

Human mosaic: maps of honeycombed British society

Parts of Britain resemble a melting pot that more than rivals any found in America. Some others appear to be social monocultures where almost everyone is white, married, has children and owns or is buying a house. But scratch beneath the superficial banality of middle England and there too is a rainbow: there is the widest variety of lives, life chances and experience. To reveal the social geology of Britain **Bethan Thomas** and **Danny Dorling** have drawn re-projected maps¹—maps where the scale is measured in human lives.

One hundredth of the world is an island, the island of Britain. One hundredth, or 1%, of the world of people, that is. What does this percentage of humanity look like if we try to visualise British social geography? Imagine that the island were reconfigured so we could easily view it all from the air. Space out everyone equally—a hexagonal arrangement is best—and give each person 50 coloured placards. The kind of placards you see used in mass games, where each person becomes a pixel. Then ask the crowd a question to which the correct answer for each is just one of their 50 colours. What would you see?

Here we have simulated the results of just such an experiment using social surveys and censuses, computer graphics and some human cartography. So free your mind for a moment and pretend that you could view everyone in this one small country.

Sixty million people live in Britain. Sixty million breaths are taken every second. Sixty million thoughts are about to be, and to be gone. Imagine 60 million. Imagine a map of 60 million. Better, imagine 60 maps of 60 different aspects to 60 million lives. Soap operas do not attempt to describe even a fictional millionth of our lives. Sixty stories are too many to follow, but 60 snapshots of time are an album of instance that con-

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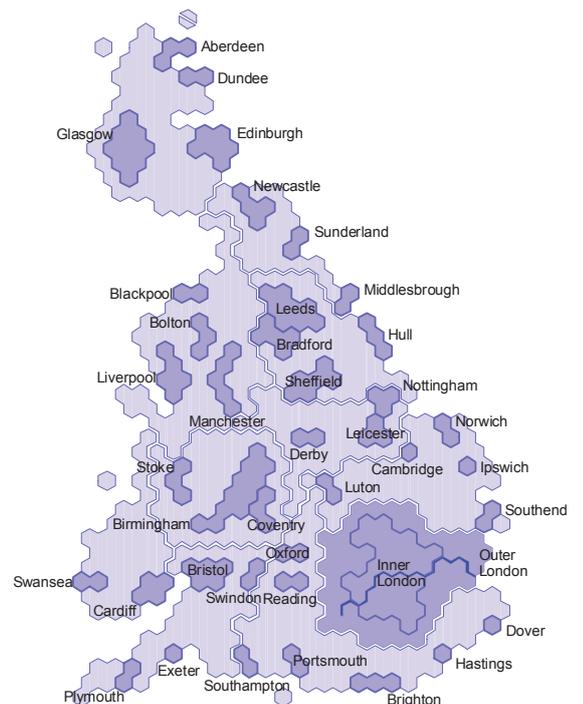


Figure 1. Each hexagon represents a parliamentary constituency, and therefore represents also roughly the same number of people. Dark hexagons represent multi-constituency cities.

stitutes a story. An album tells a tale. Can you imagine what stories there would be in an album of 60 million people?

In the picture album of Britain that we are about to describe, over 1000 neighbourhoods are depicted. Northern Ireland is omitted from this story because it is quite different. Figure 1 shows the places we can include, each shown as slices of hexagons in a honeycomb of cities and countryside; each place is a story of thousands of individual stories, a composite, a collage, a collection—a human mosaic.

Birth

Just as bees use only some of the cells in their honeycombs to develop offspring, reproduction varies dramatically across the human honeycomb of British society. Where and to whom you are born in this honeycomb determines much of your future and what you will consider to be normal.

Almost every minute of every hour of every day of the year, a baby is born in Britain. A thousand people are born between the times when you brush your teeth in the morning and at night. Of those 1000, only about 25 are born to mothers aged under 18, 50 to mothers aged 18 or 19 and 20 to mothers aged over 40, with the remaining 900-odd being born to mothers between the ages of 20 and 39. With every year that passes a few additional older women and a few fewer younger ones have children. Teenage mothers, those favourites of tabloid editors, are so rare that they do not feature in a representative image of the country, even as being the largest minority—anywhere.

