An Examination of the Relationship between Conversational Sensitivity and Listening Styles

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Abstract

Previous research on conversational sensitivity and listening styles has shown inconsistent results on the relationship between the two concepts. This study is designed to continue the line of research by further examining the relationship of the two concepts and between the dimensions. Two hundred and seventy students in the basic courses of Communication and Psychology participate in this study. The results indicate that significantly positive and negative relationships exist among the dimensions of the two concepts. Gender differences on the two concepts are also tested. Limitations and directions for future research are as well discussed.

Research has attempted to examine why people are more or less sophisticated in detecting the nuances of conversation, and the concept of sensitivity plays a key role in this line of research (Chesebro, 1999; Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1987; Hosman, 1991; Stacks & Murphy, 1993; Wigley, Pohl, & Watt, 1989). Conversational sensitivity seeks to explain an outlook and ability by which some people are more attuned to cues and therefore more aware of underlying meanings afforded in interactions.

Listening is a means by which cues are attained and processed. Listening aspects of attending, interpreting, remembering, responding, perceiving, and others involve sensitivity (Bostrom, 1990; Purdy & Borisoff, 1997; Witkin & Trochim, 1997). If one's willingness impacts degree of sensitivity achieved in conversation as suggested by research (e.g., Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1987), then constructs of listening, especially listening styles, that reflect willingness should provide a reliable measure of relationships between the two concepts (Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995).

The concept of listening styles posits that people have a favored and usually unconscious approach to how they attend to their conversation partners (Langer, 1980; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977; Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995). Studies have provided support on the relationship between listening styles and variables such as cultural orientation (Watson, Lazarus, & Thomas, 1999), personality dimensions (Sargent, Fitch-Hauser, & Weaver, 1997), and other communication attitudes (Sargent, Weaver, & Kiewitz, 1997). However, only a few scholars directly examine the impact of listening styles on conversational sensitivity, and the existing literature doesn't provide consistent information accounting for the relationship of the two concepts (Chesebro, 1999; Keyton & Rhodes, 1994). The goal of this study is then to continue this line of research by more closely examining the dimensions of conversational sensitivity and listening styles and their possible relationships.

Literature Review

Conversational Sensitivity

       The idea of sensitivity in communication has not only been an expanding theme for at least thirty years, but also claims a sizeable placement within social interaction literature. Studies on rhetorical, intercultural, and interpersonal sensitivity are among the more prominent research directions, and each context is marked by a distinct perspective. Rhetorical sensitivity describes a mindset about message construction leading the speaker to evaluate audience needs in the process of encoding (Hart & Burks, 1972; Hart, Carlson, & Eadie, 1975, 1980; Ward, Bluman, & Dauria, 1982). Intercultural sensitivity concerns an affective orientation towards cultural differences that guides one's communicative behavior (Chen & Starosta, 1997, 2000; Fritz, Mollenberg, & Chen, 2002). Interpersonal sensitivity describes levels of verbal and nonverbal perceptiveness between two people or a small group, in which the perceiver's accuracy can be measured by comparisons to the actual reported feelings or perceptions of the target (Snodgrass, 1992; Snodgrass, Hecht, & Ploutz-Snyder, 1998; Zebrowitz, 2001). Because sensitivity in conversation is mainly embedded in the process of interpersonal communication, it is appropriately treated as part of interpersonal sensitivity.

       Conversational sensitivity can be broadly defined as "the propensity of people to attend to and interpret what occurs during conversations" (Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1987, p. 168). The concept is rooted in the theory of social affordances. Gibson (1983) used "social affordance" to refer to values offered by the environment which are specific to the survival and success of various species. Dworkin and Goldfinger (1985) further discussed "social affordance" by way of how processing biases affect "attention to, anticipating, and remembering different affordances of a situation" (In Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1987, p. 194). Scholars have argued that human perceptual systems obtain social affordances from a "conversation-centered world" and that as such, invariant stimulus information for people lies in spontaneous communication (e.g., Daly et. al., 1987, p. 168). Moreover, Chesebro (1999) noted that persons higher in conversational sensitivity are able to detect and utilize more specific and covert affordances.

