

Is the Missions Textbook Doomed? The Use of Missions Related Texts in Spring 2024

The logo for the Evangelical Missiological Society (ems) is displayed in orange lowercase letters within a dark blue circular background.

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Abstract

Concerns about the costs of textbooks, and the neglect of their use, are driving university leaders to consider alternatives to traditional publishers. This study examined 315 coursebook requirements, representing 249 unique titles in 112 courses from 35 institutions. I compared the frequency of authors, titles and publishers to the available missiological books that have been published by nine major publishers. This comparison reveals which concepts are represented in the courses, and which concepts are not covered. The study also looks at the mean cost of textbooks per course and the mean age of texts, as well as the percentage of textbooks that are authored by the professor of the course, and the percentage authored by women, a person of color from the USA, or someone from a non-western country. The findings of this study are that the use of missiological textbooks remains strong. A broad scope of the available missiological literature was selected as required reading for courses in spring 2024, meaning there were no widely used texts or “celebrity authors.” Despite the broad selection of readings, some themes of missiology—whether longstanding or emerging—were absent from the required reading.

Keywords: *textbooks, missiology, evangelical publishing*

A few years ago, I pitched an idea to a publisher of missions books. After politely declining my proposal, she asked me, “Why don’t you research what books are currently being used in missions courses throughout the country? That would help us as publishers know what the market needs are.” I immediately saw the usefulness of such a study for authors as well, because virtually all book proposals for academic presses ask such daunting questions as, *How is the book different from what is currently on the market? How is the book similar to what is on the market? What courses will the book be used in?*

How could an aspiring author of missions books answer such questions without first surveying the textbook use within missions courses throughout the country? Not only would authors and publishers find this information to be invaluable from a marketing and acquisition standpoint, professors would also be interested to know current trends as they adopt textbooks for their classes. And missiologists could analyze the topics, themes and theories in those course texts to understand the trends that are shaping the next generation of missionaries.

This article examines the required reading in missions courses that were used in spring 2024 across the USA, in order to answer the following questions:

1. How does the selection of authors and texts reflect (or fail to reflect) the “pool” of missiological scholarship that is available, and what does it indicate about current trends in missionary training?
2. How does the cost of missiological textbooks per course compare to national trends, and is there a significant difference in cost between graduate and undergraduate courses?
3. To what extent are professors adopting texts by women, US people of color, and non-Western authors?

Review of Literature

In order to analyze textbook use in missions courses, two concepts must be reviewed from the literature. First, what are current trends in textbook use across the USA? And second, how can a “benchmark” of the missiological corpus be established, in order to compare published works against the selection of texts in missions courses in spring 2024? Both of these topics are briefly discussed below.

The Changing Landscape of College Textbooks

Despite the fact that 90% of students feared they would suffer academically if they did not buy their textbooks, 63% of students skipped a textbook purchase in 2019— and this number went up to 65% in 2020 (Kim 2021). Many students still buy their textbooks, even if they do not use them. A 2018 study of 1065 students showed that the mean spending per semester on textbooks was \$223.38 (Research and Markets 2018). This equals roughly \$55 in textbooks per course.

Yet a convenience sample of 105 college students found that 52% did not read their assigned chapters (Aagard, Conner & Skidmore 2014: 136). In a qualitative study of 18 students, participants reported that they bought their textbooks in case they need them for reference, and were irritated if professors required a textbook without ever having them refer to it for an assignment (Aagard & Skidmore 2009). Neglecting to interact with reading materials within the class time is a widespread problem in universities. In a Florida study with more than 13,000 participants, students reported they bought an average of 2.6 required textbooks that were never required to be used in the courses (Office of Distance Learning 2022: 4).

Clearly, the usefulness of textbooks depends not only on the quality of the text, but on how the professor uses the text in class. For starters, students said they would at least skim the readings if their quizzes included questions that were only covered in the textbooks (Aagard & Skidmore 2009). But beyond that, students may need rich classroom discussions about how to critically interact with the course readings (Knight 2015).