Birth is a good place to begin our picture book of the myriad geographies to life in Britain. Babies are differentiated in innumerable ways. The ways in which they differ tell us in turn how neighbourhoods differ, and those babies themselves contribute to making different neighbourhoods distinct. The age of their mother at the point of their birth is one aspect that sets the course of an infant's life. If there were no geographical patterning to mothers' age, then there would be little structure to be seen on the map shown in Figure 2 or in any of those shown in the rest of this article. Just a generation ago mothers in Britain had their children in a much narrower age range than is now the norm. A generation before that and we conformed even more. Now the middle class delay the time at which they have children and many more than before have no children at all. The patterning that there now

is reveals much about the starkly different social worlds into which British babies are now born—depending on the place of their birth.

Children of diversity

Most of the debate over the multicultural nature of British society takes place in an almost complete vacuum of knowledge over how diverse our neighbourhoods really are, which groups of immigrants are the largest—not necessarily those that you would think—and which groups born abroad are most spatially concentrated now within Britain.

The multicultural features of Britain in a generation's time will mainly reflect the diversity of our children and, among much else, where they were born. It is possible to map in detail the mosaic of their country of birth for all children aged under 16 living in Britain.

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It is most revealing to show the second most common country of birth, as the map of most common country of birth is very monotonous. Most children in all neighbourhoods in England, Scotland and Wales are born in those respective countries except for there being slightly more England- than Wales-born children in Welsh neighbourhoods around Buckley, Connah's Quay and rural Montgomeryshire, possibly due to maternity hospitals being located in England.

The story of children born outside of Britain is partly a military story. After the three home countries it is Germany where the next largest numbers of children living in Britain were born and then the USA. There are only five neighbourhoods in the whole of Britain where more than a seventh of children were born abroad: Mildenhall, Walton, Hyde Park, Chelsea and Kensington. In each of these neighbourhoods, the largest immigrant group is from the USA. The mosaic map of minor-

ity children's birthplace, illustrated in Figure 3, shows how these two groups of children tend to cluster either in areas with military facilities, such as the huge airbase at Mildenhall, or in areas from which the British armed forces tend to recruit heavily and areas to which military families with their children born in Germany tend to settle when they leave the armed forces. Britain also has very strong commercial ties to North America and has had an extremely long history of immigration from Germany—those links are reflected here.

The next most common overseas countries of birth of children in Britain are Pakistan, South Africa, India and Bangladesh, but fewer children born in these four countries combined are living in Britain than there were born in the USA and Germany combined. American- and German-born children again outnumber those born in the next seven highest contributing countries and provinces combined: France, Australia, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Hong Kong, Nigeria and Japan. And underlying this, the largest minority groups in most neighbourhoods in Britain are the England-born children living in Scotland and Wales, and the Scotland- and Wales-born living in England. The 21st century mosaic of children's birthplace reflects the military, colonial and imperial histories of the generations born before them, current internal migration between the home countries, and *only after all that*, although to the most colourful extent on the map, the movement of families with young children from abroad with no old military, colonial or imperial connection.

Middle age

The same place can look very different at different stages: a child growing up sees a very different world to that experienced by a pensioner. However, increasingly, people no longer conform to the stereotypes related to their age. Midlife is the third of the six stages of life that we consider here. The ages between 25 and 39 are still, for most, half way between birth and death.

For each age group, if you had to ask a single pertinent question, we have suggested in the new atlas what that question could be. For children the question was related to the number of adults in paid employment in the household—how many bring home the bacon? For young adults the question was related to sex—not so much getting any, as who of which sex was doing what where you lived. For those in midlife the pertinent question is “Do

