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THE QUEEN BEE PHENOMENON: A CONSEQUENCE OF AND CONTRIBUTOR TO GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

Lieutenant/Colonel Tina M. Verbenkov

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By Lieutenant-Colonel Tina M. Verbenkov

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INTRODUCTION

“That there is an insufficient number of women in the [Canadian] military is a matter of fact and an international concern.”¹ In 2018, despite being a strong advocate for women’s rights, Canada almost lost a United Nations mission when it could not generate a force meeting the threshold of 15% women.² To maintain credibility on the world stage, and with citizens at home, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has been given until 2026 to increase its representation of women to 25%.³ While active recruiting efforts are instrumental to meeting this new threshold, developing informed retention strategies that keep women from leaving is vital.

Yet to be examined to any great extent is a recurring statement found in exit surveys and release interviews on why women leave the CAF: “lack of fit with military lifestyle”.⁴ One possible reason could be the fact that despite institutional efforts to promote a gender-neutral force, an idealized masculine culture in the CAF persists.⁵ The Queen Bee (QB) phenomenon and social identity theory expand on this idea by explaining why some ambitious women, when faced with the threat their gender is

¹ James Pierotti, "Barriers to Women in the Canadian Armed Forces," *Canadian Military Journal* 20, no. 4 (2020): 21.

² Murray Brewster, "Canada Nearly Lost 2018 UN Mission Because it Didn't Have Enough Women in Uniform," *CBC News*, 18 February 2020.

³ National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (Ottawa, ON: Canadian Defence Academy, 2017), 12.

⁴ Nicholas Bremner, Kelsea Beadman and Glen Budgell, *CAF Exit Survey - Descriptive Analyses of 2013-2017 Data* (Ottawa: Defence Research and Development Canada, 2017), 72.

⁵ Vanessa Brown and Alan Okros, "Dancing Around Gender: Changing Identity in a Post Deschamps Military", in *Culture and the Soldier: How Identity, Values, and Norms Intersect with Contemporary Military Engagements* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2018): 42.

devalued, will “enhance their own success by subscribing to gender stereotypes while simultaneously emphasizing how they differ from other women.”⁶ While the idea of adjusting one’s behaviour to fit into a dominant gender group might not sound too controversial, it is when we consider how this behaviour reinforces gender stereotypes and influences other women in their decision to remain in the organization.

Underneath the gender-neutral smokescreen lies an idealized male soldier that has continued to reinforce stereotypical norms in the CAF. Understanding how this cloak invites coping responses in ambitious senior women is a key underpinning to the QB phenomenon. While social identity theory extends well beyond the confines of men and women as gender groups, this paper focuses on the concept as it relates to the QB phenomenon and, more specifically, intra-gender relations between senior and junior women. This paper will explore the QB phenomenon and associated behavioural traits that pose a challenge for junior women, discuss how a gender-neutral smokescreen perpetuates the QB phenomenon, and offer targeted retention strategies that should be considered to address the culture change needed in the CAF.

WHAT IS THE QUEEN BEE PHENOMENON?

A common misconception is that having women in senior leadership positions reduces gender bias and paves the way for junior females in the CAF. This is based on the premise that gender inequality “is perpetuated by men but not women, that senior women will mentor and promote other women, and that women leaders will add a feminine perspective to leadership and serve as inspirational role models for their junior

⁶ Belle Derks, Naomi Ellemers, Collette van Laar, and Kim de Groot, "Do Sexist Organizational Cultures Create the Queen Bee?" *British Journal of Social Psychology* 50, no. 3 (2011): 520.

counterparts.”⁷ Yet this fails to consider the QB phenomenon, a situation where some ambitious women reinforce gender stereotypes in male-dominated organizations.⁸

The QB phenomenon was conceptualized by three social psychologists in 1973, and is still relevant today:

The derogatory queen bee label is given to women who pursue individual success in male-dominated work settings (organizations in which men hold most executive positions)... [There are] three ways by which women do this: (1) by presenting themselves more like men, (2) by physically and psychologically distancing themselves from other women, and (3) by endorsing and legitimizing the current gender hierarchy.⁹

Before delving into how this behaviour impacts junior women and female attrition rates, it is important to understand how QB behaviour is a consequence of gender discrimination.

