Challenges and Coping Strategies of Student Mothers of 'UCC' College of Distance Education: The Case of the Cape Coast Centre

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Abstract

Student mothers in distance education programmes in Ghana have to combine family roles with work and academic pursuits. Therefore, this study sought to find out the challenges and coping strategies of student mothers at the College of Distance Education (CoDE) of the University of Cape Coast (UCC), Cape Coast Centre. In this descriptive survey, a questionnaire was used to collect data from 175 conveniently sampled student mothers attending classes at Cape Coast Centre, CoDE, UCC. The data collected was analysed using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. The findings from the data gleaned that majority of student mothers (a minimum of 71%) performed a lot of laborious non-academic activities daily in their homes and the combination of these roles with their academics pose a negative high effect on their family lives and academics. Unfortunately, the coping strategies they employed were, to a large extent, ineffective. Thus, student mothers have inevitable academic impediments that emanate from the non-academic activities they perform at home, posing challenges to their academic pursuit. Therefore, CoDE, in collaboration with the Counselling Unit of the University of Cape Coast should provide counselling services to these student mothers to be aware of the academic challenges and ways to effectively navigate these challenges to be successful.

Keywords; student mothers, challenges, coping strategies, distance education

Introduction

Some decades ago, women were seen to be for the home, they were to marry and raise a home or a family. Women were not working or going to school since much of the responsibility of money or other resources needed for the upkeep of the family rested on the man. However, the pressures of life in this modern era have necessitated that women go through the educational system and work for their independence and to support the family financially (Pinto, 2019). This

means that women have to combine family roles, work and academic pursuit. The combination of these roles poses some challenges to both their academic and family lives.

Education is an important tool for development, for enhancing social, economic and human development and has a general intrinsic value. While education of both genders has a substantial impact on economic growth, the education of girls was a stronger predictor of growth in poorer countries of sub-Saharan Africa (Sutton, 1998; World Bank, 2011). Female education makes it possible to tap the potentials of women to support nation-building, which seems to be low in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, education provides women with greater earning capacity and promotes healthier and better families to effectively deal with the challenges of the 21st century (Ityavyar, 2005).

Education is a key to transforming women's attitudes and values, from traditional to more modern and from constrained to emancipation (Jejeebhoy, 1995). Female education affects the way household decisions are made and have effects on issues like fertility, children's health, and school attendance. For instance, Bartels (1999) has stated that women who began childbearing early had more children than others who started later in life, probably because of education. Moreover, the education of a mother is consistently one of the most powerful determinants of child health. That is, educated mothers have the propensity for taking care of the health of the children (Sutton, 1998), including preventive health-care services and to demand timely treatment for their children. Besides, such mothers provide an enhanced nutritional standard for their children that also reduces child mortality by five to ten per cent for each additional year of schooling (Sutton, 1998). The multiple benefits of female education are cumulative, in that they become mutually reinforcing over time, with the advantages transmitted across generations.

By the middle of the 1990s, most education development projects focused on primary and secondary education claiming they have a better rate of return (World Bank, 1980) and play a key role in poverty reduction (World Bank, 2004). Most development partners regarded universities as white elephants (institutional enclaves) without direct participation in the development process of the African communities. Unfortunately, this view was nurtured by the World Bank for many years. It is, therefore, worth noting that the collaborative effect of Joint Japan - World Bank Graduate Scholarship Programme (JJ/WBGSP), *New Challenges for Tertiary Education,* with the aim of constructing knowledge

societies. The programme acknowledges the role of higher education as the engine of development in the new knowledge economy whereby the new modes of economic growth are dependent on knowledge and information technology (Msolla, n.d.). Thus, university education is found to prepare high calibre professionals to take charge of policies and administrative management of nations and facilitates national development. It has been observed that though all the universities in Ghana have adopted affirmative action to increase the enrolment of female students and have gender desks to ensure their welfare, conditions of operation in the universities conflict with the cultural expectations of a woman's role in the family (Kwapong, 2007).

