Exploitative Leadership and Subjective Career Success: A Serial Mediation Model

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This research was aimed to explore the relationship between exploitative leadership and subjective career success, and to examine the serial mediating roles of constructive resistance and networking in this relationship. Leveraging Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the research examined followers' coping strategies to safeguard resources in response to experiencing exploitative leadership. The study used the paper-and-pencil survey method to collect data from 305 employees in Pakistan's service sector. Results of partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) analysis indicated that exploitative leadership negatively affects subjective career success. Moreover, the results of mediation analysis employing the bootstrapping procedure confirmed the serial mediating roles of constructive resistance and networking. This study advances the leadership literature and career research by highlighting the roles of constructive resistance and networking as effective coping strategies to minimize the negative impact of exploitative leadership on subjective career success. These insights have implications for both practitioners and researchers. Organizations should promote ethical leadership, empower followers, and build resilience. Future research may examine contextual factors and multilevel leadership dynamics to deepen understanding of exploitative leadership across diverse settings .

Keywords: exploitative leadership, subjective career success, constructive resistance, networking, resource conservation.

Career success is crucial for individual well-being and organizational productivity. It is often assessed through employees' satisfaction with their career achievements (Penning et al., 2024). It encompasses both aspirations and personal growth, reflected in objective indicators (e.g., salary, promotions) and subjective evaluations (Hildred et al., 2023). With the increased emphasis on self-directed career models, such as protean and boundaryless careers, subjective career success has gained growing importance (Lochab & Nath, 2020).

Leadership mistreatment, particularly in high power-distance cultures, poses a significant threat to career success (Nawaz et al., 2020). Leaders often experience goal blockage when their objectives conflict with those of the organization or their followers (Madan et al., 2025). This conflict can lead to exploitative leadership—a prevalent form of workplace mistreatment—wherein leaders engage in self-serving behaviors that undermine followers' well-being and personal resources (Schmid et al., 2019). The power asymmetry in leader-follower relationships further exacerbates followers' vulnerability, leaving them with minimal autonomy to counteract adverse behaviors (Martinez et al., 2012; Tufail et al., 2019).

Although workplace mistreatment is often considered dyadic, the preventive role of followers remains underexplored (Vranjes & Lyubykh, 2021). Followers may adopt proactive strategies—such as constructive resistance and networking—to alleviate the effects of exploitative leadership and augment their subjective career success (Mehdipour et al., 2019). Constructive resistance, as a first line of defense, allows exploited followers to resist exploitation, while politically motivated networking provides critical support and career opportunities. These strategies may operate sequentially, with constructive resistance facilitating effective networking.

Notwithstanding the pervasiveness of exploitative leadership (Arun & Olsen, 2023), research on its impact on subjective career success and associated coping mechanisms remains scarce (Majeed et al., 2023). The deeper understanding of these follower-driven strategies is essential, as followers' personal agency to preserve subjective career success can foster a healthier workplace and enhance well-being.
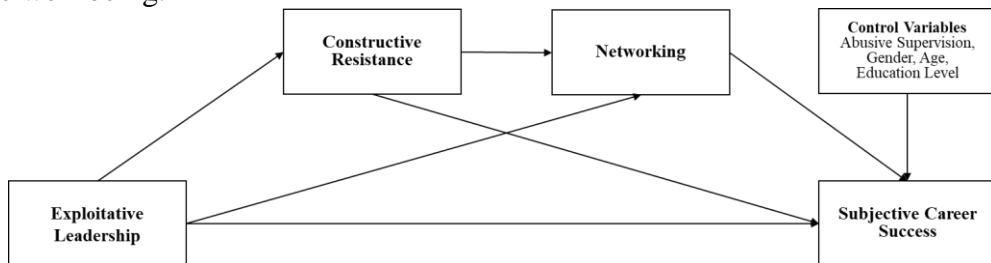
Figure 1. The serial mediation research model.

