

# PARADIGMS AND PEDAGOGY IN STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT EDUCATION: DOMINANT ORTHODOXIES VERSUS REAL-WORLD RELEVANCE

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*It is argued that textbook theory and “SWOT” Analysis pedagogy cannot be real-world relevant where they do not include application in the situational here-and-now. A situation analysis method for encouraging such critical thinking and “situationalization” for relevance is suggested.*

## **Introduction**

Perhaps similar to other subjects in business school management education programs, strategic management education doctrine is characterized by its own dominant orthodoxies of theory content and pedagogy that constitute its doctrinal discourse. In strategic management education, theories that were established in the 1970s and 1980s have become dominant orthodoxies of the discourse, and are evidenced in current, perceived to be “mainstream,” strategic management textbooks such as: Hill & Jones, (2004); Wheelen & Hunger, (2004); Pearce & Robinson, (2005); and Thompson, Strickland & Gamble, (2005). The doctrinal discourse also includes the long-established, pedagogical orthodoxies of so-called SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Analysis linked with the case method of teaching.

It is well known that, since the early 1980s, the relevance of university business school management education programs and their graduates to real-world practice has been continually questioned. Corporate executives, the business press (Merritt, 2004), and even management academics (Mintzberg, 2004) have continued to voice concerns, especially regarding Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs and graduates. In 1987, the then American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, now the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB), acknowledged and investigated concerns for real-world relevance (Porter and McKibbin, 1987). Although changes to MBA programs were advertised by the mid-1990s, especially at top-ranked schools, concerns regarding the teaching and learning of real-world relevant higher-level business and organizational managerial cross-functional and integrative skills have continued. These concerns were acknowledged by the AACSB in its report, *Management Education at Risk* (2002), and in its subsequent *AACSB Eligibility Procedures and Standards for Business Accreditation*, (2003), where the AACSB is encouraging, and perhaps even requiring, its member schools and their programs to become real-world relevant.

Strategic management is an important subject area in business management education programs and, based on the continuing concerns for real-world relevance, it is surely time to question the

relevance of strategic management education. This paper examines theory and pedagogical orthodoxies in strategic management education doctrine, and questions their relevance to real-world strategic thinking and strategy (including its content and formulation) in business corporations. Real-world relevance is perceived to derive from critical thinking in the situational here-and-now, or “situationalization.” Relevance is being in the situation as an actor, and not merely looking at the situation as an external spectator or commentator. Students can learn to become more real-world relevant in practice if they can learn to think critically and to situationalize for analysis and for strategy formulation.

### **Doctrinal Orthodoxies in Strategic Management Education: Textbook Theory**

The orthodox, textbook approach to strategic management theory is based on the process theory of management (Koontz, 1961), as it has evolved into operations contingency theory (Koontz, 1980). According to this theory, management generally is perceived to consist of the following processes or operations: Analysis, Planning, Organizing, Implementing (including Staffing and Directing or Leading), and Control. The chapter sequences in four recent, seen to be “mainstream,” strategic management textbooks: Hill & Jones, (2004); Pearce & Robinson, (2005); Thompson, Strickland & Gamble, (2005); and Wheelen & Hunger, (2004), all follow the management operations contingency approach.

These textbooks each start with their own description of the strategic management process. This is usually followed by chapters on external analysis, and on internal analysis. For external analysis, the Porter (1980) Five-Forces framework is usually a significant item, if not chapter focus; and the Porter (1980) Value-Chain is similarly significant in internal analysis. The majority of chapters are spent discussing Planning including: vision, mission and objectives as inputs to strategy formulation; characteristic business competitive strategies, usually based on the Porter (1980) Generic Strategies; characteristic corporate strategies, usually based on directional growth through concentration/integration or diversification, using market-position (*Business Week*, 1975; Hedley, 1977) or resource-capability approaches (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Stalk *et al*, 1992; Hamel & Prahalad, 1994); and strategy in different business environmental contexts, such as, stages in the product life cycle, relative competitive position, and global and high-technology environments. Organization and implementation planning, including organization culture and leadership, are discussed in the latter chapters of the textbooks, usually followed by organizational aspects of strategy control and strategy change. Recently, perhaps reflective of the Enron scandal and other similar events, major sections or even chapters on managerial ethics and corporate social responsibility have been included. Overall, the taken-for-granted strategic management focus of the textbooks is on customers and markets and on increasing sales and profits for the shareholders. Other stakeholders are not given the same level of attention.

