Relationship between career aspirations and study behaviours among second year distance learners of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between career aspirations and study behaviours among distance learners of the University of Cape Coast (Ghana) who performed poorly during their first year of study. The correlation research design that employed the explanatory sequential mixed methods approach was adopted for the study. Specifically, three hundred and sixty eight (368) participants were purposively selected, out of which 357 were used for analysis. Social Cognitive Career Theory as postulated by Lent et al. (1994) formed the study's theoretical framework. Data analysis was done using the descriptive statistics and tetrachoric correlation coefficient as well as the Merriam process of analytical coding. The results of the quantitative analysis revealed that the majority of participants had positive career aspirations as well as good study behaviours. However, the correlation coefficient was $r(355) = .273$, $p = .01$, meaning the correlation between the two variables was statistically significant but weak. The study recommends that, in order to help boost students' academic performance, management of the College of Distance Education of the University of Cape Coast should organise periodic career guidance seminars for students, to stimulate their career awareness and nurture their enthusiasm.

Keywords: Aspirations, career, distance learners, relationship, study behaviour.

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INTRODUCTION

Career goals play a significant role in shaping an individual's study behaviour in any higher education setting because it serves as motivation for the individual to achieve academic excellence. Lopez-Bonilla et al. (2012) identified that most common motivations for course or programme completion relate to career aspirations. Research findings revealed the importance of career aspirations on academic and career success. Schoon (2007) and Schoon and Polek (2011) found that students with high educational and career aspirations achieved better results than those with low career aspirations. Willcoxson and Wynder (2010) are of the view that ambitious career plans are good predictors of higher school achievement because they help students demonstrate greater interest in their coursework. Adeokun and Opoko (2015) also affirm that students with greater

clarity about why they choose their course and whether the chosen course has a direct pathway to their preferred career have better outcomes in terms of academic performance.

Agbo et al. (2015) hold the view that career aspiration is the professional path one wishes to follow and maintain; it is a lifelong process that demands accurate perceptions of ability, potential and achievement. Career aspiration is defined as long-term individual work-related goals (Quaglia and Cobb as cited in Hafsyan, 2015). According to these authors, career aspirations revolve around the ambitions and inspirations of students. Ambition, as defined by Quaglia and Cobb (cited in Hafsyan, 2015) is the perception that an activity is important as a means to achieve a future goal. Thus, if a student has the desire to achieve a future goal, s/he will be more ambitious and

strive for the goal s/he has set for him/herself. Quaglia and Cobb further assert that inspiration reflects activity which is exciting and enjoyable to the individual.

Students' attitude towards achievement situations therefore explains the type of goal they set for themselves at the onset. Mesa (2012) asserts that individuals with positive career aspirations have high learning goal orientation because their characteristics of seeking to master new skills, complete tasks and overcome difficulties will be in line with their career pursuits. Horne (2010) opines that students need to comprehend that the core skills learned in class are directly linked to their career interests and this will increase their motivation to perform well. In the same vein, Taylor (as cited in Bhat and Khandai, 2016) states that the value a student places on self-worth affects his or her academic achievement. Career aspiration therefore occupies a very important place in education. Vaughan and Roberts (2007) assert that a career journey is a very complex, non-linear pathway which takes many turns over a person's lifetime and, as such, one needs to better understand the role of unpredictability in career decisions and what tools might be useful to help manage this.

Student study behaviours refer to study habits which lead to the achievement of a learner's goal through a prescribed pattern of study practices (Kaur and Kaur, 2013; Crede and Kuncel, 2008). According to Crede and Kuncel (2008), behaviour is mainly an external factor: good or poor, that facilitates the study process. Good study behaviours include taking notes in class, engaging in study sessions, reviewing course materials and self-rehearsal (Crede and Kuncel, 2008). Poor study behaviours include skipping class, not doing assignments (Crede and Kuncel, 2008), often watching television (Bhat and Khandai, 2016) and mobile phone over-usage. Without good study behaviour, a student is unlikely to succeed. Linderman (2010) opines that having a better understanding of students' motivations as related to their academic performance can greatly assist in implementing strategies to enhance their performance.

