



# METAPHOR, MEMORY AND MEANING IN VISUAL SYMBOLISM: A LITERATURE- BASED REVIEW

AJAY YADAV

## 1. ABSTRACT

*Visual symbolism has long been central to communication, art, and design, functioning as a means of expressing complex concepts through metaphorical imagery. This literature review explores the relationship among metaphor, memory, and meaning in visual symbolism, incorporating perspectives from cognitive psychology, semiotics, communication studies, and design theory. Through metaphor, abstract ideas can be converted into concrete visual representations, enabling audiences to connect with concepts that are not easily grasped through representations they recognize. Memory is essential for preserving and recalling symbolic associations at both individual and collective levels, guaranteeing the continuity of visual metaphors across different cultural and historical contexts. This indicates that the formation of meaning relies on interpretive processes shaped by cultural codes, shared narratives, and individual experiences.*

*The review emphasizes the role of metaphors as connectors between perception and cognition, allowing designers and artists to incorporate multilayered messages into visuals. Memory plays a role in symbolic durability by ensuring the continuity of cultural identity and strengthening emotional resonance. Meaning arises from negotiation, mirroring the evolving interplay among imagery, audience interpretation, and socio-cultural contexts. This triadic relationship enhances persuasion, narrative depth, and collective identity across various domains, including advertising, fine art, and digital media.*

*The results indicate that grasping metaphor, memory, and meaning as mutually dependent elements is essential for comprehending how effective visual symbolism is. Future studies may investigate cross-cultural differences, conduct empirical research on symbolic cognition, and examine the use of visual metaphors in immersive media like augmented and virtual reality.*

**KEYWORDS:**

Visual Symbolism, Metaphor, Memory, Semiotics, Cognitive Psychology, Meaning-Making, Visual Communication

**2. INTRODUCTION**

Visual communication encompasses much more than mere literal representation; it frequently depends on symbols and metaphors to convey ideas that cannot be expressed directly.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to spoken or written language, visuals can encapsulate multiple layers of meaning within a single image, providing immediacy and interpretive depth. With the help of symbols, abstraction can be represented visually. This enables individuals and societies to incorporate their cultural values, emotions, and shared memories into forms that are easily identifiable. A straightforward image, like that of a lotus flower, can represent a botanical fact, imply notions of purity and spiritual awakening, and call to mind cultural associations shared across generations—all at the same time. This variety highlights the importance of visual symbolism in human communication. This area utilizes the triad of metaphor, memory, and meaning as a framework for comprehending how audiences interpret and interact with visual signs in various contexts.<sup>2</sup>

The first key element in this triadic relationship is metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson's theory of conceptual metaphor posits that metaphors are fundamental to human cognition and shape our understanding of abstract or intangible phenomena, rather than serving merely as decorative devices. From a visual perspective, metaphors assist in conveying meaning from a well-known source domain to an abstract target domain.<sup>3</sup> An illustration of a sun coming up, for instance, can be seen as a metaphor for renewal, hope, or new starts. Such visual metaphors are utilized by designers, advertisers, and artists to convey ideas that cannot be represented literally, thus enhancing the communicative potential of visual media. Thus, metaphor serves as a means of both compression and expansion: it distills abstract concepts into visual representations that can be perceived, while also broadening the range of interpretations available to audiences.<sup>4</sup>

Memory, encompassing both individual and collective aspects, represents the second vital dimension of visual symbolism. Through repeated exposure, cultural circulation, and transmission across generations, symbols persist and gain meaning. Cognitive psychology posits that visual imagery is more easily recalled than verbal information, a phenomenon explained by Paivio's dual coding theory. This retention is exemplified by symbols like national flags, religious icons, and corporate logos, which not only enter individuals'

<sup>1</sup> Jamieson, H. (2006). *Visual communication: More than meets the eye*. Intellect.

<sup>2</sup> Yu, N. (2009). Nonverbal and multimodal manifestations of metaphors and metonymies: A case study. *Multimodal metaphor*, 11, 119-143.

