

Factors Affecting the Homesickness of International Students

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Abstract: Attending college far from home can be an exhilarating yet emotionally challenging experience for some students, as they navigate through unfamiliar surroundings and cope with long distances. The separation from their familiar environment often leads to emotional distress among international students, manifesting in symptoms such as anxiety and depression. Moreover, chronic homesickness poses a significant risk to the mental and physical well-being of these individuals, potentially hindering their ability to successfully complete their college studies. This article examines the factors contributing to homesickness among non-local students in Hong Kong and the United States, as well as the impact of each factor. It primarily assesses the degree of homesickness through four dimensions: family harmony, cultural barriers, social relationships, and personal characteristics. The study employs multiple regression analysis to evaluate the significance of these factors on homesickness. The findings offer valuable insights that may inform strategies for addressing homesickness-related mental health issues and suggest potential preventive measures.

Keywords: component, homesickness, international students.

1. Introduction

Chinese students are one of the largest populations studying abroad. The number of Chinese students in the United States has continued to increase in the last decades [1]. The majority of international students in the US are Chinese, which is approximately equal to one-third of all international students [1]. A similar situation can also be applied to the UK and Hong Kong. Chinese students make up the most significant part of international students in UK universities, and the number is still rising over time [2]. Then, students from mainland China are more encouraged to consider Hong Kong as an ideal place to pursue their higher degrees.

Once more and more Chinese students choose to study abroad for a period, they will be separated from their homes or familiar contexts. This separation can last from several months to several years, which depends on the duration of specific study programs. Thus, most Chinese students may struggle to keep in touch with friends or other significant members from their hometowns due to different timezones or other impeding factors [3]. Challenges like these may pique psychological reactions in individuals. It was argued that the enduring absence of familiar settings that exist in a hometown may catalyze the expression of specific emotions, which could be defined as homesickness. It is usually linked to anxiety or other negative emotions while missing specific objects, food, or people from their hometown [4]. It is believed that homesickness is pervasive among Chinese students while studying

abroad after the extensive influence of the pandemic [5]. Increased flight and travel fares after the pandemic also impede the reunion of Chinese students and their families or friends, which contributes to the deterioration of homesickness. Additionally, Chinese students are more likely to express homesickness due to Confucianism. Its beliefs are embedded in Chinese moral values, which lay great emphasis on the family as the primary social system [6]. Therefore, Confucianism may push more Chinese international students to miss their family members while studying abroad as a form of homesickness.

Though homesickness is easily observed in Chinese students who study abroad, literature deliberately focusing on how homesickness is developed is limited [7]. The correlation between homesickness among international students and other factors is studied rarely. In addition, available homesickness literature often does not target Chinese populations [8]. Both these limitations facilitate this article to study potential factors playing a role in developing homesickness in Chinese students. By studying factors that contribute to the deterioration of homesickness, this article can provide practical guidelines to schools to help international students habituate to the new culture and diminish the feeling of sadness due to cultural differences. Besides, this article may have significant implications for school intervention programs to reduce the adverse effects of risk factors for homesickness and other psychological disorders that typically accompany homesickness [3].

2. Literature review

Homesickness is a frequent component of relocation, known to be related to certain adjustment difficulties, forming relationship bonds, and mental health problems including anxiety [9]. In recent decades, there were an significant increase in the number of students studying abroad. Thereupon, the experience of leaving the hometown for 4-6 years seems to be quite common. Large-scale migration in contemporary society underscores the need to lean about the complex experience of leaving home and relocating within or beyond one's own country [10]. However, an up-to-date, comprehensive overview of scientific investigations of homesickness is lacking [10]. Therefore, considering the limitations of the previous studies, this study will further investigate on various types of stressors associated with homesickness experienced by students in Hong Kong and United States, and the correlations of these variables and homesickness.

