Cyberbullying: role of the school counselor in mitigating the silent killer epidemic

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript will focus on cyber-bullying, which has become an epidemic in this country amongst children and teenagers of all different races, backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and religious beliefs. Using virtual mediums to harass, taunt, tease, threaten, and bully has become pervasive due to the availability of technology, the incredible ability to reach endless audiences, its relentlessness, as well as the aspect of anonymity. Cyberbullying can have many detrimental repercussions including decreased academic performance, poor social skills, reduced self-worth, isolation, loneliness, depression, anxiety, truancy, and suicide. School counselors play a critical role in helping perpetrators, as well as students who fall victim to cyberbullying by taking a strength based approach, teaching soft skills and social emotional learning, encouraging students to become more assertive, empathic, empowered, assisting students in regaining control, focusing on setting realistic goals, as well as encouraging increased parental involvement and monitoring of social media. The definition of cyberbullying, statistics, consequences, as well as best practices and the role of the school counselor to mitigate cyberbullying will be discussed.

Introduction

Cyberbullying is a pervasive form of bullying that takes place through virtual mediums including computers, cell phones, through texting, computers applications, and social media forums in which people can participate, view, comment, and share information. Cyberbullying occurs when harmful, intentionally cruel, or negative information is posted about a person regarding their physical appearance, behaviors, choices that is intended to hurt or cause humiliation to someone (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

Cyberbullying takes place via text messaging, email, instant messaging, spreading rumors online, positing mean messages on one's own or another's social media account, breaking into someone's account and spreading mean messages, pretending to be someone else online with the intent of hurting that person, or sexting or sending explicit pictures about a person on social media sites such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2016). One very devastating aspect of cyberbullying via social media is that posts can be viewed by anyone who has access to a person's site. In recent years, the nature of adolescent peer aggression has evolved due to the proliferation of information and communications technology (Hinduja

& Patchin, 2010). Cyberbullying is extraordinarily dangerous for both the perpetrator and victim in that for the perpetrator it will leave a permanent record of their activities, postings, and they may build a negative online reputation that is accessible to future educators, admissions officers, and employers (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2016). Further, if a perpetrator engages in sexting a photo of another person and charged legally, in addition to suits, the person also will need to register as a sex offender. In addition, it is very detrimental to the victim as they may endure endless harassment, mortification, develop a poor self-concept as a result of the constant torment, experience anxiety, depression, chronic absenteeism and poor academic performance, as well as suicidal ideations or suicide (Nobullying.com, 2016). Cyberbullying is persistent in that digital media can be utilized nonstop, as well as is permanent in that information posted online is permanent unless removed. It is so vital for people to think before they post, since once it is out there it is there for everyone to see. Additionally, it is also essential for people to demonstrate empathy (Sabella, 2012b), put themselves in another's shoes, and imagine how they would feel if certain information was posted about them, as this may help to decrease cyberbullying. In addition to raising students' awareness about empathy and compassion, schools and states are developing rules, expectations, and laws addressing cyberbullying in order to help mitigate its pervasiveness and impose consequences in hopes of ending cyberbullying attacks from occurring.

Cyberbullying Laws and Statistics

Due to its pervasiveness, all states have criminal laws that apply to bullying, however, not all states have statutes that applies to bullying or cyberbullying outside of school. Every state with the exception of Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina and Texas has laws and policies regarding bullying, whereas the mentioned states solely have laws (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Definitions, methods for reporting, investigations, written records, and consequences are stipulated in the states' laws and policies. Researchers Hinduja & Patchin (2016), conducted a nationwide study of 5,707 teens ages 12 to 17. Based upon the survey results the researchers found the following: 33.8 surveyed indicated that they have been cyberbullied, 22.5% surveyed indicated that they have had mean or hurtful comments online written about them, 20.1% surveyed indicated that they have had a rumor spread about them online, 12.2% of students indicated that they have been threatened online, 10.3% of students surveyed indicated that someone pretended to be them online, and 7.1% of students indicated that other kids created hurtful webpages about them. This study epitomizes the fact that all over the country, regardless of age, demographics, sexuality, or SES status, an exorbitant amount of students have witnessed or fallen victim to cyberbullying.

