

# *Female Patrons of Porn*<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Although the proportion of women who patronize sexually-oriented book-video-novelty stores appears to be growing, little is known about the phenomenon generally or about male female differences. In the only studies of “female patrons of porn,” both Hefley (2007) and Berkowitz (2006) report that half of the customers that they observed entering two stores were women. Compared to men, women were less likely to enter alone. To further investigate this phenomenon, we observed customers entering 33 stores for 162 hours over a two-year period. Whereas the observations of Hefley (2007) and Berkowitz (2007) were limited in to a few of the busiest hours, our observations span all seven weekdays and all hours. Seventeen percent of the patrons who entered the stores were women. This proportion varied over time and across the 33 stores. Women prefer to shop on weekend evenings in stores that provide visible security.

## **Introduction**

The effects of sexually-oriented businesses on morals (Hubbard, 2004), public health (Nemoto, Iwamoto, Wong, Le, and Operario, 2004), quality of life (Ford and Beveridge, 2004; Papayanis, 2000; Sanders and Campbell, 2007; Ryder, 2004), organized vice (Potter, 1989), and crime (McCleary and Meeker, 2006; McCleary, 2008) have been widely studied. These studies, however, typically assume that the patrons of sexually-oriented businesses are a homogenous, often not defined, mass. Such an approach, especially considering that this population may have significant social implications, is myopic and of limited value for policy or theoretical development. Perhaps the greatest mystery that remains regarding sexually-oriented businesses is who actually patronizes them and what personal, community and structural factors influence patronage.

This lacuna is most noticeable for gender. Although gender is expected to affect virtually every aspect of the phenomenon, gender has not been studied systematically. This may reflect the fact that the patrons of striptease clubs (Erickson and Tewksbury, 2000; Frank, 2002), adult theaters (Donnelly, 1981; Douglas and Tewksbury, 2008), massage parlors (Armstrong, 1978; Bryant and Palmer, 1975; Farley and Davis, 1978), bathhouses (Elwood, Greene, and Carter, 2003; Haubrich, Myers, Calzavara, Ryder and Medved, 2004; Tewksbury, 2002; Weinberg and Williams, 1975), and adult bookstores (Karp, 1973; McKinstry, 1974; Tewksbury, 1990, 1993; Stein, 1990; Sundholm, 1973; Weatherford, 1986) are predominately male.

Although women appear to be uncommon as patrons, they are a majority of employees at sexually-oriented businesses; hence, studies of female employees are common. The literature includes

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studies of exotic dancers (Barton, 2006; Bradley, 2007; Spivey, 2005; Sweet and Tewksbury, 2000a, 2000b), phone sex workers (Mattley, 2002), massage parlor workers (Bryant and Palmer, 1975; Farley and Davis, 1978; Nemoto, *et al.*, 2004), and of course, prostitutes (Lucas, 2005; Sanders, 2005; Winick, 1971). In contrast, studies of female patrons are rare and, worse, are often set in niche businesses, such as female-only striptease shows (Montemurro, 2003; Petersen and Dressel, 1982), lesbian bathhouses (Hammers, *in press*, 2008), and swingers' parties (Jenks, 1998; Vaillancourt, 2007) that are not necessarily representative of the larger class of sexually-oriented businesses. Although adult book-video-novelty stores are a relatively more common member of the class, and although women constitute a growing proportion of their patrons (Attwood, 2005), little is known about the women who patronize these stores.

Mainstream studies – which is to say, studies of male patrons – tend to portray women either as companions of men or as deviant consumers (Douglas and Tewksbury, 2008; McKinstry, 1974; Stein, 1990; Tewksbury, 1990; Weatherford, 1986). When compared to men, women typically spend shorter periods of time in book-video-novelty stores and are more likely to purchase novelties (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels, 1994; McKinstry, 1974; Stein, 1990). Men tend to browse through all sections of the stores (Tewksbury, 1990; Weatherford, 1986), are more likely to purchase sexually explicit media, and are more likely to patronize onsite peepshows and theaters (Douglas and Tewksbury, 2008; Tewksbury, 1990; Weatherford, 1986).