When starting a new life in an unfamiliar country, students may encounter several types of problems, for instance, get used to local culture, eat local foods, and form social relationships in a new environment. According to the research, almost all mainland Chinese students said the language barrier prevented them from interacting with local students [11]. Some students want to start a conversation but local students only speak Cantonese. This make it harder for students to make new friends in this new environment. Moreover, culture difference may also be a significant lead to homesickness. When international students leave their comfort zone and come to a new environment, they tend to experience four stages. At first, they will feel excited about this new place. Nevertheless, in the second stage which is called the Crisis stage, students will become very aware of the differences in culture and conflicts in values between their home and the local culture. If they overcome this stage, they will go through stage three and stage four, when they finally adapt to the country [12]. Therefore, if students fail to fit in the local culture, they will feel depressed, anxious, confused, and extremely homesick because they cannot find the sense of belonging. Finally, personal factors and background will affect how student fit in the new environment and the sense of homesickness. According to the study, relationships in hometown, for example the dependency on family and parents, was found to be a character feature of homesick students [13]. The dependency includes being supported emotionally and physically in daily life. What's more, by using the Big Five personality test with Total Homesickness test, the data reveal that introverted, neurotistic person who are closed to new experiences are especially vulnerable and easy to perceive homesickness [14]. Introverted people may

have trouble starting conversation and make new friends, and the openness to experiences may also have a correlation with the ability to adapt to the new culture.

According to the previous research, it can be shown that homesickness is a prevailing problem that involves multiple difficulties. A further examination can help us find possible solutions to help homesick students and release their burden. Hence, this study holds significant value and is vital to contemporary society.

3. Selection of research

Based on the existing research and the actual situation in Hong Kong and America, we have decided to choose factors affecting the homesickness of non-local students as our research problem.

4. Research objective

This study will construct a questionnaire encompassing three dimensions: personal, social, and familial. On an individual level, our focus will be on the participants' personal emotions and their level of integration into the local culture to evaluate the extent of homesickness experienced. From a societal perspective, we will direct our attention towards emotional development and support systems to gauge the intensity of homesickness. Lastly, at the familial level, our emphasis will lie in assessing levels of family harmony and dependency as indicators of homesickness.

Through these three levels of investigation, we hope to achieve the following objectives:

Explore the degree of homesickness of non-local students in Hong Kong and America.

Explore the factors affecting the degree of homesickness of the non-local students in Hong Kong and America.

Analyzing the correlation between different factors and homesickness.

Propose possible solutions and help.

5. Hypothesis

Based on the existing research on homesickness, we have conducted a comprehensive analysis and comparison of various factors that may impact the degree of homesickness. Taking into account the specific context in Hong Kong and America as well as our research objectives, we have formulated the following hypothesis regarding the level of homesickness at Hong Kong Shue Yan University.

Hypothesis 1:

The homesickness of international students is significantly affected by the degree of family harmony

Hypothesis 2:

The homesickness of international students is significantly affected by the degree of cultural gap

Hypothesis 3:

The homesickness of international students is significantly affected by social relationship

Hypothesis 4:

The homesickness of international students is significantly affected by specific personality traits

6. Conceptualization & operationalization

In the research, we took the degree of homesickness experienced by the subjects as dependent variables, while the independent variables included family harmony, culture gap, social relationship and personality traits.

Dependent Variable: Degree of Homesickness

The degree of homesickness can be evaluated through self-reported measures. According to the questionnaire we made, where students indicate their level of homesickness based on their feelings, emotions, and experiences. This could involve rating scales, Likert scales, or other quantitative methods to capture the intensity or severity of homesickness. Finally, we assessed the participants' degree of homesickness through a composite score database in SPSS.

Independent Variable: Family Harmony

This refers to the relationship between members of the target student's family. This mainly includes the relationship between parents and children and the relationship between parents.

Independent Variable: Culture Gap

The term "cultural gap" encompasses various factors, ranging from linguistic barriers to dietary preferences, that differentiate target students from local students. Under the influence of this divergence, the target student may experience significant discomfort.

Independent Variable: Social Relationship

This refers to the target student's social network within the educational environment, encompassing their recognition of their own social identity, values, and shared trust.

Independent Variable: Personality

This refers to the level of introversion, neuroticism, and openness to environments of the target students. This mainly includes the daily scenarios that will reflect student's personality traits and might indicate the level of homesickness they have perceived.