There is relatively little information on the correlates of career aspirations and study behaviours, since most studies conducted on career aspirations were linked to students' academic performance. Notwithstanding, Onuoha and Unegbu (2013) delved into the subject in their article entitled "Career aspiration as a predictor of students' performance on cataloguing and classification" (a librarianship degree course) at Babcock University. Their findings revealed that a minority of the respondents who desired to work as librarians or archivists were more consistent in their perceived utility of cataloguing and classification than those who did not want to pursue library or archive studies. The findings revealed that participants who want to work as librarians and archivists were academically outperformed by those aspiring for careers in other disciplines.

Further, a longitudinal study conducted by Gutman and Schoon (2012) to examine a pathway model investigating whether uncertain career aspirations and other associated variables mediate the link between socioeconomic status and prior achievement and later educational outcome, revealed that adolescents who had lower prior achievement and were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to have uncertainty when it comes to their career aspirations. The study concluded that a lack of career goals was a major factor negatively affecting students' study behaviours. The authors were of the view that effective studying does not require students to possess knowledge and appropriate learning techniques, but rather sustained efforts towards study motivation. Thus, if students do not have any career driven motivation for enrolling in a programme, such students will find it difficult to study for success.

Furthermore, Khattab (2015) conducted a study entitled "Students' aspirations, expectations and school achievement: what really matters?" to examine how different combinations of aspirations, expectations and school achievement could influence students' future educational behaviour. The study revealed that students with either high aspirations or high expectations have higher school achievement than those with both low aspirations and low expectations. However, the study also found that low expectations do not negatively impact students' future behaviour when they have high aspirations accompanied with high school achievement.

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) postulated by Lent et al. (1994) formed the theoretical framework for the study. This theory is based on Bandura's influential 1986 general cognitive theory which also looks at processes, but the SCCT has been extended to cover many areas of psychosocial functioning such a academic performance. The SCCT is therefore an integrative theory of students' academic and career-related interests, preference, performance and satisfaction which views work transition as a gradual process with continued appropriate developmental interventions throughout the school years. The SCCT aims at explaining three interrelated aspects of career development: how basic academic and career interest are developed; how educational and career choices are made; and how academic and career success is obtained. This means that career planning begins by developing an interest in a specific field and progresses until one becomes successful in that field.

Three key variables underlying the SCCT are: self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals. According to Lent et al. (1994), self-efficacy refers to expectations about one's performance capabilities. Outcome expectations also refer to beliefs about the consequences of performance efforts, and personal goals refer to the intentions of an individual in achieving long-term outcomes, such as obtaining a good grade in a particular subject, finishing school or getting a particular job. Lent et al. (*idem*) affirm that people are more likely to act based on their beliefs. The SCCT suggests that education and career programmes should be directed

toward efforts to expand interest and nurture career aspirations in children, adolescent and young adults, and also promote successful work adjustment. Based on the SCCT assertion, the present study assumes that a student who has positive career aspiration is most likely to have positive academic goals which will in turn boost his or her motivation to study hard in order to enhance his or her performance in the programme.

Students' results released by the Students Records Management Unit of the College of Distance Education (CoDE) of the University of Cape Coast (UCC) revealed that most students who are on the Diploma in Basic Education (DBE) programme perform poorly. Although some of these students may have entered the programme while working or having family and other social responsibilities that might infringe on their studies, some interventions have been put in place by the university to assist students in their academics. Some of these interventions include orientation programmes, periodic study clinics and face-to-face tutorials, counselling and academic advising. Notwithstanding this, the results of first year students who enrolled in the DBE programme at the 2016/2017 academic year revealed that most of the DBE students in the Central region exhibited low academic performance in the two semesters. What then is the cause of this low academic performance among DBE students in the distance learning programme? Patton and McMahon (2006) opined that career education and support are relevant to ensure lifelong learning and success. Since students' academic success is crucial to any institution, it has become necessary examine the relationship between career aspirations and study behaviours among these students whose CGPA was less than 1.0, to investigate the cause of the low academic performance. Hence, the need for this study.

Research questions

1. What are the career aspirations of students on the distance education programme of the University of Cape Coast who performed poorly during their first year of study?
2. What are the study behaviours of students on the distance learning programme of the University of Cape Coast who performed poorly during their first year of study?
3. What is the relationship between career aspirations and study behaviours among distance learners of the University of Cape Coast who performed poorly during their first year of study?

