Generations in the DGS Corpus: Evolving Outreach Activities and Cross-Generational Stories on Social Media in a Long-Term Corpus Project

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Abstract

Social media has become a powerful tool for research projects, community outreach, science communication, and to recruit participants. Due to its differences to traditional media and presentation modes, it provides a particular focus on producing very concise content that is entertaining and accessible while staying informative. In this paper, we describe how the long-term project DGS-Korpus, creators of a corpus and dictionary of German Sign Language, evolved its outreach strategies over time. One unique aspect of its unusually long project run-time of nineteen years is that it has involved several cases of multiple family members participating in the project at different points in time, resulting in cross-generational participation. The paper describes how the project's social media campaign uses these cross-generational connections to illustrate important aspects of the project, such as its relevance for cultural heritage and language identity, the different ways that members of the German deaf communities were and are involved in the project, and its relevance to interpersonal connections.

Keywords: sign language corpus, community outreach, science communication, social media dissemination, cross-generational participation

1. Introduction

Since the turn of the century, science communication has changed drastically, embracing new paths and formats for reaching its audiences (Kulczycki, 2013). As a long-term project with a run-time of nineteen years, the DGS-Korpus project (Prillwitz et al., 2008) has lived through the better part of these changes. In this article, we describe how it evolves and grows with these developments and how it embraces the unique opportunities of its generation-spanning community involvement.

Social media has been part of the internet since its beginnings as "nothing more than a giant Bulletin Board System" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 60), but its exact nature has evolved repeatedly, from bulletin boards and personal homepages to networking services, micro-blogging and short-form video sharing. Its growing ubiquity in people's lives, being available anywhere and anytime on personal computers and mobile devices, has led to a massive shift from traditional media to social media in terms of advertisement and public relations communication efforts (Allagui and Breslow, 2016). Aside from private use and commercial interests, social media has also become increasingly relevant for the purposes of science communication (Jia et al., 2017).

The DGS-Korpus project has had two phases of data collection, the first running from 2010–2012 and covering adults of all ages, and a second phase from 2024–2026 that focuses on young adults. Public outreach, in particular with the deaf[1] communities, has been a part of the project from the beginning. Aside from in-person activities, the outreach for the first phase focused on providing information via the project's website and on interaction through Facebook. With the shift to a younger generation in the second phase, the focus of online outreach efforts was moved to presenting short-form media on Instagram[2] and Mastodon[3]. A particular opportunity of this second phase lies in the time gap between the two data collection periods. Children and siblings of former participants or moderators who had been too young to take part in the first phase are now old enough to participate themselves.

In the remaining paper, section 2 offers an introduction of the DGS-Korpus project and deaf involvement in it. Section 3 provides an overview of the project's science communication strategy, describing its websites, considerations on accessible social media, and its various types of outreach activities. Section 4 focuses on the relevance of including different generations in the corpus and how this lead to a special social media campaign for the currently ongoing second data collection phase. Our discussion of the project's outreach and social media activities is concluded in section 5.

[1] For an elaboration of the project's decision to use "deaf" rather than "Deaf" or "d/Deaf" see Schulder et al. (2021, p. 19). A thorough discussion of the topic is also provided by Kusters et al. (2017).

[2] https://www.instagram.com/dgskorpusprojekt/

[3] https://fediscience.org/@dgskorpusprojekt/

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2. The DGS-Korpus Project

The DGS-Korpus project (Prillwitz et al., 2008) is a long-term project at the University of Hamburg, funded by the Union of German Academies of Sciences and Humanities and conducted at the Institute of German Sign Language and Communication of the Deaf (IDGS)[4]. It began in 2009 and has a run-time of nineteen years. Its primary goals are the creation of three resources:

- the *DGS Corpus*, a linguistic reference corpus of German Sign Language (DGS, *Deutsche Gebärdensprache*),
- the *Public DGS Corpus*, a fully annotated publicly released subset of the DGS Corpus,
- the *Digitales Wörterbuch DGS (DW-DGS)*, a digital dictionary of DGS primarily based on the DGS Corpus.

These resources were designed to fulfil multiple functions, working as a dataset for linguistic research, resources for sign language education, and as a cultural heritage resource, documenting the life experiences of members of the DGS language communities in Germany.

