Using Reflective Journals to Gain Insight
Into an Agricultural Communications-Intensive Study Tour

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Abstract
The globalization of society continues through the expansion of information media channels and presents the need to prepare internationally experienced agriculture students. International study experiences impact students’ global perceptions and in turn shape public perceptions regarding the future of agriculture. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into intensive work experiences for agriculture students studying abroad. Students from four land-grant universities (N = 11) were selected to participate in a three-week intensive study tour in Ghent, Belgium. Students recorded their perceptions throughout the experience using reflective journals. A content analysis was conducted on the journal entries to identify thematic reflections related to personal and professional development. The qualitative data analysis revealed the personal and professional value students found in the international experiential learning opportunity. Students struggled the most when working with clients but found successfully completing projects to be rewarding. Students’ confidence levels steadily increased as they realized they could contribute to their teams and successfully serve a client in a professional setting. Host families were the most pressing concern for students but proved to be an impactful means of exposing students to Belgian culture. Students often sought normalcy by comparing the
European culture to America and built lasting relationships with classmates and host families through meals and outings. Earlier research recommended increasing students’ opportunities in global agriculture by placing students in international settings, and this study supports this finding and encourages international work-related experiences.

Keywords: Student Work Experience, Agricultural Communications, Experiential Learning, Study Tour, Reflective Journals

Introduction
A challenge currently facing American agriculture is the diminishing number of individuals directly involved in the field (Doerfert, 2011). According to Doerfert (2011), “…the future of American agriculture rests in the hands of 98% of the United States population who do not reside on a farm and may have little to no understanding of agriculture” (p. 11). The public relies on news media for information regarding scientific issues; however, journalists responsible for disseminating this information to the masses believe that individuals are uninformed and do not have a significant impact on funding and policy (Lundy, Ruth, Telg, & Irani, 2006). Because Americans lack understanding of the agriculture industry, it is essential that agricultural communicators make information accessible to the public to increase informed decision-making in agricultural topics (Doerfert, 2011). The industry is expanding and evolving not only in America but also throughout the world. It is important for agricultural communicators to be aware of these changes and their impact on trade, policy, perceptions, and production.

United States citizens must strive for global awareness (Nehrt, 1993). Agriculture has evolved and grown in complexity, while the world continues to shrink as communication improves. Nehrt (1993) noted that the United States has become involved in a global era and education is needed to prepare people for the responsibility of living in an interconnected world. Communication channels help agricultural communicators address both global awareness and public education. Not only can media channels be tailored to meet public learning preferences, digital media can also assist by providing instant coverage and feedback across countries (Raiz, 2011). As technology continues to eliminate communication barriers across nations, it is increasingly important for agricultural communicators to be globally experienced. Agricultural communicators are uniquely prepared to assist with communicating highly technical messages in food production and processing, animal and human health and nutrition, and the environment to multiple audiences through diverse mediums. However, collegiate training and educational opportunities fall short of preparing agricultural graduates to work in the global market, and U.S. employers spend millions of dollars on intercultural training to overcome this deficiency (Hunter, 2004).

Issues in globalization and cultural diversity have gained attention in higher education (Zhai & Scheer, 2004). For over a decade, research has reinforced the need to offer international agricultural experiences to students (Edgar & Edgar, 2009; Place, Irani, Friedel, & Lundy, 2004; Wingenbach, Boyd, & Lindner, 2003; Zhai & Scheer, 2004). The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) has urged land-grant university presidents to modify curricula to provide students with tools to not only “contribute to knowledge, but also to comprehend, analyze, and evaluate its meaning in context of an increasingly globalized world” (APLU, 2004, p. 2). Universities address this call by providing globally focused courses, travel courses, and study abroad opportunities
(Gouldthorpe, Harder, Stedman, & Roberts, 2012). Place et al. (2004) discovered that although undergraduate and graduate students involved in agricultural sciences attending the University of Florida had little background in international settings, students were interested in travel and being engaged in international experiences. Agricultural communications students who study international agriculture policy, products, peoples, and culture may increase their understanding through these unique experiential learning opportunities.

