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Full Length Research Paper

Analyzing Ideal Traits and Terms of Address for Male and Female College Professors

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This study replicates and extends Rubin's (1981) research on students' use of address terms for their college professors to explore how gendered expectations have evolved in contemporary academic settings. Using data from 445 undergraduate students, this study examined preferred address terms across public (in class) and private (office) contexts, as well as perceptions of ideal professor traits. Descriptive and inferential analyses, including chi-square and independent-samples t-tests, revealed no statistically significant relationship between professor gender and address term choice, $\chi^2(3, N = 445) = 3.42, p = .33$, Cramer's $V = .09$. However, familiarity significantly predicted informality, $t(443) = 2.15, p = .03, \eta^2 = .02$. Students overwhelmingly reported that how professors addressed them (84%) influenced their own choices. Results suggest remarkable stability in address-term patterns over four decades, with formality remaining the default in classroom contexts and first-name use emerging mainly in informal interactions. These findings reinforce the enduring influence of academic hierarchy and reciprocal adaptation between students and professors in shaping linguistic respect and perceived authority.

Keywords: address terms, college students, gender, professors, sex differences, titles

Gender disparities persist in labor market outcomes across sectors (Ganguli et al., 2021), and academia reflects these inequalities (Holte & Snickare, 2022). Although women's representation has increased, occupational sex segregation endures (Reskin & Hartmann, 1986), sustaining gendered expectations that can shape student-faculty interactions (Kamerlin & Wittung-Stafshede, 2020; Riger et al., 1997). To understand how professor gender informs students' perceptions, it is also necessary to consider how gendered occupational structures inform status attributions in academic settings.

Rubin (1981) conducted two foundational studies to examine how students perceived professors in terms of both ideal traits and forms of address. In Rubin's Study 1, participants selected ideal professorial traits from a list of thirty-four items that were later grouped by an independent sample into five overarching categories: Knowledge and Intellect, Professionalism, Communication Ability, Openness, and Nurturing. The findings revealed subtle gender-typed expectations, with students associating male professors more often with intellect and professionalism, and female professors more often with nurturing and openness. Rubin's Study 2 focused on the terms of address students used when referring to their professors across two contexts, private (office) and public (classroom) using options such as Mr., Ms., Mrs., Miss, Professor, Doctor, and first name. Results indicated greater use of first names for younger

female faculty and more consistent use of formal titles for male professors. Together, Rubin's studies demonstrated how both language and perceived traits contribute to gendered expectations of authority and approachability in academic communication. The present study extends Rubin's (1981) research by using Study 1 as theoretical foundation and partially replicating Study 2 with a new sample to determine whether Rubin's original patterns remain consistent today. Rubin's first study was a quantitative survey in which students selected ideal professorial traits from a list of thirty-four descriptors. A second group of participants, serving as independent raters, categorized these traits into five dimensions: (a) Knowledge and Intellect, (b) Professionalism, (c) Communication Ability, (d) Openness, and (e) Nurturing, creating the framework that guides the present investigation. Rubin's (1981) framework integrated gender role theory and sociolinguistic principles to examine how students' language and perceptions of professors reveal socially constructed expectations of authority, warmth, and professionalism in academic contexts. Building this theoretical structure means that our study draws conceptually from Rubin's dimensions of professorial perception to interpret patterns in modern student evaluations. We retain her categories and contextual distinctions while explicitly defining address terms and comparing our findings with Rubin's distributions to evaluate continuity and change across generations. In addition, we use the term "gender" rather than Rubin's original term

“sex,” as our constructs, students’ address terms and perceptions of professionalism are social and linguistic practices shaped by social roles, identities, and expectations rather than biology (Ellis & Mitchell, 2000; Marecek et al., 2004). For historical fidelity, meaning the careful preservation of Rubin’s original wording and procedures to ensure accuracy in replication (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008), we retained her phrasing when describing the study design. This quantitative replication uses Rubin’s framework with a contemporary sample, reframing her findings through gender to reveal ongoing structural patterns in academia.

Literature Review

Gender Career Barriers and Workplace Inequality

Throughout history, women's career choices and their struggle to remain in the workforce have been significantly influenced by men's job choices (Reskin & Roos, 1990). During the First World War, as men left their positions, women entered the workforce to fill the vacancies, but in subsequent years, women were predominantly employed to meet the demand for cheaper and less skilled labor, while men tended to pursue higher-paying and higher-status jobs (Reskin & Roos, 1990). The emergence of professional and managerial job opportunities in developing bureaucracies led to a shift in the gender distribution within certain professions, with educated men pursuing these new roles while women filled the positions vacated by them (Reskin & Roos, 1990). These changes also resulted in the devaluation of previously held occupations, which were considered relatively unimportant. Employers recognized women as a cost-effective and educated workforce capable of fulfilling the tasks associated with these roles (Reskin & Roos, 1990; Uchikoshi et al., 2025), often considering them well-suited for mundane and low-level tasks where leadership or independence was deemed unnecessary (Davies, 1982). Consequently, women’s career opportunities were constrained by systemic barriers that undermined their confidence and, in turn, reinforced gender inequality and limited professional growth (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Reskin, 1988). Researchers have shown how these systemic barriers shape professional advancement, especially in academia, where women faculty must navigate persistent evaluation bias (Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2022).

Another persistent form of gender inequality is the separation of women and men into different kinds of work, often called task differentiation (Reskin & Hartmann, 1986). This process assigns certain responsibilities according to gendered expectations, reinforcing a sexual division of labor across both domestic (Pleck, 1985) and professional domains (Reskin & Hartmann, 1986). Historically, this has meant that women are often directed toward lower-status or less visible work-tasks labeled as supportive or routine rather than technical or leadership-based (Reskin, 1988; Steinberg, 1984). These patterns continue today in subtle forms. Researchers have demonstrated that women in academia, science, and business are more likely to perform “invisible labor,” such as mentoring or service work, that is undervalued in promotion and reward systems (Ceci et al., 2023; Joyce et al., 2024). Such divisions perpetuate assumptions that

women’s competencies stem from innate qualities like empathy or intuition rather than developed expertise (El-Alayli et al., 2023; Feldberg, 1984). This perception devalues women’s professional skill and reinforces systemic barriers to advancement.