Data from the Public DGS Corpus are made available through a number of different portals that are optimised for different target groups, such as the deaf communities and researchers (both deaf and hearing) (Jahn et al., 2018) (see section 3.1 for details). Over time, the portals have been revised and expanded based on communities feedback and developments in the academic field (Hanke et al., 2020) and additional portals have been added (Konrad et al., 2024).

Giving back to the communities from which its object of study, German Sign Language, originates has been an integral part of the DGS-Korpus project from its inception. This is why the corpus was designed as a cultural heritage resource and why it has a dedicated communities portal. The project's outreach and science communication activities also reflect this, as has previously been described by Jahn et al. (2022).

2.1. Deaf Involvement

Research on sign languages must always involve the deaf communities that are the primary stakeholders of their sign languages (Harris et al., 2009). From the very beginning, the DGS-Korpus project worked together in a team of deaf and hearing staff members and at least for part of the project duration the project was also deaf-led with a deaf principal investigator. Even though, this currently is not the case due to organisational reasons, deaf researchers and annotators are active on all levels: as team members, moderators, focus group members, annotators, student assistants, and participants. We especially invest in the promotion of deaf academics, supporting and accompanying educational training and career building for young deaf researchers.

The main coordinators of participant searches in both data collection phases were well-connected deaf people from the respective regions of Germany. These later also acted as moderators during recording sessions, where their task was to guide participants through the different tasks of the data collection. These recording sessions always took place in a setting with only deaf people present (Schulder et al., 2021). After the first data collection phase, they also continued to work as an advisory board and focus group which provided invaluable feedback on various steps of the endeavour (Jahn et al., 2022).

Annotation of the recordings is performed by a group of deaf and hearing student assistants with sign language competence, supervised by deaf expert annotators who also take care of quality assurance and the anonymization of video data (for further details, see Schulder et al., 2021).

As part of the project's informed consent rules, participants have full control over their recordings and usage licences for the data were designed to protect the participants' rights (Schulder and Hanke, 2022).

2.2. Working with Minority Communities

When working with and in minority communities, ethical science practices are essential (Singleton et al., 2015; Harris et al., 2009). In addition to following recommended open science practices such as the FAIR principles (*Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable*) (Wilkinson et al., 2016), the DGS-Korpus project also aligns with the CARE principles (*Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility, Ethics*) (Carroll et al., 2020) on governance of data from minority communities, as is discussed by Schulder and Hanke (2022).

It is important that minority communities, such as the deaf communities, have control over the data that originated from them (Crasborn, 2010). Aside from ensuring participants' informed consent and appropriate data handling (Hanke et al., 2010), it is also essential to keep communities informed about and involved in research outputs, both in person and online. In-person interactions are facilitated through presentations, publications, exhibitions, events, interviews, etc. and by inviting an exchange of ideas and opinions, for instance at conferences, workshops, practical trainings of language teachers, and in guided tours of the project's

[4] https://www.idgs.uni-hamburg.de

facilities and open exhibitions. For online interaction with our communities, social media posts that focus on video or visual content are particularly helpful and successful.

3. Science Communication

In this section, we discuss various aspects of the DGS-Corpus project's science communication strategy. Section 3.1 describes the websites of the project and its resources, with a focus on their considerations regarding community needs. In section 3.2, we discuss how considerations of accessibility drove our choices in social media platform. Section 3.3 provides examples of our various outreach activities, both online and in person events.

3.1. Project Websites

The DGS-Korpus project provides a number of websites to disseminate information about the project in general and provide access to the resources it creates. These were designed with the goal in mind of giving back to the communities. See also the related discussions by Jahn et al. (2022) and Schulder and Hanke (2022).

The official project website[5] is presented in four languages: DGS, German, International Sign (IS), and English. We provide videos in DGS and IS for most of the written content. It is regularly updated with reports of events and presentations visited and held by the DGS Corpus team members.

Through the communities portal *MY DGS*[6] the Public DGS Corpus is presented to the deaf communities and all people interested in the cultural heritage and life experiences of participants. Its introduction, the only longer text, is provided in DGS and German. All other German text is kept to the minimum required for navigation. To also provide accessibility for visitors not yet fluent in DGS, videos come with optional German subtitles.