<sup>3</sup> Carroll, N. (1994). Visual metaphor. In *Aspects of metaphor* (pp. 189-218). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

<sup>4</sup> Serig, D. (2006). A conceptual structure of visual metaphor. *Studies in Art Education*, 47(3), 229-247.

memories but also become embedded in the collective memory of communities and nations.<sup>5</sup> As theorized by Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory places symbols as custodians of shared identity, guaranteeing the continuity of meaning over time. This implies that the potency of visual symbolism lies not just in how readily it can be understood, but also in its capacity to endure, to be remembered, and to elicit feelings and connections long after the initial encounter.

Meaning, as the third component, arises from a negotiation between metaphorical construction and memory recall. Semiotic theory offers a valuable framework in this context, as Ferdinand de Saussure differentiates between the signifier (form) and the signified (concept), while Roland Barthes expands this distinction to encompass connotation and myth. The significance of visual symbolism is seldom established with certainty; rather, it is formed via interpretive processes influenced by cultural codes, social contexts, and personal experiences.<sup>6</sup> For example, in one culture the image of a dove may symbolize peace, in another spirituality, and in yet another it is simply seen as a bird. Thus, meaning relies on the interaction of metaphorical suggestion and memory-based associations, both shaped by the cultural positioning of the audience.

This literature-based review positions itself at the crossroads of metaphor, memory, and meaning. It seeks to offer a thorough view of the functioning of visual symbolism in modern contexts by scrutinizing academic works from cognitive psychology, semiotics, design theory, and media studies. The review emphasizes that visual communication involves an active and interpretive process shaped by metaphorical frameworks, reinforced by memory, and negotiated into meaning, rather than being a passive act of transmission. Grasping this triadic relationship has significant consequences for domains like advertising, fine art, branding, and digital culture, in which visual symbols both mirror and shape cultural realities.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 3.1 METAPHOR IN VISUAL SYMBOLISM

Visual symbolism places metaphors at its core: they serve not only as stylistic devices but also as cognitive frameworks that shape perception, interpretation, and the construction of meaning. Lakoff and Johnson's groundbreaking publication, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), argues that metaphors shape human cognition, enabling people to grasp abstract or intricate ideas by connecting them to domains they are more acquainted with. This principle applies naturally to visual media, where metaphors convert abstract concepts into tangible imagery. In visual communication, a metaphor serves more than just a decorative purpose within a

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<sup>5</sup> Bankov, K. (2021). Flags, Identity, Memory: From Nationalisms to the Post-truth Uses of Collective Symbols. In *Flags, Color, and the Legal Narrative: Public Memory, Identity, and Critique* (pp. 173-189). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

<sup>6</sup> Reavey, P., & Johnson, K. (2017). Visual approaches: Using and interpreting images. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*, 354-373.

<sup>7</sup> Udris-Borodavko, N., Oliinyk, V., Bozhko, T., Budnyk, A., & Hordiichuk, Y. (2023). Aesthetics and semiotics in 21st century visual communications: Pedagogical and sociocultural aspects. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 4(4), 22-40.

design; it constructs meaning actively, inviting viewers to identify patterns, make comparisons, and engage with abstract phenomena on a cognitive level. Visual metaphors function on several levels, from nuanced symbolic allusions in fine art to explicit metaphorical constructs in advertising and branding.<sup>8</sup>

Forceville (1996) highlights that visual metaphors depend on perceptual similarities and contextual cues, allowing audiences to connect domains that appear unrelated.<sup>9</sup> For instance, a car shown in an ad climbing a mountain may metaphorically represent ambition, resilience, or personal growth. The audience discerns this symbolic connection not via direct elucidation but through the identification of structural, conceptual, or experiential analogies between the visual representation and the intended abstract meaning. In this respect, visual metaphors serve as cognitive shortcuts, distilling intricate concepts into imagery that is both understandable and emotionally resonant. Forceville's framework emphasizes the importance of both the visual form and its context for metaphorical interpretation, illustrating the interactive relationship in meaning-making between designer and audience.<sup>10</sup>

Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) contend that in the realm of advertising, visual metaphors improve persuasive communication by necessitating an interpretive engagement from viewers, which intensifies cognitive involvement.<sup>11</sup> While literal representations can be processed in a passive manner, metaphorical visuals stimulate associative thought and encourage audiences to deduce deeper meanings. This involvement bolsters memory retention and emotional resonance, thereby enhancing the chances that the symbolic message will impact attitudes or behavior. Visual metaphors in advertisements—like portraying a brand as a guiding light or protective shield—successfully turn products into vessels of symbolic stories that align with cultural values and individual aspirations.

