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(IJHSS) Leader–Member Exchange Quality as a Moderator of Employee
Performance and Career Mobility in Kenyan Healthcare NGOs



Leader–Member Exchange Quality as a Moderator of Employee Performance and Career Mobility in Kenyan Healthcare NGOs

 **Bogonko Risper Keruboh Asnath^{1*}, Prof. Harriet J. Kidombo², Prof. Mercy G. Munjuri³, Dr. Moses M. Otieno⁴**

^{1,2,3}Department of Business Administration,

Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, University of Nairobi, Kenya

⁴Department of Extra Mural Studies,

Faculty of Education and External Studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

Purpose: The study focuses on the moderating effect of leader-member exchange (LMX) on the link between employee performance and perceived career mobility of healthcare workers in Kenyan NGOs. Drawing on the LMX theory, the study posits that high-quality supervisor–subordinate relationships enhance the performance–mobility connection through relational access to mentorship, advocacy, and developmental opportunities in structurally restricted settings.

Methodology: The research was conducted by cross sectional survey of 370 employees out of 1267 population in 13 healthcare NGOs using stratified random sampling method. Validated multi-item Likert scales were used to measure employee performance, LMX, and career mobility. The moderation effect was tested using hierarchical multiple regression with HC3 robust standard errors.

Findings: Results show that employee performance had a significant main effect on career mobility ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$) and a significant interaction with LMX ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < .01$; $\Delta R^2 = .024$, $p < .01$). Simple slopes analysis shows that the relationship is stronger at high LMX (+1 SD: slope ≈ 0.53 , $p < .001$) than at low LMX (–1 SD: slope ≈ 0.22 , $p < .05$).

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: The results broaden the concept of leader–member exchange theory in the context of resource-poor nonprofit settings by showing how a relational approach to leadership can make up for weak formal mobility structures. In practice, healthcare NGOs need to fund supervisory leadership programs to enhance the relationship between supervisors and subordinates and therefore increase the perceived opportunities for employees' careers and increase employee retention.

Keywords: *Leader–Member Exchange, Employee Performance, Career Mobility, Healthcare NGOs*

1. Introduction

Career mobility is a major component of how organizations compensate employees for their efforts and maintain employee motivation (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Spurk *et al.*, 2022) and refers to the extent to which employees can access upward, downward, and lateral internal career moves within their organization. In many organizational settings, mobility is likely to follow a fairly predictable pattern of employee performance and career mobility, which in turn is likely to result in greater responsibility (Becker, 1964). But this linkage may not work smoothly in an environment of structural uncertainty and scarcity of resources.

This is especially true for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the healthcare sector in developing economies. Healthcare NGOs are essential to complementing public health services in Kenya, providing HIV/AIDS services, maternal and child health, and community-based primary healthcare in areas not effectively covered by public health services (Ministry of Health Kenya, 2018; Ahmat *et al.*, 2022). Many of these organizations work in donor dependent funding mechanisms and have high level of dependence on short term project cycles. The employment contracts are often correlated with the duration of the grants, which also has a duration of 1-3 years, thus creating instability and uncertainty in the employment situation and reducing the possibilities to plan their career in a structured way (KANGO, 2022). This often results in poor mobility opportunities for employees and consequently, a high turnover rate and migration of skilled health professionals to more stable sectors (Mwangi & Nyaga, 2023; Ngugi *et al.*, 2024).

In these tight settings, relationships in the organization could be a critical factor in determining career outcomes. Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory is a helpful framework in comprehending the relationship between supervisor and subordinate and how it affects access to organizational resources and career opportunities. LMX theory suggests that leaders form high and low quality relationships with followers, and that these relationships can vary from low quality exchange (transactional) to high quality exchange (LMX) (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Those who develop high quality exchanges with their supervisors tend to have more access to mentoring, information, development activities and informal advocacy for promotion (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012; Johnston & Lee, 2020). Empirical research has demonstrated that those who are in high quality LMX tend to have better career outcomes such as higher likelihood of promotion and higher visibility in their careers (Harris *et al.*, 2009).

