

Towards interculturality in International Creative Business Management in Higher Education

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Frank Fitzpatrick (PhD)

Senior Lecturer

Business School for the Creative Industries, University for the Creative Arts, UK

Introduction

The nature and focus of international business is changing fast with the rate of economic growth in the emerging economies of the global East and South having doubled in the last decade to now equal the value of trade in developed countries, as they look to expand their share of global business (UNCTAD, 2019). This has led to an increase in international mobility & diversity in the global workforce (OECD, 2020) and the need to adapt to alternative perspectives and definitions (Fitzpatrick, 2019).

Increasing diversity in global business has had an impact on the nature and structure of international business education (AACSB International, 2011; Calderon, 2018). The provision of international education courses for students, has continued to grow, while universities have adopted enhanced internationalisation strategies as a business model worldwide (British Council, 2016; Zhu Hua, Handford & Young, 2016). Such trends have compelled higher education institutions, in general, and business schools, in particular, to reflect upon how to engage with students from diverse cultural backgrounds and how to respond to their potentially different prior educational experiences. The response of higher education institutions to cultural diversity, however, is considered by many as broadly inadequate and heavily reliant on a largely discredited essentialist and deterministic view of culture (Dervin & Layne, 2013). This manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, the content of business management courses in higher education tends to draw upon the dominant paradigm in *Cross-Cultural Management (CCM)*, which is increasingly considered to lag behind current thinking in conceptual trends in social science (Bjerregaard et al, 2009). This has the consequences for the treatment of culture and diversity when analysing and explaining behaviour and issues in the globalised workplace. Secondly, a poor understanding of the concept of cultural diversity has an impact on how administration and academic systems and structures in universities actually engage with international students to overcome what are perceived as problems or difficulties in adjustment to university life in an unfamiliar context (Crawford & Bethell, 2012).

Addressing these two issues requires, on the one hand, a better understanding of the concepts of culture and cultural diversity in the teaching of international business, drawing on contemporary research and approaches within the broader social sciences, and, on the other, a sense of how cross-cultural and intercultural processes

work to develop a true sense of “interculturality” both in the experience of internationalised business education and what students will eventually take into the global workplace. This article explores these concepts and issues and proposes that an understanding of interculturality should be at the heart of a global approach to higher education.

Culture as product: The dominant paradigm in international business education

In some respects, we could trace the origins of CCM back to Edward T. Hall’s work in developing the field of Intercultural Communication (ICC) at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the U.S. Department of State, as described by Leeds-Hurwitz (1990)). From Hall’s perspective, culture and communication are seen as somewhat mysterious and sinister, a “silent language” (Hall, 1959) a “hidden dimension” (Hall, 1966), unconsciously moulding our interactions with strange and exotic others in distant locations. Alternatively, culture is often described anthropologically, as a way of life (Williams, 1981), observable within a particular, bounded location, relating to shared traditions and customs, embodied in dress, cuisine, rituals, celebrations and so on. In this sense, culture is seen to provide continuity across generations and influences how individuals interpret their world, how they behave and the choices that they make.

Such approaches have led CCM theorists to focus on *national cultures* defined by *dimensions* (Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997). In such models, culture is characterised as external to individuals, with values and behaviours passed down the generations through socialisation. National cultures are categorised and explained in *essentialist* terms, defined by national characteristics and behaviours deemed to be typical and immutable of a national population. Such categorisation creates the idea of homogeneity across entire populations, including large countries or geographical regions (e.g. “Arab”, “Asian”, “European”, “Latin”), where individuals can be expected to respond and behave in a predictable way as a result of their cultural programming or “software of the mind” instilled in them through their upbringing (Hofstede, 1991). This has engendered lists and league tables of cultural typologies that dominate managerial and leadership approaches in particular and typical environments (House et al, 2004; Lewis, 1996), designed to provide guidance for managers on how to overcome seemingly irreconcilable cultural differences in the workplace and succeed in international markets.

