

A Fresh Look on the Diegetic Content of Advertisements and its Rhetorical Functions*

Abstract. In this article I set forth a conceptual distinction between two levels on which *inventio* takes place in advertising, one of which is critical for rhetoricians to examine: the diegetic content. I argue that current rhetorical studies have an inadequate construal of advertising content and I identify the source of this confusion in an older stream of research in consumer psychology. I perform a close analysis of several print advertisements and show that the diegetic content has important rhetorical effects on audience response which are not to be ascribed neither to product features nor to aspects concerning *elocutio*, as the current framework suggests. The results of my analysis are then used to explain why issues concerning relevance, credibility and persuasive power of an advertisement can only be accurately measured and explained if researchers pay close attention to the diegetic content itself.

Keywords: advertising discourse; rhetorical operations; brand meaning; persuasive imagery; diegetic content.

1. What is missing in current rhetorical approaches to advertising?

The rhetorical stream which analyzes advertisements from a rhetorical perspective has succeeded in the past twenty years to produce valuable results both for practitioners interested in persuasive outcomes of an advertisement (Scott and Vargas 2007; McQuarrie and Mick 1999, 2003; Forceville 1996) and for cultural critics interested in the wider effects of advertising on various audiences (Scott 2008; Grow and Wolburg 2006; Holt 2004; Motley, Henderson, and Baker 2003; Stevens, Maclaran and Brown 2003; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Otnes and Scott 1996). Most scholars involved in this line of investigation construe the activity of „rhetorical analysis” as consisting in a systematic examination of advertisements in order to reveal connections between particular features of the discourse and the correspondingly particular responses they cause in the mind of the audience.

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The lenses through which rhetoricians look at advertising discourse are selected according to the purpose of the analysis. Those interested in advertising as a form of art with pragmatic purposes will most often look at the ways in which formal properties of advertisements help create or enrich webs of brand-meaning in the mind of consumers. Those involved in cultural criticism, on the other hand, tend to focus on the values that advertisements promote and to reveal the persuasive strategies by which they attempt to influence consumers' overall axiological system.

Contemporary rhetoricians involved in the former category of studies claim there are two distinctive features of their work. The first is that they take into account the full richness of advertising discourse (unlike their fellow psychologists or marketers who tend to oversimplify the stimuli to fit their own patterns of investigation – see McQuarrie and Phillips 2008, 5-11; Scott 2008, 309). The second feature is somehow related to the first, but it places more emphasis on causal knowledge: they intend to provide nuanced and contextualized explanations regarding the reasons why certain rhetorical operations succeed or fail in their attempt to influence the audience (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 114; Maes and Schilperoord 2008, 229; Kai-Yu Wang and Peracchio 2008, 206-208).

But in fact the scope of their analysis is limited to questions of style and its impact on the audience. Most rhetoricians investigate „elocutio” in advertising, approaching either the effects of visual and verbal rhetorical figures whose target is always assumed to be a product attribute (McQuarrie and Mick 2003, 581-585; Forceville 2008, 180-185) or the role of visual stylistic properties such as fonts, camera angles, colours or types of layouts (Johar, Maheswaran and Peracchio 2006, 141-144; Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 2005, 33-37; Pracejus, Olsen and O'Guinn 2006, 86-88).

No attention is given to the content of the advertising diegesis itself. Most scholars define „content” as „brand or product attributes” and then go on to focus on various styles in which these attributes can be conveyed. But they are mistaken in rendering equivalent two distinct levels on which the meaning-making process of an ad takes place. Indeed, all ads point in some way to brand features, but the reference to those features often takes the audience through another interpretive stage, which is the decoding of the advertising image itself. The content of an advertising image often consists of characters and settings which have a meaning of their own, a meaning with which consumers can resonate in various ways.

It is the primary purpose of this paper to argue that the diegetic content of an ad often plays a key role in shaping the audience's attitude toward the brand discourse. In fact, in many cases it is precisely the diegetic content that makes an ad appealing to its audience. Still, in spite of its multiple rhetorical effects, the diegetic content of an ad is virtually absent in current studies. I will devote the following section to identifying the cause of this omission.

