GUANXI ORIENTATION AND SUBJECTIVE NORMS IN KNOWLEDGE SHARING: THE MEDIATING EFFECTS OF LOSS OF KNOWLEDGE POWER AND CODIFY EFFORT

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Abstract

Although knowledge sharing has been widely treated as the important factor for the success of an organization, relatively little work on exploring how to promote employees’ knowledge sharing has been done in the Chinese context. Due to the unique cultural background, attitudes, and values of the Chinese people, it is likely that the lessons gained from knowledge management practices in developed countries will not apply directly in the Chinese context. In this study, we draw upon the social capital theory to explore how two Chinese social capital, guanxi orientation and subjective norms, affect knowledge sharing. Specifically, our study proposes that loss of knowledge power and codify effort have a mediating effect on the relationship between social capital and knowledge sharing intention. A survey conducted in China was employed to test the hypotheses. The results indicate that guanxi orientation increases knowledge sharing intention through reducing loss of knowledge power. While subjective norms increase knowledge sharing intention through promoting codify effort. Theoretical and practical implications, as well as directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Knowledge sharing, Guanxi orientation, Subjective norms, Social capital, Knowledge power, Codify effort.
1 INTRODUCTION

Employee knowledge sharing is of vital importance to the success of organizations. Such sharing helps organizations develop competences, increase value, and maintain their competitive advantage (Hau et al. 2013; Liu & Phillips 2011; Reagans & McEvily 2003; Wang & Noe 2010). However, the literature indicates that individuals who have acquired or created knowledge may have limited willingness to share with others in an organization (Davison et al. 2013; Gibbert & Krause 2002). It is suggested that costs incurred from the process of sharing knowledge (such as loss of knowledge power and the effort for codification) will prevent employees to share knowledge with others (Chai & Kim 2010; He & Wei 2009; Huang et al. 2008; Kankanhalli et al. 2005). Under this condition, managers, especially in China, are challenged to relieve individuals’ reluctance to facilitate the knowledge sharing. Due to the unique cultural background, attitudes, and values of the Chinese people, it is likely that the lessons gained from knowledge management (KM) practices in developed countries will not apply directly in the Chinese context (Burrows et al. 2005). Thus, investigating how to decrease employees’ perceptions of cost, and thereby promoting them to share knowledge with others actively within organizations in China is of great significance and importance (Davison et al. 2013; Holste & Fields 2010; Renzl 2008; Wasko & Faraj 2005).

The existing literature widely applies the social capital perspective to investigate the factors affecting knowledge sharing (Chang & Chuang 2011; Chiu et al. 2006; Hau et al. 2013; Inkpen & Tsang 2005; Laursen et al. 2012). Scholars present that an employees’ social capital could facilitate them to share knowledge with each other. However, these studies are mostly conducted in the context of U.S., Japan and other developed economics. Scholars have thus indicated that the generalizability of such KM findings is problematic (Wong et al. 2003), since China has the unique institutional rules, social norms, and values (Bruton et al. 2007). Indeed, some researchers indicate that social capital includes not only social relationships, but also the norms and values (Cook 2005; Huang et al. 2008; Portes & Sensenbrenner 1998; Wang et al. 2012). In China, both guanxi orientation and subjective norms can reflect the values and norms related to social capital (He & Wei 2009; Huang et al. 2008; Huang et al. 2011; Wang & Noe 2010). However, few studies have empirically examined the impact of these two kinds of social capital on knowledge sharing simultaneously.

On the other hand, scholars have argued that in China, both guanxi orientation and subjective norms can build harmony and trustful work environment, thereby facilitating their coordination and communication (Putnam 1995; Xiaojuan Ou et al. 2014). The literature further indicates that these two types of social capital could decrease employees’ perceived costs associated with knowledge sharing, loss of knowledge power and the effort for codification in particular. For example, employees’ guanxi orientation would make them believe that it is important to warrant the effort to maintain a relationship; they may be willing to sacrifice short term benefits, in order to achieve long-term benefits (Huang et al. 2008; Huang et al. 2011). Meanwhile, subjective norms in terms of both written and unwritten rules would force employees to accomplish team goals even sacrifice their personal interests (Wang et al. 2012). However, although researcher realizes the possible role of social capital in decreasing employees’ perceived cost in knowledge sharing, there is a lack of empirical research exploring how the perceived costs mediate the relationships between social capital and knowledge sharing in China.

