

Queering the Family Sitcom

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Almost two decades into the 21st century, television depictions of the chosen family are challenging the more traditional concept of the nuclear family. This essay explores how the pilot episodes of both *Grace and Frankie* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* introduce female friendships that eventually blossom into inspirational portrayals of chosen family. In this essay, I will consider the methods that both shows use to disillusion viewers of the notion that heteronormative romantic entanglements are superior to other types of relationships. In traditional television shows, women see other women as competition because they have been trained to correlate their self-worth with how desirable men find them. In *Grace and Frankie* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, women are portrayed as benefiting from genuine female friendship and chosen family rather than compulsory heterosexuality and its signifiers.

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“...Love for the woman is a total abdication for the benefit of a master.”
(*de Beauvoir 2011, 683*)

“Perhaps the strength of chosen family or community caregiving is the empathy that owes from the fellowship of shared experiences, values, and goals.”
(*Knauer 2016, 163*)

Today, American television continues to explore and promulgate ideologies of the family, including both nuclear families and chosen families. Television shows such as *Grace and Frankie* (Netflix 2015-) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (CW 2015-) have flourished despite challenging the importance of the nuclear family, a widely socialized structure defined by a pair of parents and their socially recognized children (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2015). Writer Brett Hertel observes that “since the dawn of the 30-minute sitcom, the prototypical cast has revolved around a family lifestyle... a ‘normal’ life,” as is apparent in *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS 1996-2005) or *The Brady Bunch* (ABC 1969-1974) (Hertel 2010, 2). In recent years, television narratives have steadily shifted their focus from family-oriented narratives to friend-based narratives often following close-knit groups of friends as they supplement or substitute spousal, parental, and/or sibling bonds with the bonds of close friendship.

The appointment of friends as proxy-family is widely known as chosen family, but more formally as “fictive kin”—defined by sociologists as persons unrelated by marriage or blood but still emotionally close or significant (Ciabattari 2016). Lawyer and civil rights advocate Nancy Knauer writes that an important distinction between friends and friends-as-chosen-family is that in regular friendships “caregiving may not be typical,” but for friends-as-chosen-family,

caregiving is what “binds” them together (Knauer 2016, 161-2). Michel Foucault, French theorist and literary critic, notes that heterosexuality “reproduc[es] labor power and the form of the family” (1990, 47). By creating familial networks between friends, these friendships become queer spaces where people in non-normative relationships live separately from heteronormative traditions such as marriage and reproduction (Halberstam 2005, 3). Thus, positive fictional representations of nontraditional families effectively introduce viewers to—and help reify the value of—disruptive and non-conforming institutions. This essay explores the pilots of *Grace and Frankie* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*—two currently airing television shows that introduce a central female friendship in the first episode that eventually blossoms into a chosen family. Specifically, I consider the methods these shows use to both challenge the emotional productivity of heteronormative romantic entanglements and reinforce the benefits of genuine female friendship and chosen family.

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend is a musical comedy on the CW that follows Rebecca Bunch (Rachel Bloom), a successful lawyer. Despite her professional success, Rebecca is unhappy and cannot hold down a romantic or platonic relationship. After receiving an impressive promotion at work she experiences a panic attack, during which she encounters Josh (Vincent Rodriguez III), her first boyfriend and sexual partner. Rebecca thinks that the last time she was happy was at summer camp with Josh when they were both adolescents. Motivated by Josh’s enthusiasm about moving back to his hometown of West Covina, CA, Rebecca quits her job and moves to West Covina to rekindle their relationship and get a fresh start. Once there, Rebecca meets Paula (Donna Lynne Champlin), a middle-aged

paralegal who quickly becomes her first friend.

The Netflix show *Grace and Frankie* is a dramatic comedy that follows Grace (Jane Fonda) and Frankie (Lily Tomlin) as they discover that their husbands, Robert (Martin Sheen) and Sol (Sam Waterston), have been having an affair for the last two decades and are divorcing them so that they can marry each other. The central characters are Grace, an uptight, retired entrepreneur who uses alcohol to avoid addressing her problems, and Frankie, a sex-positive socialist with a proclivity for artistic expression and profanity. The show explores the fallout of these forty-year marriages and, in particular, how the show's namesake characters rely on each other to cope with their domestic lives being suddenly upended.

