

# “A part of who I Am:” a phenomenological study of emerging adult leader identity through family storytelling

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore leader identity development experiences of emerging adults at a large Midwest university and how retrospective family storytelling (Koenig Kellas, 2018) plays a role in the sense-making of the leader identity process. Through a unique, three-phase qualitative and narrative inquiry approach, this research further explores LID sense-making through retrospective family storytelling.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Qualitative phenomenology and narrative inquiry approach. Data collection consisted of three different data sets: (a) two semi-structured interviews, (b) leader artifacts and (c) journals.

**Findings** – The stories told by the emerging adults described how key messages influenced their identity within the context of leader identity development and their college experiences. Furthermore, a key finding in the narratives exhibited the stories emerging adults recalled in the sense-making of their leader identity centered on persevering, overcoming hardships and interpersonal connections and relationships. Findings from this research contribute to LID literature for leadership educators, researchers and practitioners in leader development.

**Originality/value** – The research presented in this article advances LID by using a narrative approach to explore the role of family narratives in identity development. Further, it approaches qualitative work with rigorous data collection and analysis processing using a cross-case analysis to develop leader identity archetypes. This study directly impacts those who work with emerging adult college students and supports the development of college student leaders.

**Keywords** Leadership education, Leader identity development, Narrative inquiry/storytelling

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Seminal authors in leader identity development (LID) have posited leaders are made through a variety of influences: childhood and adolescent development, leadership education programs, and professional adult experiences (Brungardt, 1996; Komives, Owen, Longersbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005; Lord & Hall, 2005). For over two decades, LID has been a primary category in leadership development research (Vogel, Reichard, Batistić, & Černe, 2021). Hall (2004) explained the internalization of a leader’s identity is a generative

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process that empowers individuals to assume the role of leader and thereby more effectively engage in leadership processes that facilitate the accomplishment of organizational goals.

McAdams (1993) described narrative identity as an internalized story we create about ourselves, known as our personal myth. Like most myths (i.e., stories), our narrative identities contain characters that help or hold us back, including major events that determine the plot, challenges overcome, and suffering we have endured. McAdams (1993) explained “the transition from adolescence to young adulthood is an especially significant phase in the development of human identity” (p. 36). Research on emerging adulthood elucidates that college is an important transitional period for emerging adults (Arnett, 2000, 2015), thus leadership educators have an important role in the leader identity development process. Understanding how college students make meaning of experiences is essential for fostering LID (McCain & Matkin, 2019). The use of narratives or storytelling is a pedagogical tool that can aid in identity sense-making and can be applied as a useful practice in leadership education.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore leader identity development experiences of emerging adults at a large Midwest university and how retrospective family storytelling (Koenig Kellas, 2018) plays a role in the sense-making of the leader identity process. Through a unique, three-phase qualitative and narrative inquiry approach, this research further explores LID sense-making through retrospective family storytelling. Findings from this research contribute to LID literature for leadership educators, researchers, and practitioners in leader development.

### **Theoretical frameworks**

Three theoretical frameworks provide the foundation for exploring the intersection between leader identity and family storytelling. First, emerging adult literature describes how individuals between 18 to 25 navigate the identity development process. Second, the Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives *et al.*, 2005, 2006) provides a foundation for exploring leader identity among college students within emerging adulthood. Finally, principles of narrative identity and family storytelling are explained through Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) (Koenig Kellas, 2018).

#### *Emerging adulthood identity development*

The transitional period from childhood and adolescence to adulthood brings about matters of identity development (Erikson, 1980). Our identities evolve from our interactions with others (e.g. family units, academic social groups, leadership roles) and function as a regulator of those social interactions (e.g. Lord & Brown, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Given a particular context, a specific identity becomes salient. “This means people can have an identity for each of the different personal and social positions or role relationships they hold in a specific social context” (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, Cremer, & Hogg, 2004, p. 827). For example, emerging adults who have positional or relational leadership roles may have self-schemas of leadership activated when they interact with others in organizations and experience a salient leader identity. Over time leadership skills and knowledge become integrated with the development of one’s self-concept as a leader.

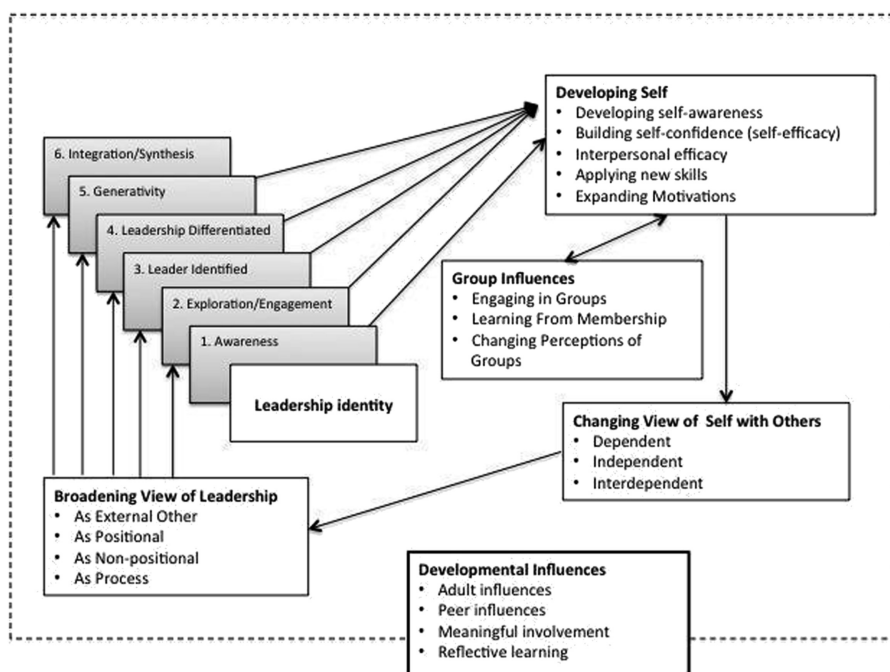
Arnett (2000, 2015) explained emerging adulthood includes ages 18 to 25, and is a transitional period in which individuals take on continued role experimentations before entering into the commitments and responsibilities of adulthood. During this phase, most identity exploration takes place and is accompanied by excitement, anxiety, and uncertainty, as emerging adults do not know where their explorations will lead. One such area of exploration is the transition to higher education (Arnett, 2000). The social and intellectual experiences, and the experience of being on one’s own, transform the emerging adult toward steps to maturity and begin the process of becoming an adult. “A college education leads to

exposure to a variety of different worldviews, and in the course of this exposure, college students often find themselves questioning the worldviews they brought in” (Arnett, 2000, p. 474). As professionals within higher education continue to develop future generations of leaders, understanding LID along with pedagogical tools for the development process is important.

