



The arena of the professional body: Sport, autonomy and ambition in professional service firms



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interplay of sport, the professional body and the self in professional service firms. We draw on qualitative data collected at two large international management consulting firms to show how individuals use sport to construct and enact themselves as autonomous and ambitious professionals, as well as to escape from frustrations arising in their everyday work life. We develop how this turn to sport can be viewed as an attempt to deal with the conflicting discourses of autonomy and ambition prevalent in professional service firms. In so doing, the paper seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the significance of the professional body for understanding the management and control regimes of professional service firms.

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1. Introduction

Management and organization research has grown increasingly aware of the importance of the body as an area of inquiry (e.g., Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Hancock et al., 2000; Hassard, Holliday, & Willmott, 2000; Hope, 2011; Wolkowitz, 2002, 2006). Studies of gender have particularly emphasized the significance of actors' bodies for understanding the inner workings of disciplinary power at work (e.g., Brewis & Sinclair, 2000; Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008; Bryant & Jaworski, 2011; Driver, 2008; Kerfoot, 2000; Thanem & Knights, 2012; Trethewey, 2001). Especially in the context of discourses of professionalism, research has highlighted how managerial control often operates not simply by targeting employees' cognitions and identities, but also and essentially through the professional body (Ashcraft, 2008; Grey, 1998; McDowell & Court, 1994; Michel, 2011; Riach & Cutcher, 2014; Trethewey, 1999; Tyler & Abbott, 1998). Following this literature, the professional body appears to be a key arena in which individuals can construct and enact themselves as professionals along the lines of organizationally promoted discourses.

The present article seeks to contribute to these ongoing efforts to illuminate the arena of the professional body by drawing

attention to the significance of sport – as a bodily practice – in professional service firms. This research interest is triggered by two qualitative empirical studies conducted independently at two large internationally operating professional service firms where sport played a surprisingly prominent and visible role. This prompted us to ask the exploratory question: Why and how does sport matter in professional service firms? In particular, how does sport relate to the formation of the professional self in such firms?

By showing how sport can significantly play into the construction and enactment of the professional self, the article seeks to add to extant research on organizational control and the professional body (e.g., Grey, 1998; Michel, 2011; Trethewey, 1999; Waring & Waring, 2009). Specifically, we show that scrutinizing sport adds insights into the understanding of the professional body as it serves to address and deal with the key tension between the discourses of 'ambition' and 'autonomy' prevalent in professional service firms (see Alvesson, 2000; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009).

We develop our argument by first discussing the extant literature on professional service work and the professional body as well as research on sport that points to its significance in professional service firms. Following a discussion of methods, we introduce the two companies we empirically investigated as typical professional service firms. In the empirical analysis we show in what ways sport gains importance in professionals' lives both at and beyond work, as well as how sport activities are supported and promoted by the firms themselves. We then analyze the significance of sport as a way for professional service workers

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to discipline their bodies in line with the discourse of professionalism as well as to escape from the frustrations arising in their high-pressure work environments. The discussion develops how the significance of sport in professional service firms relates to its apparent aptness for dealing with the tensions entailed in the discourses of professional ambition and autonomy. We conclude by pointing out implications for further research on the professional body, sport and the self in professional service work and beyond.

2. The professional body between autonomy and ambition

A central tension in professional work concerns the discourses of 'autonomy' and 'ambition' (e.g., [Alvesson, 2000](#); [Ekman, 2012](#); [Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009](#); [Michel, 2011](#)). Following [Kärreman and Alvesson \(2009\)](#), the discourse of 'autonomy' captures the ways in which professional service work requires the exercise of independent judgment and discretion. That is, part and parcel of being a professional is the display of expertise, which implies and requires high levels of personal autonomy ([Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007](#); [Ekman, 2012](#)). However, professional service work is also inherently ambiguous as there are no clear-cut and directly observable criteria for evaluating quality and impact ([Alvesson, 2000](#)). As a result, there is a constant need for professional workers to perform a negotiated and socially recognized presentation of the self, namely that of the knowledgeable expert serving the client ([Anderson-Gough, Grey, & Robson, 2000](#); [Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009](#)).