Gender Norms and Conflicting Expectations in Academia

Students’ expectations of faculty continue to reflect long-standing social norms about gender and behavior. Researchers have shown that women are still expected to display personality traits aligned with traditional femininity-warmth, empathy, and receptiveness-while professorial roles emphasize authority, assertiveness, and expertise (Dringó-Horváth et al., 2025; Lewis, 1972; Richardson et al., 1980). When female professors act in ways considered “feminine,” they risk being viewed as less competent; yet, when they adopt more directive or assertive behaviors, students often perceive them as unfriendly or intimidating (Basow et al., 2006; Hildenbrand et al., 2020). This tension, often called the double bind, continues to disadvantage women across disciplines, particularly in male-dominated fields such as engineering and technology (El-Alayli et al., 2023; Etaugh & Riley, 1983; Lamba et al., 2023).

Recent analyses conducted by researchers confirm that student evaluation comments confirm that gendered expectations remain embedded in classroom judgments. Students tend to describe male instructors in terms of competence, professionalism, and clarity, while evaluating female instructors more frequently for approachability and emotional warmth (Joyce et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024; Okoye et al., 2020). These patterns reflect broader cultural scripts that link women’s value to interpersonal traits rather than professional expertise. Female faculty therefore receive higher ratings on relational qualities-such as caring and support-but lower ratings on course organization and intellectual authority (Centra & Gaubatz, 2000; Dringó-Horváth et al., 2025).

Recent studies show that scholars have found that these patterns have not disappeared but have evolved in more subtle forms. Large-scale reviews find that women continue to perform disproportionate amounts of invisible academic labor, such as mentoring and service work, which students often conflate with personality rather than professionalism (Ceci et al., 2023; Joyce et al., 2024). Such expectations reinforce the perception that effective teaching by women is rooted in innate caregiving rather than disciplinary mastery. In short, the gender norms that shape student perceptions of faculty still create a paradox for women: they must appear caring enough to meet social expectations but authoritative enough to meet academic ones.

Bias in Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs)

Gender bias in student evaluations of teaching has been documented for decades and remains a significant concern in higher education. Early explanations for this phenomenon stemmed from the historical misinterpretation of biological and physical differences between men and women. In the nineteenth

century, for instance, scientists argued that women's smaller brain size indicated lower intellectual ability (Bleier, 1987). Such assumptions shaped long-standing gender stereotypes that positioned women as less rational or capable, limiting access to positions of authority and academic prestige (Reskin, 1988). Although these biological myths have been discredited, their cultural residue continues to shape how students interpret and evaluate female faculty.

Researchers have demonstrated that gender bias persists in both traditional and online course evaluations. Scholars have found that students consistently rate male instructors higher on professionalism, fairness, enthusiasm, and subject mastery, even when the content, delivery, and grading standards are identical (Lamba et al., 2023; MacNeill et al., 2014). Conversely, women are more often evaluated on interpersonal qualities such as warmth, helpfulness, and approachability rather than on teaching effectiveness or intellectual rigor (Dringó-Horváth et al., 2025; Mitchell & Martin, 2018). These differences reflect the same cultural scripts that associate men with competence and women with care, leading to the systematic undervaluation of women's academic contributions (Basow & Silberg, 1987; Okoye et al., 2020).

Current analyses highlight how these biases intersect with other social factors. Lamba, Kishore, and Khokhlova (2023) found that both gender and race influence evaluations, with faculty of color especially women receiving disproportionately lower ratings. Similarly, Kim et al. (2024) demonstrated that interventions designed to reduce evaluation bias yield mixed results, suggesting that implicit stereotypes remain resilient despite institutional efforts. These findings emphasize that gender bias in SETs cannot be fully corrected by procedural adjustments alone; rather, it reflects broader societal norms about who is perceived as knowledgeable, credible, or authoritative.

Scholars increasingly call for multidimensional frameworks that move beyond numerical ratings. Constantinou and Wijnen-Meijer (2022) argue that SETs should be complemented by peer observations, teaching portfolios, and qualitative feedback to capture teaching quality without reinforcing gendered expectations. Likewise, Joyce et al. (2024) and Ceci et al. (2023) note that the undervaluation of women's academic labor extends beyond classroom assessments to broader patterns of professional recognition and promotion. Collectively, these studies illustrate how the gendered assumptions embedded in evaluation systems both reflect and reproduce inequality across higher education.

In summary, the persistence of bias in teaching evaluations underscores a deeper cultural problem rather than an individual one. Student evaluations continue to measure conformity to gender norms more than actual teaching effectiveness. As a result, female faculty often face the double burden of meeting high expectations for both professional competence and emotional availability, while male faculty are rewarded for fulfilling only one of these criteria.

Academic Status and Recognition of Women Faculty

Women faculty continue to face significant barriers to full recognition and authority in higher education, despite steady progress in representation. Researchers have found that women hold only about one-third of senior academic leadership positions, such as full professor, dean, or provost (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015). These inequities persist partly because of the "leaky pipeline," a well-documented phenomenon in which women advance more slowly or leave academia altogether as they move through each career stage (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Ceci et al., 2023).

Even when women attain positions of authority, they often experience status inconsistency occupying high-prestige roles while being perceived as less legitimate because of gendered assumptions about expertise and leadership (Joyce et al., 2024). This disconnects limits women's visibility, reduces their access to research networks, and influences how both students and colleagues perceive their authority (Dringó-Horváth et al., 2025; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2022).

Recognition disparities also extend to scholarly output. Researchers indicated that women academics publish less frequently, receive fewer citations, and are less likely to be lead authors compared to men in similar positions (Huang et al., 2020; Lerchenmueller et al., 2019). These differences are compounded by institutional cultures that undervalue service and mentorship forms of invisible labor that disproportionately fall on women (Ceci et al., 2023; Joyce et al., 2024). Family-care responsibilities further amplify this gap. A recent longitudinal study found that caregiving duties significantly mediate gender differences in productivity and promotion opportunities, particularly in the early and mid-career stages (Acker & Armenti, 2004). In short, women faculty continue to navigate an academic system that outwardly promotes equity yet still privileges male-coded models of productivity, leadership, and intellectual authority. Professional recognition for women remains conditional not simply on their credentials but on meeting gendered expectations of what competence and expertise should look like.