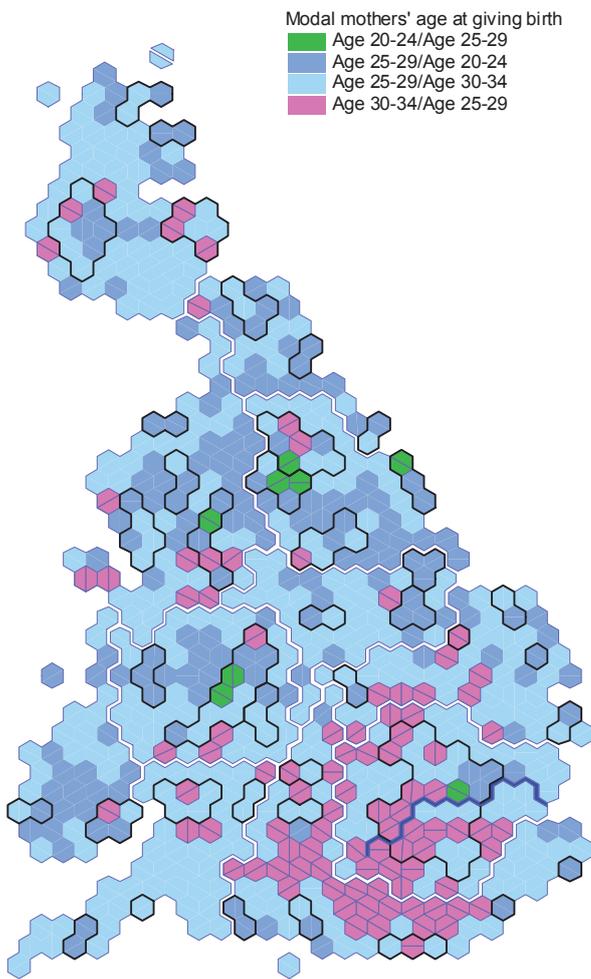


Figure 2. The honeycomb here is coloured to show both the most common age of new mothers in each place, and the second most common age. The respective age ranges precede and follow the forward slash in the key. Only four colours are needed because only these combinations occur as either the majority or minority

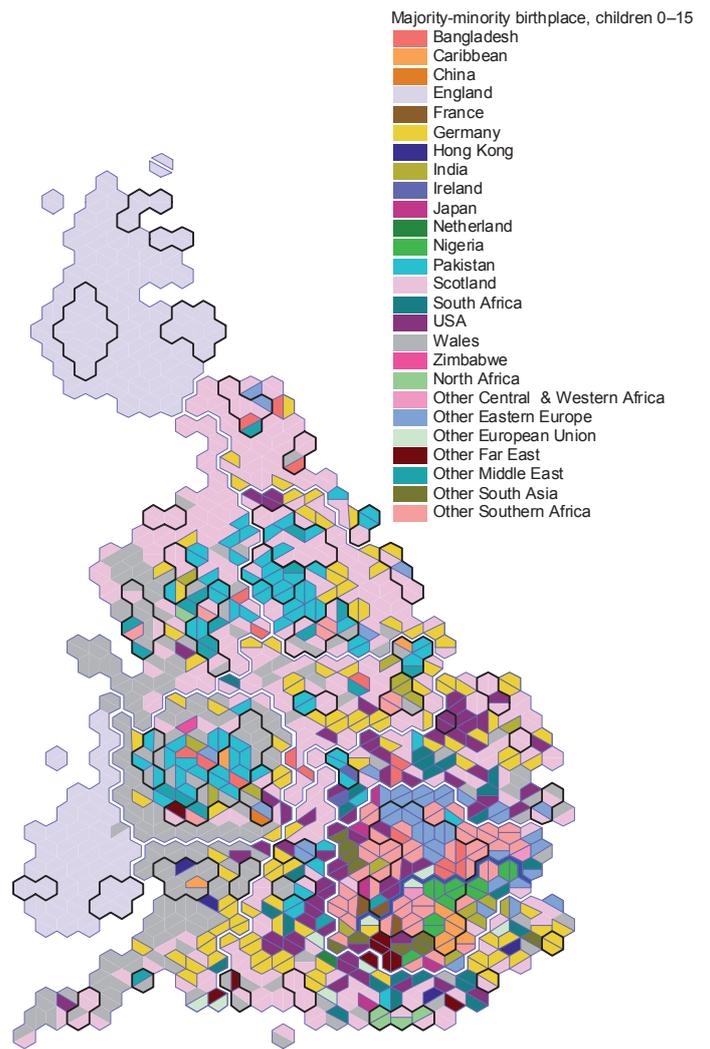


Figure 3. Shading indicates the country of birth of the largest minority of children in each place

you have children?" 6.5 million of the middle-aged are living in a household that contains children, and 6 million are not.