Students mothers generally have to overcome many barriers to successfully pursue and reach their educational goals. As part of a survey on the needs of students who care for children, the researcher noted that student parents were juggling the roles of parents and students, thus, trying to balance the workload of their studies with family life and responsibilities (Lidgard, 2004). Considering these potential time allocation conflicts, the student mothers aim to find the balance between academics, work, leisure and family activities (Bratton & Gold, 2003). Thus, the current need for knowledge update as well as taking care of the home has promoted distance learning among mothers (Bratton & Gold, 2003). In that this case, time spent in academic processes could be a source of conflict for mother learners. For instance, studies on mature students found balancing work, study and family life particularly problematic (Arskey, Marchant, & Simmill, 1994; Callister, Newell, Perry & Scott, 2006). Neale (2001) also identified dealing with family issues and problems at home as one of the main barriers preventing or limiting mothers' ability to achieve their higher education aims.

There is also the issue of emotional costs (Merrill, 1999), for student mothers whose partners are not so supportive and feel threatened by their (wife) participation in higher education. Dewart (1996) provides a more specific insight with common issues and anxieties such as lack of time, difficulty meeting family demands, fear of failure, stress and anxiety, the need to set priorities, and integrating family issues with study issues. Heenan (2002) identifies that the three main obstacles for women progressing further with higher education are their caring responsibilities, financial constraints, and lack of career advice. Similarly, Walkup (2006) confirms that student parents face challenges such as time constrain, as a result of managing academic, childcare and domestic tasks. Moreover, such parents, feel excluded because tertiary education providers fail

or have a limited approach to meeting specific needs, emotional stress about childcare provision.

Funding childcare is perhaps the most consistent problem faced by mothers who are students (Lidgard, 2004). Students who are also mothers often feel they are adversely affected by increased financial pressures and become very reliant on positive support from their partners and/or families (Kantanis, 2002). This is particularly problematic for such mothers because of the practical component of their university degree. This means additional costs for travelling to schools and resources for studies. Taking time out from their traditional roles at home to prepare for and complete their professional job practices can cause these student mothers particular anxiety, which needs a high number of coping skills. Merrill (1999) notes that a lack of integration between home and university life often requires students to engage in complex coping strategies. Therefore, having extended family members, friends and partners seem vital in determining how well mothers cope with these experiences (Kantanis, 2002). Edwards (1993) found that students who are also mothers had various ways of both separating and connecting these dual roles. These women simply added studying to their traditional domestic roles. This stance requires them to find new or additional ways of managing their domestic responsibilities and childcare arrangements. Due to these issues, childbearing mothers who wish to pursue further studies have resorted to distance education opportunities provided by some tertiary institutions.

Distance learning in developing countries emerged as a way of widening access to education for tertiary applicants who qualify but could not otherwise gain admission due to the limited space in the existing tertiary institutions (Kwapong, 2007). The delivery of the programme in Ghana is predominantly print-based and is supported with regular (every fortnight) face-to-face tutorials. Currently, four of the public universities, the University of Ghana (UG), University of Cape Coast (UCC), Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), and University of Education, Winneba (UEW), are offering academic programmes in a dual-mode - regular and distance. In most distance learning institutions, the percentage of female enrolment is rather higher than that found in on-campus programmes (Kwapong, 2007).

These student mothers do not only play the role of being a mother but also workers and students. Such multiplicity of tasks poses challenges like a high level of stress and anxiety, failure in courses being studied, inability to meet

family needs, inadequate funding and lack of support from partners. As a result of the challenges, they are sometimes unable to achieve their educational aims. However, distance education allows these mothers to combine their professional role with being a student, a wife, and a mother. Unlike the mainstream where the mother leaves home and resides on campus to undertake her studies, women in distance education reside at home and combine their traditional roles with academic pursuit, with attendant challenges. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to investigate the challenges and coping strategies of student mothers, focusing on the Cape Coast centre of the College of Distance Education at the University of Cape Coast. Specifically, the study looked at the non-academic roles undertaken by student mothers and how these roles influence their academic lives. The influence of academic pursuits on the family lives of the student mothers was also investigated.

