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Honors Dissertation Abstracts: A Bounded Qualitative Meta-Study

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A potential source of useful information about undergraduate honors education can be found in doctoral dissertation abstracts that focus on honors. We sought to explore this resource by undertaking a bounded qualitative meta-study of such abstracts using document analysis. Three sub-questions focused our inquiry:

- What are the general attributes of dissertations on honors education?
- What are the thematic subjects and topics associated with the dissertations?
- Have these dissertation findings been published in higher education journals or books?

What follows is an account of our research, including information on the meta-study framework we used, our selection of the dissertations for analysis, and our methods and procedures for analyzing the dissertations. At the close of this article, we discuss our findings, summarize publication-related trends for dissertations on honors education, and provide recommendations for future research.

A BOUNDED QUALITATIVE META-STUDY FRAMEWORK

A meta-study framework explores and synthesizes research for the purpose of addressing specific research questions (Lipsey & Wilson). Most often, the meta-study is based on a quantitative approach (Glass) using effect size data to permit meaningful comparisons across a group of studies (Lipsey & Wilson). A qualitative framework can be an important strategy (Noblit & Hare; Major & Savin-Baden) when researchers seek to analyze studies for common themes. The qualitative framework can also be used to examine attributes of the research and researchers, as demonstrated in 2001 by Paterson, Thorne, Canam, and Jillings.

For our study, we used a qualitative meta-study framework limited to or bounded by a specific activity: the production of dissertation abstracts on honors education. Additionally, we selected a specific time period (1987–2006) in which the dissertations were produced to further bound and focus our analyses. In using a bounded qualitative approach, we were applying a specific meta-study framework used successfully in several recent studies on education, including Banning and Folkestad's 2011 study of education-related dissertations on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); Davies, Dickmann, Harbour, & Banning's 2011 study on community college-related dissertations; and Banning & Kuk's 2009 and 2011 studies on dissertations covering collegiate student affairs organizations and residence life.

SELECTION OF THE DISSERTATIONS

In 2007, Holman undertook a study on publications of research related to collegiate honors and to high-achieving, high-ability, and gifted and talented education. Her findings were detailed in a report to the External Relations Committee of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) and disseminated broadly, both as an annotated bibliography and EndNote library files, in two NCHC National Conference sessions in Denver, Colorado, that same year. As part of her study, Holman (2007a) sought to locate dissertations on collegiate honors and on high-achieving, high-ability, and gifted and talented education in ProQuest. Using a list of 25 search terms, she located a total of 132 dissertations, which were incorporated into her EndNote reference library; this material was published in her *Annotated Bibliography: Honors Research.* We selected this subset of 132 dissertation-related entries for our qualitative meta-study framework and analyses. Before undertaking our review, we reran Holman's dissertation search in the current version of Digital Dissertations: ProQuest to include any additional data that might have been added to the ProQuest entries for the dissertations of interest.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Bounding the Sample

One of the primary research questions we had posed concerned the publication of dissertation-related findings in higher education journals or books. We chose to bound our study to the most recent twenty-five-year period, from 1987–2011, to gain a sense of current topics and trends in publishing on honors education research. We further determined our specific analyses of the dissertations would focus on those produced between 1987 and 2006 so that, in searching for related post-dissertation publications, we would extend to the

authors a five-year window—until 2011—to have had their research published in higher education journals or books.

To formally bound our sample, a query was run in EndNote to locate those dissertations published in the twenty-year period of 1987–2006 and containing the specific terms "honor" or "honour" in any search field. A total of fifty-one entries met the criteria. The abstracts for all entries in the query were subsequently reviewed to confirm the research had been conducted as a dissertation focused on some aspect of undergraduate honors program or honors college education. Two entries were removed, one for being a master's thesis and the other for focusing on high-achieving students earning awards and honors but not participating in an honors program or college. The remaining forty-nine entries were retained as the sample for the bounded meta-study.