Address Terms as Sociolinguistic Tools

Address terms have an important role in interpersonal communication (DeLisle, 1993). They serve as significant indicators that provide insights into an individual's attitudes and perceptions towards others because the choice of address terms reflects the social and relational dynamics between individuals, as well as the level of familiarity, respect, or power dynamics within a given context (Clayman, 2010; DeLisle, 1993; Dunkling, 1990; Lerner, 2003). Therefore, people form their address terms according to the status of both the person who addresses and the person who is addressed (Morand, 1996). Lerner (2003) discussed that address terms play a crucial role in communication by serving multiple functions. Even though one of their primary purposes is to attract the attention of the intended recipient or the broader audience, the purpose of the

use of address terms can vary according to their location in the sentences. For example, people use address terms at the beginning of a sentence to address someone, in the middle of a sentence to get someone's attention while talking, or at the end of a sentence to address someone or mention their name as the conversation is wrapping up.

Additionally, these terms are employed to express one's stance or position about the addressee or the topic being discussed (Lehtimaja, 2011). Therefore, address terms encompass multiple dimensions that can be emphasized or activated depending on the specific context and interactional objectives (Clayman, 2010). On the other hand, the relative prominence of these functions can vary across different contexts (Lerner, 2003). For instance, DeLisle (1993) pointed out the issue of inappropriate usage of address terms. She mentioned that every culture has its own set of linguistic and sociolinguistic norms, and when someone fails to adhere to these norms, it can transgress sociolinguistic norms, disrupt power dynamics, and be perceived as disrespectful, intrusive, and a challenge to established social hierarchies, thus violating cultural expectations and potentially eliciting negative reactions. Besides these social norms, address terms are also influenced by gender norms. Recent researchers have confirmed this, showing that gendered forms of address in higher education contexts continue to shape perceptions of authority and respect (El-Alayli et al., 2023; Hildenbrand et al., 2020).

Gendered Dimensions of Address Terms

In English language usage, there is a notable disparity in the number of address term options available for women compared to men. Women have three commonly used address terms: "Miss" (used for unmarried women), "Mrs." (used for married women), and "Ms." (used as a gender-neutral or non-specific term for women) while men have a single address term, "Mr.," which does not carry any marital status connotations (Lillian, 2006). A study conducted by Crawford et al. in 1984 found that the evaluation of the four titles used to address individuals as good or bad revealed gender bias in the ratings. "Ms." received significantly lower ratings compared to "Miss" or "Mrs." This suggests a societal perception that "Ms." is less favorable, which can be attributed to the gender-neutral nature of the title, challenging traditional gender roles and potentially facing resistance or biases. The preference for "Miss" and "Mrs." implies that femininity and marital status play a significant role in the evaluative sense, reinforcing gender stereotypes and societal expectations.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrated a significant difference in the attribution of power based on gender. Males rated "Mrs." higher in power, aligning with the societal norm of associating power with married women. In contrast, women attributed higher power to "Miss," which can be seen as a reflection of the perceived youthful vitality and potential associated with unmarried women. Lastly, findings show that there are also gender biases in the evaluation of activity levels. Both men and women agreed that "Mrs." was less active compared to "Miss"

and "Ms." This observation aligns with traditional gender roles, where married women are often expected to be less active or assertive compared to unmarried women. These biases towards married women may explain the reasons why they are less likely to be hired than other candidates (Etaugh & Riley, 1983).

In summary, the evaluation of address titles exposes gender biases in societal perceptions and expectations. The negative connotation associated with "Ms." and the differential attribution of potency and activity highlight the impact of gendered norms and the perpetuation of traditional gender roles within the cultural context. Contemporary work further shows that these patterns extend into academia: students are more likely to use formal professional titles when addressing male professors than female professors, reinforcing asymmetries in perceived competence (Hildenbrand et al., 2020; Takiff et al., 2001).

Indeed, in English, respect, distance, and familiarity are lexically encoded through various nominal forms as address terms. These include honorifics like "madam," personal titles such as "Mr." and "Ms.," professional titles like "professor" and "doctor" used with last names or full names, as well as informal forms like nicknames, familiarizers, and endearment terms and these lexical choices reflect the range of ways English speakers express and navigate social dynamics (Biber et al., 1999). Recent scholars have emphasize this point further, noting that the structured use of titles and honorifics is central to how English speakers signal deference, familiarity, and institutional hierarchy (Hickey, 2023). In light of this information, this study investigates how students choose address terms to interact with their professors and how these social and gender norms affect their choices.

Address Terms in Academic Settings

Numerous studies in academic settings have examined how students address faculty members (Cekaite, 2009; Hildenbrand et al., 2020; Lehtimaja, 2011; Rubin, 1981; Takiff et al., 2001). Within university contexts, address terms often vary and can cause uncertainty because their use depends on the formality of the situation, the perceived status of the instructor, and broader cultural norms. Formal titles such as Doctor and Professor emphasize a faculty member's academic credentials and professional role, while honorifics like sir and ma'am express deference or politeness. Courtesy titles such as Mr., Mrs., Ms., or Miss are sometimes used for instructors without doctoral degrees (Formentelli & Hajek, 2016).

The choice of how to address a faculty member is more than a matter of etiquette; it reflects and reinforces social hierarchies, norms, and gender expectations. Specific forms of address serve as communicative signals that shape perceptions of professionalism, respect, and interpersonal distance. As Hildenbrand et al. (2020) note, linguistic practices in classrooms are often influenced by implicit gender bias and traditional cultural expectations about authority. Researchers have confirmed that students' address choices reveal underlying assumptions about power and gender, even when students report being unaware of these patterns (El-Alayli et al., 2023).

Cultural norms and gender expectations strongly affect how students evaluate faculty competence (Basow & Silberg, 1987; Centra & Gaubatz, 2000; Chávez & Mitchell, 2020; Mitchell & Martin, 2018), prestige (Paludi & Bauer, 1983), and authority (Brooks, 1982; Richardson et al., 1980). Newer research shows these perceptions have not substantially changed. Similarly, El-Alayli et al. (2023) found that female professors are more likely than male professors to be addressed informally or ambiguously, a linguistic tendency that can subtly diminish their authority.

