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In the opposite lane: How Women of Colour experience, negotiate and apply an oppositional gaze to dominant cycling discourses

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ABSTRACT

In a cultural context dominated by the car, cyclists are often marginalised. For Women of Colour, this marginalisation may be heightened and help to reinforce often already low cycling rates. This paper is the first to pair hooks' concept of the 'oppositional gaze' with Hall's theories of representation and reception to explore how dominant discourses around cycling, gender and race shape the experience of UK Women of Colour who cycle. Using go-along interviews with cycling influencers and advocates who are also Women of Colour, it provides space for counternarratives that can challenge dominant discourses about cycling.

Borrowing the concept of 'oppositional gaze,' we examine the agency of those whose cycling experience is simultaneously shaped by both hypervisibility and invisibility on the road as in the broader cultural and policy contexts. We find that masculine sporty representations in cycling in the UK have material effects on the experience of cycling for women. Women of Colour must constantly negotiate these and other representations that do not fit them easily, sometimes claiming and sometimes challenging aspects of dominant discourses. Despite a small sample size and diverse locations, the insights offered by our research can help policymakers in similar cultural contexts start to build on existing diverse cycling experiences to create more inclusive cycling futures.

1. Introduction

In the context of the climate crisis, cycling as a low-carbon form of transport has become more prominent on global policy agendas. There is growing awareness of the need to diversify to increase levels of cycling (Goel et al., 2022). Low-cycling contexts see substantial disparities in usage, with underrepresented groups missing out on health and other benefits from using this mode of transport (Grudgings et al., 2018). In England, an already low 1.5% of trips are by bike; but among white women, this falls further to 0.9%, and for Women of Colour, it is 0.5% (compared to 1.3% for Men of Colour, and 2.4% for white men)¹. This is despite surveys suggesting high suppressed demand for cycling among people from ethnic minority groups, particularly women (Arup & Sustans, 2020; 2CV, 2021). As Leyendecker and Cox (2022) argue, the acceleration of cycling infrastructure interventions during and post the corona pandemic raises the questions of 'who is cycling for' and 'what is cycling for.' By seeking to offer new insights into the former, the conclusions of our findings also invite more nuanced and inclusive ways to see the latter.

There is a growing tradition of qualitative analysis into gendered aspects of cycling, often drawing on feminist theories to explore embodied experiences of negotiating public space while cycling (e.g., Bonham et al., 2015; Xie & Spinney, 2018; Lam, 2020). Analysis of intersectionality, however, remains relatively rare within cycling studies, especially concerning race and outside the US (Ravensbergen, 2022). If different identities, including race, are invisible in the analysis of gendered experiences, the perspective can default to that of a white, middle class, non-disabled and/or heterosexual woman. For example, Lubitow (2017) highlights that white women in Portland, US, did not think about their racial identity in relation to their cycling, whereas women who did not identify as white considered how the law enforcement might treat them and therefore constantly reaffirmed they were following all the rules of the road. In an influential analysis of cycling in London, Steinbach et al. (2011) discuss intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class. As well as including participants with diverse backgrounds, their study includes 'those who already cycled for transport, those [considering cycling] and those who did not cycle.' Many of Steinbach et al's interviewees reflected on their perceptions of 'cyclists'

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rather than their embodied cycling experiences. Our analysis here complements that work by focusing specifically on cycling experiences and how cycling representations shape these in a cultural context where cyclists and Women of Colour have a minority status vis-à-vis the societal norm.

The paper's findings can contribute to research and policy agendas in at least two ways. Firstly, researchers and policymakers might learn new insights from the struggles and joys of people from underrepresented groups who are already cycling. Where studied at all, people from such groups are often seen either as beginners or non-cyclists. Therefore, the policy approach for increasing the cycling levels tends to focus on providing cycle training and uncritical assimilation into a current cycling majority. Interventions to grow cycling among marginalised groups whose experience is shaped by the dichotomy of hypervisibility and invisibility (Lubitow et al., 2020) might benefit more from learning about the experiences of the Women of Colour who cycle rather than from an approach that might put an onus on marginalised groups to assimilate into the dominant culture (Batterbury & Dant, 2019; Mohammadi, 2019).

Secondly, the paper contributes to understanding how cycling experiences (including among underrepresented and under-studied groups) may feed into broader cultural meanings of cycling (Aldred, 2015). Understanding the experiences of Women of Colour cycling in Britain can help us not only explore what needs to change within the cycling culture for cycling to become more inclusive but also provide lessons for policymakers seeking to challenge car dominance by learning from how people in the intersections of oppression are challenging cultural normativity and dominant narratives.

1.1. Theoretical framing

Representations of Women of Colour in cycling should be seen in the context of broader cultural representations of gender and race. Recent work by Sobande (2021) and Sobande et al. (2020) has contextualised US scholarship about representations and self-representation of Black people for debates in Britain. This draws on hooks' idea of the 'oppositional gaze' (1992): how Black women, misrepresented by the dominant media, might look back and away as an act of resistance (2019). For hooks, the 'oppositional gaze' is about agency that Black women have employed to challenge their erasure and misrepresentation.

We find it helpful to bring Hall's (2013) theories of representation and reception in conversation with hooks' writings on gender, race, and representation. For Hall, there are no fixed meanings until something – whether an event, 'thing' or person – becomes represented. Below the surface, or denotative meaning, are deeper-level connotative meanings, a world of beliefs, values, and relationships. These meanings are reinforced through the replay of representations (Hall, 2013). Representations tend to be binary: man versus woman, driver versus cyclist, etc. The more powerful category becomes the default setting. Through stereotyping, the 'other' continues to be represented in over-simplified ways, denied the nuance given to the more powerful pole (Hall, 2013). For people without power, this does not just influence how one is viewed but how one starts to see oneself (hooks, 1992).

According to Hall's (2014) reception theory, there are four ways in which people engage with representations. **First**, some people decode messages as they were intended (encoded). **Second**, some go along with the message, not because they take it literally but because it broadly fits their values. The **third** way of dealing with representations is to negotiate meanings in one's practice through a mixture of preferred and resistant readings. Reception theory makes room for a **fourth** way of reading meanings. Oppositional reading, where the audience actively rejects denotated and connotated meanings to create a counter-discourse (Hall, 2014), is similar to hooks' concept of the 'oppositional gaze.'