Coping with Social Identity Threat

A growing body of research has made the causal link that QB behaviour is a consequence of social identity threat. Under social identity theory, because every person identifies with their gender to a certain extent, “when members of disadvantaged groups are in a minority position they are likely to perceive that their group's typical characteristics are not valued or considered important.”¹⁰ This arises when senior women,

⁷ Belle Derks, Colette Van Laar, and Naomi Ellemers, "The Queen Bee Phenomenon: Why Women Leaders Distance Themselves from Junior Women," *The Leadership Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2016): 456.

⁸ Derks et al., *Do Sexist Organizational Cultures Create the Queen Bee?* . . . , 519.

⁹ Derks et al., *The Queen Bee Phenomenon: Why Women Leaders Distance Themselves from Junior Women* . . . , 457.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 459.

who do not want to identify with their gender at work, feel devalued by their gender nonetheless.¹¹

To address this perceived identity threat women, as a minority group, have two choices: instigate collective efforts to improve the group's standing as a whole or distance oneself from the disadvantaged group to advance in the male-dominated organization.¹² As the name suggests, collective strategies bring women together to promote the benefits of female contributions in the workplace. Unfortunately, there are risks to this approach that deter many ambitious women from getting involved. For one, emphasizing the benefits of femininity may reinforce perceptions that women are not suited to roles traditionally filled by men. Another risk is the group may fail to achieve recognition or buy-in from those in the dominant group. Finally, there is the potential the group will experience backlash for strongly identifying with their gender.¹³

Not every woman confronted with social identity threat will adopt QB behaviour; in fact, those who strongly identify with their gender are more likely to adopt collective strategies when feeling threatened.¹⁴ However, with the aforementioned risks in mind, it is not surprising why QBs view collective strategies as a means to threaten hard-fought gains and undermine career advancement. Instead of supporting collective efforts, these women focus on individual mobility, more simply, advancing in the organization.

The QB response is how some women choose, often subconsciously, to cope with social identity threat. While this theory, and gender more broadly, extends well beyond

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

the confines of men and women as gender groups, this paper focuses on a small subset of senior women and how their QB behaviour impacts junior women in male-dominated organizations, like the CAF. Appreciating how the QB phenomenon is a consequence of social identity threat helps inform why QB behaviour damages intra-gender relations between senior and junior women.

CHARACTERISTIC BEHAVIOURS OF A QUEEN BEE

QBs in influential positions undermine collective strategies “by agreeing with negative stereotypes about their group, perceiving the system as just and fair, and opposing policies that would reduce inequality in opportunities.”¹⁵ While this train of thought is often subconscious, it takes shape through three characteristic behaviours: masculine self-presentation, distancing from junior women and reinforcing the gender hierarchy.¹⁶ This section will examine each behaviour with a focus on how it influences female attrition in the CAF.

Queen Bee Behaviour #1: Masculine Self-Presentation

Stereotypes about successful leaders and gender roles of women are incongruent.¹⁷ To cope in a male-dominated workplace, QBs seek individual mobility and assimilate into the dominant masculine culture. Assimilation takes shape through changes to mannerisms, leadership style, and personal image. Several studies have shown these women will “describe themselves as equally or even more masculine (e.g. assertive,

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 466.

¹⁶ Derks et al., *Do Sexist Organizational Cultures Create the Queen Bee?* . . . , 519.

¹⁷ Tshilidzi Netshitangani, "Queen Bee Syndrome: Examining Ubuntu Philosophy in Women's Leadership," (2019): 204.

competitive, risk-taking) than their male peers.”¹⁸ They are also less likely to report experiencing discrimination than other women.¹⁹

As of 2018, out of 130 Generals/Admirals in the CAF, only 10 were women.²⁰ With so few women in senior positions, there is no widely accepted image or norms for how a female officer, or soldier, should look or behave. This reality gives the power to define what is acceptable, both implicitly and explicitly, in the hands of very few women. Moreover, while QBs do their best to blend into the masculine norm, this makes them particularly strict and judgmental of women who do not conform to their definition of what is acceptable.²¹