Male patrons of adult book-video-novelty stores have been shown to be a diverse population (Tewksbury, 1990, 1993; Weatherford, 1986). Men in such settings are typically pursuing sexual stimulation, and perhaps sexual activities (McKinstry, 1974; Tewksbury, 1990, 1993; Sundholm, 1973; Weatherford, 1986). Although the behavioral patterns and styles of self presentation vary across such men (Berkowitz, 2006; Tewksbury, 1990, 1993), there remain important shared goals for patronage across demographics, settings and temporal variations. The pursuit of either a vicarious or anonymous, interpersonal sexual experience is the common thread that unites male patrons of porn. Such a pursuit, however, is not what the limited available research suggests about female patrons' motivations and behaviors. The reasons for the differences in both numbers and behaviors of males and females are unknown. Issues such as women being less comfortable with explicit sexual images, feelings of vulnerability or deviance and simply having less interest in such materials/goods may be suggested. Such explanations can be supported by the research showing that (male) patrons of sexually-oriented businesses often attempt to conceal their patronage or identities (Donnelly, 1981; Erickson and Tewksbury, 2000; Hefley, 2007; Holt and Blevins, 2007; Tewksbury, 1990). Additionally, as Hefley (2007) reports, female patrons are much more likely than males to offer "accounts" for their presence, most often emphasizing their involuntary presence (due to intoxication or being brought by others).

To date, only two studies provide explicit focus on female patrons of sexually-oriented book-video-novelty stores (Berkowitz, 2006; Hefley, 2007). Working as a sales clerk in one such store, Hefley (2007) observed 3,652 patrons over a nine-month period. The men-to-women ratio was six-to-four. Fully one-half of the women were accompanied by male patrons and unaccompanied female patrons were relatively rare (18.%). Berkowitz (2006) draws on "two to three" observations per week of "about an hour each time" over a six month period in one adult novelty store located in a southeast college town to examine gendered public presentations and performances. She reports observing equal numbers of male and female patrons, with most patrons appearing to be younger than 30. Although no numbers or proportions are reported, Berkowitz (2006) does report that women patronize this business,

alone, with female companions, and with male companions.<sup>2</sup>

The findings of these two studies clearly differ from those of others, especially in regards to the proportionate representation of females. It is important to note, however, that several aspects of both study sites may limit the generality of these observations and conclusions. Hefley's store is located in a region whose culture was hostile to sexually-oriented businesses and was the only book-video-novelty store within fifty miles. Although the store sold the complete range of sexually explicit merchandise, these items "actually comprised a very small proportion of the total store inventory" (p. 86). Berkowitz's site was in a small college town. Additionally, Hefley primarily observed patrons on Friday and Saturday evenings and Berkowitz (2006) observed only between the hours of 8:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m., arguably times that differ in the amount and type of customer traffic.<sup>3</sup>

Allowing for these factors, both Hefley's (2007) and Berkowitz's (2006) descriptions of the female patrons' behaviors and self-reported accounts provide a rich, theoretically coherent picture of the phenomenon. The present study, which reports the results of a two-year observational study of sexually-oriented business patrons, both corroborates these studies' major conclusions, yet also questions, clarifies and expands on the conclusions of both. Because our data were collected on all seven days of the week over the entire 24-hour day at a large sample of sexually-oriented book-video-novelty stores, we provide a more detailed and general description of limited aspects of the phenomenon than these weekend evening and late-night-only based studies. On the other hand, our data (as with others) are limited to the superficial, objective characteristics of the "female patrons of porn."

### **Study Design**

The present study was designed to address three questions. First, are women a significant proportion of the patrons of adult book-video-novelty stores? Second, do men and women behave differently inside the stores? And finally, what environmental variables make stores more or less attractive to women? To address these questions, we observed patrons who entered 33 adult book-video-novelty stores in a three-county region of southern California.

Sample selection began with an internet search for "adult video stores" in three southern California counties. Excluding sites that served alcohol or that were not open 24 hours, the search produced a list of 49 stores. Based on preliminary site visits, four stores that catered to "niche" markets were excluded on theoretical grounds. Three stores that were located in remote locations and three stores that were located in "dangerous" neighborhoods were excluded on practical grounds. After observation began, six additional stores were dropped because they had very low customer traffic.

