The Inferences of Gender in Workplace Bullying: a Conceptual Analysis

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Women are often regarded as the 'weaker' sex. This negative cliché has portrayed women as vulnerable and defenceless, privy to abuse and victimisation. The purpose of this paper is to explore the inferences of gender in workplace bullying. The study unpacks types, consequences and implications of bullying amongst women. The paper is a meta-analysis, which relied on secondary sources of information. It is a qualitative study that is based on conceptual analysis. Findings of the paper indicate that there are gender differences in reported prevalence rates and forms of bullying. The practical implications of the study is that bullying is a concern and the gendered nature of this form of abuse has implications for the way managers, organisational representatives and policy-makers should address and prevent workplace bullying. The value this paper offers is the assertion that managers, organisational representatives and policy-makers should view workplace bullying as a serious offence. The authors encourage researchers in the field of bullying to pursue further research in area of retaliation as a consequence of bullying and to integrate their findings more firmly in existing research. The South African workplace has overlooked the role of retaliation in encouraging bullying in the workplace. This gap in the research should be investigated.

Key words: bullying, gender, retaliation, workplace

Many researchers agree that bullying is a frequent occurrence in the workplace (Hoel, 2001; Pietersen, 2007; Cunniff & Mostert, 2012). In a study conducted in 2000 by the Work Dignity Institute, it was found that approximately 77.8% of South Africans had experienced bullying in the workplace. More recently, in 2012, it was found that 31.1% of a sample of 13 911 people had experienced workplace bullying (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012). These statistics make it clear that bullying is a prevalent, contemporary issue in the South African workplace, yet awareness of and research into bullying in South Africa is still in its infancy (Pietersen, 2007).

Currently, there is no generally accepted definition of workplace bullying, as such bullying can be described in a number of different ways. First, bullying can be described as a gradually evolving process (Einarsen, 1994). During the early phases, victims are typically subjected to very discreet and indirect bullying behaviour and, later, to more direct, aggressive acts. Bullying may eventually escalate to acts of both physical and psychological violence. Alternatively, workplace bullying can be defined as a type of aggressive behaviour that manifests in interpersonal work relationships, between two individuals or between an individual and a group (Zapf & Einarsen, 2001). Additionally, workplace bullying can be seen as a series of actions, such as harassment, offending, and socially excluding someone at work, that negatively affect individuals' ability to do their job (Rothmann, 2006).

A vast amount of evidence suggests that workplace bullying that arises is intensely gendered but that there are very little research on workplace bullying that provides a satisfactory consideration of gender (Hutchison & Eveline, 2010; McGinley, 2007), which highlight the importance to consider workplace bullying from a gender perspective. Gender is a prominent socio-demographic influence in workplace bullying. Women are allowed a narrower band of acceptable behaviour than men, narrower behaviour in which they have to fit in with societal expectation

irrespective of the situation they find themselves in (Babcock & Lashever, 2003; Gilbert, Raffo, & Sutarso, 2013). If the behaviour of women deviates from the traditional roles, they tend to be negatively evaluated (Masser & Abrams, 2004), which often result in workplace bullying.

According to the Global Health and Safety Issue, it was found that most perpetrators of bullying were managers, where males formed 62% of bullies, and 58% of the targets were found to be women (Cobb, 2012). Additionally, it was found that female bullies tend to target women in 80% of cases, while male bullies target men in only 55% of cases (Cobb, 2012). However, international research suggests that gender-related experiences of workplace bullying could be country-specific (Cortina et al., 2001; Niedhammer, David, & Degioanni, 2007). In a study conducted in Spain, it was found that women experienced considerably more bullying than men (Moreno-Jimenez, 2008). Conversely, in Iceland it was found that men experienced more workplace bullying than women (Olafsson, 2004).

It is clear that workplace bullying is a pertinent issue for the management of people in organisations globally, as bullying and harassment lead to lowered levels of job satisfaction and productivity and can lead to a negative work culture.

Problem statement
The workplace is often construed as fertile ground for democracy. Whereby individuals are selected for their skill and talent, in so doing individuals although familiar with their levels of work are unable to treat one another with respect and professionalism. This paper examines the effects of workplace bullying and the impact of negative work culture in the management of people.

