



PLAGIARISM AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION, ESWATINI: UNDERSTANDING, PREVENTION, AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Plagiarism is a pervasive issue in higher education that extends beyond being a mere academic violation to challenge the fundamental principles of truth, originality, and integrity that underpin the academic world. A mixed-method approach was employed to collect data through questionnaires that included both open and closed-ended questions. The goal was to gain a comprehensive understanding of institutions' perceptions of plagiarism and academic integrity, the use of plagiarism detection tools, institutional policies, and the strategies implemented by higher education institutions in Eswatini to tackle plagiarism. The findings reveal a significant gap between awareness of plagiarism as a form of academic misconduct and these institutions' actual use of plagiarism detection software and tools. Key challenges contributing to this gap include financial constraints, a lack of technical support for both educators and students and insufficient clear policies and regulations to address plagiarism effectively. This highlights the urgent need for academics, educators, and policymakers in higher education to take an active role in fostering a culture of academic integrity and reducing the incidence of plagiarism within the higher education sector.

KEYWORDS: Plagiarism; academic integrity; higher education; quality education; Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Eswatini



INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism originates from the Latin word “plagiarise,” which refers to the act of presenting another person's published or unpublished words, writings, or any other form of intellectual property as one’s own, whether intentionally or unintentionally, without giving proper credit to the original author (McIntire, Calvert & Ashcraft, 2024).

Intentional plagiarism occurs when students knowingly copy others' work, often driven by academic pressures, tight deadlines, and the pursuit of success (McIntire, Calvert & Ashcraft, 2024; Fatima, Abbas, Ming et al., 2019). This risk increases when tasks exceed their current skills and knowledge (Keefer, Brown & Rothschild, 2020). Additionally, procrastination has been linked to a higher likelihood of plagiarism, as students may resort to it due to time constraints (Pagaddu, 2021). Unintentional plagiarism, on the other hand, refers to the act of using someone else's work, ideas, or expressions without proper attribution, without intending to deceive or take credit for that work (Hafsa, 2021). It frequently stems from students' inadequate proficiency in crediting sources, employing proper citation methods and insufficient knowledge about what constitutes plagiarism (Prashar, Gupta, & Dwivedi, 2023). Even though the person committing unintentional plagiarism does not intend to infringe on another's intellectual property, it can still have severe academic and ethical consequences. Khadilkar (2018) argues that, intentionally or unintentionally, Khadilkar (2018) describes plagiarism as literary theft, fundamentally undermining academic integrity.

Academic integrity entails acting honestly, fairly, respectfully, and responsibly in relation to one’s studies and academic work (Pagaddu, 2021). This commitment includes applying these values not only in one’s work but also when engaging with the contributions of others. Both staff and students are expected to uphold these values, which include honesty, fairness, trust, respect, and responsibility (Mulenga & Shilongo, 2024). Collectively, these principles define ethical academic behaviour. According to Ahmad and Fauzi (2024), when plagiarism becomes prevalent, it directly “attacks” the core values of academic integrity, leading to compromised educational quality. It

undermines trust and honesty within the academic community by distorting the originality and authenticity of scholarly endeavours (Perkins, Gezgin & Roe, 2020).

Research shows that plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are prevalent in higher education. A study conducted by Do Ba, Lam et al. (2017) at a university in Vietnam revealed that incidents of plagiarism were increasing, with students frequently using the internet to copy materials without providing any citations. Similarly, Appiah (2016) found a high rate of plagiarism and related academic misconduct among undergraduate students in public universities in Kumasi, Ghana. The study identified several root causes, including time constraints, heavy academic workloads, easy access to online information, and difficulties with paraphrasing and referencing.

Forms of Plagiarism

Plagiarism encompasses a range of behaviours and manifests in various forms. Global plagiarism occurs when an individual presents someone else's entire work as their own, such as submitting another person's essay or reproducing an online article without proper attribution (Fatima, Abbas, Ming et al., 2019). On the other hand, direct plagiarism involves replicating a text from an external source without appropriate credit, whether it involves copying a segment of text, an entire document, or specific content verbatim without the use of quotation marks or acknowledging the original author through citations (Perkins, Gezgin & Roe, 2020).