An oppositional gaze looks back critically, "naming what we see" (hooks, 1992). While oppositional reading might apply broadly to any

representation, hooks referred to the 'oppositional gaze' in the context of challenging representations of Black women by the dominant white culture. hooks saw this as a means to create critical alternatives and to move away from dualistic thinking. Our analysis uses this approach to explore how dominant discourses in cycling may sit alongside discourses implicitly or explicitly referencing gender, race and ethnicity or their intersection and to identify ways participants challenge exclusion from representations.

2. Methods

The research draws on data Dulce collected as part of their thesis for a Master's degree in Communication for Development at Malmö University. The data collection involved nine unstructured narrative interviews conducted during a bike ride on a route the participant had chosen. Because cycling is embodied, emplaced (Larsen, 2017), and enfolded (Davidson, 2021) through the interaction between the rider, the bike, and the environment, listening to individuals talk about cycling while cycling opens up a rich source of insights into representations and experiences.

Go-along methods are increasingly used in social research (e.g., Carpiano, 2009; Spinney, 2011, 2015; Warren, 2017), with the potential to enhance recollection and empathy as well as our ability to elicit detailed verbal accounts (Spinney, 2015). We found that the go-along interview, as Allen (2017) notes, becomes nested within a host of other interactions. The recordings illustrate how the women negotiate the shared space. For example, some participants repeatedly apologise to other shared path users as we approach them and then thank them profusely as we go past. This led the interview to reflect on the embedded nature of cycling: the right to space, the sense of entitlement (or lack of) to take space, and the feeling of gratitude or the expectation to express gratitude when doing so, and how these may have gendered or racial undertones. A go-along method, therefore, provides the opportunity to observe how representations are experienced, reproduced, and challenged, which may not be as fully uncovered in a non-situational interview.

2.1. Women who took part in the project

The research recruitment was based on self-selection targeting Women of Colour who cycle and are actively engaged in the UK cycling culture. The project was advertised on social media. We contacted the Women of Colour Cycling Collective (WCCC), Cycling Sisters, and British Cycling directly. The recruitment did intentionally not specify the type of cycling (e.g., leisure or transport) to avoid framing the research through a particular narrative or normative lens. This meant that there was a mix of representations of cycling, from those who cycled in casual clothing and, in two occasions, not wearing a helmet to those who were kitted in branded sports gear (See Fig. 1).

Given the one-month time window to conduct the research and the length of the interviews (up to 90 min), participants were limited to ten. One woman dropped out.

Most participants were involved in cycling either through training, community organising, influencing, campaigning, or advocacy. Some were involved in cycling professionally and/or had won recognition for their achievements in cycling. Most participants had an active online presence where they used their platforms to share their cycling experiences, often under representation-related hashtags. While online lives offer context to the interviews, analysing digital discourses is beyond the scope of this paper.

The purposive sampling approach means that the sample size was modest and did not seek to be representative of Women of Colour in the UK. Instead of 'everyday cyclists' (Aldred, 2013), they were cycling experts in different respects, making contributions to discourses about cycling in the UK through media, social media, and other forms of representation and action. Like Bonham et al (2015), we wanted to

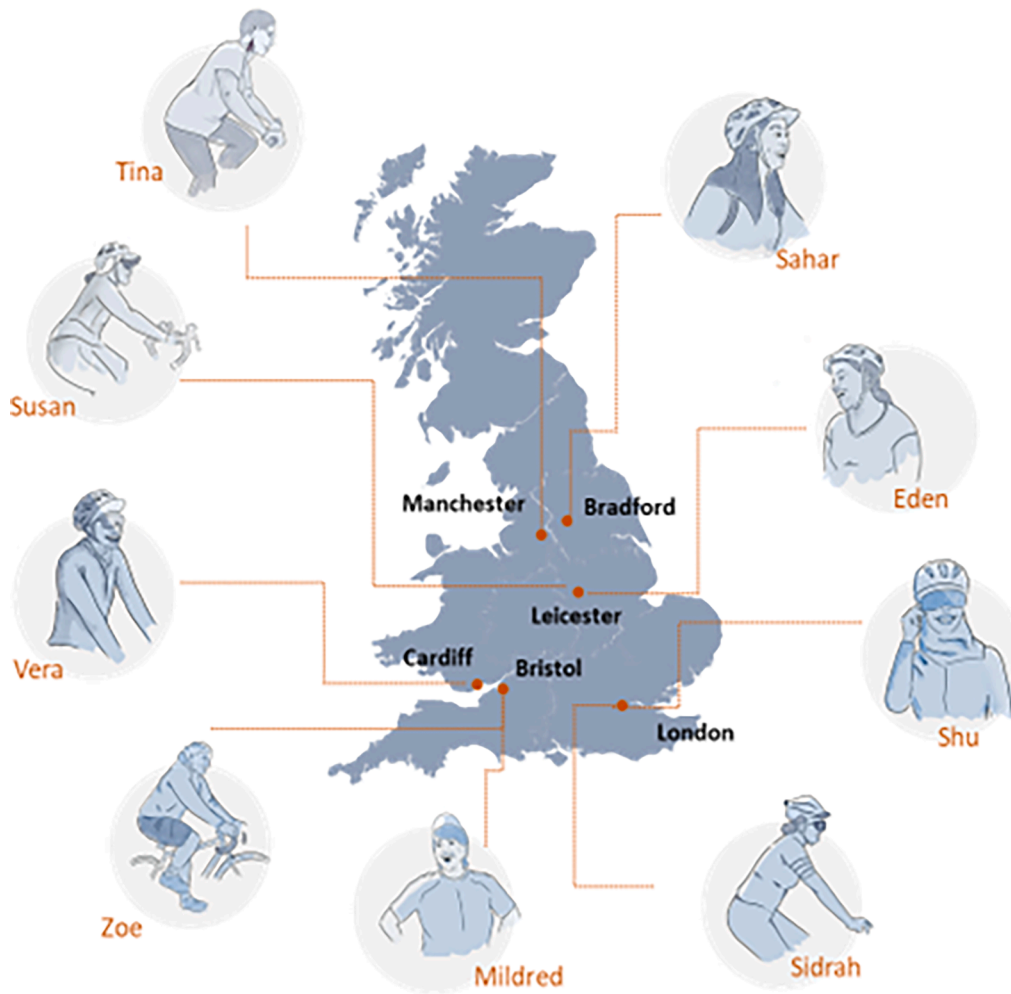


Fig. 1. Participants and ride locations.

interrupt the process that normalises women, and here Women of Colour in particular, as non-cyclists and incompetent. This, therefore, responds to hooks’ criticism of centring victimisation and othering when discussing Black women and their relationship with the dominant culture (1992, 2013). It was also important to identify women who already had some insider experience and perspective into British cycling cultures to move the analysis beyond perceived barriers to cycling and understand how these are challenged and negotiated.