To address the above research gap, we applied the social capital theory to investigate the influence of employees’ guanxi orientation and subjective norms on their perceived cost, and thereby their knowledge sharing intention. Specifically, as a social exchange process, knowledge sharing would incur costs in the form of both actual loss of resources and opportunity costs (Hau et al. 2013; Kankanhalli et al. 2005; Molm 1997; Scott 2000). Accordingly, we treat both loss of knowledge power and codifying effort as two cost-related factors in the knowledge sharing process. Loss of knowledge power reflects an employee’s perception of power and unique value lost due to knowledge sharing, while codification effort refers to an employee’s perception of the time and effort required to codify and input knowledge (Huang et al. 2008; Kankanhalli et al. 2005). Meanwhile, we define guanxi orientation and subjective norms as two important factors related to social capital which can influence
the two cost-related factors. In this study, we finally examine the potential mediating role of loss of knowledge power and codify effort in the relationship between guanxi orientation, subjective norms, and knowledge sharing intention. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical background and hypotheses development of this study. Section 3 describes the research methodology we employed. Section 4 discusses our data analysis and results. Finally, section 5 presents our discussion and conclusion.

2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

According to social capital theory, social capital refers to the sum of assets or resources embedded in relationships between individuals, communities, networks, or societies (Granovetter 1992; Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998). The literature indicates that this capital not only reflects social relationships, but also the norms and values associated with the relationships (Coleman & Coleman 1994; Portes & Sensenbrenner 1998; Putnam 1995). For example, Putnam (1995) presents social capital as the features of a relationship, such as networks, norms and social trust, which facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. In the Chinese culture, guanxi orientation has been defined as an important aspect of social capital (Xiao & Tsui 2007), while subjective norms reflect the written or unwritten rules or laws that urge organizational employees to follow (McAllister 1995). These two kinds of social capital can help employees to overcome the reluctance, which most people fear to lose knowledge power and spend too much effort to share knowledge. As such, the current study proposes that both guanxi orientation and subjective norms are social capitals that can influence the perceptions of loss of knowledge power and codify effort, and consequently affecting individual’s knowledge sharing intention (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Research Model.](image)

2.1 Guanxi Orientation

Guanxi refers to interpersonal relationships or connections, which is based on high quality of social interactions and implicitly mutual interest and benefit (Lee et al. 2001; Xin & Pearce 1996; Yang 1994). For a long time, Chinese people have viewed guanxi as an effective lubricant that enhances smoothness and efficiency of their daily social functions (Chen et al. 2011; Shou et al. 2011). Fan (2002) indicates that guanxi underlines individual-based capital and personal gain. With such orientation, Chinese employees are inclined to put more energy in maintaining good relationships with each other within the organization. In addition to the meaning of relationships, guanxi also has extra meaning of power, social status and resource transmission. It always plays as an informal mechanism that is “a subtle for formal institutional and legal support” (Xin & Pearce 1996).

Guanxi orientation can reduce fear of losing knowledge power via enhancing trust and promoting harmony among employees. Specifically, guanxi orientation can create a deep mutual commitment
that deepens trust and promotes mutually beneficial material exchanges among partners, thereby increasing the willingness to sacrifice some knowledge power (Nie et al. 2011; Renzl 2008). Moreover, guanxi orientation could make employees safeguard the interests of each other and make them not in a hurry to highlight the individual value (Nie et al. 2011). In addition, guanxi orientation may help people have a better career life (Huang et al. 2008). For example, when people share valuable and useful knowledge with others, it will cause them to gain face and thus improve their personal influence (Constant et al. 1994; Huang et al. 2008). Furthermore, guanxi orientation enables employees to have some degree of confidence in each other (Nie et al. 2011). High level confidence will ensure people to share knowledge with their colleagues because they want to develop relationships with them and anticipate to receive certain reward instead of the loss (Huang et al. 2008).

H1: Guanxi orientation has a negative impact on loss of knowledge power.

Guanxi orientation also promotes knowledge contributors to pay more effort to codify knowledge. First, investing in emotions, expressing care and understanding will produce affective trust (McAllister 1995). An atmosphere of trust may facilitate employees to spend more time and effort on codifying knowledge, skills and experience. Furthermore, the more valuable and useful knowledge, the harder it will require to articulate and document (Cabrera & Cabrera 2002; Renzl 2008). In this view, the process of knowledge documentation and expression in writing could embody one’s ability and thus more face can be gained by the knowledge contributor, which will in turn incentivize them to contribute more on codifying knowledge (Huang et al. 2011). Finally, reciprocity can give the knowledge contributors expectations that they can get more benefits after they invest effort and time on codifying knowledge.