Paraphrasing plagiarism involves rephrasing another person's ideas in one's own words while maintaining the original idea's structure without adequately citing the source (McIntire, Calvert & Ashcraft, 2024). Patchwork plagiarism entails assembling sections from different texts to create a new document (Fatima, Abbas, Ming et al., 2019), including sentences or paragraphs. Self-plagiarism occurs when an individual repurposes their previously submitted work without proper acknowledgement (Waltzer & Dahl, 2020), such as submitting identical papers for different courses or reusing portions of earlier assignments without correct citation (Ndebele, 2020).

Implications of Plagiarism

Plagiarism presents a significant peril to scholarly pursuits and constitutes a grave infringement of academic and intellectual integrity. Ahmad and Fauzi (2024, p. 65) describe plagiarism as a "contagious disease," using this metaphor to vividly capture its insidious nature in higher education and the academic space. The contention is that, like an infectious ailment, plagiarism spreads stealthily and has far-reaching consequences affecting not only individual students but also educators, educational institutions, the credibility of academic establishments, the reliability of scholarly debates, the academic integrity of the entire educational system, and the overall quality of education.

Implications for Higher Education Institutions: Tolerating acts of plagiarism can negatively affect higher education institutions as it undermines their commitment to the scholarly development of their students (Salauddin, 2023). Such a compromise can lead to a loss of credibility and a diminished reputation within the academic community (Ahmad & Fauzi, 2024). Maintaining this integrity is crucial for upholding educational standards and preserving public trust, which can be challenging to restore once compromised (Hafsa, 2021). A decline in credibility can also make institutions less attractive to prospective students who seek a quality education.

Implications for the Students: As outlined by Sayeda (2024), plagiarism impedes students' full engagement with academic material, thereby stifling personal intellectual growth and hindering the cultivation of critical thinking, research skills, and originality, all of which are indispensable attributes in academic and professional spheres (McIntire, Calvert & Ashcraft, 2024). Furthermore, plagiarism erodes trust within academic and professional contexts, casting doubt on an individual's academic integrity, standing, and competence (Ndebele, 2020).

Moreover, the ramifications of plagiarism extend to students' future career opportunities (Kumar, Verma & Aggarwal, 2023), and empirical evidence demonstrates a correlation between academic dishonesty and unethical behaviour in the workplace, such as deceit and bribery (Harwood, 2023). Employers expect



graduates to possess the necessary knowledge and a solid ethical foundation (Hafsa, 2021). An institution associated with high levels of academic dishonesty may, therefore, find its graduates viewed with scepticism by potential employers.

Goals of the Study

This study aims to explore the complexities of plagiarism within the higher education sector in Eswatini. It seeks to provide a detailed understanding of institutions' perspectives on plagiarism and academic integrity, the usage of plagiarism detection tools, institutional policies, and the strategies higher education institutions employ to combat plagiarism. By gaining these insights, the study intends to offer proactive approaches and recommendations to foster a culture of academic integrity and reduce the prevalence of plagiarism in higher education. The findings could serve as a foundation for developing effective measures that promote honesty and originality in academic work. Ultimately, this effort will play a crucial role in upholding the credibility and integrity of scholarly work, ensuring the quality of higher education in Eswatini, and establishing it as a platform for genuine knowledge advancement.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, distributing a questionnaire that included open-ended and closed-ended questions to all registered Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Eswatini, facilitated by the quality assurance focal persons. By integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, the research allowed for data triangulation, enhancing an understanding of the current state of plagiarism and plagiarism management within Eswatini's higher education landscape. This comprehensive approach provided valuable insights that informed further analysis and recommendations, combining statistical rigour with the lived experiences and perspectives of the respondents. A response rate of 36 out of the 47 respondents provided substantial data for the study. The qualitative data from the surveys underwent thematic analysis to identify prevalent themes and patterns. Meanwhile, quantitative data were analysed using Google Forms for summary statistics and visual



presentations. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper to represent the respondents and their institutions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Awareness, Adoption, Usage and Integration

The study's findings indicate that although Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Eswatini are well-informed about plagiarism detection software and tools, only 36% of the institutions have integrated them into their academic practices. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this trend.