Three participants were in their 20 s, three were in their early 30 s, and three were in their 40 s, 50 s, and 70 s. Three women identified as Black (African or Caribbean), three were of South Asian (Bangladeshi or Pakistani) heritage, and three were mixed race. Table 1 below identifies their varying locations within UK cycling cultures.

2.2. Interview process

We conducted the research in May and June 2021, when COVID-19-related restrictions governed social interaction. The chosen methodology became one of the few practical ways to conduct in-person interviews.

Many studies on cycling in the UK (Grudgings et al., 2018), almost all studies about British Women of Colour and representation (Sobande, 2020), and the few that combine the two (e.g., Lam, 2017; 2020) focus on London, which is atypical both as a megacity and because investment in cycling grew from the 2000s well ahead of national levels, with substantial growth in cycling rates particularly in Central and some Inner London areas. We advertised the project nationally to avoid

Table 1
Participants and their cycling background.

Participant	Cycling background
Sidrah	Road cyclist and bike tourer, as well as a committee member of a cycling collective for Women of Colour
Mildred	Transport and leisure cyclist, cycling journalist, campaigner for body positivity in the cycling culture, and a founder of a women-led cycling group
Shu	Road cyclist and a sponsored social media influencer
Vera	Adventure cyclist and a sponsored social media influencer
Susan	Ride instructor, ride leader, round-the-world cyclist
Sahar	Training to be a ride leader, community activist
Eden	Cycle commuter and a weekend rider advocates the benefits of cycling to colleagues and friends, featured in the ‘This Girl Can’ campaign
Tina	Member of a cycling club, author, and, to our knowledge, the first Woman of Colour to have ridden Britain end-to-end from Lands End to John O’Groats
Zoe	Cycling instructor, ride leader, active travel and sustainability campaigner and expert

contributing to a regional imbalance in representations of Women of Colour. The participants come from Bradford, Bristol, Cardiff, Leicester, Manchester, and London. All cities have a sizable population of people who identify their ethnicity as Asian, Black, mixed or ‘other’ (e.g. Arab, Kurdish or Hispanic) – the smallest representation in Cardiff (21%) and the highest in Leicester and London (59% and 46%, respectively) (Office for National Statistics, 2022). All are affected by the historical marginalisation of cycling within UK transport policy and culture (Aldred,

2013), with for instance the individualisation of risk meaning that there is strong pressure on people who cycle to wear protective clothing such as helmets and high-visibility dress, unlike more supportive cycling contexts such as the Netherlands (Aldred & Woodcock, 2015).

Narratives and representations of cycling, race and gender discussed in the interviews did not differ significantly by location – the women referred to primarily national and even *trans*-Atlantic narratives rather than local ones. The lack of representation of Women of Colour cyclists was felt everywhere, even where the population is ethnically diverse. For example, Sidrah, from South London, commented: “in cycling, I haven’t really seen many People of... Women of Colour, I see Men of Colour, even, you know... but it’s still predominantly middle-aged white men on very expensive bikes.”

The generally mixed quality of the cycling environment in the cities also meant that a sole type of infrastructure did not shape the data collected. Most participants explained their route decision based on the practicality of accommodating a 45–90 min interview, and some also wanted to show their city. In planning a roughly ten-mile route, participants, in most cases, were unable to select routes that did not involve some sharing with motor vehicles or pedestrians, which reflects their everyday experience of cycling in their city.

Table 2 below summarises the spaces in which the interviews took place. Because of the size of the sample and the scope of this paper, we have not analysed the gendered and racial aspects of particular spaces. However, some possible threads for future research emerged concerning parks and personal safety (in connection with gender), countryside and hostility (in connection with race), and jeering from other shared path users (in connection with both gender and race).

The first question was about the chosen route (“Where are we, and why did you choose this route?”). This would flow into a conversation about the participant’s cycling practice (why they cycle) and experience (what is it like to cycle), which led to a deeper reflection on identity, belonging, and representation (who is cycling for).

2.3. Positionality and ethics

All qualitative research raises the question of how the researcher as a social actor might impact the interviews. As Aldred reflected on her presentation as a cyclist and the impact of this on her research, “Rather than seeing interviewer effects as bias, we interpret them as part of the dialogic process of meaning-making: particularly in a contested context, it is unlikely that interviewees will perceive an interviewer as ‘neutral’” (2013). As the researcher, Dulce was aware that she came from the position of a non-disabled mixed-race woman. There were obvious benefits in having a shared social identity (whether perceived or actual) with the participants, not just in terms of recruitment of participants through easier access. However, the participants may have felt more at ease than if the interviewer had been a white man, for example, because of how he is associated with the dominant discourse.

In the initial write-up, Dulce dealt with the questions around

Table 2
Ride locations.

Participant	Location	Description
Sidrah	Richmond Park, London	Park
Mildred	Bristol-Bath Railway Path	Motor traffic-free shared path
Shu	Richmond Park, London	Park
Vera	A loop in Penarth, south of Cardiff	Country lanes and road
Susan	Leicestershire	Country lanes and road
Sahar	Bradford	A mix of road and physically separated cycle path
Eden	Leicester, Abbey Park	A mix of road, physically separated cycle path and park
Tina	Todmorden (30 km from Manchester)	Park
Zoe	Bristol-Bath Railway Path	Motor traffic-free shared path

normative bias and researcher impact by taking time with the descriptive analysis before jumping into interpretations. To manage researcher impact, an introductory call with the participants ahead of each ride helped make expectations clear. Bringing one’s person and practice in the interview may have contributed to the rapport and reduced power imbalance. As co-author, Rachel (a white woman with an ‘invisible’ disability) has helped draft the article and endorses Dulce’s interpretation of her data.