H2: Guanxi orientation has a positive impact on the codify effort.

2.2 Subjective Norms

Subjective norms refer to a constraint rather than an impetus (Coleman & Coleman 1994). Norms are written or unwritten regulations or rules that individual should follow when they take certain actions (Robbins & Judge 2001). Specifically, subjective norms, as a kind of social capital, emphasize collective benefits rather than personal interests (Wang et al. 2012). Scholars suggest that norms are standards of behavior that based on widely shared beliefs what individual group members (such as boss, CEO and colleagues in an organization) ought to behave in a given situation (Elster 1989; Fehr & Fischbacher 2004; Horne 2001). The group members might obey the norm voluntarily if individual goals are in line with the requirement of rules, or they might be forced to obey the norm if their individual goals differ from organizational goals (Fehr & Fischbacher 2004). Under this condition, the enforcement of the norm presupposes that norms violations are punished (Fehr & Fischbacher 2004).

Losing knowledge power can be seemed inconsistent with employees’ individual goals. Employees afraid that loss of knowledge power will cause them to lose their individual competitive advantage (Kankanhalli et al. 2005). Institutionalism encourage trustful relationships among employees (Zucker 1987). Norms would facilitate the building of trust between employees. In this view, when subjective norms are strong, knowledge contributors are likely to believe that they will be rewarded appropriately to compensate their loss of potential value. Under this circumstance, knowledge contributors may be confident that their temporary loss and sacrifice would be worthy (Wang et al. 2012). Meanwhile, when norms are strong, the barriers stem from fear of losing knowledge power witnessed in contexts that value personal expertise may be ineffective (Jarvenpaa & Staples 2000). Conversely, with weak norms, knowledge contributors may be concerned more about loss of knowledge power (Kankanhalli et al. 2005). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H3: Subjective norms have a negative impact on loss of knowledge power.

Codification of knowledge may not be dependent only on ability, but also on individuals’ willingness to document knowledge (Hansen 2002). The knowledge contributor may be unwilling to share knowledge due to lack of trust (Renzl 2008). When the norms employees perceive from their
organizations, supervisors and colleagues are strong, they will become more trust to them (Gray 2001). An atmosphere of trust may facilitate employees to spend more time and effort to finish knowledge documentation and codification. When employees trust each other in an organization, knowledge contributors believe that knowledge recipients would not misuse their knowledge and would give them credit for their codification effort (Kankanhalli et al. 2005). Meanwhile, the more those organizations expect employees to codify knowledge, the higher the codify effort the employees will spend. In the contrary, knowledge contributors may be reluctant to devote energy and effort to codify knowledge when norms are weak. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H4: Subjective norms have a positive impact on the codify effort.

2.3 Loss of Knowledge Power

Previous research suggests that knowledge sharing could be hindered if people are afraid that sharing knowledge with others will cause them to lose their unique value (Empson 2001). Employees gain their valuable knowledge gradually from their working experience including both success and failures experience. As a consequence, the valuable knowledge enables them to exceed the performance of their colleagues, obtain increasing salary and more opportunities in their career (Huang et al. 2008). Thus, individuals are anxious about giving away valuable knowledge while being offered little in return (Renzl 2008). More importantly, employees on top of certain rare knowledge and skills will make others esteem them as worthwhile and irreplaceable persons. Thus, although knowledge sharing could bring them benefits, they hold on their knowledge if they think this could benefit them more (Davenport & Pruzak 2000).

H5: Loss of knowledge power has a negative impact on knowledge sharing intention.

2.4 Codify Effort

The object of codification is to format knowledge in a certain style to make it easier to be found and to be understood by other members in the organization (Davenport & Pruzak 2000). The level of codification is of critical importance to knowledge sharing (Zander & Kogut 1995). It is evident that once knowledge is fully documented and expressed in writing, it can be shared smoothly among employees within the organization (Renzl 2008). In particular, the simple act of writing or codifying knowledge can facilitate its clarification and alembication (Davison et al. 2013; Newell & Edelman 2008). Thus, knowledge codification facilitates knowledge sharing.