**Theoretical/Conceptual/Operational Framework**

The goal of this study was to develop a basic understanding of the impact an experiential learning program had on a small sample’s attitudes and perceptions of an international experience. In 2011, broad research needs for agricultural education, agricultural communications, leadership education, extension education, and international agriculture were outlined in the National Research Agenda: Agricultural Education and Communication 2011-2015. This study responded to two specific research needs noted in the agenda. The first Research Priority Area (RPA), “Public and Policy Maker Understanding of Agriculture and Natural Resources,” urges researchers to increase the “...understanding of related message and curriculum development, delivery method preferences and effectiveness, and the extent of change in audience knowledge, attitudes, perceptions and behaviors after experiencing an educational program or consuming related information and messages” (Doerfert, 2011, p. 8). Additionally, this study considered the fourth RPA, which included creating and assessing “Meaningful, Engaged Learning in All Environments” (Doerfert, 2011, p. 9). RPA four notes the need for areas of scientific focus to “[e]xamine the role of diversity and multiple perspectives in meaningful learning across agricultural education contexts” (Doerfert, 2011, p. 9). According to Bruening, Lopez, McCormick, and Dominguez (2002), meaningful experiences are those that actively involve students in experiencing a person, surrounding, or situation. These meaningful learning opportunities are available to students through experiential learning opportunities. Experiential learning theory maintains that learning is consciously constructed and adapted through experiences over time (Kolb, 1984). While knowledge may be gained through passive learning, it is only through experiential learning that students can build skills most needed by those within the communications industry. These skills include meeting deadlines, conducting oneself ethically, dependability, verbal communication, and using grammar correctly – a broad skillset rather than one narrowly applicable to the communications field (Morgan, 2010). Students who participate in international experiences are introduced to a variety of ideas and practices that help shape the way they will work within the global era.

Subsequently, while the learner may fully experience a person, surrounding, or situation, the learner must take part in a reflection of that experience for it to take hold (Bruening et al., 2002). According to Thorpe (2004), reflective journals are an important tool in fostering active learning. Another study also stresses the importance of reflection activities throughout an experiential learning opportunity on the overall impact of a study tour. In their study of faculty international experiences, Gouldthorpe et al. (2012) recommended the use of pre-reflective exercises to identify preexisting biases or assumptions that may influence the learning process. Zhao (2003) defined reflective practice as the “ability to reflect on experiences, to employ conceptual frameworks, and to relate these to similar and dissimilar contexts to inform and improve future practice” (p. 2). Reflection allows the ability to analyze and create perceptions about experiences differently than one might have.
done without reflection (Brockbank & McGill, 1998). Reflective exercises not only provided insight for trip coordinators but also allowed participants to identify expectations (Gouldthorpe et al., 2012). Because reflective activities, such as written journals, can be time-consuming for both students and instructors, it is recommended that faculty provide structured support and a designated time for journaling (Lamm, Cannon, Roberts, Irani, Snyder, Brendemuhl, & Rodriguez, 2011). This research study has the potential to help students obtain knowledge about international agricultural policy, practices, production, and products, thereby allowing them to be further prepared internationally and assisting them with enhanced out-of-country opportunities. The study also adds insight into intensive work experiences for students visiting another country by assessing agricultural communications students’ perceptions of an intensive study tour to Ghent, Belgium in summer 2012.

**Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to add insight into intensive work experiences for students studying abroad. The study summarizes students’ journal entries with regard to perceptions of the intensive study tour experience in Ghent, Belgium in summer 2012. The objectives of this study were to (a) identify supporting themes exhibited by students in journal entries throughout the study tour and (b) assess students’ experience of the intensive study tour.

**Methods**

Agriculture students (N = 11) from the University of Arkansas, University of Florida, Auburn University, and New Mexico State University were selected to participate in a three-week intensive summer study tour in Ghent, Belgium. The goal of the study tour was to allow students to assist the Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research (ILVO), in conjunction with the University of Ghent (UG), to plan, organize, and evaluate an open house event for the organization. ILVO houses more than 500 researchers and technicians who provide insight to the Flanders government, which creates necessary policies that impact agriculture and the environment. Participants were selected through an application process that involved an application form and an essay expressing interest in the study tour. Applicants were then narrowed down by the project director based on student qualifications, and 11 students were selected in total.