Study significance

The results of this study may contribute to the existing related literature on distance learners' career aspirations and study behaviours. An important aspect of this investigation is that the findings may be used by management of CoDE in their decision-making policy to improve upon students' academic performance. Further, counsellors at CoDE will benefit from the study when dealing with issues relating to poor student performance. Finally, the results will also help students understand the need to have a positive study motivator, such as career aspiration, in order to enhance their academic achievements.

METHODOLOGY

The correlational research design which employed a sequential mixed methods approach was adopted for the study. The purpose of the correlational research design was to verify relationships between or among variables but not to ascertain cause and effect. According to Creswell (2014), correlational research design is useful when a researcher is interested in investigating the degree of relationship between two or more variables. In this study, correlational research design was used to determine the extent to which career aspiration relates to study behaviour and not the extent to which one variable causes change in another. However, the sequential explanatory mixed methods (SEMM) was employed because, according to Creswell (2014), this design is most useful when the researcher wants not only to assess trends and relationships with quantitative data but also explain the reasons behind the resultant trends.

The target population was all DBE students of CoDE, UCC, in the 2016/2017 academic year, totaling 24,361 (CoDE, Students' Support Services Unit, 2017). The accessible population was 4246 DBE level 200 students from the country's Central Region. However, 368 DBE level 200 students in the distance education programme in the Central Region whose two-semester Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) in the first year was less than 1.0 were purposively recruited from the Students' Information Database of the college. A CGPA less the 1.0 basically means the student has failed. The decision to select the level 200 students was based first, on the view that they have a CGPA which can be used to assess their level of performance during the first year of study and, second, Noel-Levitz' (2015) study on "Attitudes of second-year college students that influence college completion" revealed that, nationally, 23 percent of college students fail to complete a degree despite completing their first year of college. Thus the need to help such students successfully complete their study programme.

The main data collection instrument was a self-constructed questionnaire on students' career aspirations and study behaviours. The questionnaire had two subsections: A and B. Sections A and B dealt with students' career aspirations and study behaviours respectively, on a 5-point Likert sub-scale. Students'

career aspiration had eight items measured on a 5-point Likert scale, and a maximum score of 5 × 8 = 40 and a minimum score of 1 × 8 = 8. After using descriptive statistics to calculate frequencies, the variables were reconstructed through the use of cumulative scoring systems and grouped into categories: 1 to 24 (negative career aspiration) and 25 to 40 (positive career aspiration). Similarly, students' study behaviour subscale had eight items. The maximum score a respondent could obtain was 5 × 8 = 40 while the minimum score was 1 × 8 = 8. The scores were also regrouped into 2 categories: 1 to 24 (poor study behaviour) and 25 to 40 (good study behaviour). All the items in the two sub-scales were worded in the affirmative.

The regrouping of scores was done through collapsing all the middle point responses on the Likert scale (somehow true of me) under negative responses. Velez and Ashworth (2007) affirms that respondents select the midpoint category when they evaluate a question negatively. In the same vein, for respondents having encountered a situation and being undecided or not truly sure about how they perceived the interaction, was deemed by the researcher as a negative trait. However, the use of middle point on the Likert scale was encouraged to reduce cognitive overload on respondents and to avoid missing factors (Sturgis et al., 2014). Osborne (2012) affirms that missing or incomplete data can lead to biased parameter estimates and reduction in statistical power.

Before administering the data collection instrument, it was subjected to pre-testing to check for internal consistency. The questionnaire was administered to 37 students, whose CGPA was less than 1.0, from one of the Western Region study centres. The pre-testing sample size was based on Connelly's (2008) pilot study sample size guideline, which states that 10 percent of the total sample size is appropriate for pre-testing. Cronbach's coefficients for the two Likert sub-scales were found to be .87 for career aspirations and .85 for study behaviours. A coefficient of .70 and above is acceptable to determine a research instrument is reliable (Streiner, 2003).