Theoretical development
Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory
Exploitative leadership depletes followers' resources, leading to stress, burnout, and psychological distress. Conservation of resource theory (COR: Hobfoll, 1989) expounds how followers endeavour to preserve and accumulate resources to maintain well-being (Mackey et al., 2021). Investing in resources is essential for both preservation and growth, particularly in dynamic career environments. However, the perceived value of resources varies depending upon individual experiences and contexts (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Evidence suggests that negative leadership has a less detrimental impact on followers who demonstrate firmness towards their leader in a productive manner aimed at improvement or are co-targeted rather than singled out (Verdorfer & Schmid, 2024).

Followers may alleviate resource loss through constructive resistance and networking, helping them preserve their perceptions of career success. Constructive resistance involves voicing concerns non-confrontationally, while networking fosters supportive relationships for career advancement (Carrer & Vinthagen, 2024; Ferris et al., 2007). Enhancing stress resilience involves modifying emotional reactions to stressors and understanding followers' characteristics that shape their appraisal, processing, and coping mechanisms in response to exploitative leadership (Bukhari et al., 2023; Pircher Verdorfer et al., 2023).

Exploitative Leadership and Subjective Career Success
The frequent reportage of "bad bosses" in media narratives reflects the "bad is stronger than good" phenomenon, which is highly relevant in leadership studies. Leaders often feel entitled to disproportionate rewards, exhibiting self-serving biases that prioritize personal gain over followers' well-being—a hallmark of exploitative leadership (Huang et al., 2023). Exploitative leadership is a premeditated, "cold-blooded" form of aggression, characterized by "genuine egoistic behaviors,

taking credit for subordinates' work, exerting pressure, undermining development and manipulating followers" (Schmid et al., 2019). Such leadership practices erode organizational commitment, diminish performance, and ultimately undermine followers' career success (Verdorfer & Schmid, 2024).

Supportive work environments promote career advancement by offering engaging tasks and developmental opportunities. Conversely, adverse conditions—such as limited promotion prospects, job insecurity, and unfair treatment—impede career growth (Rana & Cheok, 2025). Exploitation cause employees to question their career achievements, undermining their success perceptions (Vranjes & Lyubykh, 2021). While some may attribute leadership mistreatment to unintended causes, such presumptions alone are insufficient to break the resource loss spirals (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Subjective career success, that is closely associated with followers' subjective well-being, becomes particularly vulnerable under exploitative leadership as their personal and contextual resources wane. As employees struggle to retain the scarce resources necessary for career success, the ensuing stress exhausts their psychological and physical capacities, hindering their ability to navigate career challenges and obstructing career progress (Kauffeld & Spurk, 2022). From a COR perspective, exploitative leadership depletes followers' resources by limiting career opportunities, triggering emotional exhaustion, and distorting career perceptions, ultimately undermining their subjective career success.

Hypothesis 1: Exploitative leadership is negatively associated with subjective career success.

Mediating Role of Constructive Resistance

Contemporary perspectives on adverse leadership behaviors emphasize the role of followers in shaping complex leader-follower dynamics—countering negative leadership, rebalancing power, and fostering positive change (Mackey et al., 2021). Followers subjected to unfair treatment experience greater career dissatisfaction and psychological distress compared to their well-treated peers (Alajhar et al., 2024).

Leveraging the COR theory, exposure to exploitative leadership depletes followers' self-resources, prompting proactive coping strategies to mitigate further resource loss (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Followers respond to workplace exploitation through retaliation, non-hostile nonconformity, or resistance (Lyu et al., 2023). While retaliation or passive aggressive actions may be harmful to individuals and organizations, organizational resistance—particularly constructive resistance—affords a more adaptive response. Unlike dysfunctional resistance, which disrupts and undermines, constructive resistance embodies principled dissent, purposeful concern, and solution-oriented communication, allowing followers to challenge inappropriate leader behaviors while preserving relational stability (Tepper et al., 2001).

Leaders perceive constructive resistance more favourably as meaningful negotiation rather than undesirable communication potentially leading to dysfunctional conflict (Karabacak et al., 2023). Leadership behaviors typically influence follower outcomes through mediation mechanisms (Lyu et al., 2023). Given the risks associated with overt retaliation, constructive resistance serves as an active strategy enabling exploited followers to evade resource loss spirals and psychological distress without disrupting organizational workflows (May et al., 2014). Consequently, the resulting relational and career stability sustains followers' subjective career success.