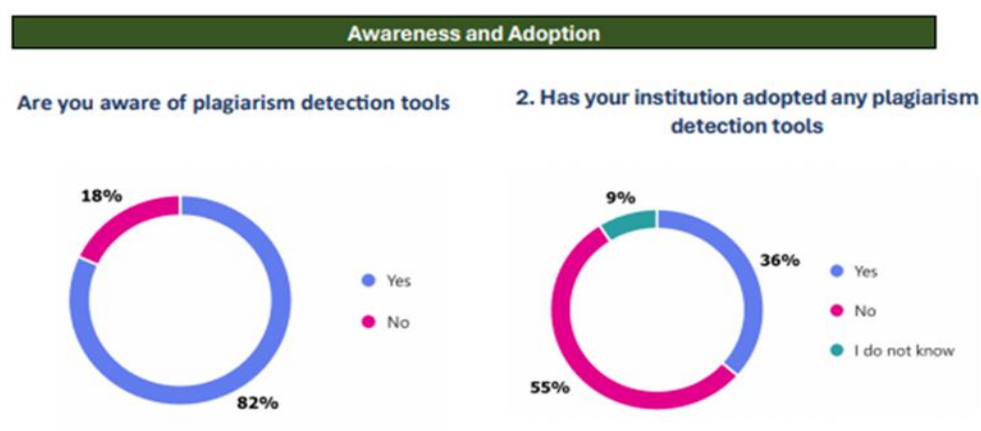


Figure 1: Awareness and adoption of plagiarism detection tools

Again, although 82% of the responding institutions utilise plagiarism detection tools, only 9% consistently incorporate them into their teaching and learning processes. Furthermore, just 9% have integrated these tools within their learning management systems.

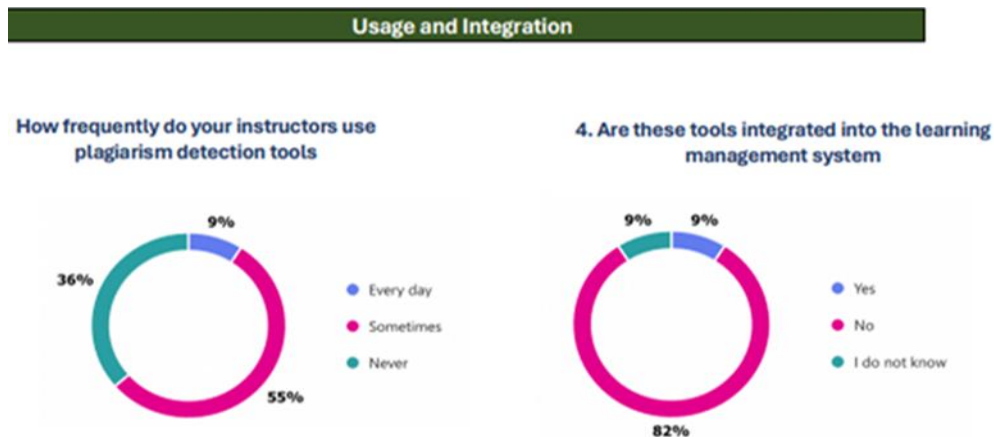


Figure 2: Usage and integration of plagiarism software and detection tools

The research shows a significant gap between awareness and adoption of plagiarism detection tools in higher education. Yet, failing to adopt and consistently use these detection tools has the propensity to compromise the quality of higher education (Ndebele, 2020). Without comprehensive and consistent measures to detect and deter plagiarism, the authenticity of students' work in Eswatini, the integrity of the institutions, and the credibility of the academic qualifications they offer may be at risk (Ahmad & Fauzi, 2024).

THE POSSIBLE BARRIERS TO ENSURING QUALITY EDUCATION

The findings indicate that 82% of the respondents acknowledge the importance of plagiarism detection tools, yet only 36% have implemented them. This suggests several barriers to adoption, including financial constraints, insufficient support for educators and students, and the absence of plagiarism policies.