Heteronormativity is Flawed

Grace and Frankie and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* both follow heterosexual characters, but neither pilot shines a flattering light on heteronormative romance; in doing so, both shows effectively introduce an argument for queer configurations of family. Adrienne Rich, feminist and literary critic, defines compulsory heterosexuality as a system in which men and women are convinced they are innately and unavoidably attracted to the opposite sex (Rich 1996). Flashing back ten years prior to Rebecca at summer camp, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* shows us a defining moment in her life. Josh, her first boyfriend, breaks up with her for being “weird” and “dramatic,” but only after “awaken[ing] her sexual being.” To borrow language from *The Second Sex* by the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, the “extreme importance” of Rebecca’s first sexual encounter proves to have had lasting “repercussions” on her life, because the passageway into womanhood is “definitive and irreversible” (2011, 391). Her

traumatic transition into womanhood—in addition to her conflicted relationships with her divorced mother and largely absent father—affects her long-term mental health. We learn later in the series that a large part of Rebecca’s unhappiness comes from the mishandling of her mental illness and ascribing too much value to her time at camp with Josh. Thus, a decade after their relationship, she is still unhappy and unfulfilled when she encounters Josh.

In the pilot, we perceive that Rebecca’s unhappiness stems from the fact that her professional success and wealth do not make her feel the way she thought they would. No amount of material gain can make her feel as happy as she felt back at summer camp. Before receiving a job promotion, Rebecca is largely able to live according to Halberstam’s definition of time; she is able to “ignore, repress, or erase the demands made on [her]... by an unjust system” by privileging “capital accumulation” (Halberstam 2005, 7). However, the promotion triggers a panic attack during which she sees Josh standing beneath a sign that reads, “When was the last time you were happy?” with an arrow pointing down at him. Within what appears to be days, Rebecca quits her job and moves across the country to find Josh, who symbolizes the happiness she seeks and makes her feel like “glitter [is] exploding” inside of her. In order to keep people from becoming suspicious of her sudden move, Rebecca accepts a job at a small, local law firm in West Covina.

As the title of the show suggests, it is easy to read Rebecca’s actions as those of a stereotypical “crazy ex-girlfriend,” but the show is quick to challenge this understanding. Rebecca is not chasing Josh per se; she is chasing the fantasy that Josh represents. Specifically, the happiness she felt and wants to feel again. Josh

represents a fantasy of love, or in the words of queer theorist Lee Edelman, a “fantasy of totalization” (2004, 73). And a fantasy should never be interpreted as inherently connected to the object it is projected upon “because fantasies are created and cherished as fantasies” (de Beauvoir 2011, 412). The theory that Rebecca is chasing a fantasy rather than reality is reinforced throughout the pilot because not only are happy heteronormative relationships completely missing from the episode, but the character of Josh remains undeveloped and superficial. The real Josh, the Josh outside of Rebecca’s imagination, is still solely defined by Rebecca’s early suffering and the fact that he ignored her texts once she arrived in West Covina. As such, the pilot of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* refuses to embrace the traditional and picturesque version of heterosexuality often presented in popular culture.

Appropriately titled “The End,” the pilot of *Grace and Frankie* also begins by deconstructing the fantasy of compulsory heterosexuality. In just twenty seconds, the theme song reduces the impressive forty-year heterosexual relationships in question to their seemingly ordinary, compulsory milestones (i.e., marriage and procreation). Following this, we see the pain that Sol and Robert’s happiness causes their wives. In addition, we see caricatures of the characters upon a wedding cake, and it concludes with the cake crumbling beneath Grace and Frankie’s feet—which seemingly echoes Simone de Beauvoir’s remark that women are nothing without their families (2011, 584). Effectively, the opening sequence positions compulsory heterosexuality as both ordinary and painful, especially for women.