The research portal *MY DGS – annotated*[7] offers access to the recordings of *MY DGS*, enhanced by research materials, such as full sign annotations, translations into German and English, and body pose position data for computer-assisted analyses (Konrad et al., 2022; Schulder and Hanke, 2020). Designed for the international academic communities, the research portal interface was originally provided only in English, but in reaction to feedback from the deaf communities, a German interface was added (Hanke et al., 2020).

Additional portals allow for systematic corpus searches and a comparative linguistics approach via the web-based corpus query tool ANNIS (Isard and Konrad, 2022) and through iLex, the transcription environment used to create the DGS Corpus (Konrad et al., 2024).

Design of the dictionary *DW-DGS*[8] (Langer et al., 2024) also centres around the wealth and complexity of DGS and its position as an independent language, as can be seen in features such as its use of *micons*, moving sign icons designed to fit in with text layouts (Langer et al., 2018). The project website also provides a series of tutorials in DGS to acquaint visitors with the various functionalities of the dictionary.

3.2. Accessible Social Media

In science communication in general, but especially when concerning sign languages and deaf audiences, accessibility needs to be considered in a number of ways, such as language barriers, audience-appropriate messaging, but also regarding user privacy protection.

Naturally, deaf audiences should be reached through their preferred language and modality. That means visual materials are prioritised, especially video, as it is the only way to appropriately communicate in sign languages. This matters for project websites (see section 3.1), but also plays a great role in choosing social media platforms through which to communicate. The target community needs to be active on said platform and the platform's capabilities must allow for the intended communication formats (e.g. supporting video posts). As platform capabilities, community preferences and critical discourse on accessibility evolves, these choices also need to be revisited regularly.

During the 2010s, the platform of choice for reaching the German deaf communities was Facebook. Over time this has shifted, especially for younger generations, who are now more active on Instagram due to its focus on visual content.

A downside of these platforms is that they are commercial ventures that, while free to use, finance themselves in part through tracking, harvesting, repurposing and reselling user data. Access to posts on these platforms is often gated, either requiring visitors outright to create a user account and log in (thus allowing them to track users both on the platform and often other websites) or at least strongly urging them to do so by otherwise presenting a degraded user experience. The exact conditions of access can also change at any time, largely without recourse.

In response to this, alternative non-commercial open source platforms have gained popularity in recent years, especially a set of decentralised and cross-compatible services collectively known as

[5] https://www.dgs-korpus.de
[6] https://www.meine-dgs.de
[7] https://ling.meine-dgs.de
[8] https://www.dw-dgs.de

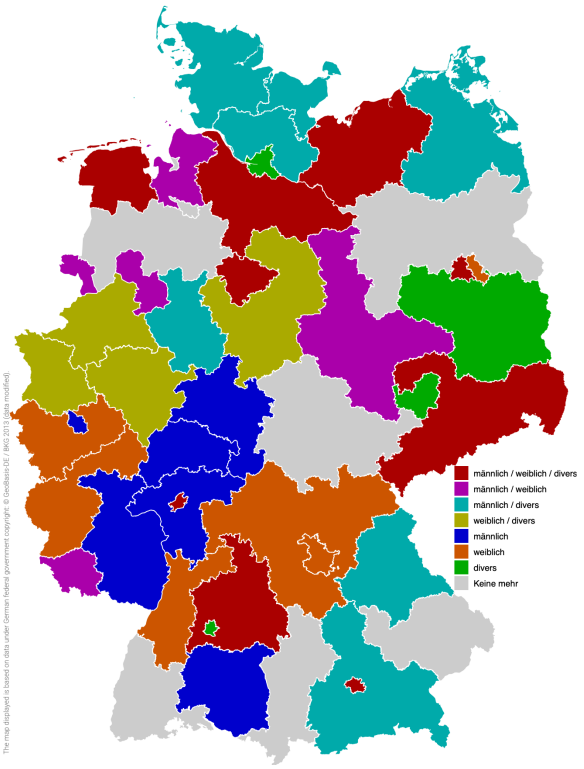

Figure 1: Example of progress map for participant search. Different colours indicate which genders are still missing in the respective region. Grey areas indicate that enough candidates were found.

the *Fediverse*. The most well known of these is *Mastodon*[9], which focusses on the short message *micro-blogging* format previously popularised by Twitter. Instances are hosted on a myriad of private or non-commercial servers in many different countries. These servers are linked to each other through shared open protocols without a centralised controlling authority, following a principle similar to that of email.