2. The inadequate conceptualization of „advertising content”

I believe that this weakness of mainstream advertising theory is a consequence of the way scholars have construed the distinction between form and content of advertising discourse. The following quote illustrates this point with clarity:

„As practiced in antiquity, rhetorical ideas governed the selection of content as well as the choice of style [...] The choice of what to say has migrated away from rhetoric and belongs now to disciplines such as psychology and economics, or more properly, their integration into marketing thought. The contribution of rhetoric is to point out that there is another set of choices to be made, concerning stylistic elements” (McQuarrie and Phillips 2008, 4-5).

It is obvious that the authors equal „content” with „brand features to be promoted”. They do not seem to realize that *inventio* in fact happens at two different levels in the creative process of an ad. Indeed, there is a first stage when marketers choose „what to say” about the brand: by taking into account a set of variables of the market context, they will decide for the best way to position their brand. But „what to say” is not limited to that. The creative department needs to make a separate decision, which concerns the specific characters and the setting which will make up the ad diegesis. If scholars claim to take into account the wide range of rhetorical operations employed in advertising discourse, they cannot leave out the diegetic content of an ad, especially since it often plays a crucial role in shaping the audience’s response. It is often the diegetic content that captures the consumers’ attention, either because they identify with one of the characters or because the narrative plot depicted in the images contains shocking elements. Also in many cases the diegetic content actually leads the way to persuasive outcomes, while the product-attribute message sinks into anonymity because of its inability to stand out in a crowded market filled with similar products (Steel 1998, 160-175). But this type of effects cannot be accounted for in the current framework, in which authors insist that

“The contribution of a rhetorical perspective is to raise the question of the relative importance of variations in style as opposed to variations in content” (McQuarrie and Phillips 2008, 13).

This restrictive conceptualization of „content” can be an unfortunate inheritance from an older tradition in consumer psychology according to which all discursive components that were additional to the explicit declarations of product attributes were described as „non content manipulations” (Petty, Cacioppo and Schuman 1983, 143). However, it is severely misleading to look at advertising discourse in this way. By now it is well understood among

advertising professionals that contemporary brand discourse often departs from strict product-selling arguments. In fact, it is precisely by departing from the usual selling-discourse conventions that an advertisement can be appealing to consumers and therefore play a major role in motivating consumer's preference for a brand, especially under current conditions when most competitors on a market segment offer similar product attributes and benefits (Michael Newman 2003, 142-198; Sutherland and Sylvester 2000, 6-25).

Indeed, some scholars have anticipated that change in emphasis of advertising discourse and argued for a deeper understanding of advertising's multiple routes to persuasion (Scott 1994). But somehow the rhetorical studies that followed this research programme became so focused on issues regarding the impact of style on advertising discourse that they ended up ignoring the role of the *diegetic* content itself. However, in shaping brand discourse *inventio* and *elocutio* interact in complex ways, which are often overlooked by rhetoricians whose emphasis is placed exclusively on the latter component.

In the next section I analyze the diegetic structure of a few print ads. My intention is to illuminate the meaning-making process elicited by these commercial images in order to show that there are two distinct kinds of „content” an ad displays: „content” in its prior conceptualization referring to brand-features; and „diegetic content”, defined as the assembly of characters, setting and plot which determine the meaning of the ad image itself.

3. Advertising content and its effects: applications on selected print ads

Before starting the analysis, I want to clarify one point about the claims to generalizability of my suggestions. The examples I evoke are meant to prove the inadequacy of prior conceptualizations of „advertising content”. I follow the path of negative case analysis proposed by the grounded theory approach to research (Fischer and Otnes, 28-29). „Negative cases” are examples which cannot be adequately accounted for by existing theory in a field. By analyzing them, researchers can provide empirical support for the conceptual innovations they set forth. My analysis of these ads is meant to show that the diegetic content of an ad has a meaning in its own right, a meaning which goes beyond conveying a certain brand feature. The examination will be accompanied by a set of reflections on the particular rhetorical functions fulfilled by the diegetic content. By no means do I suggest that the rhetorical effects of the particular diegetic structures identified here are universally applied to all commercial imagery. Instead, what interests me is to show that the diegetic content itself has several rhetorical effects. These effects may be different across advertising genres, but nonetheless they are worthy of more attention from researchers, which is why I urge a reconsideration of the way we think of „advertising content”.

