5 Qualitative research in advertising: twenty years in revolution

Linda M. Scott

An impressive body of qualitative research on the topic of advertising has emerged in marketing since the paradigm shift of the 1980s. Here, perhaps more clearly than elsewhere in the literature, we can see that the challenge to practice made in that decade was not just a matter of advocating new methods, but entailed questioning the purposes and interests that research in this field would serve.

Work on advertising was affected, as were other areas of marketing inquiry, by the shift in epistemology that attended the interpretive turn. In all areas, the notion of consumption as a meaning-based activity (as opposed to a more economistic, disembodied model of purchasing) had implications for research axiology, as well. Of particular import for advertising work, however, was the shift toward understanding the advertisement as a text and, thus, the consumer as a reader. By embracing the textuality of advertising experience, qualitative researchers opened the door to the indeterminacy of reading, to the reality of advertising as a cultural practice, and ultimately to the larger social questions that attend any purposive attempt to encourage consumption in postindustrial society.

The result has been a corpus of work too large and varied to be covered in a single chapter. My intention, therefore, is to discuss articles I have selected to represent the largest areas of inquiry. In assessing the scope of the literature to be covered, I have collected works published in Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Advertising, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Popular Culture, Journal of Advertising Research, Journal of Consumer Culture, Culture, Markets and Consumption, and Critical Studies in Mass Communications Research. I have also followed up references that led to a range of sources from the Journal of Business Ethics to the British Journal of Management. I found that qualitative work in advertising was well represented in these journals by the end of the twentieth century, though there was certainly more in some than in others. I hope also to draw attention to the way that qualitative research in this area has circled back to engage with quantitative studies, as I believe that contribution to be important. Of particular import, though, is that late twentieth-century advertising research has occurred amidst a proliferation of book-length works coming from other fields – history, sociology, women’s studies – and that many researchers in this area work in communications schools where cultural studies and critical theory were already well-established by 1985. Consequently, many of the influences on research in this area come from outside marketing, and these sources are so numerous that I will only be able to document them in a glancing manner.

The areas of interest that I will examine in this chapter are the responses of readers to advertisements, the practices of professionals in the creation of advertisements, the evolution of advertising as an art form and the theory and criticism of advertising as a social influence. These four areas encompass far and away the bulk of what has been published to date. I regretfully admit that this outline of topics will necessarily leave out some studies that did not fall neatly into the categories.

Responses of readers to advertisements
The ‘textual turn’ in advertising research has been fundamentally rhetorical in orientation even when the avowed theoretical orientation of researchers was elsewhere (e.g., poststructuralist,
I say this because, throughout this literature, there is a consistent emphasis on responses from and effects upon consumers, which is the feature that distinguishes rhetoric from other literary approaches. Even the formalist investigations and social criticism I will discuss later in this chapter can be said to fall under this rubric, as the final concern is virtually always with response or effect.

A fair number of articles appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s that called for a text-based approach to advertising research. McCracken (1987) argued for a model of advertising based on culture and meaning, rather than information. Mick (1986) outlined an approach to both consumption and advertising as an investigation of signs; Stern (1988, 1989) called attention to the potential to analyze ads as literary texts. However, three articles in particular, Mick and Buhl (1992), Friestad and Wright (1994) and Scott (1994b), stand out as having spurred investigation into consumer response using qualitative methods. Scott (1994b) advocated the use of reader response theory to resituate the viewers of advertisements as thinking human beings immersed in and motivated by their own circumstances, who were as capable of rejecting a persuasive text as they might be of absorbing the advertiser’s intention. Friestad and Wright (1994) outlined a folk knowledge of persuasion in which part of the ordinary wisdom of life was focused on learning to cope with persuasion attempts, including those of advertisers. Mick and Buhl (1992) was an empirical study of a small sample of readers interpreting advertisements. This study made very clear that consumers responded to ads in a very situated and skeptical manner – and, importantly, that ads affected consumers primarily in the context of their own life themes and projects. Usually citing Scott (1994b) and/or Friestad and Wright (1994) as the theoretical basis and Mick and Buhl as the research model, a string of new works made close investigations into the match between life projects or themes and the appeals of ads (e.g., Grier and Brumbaugh, 1999; Motley, Henderson and Baker, 2003; Parker, 1998; Stevens, Maclaren and Brown, 2003). Taken in sum, this body of research shows quite clearly the centrality of individual life projects, rather than manufacturers’ intentions or formal tricks, in influencing the response to ads. Thus, when Douglas Holt published *How Brands Become Icons*, in which he says brands become ‘cultural icons’ only by speaking to the identity projects of large groups of consumers, his position was solidly underpinned by this body of research into the responses of readers (Holt, 2004).