Qualitative Document Analysis

Qualitative document analysis (QDA) (Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, & Schneider), also known as ethnographic content analysis (Altheide), served as the primary analytical approach within our meta-study framework. QDA is a form of qualitative content analysis that examines documents in both deductive and inductive manners (Altheide) as opposed to the strict deductive coding and numerical analysis typically associated with classical content analysis (Krippendorff). Within the QDA framework, coding is undertaken as template analysis (King). In this method, *a priori* (deductive) codes are used along with new codes produced through an inductive approach to the data.

The *a priori* codes for our study were year of degree, awarding institution, author gender, research methodology used, comparative analysis with non-honors program(s) or college(s), and type of doctorate awarded. (When an author's gender was not readily identifiable in the name, an online search in Google was conducted to locate the author and confirm his or her gender through a published photograph. In all such search instances, the author was located and a photo found either at his/her place of employment or via a public social networking site, e.g., LinkedIn or Facebook.) Our thematic analyses of the dissertation subjects and topics used the inductive coding strategy of the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss); each dissertation abstract was assigned a subject and topic code, and, from the listing of codes, a thematic structure was induced. The process of peer debriefing was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the inductive coding process (Creswell). We jointly examined our separate subject and topic coding of the dissertations, and the final assignment of dissertations to subjects and topics was determined by consensus.

Carnegie Research Classification for Institutions

Our analyses included identifying the Carnegie Basic Classification for Institutions of Higher Education for each university granting a doctoral degree for the dissertations in the meta-study. Carnegie identifications were made by visiting the website for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2012) in January 2012 and searching for institutions by name to learn their current classification standing.

Author Publications in Higher Education Journals or Books

The search for journal articles or books resulting from dissertations was done in early fall 2011 using the following databases: Educational Abstracts, PsychInfo, the Humanities International, and Academic Search Premier. A follow-up search was then completed in late January 2012 in Google Scholar. Articles and books published by the dissertation authors were selected if the titles or abstracts of the publications were clearly identifiable as relating to the authors' dissertation titles or abstracts.

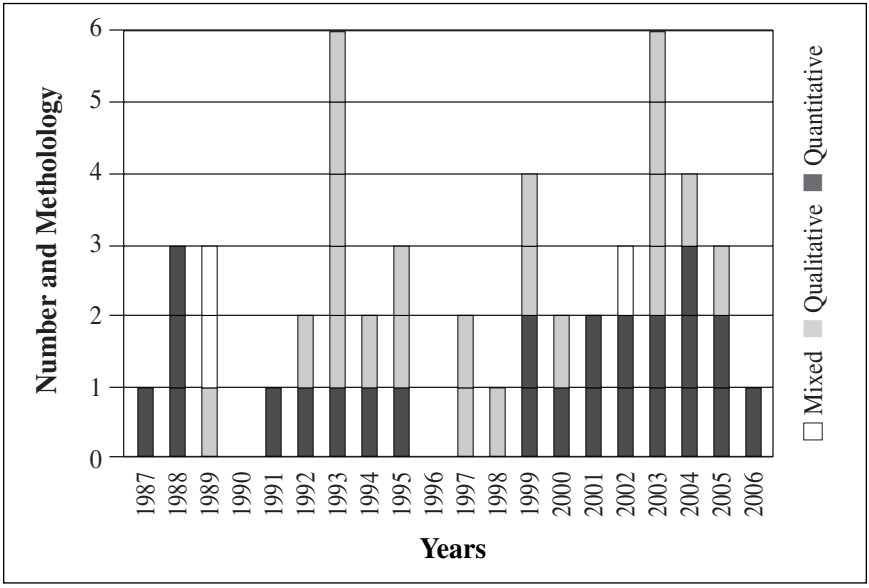
FINDINGS

University Publication Information and General Attributes for Dissertations

As shown in Figure 1, over the period of 1987–2006, dissertations on honors education were published at the rate of two to three dissertations per year. In four years—1993, 1999, 2003, and 2004—four to six dissertations were published, and in two years—1990 and 1996—no dissertations were published. Figure 1 also shows a general trend from 1999 to 2006 toward a quantitative methodological approach in the dissertation research whereas in the prior twelve years most dissertations relied on qualitative methodological approaches.