In most organizational contexts, employee performance is still a key factor in determining movement within the organization. High-performing employees have competence, reliability, and willingness to take on greater responsibilities, which are usually indicators of their potential for promotion (Pradhan & Jena, 2017; Abdullahi *et al.*, 2021). However, in donor-dependent NGOs, structure, such as funding volatility and project-based hierarchies may lead to a weaker link between performance and mobility, where high performance does not necessarily result in advancement opportunities (KANGO, 2022; Inegbedion, 2022).

While a great deal of research has focused on the relationship between LMX and various employee outcomes such as attitudes, job performance, and job effectiveness (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012; Martin *et al.*, 2015), the moderating role of LMX on the relationship between employee performance and career mobility has been under-researched, particularly in nonprofits with scarce resources. Therefore, little is known about the impact of relational leadership processes on mobility in donor-funded organizations in developing settings, such as healthcare NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the relationship between employee performance and career mobility and how leader–member exchange quality exerts a moderating effect. This study uses survey data from 370 employees in 13 healthcare NGOs and tests the hypothesis that high-quality LMX relationships will increase the relationship between employee performance and perceived career mobility through hierarchical regression analysis. This study concentrates on this conditional relationship and further develops LMX for use in donor-dependent nonprofit settings and for the literature on human resource management in development-oriented organizations.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Career Mobility in Organizations

Career mobility is defined as employees' actions in moving between jobs, roles, and/or levels within or between organizations (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Baruch & Hall, 2004), including those involving upward mobility, lateral mobility, and perceived mobility opportunities in one's career. The idea includes objective mobility, which is the actual promotion or relocation, and subjective mobility, which is the employee's perception of the opportunities for promotion (Ng & Feldman, 2015; Spurk *et al.*, 2022). Objective mobility relates to actual movement in a career, while subjective mobility is a perception that significantly impacts employee attitudes, motivation, and organizational commitment.

However, in Nonprofit healthcare institutions, where there is a strong donor dependency, the structural scope of career mobility may be limited. Most Kenyan healthcare NGOs are dependent on external funding cycles, often with short-term project grants. These funding arrangements lead to employment contracts for the most part of one to three years, which means that there is not a lot of long-term stability in the workforce and few opportunities for permanent advancement (KANGO 2022). Empirical evidence also shows that more than 60 percent of the health care NGO employees are on temporary contracts, resulting in an annual turnover rate of 30 to 40 percent (Nannyanzi, 2023; Piotrowicz & Cianciara, 2013). This instability can make it difficult for workers to plan their future careers and reduce their feelings of internal career mobility. Despite the presence of these structural obstacles, perceived career mobility is also an important factor in employee retention and motivation.

Even in cases where formal promotion opportunities are scarce, relational dynamics and informal career support mechanisms can maintain employees' feelings of advancement opportunities (Alias *et al.*, 2014; Ngugi *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, it is important to understand the circumstances in which

employees see opportunities for mobility in tight contexts, such as in the nonprofit healthcare sector, to enhance workforce stability.

2.2.Employee Performance and Career Advancement

It is a well-documented fact that employee performance is one of the most important factors in achieving career progression in an organization. Performance is a multi-faceted phenomenon that encompasses task performance (the actual work one is expected to perform), contextual performance (discretionary behaviors that affect the work environment), and adaptive performance (individuals' responses to changes in work demands) (Pradhan & Jena, 2017; Conway, 1999; Baard *et al.*, 2014).

High-performance employees are directly engaged in organizational effectiveness as a productive, cooperative, and innovative force. Consequently, many organizations rely on appraisals to make decisions on promotions, developmental opportunities, and increased workloads (Abdullahi *et al.*, 2021). Empirical research shows that when employees are good at what they do, they are more likely to be offered opportunities for career development, especially in merit-based systems that focus on competence and contribution (Ng & Feldman, 2015).

