

Words Matter:

Interpretations and
Implications of 'Para' in
Paraprofessional and
Paralibrarian

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Our Mission



Bridge the divide between librarians and library staff to create more inclusive and respectful work environments through our choice of language.



Our Project



Interpretations of
Paraprofessional





Paraprofessionals in Libraries



A member of the library support staff, usually someone who holds at least the baccalaureate degree, trained to understand specific procedures and apply them according to pre-established rules under normal circumstances without exercising professional judgment. Library paraprofessionals are usually assigned high-level technical support duties, for example, in copy cataloging and serials control. In smaller public library systems in the United States, branch librarians are sometimes paraprofessionals. Synonymous with library technician and paralibrarian.

*** Also library science associate or library technician degree*

Dictionary for Library & Information Science: https://www.abc-clio.com/ODLIS/odlis_p.aspx#paraprofessional

Paraprofessionals in Libraries



“Paraprofessionals occupy a middle stratum of a three-tiered hierarchical staffing structure. Within this model, paraprofessionals are ranked below librarians, but above clerical workers.”

Oberg, L. R. (1992). The Emergence of the Paraprofessional in Academic Libraries: Perceptions and Realities. *College & Research Libraries*, 53(2), 99–112. doi:10.5860/crl_53_02_99

“In the previous five years, library paraprofessionals were still defined as library employees who did not have an MLIS.”

Zhu, L. (2012). The Role of Paraprofessionals in Technical Services in Academic Libraries. *Library Resources & Technical Services*, 56(3), 127–154. doi:10.5860/lrts.56n3.127



Paraprofessional Controversies



"Paraprofessional makes it sound like you're only half a professional."



- Unfavorable term
- Considered demeaning
- Professionalism is an attitude
- Lack of consensus
- Shift of responsibilities in the field

Oberg, L. R. (1992). The emergence of the paraprofessional in academic libraries: Perceptions and realities. *College & Research Libraries*, 53(2), 99–112. doi:10.5860/crl_53_02_99

American Library Association Office for Library Personnel Resources Standing Committee on Library Education. (1991, Sept. 17) Terminology, World Book-ALA Goal Award Project on Library Support Staff, Issue Paper #8. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/education/3rdcongressonpro/terminology/library>