During the intensive study tour, 10 undergraduate students and one graduate student worked directly with researchers to create short, consumer-friendly messages for a variety of media, including visual boards, posters, videos, social media, interactive activities, brochures, maps, and signage. Messages created by the students were used by ILVO to educate the Belgian public about agriculture at an open house event known as Open Enterprise scheduled for October 7, 2012. The focus of the special event was to help the general public better understand the science behind where and how their food is produced, processed, and marketed. Students were placed into four groups according to individual expertise and were assigned to a specific research discipline that would be highlighted during Open Enterprise: (1) animal science and fisheries; (2) plant science; (3) food pilot (nutrition, safety, and processing); and (4) social science. During the three-week study tour, students also toured food and animal production facilities in the country and participated in weekend trips to Ghent, Brugge, Paris, and London. Two of the eleven students remained in Belgium for a total of three months to complete unfinished projects and returned to Belgium in October to assist with Open Enterprise.

Before the intensive study tour, participants attended 10 weekly meetings with University of Arkansas faculty members. The
study tour course began February 21, 2012 and was completed at the end of the three-week experience in Belgium on June 7, 2012. At these meetings, students were provided with the skills and information needed to prepare for the international course and Belgian culture. Meetings included an introduction to course expectations, travel information, guest speakers, an overview of the Belgian culture, ILVO, and UG, and a discussion about Belgian agriculture and research. Faculty members also used meetings to help students gain or improve their agricultural communications skills in campaign planning, audience analysis, layout and design, video, and photography. Students were required to maintain a journal throughout the entirety of the experience and recorded their first entry at the first course meeting. Journals served as a portion of student grades. Participants were given the opportunity to journal Monday through Friday from 4:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. and were expected to journal at least once during the weekend. This, along with the course grade, motivated students to be accountable for recording daily entries.

During the intensive study tour, advisors maintained organizational stability by creating a formal schedule for students at the workplace. Each week, students were expected to work 37.5 hours weekly in their groups to complete projects for Open Enterprise. Two students acted as student group leaders, each of whom were responsible for overseeing and directing two of the four student groups. These student leaders had past experience in leadership positions and acted as a safety net for less experienced students. Both leaders remained in Ghent for a total of three weeks to finish any incomplete student work. Student groups worked from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday each week. From 8:30 a.m. to 9 a.m., all participants met as a single group to debrief. Each day at the debriefing session, students shared successes and struggles from the previous day at ILVO. After this session, students met with ILVO’s communications group for 30 minutes to ask questions and pose issues concerning group projects. Following the second meeting, students worked from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. in their groups to complete their portion of creative pieces for their assigned research area. At this time, students were free to attend meetings that they had scheduled with researchers within their group’s assigned research area. Finally, at 4 p.m., students were given the opportunity to reflect in their journals for 30 minutes and then depart to their homestays for dinner.

Following the study tour, journal entries were transcribed and analyzed to identify emergent research themes related to the students’ personal and professional development. The reflective journal transcripts were loaded into NVIVO 9 software, which aided in open and axial coding of the content (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) constant comparative method, passages were coded in their original context (Creswell, 1998), and key themes emerged that characterized the students’ perceptions related to their personal and professional development. Credibility of the findings was achieved through member checking and the use of the students’ own reflections (via their reflective journals). Trustworthiness and dependability were established through purposive sampling, the use of thick description, and the use of NVIVO 9 to establish an audit trail supporting the key findings.

**Findings/Results**

Nine key themes emerged from the journals \( (N = 11) \): (a) host family; (b) cooking, food, and beverage; (c) confidence; (d) seeking normalcy and comparing Belgium with the United States; (e) working with clients; (f) relationship building among students; (g) safety; (h) experienced students mentor less experienced; and (i) career decisions. These themes were addressed by each participant to
varying degrees in their daily journal entries. In the narrative below, students (respondents) are referred to as R1-R11.

Host Families

Since students lived with host families for the entirety of the intensive study tour, it was initially the most pressing concern for all participants. Before departure, students were optimistic about what homestays had to offer but were concerned and nervous about how they would fit in with their new family. Student nervousness stemmed from fear of rejection, being rejected by [their] host family, being “intrusive” (R2), sharing nothing in common with their host family, host family expectations, and living conditions.

