates that framing is not merely rhetorical. It is constitutive: it shapes the very terrain on which legitimacy, urgency, and resistance are negotiated.

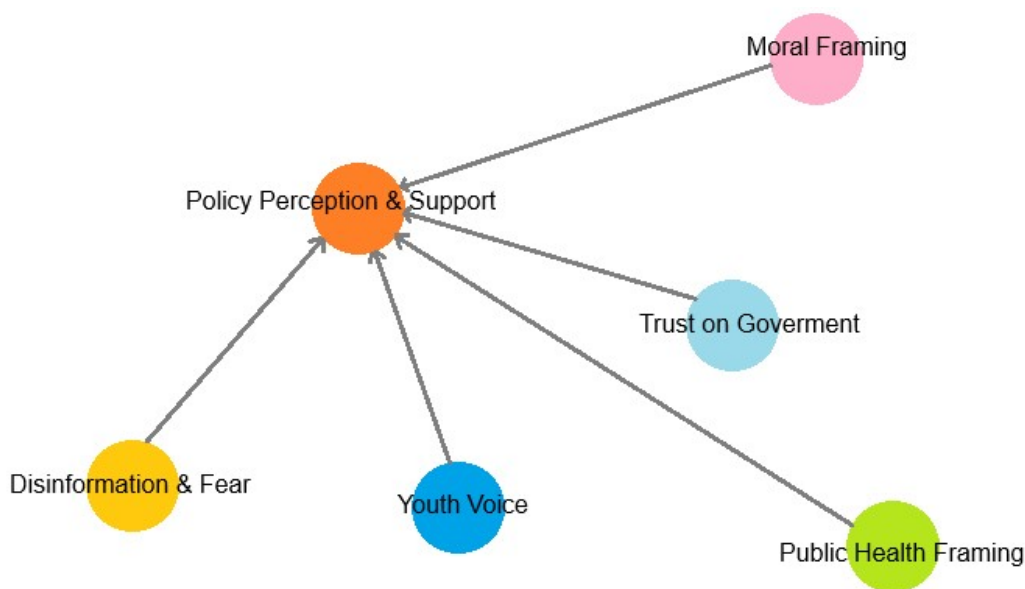


Figure 1. Narrative Frames Influencing Policy Perception of the Sex Education Bill

4.2. Trust in Institutions and the Fragility of Policy Legitimacy

Beyond narrative frames, the study reveals that support for or opposition to the bill is influenced by the level of trust in state institutions. Even among those sympathetic to the bill’s goals, there is widespread doubt about the capacity of education agencies and local governments to implement reform credibly. These doubts are rooted in lived experience. The incomplete implementation of previous reproductive health mandates has generated a perception that laws are passed more for political display than for structural transformation.

Stakeholders question whether teachers are adequately trained, whether school systems are prepared, and whether local leaders can shield implementation from backlash. The recurring fear is that the bill may become yet another symbolic law passed, but not practiced. Particularly vulnerable to implementation failure are areas governed by religious institutions or conservative LGUs. These sites are where the moral frame is strongest and where bureaucratic enforcement is often weakest.

A key finding is that legal mandates do not translate to policy legitimacy unless they are perceived as both feasible and fair. Legitimacy, in this context, is not conferred by passage alone but by the credibility of anticipated execution. The findings also indicate that “legality” and “legitimacy” must be disentangled. Stakeholders may support the law in principle, yet withhold trust in its custodians. This weakens public alignment with policy goals and enables disinformation to fill the credibility gap. Therefore, the study argues that institutional trust is not a background condition it is a frontline variable in determining the real-world impact of sexuality education reform.

4.3. Youth Marginalization, Digital Disruption, and Strategic Opportunity

A consistent theme across interviews and media analysis is the marginalization of youth voices in formal policy discourse. While adolescents are the intended beneficiaries of the bill, they are rarely treated as agents in its design or defense. In contrast, informal digital platforms provide space for youth expression. Online campaigns, video commentaries, and creative content reveal that many adolescents are not apathetic, but rather uninvited from formal channels of influence.

These same digital spaces, however, are also fertile ground for misinformation. Distorted interpretations of the bill circulate rapidly, often through emotional or religious appeals. These narratives are not just misinformed they are persuasive precisely because they fill the communicative

vacuum left by institutional silence. The study finds that youth digital activism, when properly supported, can act as a narrative counter-force. Some initiatives already show signs of success: peer-led programs, gamified education, and vernacular campaigns that reframe CSE as respect-based rather than permissive.