Perhaps not surprisingly, women in the workplace “have a simultaneous fascination and repulsion towards women’s bodies and appearance.”²² In the case of QBs, who have already assumed a more masculine image, their efforts to counsel junior women on acceptable mannerisms, image, and leadership style fall into the realm of negative criticism, more aptly defined as intra-gender microaggression:

psychosocial relations which can be subtle, invisible or intangible, non-physical, hostile and verbal and serve to harm, damage, victimize, sabotage, manipulate or undermine the target’s doing of gender (well and differently)...[and] negatively impact the target’s self-worth, self-esteem, self-image, character, reputation, confidence, credibility and/or status.²³

¹⁸ Derks et al., *The Queen Bee Phenomenon: Why Women Leaders Distance Themselves from Junior Women* . . . , 466.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Pierotti, *Barriers to Women in the Canadian Armed Forces* . . . , 24.

²¹ Klea Faniko, Naomi Ellemers, and Belle Derks, "Queen Bees and Alpha Males: Are Successful Women More Competitive than Successful Men?" *European Journal of Social Psychology* 46, no. 7 (2016): 911.

²² Sharon Mavin, Gina Grandy and Jannine Williams, "Experiences of Women Elite Leaders Doing Gender: Intra-gender Micro-violence between Women," *British Journal of Management* 25, no. 3 (2014): 451.

²³ *Ibid.*, 445.

When junior women are subject to microaggressions from senior women, these exchanges are internalized much deeper than if they were to come from a male supervisor.²⁴ The message they receive is, to be successful, they must downplay their femininity. To reinforce that point, a study in 2008 found women with female supervisors were more likely to report feeling anxious and experience negative health effects than with male supervisors.²⁵

Knowing the QB phenomenon is present within the institution, it should come as no surprise that the longer a woman is socialized in the CAF, the less likely they are to cite masculine culture or 'lack of fit with military lifestyle' as reasons for leaving.²⁶ Equally concerning, release statistics from 2019 show occupations with higher representations of women, like logistics occupations with 42% women, experience higher attrition rates.²⁷ While exit and retention surveys have yet to explore the causation of intra-gender relations on these statistics, it is worth noting that the QB phenomenon has been shown to promote higher attrition rates in women.²⁸ While it remains unclear what factors are pushing women to leave, it is reasonable to suggest that targeted microaggressions are not encouraging them to stay.

²⁴ Faniko et al., *Queen Bees and Alpha Males: Are Successful Women More Competitive than Successful Men?* . . . , 911.

²⁵ Derks et al., *The Queen Bee Phenomenon: Why Women Leaders Distance Themselves from Junior Women* . . . , 464.

²⁶ Bremner et al., *CAF Exit Survey - Descriptive Analyses of 2013-2017 Data* . . . , 72.

²⁷ National Defence, *Draft: CAF Retention Strategy* (Ottawa: Chief of Military Personnel, Plans and Strategy). n.d., 9.

²⁸ Belle Derks, Naomi Ellemers, Collette van Laar, and Kim de Groot, "Gender-Bias Primes Elicit Queen-Bee Responses among Senior Policewomen," *Psychological Science* 22, no. 10 (2011): 1244.

Queen Bee Behaviour #2: Distancing from Junior Women

QBs feel they have earned their executive status after making personal sacrifices and having to endure social identity threat along the way. An unfortunate consequence of this mindset is the need to self-distance from their gender group to lessen any further association with undesirable stereotypes.²⁹ Belle Derks, Colette Van Laar, and Naomi Ellemers, three esteemed psychologists whose research is focused on gender stereotypes, explain how the cards are stacked against women in male-dominated organizations:

Women are expected to take primary responsibility for their family, but achieving career success requires that they prioritize their work over other life domains. For instance, women in leadership positions are more likely than men in such positions to be single or childless. As a result, senior women may feel that they have made substantial sacrifices in their personal life, such as in relationships with their partner and friends and in their decision to have children.³⁰

