

II. Harms and Social Risks of NPS Use in Vulnerable Populations

7. Primary Prevention of Synthetic Drug Addiction among the Youth of Kazakhstan: The Public's View

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Introduction

In recent years, both the public and the authorities of the Republic of Kazakhstan have been paying attention to the sharp increase in drug addiction in society, in particular the widespread drug addiction among the country's youth. Ordinary citizens are confronted with the direct and indirect consequences of mass drug addiction and hear that the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan is taking measures to combat the drug epidemic. As the head of the largest public organisation aimed at preventing drug addiction among young people in Kazakhstan, I want to share my thoughts on the current situation, an analysis of measures taken in the country, subjective forecasts, and recommendations. In this chapter, I will discuss the causes of the spread of synthetic drugs in Kazakhstan, the reasons for the failure of drug addiction prevention, the institutional environment for drug addiction prevention in the Republic of Kazakhstan, and the effect of mass media on the effectiveness of prevention programmes. This work is exclusively analytical and research-oriented, presenting the perspectives of public activists involved in primary prevention

Reasons for the Widespread Use of Synthetic Drugs in the Republic of Kazakhstan

The issue of the spread of synthetic drugs in the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan began to come to light after 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic and quarantine measures highlighted the most problematic areas of society. Mass distribution of synthetic drugs did not happen immediately, and it is worth noting that the so-called 'smoking salts' appeared on the market first, which, in the early 2010s, could be found on open sale on online market-places as well as physical stores. Over the course of a decade, the population of Kazakhstan has been systematically becoming a victim of synthetic drugs

and the number of addicts has increased exponentially. In 2014, Rauan Shaekin, the Deputy of the Mazhilis of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, spoke about the need for a legislative ban on synthetic drugs in Kazakhstan (Kosenov 2014). In 2019, Kazakhstan adopted a comprehensive set of legislative measures, but by that time, synthetic drugs had already been in a legal and semi-legal status for approximately ten years. In addition to legal factors, it is necessary to take into account the specifics of the drug business in terms of the sale of organic and synthetic drugs. The sale of synthetic drugs on a large scale requires a digital ecosystem and a clear structure of people unfamiliar with each other, forming a single mechanism, the ultimate beneficiaries of which, often, are far beyond the borders of the country where this criminal business is conducted. As a rule, there is a network of administrators of online sites who are responsible for product marketing, customer service, conducting online transactions, and coordinating with the consumer in their search for drugs. There are couriers who supply large quantities of drugs and 'drug pushers' who divide these batches into smaller portions and distribute them public places. Drug pushers also prepare photos and videos that include geospatial coordinates and send them to the consumer/buyer after the transaction. This is just the tip of the iceberg, but it makes it immediately clear that building such structures requires large financial and administrative resources. This model of contactless drug sales has much greater risk tolerance than the old systems, which involved drug sellers being out on the streets looking for customers or delivering traditional drugs in person to customers. Simply put, it has become easier and faster for drug users to buy synthetic drugs compared to traditional illegal drugs.

Kazakhstan is one of the most digitalised countries in the region and has become fertile ground for this type of illegal business. The developed system of electronic payments, the circulation of cryptocurrencies, and the digital literacy of citizens all contribute to the wide network of drug sales in Kazakhstan.

One of the important factors of fast expansion of synthetic drugs is their chemical property, which cause addiction from the moment of first use and have a high level of tolerance. Many users of synthetic drugs say that these drugs increase their libido and sexual desire, which is why they are often used as a club drug and as a tool for sexual harassment. This feature of the drug allows it to spread even faster, since addicts are ready to engage in prostitution, involve new people in addiction, and engage in other illegal activities in order to obtain a new dose, creating their own

personal micro-networks of new addicts, based on a principle similar to network marketing.