3.1. „Artfully deviating” the discursive relationship between sender and receiver

To begin with, let us consider the print in Figure 1. To pursue the core variable of our investigation, let us ask the question „What is this ad about?”. A first answer, following the current conceptualization of „content”, would be to say that it is about a sport utility vehicle produced by Fiat. According to current theories, its content is the car’s „emotional selling proposition”: this car gives you the possibility to escape the monotonous work environment and to enjoy the thrill of adventure in the wild, while not taking any chances regarding your safety. However, adopting a reader-response approach to this visual discourse will convince us to take a closer look at the *inventio* involved in creating this character and this setting as components of the diegesis.

As we can see in the picture, the main character not only displays an expression of despair which suggests the bad time he has in that place, but he seems to have ended up resembling the furniture around him. There are two other prints in this campaign, one of which shows a guy resembling his pizza box because he spent his entire weekend at home in front of the TV eating junk food. Another one shows him in the office, where he resembles the „office vultures” (his colleagues) which, reportedly, „can be more dangerous than desert ones”.



Figure 1. Print ad for Fiat Idea Adventure, a sub-brand name for a mini SUV produced by Fiat. Headline says: „A day in filing room can be more dangerous than a day in the mountains. Get out of the world you live in”.

Throughout the executions of this campaign, one core idea stands out: being in a monotonous place can have more damaging consequences than one can imagine, sometimes reaching the extreme point in which the place fundamentally alters who you are. It is also noticeable that all characters look as if they lack human essence, because the material from which they are made is depicted as either wood or cardboard. This suggests that being deprived of the authentic thrills of adventure, people are being removed from their true living essence and end up to be sad copies of the places which they chose to inhabit.

One can easily tell that both the setting and the characters of this campaign are meant to foster an intense feeling of identification on the part of the audience. Not only is the situation itself similar to the lives of many, but also the invitation to „escape” resonates with contemporary popular ideas about the importance of setting oneself free from the narrow boxes in which institutions have closed us. Identification has been known to work as a facilitator of persuasion (Burke 1969, 55-59), but I believe that this choice of character and setting can be explored further in terms of its rhetorical effects.

I think we should look at it as an attempt to deviate an „exchange” relationship (which exists between the implicit author of the ad and the reader) towards a „commonality” relationship. The two terms are used by anthropologist Alan Fiske to describe two of the major kinds of relationship humans have with one another (Fiske 1992, 690-710). I suggest that by changing the focal point of the discourse from conventional selling discourse to a topic with which the audience resonates more intimately, the creator of the ad tries to accomplish a very clear goal: to change the reading-strategy which the reader will apply to the discourse, to appeal more to the reader as an individual and less as a consumer, to modify the discursive relationship which is implicit between seller and buyer.

This may be an adaptive response of ad creators to the skepticism most people feel by default towards any selling discourse. By appealing to a common set of values, the advertiser tries to make the audience approach the text in a different way. While browsing through the pages of a magazine and suddenly seeing this ad, the reader’s attention may be captured precisely because he identifies with the character’s situation. Then, when reading the text, „A day in filing room can be more dangerous than a day in the mountains”, the audience will by default approach it as an assertive speech-act¹ which describes the current situation in which he finds himself. Therefore, it is quite unlikely that this ad will be read with the skeptical eye of the buyer.

¹ John Searle’s distinction between „assertive” and „directive” speech-acts (see Searle 2010, 69) is relevant to the analysis of the text which completes the meaning of these pictures. This is why. Although advertising is well-known to make extensive use of directives („Buy this”, „Trust us”, „Join the party” are the standard type of advertising text), I will show that when a deviation of the discursive relation is attempted, the authors turn more often to assertives. Moreover, the propositional content of these assertives reflects the diegetic content of the pictures, not the brand-features. This supports my argument that the emphasis is purposefully placed on the diegetic content itself, which is expected to weigh a lot in determining the audience’s response to the ad.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I emphasize that my explanation regards strictly the *discursive* relationship, not the *selling* situation. To say that they approach the brand *discourse* in another way is not to say that they are somehow tricked into believing that the product is actually *sold* by their best friend to their best interest. What I suggest is that the content of the ad diegesis can act as a causal factor in determining the way in which the audience will approach the discourse itself. If the „reading strategy” turns from „distrust” to „identify with character and resonate with message”, chances are he will show more interest in the message. However, this does not shorten in any way the complex road which is widely known to exist from liking an ad to the desired „brand preference” in actual shopping conditions. In fact, it may make that road a bit more intricate: this type of „deviation” in focal point of discourse may provide new challenges for ad creators. Although it has the great merit of reducing audience skepticism and rejection towards the ad itself, it may have to fulfill additional conditions in order to succeed in creating an enduring cognitive connection between ad and brand in the mind of the audience.