The honeycomb map in Figure 4, showing the likelihood of someone in midlife living with children, is far from complex. There are some nuances, but, in general, move away from the centres of towns and cities and out of the south, and up to a maximum of two thirds of this age group are found living in households with children. In almost all cases these children are their biological children or step-children.

In London and a few other parts of the South East those in midlife behave a little more like younger adults in their chances of

having had children and how they choose or are able to live together. Conversely, in parts of Yorkshire and Wales especially, away from the bigger cities and the bright lights, by the age of 25 many have already settled down and are behaving a little more like those a few years older than them in the rest of the country. By this stage of your life, where you live is beginning to matter a little more than how old you are when it comes to affecting how you live. This is possibly partly because social inequalities have arisen: we now age physically at slightly different rates. People of the same age in different parts of the country are beginning to look quite different.

Maturity

Once maturity has been reached, what it is to be "normal" now varies dramatically between neighbourhoods. As people age they acquire more and more baggage, which influences what we now see when we look at a slice of their lives.

The age groups that reached their 40s and 50s by the turn of the millennium had been born as early as the year when the course of the Second World War began to turn (1942) and some as late as not to have been around at the time of the Lady Chatterley trial (1960) but none that we map here were born after the release of the Beatles' first album (1964). They most commonly entered the labour market at

the age of 15, in the 20 years bracketed by the years 1957 and 1976, both years in which Britons had "never had it so good" (as Harold Macmillan said of 1957 and the New Economics Foundation said of 1976). Despite these common experiences, the outcomes for this group vary dramatically and they have moved about the country in ways that make their different experiences show up geographically and spatially most starkly. Here we concentrate on who has loved and lost most by these years.

The honeycomb geography to the 31% of this age group who are remarried, separated or divorced is striking, as shown in the map of that aspect of this age of life (Figure 5). The tendency to "get away from it all" is very strong. The sea, especially the warmer sea, appears to draw those who have lost a marital partner. Some coastal towns are especially attractive, partly because it may be cheaper to live in these towns than elsewhere along the coast, and disposable income usually falls on separation. There are also many parts of outer London and the more expensive quarters of other cities where those who have been separated once or more are least often found. Here it is usually too expensive to live if not part of a couple, and for those who have separated it is also too close to urban reminders of home.

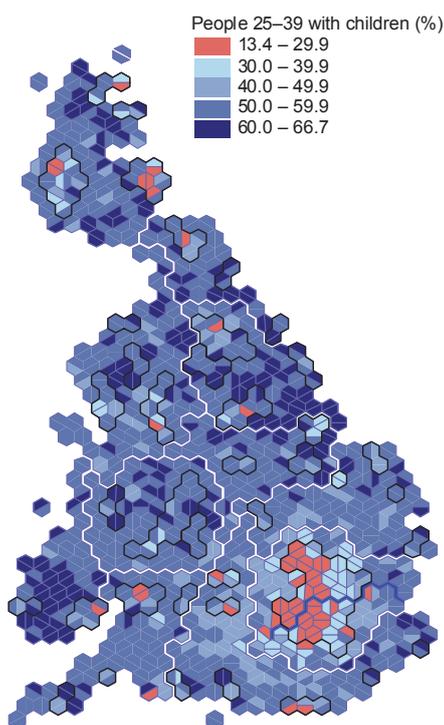


Figure 4. The likelihood of adults in their midlife years having children sharing their household with them, by area

Outside of most of urban Britain, extol the values and sanctity of first marriage to someone of mature years, and often (more than a third of the time) you will be speaking to someone who has been through one marriage already and has separated or divorced. Those who have never married, or the larger group in their first marriage and still together, live more in cities.

Old age

Old age is being pushed forward ever further into the future. The better-off in Britain are living long and longer, but for most being and feeling old does begin at 60 with the free bus pass. It ends at 74, a day before your TV license fee is free.

No longer expected to look after children, to earn money, to have to pay off loans: for some, these are the easy years. Many others, though, still have to work just to get by and to heat their home, whereas their contemporaries who had lived different lives now frequently holiday abroad in the warmth when they fancy it.

These are the years when the social divisions can be seen as most stark between those who have been able to amass their wealth and those who still struggle. More bleakly, these are the years in which these differences are most played out in early death and widowhood for many and, at the other extreme, a relatively healthy old age. "Old age" is a term that slips out too easily to encapsulate these years. You can still be young in old age, or you may feel all the weight of your years in your bones.