H6: Codify effort has a positive impact on knowledge sharing intention.

3 SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

We conducted a survey in China to test our research model. Since China has become a global economic power and Chinese companies are increasingly becoming influential players in the global village, the data collected from China become growing valuable. We chose the part-time Master of Business Administration (MBA), which are working full-time in a wide variety of different sizes of Chinese organizations and come from a vast number of different industry sectors, as the target samples. These MBA students, most of whom are in senior positions, had already taken KM courses in their first year of MBA study. Because they have not only enough practice experiences but also considerable academic experiences, their view of knowledge sharing can make a contribution to our research.

Before formal data collection, we conducted a pilot test of 19 randomly selected MBA students. The feedback received from them showed that the items and questions were appropriate. In the formal study, we invited second year MBA students from a university located in eastern China to participate in this study voluntarily. Out of a total of 200 questionnaires, 154 responses were returned, with a
response rate of 77.0%. Table 1 shows the demographic data of these respondents, such as the information about their industry, the size of the organization, experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transportations</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>50 or below</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>51-100</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>101-500</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>501-1000</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1001 or more</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director of the department</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior Manager</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Demographic Information of Respondents.

4 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

LISREL 8.7 was used to conduct our model as it supports both confirmatory and exploratory research. According to two-stage analytical procedures, we examine the measurement model and structural model.

4.1 Measurement Model

In order to validate the measurement model, we assessed Cronbach’s alpha, composite reliability of constructs, and average variance extracted (Davenport & Pruzak) to test convergent validity (Davenport & Pruzak). As Table 2 reports, Cronbach’s alpha ranged from 0.694 to 919, nearly all above the benchmark value of 0.700, except for the codify effort construct. The values of composite reliability ranged from 0.802 to 0.942 and were above the benchmark value of 0.700. The AVE scores ranged from 0.670 to 0.766 and were above the benchmark value of 0.500 (Fornell & Larcker 1981). Consider that they were only two items of codify effort construct and its high composite reliability and AVE, we think it is acceptable in this study. All these results indicated that the measurement model had satisfactory convergent validity. In addition, as Table 3 shows, the square roots of the AVEs for all constructs were greater than the correlations between constructs, which confirmed the discriminant validity of the measurement model.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
<th>Composite Reliability</th>
<th>Average Variance Extracted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guanxi (GX)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.919</td>
<td>0.942</td>
<td>0.766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective Norms(SubN)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.789</td>
<td>0.879</td>
<td>0.707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of knowledge power(LKP)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.874</td>
<td>0.915</td>
<td>0.728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codify effort (CoE)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.694</td>
<td>0.802</td>
<td>0.670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to share knowledge (Int)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.804</td>
<td>0.888</td>
<td>0.727</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GX</th>
<th>Norms</th>
<th>LKP</th>
<th>CoE</th>
<th>Int</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GX</td>
<td>0.875</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SubN</td>
<td>0.350</td>
<td>0.841</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LKP</td>
<td>-0.189</td>
<td>-0.091</td>
<td>0.854</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>0.180</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td>0.819</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Int</td>
<td>0.577</td>
<td>0.333</td>
<td>0.382</td>
<td>0.101</td>
<td>0.852</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The diagonal elements are the square root of the AVE.

Table 3. Correlations.

4.2 Structural Model

Figure 2 presented the results of the structural model. The results showed a good fit between the model and the dataset ($\chi^2 = 253.14$ on 112 d.f., RMSEA=0.08, CFI=0.94, IFI=0.94, NFI=0.90, NNFI=0.93). The results demonstrated that most of the hypotheses were supported, except H2 and H3. The results indicated that guanxi ($\beta$=−0.29, $p<0.001$) had a negative effect on loss of knowledge power and norms ($\beta=0.28$, $p<0.010$) had a positive effect on codify effort, thereby supporting H1 and H4. Moreover, knowledge power ($\beta=0.50$, $p<0.001$) was negatively related to knowledge sharing intention and codify effort ($\beta=0.26$, $p<0.010$) was positively related to knowledge sharing intention, as anticipated in H5 and H6.

Figure 3. Results of the Structural Model.