       Previous research has revealed that conversational sensitivity associates with various personal traits, including self-esteem, self-monitoring, private self-consciousness, assertiveness, the "noble self" dimension of rhetorical sensitivity, and empathy (Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1987). Self-esteem and sensitivity may relate because people who have positive self-perceptions are either motivated by such perceptions to interact with others or perceive themselves more positively because they know the social value of their sensitivity. Related to attending to and interpreting aspects of conversational sensitivity, high self-monitors may be "particularly sensitive to the expressions and self-presentations of others" (Brownell, 2002, p. 19). More advanced cognitive schemes enable them to be particularly aware of their social environments and to the dynamics involved in exchanges, however not because they are seeking social approval (Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1987).

       As a person exhibiting higher levels of private self-consciousness, the sensitive person has an awareness about the self that can be described as an "objective self awareness" (Berger & Bradac, 1995; Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). The centrality of conversations and cues to the sensitive perceiver relates to the high internal locus of control involved with higher private self-consciousness. As assertiveness is a correlate of sensitivity, people higher in sensitivity probably tend to be better at advocating for their needs. They are more likely to

have attributes of greater skill and likelihood of defending their rights, to be more direct, to be independent and to be able to negotiate for their needs as social participants. The "noble selves" dimension of Hart, Carlson, and Eadie (1975, 1980) additionally reflects the strong sense of self revealed in these attributes and in this case, in one's conversational skills. Finally, empathy and sensitivity both require abilities to focus on the other person and the message in addition to drawing from a wide variety of possible reactions to more accurately identify with the other (Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1987).

Among personal traits, conversational sensitivity is most likely to relate to interaction involvement. Interaction involvement concerns the degree of existence within an interaction, measured by perceptiveness, attentiveness and responsiveness (Cegala, 1981, 1984; Cegala, Savage, Brunner, & Conrad, 1982). Involvement might be thought of as a level of communicator saturation. People who show high interaction involvement exhibit better memory of their interactions, a broader perspective in perceiving those interactions, closer connections to those with whom they interact and more agility with explaining themselves (Cegala, 1984). In conversations, more highly involved and more sensitive people seem to share abilities of greater recall, greater affinity towards conversation, greater skills to manage their interactions, and use of body gestures in their explanations (Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1987).

However, although the two concepts are closely related, they are still distinct from each other, because conversational sensitivity is mainly concerned with attending to and decoding conversations, and interaction involvement includes decoding and encoding elements. According to Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton (1987), an "awareness of self as object" is associated with interaction involvement but not the sensitivity concept (p. 195).

In addition, Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, (1987) found that conversational sensitivity is negatively related to receiver apprehension, communication apprehension, and social anxiety. The relationship between receiver apprehension and communication apprehension was explicated in terms of their lesser degree of social experience and resulting rewards afforded from conversation interaction. The first is a resistance to receiving information or listening, the latter deals with trepidation involved with speaking. Neither the person who resists listening nor the person who resists speaking will be motivated to approach conversational situations. This was also demonstrated in other research, such as that by Baxter (1995), which reported that in the specific situation of relationships ending or "disengaging," people with higher apprehension tend to be indirect and to avoid others. Hosman (1991) also reported that people higher in conversational sensitivity are motivated to conversations for the potential relationships they can form.

Social anxiety is more broad but similar to apprehension in that socially anxious individuals experience increased discomfort with the possibility of interacting with others in a variety of contexts. Discomfort in social environments is less apt to be the experience of the sensitive person who is characterized by higher self-esteem and higher interaction involvement. Conversationally sensitive people tend to be more outgoing, confident and predictably more competent communicators.

Conversational sensitivity can also be conceptualized from behavioral and situational perspectives. Behaviorally, conversationally sensitive people tend to remember interactions differently. For example, Daly, Vangelisti, and Daughton (1987) found that conversationally sensitive individuals recall the conversation more in personal terms, i.e., they infer more, relate what is happening to themselves more, and tend to view situations in conversational

terms more than do those who are less conversationally sensitive. Those less conversationally sensitive tend to not relate to what is being said, but rather focus on the "face value" of given conversations. Lower conversational sensitivity also associates with decreased recall of what occurs and what was said in interactions.