2.4. Anonymity

As Lazar reflects, any study into discourse is not just about “academic deconstruction of texts and talk for its own sake.” The issues covered by this research could have “material and phenomenological consequences” Lazar (2007). The main concern was the possible consequences of using any non-anonymous interview data in public material. However, qualitative researchers have challenged the norm of confidentiality and anonymity, arguing that in some circumstances these can be disempowering and silencing (Guenther, 2009; Gordon, 2019). Weighing the potential risk of online discriminatory comments against the wish to be heard, all participants wanted to use their real names. Many asked to include their social media handles in a blog post² about the study.

This and other ethical implications were discussed with the Communication for Development course lead and Dulce’s supervisor at Malmö University in lieu of formal ethical approval (waived by the department).

3. Findings and analysis

In this section, we discuss how Women of Colour who cycle relate to and experience dominant representations in cycling; negotiate and challenge discourses in and through cycling.

3.1. How Women of Colour who cycle relate to and experience dominant representations in cycling

When referring to a ‘dominant discourse,’ we return to Hall’s definition, where discourse is a system of representation (2013). A dominant discourse has been accepted as the truth, serving the existing power structures while suppressing other meanings.

Many discourses (re)produced within and outside cycling interacted with the experiences of Women of Colour who ride. The latter include broader societal discourses around gender, race, and ethnicity and those that stem from one’s ethnic, cultural, or religious community. For the analysis, we focus on discourses that came up consistently in the narratives.

3.1.1. Discourses in cycling: More sport than transport

The dominance of the construction of cycling as primarily a sporty leisure activity in the UK is evident in how participants talked about cycling. When cycling is framed primarily as a sport, it becomes measured in terms of skill and speed relative to other cyclists. How much one’s practice conforms to or deviates from this competitive representation may determine whether one self-identifies as a cyclist. This is illustrated in Sahar’s speculation over whether just ‘doing’ cycling makes her a cyclist:

“Whenever I label myself as something like cyclist or runner, I feel like it comes with **expectations to be extremely good at it**, and I shouldn’t but whenever I tell people that I’m a runner or a cyclist that **doesn’t mean I’m good at it, but I do it**. But I should just, I shouldn’t say that. I should just say ‘yeah, I do it’ like I may not be the

² <https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/ata/still-i-ride-how-women-of-colour-a-re-challenging-discourses-in-and-through-cycling/>.

fastest [laughs] or the most experienced, but yeah, I'm trying to work on that more. But yeah, I would say I cycle but I'm not like, I don't cycle like a lot or well or anything, but I try to just say, yeah, I cycle. I find it hard to label myself as like sporty or active because I didn't do it as much." (all emphases are ours).

Sahar is negotiating between denotative and connotative meanings. On the one hand, she uses pedals to propel a vehicle consisting of two wheels; therefore, she is a cyclist. On the other hand, she does not identify with the connotations of being a cyclist (extremely good, fast, experienced). She is the least experienced cyclist among the participants, having taken up cycling during the lockdown. Yet she cycles confidently, steering with one hand, gesturing with the other as she speaks. She talks about 'doing it' but stops short of calling herself a cyclist. This is an example of a negotiated reading, where instead of altogether rejecting the connotative meaning, she negotiates her practice around it. More widely, participants tended to go along with or negotiate sporty connotations of cycling in their discourse and their practice of cycling. For instance, five wore Lycra, and six used road bikes with dropped handlebars and performance-oriented geometry.

While people have a degree of agency in choosing *how* they ride, and most participants reflected the sporty representation of cycling in their material choices, they were also critical of how a materialist sporty cycling discourse can translate into exclusion:

"...And they have **very expensive bicycles and very expensive kit**. And they kind of size you up, and is **whether or not you're worth speaking to**, based on what kind of bicycle you have." (Zoe).
 "When I'm cycling around on this bike, with all my panniers [...] all of the road cyclists would like, say hello to me. But on days **when I'm just wearing ordinary clothes** on this bike with no panniers, you know that they're going – even when you say hello to them [...] – **they're just gonna ignore you.**" (Susan).

The bike and clothes are signs that carry meaning. These could become grounds for exclusion or belonging, but having access to the 'things' attached to the representation of a cyclist may change whether one perceives oneself as someone on a bike, 'an aspiring cyclist,' or a cyclist. This is implied in the conversation with Vera:

"I always called myself 'an aspiring cyclist'. I don't even know what that meant. Because I thought like cyclist means, you know, you're like, **racing** or like, **quite serious** about it. You're in **Lycra.**"

When Dulce points out that Vera is wearing Lycra, Vera laughs:

"I am now! So **maybe that's why I'm like, I'm gonna call myself a cyclist**. But like, you know, my commuting. I don't commute on this sort of bike. Yeah, I was on my basket bike [...] and looked like the queen. Didn't feel like I'm a cyclist but I'm on a bike. I think I call myself a cyclist. Now."

Yet, when Vera started riding with a club having bought a road bike, there were suggestions that this might not be enough without intricate knowledge of the machine itself:

"They were like, 'Oh, you know, you should **get this upgrade**' or like, 'you should do this' or like, 'if you do this', you know, **all these like tech things** and talking about their carbon bikes and asking me questions. I think it put me off."

Eden's story can be read similarly, even if the context is different:

"And I just like helped [my friend], introduce her to like the roads and cycling on the road and road safety. And so now she's like, cycles to work as well. And her boyfriend wants her to be able to do like more cycling recreationally. So, **he's upgraded her bike.**"

While Eden's role in supporting her friend was focused on the practice of cycling, the boyfriend bought the friend a bike. Note the word 'upgrade' in Vera's and Eden's examples. 'Upgrade' suggests not

just a different but a higher standard, in both cases, a bike that is faster to ride and not primarily designed for commuting. Within the cycling discourse, 'recreational cycling' could be understood as a progression from cycling to work. However, when it comes to broader discourses around urban space and transport planning which prioritise economic activity over leisure, this representation demotes cycling making it less important compared to motorised traffic and, therefore, even more challenging and perhaps even riskier for Women of Colour who cycle. This hierarchy shows in Sahar's reflection on how car drivers might perceive her:

"I feel like people would **not take me seriously on the road**. Because they might think that I'm not doing it for **transport**, they don't expect to see an Asian..." (Sahar).