Moreover, in regard to statistics, more than 1 in 3 young people have experienced cyber threats online and over 25% of teens have been bullied through their phone or the Internet. In a random sample study, over 14% of teens admitted to cyberbullying another person via spreading rumors online, via text or email (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2015). More than half of teens have witnessed cyberbullying on social media (Cox, 2014). 54% of teens surveyed have witnessed online bullying including 39% on Facebook, 29% on YouTube, 22% on Twitter, and 22% on Instagram (Cox, 2014). Teens report being bullied due to appearance (61%) academic achievement (25%), race (17%), sexuality (15%), financial status (15%), religion 11% (Cox, 2014).

Further, in a study conducted by Zweig, Dank, Lachman, & Yahner (2013), 25% of teens on social media have reported having an experience resulting in a face to face confrontation, 13% reported concern about going to school the following day, and 12% reported being called names they didn't like via text. According to PEW Internet Research Center (2011), 95% of social media using teens who have seen cruel behavior on social networking sites ignore the mean behavior. 1 in 6 parents know that their child has been bullied via social networking and 52% of parents are worried that their child will be bullied via social networking (PEW Internet Research Center, 2011).

Moreover, fewer than 1 out of 5 teens report cyberbullying to law enforcement, 1 out of 10 teens have had demeaning pictures taken of themselves without their permission, and 1 in 5 teens have posted or sent explicit photos of themselves to others.   In addition, according to the Cyberbullying Research Center (2016), a survey of 5.5 million young people was conducted and the findings were staggering. Over 80% of teenagers use a cellphone regularly, making it one of the most common forms of cyberbullying. Therefore, due to the overwhelming number of kids who have access to cell phones, it would be advantageous for parents to monitor self-phone usage in order to determine whether or not their child is involved in cyberbullying. 68% of teens agree that cyberbullying is a serious issue. 81% of young people think bullying online is easier to get away with due to anonymity. Approximately 58% of kids surveyed admitted that someone has said something hurtful to them online and 4 out of 10 students said that it happened more than once (Moessner, 2007). Moreover, approximately 75% of students have admitted to visiting a website bashing another student. Thus, as advocates and leaders, counselors can encourage students to break down codes of silence and to speak up if they see unkind messages posted, as well as start a positive message / affirmation page in which students can only post positive and inspiring comments about one another.

Further, boys are more likely to be threatened via cyberbullying, whereas girls are twice as likely to experience cyberbullying in their lifetime (40.1%), cyberbullying affects all races, and cyberbullying victims are more likely to struggle with lower self-esteem and suicidal ideations. According to Jacobs, Vollink, Dehue, and Lechner (2014), 20% to 40% of adolescents worldwide have indicated that they have been victims of cyber harassment or bullying. Due to technological advancements and peoples' endless access to technology, cyberbullying is becoming a silent killer epidemic worldwide. There are, however, many warning signs that both victims and perpetrators display if they are involved in cyberbullying. Stakeholders need to be mindful of these

signs, as well as educate students about the dangers of the signs and symptoms associated with cyberbullying, so that awareness can be raised and instances of cyberbullying can be reduced.

Signs of Cyberbullying

There are several harmful consequences that victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying face. There are many social emotional consequences that victims of cyberbullying endure due to the non-stop and relentless attacks. Victims of cyber bullying may experience humiliation, isolation, depression, internalized anger and sadness, frustration, low self-esteem, shame, excessive absenteeism impacting academic performance, truancy, withdrawal, stress, lack of appetite, weight loss or gain, paranoia, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and committing suicide (Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013). Additionally, students who are victims of cyberbullying may also struggle with stress related disorders due to living in a constant state of fear and anxiety. Students may also experience sleeping problems, stomach problems, not feeling safe, aggression, and failing grades (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013). Further, students who are victims of cyberbullying may struggle with substance abuse issues, as they may utilize substances in order to cope with and numb themselves of the emotional pain and have a decreased sense of self-worth.