After learning about the affair, both couples return home and the conversations that ensue expose the deeply discontented nature

of both relationships. Frankie appears blindsided by Sol’s revelation; she thought they were happy since their marriage sustained an intimate friendliness. However, when Sol apologizes, he asks, “How do I tell the woman I’ve loved for forty years that I can’t be with her if I want to be happy?” In response Frankie snaps, “You don’t. Stay miserable.” In this moment, Frankie’s world is shattered because she feels like the last forty years have been a lie; she feels like she has sacrificed her own ambitions and happiness in exchange for nothing. Grace and Robert’s conversation, likewise, appears to be a jab at compulsory heterosexuality as an “imposed order” as defined by feminist scholars Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (2010, 76).

Robert: ...I'm sorry. I just never thought you'd be this upset.

Grace: What did you think I'd be?

Robert: I honestly thought you'd be relieved.

[...]

Robert: Let's be honest, were you ever really happy with me?"

Grace: ...I was happy enough. So we didn't have the romance of the century, but I thought we were normal. I thought we were like everybody else. I thought this was life.

Robert: And I thought there was more. (Kauffman and Morris 2015)

This conversation captures the disconnect with which both Grace and Robert survived their relationship. Ostensibly, had the structures of heteronormativity not been forced upon Robert and Sol, neither they nor their ex-wives would be in this unfortunate situation. However, now that Robert and Sol are out and together, Grace and Frankie

no longer have to live their lives according to their husbands; their lives are now open to the potential of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing (Halberstam 2005, 2). Without the obligations of wifedom, Grace and Frankie can pursue their own endeavors.

While both *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *Grace and Frankie* begin with a strong focus on their failed heteronormative relationships, these shows are not about women seeking romantic love. Instead, the focus is primarily on female friendship. When romantic companions are introduced in either show, these instances are fleeting, and the main focus always returns to the unconventional female relationships.

The Concept of Desirability and Female Rivalries

According to the sociological study, “When Beauty Brings Out the Beast: Female Comparisons and the Feminine Rivalry,” female friendships are not easily established. Women are taught to see other women as competitors, and female rivalries are fueled by the impulse to prove one’s superiority and desirability (Anthony et al. 2016, 312). In the book, “We Should All Be Feminists,” adapted from a talk of the same name, writer and activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states:

We spend too much time teaching girls to worry about what boys think of them... All over the world, there are so many magazine articles and books telling women what to do, how to be and not to be, in order to attract or please men... Because I am female, I’m expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important... We raise girls to see each other as competitor—not for jobs or accomplishments, which in my opinion can

be a good thing—but for the attention of men. (2014)

Adichie is not saying that women cannot get along; she is underscoring that women as young girls are conditioned to see each other as competitors. De Beauvoir echoes this claim when she remarks that women can affirm one another’s common universe, yet “it is nonetheless rare for feminine complicity to reach true friendship” (2011, 584-7).

Regardless of whether women are longtime acquaintances (as in *Grace and Frankie*) or strangers (as in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*), they must first overcome the impulse to compare themselves to one another if friendship is to be possible. Female rivalry is so ingrained in society that “even when women attempt to distance [themselves] from these pressures,” they still use its rhetoric (Anthony et al. 2016, 319). De Beauvoir insists that women understand one another on a level that even their own husbands cannot (2011, 584). Despite this, she corroborates that female rivalry, as we know it, is mainly fueled by the concept of desirability because “[women] cannot bear to perceive the slightest halo around someone else’s head” (de Beauvoir 2011, 588). The halo functions dialectically. For the woman without the halo, it symbolizes all that the wearer is as well as what she is not. In other words, the halo is a way of assessing one’s perceived value. In turn, the most obvious hindrance to female friendship involves insecurity; one’s perception of how well she and the women around her are performing traditional femininity (Anthony et al. 2016, 321). Problematically, this results in women often feeling that their authority—wherever it happens to reside—is challenged regardless of the other party’s intentions, a phenomenon also known as Queen Bee Syndrome (Anthony et al. 2016, 312).