While CCM theorists claim that their work is empirically sound and widely researched, this has been deeply contested (McSweeney, 2002; Söderberg, 1999) based on the very notion that culture and cultural identity are socially constructed, dynamic and open to interpretation. Furthermore, such an approach to culture tends to rest on intuitive perceptions, appealing to acquired stereotypes or commonly held, imagined views drawn from prejudice or anecdotal accounts of supposedly typical behaviour (Anderson, 1991). In this sense, moving away from a “billiard board” model of culture (Wolf, 1982), which inspires the view of essentialist incompatibility of different cultural perspectives knocking against each other, towards a more pluralist and constructionist approach is critical to ensuring inclusivity and diversity.

The idea of creating describable categories and typologies of culture or through comparative dimensions is an approach that is heavily influenced by a positivist

perspective, which seeks to understand behaviour on the basis of identifiable “types of people” (Moghaddam, 2012) with set characteristics, not dissimilar to approaches to social categories and roles, such as race or gender, in which individuals from a certain category or background are assumed to be alike or determined by their fixed and immutable essential nature. Likewise, persisting with the idea that culture can stretch across a whole national population as a ‘national culture’ belies the growing diversity of many national populations as a bricolage of diaspora, hybridity and fusion. Such a vision of cultural homogeneity perceived in large communities can be said to be largely conceptualised, or imagined (Anderson, 1991), depicted through symbolic representation. It is often the case that individuals and groups identify with such conceptualisations and associated cultural categorisations, believing them to represent a presumed inherent cultural heritage. However, culture, viewed as a product of nationhood or a similarly large construct, such as ethnicity or religion, can also encourage the discourse of ethnocentric cultural superiority over others and potential intolerance of other ways of life that could lead to intercultural conflict.

Culture as process: Culture large and Culture small

In contrast, an interpretive perspective sees culture and identity in a *non-essentialist* way, as socially constructed, created and negotiated by individuals in a social context across multiple sites and locations through interaction. This is to see culture more as a *process*, one of dynamic social construction (Berger and Luckman, 1967), rather than a static *product* or imagined construct that individuals continually relate back to as a notional or imagined concept. In contrast, treating culture as a process, driven by interaction, allows us to entertain the idea that culture and cultural identity can evolve as a result of negotiation and experience.

Building on this, Holliday (1999) introduces the notion of ‘two paradigms’ of culture, described as ‘large cultures’ and ‘small cultures’. The notion of *large culture* relates to a reified concept of culture focusing on notions and descriptions of cultural influences such as nationhood, community, background, upbringing and so on, which we often use to describe where we are from and are open to interpretation. On the other hand, the idea of *small cultures* refers to how we construct and negotiate shared understanding and cultural meaning at a group level through everyday interaction and language and is more concerned with social processes (Holliday, 1999). For Holliday, the paradigm of large cultures can tend towards cultural reductionism or *culturalism*, in which the notion culture has become stabilised and reified by particular parties with particular interests and which can lead to a process of *otherisation*, ‘whereby the “foreign” is reduced to a simplistic, easily digestible, exotic or degraded stereotype’ (ibid, p. 245). A *small culture* approach, on the other hand, can liberate definitions of culture from the *large*, imagined notions of ethnicity or nationhood as determining influences and thereby explore the full complexity of culture and identity. In this sense, culture is seen as a complex and dynamic *process* as individuals interact with each other at small group level to create shared cultural understanding at all levels of social existence through *universal cultural processes* (Holliday, 2011).

This does not exclude external influences on individuals, which may be identified as tradition, national symbols and values, popular media or cultural artefacts, symbols, resources and narratives, which people may choose to identify with, but it does not accept socialisation as a *determining* factor. The increasing diversity of spaces and

sites of intercultural interaction, and the increasing assortment of resources and media for international connectivity and mobility militates against a simplistic identification of individuals with stable and static identities based on a fixed location or social role.