General similarities between definitions of corporate strategy and business strategy in the four textbooks indicated above are seen as reflective of the dominant theory orthodoxies in strategic management education doctrine. (Pearce and Robinson (2005) use the terms “Grand Strategy” and “Generic Strategy” and these are perceived to correspond to corporate and business strategy, respectively.) For example, textbook definitions of corporate strategy and grand strategy are as follows:

*“Corporate level strategy answers the primary questions: What business or businesses should we be in to maximize the long-run profitability of the organization, and how should we enter and increase our presence in these businesses to gain a competitive advantage?”* (Hill & Jones, 2004: p17)

*“Corporate strategy consists of the kinds of initiatives the company uses to establish business positions in different industries, the approaches corporate executives pursue to boost the combined performance of the set of businesses the company has diversified into, and the means for capturing cross-business synergies and turning them into competitive advantage.”* (Thompson, Strickland & Gamble, 2005: p34)

*“A strategy that states a company’s overall direction in terms of its general attitude toward growth and the management of its various businesses and product lines.”* (Wheelen & Hunger, 2004: Glossary)

*“...a comprehensive general plan of major actions through which the firm intends to achieve its long-term objectives in a dynamic environment. Called the Grand Strategy, this statement of means indicates how the objectives are to be achieved. Although every grand strategy is, in fact, a unique package of long-term strategies, 14 basic approaches can be identified: concentration, market development, product development, innovation, horizontal integration, vertical integration, joint venture, strategic alliances, consortia, concentric diversification, conglomerate diversification, turnaround, divestiture, and liquidation.”* (Pearce & Robinson, 2005: p14)

Regarding business strategy, the textbooks offer definitions, as follows:

*“Business-level strategy encompasses the business’s overall competitive theme, the way it positions itself in the marketplace to gain a competitive advantage, and the different positioning strategies that can be used in different industry settings – for example, cost leadership, differentiation, focusing on a particular niche or segment of the industry, or some combination of these.”* (Hill & Jones, 2004: p17)

*“Business strategy concerns the actions and approaches crafted to produce successful performance in one line of business. The key focus here is crafting responses to changing market circumstances and initiating actions to strengthen market position, build competitive advantage, and develop strong competitive capabilities.”* (Thompson, Strickland & Gamble, 2005: p34)

*“A competitive and cooperative strategy at the business unit or product level that emphasizes improvement of the competitive position of a corporation’s products or services in the specific industry or market segment served by that business unit.”* (Wheelen and Hunger, 2004: Glossary)

*“Many businesses explicitly and all implicitly adopt one or more generic strategies characterizing their competitive orientation in the marketplace. Low cost, differentiation or focus strategies define the three fundamental options. Enlightened managers seek to*

*create ways their firm possesses both low cost and differentiation competitive advantages as part of their overall Generic Strategy.” (Pearce & Robinson, 2005: p14)*

Specific textbook components of strategic planning include: Strategic vision, Mission or mission statement, Objectives, Goals, Strategic intent, Strategy, Corporate strategy, Grand strategy, Business strategy, Generic strategy, Competitive strategy, Functional strategy, Operating strategy, Policies, Business model, Competitive advantage, Competences, Core Competences and Distinctive Competences, and Capabilities. This body of orthodoxies has grown up since at least the 1970s and has come to constitute the doctrinal discourse – with its inherent knowledge-power (Gordon, 1980; Burrell, 1988) and, perhaps, even ideological implications. The continuing dominance of theory orthodoxies in strategic management education doctrinal discourse is assisted to the extent that teaching of theory concepts in strategic management courses may be based exclusively on one “mainstream” textbook. The course textbook may be accorded dogmatic status by the students as they are examined on their memorization of it!

The question can be asked: As they constitute strategic management education doctrine, are these textbook theory orthodoxies, and the doctrinal discourse in which they are embedded, relevant to real-world business and management practice, i.e. can they be effectively applied and used in practice, in real-world situations? This question is not addressed at this time because any relevance of theory orthodoxies to the real world in the minds of students is perceived to be a function of the doctrinal teaching and learning pedagogy of “theory application” that students have experienced.