### Leadership development

Seminal work by Brungardt (1996) illustrated leadership development theory bridges together the human developmental process (i.e., growth from childhood to adulthood) and leadership learning theory (i.e., leadership pedagogy) to help educators understand impactful practices for leader(ship) development. To expand on conceptual models of leadership development, Komives *et al.* (2005) used a grounded theory approach to understand the experiences of college students in creating a leadership identity. The results of their work introduced the Leadership Identity Development Model, which has been extensively cited in leadership literature. The model describes how young adults situate themselves in the construct of leadership over time (Komives, Longersbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the LID model integrates six stages of leadership identity where students begin with a simplistic conception of leadership and move to more complex understandings. As young adults transition through the stages, they gradually shift their thoughts on what it means to be a leader. The cyclical model allows for stages to be repeated, and in each return, the individual may experience that stage with a deeper and more complex understanding. Environmental factors and outside influences (e.g. group memberships,



Source(s): Adapted from Komives *et al.* (2005, 2006)  
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Figure 1.  
Leadership identity  
development model

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leadership education, mentors) are integral factors during the transition period. Developmental influences, such as affirmation by adults (e.g. parents, teachers, coaches), influence students' transition into higher leadership phases.

Within higher education practices, it is important to understand how to advance emerging adults into higher levels of leadership identity; however, employing LID can present challenges for research and assessment purposes (Komives *et al.*, 2009). Quantitative assessments of the model have proven complicated because students may cycle back to earlier stages when faced with situations that challenge their identity as leaders. Thus, this study uses a qualitative design to further explore the meaning-making of leader identity development in connection to family storytelling.

### *Narrative identity & family storytelling*

The overarching goal of narrative theories is to better understand the outcomes of interpersonal narratives, stories, and storytelling (Koenig Kellas, 2015). Narrative scholars (e.g. Bruner, 2004; Labov, 2007; McAdams, 1993) assert humans bring together thoughts and emotions by constructing a story of the self through the plot, sequence, characters, and agency. Narrative sense-making is known as the process of working to understand one's experiences through the creation and organization of storytelling that occurs through both the content and the process of telling a story (Koenig Kellas, 2005). Through personal stories, individuals create the reality of their world, and at the same time create identities (McAdams, 1993).

Research on storytelling in the family suggests stories are a central means of understanding identity construction, family socialization, and ways to cope with difficulty (e.g. Koenig Kellas, 2005; McAdams, 1993; Stone, 2004). The messages family members share in stories about navigating and coping with difficult challenges, socializing with other groups, and lessons learned from the past all share in co-creating the "second skin" or identity of family members. Koenig Kellas (2018) explained significant family stories can have lasting effects on those telling and hearing them in terms of values, impressions, fears, lessons, and beliefs. To further explore the connection between leader identity and narratives, Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) is provided as a framework for retrospective storytelling.

*Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM)*. CNSM (Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015) is an empirical approach to understanding how narratives affect and reflect individual and relational well-being by exploring the communicated nature of narratives and the content or processes of telling stories in families. The first assumption of CNSM focuses on narrative as communication and defines storytelling as "the communicative manifestation of narrative sense-making" (Koenig Kellas, 2018, p. 3). Emerging adulthood is a time of exploration and transition; therefore, the impact of hearing family legacy leadership stories may aid in the sense-making of LID. The second assumption links storytelling to health and well-being. Erikson (1980) and Arnett (2000, 2015) explained emerging adults' identity transitions, may produce stress, anxiety, and worry while experiencing transitions into adulthood. Thus, family stories may lend a way to cope with sense-making and exploration of identity development. The third assumption is grounded in the functions of storytelling, which help people make sense of and organize experiences of family life: creating, socializing, and coping (Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015). Creating is narratively communicating and reflecting individual, relational, and family identity (McAdams, 1993; Bamberg, 2011). Socializing functions as teaching lessons and/or acclimating family members to specific values, assumptions, and behaviors (Miller-Day & Dodd, 2004; Stone, 2004). Coping is the process of making sense of and dealing with stress, difficulty, illness, trauma, and/or loss (Frank, 1997).

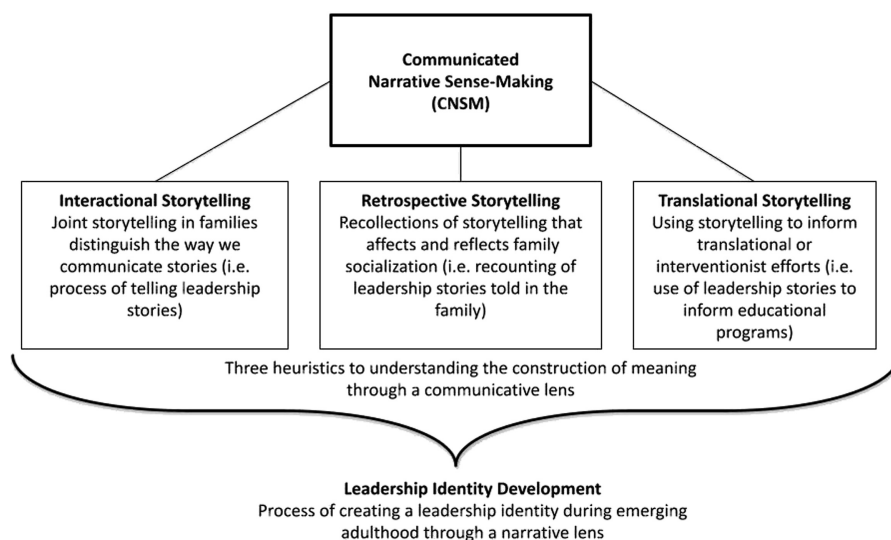
Figure 2 illustrates three heuristics that guide CNSM to understand the construction of meaning through a communicative lens: (a) retrospective storytelling, (b) interactional storytelling, and (c) translational storytelling. Retrospective storytelling is an approach to research on participants' recollections of storytelling in the family that affects and reflects family socialization. "The content of retrospective storytelling reveals individual, relational, and intergenerational meaning-making, values, and beliefs" (Koenig Kellas, 2018, p. 5). The premise is that the stories we *hear* and *tell* can have significant and lasting effects on our beliefs, values, behavior, and health (Koenig Kellas, 2018).