A research assistant was trained to help with questionnaire administration. The research assistant and the study centre coordinators helped in distributing copies of the questionnaire to participants at the seven study centres purposively selected for the study. Respondents were made to complete the questionnaires after their consent had been sought. Instructions on the questionnaire were also made clear to participants. All copies of the questionnaire were administered and collected on the same day at each study centre, with the exception of participants who were not present for face-to-face tutorials during questionnnaire administration. These were rescheduled and the data were collected at a later date. Out of the 368 students who were approached, 357 gave their consent and were used as study participants. This resulted in a response rate of 97 percent, which

according to Fincham (2007) is acceptable.

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used in analysing the quantitative data. Before investigating how career aspiration relates to study behaviour, descriptive statistics (percentages and frequencies) were used to describe the distribution of responses to the questions on the Likert scale items as well as the open-ended questions used to solicit responses on participants' biographical data. Although data collected using the research questions did not contribute directly to answering the key research hypothesis, they were intended to explore the data for further discussions.

Second, the tetrachoric correlation coefficient (r_{tc}) was used to investigate the nature of the relationship between career aspiration and study behaviours. This coefficient was used to establish the relationship between the two variables because they were artificially binary variables (Digby, 1983). Confidence level and level of significance were set at 95 percent and .05 percent, respectively.

The analytical procedure used for the qualitative data analysis was Merriam's (2009) process of analytical coding. First the recorded discussions were transcribed. Initial codes or categories, emergent themes and concepts from the texts were then established and subjected to content analysis. These were then grouped into a comprehensive sub-category or themes based on phrases or sentences. Post-analysis qualitative data were presented in the narratives and sometimes quoted verbatim.

A permission letter was sought from the Registrar of CoDE addressed to the study centre coordinators before the due date for data collection. The researcher also visited the seven study centres selected for the study prior to data collection in order to interact with the study centre coordinators. One research assistant was trained to assist the study centre coordinatorsin their task of distribution and collection of questionnaire copies.

The researcher gave due consideration to the legal framework governing the conduct of research. All participants were assured of their anonymity and informed that any information provided would be used for study purposes only. Participants were also assured that any information that would identify them (such as their study centre's name) would not be included in the study. Research participation was voluntary and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time with no consequence. In addition, anything that infringed on their right as participants was avoided. Informed consent was sought from each participant before the data collection instrument was administered.

RESULTS

Research question one aimed to answer questions relating to students' career aspirations in the distance learning programme. First, respondents' scores on a Likert

scale for career aspirations were computed using frequencies and percentages. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 1.

The results in Table 1 show that 84 (23.5%) participants who responded to item 1 (I strongly believe that the programme I am pursuing is relevant to my career path) were not certain that the programme they were pursuing was relevant to their career path. Also, 56 (15.7%) of the participants who responded to item 2 (It is my desire to get the job I am interested in) were uncertain about their desire to get the job of their choice. Similarly responses of 105 (29.4%) participants who responded to item 5 (I am certain there is a connection between what I am studying and my career aspirations) showed that they did not see or believe there was any connection between the course content and their career aspirations. Subsequently, using cumulative scoring, the results on career aspirations were regrouped from negative career aspirations (1 to 24) to positive career aspirations (25 to 40) points. The results are depicted in Table 2.

The results in Table 2 show that the majority of the respondents (75.1%) have positive career aspirations.

Research question two aimed to answer questions in relation to students' study behaviours in the selected distance learning programme. First, respondents' scores on a Likert scale for study behaviour were computed using frequencies and percentages. The analysis results are presented in Table 3.

The results in Table 3 show that 31.3 percent of the respondents disagreed with statements in item 2 (I often come to face-to-face with questions I could not solve at home for assistance) of which 20.2 percent were not even sure. This translates to 51.5 percent of respondents not having any questions for assistance during face-to-face tutorials.

Using the cumulative scoring from poor study behaviour (1 to 24 points) to good study behaviour (25 to 40), the results are depicted in Table 4.

The results in Table 4 show that the majority of the respondents 68.1 percent had good study behaviour. However, the results also revealed that almost one third of the study participants exhibited poor study behaviour.

To establish the relationship between DBE distance learners' career aspiration and study behaviour, the null hypothesis was formulated from research question three.