The research into reader response, however, produced more than just a basis for understanding how viewers evaluated ads. This approach fundamentally changed the way the consumer was imagined: from being a passive recipient of advertiser intent (or an addled ‘miscomprehender’ of manufacturers’ messages) to being an empowered, grounded, thoughtful human with better things to do than watch ads. From here, it is a short and logical jump to begin looking at consumers and their uses for ads in a social context. Ritson and Elliott (1999) accurately argued that the reader response approach as thus far practiced had continued the old paradigm tendency to characterize consumers as solitary creatures. So their study of British adolescents focused on the ways that consumers quoted, reinterpreted and reused ads as part of an ongoing local social discourse. In this study, the appearance of ads in conversation as phatic communication, shared jokes, ways of poking fun at teachers and friends, was a humbling reminder that humans consume to live, not live to consume – and that ads fall into a larger, complex ‘text’ of other media materials and actual face-to-face dialogue rather than being the isolated, privileged missives of information implied by the heretofore dominant model of research (see also Alperstein, 1990).

Throughout the reader response material, in fact, other cultural influences intermittently poke through. In spite of frequent charges that advertising has supplanted school, church and
family as the dominant influence on behavior, this literature demonstrates that all three still have a strong influence on the particulars of the way ads are read and consumption is formed (for instance, see Parker, 1998). Thus, membership in certain subcultural communities, does, as initially articulated in the theoretical work (Scott, 1994b), have an effect on the way ads are read and evaluated. Grier and Brumbaugh (1999) showed, for instance, that the subcultural status of readers (by race and sexual preference) formed the reading strategy and ultimately had a strong impact on response to ads.

In cultural studies and critical theory, literary approaches had already become a primary vehicle for social analysis and criticism by the early 1980s. Thus it is not surprising that the textual turn in advertising research would be attended by a socially critical perspective. In some ways, however, the very rethinking of the consumer into a social setting in which persuasion attempts were resisted as often as accepted was bound to lead to questions about the power relationship between advertisers and consumers, the nature of control and resistance, and the relationship of research to the social structure. One early study (Ahuvia, 1998), investigates the social uses of literary interpretation.

Ahuvia questions the assertions of an established critic, who had already interpreted an ad for Airwalk shoes as carrying a message supporting a ‘culture of rape’ as well as racial stereotyping. Ahuvia’s respondents shared some of the critic’s interpretation, but not all of it. But, while Ahuvia’s results supported the general trend toward understanding ads as polysemic texts subject to multiple interpretations by readers, the mismatch between a naively reader-oriented approach to studying ads and a more theoretically informed critical perspective emerged here. Specifically, the concept of ‘ideology’, a primary building block of the critical work in literary theory (see, for instance, Kavanaugh, 1995), refers to the way a text constructs social relations (class, gender, race) in such a way that they become ‘natural’ and therefore invisible to many, if not most, in the culture. With this perspective, researchers would not be surprised that readers did not articulate the same criticism that an ideologically sensitized critic would. At the same time, some of the verbatim from Ahuvia, as well as other studies, suggest the ability of respondents to see themselves as situated in oppressive social structures and to see the function of ads to support that configuration of relations. For instance, British women viewing spots for Red magazine expressed discomfort over the use of striptease, even if with a surprising ‘twist’ at the end: ‘it’s just, again, there we are – taking off our clothes to sell a magazine’ (Stevens et al., 2003, p. 39). Further, Motley et al. (2003) argue that African-American respondents often interpreted offensive commercial racial memorabilia in a way that helped them confront, understand and work through their historical past, while not denying its oppressive and dehumanizing nature. The tension between seeing consumers as critical agents potentially engaged in change and seeing them as inextricably enmeshed in the ideology of their own social structure emerges as an unresolved question of the past 20 years, of particular concern in the arena of social theory and criticism discussed below.