3.2. A few implications of this „deviation”

From a managerial point of view, the main issue that arises with this type of „deviation” in content is that many people can find the diegetic content itself appealing and memorable, but completely miss out the brand, precisely because the image itself resonates with their interests and, accompanied by the assertive speech-act („a day in filing room can be more dangerous than a day in the mountains”) it actually has an autonomous meaning. However, I believe that this difficulty can be overcome on the long term, if companies understand the importance of keeping a set of brand-specific elements constantly present in their commercials. By keeping certain characters, settings and narrative plots constant from one campaign to the other, the brand can gain a salient and consistent brand personality which can cue the audience into making a clear connection between the commercial and the brand itself (Batey 2008, 207-223; Sutherland and Sylvester 2000, 208-268). In other words, even if the emphasis on the diegetic content creates the danger that the audience will only remember the story and not the brand, practitioners can prevent that from happening by planning and managing the brand-characteristic features of the diegetic content itself (for concrete examples of applying this principle, see Stella Artois and Sprite campaigns’ evolution over the years).

A distinct but related problem concerns the researchers’ assessment of the effects of such commercials. A frequent mistake is for researchers to ask general questions about the credibility or appeal of the advertisement taken as a whole, without distinguishing between the two separate objects of belief or liking: the diegetic content and the content concerning the brand features. In our case, the reader can actually deeply resonate with the situation of the contemporary man trapped in spaces that devoid him of his freedom and individuality. But this attitude toward the ad can be perfectly consistent with his

ignoring or being skeptical of the brand-promise that this particular car would provide safety during adventurous trips in the mountains, the desert or the jungle. The frequent merging of the two different levels of meaning leads many researchers into drawing irrelevant conclusions regarding „ad credibility” (for more reflections on the need to parse these questions both in market research and in laboratory experiments performed by contemporary rhetoricians also see Grancea 2011, 99-101). Therefore, I hope it is clear that the reconceptualization I urge in what concerns the notion of „advertising content” is not purely terminological, but has important implications for the research undertaken in this area of persuasive communication.

3.3. Extending the discussion: which „relevance” is being assessed?

To gain a more encompassing view on the role of the diegetic content, let us examine another print advertisement which promotes a brand of eye-glasses (see Figure 2).

The image may draw readers’ attention because the situation depicted is unusual: an eagle with a fur cap in his claws is a stimulus which creates a state of incongruity in the mind of readers. The solution to the puzzle is offered by the text, „Age weakens even the strongest vision”. Even eagles, traditionally known for their brilliant sight, turn out to be vulnerable to eye-problems. Their efficacy as well as their dignified status can be seriously affected when the poor vision leads them into humiliating mistakes, such as taking fur caps for rabbits. Note that even if we are dealing with a rhetorical figure, its tenor is not a product attribute, as proposed by most rhetoricians who deal with *elocutio* (for example, see Forceville 2008, 180-185 and also McQuarrie and Mick 2003, 581-585). Rather, the tenor is represented by those who are in some way or another in the eagle’s situation – either because they themselves are too proud to wear glasses as they age or simply because they have made similar confusions due to their own eye-problems.



Figure 2. Print ad for Instrumentarium, a brand of eye glasses. Text says: „Age weakens even the sharpest vision”.

The emphasis of this persuasive process is determined by the diegetic content, not by the reference to the product-category. In fact, not much is being said about the product itself. The text does not make any superlative claims typical to conventional advertising („best glasses”, „quickest delivery service”), nor does it end with a directive speech-act („buy now”, „come to our stores”). Moreover, if we return to the problem of credibility, we realize that the propositional content of the assertive speech-act is hard to argue with. This does not suspend the importance of other issues related to credibility: does the audience believe that glasses can really help them? Do they trust this particular brand to be a producer of quality glasses? These questions remain important, but two things need to be said about them.