While deaf communities presence on the Fediverse is still small, the DGS-Korpus project chose to create an account on `fediscience.org`, a Mastodon instance for scientists hosted in Germany by the non-profit *Fediscience e.V.* The same content is now posted to Instagram and Mastodon, thus creating un-gated versions of all posts.[10]

3.3. Outreach Activities

Public relations activities of the DGS-Korpus project are a collaborative team effort. A small designated group of team members and students handle the social media accounts and coordinate other activities as one of their various project duties. All other team members support the effort by contributing to specific events and by providing suitable materials from their other activities (e.g. photos or video messages from public events). In the following, we describe some of our recent efforts. Further activities have also already been described by Jahn et al. (2022).

Aside from keeping people informed about the project's work in general, many outreach activities focus on making them acquainted with the resources the project has created, such as the Public DGS Corpus and the DW-DGS, and to show them how these resources can be of use to them. During data collection phases, an additional focus lies on the recruitment of participants.

3.3.1. Social Media

As the second data collection focussed on young signers between 18 and 33 years of age, outreach relied heavily on social media posts on Instagram (and later Mattermost), first to find moderators and then to support them in finding participants from their respective regions (see also section 2.1). For this, moderators would individually record short videos in which they would introduce themselves and the project and describe what region they were searching participants for. These videos were then shared on the project's social media accounts. (A later campaign focussing on cross-generational connections in the corpus is described in more detail in section 4.2.)

Each recruitment video would also show a map of Germany with regions being colour-coded to indicate their respective recruitment progress (see fig. 1). Different colours would indicate whether the project was still looking for male, female or non-binary candidates in that region. An up-to-date version of the map with interactive tooltips was also available on the project website.

3.3.2. Exhibitions

Another type of outreach activity is the project's presence in exhibitions. Since 2021, a media station about the project is part of a long-term exhibition at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, as described already by Jahn et al. (2022).

More recently, the DGS-Korpus project joined seven other long-term projects funded by the *Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Hamburg*[11] in the interactive exhibition *"Notwendig, nützlich, neu – Langzeitforschung in Hamburg"* ("Necessary, useful, new – Long-term research in Ham-

[9] `https://joinmastodon.org/`

[10] We also investigated other Fediverse platforms like *Pixelfed* and *PeerTube* that have a greater focus on image or video materials. Mastodon was chosen based on a number of factors, such as video size limitations, platform maturity, and availability of suitable servers.

[11] `https://www.awhamburg.de/`

Figure 2: The exhibition “Necessary, useful, new – Long-term research in Hamburg” at the Hamburg State and University Library Carl von Ossietzky. Photo © AdWHH / Jann Wilken

burg”).[12] The travelling exhibition started out in Hamburg in late 2025 (see fig. 2) and is currently in Bremen before moving on to other locations.

Our goal for this latest exhibition was to inform the general public about our research outputs and the impact such a project has in terms of preserving the cultural heritage of a minority. At the same time, we also collaborated with the academy to ensure the entire exhibition would provide barrier free access for deaf visitors. In a joint effort between professional deaf interpreters, staff of the IDGS interpreting programme and sign language interpreting students, we created DGS translations for all written and spoken content of the exhibition, available via QR codes at the various exhibits. Aside from ensuring accessibility, this also provided valuable practical experience to the students involved. In addition, we organised tours of the exhibition in DGS, run by a professional deaf museum guide and supported by project members, one tour each in Hamburg and Bremen.

3.3.3. Workshops

The DGS-Korpus project also organises presentations and workshops to promote its resources. While earlier workshops covered the Public DGS Corpus, many of the more recent workshops have focussed on the corpus-based dictionary DW-DGS. For these workshops, project members visit different institutions and universities in Germany to acquaint sign language teachers and students in linguistics or interpreting degrees with the dictionary and corpus, inform them about their development, and teach them how to use them for their teaching, practice of signing and interpreting, and for their own research.