Another factor complicating the general assessment of consumer sophistication is the increasing salience of postmodern form and style in advertisements themselves. The selfreferential, dissembling and ironic stance of late twentieth century advertising tends to imply a jaded, even cynical, reader, yet the multiform, intertextual style of these same ads also implies a consumer who is increasingly imaginative, cognitively agile, full of whimsy and laughter, and able to consider (and reject) multiple propositions through image and music, as well as text.

Advertising as form
The early textual turn also highlighted advertising’s formal properties in a way that the dominant paradigm did not recognize. The psycho-scientific orientation of the previous 20 years of research had tended to treat ads as assemblies of ‘stimuli’ or, at best, ‘information’ defined in a very limited way (see Levold, 2002). The new discourse of the late 1980s and early 1990s insisted instead on viewing ads as cultural artifacts (McCracken, 1986, 1987) or even as art (Stern, 1988, 1989), as well as expanding the scope of ‘meaning’ or ‘information’ to include visual and musical forms in addition to text or numbers (Scott, 1990, 1994a).

This approach drew impetus from the ready mismatch between ads running in the 1980s and 1990s – a genre period that has been concretely identified as a watershed in ‘postmodern’ signification (see, for instance, Goldman, 1992) – and the mock-ups or models that underpinned studies in the dominant stream of research. Spurred by the theoretical works that insisted on the ‘fictive’ or ‘poetic’ aspects of ads in contemporary discourse, some advertising researchers undertook to document the frequency of more sophisticated formal features, showing that, indeed, a major shift was under way (Callcott and Lee, 1994; Leigh, 1994; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2002).

At the same time, an important effort emerged to investigate the degree to which consumers understood and liked the new forms. Of particular interest is the work of Edward McQuarrie, David Mick and Barbara Phillips, who developed a robust stream that took the principles of rhetoric, applied them to visual messages and demonstrated, not only the ability of consumers to ‘read’ such texts, but their propensity to prefer those that were more figurative and thus ‘deviant’ from the kinds of predictable, straightforward messages presumed by the scientific, ‘informational’ research model (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992, 1996, 1999; Phillips, 1997). This research suggested strongly that treating pictures as mere ‘stimuli’ was wholly inadequate. This in turn had profound implications for the way the field should view a growing set of ads that was primarily imagistic. Many attempted to build further on a literary/rhetorical premise by investigating other forms, such as drama, or other features, such as characterization (Deighton, Romer and McQueen, 1989; Hung, 2000, 2001; Frosh, 2002; Mulvey and Medina, 2003). One tactic that did not succeed was the notion that a particular genre or formal feature would necessarily always be preferred as a persuasive tool. As Deighton et al. wrote, ‘As it happens, we can say that no one form of advertising consistently beat the other in our sample. And we cannot say from this study if there are contingencies under which one form would always dominate the other. In fact, given the inventiveness of advertising writers, we see little point in looking for such contingencies’

One important feature of this area of research was the employment of quantitative methods to investigate claims made by theorists working out of humanistic traditions. Several teams made astute use of experimental methods to investigate theories that had been advanced directly from an arts perspective. The success of these researchers bodes well for the continued cross-pollination of qualitative and quantitative work, though such crossover efforts are still relatively rare. Note, too, that, while many of these studies were focused on the viability of certain forms, such as tropes, narratives or dramas, the tests used were almost invariably focused on the responses of readers; thus this category that I have labeled ‘an investigation of form’ is also an extension of investigating consumer response to ads.

The picture of the consumer emerging was very different from the one implicitly constructed by the scientific paradigm. This consumer is neither passive nor cognitively lazy, but instead is drawn toward more challenging textual forms, is more concerned with his/her own life
experience than with learning brand attributes, can engage with the sociopolitical implications of ads despite the blinding force of ideology, and is adept at learning to read new meaning in unfamiliar forms. This view of the consumer is intrinsically more respectful than the one constructed by the field prior to the mid-1980s, but I must emphasize that this change is not a result of method, but rather one of theory. This radically different view of the reader/consumer has been substantially built and supported by researchers working in the qualitative tradition but using quantitative techniques.