In the *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* pilot, the prevalence of Queen Bee Syndrome fuels almost every interaction between Rebecca and Paula, the paralegal at Rebecca's new job in West Covina. Paula, who is underappreciated at the law firm despite her hard work, is suspicious of Rebecca for being overqualified for her new position. Paula does not understand why a successful New York lawyer and Ivy League graduate would accept a position at this undistinguished firm. Further exacerbating these circumstances, Rebecca initially mistakes Paula for her assistant, which Paula interprets as an insult undermining her hard work and seniority. Paula remarks, "Two years of training, six months of night school, and fifteen years of experience, but... never mind." Later in the pilot, Paula outright admits her reason for disliking Rebecca: "You think you're so much better than me." However, there is no evidence that this is the case. As we learn throughout the series, Rebecca projects an aura of confidence to hide her deep insecurities about herself.

Although the show *Grace and Frankie* adopts the "odd couple" trope to establish the animosity between the namesake characters early on, what could have been a cheap and childish premise for a rivalry turns out to be much more complicated. In the opening scene, Grace and Frankie wait for their husbands to arrive at a restaurant for what both women assume is going to be the announcement of their retirements. Despite the presumed significance of this announcement, both Grace and Frankie arrange to escape the meal as quickly as possible to avoid one another. However, the show overturns our basic assumptions about the relationship between these characters. For instance, although Robert and Sol knew that their wives did not like one another, they convinced them to invest in a beach

house that secretly functioned as a place for the two men to carry out their affair. And now that neither woman wants to live in the house she shared with her husband, Grace and Frankie decide to move into the beach house together. The beach house serves as a liminal space for Robert and Sol as well as Grace and Frankie. It functioned for Robert and Sol as a transitory space between their homosexual desire and their heteronormative marriages. It provides a similar service, somewhat ironically, for Grace and Frankie: it is a space beyond their family homes (and the memories preserved there) but not completely outside of their previous lives—a sort of purgatory where they can process the dissolution of their marriages.

We also learn in later episodes that Robert (Grace's husband) and Frankie were close friends before the reveal of the affair. We can surmise that Grace, knowing that her husband was unhappy, developed a case of Queen Bee Syndrome and perceived Frankie to be a threat to her marriage—keeping in mind de Beauvoir's acknowledgment that "the shadow of the male...always weighs [on female acquaintances]" (2011, 588). In fact, when Robert tells Grace he is leaving her, she interjects, "Who is she?" Grace, who is often incapable of accepting fault, assumes their marital problems must mean that another female is trespassing on their marriage.

In both pilot episodes, one female character strongly believes that they have been wronged by another female character, despite a lack of evidence. Both shows overcome female rivalry in part by interrogating the heterosexual drive of the relevant characters. Once these women are able to overcome the impediments of compulsory heterosexuality—i.e., the drive

to find their happiness in men—they are free to disassociate their self-worth from how desirable men find them, and instead pursue female friendship and reap the benefits that accrue.

The Earnest Confessional and Truth in Female Friendships

Sociologist Elisabeth Morgan Thompson maintains that “emotion[s] and [affection]... are often present and integral to girls’ friendships” (2006, 52). Because female rivalry is widely reinforced by society, the only way for women to overcome this impulse is to be honest with one another. De Beauvoir argues that female friendships are truthful because they do not have to appease one another by feigning contentedness, like they must for their husbands and boyfriends (as Grace did for Robert). Truthfulness is what makes female relationships “very different from [the] relations men have,” and it is actually the most valuable aspect of female friendships (de Beauvoir 2011, 584). In an article on male friendships for *The Telegraph*, writer Chris Moss notes that male-based friendships manifest different attributes than their female counterparts. For instance, Moss says that one of the unofficial “rules” of male friendships is never talking about the value of the relationship; unlike female friendships, truthfulness is likely to be received negatively, especially if the expressed truth is emotional. Men are expected to be stoic (Moss 2017). The central female friendships in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *Grace and Frankie* are bolstered and equalized by confessionals in which characters admit their mistakes by exposing their respective imperfections. Friendship can ensue when the façade of superiority or perfection dissolves. Once the façade recedes, these characters can affirm each other’s common universe.