H_0: There is no significant relationship between career aspirations and study behaviours among distance learners of the University of Cape Coast who performed poorly during their first year of study.

The tetrachoric correlation coefficient (r_{tc}) test was performed to establish the degree of relationship between the two variables. The test of correlation between the two variables revealed $r(355) = .273$, $p = .01$). This means that the degree of relationship between students' career aspiration and study behaviour was statistically significant

because $p = .01$ is less than $p < .05$ (the threshold for statistical significance). However, the coefficient of correlation between the variables was .273, which indicates that the two variables were weakly related. Thus, statistically speaking there is a weak positive relationship between students' career aspiration and study behaviour.

In order to understand the reasons behind the resultant trend why participants had good career aspirartion as well as good study behaviour, but still had a CGPA of less 1.0 - a focus group discussion was conducted with 12 participants. An unstructured interview guide was used for the focus group discussion to solicit responses from the 12 participants. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) assert that a focus group discussion is a situation whereby a researcher ask group members very specific questions about a topic after considerable research has already been done. Although specific questions were asked during this discussion, questions generated were used to elicit initial responses and further probing questions were asked based on the participants' responses. This was used to support the quantitative data findings. The discussion revealed that the majority of respondents lacked career guidance. Four respondents said they studied hard but failed most of their papers which they still did not understand. Three respondents believed the workload was too heavy for them. Two believed they did not have enough time to study, while three believed they had wrongly chosen their study programme and wanted to drop out. One of the focus group participants shared this: "I didn't know what I wanted to do at the time of buying my application form...". Another also believed he did not really know what he was doing: "I just assumed I was doing education, because it was the only means I can get a job".

DISCUSSION

The study results revealed that there was a statistically significant relationship between students' career aspiration and study behaviour in distance learning. However, the level of significance was positively weak. This means that as more positive career aspirations are adopted, students' study behaviours will be heightened. However, the degree to which this would be observed will not be very high.

Further, descriptive statistics' analysis revealed that the majority (75.1%) of respondents had positive career aspirations and also good study behaviour (68.1%) , yet the CGPA of these students was less than 1.0. Further, the finding results revealed that only (29.4%) of the respondents were not certain that there was a connection between what they were studying and their career aspiration. This means that these participants, although they are on the programme, might have no motivation to do any meaningful learning. This contradicts the findings of Khattab (2015) who discovered that students with either high aspirations or high expectations have higher school achievement than those with both low aspirations and low

Table 1. Respondents' career aspirations.

Statements	NAT F (%)	NT F (%)	ST F (%)	T F (%)	VT F(%)
1. I strongly believe that the programme I am pursuing is relevant to my career path.	17 (4.8)	16 (4.5)	51(14.2)	115 (32.2)	158 (44.3)
2. It is my desire to get a job after this programme.	5 (1.4)	23 (6.4)	56 (15.7)	107 (30.0)	166 (46.5)
3. I want to develop as an expert in my career field.	2 (0.6)	16 (4.4)	43 (12.0)	82 (23.0)	214 (60.0)
4. I will like to pursue graduate training in my occupational area of interest.	9 (2.5)	13 (3.6)	52 (14.6)	125 (35.0)	158 (44.3)
5. I am certain there is a connection between what I am studying and my career aspirations.	16 (4.5)	14 (3.9)	75 (21)	121 (33.9)	131 (36.7)
6. Attaining a leadership position in my career is an important reason for pursuing this programme.	18 (5.0)	26 (7.3)	53 (14.9)	119 (33.3)	141 (39.5)
7. It is my desire to excel and advance in my career field.	5 (1.4)	11 (3.1)	44 (12.3)	105 (29.4)	192 (53.8)
8. My aim for being on the programme is to aspire for promotion in my job.	37 (10.4)	62 (17.4)	58 (16.2)	87 (24.4)	113 (31.6)

Key: NAT = Not at all true of me, NT = Not True of me, ST = Somehow true of me, T = True of me, VT = Very true of me.

Table 2. Respondents career aspirations.

Statement	Groups	n	Percent
Career aspirations	Positive	268	75.1
	Negative	89	24.9
	Total	357	100

Table 3. Respondents' study behaviours.