Because college administrators are concerned about the cost of textbooks — especially the ones that go completely unread—some colleges are abandoning traditional textbooks for completely free open-source materials, saving students “as much as \$1,300 a year” (Douglas-Gabriel 2016). One university is even paying professors \$5000 stipends to write open educational resources (OERs) in lieu of requiring textbooks (Snyder 2019). As of 2022, 55.6% of US colleges students had access to an OER (Office of Distance Learning 2022: 7).

As I designed the current study, I wondered if the traditional missions textbook was destined to be replaced by such open-source materials. To what extent are professors still requiring students to purchase actual books?

The Curriculum for Missiology

I also wanted to know what qualifies as a “missiological text.” The curriculum for missiology is not as stable as it is in certain other professional training programs like nursing or engineering. There is no accrediting body that determines the competencies or theories that students must learn, and no canon of literature has emerged. This lack of standardization makes it difficult to determine if a particular book is, in fact, missiological. When does a church growth book count as a missiology text? If a professor requires a secular text on microloans for a course on international community development, does that count as a missiological textbook?

Elsewhere I have noted that, being highly interdisciplinary, missiology draws on other fields like communication theory, agriculture, the study of world religions, ecumenism, and community development (Nehrbass 2016: 56-57). Several schools that outlined a missiological curriculum drew on biblical studies, history of missions, engagement with other cultures, spiritual maturity, resilience, inner healing, evangelism, and provision of healthcare (Nehrbass, Dunaetz, & Jow 2024). Despite its ever-widening reach, the field of missiology does have some soft boundaries, delineated by the goal of making disciples across cultures.

In missiology, the space where these multiple disciplines converge is the purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission. Without that specific convergence, there would be social sciences, history, ethnotheology, etc., but there would be no missiology. Missiology exists when the study of God and the world is employed for the purpose of making disciples across cultures. (Nehrbass 2021: 30)

Of course, missiology is shaped by popular trends that come and go. Some, like “contextualization” have a longer “half-life” than others — (e.g., the church growth movement) (Nehrbass 2014). This current study looks at the textbook use in spring 2024 to answer which ideas have had a sufficiently long tail life that they capture the interest of professors and students. And are there any new subjects emerging that show up on the reading list for 2024?

The Texts Available for a Missiological Curriculum

This breadth of missiological curriculum is being published by nine main Christian presses; yet, as mentioned above, at times it can be difficult to determine if a book belongs in the category of missions/missiology. It is a realistic judgment that all 300 titles from William Carey Publishing (WCP) are on missions. The imprints of Wipf and Stock do not have a category called “missions,” but an analysis of their listings published in the last ten years includes over 350 books related to making disciples across cultures (note this is the criteria described above, for determining whether a book falls under the rubric of missiology).¹ Like Wipf and Stock, Orbis does not have a subcategory of missions, but an analysis of their catalog reveals roughly 120 books related to the history of missions, global Christianity and cross-cultural ministry. Eerdmans has 54 titles in their missions category (20 published in the last ten years) and Intervarsity Press (IVP) Academic lists 167. Of 9,856 books published by the imprints of

¹ This count excludes books that are useful in missions courses but that are not specifically about missions, such as community development (in general), or outreach (in general).

Baker Books (this includes Baker Academic, Bethany, Revell and Brazos), 121 are in their intercultural studies or missions category (30 have been published in the last five years). Zondervan is a much smaller player in the missiological space, and does not have a subcategory for missions books. Of 2,084 titles, only 19 are directly related to making disciples across cultures. Langham Academic has roughly 94 titles related to missions or contextual theology in English. And Crossway has 41 titles in the missions and evangelism category. In all, there are just over 1100 missions-related options for textbooks available from these eight major publishers alone. A pool of 1100 potential textbooks seems manageable enough to wade through. For this study, I wanted to know, *what percentage of these books are actually being used in courses?*

Method

I used two non-probabilistic approaches to compile a list of textbooks that were required for missions courses in spring of 2024 in the USA. First, I assembled a list of universities and seminaries that offer degrees in intercultural studies, global studies, or missions. In many cases, those universities have public-facing online bookstores; so I was able to select the spring 2024 missions-related courses on those websites, and the required texts appeared in my virtual “cart.”

However, universities that use an online textbook service called Slingshot often require a valid student ID to query the textbooks and course offerings. In these cases, I reached out to professors and asked for a list of their missions coursebooks for spring 2024.