Survey Methods



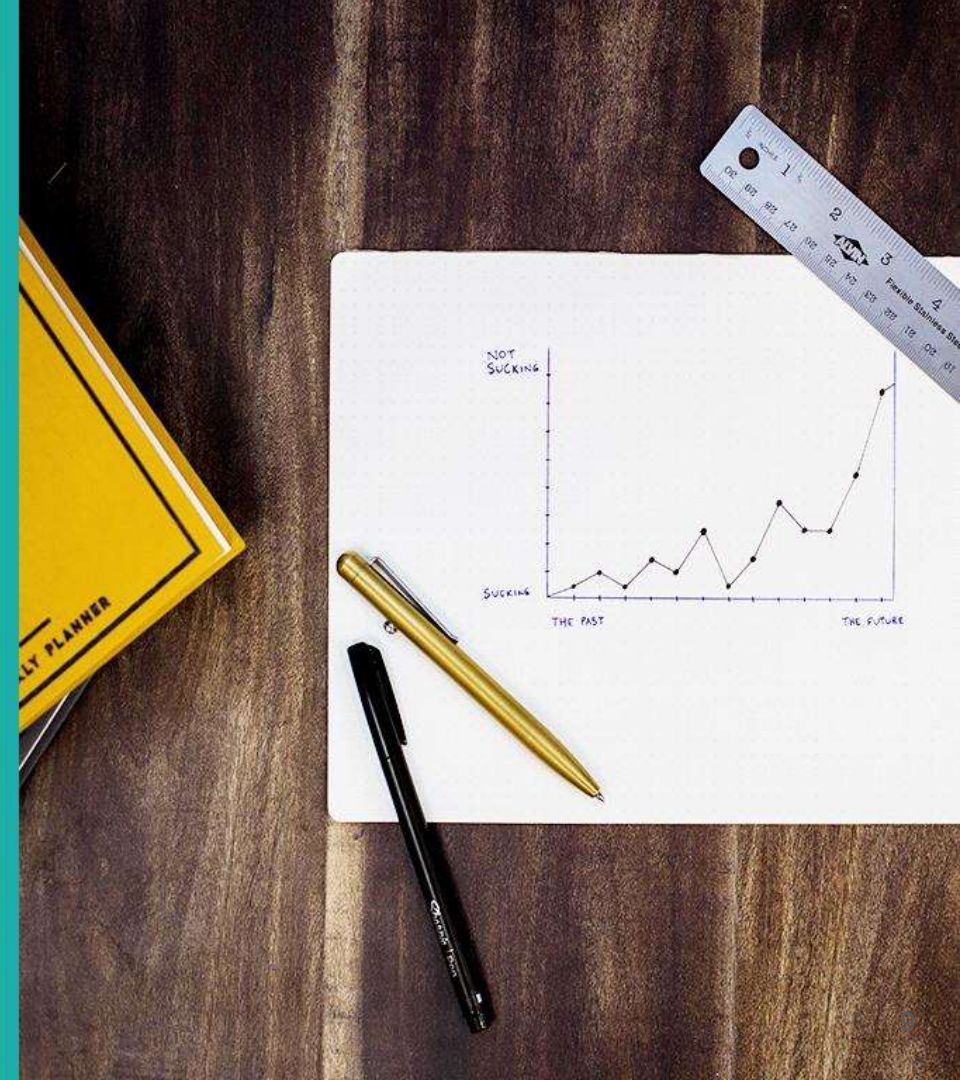
Objectives, Design, & Distribution



Survey Objectives



- To determine the identification term or terms (e.g. paraprofessional or library staff) preferred by non-librarian library staff.
- To determine how library staff interpret terms, such as paraprofessional or library staff.
- To determine if job title, job responsibility, type of library, or educational degree has any influence on the primary objectives.



SURVEY DESIGN & DISTRIBUTION



Responses were kept anonymous. No identifying information was collected.



Participants are staff not employed as librarians and work in a medical or health sciences library.



Survey consisted of 10 total questions. None were required.



The survey was distributed through various listservs and social media platforms and was active from Oct- Dec 2018.

Job Titles & Umbrella Terms



- Library Assistant
- Library Aide
- Library Clerk
- Library Assistant
- Library Associate
- Library Technician
- Library Services Assistant
- Library Specialist
- Page
- Library Supervisor



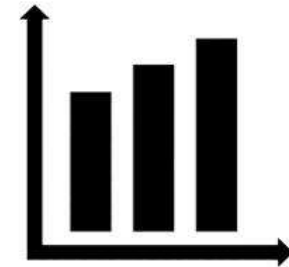
- Paraprofessional
- Paralibrarian
- Library assistant
- Library associate
- Library technician
- Non-MLS (or MILS) staff
- Library support staff
- Library staff
- Library clerk