This implicates a specific kind of disciplinary regime prevalent in professional work. In professional service firms, the central question of control shifts from how to directly control behaviors and practices to how to "ensure that employees realize the full fruits of their own expertise and ingenuity for the purposes of the organization" ([Sewell, 2005: 687](#)). The latter involves more subtle forms of control that aim at aligning the individual and his or her sense of self with the professional service firm (e.g., [Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007a](#); [Anderson-Gough, Grey, & Robson, 2001](#); [Bergström, Hasselbladh, & Kärreman, 2009](#); [Brown & Lewis, 2011](#); [Costas & Grey, 2014](#); [Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998](#); [Grey, 1994](#); [Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004](#); [Thornborrow & Brown, 2009](#); [Whittle, 2005](#)).

In particular, the work of [Foucault, 1977, 1980, 1982](#) has informed research on the ways in which discourses of professionalism can produce disciplinary effects on the self. Following [Foucault \(1982\)](#), one way disciplinary power operates involves the production of subjectivity through discourses that define how individuals should be. In the context of this paper, this operates as a key mechanism of the subtler form of control prevalent in professional service firms. In particular, Foucault also draws attention to ways in which social practices, such as surveillance systems (e.g., the panopticon), normalize and domesticate bodies ([Foucault, 1977](#); [Lash, 1984](#); [Shilling, 1991](#)). Hence, through the lens of Foucault, the significance of the discourse of professionalism lies in the ways in which it produces and disciplines the conduct of selfhood and therefore the professional body (see also [Fournier, 1999](#)). Thus, "being a professional" ([Grey, 1998](#)) requires individuals to conform not only to certain ways of being and behaving, but also dressing, speaking and looking ([Brewis & Sinclair, 2000](#); [Driver, 2008](#)).

At the same time, professionalism involves a defined set of expectations of how to develop and progress as a professional ([Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007a](#); [Costas & Grey, 2014](#); [Grey, 1994](#); [Thornborrow & Brown, 2009](#)). Following [Kärreman and Alvesson \(2009\)](#), this concerns the discourse of 'ambition' that is prevalent in professional service work. It is most evident in the ways in which the professional career is constructed, namely as a particular

project of the self ([Grey, 1994](#)), which implies a future orientation through which disciplinary power is exercised ([Costas & Grey, 2014](#)). In professional service work environments the notion of the career is often translated into displaying the right kind of ambitions; that is, aspirations of developing competence and expertise, a willingness to work hard for achieving future success, and skillfully performing and displaying the expected professional identity.

By evoking the Foucauldian framework, many studies of professional service work have drawn attention to how the professional body plays a significant role here ([Ashcraft, 2007](#); [Meier Sørensen & Villadsen, 2015](#); [Michel, 2011](#); [Trethewey, 1999](#)): "The body is (. . .) the surface onto which (. . .) culture is inscribed and the vehicle for its reproduction through enabling the interiorization of ethical values that guide behavior in situations of face-to-face interaction" ([Bell & King, 2010: 430](#)). Thus, the 'right' kind of professional norms and values are not only a matter of cognition, but are essentially inscribed and expressed through the professional body, for instance regarding visual appearance, posture, voice, and scent (see also [Meriläinen, Tienari, & Valtonen, 2015](#); [Mirchandani, 2015](#)). As research has pointed out, this may produce certain regulatory and discriminatory effects. In the context of professional identity, the presentation of what is regarded as a male professional body, i.e., the ideal of a desexualized, rational and disciplined body is dominant (e.g., [Acker, 1990](#); [Ashcraft, 2008](#); [McDowell & Court, 1994](#); [Trethewey, 1999](#)). Although masculine subjects also experience ambivalences and uncertainty in relation to their bodies ([Kerfoot, 2000](#); [Prichard, 2000](#)), the image of the professional body is particularly constraining and marginalizing for women ([Ashcraft et al., 2009](#); [Brewis & Sinclair, 2000](#); [McDowell & Court, 1994](#); [Bryant & Jaworski, 2011](#)). The female body is constructed as weak, overflowing, uncontrollable and "excess(ively) sexual" ([Trethewey, 1999: 445](#)), thus not professional. Women are therefore particularly concerned with displaying a fit professional body as an indication of discipline, endurance and control ([Trethewey, 1999](#); [McDowell & Court, 1994](#); [Tyler & Abbott, 1998](#)).