Between January, 2006 and December, 2007, nine trained graduate student researchers recorded patrons by gender and grouping as they entered the 33 stores in our sample. Working from a common

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<sup>2</sup> Berkowitz (2006: 600) reports that she "never once saw a man enter the shop with another man or other men."

<sup>3</sup> Berkowitz (2006: 602) notes that her findings may be difficult to generalize "because this study took place in a college town, the setting of the sex shop is quite different from what one would find in a large city or rural locale."

protocol, researchers parked at least one block from a store and walked to the site. Inside, researchers took positions with unobstructed views of the entrances and observed and recorded entering patrons. Researchers also recorded distinguishing characteristics of the stores, including the presence (or absence) of video viewing booths, total floor space devoted to merchandise displays, and employee characteristics.

Although the protocol required researchers to remain inside a store for 30 continuous minutes, they could leave before 30 minutes if necessary. This happened in approximately 20 percent of the trials. Researchers could also remain inside beyond 30 minutes for any reason. This happened in approximately 60 percent of the trials. Over the 24-month period, researchers observed patrons entering the 33 sites on 271 separate trials for a total 162 hours.

	N	Hours		N	Hours
Sunday	48	22.23	2200 - 0159	41	24.00
Monday	41	24.73	0200 - 0559	66	40.13
Tuesday	37	22.82	0600 - 0959	30	16.23
Wednesday	36	21.04	1000 - 1359	40	24.13
Thursday	39	22.22	1400 - 1759	48	32.40
Friday	43	26.00	1800 - 2159	46	25.21
Saturday	37	23.06			

Table 1 reports the distribution of the observation trials and times over days of the week and hours of the day. Neither the sample of 33 stores nor the observation schedule is random in the strictest sense. The sample appears to include virtually all of the adult stores in southern California that satisfy our criteria, however. The observation schedule includes all seven weeks and all 24 hours. It is a complete sample, in other words, with no obvious biases. Tests of statistical significance, reported in subsequent sections, assume random sampling. We will re-examine this assumption at that point.

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Singles</i>	789	28	817
<i>Same-sex groups</i> <sup>a</sup>	192	105	297
<i>Mixed-sex groups</i> <sup>b</sup>	30	48	78
<i>Female-Male couples</i>	33	33	66
<i>Total</i>	1044	214	1258

<sup>a</sup> 77 male and 40 female same-sex groups; <sup>b</sup> Female-male couples counted separately

### Results: Entrances by Gender and Group

The data reveal a distinctive feminine style organized around salient differences in *how* and *why* men and women patronize the stores. The breakdowns by gender and group reported in Table 2 address the *how* questions. Of the 1,258 patrons who entered the 33 stores during 162 hours of observation, 1,044 (83 percent) were men, 214 (17 percent) were women. Most men (75.6 percent) entered alone, most women (86.9 percent) entered in groups, either same-sex (49.1 percent), mixed-sex (22.4 percent), or in a traditional female-male couple (15.4 percent).

At first glance, the data in Table 2 seem substantively different from the data reported by Hefley (2007, p. 90). The apparent differences reflect our sample design, however. Whereas our data were collected across all seven weekdays and all 24 hours, Hefley's were collected on Friday and Saturday evenings (6-11 P.M.) during peak business hours. Controlling for day and time, our data are virtually indistinguishable from Hefley's. We will return to this point in a later section.

**Table 3 - Characteristics of 33 Adult Bookstores**

	Mean	SD	n	$\beta$	t( $\beta$ )	$e^{\beta}$
Security Guard?	.212	.415	271	1.214	3.96	3.367
Employees	1.667	.890	271	0.840	5.15	2.315
Store Traffic	4.618	1.346	33	0.214	2.45	1.239
Viewing Booths?	.485	.508	33	-1.733	-6.32	0.177
Media Space	1302.4	510.1	33	-0.0001	-0.70	0.999
Novelty Space	488.5	309.1	33	0.0006	1.62	1.000
Female Employees			271	-1.734	-7.92	0.176
Constant				-0.916		

### Results: Entrances by Store Type

The *why* questions require a more sophisticated statistical analysis. Put simply, women prefer specific store types. The three left-hand columns of Table 3 report the means, standard deviations, and sample sizes for eight theoretically relevant characteristics of the stores. Sample sizes differences reflect the fact that some characteristics (*e.g.*, number of employees) change from trial to trial while others (*e.g.*, total floor space) remain constant. Thus, the sample size is either the number trials (271) or the number of stores (33).