According to the Republican Scientific and Practical Center of Mental Health, by 2023, 13,437 people had been diagnosed with a mental or behavioural disorder due to substance use (Republican Scientific and Practical Center of Mental Health 2023). Every year, the number of addicted people grows by tens of thousands, and this leaves its mark on society—various kinds of media content are filled with allusions and references to the use of psychoactive substances, as well as to dependent behaviour. According to the Scientific Research Centre “Youth”, issues related to a sedentary lifestyle and the use of electronic cigarettes, vapes, and drugs are relevant for those aged 29–34 years in Kazakhstan (Figure 1) (‘Youth of Kazakhstan’ analytical report based on the results of a sociological study by the Scientific Research Centre ‘Youth’, 2023).

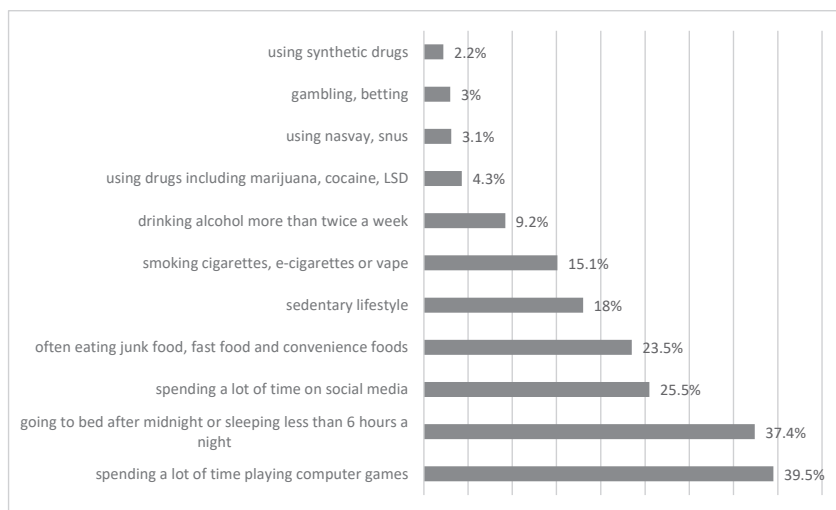


Figure 1: The bad behavioural habits of young respondents in Kazakhstan (‘Youth of Kazakhstan’ analytical report based on the results of a sociological study by the Scientific Research Centre ‘Youth’, 2023)

These findings warrant the need for evidence-based steps in policies to combat spread of synthetic drugs. First of all, these are bureaucratic and legal restrictions of law enforcement agencies — the lack of authority for law enforcement agencies to give synthetic drugs an illegal status gave

criminals a big head start. Secondly, there is a lack of operational measures on the internet to monitor suspicious adverts and transactions, and as yet there is no drug business network to identify the full structure and persons involved in drug crime on a systemic scale. Thirdly, there is a lack of permanent, high-efficiency information work aimed at a specific audience.

In this section of the chapter, the causes of the spread of synthetic drugs in Kazakhstan have been touched upon, and in the next section, the reasons for the low effectiveness of drug addiction prevention will be assessed.

Reasons for the Low Effectiveness of Drug Addiction Prevention in the Republic of Kazakhstan

Government agencies prevent drug addiction using traditional methods, such as lectures by doctors and law enforcement officers on the dangers and harms of drugs. Also, there are various kinds of public and sports events under slogans such as ‘no drugs’. In the field of information work, the state uses social videos aimed at inducing fear of losing loved ones and of marginalisation, but innovative methods in prevention have not yet been developed.

Despite numerous measures implemented by the state and the head of state, society evaluates the effectiveness of these actions very poorly. Constructive criticism has been repeatedly voiced by the President K. Tokayev:

‘The dynamics are sharply negative: over the past three years, the volume of “synthetics” withdrawn from circulation has increased 10 times. Synthetic drugs are becoming cheaper and more accessible every year. They are almost freely sold through social networks, messengers and even delivered to your home. Given the scale of this extremely dangerous social disease, the fight against the production and distribution of synthetic drugs should take on a national character,’ on 1st September 2022 (Tokayev 2022).

‘On the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the production of drugs is growing. This is a problem that threatens the security of our state. To combat the spread of drugs, it is necessary to unite the efforts of all authorized bodies. Otherwise, we will aggravate the situation. It is necessary to take decisive measures to radically eliminate places for the production of synthetic drugs on the territory of Kazakhstan. This is a very important task,’ on 30th June 2023 (Tokayev 2023).