Survey Results

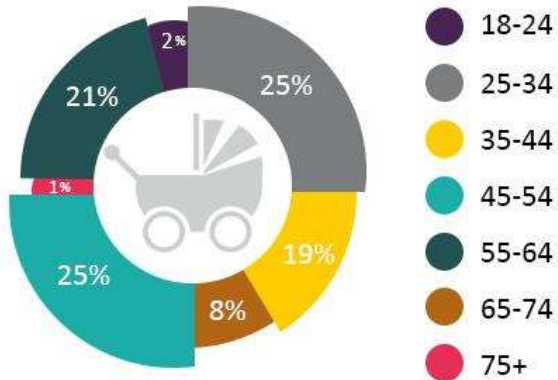


Demographics, Correlations,
& Comments



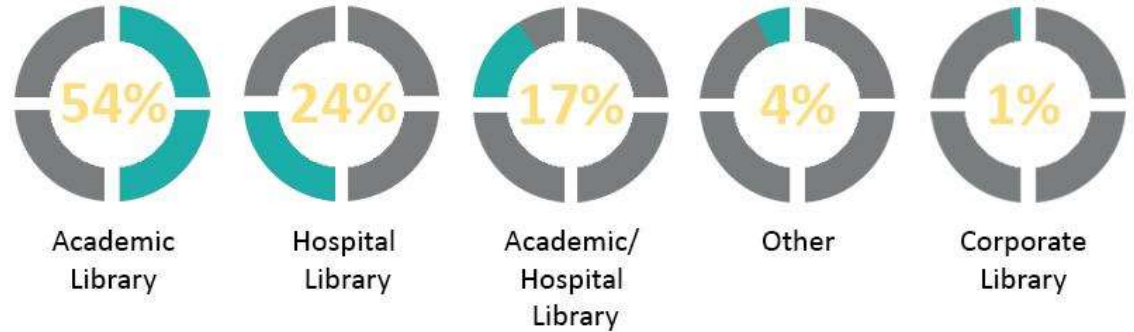
Survey Participants

Age

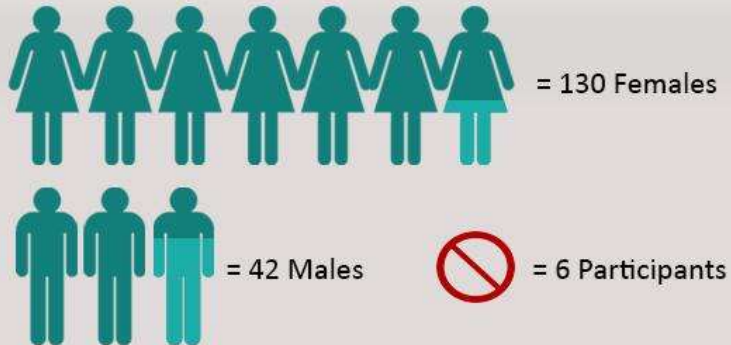


- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75+

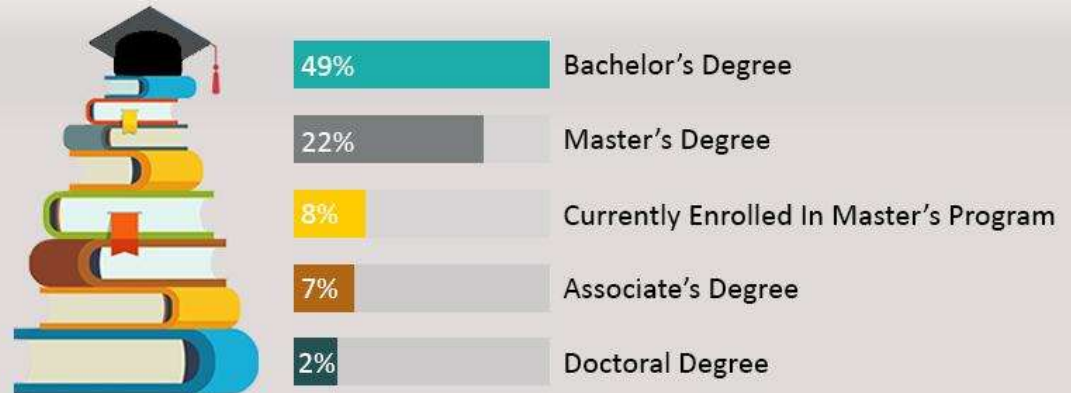
Work Setting



SEX



Education



Label Ranking



How do you identify as part of a collective group differentiated from librarians? Drag and place the terms in order of preferences, with #1 being your most preferred term.