Perpetrators of cyberbullying also face repercussions for their actions including school detention, suspension, expulsion, removal from teams, a negative online reputation that can impact their post-secondary and career plans, civil lawsuits, criminal charges such as harassment, intentional infliction of emotional pain, negligence or vicarious liability, or hate crimes including impersonation, and violations under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (nobullying.com, 2016). A few bullying cases fall under discrimination harassment laws. These laws protect people from being harassed due to sexual orientation, gender, religion, disabilities, or race. In these instances, schools investigate the situation immediately, provide a safe climate for the victim, and take measures to prevent retaliation (Robb, 2018). However, criminal charges are difficult to pursue due to the fact that many laws addressing cyberbullying have been seen as unconstitutional due to impeding upon freedom of speech rights. As of 2016, all states have laws against bullying, however, only 23 states have laws addressing cyberbullying. Presently, approximately 14 states impose criminal penalties including jail and fines. Most states require schools to establish policies and protocols against bullying in order to protect all students' academic, personal, social, and emotional welfare. School counselors along with other critical stakeholders play an instrumental role in developing and implementing these policies and protocols. Due to their visibility, approachability, ability to relate, and connection with students, school counselors are at the forefront of assisting both victims and perpetrators impacted by cyberbullying.

Role of School Counselor: Best Practices for Mitigating Cyberbullying

School counselors play an instrumental role in mitigating cyberbullying. School counselors can work collaboratively with victims and parents of victims and address issues such as control, empowerment, goal setting, identifying strengths, assertiveness, confidence, social skill building, as well as the importance of monitoring social media and involvement. Counselors can also work with perpetrators and their families to determine underlying causes for bullying such as anger, aggression, control and encourage parents to monitor social media and technology usage to prevent future cyberbullying from occurring.

Additionally, counselors need to document incidents, ask students for emails or print outs of text messages or social media messages and share with administration and parents to keep all stakeholders abreast to cyberbullying taking place. Counselors can also encourage parents to limit their child's access to technology, as well as persuade parents to join social media sites children are on to monitor posts. Additionally, school counselors can take initiative on taking a comprehensive approach including facilitating the development of effective school policies, educating parents, developing peer helper programs, and providing responsive services including reporting and small group counseling. These must include all stakeholders including parents, administrators, students, and the community at large (Sabella, Patchin, & Hinduja, 2013; Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters & Falcorner, 2011).

Policies

It is essential that schools have clear policies and regulations regarding bullying in order to protect students and themselves from liability (Hinduja &Patchin, 2009). Cyberbullying and bullying should not be tolerated in schools and schools can implement an anti-cyberbullying policy including a prevention plan, as well as an evaluation component to assess for the impact of the program on mitigating cyberbulying (Hamburger, Basile, & Vivolo, 2011).

Enlightening faculty and parents

Counselors are leaders in the school and take initiative to reach out and collaborate with key stakeholders, provide training, and professional development in order to prevent cyberbullying from taking place (Bauman, 2011). Parents and faculty need to be mindful of how students communicate online and what cyberbullying entails (Sabella et al., 2013). Parents can encourage their children to resolve bullying struggles rom a human relational or technological perspective. Human / relational problem solving may include developing trusting relationships and open communication patterns (Sabella, 2012a). Parents can also become more knowledgeable about how their kids are using technology and set privacy or parental settings, as well as filtering or tracking in order to further protect their children from cyberbullying harm (Sabella et al., 2013). Some technological solutions to reduce bullying may include Internet safety software, monitoring services, password protection, and having greater parental control and monitoring over cellphone usage (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008).

Educating students

Counselors can go into classrooms and provide classroom instruction regarding the signs, dangers, and consequences of cyberbullying in order to enlighten students and create a safe climate where students feel safe to self-disclose and share their experiences. Counselors can also address healthy ways to address conflict resolution, problem solving, appropriate behaviors, emotion regulation, conflict resolution and anger management. Counselors can also discuss empathy and the importance of feeling what someone else feels and putting ourselves in another's shoes in order to imagine the emotions they may be experiencing, which is very powerful (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan, & Gulemetova, 2011). Although an abundance of Internet safety resources exist, there is a lack of cohesive lesson plans addressing cyberbullying (Sabella et al., 2013). Developing lesson plans is something that is suggested for future research or counselors to develop, as there is a dire need.