For the 49 dissertations under study, a total of 37 universities served as the publishing entities for the research undertaken, with Arizona State University and Indiana University having the highest publication rate of three dissertations each during the twenty year period of 1987–2006. Eight institutions—Morgan State University, State University of New York at Buffalo, Texas A&M University-Commerce, The Ohio State University, The Pennsylvania State University, The University of Alabama, The University of Connecticut, and University of South Carolina—each published two dissertations. Table 1 shows that only six dissertations—12% of the total—were produced at universities in the Western United States, with half of those at

Figure 1. Dissertation Publication Rate by Year and Methodology, 1987–2006



Arizona. A few dissertations were published by universities in the Upper Midwest or Midwest. The majority of the dissertations were published by universities in the Eastern and Southern United States.

Table 2 presents our findings on the general attributes for the dissertations, including author gender, research methodology, comparative analysis with non-honors program(s) or college(s), type of doctorate awarded, and institutional classification by Carnegie. By gender, 73% of the dissertations were produced by female students and 27% by male students. A little over half the dissertations, 25 total, relied on quantitative methodology, but, with 21 dissertations having a qualitative focus, there was no substantively demonstrated preference in methodologies. As previously noted, however, and as displayed in Figure 1, there was a preference for using quantitative methodology in dissertations published from 1999 to 2006. There was also a preference—over the entire period under study—for doing research that focused exclusively on honors education, with just over three-quarters of all the dissertations not incorporating some element of comparative analysis with non-honors programs, colleges, or students. When looking at the types of doctoral degrees granted, 69% were found to have been awarded as doctors of philosophy, 29% as doctors of education, and 2% as doctor of arts. The large majority of degree-granting institutions, a total of 83%, were classified by Carnegie as having RU/H or RU/VH status, indicating that most students undertook their dissertations on honors education at institutions with high to very high research activity.

Table 1. Summary of Dissertations Included in Meta-Study (N = 49)

Author (Year)	Institution
Abrams, D. J. (2004)	George Mason University, Virginia
Adkins, K. K. (1994)	The University of Alabama, Alabama
Allen, N. E. (2002)	Morgan State University, Maryland
Aryulina, D. (1995)	Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, Virginia
Billingsley, L. C. (1994)	Nova Southeastern University, Florida
Bouldin, E. L. (1998)	The University of Alabama, Alabama
Brown-Myers, P. A. (1989)	Auburn University, Alabama
Bulakowski, C. (1993)	Loyola University of Chicago, Illinois
Campbell, K. C. (2006)	Oklahoma State University
Capuana, J. A. (1993)	State University of New York at Buffalo, New York
Chmiel, S. M. (1993)	State University of New York at Buffalo, New York
Christopher, M. M. (2003)	Texas Tech University, Texas
Cook-Goodhue, N. R. (1989)	University of South Carolina, South Carolina
Cosgrove, J. R. (2004)	The Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania
Cummins, C. F. (2004)	Texas A&M University–Commerce, Texas
DeHart, K. E. (1993)	The University of Akron, Ohio
Enochs, P. P. (2001)	Tennessee State University, Tennessee
Freeman, M. G. (1988)	The Ohio State University, Ohio
Gagliardi, C. J. (2005)	Arizona State University, Arizona
Galinova, E. V. (2005)	The Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania
Gibboney, R. K. (1997)	Indiana University, Indiana
Green, S. M. (2005)	Delta State University, Mississippi
Guzy, A. (1999)	New Mexico State University, New Mexico
Haarlow, W. N. (2000)	University of Virginia, Virginia
Harrison-Cook, R. R. (1999)	University of South Carolina, South Carolina