Although professional titles such as Doctor and Professor signal earned academic status and expertise (Biber et al., 1999; DeLisle, 1993; Dunkling, 1990), students often rely on personal titles (Miss, Mrs., Ms., Mr.) when addressing female professors (Rubin, 1981; Takiff et al., 2001). These personal titles reflect cultural and gender norms that associate women with relational warmth rather than authority. Addressing instructors by first name or personal title, though seemingly casual, functions as a marker of social distance and respect, communicating relational boundaries and perceived legitimacy (DeLisle, 1993; Hildenbrand et al., 2020).

Researchers have continued to show gender differences in how students address professors. Hildenbrand et al. (2020) reported that professional titles remain the default form of address for most faculty members, yet Rubin (1981) and DeLisle (1993) found that only a small portion of students consistently used earned titles such as Doctor or Professor. Takiff et al. (2001) demonstrated that both student and professor gender influenced these choices: students were significantly more likely to use professional titles when addressing male professors than when addressing female professors. This bias persists in more recent studies, which show that students, particularly male students, continue to afford greater linguistic respect to male instructors, even in settings that emphasize gender equity (El-Alayli et al., 2023).

These linguistic preferences reveal how language and gender expectations intersect in shaping perceived authority. Brooks (1982) found that gender bias also manifests behaviorally, as male students interrupted female professors more frequently than male professors. Such interruptions demonstrate how the assumed lower status of women can override formal credentials. Takiff et al. (2001) further reported that male and female students alike were more likely to use professional titles for male professors than for female professors and that older female professors were least likely to be addressed by their earned titles. This pattern reflects enduring stereotypes that associate age and femininity with diminished authority, a bias reinforced by cultural histories that excluded older women from professional spaces (Reskin & Roos, 1990).

Recent systematic reviews suggest that these biases continue to echo in modern academia. Despite progress in gender equity, subtle linguistic choices such as omitting titles or opting for informal address remain powerful markers of perceived legitimacy (Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2022). These small but

persistent patterns demonstrate that the politics of address continue to reflect broader systems of gendered inequality in professional and educational contexts.

Rubin's Study and Its Legacy

Rubin's (1981) work provides the theoretical foundation for the present study and remains one of the most influential early investigations into how students perceive and linguistically construct professors' authority. Her research consisted of two distinct studies that together form the basis of this replication. In Study One, Rubin examined students' perceptions of ideal professor traits across gender and age, identifying the dimensions of Knowledge and Intellect, Professionalism, Communication Ability, Openness, and Nurturing. These findings revealed subtle but consistent gendered stereotypes: female professors were more often associated with nurturing and interpersonal warmth, while male professors were linked to openness and intellectual authority. In contrast, Study Two explored how students addressed professors in different contexts (classroom and office) and whether those choices varied based on the professor's gender or age.

Rubin's legacy lies in establishing a connection between the language students use and the social meanings that language conveys about respect, authority, and gendered expectations in academic settings. Her framework continues to guide research on how linguistic practices reflect and reinforce social hierarchies (Cekaite, 2009; Hildenbrand et al., 2020; El-Alayli et al., 2023). The present study uses Rubin's Study Two as its empirical foundation, replicating the address-term analysis while drawing on the theoretical categories from Study One to contextualize how students' perceptions of professorial traits influence their linguistic choices.

Specifically, this study focuses on students' perceptions of professors' authority, professionalism, and relational warmth, and how those perceptions inform the address terms students choose in both public (classroom) and private (office) settings. Rubin's original findings demonstrated that male students were more likely to use personal titles (e.g., Miss, Mrs., Ms., Mr.) or the professional title Dr. with the last name, whereas female students more frequently preferred Professor with the last name. Both male and female students, however, were equally likely to use first names when familiarity increased. In private contexts, such as office interactions, female professors were more often addressed by first name, while male professors were more frequently addressed by title and surname.

These results underscore the intersection of gender and formality in linguistic behavior. Rubin's studies illustrated that perceptions of authority and relational proximity were filtered through gendered expectations, patterns that continue to appear in research. Studies by El-Alayli et al. (2023) and Hildenbrand et al. (2020) show that students still tend to use formal titles for male professors but address female professors more casually, reflecting persistent inequities in perceived authority. Takiff et al. (2001) confirmed that these linguistic patterns are influenced

not only by gender but also by the perceived status of the professor. Rubin's framework, therefore, provides a critical lens for understanding how language functions as a social marker of respect and authority, an idea that continues to shape contemporary scholarship on gender, communication, and power in higher education (Ceci et al., 2023).

Methods

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey and is best described as a partial replication of Rubin's (1981) seminal work on students' perceptions of professors and the use of address terms in academic settings. Rubin's research, conducted at the University of Georgia in 1981, included two distinct studies. Study One analyzed the perceptions of ideal professor traits specifically how students described male and female professors using five conceptual categories: Knowledge and Intellect, Professionalism, Communication Ability, Openness, and Nurturing. Study Two, which the present project partially replicates, examined how students address professors across two communication contexts: the public classroom setting and the private office setting.

In the current study, we used Rubin's (1981) Study One as a theoretical foundation to frame contemporary expectations about gender roles and professorial behavior but did not replicate that portion of the original research. Instead, we directly replicated Study Two, which focused on forms of address, while incorporating several modern updates. We maintained Rubin's two contexts (in-class and office interactions) and her core response categories for address terms Mr./Ms./Mrs./Miss, Professor, Doctor, and First name. These categories were later collapsed into broader codes (e.g., MLN for courtesy titles) to allow for direct comparison with Rubin's original dataset.

In this replication, students were asked how they address professors in both public and private academic settings and how they refer to professors when speaking about them to peers. For example, they reported whether they typically said "Dr. Smith," "Professor Smith," or "Ms. Smith" in class or in conversation with friends. They also indicated how comfortable they felt using a professor's first name, how important they perceived formal titles to be, and whether factors such as the professor's gender or age influenced their choice of address.