Library Staff



Library Support Staff



Paraprofessional



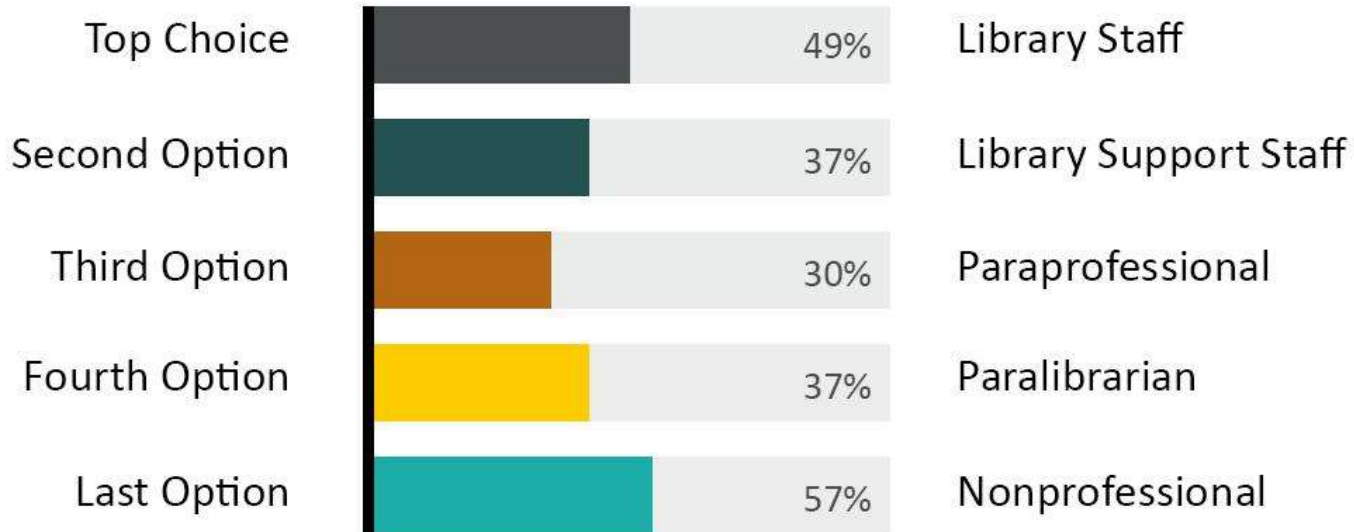
Paralibrarian



Label Ranking By Option



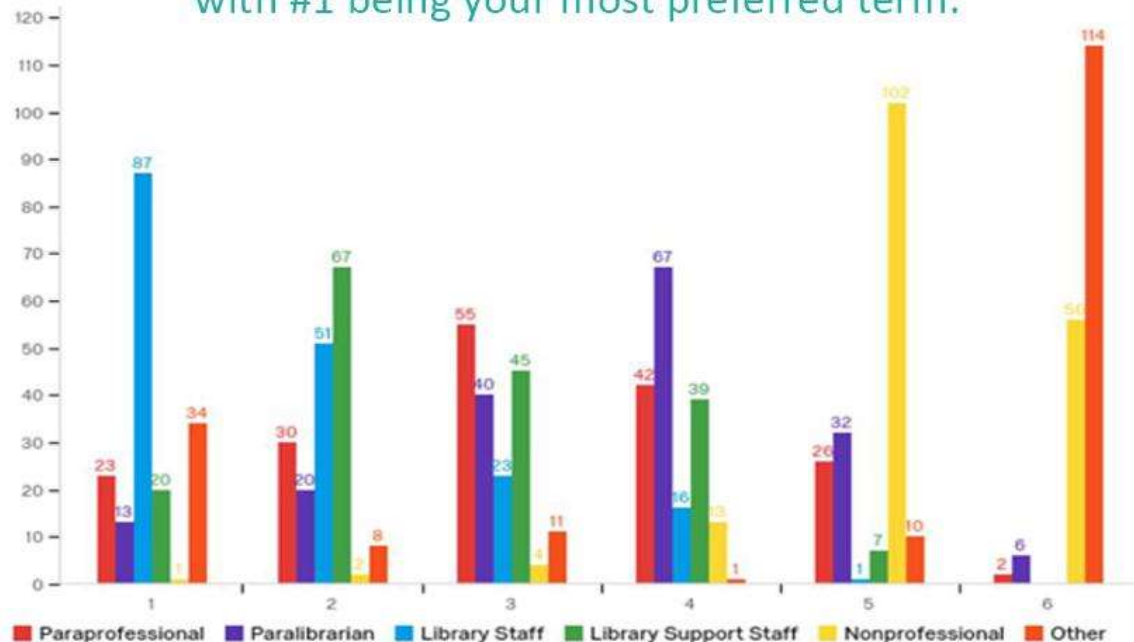
How do you identify as part of a collective group differentiated from librarians? Drag and place the terms in order of preferences, with #1 being your most preferred term.



Label Ranking By Participants



How do you identify as part of a collective group differentiated from librarians? Drag and place the terms in order of preferences, with #1 being your most preferred term.



RESPONDENTS COMMENTS



“I've never heard the term 'paralibrarian”

“Terms containing prefixes such as 'para' are not preferable because they imply a lesser-than quality, a shortfalling.”