Note: *$p<0.050$; **$p<0.010$; ***$p<0.001$. 
4.3 Mediating Effect Testing

We tested the mediating effects of loss of knowledge power and codify effort on the relationship between two types of social capital and knowledge sharing intention by the procedures suggested by Gregory et al. (2009). The analysis was conducted in three steps based on the path coefficients and t-values among the independent variables (IVs), mediating variables (MVs) and dependent variable (DV). As shown in Table 5, the results suggested that the impact of guanxi orientation on knowledge sharing intention are partially mediated by loss of knowledge power and the impact of subjective norms on knowledge sharing intention are fully mediated by the codify effort.

![Table 5. Mediating Effects](image)

5 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATION

The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of guanxi orientation and subjective norms on knowledge sharing in the Chinese context. Drawing upon the perspective of social capital, this paper proposes a conceptual model in which loss of knowledge power and codifying effort play a mediating role between two kinds of social capital and knowledge sharing intention. Our empirical findings on the relationship among guanxi orientation, subjective norms and knowledge sharing intention are consistent with prior studies (Huang et al. 2008; Huang et al. 2011; Wang et al. 2012). Rather, our study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how guanxi orientation and subjective norms affect knowledge sharing intention by reducing the loss of knowledge power and improving codify effort.

The results of this study strongly support that subjective norms can urge employees to make the codification effort and guanxi orientation can help employees reduce the loss of knowledge power. However, the results do not support the existence of the impact of guanxi orientation on the codify effort. A possible explanation is that codifying knowledge is a formal requirement of their supervisors and managers, and as such guanxi does not help add more investment on knowledge codification (Huang et al. 2008). That is, they would usually codify knowledge in obedience to this requirement rather than interpersonal interactions. Our results also do not support the hypothesis on the relationship between subjective norms and loss of knowledge power. This may be due to sharing informal and tacit knowledge will greatly weaken the power and authority. The prevailing culture in China has a deeply embedded preference for the communication and exchange of informal and tacit forms of information (Davison et al. 2013; Martinsons & Westwood 1997).

Our current study further indicates that loss of knowledge power can partially mediate the impact of guanxi orientation on knowledge sharing intention, and codify effort can fully mediate the impact of subjective norms on knowledge sharing intention. Our research thus takes an important step forward by exploring the underlying mechanism through which guanxi orientation and subjective norms influence knowledge sharing intention.

Nevertheless, it is necessary evaluate the contribution of this study in the light of certain limitations. First, there are some other possible types of social capital that can influence knowledge sharing
intention. As such, future research may extend the scope of this study by examining the details of how other Chinese concepts influence knowledge sharing. Second, all the major constructs in this study are measured by the perception of individual respondents, which are inherently subjective. Although our analyses do not show that the common method bias is a serious problem, we urge future researchers to use objective data or collect data from multiple informants to ensure the robustness of our results. Third, this research model was empirically tested based on the responses of informants who obtained training from the same institution in China. Therefore, scholars and managers should take precautions in generalizing our findings to firms which are located in different areas. Fourth, this study only considers three control variables. Future research should examine other possible control variables.

This study has several implications for both researchers. Specifically, from a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature mainly in two ways. First, this study enriches our understanding of the impact of social capital on knowledge sharing in the context of China. We classified social capital into guanxi orientation and subjective norms to offer a clear and comprehensive insight. The findings suggest that these two types of social capital can affect knowledge sharing intention both directly and indirectly. Second, this study bridges the separate studies on social capital, cost and knowledge sharing intention. It empirically tests their relationships in the China context. Our study examines the effects of two types of social capital on knowledge sharing intention and finds that in the China context, both loss of knowledge power and codify effort can affect knowledge sharing intention, which can be also affected by guanxi orientation and subjective norms.

In addition, this study also has major practical implication for managers. First, since Chinese employees are likely to spend a lot of their time to exchange informal and tacit forms of knowledge. We suggest that managers should attempt to formulate a series of rules and regulations of penalties and rewards to arise the enthusiasm of knowledge codify of staffs. For instance, managers should create a harmonious environment and maintain a knowledge-friendly culture in the workplace. The tangible and intangible benefits from good relationships could offset the loss of knowledge sharing. The findings indicate that guanxi orientation and subjective norms will lead to better knowledge sharing when they complementarily combine. Therefore, organizations should not only create a harmony atmosphere but also provide useful and specific guidelines for management practice. In order to push people to pay the time and effort to codify knowledge, policies should be developed accordingly.

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