If the concept of the consumer that held sway in the years from 1965 to 1985 is not a necessary outgrowth of scientific method, it must follow somehow from other influences on the way the field imagined and built itself in its earliest years. Prior to the interpretive turn, researchers in advertising often claimed that their purpose was to serve advertisers by showing them which advertising ‘stimuli’ worked best to persuade. This viewpoint has always been flawed on many levels, but we can certainly see at this point the way it ignored both the situatedness of formal features in a text and the situatedness of readers in their life projects and social settings. (Indeed, as Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999, exemplify, the old model can only be maintained now by ignoring the entire body of qualitative research.) As someone who entered the field from the advertising industry at the very moment of the interpretive turn, I felt the then prevailing view was marred by an amazingly misinformed speculation about how advertising professionals saw their work, imagined the consumer and understood the relationship between themselves as social actors and the academy as an independent intellectual force. Thus I am gratified to report that another large category of research emerging in the past 20 years has taken advertising professional practice as its object.

**Studying advertising practice**

The simplistic and manipulative agenda of advertising research prior to the mid-1980s takes on a very different cast when set in the context provided by researchers studying the production of advertising through qualitative methods in recent decades. Virtually all of the published research characterizes advertising practice as agonistic, fragmented, uncertain, fluid and stressful, suggesting further that the task of producing advertising itself is subject to multiple strategies, homilies, agendas and interpretations (Cronin, 2004a, 2004b; Hackley, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Kover, 1995; Kover and Goldberg, 1995; West, 1993). Though greater certainty of outcome would surely relieve much of the stress (a remark that could be made about most of life), the highest values consistently reported for creative work include novelty, spontaneity and ‘edginess’ – especially ‘something that has never been done before’ – criteria that undercut the dominant paradigm’s push for a one-from-column-A, one-from-column-B formula of advertising development. To be sure, a constant refrain is the difficulty of demonstrating the effectiveness of advertising itself. This is not to say, as some old paradigm marketing researchers have inferred (e.g., Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999), that advertising is known not to work. On the contrary, the amount of time, money and effort that goes into producing ads suggests that industry people do believe it works, generally speaking. The problem is in tracing the effectiveness of particular ads with the specific goals and peculiar circumstances that are inevitably part of the campaign brief. Since advertising is always deployed into a market with an array of confounding influences and measured with, at best, flawed tools, the feasibility of evaluating a campaign’s effectiveness in other than subjective terms is notoriously elusive. As a consequence, many in advertising are haunted by the fear that their work, rather than being the all-controlling social force that academicians elsewhere in the academy often pretend, is ultimately pointless (Schudson, 1984).
Given the real-life context of organizational struggle, complex markets, situated readers and morphing texts, the traditional marketing researcher’s desire to codify reliable ‘stimuli’ that would consistently result in purchase seems a naïve attempt to try to introduce a rhetoric of certainty with which manufacturers could better control the efforts of their agencies, rather than any sincere belief in the existence of a formula that would sell in all times and places. Yet the circumstances of practice and the best judgments of advertising professionals tend to argue for a more situated, provisional, resilient, text-based approach – and now qualitative academic research in this area supports them. At this point, the evidence of multiple reading strategies being employed even by the same reader at different times and with different ads suggests that the old standard of producing a 100 per cent effective advertising toolbox through scientific method is nothing but a chimera.

Interestingly, the polarities discernible in the practice of research in marketing has a parallel in advertising practice. Chris Hackley, who has extensively studied (2003a, 2003b, 2003c) the efforts of advertising account planners to understand and articulate the views and voice of consumers, mostly through qualitative research, argues that advertising professionals have come to view consumer behavior ‘as an imaginative activity realized through symbolic consumption as opposed to a merely instrumental activity driven by rational product evaluation’ and thus an ‘activity “inspired” by the beauty of persuasive and alluring images and ideas’ (2003b, p. 2). Hackley suggests that agencies employ neopositivistic research methods primarily as a means to provide ‘factual data’ that will dress up their ideas enough for manufacturers to spend money on them. This is an agenda not dissimilar from the erstwhile goals of the marketing academy (Levold, 2002).