To facilitate the analysis, all variables were measured using Likert scales. The responses to the questions encompassed five levels of agreement, ranging from strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, and strongly agree, in order to enable statistical measurement.

7. Data processing and data analysis

This study is based on the data analysis of SPSS Statistic 26. The independent variables analyzed have been analyzed through Explore to assess normality, and the abnormal independent variables detected have been recoded through Transfrom (Sqrt and Lg10). Multiple linear regression was used for analysis.

7.1. Hypothesis 1: the homesickness of international students is significantly affected by the degree of family harmony

In the existing literature, homesickness can arise from individuals experiencing a longing for their place of origin [4]. Family relations encompass not only the emotional closeness between parents and children but also the dynamics within marital partnerships. In order to further investigate the impact of family relationships on homesickness, the study devised five factors as indicators of familial harmony: Did your parents argue with each other? (25) Did you argue with your parents? (26) How often do you think your parents didn't understand you much? (27) Did you spend a lot of time with your parents before studying abroad? (28) Did your parents punish you unfairly for making mistakes? (29)

These five factors were rated on a five-point Likert scale. A higher score of 25, 26, 27, or 29 indicates a lower level of family harmony and a deteriorated relationship between parents and between you and your parents. Conversely, a lower score suggests a higher level of family harmony and improved relationships. Additionally, scoring higher on factor 28 signifies increased time spent in active listening with each other, while a lower score implies reduced communication and understanding between you and your parents.

Based on the aforementioned, the degree of homesickness is considered as the dependent variable, while the five factors are regarded as independent variables and incorporated into a multiple regression model for examination. Please refer to following Tables and Figure for the obtained results:

Table 1: Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.458	.210	.157	1.035

Table 2: ANOVA table

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	21.078	5	4.216	3.933	.003
Residual	79.310	74	1.072		
Total	100.387	79			

Firstly, the overall model indicates a significant impact of family harmony on homesickness (sig0.003), with an adjusted R-squared value of 0.157. This implies that the model can account for 15.7% of the variation in homesickness. The low degree of fit may be attributed to the limited sample size.

Table 3: Coefficients table

	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Collinearity Tolerance	Statistics VIF
Constant	3.763	.606		6.205	.000		
25. Did your parents argue with each other?	.070	.146	.057	.475	.636	.739	1.352
26. Did you argue with your parents?	-.069	.170	-.059	-.407	.685	.516	1.940
27. How often do you think your parents didn't understand you much?	-.478	.152	-.426	-3.151	.002*	.584	1.712
28. Did you spend time with parents before studying abroad?	.154	.116	.148	1.332	.187	.868	1.152
29. Did your parents punish you unfairly for making mistakes?	.063	.105	.069	.596	.553	.786	1.273

Secondly, among the five factors examined, only "How often do you think your parents don't understand you?" exhibits a significant association with homesickness and is negatively correlated with it; thus indicating that greater parental understanding leads to increased levels of homesickness in children while no statistically significant relationship was found between any other four factors and homesickness.

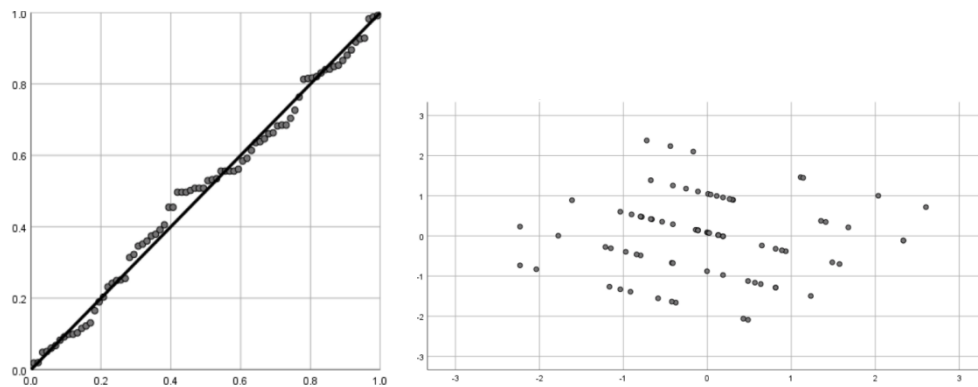


Figure 1: Normal probability plot and scatterplot of variable family harmony

Thirdly, according to Figure 1, Normal Probability Plot (P-P) of the Regression Standardized Residual points line in a reasonably straight diagonal line from bottom left to top right and the Scatterplot of the standardized residuals are roughly rectangularly distributed, which means normal.