Research questions
The following research questions will be considered:
- What are the types of bullying?
- What are the consequences of bullying?
- What does workplace bullying imply for gender?

The aim and objectives of the paper
The paper aims
- To unpack the different type of bullying
- To examine the consequences of bullying?
- To investigate implication of workplace bullying and gender?

Method

The paper is a meta-analysis, which relied on secondary sources of information. It is a qualitative study that is based on conceptual analysis. It considers the inferences of gender in workplace bullying from an "-emic" perspective (author's viewpoint). The analysis has included a comparative review of literature relating to gender and workplace bullying. Gender in workplace bullying has been discussed by examining literature that discusses the role of gender and bullying in the workplace. Literature was further probed, to investigate the various type of bullying within the workplace.

Theoretical Framework

Workplace bullying
According to Hutchison and Eveline (2010), workplace bullying has become an issue of academic inquiry internationally. Bullying has been defined by psychologist, Leymann as "…'mobbing others at work' and described workplace bullying as conflict that lasts for a long period, occurs regularly and where victims are not able to defend themselves because of unequal distribution of power between the victims and perpetrators" (Leymann, 1996, p. 165).

A more comprehensive definition describes workplace bullying as *"...repeated actions and practices that are directed to one or more workers, which are all unwanted by the victim, which may be done deliberately or unconsciously, but clearly cause humiliation, offence, and distress, and that may interfere with job performance and/or cause an unpleasant working environment"* (Rothmann & Rothmann, 2006, p.14).

Workplace bullying occurs horizontally and affects all employees, within all types of organisations and all types of professions (Pietersen, 2007). More importantly,

workplace bullying affects both men and women in managerial as well as in subordinate roles (*cf.* Cunnif & Mostert, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2013; Pietersen, 2007). There are different types of bullying with major consequences to both the organisation and employee.

Types of bullying
There are two main types of bullying, namely direct and indirect bullying (Ross, 1996). Direct bullying relates to behaviour that is face-to-face and at an interpersonal level. It includes acts of verbal abuse, such as public humiliation, criticism, inaccurate accusations, as well as threatening behaviour and intimidation (Einarsen, 2009). Indirect bullying is a restrained type of bullying that is used to affect people on an emotional level. Examples of indirect bullying are gossiping, manipulation of situations and spreading of rumours (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012). Indirect bullying behaviours can be grouped into five categories, namely threats to professional status, threats to personal standing, isolation, excessive overwork, and destabilisation (Rayner, 1997). Bullying can also take the form of either horizontal or downward bullying, thus it can occur between co-workers, between managers, or between supervisors and their subordinates (Pietersen, 2007).

Gossip, sarcasm, vulgarity, and isolation are the main types of bullying behaviour in the workplace (Farrel, 2006). This preference for the use of indirect tactics over direct or physical bullying may be due to the fact that such acts are more acceptable in modern society (Crawford, 1999). Additionally, it was found that, in South Africa, the majority of informants experienced downward bullying, as appose to horizontal bullying (Pietersen,2007), and that the perpetrators of bullying all employed verbal and/or indirect tactics to bully their targets (Einersen, 1994). On the other hand, it has been found that direct bullying and bullying by supervisors were more prevalent than indirect bullying and bullying by colleagues (Cinniff,2012) (refer to Figure 1). This reinforces the idea that bullying manifests differently in different countries and even within different industries. In South Africa, perpetrators seem to generally be supervisors who employ mostly verbal or direct tactics towards their victims. Examples of bullying in the workplace may include being shouted at or humiliated, being the target of practical jokes. Blame without justification, exclusion or social isolation, physical intimidation (proximal), excessive micro-managing, purposely withholding vital information, setting impossible goals for subordinates to reach, blocking potential training and employment, tampering with an employee's personal belongings and removing areas of responsibility without cause.