In this regard, the familial stories we hear in our childhood and emerging adulthood containing leadership messages may have significant and lasting effects on our beliefs, values, and behaviors as leaders. Figure 3 illustrates the integration of the LID model and CNSM as the frameworks guiding this research.

## Methods

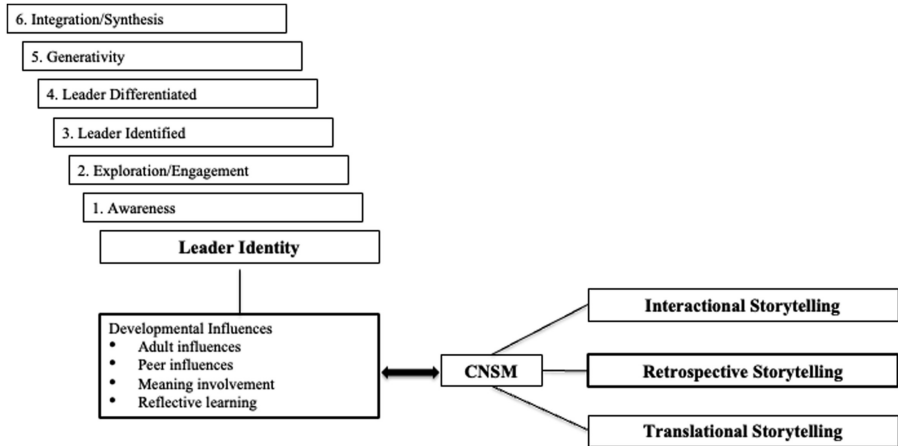
The overarching research question guiding the study is: What role do retrospective family stories play in the sense-making of leader identity development in emerging adults?

Klenke (2016) asserts that qualitative methods add value to the study of leadership with the use of thick descriptions of a phenomenon and the perspective of multiple voices. Qualitative phenomenology attempts to describe the common meaning of lived experiences of those who have lived with or experienced a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As researchers, we use an interpretive/constructivist paradigm for collecting data; however, we also acknowledge the post-positive and systematic nature of the content, process, and outcomes of narratives that affect and reflect storied sense-making. Through this lens, we explore the phenomenon of leader identity sense-making through family stories in terms of family socialization and identity construction.



Source(s): Adapted from Koenig Kellas and Kranstuber Horstman, (2014)  
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Figure 2.  
Communicated  
narrative sense-  
making model



**Figure 3.**  
Theoretical frameworks bridging LID to CNSM

**Source(s):** Figure are created by authors

*Participant selection*

Participants consisted of emerging adult students (Arnett, 2000) at a large Midwest university between the ages of 19–25. Eligible participants were recruited through the university’s Recognized Student Organizations (RSO) and held positional or relational leadership roles. This academic involvement allowed for purposeful sampling to ensure all participants had some awareness or perceptions of being a leader. A positional role was defined as having a membership role that included a title (i.e., president, treasurer, committee chair); whereas a relational role was attributed to being viewed or designated a leader by others through reputation in involvement. There was no compensation for participating in the study and a total of 20 emerging adults freely volunteered; 14 self-identified as female, and six self-identified as male. Of the 20 participants, the majority were upper-level classmen (n = 2 sophomores, n = 4 juniors, n = 12 seniors; n = 2 graduate students). Demographics of the participants self-identified as 17 White/European American, 1 African American, 1 Asian American, and 1 Hispanic. A wide variety of majors and RSOs across campus was represented.

*Data collection*

Data collection consisted of three different data sets: (a) two semi-structured interviews, (b) leader artifacts, and (c) journals. To ensure findings adequately represented the essence of leader identity development, three forms of data allowed for triangulation and provided a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

*Interview protocol.* One-on-one, recorded interviews were held with each participant in a location of the participants choosing and recorded for transcription purposes. The first interview allowed participants to reflect on their past and current leadership roles and how those experiences have shaped their LID. The semi-structured interview questions were guided by Komives et al. (2005) grounded theory study and divided into three sections: (a) emergence of identity, (b) leadership experiences, and (c) changing views.

The second interview took place two to four weeks after the first. The protocol for the second interview was guided by CNSM and used a storytelling method. Participants were asked to share retrospective family stories that assisted in the sense-making process of their identity as a leader. “Today I would like you to tell a story that you remember being told by a

family member that reflects or characterizes your views of leadership. Think of a story in terms of a beginning, middle, and end and that has a message or meaning behind it.”

*Artifacts.* In addition to the two interviews, artifacts were shared that represented the participants’ leader identity and/or experiences as emerging adult leaders. At the close of the first interview, participants shared and described the artifacts relevant to their identity as a leader (e.g. certificates and awards, pictures, metaphorical objects, etc.). Artifacts provide triangulation of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and with permission, images of the data are shown in the findings to provide support for the essence of the leader identity phenomenon.

*Journaling.* To help validate the interview findings, participants journaled for two to four weeks in between the first and second interviews. During this time participants were encouraged to journal their earliest conceptions of leadership and reflect on family stories. Journal prompts were not provided in an attempt to allow participants to journal freely about the phenomenon. Some participants included entries about leadership experiences that were used to help validate their current leader identity. Other participants chose to use the journal as a mechanism to help them retell family stories. Reminders to journals were not sent out to the participants; however, participants were sent a confirmation email before the second interview with a reminder to bring journals. Journals were shared during the second interview and added to the interview data transcripts for analysis.