[12] https://www.awhamburg.de/magazin/ausstellung-zur-langzeitforschung-in-hamburg.html

3.3.4. Public Events

Other ways to reach future researchers are taking part in events for pupils organised at the University of Hamburg. The DGS-Korpus project supports the IDGS in taking part in university open house events, classroom visits, school events like *Boys' Day*[13] and other public information events.

4. Generations in the DGS Corpus

Due to both its design and long project run-time, the involvement of several generations of signers is a poignant topic of the DGS-Korpus project, which has also been reflected in some of its outreach work. In this section, we describe how it mattered for the design and creation of the corpus itself (section 4.1) and how it was used for a small successful social media campaign during the second data collection phase (section 4.2).

4.1. Corpus Design and Creation

The DGS Corpus was designed to provide a diverse and balanced cross-section of DGS communities in Germany. A detailed description of the factors that went into participant selection can be found in Schulder et al. (2021), but the most important ones were region, age, and gender. Aside from ensuring diverse cultural heritage content, this was also done to enable linguistic studies of regional and dialectal differences as well as of language change across generations.

For the first data collection phase beginning in 2010, the participants were divided into four age groups: 18–30, 31–45, 46–60, and 61 or older. This division broadly corresponds to the existing generational cohorts commonly referred to as the millennials, generation X, etc. This division made it feasible to balance age groups during participant recruitment, but also later served as a privacy-retaining way to provide age information in the Public DGS Corpus (Schulder and Hanke, 2022). The majority of participants were partnered with a person of their own age group, but in the interest of also covering cross-generational interactions, some pairs with greater age differences were also selected.

The second data collection phase focuses on a fifth cohort, born between 1993 and 2007. As such it mainly covers people who were not considered during the first data collection period as they were still underage. A small number of participants belonging to the previous cohorts was also recruited to again also include cross-generational pairs.

[13] *Boys' Day*/*Girls' Day* is a national initiative to acquaint pupils with vocations and research fields in which their respective gender is under-represented.

Figure 3: Screenshot of first social media post about family connections in the corpus. The mother (left) was an advisory focus group member during the first data collection phase and the daughter is now moderator in the second phase.

Figure 4: Screenshot of second social media post about family connections in the corpus. The daughter (left) was a participant in the first data collection phase and moderator in the second phase, while her father joined the second phase as a participant.

Since the new data collection focusses on a single cohort of young people, it was decided to also select moderators from the same age group. The responses to the call for new moderators were different to the search for moderators in 2009. This new generation has built strong deaf identities through bimodal-bilingual education and the cultural and legal recognition of sign languages. In contrast to the first phase, we mainly found new moderators that had a deaf family background. This was partly because focus group members of the first phase were asked to help with finding moderators, in some cases resulting in them proposing family members.

In one case, a whole family has now been involved in the project's data collection. Both parents were moderators in the first data collection phase and in the second phase their daughter and son are now moderator and participant, respectively. These inter-familial and cross-generational connections within the corpus in turn inspired the social media campaign described in the following section.

4.2. Cross-generational Social Media Campaign

In several instances, families have been involved in both data collection phases, with different family members being moderator or participant in either phase. This provided a unique opportunity for a small social media campaign that highlights these cross-generational connections within the DGS Corpus. The concept of this campaign was to show how participation in the DGS Corpus can connect the different generations, creating a shared experience, and how participation can be of value for the deaf communities. This helped advertise the corpus in general, highlight its relevance to the communities and, most importantly, motivate potential candidates to volunteer for participation.

For the campaign, we asked each pair of family members to record a short video in which they talk about their experiences with the DGS-Korpus project. These were then posted to the project's Instagram and Mastodon accounts. Links to the Mastodon post of each video are provided in the footnotes.

In the remainder of this section, we will present four of the resulting social media posts about cross-generational connections (sections 4.2.1 to 4.2.4) and the impact of this social media campaign (section 4.2.5).

4.2.1. Video 1: Heritage

The first video[14] posted to our social media accounts shows mother and daughter (fig. 3). The mother was a moderator in the Leipzig region. She later worked very passionately in the focus group. Her daughter signed up to be moderator in the second data collection phase. Together, they sign about how the first data collection phase was organised a little differently to the second phase, but that together both data collections will build a large archive of German Sign Language utterances and stories and that it is important to support this project.