The following graph is a representation of a South African study conducted in six different sectors including: financial, mining, government, manufacturing, academic and call centres. Figure 1 graphically illustrates the percentage of people who experienced direct bullying, indirect bullying, bullying by a supervisor, and bullying by a colleague within the South African landscape (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012)

Figure 1: A graphical representation of a South African study showing the percentage of people who experience direct bullying, indirect bullying, bullying by a supervisor, and bullying by a colleague.
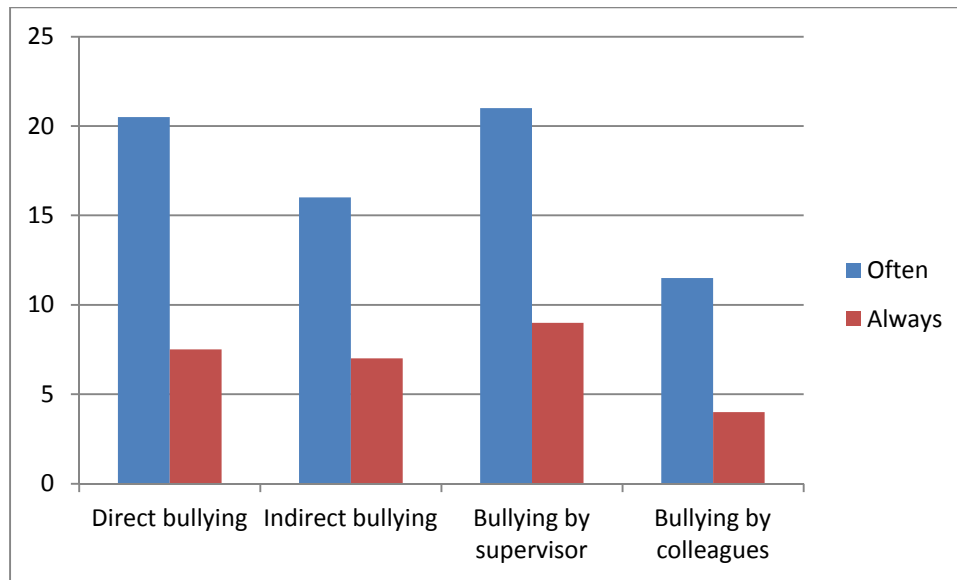
Cunniff and Mostert (2012). Prevalence of workplace bullying of South African employees

Figure 1 shows that a significant number of individuals (20.5%) often experience direct bullying in the workplace. Additionally, it was found that supervisors were more often behind workplace bullying than colleagues. According to the Health and Safety Authority of South Africa, bullies abuse the existing power structure because of the professional or personal power they have over their victims (Cobb, 2012) the power imbalance between a supervisor and their incumbent is conducive to bullying (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012). The consequences of bullying by a supervisor can be devastating to trust in the organisation (Hodson, 2006).

The Consequences of Bullying
Workplace bullying has negative physical and psychological effects on the individual and severe consequences for the organisation (Hood, 2004). Research has shown that individuals are affected by bullying in three main areas, namely psychological well-being, physical health, and work-related performance (Matthiesen, 2001; Cunniff & Mostert, 2012). It is important to pay attention to workplace bullying as there are several negative workplace consequences, which could ensue should bullying be allowed to become rampant in an organisation. A workforce that experiences bullying can cause damage to an organisation's productivity, through decreases in the performance of employees, increased violence, more employees wanting to resign, and a subsequent increase in recruiting costs to fill vacant positions (Mayhew, 2004; Djurkovic, 2008). Bullying in the workplace can also cultivate a hostile work environment that is characterised by distrust, anger, and suspicion, culminating in poor group communication (Frost, 2003). This may further result in absenteeism, manifestation of illness, increased accidents on the job and violence.

Table 1: A Graphical Representation of the Consequences of Workplace Bullying for Both the Organisation and Individuals

Consequences for the individual	Consequences for the organisation
Psychological wellbeing	Poor performance
1. Reduced motivation	Increased absenteeism
2. Anxiety	Increased turnover
3. Depression	Reduced productivity and quality
4. Lowered self-esteem	Increased medical expenses

Physical health	Financial loss
1. Sleep and eating disorders	Hindrance of group communication
2. Stress related illness	Hostile work environment
Work related performance	High recruiting costs
1. Damaged reputation	Damage to corporate image
2. Harming of the occupational situation and level of work	Poor work performance
3. Intensions to leave	Loss of trust
4. Decreased performance	Loss of skills and experience
5. Low morale	

Source: Van den Broeck, (2011). Job Demands-Resources model

From Table 1, above, it is clear that a plethora of consequences arise as a result of workplace bullying. Research indicates that workplace bullying yields severe consequences for both the individual and the organisation (Van den Broeck, 2011). Table 1 shows the different consequences associated with bullying for individuals in three areas, namely psychological well-being, physical health, and work-related performance. Furthermore, it shows the detrimental consequences organisations could face if workplace bullying is not addressed.