Hypothesis 2: Constructive resistance mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and subjective career success.

Mediating Role of Networking

Networking, as a facet of organizational politics, significantly influences follower outcomes. It involves cultivating relationships with individuals who can support one's professional journey. Effective networking enhances job performance and well-being by leveraging collaboration and resource management (Wanigasekara et al., 2022).

Politically skilled employees actively build and leverage network of influential colleagues and associates at work to facilitate tasks, achieve goals and access critical resources (Ferris et al., 2005). Such interactions not only enhance skills but also buffer the negative impact of exploitative leadership by offering social support and reducing stress (Wang & Luan, 2024). From a COR perspective, networking helps followers conserve cognitive resources, manage work-related stressors, and foster problem-solving, ultimately preserving subjective career success (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Kauffeld & Spurk, 2022).

Hypothesis 3: Networking mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and subjective career success.

Sequential Mediating Roles of Constructive Resistance and Networking

The pursuit of career success under exploitative leadership hinges on followers' motivation, resilience, and sanctioned political behavior (Malik & Sillah, 2025). Career decisions and experiences are shaped by leader-follower dynamics, dispositional traits (e.g., personality), and contextual factors (e.g., time pressure) (Wang & Luan, 2024). Constructive resistance serves as the first line of defense against exploitative leadership, empowering followers to voice concerns while preserving autonomy. In turn, networking offers career-enhancing support. Constructive resistance safeguards intrinsic resources, while networking fosters peer support and leverages career opportunities. Thus, followers' constructive resistance and networking act as sequential mediators linking exploitative leadership and subjective career success.

These coping strategies align with the principles of COR theory, emphasizing resource preservation, stress mitigation, and reciprocal social support, thereby reinforcing subjective career success (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The challenges posed by exploitative leadership encourage positive coping strategies in workplace and reinforce interpersonal relationships through reciprocity (May et al., 2014). As constructive resistance promotes fairness, networking consolidates workplace resources facilitating subjective career success.

Hypothesis 4: Constructive resistance and networking sequentially mediate the relationship between exploitative leadership and subjective career success.

Method

Positivist paradigm underpins this research, employing quantitative and confirmatory approach (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Habes et al., 2022) to validate hypotheses regarding leaders' exploitation and followers' utilization of constructive and networking strategies to preserve subjective career success.

Participants and procedure

A cross-sectional study was conducted using a self-reported survey in English—the principal language for higher education in Pakistan—to deduce the association between exploitative leadership and followers' subjective career success with constructive resistance and networking as mediators. The sample was drawn from four key service sector industries—healthcare, hospitality, financial services, and education—selected for their economic relevance and high levels of employee

interaction (Nasrullah et al., 2021). Participants were full-time employees with minimum two years of work experience and at least six months under their current supervisor. Convenience sampling was employed to recruit 305 volunteer participants due to restricted access to formal organizational data, given the sensitive nature of the topic.

Measures

Exploitative Leadership. It was measured using a 15-item scale introduced by Schmid et al., (2019). A sample item was "My immediate supervisor puts me under pressure to reach his or her goals." Scale anchored from 1 (not at all) to 5 (frequently, if not always). Composite reliability was 0.951.

Constructive Resistance. Followers' constructive resistance towards exploitative leadership was assessed through a 5-item scale established by Tepper et al., (2001). A sample item was "I ask my immediate supervisor for additional clarification and explanation." Scale anchored from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Composite reliability was 0.834.

Networking. It was measured using a 6-item scale from Ferris et al., (2005) as part of the political skill inventory. Sample item was "I spend a lot of time and effort at work networking with others". Scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Composite reliability was 0.832.

Subjective Career Success. It was assessed through a 10-item scale introduced by Pan and Zhou (2015). A sample item was "I have been continuously engaged in challenging work." Scale anchors extend from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Composite reliability was 0.851.