The first set of variables in Table 3 measure a store's perceived *safety* or *security*. Given the criminogenic reputation of sexually-oriented businesses (Potter, 1989; McCleary, 2008) and women's putatively high fear of crime (LaGrange and Ferraro, 1989; Sutton and Farrall, 2005), women should prefer stores with visible security. All 33 stores had unobtrusive passive security systems, including mirrors, surveillance cameras, anti-theft alarms, and outdoor lighting. But seven stores employed uniformed security guards during the evening and nighttime hours. The guards were observed to patrol parking lots and exterior premises of the stores but not the interior premises.

Safety is also the theoretical rationale for the number of non-security employees and patron

traffic. Given the strong negative relationship between fear-of-crime at a place and the number of people at the place (Taylor and Covington, 1993; Day, 1999), women should perceive stores with more customers and employees as safer places. Controlling for weekday and time, the number of employees working in a store depends on the store's physical size and the volume and complexity of its sales. Customer traffic depends not only on these same variables but, also, on the store's popularity. Since the numbers of employees and patrons in a store varies by day and time, both variables are confounded with the natural ebb and flow of patron entrances. To resolve the confound, both variables are defined as the mean of all trials. More complicated coding schemes lead to substantively similar results.

The second set of variables attempt to measure a store's commercial *appeal* to women. Since women are the major purchasers of non-media "novelty" merchandise (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels, 1994; McKinsty, 1974; Stein, 1990), women should prefer stores with larger inventories of non-media merchandise but should be indifferent to the size of the store's inventory of books and videos.

On-site video viewing booths are more problematic. Other things held equal, women should be indifferent to the presence (or absence) of booths. Because booths are associated with a distinctive ambience (Burr, 1998; Kelly and Cooper, 2000; Tewksbury, 1990, 1993), however, it may be naive to think that "other things" can be "held equal." Though remaining agnostic on the expected effect, the presence (or absence) of viewing booths is coded as a binary indicator variable.

The number of female employees at a store also requires agnostic disinterest. Across all 271 trials, 444 employees were observed. Exactly half were women. Although observers pointed to this variable as a salient distinguishing characteristic, the theory is ambiguous. To the extent that female employees "feminize" a store, women patrons might be attracted to the store. But to the extent that interactions with female employees might embarrass some women patrons, the opposite effect is expected.

Though more difficult to estimate, floor space has a more obvious theoretical rationale. Total floor space in the 33 stores was estimated to range from slightly less than 1,000 to more than 4,000 square feet. Non-media novelty display space was estimated to range from 80 to 1,500 square feet. Media display space was estimated to range from 200 to 2,470 square feet. The residual floor space was devoted to booths, storage, security, sales, and other functions.

The three right-hand columns of Table 3 report the results of a Poisson (negative binomial) regression.<sup>4</sup> The columns labeled " $\beta$ " and " $t(\beta)$ " give the parameter estimate and associated t-statistic; t-values larger than 1.96 in absolute value are statistically significant with 95 percent confidence. By this convention, the floor space devoted to novelty and media merchandise are not statistically significant. Women are indifferent to these variables. The presence (or absence) of a security guard, the number of employees, customer traffic, on-site viewing booths, and the number female employees are statistically significant. These variables explain women's preferences for a particular store.

The parameter estimates in Table 3 are reported in the natural logarithm metric for purposes of

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<sup>4</sup> The Stata 10 *xtbnreg* routine was used with each site treated as a cluster. Confidence levels were calculated from population-averaged standard errors.

significance testing. This makes substantive interpretation of the estimates difficult. Exponentiated parameter estimates ( $e^{\beta}$ ) can be interpreted as effect ratios, however. The effect ratio for the presence (or absence) of a uniformed security guard ( $e^{\beta} = 3.367$ ), for example, can be interpreted to mean that women are 3.367 times more likely to enter a store that employs security guards. The effect ratio for on-site viewing booths ( $e^{\beta} = 0.177$ ) can be interpreted to mean that women are only 0.177 times as likely to enter a store that has viewing booths.