Workplace bullying and gender

Due to gendered nature of organisations (*cf.* Hutchinson & Eveline, 2010), workplace bullying from a gendered perspective can be understood by examining the theory of *gendered organisation* by Acker (1990). The theory of the gendered organisations can be valuable in the explanation to the prevalence of workplace bullying based on gender. The theory of the gendered organisation emphasises how organisations is gendered and how gender inequalities are promoted (Hutchison & Eveline, 2010). Five important organisational processes are identified through which organisations are gendered (Acker, 1990), which aids in understanding the occurrence of bullying in the workplaces. First, there exists gender segregation of work within workplaces (Acker, 1990). This includes the construction of gendered work divisions such as the separation of occupations based on gender and the fact that upper management are more male dominated (*cf.* Hutchison & Evaline 2010). These separations of work divisions also affect the allowed behaviour, allocations of physical space and that of power. Second, organizational processes are based on the images and symbols that are reinforced and challenge work divisions (Hutchison & Eveline, 2010). For example, a business leader is often portrayed as successful, forceful and masculine. If women had to obtain those skills it may threaten masculinity (or in the women's case her feminity). Third, are the processes that contribute to gendered relationships between women and women, women and men as well as and men and men. In this lies the interactions that are driven by power relations and social roles (Acker, 1990). Men are active doers, while women are in that of a supporting role (Hochschild, 1983). Fourth, organisational process contributes to aspects of individual gender identity. These are process that shapes the appropriate presentation of the gendered self as an active member of the organisation. This includes e.g. appropriate language, manner, dress code based on gender (Acker, 1990). Fifth, organisational processes concerns "...gender is implicated in the fundamental, on-going processes of creating and conceptualizing social structures (Acker, 1990, p. 147).

Furthermore, the social construction of gender affects the bullying behaviour that women (and men) experience in the workplace (Gilbert, Raffo, & Sutarso, 2013). The result of bullying can further be due the differential treatment as a result of cultural disposition (Gilbert, et al., 2013).

Gender differences in the experience of workplace bullying have received more attention in international research. However, the results of these studies have been inconclusive (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012). Globally, women in senior management roles experience more bullying from supervisors, colleagues and sub-

ordinates compared to men (Hutchison & Eveline, 2010; Jones, 2006; Tehari, 2004). Further, different kinds of workplace bullying are directed towards men and women (Salin, 2001; Simpson & Cohen, 2004). Women tend to experience more 'gender incivility' compared to men with bullying behaviour that are often sexist of nature (Cortina, et al., 2002).

International researchers agree that women are easier targets for bullying in the workplace, and that men and women experience different types of bullying (Cortina et al., 2001; Namie, 2003; Niedhammer, 2007), this is due to the different interpersonal styles of men and women and the male-dominated work environment (Rayner,1997). Men dominate in management positions in South Africa, and they are also the most economically active gender (Commission of the Employment Equity, 2010). Studies have found that men tend to suffer more physical abuse, while women tend to experience more verbal abuse (Farrel, 2006). Furthermore, workplace bullying incidents tend to be same-sex harassment and male bullies tend to employ tactics such as public screaming, name-calling, and threats of job loss (Namie, 2003).

Very little research has been done in the South African context or Africa on the different bullying experiences of men and women in the workplace. Only three studies have looked into whether one gender group experiences more workplace bullying than the other. These studies found that: first, South African women were more vulnerable to workplace bullying than men were (Steinman, 2003). Secondly, bullying behaviours were, for the most part, not gender specific Pietersen, 2007). Thirdly, men reported significantly higher levels of workplace bullying than women did, more direct and indirect bullying from supervisors, and more direct bullying by colleagues (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012).