Culture as context: A dialectical approach

Critical in all of this is the existence of free will and choice as our identity evolves. However, culture is constructed and sustained through structures set within a framework of authority and power relations that govern and regulate a particular social and economic order, both from the wider institutional organisation of society to the concertive informal way that individuals and groups negotiate everyday issues through universal intercultural processes at the discourse level (Holliday, 2011). Thus, the social construction of culture takes place within particular *contexts* influenced by wider economic, socio-political and ideological influences. This is not a static environment, however, and the concept of context goes further than simply location. While context suggests a physical location, relating to a local infrastructure and conditions of life, it also entails a social or behavioural environment, formed through sociocultural practices and processes, regulated by socially constructed conventions and created and sustained through a discursive and historical dialectical process, embracing also broader extra-situational forces that impinge upon the location from broader socio-economic and geo-political frameworks (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992). This adds a further dimension to the social constructionist approach, bringing into view the dynamics of power and conflicting agendas of the context that frames the purely constructive process and negotiation of meaning. In this sense, a *dialectical* approach becomes apposite, one of opposing and contradictory forces and interests pitched against each other, which acknowledges the relational tensions that larger sociocultural constructs can generate (Martin and Nakayama, 2009). Context, then, should be viewed more as a dynamic process, rather than a static environment in which implicit norms and conventions and inherent power relations, inequities and ideologies pervade the social construction of shared meaning and understanding in all facets of sociocultural behaviour. In this sense, it is the context of cultural behaviour and the locational, behavioural and extra-situational dynamics that create and sustain cultural interaction, rather than innate and immutable cultural characteristics, locationally determined.

Culture as universal: The omnicultural imperative

Culture can also be seen as a universal phenomenon in that all biological and cognitive and interactive processes can be considered common to all human groups as members of the same species. Through language and instinct, we have a natural predisposition to be able to interpret the behaviour of other humans regardless of cultural variance and negotiate shared understanding of what is considered acceptable group (cultural) behaviour (Berger and Luckman, 1969). This approach has been supported by a long tradition of anthropological research and identifies the commonalities in the way humans live together in groups and societies, referring to such areas as, for example, social organisation and governance, the structure of belief and value systems and social living and behaviour relating to such things as rituals, rites, feasts, greetings, gift-giving, games, body adornment, dancing, gestures, language and so on (Antweiler, 2016; Brown, 1991; Fitzpatrick, 2020). The existence of universals could indicate that behaviour, which might be identified as culturally

distinct across different societies, is actually the result of differences in contextual or dialectical dynamics created and sustained through the application of distinct systems of power and control, driven by self or group interest, rather than being essentially distinguishable.

This has resulted in a more dispassionate approach to culture and diversity in multicultural education, with a focus on *omniculturism* (Moghaddam, 2012), as an imperative to avoiding the potential pitfalls of diversity policies and practices, such as exoticisation, tokenism or otherisation, in which those from alternative cultural backgrounds can be persistently labelled or defined by their difference from the mainstream within society and denied opportunities to integrate more widely (Fitzpatrick, 2020). Thus, in this it is the shared human commonalities and cultural universals that are sought and emphasised, removing focus from essential cultural differences. The benefit of such an approach is to defuse the narrative of cultural discourse as a potentially divisive exercise and replace it with the exploration and reflection of what is fundamentally human in social interaction and organisation.

Culture as identity: Personal cultural narrative

Primary socialisation, or, principally, *enculturation*, is the process by which an individual learns and internalises the accepted norms and values of their cultural group or society in early life (Kottak, 2013). However, as pointed out above, while we are born into a social order and way of life which existed before us and we learn to interact within a social and institutional framework of relationships that ascribe identity and roles to us through cultural categories and representations, we are not determined or constrained by this (Berger and Luckman, 1967).

In this sense, culture can be defined as membership of ‘a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings’ in which individuals share ‘a common system of standards for perceiving believing, evaluating and acting’ (Kramsch, 1998:10). Such standards have also been described as ‘regularities’ (Spencer-Oatey and Zegarac, 2018), or consistencies, in how people behave and articulate their understanding of their world, the legitimacy of which is shared and adhered to by individuals within a given group and which, consequently, govern the group’s behaviour. The assumption here is that, even when individuals move away from their community of origin, such standards and regularities will continue to influence them to some extent and are often identified as their *culture*. With this definition, however, while it is understood that there is a process based in heritage, socialisation and the early stages of learning to live in communities (*enculturation*), all of which influences individuals in their cognitive, emotional and sociocultural development and sense of identity, if we accept that individuals are able to make choices as free agents, their sense of identity is likely to evolve over the course of their lifetime as a result of their experiences. Thus, individuals will continue to construct and forge their cultural identity through what can be described as a *personal cultural trajectory* (Holliday, 2011) across multiple discursive sites of interaction, influenced by the sociocultural groups that they belong to, the spaces and institutions that they frequent and the narratives that they draw upon and identify with over time (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). As depicted in Figure 1, then, cultural identity can be seen as a personal cultural narrative or autobiography that we construct over time about who we are culturally, although this is a static representation of the processes involved and is

