

University Students' Career Decision Regret: A Mixed-Method Research

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This research aims to determine the factors affecting university students' regrets regarding career decisions. The study utilized a mixed-method approach, specifically an explanatory sequential mixed design, which is one of the mixed-method designs. The quantitative phase involved 249 undergraduate students enrolled in the 2022–2023 academic year at Trabzon University Faculty of Education, while the qualitative phase included five students selected from this sample group using the criterion sampling method. The researchers collected quantitative data using the "Career Decision Regret Scale", adapted into Turkish by Erdurcan and Kırdök, along with a "Personal Information Form" developed by the researchers. Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Based on the quantitative findings, significant differences in university students' levels of career decision regret were observed in relation to gender and academic year, while no statistically significant difference was found based on department. The qualitative findings identified four main themes influencing students' regrets about career decisions: occupational, family, environmental, and psychological factors. The research findings were discussed in the context of existing literature, and recommendations for future research were provided.

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INTRODUCTION

Individuals are faced with numerous options and choices throughout different phases of their lives. One of these critical phases is during university years, where individuals make significant decisions related to their career paths and have the chance to explore and experience these choices. Career decisions are predominantly made during adolescence, a period characterized by self-discovery, identity formation, and undergoing various transformations. However, it is worth noting that university placement is often determined randomly during entrance exams (Afşar Doğrusöz et al., 2022). Consequently, these decisions can evoke either positive emotions or feelings of regret among individuals.

Regret is an unpleasant emotion that arises when we imagine or realize that our situation could have been better if different decisions were made (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). To experience regret, individuals need to consider the consequences of their current choices and the potential outcomes of alternative choices. When individuals perceive that they have obtained unfavorable outcomes compared to the results associated with other available options, they may experience regret (Zeelenberg, 1999). In the context of career decisions, individuals may experience regret due to evolving human needs and the changes brought about by their era. Career decision regret reflects an individual's discomfort with their choice of university major (Polat, 2007). When individuals make career decisions based on certain desires and expectations, not having those expectations met can lead to feelings of regret (Erdurcan & Kırdök, 2017). A meta-analysis conducted by Roesse and Summerville (2005) found that the first two types of regret experienced by Americans are related to education and career choices. Individuals who regret their career decisions and feel unfulfilled may encounter various setbacks. In fact, studies have indicated that career decision regret influences employment termination intentions (Afşar Doğrusöz et al., 2022; Santra & Giri, 2017), burnout (Doğanülkü & Kırdök, 2021; Tian et al., 2019), life and job satisfaction (Köse, 2019), proactive career behaviors (Doğanülkü & Güneşlice, 2022), and coping with stress in academic life (Polat, 2007). Existing literature primarily focuses on career decision regret among employed individuals, particularly in the field of health (Dyrbye et al., 2018; Dyrbye et al., 2020; Köse, 2019; Sierra et al., 2018), as opposed to university students (Biricik Gulseren, 2019; Doğanülkü & Güneşlice, 2022). However, understanding the factors contributing to career decision regret among individuals who have not yet entered the workforce can inform necessary adjustments and improvements in the educational process and professional life. Additionally, identifying the underlying factors of career decision regret before individuals embark on their careers can provide vital insights to prevent negative consequences and foster job satisfaction.

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Individuals making career choices often lack experience due to their young age. Gender is considered a significant variable to consider when exploring career decision regret among university students who have selected a specific profession, whether randomly or with certain expectations. Indeed, findings from studies (Gökçen & Büyükgöze Kavas, 2018; Haskan Avcı et al., 2019) on gender roles as a factor influencing individuals' career choice process indicate that students who encounter situations that do not align with their expectations may experience career decision regret later on. Comparisons made by students regarding the suitability of their chosen profession to their expectations may vary between the start of their university journey and their graduation. Over time, students can engage in practical experiences and internships that provide them with a deeper understanding of their chosen profession and access to more comprehensive knowledge. Consequently, considering the variation in career decision regret at different academic levels can offer a clearer understanding of students' perspectives.