Table 1. Continued

Author (Year)	Institution
Higginbotham, L. G. K. (1992)	Indiana University, Indiana
Hollister, D. L. (2001)	University of Central Florida, Florida
Huggett, K. N. D. (2003)	The University of Wisconsin–Madison, Wisconsin
Lapp-Rincker, R. H. (2003)	University of Kansas, Kansas
Lease, J. A. (2003)	University of Georgia, Georgia
Longo, F. C. (1995)	The University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi
Mathey, C. K. (1993)	New York University, New York
McCrimmon, C. A. (1988)	Brigham Young University, Utah
Meel, D. E. (1995)	University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Montgomery, W. L. (1991)	Illinois State University, Illinois
Park-Curry, P. S. (1988)	The Ohio State University, Ohio
Peterson, S. S. (1989)	Vanderbilt University, Tennessee
Phillips, G. W. (2003)	Sam Houston State University, Texas
Pittman, A. A. (2003)	The University of Connecticut, Connecticut
Powell, G. S. (1992)	East Texas State University, Texas
Ringle, J. A. (1999)	Oregon State University, Oregon
Rinn, A. N. (2004)	Indiana University, Indiana
Sell, D. K. (1987)	Kent State University, Ohio
Shushok Jr., F. X. (2002)	University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland
Shute, L. D. (1999)	The University of Connecticut, Connecticut
Smith, G. P. W. (2000)	Morgan State University, Maryland
Viger, D. V. (1993)	Arizona State University, Arizona
Wallace, M. L. (2002)	University of Missouri–Columbia, Missouri
Wheeler, J. I. (1997)	Arizona State University, Arizona

Table 2. Dissertation Attributes (N =49)

	Subject	
	n	%
Gender of Researcher		
Female	36	73
Male	13	27
Methodology for Study		
Quantitative	25	51
Qualitative	21	43
Mixed	3	6
Comparative Analysis with Non-Honors (all quantitative studies)		
Yes	12	24
No	37	76
Degree Granted		
Ph.D.	34	69
Ed.D.	14	29
D.A.	1	2
Carnegie Classification (n = 37)		
RU/VH: Research Universities (very high research activity)	19	51
RU/H: Research Universities (high research activity)	12	32
DRU: Doctoral/Research Universities	5	14
Master's L: Master's Colleges & Universities (larger programs)	1	3

Dissertation Subjects and Topics

Although we determined primary subject and topic categories by consensus, many of the dissertations could have been coded into more than one category. Ultimately, we settled on six distinct subject codes and sixteen related topic codes induced from a constant comparative analysis of the dissertation abstracts. As shown in Table 3, the most common subject pursued in the dissertations was evaluation, followed closely by curriculum and instruction and then achievement. Other subject areas of interest were recruitment and retention, student development, and residence life.

For those dissertations focusing on evaluation, three forms (topics) of evaluation were common: program/operational assessment, historical

Table 3. Dissertation Subjects (alpha-ordered) and Topics (frequency-ordered) (N = 49)

	Subject		Topic	
	n	%	n	%
Achievement	10	20		
Honors & Gifted Education			4	8
Peer/Familial Relationships			2	4
Perfectionism			2	4
Self Esteem/Self-Efficacy			2	4
Curriculum & Instruction	11	23		
Literature/Composition			4	9
STEM Education			3	6
Learning Styles/Strategies			2	4
Other			2	4
Evaluation	15	31		
Program/Operational Assessment			9	19
History			4	8
Student Satisfaction			2	4
Recruitment & Retention	6	12		
Persistence/Completion			4	8
Recruitment			2	4
Residential Life	1	2		
Engagement/Involvement			1	2
Student Development	6	12		
Identity/Interrelationships			3	6
Psychological Evaluation			3	6

examination, and assessment of student satisfaction. Nine dissertations involved program/operational assessment, with Powell (1992), Bulakowski (1993), Viger (1993), and Phillips (2003) focusing on community college settings; Peterson (1989) looking at honors in nursing; Cummins (2004) examining honors in private, Catholic school settings; and Billingsley (1994), Huggett (2003) and Christopher (2003) evaluating some other aspects of honors programs or colleges. Capuana (1993), DeHart (1993), Haarlow (2000),

and Galinova (2005) each undertook evaluation involving a historical examination of honors education. Finally, two dissertations (Montgomery, 1991; Enochs, 2001) centered on evaluation in relation to student satisfaction.

Subjects related to curriculum and instruction were the second most common found among the forty-nine dissertations in the meta-study. Literature/composition was the most common topic, pursued by Mathey (1993), Wheeler (1997), Guzy (1999), and Abrams (2004). The topic of STEM education in relation to honors was found in three dissertations (Aryulina,1995; Meel, 1995; Wallace, 2002). Additionally, Ringle (1999) and Hollister (2001) took topics related to learning styles/strategies; Cook-Goodhue (1989) looked at teacher education; and Gibboney (1997) examined service learning.