Moreover, studies have also drawn attention to the ways in which certain bodily performances serve to display professional competence and expertise ([Ashcraft, 2005, 2013](#); [Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007](#)). In the latter sense, the professional body is not only a site for the exercise of disciplinary power, but also one for performance and play (see also [Kachtan & Wasserman, 2015](#)).

Drawing on this literature, in this paper we focus on how the professional body matters in terms of the discourses of autonomy and ambition in professional service firms. For instance, speaking and standing up in a certain pose and therefore engaging in a certain bodily performance is required to be perceived as an autonomous expert (e.g., [Kenny & Bell, 2011](#); [Meriläinen et al., 2015](#)). At the same time, being ambitious is proven through effortlessly disciplining the professional body and putting it to use in ways that makes one a candidate for development and promotion (e.g., [Trethewey, 1999](#); [Waring & Waring, 2009](#)). A recent ethnography of investment bankers by [Michel \(2011\)](#) provides specific insights into how the professional body can relate to both the discourse of autonomy and the one of ambition. [Michel \(2011\)](#) demonstrates how professional service workers experience their bodies both as "objects" and as "subjects." On the one hand bankers seek to discipline their bodies, relating to them as "objects" in line with the discourse of ambition (i.e., presenting themselves as hard-working and successful despite fatigue and sickness; engaging in sport activities at night in order to loose weight and maintain professional appearance). On the other hand, such disciplining efforts are always at risk of failing as bodily breakdowns may occur, thus putting a limit to the ambition discourse (i.e., health problems due to sleep deprivation). Following [Michel](#), such breakdowns of the professional body facilitate a shift in

discourse from ambition to autonomy whereby the body is understood as a subject and constructed as a repository of experience, skill and wisdom.

Several studies of professional work and identity also implicitly point to the significance of the professional body in relation to sport discourses—the focus of this paper. For instance, research has outlined the pervasiveness of sport metaphors and clichés in organizational contexts, such as those about being a team player whilst also displaying competitiveness (e.g., Anderson-Gough, Grey, & Robson, 1998). Another study has demonstrated how a professional service firm used a sport star in their branding activities to highlight the core values and therefore core aspects of the professional and organizational identity (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). Knoppers (2011) explored the symbolic aspects of sport more explicitly by looking at how managers evoke sport metaphors in order to construct themselves as skilled, tough and successful—something that entails the gendering of the figure of the manager. Furthermore, Waring and Waring (2009) looked at how professional service workers in the City of London engage in fitness activities in health clubs to manage and represent a specific professional body image that conforms to the discourse of professionalism: “the creation and maintenance of a corresponding body image symbolizes commitment, dedication and conformity to these [corporate] expectations” (2009: 360). Sport has also been identified as a practice hedge fund traders turn to in order to maintain a healthy and enduring professional body and establish “an intimate and ongoing connection with their ageing bodies” (Riach & Cutcher, 2014: 782). In other words, sport practices can be viewed as an embodied response to professionalism, which promotes a discourse of ambition as expressed in competitive behavior and the desire to succeed. Interestingly, disciplining professional bodies through sport appeared “to be a gender-blind process” (Waring & Waring, 2009: 358), in that a certain “grooming” (ibid.) of the professional body was required for both women and men.

Building on these insights, the present study seeks to draw attention to the interplay of the professional body, sport and both the discourses of ambition and autonomy. Extant research, such as the work of Waring and Waring (2009), tends to stress the symbolic aspects of sport as a form of professional embodiment and, thus, how the fit professional body is disciplined and can serve to symbolize ambition. We aim to take this further in two ways: First, we expand the current focus on the symbolic aspects of sport i.e., how to *look* fit to exploring also what it means to *be* fit, i.e., the actual practices of doing sport, in the context of professional service firms. Second, we show how through sport professional service workers may also seek to escape the discourse of ambition and understand themselves in autonomous ways. Thus, in this paper, sport operates at the intersection between the discourses of autonomy and ambition. Indeed, in the professional service firms we empirically studied, it was this functioning of sport as both an integration into and an escape from work that make it such an intriguing phenomenon to study.