Method

This study employed a descriptive survey design involving 175 conveniently sampled student mothers who were studying at the Cape Coast centre, CoDE, UCC. They included mothers with age range 21 to 40 years. They included students who were studying various degrees such as Diploma in Basic Education 76(43%), Diploma in Psychology and Foundations of Education 23(13%), Diploma in Science and Mathematics Education 3(2%), Diploma in Management Studies 24(14%), Diploma in Commerce 2(1%), Bachelor in Basic Education 11(6%), Bachelor of Psychology and Foundation in Education 3(2%), Bachelor of Management Studies 24(14%), Bachelor of Commerce 8(4%) and Bachelor of Science in Marketing 1(1%).

Permission was sort from the College Registrar to administer the questionnaires which were in print form to student mothers. The participants were people who could read and write. Thus, the researchers used a closed-ended item questionnaire for this study. The items were based on the relevant literature about the phenomenon under study. The questionnaire had five sections, 'A' to 'E'. Section A had seven items and solicited information on the bio-data such as age, programme, school standing (level), marital status, number of children, and economic status. Section B had twelve items and looked at the non-academic roles undertaken by the respondents, such as cooking at home, caring for the children and husband, other house chores, and work activities. Section C also had twelve items that solicited from the students how their non-academic roles influence their academic lives. Also, Section D had nine items that were based on the influence of the student mothers' academic pursuits on their family lives.

Finally, Section E which had thirteen items measured the coping strategies of the student mothers. Some of the items included *"constantly seeking for support from my husband", "employing the services of a paid domestic worker". "skipping lectures sometimes to breastfeed my child",* among others.

A pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted using five student mothers drawn from the College of Distance Education of the University of Cape Coast, Agona Swedru study centre. Choosing students from this Centre was basically due to the homogeneity in their characteristics. It was discovered that some of the student mothers did not respond to a few statements, perhaps, they did not understand them. Such statements were noted and later restructured. The questionnaire was also given to four Master of Education students who reviewed it. The comments and suggestions from these candidates were also incorporated into restructuring the questionnaire. Again, the questionnaire together with the purpose of the study and research questions were submitted to two Senior Lecturers in education who finalised the instrument. Moreover, the main data yielded high KR-21 reliability value of .78, which is deemed appropriate.

The research protocol was approved by the University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Moreover, we sought and obtained permission from the University Registrar and the Director of CoDE to survey their students. Besides, we asked permission from the tutors and the students and explained the purpose of the study before data collection. Data collection took place at the CoDE, UCC centre where the participants were met in their various lecture theatres. The instrument was given to each participant and allowed about 10 minutes to complete, where we were able to retrieve all (100%) of the completed instrument, giving us a return rate of 100%. The process disrupted lecturing for about 15 minutes. The participants were assured of their anonymity, the confidentiality of their information and voluntary participation and that they can stop answering the questionnaire in the process. Furthermore, each participant signed an informed consent form before taking part in the study.

To provide answers to the various research questions, frequency and percentage, and arithmetic mean and standard deviation were calculated. This was possible because the items measuring the constructs were in nominal and ordinal scales and even those on Likert scales were reduced into categories.

Results

The result in Table 1 generally showed that student mothers had a lot to grapple with in their daily responsibilities at home. About 71% of the student mothers either strongly agreed or simply agreed to all the items on the Table, except doing farm work and fetching of water, that they perform these duties daily like they have to cook, wash, tidy up their homes and care for little children each day.

Table 1

Non-academic Roles Student Mothers of CoDE, UCC, undertake in their Life

Role	SD N(%)	DN (%)	A N(%)	SA N(%)	Total
Cook for my family every day.	-	5(3)	56(32)	114(65)	175(100)
Have to care for my child/ children every day.	-	5(3)	37(21)	133(76)	175(100)
Have to fetch water for my family every day.	30(17)	56(32)	53(30)	36(21)	175(100)
Have to wash for my family every day.	21(12)	10(6)	96(55)	48(27)	175(100)
Assist in farm work every day.	113(64)	52(30)	10(6)	-	175(100)
Must take my child/children to school and bring him or her/ them home every day.	15(9)	36(20)	65(37)	59(34)	175(100)
Must assist my child/children in his or her/their homework every day.	-	20(11)	52(30)	103(59)	175(100)
Must report to my workplace every weekday.	-	-	16(9)	159(91)	175(100)
Must take my child/children to the hospital when they are sick.	-	5(3)	29(16)	141(81)	175(100)
My responsibility to tidy up my house /home every day.	-	5(3)	35(20)	135(77)	175(100)
My responsibility to satisfy the sexual pleasures of my husband anytime.	15(9)	15(9)	39(20)	106(62)	175(100)