To varying degrees, participants bought into the '*how*' and '*what*' when it came to the sporty discourse. Provided one had the resources, it seemed possible – at least to a point – to write oneself into the discourse and 'pass' as a cyclist. However, a sense of exclusion became pronounced in the personification – the *who* – of the cycling practice in the MAMIL stereotype. The 'middle-aged man in Lycra' image resonated with all participants. Other shared connotations are not explicit in the acronym: MAMIL was also understood as white and middle class. Identifying as a cyclist may become even more complicated when the connotative meanings clash not just with one's practice but with one's social identity:

"That's a hard question. And I think it's hard because in my mind, **especially as someone who's like a Woman of Colour, 'cyclist' conjures up different images** than it does for me. And so **strictly speaking...** [tentatively] I'm probably a cyclist [laughs]." (Eden).

Eden also differentiates between the connotative ("different images") and denotative ("strictly speaking") meanings as she decodes these as a Woman of Colour.

While these examples illustrate the dominance of the sporty representation of cycling and how this is reinforced in practice, in material reality, and whether one identifies as or is seen as a cyclist, the following section looks more closely into how this interacts with gender.

3.1.2. Discourses around gender: Split figures

While gender is neither experienced nor enacted in the same way by everyone, everyone participating in this research agreed that gender interacted in some significant way with their cycling experience:

"So, I suppose **the first one would be gender...** was always like, has always been in the forefront of like cycling, even when I learned to cycle as a little child. You know what I mean?" (Vera)

When cycling is constructed not just as a sporty activity but also as childlike (Aldred, 2015), on the one hand and unfeminine on the other (Ravensbergen, 2022), it is hardly surprising that the point when cycling is no longer a normal activity, is when one starts to transition from a girl to a woman:

"I also grew up playing a lot in the park, you know. I felt like there was an age where it was fine. And then it got to an age where you were like, 'Okay, do you think you should still be doing this?' And maybe that was because of comments from my dad, et cetera. But I felt it from society too." (Sidrah)

"There was always a distinct difference in the way, in the ways that boys and girls were treated, **especially I guess maybe in the teenage years** or – because I learned how to cycle as a child, but then stopped cycling. But there's always an attachment of gender and like, you're a girl, you shouldn't be having your legs across the bike or things like that." (Vera)

Other studies have noted how social norms around cycling as an activity play a role in shaping teenage girls' attitudes toward cycling (Underwood et al., 2014). However, the comments made by participants

in this study suggest that representations also affect the material reality of girls and women. When girls outgrow the childhood bike, they have symbolically outgrown cycling:

“But like, you know, I remember having a tricycle and you know, all of those different increments and then I always rode. And then I got to a point where **maybe when I was like 10 or 11, I no longer fitted my bike. We gave it away and we didn’t think about it for... like I forgot about cycling for a while.**” (Sidrah)

As children grow up, the practice of cycling is ever more shaped by discourses around gender. This may be reinforced by the broader society or stipulated by one’s community:

“And then again, it kind of highlights like how misogynist and male focused our community is because [my friend] was like celebrating me when I was on my **hybrid bike riding seven miles per hour in the local park.** ‘I’m so proud of you’. And then when it came to me like working with Rapha and then getting multiple sponsorships and stuff like that, it’s like, **not interested.**” (Shu)

We average about 25 km/hour as Shu speaks: when her cycling was almost the opposite of the sporty representations of cycling, the alleged praise from a romantic interest revealed preconceptions around the performance of gender. Discourses around gender do not only set parameters for the type of bike (a hybrid) and cycling practice (e.g., cycling slowly in a local park) but appearance while cycling is essential to representations of womanhood:

“...And it seems really unfair that, yeah, if you do get into something and really enjoy it, then there’s still this weird **pressure from society to be pretty while you’re doing it.**” (Zoe)

“...as women it’s easy to come up with, like, sort of fears around safety or even concerns about how to fit your hair in your helmet or how to be you know, if you are somebody that’s quite concerned about modesty, **how to be modest or to look elegant, or, you know, to look put together while cycling.**” (Eden)

Zoe refers to external pressures, while Eden’s example speaks to the power of representations to shape how we see ourselves (hooks, 1992). We are accustomed to seeing how sporty discourses and gender norms compete in representing professional women athletes. Given how in the UK discourse, cycling is often seen in the realm of sport, understanding how gender plays out in broader sports discourses can help us make sense of the experiences of women who cycle.³, yet a woman who is an everyday cyclist appears to be subject to the same conflict. While chastised by some Muslim men for compromising her modesty for riding a bike under the pretext of the sporty discourse, some white men sought to discredit Shu’s self-identification as a cyclist by posting comments such as “is your hijab even aerodynamic?”.

Therefore, a woman who cycles is expected to emphasise feminine representations to counter the masculine connotations of the activity. However, her feminine representation makes her less of a ‘cyclist.’ A woman cyclist could be seen as an example of the ‘split figure,’ a term Hall used to describe the ‘other’ who is exposed to binary representations, required to be two conflicting things at the same time (1997).

3.1.3. The discourse does not come in your size

Hall held the body as the “surface on which different regimes of power/knowledge write their meanings and effects” (1997). It is hard to speak of gender without a reference to the body. A female body is already perceived as inferior when assessed against qualities defining male physical capacities. However, the more a body deviates from the slim body norm of a cyclist, the more likely a person may find themselves at the margins of the discourse. Mildred described how the

perceived inferiority would transcend from physical capacity to the realm of knowledge and skill. Men cyclists, not knowing that Mildred has worked in the cycling industry for years including as a bike mechanic, sometimes patronisingly assume that she does not know how to fix a puncture:

“There’s definitely a culture of not being seen. Not just as a woman, but actually **as an overweight woman as well, as not knowing what I’m doing.**”

The way the cyclist’s body is represented within the discourse is reproduced and normalised in material reality, which, in turn, has real-life consequences:

“But if I, like, after having a baby putting on a little bit of weight or something, then suddenly it’s like, there’s **absolutely nothing that fits in the, you know, like normal women’s size range of cycling kit**” (Zoe)

Dominant discourses determine what gets produced and sold. While the construction of ‘normal’ also affects clothing options available to men, for women, this is compounded by societal norms around the female body. The chafing from an ill-fitting garment reminds you that your body is not ‘normal.’