Metaphors are crucial in art and design, as they evoke intangible experiences like freedom, spirituality, transformation, and loss. This significance extends beyond the realm of advertising.<sup>12</sup> By employing metaphor strategically, artists and designers convert abstract ideas into sensory experiences that audiences can perceive, make sense of, and absorb. For example, the utilization of light and shadow to depict hope and despair, or birds in flight to symbolize liberation, illustrates how metaphorical imagery conveys intricate emotional or philosophical concepts. Metaphors serve as bridges linking the visual and cognitive domains, connecting symbolic imagery to lived experience and enabling a deeper, multidimensional interaction with visual texts.

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<sup>8</sup> Phillips, B. J., & McQuarrie, E. F. (2004). Beyond visual metaphor: A new typology of visual rhetoric in advertising. *Marketing theory*, 4(1-2), 113-136.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, B. J., & McQuarrie, E. F. (2004). Beyond visual metaphor: A new typology of visual rhetoric in advertising. *Marketing theory*, 4(1-2), 113-136.

<sup>10</sup> Forceville, C. (2024). Identifying and interpreting visual and multimodal metaphor in commercials and feature films. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 39(1), 40-54.

<sup>11</sup> Relja, R. (2022). *Just for people like me: A multimodal interpretative phenomenological analysis of font consumption* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Gloucestershire).

<sup>12</sup> Liu, L., & Zhao, H. (2024). Research on consumers' purchase intention of cultural and creative products—Metaphor design based on traditional cultural symbols. *Plos one*, 19(5), e0301678.

To sum up, the literature emphasizes that visual metaphors are essential to symbolic communication. They offer a way for abstract ideas to become more visible, emotionally impactful, and richly interpretable. Metaphors play a crucial role in theoretical and applied research on visual symbolism by structuring cognition, guiding perception, and enhancing engagement. Their application in advertising, fine art, and design showcases their adaptability and lasting importance as tools for creating meaning in modern visual culture.

### 3.2 MEMORY AND SYMBOLIC RETENTION

Memory plays a crucial role in interpreting, retaining, and sharing visual symbols, influencing how images communicate meaning in both individual and collective contexts. Cognitive processes that boost memorability and long-term retention are engaged by visual representations, making them especially potent. Paivio's Dual Coding Theory (1971) offers a fundamental framework for comprehending this phenomenon, claiming that information is encoded and recalled more effectively when it is processed through both verbal and visual channels. Images, particularly those rich in metaphorical meaning, tend to be remembered more easily than abstract verbal descriptions alone. The reason for the lasting effects of visual metaphors in advertising, fine art, and media shaping cognition and emotional involvement as time goes on is this dual-coding effect.<sup>13</sup>

Memory operates at a collective level as well, anchoring symbols in the shared cultural consciousness beyond individual cognition. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) underscores that collective memory functions as a storehouse of social knowledge, values, and historical continuity. Visual symbols—like national flags, religious icons, and corporate logos—act as concrete representations of these collective memories, embedding communal narratives into visible forms.<sup>14</sup> By being repeatedly confronted with these symbols, cultural identity, social cohesion, and historical awareness are all strengthened, allowing them to serve as robust carriers of meaning across generations. Thus, visual symbolism serves not just as a means of communication but also as a mechanism for the preservation and transmission of collective memory, helping to keep culturally important ideas prominent in social consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

The mnemonic power of symbols is especially evident in advertising. Keller (1993) emphasizes that brand logos and repeated visual motifs establish enduring associative networks in consumer memory. For example, the bitten apple of Apple and Nike's swoosh are immediately identifiable and bring to mind a variety of metaphorical and emotional connections, including creativity and innovation as well as speed and performance. These

<sup>13</sup> Sadoski, M., & Paivio, A. (2013). *Imagery and text: A dual coding theory of reading and writing*. Routledge.