#### *Data analysis*

A structured data analysis process outlined by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2018) was followed. We conducted three phases of analysis to provide trustworthiness, “integrity and validation of the study results” (Burkholder, Cox, Crawford, & Hitchcock, 2020, p. 224). Phase one included a deductive coding process of interview one using Komives *et al.* (2006) LID model, phase two included an inductive thematic analysis of family stories, and phase three applied a cross-case analysis (CCA) to synthesize the data sets (Miles *et al.*, 2014).

*Phase one.* Phase one of data analysis consisted of transcripts from the first interview, journal entries, and artifacts. Images of the artifacts were used to aid in validating the leader identity stage of the emerging adults. Following transcription of the interviews and journals, data was entered into MaxQDA software program for organization and coding. We used a deductive coding process that applies a provisional start list of codes based on a conceptual framework (e.g. LID) (Miles *et al.*, 2014). During the first round of coding, significant statements and descriptive codes from the LID model were identified. A frequency table was used to aid in describing the stage of leader identity development for each participant. Each time a code from the LID model was noted in the transcript, a tally mark was made in one of the six stages. Through this process, an understanding of the participants’ general view of themselves as a leader suggested a stage within the LID model. Although the LID model is not used to characterize students into stages, the model did help to indicate how participants viewed their identity during the current period. This process allowed us to better understand the stages at which participants experienced and made sense of being a leader.

*Phase two.* Phase two of the data analysis consisted of transcripts from the family story interview along with any journal stories around leadership storytelling. An inductive analysis allowed for codes and themes to emerge organically through the participants’ responses and provided insight into how participants framed their LID (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Line-by-line coding was conducted to find regularities and patterns in the stories (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Although line-by-line coding is not regularly applied in narrative inquiry, this process was used to identify patterns of keywords and themes within the stories. In vivo codes, direct words, or phrases from the data (Saldana, 2013), were used to keep the theme and message of the narrative true to the sense-making process of leader identity development. Similar family story in vivo codes were then collapsed into themes.

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*Phase three.* During stage three, the deductive results suggesting LID stages were combined with the inductive in vivo story themes in a CCA or data matrix. CCA is used for analytic purposes to organize data into an “at-a-glance” format for reflection, verification, and drawing conclusions (Miles *et al.*, 2014, p. 91). A matrix allows us to see the “intersection” of two lists or data sets. Miles *et al.* (2014) explained, “A matrix is a tabular format that collects and arranges data for easy viewing in one place, permits detailed data, and sets the stage for later cross-case analysis with other comparable cases or sites” (p. 110). Through this process, we were able to identify leader archetypes that emerged from the patterns and themes presented in the LID stages and family narratives.

#### *Validation strategies*

Data saturation was reached during interviews with participants, in which no additional data or codes were found to answer the research questions. Creswell and Poth (2018) identified nine strategies used frequently by qualitative researchers and encourage researchers to engage in at least two of the validation strategies in any given study. The authors categorize the nine strategies into three groups: the researcher’s lens, the participant’s lens, and the reader’s lens. For the current study, we engaged in four validation strategies and each of the three lenses: (a) peer review of transcripts and member-checking for accuracy (participant’s lens), (b) rich and thick descriptions to allow for results to be transferable to the audience (reader’s lens), and (c) triangulation of multiple data sources (researcher’s lens).

## **Results**

The results of the study are divided into three phases. First, descriptions of the participants’ experiences of leader identity development are discussed with connection to LID stages. Second, descriptions of family storytelling and leader identity development are thematically explained. Finally, the essence of leader identity through family legacy stories is described using a CCA to illustrate leader identity archetypes.

#### *Phase one: leader identity development*

The LID model is used as a formative assessment to understand how emerging adults define leadership and their sense of independence from, and interdependence with, others. In this regard, educators are better able to understand students’ current level of comprehension and development to optimize student learning (Komives *et al.*, 2009). It should be understood, that “it is a misuse of developmental theory to categorize students into boxes rather than to gain insight into how they experience and interpret their world” (Komives *et al.*, 2009, p. 26). The categorical placements in this research are not a permanent LID stage, but rather an interpretation of the current level of comprehension and leadership behaviors in the present time (Komives *et al.*, 2009).

The majority of participants identified with LID stages three and four. Twenty codes relating to stage one were identified, however, all participants had experiences that helped them progress to higher levels of leadership development. Similarly, for stage two, no participants were identified as relating to leadership in the Exploration/Engagement stage. A total of 76 deductive codes were identified, which focused on experiences of joining clubs and organizations in grade school through high school. The majority of participants identified their leadership in stage three, Leader Identified, and stage four, Leadership Differentiated.

Of the 20 participants, nine participants were categorized as engaging in stage three, Leader Identified. A total of 133 deductive codes were identified using the frequency table indicating leader perceptions and behaviors. Individuals in Leader Identified understand



leadership as individual responsibility and a positional role; thus, the person in the position is seen as a leader. If an individual is not in a positional role, they view themselves as a follower or group member and look to the leader for direction (Komives *et al.*, 2006). A sample of codes and significant statements are presented in Table 1.

The main theme found within stage three was the acknowledgment of having a positional role as a leader, and the ability to take on responsibilities and get tasks accomplished. Participants explained having roles in organizations was meaningful to them. Keely discussed accepting a leadership role in her sorority and how that was important for her as a leader. “I got a leadership position that year, which is almost impossible... but, I basically came in as a freshman and applied for an exec position and got it, and I feel like I really flourished in this position.”

Many of the participants in stage three provided artifacts that showcased their positional leadership roles, such as pictures of being team captains, or certificates and awards. For example, Dean’s artifact was their drum major whistle. They explained,

“I used it through the season. . . being able to be in that leadership role and it’s kind of what my parents raised me and taught me what a leader is about. It all came together during that season and being a drum major I got to, gave the really, got to give the really cool motivational speeches. I keep it [drum major whistle] around all the time. I just keep it in my backpack.

Of the 20 emerging adults, eleven were categorized in stage four, Leader Differentiated. A total of 139 deductive codes were identified using the frequency table. A sample of codes and significant statements are presented in Table 2. Komives *et al.* (2009) explained, “Establishing identity most closely aligns in the LID model with the achievement of Stage Four, Leadership Differentiated.” (p. 22). Individuals in this stage are more secure in their sense of self and can collaborate and embrace differing perspectives. In this identity stage, individuals begin to acknowledge leadership as having both positional and non-positional roles.