7.2. Hypothesis 2: the homesickness of international students is significantly affected by the degree of cultural gap

Cultural barriers have always been a significant consideration in the study of homesickness. In this research, cultural barriers were categorized into four dimensions: language barriers, cultural customs, living habits, and dietary habits. The following four factors were used for multiple regression analysis: "To what extent can you speak the local language after studying abroad" (8), "How well do you feel you fit into the local culture" (9), "To what extent do you feel you are able to adapt to local living habits" (10), and "How often do you eat food from your hometown after studying abroad" (12). These factors were standardized using a five-point Likert scale. Higher scores on factors (8) and (10) indicate a greater potential impact of cultural barriers on the respondents, while higher scores on factors (9) and (12) suggest a smaller potential impact of cultural barriers.

Based on the aforementioned, the degree of homesickness is considered as the dependent variable, while the four factors are regarded as independent variables and incorporated into a multiple regression model for examination. Please refer to Tables 4, 5 & 6 and Figure 2 for the obtained results:

Table 4: Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.342	.117	.070	1.087

Table 5: ANOVA table

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	11.754	5	2.938	2.486	.051
Residual	88.634	74	1.182		
Total	100.387	79			

Firstly, the overall model indicates no significant impact of culture gap on homesickness (sig0.051), with an adjusted R-squared value of 0.070. This implies that the model can account for 7% of the variation in homesickness. The low degree of fit may be attributed to the limited sample size.

Table 6: Coefficients table

	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Collinearity Tolerance	Statistics VIF
Constant	4.341	.631		6.884	.000		
1. To what extent can you speak the local language after studying abroad	-.038	.109	-.046	-.349	.728	.692	1.445
2. How well do you feel you fit into the local culture	.069	.166	.057	.416	.679	.620	1.612
3. To what extent do you feel you are able to adapt to local living habits	-.519	.197	-.361	-2.629	.010*	.623	1.605
4. How often do you eat food from your hometown after studying abroad	.114	.120	.113	.953	.344	.840	1.190

Secondly, among the four factors, only "To what extent do you feel you are able to adapt to local living habits" exhibits a significant association with homesickness and is negatively correlated with it; thus indicating that the greater the challenge of adapting to local customs, the higher the likelihood of experiencing homesickness while no statistically significant relationship was found between any other three factors and homesickness.