These findings show how cycling is experienced through gender starting from an early age but intensifying in teenage years as gendered expectations become more pronounced. Mediated through family, community, and broader society, gender sets parameters to what cycling practice should be and how one ‘should’ look while cycling. Because representations of gender often conflict with cycling representations, women must negotiate these contradictions and their consequences in cycling practice. Discursive exclusion is enacted silently and often in material reality. From a bike that no longer fits to clothes that are too small, women are reminded that we “probably shouldn’t be doing this.”

3.2. Discourses around gender and race: hyper-visible yet absent

Similar to gender, the more concretely the expression of one’s race or ethnic identity differs from the norm, the more one’s exclusion from the cycling discourse may be felt in material reality. In the case of the participants, this could translate to not having a hijab designed for cycling or a helmet that fits braids.

“I recently **got box braids put in**, which are quite long, and probably need to be refreshed. But I was like ‘oh, my goodness, **there’s a lot of hair on my head. How am I gonna fit that in this?**’ [laughs]” (Eden)

The resulting sense of exclusion from the cycling discourse connects some of these practical concerns to the dominant narratives around who cycling is for. The representation of the Woman of Colour in the cycling culture has been through her absence. Sidrah, for example, explained that for an Asian girl, cycling is not seen as the ‘done thing’:

“I always felt that if I was a boy, no-one would have questioned, you know? I remember my dad saying, ‘Can you **see any other brown girls** doing this?’”

At the individual level, collective invisibility can sometimes mean becoming extremely visible. Most participants described the feeling of ‘sticking out’ when cycling. Vera, who works in STEM, described:

“I’m sort of tired of being **the only one in certain spaces.** So, it’s like, why am I going to another thing where I’m like... but sometimes I’m like, you know what I mean? Like, you know, **always sticking out like a sore thumb.** And now I’ve just gone to another activity where it’s more of the same. To be fair, it’s way better than engineering in that sense! [laughs] But yeah, sometimes there are questions of like, you know, **I’m just putting myself in another situation where I’m not as represented.**”

³ e.g., In Tokyo Olympics 2021, women athletes got penalised when their shorts were either too revealing or covered too much.

As with gender, discourses around race and ethnicity outside cycling can seep into the cycling experience for Women of Colour. For example, Susan's cycling through certain areas points to broader issues around race and belonging in post-Brexit British society:

"...And so there's also the whole thing of maybe coming out to areas where, I don't know, **you don't feel that you necessarily belong, or would feel welcome**, which I would say most of the time you are, it's just that one occasion. [...] sometimes especially where it's seeing Union Jacks or British flags up, especially noticing that a lot more after Brexit [...] It's nice that people are proud, but then it's also the whole for me... what it actually really... [...] what actually made them think 'I'll put that flag up'?"

Hypervisibility can be an additional threat in a car-dominant society where cyclists are constructed as a nuisance. As Susan and Dulce positioned in the middle of the lane to turn right, a woman driver undertook them and opening the car window swears at them. The verbal attack was not based on gender or race (at least overtly). However, it served as a reminder of how taking space and being visible to be safe also makes one target for hate and harassment – which for a Woman of Colour has the potential to take a misogynist or racist turn:

"I think often it's like this, this **not only fear of discrimination, but likelihood of discrimination**. That is really intimidating. And I think, I mean, otherwise, perhaps not face anything so direct as that, I think, I carry that likelihood with me. **When I cycle, I know that actually I stand out.**" (Eden)

"A couple of women in the groups I taught, came out on their own to practice on the railway path. And then they were **subjected to harassment**, which again, completely put them off being on the bikes, or to some extent, even just, you know, walking and **spending time in this kind of space.**" (Zoe)

3.2.1. *It feels like it's always me*

While the participants were quick to explain specific experiences as gendered, self-doubt, speculation, and cautiousness marked the reflection on the role of race in the cycling experience:

"You know, like when I've had my breakdown and the bike shop doesn't want to help me, because I haven't booked an appointment **would that have been different if I was someone else? I don't know**. I don't know, you know when I've asked for water from a cafe, and they initially took the bottles and came back, and they're like, 'Oh, no, sorry, health and safety' or something, you know, like, yeah, it's, it might not be an issue. Race might definitely not be an issue in that case. But **you sometimes do wonder and second guess yourself and wonder, like, how much of a part that plays in your experience**, especially in a world that's not, you know, travelling around rural areas that don't see many people of your kind? (Vera) "Yeah, but I can never pinpoint at any point. Like, feeling like I didn't belong. Or feeling like I wasn't welcome." (Shu)

The hesitance could be due to the discrete nature of many racialised experiences. Expressing prejudice directly has become culturally less acceptable, and everyday racism is often reproduced more covertly (Lentin & Titley, 2012). Before the Black Lives Matter movement, it was rare for racism ever to be brought up in the cycling context. Therefore, Susan was shocked not just because a speaker at an event talked about racism but that he used it to make a point about the experience of cyclists:

"I was really shocked and stunned when he actually said, you know, **'the treatment that we get as cyclists, it's like racism'**. And obviously, I'm the only Person of Colour in the whole room. And my mouth just drops. But then it's also knowing, if you say anything, **people might just think that you're the angry Black woman in the room**. And you're just kicking off a fuss."

As the only Person of Colour in the room, Susan's reading (decoding) of the message differs from the other audience who are unlikely to share the same background and personal experiences. She wants to reject the representation of racism that reduces the impact of deep-rooted systemic oppression of People of Colour to the experience of being subjected to road rage. While the speaker's *idea* of racism is used to give gravity to the dangers cyclists face, *actual* systemic racism makes it difficult for Susan to challenge this comparison. She is aware of the pejorative trope of the 'angry Black woman' used to silence Black women (West, 2018). The power of various persistent stereotypes of irrational, tiresome, and opinionated women is such that they do not even need to be articulated to have a silencing effect:

"And I really wanted to reply and say that's a very white panel. But immediately I was like, that's not gonna go down well. There was that whole second guessing myself and like, when is it okay to rock the boat? When am I going to just be seen as **that person who doesn't shut up about the same thing?** And is a broken record? Yeah, because it's always me. It feels like it's always me." (Mildred)

3.2.2. *Did the feminist cycling movement throw intersectionality under the bus?*