merely a heuristic device to help us explore such complexity. By drawing on the particular cultural narratives that have influenced us in our socialisation and through engagement with particular sites of interaction, social networks and discourse communities, we shape our own personal cultural narrative and identity as we navigate the ongoing opportunities, relationships and experiences that we encounter, albeit subject to contextual dialectical constraints and the sociocultural contextualities and filters that frame our interactions.

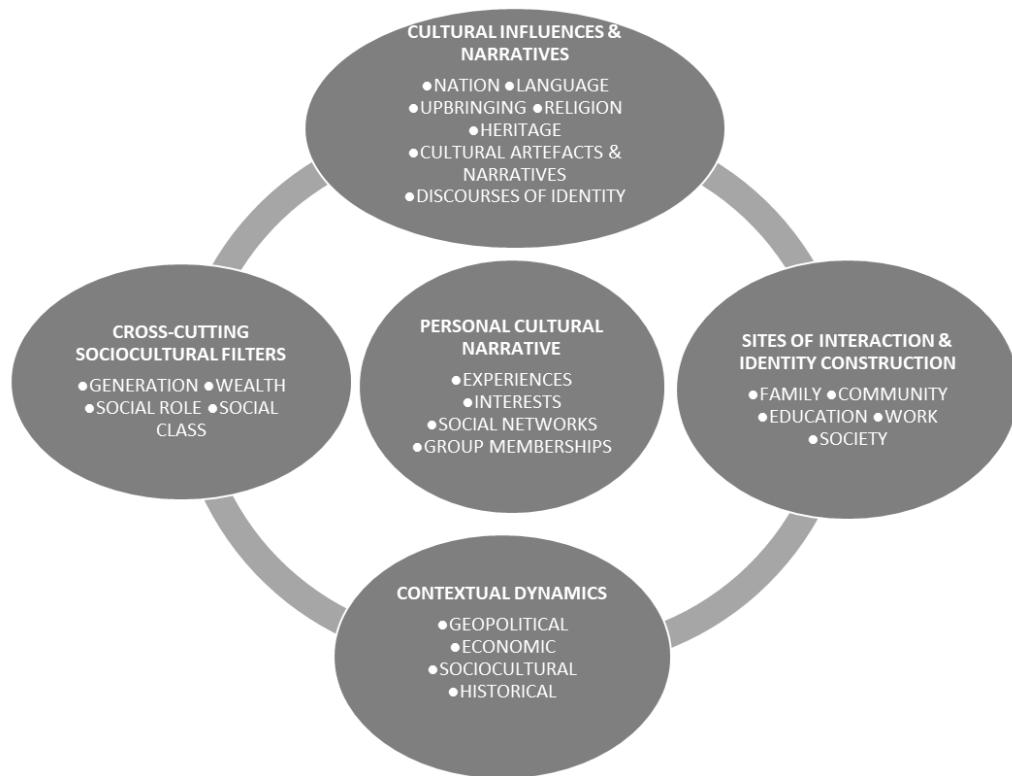


Figure 1: The Construction of Personal Cultural Narrative (Cultural Identity)

Approaching culture in international creative business education: Cross-cultural or Intercultural?

Given this overview, how then should we approach culture and cultural identity in international business education in order to nurture interculturality? The approach taken in international business and business education has tended to favour a *cross-cultural* analysis, with an *intercultural* focus being used when focusing specifically on communication issues and, in this sense, the cross-cultural approach tends to dominate the paradigm, as indicated by the predominant use of the name *Cross-Cultural Management (CCM)* (French, 2015). Breaking this down, CCM studies tend to take a *cross-cultural* comparative approach to how people behave across different cultural settings, while an *intercultural* focus analyses interaction amongst individuals from different cultural backgrounds within a particular cultural context (Gudykunst, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 2020). An example of a cross-cultural analysis might be to compare how meetings are conducted in different cultural contexts by looking at, for example,

