Threads of Identity

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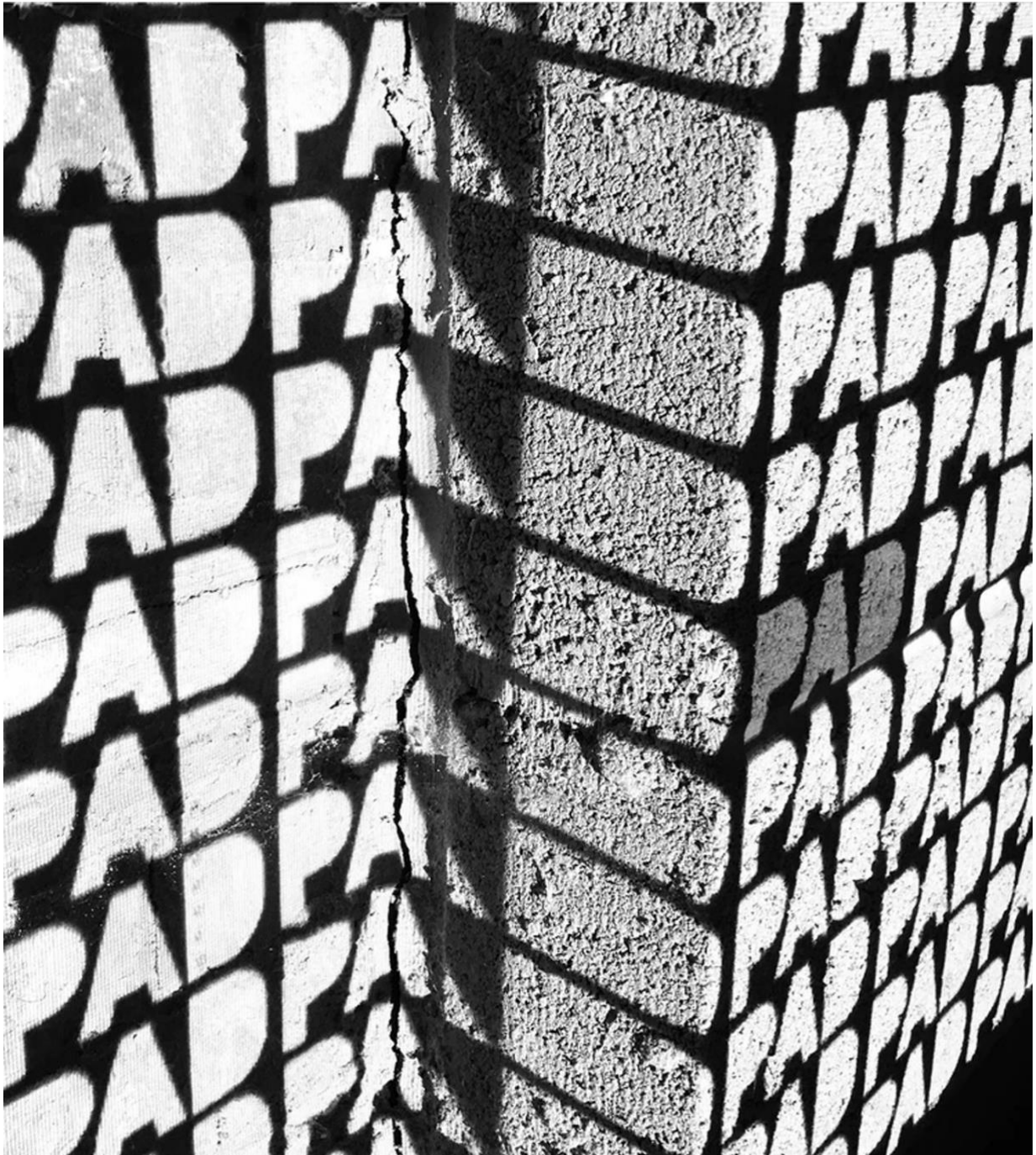
The relationship between clothing, fashion, and the self has been an ongoing topic of debate within the fields of Sociology, Anthropology, and Psychology. On one hand, some scholars argue that clothing is a form of self-expression that enables individuals to communicate their personality, identity, and more, through the garments they choose to wear (Davis, 1992; Kaiser & Kwon, 2013). On the other hand, others argue that fashion and clothing are not always an individual's free choice, but rather a form of social construction shaped by cultural norms and societal expectations (Entwistle & Rocamora, 2006; Craik, 1994).

