

# Youths talk about Death: Causes for suicide

Jin Kuan Kok, Chin Chin Gan, and Lee Ying Goh

**Abstract**—This study aims to investigate young people's attitudes towards death and to discover from them the causes for high incidences of suicide among teenagers. A non-probability sampling and a mix method of survey were used. A total of 270 youths aged 15 – 24 from various schools, colleges and hospitals in West Malaysia participated in this study. SPSS was used to analyze the statistic figure for frequency count, Chi-square test for independence was conducted. The findings reveal that young people are open for discussion on the topic of death with their friends and family members. The main factors for suicide were uncovered. More male participants than female participants indicated relationships with the opposite sex as a contributing factor to the suicide problem. Statistically ethnicity was shown to be an important factor. More Chinese students mentioned school work as a cause for suicide than non-Chinese students. The perspectives of young people on the sources of stress for suicide were compared across different family types, namely blended, nuclear and single parent families.

**Index Terms**—Counselling youth, youths perspective on death, suicide, causes for suicide, factors in youth suicide.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Hendin [1] has identified Youths Suicide as an acute world wide problem, and it has become an epidemic in Asia where high suicide rates in several countries with larger populations have accounted for a greater part of the world's suicides. Suicide was the third leading cause of death among youths and young adults aged 10 to 24 in the United States, approximately 4559 cases in year 2004 [2]. Hence suicide is a worrying social issue.

An interview with the current Health Minister, Datuk Seri Liong Tiong Lai (The Stars, April 2009) confirmed that suicide issues have been an on-going concern in Malaysia. The suicide rate in Malaysia, according to the National Statistics Department is as low as 1 per 100,000 suicides per year (2003); however, the exact figure should be higher as the degree of subjectivity in identifying a death by suicide has caused difficulties in many ways [3]. The suicide rate among youths in Malaysia was found to be shocking. Suicidologist Adnan Omar, who is the head of the Counselling and Psychological Services Centre of Taylor's University, believes the suicide trend among the young in Malaysia is getting more serious, and is fast catching up with Japan that has a rate of above 30 per 100,000 people [4] At least 60 people plan suicide everyday. The exact number could be

even more worrying as the numbers from the National Suicide Registry may be underreported due to the problem in identifying the cause of death and other considerations, such as insurance cover. However, Adnam confirms the trend that points to the 20-39 age group making up the highest number of suicides [4].

In Malaysia there was a fervent discussion on the issue of suicide after two tragic suicide incidents happened in Feb 2011. Two major risk factors were highlighted:-

- Poor coping mechanism for the stresses of school life [4]
- The lack of a program to promote good mental health in the country [5]

Adnan [4] emphasized the rising stress levels in a transitional society as the main factor. He attributed the risk factors of the young to the instability felt by teenagers growing up in the context of a society undergoing value changes. The traditional protective factors such as family and religion are no longer in place

Adnan's perspective and his description of Malaysia's suicide trend can be traced back to French sociologist Emile Durkheim's Theory of Suicide in which he postulated an explanation of suicide cases as 'anomic suicide'. His attribution framework is as follow: as the integration of society deteriorates, people will feel less anchored to the social world. Thus, Durkheim [6] attributes suicide to an external and constraining social fact which is independent of individual psychopathology.

Adnan's use of anomic and fatalistic suicides to describe Malaysia's suicide cases, operates from variance in normative. However, the risks factors highlighted by Adnan, the instability of teens, and the absence of family/ religious protecting factors have not yet been confirmed by empirical research.

Anomic, literally "without norm", behaviour results from the temporary, but abrupt disruption of normative restraint. This anomic or fatalistic suicide, which Durkheim considered only as a footnote, is generated by excessive regulation. Therefore by principle, the sudden removal of excessive regulation or control as a result of social change will trigger of anomic behaviour What are the actual normative restraints or disruption of normative restraint as experienced by our young people? What exactly are the struggles, the stress, the unbearable pains our youths face from their environment (which normally means their schools, family and the eco-systemic context for most youths) that they want to put a stop to their existence? As individuals are part of the society, suicide should not be treated solely as the product of intolerable acute stressors.