This week during class we had someone come in and speak to us about homestays. She talked about her experiences staying with a host family and gave us some ideas about what to expect. After hearing her talk about homestays, I am less nervous and excited about the opportunity to learn about a new culture. (R1)

As students learned more about their host families and the experience, nerves subsided. While in Europe, relationships were strained for a few students and their host parents, but students adapted and seemed to make the most of the experience. Host families had a significant impact on exposing students to the Belgian culture. At the end of the study tour, students noted their host family as their favorite aspect of the experience and expected to maintain a relationship with their host families after returning to the United States. One participant noted during his final days in Belgium, “[My host father] has become a good friend. I have been wondering what I will miss most about Belgium, and I know that I will miss his friendship the most” (R3).

Cooking, Food, and Beverage

Sharing food and beverages with other students as well as with host families was noted often in student journals as an opportunity to bond and experience the Belgian culture. Students recorded differences in Belgian meals from their typical American ones and used these opportunities to reflect on their lifestyles and relationships with those around them. “Cooking with [host father] is fun and an educational experience. I try to keep an open mind about food so I try everything he suggests, and to my surprise, most of them are good” (R3). Bonding over meals with classmates and experiencing the culture was meaningful to students and often noted as being a “much needed” opportunity to relax between work hours. “We all had some drinks, and I do believe that was the best time I have had on the entire trip. The little moments like sitting at the café are the ones I crave” (R4).

Confidence

Students’ self-confidence levels increased steadily during the study tour. The experiences that contributed most to student confidence were related to successfully serving a client in a professional setting and realizing they could contribute to their teams. At the beginning of the study tour, students were insecure regarding their skills, ability to complete the study tour, role within their assigned work group, and role related to ILVO. In preparing for the study tour, one student noted,

I don’t really feel like I have a good grip on what we’ll be asked to do by whom and for whom—and I feel like those things are things that I, as a student, will have to just figure out when I get there. (R5)
As students were assigned to groups and began work with ILVO, they slowly gained confidence, with highs and lows unique to each student.

I feel a lot better today about my input and the input of the other members of my group... I also felt a lot more useful today because I was able to be the note-keeper with my computer and keep everything in an organized manner that satisfied my type-A personality. (R6)

As students recognized that both their group and ILVO could benefit from their skills, they became more positive regarding their participation in the experience. Students were most appreciative and satisfied after successfully completing something they had never tried before.

Seeking Normalcy
In all aspects of the intensive study tour, students constantly sought normalcy and compared their experiences to home. Students struggled with homesickness and situations that they had never encountered, so they were comforted when they found similarities or constants. These comparisons also helped students gain a greater understanding of the world and a deeper appreciation for home. After visiting Paris on Memorial Day weekend, one student noted,

I have not decided yet if I want to go back [to Europe] or not. So much of what I saw was so beautiful and amazing, but I can’t decide if these things outweigh the filth and rude people. I am so glad I had an opportunity to go to Paris, but I am even more glad that I live in America! (R1)

Students noted similarities between Belgian and American agricultural practices and identified ways in which these practices could be improved on both ends.

Arriving at the layer farm was quite a bit of a shock. I have never seen such a clean poultry farm. The grass was cut and there was cement paving. The houses were solid walls with fans on the top. The grower seemed to be well-educated about the poultry business in Belgium as well as internationally. I found this to be quite a shock. (R3)

While students found Belgian poultry farms to be more modern and controlled than those in the United States, they also felt that other Belgian practices could be improved.

I found the Belgian Blue Cattle fascinating because I come from a beef cattle background. I really like the gait measurer and found it interesting that the Belgian people were so far behind in terms of spraying with GPS. (R7)

Working with Clients
Another theme identified in student journals was the challenge of working with clients. Working for clients was intimidating for all students and was the most difficult part of the program. Students struggled to communicate with clients and at times struggled to accept feedback without involving emotions. Not only did students have to learn to communicate with non-native English speaking clients in another country, but they
also had to learn how to work with researchers to translate complex research terminology into understandable and meaningful messages for the general public. One student reflected, “The researchers made it clear that they wanted to present their research without dumbing it too far down… It seems as though ego will be a big factor when dealing with researchers” (R6). Students were also apprehensive of sharing their work with the researchers due to fear of rejection and of prompting further revisions. Though the job was challenging, serving clients proved to be very satisfying for students. “It was nice to hear all the great things [the client] had to say about our work, because in the beginning it definitely felt like we were interlopers and the researchers weren’t incredibly excited about our presence” (R7).