“Paralibrarian sounds like a disease”

“I feel that non-professional and paraprofessional are semi insulting to those who are working full time in a professional office.”

“I'd refer to myself as a paraprofessional, although some of my duties include librarian work.”

“Paralibrarian seems to be best title for non-librarian staff because it does indicate our support of the library as well as indicates that many of us actually take on librarian responsibilities.”

Survey Limitations



- Inclusion of nonprofessional
- Using non-inclusive language (non-librarians, non-MLIS)
- More testing with library staff
- Could not analyze fill in the blank options





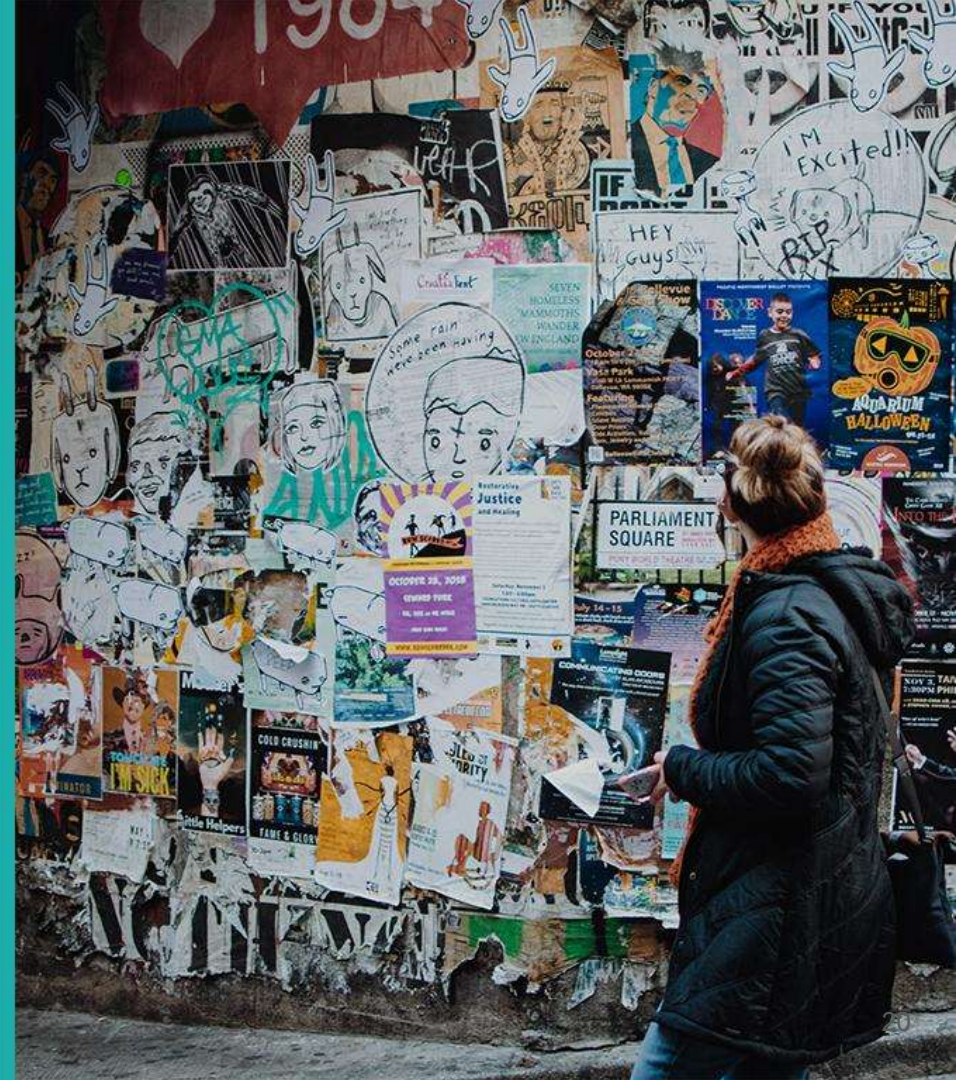
Conclusion



Paraprofessional in LIS Literature and Organizations

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- Term is used in current library information science literature.
- Library associations use the term in their websites, branding, and awards.