<sup>14</sup> Geisler, M. E. (Ed.). (2005). *National symbols, fractured identities: Contesting the national narrative*. UPNE.

<sup>15</sup> Assmann, J. (2011). Communicative and cultural memory. In *Cultural memories: The geographical point of view* (pp. 15-27). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

symbols evolve into more than just identifiers; They embody values, narratives, and aspirational ideals that audiences internalize through repeated exposure. Symbolism in advertising is strategically employed to utilize memory for bolstering brand recall, intensifying emotional connections, and strengthening consumer allegiance.<sup>16</sup>

Memory also collaborates with metaphor to enhance symbolic interpretation. A metaphorical image becomes more powerful when it connects with existing mnemonic associations, whether they are personal or cultural.<sup>17</sup> The illustration of a rising sun, for instance, may inspire feelings of hope, continuity, or rejuvenation due to the fact that people have come across comparable visual metaphors in literature, religion, and media. This multilayered approach illustrates that memory operates in conjunction with other processes; it is fundamentally connected to metaphorical structure, cultural context, and experiential familiarity, which together enhance the interpretive richness of visual symbols.

To sum up, memory acts as a cognitive and cultural mechanism that secures visual symbolism within lasting frameworks of comprehension. Memory enables symbolic imagery to stay relevant, evoke emotional resonance, and reinforce collective narratives by facilitating recognition, retention, and recall.<sup>18</sup> The interaction between memory and metaphor enhances the communicative strength of visual symbols, allowing designers, artists, and advertisers to create imagery that resonates across time, culture, and individual perception. It is crucial to grasp this dynamic in order to understand the lasting effects and efficacy of visual symbolism in today's visual culture.

### 3.3 MEANING-MAKING IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION

In visual communication, meaning arises from the complex interaction of symbols, cultural codes, and how audiences interpret them. Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) laid the groundwork for semiotics by differentiating between the signifier the form a sign takes and the signified the concept it represents, thus establishing a foundational framework for understanding how visual symbols communicate meaning. In visual contexts, the signifier can manifest as an image, icon, or visual metaphor, whereas the signified comprises the abstract idea or cultural concept communicated by that image.<sup>19</sup> The relationship is fluid rather than fixed, with meaning shaped by the interpretive processes of viewers who bring their prior experiences, cultural knowledge, and personal associations to the decoding process.

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<sup>16</sup> Rigby, B. D., & Lee, R. (2024). Creating emotional resonance in advertising language strategies and consumer identity. *Journal of Linguistics and Communication Studies*, 3(3), 1-13.

<sup>17</sup> Ibarretxe-Antuñano, I. (2013). The relationship between conceptual metaphor and culture. *Intercultural pragmatics*, 10(2), 315-339.

<sup>18</sup> Ejaz, U., & Bollocks, J. (2025). The Power of Images in Shaping Collective Memory.

<sup>19</sup> Lehtonen, K. E. (2011). Rhetoric of the visual: Metaphor in a still image. *Jyväskylän yliopiston humanistisen tiedekunnan tutkimusraportit*, (166).

Roland Barthes (1964) broadened this semiotic viewpoint by presenting the idea of myth, showing how symbols gain additional connotations beyond their denotative function. A simple depiction of a dove, for example, represents a bird literally, but culturally it embodies concepts like peace, hope, purity, and spirituality. These connotative meanings are built up socially and reinforced through repeated exposure in media, literature, and art, resulting in shared interpretive frameworks that enable audiences to decode symbolic imagery with a degree of consistency. Visual metaphors work within this semiotic framework, serving as tools for generating meaning that connect perceptual recognition with cognitive interpretation.<sup>20</sup>

The interplay between memory and metaphor is another factor on which visual meaning-making hinges. By creating relational or analogical links, metaphors enhance symbols and allow for the concrete representation of abstract ideas. Memory, whether at the individual or collective level, serves as a repository of cultural and experiential associations that shape interpretation.<sup>21</sup> For instance, a depiction of a rising sun can represent hope or renewal, as audiences have encountered this visual motif in literature, religious iconography, or media representations. Thus, meaning arises not only from the visual representation but also from the audience's interaction with amassed symbolic knowledge, illustrating that interpretation is an active process influenced by context.