‘I have given instructions on this issue several times. However, there are no serious results. The availability of synthetic drugs and their rapid spread are leading to an increase in drug addiction among young people. The dangerous consequences of drug addiction need to be widely explained. It is necessary to stop campaigning and working only for the sake of statistics,’ on 22nd January 2024 (Tokayev 2024).

From these quotes, one can understand the history of the fight against drug addiction and drug trafficking. In fact, a number of experts argue that in Kazakhstan, the phenomenon of drug addiction now needs to be dealt with through systematic measures and a collective societal effort. It is not only authorised bodies who should do this work. But what is the reason for such low results and what difficulties does the state face in implementing the President’s policy? After analysing the situation, we can conclude that the key factors are the lack of a unified algorithm of actions, disorganisation between key departments, the desire to mechanically achieve planned indicators without taking into account the effectiveness of the measures taken, the lack of systematized evidence-based approaches, and underfunding of preventive programmes. I will now focus on each of these points separately.

In the field of drug addiction prevention, there are no fundamental documents or institutional tools for the implementation of prevention programmes, which causes confusion among certain government agencies. The task of combating drug addiction and drug trafficking is assigned to the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which has adopted a Comprehensive National Plan to combat drug addiction and drug trafficking for 2023–2025 with focus on synthetic drugs. The Ministry of Internal Affairs is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan. The implementation is entrusted to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, the Ministry of Culture and Information, the Ministry of Digital Development and Aerospace Industry, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of National Economy, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Population, the Ministry of Justice, the Prosecutor General’s Office, the National Security Committee, the Agency for Financial monitoring, and local executive bodies.

Budgetary allocations under the Comprehensive Plan are primarily aimed at preventing drug crimes, and most preventive measures are funded within the framework of the previously adopted and current budget

(developed without taking into account the adoption of a Comprehensive Drug Addiction Plan), without the need for additional funding under the Comprehensive Plan.

At a regional level, interdepartmental headquarters operate under local executive bodies to coordinate the activities of state bodies aimed at countering drug addiction and drug trafficking, similar to the republican Comprehensive Plan. They adopt their own work plans, taking into account regional specifics.

As a rule, the goals and tasks assigned to each state body are prescribed by the same state body itself during planning, and thus, a situation arises whereby an agency creates goals for itself with achievable tasks and deadlines, while the really necessary measures remain ignored to various extents. This is complemented by the situation in the various regions of Kazakhstan, whereby local administrations ignore the tasks set by the interdepartmental headquarters thereby delaying the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan. Often, the reason for such a reaction is the dispersion of responsibility, since two to four state agencies are assigned to one point of a plan and each state body, due to its workload, expects its colleagues to implement tasks as specified in the plan.

Control over the execution of the Comprehensive Plan is entrusted to the same ministry (the Ministry of Internal Affairs). It primarily focuses on executing its main tasks and only afterward addresses interdepartmental control, lacking any mandatory authority over other departments.

The second reason for the low effectiveness is the previously mentioned lack of key documents regulating the prevention of drug addiction. Some documents use terms such as 'drug addiction', while there is no clear definition of the terms 'drug addiction', 'co-dependency', 'addictive behaviour', 'counter-addictive behaviour', 'prevention', 'primary prevention', 'secondary prevention', 'tertiary prevention', and others. There is a need for a cornerstone standard that codifies and organises everything, has a single algorithm for primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention, and regulates the process of rehabilitating and resocialising people with substance use disorders. There are no fundamental studies or analytical documents forecasting the growth of the problem and formulating clear recommendations. Similar opinions are voiced by national youth organisations (Central Communications Service under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022).