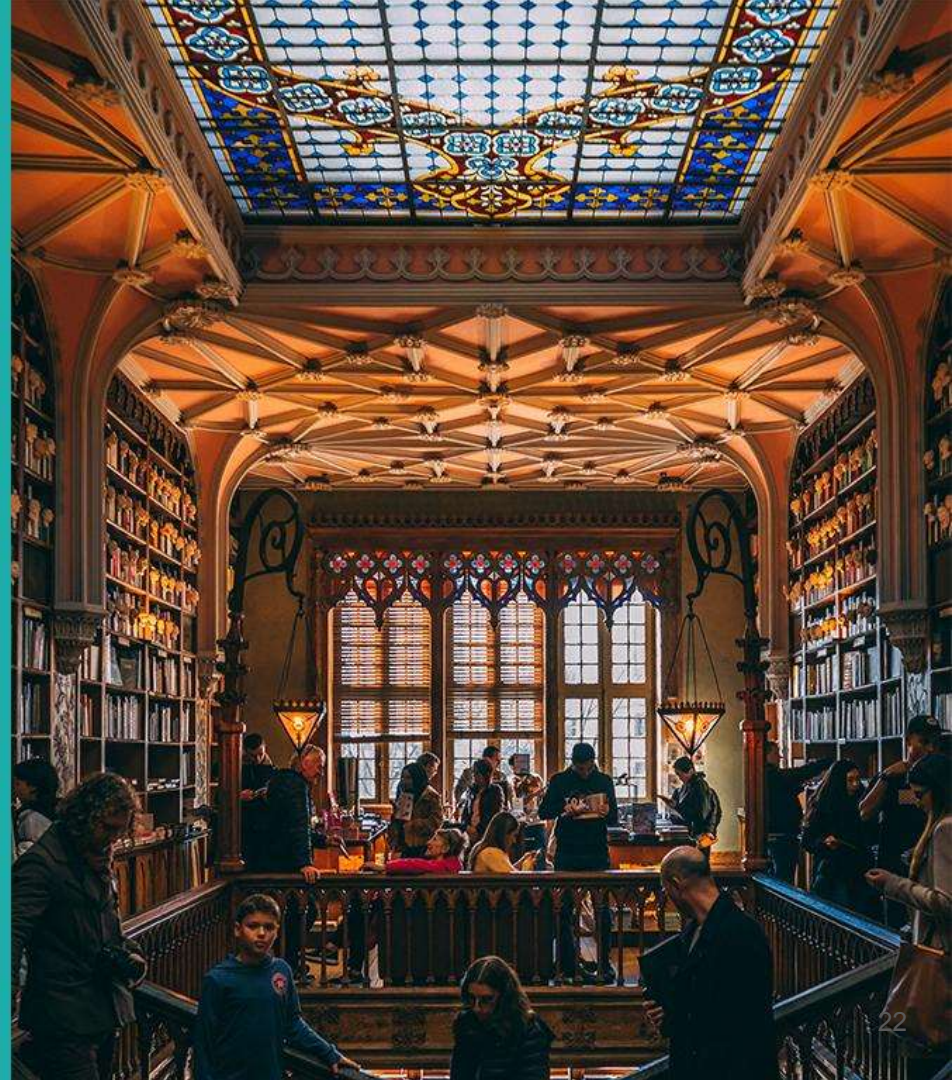
Why Not Paraprofessional ...

- It's not about the dictionary definition
- Negative implications
- Unnecessary divisive
- All library employees are professionals
- Microaggression
- Outdated terminology

Inclusivity Of Library Staff



- Focus on similarities rather than differences
- Can apply to ALL library staff, including librarians
- Helps bridge the divide between librarians and staff
- Other similar terms: library employees, library personnel



Final Takeaways



Survey results

- Library staff is #1 preferred term
- Library support staff is #2 preferred term
- For many, the “para” in paraprofessional and paralibrarian has negative connotations
- Others found the terms confusing
- Others had never heard of the terms



What we can do!

- Stop using terms like paraprofessional and paralibrarian in LIS literature and associations
- Use inclusive language, such as “library staff” to refer to ALL library employees
- When it’s necessary to distinguish librarians from other library employees, use language that makes sense for your institutional environment (e.g. “librarians and staff,” “library faculty and staff,” or librarians and support staff”)

Thank You!

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