

# Leadership's Ripple Effect: How Trust Shapes Psychological Safety and Employee Expression

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**Abstract:** This study, grounded in the extant literature on voice behavior, investigates the relationship between trust in leadership and employee voice behavior, with a particular focus on the mediating role of psychological safety. Utilising SPSS for statistical analysis, the research examines several key relationships within this framework. The findings of this investigation are multifaceted. Firstly, the study elucidates the impact of leadership trust on psychological safety within organizational contexts. Secondly, it explores the direct influence of leadership trust on the voice behavior of organizational members. Thirdly, the research sheds light on how psychological safety affects the propensity for voice behavior among employees. Moreover, this study contributes to understanding psychological safety as a mediating factor in the relationship between leadership trust and voice behavior. The results suggest a positive correlation: as the level of trust in leadership increases, there is a corresponding enhancement in the psychological safety experienced by organizational members. This heightened sense of psychological safety, in turn, encourages a greater frequency of voice behavior among employees. The research posits a chain of influence whereby leadership trust fosters an environment of psychological safety, subsequently facilitating increased instances of voice behavior within the organization. These findings significantly impact understanding how leadership practices influence employee communication and engagement within organizational settings.

**Keywords:** Trust; Voice behavior; Psychological safety; Employee Communication.

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## 1. Introduction

Organizational dynamics are significantly influenced by the ability of internal members to address challenges through constructive voice behavior. This mechanism serves as a catalyst for organizational problem-solving and adaptation, underscoring the critical nature of voice behavior in contemporary organizational settings. Despite well-established systems and procedures, organizations inevitably encounter issues that require attention [1]. The judicious promotion of voice behavior can lead to employee recognition and leadership affirmation, while its suppression may be perceived as a challenge to authority [2].

Recent research has expanded the focus from employee-centric perspectives to include leadership cognition and attitudes. The expression of employee opinions has been shown to impact superior cognition, attitudes, and behaviors significantly [3]. Constructive voice behavior, characterized by the proposal of novel ideas and work practice improvements, is more likely to be positively received by leadership when perceived as beneficial to the organization [4]. Consequently, organizations are increasingly recognizing the importance of fostering an environment conducive to voice behavior.

The primary objective of employee voice behavior is to enhance organizational effectiveness through constructive input [5]. Organizations that actively encourage voice behavior tend to exhibit more comprehensive knowledge bases, deeper interpersonal interactions, and heightened creativity [6]. As such, voice behavior can be considered a key factor in improving both individual and organizational performance.



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Extant literature has explored the positive effects of voice behavior on various organizational aspects, including performance, employee assessment, organizational justice, and psychological well-being. Employees represent a valuable resource of knowledge and insight, capable of providing constructive feedback that can drive organizational innovation and development. Consequently, there is a growing trend among organizations to encourage employee voice behavior [7]. However, barriers to expression often prevent employees from voicing potentially valuable ideas or concerns, resulting in missed opportunities for organizational improvement. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms that facilitate employee voice behavior is crucial for effective motivation and organizational progress [8].

This study focuses on trust in leadership as a critical element in enhancing voice behavior. Interpersonal trust between leaders and subordinates contributes to the establishment of an organizational trust mechanism, fostering an open environment where employees feel empowered to express themselves freely. By analyzing the factors that influence constructive voice behavior, organizations can create an atmosphere of trust, improve internal communication, and establish effective voice mechanisms. These improvements can enhance the quality of organizational decision-making and contribute to long-term organizational development.

The relationship between leadership trust and voice behavior is multifaceted. Leaders who demonstrate authenticity, self-awareness, and transparency in their interactions with organizational members can foster increased trust. This trust, in turn, encourages members to engage in voice behavior [9]. In an era of intense competition and rapid environmental change, organizational innovation is paramount. Encouraging members to voice their ideas within the organization actively is a crucial pathway to achieving this innovation [10].