Control variables. To account for potential influences on subjective career success, gender, age and education level were controlled (Ng & Feldman, 2014). Moreover, as abusive supervision is implicated having impact on employee satisfaction (Schmid et al., 2019), it had been controlled in the model, and is measured using a shortened 5-item scale adopted from Mitchell and Ambrose (2007). A sample item was "My immediate supervisor lies to me" Scale anchors encompass from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Composite reliability was 0.885.

Common Method Variance. CMV was catered for through both procedural and statistical techniques. Ethical considerations and confidentiality were maintained to minimize evaluation apprehension and social desirability bias (Capili, 2021). A self-reported survey was administered in three waves with a four-week time lag. Followers reported exploitative leadership at Time 1, constructive resistance and networking at Time 2, and subjective career success at Time 3, to reduce CMV (Tehseen et al., 2017). Statistically, the full collinearity assessment approach (Kock, 2015) was employed using SmartPLS 4.1. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.011 to 2.837. As all were below the threshold of 3.3, it indicated no significant threat of CMV.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and CFA. Data were analysed using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4.1 (Shagufta & Nazir, 2021). Data followed a normal distribution. Of the total 305 participants, 123 (40.3%) were female. Participants' age averaged at 31.67 years (SD=8.777), while mean tenures with organization and current supervisor were 7.48 years (SD=6.267) and 3.61 years (SD=3.344) respectively. Participants were well-educated; 38.1% had bachelor's degree, 45.3% held master's degree, while 16.6% had doctorate degree. *Table 1* displays means, standard deviations and inter-construct correlations. The pattern of correlations was found to be in the predicted direction; however, no

control variable was significantly associated with any of the study variables. Therefore, these "ineffective" control variables were removed from further analysis.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations and inter-construct correlations (Pearson's r).

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	1.400	0.491	-							
2. Age (Years)	31.67	8.777	0.018	-						
3. Education Level	1.800	0.710	0.003	0.053	-					
4. Exploitative Leadership	2.341	1.101	-0.117	-0.067	-0.022	**0.749**				
5. Constructive Resistance	3.010	0.961	-0.069	-0.084	-0.081	0.424**	**0.775**			
6. Networking	3.203	1.078	-0.008	-0.031	-0.030	0.328**	0.518**	**0.788**		
7. Subjective Career Success	3.737	0.842	0.034	0.051	-0.020	-0.225**	0.350**	0.629**	**0.751**	
8. Abusive Supervision	2.370	1.106	-0.071	-0.093	0.024	0.548**	0.430**	0.245**	-0.212**	**0.751**

AVE square root value on the diagonal (in bold).

$**$ $p < 0.01$.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) results showed that most of the factor loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70. However, two subjective career success items and one constructive resistance item with factor loadings below 0.70 were retained to preserve content validity. Each scale's Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values were over the threshold of 0.70. AVE value for each construct was also higher than 0.50 (Hair Jr et al., 2021). Results of CFA are given in *Table 2*. All inter-construct correlation coefficients were lower than each AVE's square root (see *Table 1*) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and all heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios (see *Table 3*) were lower than the cut-off value of 0.85 (Hair Jr et al., 2021). The results confirm internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity.

Table 2

Results of confirmatory factor analysis.

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Exploitative Leadership	EL1	0.708	0.561	0.945	0.951
	EL2	0.716			
	EL3	0.708			
	EL4	0.739			
	EL5	0.770			
	EL6	0.702			
	EL7	0.792			
	EL8	0.728			
	EL9	0.789			
	EL10	0.807			
	EL11	0.752			
	EL12	0.798			
	EL13	0.752			
	EL14	0.789			
	EL15	0.759			
Constructive Resistance	CR1	0.709	0.600	0.748	0.834
	CR2	0.773			
	CR3	0.709			
	CR4	0.725			
	CR5	0.693			
Networking	NW1	0.766	0.621	0.796	0.832
	NW2	0.817			
	NW3	0.783			
	NW4	0.746			
	NW5	0.798			
	NW6	0.836			
Subjective Career Success	SCS1	0.640	0.564	0.813	0.851
	SCS2	0.749			

SCS3	0.711
SCS4	0.769
SCS5	0.756
SCS6	0.667
SCS7	0.706
SCS8	0.784
SCS9	0.703
SCS10	0.719

Table 3
HTMT criterion to establish discriminant validity.