The failure to integrate youth meaningfully into the policy process is both a democratic and strategic loss. When young people are treated as subjects rather than co-authors, the resulting policy risks being misaligned with its constituency.

Ultimately, the analysis suggests that reclaiming narrative space, rebuilding institutional trust, and centering youth as co-producers are not supplementary steps, they are foundational for the bill's success and for a deeper cultural shift toward evidence-based, rights-affirming adolescent health policy.

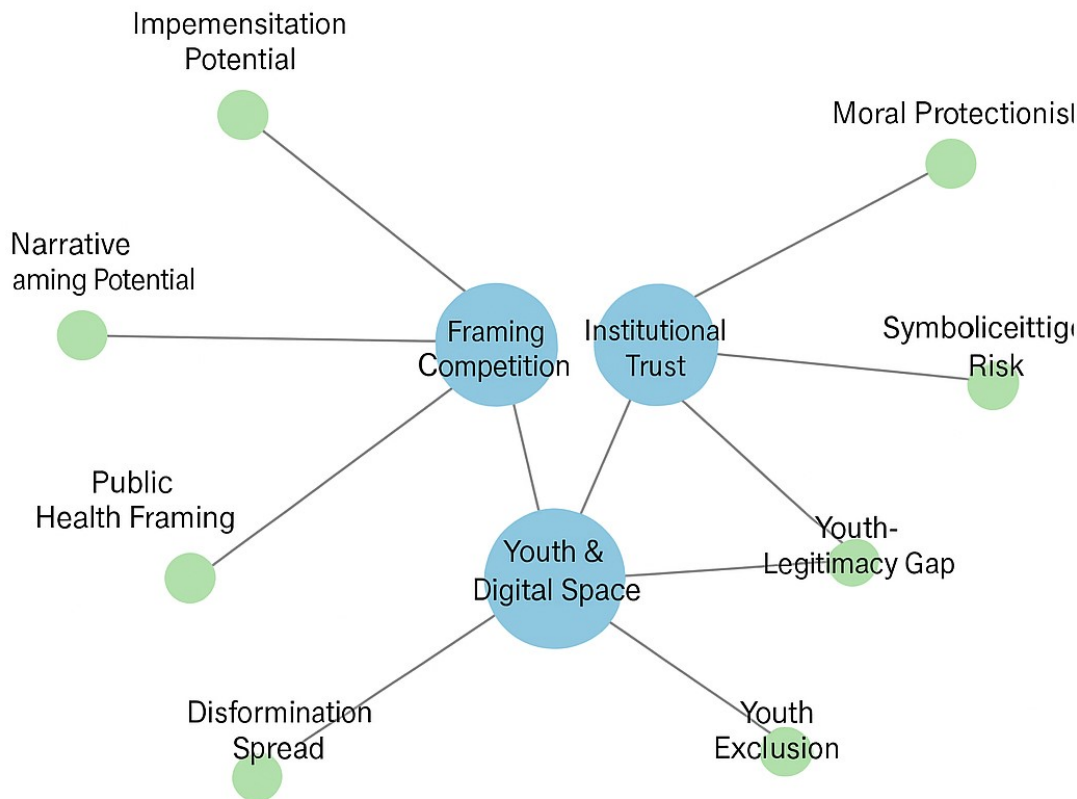


Figure 2. Thematic Map of Findings: Sex Education Policy in Philippines

Figure 2 illustrates the interconnected themes that emerged from the study of the sex education policy debate in the Philippines. It visually maps the dynamic relationships between three central themes (in blue) and their associated sub-themes (in green), offering a structural understanding of the social, institutional, and discursive forces shaping the policy landscape.

Core Themes (Blue Nodes)

- 1) Framing Competition
 This theme highlights the ongoing struggle between competing narratives surrounding the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Bill. On one side, moral protectionism frames the bill as a foreign and culturally intrusive agenda. On the other, public health framing defines it as a harm-reduction strategy rooted in science and adolescent rights.
- 2) Institutional Trust
 Institutional trust refers to public confidence in government bodies (e.g., Department of Education, local government units) to implement the bill effectively and fairly. The study

finds that even supporters of the bill question whether it will move beyond symbolic legislation to real impact.

3) Youth & Digital Space

This theme focuses on how youth, though often excluded from formal policymaking, are active in digital arenas. These platforms serve as spaces for both youth expression and disinformation spread, showing the double-edged nature of online engagement.