### **Doctrinal Orthodoxies in Strategic Management Education – The SWOT Analysis Pedagogy**

It is a doctrinal orthodoxy in strategic management education that teaching and learning regarding corporate and business strategies and their formulation is carried out through case studies of business corporations in different contexts and situations. A dominant pedagogical orthodoxy for doing this in the classroom and for student assignments is so-called SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Analysis (even though this may involve no analysis!) A typical SWOT Analysis process may be structured as follows: Summary Overview; Problem Statement, Identification of SWOTs; Identification of Strategy Alternatives; Choice of Strategy; and Implementation Plan.

So-called SWOT Analysis can be problematic for student learning where it is being applied to the case generally and non-situationally, or being used illustratively, normatively or prescriptively. i.e., where there is no here-and-now situation analysis. In such classroom applications – which may be the orthodox applications – the analysis is not being applied in the real situational here-and-now of the case and, accordingly, it cannot be relevant to the real-world situation of the case. Students can be sadly and even dangerously misled into believing that they are doing real situation analysis when, in fact, they are not. Such students cannot know that strategic thinking is a critical thinking process in the here-and-now situation. Moreover, where SWOT Analysis is applied to, instead of applied in, the situation learning can be made even more unreal – as students learn by experience of the classroom process to “fit” the reality of the case situation to the SWOT Analysis process. (This may be reflective of the assertion by Saul (1993)

that: “...(business schools) train the technocrat to tame reality. Reality being what it is – that is, real – they must deform it in order to accomplish this (p120).”)

Specific pitfalls perceived to be inherent in the SWOT Analysis orthodoxy, that can lead to educating students for non-relevance – while at the same time causing them to believe that they are relevant – are described below.

### **1. Premature Problem Statement**

If the real problem or opportunity in any strategic situation it is to be determined based on identification and combination of real, analytically determined SWOTs, it seems premature to state the problem before doing the analysis.

### **2. Believing That SWOT Lists Are Analysis**

Identification of SWOTs in the classroom can be done by setting up headings on the black/white board - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats – and simply listing whatever students shout out. To encourage this “participation” students can be given marks for shouting out a SWOT and getting it listed on the board. Students need not be required to provide their situation analysis and major findings to the class to support what they shout out – and in any case, the class time may be too short for this to be done. In particular, the details of the financial performance and situation of the company, specific implications of changing and developing product and market technologies, and significant operational and organizational details may not be explored.

If this is the pedagogical process, students are being misled to believe that unorganized SWOT lists derived by intuition and guesswork are analysis. They cannot know that SWOTs should be situation-specific conclusions based on analysis and findings in the here-and-now situation, and because they do not know they will find it hard to be real-world relevant when they graduate.

### **3. Using Normative Categorical Generalities**

Where prior supporting critical thinking situation analysis is not required in determining SWOTs, students can easily compile general SWOT lists in the classroom or in written assignments by listing textbook and other normative, categorical generalities in the context of the case. For example, “High market share is a strength,” “A growing market is an opportunity,” “Increasing price competition is a threat.” Categorical generalities may be contextually meaningful but, to the extent that they do not have situational specificity, such generalities cannot have informative meaning in any here-and-now situation. Nevertheless, because they are contextually meaningful the categorical generality is not incorrect, so that providing such generalities can be an effective way to get participation marks.

Students who learn (because they know no better) that strategic analysis is simply listing as SWOTs as many contextually appropriate normative categorical generalities that they can intuitively think of are unlikely to develop the situational critical thinking they need for real-world relevance.

By analogy, in the context of the stock market it is a meaningful categorial generality that the way to make money is to buy low and sell high. It is the situational specificity of when and what to buy and sell that is the real problem – and this demands critical thinking and situationalization in the here-and-now for analysis and for strategy formulation.