Construct	1	2	3	4
1. Exploitative Leadership				
2. Constructive Resistance	0.522			
3. Networking	0.427	0.664		
4. Subjective Career Success	0.282	0.396	0.625	

Hypothesis Testing. Results reveal that exploitative leadership was significantly but negatively associated with subjective career success (β = -0.344 t = 8.333, p = 0.000), lending support to *H1*. Bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples was employed to test significance of indirect effects. Results suggested that the relationship between exploitative leadership and subjective career success was mediated through constructive resistance (point estimate=0.029, 95% bias–corrected confidence interval: 0.004–0.060), and networking (point estimate = 0.059, 95% BC CI: 0.022–0.105). Since zero was not involved in the confidence intervals, it is established that indirect effects are significantly different from zero at p < 0.001, lending support to *H2* and *H3*. Similarly, results confirmed that exploitative leadership–subjective career success link is sequentially mediated through constructive resistance and networking (point estimate = 0.084, 95% BC CI: 0.057–0.121). Since indirect effects are significantly different from zero at p < 0.001, support is presumed for *H4*.

Table 4
Results of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path coefficient	p-value	95% Bias-corrected confidence interval	Supported
H1: EL → SCS	-0.344	0.001	[-0.402; -0.279]	Yes
H2: EL → CR → SCS	0.029	0.000	[0.004; 0.060]	Yes
H3: EL → NW → SCS	0.059	0.000	[0.022; 0.105]	Yes
H4: EL → CR → NW → SCS	0.084	0.000	[0.057; 0.121]	Yes

EL = Exploitative Leadership; CR = Constructive Resistance; NW = Networking; SCS = Subjective Career Success.

The predictive relevance (R^2) values for endogenous constructs—constructive resistance (0.564), networking (0.426), and subjective career success (0.668)—indicate that while exploitative leadership and mediators significantly influence subjective career success, additional unmeasured factors might contribute to unexplained variance. Similarly, the effect size (f^2) value (EL→ SCS = 0.290) indicates medium effect of exploitative leadership on subjective career success. To evaluate out-of-sample predictive relevance, Stone-Geisser's Q^2 was computed using a blindfolding procedure (D=7). The Q^2 values for the endogenous constructs were 0.188 (constructive resistance), 0.125 (networking), and 0.144 (subjective career success)—all greater than zero, signifying that the model bears acceptable predictive relevance (Hair Jr et al., 2021).

Discussion

This study examines how followers navigate through negative effects of exploitative leadership on their subjective career success by adopting constructive resistance and networking strategies. Grounded in the COR theory, the findings suggest that exploitative leadership depletes followers' psychological resources, prompting followers to engage in socially sanctioned coping mechanisms. Unlike emotion-focused or avoidant approaches, which offer only temporary relief (May et al., 2014), constructive resistance and networking serve as resource-conserving mechanisms that enhance subjective career success. Consistent with previous research, followers facing destructive leadership prefer constructive tactics such as rational persuasion and sanctioned political behaviors, which are socially acceptable and mitigate stress (Malik & Sillah, 2025). When an individual reflects backward on the stress-provoking event (e.g., exploitative leadership), the experience will be primarily negative and unpleasant, whereas, when an individual reflects forward (i.e., focus on subjective career success), the experience will be significantly more positive and pleasant. The forward reflection triggers a positive outlook and a positive subjective sense, thereby leading to socially acceptable behaviors (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006). The mediation analysis confirmed that constructive resistance enables resource preservation, which are then invested in networking to replenish career-related resources, thereby augmenting subjective career success.

By identifying constructive and collaborative initiatives, this research emphasizes followers' personal agency in safeguarding career outcomes, rather than being passive subjects of exploitative leadership (Hussain et al., 2024). In hierarchical cultures, where direct confrontation is discouraged, subtle coping mechanisms become essential. These insights highlight the importance of career adaptability and political skills, particularly for employees vulnerable to exploitative leadership.