The proliferation of synthetic drugs among youth in Kazakhstan is a concerning trend with far-reaching consequences. The accessibility and

allure of these substances means that they pose a serious threat to the well-being of the younger generation. Increase in the number of young people engaged in drug consumption raises concerns and underscores the need for comprehensive targeted interventions. In my work with young people, I have noticed that drug use is common among different categories of young people—that is, those who are not engaged in any particular activity and those who are well educated and working are equally susceptible. This suggests that the problem goes beyond socio-economic factors or the level of education and that the root causes can be multifaceted. Today in Kazakhstan there are a number of programs and projects aimed at combating this problem, but the continued increase in the use of synthetic drugs indicates that these initiatives face certain difficulties. Firstly, there is often a lack of adequate understanding among young people about the risks and consequences of using synthetic drugs. Initiatives may not present information well or be adapted to the interests and needs of young people. It is crucial that contemporary teaching methods, which focus on personality development, are utilized and tailored to align with the current trends and realities of youth culture. Secondly, the lack of adequate funding is also a key root of the problem. Limited budgets and resources can make it difficult to scale and maintain youth initiatives. Effective control of synthetic drug use requires not only money, but also human resources, educational materials, the ability to evaluate and adapt programmes depending on the changing environment, and the ability to draw on international experience. Thirdly, in Kazakhstan today there are unfortunately no statistics or studies that would accurately identify the category of young people who use synthetic substances. I believe that understanding this would help to develop more effective methods for selective and indicated prevention.

As an example of effective measures, targeted psychological help should be mentioned. It is clear that this is being provided and is getting better every year. However, it is important to understand that not everyone needs the same kind of psychological support. For example, a schoolchild, a working student, and a young person who already has a family and also works all require different types of approaches and help. There is a need to train and allocate specialists experienced in working with various target groups. I would also like to point out that in preparing this work, I repeatedly turned to the available sources to obtain statistical data related to this topic. However, I could not obtain sufficient information due to the lack of specifics and variations in the existing body of research. The impact of youth initiatives on the effectiveness of prevention efforts cannot

be overlooked. Nationally, there has been an uptick in the detection and blocking of internet resources used for drug distribution, an increase in preventive seminars and trainings that engage young people of various ages, and a rise in the participation of young people in diverse leisure activities. The number of targeted young people is growing every year, as well as the number of worthwhile initiatives. Yet within the current reality, we need an inclusive, large-scale programme that will combine all the existing prevention programmes and initiatives and continue this fight.

To enhance the role that youth play in political decision-making, the Council for Youth Policy under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan was formed in 2008. It holds quarterly meetings and actively monitors the implementation of the Comprehensive National Plan to combat synthetic drugs. Due to the efforts of the Council members, modifications were made to the Comprehensive Plan, resulting in the supervising body, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, now reporting directly to the Council on the implementation of the Plan.

Preventive Measures Taken by Public Organisations (NGOs and Foundations)

In addition to government agencies, public organisations are engaged in prevention on the ground. Many of them work within the framework of government social orders, grants, and international programmes such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA), the Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP), and others. It is worth noting that the level of private sponsorship and the number of corporate prevention programmes are extremely low, and donations from citizens themselves are few and far between.

The analysis of preventive services in Kazakhstan shows that it is mainly regional, non-governmental public organisations that are engaged in preventive measures, the effectiveness of which is questionable. The technical specifications of such projects do not take into account new tools that can be adopted, such as tracking, artificial intelligence, the strengthening of youth cybersecurity, and others. In these actions, there is a noticeable lack of systematic work and a multiplicative effect of measures, they are often aimed at achieving predetermined statistical indicators and do not carry

a cumulative meaning to continue the best practices of the past year or introduce innovative methods of prevention into events.

Despite the overall picture, it is worth noting the organisations whose preventive work has the greatest impact.

The Soc-KZ Public Foundation, in partnership with the KGN Alliance of Kazakhstan



Figure 2: The head of the Soc-KZ Public Foundation and an East Kazakhstan regional police officer meeting schoolchildren in Oskemen (www.sots.kz)

The Soc-KZ Public Foundation and the KGN Alliance of Kazakhstan are two organisations from the East Kazakhstan region that work in the fields of drug addiction prevention, sexually transmitted diseases, and work with sex industry employees. The range of work carried out by these organisations is wide, but despite this, they implement their projects effectively. The key feature of these organisations is the involvement of para-specialists. A para-specialist is an assistant to a professional, a specialist who does not have a higher level of education but has completed specialised courses, has appropriate professional training, and has passed a qualification exam. Often, these are people from key communities (addicts, sex workers, etc.) who have the social connections and special skills necessary to immerse themselves in this community. They conduct educational lectures, make monitoring visits to the so-called ‘street corners’, and act as advocates

between the state and these communities in order to improve situation and create an environment favourable for the rehabilitation and resocialisation of individuals from these communities.