The more personal life sacrifices a woman makes to overcome stereotyped expectations throughout their career, the greater the likelihood of a QB response.³¹ This explains why QBs feel more committed to their careers and are less likely to support women who heavily identify with their gender or put their family first.³² This stance is also synonymous with the notion that women in the CAF would rather be seen as a ‘soldier first’, as opposed to a ‘female soldier’, which denotes weakness attributed to a gendered conception of female.³³ This behaviour, in turn, leads junior women to “internalize their low position and blame themselves for the lack of career advancement

²⁹ Derks et al., *The Queen Bee Phenomenon: Why Women Leaders Distance Themselves from Junior Women* . . . , 461.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Faniko et al., *Queen Bees and Alpha Males: Are Successful Women More Competitive than Successful Men?* . . . , 903.

³³ Brown et al., *Dancing Around Gender: Changing Identity in a Post Deschamps Military* . . . , 42.

by considering themselves as less career-committed than those women who have been successful.”³⁴

While promoting the idea that junior women are less committed to their careers does perpetuate a gendered hierarchy, it is a slippery slope to suggest QBs, and not the unjust system, are to blame for the marginalization of women. That said, these women do have a role to play in legitimizing the status quo. As the CAF grapples with retaining women, strategists must be cognizant of the drivers promoting the idea that women must be willing to make personal sacrifices to advance in the organization.

Queen Bee Behaviour #3: Legitimizing the Status Quo

Appointing QBs into influential positions legitimizes a masculine culture in two ways. First, it presents a powerful image that the system is fair and that the glass ceiling has been broken. Second, QBs consistently deny that gender discrimination exists.³⁵ Further, because QB views are rarely seen as sexist, based on the falsehood that one cannot be biased to one’s gender, this allows the behaviour to go unchecked.³⁶ The risk of having these women in senior positions is that societal and political pressures to promote opportunities for women are seen and reported to be met and underlying gender stereotypes that serve to devalue women are allowed to persist.³⁷

³⁴ Klea Faniko, Naomi Ellemers, Belle Derks, and Fabio Lorenzi-Ciodi, "Nothing Changes, Really: Why Women Who Break through the Glass Ceiling End Up Reinforcing It," *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* 43, no. 5 (2017): 648.

³⁵ Mavin et al., *Experiences of Women Elite Leaders Doing Gender: Intra-gender Micro-violence between Women . . .*, 447.

³⁶ Derks et al., *The Queen Bee Phenomenon: Why Women Leaders Distance Themselves from Junior Women . . .*, 464.

³⁷ Andrea C. Vial, Jaime L. Napier and Victoria L. Brescoll, "A Bed of Thorns: Female Leaders and the Self-Reinforcing Cycle of Illegitimacy," *The Leadership Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2016): 410.

QBs are threatened by efforts to “roll out the red carpet for women”, as it undermines their sacrifices and experience with sexism:

Queen Bees express discomfort with other women’s expectations that ‘women can have it all’ in that work–life balance and caring responsibilities (doing gender well) are somehow not quite in keeping with elite leader positions (which requires doing gender differently). This reinforces the masculine symbolic order in that women should not expect the (patriarchal) system to ‘bend’ to them when they become mothers.³⁸

A counterargument to the QB phenomenon is to suggest women are simply more critical and competitive with one another than they are towards men. This view relies on the stereotype that women should be empathetic and nurturing to other women, while men can continue to compete for higher positions.³⁹ This argument over competition falls flat when researchers explain how QBs are averse to gender quotas that target junior women, yet are comfortable with quotas and other opportunities targeted at their level and higher in the organization.⁴⁰ This nuance shows how the QB response is not about competition between women, but instead is about reinforcing the gendered stereotype that women who do not make sacrifices in their personal life are less committed and deserving of higher rank.⁴¹ This perspective should be particularly concerning to strategists when considering the importance of senior women as change agents in the CAF and their level of influence over targeted recruiting and retention efforts.

³⁸ Sharon Mavin, Gina Grandy, and Jannine Williams, "Experiences of Women Elite Leaders Doing Gender: Intra-gender Micro-violence between Women," *British Journal of Management* 25, no. 3 (2014): 447.