At the end of the pilot of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Rebecca and Paula become friends. Paula shows up at a party that Rebecca is attending while on a date with Greg, Josh’s best friend. Rebecca agrees to attend the party with Greg because she thinks she will encounter Josh. At the party, Rebecca suffers another panic attack because Paula confronts her about the real reason she moved to West Covina. Moments into the panic attack, however, Paula defends Rebecca from herself. Rebecca panics, “I’m stupid and emotional and irrational. I’m every rotten thing my mother says I am.” Paula interjects, “Stop it. Stop it right now. Don’t you ever talk like that about my friend again—you hear me?” Rebecca, feeling insecure and without any apparent friends, asks, “We’re... friends?” To which Paula says, “I’d be proud to be your friend. Now that I know the truth... What you did for love... The sacrifices? You’re brave.” Paula, happy that Rebecca is no longer lying to her, admits her own insecurities: “I wish I’d been that brave at your age.” Paula’s ambiguous confession of her own regrets—we later learn that she also never got over her first boyfriend, is unhappily married with kids, and was unable to pursue her dream of earning a law degree—represents her desire to bond with Rebecca and make her feel better. Having bonded over their mutual insecurities, they sing a duet. As they harmonize, Paula sings, “All our cares will disappear,” referring to Rebecca and herself scheming together. As the scene cuts to black, Paula says, “This is going to be so much fun... You’re not alone anymore. We are going to win this, you hear me?” In just two sentences, Paula and Rebecca become a pair—become we. With their needs being met in a more genuine way, there is little need for male affection. Both characters must learn this lesson multiple times in the first two seasons before embracing the strength and resulting fulfillment of their

relationship. We last see Rebecca and Paula leaving the party without even bothering to tell Greg.

Grace and Frankie become friends after spending the night on the beach high on Frankie's muscle relaxers and "peyo-tea," a peyote-infused tea she had intended to consume with Sol. Halberstam might suggest that the duo, now single, are abandoning family time, the "[hetero] normative scheduling of daily life" (2005, 3). Waking up from their peyote-driven "journey," which Frankie believes will birth her anew, Grace and Frankie leverage what fault is their own in the divorce. Grace says, "I walked into Robert's study yesterday for the first-time in... I don't know how many years. It was right there in front of my face. I missed it. Where was I?" For the first time, Grace puts her anger to the side and admits that she was a negligent wife; she gives up playing the role of the blindsided victim. Even though there was nothing she could have done to keep her husband happy, she still admits that she could have been more present in their relationship. Frankie responds, "Sol once asked me to wear a dildo." To which Grace says, "That's worse," and both laugh heartily. Soon thereafter, they help each other stand up, and stumble home side by side. In the last moment of the show, Grace and Frankie, back in their beach house, place two chairs next to one another and both sit facing the camera and sharing a laugh. In an almost identical fashion to Paula, Grace says, "Now what?" as the scene cuts to black. Together, they ready themselves for whatever life throws at them.

Having overcome their rivalries and established truthfulness with one another, these women can begin their respective friendships. Moreover, before the end of each episode, both sets of friends find

solidarity in a mutual endeavor: Rebecca and Paula will work together to achieve the happiness that Josh stands in for, and Grace and Frankie will help each other recover from their divorces. As the shows progress, they continue to champion the belief that once female rivalry is circumvented and trust is established, female friendship reaches a level of authenticity that supersedes heteronormative relationships. Notably, in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Rebecca and Valencia—Josh's girlfriend in the first season—also eventually develop a friendship that outweighs what either have (or ever had) with Josh. With all of these female characters fulfilling their emotional needs through their relationships with each other, the signifiers of compulsory heterosexuality continue to appear disingenuous and unsatisfying.

Lessons Learned: The Formula of These Pilots

Despite these two television shows' many differences (i.e., subscription streaming vs. a broadcast network, young adult vs. older adult struggles), not only are the pilots of both shows similar, but the series are similar in how they talk about compulsory heterosexuality and female friendships. Women must not rely on men to make them happy and should in fact look to other women for authentic companionship. However, before women can become friends they have to overcome the learned behaviors that shackle them to compulsory heterosexuality and its signifiers. In these pilots, this occurs in three main ways:

1. Female characters must challenge the fantasy of heteronormative romance. By doing so, they are able to look beyond the drive to find happiness through a male partner.