This research posits that trust in leadership will positively influence members' voice behavior. The study aims to elucidate the role of psychological safety as a mediating factor in this relationship. By examining these interconnected elements, this research seeks to provide insights into strategies for increasing voice behavior within organizations. The investigation of psychological safety as a mediator offers a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which leadership trust influences voice behavior.

In summary, this study endeavors to explore the complex dynamics of voice behavior enhancement in organizational settings. By clarifying the roles of leadership trust and psychological safety in fostering voice behavior, this research aims to contribute to the development of effective strategies for promoting open communication and innovation within organizations. The findings of this study have the potential to inform future research directions and practical applications in the field of organizational behavior and leadership.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Trust in Leadership**

Trust in leadership is conceptualized as the willingness of subordinates to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the leader's intentions or behaviors [11]. This construct encompasses the perception of a leader's integrity, respect for subordinates, and fairness in work-related decisions and evaluations.

Scholars have defined trust in leadership as employees' willingness to relinquish vigilance and expose vulnerabilities, believing that leaders will not exploit these vulnerabilities [12]. This trust significantly influences employees' focus on organizational value creation, including both in-role responsibilities and extra-role behaviors such as organizational citizenship [13].

Research indicates that trust in leadership fosters closer psychological proximity between employees and leaders, potentially mitigating negative subordinate behaviors [14].

The frequency and quality of interactions between employees and their immediate supervisors play a crucial role in shaping this trust dynamic. Notably, servant leadership has been associated with increased levels of trust and subsequent constructive voice behavior among employees [15].

Empirical studies have demonstrated various outcomes associated with trust in leadership. For instance, it has been negatively correlated with turnover intentions within work groups [16]. Furthermore, humble leadership styles have been positively linked to employee voice behavior, with trust in leadership partially mediating this relationship [17]. In educational settings, trust in leadership has been found to impact job satisfaction among kindergarten teachers significantly [18].

## **2.2. Psychological Safety**

Psychological safety refers to the shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking [19]. It encompasses the formal and informal organizational practices that support open and trusting interactions within the work environment.

Edmondson conceptualized organizational psychological safety as the collective perception regarding the safety of risk-taking within the organizational context [20]. A robust psychological safety climate has been associated with enhanced team learning, organizational learning, and increased employee participation and commitment [21]. Teams characterized by high psychological safety tend to exhibit more innovative suggestions and richer discussion processes [22].

Research has indicated that psychological safety positively influences various organizational outcomes, including employee learning behaviors, voice behavior, innovation, job commitment, and overall work performance [21]. In academic settings, team psychological safety has been linked to improved research capabilities among graduate students [23]. Moreover, psychological safety has been found to mediate the relationship between psychological capital and employee innovative behavior [24], as well as the impact of psychological resilience on knowledge workers' creativity [25].

## **2.3. Voice Behavior**

Voice behavior is defined as the voluntary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational functioning [26]. It represents an individual's effort to effect constructive change within their organizational context.

Scholars emphasize that voice behavior is critical for both individual and organizational effectiveness [27]. Employees engaging in voice behavior carefully evaluate potential risks and benefits before expressing their opinions [27]. The primary purpose of voice behavior is to enhance organizational effectiveness through constructive input [5].

Research has identified various factors influencing voice behavior. For instance, abusive management practices have been negatively associated with organizational members' voice behavior [8]. Conversely, prosocial motivations and certain leadership substitutes have demonstrated positive effects on creative and voice behaviors [29,30].

Organizational trust has been found to mediate the relationship between empowering leadership and employee voice behavior [31]. Additionally, affective commitment has been shown to mediate the relationship between person-organization value congruence and voice behavior [32].

In conclusion, the interplay between trust in leadership, psychological safety, and voice behavior represents a complex and significant area of organizational research. Understanding these dynamics can provide valuable insights for fostering more effective, innovative, and communicative organizational environments.