The map of health is not one we could have drawn for earlier life stages as the result would have been too dull, but Figure 6 sums up the divisions across the country for those in old age. Where life has been, and continues to be, hardest, are the few places where the majority in old age are in poor health and most of the rest only in fair health. Fair and poor health predominate also in the rest of the poorest parts of Britain. Around them in turn are the neighbourhoods where fair health is most likely but good health next most so, and around them the areas where good health is the norm. The "good" and the "poor" never mix in old age in the neighbourhoods of Britain, just as we have seen so little mixing in earlier years.

The final stage

And so to a final stage of transition, from old age to death, via the years of being truly elderly.

Remarried, separated or divorced, people, 40-59 (%)

- 16.0 - 24.9
- 25.0 - 29.9
- 30.0 - 34.9
- 35.0 - 39.9
- 40.0 - 44.9

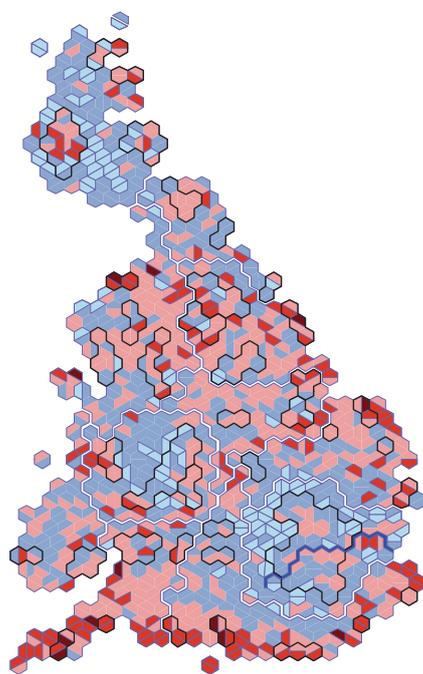


Figure 5. The likelihood of adults in their mature years having once been married and that marriage having ended, by area

For statistical convenience more than biological import we put the over-75s in this group.

These are the years in which almost nobody is in paid employment, in which almost nobody is caring for children, in which good health is not to be expected, and years that, un-

By the middle of their lives, people in different parts of the country have begun physically to age at different rates

til very recent times, most of us did not expect to reach.

By now, pensions have been collected for 10 years or more. Still, the government has had to make further payments of pension credits to over a quarter of people at these ages, just to give them enough to survive on. The map in Figure 7 shows the places where most of those live whose passage into the good night is being

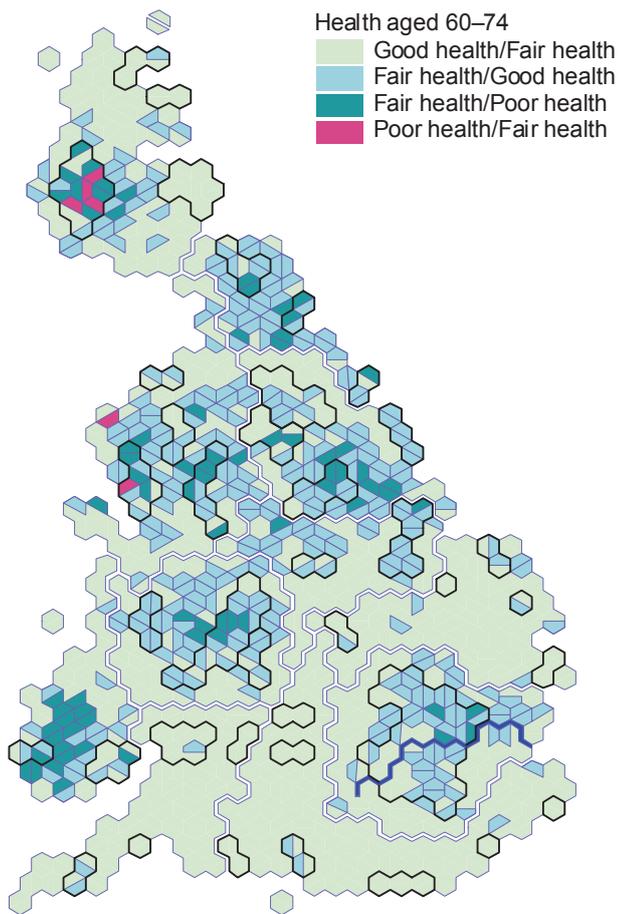


Figure 6. The likelihood of most probably being in good, fair or poor health in old age, and what state of health is next most likely, by area. It's where you are as much as how old you are that now matters