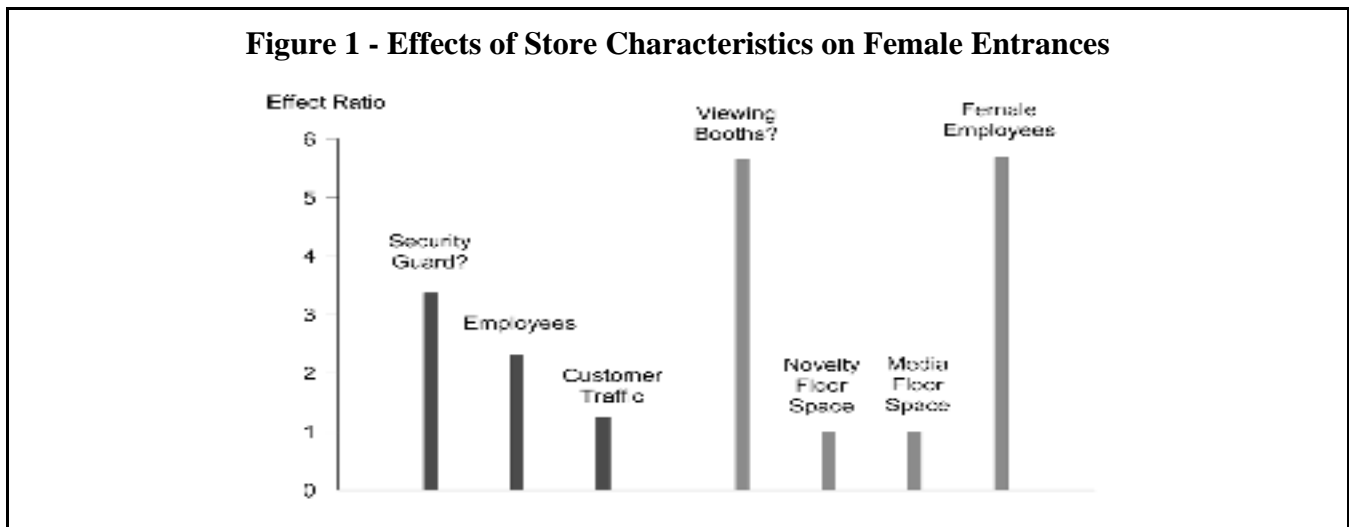


Figure 1 plots the effect ratios of these six variables on the per hour rate at which female patrons enter the stores. The floor space devoted to media and non-media novelty merchandise have trivially small influences on rate. With each additional square foot of media floor space, the rate drops by a factor of ( $e^{-0.0001} =$ ) 0.9999; and with each square foot of non-media novelty floor space, the rate rises by a factor of ( $e^{0.0006} =$ ) 1.0001. In either case, merchandise floor space has a trivially small effect on female patrons. It is no surprise then that, as reported in Table 3, neither effect is statistically significant.

In contrast, the presence of video viewing booths and female employees have extremely large effects on the rate at which women enter a store. Compared to stores with viewing booths, women enter stores *without* viewing booths at a rate that is ( $e^{1.733} =$ ) 5.65 times higher.<sup>5</sup> The effect of each additional female employee is nearly identical ( $e^{1.734} = 5.65$ ). Both effects are statistically significant. Finally, the effect ratios for customer traffic and the presence of a security guard are smaller, but significant nevertheless.

### Conclusion

Several apparent discrepancies between our observations and those of Hefley (2007) and Berkowitz (2006) can be explained by differences in days, times, and store-types in our samples. When sampling differences are taken into consideration, our observations corroborate Hefley (2007) and Berkowitz (2006) and, also, provide a context for interpreting and generalizing their findings. We address the apparent discrepancies in order of importance.

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<sup>5</sup> To facilitate comparison, the viewing booth effect is expressed as the *absence* of viewing booths. This expression makes use of the relationship  $e^{-1.733} = 1/e^{1.733}$ .