Tales of struggle for control over the final product of an ad campaign are, in fact, familiar to anyone who has worked in an agency or anyone who has read advertising histories and biographies with any breadth. Advertising practice, whether modern or postmodern, pre-direct mail or post-Internet, seems to be condemned to uncertainty of outcome, as a field that engages with the eternal instability of public reading might be expected to find itself. This aspect of the research on advertising practice enlightens and adds necessary balance to the analysis of ads-as-texts or consumers-as-readers, as one of these authors suggests: ‘Whilst practitioners certainly cannot be said to determine viewers’ reception of their texts, completely excluding practitioners from the analysis skews understanding of the significance of advertising practice and its textual products’ (Cronin, 2004a, pp. 352–3). Nevertheless, I believe the long-term contribution of such studies ultimately lies in their ability to engage with and potentially challenge the burgeoning discourse of social criticism and cultural theory.

**Advertising as an object for theory and criticism**

Qualitative literature on advertising contains a number of essays that interpret one ad or a small group of ads in order to make larger accusations about the negative influence of advertising on society. There is a long tradition, after the manner of Williamson (1978), in which a handful of ads is used as the basis for exceedingly overblown social claims without attention or recourse to subtleties of probable reader response, plausible producer intent, possible product competition, or palliative price constraints (for instance, Delahoyde and Despenich, 1994; Goldman, Heath and Smith, 1991; Covino, 2001). The newer, more subtle, work attempts to theorize the effects of advertising in a way that accommodates the less-certain, destabilized vantages typical of a post-Marxist, post-Einstein, post-cultural relativist, and (of course) postmodern sensibility. Essays published in *Consumption, Markets and Culture* have been particularly sophisticated and offer a
much-needed injection of both erudition and common sense to this often inflamed discourse. In this regard, the extensive experience within the advertising world that some scholars have can now provide a ballast that is lacking elsewhere, thus making it possible both to problematize the assumptions of cultural criticism and to mount a more compelling critique. For instance, Cronin, using her substantial experience with advertising professionals, raises multiple questions about the degree to which these people produce culture rather than ‘siphon it off’, the truth of nostalgic academic claims for a separation of economics and culture, and so on (Cronin, 2004a). In contrast, Chris Hackley, also working from a base of substantial experience, builds a case for the ‘panopticon’ properties of the advertising industry. The quiet understatement and frequent qualifications that clearly come from actual experience only serve to make Hackley’s (2002) surveillance-for-control case more convincing, more compelling and, ultimately, more chilling, than less grounded, more flamboyant efforts at critique.

In the arena of theory, two issues seem to be emerging as potential flashpoints for contest and growth. Even the newer articulations of critical theory have a tendency to presuppose a certain kind of preindustrial past, a particular history for the emergence of consumer culture. Much of the rhetoric rests on a logic in which people before operated in such-and-such-a-way, but now they do things in a radically different thus-and-so manner. Some of these theoretical stances can, if one pauses to catch breath and think ‘critically’ in the commonly-used sense, be challenged even from a ‘collective memories’ sense of history. For instance, Clarke (1998) argues that before people defined themselves by their work but now they define themselves by their consumer goods. This statement is likely to fly brilliantly past any casual gathering of, say, regular readers of salon.com. Yet even a high school education in history suggests the argument that previous generations have defined themselves more by religion than either work or consumption. Further, other research tells us (e.g. Schor, 1991) that Americans, the citizens of the world’s most advanced consumer society, are horribly overworked and tend to define themselves too much by occupation. So, in this case, the theorist has traded on a truism of our times, but not necessarily a factually based historical analysis. Theory still tends to glamorize and sentimentalize preindustrial life, in the tradition of Marxist criticism. Yet my own work on the history of American women, feminism and the modern market has led me to believe, along with others who have studied feminism in world history, that there has been much about the industrial economy that was profoundly positive for women (Scott, 2000, 2005). Thinking a little further, it does not take much to see that African-American history might weigh the United States’ agricultural period rather differently than some critical theorists’ imagined past. And this is the crux of the problem: it is an imagined past. As my colleagues and I point out in another chapter in this volume, there has been painfully little written history on the emergence of consumer culture in America, let alone anywhere else. So there simply is not an evidentiary base to support these grandiose claims for the historical trajectory of the global consumer society. In the relative absence of written histories, ideology seems to take over: the contemporary critic’s sentimental agricultural society is uncomfortably close to the ‘agrarian myth’ once identified by Richard Hofstadter (1955), the ideology manufactured by the disenfranchised agrarian gentlemen of post-Revolutionary America who saw the modern market eroding their power base. A challenge for future research and critique, then, would be to examine the whole question of the consumer past.