One is important for scholars that perform interviews and experiments concerning ad stimuli: when investigating ad *credibility*, the research design must allow a clear separation between questions related to the diegetic content and questions which regard the other type of content, namely the product-attribute talk. The second thing is particularly useful for rhetoricians investigating the *relevance* of advertisements. It might be tempting to dismiss such ads as „irrelevant” because they do not contain a clear statement about what makes these glasses different from other competitive brands. Yet, I believe that such dismissal is not coherent with the way in which these ads are read by the consumers and how their „relevance” is implicitly assessed by them. If the audience arrives at the successful resolution of the cognitive puzzle proposed by the ad diegesis and they see a connection between the story itself and the product advertised, then the ad can be said to make sense to them. In other words, it will be „relevant”, it will match the context, in the sense Sperber and Wilson use the term (1986).

There is a misguided assumption that the audience sets out searching for product information in ads and rejects all ads that fail to provide that. In fact, the audience’s attention may be captured by the ad discourse itself and then, once they engage it, they will try to see whether they can find a connection between the advertised product and the story of the ad. In other words, they will search for that interpretation which is closer to the context. This context is inadequately conceptualized as „search for product-attributes”. Indeed, the context is „advertising communication”. But the expectations towards each ad in particular are determined by the rhetorical operations performed within that discourse. In the example offered above, the expectation of the audience is to understand the paradox of the association „eagle-fur caps in his claws”. The context is „advertising communication” and the cue used by the reader to decode meaning is „eye-glass product category”. The reader will then understand that in fact the eagle is figuratively pointing to people in similar situations. At the final stage of the decoding process, the reader will diagnose the ad as making sense or not.

In the course of that decoding process the discursive relationship between sender and receiver is implicitly negotiated and the advertiser’s *ethos* is shaped in it. If the receiver will find the ad relevant, the ad will stand a better

chance to be liked and, on the long term, to modify brand preference. But in such cases the brand is liked in the same way one likes an *author* of an attractive discourse.

The mere fact that such brand preference will not be the consequence of the promoted product-attributes but of rhetorical operations within the discourse has an enormous theoretical importance. The „product-attribute reasons” and the „discursive reasons” for an advertisement’s success are not mutually exclusive, but they are radically different in the way they influence the audience. The second type of persuasion can only be adequately understood if we pay close attention to the rhetorical functions of the „diegetic content” itself.

To avoid misguided assumptions related to the ethical aspects of this issue, I make a brief clarification. All this discussion concerns advertising discourse and not other areas of the marketing chain, from product quality to pricing. To say that there are two routes in which an advertisement may succeed is not to say that somehow good advertising might replace the real quality of products. An advertisement’s success is adequately measured by the way it manages to create brand salience and preference in the mind of the audience. For the product itself to be a market success, a lot of other conditions must be fulfilled. But rhetorical studies only deal with the role of brand discourse. And within this context we must understand that sometimes brands can be remembered and liked because the diegetic content of their advertising has powerful rhetorical effects on their audience.

3.4. In the absence of figuration: delineating the rhetorical effects of diegetic content

To get closer to a conclusion regarding the role of the diegetic content, one last issue must be tackled. The cases provided so far employed a certain degree of figuration, so one might claim that the rhetorical effects of the diegetic content can be attributed merely to *elocutio*. Although in each case I showed that the diegetic content’s *invention* envisaged a series of rhetorical operations which had their own effects on the audience, I feel that my demonstration needs one more piece to show the power of diegetic content per se. The following example is purposefully chosen to display no figurative language. While the other two employed a certain degree of figuration, the last one is meant to prove that even in the absence of rhetorical figures, there are specific rhetorical functions fulfilled by the diegetic content and that these functions go beyond communicating product features. This being said, let us take a close look at Figure 3.

The image shows an exercise bike which is used as a hanger for clothes, jewellery, shoes and other belongings of a woman. Since no character is actually present in the image, the setting itself is the main diegetic component. The setting not only indicates the absent feminine character, but also the main problem she faces – the lack of will to take up exercise at home, a familiar shortcoming of many members of the targeted audience. The text is placed near the light yogurt’s image and says „for those who want to, but can’t”.