Ultimately, I collected 315 entries, representing 249 unique textbooks in 113 courses (39% graduate level) from 35 seminaries and universities. Below is an analysis of the textbooks they selected for those classes.

Limitations

In order to bracket my own bias as an evangelical, I used the Lightcast research service to identify eligible conciliar and evangelical² universities and seminaries in the USA. Delimiting the study to only “missions”, “intercultural studies” and “global studies” programs may have elided mainline schools. Additionally, because this study relied on convenience sampling, I found it easier to leverage my strong ties with evangelical professors, and found it more difficult to leverage my weaker ties with professors at conciliar or mainline schools.

²Seventh Day Adventist universities were excluded.

Findings

First, it is encouraging to see how many universities are offering missions courses, given that the BA degree in missions has experienced a 35% decline since 2018, the BA in intercultural studies (ICS) has experienced a 26% decline and graduate degrees in missions have experienced a 30% decline in the same period.³

And it is encouraging that the missions textbook is not dead. There was not a single course in spring 2024 that abstained from the use of textbooks. The findings of this study are that a broad selection of the available missiological literature was selected as required reading for courses in spring 2024. There are no widely-used texts or “celebrity authors.” Despite the broad selection of readings, some themes of missiology—whether longstanding or emerging—were absent from the required reading.

The cost and age of the textbooks

The mean age of coursebooks was 11.4 years ($SD = 7.7$), with a wide range of publication dates from 1978 (Kane 1978) to 2024. There was no statistically significant difference between the age of course books used in graduate courses (with a mean age of 11.6 years, $SD=6.8$) or undergraduate courses (with a mean age of 11.4 years, $SD=9.2$).

The mean cost of textbooks per course was \$68.67 with a wide range from \$11 to \$323.76 ($SD=\$49.15$). With a mean price of \$26.27 ($SD=\16.12) per text, students are buying between 2 and 3 missions texts per course. Because graduate courses have a longer reading list, there was a statistically significant difference in the cost of undergraduate courses compared to graduate ones — \$48.95 compared to \$100.24 respectively, $t(65) = 5.6$, $p < .001$.

The texts being used

There is no textbook that is broadly used in missions curricula. The text with the largest influence is *Perspectives* (Winter & Hawthorne 2009) with a frequency of 6 in the sample. Table 1 on the next page shows all titles that appeared in three or more courses of the study sample in spring 2024.

³This information comes from the Lightcast reports, based on reporting to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Graduate degrees in intercultural studies have experienced a 5% growth since 2018. The Lightcast report includes some public institutions that offer intercultural studies or global studies degrees.

Table 1: Most frequently used missions textbooks spring 2024

Title	Frequency	% of market share in college courses
<i>Perspectives On The World Christian Movement 4th Ed.</i> (Winter & Hawthorne 2009)	6	5%
<i>From Jerusalem To Iran Jaya</i> (Tucker 2004)	5	4%
<i>Introducing World Missions</i> (Moreau, Corwin & McGee 2015)	5	4%
<i>Invitation To World Missions</i> (Tennent 2010)	5	4%
<i>Effective Intercultural Communication</i> (Moreau, Campbell & Greener 2014)	4	3.5%
<i>Mission Of God</i> (Wright, 2006)	4	3.5%
<i>Cross Cultural Connections</i> (Elmer 2002)	3	2.7%
<i>Cross Cultural Servanthood</i> (Elmer 2006)	3	2.7%
<i>Holistic Mission: God's Plan For God's People</i> (Woolnough 2010)	3	2.7%
<i>Introducing Christian Mission Today</i> (Goheen 2014)	3	2.7%
<i>The Celtic Way Of Evangelism</i> (Hunter 2011)	3	2.7%
<i>Transforming Mission</i> (Bosch 1991)	3	2.7%

Given that across the USA there were 539 “completions”⁴ of BA degrees in missions and ICS combined, and 507 graduate degrees in missions and ICS combined, a textbook that has 5% market share will be used by only 52 students of missions, annually⁵. Yet if, as noted above, only 50% of students even purchase their textbook, the highest achievable annual sales *as a required textbook* is more likely to be about 26 copies.⁶

Of course, students who are majoring in other disciplines are also taking these missions-related courses; so, if they are also buying the required textbooks for these courses (and if these missions-related textbooks are being used in non-missions courses, such as introductory ministry courses) the sales will be higher — perhaps significantly higher. This would mean that the missions textbook — as a textbook for students of missions — will have slim sales; but books that are meant for wider audiences may fare better.