#### **4. Believing that Lists of Strategy Alternatives are Meaningful**

In the classroom, so-called strategy alternatives can simply be listed on the board, based on what students shout out (for participation marks). Students can shout out strategy categorial generalities from the textbooks, for example, the four Porter (1980) generic business strategies, the four Ansoff (1965) growth directions, and the fifteen grand strategy options listed by Pearce and Robinson (2005:p200). Such a list of so-called alternatives must be without specific meaning for the here-and-now situation of the company in the case being studied, and it can be only a testament to students' memorization of strategy categories described in the text.

In a critical thinking, situation analytical approach the strategy options available in a specific here-and-now situation may be largely a product of the situation analysis. Knowledge of general categorial strategy possibilities for the future can be useful, however, in stimulating imaginative strategic problem/opportunity definitions and solutions.

#### **5. Picking a Strategy and Rationalizing It**

Following a listing of so-called strategy alternatives (which may be, in fact, a list of general categorial strategy possibilities – in theory), so-called strategy choice may be carried out simply by picking a growth strategy and rationalizing it. Students may say: *“Based on the XYZ Company’s market competitive situation, right now, strategic options that should be considered include market consolidation or penetration, product development, market development and innovation/diversification.”* They have “fitted” the case reality (which they have most likely not properly analyzed) to the strategy categories characterized by Ansoff (1965) and once again seen that these four strategy categories are always generally available to corporations – as are Porter’s (1980) four generic strategies, and the fifteen grand strategy options described by Pearce and Robinson (2005: p200). Students can go on to intuitively pick one (or all) of the strategy “options” and indicate in a general way how it/they might be implemented. Sadly, the students will then believe (wrongly) that they have properly exercised strategic thinking and correctly completed the case exercise.

If this is the manner in which students' SWOT Analyses of the case are carried out, it is unreal and meaningless because students have not carried out a critical thinking situation here-and-now analysis. They are simply listing normative categories for strategic thinking (that are always applicable to every company in the world) in the misbelief that these so-called “options” are specifically situational to the company under consideration. The real problem in a business corporation’s strategic situational here-and-now and into the future is what specific, situationalized strategy is most effective to implement and execute, to produce the desired results – and it does not matter what this strategy may be labeled by textbook authors or anyone else.

## 6. What Students Really Learn

Particularly if a written SWOT Analysis is being done for an assignment, students can easily list more Strengths and Opportunities so that a growth strategy can be “justified” and recommended. This enables an implementation plan to be written in the hope of getting more content into the assignment and higher marks. (Students may also believe that the instructor will be favourably impressed by their “being positive” in picking a growth strategy!) It may be, however, that in the situational here-and-now of the company under study its financial or operational performance cannot support a growth strategy, but students cannot take these things into account if they do not look for them. Unless students are specifically required to carry out such situational analyses they are likely to learn to ignore specific financial or operational and other situation-specific information and always pick a growth strategy (to try to maximize their marks).

As a result of the SWOT learning process, students may come to believe that they have learned to apply management knowledge in real-world situations. Sadly, this cannot be so. They have learned merely to pick out from some actual real-world situations items that can act as convenient hooks upon which to hang normative, categorical textbook theory. More dangerously, students have also learned to use unthinking guesswork in filling in the SWOT boxes, and more guesswork in picking some kind of growth strategy category because normatively or prescriptively this is always what should be done, or what to do. As students do not know any better, they believe that this is managing in situational reality – and this is what they will do when they graduate and become “SWOT managers” who do not know how to be real-world relevant, even though they may think that they are being so.

The question can again be asked: As they constitute strategic management education doctrine, are the textbook theory orthodoxies, and the doctrinal discourse in which they are embedded, (which has been seen to include pedagogical orthodoxies) relevant to real-world business and management practice?

If in teaching and learning there is no critical thinking and situationalization, there cannot be any learning of real-world relevance in application. Based on the above discussion, it is concluded that strategic management education doctrinal theory and pedagogical orthodoxies cannot be real-world relevant where they do not include application in the situation, which must involve critical thinking and situationalization. It is perceived that current orthodox pedagogy, dominated as it seems to be by SWOT Analysis, need not encourage critical thinking and situationalization, but through its classroom process can lead students to learn to become non-relevant, while leading them to believe (wrongly) that they are relevant.

