International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management (ISSN: 2700-8983)
an Open Access journal by Wohllebe & Ross Publishing, Germany.
Volume: 06 Issue: 02 Year: 2025
https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.2025.kmhd.45833

Human Resource Management Practices and Organizational Commitment in Selected Small Medium Enterprises in South Africa

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Abstract:

Due to the economic impact caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and rapid technological advancement, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) adopted various crisis-management techniques, including the adoption of innovative technologies and improved HRM practices to strengthen their resilience and remain in the market. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between HRM practices and organizational commitment of employees in the SMEs in Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. A quantitative research design was used and self-administered questionnaires were utilized to collect data from a convenience sample of 149 participants from 18 SMEs. Descriptive and inferential statistics, including correlation analyses, were used to analyze data. The findings indicate that there is a significant positive relationship between overall HRM practices and overall Organizational Commitment as well as between HRM practices and the three dimensions of Organizational Commitment (Affective, Continuance and Normative Commitment). However, the weakest correlation strength was found between overall HRM practices and Continuance Commitment. It is recommended that SMEs managers implement proper HRM practices to enhance their employees' overall commitment to their organization while also paying attention to specific HRM practices that contribute towards employees' commitment in relation to each commitment dimension. The study recommends further research into the influence of individual HRM practices on employees' organizational commitment.

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Keywords:

Affective Commitment, Continuance Commitment, Human Resource Management Practices, Normative Commitment, Organizational Commitment, Small Medium Enterprises.

Submitted: 2025-06-25. Revised: 2025-06-30. Accepted: 2025-08-08.

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Introduction

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) provide a major contribution to economic growth in developing countries such as South Africa, with its unequal income distribution and unemployment challenges (Kuckertz et al., 2020; Rabie et al., 2016; Sanda & Ntsiful, 2021). However, the challenges brought by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the heavy reliance on advanced technology make it difficult for the SMEs to survive (Crupi et al., 2021; Enaifoghe & Vezi-Magigaba, 2023). The post COVID-19 era is marked with organisations' determination to recover from the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, compelling SMEs to respond to the rising pressures from globalization and competition from established firms (Brown & Rocha, 2020). To increase the competitiveness of SMEs and the quality of their products and services, a well-managed and motivated workforce is needed. The human resources (HR) component is the most valuable aspect of any organisation in developing countries as employees are the key to helping organisations realize both their short and long terms goals (Molina-Azorin et al., 2021). Hence, employees' commitment to their organisation is crucial for SMEs to gain competitive advantage and survive in the digital competitive world.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the global financial system and negatively affected various industries, including SMEs. According to Clauss et al. (2021), many businesses experienced decreased demand, increased transaction costs, and supply chain disruptions. SMEs are typically vulnerable to natural disasters as they tend to have difficulties in generating increased innovation returns (Soluk et al., 2021). In addition, SMEs often do not have sophisticated financial decision-making systems (Levy, 2021) and financial muscles to acquire sophisticated technologies of this digital era compared to large companies (Cherif, 2020; Enaifoghe & Vezi-Magigaba, 2023; Jindal et al., 2024). This means that SMEs rely heavily on their employees' commitment to survive and develop resilience in a highly competitive environment, and this requires effective human resource management (HRM) practices (Msomi, 2024).

Employee commitment to their organization (organizational commitment) is defined as an action that ties employees' identity to an organization, which ensures that employees' goals and the goals of the organization are congruent (Wright et al., 2021). Developing a strategy of flexibility that enhances employees' organizational commitment can benefit organizations, including the SMEs in this digital competitive era (Saengchai et al., 2020). Thus, appropriate HRM practices are needed to enhance employee commitment, which can help in attaining organisational goals (Otoo, 2022). Previous research reveals that employees with positive perceptions of HRM practices display higher levels of commitment to their organisations (Kim et al., 2020). Thus, organisations that deploy HRM practice strategy have committed employees, who feel a need to be part of the growth of the firm in the longer run (Cesário et al., 2021).

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In the competitive digital world marked with heavy reliance on sophisticated technology, it is difficult for the SMEs to compete fairly with established competitors and gain competitive advantage needed for their survival (Cherif, 2020). Furthermore, most SMEs lack a proper selection process as they tend to lean towards informal selection methods, especially for lower positions, fail to retain competent employees (Biea et al., 2024; Mutumba et al., 2020; Sanda & Ntsiful, 2021) and are unlikely to provide adequate training and development for their employees than larger businesses (Rabie et al., 2016). Although SMEs cannot compete with larger organisation in terms of compensation packages, they should compensate their employees adequately to compete effectively for competent employees (Jidal et al., 2024). Clinton-Baker (2014) and Joshi et al (2023) emphasise the need for efficient and effective HRM practices in SMEs to actively reap the rewards such as organisational commitment. Furthermore, research found that formal HRM practices in SMEs result in a well-managed workforce, which in turn results in employees' commitment to generate higher productivity levels (Kanu, 2015).