## **2.4. Trust in Leadership and Psychological Safety**

The relationship between trust in leadership and psychological safety has been a subject of significant scholarly interest. Research suggests that organizational environments

characterized by high levels of trust tend to foster enhanced psychological safety among employees [33]. This relationship extends to the group level, where trust in leadership has been associated with improved group psychological safety and, consequently, reduced turnover intentions [16].

When organizational members develop trust not only in their leaders but also in their colleagues and the organization as a whole, they are more likely to perceive their work environment as psychologically safe [34]. Interestingly, the impact of leadership trust on psychological safety appears to be particularly pronounced among employees with higher power distance orientations [10]. Based on these findings, we propose:

**Hypothesis 1:** Leadership trust may exert a positive influence on psychological safety.

### *2.5. Trust in Leadership and Voice Behavior*

The influence of trust on voice behavior within organizations has been well-documented in the literature. Trust, whether directed towards colleagues, immediate supervisors, or the organization itself, has been shown to facilitate voice behavior among organizational members [35]. Indeed, organizational trust is often viewed as a source of competitive advantage, enabling open communication and thereby enhancing voice behavior [36].

Research suggests that managers who establish harmonious interpersonal relationships with subordinates and foster positive collegial environments are more likely to encourage employee voice [37]. Furthermore, when organizational members trust both their leaders and the organization, they are more inclined to engage in voice behavior [37]. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 2:** Leadership trust may have a positive effect on voice behavior.

### *2.6. Psychological Safety and Voice Behavior*

The role of psychological safety in promoting voice behavior has been extensively studied. Enhancing employees' psychological safety empowers them to voice their opinions regarding organizational matters without fear of negative repercussions [38]. Providing a work environment characterized by freedom, safety, and reliability has been shown to improve psychological safety and, consequently, promote voice behavior [39].

Conversely, lower levels of psychological safety have been associated with decreased likelihood of employees expressing their thoughts on organizational issues [40]. Employees who experience high psychological safety are more likely to view voice behavior as an integral part of their role, perceiving the benefits of speaking up to outweigh potential risks [41]. Thus, we propose:

**Hypothesis 3:** Psychological safety may positively impact voice behavior.

### *2.7. The Mediating Role of Psychological Safety*

The mediating role of psychological safety in the relationship between leadership and voice behavior has garnered considerable attention. Ethical leadership, for instance, has been found to partially enhance employee psychological safety partially, thereby promoting voice behavior [42]. Trust has been shown to improve psychological safety awareness among organizational members while simultaneously reducing job stress [43].

Trust in leadership appears to mitigate the perceived risks associated with voice behavior, influencing such behavior through its impact on psychological safety [10]. When employees positively evaluate their trust in leadership, it fulfills their need for psychological safety, which in turn manifests as increased voice behavior [44].

Given these findings, trust in leadership may enhance psychological safety, which may subsequently increase voice behavior among organizational members. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 4:** Psychological safety may mediate the relationship between leadership trust and voice behavior.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Sample Characteristics

This study conducted an empirical investigation focusing on employees in Chinese Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). A total of 300 valid questionnaires were utilized for the final analysis. The demographic profile of the respondents exhibited diverse characteristics across several dimensions.

The gender distribution among participants showed a relatively balanced representation, with 138 males (46%) and 162 females (54%). Age demographics revealed a predominantly young workforce, with 159 respondents (53%) aged 20-29, 87 (29%) in the 30-39 age bracket, 42 (14%) aged 40-49, and 12 (4%) in the 50-59 age group.

Educational attainment varied within the sample. The majority, 183 respondents (61%), held bachelor's degrees. Postgraduate qualifications were reported by 54 participants (18%), comprising 48 with master's degrees and 6 with doctoral degrees. High school graduates accounted for 48 respondents (16%), while 15 (5%) had completed elementary education or below.

Regarding organizational roles, 192 participants (64%) identified as regular staff members. Middle management positions were held by 66 respondents (22%), while senior staff accounted for 12 individuals (4%). The remaining 30 participants (10%) occupied various other positions within their respective organizations.