2.3.Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory is an important theory for understanding the supervisor-subordinate relationship (SSR) and its impact on work outcomes. The theory assumes that leaders have different relationships with members, corresponding to different exchange qualities (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). High-quality LMX relationships include trust, respect, loyalty, and open communication, as opposed to low-quality relationships that are more transactional and confined to job or formal relationships. Quality exchanges provide employees with access to a host of worthwhile organizational resources, such as mentorship, developmental assignments, feedback, and informal support from supervisors (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012). Such connections frequently allow employees to be part of the leader's “in-group,” and thus they are more likely to receive opportunities for professional development and advancement. Conversely, workers in poor-quality exchanges might lack the chance to grow and learn and might not engage in strategic activities.

The positive effect of LMX quality on employee outcomes has been supported by extensive empirical research. High-quality LMX relationships have been shown to lead to better job performance, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and lower turnover intentions in meta-analytic evidence (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012; Gerstner & Day, 1997). Formal career mechanisms may be less developed in nonprofit organizations, and relational leadership styles may be more important in determining access to developmental opportunities and career support.

2.4.Moderating Role of Leadership Relationships

In addition to the direct effects of LMX quality on employee attitudes and performance, the quality of LMX may also affect the strength of the relationship between other organizational variables.

Specifically, LMX may be a moderating variable that influences the relationship between employee performance and career outcomes.

Quality LMX relationships can also magnify the positive effects of good performance, as employees can gain more visibility into their work, constructive feedback, and strategic assignments that can improve their career opportunities (Kraimer *et al.*, 2011). Having a good relationship with subordinates can allow supervisors to better advocate for them in terms of promotions, moving them up to leadership positions, or mentoring them to help them develop professionally.

These relational mechanisms may be even more important in resource-poor organizational settings. Relational advocacy and promotion by supervisors may also be a determining factor if formal promotion opportunities are restricted because of structural constraints in the organization, as high-performing employees may be promoted or provided with career-enhancing experiences based on such processes (Alias *et al.*, 2014; Njeru & Otieno, 2023).

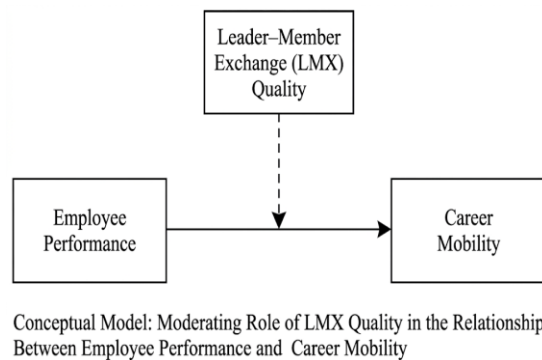
Empirical studies have shown that LMX interacts with employee performance in predicting a variety of work outcomes, such as creativity (Volmer *et al.*, 2012), job engagement (Martin *et al.*, 2015), and career success. For employee performance to positively influence perceived career mobility in donor-funded NGO, high-quality LMX may be more likely to result in such positive relationships within donor-funded NGOs, where career mobility may be limited due to project structures.

2.5.Hypothesis Development

The literature indicates that employee's performance is a positive factor in their career mobility, as it suggests a competence, capability, and readiness to accept more responsibility. But, in donor dependent healthcare NGOs, there may be a less direct link between performance and advancement opportunities. In such settings, the relationships between leaders and followers might be a key factor in facilitating access to career development opportunities for high-performing employees.

2.6.Hypothesis

The positive relationship between employee performance and career mobility exists as a function of the quality of leader–member exchange (LMX) such that when LMX quality is high, the positive relationship between employee performance and career mobility is stronger than when LMX quality is low.