Whereas nearly half of the patrons who entered Hefley's (2007) and Berkowitz's (2006) stores were women, only 17 percent of our patrons were women. Counting only patrons who entered our stores on Fridays and Saturdays between 6 and 11 PM, however, 32 percent were women. And excluding stores with booths, 48 percent of our patrons were women, a proportion virtually identical to the proportions reported by Hefley (2007) and Berkowitz (2006).

And whereas Berkowitz (2006) reports that men *never* entered her store in same-sex groups, nearly one in five of the men who entered our stores entered in same-sex groups. Most of these groups entered immediately after bar closing time (2 A.M.), however, and many of the entrances were observed at stores with on-site viewing booths. There are many theoretical links between bar-closings and same-sex male groups.

And whereas Hefley (2007) reports that 53 percent of the women who entered her store entered in a male-female couple, male-female couples account for only six percent of the women who entered our stores. This apparent discrepancy reflects not only differences in the times sampled (Friday-Saturday evenings vs. seven weekdays, 24 hours) but, also, in our opinion, differences in the communities and stores sampled.

Finally, the apparent discrepancy in female same-sex groups, 72 percent in our sample vs. 10 percent of Hefley's (2007) has no simple explanation. Pending further study, it must be attributed instead to the interaction of several factors. All other discrepancies appear to lie in the range of "sampling error." The male-female ratio for patrons who entered our stores alone is 76 percent male to 13 percent female, for example. Although this ratio differs substantially from the ratio reported by Berkowitz (2006), it is close to the ratio reported by Hefley (2007).

Our broad (but shallow) sample design is unsuited to an investigation of the subtler behavioral aspects of the phenomenon. That requires narrow (but deep) sampling designs such as those used by Berkowitz (2006) and Hefley (2007). Our broad, shallow sample design reveals that the proportion of women entering adult book-video-novelty stores varies by weekday, time, region, and store-type, however, and that is the unique contribution of our study.

Our investigation of the effects of environmental variables on the expressed preferences of female patrons shows that the perceived security of a store has a strong influence on women's patronage but inventory does not. Presumably, women would go out of their way patronize a store that is perceived as "safe" but not for one with a larger inventory of appealing merchandise. Women prefer "busier" stores because, presumably, these stores appear "safer."

By far the most influential environmental factors, however, are the presence (or absence) of video viewing booths and female employees. The fact that women avoid stores with on-site viewing booths is consistent with the finding that, when booths are available, women are unlikely to use them. Indeed, many stores discourage (or even, informally *prohibit*) women from entering areas with viewing booths. Since these viewing booths are known to be locations for male-male sexual encounters (Sundholm, 1973; Tewksbury, 1990, 1993, 2008; Weatherford, 1986), it is not surprising that women are less likely to patronize booths and stores with booths.

The fact that women are less likely to patronize stores with female employees is more problematic. In principle, the presence of female employees communicates to women patrons that they

are welcome in the store and that they should not expect to be singled out by male patrons for unwelcome attention and/or advances. The data contradict this expectation, however. It is possible that the effect reflects some aspect of the female-female interactions that occur in stigmatizing places. But it is also possible that the effect is an idiosyncrasy. This question bears further study.

In sum, our study demonstrates that women are a significant share of the customer base of adult book-video-novelty stores. But women patronize such stores in different ways, and when compared to men, women have distinctive preferences in stores. Men and women use and experience adult stores in different ways (Berkowitz, 2006). As a result, the social performances of men and women differ in such establishments. Women are important consumers of sexually oriented materials and businesses. To better meet the needs of (and attract) women, however, stores may need to modify their environments. Differences in merchandise do not appear to play a significant role in attracting female patrons.

This study presents another step forward in understanding the patrons of porn, and offers insights to the distributions of patrons and environmental aspects of such businesses that appear to attract (or not) a diverse base of customers. Importantly, this study suggests that some of the findings reported by previous researchers (Berkowitz, 2006; Hefley, 2007) may be artifacts of their unique settings. While these narrower, deeper studies make valuable theoretical and empirical contributions, the findings from this larger, more diverse sample of observations in a larger set of communities suggest that there is more to the picture than previously known.

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