The Financial Challenges

Seventeen (17) respondents admitted to lacking plagiarism detection software or tools due to the high acquisition costs. For example, Dr Willie* from Nsuka University had this to say;

“Even though we understand that plagiarism compromises the education we offer as an institution, the plagiarism software is costly for us, and we cannot afford it”.

Likewise, Dr Mali* from Muntu College* emphasised that; *“without the financial resources, it is complicated and even almost impossible (for institutions) to acquire such software and tools”*.

The responses underscore the challenge higher education institutions face in providing quality education and ensuring the credibility of qualifications due to financial constraints. This raises the question of whether finances are the sole obstacle or if issues such as plagiarism are not prioritised for necessary financial investment. Regrettably, this limitation hampers the institutions' ability to detect and prevent plagiarism, resulting in lowered academic standards, compromised integrity, and diminished learning outcomes (Harwood, 2023).

One effective way to tackle the financial challenges that educational institutions face in accessing plagiarism detection software could be to leverage open-source and complementary tools such as Grammarly and Quetext. These tools provide free versions that can effectively identify plagiarism (Bahuguna, R., Nainwal, N., Banerjee et al., 2024). Higher Education Institutions can also collaborate to share resources and costs for plagiarism software by forming consortia. These joint efforts can facilitate data sharing, enhance the individual capabilities of institutions in detecting plagiarism, and promote a more cohesive academic community (Foltýnek, Dlabolová, Anohina-Naumeca, A. et al., 2020).

ABSENCE OF TECHNICAL SUPPORT

The data reveals a notable incongruity in providing technical support to educators and students across various educational institutions. It is concerning that while 58% of the institutions offered technical support for faculty and students, 25% did not provide such support, and an additional 17% were unaware of any support services within their institutions.

Is technical support readily available for Faculty and students?

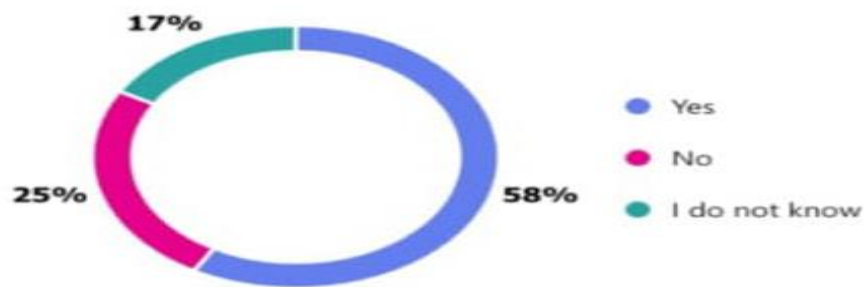


Figure 3: Technical Support for faculty and students

To echo these findings, when asked about providing support services for staff and students, Ms Dlamini from Muntu College* articulated that the institution offers "*academic integrity workshops and access to academic support services for students and educators.*" In contrast, several institutions responded with either "no" or "I do not know."

The different responses show the varied approaches to academic support services, highlighting the lack of a deliberate focus on addressing plagiarism by most higher education institutions in Eswatini. Again, the lack of awareness among quality assurance officers regarding the availability of support is surprising and underscores potential gaps in communication and implementation of anti-plagiarism measures within the institutions. This emphasises the imperative need for comprehensive and consistent enforcement of plagiarism policies and improved communication within institutions to ensure that all stakeholders are informed and involved in addressing plagiarism and ensuring academic integrity.

Institutions need to recognise that plagiarism can manifest as intentional or unintentional, which Hafsa (2021) describes as the "presence or absence" of deliberate dishonesty. Unintentional plagiarism can be mitigated by cultivating proficient research and writing skills in every student, enabling them to produce high-

quality written work for academic and professional purposes (Wischgoll, 2017). This can be achieved through workshops focusing on proper citation and research techniques. Educators play a vital role in assisting students by establishing clear expectations for original work, providing examples of adequately cited sources, and offering guidance on avoiding plagiarism (Waltzer & Dahl, 2020). Additionally, students can be encouraged to utilise plagiarism checkers before submitting their work and to seek assistance from educators or librarians if they are uncertain about proper citation methods (Hafsa, 2021).