Peer leaders

Counselors can also have student leaders go into classrooms and speak to students about their experiences, as well as the dangers of cyberbullying, as peers tend to be more receptive to peers at times. Peer leaders can address using technology in an appropriate manner to help rather than hurt others. Students can work with those who are at risk or those students experiencing peer concerns (ASCA, 2008). Using peer leaders can help to encourage open communication, create a safer school climate, have greater message delivery, promote cohesion and togetherness, as well as create a more tolerant and accepting school climate (Myrick, Highland, & Sabella, 1995).

Responsive services

Counselors can also facilitate small group counseling or crisis services to students who are victims and or perpetrators of bullying (ASCA, 2012). Counselors can conduct workshops for parents addressing cyberbullying and the dangers associated with cyberbullying. Further, counselors can facilitate counseling groups addressing soft skills including self-esteem, social skill building, decision making, conflict resolution, empathy and compassion, resilience, assertiveness, stress management (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008) as groups can provide emotional support, encourage communication, self-disclosure, and provide victims with a sense of control, as well as encourage them to refocus attention on themselves and their goals rather than on the cyberbullying.

Self-esteem small group

Self-esteem encompasses one's ability to succeed in meaningful areas of life and to believe in aspirations (Mruk, 2013), as well as raising one's own sense of worthiness. Self-esteem plays an instrumental role in students' performance, peer relationships, and overall wellbeing. Counselors' can facilitate small groups addressing self-esteem and focus on strengths, inner resources, attributes, growth mindset, as well as ways that students can build upon their strengths in order to achieve goals. Utilizing affirmations, positive self-talk, journaling, empowering collages, as well as vision boards are activities that counselors can integrate into their group in order to enhance students' self-worth.

Social skill building small group

Social skills are critical skills for students to possess in order to build happy and healthy relationships. Counselors can facilitate social skill building groups in order to address communication, conversation, friendship, non-verbal communication, emotions, coping skills, and self-control. Counselors can integrate role-playing, the empty chair technique, charades, modeling, and collaboration / pair share work in order to assist students in enhancing their social skills.

Decision-making small group

Decision-making is vital for students and students need to be encouraged to think before acting, as every action has a reaction. Counselors can address healthy decision-making, emotion regulation, weighing pros and cons, as well as considering the impact of choice on oneself and others. Counselors can integrate a decision-making tree, logical consequences (tell me what will happen if you do this and tell me what will happen if you do not do this), and encourage students to identify their goals, options, and consequences.

Conflict resolution small group

Conflict resolution is an imperative skill for students to possess, as conflicts are inevitable and they need to possess skills in order to overcome solving problems in a constructive and healthy manner (Doyle, 2017). Counselors can teach students how to identify the source of the conflict, look beyond the incident, brainstorm solutions, identify solutions that both students support, and come to an agreement via negation and compromise to get to a win-win outcome. Counselors can integrate peer mediation, discussion, listening skills, and collaboration in order to reinforce the importance of effective problem solving.

Empathy and compassion small group

Empathy is foundational for building connections between others, understanding one another's emotions, gaining diverse perspectives, as well as leveraging and balancing collaborative relationships (Catapano, 2018). Empathy is a corner stone of social emotional learning in that people are encouraged to feel what others are feelings in order to truly understand others' life experiences. Students need to learn how to be empathic in order to recognize the impact of their behaviors on others, as well as to recognize the perspectives of others. Counselors can integrate empathy into their curricula by modeling, encouraging open dialogue, role playing, guided imagery, asking students to consider a situation from their peers' perspective, identify and share values and differences, as well as enhancing communication and collaboration so students have an opportunity to share, learn, and exchange ideas.