These inconclusive results can be attributed to the fact that the first two studies (Steinman, 2003; Pietersen, 2007) focussed on different sectors, namely the health and academic sectors respectively. This indicates that the experience of workplace bullying may differ between industries. This is also in line with international research, which has shown that there are higher levels of workplace bullying in the health and public sectors than in other industries (Ortega, 2009). The narrow focus of these studies in terms of industry limits the generalisation of their results to other sectors. However, in 2012, a study on workplace bullying was conducted across six different industries, namely financial, mining, government, manufacturing, academia, and call centres (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012). Consequently, their results allow for a more generalised application. Workplace bullying is experienced by both men and women alike. However, recent studies indicate that a significantly higher proportion of women are being bullied compared to men (Salin, 2013). The risk implication of bullying is that both female employees and female experts perceive emotional abuse to be more severe than men. Female employees also perceive isolation and professional discredit to be more severe than men do. Men tend to emphasise victim characteristics more than women do. However, according to literature women were more likely than men to conceptualise bullying as organisational problem, with organisational antecedents and organisational consequences (Salin, n.d). The health effects of bullying may have a detrimental effect on both men and women alike. Men and women who have been bullied report negative effects on mental and physical health (Hoel, 2004; Vartia, 2002). The correlation between self-reported frequency of bullying and health effects were slightly stronger for men (Hoel, 2004), whilst the correlation between negative acts and health effects slightly stronger for women (Hoel, 2004).

Coping with bullying is a consequence that is often borne by the individual rather than the organisation. Women are more likely to seek help and use avoidance strategies as a means of coping, men on the other hand are more likely to use assertive strategies (Ólafsson, 2004; Simpson, 2004). Therefore, workplace or organisational action is imperative the gender differences in conceptualisation and perceived severity likely to affect action that may result in

irreversible consequences like resignations poor productivity and emotional scaring. The individuals responsible for handling these actions are expected to be proactive and sensitive to the needs of the victim. However, research indicated that male Human Resource (HR) managers are more likely to refrain from taking action (Salin, 2009). The gender of the victim, perpetrator and HR manager affect whether the negative act will be labelled as bullying (Salin, n.d). Ironically men are less likely to believe that other men suffer health consequences and are less likely to get offered professional support and rehabilitation (Salin, n.d). Gender aspects are therefore highly relevant for both men and women when unpacking the experience and intervention of bullying in the workplace.

The practical application for human resource practitioners
There are five practical applications for Human Resource practitioners to address bullying in their workplace. Promote a positive workplace culture. An understanding and awareness of the prevalence of workplace bullying and its far-reaching effects is an essential step in creating a positive work culture and minimising the risks posed by bullying behaviour. As an HR practitioner, you can create prevention initiatives that create a culture where bullying is not tolerated, and, if it does occur, is recognised and acted upon. The first step is to seeing bullying as gendered rather than gender-neutral. The rationale for the suggestion according to Hoel (2011) is that *"if negative acts are interpreted differently by men and women and they have different possibilities to defend themselves, then there is a risk that female targets' experiences may be trivialised by (predominantly) male managers"*. Similarly, organisational representatives may need to pay particular attention to actively identifying male targets, which, due to gendered expectations emphasising self-reliance and independence, may be less willing to come forward and seek help at early stages (Salin, 2013). It is thus important that both line-managers, who have a primary

responsibility for intervening in conflicts in their departments and units, and those in charge of handling formal complaints about bullying, are aware of these gender dynamics

The second step to preventing bullying in the workplace is to secure the commitment and involvement of the organisation by attaining support from top management and the cooperation and participation of the employees. Develop a bullying policy and related procedures. HR practitioners need to take it upon themselves to create a zero tolerance anti-bullying policy. Anti-bullying policies should clearly define bullying, include examples, and clearly spell out the consequences of such behaviour. This is part of a wider commitment to a safe and friendly work environment. It is also essential to ensure that the organisation's bullying policy is publicised by making posting it in central locations and highlighting it as part of the employee orientation on-boarding process. Employees should also be provided with an independent contact, which person should be available to offer advice, information, and support, and handle complaints of workplace bullying. The contact officer should be objective, unbiased, and able to provide assistance to the employee, but should not be directly responsible for conducting the investigation. A procedure for anonymous reporting can also be put in place, so as to encourage victims to come forward.