The first perspective posits that clothing serves as an extension of an individual's personality, allowing them to express their identity and personal taste. This theory is based on the idea that humans have an innate desire for self-expression, and clothing is just one avenue through which this is achievable. According to this viewpoint, the clothes that an individual chooses to wear are a reflection of their personality, values, and beliefs. For example, someone who wears bold, colourful clothing may be perceived as outgoing and confident, while someone who wears more conservative clothing may be viewed as reserved or traditional.

The second outlook challenges the notion that fashion and clothing are entirely a matter of individual choice. According to this view, clothing choices are shaped by societal expectations, cultural norms, and other external factors that influence what is considered fashionable or appropriate to wear in different contexts. This theory is based on the idea that individuals are socialised from a young age to adhere to certain clothing standards and expectations, such as dressing appropriately for work or formal events. Therefore, an individual's clothing choices may not necessarily reflect their true personality or identity, but rather a desire to conform to societal expectations.

This article will examine both perspectives of the argument, utilising prominent theories that have been proposed to explain this relationship.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a psychological theory that suggests that human beings have a hierarchy of needs that they seek to fulfil. The hierarchy is typically depicted as a pyramid, with the most basic physiological needs at the bottom and higher-level needs for self-actualisation at the top (Maslow, 1943). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Copyright Thought.Co.

Maslow views the relationship between clothing, fashion and the self through a psychological lens, suggesting humans operate through a 'hierarchy of needs', navigated for fulfilment. This examines the hierarchal balance between the most basic physiological needs against the more dominating human desire for self-actualisation. Through this model, textiles and clothing is likened to the most basic needs for food and shelter and focuses on the 'original purpose' of clothing as a source of protection against the environment. Hollenweger and Reddy (2016, p.54) expand on this notion of 'physiological need' and see clothing as a mechanism for basic necessity, required to regulate body temperature and for protection against the elements.

It is prudent here to view the interaction between the levels of the pyramid and the way in which the boundaries between basic needs become blurred when combined

with the innate desire for belonging. At this point, clothing and self-expression interlink and can be viewed beyond the practical function of protecting the body from the elements and rather, as an intricate and powerful medium through which individuals can express their individuality, convey their personal identity, and signal their social status. Cultural historian Alison Lurie, in her book "The Language of Clothes," argues clothing serves as a form of nonverbal communication that can convey a wide range of information about the wearer, including an individual's beliefs, emotions, and interests that can facilitate social interaction.

For example, patterns and prints on clothing, such as a traditional African print, can indicate cultural heritage, while a graphic T-shirt with a band logo can indicate musical tastes, as depicted in Figure 2 and Figure 3. Through the conscious or unconscious selection of clothing, people can connect with others who share similar values, interests, and lifestyles, creating a sense of belonging and social cohesion. This implies that clothing, as a means of self-expression and communication, can shape our social interactions and relationships, satisfying the need for love and belonging, as people feel a sense of connection to others who share their tastes and interests.
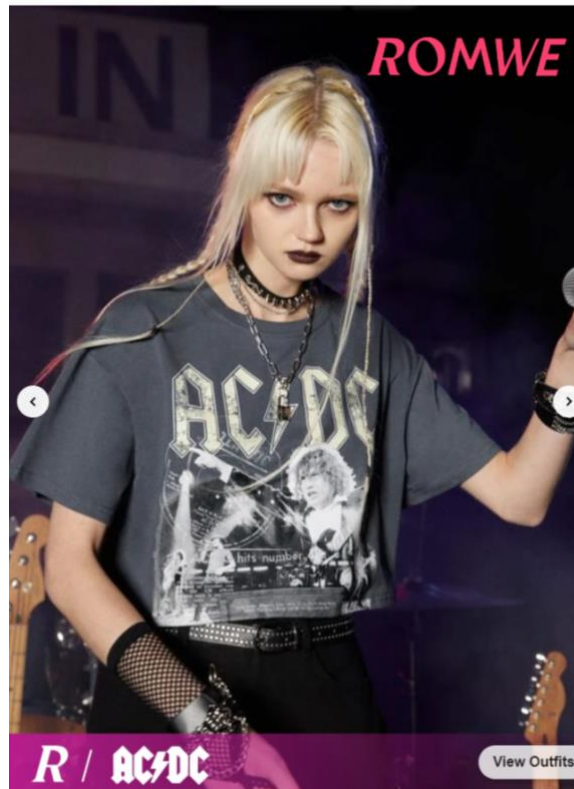

Figure 2: Traditional African Print. Copyright Cultureville

The idea that clothing can serve as a symbol to communicate one's identity and values aligns with symbolism theory. According to this theory, symbols are used to convey meaning. As noted by Kaiser & Nagasawa (2018, p.47):

Figure 3: ACDC T-Shirt sold at SHEIN.
Copyright SHEIN.