Additionally, the literature suggests that several factors play a role in career decision-making. Ensari and Alay (2017) identified work-oriented, individual, systemic, and environmental factors as key elements in the process. Students may experience career decision regret if their chosen department fails to meet their expectations or when comparing their profession to others. Therefore, it would be beneficial to examine how career regret varies across different academic departments.

In this study, understanding career decision regret requires an overview of the decision justification theory developed by Connolly and Zeelenberg (2002). According to this theory, decision-related regret consists of two components. The first component involves self-blame for making the wrong choice, while the second component relates to perceiving the outcome of the final decision as inferior to the outcome of the rejected alternative. These components can coexist or independently affect the individual (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002). Therefore, making comparisons between choices can contribute to experiencing career regret. Additionally, even if the outcome of the career decision turns out to be favorable, individuals may still experience regret due to self-blame for various reasons. Notably, Budjanovcanin and Woodrow (2022) highlight that career choices significantly impact self-blame regret because individuals themselves are primarily responsible for the decisions and events leading to their career choices (Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022).

Previously, Sullivan, Forret, and Mainiero (2007) conducted an exploratory study examining the causes of career decision regrets in working individuals, focusing on career choice strategies. However, the study lacked in-depth analysis. In contrast, Hennessey (2011) investigated career decision regrets among retired individuals, which differs from the university years' context. Sullivan et al. (2007) suggested that age may be a significant factor in career decision regret. Given the distinctive characteristics of both age and university years, it is crucial to explore the factors influencing career decisions during this specific period. Nevertheless, there is a need to reassess the existing literature on this topic. Considering the documented negative consequences of career decision regret, it is essential to investigate this issue for future planning. Additionally, contributing to the existing literature and understanding the dynamics of career decision regret would be valuable.

This research investigated the factors influencing university students' regrets regarding their career decisions. A mixed-method approach was adopted specifically an exploratory sequential mixed-method design. In mixed-method research, both quantitative and qualitative data are collected, integrated, and analyzed to draw comprehensive conclusions. Utilizing the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods is a logical approach (Creswell, 2021). The mixed-method design is particularly suitable when multiple perspectives are necessary to examine a complex issue (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2020). Therefore, this study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-method design as it recognized that solely assessing the levels of career decision regret among university students would be insufficient without gaining in-depth insights into the factors contributing to such regrets.

The quantitative portion of the study aimed to explore potential differences in career decision regret levels among students based on gender, department, and academic year. The following research questions were addressed: (1) Do career decision regret levels vary between male and female students? (2) Are there any significant differences in career decision regret levels across different academic departments? (3) Does career decision regret differ among students in different school years?

The qualitative component of the study aimed to delve into the factors influencing students' career decisions. It sought to answer questions that would enable students to express their perspectives on the factors

contributing to their career decision regret. The focus was on obtaining detailed insights into the various aspects that shape their career choices and subsequent regrets.

METHOD

Research Design

An exploratory sequential mixed design was employed in this research, following the framework of the mixed research method. This design involves an initial quantitative phase for data collection and analysis, followed by a subsequent qualitative phase to explain the quantitative findings. This design aims to enable the researcher to assess relationships and trends using quantitative data and subsequently elucidate the underlying mechanisms or results driving those trends (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2020). Accordingly, the research commenced with the quantitative stage and proceeded to the qualitative stage.

The data for the quantitative phase of the research were collected using a convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling involves selecting a sample from units that are readily available due to practical constraints (Büyüköztürk et al., 2018). In this study, permissions were obtained from several lecturers responsible for administering the scale and personal information form to students enrolled in various departments of Trabzon University Faculty of Education. Subsequently, these instructors visited their classes, provided information about the research, and distributed a Google form to the students. Additionally, the form was shared online with certain instructors for them to distribute among their students simultaneously.