An effective strategy to prevent intentional plagiarism among students could involve providing clear guidelines and education on proper citation and referencing (Ndebele, 2020). It is also vital to encourage critical thinking and originality in assignments and emphasise the value of independent work (Harwood, 2023). Additionally, offering resources such as writing centres, plagiarism detection software, and constructive feedback on drafts can support students in producing original work (Pagaddu, 2021). Creating a culture of academic integrity and ethical behaviour through open discussions and setting a positive example can further discourage intentional plagiarism (Sayeda, 2024).

It is worth noting that Kumar, Verma, and Aggarwal (2023) argue that traditional preventive measures, such as using plagiarism detection software and imposing punitive actions, have not been fully effective in discouraging students from committing plagiarism. Sayeda (2024) emphasises a direct and negative correlation between academic dishonesty and an individual's ethical conduct and attitude. While punitive measures may deter dishonesty in specific cases, they do not necessarily lead to behavioural change. Therefore, it is crucial for higher education institutions to not only treat plagiarism as a punitive issue but also to focus on students' ethical and moral development, for example, by encouraging open discussions about academic integrity (Mulenga & Shilongo, 2024).

Lack of Clear Policies and Regulations

Based on the findings, approximately 75% of the higher education institutions (HEIs) have policies on plagiarism, while 25% do not.

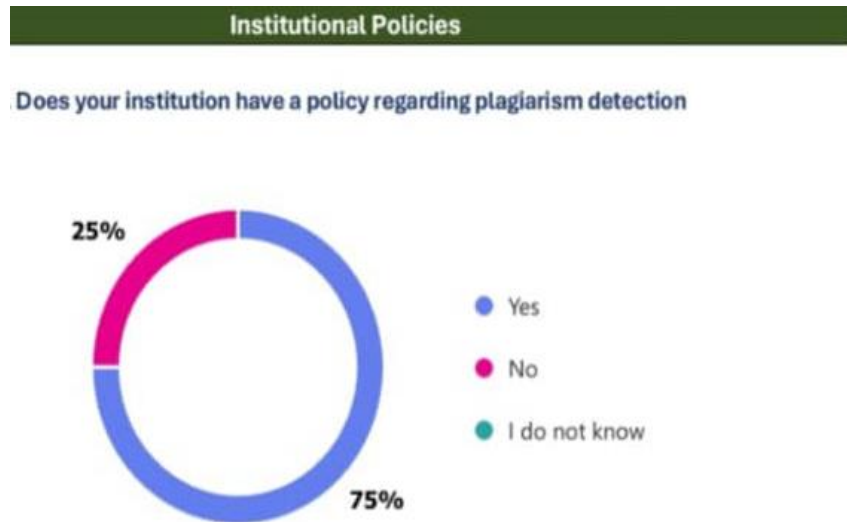


Figure 4: Policies and regulations

The findings highlight the significant presence of plagiarism policies in higher education institutions, with most institutions having formal guidelines. This presents a positive step in addressing plagiarism and maintaining educational standards. However, it appears that these policies exist only on paper, indicating a disconnect between policy and practice, as demonstrated below:



Figure 5: Responses from the survey on higher education policies

The responses highlight several crucial issues with plagiarism policies in higher education institutions. The *"lack of clarity and specificity"* in the policies at Pool Academy indicates that although institutions develop policies, they may not be sufficiently detailed to provide clear guidance. This ambiguity can result in inconsistent enforcement and confusion among students and staff. Without well-defined procedures, as evidenced at River Academy, institutions may encounter challenges in effectively handling and managing plagiarism cases, leading to potential unfairness and frustration for educators and students (Wischgoll, 2017). Although it is commendable that policies and consequences are effectively communicated at this institution, effective communication alone is inadequate if the policies are unclear or there are no robust processes to support them (Cantiello & Geschke, 2024).

According to Dr Mali from Muntu College*, offenders' defensiveness and the lack of clear policies to address such issues complicate the resolution process. This defensiveness may arise from a lack of understanding of the policies, underscoring the necessity for clear, equitable, and transparent procedures (Ndebele, 2020). Moreover, the ambiguity surrounding the classification of "minor (forgivable) or major (unforgivable) plagiarism" at CLM University indicates a significant concern. It is

imperative to provide precise definitions and examples to ensure that all involved parties comprehend the severity of various types of plagiarism and the corresponding repercussions (Ahmad, H., & Fauzi, 2024).