A majority of the emerging adult participants described the importance or meaningfulness of their involvement within clubs or organizations. Participants also commented on the importance of forming relationships and making connections within the organization’s community. Morgan’s artifacts supported their leader identity in Stage Four.

Descriptions	Deductive codes: Example statements
Try new roles, identify skills needed	“You can’t be afraid to get your hands dirty, which is kind of a leading-by-example thing.”
Positional leadership or group member roles	“I always wanted to be the team leader.”
Narrow down meaningful experiences	“So many opportunities to get involved in, and freshman year I knew that getting involved was something that really matters to me.”
Individual accomplishments are important	“I was drum major, and they said that hands down I was the best drum major and it was just so, it was so surreal to hear that from him [band director].” “I just think the recognition is just like a bonus. Just a bonus for your confidence, I guess.”
Leader struggles with delegation	“It’s challenging, maintaining the like authoritative, but also friend influence kind of leadership style, cause they’re all my same age.”
Leader gets things done	“I was for the first time able to really look back and say, you led that group, and like you got what needed to be done, done.”

Source(s): Created by authors

**Table 1.**  
LID stage three: leader identified

Descriptions	Deductive codes: Example statements
Belief that leadership can come from anywhere	“I believe that everyone is a leader, and we all lead in different ways, and as a group we can all lead together.” Doesn’t necessarily mean we have to have the title of leader or follower.”
Join others in shared goals	“I kind of take a step back, look at what I have and take the role, you know and give it back to them as if I’m no different than they are.”
Learn to trust and value others	“I think behavior as someone who, believes in the program, understands the program, and like promotes it for everybody else to come along with. And since then I think I’d always been that kind of character.”
Openness to other perspectives	“You have to build a relationship, and I think that trust is important... to follow somebody you need to trust them.”
Values connection with others	“You have to be able to, to analyze everybody’s talents, and their weaknesses, and organize those in a way that makes the group more efficient.”
	“Sharing my experience and just building relationships with them is probably the most pivotal role.”
<b>Source(s):</b> Created by authors	

**Table 2.**  
LID stage four:  
leadership  
differentiated

They brought with her a quote she had received from a leadership conference that inspired her.

...quote by Willa Cather, that was up on my wall, it was included in a journal that was handed out to us at this conference. The quote says, “Today I stood taller from walking among the trees,” and to me that represents like surrounding yourself by leaders and like powerful women and people. I have this on my wall and that kind of just like makes me feel good, makes me feel confident and happy about where I am. It makes me reflect also on this, this conference because that’s a huge thing about leadership and reflection and thinking about how you can grow and improve.

Allie described her passion as a music major and explained that even without a positional role, she is a dedicated group member.

There’s not like a specific leadership position that I fill, but because I love the art so much I want it to be the best it can be, so I show up, and I’m like, I’m ready to work. I’m ready to have a good time. Like working towards this is pleasant for me, and I want it to be pleasant for everyone else, so we’re going to work hard, but we’re also going to be, I don’t know, pleasant. . . I love, I love doing things together with people. I love people, and I’m so delighted when, when everyone leaves an endeavor with a sense of accomplishment and pride in the work that we’ve done together.

Allie’s leader identity is further supported by their unique artifacts (see [Figure 4](#)). They brought in a small porcelain shoe given to them by their grandmother. They described the shoe as representing their leadership journey, “reality as a leader is knowing absolutely who I am, and enjoying, very much, the interesting, the oddities or eccentricities of my personality. Um, I’ve worn a lot of different shoes in my leadership journey. I mean, substitute shoes for hats.”

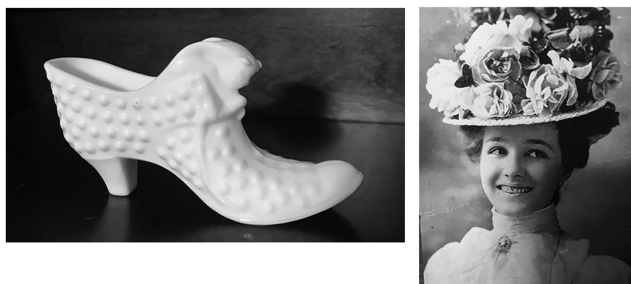
Generational influences also played a role in her development process. Allie brought a picture of their great-great-aunt and described how the photo influenced their identity. “I am who I am because of where I have come from, and family is so important to my identity, and the values that I have are because of my family. I think I love their spirit, the reason I have this picture is I just love her spirit.”

In stage five, Generativity, individuals show an ability to look beyond themselves and are passionate about their commitments and the welfare of others (Erikson, 1968). In the LID model, as Komives *et al.* (2006) explain, individuals in this stage are concerned with group sustainability and are interested in developing younger peers. From the participant transcripts, 29 deductive codes were identified as Generativity. No participants were identified as currently making meaning of leadership in this stage given the results of the codes on the frequency table; however, participants did describe generativity and transitioning thoughts of who will succeed them in an organization, the desire to coach and serve others. This finding is not overly surprising, as some argue generativity is further developed in middle adulthood (e.g. McAdams, 1993). Research has supported generative concern in emerging adults who have had mentoring experiences (Sunderman, McCain, & Hastings, 2022). The lack of generative themes in this study may be a result of not specifically exploring mentoring examples.

According to the LID model in stage six, Integration/Synthesis individuals integrate their view of themselves as effectively working with others and have confidence they can accomplish this in any context (Komives *et al.*, 2006). Individuals in this stage do not need a positional role to know they are engaging in leadership. This stage is identified as a commitment to life-long development. No participants in this study were identified as currently processing in this stage. In addition, no specific codes were found in the transcripts.

*Phase two: family narrative themes*

To maintain as much as possible the accuracy of the story, in vivo codes were used to maintain the meaning-making of the family narrative. Table 3 illustrates the four family narrative themes: (a) “Perseverance” Narrative, n = 7; (b) “Family Spirit” Narrative, n = 6; (c) “Tough Love” Narrative, n = 4 and (d) “Butterfly Effect” n = 3 Narrative.