Risk factors that lead to suicidality identified from the previous research studies are: Stressful lifestyle [7], job burnout, family relationships [8], peer pressure and academic success [9], negative childhood experience such as physical

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and/or sexual abuse, neglect and separation [9 ; 10], substance misuse such as drugs and alcohols [9], economic issues [8]

Most of the previous studies on suicide issues are largely conceptualized and theoretically based. There is a lack of empirical research. Therefore the internal landscape of the person needs to be explored. Interviews carried out directly with the young people will provide insights into understanding the current acute suicide issue.

In order to grasp the attitudes to death among the youth, their perceptions of the reasons or causes for death, the risk factors of suicidality, and their subjective feelings and experiences when talking about this sensitive topic, there needs to be an empirical study.

Therefore, instead of using existing psychological instruments, which aim to confirm rather than explore, and to get a better understanding into this human phenomena, it is necessary to draw insight from individual, personal, descriptions by young people of their perception of suicide.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. A total of 270 students comprises of 127 males and 143 females aged from 15 to 24 from different parts of urban west Malaysia were involved in this study. The participants were from different secondary, university campus and hospital settings. A questionnaire was designed to find out their perceptions of death, and if they were prepared to discuss their views on the reasons for suicide among teenagers and young adults.

Permission for the study was obtained from the gate keepers of relevant authorities from the various organizations taking part, who were the principals of secondary schools and administrative authority from hospitals. The participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study if they felt the questions were intrusive or difficult to answer. Sensitivity was noted and participants were informed that only group data would be used for publication and no personal information, nor the name of their schools or organization would be revealed.

For the online and hospital groups, a drop-off administration was carried out whereby the participants voluntarily returned the questionnaire to the various centres. A token of appreciation was given to all the participants.

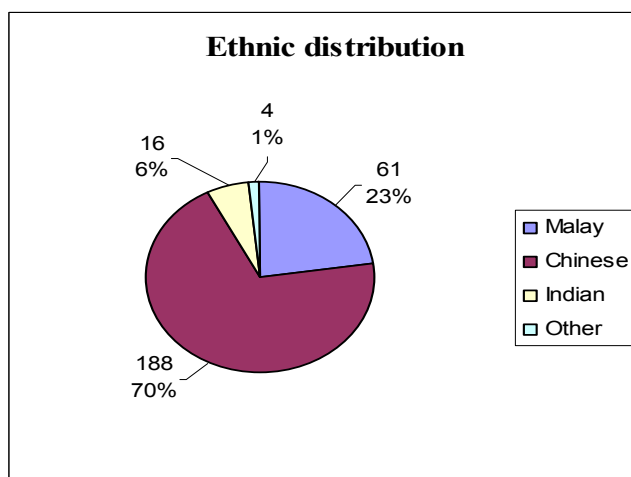
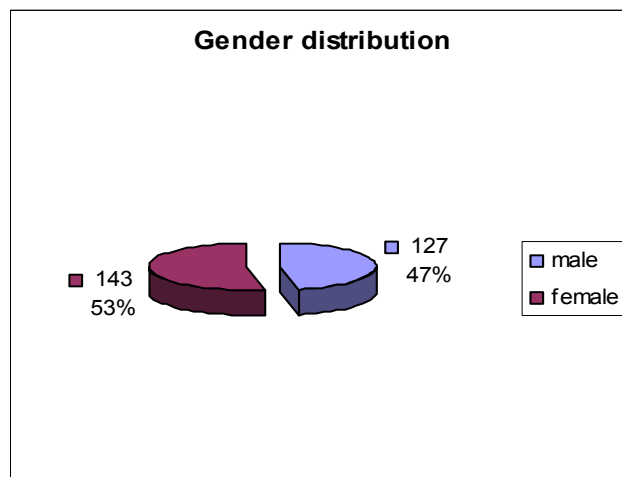
The questionnaire, include basic demographics, objective questions and a few open ended questions on “what is meant to be a meaningful life” aimed to find out the perspectives of young people on the topic of death. There were two open-ended questions and a thematic approach was used to identify the various emerging themes. Email interviews were followed up for 20 students who gave permission for doing so. The identification of themes from the email replies followed a qualitative approach.