Tenure within the current SME varied among respondents. Short-term employees (0-2 years) constituted 87 participants (29%). Medium-term tenure groups included 72 individuals (24%) with 2-5 years of service and 81 (27%) with 5-8 years. Long-term employees were represented by 33 respondents (11%) with 8-12 years of service, and 27 (9%) with over 12 years in their current SME.

This diverse sample comprehensively represents employees across Chinese SMEs, offering valuable insights into various demographic and professional attributes pertinent to the study's objectives.

#### 3.2. Measurement Instruments

##### 3.2.1. Leadership Trust

Leadership trust is conceptualized as both an antecedent to communication and a direct outcome of interactions between subordinates or team members and organizational leaders. To assess leadership trust among employees in Chinese SMEs, this study employed a modified version of the trust scale developed by Anderson and colleagues [45]. Responses were collected using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Example items include: "There is a mutual understanding between my leader and me, allowing for open exchange of ideas and aspirations" and "My leader demonstrates a high level of professionalism and commitment to their role."

##### 3.2.2. Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is defined as an individual's perception of being able to engage in interpersonal risk-taking within their work environment without fear of negative consequences [46]. To measure psychological safety, we adapted the scale developed by Chen et al. for the Chinese SME context [29]. Participants responded to items on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement. Sample items include: "I feel comfortable expressing my genuine thoughts about work-related matters in my department" and "My colleagues are receptive to differing viewpoints without negative repercussions."

##### 3.2.3. Voice Behavior

Voice behavior encompasses not only constructive criticism but also proactive actions aimed at suggesting improvements and challenging the status quo for organizational benefit [47]. To assess voice behavior among employees in Chinese SMEs, we utilized an adapted version of the voice behavior scale developed by Thompson and Phua

[48]. The instrument employed a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Representative items include: "This employee actively contributes to the professional development of their colleagues by sharing knowledge" and "This employee consistently fulfills their job responsibilities while also proposing innovative ideas for improvement."

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Exploratory Factor Analysis and Reliability Analysis

To ensure the appropriateness of our measurement constructs, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal component analysis with varimax rotation. The results of the EFA revealed a clear three-factor structure, aligning with our proposed variables: leadership trust, psychological safety, and voice behavior.

The leadership trust construct comprised 10 items, with factor loadings ranging from 0.572 to 0.783. Psychological safety emerged as the second factor, consisting of 5 items with loadings between 0.654 and 0.802. The third factor, voice behavior, included 6 items with loadings ranging from 0.615 to 0.747.

The eigenvalues for all factors exceeded 1, ranging from 1.486 to 9.237. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.938 ( $p < .001$ ), indicating the appropriateness of the factor analysis. These results confirm the distinctiveness of our three primary constructs.

Reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.912 for leadership trust, 0.859 for psychological safety, and 0.831 for voice behavior. All values surpassed the recommended threshold of 0.7, demonstrating strong internal consistency and reliability of our measures.

**Table 1.** Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis

Variable	Items	Composition			Cronbach's $\alpha$
		1	2	3	
Leadership Trust	1	0.572	0.235	0.352	0.912
	2	0.651	0.278	0.265	
	3	0.639	0.342	0.253	
	4	0.703	0.269	0.279	
	5	0.583	0.282	0.241	
	6	0.715	0.305	0.135	
	7	0.783	0.052	0.037	
	8	0.578	0.379	0.185	
	9	0.592	0.237	0.273	
	10	0.709	0.291	0.131	
Voice Behavior	1	0.185	0.191	0.673	0.831
	2	0.105	0.107	0.747	
	3	0.175	0.235	0.721	
	4	0.167	0.251	0.625	
	5	0.209	0.073	0.669	
	6	0.193	0.168	0.615	
Psychological Safety	1	0.363	0.654	0.315	0.859
	2	0.237	0.672	0.319	
	3	0.235	0.775	0.231	
	4	0.338	0.713	0.187	
	5	0.333	0.669	0.142	
Eigen value		9.237	2.315	1.486	
Variance (%)		41.986	10.523	6.754	

Cumulative (%)	41.986	52.509	59.263
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KMO = 0.938 ( $p < .001$ )

#### 4.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

The descriptive statistics and correlation analysis provide valuable insights into the relationships among the key variables in this study. **Table 2** presents a summary of these findings.