Conversational sensitivity is situational as well. Although individuals may be more or less sensitive in general, a heightened sensitivity may also result from conversations focusing on personal matters, from conversations that defy some usual protocol, from when the conversational nature is more formal, from when they are engaging and out of the ordinary, and from when they involve others for whom one has a positive regard (Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1987).

Furthermore, research has suggested that higher conversational sensitivity exhibits more diverse cognitive structures and is related to cognitive complexity (Stacks & Murphy, 1993). Cognitive complexity refers to a range of experiences conceptually represented in a person's mental processing, allowing for a broader scope of understanding, concept identification and problem-solving capacity (Beatty & Payne, 1984). It is believed that the nature of cognitive complexity leads to better ability to detect intricate cues (Stacks & Murphy, 1993). The conversationally sensitive person's range of experiences underlies their self-monitoring abilities and seems to equip them with increased capacities to identify with others as their empathic skills require.

The conversationally sensitive person as well has a greater tendency to verbally praise others. Wigley, Pohl, and Watt (1989) postured verbal praise as a predisposition of sensitivity, and attributed that to the sensitive person's greater appreciation for conversation and its rewards. Verbal praise and conversational sensitivity did produce a positive and significant relationship in their research. The authors also examined the relationship between verbal aggressiveness and praise behavior, and between aggressiveness and conversational sensitivity. They found a negative relationship between verbal aggressiveness and verbal praise behavior. However, although it seemed that verbal aggressiveness would be a strategy of less sensitive people (due to apprehension and desire for brief demands on their conversational skills), no relationship was found between aggressiveness and conversational sensitivity.

Using Rubin, Perse, and Barbato's (1988) instrument on motives to assess motivational impacts on the private, lonely, or conversationally sensitive person's involvement in interactions, Hosman (1991) found that interpersonal motivations of conversationally sensitive people reveal proclivity for interacting with and interest in others and tend to demand greater levels of intimacy, and increased sensitivity also related to a proclivity for enjoyment in communicating with one's neighbors, and an inverse reflection of the "not neighboring" aspect of privacy.

Finally, to examine conversational sensitivity also requires inclusion of processes by which such elements as detection, attending to, and interpretation can happen. In other words, conversational sensitivity should also be closely related to specific receiving attitudes and behaviors in the listening process.

Listening Styles

Listening is the active "process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages" (Emmert, 1994, p. 6). Listening includes the physiological component of hearing, in addition to aspects of selecting, comprehending

and understanding, interpreting, retaining, and responding: it is dynamic and multidimensional, and is an integral part of the decoding process (Barker, 1971; Bentley, 1997, 2000; Bostrom, 1990; Brownell, 2002; Glenn, 1989; Purdy & Borisoff, 1997; Witkin & Trochim, 1997; Wolvin & Coakley, 1996).

Like other communication behaviors, listening serves particular goals and is influenced by motives. Numerous studies have discussed differing listening approaches upon which people might rely. Depending upon the goal, listening might be "conversational", "appreciative", "empathic", "discriminative", and "evaluative" (Barker, 1971; Goss, 1991; Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995; Wolvin & Coakley, 1996).

Research on listening styles has contributed profoundly to investigations of message decoding behaviors (Johnston, Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 2000; Kiewitz, Weaver, Brosius, & Weimann, 1997; Sargent, Fitch-Hauser, & Weaver, 1997; Sargent, Weaver, & Kiewitz, 1997; Watson, Lazarus, & Thomas, 1999; Weaver & Kirtley, 1995; Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 1996). According to Watson, Barker, and Weaver (1995), listening styles are the "ways in which people prefer to receive information" (p. 2), and selection or use of styles is motivated by the "attitudes, beliefs, and predispositions about the how, where, when, who, and what of the information reception and encoding process" (p. 2). The authors have developed the Listening Styles Profile (LSP) instrument to measure self-reported preferences for receiving information. Four primary styles, including people-, action-, content-, and time-oriented listening, emerged as distinct preferences in listening scenarios.