The demographics of participants are shown in the pie charts below:

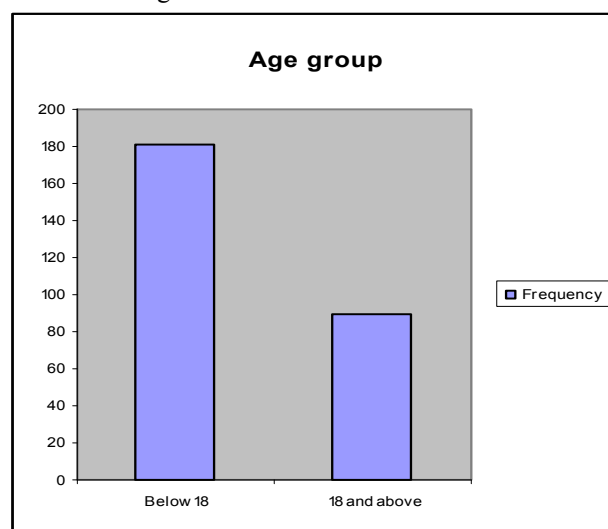
## III. FINDINGS

This paper reports only the quantitative part of the survey.

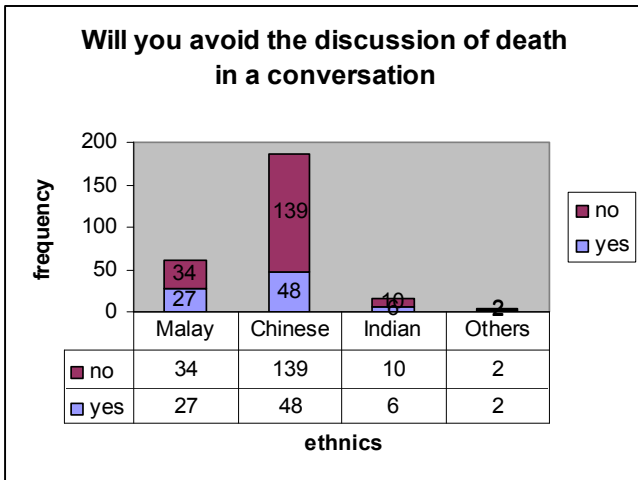
The findings suggest that most students are open to discussion about the topic of death. They mostly discuss it with their friends. The people students are least likely to approach for a conversation on the topic of death are school teachers. Males are likely to attribute the reason for suicide to boy-girl relationships, this is similar across all ethnic groups. As for other possible reasons for suicide, more Chinese students thought the stress of school work was most likely. Malays students put more emphasis on family issues.



There were 181 students below the age of 18, and 89 students were aged 18 and above.

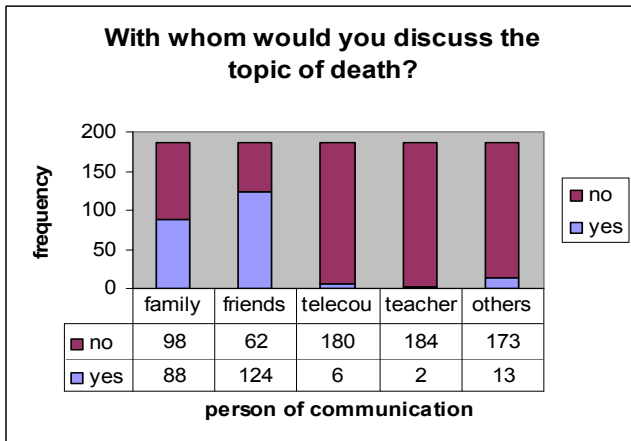


A. Open to discussion on the topic of Death



55.7% (n=34) of Malay students, 73.9% (n=139) of Chinese students, and 62.5% (n=10) Indian students will not avoid the discussion of death in a conversation.