2. Before female characters can become friends, they have to overcome the impulse to see other women as competitors for male attention (enforced by compulsory heterosexuality).
3. In order to get to the level of empathy and trust that de Beauvoir spoke of, women must both confess their flaws to each other so that their respective insecurities become something that can bond them together rather than wrenching them apart.

As the pilots conclude, we understand that both shows, *Grace and Frankie* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, are more interested in exploring the development of these female relationships than heterosexual romance. Consequently, we are prepared to see these characters grow and evolve into chosen family, an establishment in which both parties benefit, and one that is perhaps more genuine than traditional family (Knauer 2016, 125). The chosen family offers these characters a fresh start: neither party—unlike the dominant-passive binary of heterosexual formations—has to feign happiness, sacrifice, or submit to the other, because their relationship is queer and thus outside of the limitations placed upon heteronormative relationships.

Between *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *Grace and Frankie*, the latter is the more obvious critique of the nuclear family. Not only does *Grace and Frankie* begin with the dissolution of two nuclear families, only to yield less conventional yet more rewarding models of family and friendship in their places, it also takes place within the homes of these respective families, which is formulaic of the typical family sitcom. Of equal importance, the dissolution of nuclear families is central to Grace and Frankie's individual and shared narrative journeys in more obvious ways

than in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. This is partly because Grace and Frankie have decades of history together, therefore making their growth more obvious. However, both of these shows ultimately challenge de Beauvoir's assertion that women help one another but men inevitably liberate them (2011, 588). Both shows are obviously built upon heteronormative institutions, but it is women who do the liberating for one another. Grace was rejected by Robert, Frankie was rejected by Sol, Rebecca was rejected by Josh, and Paula's marriage is in a rut; "in the face of rejecting families and a hostile society" (Knauer 2016, 153) each character turns to their chosen family (i.e., their closest female friend) for rehabilitation. Grace, Frankie, Rebecca, and Paula each assume the "supportive functions of a family by providing a sense of belonging, strength, and solidarity" to their respective female partners (Knauer 2016, 159).

The Family Sitcom: An Ongoing Discussion

Unlike more traditional types of media, television has become increasingly accessible to a broad range of people regardless of race, education, age, socioeconomic status, or disability. Television shows can be accessed traditionally or through streaming services, paid or unpaid, and watching them does not hinge upon the ability to read. A potential result of this is that queer portrayals of friendship and family on television can foster greater societal acceptance for non-heteronormative family structures. Beyond the worlds of these shows, "it is nonetheless rare for feminine complicity to reach true friendship," because women have been, up to and including this point, restricted by the demands of compulsory heterosexuality (de Beauvoir 2011, 584-7). That is, female friendships have historically been constrained by their relationships to

men via desirability and competition. These shows expose viewers to the many rewards that female friendships—in all their queer complexity—have to offer. To borrow the language of Halberstam, it is a “queer [use] of time and space develop[ed], at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (2005, 1). With this in mind, it is important to support *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, *Grace and Frankie*, and other shows of this nature because they are exposing audiences to nontraditional families and thus queering the sitcom, which creates much needed representation for queer individuals.

There is more work to be done. This essay has only explored a specific subset of chosen family: two friendships between white, educated, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual females. No doubt, with each change to these variables, the structure of chosen family changes. In order to do the establishment of chosen family justice, it is important to understand it as a complex and fluid response to “traditional family values,” and to further explore the many ways that the American family unit—whether biological, chosen, or legal—is evolving to become more dynamic and inclusive of differences. Further research should also consider family shows that feature divorce, same-sex couples, and other minor deviations from the nuclear family such as *Parenthood* (NBC 2010-15) and *Modern Family* (ABC 2009-); these shows and others like them portray traditional family values as desirable and capable of progressive inclusivity—and therefore serve to potentially undermine the queer, chosen family as an emerging alternative.

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