Similarly, Ms Maziya from Theresa University* reported that students “*struggle to comply with the policies*”. This suggests that the policies might be too complex, not well-integrated into the educational process, not adequately explained to the students’ understanding, or not adequately supported by educational resources (Mansoor, Ameen & Arshad, 2024). This indicates a need for enhanced education on academic integrity and more readily available support systems for students and faculty (Kumar, Verma & Aggarwal, 2023).

The lack of clear anti-plagiarism policies and procedures and the insufficient consequences for plagiarism exacerbate dishonesty within academic and professional circles (Perkins, Gezgin & Roe, 2020). This lax approach fails to deter individuals from engaging in unethical behaviour, ultimately undermining the integrity of scholarly work. Therefore, addressing plagiarism in higher education requires the development of comprehensive policies that unambiguously define plagiarism. These policies should include specific examples of what constitutes plagiarism and provide clear guidance on proper source citation (McIntire, Calvert & Ashcraft, 2024). It is also crucial for institutions to refine these policies, ensuring effective communication and robust procedures to handle cases reasonably and consistently (Mulenga & Shilongo, 2024). These policies should also outline procedures, consequences, and the institution's commitment to upholding academic integrity through staff and student training (Hafsa, 2021).

Furthermore, the policies need to explicate how they will be implemented, monitored, and evaluated to ensure effectiveness, with provisions for necessary revisions (Wischgoll, 2017). In addition to plagiarism policies, institutions can implement honour codes emphasising honesty, trust, and responsibility (Mansoor, Ameen & Arshad, 2024). Enforcing clear consequences for plagiarism within the honour system can also help reduce its occurrence (Cantiello & Geschke, 2024). These policies must be



consistently enforced, implemented, and evaluated to ensure their ongoing effectiveness, with an impartial and open procedure for handling accusations and applying penalties (Salauddin, 2023).

Prashar, Guptaa, and Dwivedi (2023) have also observed that educators' leniency and lack of enforcement of deterrents against plagiarism lead to increased engagement in academic dishonesty among students. Students may perceive this leniency as an opportunity to deceive educators without consequences. Therefore, implementing stricter measures and emphasising the significance of academic integrity to educators and students could deter plagiarism and contribute to cultivating a more ethically sound learning environment. Additionally, Perkins, Gezgin, and Roe (2020) argue that the easy accessibility of electronic resources and online materials has significantly contributed to the rise in student plagiarism.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings emphasise a critical need for higher education institutions (HEIs) in Eswatini to implement plagiarism detection tools effectively. While these tools are recognised as important among institutions, the low rates of usage highlight vulnerabilities in maintaining academic integrity. Institutions must adopt these tools and integrate them into their academic frameworks to ensure the authenticity of student work and uphold the credibility of academic qualifications. This requires focusing on developing preventive strategies, cultivating a culture of integrity, and addressing the challenges faced in implementing plagiarism detection. By embracing this proactive approach, HEIs can significantly enhance academic integrity, foster genuine learning, and support scholarly achievements and the reputation of HEIs in Eswatini.

RECOMMENDATIONS - PROMOTING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The following recommendations are meant to support initiatives aimed at addressing issues of plagiarism within the higher education context;

- There is a heightened need for higher education institutions to unmask their subjective “contextual” roots for tailored solutions. Addressing plagiarism is akin to managing a "contagious" disease (Ahmad & Fauzi, 2024). Thus, effectively addressing plagiarism within an academic institution necessitates a holistic approach. This approach transcends the mere establishment of policies, software usage, and support provision. Instead, it entails institutions meticulously considering and comprehending the root causes and contextual factors contributing to plagiarism within their academic context. Institutions can devise customised and efficient solutions tailored to their needs by attaining such comprehensive insights.

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Dr. Ncamsile D. Motsa, the Research, Monitoring, and Publications Manager at ESHEC, researched and authored this issue. For those interested in further discussion or engagement regarding the article's content, Dr. Motsa can be contacted directly at ncamsilemotsa@eshec.org.sz.

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