The people-oriented listening style is characterized by showing interest in others. It focuses on receiving information in terms of feelings and emotions about the speaker. As such, people-oriented listening is relationship-focused and seems to accompany or lead to increased empathy (Weaver & Kirtley, 1995). It appears to involve devoting considerable effort to the exchange (Barker & Watson, 2000).

Those who engage in an action-oriented listening style prefer "concise, error-free presentations" (Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995, p. 3). The listener using this style values a pithy format of information. Action listeners may become impatient or frustrated with information that is disorganized or lengthy. Action-oriented listening is aligned with task orientation.

Content-oriented listening style is characterized by a preference to be challenged when receiving information. A person engaging a content style appreciates detail and tends to be thorough in reviewing information. Therefore, content listening usually features comprehensive approaches to making decisions. The content listener also tends to focus on fairness (Worthington, 2001).

The time-oriented listening style includes preferring "brief or hurried interactions" (Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995, p. 3). The time listener may either directly state the amount of time that he or she is willing to invest into listening, or may use nonverbal cues to alert the speaker to that fact. For example, sometimes the time listener is known for glancing at his or her watch while listening. The time listener may project anxiousness about time into judgment of others or may seek to somehow regain his or her time within the dynamics of the context (Worthington, 2001).

Worthington's (2001) study exploring juror decisions as a possible function of listening style further develops the style characteristics. Her two-part investigation enabled testing for the proclivity of (mock) jurors to decide negligence and damages. Based on participant reactions after viewing a pre-taped mock trial, juror listening styles were not found

to impact their submitting judgments of negligence overall. However, the time style did positively correlate with increased decision of negligence when people, action and content listening styles were isolated. This was attributed to the value that the time-oriented listener places on time. An inverse relationship between people listeners and assignment of damages did emerge and was attributed to the increased personal details used to describe defendants in the video. The content style also exhibited a partial correlation with assignment of damages. The content listener's consideration of fairness was believed to be an impact (Worthington, 2001).

Because the styles are conceptualized as preferences of habit, the distinct approaches to listening are often discussed as a person's predominant style. However, it is important to note that listeners are able to use numerous styles. People may and can engage more than one style depending upon their skill, the context in which their listening occurs, and needs or requirements associated (Barker & Watson, 2000; Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995; Watson, Lazarus, & Thomas, 1999). Nevertheless, the argument of one predominant style relied upon more than others has continued.

Expected Relationships between Conversational Sensitivity and Listening Styles

Preferences for listening can be considered as motives for receiving information and for communicating. A more substantial selection of information devoted to listening styles demonstrates how such motives, whether consciously or unconsciously engaged, impact one's attending to others and ability to detect affordances necessary for interpretation. Information regarding decisions that result from listening, and variables which affect one's listening motivation, provide a possible association between listening styles and conversational sensitivity. Specifically, investigations related to how aspects of role (Worthington, 2001), profession (Watson, Lazarus, & Thomas, 1999), culture (Kiewitz et. al., 1997), personality (Sargent, Fitch-Hauser, & Weaver, 1997; Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 1996), empathy (Weaver & Kirtley, 1995) and communication attitudes (Sargent, Weaver, & Kiewitz, 1997) impact listening preferences further support the understanding of the relationship between listening styles and conversational sensitivity.

Among these concepts, empathy is most related to conversational sensitivity. Weaver and Kirtley (1995) investigated the relationship between listening style preferences and the empathic responsiveness, perspective-taking and sympathetic responsiveness scales. They found that sympathetic responsiveness was positively related to people-oriented listening though empathic responsiveness was not. In other words, the people-oriented listener may feel sad for the other but will not experience the same emotive affect as the person who actually had or is having the experience. Empathic responsiveness did alternatively correlate with content listening. The content-oriented listener has a different emotional stability allowing for objective and broader evaluation of the situation. He or she can interact with others without experiencing a mirrored affective response. The content style and the empathic responsiveness construct of empathy were negatively related. Action listening revealed unsympathetic responses. The time style emerged with lack of positive relationships with the empathy aspects. The authors concluded that the time-oriented listener preference seems unsympathetic and generally apathetic but that the action and time styles may still retain an emotional level. The authors believed that the distances reflected by these behaviors and their interest in "facts only, please" may be more related to a self-protection tendency.