Yang and Mostafa (2024) discovered that high-performance HRM practices influence employees' commitment to their organisation, which can be regarded as a requirement for SMEs to grow and become competitive. However, there seems to be a dearth of studies that focuses on the relationship between HRM practices and organisational commitment in SMEs, especially in the developing countries like South Africa, where SMEs contribute significantly towards economic development (Rabie et al., 2016; Sanda & Ntsiful, 2021).This paper addresses the gap by focusing on the influence of HRM practices on employees' commitment in the selected SMEs in Capricorn District in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. The overarching research questions is: "What is the influence of the overall HRM practices on organizational commitment of employees in the selected SMEs in Capricorn District in the Limpopo Province, South Africa?" The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: literature review, methodology, results, and discussion as well as conclusion.

Literature Review

This section presents literature related to the study by focusing on the Michigan model of HRM and the Three-Component Model of Organizational Commitment as theories underpinning this study as well as previous research findings on the relationship between HRM practices and organizational commitment.

The Michigan Model of HRM

Fombrun, Tichy and Devanna (1984) propounded this model at the Michigan Business School, and they named it the Matching model of HRM (Tamunimiebi et al., 2023). The Michigan model emphasises the links between organisational strategy and HRM practices, concentrating on vertical alignment instead of horizontal integration (Marchington et al., 2011, Tamunimiebi et al., 2023). The model emphasizes that the application of the major functions of HRM effectively is an important action to achieve the

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objectives of an organization. Thus, the work and contribution of selected HR functions must be evaluated by using appropriate techniques to ensure the achievement of organizational objectives. According to Guest (2002), the Michigan model is concerned with the powerful utilization of employees and the alignment of HRM practices for an organization to gain competitive advantage. For this reason, increasing organizational overall performance is the descendant of improved HRM practices (Otoo et al. 2022). Hence, Rüzgar and Ülgen (2017) assert that the Michigan model of HRM considers employees as key sources and drivers of competitive advantage. This means that for SMEs to survive the harshness of the digital competitive world, there must be alignment between HRM and organizational strategies while employees' commitment to the organizational goals is also invaluable.

The Three-Component Model of Organizational Commitment

Meyer, Allen and Smith (1993) declare that the three forms of commitment, namely, normative, continuance and affective commitments, are a psychological state, determining the employees' relationship with the groups and whether the employees will live with the organisations. Thus, these three types of commitment are a psychological state that either characterizes the employee's relationship with the employer or has the consequences on whether the employee will keep up with the employer. Research suggests that employees with a sturdy affective commitment will continue to be with an organization because they want to; people with a robust continuance commitment remain because they ought to; and those with a normative commitment remain because they feel that they have to (Meyer et al., 1993; Otoo, 2022). Cardoso et al. (2024) found that employees whose overall commitment to their organisation is higher tend to be productive at all levels, which is crucial for the survival of SMEs.

HRM Practices and Organizational Commitment

It has been discovered that research on HRM practices in SMEs has been given low priority despite SMEs generally playing a good-sized function in developing countries' economies, especially in local development (Kuckertz et al., 2020; Rabie et al., 2016; Sanda & Ntsiful, 2021). A review of the literature reveals that most of the research attempted to determine the impact of HRM practices on the employees' performance and on organizational performance (Harney & Alkhalaf, 2020). Research either focuses on the overall HRM practices or selected HRM functions in larger organizations (Muleya et al., 2022; Oliveira & Honório, 2020). However, research on the relationship between HRM practices and organizational commitment of employees in SMEs is considered much less critical than it deserves (Meyer & Smith, 2000; Naqshbandi et al., 2023). Obeidat et al. (2014) have confirmed relationship between six HRM practices (recruitment methods, training and development, performance appraisals, and reward systems) and organizational commitment of employees. Organizational commitment is an indicator that testifies whether the HRM practices deployed by an organisation can foster psychological

links among organisational and employee goals (Chen & Delmas, 2012; Tamunimiebi et al., 2023). HRM practice is an intangible outcome of an HRM system and is critical in keeping employees and fully growing their capability over the years (Ahmad & Schroeder, 2003; Harney & Collings, 2021; Vin-cent et al., 2020).