Sub-Themes (Green Nodes)

1) Linked to Framing Competition:

- Narrative Reframing Potential: Opportunities to merge moral and health narratives for inclusive discourse.
- Moral Protectionism: Frames CSE as a threat to cultural and religious values.
- Public Health Framing: Advocates for CSE as a public health necessity.
- Implementation Potential: Concerns about real-world feasibility of policy delivery.

2) Linked to Institutional Trust:

- Symbolic Legislation Risk: Fear that the bill may be passed but poorly enforced.
- Youth–Legitimacy Gap: Disconnect between youth interests and how legitimacy is constructed.
- Implementation Potential: Overlaps with framing and trust, showing shared concerns.

3) Linked to Youth & Digital Space:

- Disinformation Spread: Emotional and misleading content circulating in social media.
- Youth Exclusion: Lack of youth participation in policy design and deliberation.
- Youth–Legitimacy Gap: Reinforced by exclusion from formal processes.

Figure 2 shows that these three dimensions i.e, narrative framing, institutional credibility, and youth engagement. They are deeply interdependent. Weakness in one area reinforces challenges in others:

- Lack of institutional trust enables disinformation to fill the void.
- Framing competition without reconciliation fuels public confusion.
- Youth exclusion limits legitimacy and risks policy misalignment.

The thematic map underscores that evidence alone is not enough to push reform. Effective sexuality education policy in the Philippine context requires:

- Narrative hybridization that bridges moral and health concerns
- Rebuilding trust in public institutions
- Authentic youth inclusion as co-creators of policy

Figure 2 thus serves not only as an analytical tool but also as a strategic guide for future research, advocacy, and legislative engagement.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the discursive, institutional, and participatory dynamics surrounding the proposed Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Bill in the Philippines. Anchored in a qualitative synthesis of literature and policy discourse, three key insights emerged. First, the issue of sexuality education is not merely technical but deeply political, shaped by competing narrative frames. The moral framing positions the bill as a cultural threat, while the public health framing frames it as an urgent policy intervention. These frames not only diverge in substance but rarely intersect in dialogue. Their mutual exclusivity fosters polarization, impeding consensus and eroding the perceived legitimacy of reform.

Second, even among supporters of the bill, trust in institutional implementation is fragile. Past experiences of partial or symbolic enforcement of reproductive health laws have cultivated skepticism. As a result, policy acceptance is conditioned not just by agreement with the bill's intent but by confidence in the state's ability to implement it effectively, fairly, and consistently.

Third, although youth are the intended beneficiaries, they remain structurally and discursively marginalized. In mainstream media and legislative processes, their voices are tokenized or absent. Yet

in digital environments, young people demonstrate both agency and innovation, albeit within arenas also prone to misinformation and moral panic.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that the success of sexuality education policy is not merely a question of legislation, but of narrative construction, institutional trust, and democratic inclusion. Legitimacy must be cultivated not just from above but through broad-based, culturally resonant, and youth-centered engagement. To respond to these insights, this study offers the following recommendations:

1. **Reframe the Narrative Bridge**
Future advocacy must move beyond binary framings. A hybrid narrative, one that respects cultural values while foregrounding adolescent health, can bridge moral and public health frames. Messaging should emphasize shared goals such as safety, responsibility, and family cohesion.
2. **Enhance Institutional Readiness**
Passage of the bill must be matched by a realistic implementation roadmap. This includes teacher training, parent engagement, and LGU-level accountability mechanisms. Without this, legal reform risks remaining declarative rather than transformative.
3. **Strengthen Participatory Channels for Youth**
Adolescents must be treated not as passive recipients but as co-designers of educational content and policy monitoring. Institutional platforms for youth consultation and school-based leadership programs should be institutionalized at the local level.
4. **Counter Misinformation Strategically**
Government and civil society actors must invest in rapid, culturally competent counter-narratives, particularly in digital spaces. This involves digital literacy training, collaborations with youth influencers, and community-based dialogue grounded in empathy.
5. **Monitor Legitimacy, Not Just Compliance**
Evaluation mechanisms should go beyond indicators of curriculum coverage to include measures of perceived legitimacy among educators, parents, and students. Trust-building must be treated as a policy outcome in itself.

In conclusion, achieving a socially embedded and evidence-informed approach to sex education in the Philippines requires more than legislation, it demands narrative sensitivity, democratic depth, and institutional credibility. This study contributes to that effort by illuminating the pathways through which policy legitimacy can be cultivated from conflict toward consensus.

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