**Fig. 1: Conceptual Model of the study.**

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Philosophy

This study used a positivist research philosophy that views social phenomena as something that can be observed and measured objectively through empirical methods (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). The use of positivism was fitting as the study was designed to quantitatively test the hypothesized relationships between employee performance, leader-member exchange (LMX) quality, and career mobility, and to infer generalizable patterns from structured measurements and statistical analyses of the data.

3.2. Research Design

A cross-sectional survey was used, which allowed for the collection of data from a large sample at one point in time. This design allowed us to investigate the relationships and moderation effects between the variables of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Cross-sectional designs do not allow causal inferences to be drawn because they lack temporal sequencing; however, they are appropriate in the testing process of moderation in organizational studies where longitudinal data are not available or resources are limited.

3.3. Population, Sampling, and Sample Size

The target population was healthcare workers in 13 NGO providers of HIV/AIDS services, maternal and child health services and primary healthcare service provision, with 1267 employees as the target population in 2025. Stratified and simple random sampling were used to guarantee the representativeness. The NGOs were grouped into strata as primary units and the employees in each group were randomly selected from a random number table (Rand Corporation, 1955) to ensure proportional representation between organizational levels and function. Sample size was calculated using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table of the number of samples in finite populations. At a 95 percent level of confidence and 5 percent margin of error, the minimum number of employees needed for the sample was 296. To reduce non-response bias, 474 questionnaires were sent out and 370 of these were usable (78.1%).

3.4.Data Collection Instrument

Data were gathered using a structured self-administered questionnaire adapted from validated scales. Four sections of study variables and demographics (gender, education, tenure, and promotions) were included in the instrument. A five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) was used for all items.

3.4.1. Measurement of Variables

Three study variables were operationalized using validated multi-item Likert scales adapted from established instruments, as described in the subsections below.

3.4.1.1.Employee Performance

Measured using items adapted from Conway (1999), Pradhan and Jena (2017), and Baard *et al.* (2014) as task, contextual, and adaptive performance. Sample items include "I often achieve my work goals" (task), "I help others achieve difficult goals" (contextual), and "I rapidly learn and apply new work procedures" (adaptive).

3.4.1.2.Career Mobility

This was adapted from Sullivan and Arthur (2006) and Ng and Feldman (2015) and measured by perceived upward and lateral mobility. Items could be, for example, "There is an opportunity for me to advance in this organization" (upward) or "I can move to a different department in this organization" (lateral).

3.4.1.3.Measures of Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Quality

Based on a multidimensional scale used by Liden and Maslyn (1998), which includes affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect. Sample items included: "My supervisor would not mind my knowledge and competence" and "My supervisor would give me a chance even if I made a real mistake."

3.5.Reliability and Validity

A pilot test of 40 employees in two non-participating NGOs showed high internal consistency (employee performance $\alpha = 0.89$; career mobility $\alpha = 0.87$; LMX quality $\alpha = 0.91$) (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Content validity was determined by expert review and construct validity by exploratory factor analysis with KMO > 0.70 and significant Bartlett's test.

3.6.Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **SPSS v26**. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) were used to summarize the respondents' characteristics and variable scores. The inferential analysis included:

- *Preliminary diagnostics:* linearity (scatterplots), normality (Shapiro–Wilk and Q-Q plots), multicollinearity ($VIF < 5$; tolerance > 0.20), and heteroskedasticity (Breusch-Pagan test). HC3 robust standard errors corrected for heteroskedasticity.
- *Moderation testing:* Hierarchical multiple regression following Aiken and West (1991) and Hayes (2018). The predictors were **mean-centered** to reduce multicollinearity and facilitate interpretation.

Moderation is supported if the interaction term (β_3) is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) and adds significant incremental variance (ΔR^2) beyond the main effects. *Simple slopes analysis* was used to probe interactions at ± 1 SD of LMX quality.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and anonymity and confidentiality were ensured. The Ethical Guidelines for Human-Subject Research were followed in obtaining approval from the institutional review boards and organizational authorities.