Previous studies found evidence that HRM practices (training, selection, rewards, information/knowledge sharing and compensation, and performance appraisal) are correlated with organizational commitment of employees (Oliveira & Honório, 2020; Warsame, 2015). Additionally, HRM practices such as job design or job crafting (Wojtczuk-Turek, 2025), remuneration (Mahmood et al., 2019), recruitment and selection, rewards and recognition, performance management and work environment (Jawaad et al., 2019) have been discovered to relate to organizational commitment. This implies that supportive HRM practices enhance employees' commitment to their organization. Therefore, the first proposed hypothesis is presented below:

H1: There is a positive relationship between the overall HRM practice and the overall organisational commitment of employees.

Previous research in relation to the relationship between HRM practices and the three dimensions of organizational commitment (affective, continuance and normative commitment) revealed that a positive relationship exists. For example, a positive relationship was found between HRM practices and affective commitment (Perumal et al., 2019; Steyn et al., 2017). In a study conducted by Otoo (2022), a positive relationship between HRM practices and continuance commitment. while Oliveira and Honório (2020) found a positive relationship between HRM practices and normative commitment. Therefore, the second, third and fourth proposed hypotheses focus on these three dimensions of organizational commitment and are presented below.

H2: There is a positive relationship between overall HRM practice and affective commitment.

H3: There is a positive relationship between overall HRM practice and continuance commitment.

H4: There is a positive relationship between overall HRM practice and normative commitment.

Methods and Data

This study adopted a quantitative research approach, which is based on the positivists' belief of measuring and quantifying social phenomena. Hence, a deductive approach was applied, whereby hypotheses were tested using collected data to describe the relationship between HRM practices and organizational commitment among employees in the South African SMEs (Saunders et al., 2023). The primary data was collected from a convenience sample of 149 employees (Male = 72; Female= 77)

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drawn from 18 accessible SMEs even though there were 48 SMEs listed in the database commissioned by the Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA) in Capricorn District.

A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. Human Resource Management Practices Questionnaire (HRMPQ) developed by Gould-Williams and Mohamed in 2005 and Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) developed by Allen and Meyer (1990) were used to measure the two variables understudy. The HRMPQ was reported valid and reliable, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of above 0.70 (Gould-Williams & Mohamed, 2010; Lee et al., 2010). The OCQ has been found reliable and valid by various scholars with Cronbach alpha above 0.70 (Jacobs, 2005; Martin, 2007; Pretorius & Roodt, 2004; Storm & Roodt, 2001). Similarly, the dimensions of organisational commitment reported high reliability, 0.87 for affective commitment, 0.75 for continuance commitment and 0.79 for normative commitment (Meyer et al., 2002). In this study, internal consistency reliability was conducted, and Cronbach alpha of .845 was found for HRMPQ while 0.75 was found as Cronbach alpha for OCQ. This confirms the reliability of the measures used in this study.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29.0 was used to analyse the collected data. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the mean and standard deviation while inferential statistics were used to analyse the internal consistency reliability of the measures (HRMPQ and OCQ) and to test the proposed hypotheses. Precisely, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to assess the reliability of each measure while Pearson Product-moment correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between HRM practices and organisational commitment, including the relationship between HRM practices and the three dimensions of organizational commitment (affective, continuance and normative commitment).

Results

The next subsections present the results in relation to the four hypotheses, which were tested using Pearson product correlation moments.

Correlation between Overall HRM Practice and Overall Organizational Commitment

The first hypothesis (H1) tested in this study was on the relationship between the overall HRM and the overall organisational Commitment of employees, with the null hypothesis stating that there is no relationship between the overall HRM practice and the overall organisational commitment of employees while the alternative hypothesis states that there is a positive relationship between the overall HRM practice and the overall organisational commitment of employees. Table 1 shows that the significance level (p value) is 0.002, which implies that the null hypothesis is strongly rejected. According to Majumder

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and Maheshwarappa (2023), a null hypothesis can only be rejected if p value is less than or equal to 0.05. Therefore, a null hypothesis is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis.

The results displayed in Table 1 show that the correlation (r) between the overall HRM practice and organisational commitment is 0.241. According to Schober et al. (2018), a correlation coefficient between 0.10–0.39 is regarded as a weak correlation. It can be deduced that a significant positive but weak correlation exists between overall HRM practice and overall organizational commitment. Therefore, the proposed hypothesis stating that there is a positive relationship between the overall HRM practice and the overall organisational commitment of employees in this study is supported.

Correlations			
		HRM practice	**Organizational Commitment**
HRM practice	Pearson Correlation	1	.241**
Organizational Commitment	Pearson Correlation		1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.002	
	N	149	
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).			
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).			