Symbolic interactionists view fashion as a medium for expressing and communicating one's identity and personality to others. Fashion symbols serve as signifiers of one's personal characteristics, social status, cultural affiliation, and group identity. Through fashion, individuals create and negotiate their social identities and relationships, as well as reinforce or challenge social norms and values.

The recognition of cultural symbols as significant in shaping human behaviour and perception is one of the main strengths of symbolism theory (Georgiou, 2016). Cultural symbols refer to shared meanings and representations used by people to

make sense of their world, and they can be expressed through various mediums including language, art, music, and fashion. In the domain of fashion and textiles, cultural symbols are evident in traditional clothing patterns, colours, and designs (Kaiser, 2012). For example, in many cultures, the colour white is associated with purity and innocence, while the colour red may symbolise passion or danger.

However, one limitation of symbolism theory is that it tends to overlook the role of individual agency and interpretation in the creation and dissemination of symbols (Bowlby, 1991). While cultural symbols may be shared across a group or society, individuals may interpret and use them in unique ways, based on their personal experiences, values, and contexts. For instance, what may be considered a symbol of power or authority in one culture may be seen as a symbol of oppression or subjugation in another (Said, 1978). This means that the meanings of symbols can be complex and dynamic and may vary depending on the social and cultural contexts in which they are used. Nonetheless the attempt to use clothing as a means of self expression and communication with others is clear (Kaiser, 2012).

Similarly, clothing can be used to signal one's status or attractiveness, which satisfies the need for esteem. Esteem needs include the desire for self-respect, respect from others, and recognition of one's achievements. By dressing in a certain way, people can signal to others that they are successful, attractive, or desirable. This can be an important aspect of self-expression, as people seek to project a certain image to the world. As a result, self-expression through clothing can improve one's confidence by allowing them to present themselves in a way that aligns with their individuality and personal style. When a person feels that their clothing accurately reflects who they are, they may feel more comfortable and secure in their own skin. Choosing clothing that makes them feel good about themselves can boost their mood and self-esteem, which can in turn lead to increased confidence.

As stated by psychologist and author Dr. Jennifer Baumgartner (2011, p.9):

> When we feel good about ourselves on the inside, we want to reflect that on the outside. Clothing is a way we can make that happen.

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As we delve deeper into the subject of emotions, it becomes apparent that people have the ability to express their emotions through clothing in a multitude of ways. One of the most common methods is through the use of colour. The hues we adorn ourselves with have the power to evoke specific emotions, for instance, red often symbolises passion and energy, while blue exudes a sense of calmness and serenity (Johnson & Torres, 2018). The information conveyed in Figures 4 and 5 support the argument that prints and patterns also play a vital role in expressing emotions. Among others, floral prints evoke feelings of joy and happiness, while geometric patterns exude a sense of structure and stability.

Figure 4: & Other Stories Floral Dress and **Figure 5:** & Other Stories Geometric Dress

Additionally, people can express emotions through the way they put together their clothing, such as the combination of different pieces. For example, someone might wear a bold and bright outfit to express a sense of excitement and adventure, while someone else might opt for a more subdued and understated outfit to express a sense of contemplativeness or introspection.

Therefore, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is highly relevant to the debate over the relationship between clothing and self-expression. Clothing can satisfy a range of needs, from the basic need for protection and shelter to the higher-level needs for love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation. By understanding how clothing can satisfy these needs, we can better understand why people use clothing as a means of self-expression, and how clothing can contribute to a sense of personal fulfilment and well-being. However, clothing, though often seen as a form of self-expression, may not always accurately reflect one's true individuality due to external factors that restrict their choices.

Feminist theory provides a framework for understanding and addressing gender-based inequalities and discrimination against women in various areas of society, including fashion. According to Barnard (2002, p.10), fashion is a cultural and social practice that reinforces gender norms and hierarchies, limiting the freedom and autonomy of individuals based on their gender. This is evident in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in fashion, where women are often expected to wear tight-fitting and revealing clothing, while men are expected to dress in a more conservative and traditional manner. This can be seen in Figure 6, which exhibits a female wearing a tight dress and a man dressed in a suit, conforming to the typical gender roles and expectations in fashion. These stereotypes are reinforced by fashion magazines and advertisements, portraying women as objects of desire and men as powerful and dominant. Ultimately, these gender stereotypes in fashion serve to reinforce patriarchal power relations, limiting the choices and freedoms of individuals based on their gender.