4. Results

Percentages and other descriptive statistics for the sample and response rate. The sample was considered representative as 370 questionnaires were returned out of 474 (78.1% response rate). Respondents were mostly females (~70%), mirroring the gender split in Kenyan healthcare NGOs. The majority were bachelor's degree holders or above, with tenures varying from 1 to 10 years. A significant minority said that there was some promotion (0–1), which is related to donor dependency in the NGO structure.

Table I: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 370)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	111	30%
	Female	259	70%
Education	Diploma	78	21%
	Bachelor's	205	55%
	Master's+	87	24%
Tenure	< 1 year	45	12%
	1–5 years	192	52%
	6–10 years	98	26%
	>10 years	35	10%

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Moderately high self-reported employee performance ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.68$) on task, contextual, and adaptive dimensions was found during the descriptive analyses (Table 11, original thesis).

Career mobility was not as high ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.82$), reflecting the perceived structural constraints. LMX quality was generally positive, although there was variation, with an average score of 3.68 ($SD = 0.75$).

Preliminary support was found for the hypothesized relationships, as bivariate correlations were positive and significant for performance and LMX quality with career mobility ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$) and LMX quality with performance ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$).

Table II: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Employee Performance	3.53	0.68	—		
2. LMX Quality	3.68	0.75	.38**	—	
3. Career Mobility	3.12	0.82	.42**	.45**	—

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

4.2.Assumption Testing

Based on preliminary diagnostics, it was determined that the data were suitable for regression analysis.

- *Linearity*: Scatterplots revealed linear relationships between employee performance and career mobility. Normality: Shapiro–Wilk tests and Q-Q plots suggested approximate normality (minor deviations compensated for by robust estimation).
- *Multicollinearity*: Variance Inflation Factors < 2.5 and tolerance > 0.40 .
- *Heteroskedasticity*: The Breusch–Pagan test showed the presence ($p < 0.05$), and HC3 robust standard errors were used in all regression analyses.

4.3.Moderation: Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to examine the moderating role of LMX quality between the relationship between performance and career mobility. To reduce multicollinearity and ease interpretation, continuous predictors were mean-centered prior to calculating the interaction term (Performance $\times$ LMX).

Table III: Hierarchical Regression Results Predicting Career Mobility

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Employee Performance	0.38***	0.34***
LMX Quality	0.29***	0.26***
Performance × LMX	—	0.16**
R ²	0.31	0.334
ΔR ²	—	0.024
F	—	—

Note. Standardized beta coefficients are reported. HC3 robust standard errors were used throughout. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

4.4. Simple Slopes Analysis

Simple slopes analysis at ± 1 SD of LMX quality revealed:

- *High LMX (+1 SD)*: slope ≈ 0.53 , $p < 0.001$
- *Low LMX (−1 SD)*: slope ≈ 0.22 , $p < 0.05$

5. Interpretation

Graphically, this interaction manifests itself in the form of diverging regression lines: The high-LMX line is steeper, indicating a stronger performance–mobility link, and the low-LMX is flatter. Such patterns indicate that in donor dependent NGOs a good quality relational setting (between leader and members) acts as a relational amplifier and enables high performers to take advantage of informal opportunities (mentor, sponsor, visibility) to achieve greater perceived mobility.

5.1. Hypothesis Testing

The moderation hypothesis was upheld; LMX quality significantly enhanced the positive relationship between employee performance and career mobility among healthcare employees in Kenyan NGOs.