Table 1: Correlation between overall HRM practice and overall organizational commitment

Correlation between Overall HRM Practice and Affective Commitment

The second hypothesis (H2) tested in this study focused on the relationship between the overall HRM practice and affective commitment of employees. This means that the null hypothesis states that there is no relationship between the overall HRM practice and affective commitment of employees while the alternative hypothesis states that there is a positive relationship between the overall HRM practice and affective commitment of employees. The results depicted in Table 2 show convincing evidence against the null hypothesis. The results show that the significance level (p value) is 0.002. Since the p value is less than 0.05 as suggested by Majumder and Maheshwarappa (2023), the null hypothesis is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis.

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The correlation (r) found between HRM practice and effective commitment is 0. 411, and according to Schober et al. (2018), a correlation coefficient between 0.40–0.69 is regarded as moderate correlation. Therefore, the results show that there is a significant positive and moderate relationship between HRM practice and affective commitment of employees. This means that the proposed hypothesis stating that there is a positive relationship between the overall HRM practice and affective commitment in this study is supported.

Correlations			
		HRM practice	**Affective Commitment**
HRM practice	Pearson Correlation	1	.411**
Affective Commitment	Pearson Correlation		1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	
	N	149	
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).			
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).			

Table 2: Correlation between overall HRM practice and affective commitment

Correlation between Overall HRM Practice and Continuance Commitment

The third hypothesis (H3) tested in this study focused on the relationship between the overall HRM practice and continuance commitment of employees. The null hypothesis states that there is no relationship between the overall HRM practice and continuance commitment of employees while the alternative hypothesis states that there is a positive relationship between the overall HRM practice and continuance commitment of employees. The results depicted in Table 3 show that the null hypothesis is not supported as the significance level (p value) is 0.03, which is less than 0.05. Majumder and Maheshwarappa (2023) emphasise that when the p value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected.

On the other hand, the correlation (r) found between HRM practice and continuance commitment of employees is 0.151. According to Schober et al. (2018), a correlation coefficient ranging between 0.10–0.39 is regarded as a weak correlation. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a significant positive but weak relationship between HRM practice and continuance commitment of employees. Therefore,

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the proposed hypothesis stating that there is a positive relationship between the overall HRM practice and continuance commitment of employees in this study is supported.

Correlations			
		HRM practice	**Continuance Commitment**
HRM practice	Pearson Correlation	1	.151*
Continuance Commitment	Pearson Correlation		1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.03	
	N	149	
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).			
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).			

Table 3: Correlation between overall HRM practice and continuance commitment

Correlation between Overall HRM Practice and Normative Commitment

The fourth hypothesis (H4) focused on testing the relationship between overall HRM practice and normative commitment of employees. The null hypothesis states that there is no relationship between the overall HRM practice and normative commitment of employees while the alternative hypothesis states that there is a positive relationship between the overall HRM practice and normative commitment of employees. As depicted in Table 4, the significance level (p value) of 0.004 shows convincing evidence against the null hypothesis because it is less than 0.05 (Majumder & Maheshwarappa, 2023). Thie means that the alternative hypothesis is supported instead.

The correlation (r) between HRM practice and normative commitment is 0.203, which is weak as suggested by Schober et al. (2018) that a correlation coefficient of between 0.10–0.39 is regarded as weak. The results show that there is a significant positive but weak relationship between HRM practice and normative commitment. Therefore, the proposed hypothesis stating that there is a positive relationship between the overall HRM practice and normative commitment in this study is supported.

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Correlations			
		HRM practice	**Normative Commitment**
HRM practice	Pearson Correlation	1	.203*
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.004	
	N	149	
Normative Commitment	Pearson Correlation		1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.004	
	N	149	
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).			
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).			

Table 4: Correlation between overall HRM practice and normative commitment.

Discussion

This section provides a discussion of the findings of this study according to the tested hypotheses.

HRM Practices and Overall Organizational Commitment

The findings of this study show that a significant positive but weak relationship exists between the overall HRM practices and the overall organisational commitment (r = 0.241). The positive relationship found in this study implies that when employees perceive the HRM practices positively, they tend to be more committed to their organisation. These findings are consistent with previous research findings (Mathew, 2021; Warsame, 2015). Oliveira and Honório (2020) discovered that in general, there is a significant positive relationship between HRM practices and organisational commitment, although the strength of the relationships differs in relation to the relationships between various HRM practices and the dimensions of organisational commitment.