In the realm of advertising, the process of creating meaning is intentional and strategic. Designers employ visual metaphors and symbolic motifs to elicit emotional reactions, build narratives, and strengthen brand identity. A logo or campaign image that is well-designed serves as a semiotic tool, communicating intricate messages in a brief and unforgettable manner.<sup>22</sup> Advertisers enrich the potential interpretations of the symbol by embedding metaphorical layers within it, ensuring that audiences not only acknowledge its visual appearance but also take in the values and stories it embodies. Thus, the effectiveness of visual communication depends on how well symbols can create meaning across cognitive, emotional, and cultural dimensions.

Outside of advertising, the process of creating meaning in art and design involves wider cultural, philosophical, and emotional frameworks. Artists employ symbolic imagery to incite contemplation, question assumptions, or convey abstract experiences like freedom, mortality, or spirituality. As viewers negotiate meaning through personal and cultural lenses, the interpretive process is dialogic.<sup>23</sup> This underscores the dynamic and context-dependent character of visual symbolism: meaning is not fixed but continually reconstructed through

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<sup>20</sup> Feng, D., & O'Halloran, K. L. (2013). The visual representation of metaphor: A social semiotic approach. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics. Published under the auspices of the Spanish Cognitive Linguistics Association*, 11(2), 320-335.

<sup>21</sup> Assmann, A. (2006). Memory, individual and collective. *The Oxford handbook of contextual political analysis*, 5, 210-224.

<sup>22</sup> Udris-Borodavko, N., Oliinyk, V., Bozhko, T., Budnyk, A., & Hordiichuk, Y. (2023). Aesthetics and semiotics in 21st century visual communications: Pedagogical and sociocultural aspects. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 4(4), 22-40.

<sup>23</sup> Kögler, H. H. (2005). Recognition and difference: The power of perspectives in interpretive dialogue. *Social Identities*, 11(3), 247-269.

the interplay between the symbol, the metaphorical associations it triggers, and the audience's memory networks.

To sum up, in visual communication meaning emerges from the complex interplay of semiotic structure, metaphorical representation, and mnemonic frameworks. Symbols convey not just their explicit meaning but also cultural narratives with connotations, allowing viewers to interpret, internalize, and emotionally connect with visual messages.<sup>24</sup> For designers, artists, and communicators aiming to craft imagery that deeply resonates, maintains cultural relevance, and conveys intricate concepts with clarity and impact, grasping these processes is vital.

### 3.4 INTERSECTIONS OF METAPHOR, MEMORY, AND MEANING

At the heart of effective visual symbolism lies a triadic relationship between metaphor, memory, and meaning a dynamic interplay that is fundamental to human cognition and cultural communication. Cognitive psychology offers valuable insights into this intersection, indicating that metaphorical visuals are especially memorable due to their simultaneous engagement of emotional and cognitive processing.<sup>25</sup> According to McCloud (1993), visual narratives, which are frequently based on metaphorical structures, enhance understanding and memory retention by merging symbolic representation with perceptual involvement. In a similar vein, Pinker (1997) emphasizes that visuals that trigger conceptual analogies activate various cognitive pathways, thereby improving recall and interpretive depth. The interplay between metaphor, memory, and meaning highlights the reason for the strong resonance of symbolic visuals with audiences across various contexts, including art, advertising, and digital media.

As the structural framework of visual symbolism, metaphor allows for the translation of abstract concepts into perceivable forms. Designers and artists use metaphor to create analogies between the familiar and the new, offering audiences cognitive anchors for understanding. Memory guarantees the retention and recall of these metaphorical constructions across time.<sup>26</sup> Paivio's Dual Coding Theory (1971) illustrates that images are inherently more memorable than textual or verbal information, especially when they carry metaphorical significance. As Halbwachs (1992) describes, collective memory bolsters this retention by embedding symbolic visuals within shared cultural frameworks that facilitate consistent interpretation and emotional resonance. Metaphor and memory work in tandem to establish a basis for the construction and negotiation of meaning, connecting perception with cultural understanding.