Urban public movement 'NarkoStop' in Almaty



Figure 3: An action organised by NarkoStop, which involved painting over drug advertisements (www.narkostop.kz)

This movement has created a community centre in Almaty and is engaged in involving young people in a healthy lifestyle, through entertainment events that are educational in nature. Its main focus is working with young people through community centres. This organisation also organises activities that involve young people painting over drug advertising graffiti on walls in Almaty.

Public Foundation Esirtkisiz Bolashaq ('EsBol')



Figure 4: A gathering at the Astana headquarters of volunteers from the EsBol Foundation (author's compilation)

A republican public organisation that aims to conduct primary prevention of drug addiction and prevention of drug crime among young people. The Foundation provides expert support to government agencies and private partners in the fields of rulemaking, advocacy, and consultations. The EsBol Foundation concentrates on delivering life skills trainings to small groups of young people, teaching parents proper communication techniques with their children, and enhancing the skills of psychologists and teachers in educational institutions. Additionally, the foundation's volunteers participate in removing drug-related graffiti. They developed a software algorithm called 'MERGEN' that identifies and blocks websites and social network channels for drug trafficking. At the time of writing, the EsBol Foundation has blocked more than 3,000 channels in the Telegram Messenger app. The Foundation also focuses on creating preventive content

on the web, such as comics, short cartoons, and interactive checklists for parents.

Media Coverage of the Problem: Difficulties and Expertise

There are a number of weak spots in the mass media's coverage of the problem of synthetic drugs and their distribution among young people, which sometimes prevent the audience of these media from gaining an objective understanding of the problem. These weak spots include the stigmatisation of addiction and its consequences; making a poor distinction between the prevention of drug addiction and drug crime; and presenting the drug problem in an intentionally 'interesting' or hyped light, as opposed to a rational, accurate one.

The stigma of addiction and its consequences

The stigmatisation of drug addiction is a serious problem that can have profound and devastating consequences for those who suffer from this disease and for society as a whole. When people are considered 'drug addicts' or 'drug users', both their public reputation and self-esteem suffer, which can lead to social isolation, refusal of professional help, and even exacerbation of the problem. The process of stigmatisation often begins with negative biases and myths about drug addiction that take root in the public consciousness.

Examples of the stigmatisation of drug addiction may include employers' refusal to hire people with a history of drug addiction, public condemnation and alienation from friends and family, and the unavailability or unacceptability of medical care for drug addicts. This creates a vicious circle in which addicted people experience fear and shame, which prevents them from seeking help and support.

An integrated approach is needed to overcome the stigma of drug addiction, which should include the most effective measures, as follows. Education and public awareness should be prioritised, by conducting campaigns and educational programmes aimed at combating myths and prejudices about drug addiction and helping to change public opinion, while creating a more supportive and inclusive environment. Support from society and the state is also important in order to enable people suffering from addiction to feel accepted and supported. This may include providing access to medical and psychological care, as well as support with employment

and rehabilitation. Developing understanding and empathy is important—realising that drug addiction is a disease that requires a comprehensive approach to treatment and support. This attitude helps to create a more tolerant and supportive society that is ready to help people in their struggle with addiction. Overcoming the stigma of drug addiction requires joint efforts by society as a whole, the state, and the medical community aimed at education, support, and the development of empathy and understanding. The media is crucially important in this, as it can share specific messages and information with the public.