### **Shifting to Critical Thinking and Situationalization for Analysis and Strategy Formulation**

In strategic management courses, students cannot hope to be exposed to classroom discussion of all the types of strategic situations that they may encounter as managers. Hence, any real-world relevance of strategic management education must be directly dependent on the situationalization skill developed in students. This situationalization must be the result of critical thinking process (Bagg 2002, 2003; Bragg & Hajek, 2001, Paul & Elder, 2004) applied in the situation here-and-

now. Knowledge and information content is of the situation and is derived in the situation here-and-now.

In learning critical thinking, the knowledge-able student must carry out his or her own critical analysis of the situation here-and-now, and make his or her own decisions. There is no external authoritative normative or prescriptive source of knowledge and rules of its applicability. The critical thinker must always take responsibility for his/her own perceptions of the world, and for his/her own thinking, including his/her imagination. Part of this responsibility includes continually questioning one's perceptions, one's thinking and one's imagination! Situational application for learning may be through using published case exercises based on business firms, business games or students' own real-world research and information gathering, to provide some particular real-world actual situation in real context.

Situationalization, i.e., critical thinking in the situation here-and-now, is being a player and not a spectator or commentator. In the reality of the game only the individual player in the situation at the time can decide and act, so players must learn to constantly situationalize – e.g., according to Wayne Gretzky, “*I skate to where the puck is going to be.*” In contrast, spectators and commentators are merely onlookers and, as such, they can only apply knowledge (usually as ideas and opinions) to the situation in a general, non-situational normative or prescriptive manner. Spectators and commentators are non-relevant to the ongoing and changing situational reality of the game, even though they may be vociferous in saying what should be done and what a player should do. Perhaps management education programs have educated their students and graduates to be spectators or commentators, and into the misbelief that they are players. (Of course, graduates whose programs were lacking in critical thinking/situationalization teaching and learning may learn for themselves, on-the-job, to do this type of thinking in the situation here-and-now, so as to become relevant to real-world practice.)

Teaching and learning of critical thinking and situationalization are to do with the application of a thinking process and are perceived to be primarily matters of course and classroom pedagogy. This learning can be encouraged through emphasizing knowledge process applied in the situation here-and-now (i.e., critical thinking and situationalization for real-world relevance) while de-emphasizing “textbook” knowledge content applied normatively or prescriptively to universal or type situations (in a manner that must be non-relevant).

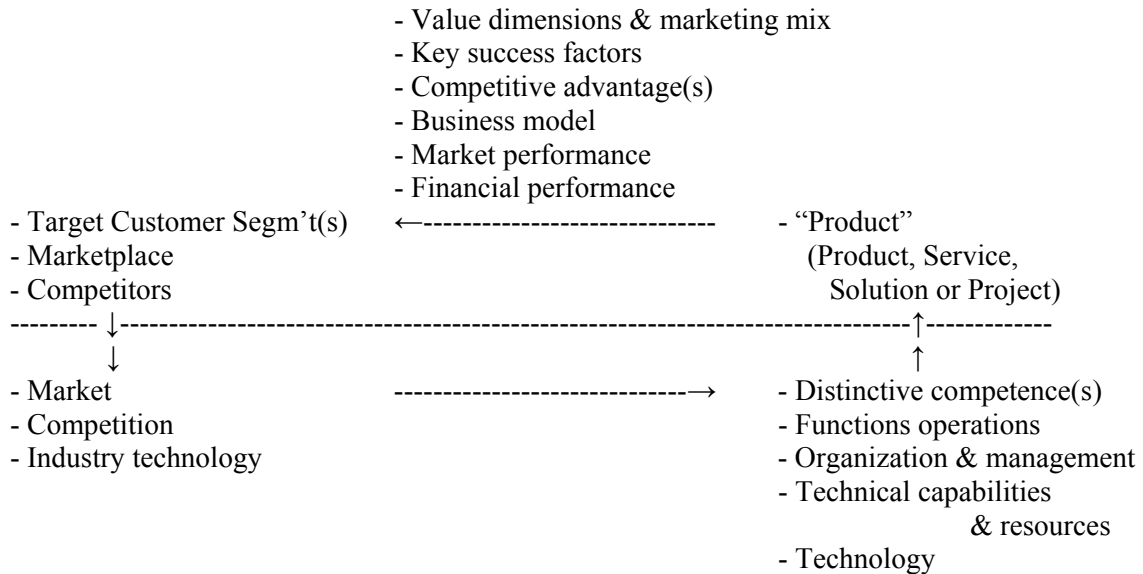
A pedagogical approach is suggested that, it is believed, can facilitate movement towards critical thinking, situationalization and real-world relevance in practice. This approach depends, first, on making case studies (or any other application of thinking in the situation, e.g, student research on real corporations) the primary learning vehicle. Textbook knowledge is useful and even necessary as this is the language of the subject, and the theory provides a “catalogue” of analysis frameworks and strategy categories that students' own critical thinking and imagination can use. The focus of the learning is, however, to develop students to take responsibility for their own critical thinking, rather than to leave them to memorize the textbook normative and prescriptive categorical generalities and write them down in some appropriate contexts just to get the marks.