Figure 6: Couple in gender stereotypical clothing

The ideas of "femininity" and "masculinity" are deeply ingrained in our society and are often reflected in our clothing choices. For women, clothing that is considered "feminine" is often characterised by soft colours, delicate fabrics, and flowing shapes. For example, dresses and skirts are seen as traditionally feminine, especially when paired with pastel colours and floral prints. In contrast, clothing that is considered "masculine" for men is often characterised by dark colours, sturdy fabrics, and structured shapes. Suits, dress shirts, and trousers are all considered traditional masculine clothing.

However, it is important to note that these ideas of femininity and masculinity are not fixed and can vary based on the context and environment. For example, in professional settings such as law or finance, women are often expected to dress in a more masculine style, with suits and blazers being the norm. Similarly, in certain cultures, such as Scotland, kilts are seen as a traditional masculine garment, even though they are typically associated with skirts.

A crucial element of feminist theory is its attention to the ways in which fashion can be used as a tool for resistance and empowerment. As Bell Hooks argues, *"Fashion can be a means of claiming power and expressing individuality, but it can also be used to resist dominant ideologies"* (Hooks, 1992). By examining the ways in which individuals use fashion to resist patriarchal power structures, feminist theorists can highlight the potential of fashion to be a force for social change.

The fashion industry's transformative journey towards gender equality has been marked by significant milestones, including the advent of gender-neutral clothing as a breakthrough moment. Figure 7 shows examples of a female dressed in more casual and baggy clothing, challenging society's expectations of how women should dress. By dismantling the rigid constructs of gender norms, the fashion world has created an environment where individuals can express themselves more freely without fear of judgment or limitations. This has also disrupted the patriarchal power structures that once dictated what was considered "masculine" or "feminine," challenging societal expectations.

Figure 7: Malegowska, A. (2022). Gender Neutral Clothing.

Feminist fashion has further contributed to this movement by introducing clothing and accessories that embody feminist values and reject traditional gender roles. For instance, the rise of gender-neutral fashion, promoting gender equality demonstrates

the power of fashion as a tool for social change. Androgynous clothing blurs the lines between traditional gender norms by combining elements of both masculine and feminine styles (Jenner, 2019). This movement has turned fashion into a source of empowerment, enabling individuals to break free from gender constraints and embrace their authentic selves.

Fashion has also become a tool for queer expression and identity. By wearing androgynous clothing, queer individuals can express their non-binary or genderqueer identity in a way that feels authentic to them, while also challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes (Jenner, 2019). A queer individual is a term used to describe someone whose sexual or gender identity does not conform to traditional societal expectations or norms. It is an umbrella term that can refer to a wide range of identities, including but not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and non-binary individuals. For instance, Figure 8 showcases, Alok V Menon, a queer author, poet and public figure, expressing themselves in a gender non-confirmative manner, highlighting the diverse ways in which fashion can enable queer expression. Queer individuals may experience discrimination or marginalisation due to their non-conforming identities, and the fashion industry has become a platform for them to express their identities and resist societal expectations of gender and sexuality (Davis, 2019). By challenging these norms, queer individuals and their allies work towards creating a more inclusive and accepting society for all.

Figure 8: Portrait of Queer Author and Poet, Alok V Menon

The utilisation of fashion as a tool to either conform to or challenge gender stereotypes carries with it a profound political significance. The personal sartorial choices of individuals, while ultimately reflective of their values and beliefs, remain subject to the overarching political and social climate of their time. It is important to recognise that the same individual may make different sartorial choices under altered political circumstances. In a patriarchal society, individuals may feel constrained to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations, as noted by Goffman (1979, p. 34). However, in a more inclusive and accepting society, individuals may feel more free to express their gender identity in diverse ways, or even reject the need for gendered expressions altogether, as highlighted by Butler (1990, p. 33). The idea that individual choices are shaped by their environment is supported by Wilson (2003, p. 56), who argues that values and beliefs are subject to change over time, influenced by shifts in the political climate. This reinforces the fact that individual

choices are affected by the environment in which they inhabit and therefore brings to question whether self-expression can indeed be a result of agency in its entirety.

This links to one of the most influential theories on this topic, the "social construction of self" theory, which argues that individuals do not have a pre-existing, innate self, but rather their self-concept is purely shaped by their social interactions and cultural background including their economic status. In the context of fashion, this theory suggests that personal preferences may not be the sole driving force behind clothing choices, as individuals may be influenced by societal expectations and cultural norms (Davis, 1992). Therefore, the decision to wear certain clothing may be a reflection of a person's social identity, rather than simply an expression of individual taste (Sullivan, 2006).