The qualitative phase of the research employed the criterion sampling method to collect data. Criterion sampling involves studying situations that fulfill predetermined criteria (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In this study, the criterion for selection was individuals' career decision regret. A random selection was made among the students who met this criterion, and phone interviews were conducted to gauge their interest in participating in the research. During the interviews, the participants were provided with necessary information regarding the second stage of the study. Subsequently, online interviews were conducted with those participants who voluntarily agreed to participate. Before analysis, the audio recordings of these online interviews were transcribed with the participants' permission.

Participants

The quantitative phase of this research involved 249 undergraduate students enrolled in the 2022–2023 academic year at Trabzon University Faculty of Education. Convenience sampling was employed during this phase. Among the participants, 75.1% (n = 182) were female, while 24.9% (n = 67) were male. Regarding academic year, 53% (n = 132) were first-year students, and 47% (n = 117) were fourth-year students. The participating students belonged to various departments, including classroom teaching, guidance and psychological counseling, English, primary school mathematics, science, special education, preschool, and Turkish.

In the qualitative research phase, the criterion sampling method was employed, with career decision regret being identified as the criterion. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students who met these criteria and willingly participated in the second stage of the research during the 2022–2023 academic year. Among the participants, two were female, and three were male. In terms of academic year, three were first-year students, and two were fourth-year students. Additionally, two participants were enrolled in the department of preschool teaching, while the others belonged to the departments of guidance and psychological counseling, English teaching, and science teaching.

Data Collection

The quantitative stage of the research utilized the "Career Decision Regret Scale" and the "Personal Information Form" as data collection tools. On the other hand, in the qualitative stage, the "Semi-Structured Interview Form" was employed. Further details regarding these data collection tools are provided below.

Career Decision Regret Scale

The Career Decision Regret Scale, originally developed by Brehaut et al. (2003), was adapted into Turkish by Erdurcan & Kırdök (2017) for this research. The Likert scale consists of five items and measures a single dimension. In the Turkish version of the scale, the items are rated on a scale ranging from "0" (strongly

disagree) to "4" (strongly agree). Notably, the first, third, and fifth items of the scale are reverse-coded. The individual item scores are summed to obtain a total score, which is then multiplied by five to yield a score ranging from 0 to 100. Interpreting the scores, a range of 0–24 indicates "no regret from the decision," 25–49 suggests "a little regret about the decision," 50–74 signifies "regretting the decision," and 75–100 implies "very regretful of the decision".

Personal Information Form

The researchers developed a personal information form that included three questions pertaining to gender, school year, and department.

Semi-Structured Interview Form

Researchers created a semi-structured interview form to understand the factors affecting career decision regret and include the following questions: (1) What are the factors that affect your career decision regret? And (2) In which aspects do you compare your chosen career with other professions/careers? How do these comparisons affect your career decision regret?

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using the SPSS 24.0 software package. Before the analysis, skewness and kurtosis values were examined to assess the normality of the dataset. The skewness values ranged from .471 to .154, while the kurtosis values ranged from -.155 to .307. Following Şencan's (2005) guidelines, it can be determined that data does not exhibit a normal distribution when the sample size exceeds 50 by observing the skewness and kurtosis values. In this study, both skewness and kurtosis values fell within the range of ± 1 standard deviation, indicating a normal distribution. For the quantitative data analysis, independent samples t-test was employed to determine if there was a significant difference in career decision regret mean scores based on participants' gender and school year. Prior to these analyses, it was confirmed that the data met the assumptions of normal distribution and homogeneity of variances through Levene's test, as outlined by Büyüköztürk et al. (2015). Additionally, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was utilized to examine potential differences in career decision regret mean scores based on the participants' department. It was ensured that the necessary assumptions for ANOVA analysis, including normal distribution of data and homogeneity of variances, were met (Büyüköztürk et al., 2015).