Unfortunately, although studies have reported listening preference relationships to various personality attributes, no clear relationships have been found between any listening style and conversational sensitivity. For example, Chesebro (1999) used the uni-dimensional treatment of sensitivity to study self-perception as it related to Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton's (1987) eight components of sensitivity and the four different preferences for receiving information, but only people-oriented listening style was significantly related to conversational sensitivity. Nevertheless, the outcomes of Chesebro's study provide a critical foundation for listening styles' proclivity to encourage or discourage conversational sensitivity.

Moreover, conflicting findings and research design issues concerning the eight original factors of conversational sensitivity utilized in Chesebro's study as compared to the five-factor structure advanced by Stacks and Murphy (1993) invite more thorough testing on the relationship between the two concepts. Aiming to this goal, the present study is to answer the following research question:

RQ: What is the relationship between dimensions of conversational sensitivity and listening styles?

In addition to the research question, this study also examines the gender differences of the two concepts.

Methods

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students enrolling in basic communications and psychology courses at a medium sized northeastern university. Among the 270 participants, 94 were males and 174 were females. Three did not report their gender. The average age of the participants is 19.88.

Procedures

Survey method was used to collect data in this study. Administration to all participants occurred during regular class time, and it was understood that the concepts under study had not been discussed in their classes. No incentives were given for participation. Each class section received instructions and the option of not participating was also acknowledged. In all cases, class instructors were not present during the administration. All questionnaires were administered during a three-week period in March and April, 2002.

Instruments

Participants were asked to complete two questionnaires: the Conversational Sensitivity Scale developed by Daly, Vangelisti, and Daughton (1987), and the Listening Styles Profile (LSP) developed by Watson, Barker & Weaver (1995).

In order to validate the dimensions of both scales, factor analyses were conducted. The results were very close to the factors found by the original authors. For the Conversational Sensitivity Scale eight factors were extracted, but only five had satisfactory reliability coefficients, including Conversational Alternatives with .82 coefficient alpha, Detecting Meanings .75, Conversational Enjoyment .81, Conversational Imagination .89, and Interpretation .60. The coefficient alpha for the overall scale is .69. Because the coefficient alpha is lower than .40 for Conversational Memory, Detecting Power, and Perceiving Affinity, they were excluded in the analyses of this study.

Consistent with the original study, four factors were extracted from the Listening Styles Profile. The coefficient alpha for the overall scale is .76. The four factors are the People Style with .60 coefficient alpha, the Action Style (.62), the Content Style (.64), and the Time Style (.66).

Analysis

To answer the research question Pearson product-moment correlations were computed between the two scales and their dimensions. In addition, t-tests were used to test the differences of gender on the two concepts.

Results

The primary research question sought to determine the relationship between dimensions of conversational sensitivity and listening styles. Pearson product-moment correlations were computed to answer the question. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Variables

Variables	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Conv. Alt.	.39*	.06	.12*	-.33*	.67*	.14*	.19*	.10	.26*	.26*
2. Det. Mean.		.24*	.18*	-.32*	.72	.21*	.22*	.12	.17*	.28*
3. Conv. Enj.			.16*	-.02	.44*	.25*	.13*	.16*	-.14*	.17*
4. Conv. Imag.				-.05	.40*	.04	.14*	.15*	-.04	.11
5. Interp.					-.14*	-.16*	.03	.04	-.24*	-.13*
6. Conv. All						.25*	.32*	.19*	.14*	.35*
7. People							.08	.18*	.11	.49*
8. Action								.31*	.33*	.73*
9. Content									.21*	.67*
10. Time										.60*
11. List. All										---

*$p < .05$. N = 270

The results showed that a positive relationship exists between conversational sensitivity and listening styles ($r = .35$, $p < .05$). Most of the dimensions of conversational sensitivity and listening styles also showed significant relationships, either positively or negatively, with a few exceptions. Those exceptions include that Conversational Alternatives did not show significant correlations with Conversational Imagination and Content Style; Detecting Meanings with Content Style; Conversational Enjoyment with Interpretation; Conversational Imagination with Interpretation, People Style, Time Style, and Overall Listening Style; Interpretation with Action Style and Content Style; and People Style with Action Style and Time Style.