A further point of contention may emerge in the confrontation between theory and the growing number of studies documenting real readers’ responses to ads. Contemporary theorists, though they sometimes vociferously reject the totalizing view of culture that once characterized
social criticism, still often want to place consumers in an endless circle from which they cannot escape being duped by the forces of marketing. In a field now deluged with evidence of the intransigence and multiplicity of consumer viewpoints, this stance is beginning to look a little too much like the arrogant, derogatory view the old scientific paradigm once took of consumers.

Consequently, the ‘vernacular theory’ espoused by Thomas MacLaughlin (1998) may offer an interesting path toward reconciling a critical perspective with respect for our cultural compatriots. MacLaughlin reminds us that ‘though Marx and Engels believed that ideas about revolutionary change had to be based on the proletarian experience of capitalism, they believed that those ideas were unlikely to come from the proletarians themselves.

It was precisely the role of bourgeois intellectuals sympathetic to the proletariat to learn from that experience and articulate it intellectually for the masses, whom they considered too embedded in ideology to be able to understand their situation critically without the cognitive leadership of intellectuals trained in philosophical analysis and critique’ (ibid., p. 208). This stance, which today we might be tempted to label ‘paternalistic’, has not only continued to infect critique, but leads to several problems: one is that ‘it does a better job explaining why people fail to understand their society than why they succeed’ (ibid., p. 209) and another is that it fails to encompass the historical record in which other oppressed groups (African-Americans and women are the examples MacLaughlin gives) manage to mount a substantial critique out of common experience and necessity: ‘Groups defined by demeaning and dehumanizing mainstream values either do theory or die in spirit’ (ibid., p. 221). MacLaughlin specifically invokes reader response theory for having overridden the Adorno/Horkheimer model of cultural control by ‘teaching’ that reading is an active process in which the readers themselves make meaning. Almost as if taking a page from an ad agency’s handbook, he notes, ‘It is the work of rhetoric to construct texts that maximize control over readers’ responses, but the practice of rhetoric is based on the premise that there will be resistant readers, that control will never be total’ (ibid., p. 217). He ends with a passionate recollection of his own working-class Philadelphia experience, insisting that this experience formed the basis for his own critical vision, and warns that ‘not all the sharp minds get to go to college, and not all the theorists are in the academy’ (ibid., p. 229). Such a spirited defense of vernacular criticism seems a fitting call for developing theory from our own group of scholars, who have now so well recognized the resistance among advertising readers.

Another common seam between qualitative and quantitative research on advertising presents itself, perhaps surprisingly, in the social criticism arena. Seemingly in response to criticism first mounted in the 1960s and 1970s by civil rights groups, Second Wave feminists and environmental activists, advertising researchers have often focused on trying to document, usually through content analysis, the incidence of imagery that political critics have found problematic: racial stereotyping, ‘sexualizing’ imagery of women, ‘green’ appeals, and so on (for instance, Bannerjee, Gulas and Iyer, 1995; Ferguson, Kreshel and Tinkham, 1990; Kolbe and Albanese, 1996; Stephenson and Stover, 1997). Others have tried to pick through, explain and synthesize the increasingly dense and often tangled arguments that characterize certain corners of social debate, most notably gender (Brown, Stevens and Maclaren, 1999; Kates and Shaw-Garlock, 1999; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998; Stern, 1993). Over time the ability to document both the occurrence of these images or appeals and their interrelatedness to the discourse of criticism will ultimately add the kind of evidentiary ballast often lacking.

Conclusion
The first 20 years of advertising research using qualitative methods have upended many traditional assumptions and purposes formerly taken for granted in the field. In this way (and in others) this moment in scholarship has been revolutionary. It has led to a heartening proliferation of high quality research, appearing in a broad range of journals and showing the marks of influence from a variety of other disciplines. This stream has also led to a point where many of us may come to rethink our relationship to research and the interests we wish our work to serve, whether industry, consumers, government or some as-yet unimagined world order. In that sense, the force of this work may also be turning the wheel.

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