The qualitative data analysis was conducted using the MAXQDA 22 software program. The data collected in the research were analyzed using the content analysis method. The data were initially coded into 12 codes, which were subsequently grouped under four main themes: occupational factors, family factors, environmental factors, and psychological factors. Both researchers achieved consensus in coding the codes and identifying the main themes. To ensure the reliability of the qualitative data, the agreement between the coders was calculated using the formula proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). A coefficient of agreement of 90% was expected among the coders (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the present study, the coefficient of agreement between the coders was calculated as 91%. Furthermore, to maintain confidentiality, direct citations in the study utilized letters instead of participants' names for coding purposes.

RESULTS

This section presents the results obtained from the quantitative and qualitative analyses conducted in their respective stages.

Examining University Students' Career Decision Regret Levels By Gender

Table 1 presents the results of the independent samples t-test conducted to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in career decision regret levels among university students based on gender.

Table 1. Independent samples t-test results of university students' career decision regret by gender.

Gender	<i>N</i>	\bar{x}	<i>Ss</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Female	187	24.36	18.82	247	-2.390	.018*
Male	62	30.97	19.03			

* $p < .05$

Based on the findings presented in Table 1, there was a statistically significant difference in career decision regret levels between male and female university students ($t(247) = -2.390, p < .05$). Specifically, male students exhibited higher levels of career decision regret compared to their female counterparts.

Examining University Students' Career Decision Regret Levels By Department

Table 2 presents the results of a one-way ANOVA conducted to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in career decision regret levels among university students based on their departments.

Table 2. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) results of university students' career decision regret levels by department.

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	<i>sd</i>	Mean Squares	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Between Groups	4921.147	7	703.021	1.991	.057
In-Groups	85077.849	241	353.020		
Total	89998.996	248			

$p > .05$

Based on the findings presented in Table 2, there was no statistically significant difference in career decision regret levels among university students based on their departments ($F(7,241) = 1.991, p > 0.05$).

Examining University Students' Career Decision Regret Levels By School Year

Table 3 presents the results of the independent samples t-test conducted to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in career decision regret levels among university students based on their school year.

Table 3. Independent samples t-test results of university students' career decision regret levels by school year.

School Year	<i>N</i>	\bar{x}	<i>Ss</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1 st year	132	28.90	18.60	247	2.578	.011*
4 th year	117	22.73	19.10			

* $p < .05$

Based on the findings presented in Table 3, there was a statistically significant difference in career decision regret levels among university students based on their school year ($t(247) = 2.578, p < .05$). Specifically, first-year university students exhibited higher levels of career decision regret compared to students in their fourth year.

Results Related to the Factors Affecting University Students' Career Decision Regret

Table 4 presents the results of the content analysis conducted to identify the factors influencing university students' regret regarding their career decisions.

Table 4. Results on Factors Affecting University Students' Career Decision Regret

Factors Affecting Career Decision Regret	<i>f</i>
FACTORS RELATED TO THE CAREER	
A mismatch between the individual and the career	3
Realizing that the job is not easy	1
Financial concerns	2
Prestige	2
FAMILY FACTORS	
Family attitudes	6
ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS	
Sexist/gendered attitudes	1
Classroom environment	1
Attitudes of friends	2
Dissatisfaction with the city/university	3
Misleading advice from the people around them	1
PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS	
Feeling of inadequacy	1
Lack of professional affiliation	1

Table 4 presents the findings of the content analysis, revealing a total of 12 codes. Four main themes emerged as significant factors influencing university students' regret regarding their career decisions. The most frequently mentioned family-related factor was family attitudes. Participants Y and K provided statements such as "Let us say family pressure" and "My father was just saying, be a teacher or something, so I selected this career because he forced me a bit too, of course", highlighting the impact of family attitudes on students' career decision regret. Additionally, within the main theme of environmental factors, dissatisfaction with the city/university emerged as another prevalent issue mentioned by the students. The following student statements exemplify this trend:

Participant Z: "So it is a bit related to the city in which I attend the university."

Participant Y: "I do not know; it may also be due to the city. I mean, my idea of the university was not exactly like the university here."

The discrepancy between students' expectations of the university environment and the city they envisioned may have influenced their career decision regret, as indicated by the question, "Am I here to study in this department?".