The mean scores for the primary constructs were as follows: leadership trust ( $M = 3.682$ ,  $SD = 0.637$ ), psychological safety ( $M = 3.594$ ,  $SD = 0.715$ ), and voice behavior ( $M = 3.758$ ,  $SD = 0.569$ ). These values suggest that, on average, respondents reported moderately high levels of all three variables, with voice behavior scoring slightly higher than the others.

Correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships among all variables: Leadership trust strongly correlated with psychological safety ( $r = .653$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Leadership trust showed a moderate positive correlation with voice behavior ( $r = .557$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Psychological safety exhibited a moderate positive correlation with voice behavior ( $r = .485$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis Results

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Leadership Trust	3.682	0.637	-		
2. Psychological Safety	3.594	0.715	.653***	-	
3. Voice Behavior	3.758	0.569	.557***	.485***	-

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

#### 4.3. Regression Analysis

To test our hypotheses and examine the relationships among variables, we conducted a series of regression analyses. The analysis proceeded in the following sequence: (1) the effect of leadership trust on psychological safety, (2) the impact of leadership trust on voice behavior, (3) the influence of psychological safety on voice behavior, and (4) the mediating role of psychological safety.

Hypothesis 1 posited that leadership trust would positively influence psychological safety. The regression results supported this hypothesis ( $\beta = .653$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that higher levels of leadership trust are associated with increased psychological safety.

**Table 3.** Effect of Leadership Trust on Psychological Safety

Variable	Psychological Safety
Leadership Trust	$\beta = 0.653^{***}$ ( $t = 15.743$ )
R <sup>2</sup>	0.426
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.424
F	247.834***

\*\*\*.  $p < .001$ , \*\*.  $p < .01$ , \*.  $p < .05$ , † =  $p < .1$

Hypothesis 2 proposed that leadership trust would positively impact voice behavior. This hypothesis was also supported ( $\beta = .557$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that greater leadership trust is linked to increased voice behavior. **Table 4** summarizes these results.

**Table 4.** Effect of Leadership Trust on Voice Behavior

Variable	Voice Behavior
Leadership Trust	$\beta = 0.557^{***}$ ( $t = 12.218$ )
R <sup>2</sup>	0.31
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.308

F

149.280\*\*\*

\*\*\*:  $p < .001$ , \*\*:  $p < .01$ , \*:  $p < .05$ , + =  $p < .1$ 

Hypothesis 3 suggested that psychological safety would positively influence voice behavior. The analysis supported this hypothesis ( $\beta = .485$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that higher levels of psychological safety are associated with increased voice behavior. Table 5 presents these findings.

**Table 5.** Effect of Psychological Safety on Voice Behavior

Variable	Voice Behavior
Psychological Safety	$\beta = 0.485^{***}$ ( $t = 10.109$ )
R <sup>2</sup>	0.235
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.233
F	102.192***

\*\*\*:  $p < .001$ , \*\*:  $p < .01$ , \*:  $p < .05$ , + =  $p < .1$ 

Hypothesis 4 proposed that psychological safety would mediate the relationship between leadership trust and voice behavior. To test this, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis. The results, presented in Table 6, support the mediating role of psychological safety.