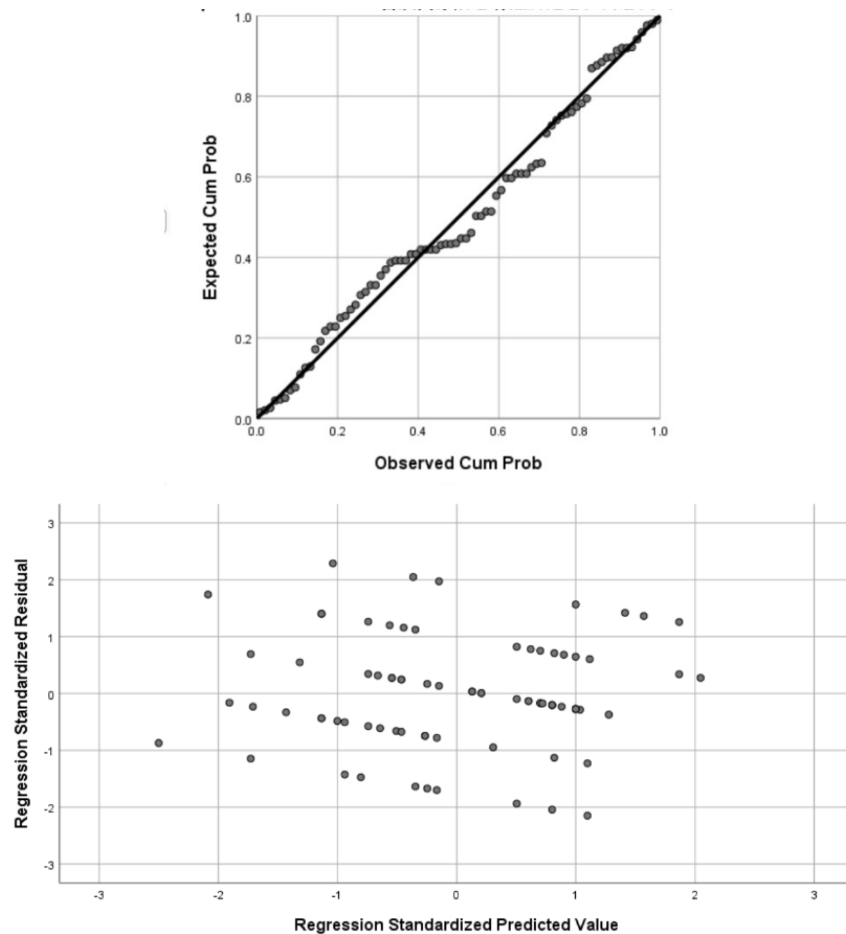


Figure 2: Normal probability plot and scatterplot of variable culture gap

Thirdly, according to Figure 2, Normal Probability Plot (P-P) of the Regression Standardized Residual points line in a reasonably straight diagonal line from bottom left to top right and the Scatterplot of the standardized residuals are roughly rectangularly distributed, which means normal.

7.3. Hypothesis 3: the homesickness of international students is significantly affected by social relationship

In previous study, Watt and Badger found that individuals' social networks or immediate interpersonal relationships may affect peoples' feelings of belongingness [15]. Lack of belongingness due to undermined social networks may be a primary cause of homesickness [15]. Based on the foundation laid by previous works, it is reasonable for this paper to study the effect of social relationship on expression of homesickness. This article designed five questions in the questionnaires representing five variables under the field of social relationship: (17) what is the frequency you hang out with friends from your hometown during study abroad? (18) what is the frequency you hang out with local friends during study abroad? (19) what is the frequency you hang out with friends from other places (non-hometown & non-local)? (20) are you satisfied with your current social networks? (21) are you able to seek immediate help and support from your current social networks?

The five subfields are also assigned based on the Likert rule, which consists of five levels as described above. Question 17th, 18th, and 19th are designed to assess the makeup of students' social networks. In other words, the article strives to learn when the responders more often contact with. Question 20th and 21st are designed to assess individuals' satisfaction of current social networks.

The degree of homesickness is still considered the dependent variable, while the answers to the five questions are coded as five variables, which are incorporated into the multiple regression model. Please refer to Tables 7, 8 & 9 for obtained results:

Table 7: Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.393	.155	.098	1.071

Table 8: ANOVA table

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	15.536	5	3.107	2.710	.026*
Residual	84.852	74	1.147		
Total	100.387	79			

Table 9: Coefficients table

	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Collinearity Tolerance	Statistics VIF
Constant	3.418	.624		5.476	.000		
17. what is the frequency you hang out with friends from your hometown during study abroad?	.138	.106	.145	1.302	.197	.922	1.084
18. what is the frequency you hang out with local friends during study abroad?	-.140	.121	-.130	-1.156	.251	.908	1.101
19. what is the frequency you hang out with friends	.370	.127	.356	2.912	.005*	.763	1.310

Table 9: (continued)

from other places (non-hometown & non-local)?							
20. are you satisfied with your current social networks?	-.266	.176	-.201	-1.508	.136	.644	1.554
21. are you able to seek immediate help and support from social networks?	-.213	.175	-.175	-1.219	.227	.552	1.812

The overall model suggests that students' interpersonal relationship significantly affects the expression of emotions linked with homesickness ($F=2.710$, $p=.026$) with an adjusted R-square value of 9.8%. It means that 9.8% of the variability in homesickness expression can be explained by putting participants' social relationships into the regression model.