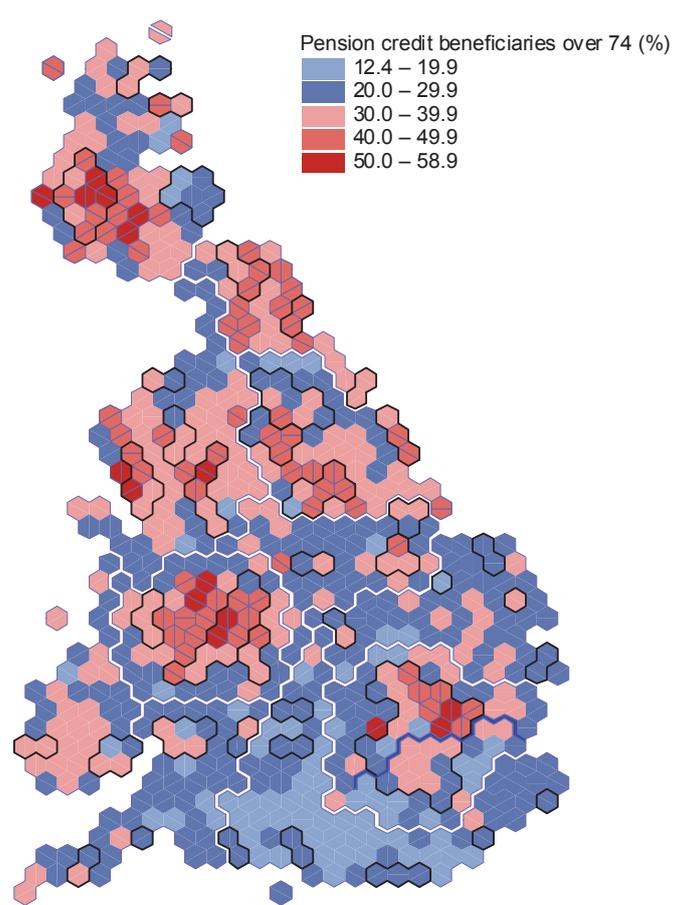


Figure 7. The honeycomb structure to the likelihood of requiring pension credits to survive when truly elderly, by area

prolonged through its last steps by such hand-outs. It is worth remembering that “outdoor relief”, handed out from the Poor Laws still existed in the childhoods of some of this cohort. But “credits” may mean much the same thing.

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Where you end up living, if you reach these final years, will depend very much on what you can afford. That in turn will depend on where you began your life and the places you have moved through as much as

what you, yourself, have done or failed to do. Opportunities, chances and outcomes vary so dramatically by area that our new geography reinforces a social immobility in British society that was once firmly enshrined simply by class. Now there are far fewer distinctions between those who live upstairs and downstairs than when the truly elderly were born. Instead the great gulf is not between people of different “stations” but between people of different places. You know now where you would never choose to live, or where you could never afford to live. There is a fertile crescent of advantage, where to succeed is to do nothing out of the ordinary; there are valleys of despond where just to get by is extraordinary.

When the truly elderly were young the country was far more mixed socially. There were affluent and poor living in almost every place. It was no idyll: prejudice and snobbery were rife and women were inferior, but at least different folk saw each other. Now they live

lives separated, not by class, but by geography and by miles of ground.

Step back from the different stages of life, the hundreds of images of a thousand facets to life in Britain today and what do you see?

Most people think they are average when asked. In most things, most people are not. Most say they are normal, but what is normal changes rapidly as you travel across the social topography of human identity in Britain.

Reference

1. Thomas, B. and Dorling, D. (2007) *Identity in Britain: a Cradle-to-grave Atlas*. Bristol: Policy Press. See www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/publications/identity.html for information on the atlas and the construction of its images.

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