HRM Practices and Affective Commitment

The current research findings reveal that a significant positive though moderate relationship exists between the overall HRM practices and affective commitment (r = 0. 411). Previous studies found a

positive relationship between HRM practices and affective commitment, and this dimension of organisational commitment was found to correlate with various HRM practices. For example, a study conducted by Oliveira and Honório (2020) found that HRM practices influence affective commitment, with HRM practices associated with career planning and benefits found to predominantly influence affective commitment positively. Muleya et al. (2022) found that HRM practices such as training and career development predominantly correlate with affective commitment. Similarly, HRD practices were found to significantly influence employees' affective commitment (Otoo, 2022; Otoo & Rather, 2024). In addition, Atoko et al. (2019) found that recruitment significantly and positively influences affective commitment while Perumal et al. (2019) found affective commitment to be influenced by performance appraisal. These findings attest that various HRM practices may influence employees' commitment to their organization.

HRM Practices and Continuance Commitment

The findings of the current study show that a significant relationship between the overall HRM practice and continuance commitment (r = 0.151) exists, though the correlation is weak. A study conducted by Oliveira and Honório (2020) support this relationship but also emphasise that continuance commitment is least influenced by HRM practices when compared with affective and normative commitment. Similarly, in this study, the weakest correlation strength was found between HRM practices and continuance commitment. These findings may be attributed to the SMES' minimal formal HRM practices (Cherif, 2020; Sanda & Ntsiful, 2021) and limited financial muscles to compete with larger firms in compensating employees (Jidal et al., 2021; Msomi, 2024). Furthermore, the current study's findings may be attributed to the limited job opportunities, especially in South Africa, where the unemployment rate is estimated to be 32,9% in the first quarter of 2025 (Statistics South Africa, 2025).

HRM Practices and Normative Commitment

The findings of this study show a significant positive relationship between the overall HRM practice and normative commitment (r = 0.203), although the correlation is weak. There seems to be inconclusive findings in relation to the relationship between HRM practice and normative commitment, with fewer studies confirming a positive relationship while others found non-significant relationship. Oliveira and Honório (2020) found a positive relationship between HRM practice and normative commitment, with training and development as HRM function found to be predominantly and positively related to normative commitment. Similarly, Warsame (2020) found a significant relationship between HRM practices and normative commitment. On the other hand, a non-significant relationship between HRD practices and normative commitment was found (Otoo, 2022; Otoo & Rather, 2024). Nevertheless, the current study's findings imply that the HRM practices tend to contribute to the employees' tendencies to value their

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organisations and their willingness to remain irrespective of the limitations that SMEs have when compared with larger organisations.

Conclusion

The Michigan model of HRM asserts that human resources (employees) play a crucial role in assisting organisations to gain competitive advantage, making it imperative for SMEs to implement effective HRM practices that are perceived positively by their employees. On the other hand, the Three-Component Model of Organizational Commitment emphasizes that employees' overall commitment to their organisation is crucial for enhanced organizational commitment, making it essential for SMEs to devise mechanisms that would enhance employees' commitment to become and remain competitive. Accordingly, the aim of this paper was to examine the influence of HRM practices on employees' commitment to their organisation, with specific reference to SMEs. The findings show that the overall HRM practices have a positive influence on employees' organisational commitment, highlighting the importance of SMEs to ensure that their employees positively perceive their HRM practices to enhance employees' overall commitment. The findings also revealed a positive relationship between HRM practices and the three dimensions of organizational commitment, namely, affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment.

There are few recommendations for SMEs based on the current research findings:

- Firstly, the positive relationship between HRM practices and the overall organisational commitment suggests that for SMEs to enhance their invaluable contribution towards a country's economic development, they should ensure alignment between their HRM practices, strategic goals, and employees' needs.
- Secondly, the positive relationship between HRM practices and affective commitment implies that it is important for SMEs to continuously improve their HRM practices and ensure that their HRM practices are aligned with their employees' expectations and needs.
- Thirdly, the positive relationship between HRM practices and continuance commitment suggests that SMEs should create a unique and positive workplace environment that ensures a balance between their employees' personal and professional wellbeing.
- Lastly, the relationship between HRM practices and normative commitment suggests the importance for SMEs to create positive organisational culture and foster beneficial workplace relationships based on trust, interdependence, and benevolence.

It is apparent that this study contributes to the body of knowledge, however, it has limitations. The study used a convenience sample of employees from few SMEs, which implies that the sample used in this study may not truly represent the entire population. This has a direct impact on the generalizability of

the findings. It is therefore recommended for future research to focus on a larger probability sample. Furthermore, the focus of this study was on the overall HRM practices, which failed to examine the influence of specific HRM practices on the overall commitment or its three dimensions. It is recommended for future research to focus on specific HRM practices to identify specific HRM practices that need improvement.

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