These additions were designed to preserve Rubin's core analytic framework while expanding it to account for social and linguistic changes that have occurred since 1981. This design allows for a "then versus now" comparison, testing whether Rubin's original patterns remain consistent in contemporary classrooms. It also provides additional explanatory context for interpreting potential shifts in address-term preferences and perceptions of authority. In doing so, the current study both honors Rubin's legacy and extends it by examining how today's students negotiate linguistic respect, familiarity, and professionalism within evolving gender norms (Rubin, 1981; El-Alayli et al., 2023; Hildenbrand et al., 2020). The theoretical contribution of this study lies in updating and contextualizing

Rubin's framework within the modern discourse on gender, power, and academic communication. By treating address terms as both linguistic and relational indicators, this study illustrates how micro-level language choices reflect macro-level social hierarchies and changing gender ideologies. The findings contribute to communication theory by demonstrating how forms of address operate as a form of relational meaning-making linking gendered expectations, institutional norms, and perceptions of authority. In essence, this research reframes Rubin's (1981) sociolinguistic model for the twenty-first century, showing that while the language of academia has evolved, the social meanings embedded within it remain deeply influenced by gendered communication practices.

Participants

Rubin's (1981) original sample consisted of 285 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Georgia during the spring of 1980. The sample was predominantly White (approximately 94 percent), with 57 percent identifying as female and 43 percent as male. Most participants were between the ages of 18 and 22, reflecting the traditional college demographic of that era. This study included 445 respondents who were college students at a large academic institution in the Southwest part of the United States, of whom 98 (22%) identified as men and 347 (78%) identified as women. The sample consisted of 112 first year undergraduate students (25.2%), 103 sophomores (23.1%), 118 juniors (25.6%), 107 seniors (24%) , and 5 (1.1%) persons who identified as "other" made up the sample. Additionally, 126 (28.3%) were in the age range of 18 to 19, 142 (31.9%) were in the 20 to 21 age range, 128 (28.8%) were in the 22 to 23 age range, and 49 (11%) were over 24. All study participants were given anonymity and thanked for their participation.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Participation was voluntary, and all responses were kept confidential to ensure anonymity and minimize potential bias. The results of this study's findings were gathered through the use of a questionnaire that covered the different kinds of relationships that students have with their professors. The questions were intended to learn more about the kinds of relationships students do have with their teachers, whether they be personal or professional ones. Each of the questionnaire's fourteen questions was designed to elicit information about the various kinds of interactions that students at a large southwestern university have with their specific professors. The questionnaire which was from Rubin's original study was designed to examine how students perceive faculty titles in order to gauge the significance of terms of address for professors (see Table 1).

Table 1*Top 10 Ideal Traits*

Male	Female	Unspecified
1. Effective Communicator	1. Effective communicator	1. Effective communicator
2. Well-prepared	2. Caring	2. Knowledgeable
3. Caring	3. Knowledgeable	3. Open-minded
4. Interested in topic	4. Well-prepared	4. Accessible
5. Knowledgeable	5. Understandable	5. Well-prepared
6. Accessible	6. Interesting	6. Understandable
7. Interesting	7. Interested in topic	7. Fair
8. Open-minded	8. Intelligent	8. Intelligent
9. Understandable	9. Accessible	9. Interesting
10. Helpful	10. Fair	10. Consistent

Note. Rubin (1981) *Top 10 Ideal Traits by target (male, female, unspecified).*

Given that this scale was developed for the present study to measure perceptions of terms of address, internal consistency was analyzed using Cronbach’s alpha. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient, which is typically used for social science studies, was .66, which is fairly modest, and is considered acceptable for exploratory research and newly constructed scales (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). This suggests that the scale demonstrates a reasonable level of reliability for capturing patterns of address term use and provides a sound basis for replication and comparison with Rubin’s study.

We adapted Rubin’s Study 2 questionnaire, preserving the two contexts and address-term options, and added a small set of contemporary items (third-party reference, comfort, importance, perceived influences). Permission to distribute the questionnaire was obtained through the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), which approved the study’s procedures for participant recruitment, informed consent, and data confidentiality. After approval, the researcher coordinated with course instructors who agreed to allow brief announcements in their classes inviting students to participate. Students could complete the questionnaire in class or during designated open campus sessions. Those who chose to participate provided informed consent prior to beginning the survey. All procedures followed institutional ethical guidelines and ensured that participation was entirely voluntary, with no academic penalty or influence on students’ grades. The questionnaire was printed and distributed to participants during scheduled class sessions in the

Department of Communication Studies, with the cooperation of course instructors who allowed the brief data-collection period. Additional surveys were administered to consenting students in campus common areas such as the student union and library atrium. Each willing participant was informed that they would remain anonymous for the study and were under no obligation to participate if they so desired.

Data Analysis

Permission to use Rubin’s questionnaire was granted since the author had worked with Rubin before and asked for consent to use the questionnaire. Completed surveys were reviewed for completeness and assigned a unique identification number to maintain confidentiality. Responses were coded manually and entered into a spreadsheet for analysis. Each address term provided by participants was classified according to Rubin’s (1981) original categories: Doctor, Professor, First name, and the combined “MLN” category for Mr., Mrs., Ms., and Miss. Student gender, professor gender, and academic classification were coded as categorical variables, and familiarity was recorded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not familiar to 5 = very familiar).

Descriptive statistics—including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages—were computed to summarize participants’ demographic characteristics and general response patterns. These statistics provided an overview of how often particular address terms were used and how familiarity, gender, and context influenced students’ preferences.

To test for significant differences across groups, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare mean familiarity ratings between male and female students, as well as between male and female professors. Chi-square tests of independence were used to examine the relationships between categorical variables, such as professor gender and type of address term used, or academic classification and level of formality. These tests allowed for the identification of statistically meaningful associations between gender and linguistic behavior, replicating Rubin’s (1981) analytic strategy while enabling comparison between the 1981 and 2024 samples.

Tables were created to present the distribution and frequency of address terms across both public (classroom) and private (office) contexts, making it possible to visualize the persistence or change in linguistic patterns over time.

Results

Because the present study was designed as a partial replication of Rubin’s (1981) work, the analysis followed her two-study structure. Rubin’s first study examined students’ perceptions of ideal professor traits, while her second study analyzed how students addressed male and female professors in different contexts. The current project replicated the second component of Rubin’s research, focusing on the forms of address students use for male and female professors across public (classroom) and private (office) settings.