6. Discussion

The overall findings provide empirical evidence for the moderating effect of leader–member exchange (LMX) quality on employee performance and perceived career mobility of employees functioning within non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Kenya. The significant interaction term ($\beta \approx 0.16$, $p < 0.01$) and the incremental variance explained by the interaction ($\Delta R^2 \approx 0.024$, $p < 0.01$) suggest that LMX quality moderates the performance–mobility relationship. Simple slope analysis provided further clarification of this conditional effect: the positive relationship between performance and LMX quality perceptions was much stronger at high levels of LMX quality (simple slope = 0.53, $p < .001$) than at low levels of LMX quality (simple slope = 0.22, p

< .05). The results support and further develop the central tenets of LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and provide valuable contextual insights for work settings characterized by donor dependency and scarce resources.

Conceptually, the moderating effect supports the dyadic relationship differentiation aspect of LMX theory, which posits that organizational resources, opportunities, and support are supplied unequally among employees (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012). High LMX in stable organizational contexts tends to be related to performance and formal rewards in the form of a structured promotion system (Gerstner & Day, 1997). This research paper highlights that while formal mobility pathways are heavily restricted in Kenyan healthcare NGOs due to the short-term nature of donors' contracts, project timeframes, and funding fluctuations (KANGO, 2022; Inegbedion, 2022), high-quality LMX is an important informal pathway. In high-LMX relationships, supervisors seem to act as career advocates and offer mentoring, visibility for special assignments, recommendations for project leadership, and access to developmental experiences that are scarce due to external donors' priorities (Alias *et al.*, 2014; Ngugi *et al.*, 2024). This relational buffering can explain why high-performing individuals in supportive dyads see greater mobility in their careers, even when there are structural obstacles that would otherwise make it difficult to connect performance to mobility.

7. Practical Implications

First, the quality of the LMX relationship is an important moderating factor, thus emphasizing the strategic value of improving the quality of the relationship between supervisors and subordinates as a means of improving the perceived career mobility of high-performing employees. Structured interventions to generate high-quality LMX relationships should be a top priority for NGO managers.

Second, the findings indicate that NGOs must lobby governments for donor policies that invest in relational and leadership capacity development. This policy advocacy reflects sector-wide efforts to combat the disruption of healthcare delivery through turnover and improve the retention of healthcare providers in underserved communities (KANGO, 2022; Mwangi & Nyaga, 2023).

8. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the moderating role of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) quality in the relationship between employee performance and perceived career mobility among Kenyan Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) healthcare employees. The HC3 robust standard errors of the hierarchical regression analysis showed a significant positive interaction ($\beta \approx 0.16$, $p < 0.01$; $\Delta R^2 \approx 0.024$, $p < 0.01$) based on a cross-sectional survey of 370 respondents from 13 healthcare NGOs. Simple slope analysis validated that the relationship between performance and career mobility was significantly stronger at high levels of LMX than at low levels.

In conclusion, this study highlights that while career performance is a key determinant of overall career perceptions, relational capital is important in determining whether a person's career

performance leads to a satisfactory level of career mobility. Kenyan healthcare NGOs can reduce some of the negative impacts of constraints imposed by donors, improve workforce stability, and build long-term capacity to provide critical healthcare services by strengthening supervisor–subordinate relationships.

9. Limitations and Future Research

First, a cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences or a temporal sequence of variables.

Second, the study focused on healthcare NGOs in Kenya and may not be generalizable to other NGO subsectors (such as education and humanitarian relief) or geographic settings with different funding models and cultures. *et al.*, 2023).

Third, common method bias and social desirability effects may be present when using self-report questionnaires, especially for sensitive variables such as performance and career perceptions.

Fourth, the model accounts for approximately one-third of the variance in career mobility, which means that there is a large amount of variance that cannot be explained by the model and, therefore, by the measured variables.

Future research should thus endeavor to address future gaps in the literature by using longitudinal and multi-source designs, broadening the scope of comparison, and using structural measures as covariates to further clarify the moderation boundary conditions of LMX in resource-constrained nonprofit contexts.

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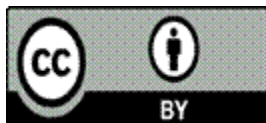
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