Theoretical Implications

This research advances exploitative leadership literature by addressing critical theoretical gaps and integrating its theoretical framework. While prior research has largely focused on attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, little is known about exploitative leadership's impact on followers' subjective career success (Hussain et al., 2024; Pircher Verdorfer et al., 2023). Addressing this gap, the present research indicates how constructive resistance and networking—rooted in organizational political skill—mediate the exploitative leadership–subjective career success relationship. The findings reveal that not all followers passively suffer under exploitative leadership. Instead, constructive and proactive political strategies enable followers to reframe negative leadership effects (May et al., 2014), challenging the notion that exploitative leadership is entirely detrimental (Hussain et al., 2024).

The sequential mediation model illustrates how employees engage in resource-protection and acquisition strategies to preserve intrinsic resources, underscoring COR theory's premise of dynamic resource management (Hobfoll et al., 2018) and emphasizing individual strategies that empower followers as active agents within a broader leadership-followership framework.

Practical Implications

The findings indicate the need for organizations to acknowledge the existence of exploitative leadership and implement preventive measures that promote ethical behavior and constructive resistance. The recruitment process should prioritize leaders with low selfishness and strong interpersonal skills. Leadership development programs should integrate training on ethical leadership, accountability mechanisms, power-balancing strategies, interdependence, collaborative decision making, and employee well-being initiatives. Since networking mediates exploitative

leadership–subjective career success link, organizations should facilitate networking and collaboration opportunities to help employees access resources and support.

Aligning workplace policies with regulatory frameworks (e.g., U.S. Department of Labor's Workplace Violence Program; Rosen, 2001) reinforces leadership accountability. Standardized resistance strategies, psychological support, and stress management programs can augment resilience. Moreover, transparent HR practices, fair compensation, and anti-exploitation policies foster trust and pro-organizational behavior. Empowering followers through community-based norms and resource-sharing enables constructive responses to exploitative leadership, rather than attributing exploitation solely to systemic dysfunction.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite offering valuable insights into the deleterious effect of exploitative leadership on followers' subjective career success, this study bears certain limitations that advise future research to develop the understanding of contextual influences, and alternative explanatory mechanisms. The research is conducted among full-time employees in Pakistan's services sector—limiting its generalizability across cultures and industries. Although the research design established inter-construct relationships, future longitudinal or vignette-based experimental studies—examining leader-follower or follower-coworker dyads—could offer deeper insights.

While this research accounts for followers' characteristics in shaping responses to exploitative leadership, it overlooks situational constraints and dispositional factors such as career aspirations, access to resources, and proactive personality traits. Future research could explore how contextual factors and followers' affective states influence resource preservation strategies and perceived career barriers.

Given the multilevel nature of organizational leadership, investigating organizational climate, hierarchical structures, and team dynamics could offer a broader perspective on the effects of exploitative leadership. While constructive resistance and networking mediate exploitative leadership–subjective career success relationship, future research should examine alternative mechanisms (e.g., stress, moral disengagement) and moderators (e.g., coworker standing up behavior, resilience, justice climate).

Conclusion

Essentially, destructive leadership operates as a negative mirror of constructive leadership. Within this premise, this research contributes to leadership and followership literature by integrating perspectives on leaders' and followers' workplace behaviors and resource-centered approaches, underscoring the role of coping strategies in suppressing harm. Despite the pervasiveness of exploitative leadership and its adverse consequences (Arun & Olsen, 2023), the active role of followers remains underexplored.

By focusing on constructive resistance and networking within Pakistani service sector organizations, the findings indicate that followers' active engagement can partially offset the deleterious impact of exploitative leadership. The emerging research on exploitative leadership would offer a valuable opportunity to refine both leadership and followership theory and inform more effective organizational practices.

Ethical approval

All data were collected following the ethical principles for dealing with human subjects. There was no standard ethics or institutional committee in place at the researchers' institution when the study was conducted.

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