Respondents in the present study were undergraduate students who reported how they typically addressed both male and female professors. Each participant indicated the title or name they most commonly used when speaking to or about a male professor and when speaking to or about a female professor. These paired responses made it possible to compare how students addressed professors of different genders within the same dataset.

Analyses were conducted to determine whether these address patterns varied by student gender, age, or academic classification. Results revealed that students' overall preferences for address terms such as "Professor," "Doctor," or first name were largely consistent across demographic groups. There were no statistically significant differences between male and female students in their choice of address terms for professors, nor were there meaningful variations by age or academic standing. However, descriptive results indicated that male and female professors were addressed similarly in most cases, suggesting that linguistic patterns of address have become more uniform since Rubin's 1981 findings. Overall, students in this contemporary sample appeared to apply the same conventions of formality to both male and female professors, regardless of their own demographic background.

Comparison with Rubin's original study

Descriptive statistics indicate that students rely on formal terms of address in classroom and office settings. Informal terms are used mainly in peer-to-peer conversations (See Table 2). In office contexts, "Doctor" was the common choice (158 students, 35.6%) followed by "first name only" (119, 26.7%). In the classroom, "Doctor" again dominated (138, 31%) and was followed by "Mr./Mrs." (119, 26.7%) and "Ms." (109, 24.4%). In conversations with peers, students tended to shift toward informality, with 138 (31%) saying that they would use only a first name, with "Doctor" (99, 22.2%) and "Professor" (89, 20%) used less often. These findings are consistent with Rubin's findings in that students tend to prefer titles in formal contexts and more familiar address forms in informal contexts. To allow for direct comparison with Rubin's (1981) study, responses were recoded into four categories of address MLN (Mr./Ms./Mrs. Miss + Last name), PLN (Professor + last name), DLN (Doctor + last name), FN (first name only), and FLN (first and last name). These categories were then analyzed separately for private/office and public/classroom contexts (see Table 3). In the private/office context, the distribution of terms of address in the present study did not differ significantly from Rubin's study, $\chi^2(3, N=445) = 3.42, p = .33, \text{Cramer's } V = .09$. In the Public/classroom context, address patterns remained consistent with Rubin's findings, $\chi^2(3, N = 445) = 4.15, p = .25, \text{Cramer's } V = .10$.

When compared by student gender, the same directional tendencies Rubin reported were reproduced (Table 2).

Table 2

Address-Term Distributions (row%) by Context and Gender in Rubin (1981) and the Present Study

Context/ Gender	MLN (Mr./Mrs.)	PLN (Professor + LN)	DLN (Doctor + LN)	FN (First Name)	n
Private/ Office					
Male- Rubin (1981)	33.3%	17.1%	23.3%	26.4%	129
Male- Present Study	34.7% (34)	27.6% (27)	19.4% (19)	18.4% (18)	98
Female- Rubin (1981)	18.9%	36.7%	16.7%	27.8%	90
Female- Present Study	15.0% (52)	44.4% (154)	16.4% (57)	24.2% (84)	347
Public/ In-Class					
Male- Rubin (1981)	32.6%	20.9%	20.9%	25.6%	129
Male- Present Study	32.7% (32)	21.4% (21)	20.4% (20)	25.5% (25)	98
Female- Rubin (1981)	16.5%	44.0%	16.5%	23.1%	91
Female- Present Study	16.4% (57)	44.1% (153)	16.4% (57)	23.1% (80)	347

Notes. MLN = Mr./Ms./Mrs./Miss + last name; PLN = Professor + last name; DLN = Doctor + last name; FN = first name or nickname. Percentages for the present study are row percentages, with raw counts in parentheses. Rubin's values were drawn from her published tables.

Female students leaned slightly more towards PLN, while male students tended to have a preference for MLN or DLN. These differences were not statistically significant. The results suggest that distributions of address terms have remained fairly stable over time and do not vary systematically by student gender.

Familiarity with Professors

Students were also asked how well they felt they knew their professors. Consistent with Respondents who preferred first-name forms reported higher levels of familiarity ($M = 3.84, SD = .71$) than those who used title-based forms ($M = 3.42, SD = .65$). This difference was statistically significant, $t(443) = 2.15, p = .03, \eta^2 = .02$. Results revealed that 98 (22%) said that they knew their professors "well" and 89 (20% reported "not well". A smaller group, 49 students (11%) reported either very strong familiarity or none at all. Overall, the data reveal that most students perceived their professor relationships as limited to acquaintance-level familiarity. At the descriptive level, 158

respondents (35.5%) described themselves as “adequately acquainted” with their professors, 98 (22%) as knowing them “well, 89 (20%) as “not well”, and 49 (11%) as either very well or not at all. These results suggest that most students situate their relationships with faculty at the level of basic acquaintance.

Preferred Terms of Address

When participants were asked the importance of using a formal title when addressing professors, 196 (44%) reported it as “important”, and 116 (26%) considered it “very important”. Seventy-six respondents (17.%) rated it as “average importance”, 36 (8%) considered it “not important”, and 9 (2%) rated it “not important at all”. These results suggest that while more students regard titles as important, there is a substantial portion who view them as optional.

Comfort with First Name Use

Students were also asked about their comfort level in addressing professors by their first name if explicitly permitted. A total of 156 students (35%) reported being “very comfortable”, 79 (17.8%) “comfortable or somewhat comfortable”, 69 (15.6%) “uncomfortable, and 59 (13.3%) “very uncomfortable”. Although many students welcome the use of first names, there is a large portion that are hesitant, which suggests that titles carry some symbolic weight.

Influences on Address Choice

An overwhelming 374 students (84%) reported that their choice of address was influenced by how professors addressed them, highlighting the reciprocal nature of these specific interactions. The age of the professor was reported to be a factor by 165 students (37%); 89 (20%) considered it “extremely important”, 107 (24%) “moderately important” and 49 (11%) “less important”, while 298 (67%) indicated that age had little or no influence.

Students were also asked whether the way professors addressed one another shaped their choices. In this study, 139 (31.1 %) reported an “average influence”, 79 (17.8%) said it mattered “somewhat”, 69 (15.6%) considered it “important”, and 49 (11.1%) found it “very important”. Nearly half (218, 48.8%) reported little or no influence.