Source(s): Figure are created by authors

Figure 4.  
Artifact examples of  
LID Stage Four,  
Leadership  
Differentiated

Theme	Subthemes
“Perseverance” Narrative (n = 7)	<i>Sacrifice/serving others</i>
“Family Spirit” Narrative (n = 6)	<i>Tough choices</i>
“Tough Love” Narrative (n = 4)	<i>Empowerment</i>
“Butterfly Effect” Narrative (n = 3)	<i>Role model behavior</i>
	<i>Setting high standards</i>
	<i>Hard work ethic</i>
	<i>Relational connections (out of family)</i>
	<i>Family connections (in family)</i>

Source(s): Created by authors

Table 3.  
Family narrative  
themes and subthemes

Perseverance was a prominent in vivo code found within the family stories. Through these stories, participants reflected on family members who had shown grit or perseverance in overcoming adversity. Of the 20 participants, seven retrospective family stories were identified as “Perseverance” Narratives. Table 4 illustrates sub-themes and significant statements within the Perseverance narratives. Seth shared his grandfather’s childhood legacy story.

They pretty much dropped everything and came out here through the Homestead Act. The first few years went very poorly, and they were ready to give up and go back to what they knew, but he just talked about perseverance. I think from that, I get an outlook from that front of leadership identity as pushing through even when times get tough.

Claire described her grandfather’s sacrifices and how the stories have helped her push through and find solutions in her role as a leader.

He moved across the country and did all these random things, he dropped out of school and started his own business into music and raised them [her mom and siblings], being a musician. So, they lived in a trailer and finally settled so my mom could start first grade. I think it’s just, the keep going idea. You can’t give up, you can’t quit. You’ve committed to something or you’ve engrossed yourself in something really important so you have to keep going.

Morgan felt her mother’s story of overcoming challenges gave her confidence. She uses a picture of her mom as a bookmark (see Figure 5) for a constant reminder. Morgan explained,

Meaning making	Significant statements
Sacrifice	<p>“Watching her [grandmother], and what her sacrifices [were], and what she had to do to become the leader of the family kind of plays a part into what kind of I want to do, how I want to become a leader and help people.”</p> <p>“I see sacrifice, I see that my grandfather had to sacrifice his time [for] them [his family] in order to bring in enough money.”</p>
Tough choices	<p>“I think we learn to grow from that [making difficult choices] and from relationships. You know it’s all about making those tough decisions.”</p>

Source(s): Created by authors

Table 4. “Perseverance” narrative



Figure 5. Artifact examples LID Perseverance Narratives

Source(s): Figure are created by authors

“every inch of power she had was self-accumulated, getting out of her situation, being successful, and creating a better life.” David recollected his father’s stories about being in the military. Through this story, David described his father’s perseverance in leading his military group and sacrificing to serve the better good. Dog tags (see [Figure 5](#)) given to him by his father also played into his identity.

The Family Spirit Narratives reflected messages of empowerment, which at times related to gender roles. In addition, the stories often reflected a family member’s role model behavior, and how that behavior influenced the emerging adult’s identity. Participants reflected on a sense of responsibility to uphold the spirit of the family and felt there was “honor” in representing the family. Out of the 20 participants, six retrospective family stories were identified as Family Spirit Narratives. Stephanie recounted a powerful story about their fraternal great-grandmother’s journey as a mail-order bride from Germany. They described how their great-grandmother overcame hardships, which empowered them in their leadership identity. Stephanie also shared how her maternal grandmother gives her a sense of empowerment as a woman leader. “She was really firm and like a strong girl, she never let me be less than what she knew I could be. So, all of her lessons and little morals in life have stuck with me throughout. And she always checks in on me and makes sure I’m still being a strong woman.”

Eve discussed how they model her grandfather’s behavior. A memorable message in her family is, “Do it like Grandpa Hugh would do, do it for a purpose, and make sure that there’s good intentions behind what you’re doing..So I would just say that thinking about how the actions affect people and think about my grandpa.” [Table 5](#) provides sub-themes and significant statements for the Family Spirit Narratives.

The Tough Love Narratives held messages of setting high standards and a high work ethic to be successful or pave the road for future generations. In vivo codes of “hard work” were prominent through many of the narratives. Specific messages included being motivated to work hard due to the high standards set by family members. Of the 20 participants, four retrospective family stories were identified as Tough Love Narratives. A participant re-told their grandparent’s story of immigrating from Mexico and the hardships they had to overcome. “I think that’s just the Mexican tough love that you grow up with. You don’t want to be like us because they were kind of that struggling generation to get us where we had to be.”

Similar to the perseverance narrative of overcoming challenges, the memorable messages or central theme of Tough Love focused on meeting high standards and working hard (see [Table 6](#)). Another participant also described tough love in her family’s cultural heritage legacy story. “That’s a very common thing in Cameroon culture; once somebody makes it in America, they help others make it. So that taught me how to, if I get into positions of leadership, to uplift other people and help them out too.” Melissa also described how she has “high standards” due to her grandfather’s influence. “I’m not going to settle for anything less.

Meaning making	Significant statements
Empowerment	“That ‘girl power’ thing, and not taking what is technically the social norm, and going above and beyond, and knowing you can do whatever you want to do.”
Role model behavior	“He’s out there with the shop guys making sure everything goes well, even though he doesn’t have to, he’s leading by example.” “He [grandpa] would do everything with grace, he really gave a lesson to the end of all of his stories.”

Source(s): Created by authors

**Table 5.**  
“Family spirit”  
narrative

I think the story is influential to the grandchildren because we hold that standard...my grandpa was kind of in my heart telling me.”

The Butterfly Effect Narratives held messages about building interpersonal connections. Through recollection of family stories, participants described the importance of building connections with others to build trust. Out of the 21 participants, three retrospective family stories were identified as Butterfly Effect Narratives. Through recollection of family stories, participants described the importance of building connections with others to develop trusting relationships. Table 7 illustrates sub-themes and examples of significant statements for the Butterfly Effect family narratives.

Harrison illustrated an example of the Butterfly Effect in his story about his grandfather forming important relationships “They are still best friends [grandfather and colleague] to this day, as they went through that transitioning process. I’ve actually kind of become a mentor to a couple of his grandkids; it’s like this full circle of coming back to this idea of mentorship that becomes friendship and that is something I definitely aspire to have as a leader.”