⁴This is the term that the Lightcast report uses for graduating students.

⁵Of course, these courses may have higher enrollments if they include students from other majors; and textbooks have other avenues for sales, beyond the classroom.

⁶These low numbers seem credible to those of us who receive annual sales reports from our missions book publishers.

The Heterogeneity in Textbook Selection

The section above referenced a pool of 1100 textbooks available through the nine major publishers of books on missions. In this sample of courses from Spring 2024, 166 (15%) of the books in that corpus of missions books from those nine publishers were adopted for use. The other 57 texts in the sample for this study were released by other Christian publishers like Moody and B&H; and 26 titles in this study were published by secular presses.

In other words, one in eight (15%) of the missions texts published by the “big nine” were actually used in the missions course sample in spring 2024. These seem like good odds: a professor has a one-in-eight chance of having his or her book adopted into the curriculum. But another way to look at this is that the broad selection of texts means that the corpus is spread very thin. While the canon of missiological textbooks may have been fairly standardized in the 1990s — drawing on “celebrity missiologists” like Charles Kraft, Sherwood Lingenfelter, Paul Hiebert, and Lamin Sanneh— there is not the same degree of homogenization today. One in eight missiological titles is adopted in any given semester.

This raises the question, is the corpus spread so thin because every professor is using his or her own book? The data from this sample show that only 4.8% of coursebooks are authored by the professor, so this cannot be the reason for such heterogeneity in coursebook selection. Instead, the lack of “celebrity texts” seems to be due to the fact that missiology is such an unstandardized discipline, and draws from an increasingly broad number of fields.

One reason for the lack of a “celebrity text” may be the large pool of texts to draw from. Every year, more missions textbooks are published, so the pool keeps expanding. It is much larger than it was in 1980, or 1990. So *choice* has replaced hegemony of a few “celebrity” texts.

The Authors in Missions Course Textbook Selection

While there was great heterogeneity in textbook selection, there are eleven authors who appeared in five or more courses across the USA in spring 2024 as highlighted in the following table.

Table 2: Authors who appeared as author, co-author or editor in five or more courses in spring 2024

Author	Titles	# of Courses Represented	Market Share of Courses
Moreau, A. Scott	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Contextualizing the Faith</i> • <i>Effective Intercultural Communication</i> • <i>Introducing World Missions</i> 	10	9%
Smither, Ed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Christian mission</i> • <i>Mission as Hospitality</i> • <i>Mission in the Early Church</i> • <i>Augustine as Mentor</i> • <i>Missionary Monks</i> • <i>Mission in Praise, Word, and Deed</i> 	8	7%
Wright, Christopher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Old Testament Ethics for the People of God</i> • <i>The Mission of God's People</i> 	8	7%
Tennent, Timothy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Invitation to world missions</i> • <i>Christianity at the Religious Roundtable</i> 	8	7%
Elmer, Duane	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Learning Cycle</i> • <i>Cross-cultural conflict</i> • <i>Cross-Cultural Connections</i> • <i>Cross-Cultural Servanthood</i> 	7	6%
Ott, Craig	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Teaching and Learning Across Cultures</i> • <i>Mission of the Church</i> • <i>Encountering Theology of Mission</i> • <i>Global Church Planting</i> 	6	5%
Winter, Ralph & Hawthorne, Steven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Perspectives on the World Christian Movement</i> 	6	5%
Goheen, Michael	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story</i> • <i>Introducing Christian Mission Today</i> • <i>Reading the Bible Missionally</i> 	5	4%
Steffen, Tom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Return of Oral Hermeneutics</i> • <i>Encountering Missionary Life and Work</i> 	5	4%
Tucker, Ruth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya</i> 	5	4%

It does appear that one key to being a frequently-used-author is to have multiple titles available. All of these authors are prolific, and the above selection of texts is just a portion of the books published by those eleven authors.