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree
The result further indicated that student mothers were not able to prepare well

for and concentrate on semester examinations (M= 3.20; SD= .93), and they arrive late at examination centres (M= 2.98; SD= 1.07). Ultimately, this has made them believe that the non-academic activities they perform, at home, are responsible for the poor grades that they usually get (M= 3.10; SD= .63). The student mothers, however, did not ascribe forgetting times for lectures and tutorials (M= 2.01; SD= 1.09) and sleeping in class (M= 2.24; SD= .91) to the plenty of house chores that they engaged in (see Table 2). This implies that other factors take them off lecturers and sometimes forget tutorials times or made them sleep in class.

Table 2
Influence of Non-Academic Roles on Academic Lives

Statement	M	SD
I am not able to attend lectures regularly because of the many non-academic activities I perform.	3.47	.79
As a student mother, I am not able to get enough time to learn.	3.23	.88
As a student mother, I am not able to prepare well for and concentrate on examinations.	3.20	.93
My activities as a student mother always make me attend lectures late.	3.00	.94
Plenty of house chores make me sleep in class.	2.24	.91
As a result of non-academic activities as a student mother, I sometimes forget the time for lectures and tutorials and absent myself.	2.01	1.09
As a result of activities as a student mother, I sometimes report late at examination centres.	2.98	1.07
As a result of non-academic activities as a student mother, I am not able to complete and submit assignments on time.	2.68	.94
As a result of non-academic activities as a student mother, I am not able to attend group discussions regularly.	3.50	.85
The non-academic activities I perform are responsible for my bad grades.	3.10	.63

Note: Standard Deviation (SD); Mean (M); Mean of Mean (MM)= 3.041; MSD= .91;

With a mean of means (MM) of 3.31, the results again revealed that the respondents generally agreed (with varying degrees) to the items and that their

academic activities affect the family lives (see Table 3). They further indicated that because of their academic pursuits, they tend to have less time for their partners/husbands (M= 3.57; SD= .98) and child/children (M=3.74; SD= .86), to the extent of not being able to breastfeed their newly born babies very well (M= 3.63; SD= 1.04). For family meetings or gatherings, they strongly agreed that they were not able to attend regularly when scheduled on weekends (M= 3.56; SD= .72) and that their academic activities create confusion between them and their husbands/partners (M= 3.15; SD= .90).

Table 3
Influence of Academic Pursuits on Family Lives

Statement	M	SD
I often have less time for my husband because of my studies.	3.57	.98
My academic activities create confusion between me and my husband/partner.	3.15	.90
I often have less time for my child/children.	3.74	.86
I am not able to attend family meetings or gatherings regularly when scheduled on weekends.	3.56	.72
As a result of my studies in distance education, I am not able to breastfeed my newly born baby very well.	3.63	1.04
I am not able to have good sleep during the night due to my studies.	3.69	.62
I sometimes skip my breakfast due to my studies as a student mother.	1.81	.81

Note: Standard Deviation (SD); Mean (M)

As presented in Table 4, the majority of the student mothers generally agreed (in varying degrees) that they employed the coping strategies in dealing with challenges associated with their academic workers as mothers (i.e., MM= 3.10). Moreover, a larger proportion of the respondents either agreed (36%) or strongly agreed (25%) that they employed the services of a paid domestic worker (M= 2.65; SD= 1.06) or a family member (M= 3.79; SD= .83) when attending lectures.

However, those who breastfeed their new-borns had to skip lectures sometimes (M= 3.35; SD= .96). When it comes to accessing support from their partners/ husbands, the student mothers appeared divided in their responses: 51% of them disagreed (merely or strongly) while 49% agreed (merely or strongly) to the strategy of constantly seeking support from their partners/husbands (M= 2.32; SD= 1.22). Besides, about 146 (84%) respondents merely or strongly agreed that they do plead for lecturers' help.