**Relationship Building**

Journals also revealed that students bonded and built lasting relationships with each other. In spite of the fact that students attended four different U.S. universities, the intensive study tour presented an opportunity for students to grow closer as colleagues and friends.

I know that we are here to work, but I also feel that we are here for such a short time. I personally think that we should do more group activities together… I like to make friends, and the more time I spend with these people on this trip, the more I feel like I am making friends. (R3)

Although students built friendships, there were noticeable divisions among the students groups. One student explained,

I see that our group has its divisions. People quickly understand who they want to hang out with… It’s not that I don’t like the others; it’s just that these are the ones I seem to fit the best with. (R4)

Participants often recorded the desire to continue developing these friendships upon returning to the United States.

**Safety**

Safety was also a common theme in student journals. Not only were students in an unfamiliar country, but they were sometimes on their own as they navigated the cities where they visited and worked. Some students got lost at different points during the trip and reflected in their journals.

At one point we ended up getting on the wrong tram and had to backtrack our way home… It was a little scary not having our bearings or knowing where we were, but I think that’s all part of this trip—to be lost and find our way home. (R1)

Students especially showed concern for their safety upon witnessing pickpocketing and public intoxication on weekend trips. Despite being outside of their comfort zone, some students stepped up to ensure the safety of others on outings.

**Student Mentoring**

Just as students were protective of each other, students with more experience became student mentors. These students willingly accepted the responsibility of teaching classmates skills, such as using Adobe Creative Suite software and taking photos, to help classmates succeed in their communications tasks. Some students surrendered leadership positions to keep the peace within groups. One student reflected,
...I am stepping back and letting her take the lead, not as a coward, but because I know she has had more courses than I, and I could definitely learn things from her. I’m trying to not speak as much and just observe, process, and only if something is wrong, speak. (R8)

Students learned from each other and made adjustments to make sure that all projects were completed and prepared for ILVO by the end of the experience.

Career Decisions
Finally, a few students reflected deeply on their career paths as a result of their work experience during the intensive study tour. Students gained a greater understanding of their capabilities and limits, and some made decisions about the kind of work they do not want to do in their careers. One student reflected,

Sometimes I really wonder if I will ever make it in this industry. I just don’t know if I have it in me to work at a computer or be in meetings all day long. I love to write, but not like that. (R4)

Others found that they were able to survive an office-type, professional setting and discovered that they would be interested in pursuing a career in agricultural communications.

Summary: Program Success
Overall, students found the intensive study tour to be a success. All but three participants noted that he or she would like to participate in a similar experience again, but all found the program to be a meaningful one. A student who declined a second trip wrote, “I am proud of myself, and I am so glad I challenged myself to be a part of this. I would never do it again, but I am glad I did it” (R1). Beyond the challenge of leaving the country, others appreciated the tour for the skills that they acquired. “I’m glad that I am learning so much on this trip. It is like a class but accelerated and more practical” (R3). Finally, students valued the friendships that were made on the trip. “I realized today that the only thing that makes this trip (if not life in general) worth anything is the people. I love spending time with these people I have grown to love” (R4). Each student clearly gained something from the experience.

Conclusion and Recommendations
The findings of this study support conclusions and recommendations of previous studies urging educators to offer international agricultural experiences to students (Edgar & Edgar, 2009; Place et al., 2004; Wingenbach et al., 2003; Zhai & Scheer, 2004). Researchers have noted the importance of students participating in international experiences to increase their global perspective and gain cross-cultural competencies needed for a diverse and global workplace (Edgar & Edgar, 2009; Wingenbach et al., 2003; Zhai & Scheer, 2004). According to the student journal entries, all participants found the study tour to be meaningful. For many, this was their first internship experience as well as their first time traveling outside of the United States. Students found the experience offered a unique opportunity for them to gain practical skills quickly and work in a real-world setting. Study tours are beneficial in enhancing students’ understanding of the world and introducing them to multiple perspectives. Students played an active role in learning at ILVO as suggested by Bruening et al. (2002), creating a meaningful learning opportunity for themselves. Although students had prepped in their college classrooms for agricultural
careers, the international work experience helped students to see how the theory and skills they learned will be utilized in a work environment.