Sexist attitudes were identified as another environmental factor. Participant S's statement, "I believe that it will be more positively received by society. I think that other professions will be more socially positive regarding sexist attitudes towards my profession and the financial opportunities this will provide", indicating that societal perceptions of gender-specific jobs can contribute to an individual's regret over their chosen profession. Additionally, misleading advice was highlighted as another environmental factor by Participant H, who stated, "I think the factors that affect our career decision regret may be the wrong choice or the misleading advice". If individuals base their career decisions on advice from those around them, they may later regret their choices upon realizing that the recommendations were misleading.

At the same time, students expressed that they had inadvertently preferred careers unsuitable for their characteristics. In fact, one of the findings obtained in the current study showed that career decision regret was affected by the mismatch between the individual and the career under the main theme of career factors. Participant S said, "I could have preferred to do a job more aligned with my hobbies. Sometimes I wonder if this job is appropriate for me". The statement of Participant Z, "I realized that teaching is not for me while doing it", showed

that the students realized that there was an incompatibility between their own characteristics and the ones required by profession, and this caused them to feel regret.

Two codes were identified within the main theme of psychological factors: feelings of inadequacy and a lack of professional affiliation. Participant Y's statement, "*Seeing myself as inadequate sometimes*", highlighted the experience of inadequacy, while Participant Z's statement, "*I never fully felt that I belonged to the department*", indicated a lack of professional affiliation. These factors were found to impact career decision regret. Biricik Gulseren's (2019) research concluded that higher levels of negative affect stemming from low career self-efficacy and low career outcome expectations were associated with individuals' career decision regret. Thus, it can be argued that the feeling of inadequacy individuals may experience in relation to their chosen professions can influence their regret over career decisions. Therefore, this study indirectly aligns with Biricik Gulseren's (2019) research findings.

Based on the findings derived from the qualitative data analysis, it can be concluded that the factors influencing students' career decision regret are multi-dimensional. However, there is a lack of studies directly investigating the factors impacting career decision regret among university students in the existing literature. The university years encompass various transitional processes, including emotional, social, and academic aspects. Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that individuals' perspectives on life are influenced by numerous factors during this period. Further research is required to shed more light on this issue and explore it in greater depth.

Although the research conducted by Hennessey (2011) focused on retired individuals rather than university students, its findings indicated that family, economic conditions, and friends played a significant role in determining career paths. Furthermore, it was observed that individuals who made sacrifices to meet their family's needs often experienced regret. Similar findings were reported by Sullivan et al. (2007), who found that changing professions due to family obligations was associated with regret. The results of Hennessey (2007) and Sullivan et al. (2011) indirectly align with the findings of the current study. In fact, when families guide individuals to make professional decisions to fulfill their own needs and express verbal opinions regarding these decisions, it can contribute to regret in the future. Therefore, the present study's finding that family attitudes influence career decision regret is indirectly supported by previous research.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Suggestions

This research examined the factors influencing university students' regret regarding their career decisions. In this study, we investigated whether there were significant differences in the levels of career decision regret among university students based on their gender, department, and school year. Additionally, we qualitatively explored students' perspectives on the factors contributing to their career decision regret through content analysis.

Based on the findings from the quantitative phase, there was a significant difference in the level of career decision regret favoring male students. This result aligns with the findings of other studies (Dyrbye et al., 2020; İpek et al., 2020; Kermen, 2021) conducted with both similar and different sample groups. Güleç and Kırdök (2018) reported that male students in the guidance and psychological counseling department exhibited higher career decision regret compared to females, while Özaltn (2020) found that male candidates pursuing a career in psychological counseling experienced higher levels of regret compared to their female counterparts. Notably, during the qualitative stage of our research, Participant S also emphasized that male students may feel the pressure of gender roles and sexist attitudes within certain occupational groups, which could contribute to their higher levels of regret regarding professional decisions, in line with the quantitative data. Therefore, the qualitative findings support the quantitative data.