Note that only one of the eleven “frequent authors” (or editors) above is a woman, and all are white; all but one is still alive.⁷ Only 3% of courses had a coursebook by at least one author who is a US person of color, and 7% had at least one author from a non-western country.

⁷ However, *Perspectives* has contributions from women and people of color.

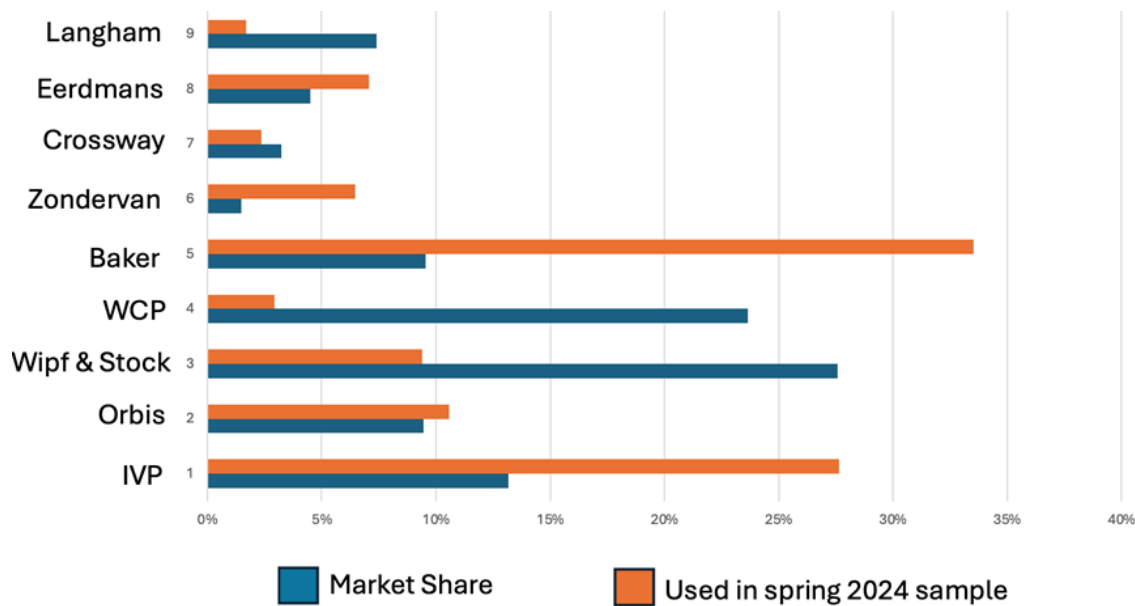
The lack of diversity among the authors who are selected for missions textbooks is notable, but likely represents the level of diversity within the available missiological corpus in English (excluding Langham, which represents majority world authors). Among the required textbooks, 14% had at least one female author, whereas 22% of texts published with WCP have a female author, compared to 17% of missions books with Eerdmans, 13% with IVP Academic, 9% with Baker and 7% with Crossway. It is much more difficult to determine the percentage of books within the missiological corpus that are authored by a US person of color or a person who is from a non-western country.

The Representation of Missions Publishers in Textbook Selection

Figure 1 on the next page shows that some publishers are over-represented while others are under-represented in missions courses. Zondervan has only a 1% percent of market share of published missions books, but has 6.5% of market share in the sample of missions courses, and Baker has 10% of missions books but has a 33% share of the required course texts in the sample. On the other hand, WCP has 24% market share of published missions books, but only 3% share of the books used in missions courses. Likewise, Wipf and Stock's imprints have a 30% market share of missions textbooks but only have 9.5% of the share in required courses, and Langham has 7% of available missions textbooks but only 1.5% use in the spring 2024 sample. This mismatch in representation may be largely due to budgets available for marketing. Langham and Wipf and Stock and WCP have far fewer resources for marketing than Baker and Zondervan have. The mismatch may also be related to sentiment about publishers' rigor. However, Langham, WCP and Wipf and Stock have published a trove of valuable missiological resources, including the monographs for the Evangelical Missiological Society (none of which were used in this sample of 2024 missions courses). Lastly, publishers like Baker and Zondervan may be better-equipped to produce courses that can be adopted by professors — i.e., ones that can be integrated into Blackboard or Canvas, and that include heuristic devices.