Statements	NAT F (%)	NT F (%)	ST F (%)	T F (%)	VT F(%)
1. I take notes during face-to-face tutorials.	14 (3.9)	35 (9.8)	22 (6.2)	142 (39.8)	144 (40.3)
2. I often come to face-to-face with questions I could not solve at home for assistance.	34 (9.5)	78 (21.8)	72 (20.2)	102 (28.6)	71 (19.9)
3. I seek assistance from friends when I have difficulties in my study.	20 (5.6)	32 (9.0)	28 (7.8)	149 (41.7)	128 (35.9)
4. I enhance my knowledge with information from books or the internet.	29 (8.1)	65 (18.2)	59 (16.5)	113 (31.7)	91 (25.5)
5. I divide learning materials into smaller, manageable units when studying.	19 (5.3)	43 (12.0)	51 (14.3)	128 (35.9)	116 (32.5)
6. I always read my modules weeks before quizzes and exams.	11 (3.1)	28 (7.8)	42 (11.8)	162 (45.4)	114 (31.9)
7. I have a private timetable schedule for my studies.	24 (6.7)	72 (20.2)	48 (13.5)	129 (36.1)	84 (23.5)
8. I test myself after studying to make sure I understand the content I have read.	14 (3.9)	37 (10.4)	35 (9.8)	148 (41.4)	123 (34.5)

Key: NAT = Not at all true of me, NT = Not true of me, ST = Somehow true of me, T= True of me, VT = Very true of me.

Table 4. Respondents' study behaviour.

Statement	Classification	n	Percent
Study behaviour	Good	243	68.1
	Poor	114	31.9
	Total	625	100

expectations. Further, the findings is incongruent with the findings of Gutman and Schoon (2012) who found a lack of career goals as the major factor negatively affecting students' study behaviours. However, the findings, to

some extent, were in agreement with those of Onuoha and Unegbu (2013) who noted that students who wanted to work as librarians and archivists outperformed those aspiring for careers in other disciplines. This shows that, when students are career-focused, this will help them in their academic performance.

Furthermore, to some extent, the findings were congruent with the findings of Hafsyan (2015), who found no significant relationship between students' level of involvement (which could be their study behaviour) and career aspiration for Honours and non-Honours students. Further, despite the fact that majority of the respondents had positive career aspirations and good study behaviours, in reality, they might have been experiencing changes which this study this study did not consider. This may mean that, in reality, the respondents might have been experiencing challenges which this study did not consider. It might also mean that most of these students might have acquired positive career aspirations and good study behaviours due to previous experiences but lack ambition and guidance. This was affirmed in the focus group, where three group members believed they enrolled for the programme without any related ambition.

In relation to the Social Cognitive Career Theory, the study assumed that participants lacked outcome expectations which might have hindered their performance. Although participants had positive career aspirations and good study behaviours, their lack of exposure to career guidance might have influenced their goal of obtaining good grades and therefore working hard towards it. Also, if a student has a personal goal (such as obtaining good grades), but lacks outcome expectations, it will be very difficult for such a student to achieve his/her long-term goals.

Finally, it is assumed that students in a distance learning programme have already developed basic academic and career interest and/or made their educational and career choices. What was left now was for the university to help them obtain academic and career success.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, the study examined how students' career aspirations related to study behaviours in distance learning and found out that there existed a statistical relationship between the two variables but the degree of the relationship was weak. The findings showed that the majority of the participants had positive career aspirations as well as good study behaviours but may have lacked career guidance which might have contributed to their poor performance. This lack of career guidance might have created a lack of ambition needed to excel, on the part of participants. The study recommends to counsellors of the Counselling Unit of CoDE to assess fresh students career aspirations when given admission at the college using any career readiness scale. Further, the study recommends to the management of CoDE to institute periodic career guidance seminars to students who enroll in distance education programmes, especially DBE students, throughout their studies to stimulate career awareness and also nurture their enthusiasm to study for positive results.

Study limitation

The focus of the study was primarily to investigate the relationship between career aspirations and study behaviours among DBE distance learners of the University of Cape Coast. in the Central region, whose CGPA was less than 1.0 in their two semesters results. The findings of the study is therefore limited to only DBE students in the distance programme of the University of Cape Coast.

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