*Phase three: cross case analysis*

A cross-case analysis (CCA) was used to identify patterns in leader identity stages and family story themes (Miles et al., 2014). Patterns in the CCA suggest leader identity stages align with the meaning-making of intergenerational stories within leader identity development and create a salient leader character or identity archetype. Many emerging adults categorized in Stage Three, Leader Identified, told narratives of Perseverance and Tough Love. The narratives centered on messages of overcoming hardships, sacrificing for others to get the job done, making tough choices, and setting high standards. The narratives were more positional-focused, suggesting that family stories are closely connected to the stage of identity development.

Emerging adults categorized in stage four, Leadership Differentiated, told narratives of Family Spirit and Butterfly Effect. Participants described their leadership experiences as shared tasks/goals from positional or non-positional group roles. The narratives were less focused on positional roles and more about building trusting relationships and community with others. In connection to the family stories, the emerging adults described family members as leading by example, showing patience, and concern for others.

**Table 6.**  
“Tough love” narrative

Meaning making	Significant statements
Setting high standards	“Not limiting myself because my parents had high expectations, they [parents] gave me the ability to go outside my limits.”
Strong work ethic	“It was a leadership role that my dad enforced on me, work hard and you’ll get places.”

**Source(s):** Created by authors

**Table 7.**  
“Butterfly effect” narrative

Meaning making	Significant statements
Relational connections	“Willingness to put others before yourself and do whatever it takes to makes things as successful as possible, whether that be the work that you’re trying to do, or the relationships you’re trying to build.”
Familial connections	“My family took it [difficult situation] better than I could’ve imagined, and ever since then my family just really [is] closer, we appreciate each other.”

**Source(s):** Created by authors

The patterns found in the CCA suggest the stories emerging adults recall have a strong influence on their values and beliefs and play a role in how they identify as a leader. Leadership archetypes based on [McAdams' \(1993\)](#) narrative identity work describe imagos, or archetypal patterns, for human thought that compose idealized personifications within personal myths [stories]. Imagos serve as “characters” within one’s life story and give voice to individual and cultural values (p. 122). The results indicate a salient leader identity, within a given time, draws on memorable messages of familial stories creating leadership imagos. [Table 8](#) provides the results of the matrix indicating the patterns among the LID and CNSM interviews and the leadership archetypes (i.e., character imagos).

Agentic imagos of *Warrior* and *Maker* align with stage three of the LID model and the Perseverance and Tough Love Narratives. [McAdams \(1993\)](#) described the Warrior as those who have to engage in courageous battle, physical, verbal, mental, or spiritual. This archetype aligns with the meaning-making of Perseverance narratives in overcoming challenges. The Maker is described as a creator and producer and is often less interpersonal. Through this archetype, the individual seeks to be productive and efficient; they want to do things well. The Maker archetype aligns with themes found in the Tough Love narratives focused on setting high expectations and working hard to get ahead.

Communal imagos of *Friend* and *Ritualist* align with stage four leader identity perceptions and the Family Spirit and Butterfly Effect narrative. Communal imagos act, think, and feel in communal ways and are oriented toward love and intimacy ([McAdams, 1993](#)). The Friend character may understand their stories as tales of friendships and strive to build lasting relationships. This archetype centers on the Butterfly Effect, which relates to family story themes centered on relational connections. The Ritualist describes those who preserve traditions that bring people together in family and community. These narrative myths center on passing on skills and attitudes that focus on primary life goals. This archetype is well supported by the family story theme of Family Spirit, supporting empowerment and role-modeling behavior for others. Emerging adult LID is connected to the stories they hear in which they create “idealized imagos that personify the general agentic and communal tendencies of human life.” ([McAdams, 1993](#), p. 161). Leadership archetypes bring awareness to understanding how emerging adults make sense of the stories they hear and tell that influence their identities as leaders.

## Discussion

This research examined leader identity development and the role of meaning-making through family legacy stories. Overall, the categorical placements in Phase One provide a foundation for understanding the participants’ experiences with leadership and their current level of comprehension and leadership behaviors at the time of the study. The results

Leader identity development ( <a href="#">Komives et al., 2005, 2006</a> )	Family narrative theme ( <a href="#">Koenig Kellas, 2018</a> )	Leader archetype ( <a href="#">McAdams, 1993</a> )	Meaning making of leadership through family storytelling
Stage Three Leader Identified	Perseverance (n = 4) Tough Love (n = 3)	Agentic Leader Warrior & Maker	Positional Leaders focus on being more agentic in their identity as leaders
Stage Four Leader Differentiated	Family Spirit (n = 5) Butterfly Effect (n = 2)	Communal Leader Friend & Ritualist	Relational leaders focus on being more communal in their identity as leaders

Source(s): Created by authors

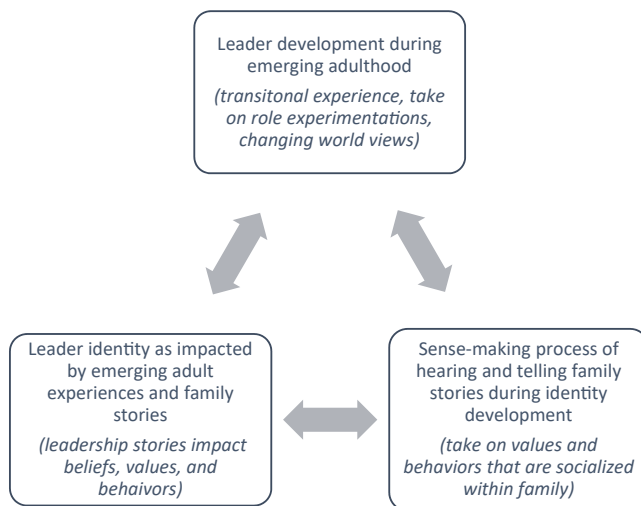
**Table 8.**  
Cross case analysis  
results

support previous work on leader development in the notion that developmental experiences, such as group influences, educational experiences, and adult/parental and peer influences are strong antecedents in developing a leader identity (Brungardt, 1996; Komives *et al.*, 2005, 2006; Lord and Hall, 2005). Understanding these developmental stages can help leadership educators support emerging adults in their transitional periods in higher education to develop into higher LID stages.