A fifth of all the dissertations took the subject of achievement. Four authors (Longo, 1995; Shute, 1999; Rinn, 2004; Green, 2005) looked at achievement through the lens of honors and/or gifted education. Achievement was also examined topically in relation to peer/family relationships by Bouldin (1998) and Smith (2000) and in relation to self-esteem/self-efficacy by McCrimmon (1988) and Lapp-Rincker (2003). Two authors (Higginbotham, 1992; Adkins, 1994) explored the topic of perfectionism in relation to achievement.

Six dissertations focused on recruitment and retention, another six on student development, and one on residence life. For the dissertations on recruitment and retention, the topic of persistence/completion was most common with four of the six authors (Allen, 2002; Cosgrove, 2004; Gagliardi, 2005; Campbell, 2006) exploring some aspect of persistence and/or completion in their studies while two authors (Sell, 1987; Harrison-Cook, 1999) looked at recruitment. Under the subject of student development, three dissertations focused on aspects of student identity/interrelationships; these dissertations had sub-topics of role (Park-Curry, 1988), peer relationships (Lease, 2003), and race (Pittman, 2003). Two student-development-based dissertations focused on psychological evaluation of first-year/freshman students in honors (Brown-Myers, 1989; Shushok, 2002), and one dissertation (Chmiel, 1993) undertook psychological evaluation of honors students in STEM education. The remaining dissertation (Freeman, 1988) in the meta-study was concerned with engagement and involvement of honors students in residence life.

Publication Results

Using Educational Abstracts, PsychInfo, the Humanities International, and Academic Search Premier, 8% of the dissertations, a total of four authors (Adkins, Bulakowski, Christopher, and Rinn) were found to have published articles related to their dissertations. When the search was repeated in Google

Scholar, we found that almost 20% of the dissertations, a total of ten authors (Adkins, Bulakowski, Campbell, Christopher, Cosgrove, Guzy, Huggett, Meel, Rinn, and Shushok), had either published articles related to their dissertations or had their dissertations highlighted in published reviews.

Table 4 provides a summary of the journals that published the honors-related dissertation research. Rinn, with five publications since her dissertation was completed in 2004, was the most successful author in getting her dissertation-related research on honors education published in articles or reviews. Both Adkins and Huggett were also able to publish twice in relation to their dissertation research.

Although not highlighted in Table 4, three of the 49 authors with honors education dissertations were found, through the search in Google Scholar, to have been successful in getting their dissertation-related research published as monographs or books. In 2004, Guzy authored *Honors Composition: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Practices*, an NCHC monograph which remains available in print and can be obtained from the NCHC national office. In 2003, Routledge published Haarlow's *Great Books, Honors Programs, and Hidden Origins: The Virginia Plan and the University of Virginia in the Liberal Arts Movement*. Finally, Peter Lang published Pittman in 2009 under the title *Whited Out: Unique Perspectives on Black Identity and Honors Achievement.*

In total, 12 of the 49 authors—almost 25%—had some portion of their dissertation-related research published in education journals or books. Those 12 authors were responsible for generating a total of 16 articles, 2 books, and 1 monograph. The remaining 37 authors, just over 75%, either did not pursue post-dissertation publication or were unsuccessful in getting their dissertation research published for the higher-education readership.

Some additional attribute-related highlights of those who were published include: 6 of the original dissertations used quantitative methodology, and 6 used qualitative methodology; 11 of the 12 authors received PhDs, with the twelfth receiving an EdD; all of the authors published their dissertations at institutions ranked by Carnegie as having an RU/H or RU/VH research status. For those authors whose work appeared in journals, the average time between the publication of their dissertation and the first appearance of their work in a journal was 1.8 years. The journals publishing more than one article were: *JNCHC* (4), *Gifted Child Quarterly* (3), *Roeper Review* (3), and *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education* (2). For the three authors with monograph or book publications, the average time between publication of their dissertations and publication of the monograph or book was 4.3 years.