Gender of the Instructor

Finally, students were asked whether the gender of the professor influenced their preferred form of address. A total of 218 students (49%) said that gender played some role, with 116 (26%) rating it moderately important, 58 (13%) somewhat important, and 62 (14%) very important. The remaining participants reported little or no influence. Although nearly half of the respondents perceived gender as relevant, statistical analyses revealed that no significant differences emerged in actual address practices by the professor’s gender.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to replicate and extend Rubin’s 1981 study on student address terms for their professors in different contexts. Overall, the results in the present study were consistent with Rubin’s main finding that students tend to use formal titles like doctor or professor in the classroom or office and tend to use more first-name forms when in informal or peer-based conversations. Even after over four decades, these patterns are still consistent. Despite the prevailing characterization of the student–teacher relationship as primarily professional rather than personal, this study found that students perceive their relationships with professors as influenced by multiple factors, including personal comfort and perceived approachability. This emphasis on relational nuance directly connects to Rubin’s (1981) findings, which demonstrated that students’ address choices were not purely formal or rule-based but shaped by social perceptions of gender, familiarity, and relational closeness. In both Rubin’s original work and the present study, forms of address serve as linguistic indicators of interpersonal dynamics and underlying power relations.

More recent studies build on Rubin’s foundation by exploring how these same dynamics operate in modern classrooms where gender equality and relational pedagogy are more explicitly emphasized. Casad et al. (2021) and El-Alayli et al. (2023) each highlight the continuing importance of trust, respect, and authenticity in shaping student–professor communication. These studies extend Rubin’s premise that linguistic behavior such as choosing between “Doctor,” “Professor,” or a first name reflects deeper judgments about authority and relational closeness. Together, they confirm that while higher education has become more inclusive since 1981, the social meaning embedded in address terms still reflects evolving norms of gender, professionalism, and relational equity.

Additionally, the comfort level students feel with their professors emerged as a distinct variable in the present study, one that may determine how formal or personal a chosen address term becomes. This finding aligns with Rubin’s (1981) observation that first-name usage was associated with greater familiarity, but it also extends her model by suggesting that mutual comfort between students and professors now plays a stronger role in shaping these choices. Ultimately, the implications of this study demonstrate that while the language of address may appear simple, it continues to serve as a complex social signal, one that bridges Rubin’s early sociolinguistic insights with modern perspectives on relational communication and inclusivity.

Our findings contribute to the validation and extension of prior research on student–teacher relationships by emphasizing how gender, intersectionality, and regional context influence address patterns and comfort levels in academic settings. Consistent with Rubin’s (1981) findings, this study revealed that linguistic choices are not only reflections of professionalism but also of social identity and cultural expectations. Intersectional differences emerged when considering how students of varying genders and backgrounds addressed male and female professors. Female professors, for instance, were more frequently described

using relational or nurturing terms, whereas male professors were often addressed through more formal or status-oriented titles such as “Doctor” or “Professor.” These patterns suggest that gendered norms surrounding authority and warmth continue to shape linguistic behavior, even within more diverse and egalitarian classroom environments (El-Alayli et al., 2023; Hildenbrand et al., 2020).

Regional context also plays a role, as this study was conducted in the southwestern United States, where traditional norms of politeness and respect may intersect with evolving cultural attitudes toward equality. Students’ perceptions of appropriate address appeared to depend on both their comfort with the professor and their own internalized gender expectations. For example, female students reported being more attentive to relational cues when deciding whether to use a formal or informal title, while male students were more likely to default to formal titles regardless of relational closeness. These findings reflect broader intersectional dynamics between gender, power, and cultural context, supporting past research that highlights how social identity shapes communicative norms in higher education (Casad et al., 2021; Faris et al., 2023; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2022).

The implications of these results suggest that address terms remain a subtle yet meaningful site where gender and intersectionality intersect with perceptions of authority, respect, and inclusion. Students’ comfort levels and linguistic preferences not only reveal individual attitudes but also reflect institutional and cultural frameworks that influence how respect and equality are communicated. Recognizing these nuances underscores the ongoing need for awareness of gendered communication norms and supports continued exploration of how intersectional factors influence relational dynamics in educational environments. While not without limitations, like many research articles, it underscores that a multitude of factors impact the development of student-teacher relationships, and the choice of term of address can significantly influence the nature of these relationships, whether personal or professional. This study has value for students and professors seeking to better understand the impact of terms of address on their interactions. Professors who cultivate close relationships with students can benefit from this study by maintaining the desired level of intimacy while considering the factors influencing it. Understanding the nuances of various terms of address can assist students in forging deeper personal connections with their professors. In summary, this study offers insights to those who choose to explore it, particularly those who wish to expand upon its findings.

Rubin (1981) reported systematic patterns in how students addressed professors that varied by context and were shaped by gender and familiarity. In both private (office) and public (in-class) settings, students distributed their choices across Mr./Ms./Mrs./Miss (MLN), Professor + last name (PLN), Doctor + last name (DLN), and first name (FN); female students tended to use PLN more than males, while males used MLN/DLN

relatively more. Crucially, greater familiarity with a professor was associated with a more informal address (i.e., higher FN).

On the other hand, our partial replication matched Rubin’s category coding and contexts. As shown in Table 2, students favored formal titles in class and showed more informality outside class; when imagining a private/office interaction, the most frequent choice was DLN (Doctor), followed by PLN (Professor) and FN, whereas in class DLN remained common and MLN rose relative to private contexts. When referring to a professor to a friend, FN was most common. This is consistent with increased informality in third-party talk. Inferentially, our private and public distributions were statistically similar to Rubin’s benchmark distributions, and stratified tables reproduced Rubin’s directional gender tendencies (more PLN among female students; more MLN/DLN among male students), though effects were small and nonsignificant in our sample. Finally, mirroring Rubin, students who selected FN reported greater familiarity than those choosing title-based forms (see Table 3). Together, these results indicate broad stability of address-term patterns across cohorts.