An interesting finding in Phase Two is the telling of family legacy stories. In families, multiple participants across generations co-narrate and evaluate shared stories, thus intergenerational family storytelling becomes important to identity development (Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Peterson & Langellier, 2006). The stories told by the emerging adults described how key messages influenced their identity within the context of leader identity development and their college experiences. Langellier and Peterson (2004) explained legacies help to preserve identity across generations, typically communicating simple themes that family members can recall. Consistent with CNSM, “the content of retrospective storytelling reveals individuals, relational and intergenerational meaning-making, values and beliefs.” (Koenig Kellas, 2018, p. 5).

Furthermore, a key finding in the narratives exhibited the stories emerging adults recalled in the sense-making of their leader identity centered on persevering, overcoming hardships, and interpersonal connections and relationships. In retelling a family story, emerging adults began to see connections between who they are as a leader and how the stories impact their identity. The storytelling process revealed individual, relational, and intergenerational meaning-making (Koenig Kellas, 2018) of identities salient to leadership.

Research on storytelling in the family posits stories are a central means of understanding identity construction and family socialization, (Koenig Kellas, 2005; McAdams, 1993; Stone, 2004). Through this process, individuals adopt values and behaviors that are socialized within the family. Accordingly, the overall findings indicate emerging adults adopt the values and behaviors that are socialized within the family in terms of leadership. Figure 6 illustrates the cycle of this process.



Source(s): Figure are created by authors

Figure 6. Sense-making process of storytelling and leader identity development



### *Limitations*

The results are based on 20 emerging adult leaders at a Midwestern university; therefore, generalizations beyond the participants in this study cannot be applied. Although there were gender and cultural aspects discussed in the interviews, an analysis was not made based on gender or cultural diversity due to the limited number of diverse participants. Participants were predominantly White/European American. Emerging adults who identify as non-white, Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and are outside of the Midwest most likely have different leader identity experiences. The participants' LID stages were based solely on deductive codes found within the model and supported by the participants' current experiences. Due to the cyclical nature of the LID model, students recalled experiences at different times and cycled back to leadership roles that had been most salient, whether they were current or not. Additionally, when using a semi-structured interview, what participants shared was not always presented in a clear, linear fashion.

### *Future research*

Future research on identity development is to provide intersectionality across multiple dimensions. [Komives et al. \(2009\)](#) explain leadership educators need to understand the way identity intersects within dimensions of "race, culture, sexual orientation, gender, disability, religion, and social class" (p. 24). As one participant in the current study noted, "It's really the women in my family that are like, 'I'm going to keep going and keep pushing,' which I kind of found still applies to the newer generation of like me and my brother." Similar to [Komives et al.'s \(2005\)](#) findings, gender orientation was a factor with some of the participants, particularly emerging adults that self-identified as female.

Models such as the LID describe developmental influences and experiences as part of the LID process. Future research into developmental factors such as the role of adult and peer influences, meaningful involvement, and reflective learning could be explored. For example, research by [Orsini, McCain, and Sunderman \(2024\)](#) supports the use of peer interviewing as a pedagogical technique for LID meaning making.

### **Conclusions & implications**

Research on leader identity development is an important area of inquiry for leadership scholars and educators. Understanding the process of creating a leader identity is crucial for those in higher education designing leadership curricula and developmental programs ([Komives et al., 2005](#)). Higher education aims to teach and grow future leaders to be successful after graduation, thus, leader identity development is one of the most important predictors of effective leadership and career development ([Day & Harrison, 2007](#); [Hall, 2004](#)). The results of this study provide an understanding of the interplay between leader identity development and family storytelling, suggesting intergenerational stories told within the family play a role in the sense-making process of creating a salient leader identity.

By applying a storytelling approach, educators may produce new leadership curricula and training programs focused on helping leaders understand where their identity stems from and how their identity influences their interactions with others ([McCain & Matkin, 2019](#)). Research on high-quality leadership programs ([Eich, 2008](#)) stresses the need for student-centered learning systems that extend beyond the formal classroom. For example, allowing individuals to reflect on family stories brings to focus values and behaviors that carry into leadership roles. [McCain and Matkin \(2019\)](#) offer suggestions for applying storytelling in leadership courses, such as having students keep reflective journals over their identity development, socialization of group norms, and coping with periods of transition in a leadership context. Interactional storytelling ([Koenig Kellas, 2018](#)) could be used in the classroom by having students engage in storytelling with a leader, mentor, or family member and reflect on how the

stories impacted their leader behaviors. Orsini *et al.* (2024) offer interviewing and turning point graphing as a classroom activity for the process of leader identity development. Interviewing allows for the interviewee to participate in self-authorship which permits an individual to author one's own thinking, feeling, social relating, and leader identity development (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Kegan, 1994; Komives *et al.*, 2009). The communicative act between the interviewer and interviewee allows for joint meaning making construction. In addition to interviews, turning point graphing is an autobiographical reflection where individuals can graph high points, low points and turning points that provided meaning in their life trajectory (i.e. such as their leadership journey). Orsini *et al.* (2024) found students who participated in these storytelling methods viewed the process as favorable and reported an increased awareness of their leader identity meaning making.

Additionally, articles by Albert and Vadla (2009) and Armstrong and McCain (2021) examined storytelling leadership courses. This research supported storytelling courses allowed for students to "emerge with greater clarity and confidence in their leadership voice." (Albert & Vadla, 2009, p. 82). Their article further provides leadership instructors with key factors for creating a narrative approach in the classroom. Armstrong and McCain's (2021) case study expanded on this work and found three overarching themes of students in storytelling courses (a) vulnerability, (b) self-reflection on memorable moments, and (c) value in hearing the stories of classmates' experiences.

By applying a storytelling approach, such as theories like CNSM, educators can help leaders understand where their identity stems from and how their identity influences how they interact with others. Storytelling provides insight into how emerging adults develop their leader identity through the sense-making of character imagos presented in their life narratives. Since educators play a key role in leader identity development, this study provides support for exploring storytelling/narrative techniques as part of classroom projects.

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