However, the social construction of self theory has faced criticisms that question its validity and comprehensiveness. One major criticism is that the theory oversimplifies the complexity and diversity of human experience. It does not take into account how multiple identities, such as race, gender, and class, can interact and shape an individual's self-concept (Bourdieu, 1984; Butler, 1990). The theory also fails to recognise the role of personal agency and choice in shaping an individual's self-concept (Maslow, 1943). Multiple identities interact to form an intricate sense of self that is not fully captured by the social construction of self theory (Küchler, 1994). An individual's self-concept is influenced not only by their social environment but also by their unique perspective and values, as well as their personal agency and choice (Entwistle, 2000). Therefore, while the social construction of self theory has some value in understanding how an individual's self-concept is shaped by their environment and social interactions, it does not fully capture the complexity and diversity of human experience.

When considering the financial implications of self-expression through clothing, it becomes increasingly evident that a significant class divide exists within the fashion industry. Unfortunately, this divide can lead to obstacles for individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who wish to express themselves through fashion.

These obstacles can include limited access to clothing items that accurately represent their identity, resulting in feelings of exclusion from certain subcultures or social groups. For instance, certain clothing styles have become closely associated with specific cultural backgrounds or social classes. The style of urban streetwear, for example, has become intertwined with hip-hop culture, while preppy clothing is often associated with wealth and privilege (Entwistle, 2000). Individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may struggle to afford the expensive clothing items associated with preppy clothing (Kawamura, 2004), and may not feel that urban streetwear accurately reflects their personal style or cultural background. This can limit their ability to express their identity through fashion, causing a sense of exclusion from certain social groups or subcultures.

One example of this limitation is highlighted in a study by Kim and Johnson (2018), which found that "low-income consumers express dissatisfaction with their clothing choices because they cannot afford the clothing that reflects their preferred style" (p. 276). The study emphasises the difficulty faced by low-income individuals in expressing themselves through fashion due to financial constraints.

Those who belong to higher social classes can afford designer clothing that is often associated with prestige, luxury, and social status. In contrast, individuals from lower economic backgrounds often have limited access to designer clothing due to its premium pricing, and they may have to resort to inexpensive clothing that carries certain negative connotations in society. Inexpensive clothing is associated with low quality, poor craftsmanship, and a lack of style (Lurie, 1992). It is also viewed as disposable and lacking in durability, with many people believing that cheaper clothing is not designed to last and is therefore wasteful and environmentally damaging (Küchler, 1994). Additionally, inexpensive clothing is sometimes associated with exploitation of workers (Davis, 2019; Welters, 2008), as some companies may use sweatshop labour or pay very low wages to produce cheap garments.

Sustainability and the use of ethical fashion practices is increasingly topical and has become a source of self-expression in its own right. Many individuals now choose to

avoid fashion pieces that have resulted in the exploitation of marginalised groups in favour of sustainability in the form of slow fashion, which prioritises quality over quantity and encourages consumers to invest in high-quality, sustainable clothing that is designed to last. Additionally, there is a growing trend of supporting and promoting clothing and accessory brands that are owned and operated by women, people of colour, and other marginalised groups. By promoting these brands, individuals can help to empower these groups and challenge the traditional power structures that have excluded them from the fashion industry.

However, according to Masiero and Dalli (2018), sustainable and ethical fashion is often more expensive, which creates a further divide between those who can afford it and those who cannot. While investing in high-quality, sustainable clothing may be a more financially responsible choice in the long run, the upfront cost can be a barrier for many individuals. This reinforces negative stereotypes and can result in individuals being judged based on their clothing choices. It can therefore create an atmosphere where individuals feel the need to conform to certain fashion norms to be accepted, limiting their ability to express their values and beliefs through fashion.

Furthermore, the unceasing rotation of fashion trends perpetuates the existing class divide. Initially fashionable among the upper echelons, these trends eventually trickle down to fast fashion and high street brands, thereby becoming accessible to the lower classes. However, by the time they become mainstream, the upper classes have already moved on to something else, resulting in a never-ending cycle of class-based fashion trends. This constant evolution can be particularly challenging for those who are unable to afford new clothing regularly, as they may feel as though they cannot keep up with the latest trends or express themselves as they desire.

In conclusion, the relationship between clothing, fashion, and the self is a complex and multifaceted topic that has been debated for many years. While some argue that clothing is a form of self-expression that allows individuals to communicate their personality and identity, others argue that fashion and clothing are not always an individual's free choice, but rather a form of social construction shaped by cultural

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norms and societal expectations. Through an analysis of prominent theories, it is clear both perspectives have merit, though the extent to which one surpasses the other is highly questionable. Just as fashion itself is open to interpretation, so too are the actions and influences of the wearer, and the interlinking properties serve to support the title of this essay – agency and social constructs do indeed, weave and intertwine to form the threads of our identity.

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