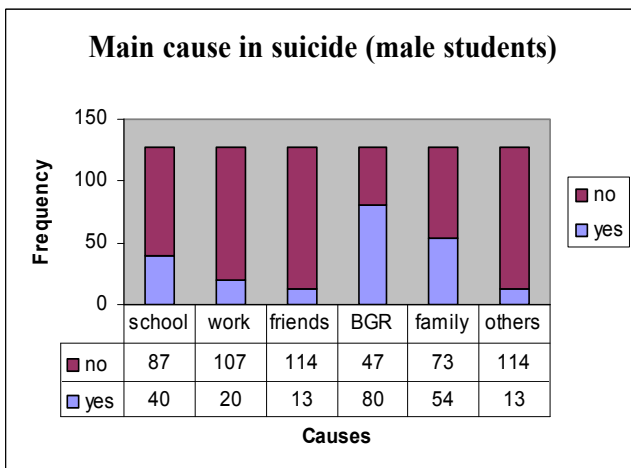
B. With whom teens discuss the topic of Death



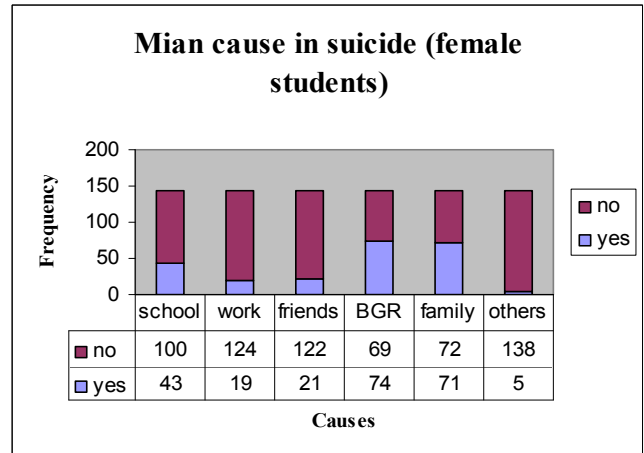
The above chart shows the answers to the question “who would you talk to” on the topic of death. Friends and family are the two main source of communication on this topic. More participants chose to talk with their friends rather than with family members.

C. Possible causes of suicide

There sources of stress that might have been causes for suicide for the young were identified, namely boy-girl relationships, family issues and school work.



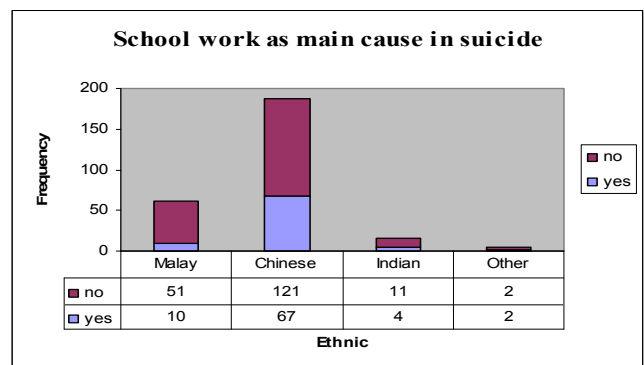
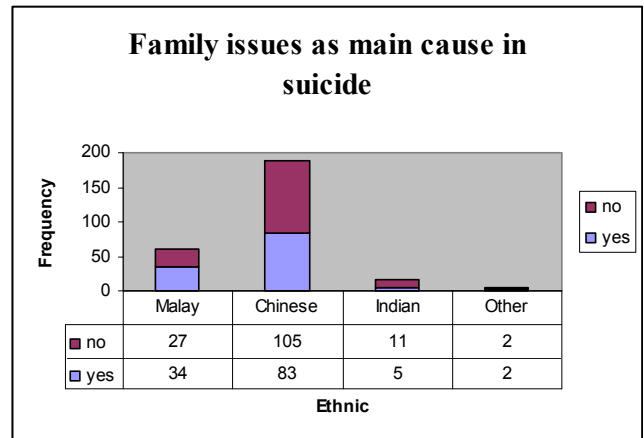
Boy-girl relationships ranked the highest for the possible reasons for suicide for both the male and female students.



80 out of 127 (63%) of male participants and 74 out for 143 (52%) female participant stated BGR as the possible reason for suicide. More male participants than female participants think BGR issues contribute to suicide.

71 (around 50%) of female stated family issues as a possible reason for suicide. Male students’ answers were comparatively lower on family issues. Only 54 (42.5%) of male students stated family issues as a possible suicide reason.

34 out of 61 of Malay participants (55.7%) stated family issues as a reason for suicide, whereas the percentage of Chinese and Indian participants are lower. 83 out of 188 of Chinese (44.1%) and 5 out of 11 Indian participants (31.2%) stated so.