³⁹ Derks et al., *The Queen Bee Phenomenon: Why Women Leaders Distance Themselves from Junior Women . . .*, 465.

⁴⁰ Faniko et al., *Nothing Changes, Really: Why Women Who Break through the Glass Ceiling End Up Reinforcing It . . .*, 644.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

The goal of a QB is to advance in the organization. With sexism often implicit, the message conveyed by QBs is the lack of women at the top is due to deservingness and level of career commitment, which devalues claims of illegitimacy in the system.⁴² Denying the existence of an unjust system and devaluing those that suggest otherwise, legitimizes the status quo and does little to inspire junior women to advance in the organization.

THE GENDER-NEUTRAL SMOKESCREEN

The QB phenomenon describes how some senior women are “less supportive of the advancement of other women, express more gender-biased perceptions of other women’s career commitment and become less supportive of equal-opportunity programs as they advance in the organization”.⁴³ Understanding how this behaviour reinforces an idealized masculine culture in the CAF is critical to the development of effective retention strategies. This section will explore why the QB phenomenon is not the driving issue needing to be reconciled in the CAF, given that it is a consequence of gender discrimination.

Undermining Gender Equality

In 1989, following a Canadian Human Rights Commission Tribunal, all trades, except those working on submarines, were opened to women.⁴⁴ While this ruling removed some barriers that explicitly discriminated against women, the CAF has continued to struggle with increasing its representation of women. Professor Brown and

⁴² Netshitangani, *Queen Bee Syndrome: Examining Ubuntu Philosophy in Women's Leadership* . . . , 206.

⁴³ Derks et al., *Gender-Bias Primes Elicit Queen-Bee Responses among Senior Policewomen* . . . , 1244.

⁴⁴ Gauthier, Houlden, *Brown v. Canadian Armed Forces* (Canadian Human Rights Commission, Tribunal Decision 3/89), [1989].

Dr. Okros, two esteemed CAF advisors and researchers in gender and diversity, explain how the decision shortly after the Tribunal to promote the idea of a gender-neutral soldier in the CAF has undermined gender equality:

The gender-neutral soldier has remained a masculinized ideal because changing the language used to refer to the soldier has not necessarily affected the male-dominant culture that existed prior to that change. Moreover, a common unwillingness to address gender, gender relations, and the effects that gender neutrality has had on CAF members has enabled the specific and problematically gendered ideal of the combat warrior identity... [T]he institutionally prevalent identity of combat warrior is nevertheless understood through an essentially masculine framework in which male is equated with strength and female is equated with weakness.⁴⁵

A central theme behind Canada's Defence Policy Strong, Secure, Engaged is "respect for diversity and human rights".⁴⁶ Paradoxically, the decision to promote a gender-neutral soldier, while well-intentioned, effectively discriminates against women and other minority groups in the CAF. Consider the implications of what happened at KPN, a Dutch telecommunication company that stopped using gender quotas for that very reason. The company's rationale for stopping quotas was:

While they were looking for senior women who, based on their femininity would bring other values, insights, and qualities to the company, the women who were promoted were in their behaviour and competencies very similar to the men who were already there, including their shortcomings.⁴⁷

While perhaps extreme, KPN serves as a warning that having QBs at senior levels limits the diversity one can expect them to bring to the organization.

⁴⁵ Brown et al., *Dancing Around Gender: Changing Identity in a Post Deschamps Military . . .*, 42.

⁴⁶ National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy . . .*, 12.

⁴⁷ Netshitangani, *Queen Bee Syndrome: Examining Ubuntu Philosophy in Women's Leadership . . .*, 207.

Underneath the gender-neutral smokescreen lies an idealized male soldier that has continued to reinforce stereotypical norms in the CAF. The broader implication of the QB phenomenon is that the CAF cannot reap the benefits of a diversified workforce when senior women have assimilated into the masculine framework.⁴⁸ Understanding how these correlations reinforce a gendered hierarchy and invite behavioural changes in senior women is important for strategists to understand as they embark on the development of targeted retention plans.