how individuals from the same cultural context address each other, how formal they are, what sort of dress code exists or what types of gestures, non-verbal cues, body language and communicative scripts or discourse features dominate and compare and contrast these features with other cultural contexts. In research terms, this approach takes an *etic* focus in that it is an external analysis of cultural behaviour. On the other hand, an intercultural analysis would focus more on the nature and outcomes of intercultural contact amongst individuals from different backgrounds when they meet together or interact with each other in a particular cultural context. This is more of an *emic* focus in research terms in that the motive of the analysis becomes the intercultural processes within group encounters. While both levels of analysis have value, there is a tendency to favour a cross-cultural focus both in dealing with internationalisation and through the use of essentialist dimensional models of culture in Cross-Cultural Management content, such as those mentioned above. The danger with a cross-cultural comparative approach, however, is that it tends to extrapolate observations of behaviour, or accounts of what is perceived as typical behaviour, and reify these as part of a set of immutable cultural dimensions to be associated with set contexts or territories embodied in *national cultures* (as in Hofstede, 1991). Cross-cultural analysis does not need to be like this, but to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism and reification, it would need to concentrate on particular cultural settings and take into account the contextual elements that frame intercultural behaviour at the time of observation, rather than *a priori* and immutable notions of assumed or imagined stereotyped national characteristics. On the other hand, an intercultural approach is more favourable for exploring the notion of identity and personal cultural narrative as individuals reflect upon and develop their cultural perspective as a consequence of their international experience. Through this, an awareness of interculturality amongst students of varying cultural backgrounds can be encouraged.

The intercultural process: Interstitial culture and Third Space

By taking an intercultural approach, then, it is possible to focus on the processes of change and growth that international students and workers experience in their time in a new environment. This can help create a more fruitful understanding amongst those that administer international programmes of study of the nature of cultural diversity and how intercultural engagement can evolve amongst individuals from varied backgrounds.

The approach here, then, is to explore what is known as the *Third Space* or *interstitial* space (Bhabha, 1994) in which, in this case, students from different cultural backgrounds have the opportunity to interact with each other to form relationships and friendship and collegiate groups without the baggage of cultural labelling. This can be considered a neutral domain in which individuals come together as themselves, rather than members of a distinctive cultural or national grouping (Holliday, 2013:110). Through their interactions in their everyday course work, group work, extra-curricular activities and participation on campus in social and academic spaces they can form new relationships and forge new memberships to enhance their own identity beyond their cultural origins. In other words, students from all backgrounds use this interstitial space to develop their own intercultural reference points and *interculturality*, together, as a unique group in a unique context, drawing on, but distancing themselves from, the polarising perception of their own cultural background and influences, as they experience identity convergence through growing *symbolic interdependence* (Imahori

and Cupach, 2005) and mutually shared commonalities in their perspectives as a common group.

This can be demonstrated in the model in Figure 2. As a group comes together with a sense of belonging and common purpose, individuals from different cultural backgrounds and perspectives can build interculturality through their shared experience in the third space amongst them, which in turn may influence their own sense of cultural identity and personal cultural trajectory as they adapt to and integrate other cultural perspectives associated with a more ethnorelative outlook (Bennett and Bennett, 2004). In effect, their experience in an international setting results in an evolving personal perspective on the world, which may incorporate views, values, tastes, choices, reflections and such, which may have been previously unfamiliar to them, or may have begun to influence them to alter their view of the world, their own cultural origins and their evolving personal cultural narrative.