Second, the analysis of the case studies is deliberately situationalized using a Strategic Situation Analysis and Planning (SSAP) Method (Skipton, 2000). A situational concept of corporate or



business strategy is central to this Method, and a Business Strategy Connection Diagram is shown in Exhibit 1 below. This represents the connection between the corporation's "product" and the target customer stakeholder. Where there is more than one product or product line, connection diagrams can be made for each customer-product connection. Other stakeholder connections can be similarly diagrammed for analysis and strategy formulation. Corporate strategy will be concerning all of the business and other stakeholder connections.

**Exhibit 1. Business Strategy Connection Diagram**



(From: Skipton, 2000; Exhibit 9, modified)

The strategic analysis and planning method is straightforward and is based on thinking critically and situationalizing the connection, using a strategic gap representation to cover past, present and future. For a corporation and its business, i.e., customer-product, connection, critical thinking can be relative to analyzing past and present: (1) Financial performance and position; (2) External business environment, including target customers, segments, market(s), etc.; (3) Business connection characteristics, e.g., customer needs, marketing mix, competitive advantage, business model, etc.; (4) Functional operations, including value chain activities, competences, capabilities, resources, and company technology; and, (5) Organization and management, including people, culture, etc. The findings of these quantitative and qualitative analyses can be projected forward into the future to form a basis for constructing the future envisioned strategic gap, as part of strategic planning. It is at this point that Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats may be identified, as conclusions based on preceding analyses, findings and analytical projections. These identified SWOTs will fall into the five areas of analysis, i.e., financial, environment, business connection, operations, organization and management, as described above. These SWOTs can be used to define the real problem or opportunity in the corporation's strategic situation here-and-now and into the future, and they can be used as the basis for formulating strategy for the future to effectively address the defined problem or opportunity, i.e., to close the envisioned strategic gap.

It is believed that the SSAP method is pragmatic and practical, and because the method facilitates critical thinking situationalization, it can be applied to different types of business firms in their different situations. The method can be applied to a small convenience store in its situation, just as it can be applied to a large corporation in its situation. The strategy of a convenience store may not be couched in sophisticated strategic management terminology but, after 80/20 analysis of the store's product lines, it might be simply expressed as "Sell more of what you make most profit on, and make more profit on what you sell most of." The product line 80/20 analysis will lead to implementation decisions and actions regarding pricing and cost control for specific product lines, and perhaps for adding and removing product lines.

In the classroom and in assignments students can be required to follow the SSAP method, particularly for their situation analysis. Within each of the five areas of analysis, the method suggests particular analyses that can be undertaken. For example, the financial analysis is suggested to include: trend and percentage analyses of the income statements and the balance sheets, working capital and financial structure ratios, profitability ratios, utilization ratios, and shareholder ratios. Business environment analysis includes such items as: Identify and describe the customer segments, market segments and the market; Find the size and growth rate of the market, and its segments, and shares of competing companies by segment, all in unit and dollar terms. If students are told what to look for and how to look for it, they will have some chance of finding it and thinking critically about it.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that strategic management education is in need of shifting paradigms and pedagogy to educate students to become more relevant to real-world business and management situations in which they will find themselves in practice. Only teachers can shift paradigms and pedagogy towards encouraging critical thinking and situationalization for relevance, and it is hoped that the suggested Strategic Situation Analysis and Planning Method may be of some assistance.

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