3. Methodological considerations

Two studies of large, globally operating management consultancy firms, ConsultStar (CS) and LunaCon (LC), form the empirical basis of this paper.¹ The two studies were conducted independently in different geographical locations. Both studies involve the same company (ConsultStar), and one company in addition (LunaCon). Methodologically, the field studies were based on p-

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¹ We have replaced all names with pseudonyms to protect the identities of those involved in the studies.

participant observations, interviewing and documentary analysis. We pursued a case study approach, drawing on interpretive and qualitative methodology. Ontologically, we took a social constructivist point of view and, epistemologically, our approach is interpretivist. In other words, we do not accept that we have immediate and objective access to some kind of external reality. In this sense, we were primarily concerned with the meanings ascribed to the discourses and practices we focused on.

The first, five-year long study at ConsultStar consists of 52 interviews with 45 persons, as well as participant observations at various organizational gatherings. The latter included following a team for two work days, participating in training sessions, internal meetings and external presentation events. The second study is based on a total of 57 interviews (from analyst to director level)² at ConsultStar and LunaCon, which lasted from 45 min to one hour. At ConsultStar, the first author also participated as an observer in an internal HR team. This meant that she visited one of the ConsultStar's offices in London up to four times per week. Moreover, she attended and participated in twelve focus group meetings on HR practices. At LunaCon, over a period of five months she hung out at the consulting office and informally engaged with consultants by going for lunch, coffees and after work drinks. Both studies also entail the analysis of HR documents, company websites and recruiting brochures. Importantly, in both studies the researchers were not employed by the companies but participated as more or less active observers in the field.

The significance of sport emerged as an empirical finding in both data sets and was not generated by the original research questions. Both empirical studies were exploratory in design and broadly interested in the characteristics of knowledge work, and, in particular, professional service work (study 1), and in the dynamics of organizational culture and identity in professional service firms (study 2). The interview guide of the first study focused on consultants' everyday work practices, their understanding of their work and their identity constructions as professional service workers. The interview guide of the second study was designed to tap into consultants' understanding and experience of the professional service firms' culture, their perceptions of professional work and their identity constructions at work and beyond. Depending on the empirical setting, we deployed different sampling strategies. In the first study, there was a combination of snowball sampling and purposeful sampling in order to “study up” and focus on managers and partners. In the second study, at ConsultStar, snowball sampling was applied, whereas, at LunaCon, the firm provided a representative sample of consultants at all hierarchical levels.

During the course of fieldwork at ConsultStar and LunaCon, unexpectedly to both researchers, sport emerged as one central theme: For instance, the companies' branding and recruiting campaigns made heavy use of sport metaphors and images. In the interviews consultants referred to sport, specifically when asked to describe the culture, events and activities organized within the companies and also themselves, their interests and extra-curricular activities. Through participant observation it became apparent in both studies that sport also featured extensively in informal talk in everyday corporate life. For example, during coffee breaks, consultants often exchanged insights about the state of their marathon training and, on Mondays, they would report – or sometimes even brag – about their weekend sport activities. Although one limitation of both studies is that the researchers did not participate in the company sport events themselves, the interview, documentary and participant observation data provide c-

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² At both firms the hierarchy levels (from below to the top) are: analyst, consultant, senior consultant, manager, senior manager, director and executive.

plementary insights into the significance of sport in the consultants' working life.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim within one week of recording. Moreover, the participant observations were written down in field notes. Given the similarities of the companies (in terms of size, business operations and culture), a comparative analysis was not conducted. Instead the data was analyzed around themes. The logic of abduction directed the data analysis process (see [Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007b](#); [Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008](#); [Van Maanen, Sørensen, & Mitchell, 2007](#)). In both studies, the empirical field was initially approached through established conceptions concerning professional service work (autonomy, expertise, client work), culture (meaning, symbols, values) and identity (socialization, identification, roles). The prominence of sport in the empirical material was surprising to us to the extent that carrying out this activity, which in many ways is understood and presented as being beyond the boundaries of professional work, appeared to be such an integral part of being a professional consultant. In other words, in our empirical data, sport was not only practiced as a way to discipline the professional body and integrate into professional service work, in line with the discourse of ambition, something that extant research has pointed out, but it was also understood as a space to escape from work. As we develop in the next section, this illuminates how the tension between the discourses of autonomy and ambition plays out with respect to the professional body.