The nine themes that emerged from student reflections indicate important considerations related to international programs such as this one. Building relationships was especially important to students and was the root of their social concerns. Though students initially had anxieties regarding their host families, students noted their host family as their favorite aspect of the experience. Meals and weekend outings proved to be valuable in creating relationships with host families as well as strengthening relationships between classmates. These outings helped students build lasting friendships that each hoped to continue after the study tour was completed. Opportunities to relax with host families and classmates were essential in maintaining morale at the workplace. Although students found homestays to be an enjoyable experience by the end of the study tour, it is recommended that future study tours encourage students to communicate via social media or video chat with host families early on to decrease concerns regarding incompatibility. Students in this study did contact host families through email, but other forms of communication or relationship-building activities may be more effective in making students comfortable with the living situation.

Additionally, students sought to build professional relationships. Having students work in groups allowed students to learn from each other’s strengths and solve problems as done in the workplace. Students at times became self-appointed leaders. This created power struggles among group members, especially those who were placed in leadership positions by advisors. Although conflicts did arise, group work taught students to overcome disagreements and to focus on completing the project. Working collaboratively and with a client from another country created an opportunity to present multiple perspectives to students and enhanced their understanding as encouraged by the fourth RPA of the National Research Agenda (Doerfert, 2011). Students gained skills from each other as fellow participants assisted in educating classmates to ensure that projects would be completed.

In many instances, the study tour pushed students outside of their comfort zone. Students sought normalcy in both the workplace and at home by comparing the Belgian and American cultures. To help overcome the unpredictability of visiting another country, advisors introduced formal schedules to create stability within the foreign environment. In hindsight, this preparation eased students’ transitions personally and professionally. Additionally, working for clients was intimidating for all students and was the most difficult part of the program. Although working with clients was challenging, it is recommended that students participate in international internships or intensive work-related study tour opportunities to prepare for careers in agriculture. Students struggled to accept feedback from clients because they were not yet comfortable with their own competence in design software and photography. These issues tested student confidence as participants sought their purpose within their group and at ILVO. Although it is encouraged that faculty and staff select students with existing skills needed to successfully complete the study tour, mastery of every skill in the discipline is not required. Students that lacked necessary skills adapted and picked up abilities along the way, which strengthened student confidence. An additional recommendation related to students’ comfort zone is to have in-depth, concrete discussions about emotional intelligence before departure to help students deal with criticism without damaging their confidence.

Finally, utilizing journal entries to gain insight into student perceptions proved not only valuable for the researchers but for the students
as well. Other researchers have noted the value of using journaling to strengthen, deepen, and enhance learning (Brockbank & McGill, 1998; Gouldthorpe et al., 2012; Zhao, 2003). Journal entries provided an outlet for students to record events and see the big picture as discussed by Brockbank and McGill (1998). Although students sometimes did think deeply about their personal growth throughout the study tour, their journal entries at times lacked in-depth reflection regarding their work with ILVO. Students worked an average of 37.5 hours per week but seemed more focused on the social aspect of the study tour in their journal entries. It is recommended that future study tours require daily journal entries but provide writing prompts to improve the quality and quantity of student reflections regarding the experiential work.

Though these findings cannot be generalized beyond the sample, they are useful in informing future study tours about possible benefits and limitations. The findings also prove the value of this particular experiential and international opportunity for students as requested in the first RPA (Doerfert, 2011). Furthermore, this study adds insight into conflicts and professional relationships that may arise in agricultural communications work environments. It is recommended that researchers study the impact of homestays or dorm living on student attitudes of an intensive study tour. Researchers should also test the use of personality assessments for participant placement into work groups and whether such a test is beneficial in creating a favorable work environment. Finally, researchers could benefit from contacting participants a year after the study tour to compare current student perceptions with those recorded immediately following the study tour. Remaining in contact with employed, past participants could also help researchers determine skills that should be taught to post-secondary students through experiential learning opportunities.

References


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