Among the five subfield questions, only the frequency of hanging out with friends from another place (non-hometown & non-local) significantly relates to the expression of homesickness in Chinese students ($t=2.912$, $p=0.005$). By conducting correlation analysis, this study found that the extent of homesickness among Chinese students only significantly correlated with the frequency of hanging out with friends from other places ($p=0.041$) and the satisfaction of current social networks($p=.037$), which partially confirmed the analysis result of regression. The frequency of hanging out with friends from other places positively correlates with homesickness. Nonetheless, the satisfaction of the current social circle negatively correlates with homesickness-related emotions.

7.4. Hypothesis 4:the homesickness of international students is significantly affected by specific personality traits

Khademi and Aghdam, in their study, demonstrated a direct relationship between the homesickness and specific personality traits [16]. Therefore, this study incorporated some questions to assess this potential correlation. This study developed certain questions to collect more comprehensive data which included: (33) i feel exhausted about socializing (34) i am eager to introduce myself to others (35) i am curious about new things (36) i am willing to accept new perspectives (37) i often feel unbearable stressed (38) I often connect someone else's random sayings to myself.

The six subfields are also assigned based on the Likert rule, which consists of five levels as described above. They are all designed for specific personal tendencies. Answers to these six questions are coded as six factors, which are incorporated into the multiple regression model for further analysis. Please refer to Tables 10, 11 &12 for the obtained results:

Table 10: Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.229	.052	-.026	1.142

Table 11: ANOVA table

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	5.242	6	.874	.670	.674
Residual	95.145	73	1.303		
Total	100.387	79			

The overall model indicates that individuals' personality traits or personal tendencies do not significantly affect the expression of emotions linked with homesickness ($F=.670$, $p=.674$), with an adjusted R-squared value of 2.6%. Thus, only 2.6% of the variability in homesickness expression can be explained by putting participants' personality coding data into the regression model.

Table 12: Coefficients table

	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Collinearity Tolerance	Statistics VIF
Constant	2.839	.695		4.085	.000		
33. i feel exhausted about socializing	.077	.150	.067	.510	.612	.753	1.329
34. i am eager to introduce myself to others	.027	.156	.025	.170	.865	.593	1.686
35. i am curious about new things	.245	.182	.224	1.349	.182	.472	2.117
36. i am willing to accept new perspectives	-.326	.220	-.267	-1.480	.143	.398	2.514
37. i often feel unbearable stressed	.130	.136	.118	.951	.345	.846	1.181
38. I often connect someone else's random sayings to myself	-.089	.140	-.083	-.636	.527	.763	1.310

Among the six coded factors, neither all of the personality questions are significantly related to the expression of homesickness among Chinese students. The correlation analysis supported the result produced by the regression model. The extent of homesickness among Chinese students did not significantly correlate with any personality-related variables.

Though the regression and correlation analysis did not produce significant results, which may contradict the related literature, other approaches still suggest the potential connection between personality or individual tendencies and homesickness. During the analysis, the research team targeted participants who responded with a higher level of homesickness on the questionnaire. Among these participants, ten subjects agreed or somehow agreed that they often feel unbearably stressed. Nevertheless, only one subject highly disagreed that he often felt unbearably stressed. By comparing these data, it is clear that there is some potential connection between personality and homesickness, which supports the literature findings. The statistically significant relationship may be feasible in future studies with larger samples based on more valid questionnaires.

8. Conclusion

Without a doubt, this study provides some implications for alleviating negative emotions linked with the expression of homesickness. Firstly, universities or other institutions should develop regular programs to help international students get used to the local lifestyle, which this study supports and can significantly reduce homesickness. These programs can maintain international students' mental health and positive emotions. Besides, this study does not support some stereotypes. For example, eating food from the hometown does not significantly reduce homesickness. In future studies, there are still many topics waiting to be studied. Future studies can focus on a given personality trait to learn the relationship between this trait and the expression of homesickness. Additionally, future research can understand the concrete mechanism of how misunderstanding from parents affects homesickness. More research is needed to determine if there are mediators within this process.

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