Table 4
Coping Strategies of Students Mothers

Statement	SD N(%)	D N(%)	A N(%)	SA N(%)	Total N(%)	M	SD
Constantly seeking support from my husband.	64(36)	26(15)	38(22)	47(27)	175(100)	2.32	1.22
Employing the services of a paid domestic worker.	35(20)	34(19)	63(36)	43(25)	175(100)	2.65	1.06
Skipping lectures sometimes to breastfeed my child.	33(19)	27(15)	40(23)	75(43)	175(100)	3.35	.96
Employing the services of a family member when attending lectures.	10(6)	15(8)	79(45)	71(41)	175(100)	3.79	.83
Pleading for lecturers' help.	16(9)	13(7)	33(19)	113(65)	175(100)	3.39	.97

Note: Standard Deviation (SD); Mean (M)

Discussion

This study aimed to find out the challenges and coping strategies of student mothers at the College of Distance Education (CoDE) of the University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast Centre. It was found that the majority of student mothers performed a lot of laborious non-academic activities daily in homes and the combination of these roles with their academic activities pose a negative effect on their family lives and academics. Unfortunately, the coping strategies they employed were, to a large extent, ineffective.

The foregoing findings exemplify few but hectic non-academic activities that student mothers go through daily. The results support the longitudinal data from the National Survey of Families and Households (Noonan, 2001), that

time spent in female housework chores hurts their formal work and wages and that, the negative relationship between housework and wages is stronger for women than for men. Similarly, the findings by the Bureau of Labour Statistics (2015) indicated that on an average day, women spend more than twice as much time preparing food and drink and doing interior cleaning, and four times as much time doing laundry. These chores would affect the performance of other activities either in the house or the workplace or at school.

Bobbie (2008) admits that poor academic performance among women is a result of overburdening household chores. The findings support that of Dallas (1998) who found that undergraduate studies are time structured and inflexible such that a woman would have to attend classes when they are offered and not when they fit into her day. Hensel (1990) also pointed out how difficult it is for women to pursue academic careers and family life. In the same vein, Williams (2007) added that choosing to become a mother gives the appearance that a woman is unmotivated, less committed, less interested in doing what she must do to get to the next step on the ladder. This has led some of their colleagues to drop out of the programme. As mothers, they are bothered about their babies.

Most of the respondents believed that, as student mothers, the academic activities they engage in have highly affected their family lives negatively. Perhaps, these student mothers have to combine homework with that from an academic setting, dual roles which demand a tremendous amount of time and energy. These mothers may give relatively more attention to their academic works over family duties, a situation that could create problems. For example, Dallas (1998) found out that several problems are created in family management when mothers combine schooling with their responsibilities in the home. Such student mothers often get tired because of workload and this may affect their relationship with their husbands and children. In such cases, these mothers may suffer emotional health issues which could further lower their propensity to achieve good academic grades. Moreover, in such a strained environment, these student mothers are likely to be academically demotivated which limit the attainment of their full potentials.

Furthermore, these student mothers may not be able to put up their best performance academically and may be unable to keep up with colleagues who have either no children or husband. Many of these student mothers are under stress from schooling and responsibilities of home creating an overworked, overstrained couple with the act of always waking up from bed early and

tired. Student mothers, therefore, face the challenge of combining their roles as mothers and/or wives with their academic work effectively if the problems persist. This is corroborated by Milner-Home, Power and Dennis (1996) who state that the traditional image of a mother is that of a self-sacrificing being. If taken as such, the student mother is likely to exhaust herself as she attends to both her studies and the parenting role. Chen and Kaplan (2003) added that breastfeeding babies is also one of the challenges that are encountered by most students. Consequently, some of these learners miss classes as they are expected to attend to crying babies just within the teaching hours and area sometimes. Some babies get sick and thus, put pressure on the mothers, as they have to take them to hospitals, even where such babies are under a caretaker, the other faces a concentration difficulty as she has to be thinking about her baby. Similarly, Suiter (2008), observed a decline in marital happiness, among couples where one is in a university when women return to school. This is especially pronounced over time when wives enrolled as full-time students, but better where wives were in part-time studies. This implies that the marital happiness of the student mothers of CoDE, UCC is relatively lower than when they had not enrolled in their programme of study. In such a situation, the academic achievement of these mothers will suffer as they may face challenges with concentration for effective academic work, resulting in poor grades and low class at the end of the programme.