To test the gender differences on conversational sensitivity and listening styles t-tests were conducted. The results showed that three significant differences were found between males and females on three dimensions. First, females (M = 3.79, $p < .001$) scored significantly higher than males (M = 3.15, $p < .001$) on Conversational Enjoyment; second,

females (M = 4.12, p < .001) were also found that they scored significantly higher than males (M = 3.88, p < .001) on People Style listening; and third, male (M = 3.08, p < .001) scored significantly higher than females (M = 2.71, p < .001) on Time Style listening.

Discussion

The results of this investigation support previous research that delineated the relationship between conversational sensitivity and listening styles. The significant correlations between most of the dimensions of conversational sensitivity and listening styles found in this study strengthen the argument that attitudes towards receiving information impact the achievement of overall conversational sensitivity.

It would seem that the differentiation of individual approaches to receiving information based on these attitudes would lead to greater or lesser degrees of conversational sensitivity. This is suggested by the literature pertaining to the concepts. For example, listening styles have been found to significantly differ on dimensions of empathy and cognitive complexity, and are also related with greater conversational sensitivity (Chesebro, 1999).

The results in this study should be expected given the nature of conversational sensitivity as well as that of the four listening styles. Greater detection of social affordances is an outcome of being more skilled in conversation, more personable, and more equipped with a variety of schema with which to interpret the messages communicated by others in our social world. Conversational sensitivity has been found to associate with increased praise of others (Wigley, Pohl, & Watt, 1989), motivations towards forming relationships (Hosman, 1991), and cognitive complexity (Stacks & Murphy, 1993). Listeners who are empathic, interested in others and better at displaying their interest as well as those who have a proclivity for challenging information and who have an unemotional and yet empathic nature are probably more adept in conversation and skilled in decoding its nuances.

Conversely, conversational sensitivity would seem to be less associated with listening styles characterized by task versus person orientation, less patience and greater concern with precision. The action and time styles have been found to relate positively with communicative behaviors that are neurotic, "socially callous" (Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 1996) and more apprehensive about communication (Sargent, Weaver, & Kiewitz, 1997). However, decreased cue detection or negative relationships to conversational sensitivity has still not been found.

Gender differences were also examined in this study. The results support previous research specific to male and female differences in receiving information. There is an ongoing pattern wherein males tend to be more reliant upon task and time-oriented listening behaviors, and this study revealed a significant relationship once again between males and the time-oriented listening style. Another pattern consists of females being more relational and content-focused in their preferences for receiving information. In this study females were found to significantly relate to the people listening style. This may also explain the finding that females scored higher than males on the Conversational Enjoyment dimension.

This research may have been limited for a variety of reasons. One that appears to prevail in the existing literature is that concerning the Listening Styles Profile (LSP). The profile instrument measures peoples' self-perceptions about listening behavior. Actual observed behavior has not been tested in this fashion. Also, the listening styles research has continued under the direction of a small selection of primary scholars. On the one hand this is

logical as good research can emerge from expertise. However, non-biased scholars may give way to a new line of questions and validity checks. Also, to this point conversational sensitivity research has advanced with a predictable remark noting Daly, Vangelisti & Daughton's (1987) directions that their original measure was intended for a broad treatment of the concept. Most studies are needed to continue the test. Moreover, while this study used an acceptable sample population in numbers, college students can only give us one perspective of social communication behaviors. Certainly those perceptions restrict us from understanding comprehensive community demographics.

Finally, for future research, in addition to improving the limitations of this study, scholars can consider the impact of environment on the two concepts. For instance, given current research on how computer mediated communication (CMC) affects other communication behaviors and interpersonal outcomes, it will be interesting to ask how conversational sensitivity and listening styles change in this medium.

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