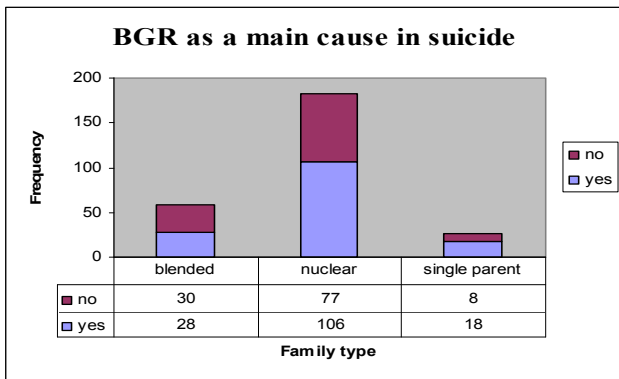
From the above tables: Among the three major ethnic groups, students from the Chinese community mentioned school work as the source of most stress, they also gave it as the main cause in suicide. The frequency and percentage

were as follows: 67 out of 188 (35.6%) for Chinese, 4 out of 12 (25%) for Indian and 10 out of 61 for Malay (16.4%)

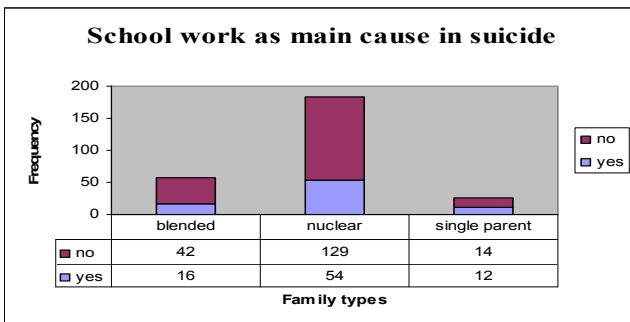
Chi-square test for independence was run and the result showed that there was a significant association between the ethnicity (Chinese vs non-Chinese) and school work as a reason for suicide cases (Yes vs No),  $X^2(1, n=269) = 6.696, p = .01$ . More Chinese thought that school work is a main cause in suicide than non-Chinese (35.6 % vs. 19.8%), whereas more non-Chinese thought that school work is not main cause in suicide compared to Chinese ( 80.2% vs. 64.4%).

**Comparison among family types**

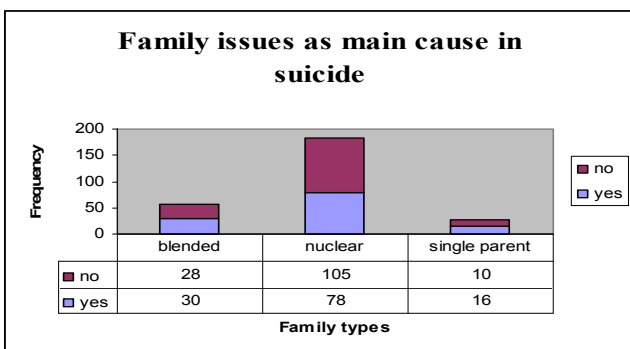
If we compare the above mentioned sources of stress leading to suicide for the different family types, namely blended, nuclear and single parent families, the single family type scored highest for all the above three possible reasons for suicide.



The above table shows that the percentage of participants who stated BGR as a suicide reason: 69.2% participants from single families (18 out of 26); 57.9% from nuclear families (106 out of 183) and 48.3% (28 out of 58) from blended families.



The above table shows that the percentage of participants who stated School Work as main cause in suicide: 46.2% (12 out of 28) from single parent families; 29.5% (54 out of 183) from nuclear families and 27.6 % (16 out of 58) from blended families.



The above table shows that the percentage of participants who stated Family Issues as main cause in suicide: 61% (16 out of 26) from single parent families; 42.6% (78 out of 183) from nuclear families, and 51.7% (30 out of 58) from blended families.

The results show higher percentage of students from single family type mentioned the three main factors or causes in suicide, namely coping with boy-girl relationship, school work and family issues.

**IV. DISCUSSION**

Young people are trapped between the stage of childhood and adulthood, and there are many developmental processes at work during this stage of development [11]. Some researchers suggested that people at this growing up stage are confronted with a lot of struggles and can experience alienation[12].