Resilience small group

Resilience is an imperative skill to possess as it allows us to face adversity, overcome stressors, and not allow challenges to dictate who we become and overpower us. Counselors are encouraged to teach students about the importance of resilience so that they can overcome hurdles in school and life and continue to persevere in order to reach their fullest potential. Counselors can integrate resilience into their curricula and encourage students to problem solve (Tartakovsky, 2016), brainstorm and discover answers, encourage students to make mistakes, as these are teachable moments that students learn from, manage emotions and put situations in perspective, as well as to find the silver lining; what did you learn from this experience, how did you become stronger, and what can you do differently moving forward? An example of a lesson addressing resilience could include
- Defining resilience
- Identifying emotions, we experience when we feel overwhelmed, sad, or disappointed
- Having students draw themselves as superheroes
- Naming their superhero, their mantra, as well as their superpower
- Addressing ways in which they possess strengths that enable them to demonstrate resilience
- Steps that they can take in the future that mirror their superhero's actions to further act in a resilient manner

Assertiveness small group

Assertiveness is a quality that allows one to express themselves in a confident manner rather than being passive or aggressive. It is important for students to possess effective assertiveness skills so that they can express their feelings and thoughts effectively and stand up for themselves and others. According to the Mayo Clinic (2017), those who possess assertiveness skills are able to better communicate, as well as reduce stress. Those who possess assertiveness skills have enhanced confidence, are better able to recognize feelings, earn respect from others, improve communication, create win-win situations, create honest relationships, as well as have greater school and career satisfaction (Mayo Clinic, 2017). Counselors can integrate assertiveness training into their curricula via utilizing role playing, accountability, teaching verbal communication and non-verbal communication / body language (eye contact, posture, proximity), encouraging students to rehearse what they want to say before saying it, as well as teach I Messages (I feel _____ when you _____ because_____), as this type of statement allows those to take ownership of their feelings without blaming others, which is empowering.

Stress management small group

Stress is an inevitable part of life (Collingwood, 2016) caused by a myriad of issues not limited to school, peer relationships, work, health related issues, peer pressure, family pressure, and expectations of self. Students who are stressed may experience depression, anxiety, fatigue, appear withdrawn, have low self-worth, agitation, or impulsivity. Counselors can integrate stress management into their curricula by addressing time management, scheduling, prioritizing, deep breathing, meditation, using the emotion freedom technique to tap on pressure points to relieve stress, identifying triggers of stress, using stress balls, writing, using a stress log, as well as discussing healthier ways of dealing with stress (sleeping, exercising, journaling).

Modalities

According to Sabella (2012b), counselors can use a variety of modalities including Solution Focused Brief Counseling, Reality Therapy, or Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy as these modalities motivate perpetrators to reflect, self-assess and take accountability for behaviors, as well as motivates victims to regain control, cope with, and experience empowerment. Additionally, using interventions within Solution Focused Counseling such as Scaling Questions (on a scale from one to five; 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, rate the following), Exception Finding Questions (tell me about a time when you weren't being cyberbullied; what was that like for you and how did you feel?), or the Miracle Question (if all of your problems went away, what in your life would be different and who would notice?), allow students to envision their ideal future, promotes motivation, goal setting, as well as fosters empowerment, inspiration, resilience, and control. Small group counseling with victims of bullying have shown to increase levels of student self-worth, as well as increase ability to cope with and address bullying; separating person from problem.

Collaboration

Collaboration with stakeholders is essential. Counselors have a myriad of responsibilities and have extraordinarily large caseloads of students. In order to tackle all of their demands, collaboration is key in reducing cyberbullying. Counselors are encouraged to work with students who are victims and perpetrators of bullying in order to help them address the motives of the behavior, accountability, impact on self-concept, academics, social skills, and consequences. Counselors can also work with bystanders who are witnessing bullying and motivating those students to come forward, speak up, and work towards making positive changes. Counselors are also encouraged to collaborate with teachers, as the teachers are working directly with students' day every day and may possess additional insights and information pertaining to which students are being impacted by cyberbullying. Counselors can collaborate with stakeholders and integrate cyberbullying awareness into individual sessions, small groups, classroom guidance, and school wide guidance, such as implementing programs such as No Place For Hate through the Anti-Defamation League, which promotes having a safe school climate and a zero tolerance policy for bulling. Counselors are encouraged to communicate with and educate parents about warning signs associated with cyberbullying, consequences, provide resources, and motivate them to have an open dialogue with their children about cyberbullying to determine whether or not they possess information about bullying instances or are being directly impacted themselves. Additionally, school counselors can collaborate with outside counseling agencies, provide resources, and refer students who are both victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying, in order to provide them with the help and support that they need to improve, enhance awareness, and reach their fullest potential.