4.2.2. Video 2: Recording Day

The second video[15] features a daughter and her father (fig. 4). She was a participant of the youngest cohort during the first data collection phase. When she learned about the second data collection, she

[14] https://fediscience.org/@dgskorpusprojekt/114986130472182158

[15] https://fediscience.org/@dgskorpusprojekt/114953928082797230

Figure 5: Screenshot of third social media post about family connections in the corpus. Two brothers, one is a moderator in the second data collection phase (left) while the other had already been a participant in the first phase.

Figure 6: Screenshot of fourth social media post about family connections in the corpus. The daughter (left) was a participant in the second data collection phase and her father was a participant in the first phase.

volunteered to participate again, this time as a moderator. Since she represented one of the regions that was selected to have a participant of an older cohort, she chose to ask her father if he wanted to be part of her group. He agreed, and after his data collection session for the corpus they recorded a short video together to promote participation in the ongoing data collection. They sign about how participating is not complicated and that even though the father was initially very nervous because of all the cameras, he soon forgot about them and had a pleasant time.

4.2.3. Video 3: Language Change

In the third video[16], we see two brothers (fig. 5). One of them was a participant in the first data collection. At that time, the other brother was too young to participate, but when offered the chance to be a moderator in the second phase, he accepted to be a part of the project. They recorded a video reflecting on how the language has changed over time and why it is of utmost importance to document these language changes on video.

4.2.4. Video 4: Youth Language

In the fourth video[17], we see father and daughter (fig. 6). The father has been working at the IDGS as a lecturer for sign language and deaf studies for a long time. During the first data collection period he was asked to take part in an equipment testing session. That sparked his interest and he was then selected as a participant. During the second phase, he recommended his daughter as a suitable candidate for the data collection. She was then contacted by the moderator of her region and selected for participation. In their conversation they touch upon language change and youth language among other things.

4.2.5. Impact

All videos were posted to Instagram and Mastodon to promote participation in the data collection and to show that taking part is a unique opportunity that provides value for the deaf communities. On Instagram, these videos were collectively watched 23,300 times with the second one with 8,800 views being the most watched out of these four videos. The posts resulted in 905 likes, 127 new followers and in several people applying to participate in the data collection. In comparison to the engagement with other posts, these were received particularly well in the communities.

In general, we made the observation that posts that feature signed videos are viewed more often than posts that only feature pictures and text, but the cross-generational videos have been the best performing even among other DGS video posts. The small cross-generational campaign might have helped to convey the sense of why we are trying to collect this data and that the DGS Corpus is not only a compilation of signed data for linguistic research but also an archive of deaf cultural heritage and life experiences.

5. Conclusion

In today's science communication, social media is a valuable tool, especially to reach younger generations. It has the advantage of directly reaching target groups in a dynamic and open conversational manner (Al-Quran, 2022). Our article showed how the DGS-Korpus project uses social media as well as other outreach formats, such as workshops, exhibitions and public events, to keep the deaf com-

[16] https://fediscience.org/@dgskorpusprojekt/114852199075743085

[17] https://fediscience.org/@dgskorpusprojekt/116198565031730915

munities and the general public informed about the project's work, make them acquainted with its corpus and dictionary, but also to promote interest in sign languages and deaf culture.

Especially when working with minority languages and cultures, it is vital to find a way to reach the target group in their preferred mode of communication. Social media has offered the small public relations team of the DGS-Korpus project the opportunity to serve the necessity of visual communication. Through signed videos and eye-catching posts, they not only keep the communities informed but also engage with them on an equal footing. The amount of user engagement, when gauged by popular metrics such as numbers of views, likes and comments, can naturally not compete with professional accounts with the resources to produce a steadier stream of high quality content. Nevertheless, we could clearly see that posts were rewarded with interactions and increasing numbers of followers, as well as several applications for participation in the DGS Corpus data collection. The cross-generational videos posted on social media, but also the other posts about conferences, papers and exhibitions show how the collection of signed conversations and the research already done on the data of the first data collection of the DGS Corpus impact the different generations of deaf people in Germany. It helps all of us see and understand how unique and worthy of protection sign languages, insider experiences and the deaf cultures are.

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