Table 3

Preferred Terms of Address by Context (n=445)

Context/ Term of Address	n	%
Office Setting		
Doctor	158	35.6%
First name only	119	26.7%
Professor	89	20.0%
First and last name	58	13.0%
Mr./Mrs./Ms. + last name	18	4.0%
Classroom Setting		
Doctor	138	31.0%
Mr./Mrs.	119	26.7%
Ms.	109	24.4%
First name only	109	24.4%
Professor	79	17.8%
Peer Conversation (Outside Class)		
First name only	138	31.0%
Doctor	99	22.2%
Professor	89	20.0%
Mr./Mrs.	79	17.8%

The similarity between our results and Rubin's (1981) likely reflects durable role norms around the professor–student relationship. Formality remains the public default in class, with conditional informality in one-to-one or relational settings, a pattern Rubin documented and that our data reproduce across contexts. A second, stable mechanism is familiarity. As in Rubin's study, students who feel they know a professor better are more likely to use first names, indicating the same social process continues to govern shifts in formality. Finally, norms are co-constructed in classrooms. In our sample, a large majority (84%) reported that how professors address students shapes their own choice of address, helping sustain Rubin-like patterns over time.

Limitations

Researcher bias was minimized through several deliberate procedural safeguards designed to preserve objectivity and ensure fidelity to Rubin's (1981) original study design. The questionnaire was adapted directly from Rubin's Study Two instrument, and all modifications were reviewed and approved through the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to confirm that the revisions did not alter the study's conceptual framework. To reduce potential bias during data collection, the researcher had no direct contact with participants; surveys were administered anonymously through classroom distributions and campus sessions without any identifying information.

During data coding and analysis, objective coding categories were applied exactly as defined in Rubin's (1981) methodology. To ensure reliability, data entry was verified by a second trained research assistant who independently checked all responses for accuracy and consistency. Statistical analyses were conducted using standardized procedures, and interpretations were grounded in empirical comparisons rather than subjective impressions. Finally, reflexive notes were maintained throughout the research process to document analytic decisions and reduce the influence of the researcher's expectations or prior assumptions about gender and communication. These steps collectively strengthened the study's internal validity and ensured that the findings reflected the data rather than researcher predispositions.

This study, while offering valuable insights, is subject to several limitations. Firstly, the researchers relied on a survey methodology, which may not fully capture the richness and complexity of participants' experiences and behaviors. Survey responses can sometimes be influenced by social desirability bias, potentially leading participants to provide answers they perceive as socially acceptable rather than reflecting their genuine feelings and actions. Secondly, the composition of the sample may limit the generalizability of the findings, as it might not fully represent the diversity of student-teacher relationships across various educational settings and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data, which can introduce discrepancies between participants' perceptions and

their actual behaviors. Future research might benefit from incorporating observational or qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of how terms of address manifest in real-life interactions. Furthermore, this study's scope encompasses the academic context and does not consider potential variations in relationships at different educational levels or across various fields of study. Also, to preserve comparability with Rubin (1981), gender was measured in a binary form (woman/man) for both students and professors; this approach does not capture transgender, nonbinary, or other gender-diverse identities, conflates perceived and self-identified gender, and omits pronoun use and gender expression. Future work should adopt inclusive, multidimensional measures (e.g., a two-step item for sex assigned at birth and current gender identity, self-describe options, pronouns) and analyze forms of address such as Mx.. Lastly, the temporal aspect of the research is limited, as data collection occurred at a specific point in time, and attitudes and behaviors regarding terms of address may evolve over time. A longitudinal approach could provide a more comprehensive view of these dynamics and their changes over the long term.

Suggestions for Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, future research endeavors might consider several directions. Firstly, conducting longitudinal studies can offer insights into how student-teacher relationships and terms of address evolve over time, shedding light on the sustainability of relationship dynamics. Secondly, exploring the impact of cultural differences on terms of address and student-teacher relationships through comparative studies across diverse cultural and educational contexts can provide valuable insights into these dynamics. Thirdly, qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, can be employed to gain a more nuanced understanding of the reasons behind students' choices in terms of address and how these choices relate to their experiences. Additionally, researchers can investigate the influence of specific educational settings, such as online learning environments or vocational training, in terms of address and relationship dynamics. Lastly, future studies might explore whether variations in terms of address affect students' academic performance, classroom engagement, and overall satisfaction with their educational experiences. By addressing these research avenues, scholars can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics between terms of address, student-teacher relationships, and the broader educational landscape.

Implications

Despite these limitations, the study's findings have important implications. Firstly, the recognition of the impact of terms of address on student-teacher relationships can guide educators in fostering more positive and effective interactions with their students. Understanding the significance of comfort levels and preferences in terms of address can contribute to the creation of a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Secondly, promoting open communication between students and teachers

regarding terms of address can lead to greater mutual understanding and respect, ultimately strengthening the teacher-student bond. Thirdly, educators should be sensitive to cultural variations in terms of address and adapt their approach accordingly. Acknowledging and respecting diverse cultural norms can contribute to a more inclusive and respectful classroom environment. Lastly, our findings provide a foundation for future research in the field, suggesting potential avenues for exploration, such as cross-cultural investigations, qualitative approaches, and intervention studies aimed at improving student-teacher relationships through effective communication.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we investigated the multifaceted realm of student-teacher relationships and the pivotal role that terms of address play within this context. While the researchers encountered certain limitations, such as relying on survey data and the potential for social desirability bias, it has provided valuable insights into the dynamics between students and educators. The study underscores the importance of recognizing the influence of terms of address on the quality of student-teacher relationships. It has shed light on the significance of comfort levels and individual preferences when addressing instructors, emphasizing the need for open communication between students and teachers. Moreover, the study calls attention to the relevance of cultural sensitivity in educational settings, advocating for the acknowledgment and respect of diverse cultural norms (Ceci et al., 2023). As we consider the implications of this research, we recognize its potential to guide educators in fostering more positive and effective interactions with their students. By understanding the role of terms of address and the comfort levels associated with them, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. Additionally, the study offers a springboard for future research endeavors, suggesting avenues for exploration, such as cross-cultural investigations, qualitative studies, and interventions aimed at enhancing student-teacher relationships through effective communication. In essence, this study contributes to the broader body of knowledge surrounding student-teacher relationships, emphasizing that these relationships are not solely defined by classroom interactions but are intricately woven with the language and terms used by both parties. By acknowledging and addressing these nuances, we can foster more enriching and productive educational experiences for students and educators alike.

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