HOW TO FIGHT THE QUEEN BEE PHENOMENON

With societal norms changing and the push for more gender equality in the workplace, it is possible the QB response is generational and that with time its pervasiveness will slowly phase out.⁴⁹ Yet, with so few women in the CAF, there is a strong likelihood that left unchecked the behaviour will persist. For this reason, retention strategists need to appreciate the unique challenges facing women in the CAF before embarking on targeted retention plans. This will be particularly challenging as exit strategies and retention surveys have failed to draw out the context needed to draw meaningful gender-based conclusions. Without context behind why women are leaving the CAF, strategists will have difficulty developing effective retention plans.

The QB phenomenon rests on the notion that the system is legitimate. Bringing awareness to the illegitimacy of the system has been shown to promote “higher identification with one's group, further promoting collective rather than individual coping

⁴⁸ Derks et al., *Gender-Bias Primes Elicit Queen-Bee Responses among Senior Policewomen . . .*, 1244.

⁴⁹ Marianne Cooper, "Why Women (Sometimes) Don't Help Other Women," *The Atlantic*, 23 June 2016.

strategies.”⁵⁰ Instituting qualitative approaches, like focus groups, would not only help strategists develop more informed retention plans but would also provide the venue needed for collective awareness and guided self-reflection.⁵¹ Drawing attention to deep-seated negative bias and how the system is illegitimate could be an effective strategy to motivate QBs towards making positive changes for junior women.

Another area needing attention is mentorship in the CAF. Junior women in the CAF are desperately in need of female mentors. To assume senior women have the tools to do this effectively ignores the possibility that gender bias might be present and that harmful microaggressions will undermine the effort. QBs need to be shown how they have unknowingly guided junior women down the path of assimilation. Reminding them that feminine leadership traits are desired by the institution and that junior women are equally committed to their careers may lessen the degree of microaggression directed at junior women.

Finally, while focus groups and self-reflection are important steps to alter QB behaviour, strategies that promote a CAF culture that embraces diversity and reduces negative stereotypes should be the ultimate goal. Understanding how the gender-neutral soldier reinforces the QB response and, more broadly, reinforces gender stereotypes in the CAF should be what informs the development of effective culture change initiatives going forward. From there, applying gender-based analysis to all retention strategies and

⁵⁰ Derks et al., *The Queen Bee Phenomenon: Why Women Leaders Distance Themselves from Junior Women* . . . , 466.

⁵¹ Vanessa Brown and Alan Okros, "Unlearning Stranger Danger: Developing Cultural Competence in Canadian Military Professionals through Collective Learning and Self-Reflection," in *Warriors or Peacekeepers? Building Military Cultural Competence*. (Springer International Publishing, 2020): 79.

promoting initiatives as open to all gender groups should limit the likelihood of backlash on the very groups these retention plans set out to support.

CONCLUSION

As a renowned champion of women's rights, Canada has no choice but to increase its representation of women in the CAF or risk losing credibility with its citizens, the United Nations, and the international community. While recruiting efforts will be what gets women in the door, the CAF will be judged on how well retention plans maintain that 25% level. To be effective, strategists must understand how the QB phenomenon is both a consequence of and a contributor to gender discrimination in the CAF.

While social identity threat extends well beyond the confines of men and women as gender groups, this paper focused on how intra-gender relations, specifically between senior and junior women in the CAF, are influencing attrition rates. An idealized masculine culture is leading some senior women to adopt QB behaviour. This, in turn, sends negative signals to junior women that, to be successful in the organization, they must downplay their femininity and make personal sacrifices. To deny the presence of the QB phenomenon in the CAF would be to deny the experience of every female member who has ever felt criticized or shamed by a senior woman for thinking they had what it takes to make it in the organization.

In the short term, targeted focus groups, deep self-reflection, and mentorship training will bring awareness to those who hold deep-seated biases and will stop well-intentioned senior women in the CAF from unknowingly using microaggressions when counselling junior women. That said, the hard work ahead is on the institution to address

the masculinized ideals behind the gender-neutral soldier. So long as women continue to view their gender as a liability, the QB phenomenon will persist.⁵²

⁵² Belle Derks, et al., *Gender-Bias Primes Elicit Queen-Bee Responses among Senior Policewomen . . .*, 1248.

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