The study also found that there were no significant differences in students' levels of career decision regret based on their department of study. No previous research supporting this particular finding was encountered in the available literature. However, this result contradicts the findings of the study conducted by Güleç and Kırdök (2018). In their research, Güleç and Kırdök (2018) discovered that students in the guidance and psychological counseling department experienced the lowest levels of career decision regret. Similarly, Kermen (2021) identified significant differences in career decision regret among graduates of sports science programs based on their specific departments. Therefore, further research is needed to better understand how students' career decision regret may vary depending on the department they study. Additional studies will contribute to clarifying the relationship between these variables.

The study concluded that students' levels of career decision regret significantly varied based on their school year. The findings indicated that first-year students experienced significantly higher levels of career decision regret compared to fourth-year students. This result is consistent with Özaltın's (2020) study, which also found significant differences in career decision regret based on the school year among psychological counselor candidates. In order to explain this difference, some participants in the qualitative phase of our research mentioned being dissatisfied with the city or university in which they were studying. Therefore, students may feel regret when their university and city experience does not meet their expectations during their initial transition to university life. Being in a city or university that they did not desire to study in may be a contributing factor to their career decision regret. Indeed, previous studies (Erdoğan et al., 2005; Mudhovozi, 2012) have concluded that first-year students encounter social, academic, and other adjustment problems. Considering that academic adjustment, which is a dimension of the university adjustment process, involves fulfilling academic responsibilities related to one's chosen field of study (Sevinç Tuhanoğlu & Gizir, 2020), the mismatch between individuals' characteristics and the professions they have chosen may also contribute to their career decision regret. The statements of participants S and Z in our study support the idea that the lack of compatibility between individuals and their chosen careers impacts career decision regret. However, this finding regarding the variation of career decision regret based on school year contradicts some research results (Bayın Donar & Aydan, 2021; Çalışkan, 2022). In fact, numerous studies in both national and international literature have emphasized that addressing career decision regret while continuing university life would help alleviate uncertainties associated with different variables such as school year. It is believed that individuals questioning what it would be like to choose another profession and recognizing missed opportunities in that regard will influence their feelings of regret.

Throughout their university journey, students undergo diverse social, emotional, and academic experiences that may lead them to reconsider their professional decisions and experience regret. The present study revealed four main themes, namely career-related, family, environmental, and psychological factors, which significantly influence students' career decision regret. It is worth noting that these main themes and the identified codes may exhibit both similarities and differences among various sample groups and individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, future research addressing this concept among individuals and sample groups with distinct cultural characteristics would make a valuable contribution to the literature.

The present research provides a foundation for future studies aimed at implementing effective practices to prevent individuals from making incorrect career choices. By thoroughly evaluating the changes in career decision regret levels across different variables and identifying the factors influencing this regret, further research can be conducted. To support students in making more accurate career choices, a focus on vocational guidance activities within secondary education institutions is recommended. Moreover, university career counseling centers can organize informative seminars and events to provide additional support for students in career planning. These centers can also arrange field trips and promotions that showcase the practical requirements of the chosen profession, irrespective of the student's school year. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to conduct comparative investigations into the level and reasons for career decision regret among students in different faculties. The current study's findings are anticipated to make valuable contributions to the development of programs that assist students in reducing career decision regrets, not only during the early stages but also throughout their academic journeys.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval

Before the research, necessary permissions were obtained for the scale to be used in the research. After obtaining permission to use the scale, the required ethics committee approval was also obtained. Ethical approval of the research was received from Trabzon University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (nr. 2022-11/2.22, date 18.11.2022). The personal information of the participants was not included in the study.

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Research and Publication Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the research team's university ethics committee of the Trabzon University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (nr. 2022-11/2.22, date 18.11.2022). Hereby, we, as the authors, consciously assure that for the manuscript "University Students' Career Decision Regret: A Mixed-Method Research" the following is fulfilled:

- This material is the authors' own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.
- The paper reflects the author's own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner.
- The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research.
- All sources used are properly disclosed.

Contribution Rates of Authors to the Article

The authors provide equal contributions to this work.

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