The lacking differentiation between drug addiction and drug crime prevention in the media

The distinction between the prevention of drug addiction and drug crime is an important aspect of information work that must be properly presented in the media. However, the difference between these two concepts is often unclear in the media, which can lead to misunderstandings among viewers, readers, or listeners. The problem of the lack of differentiation between drug addiction prevention and drug crime in the media often manifests in the following ways. The first way it manifests is through an inappropriate coverage of events. Some media reports or news reviews may mix up information about drug addiction and drug crime, making it difficult to understand their differences and unique aspects. For example, the news about a police raid to eliminate drug trafficking may be presented in the context of the ‘fight against drug addiction’, which distorts the real picture. Secondly, mass media regularly present information in a simplified form. In some cases, the media may not be able to provide a sufficient explanation of how drug addiction prevention differs from measures to combat drug crime. This may lead to a misunderstanding of what specific actions should be taken to tackle each of these problems. An example of incorrect differentiation in the media may be a situation in which a report on preventive measures among young people intended to prevent drug addiction is perceived by viewers as a fight against drug crime. In such cases, the public may develop the misconception that the fight against drug addiction is carried out through repressive measures, which can scare people suffering from drug addiction away from seeking help.

In order for the media to correctly distinguish between the prevention of drug addiction and drug crime, a range of internationally acknowledged actions should be implemented. One of the most urgent is training journalists on the differences between the prevention of drug addiction and the

fight against drug crime, as well as on methods and principles of proper coverage of these topics in the media. Thus, recommendations or standards of journalism could help journalists to cover the topics of drug addiction and drug crime correctly and objectively. At the same time, it is important to regularly inform the public about the relevance of both prevention and the fight against drug trafficking. In my opinion, it is necessary to focus efforts on raising awareness and educating both journalists and the public in order to ensure more accurate and objective coverage of the problem of drug addiction and drug crime in the media.

The predominance of engaging images and hyped information in the coverage of drug addiction issues

The predominance of engaging images over rational information in the coverage of drug addiction issues in the media can create a distorted view of the problem and hinder the formation of an objective view of it. This approach of hype and drama can lead to a superficial understanding of the problem and manipulation of the emotions of viewers, readers, or listeners. Some media outlets prefer to use sensational headlines and vivid images that grab the attention of viewers or readers but can distort the real picture of the problem of drug addiction. For example, the headline ‘Big drug scandal in Shymkent: shocking details’ is uninformative and focused on creating excitement, instead of providing objective information about the causes and consequences of drug addiction (Vera.kz 2024). Some media outlets prefer to pay more attention to the emotional aspects of the problem of drug addiction, for example by publishing personal stories of people’s suffering or impressive videos of personal dramas, to the detriment of rational analysis and objectivity. This can lead to a distorted view of the problem and make it difficult to develop constructive approaches to solving it.

In order to overcome the predominance of engaging images over rational information in the coverage of drug addiction in the media, it is important to conduct training seminars and courses on the ethics and standards of journalism in order to educate journalists on how to balance the emotional and rational aspects in the presentation of information about drug addiction. Journalistic guidelines and standards should emphasise the importance of objectivity, balance, and accuracy in reporting on drug addiction. Collaboration with experts, narcologists, activists, and members of the public could help journalists obtain high-quality information and recommendations on addressing the problem of drug addiction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to note that studying the effectiveness of the primary drug addiction prevention measures taken in the Republic of Kazakhstan requires a lot of time and resources. The specificity of any preventive activity is such that it should be permanent, and its result is noticeable only after many years. Any prevention of a negative phenomenon has to resist several risk factors at once, such as social pressure, the climate in an individual's family and close environment, their emotional and mental stability, their genetic predisposition, and many others. In such a situation, it is difficult to consider the effectiveness of measures in a vacuum, and it is necessary to take into account each experience individually. In Kazakhstan, there is still no way to dynamically monitor young people at risk, which is very sad. After all, such data would allow us to interview people who were at risk of becoming addicted and managed to bypass addiction. Such studies would allow us to develop effective preventive measures and justify removing measures from programmes that have shown to be ineffective or even harmful.

The absence of a government agency specifically responsible for primary prevention complicates the situation, as does the lack of strategic planning and involvement of experts from the field of prevention in the development of necessary measures. As is the case when solving any complex problem, an accurate analysis of the status quo and a clear understanding of the situation are required to begin with and must not be obscured by media headlines.

Kazakhstan has a long and difficult road ahead to improve the prevention of drug addiction among young people, and success will only be possible with the participation of qualified experts and NGOs and a strategic approach to such an important issue as the safety of our youth.

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