Figure 1:

Market share of mission books, compared to share in the missions courses



Heterogeneity of Topics

While authors of textbooks may be encouraged that one in eight missions texts “out there” ends up in a missions course, this means that seven out of eight are not being adopted for courses. One reason is that much of the published missiological scholarship — in an effort to be specialized enough to make a significant contribution— is too narrow for use in a classroom. For example, Shakwelele’s (2023) study of ancestor veneration among the Bisa people and Wood’s (2023) study of male leadership in Mongolia both contribute to the field of ethnotheology, but may be too specialized for use in a course on contextualization. Additionally, many useful biographies are being produced, but may be too obscure for wide appeal in the classroom, such as the recent biographies of Armenian relief worker Penelope Prior (Clifford 2024), or Assemblies of God missionary Noel Perkin (McKnight 2024).

To determine which topics were discussed (and elided) in the sample of courses in spring 2024, I read all of the textbook descriptions and then used initial and thematic codes to place the textbooks into categories (Bingham 2023). The following table shows the frequency of topics that did show up in the missions courses in spring 2024.

Table 3: Frequency of topics in the sample of missiology textbooks spring 2024

Topic	Frequency
Theology Of Missions	42
Intercultural Communication	27
Global Christianity, Contextualization	26
History Of Missions	24
Development, Holistic Mission	17
Evangelism, Discipleship	16
Diaspora, Migration, Refugees	15
World Religions	13
Missiology, Intro	13
Missiology, Comprehensive	13
Church Planting	7
Anthropology For Missionaries	6
Cross-Cultural Leadership	6
Intercultural Education	5
Missionary Life	5
Women In Missions	5
Islam	4
Missionary Biography	4
Racial Reconciliation	4
Urban Mission	3
Spiritual Warfare	3
Orality	3
Mobilization	2
Member Care	2

This list of themes is fairly comprehensive, and reflects the broad survey of missiological literature that has recently been produced (Nehrbass 2021: 282). Yet it also misses some of the current themes in the literature. For example, recently missiologists have taken interest in digital ministry (Robertson 2023). Additionally, longstanding missionary methods like theological field education (Trist 2023) and medical missions (Lee 2021) are also not represented in the courses even though scholarship is being published on these topics. There was apparently no focus on language learning in missions (Dormer 2021), persecution of Christians (Ripken 2014),

or ministering in honor-shame cultures (Georges & Baker 2016). And missionary strategies like peacebuilding (Anyanwu 2022; Scott, et al. 2021), chaplaincy (Linzy & Travis 2022), the arts (Balasundaram 2021; Gillard 2022; Whittaker 2021), as well as Bible translation and teaching English as a second language (Nehrbass 2021: 229-278) were also missing among topics in the sample from spring 2024.

Implications

This survey of textbook use in missiology brings to light several implications for practice:

- Make yourself aware of books from under-represented missions publishers like Langham, Wipf and Stock and William Carey Publishing.
- Reflect on how your coursebook selection can better reflect the diversity of authors within the missiological corpus.
- Be intentional about designing your book to be textbook-friendly. It should have bite-sized chapters, and should have heuristic devices like callouts, internet links, study questions, and activities.
- Be aware of topics that are currently being published in missiology, to see if these topics need to appear in the course content (e.g., peacebuilding, the arts, digital ministry).
- Consider whether your course's textbook requirements align with national trends regarding cost.
- Reflect on the way your course's learning activities and assessments compel students to not only read the texts, but interact critically with them.

Conclusion

Despite apparent troubles in the college textbook industry, published books continue to be a core learning activity for missions courses, and the cost per course is in line with national trends. There are no “celebrity texts” due to breadth of fields from which missions courses draw. The major topics reflect traditional missiological training, such as the theology of missions, global Christianity, and missiological anthropology. Islam, community development, urban missions and diaspora missions are still trending in the courses. Despite this broad interdisciplinarity, about eight in nine books by the major eight publishers of missions books are not represented in the mandatory reading.

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