<sup>24</sup> Feng, D., & O'Halloran, K. L. (2012). Representing emotive meaning in visual images: A social semiotic approach. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(14), 2067-2084.

<sup>25</sup> Fernandez-Duque, D., & Johnson, M. L. (1999). Attention metaphors: How metaphors guide the cognitive psychology of attention. *Cognitive science*, 23(1), 83-116.

<sup>26</sup> Roediger, H. L. (1980). Memory metaphors in cognitive psychology. *Memory & Cognition*, 8(3), 231-246.

Meaning arises as the outcome of this interaction. Semiotic viewpoints, like those suggested by Saussure (1916) and Barthes (1964), demonstrate that the meaning of a symbol is not predetermined but develops through interaction with cultural codes and mnemonic associations. Because they provide layered interpretations that can be understood differently based on audience experience, cultural context, and memory networks, visual metaphors are especially effective in meaning-making.<sup>27</sup> The multilayered interpretive potential of symbols enables them to convey complex ideas succinctly, elicit emotional reactions, and maintain relevance across different cultures and time periods.

In today's digital media, the connections between metaphor, memory, and meaning are becoming more apparent through the circulation of memes, GIFs, and symbolic imagery. According to Shifman (2014), these forms gain traction when they resonate metaphorically and tap into collective memory, often utilizing cultural narratives and widely recognized symbols to achieve rapid dissemination. Memes, especially, serve as a prime illustration of the intersection of metaphorical structure, memory cues, and culturally negotiated meaning in the development of content that is both captivating and laden with social and emotional significance. The fact that such symbolic visuals go viral shows that the triadic framework remains relevant, even in fast-changing digital settings.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This literature-based review highlights that the triadic relationship of metaphor, memory, and meaning is essential for comprehending the potency and effectiveness of visual symbolism. Metaphors serve as cognitive and communicative bridges, transforming abstract ideas into tangible visual representations that audiences can see, understand, and absorb. Metaphors improve understanding, involvement, and interpretive richness by creating analogical connections between well-known and new domains. Memory, which comprises both individual and collective aspects, serves as an anchor for these symbolic associations over time, guaranteeing that visual metaphors endure in cultural consciousness rather than being ephemeral. In the realm of collective memory, visual symbols are established as custodians of shared identity, history, and values, thereby bolstering social cohesion and emotional connection. Meaning, the third component, arises as a negotiated and context-dependent result of metaphorical construction and memory activation, reflecting the interaction between cultural codes, personal experience, and interpretive frameworks.

These three components work together to create a dynamic system that enhances the communicative power of visual imagery. In the realm of fine art, this triad enables artists to express abstract emotional or philosophical concepts that captivate viewers on both cognitive and emotional levels. In the realm of advertising, metaphor, memory, and meaning work together to forge captivating brand stories, improve memorability, and elicit emotional reactions, all of which aid in the development of brand loyalty and cultural importance. In

<sup>27</sup> Tidwell, D., & Jónsdóttir, S. R. (2022). Visuals as meaning making. In *Writing as a Method for the Self-Study of Practice* (pp. 155-180). Singapore: Springer Singapore.

the realm of digital media, especially during the era of memes and the spread of symbolic content, the triad proves relevant by enabling quick understanding, sharing, and cultural impact among various audiences.

This framework can be further clarified by future studies on cross-cultural differences in symbolic interpretation, neurocognitive reactions to visual metaphors, and the use of visual symbolism in immersive and interactive media like augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR). Designers, advertisers, and scholars can gain valuable insights for creating visuals that deeply resonate, uphold cultural heritage, and remain relevant today by understanding the interconnected functions of metaphor, memory, and meaning. This review underscores that the potency of visual symbolism derives not just from its form but from the complex, intertwined processes through which metaphor, memory, and meaning come together to influence audience perception, engagement, and understanding.

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