Figure 3. Print ad for Colun Light Yoghurt. Headline says: „For those who want to, but can't”.

Although the „problem-solution” structure is overused in advertising, I believe that this image is meant to deviate the discursive relationship from „exchange” to „communality” by way of its diegetic content. This is the focal point of the persuasive process, not the talk about brand features. In other words, if this ad is successful, it is not because of the product-attributes it promotes, nor because it adheres to the „problem-solution” template. It is because it elicits *identification* in a humorous way which invites the audience’s affectionate complicity.

To understand this better, contrast this ad to the typical testimonial monologue employed in conventional ads which maintain the „exchange” relationship. In those cases the audience’s rejection towards the ad is caused by their feeling that someone is trying to sell them something and they do it in an artificial tone which raises an even higher wall of distrust. Here, the character is only suggested, which from the start removes much of the annoyance of the conventional selling discourse. Some of the main character’s traits are already sketched by the setting, all pointing to a modern, stylish woman - „it might be you”, the implicit author suggests subtly. Of course not all women in the audience have this problem, but those who are the target-public of a light yogurt surely can relate to the situation, one way or another. The advertiser’s ethos is therefore diplomatic and, with a touch of humour, manages to convey in a delicate way the support messages one would need from a friend, „I understand you” and „It is ok, there are solutions”. None of these claims is made explicitly and this is where the beauty of the ad comes from: by the double choice „absent

character-expressive setting”, the diegetic content itself manages to negotiate the discursive relationship between creator and receiver with distinguished subtlety.

All this is achieved without any figurative language, since a literal reading of this image makes perfect sense and is aligned with the audience’s interests. This demonstrates that the diegetic content’s effects are not inextricably linked to the employment of figurativity within the discourse.

4. Conclusions and implications for further research

The aim of this article was to set forth a different conceptualization of the notion of „content” in the realm of advertising rhetoric. Despite their commitment to analyzing the full range of rhetorical operations which may influence consumer response, most scholars remain anchored in formal analyses of *style* which they oppose to *content*. My intention was to show that apart from the content they have in mind – product attributes – there is another level in the meaning-making process of an ad worthy of closer analysis: the diegetic content, described as the assembly of characters and settings which constitute the ad image itself. I explained why this second type of „content” needs more attention in theoretical accounts on the persuasive outcomes of advertising.

I brought to attention a set of print ads to illustrate how the diegetic content itself has important rhetorical effects on the audience. These examples were intended to play the role that „negative case analysis” has in grounded research: to prove that the mainstream theory is inadequate in a certain respect – in our case, mainstream rhetorical research largely ignores diegetic content.

There are various aspects of advertising communication that this article only touches briefly but which are to be subjected to further investigation. One of them concerns the current explanations of the cognitive routes that an advertising takes towards influencing an audience’s attitude towards a brand. Practice has shown an impressively wide range of discursive tactics which have been proven to have major effects on the audience, but few of them have been systematically investigated and adequately conceptualized by researchers in advertising rhetoric. My proposal to consider more closely the focal point of the persuasive process can be a solution to this problem. When the diegetic content has the key-role in advertising response, it is often because it performs certain rhetorical operations which modify the discursive relationship between sender and receiver, as I have shown throughout this paper. Yet, this type of „deviation” has been virtually absent from rhetorical studies, while its stylistic counterpart, the „artful deviation” (departure from „degree-zero” discourse) has received a huge amount of attention, being subjected to extensive analyses performed by the some of the most prominent figures of current ad rhetoric.

Needless to say, the two of them are not mutually exclusive. In many cases, they interact and intertwine in complex ways. The fact that they often have synergic effects is not an objection to my account, but a further argument that content’s functions are worthy of equal highlighting. Moreover, the two

types of „deviation” can also be employed independently. When they are, their effects can be accurately isolated and explained, an endeavour which I believe to be essential for an adequate conceptualization of how advertising achieves its influence.

This article showed that the diegetic content has several rhetorical effects of its own. However, once this is shown, the next step is to specify the different ways in which the diegetic content stands for the brand message within the ad discourse. Logically speaking, there is a limited number of ways in which this connection can be done. The aforementioned remarks on „discursive deviation” can become a useful reference point for tracing the main contours of each resulting type of advertisement.

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