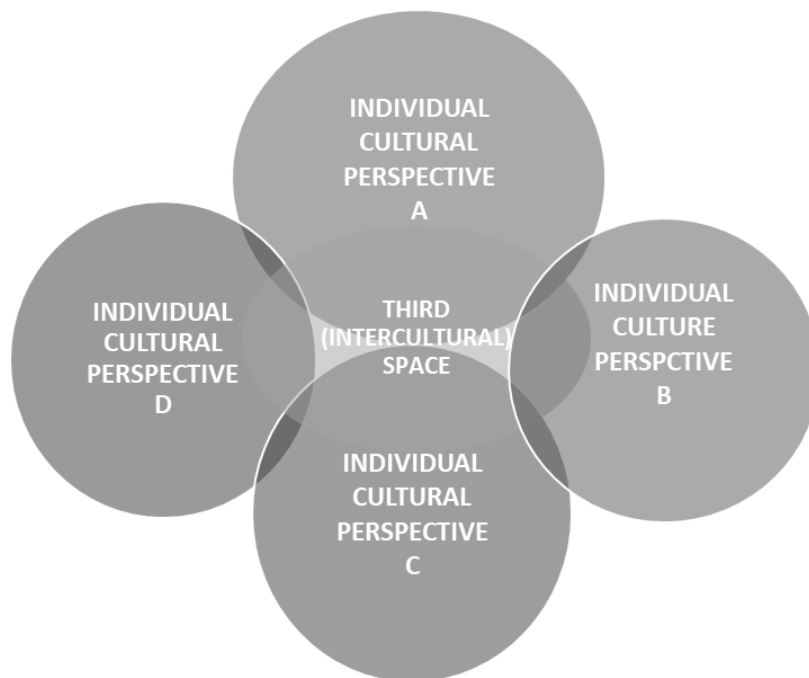


Figure 2: Developing interculturality

With this approach, the role of the educator is to promote and provide the opportunities for intercultural understanding, focusing on team and group dynamics, ensuring tolerance and inclusion and avoiding cultural stereotyping.

Understanding and overcoming obstacles to building interculturality

While this may seem straightforward, it is important to understand the challenges of adjustment to unfamiliar cultural contexts and the processes and resources that are in play within the third or intercultural space, as the obstacles to building interculturality can be considerable. Firstly, it is questionable as to whether interaction takes place amongst students on equal terms. International students, for example, may come from very different educational contexts in which their experience of learning and teaching might not prepare them for approaches and methods in an alternative context without being given specific support or without scaffolded intervention (Peacock & Harrison,

2008). Likewise, diversity in communications styles or aspects of observable cultural differences may lead to cultural or behavioural labelling, setting them apart from home students. Consequently, the question arises as to how to create equity of treatment within the formation of relationships amongst students, who may struggle to engage or integrate with local networks and groups and who may prefer the psychological comfort of their own national and cultural groupings.

Likewise, it is also important to be aware of the challenges of cross-cultural adjustment, commonly known as “culture shock”, in which students are faced with affective, behavioural and cognitive challenges in navigating an unfamiliar cultural context, where they will need to make both sociocultural and psychological adjustments in their daily lives (Ward et al, 2001). While international students have increasingly established *personal resources* to deal with adjustment, in terms of linguistic and intercultural skills, experience and means to access support, educators and, in particular, university support staff should ensure that they provide adequate *institutional resources* to ensure that students are supported in their new environment and able to build new *social networks* to facilitate their cross-cultural integration (Fitzpatrick, 2016; 2017).

Towards interculturality in creative business management education

Overall, then, the benefits of building a genuine understanding, space and opportunities for intercultural growth in international higher education programmes are considerable. As we have seen, global workforce mobility and diversity are on the increase and becoming progressively wide-ranging. Workforce diversity has long been considered a strength for organisational effectiveness for a number of assumed reasons, including wider market knowledge and insight, access to local networks and connections across international markets, greater diversity of skills and an increasing sense of ease and ethnorelative perspective in the face of cultural difference (Brett et al, 2006). Diverse workforces are likely to be less ethnocentric and more comfortable with culturally novel situations and intercultural interaction, reducing the likelihood of misunderstanding and conflict at work (Fitzpatrick, 2020).

Furthermore, some research suggests that taking an intercultural perspective can enhance the performance and creativity of teams (Fontaine, 2017). Focusing on interculturality, then, can bring a number of advantages to creative business management education in the way that teams and group-level processes construct and stabilise culture and how diverse individuals can work together to build an evolving and dynamic interactive experience and shared understanding within an interstitial or third and unique space.

Much work has to be done, however, to engage academic and support staff in understanding the challenges of international students and to provide institutional resources and conditions in the form of support systems that will facilitate inclusive engagement for all students regardless of background and experience and ensure their full integration into university life. By understanding the educational and personal challenges of international students and by building

intercultural sensitivity within the host university community and amongst individuals, interculturality can bring benefits to both the creative international educational

experience and help build critical intercultural skills and perspectives for future global working.

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