As a result of social change, youths are faced with many challenges. Young people nowadays are growing up in an increasingly competitive, globalized society, in which uncertainty, rapid and frequent change, insecurity and risk taking are some of the characteristics of post-modern globalization [13]. The school environment is always a place of stress for most students. This is also emphasised by previous studies showing that education is most valued in traditional Chinese families. It can be traced back from Chinese Confucian belief [14] that education has an important value in most Chinese families, including Malaysian Chinese families as shown in the respondents' results in this study. Most Chinese parents would expect high academic achievement from their children, and most Chinese students have a concept of filial piety so they do not want to disappoint their parents. This explains why most Chinese participants cited school work as a contributing factor to suicide.

The finding of this research is in line with the previous study that normally teachers were the last people that students would seek counseling from in a school setting and the counseling services in school is not popular. Most student would seek counseling services for school work or career problems but not on personal issues [15]. This finding found that friends' help was most sought for, and another resource for young people to talk about the sensitive issue on the topic of death is family members.

For the sources of stress that the participants identified as possible causes of suicide, boy-girl relationships were among the highest ranked.

According to Durkheim's suicide theory [6] which depicted males as always more vulnerable, their risk of suicide is considerably higher. The findings seem to confirm Durkheim's postulation as the male students are more emotionally vulnerable, as most of them cited a broken relationship as a reason for suicide.

Durkheim's theory [6] also stated that the risk of suicide is higher when the society has excessive or insufficient influence on individuals. The former refers to altruistic suicide and the latter points to the alienation or lack of support from the society in the case of growing youngsters.

Adnan, [4] attributes the risk factors of the youths to: -

Instability: the young growing up among changes of values of the society. The changing society is an external environment factor, whereas the fading away of traditional protective factors such as family and religion refer to immediate eco-systemic environments in which our young people are developing. Both of these causes are the environmental contributions, which belong to external and constaining social conditions independent of individual psychopathology.

The findings confirm indirectly with those of Mr Arnan as the results are quite similar across the board, in that most of the participants regardless of religion or background mentioned similar causes for suicide. Participants stated boy-girl relationship and, especially students from Chinese families, school work. The two main causes cited arise from external stresses. The idea of anomic suicide, which is described by Durkheim refers to a state of dissatisfaction due to external stress. The findings of this researcher imply that young people are increasingly reacting with dissatisfaction to the way they are regulated by the society. Young people experience lack of control in their own lives and they might feel unable to cope when faced with uncertainty, even though these uncertainties are presented to them as “opportunities” [16].

However, friends are the most sought-after people for the young in times of need and they would prefer to discuss, suicide and death with their friends, rather than anyone else. Because of this, peer support leaders in the school counselling programme could be effective in reducing suicide rates among the young. Mentoring and coaching by peer support leaders could be developed. Western Australian mental health researchers Singh and Leung [17] have found that peer support programmes are effective in providing positive influence in the areas of academic and non-academic situations in an educational setting. Peers have a greater impact on their fellow pupils in that they serve as for guides and role models. When youngsters are confronted with problems, friends are sought for an listening ear. Thus peer support programmes will contribute to the establishment of self-concepts transferring of skills. This will help setting of good examples as most young people will seek help from their peers rather than adults. Peer leadership training would be a resource for educators. Parents who know their children’s friends will be in a better position to understand their children.

Besides exhibiting strong attachment to peers, many young people are also still pretty much strongly tied to their family members. However, are parents prepared and well-equipped to talk to their teens on these sensitive issues, or most importantly do they have the communicative and supportive relationship for the young people to approach them to talk about such essential questions. Working towards strengthening family ties with our young people in order to be able to offer help when needs arise is important.

The classification of family types in this study seems to have adopted the traditional family life-cycle described in the literature [18] in which the modern variable patterns of marriage were not taken into consideration. This is because Malaysia as a whole is still mainly governed by communal values and traditional definitions of family types. However, reading from the findings, young people from single parent family faced the most stress and perhaps this group of people needs more support.

## V. CONCLUSION

Suicide as a social pathology requires preventive measures in the social context in which suicidal individuals are located. This paper reveals the perspective of young people on the issues of suicide and death. Various possible causes for suicide were identified by the participants. It is hoped that the tragedy of suicidally unhappy young people could be reduced.

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