While it is hard to separate gender and race and ethnicity, these examples demonstrate what intersectional feminists have been asserting: gender as a focus is not just insufficient for tackling inequality but has often historically had the opposite effect. hooks criticised white feminism for remaining "aggressively silent on the subject of blackness and specifically representations of black womanhood" (1992). Given the significance of the bicycle to the suffragettes, it is not surprising that current counter-discourses in cycling draw inspiration from the movement. However, women's liberation movements in the UK and other countries have often been criticised for not being universally intersectional and for excluding lower-class and Black women (e.g. Zephyrs, 2020). Some Women of Colour may not decode references to the suffragette movement as a counter-discourse in a way cycling advocates may have intended. Reflecting on the complex relationship of Women of Colour with the feminist movement, Susan told how she and other Women of Colour cyclists had been asked to pose in a photoshoot in front of the statue of suffragette Alice Hawkins in Leicester:

"History is a difficult one, but it's just one that **doesn't resonate with me**, because I suppose back then, it was more about white women getting the vote. [...] **the whole thing was more about how these white women could help the Empire as well, rather than emancipating all women**, so I find it really difficult. And obviously, the American history of the suffragette movement was, it was meant to be all women working together, but white women threw Black women under the bus."

The discussion in this section highlights how gender is experienced through race. While gender exclusion is often concretely expressed in practices and 'things' (**how** you cycle and **what** you have or do not have) and was perhaps most often negotiated within the context of the sporty discourse, race, and ethnicity-based exclusion was not principally expressed through practices or 'things' except where the expression of one's racial or ethnic identity had a clear material dimension (e.g., when wearing a hijab or braids). However, in most cases, the experience of race and ethnicity-based exclusion was characterised by the absence of Women of Colour in the cycling culture, manifested in a feeling of not belonging (based on **who** you are). This form of exclusion is more challenging to point out and challenge.

Therefore, the lack of representation within cycling can have real consequences either where Women of Colour cyclists feel they are not taken seriously in traffic or when the heightened visibility of Women of Colour who cycle makes them vulnerable to harassment, as in Zoe's earlier example of teaching women to ride on a shared path. Indeed, a recent study commissioned by Transport for London (2CV, 2021) found

that fears for personal safety and unwanted attention while cycling were highest among ethnic minority women. Feminism that is not attuned to the intersectional experience may therefore reproduce inequalities.

3.3. Challenging dominant discourses through and in cycling

The interviews showed evidence of talking back in a ‘Hallian’ sense where Women of Colour challenged taken-for-granted assumptions around cycling. However, the most common occurrence was to negotiate the meanings of these representations rather than deconstruct these. In our research, we want to give space for the production of counternarratives exploring the agency in the margins and gaps of dominant discourses, as hook wrote.

“Do I have pain? No. Am I breathing? Yes. Are my legs still working? Yes. Then, **‘this girl can!’** to borrow a phrase from a popular campaign. I guess I do follow them on social media. Come to think of it. I’ve definitely said that phrase to myself more than a few times on hills like that.” (Eden)

Most participants saw cycling in the domain of sports and exercise. However, while they did not necessarily challenge the sporty discourse, writing their selves into the discourse allowed them to challenge gender representation in sports and physical activity or broader representations of gender in a public space. Positioning oneself in the dominant cycling discourse can become a way to reject oppressive discourses around gender and race.

Shu, for example, questions the need to replace things and practices that carry representations of white masculinity with alternatives but instead wants to co-opt them:

“And people have said to me ‘Oh, why don’t you want to start, you know, a Muslim women’s club?’ Because I want to give women the **confidence** to be like me. To go **ride with mainstream clubs**. The analogy I use is, I help a lot of people with job applications. They often don’t think they’re **good enough** to go with the big boys.”

Shu makes an interdiscursive link with women’s empowerment in business and work. There has long been a narrative around women being coached to pursue their ambitions rather than blaming existing power structures (e.g., Sandberg, 2013). Shu’s riding is more forceful than the others’ – unlike Susan and Sidrah earlier – she does not apologise but yells out an assertive warning to wandering pedestrians and tells off a cyclist riding on the wrong side.

Current criticism levelled at the ‘vehicular-cycling personality’ (e.g., Leyendecker and Cox, 2022) for its machismo and non-conformism and its confrontations with cars and insisting on rights, might ignore the empowering process that this may award to some people who have the experience of being unseen in society. This could be a form of oppositional gazing and spill over as confidence in other spaces, as in Young’s essay.

“Do you know what, I’ve definitely found my voice more was as a cyclist. I was running with a friend. And someone, can’t remember what someone shouted at us, and I shouted back, and she was like “where did that come from?” And I was like, well, **I’ve found my voice cycling**, because I have to shout out to like, pedestrians or cars or, you know, other people to let them know that you’re there, **you have to be visible**. Whereas in other points of my life, I might try and shy away from being seen. And trying, you know, melt into the background. But this is the first time that I’ve been, no, for my own safety, **I need people to see me**. And then that has translated into life in general.” (Sidrah)

The power of oppositional gazing is that when looking back, it insists on becoming equal. Although Sidrah did not set out to change reality – unlike the woman in hooks’ Black Looks – as a result of needing to be safe, her reality started to change as she no longer accepted melting into the background.

Having lived in Germany and exposed to different cycling narratives, Zoe may have become closest to questioning the framing of cycling as a sporty activity. Instead of reshaping gender representations to fit in the dominant cycling discourse, Zoe sought to align the practice of cycling to more dominant feminine representations by procuring Dutch-style bikes for the Asian women she taught to cycle:

“And it’s like, well, why not? You know, let’s make that also totally acceptable and, you know, have beautiful bikes, where you feel like you can ride and still feel if you want to, you know, really pretty.”

If we accept that conflicting expectations can turn women into ‘split figures’, conflicting strategies to challenge oppressive discourses should be expected. There is a tension that the women are negotiating, and it may depend on individual circumstances, which discourse one aligns with, and which one chooses to challenge. Sometimes Women of Colour use cycling representations to oppose broader gendered or racialised representations. Sometimes (as with Zoe’s quote above), they draw on such representations to challenge cycling images. Shu can integrate some connotations of mainstream representations in her cycling practice while calling out the tokenism of the cycling industry for remaining silent on the racism she experienced when representing their brands:

“Cuz I can model for you but I also come with a mouth. And **I will speak** and if you don’t like what I have to say... Well, you said you want diversity and inclusion. Oh, you want to diversity and inclusion that conforms with your white perception of what the world should look like.”