Table 4. Summary of Journals & Articles Published with Dissertation-Related Findings

Journal	Author(s) and Year
CBMS Issues in Mathematics Education	Meel, D. E. (1998)
Community College Journal of Research and Practice	Bulakowski, C., & Townsend, B. K. (1995)
Gifted Child Quarterly	Rinn, A. N. (2007) Rinn, A. N., & Cunningham, L. G. (2008) Rinn, A. N., & Plucker, J. A. (2004)
Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice	Campbell, K. C., & Fuqua, D. R. (2008)
Journal of Secondary Gifted Education	Parker, W. D., & Adkins, K. K. (1995) Rinn, A. N. (2005)
Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council	Cosgrove, J. R. (2004) Guzy, A. (2004) Huggett, K. D. (2003) Shushok Jr., F. (2006)
NACADA Journal	Huggett, K. D. (2004)
Roeper Review	Blanchfield, S. L. K., Christopher, M. M., & Lee, M.-S. (2004) Chin, C. S., & Rinn, A. N. (2004) Parker, W. D., & Adkins, K. K. (1995)

DISCUSSION

Through our bounded qualitative meta-study of doctoral dissertation abstracts on undergraduate honors education, we learned a great deal. Ten universities, with two in particular, Arizona State University and Indiana University, have taken a leadership role in supporting doctoral research on honors education since the mid-1980s. Those universities granted more PhDs for honors-related dissertations than EdDs, at an almost three to one ratio from 1987 through 2006. During that time, 84% of the dissertations were also published at institutions with an RU/H or RU/VH Carnegie research classification.

In a three-to-one ratio, more women than men authored doctoral dissertations between 1987 and 2006; this is consistent with previous studies of higher-education-related dissertations (Banning & Kuk, 2009 and 2011). Also consistent with previous studies was the balanced distribution of quantitative and qualitative methods across the dissertations, although a trend toward quantitative-based methodology in honors-related dissertations may have started developing in around 2000.

Typical subjects for honors-related dissertations from 1987 through 2006 were, in order from most to least common, evaluation, curriculum and instruction, achievement, recruitment and retention, and student development. Just over three-quarters of all dissertations produced did not involve a comparative study with non-honors programs, colleges, or students.

Publication-Related Trends for Dissertations on Honors Education

The number of dissertations on honors education is on the increase with 21 published in the ten-year period 1987–1996 and 28 published in the subsequent ten years, representing overall a 33% increase decade to decade. Education journals and publishing houses have taken notice of the increased interest in honors education. Over the twenty-year period examined, 12 of the 16 dissertation-related articles that were published appeared in print after 2000. Additionally, the NCHC monograph and two books generated from the dissertation research have all been published since 2003.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on our analyses, we have two sets of recommendations for those interested in undertaking future honors-related doctoral research. The first recommendation is directed toward individuals considering evaluation-based orientations for their dissertation. A strong preponderance of qualitative-based methodology (11 out of the 15 dissertations) characterized the dissertations on evaluation, and none of the evaluation-oriented dissertations sought comparative analyses with non-honors programs, colleges, or students. To provide balance in evaluation-based research on honors, we recommend more dissertations take a quantitative or mixed methods approach. In particular, Teddlie and Tashakkori in 2009 provided a valuable resource for those considering mixed methods. Additionally, in an effort to better understand what makes honors distinct from other collegiate education experiences, evaluation ought to incorporate some comparative analysis with appropriate non-honors education paradigms.

Our second recommendation is for researchers in social science or educational psychology disciplines. We found that many of the dissertations

focused on personal attributes of honors students, typically examining the attribute in relation to some aspect(s) of the students' collegiate or honors-specific experience(s). The results of these studies typically pointed to the value of honors education in students' overall collegiate success. When considering future studies of honors students' personal attributes in relation to major or honors program characteristics, an ecological framework may be of interest. The ecological framework not only focuses on dynamics among personal attributes and environmental conditions related to behavioral outcomes but also helps structure interventions (Felner & Felner). Therefore, an ecological framework could support the following kind of question for honors education research: What student attributes under what kinds of program characteristics promote what kinds of behavior? Answering such a question within a mixed methods approach could further support student success outcomes for participants in honors programs and colleges.

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