We have also found that many of the student mothers used varied coping strategies, which, unfortunately, to a large extent, were ineffective. Perhaps, apart from their immediate families, these student mothers do not have many alternatives for home care assistance. Thus, Grohman and Lamm (2009) found out that one coping strategy that cannot be ignored is the support from the family, especially, husbands, parents, grandparents and other relatives in Africa. They added that emotional support from husband and peers and time management strategies was used by many as a stop measure. For instance, emotional and physical supports from close relatives like husbands are important student others especially those with first-time birth. Meanwhile, in a financially established family, student mothers and couples could pay for domestic aids to either carry the baby and stay at home or follow the mother to class. A situation like that gives the student mother leverage and emotional stability as she can always have access to her baby.

Furthermore, more than half of the student mothers wished to change their coping strategies because they believed such strategies were not effective. Probably, many of the mothers keep searching for better strategies that could let

them cope with the situations they face. Given all the multiplicity of domestic roles, economic duties and academic pursuits of student mothers and the effects they tend to have on their family lives, a question worth-answering is "whether they would wish to stop or continue reading their programmes?" Whatever their answer(s) may be, the Transactional Coping Theory can be used to explain and that, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) the mother are likely to appraise and cope with situations in several means. For instance, most of the mothers will not abandon their programme of study, rather show more dedication because of the general gains of education they anticipate. Thus, their commitments, beliefs and personal traits contributed to their resilience towards completing the programme. Therefore, these student mothers may need to be taught varied coping strategies and means of using them effectively. In that case, they could complete their programme in good academic standing and even be able to multi-task in future.

Conclusions

This explored the challenges and coping strategies of student mothers at the College of Distance Education (CoDE) of the University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast Centre. Student mothers had a lot of laborious non-academic activities that they performed daily in their homes. It is therefore concluded that CoDE student mothers have very limited time for their study. Moreover, the non-academic activities performed by these mothers negatively affect their academic lives. Thus, these student mothers have inevitable academic impediments that emanate from the non-academic activities that they perform. In another breath, it was found that the academic activities that the student mothers engaged in harmed their family lives, putting the success of their academic pursuits at the expense of the time for their families. Besides, these student mothers would continue to experience some of these challenges they face, unless they are taught appropriate and effective coping strategies. In effect, many of these mothers may not be able to achieve full academic potentials.

Recommendations

1.   Student mothers need to delegate or share their responsibilities with their partners/husbands and any other person they deem fit. Their husband(s)/ partner(s) or the persons they deem fit, should in turn give their full support to the student mothers to reduce their daily schedules and chores to get time for their studies.

2.   Counselling Unit at CoDE with the assistance of the Counselling Centre of the University of Cape Coast needs, as part of their orientation programme, provide intensive counselling services to all the female students to be

aware of the academic challenges that await them when they conceive/ deliver in the course of reading their programmes.

3. Student mothers need to endeavour to explain the consequences of enrolling in the CoDE programme to their families, especially, partner/ husband for them to fully understand their actions to offer the necessary assistance when the need arises.

4. To save the student-mothers from the overwhelming challenges they face, the strategies such as establishment a breastfeeding room at the centre where student mothers can store milk and feed their children; a day-care centre at the study centre for the babies of CoDE student mothers; the provision of hostel facilities on campus for CoDE student mothers; guidance and counselling on how to manage academics with family responsibilities are important.

Implications for Administrators

The academic and non-academic activities of student mothers have effects on their academic and family lives. It is therefore pertinent that Administrators consider them when executing their duties. Based on the conclusions and recommendations of the study, the following are the implications for the Administrator:

1. The Administrator has to organise Counselling sessions on diverse topics including family life and academic progression of fresh students during the University's orientation programmes.
2. The Administrator should liaise with the Counselling Unit to speak on topics related to the challenges that are associated with the academic pursuit and family life.
3. The Administrator should ensure access to physical resources such as breastfeeding rooms, hostel facilities and a day-care centre to student mothers to provide some comfort to them in their academic pursuit.
4. The Administrator should factor the needs of the student mother into the planning of the academic calendar and also ensure that academic programmes and semester schedules are adhered to since a minute delayed is a loss to the student mother.

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