Raise awareness and provide training. As an HR practitioner, you can hold awareness campaigns in the form of training sessions and workshops for all employees on workplace bullying and the consequences of engaging in it. Such initiatives should focus on the development of healthy and productive communication skills through information, instruction, and training to promote a positive work culture and reduce the risk of bullying in the workplace. These strategies and should not simply focus on minimising or controlling bullying, but should be designed to create a long-term change within the workplace. HR practitioners should also consider conducting periodic surveys of current employees to assess whether any

destructive behaviour is impacting on morale or creating other problems in the workplace.

Seek information; if there is a bully in the organisation, it is imperative that management and HR recognise the red flags. A pattern of resignations, discharges, or requests for transfers might be an indication of workplace bullying. An increase in sick leave or the number of grievances filed could also flag the need for further investigation. Additionally, conducting meaningful exit interviews with each individual who leaves the organisation will help identify any problems and patterns. Larger organisations can keep statistical records and information relating to these events, to allow for a more thorough analysis.

Encourage "active" managing. Workplace bullying prevention efforts can be better served by giving management a more active role. In doing so, managers are in a better position to spot potential bullies and eliminate inappropriate behaviour with their presence. As an HR practitioner, you can make managers aware of the responsibility they have to assist their employees, thereby improving management's sensitivity in dealing with conflicts. Additionally, managers need to take all complaints seriously, and investigate each compliant properly. Immediate action should be taken to address bullying behaviour. Another option may be to provide alternative dispute resolution to deal with conflict.

Conclusion
This study examines several specific and practical implications regarding workplace bullying for managers, organisations, and women in the workplace. Firstly, the present study creates awareness of the prevalence of bullying amongst South African employees, and specifically women, in the workplace (Van Schalkwyk, 2011), through both direct and indirect bullying. Information regarding workplace bullying amongst women will increase awareness of what constitutes workplace bullying and how to manage it, which will contribute to diminishing its occurrence and impact on women in the workplace (MacIntosh, 2011).

It also highlights why the necessary resources and support are needed from organisations and managers and in the workplace.

Secondly, this study gives managers and HR practitioners' insight into the importance of having the necessary prevention methods in place to address bullying in the workplace by informing managers of the serious potential consequences associated with workplace bullying for both individuals and the organisation. By taking into consideration the seriousness of workplace bullying, managers can ensure that they establish and maintain a workplace where the intrinsic dignity and value of persons are respected, which will make the organisation more productive and successful (Momberg,2011). Finally, the study raises awareness among organisations, managers, HR practitioners, researchers, and employees of the pervasive and damaging nature of bullying in the South African workplace.

Limitations and scope for future study
The limitations of the study lie with the lack of data and literature on the different bullying experiences of South African men and women in the workplace. This accompanied with the unexplored comparison between bullying and retaliation in the workplace has allowed for further limitation to the study. The different bullying experiences of South African men and women in the workplace would allow for a deeper insight into the effect and consequences of bullying in South Africa, allowing for legislators and HR practitioners to re-evaluate their approach when addressing complaints arising out this form of silent abuse.

If bullying in South Africa is regarded to be in its infancy retaliation within the workplace is a concept and reality that is at its inception. Retaliation is about making people afraid to complain or to assert their rights. It is a subtle, but important distinction. A detailed investigation into retaliation as a consequence of bullying needs to be explored. Countries like the United States of America have identified retaliation as a debilitating consequence of

bullying however, South African law identifies retaliation as a consequence of whistleblowing. Whistleblowing may result in retaliation however; the fear to retaliate is not confined to whistleblowing and sexual harassment. Retaliation has the ability to attach itself other types of bullying. Gossip, sarcasm, vulgarity, and isolation are consequences of retaliation.

What should become apparent through this study is the need for further research on workplace bullying in South Africa, specifically on the influence of different socio-demographic characteristics and industries, as well as the country context. The study has identified workplace bullying as a prevalent problem in South African organisations. It is therefore, increasingly important for both employers and employees to be well informed regarding the manifestations and effects of workplace bullying, in order to combat this phenomenon effectively. Furthermore, it is important that organisations realise that workplace bullying if not adequately addressed can lead to several negative outcomes, including increased absenteeism and emotional distress. Moreover, it is essential that the HR practitioners in organisations investigate and address bullying, and ensure the active participation and co-operation of managers in preventing bullying in the workplace.

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