Discussion

This manuscript is relevant as it highlights statistics associated with cyberbullying, signs of cyberbullying, consequences associated with cyberbullying as well as best practices that school counselors can use to extinguish these destructive behaviors. Although a gap in literature still exists regarding the most impactful counseling intervention to use to reduce cyberbullying, addressing soft skills such as accountability, empathy, communication, assertiveness, setting goals that are strengths based, fostering optimism and the importance of having a positive mindset, and instilling zest, charisma, motivation, and perseverance in students has been shown to reduce behaviors associated with cyberbullying. Additionally, educating faculty parents and students about the dangers and long-term consequences of cyberbullying, and encouraging parental awareness have also shown to be impactful. Further, monitoring of social media, providing students with leadership roles to promote empowerment and modeling of prosocial behaviors, as well as facilitating responsive services including small groups addressing anger management, empowerment, self-worth, compassion, friendship skills, social emotional learning, and emotion regulation have been found to augment students' constructive behaviors, as well as decrease destructive behaviors. It would be advantageous to conduct further research in order to determine the most efficacious interventions to use in order to assuage cyberbullying, as it has a detrimental impact on students academically, personally, emotionally, socially, and psychologically.

Thus, the implication for school counselors is to continue to be vigilant, have a strong visibility and presence, as well as create a safe and inclusive school climate that is accepting, engaging, rigorous, tolerant, culturally sensitive, and promotes connectivity for all. Further, encouraging open dialogue with students and parents is imperative so if they do possess information, they feel comfortable and confident reporting what they know rather than remaining bystanders. In addition, as leaders, advocates, and change agents, counselors are encouraged to address soft skills, as these skills can be enhanced via

practice and are not fixed. Moreover, counselors can educate, raise awareness, teach empathy, as well as address severe consequences both emotionally and legally that are associated with cyberbullying in order to enhance accountability, compassion, and reflective practice, as there is always room for growth.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying is a pervasive challenge threatening people of all races and ages due to the breadth and depth of the Internet, its constant state of flux and usage, as well as lack of Internet policing, which makes cyberbullying difficult to control and eliminate. Even though it is challenging to completely eradicate cyberbullying, school counselors play a vital role in raising awareness about the damaging impact cyberbullying has on both victim and perpetrator, working tirelessly with administrators, parents, and students to enlighten, challenge, encourage, educate about the risks, as well as ways address strategies that can be used to further prevent cyberbullying from taking place. Counselors are key stakeholders in eliminating cyberbullying, as they work directly and closely with parents, teachers, community, and most importantly students who are in the direct line of fire. Facilitating classroom instruction about the dangers of cyberbullying, as well as small group counseling sessions addressing social emotional learning, accountability, problem solving, social skill enhancement, anxiety, stress management, communication, self-efficacy / self-esteem, empowerment, goal setting, and coping skills have been found to be largely impactful in mitigating cyberbullying, as well as reducing the internalized and deleterious impact cyberbullying has on students' self-concept and overall mental health and wellness. For students struggling with anxiety, depression, or suicidal ideation, school counselors can work with them and their parents on prevention, developing safety contracts, providing resources, grounding and mindfulness, positive self-talk and reframing, coping skills, gratitude, self-worth, self-control, self-love, resilience, and hope. When students are able to learn healthy coping skills, communicate and talk about their feelings, feel safe and respected, and recognize that it is a temporary rather than permanent situation, this will help to reduce suicides from taking place.

Although the wrath of technology and exposure to the Internet makes cyberbullying extremely challenging to decimate, as long as we as a society holistically reinforce the importance of empathy, compassion, responsibility, decision making, provide support and educate, encourage one another to stand up for each other, to treat others the way we want to be treated, emphasize the fact that our choices directly impact the lives of others, promote strengths based goal setting, optimism, motivation, unity, inclusivity, courage and bravery, as well as reiterate that happiness is a conscious choice, these factors will help to eliminate this silent killer.

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