Often Women of Colour are not in positions of power to directly shape the dominant cycling discourses. As one of the few female cycling journalists in Britain, Mildred seeks to use her platform to shape the discourse. However, she often finds that the male audience holds significant power over the representations. The knowledge of women experts does not have enough authority to overturn the order of discourse:

“I deliberately made it kind of a unisex article, but I had a full-on section just related to labial discomfort because a lot of saddle sores articles don’t talk about that. Yeah, like I spent a lot of time on that article. I interviewed a gynaecologist, an endocrinologist and various sports coaches and bike fitters, physios. **I spoke to all the people who know these things, all women**. And every comment on the article is a guy saying, ‘the best thing to do for saddle sores is this’. And it’s just like, ‘did you read it?’ ‘I think you’ll find I already said that in the article, if you bothered to read it.’ Yeah, **it’s just that whole kind of assumption of like, ‘I know better’.**”

Increasing the representation of women in discourse production is important to challenge assumptions that have material consequences for women who cycle and having more People of Colour create narratives can combat the feeling of not belonging. However, Hall’s assumption that the discourse is primarily controlled by those with access to the media and knowledge production is called into question in the present context, where the audience exercises more control over content through, for instance, creating and interacting with content on social media.

However, while the audience’s control over content may lead to attempts to silence or delegitimise women’s views, social media has also enabled hooks’ oppositional gaze, where Women of Colour, instead of trying to find themselves represented in the dominant discourse, look to each other to cultivate the oppositional gaze. hooks described how the film and TV offered Black people an opportunity to negotiate representation and then challenge these through independent Black cinema (1992). Today, digital spaces have provided marginalised people a platform and agency to critique the dominant culture and replace externally defined identities with new images (e.g., Sobande, 2020). There has been a proliferation of self-curated content on cycling by underrepresented groups online. These narratives could be described as “hidden stories” to which Hall gives “a critical role in the emergence of

many of the most important social movements of our time” (1990). The women participating in our research made references to various cycling content creators from marginalised backgrounds in the UK and the US. Most of the women also had their own social media platforms where they share their own cycling stories and use specific hashtags, such as #representationmatters, to label the content and connect with others.

These counternarratives are not just aimed at changing the image of cycling and who cycles, but also stereotypes about Women of Colour. Instead of being defined through erasure, centring victimisation, or reduced to anger, the women choose not just to be visible but to display joy. The role of ‘joy’ as a potential counter-discourse both to dominant discourses in cycling and certain negative representations of Black women, for example, found its way into the analysis through narratives and laughter that punctuated these as we rode. The interview recordings capture the laughter that accompanied the rides and turned heads as we passed pedestrians.

For the women in this study, it was the representation of cycling as fun that they thought could inspire more cycling participation, as encapsulated in Eden’s wish:

“I am one of these people, one of these Women of Colour on the road. And I think actually, who’s sitting in the window looking and thinking ‘**actually, that would be fun?** She’s doing it, I can too’. So hopefully, I’ve started something, maybe.”

Joy could be seen as one way Women of Colour challenge discourses *through* cycling (the absence of Women of Colour in the cycling culture or the narrative of victimhood or anger in broader representations of Women of Colour) but also *in* (whether sporty performative or purely utilitarian representation of) cycling.

As a result of not belonging, Women of Colour – and other marginalised groups who move in the intersection of different lived experiences – occupy “a critical space where simple binaries are being deconstructed” (hooks, 1992). This may enable them to challenge dominant meanings by deconstructing the binaries through which these are reinforced. In the case of cycling discourse, this could mean going beyond dichotomies within cycling policy and advocacy such as the division of cycling into either sport and leisure, or transport – a division that was not so clearly identifiable or relevant in the narratives of the women participating in this research.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to think that all Women of Colour who cycle engage in the politics of power or go beyond negotiating meanings to developing an oppositional gaze. This is encapsulated in Tina’s response to the question of whether she thought of representation while cycling:

“No, and that’s what I like about cycling, I don’t think about issues. I just think about nature and staying safe and glad to be outdoors.”

But in a low-cycling context and a culture that privileges the car, just by choosing to cycle, the women challenge the narrative about who cycles and how perhaps exposing the holes in the dominant discourse on what cycling is for.

4. Conclusion

This project has examined how dominant discourses around cycling, gender, and race play out in the experience of Women of Colour who cycle in the UK. While positioning oneself within the dominant sporty cycling discourse may enable Women of Colour to challenge restricting gender norms beyond cycling, they can become ‘split figures,’ constantly negotiating conflicting representations.

Discursive exclusion based on race and ethnicity is characterised by the absence of People of Colour in cycling representations and manifests in the feeling of not belonging. The very act of cycling by Women of Colour is to engage in oppositional reading because their cycling challenges representations that erase a diversity of experiences and identities, whether in the cycling culture or, more broadly, in society. This is

similar to Leyendecker’s (Leyendecker & Cox, 2022) observation about women cycling campaigners who found their work on bicycle justice had much less to do with bicycles and bike lanes than with the broader sense of “being a woman in a man’s world.” Our paper has tried to expand this acknowledgment with a more intersectional reading. Cycling exists within broader societal discourses which make race and ethnicity relevant to the cycling experience of Women of Colour.

From being an object which is both stared at and not seen, to a looking subject, oppositional gazing can counter the invisibility at the collective level, and the hyper-visibility felt at the individual level. In a hostile environment, connecting with other underrepresented cyclists turns oppositional reading into oppositional gazing.

When the expression of joy and being outdoors as a Woman of Colour may provoke a backlash⁴ Moreover, in a car-dominant society where cyclists are seen to have less legitimate grounds to be on the road than motorised vehicles, merely riding and taking space – and doing so joyously – is changing more than one narrative.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Dulce Pedroso: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Rachel Aldred:** Validation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Dulce Pedroso was a part of the Women of Colour Cycling Collective (WCCC), however, she did not have any personal connections or relationships with the members who participated in the study that could affect the research outcome.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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⁴ See the BBC’s response to complaints they received for a Countryfile episode about a Black women’s hiking group (BBC, 2021).

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