**Table 6.** Mediating Effect of Psychological Safety

Variable	Voice Behavior	
	Model 1	Model 2
Leadership Trust	$\beta = 0.557^{***}$ ( $t = 12.218$ )	$\beta = 0.413^{***}$ ( $t = 7.025$ )
Psychological Safety	-	$\beta = 0.220^{***}$ ( $t = 3.745$ )
R <sup>2</sup>	0.31	0.337
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.308	0.333
$\Delta R^2$	-	0.027
F	149.280***	84.563***

\*\*\*:  $p < .001$ , \*\*:  $p < .01$ , \*:  $p < .05$ , + =  $p < .1$ 

The inclusion of psychological safety in Model 2 resulted in a significant increase in explained variance ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.027$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while reducing the direct effect of leadership trust on voice behavior. This pattern of results supports the partial mediating role of psychological safety in the relationship between leadership trust and voice behavior.

These findings collectively support all four hypotheses, demonstrating the significant relationships among leadership trust, psychological safety, and voice behavior in the context of Chinese SMEs.

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1. Conclusions and Implications

This research focused on employees in Chinese small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), exploring factors that enhance voice behavior. Specifically, we examined the influence of leadership trust on voice behavior and psychological safety, as well as the mediating role of psychological safety in this relationship. Our findings offer several important insights:

**Leadership Trust and Voice Behavior:** Our study confirms that leadership trust significantly increases employee voice behavior in Chinese SMEs. This underscores the critical role of trust in fostering an environment where employees feel comfortable expressing their ideas and concerns. As voice behavior is crucial for organizational innovation and problem-solving [49], nurturing leadership trust should be a priority for SME managers.

**Leadership Trust and Psychological Safety:** The research demonstrates that leadership trust enhances employees' psychological safety. This finding highlights the im-



portance of developing trust-building strategies and policies within Chinese SMEs to create a psychologically safe work environment. Psychological safety encourages employees to take risks, learn actively, and engage more fully in their work [50].

**Psychological Safety and Voice Behavior:** Our results confirm that psychological safety positively influences voice behavior. This suggests that as employees in Chinese SMEs feel more psychologically safe, they are more likely to engage in voice behavior. Organizations should focus on creating an environment that promotes psychological safety to encourage open communication and idea sharing.

**Mediating Role of Psychological Safety:** The study reveals that psychological safety plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between leadership trust and voice behavior. This finding emphasizes the importance of psychological safety as a mechanism through which leadership trust influences voice behavior. Chinese SMEs should develop strategies that not only build trust but also enhance psychological safety to promote voice behavior effectively.

### 5.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While our study provides valuable insights, it also has limitations that open avenues for future research:

**Expanding Independent Variables:** Our focus on leadership trust as the primary independent variable, while informative, is limited. Future studies should explore other variables that may influence voice behavior, such as humble leadership, self-efficacy, and leader-member exchange (LMX). This broader approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors driving voice behavior in Chinese SMEs.

**Exploring Psychological Safety's Dual Role:** This study examined psychological safety as a mediator. However, recent research (e.g., [51]) suggests that psychological safety may also play a moderating role in various organizational processes. Future research should investigate both the mediating and moderating effects of psychological safety in the context of voice behavior and leadership trust.

**Investigating Negative Influences on Voice Behavior:** Our study focused primarily on positive influences on voice behavior. However, it's crucial also to examine factors that may negatively impact voice behavior, such as unspoken rules and job stress [52]. Future research should aim to classify and test both positive and negative variables affecting voice behavior in Chinese SMEs.

**Longitudinal Studies:** To better understand the causal relationships among our variables, future research should consider longitudinal designs. This approach would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how leadership trust, psychological safety, and voice behavior evolve over time in Chinese SMEs.

**Cross-Cultural Comparisons:** While our study focused on Chinese SMEs, future research could benefit from cross-cultural comparisons. This would help identify cultural factors that may influence the relationships among leadership trust, psychological safety, and voice behavior.

By addressing these limitations and pursuing these research directions, future studies can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of voice behavior in Chinese SMEs and provide valuable insights for both theory and practice in organizational behavior and management.

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