The findings of our study are therefore strongly related to the particular context of professional service work. Of course, we cannot rule out that some findings also apply to other contexts, such as work in high tech, pharmaceuticals and advertising, where similar pressure towards performance (i.e., the discourse of ambition) can be observed. In the context of professional service work, however, the two companies can be seen as representative. They are two of the biggest internationally operating professional service firms, and exhibit the culture, norms and practices typical for such work settings.

4. Introducing the firms—ConsultStar and LunaCon

LunaCon and ConsultStar are professional service firms that offer IT implementation, accounting and consulting services (the research focuses on the latter). They operate on a global basis and employ tens of thousands of employees. The companies are regarded as prestigious places to work. They recruit graduates from highly ranked universities. Most of the people working there (and whom we interviewed) are young (the average is around/below 30). Consulting work is classified and understood as knowledge work, namely work characterized by problem-solving, task complexity and creativity. Graduates, in particular, regard consulting as an important stepping-stone to swift career progression (see also [Costas & Grey, 2014](#)). They apply to the firms with the expectation of working on interesting projects relatively autonomously, learning from other highly qualified team members and interacting with clients on a senior level early in their careers. The discourse of autonomy, namely that of the professional exercising independent judgment and discretion, is clearly present in both the ways in which the firms present themselves and professional work as well as in the expectations of the individuals joining these firms (see also [Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004](#); [Costas & Kärreman, 2015](#)). Although both companies portray consulting work as creative, diverse, dynamic and autonomous, standardization and formalization of work processes and practices can be high. LC and CS consultants perceive themselves as gold-collar workers; individuals who are highly paid for their intellect, talent and qualifications rather than physical strength (see also [Alvesson, 2000, 2004](#)). However, HR executive Agnes (CS) remarks how in

graduate recruitment the company also looks for “empathy, energy and enthusiasm” in their candidates (see also [Anderson-Gough et al., 2000](#); [Anderson-Gough, Grey, & Robson, 2000](#); [Grey, 1998](#))—something that consultants are expected to indicate through their extra-curricular activities, such as those relating to sport or travel (on travel, see also [Costas, 2013](#)).

Despite this emphasis on individuality in recruitment, professional service firms like CS and LC pay much attention to the socialization of trainees (see [Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007a](#); [Anderson-Gough et al., 2000, 2005](#); [Grey, 1994, 1998](#)). HR manager Michael (CS) describes the socialization of graduates:

It is more about getting the right raw material and then obviously they get training and are molded into the right direction.

Such “moulding” of “raw material” refers to both mental *and* physical aspects, as the “right direction” relates not only to thinking, but also to, for instance, talking and behaving in professional ways, i.e., displaying a high client ethos, an attitude of “can do” and “delivery,” and high ambition to rise within the firm (see also [Anderson-Gough et al., 2000, 2005](#); [Grey, 1994](#); [Poulter & Land, 2008](#)). In this sense, the discourse of ambition with its disciplinary effects on the professional body has a clear and visible presence in daily corporate life and the consultants' understanding of their selves as projects, i.e., as something to be constantly worked on, improved and monitored (see also [Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007](#); [Costas & Grey, 2014](#)). Professional appearance is important, as consultants typically work at the client site and hence are “ambassadors” of their organization:

There is a professional behavior that I would adopt always with the client: . . . you always look busy . . . you would maintain your physical appearance, the way you speak with your client and your peers and little things like not a huge amount of conversation, unless required (Martin, manager, CS).

Hierarchy strongly determines the division of labor, responsibility and level of client interaction. Hierarchy also matters in terms of career structure and evaluation. Both companies employ a so-called “up or out” career system whereby individuals compete with those on the same level over moving up (or else they have to leave the company). Formal and informal performance assessments determining the consultants' trajectory are frequent: The management of the various project teams gives feedback, twice a year the consultants meet up with their mentor and in everyday consulting life consultants receive comments especially on their professional conduct of selfhood from management.

Turnover rates are high in both companies, which can be related to the career model and high-pressure work environment (see also [Muhr, Pedersen, & Alvesson, 2012](#)). Overwork is common, especially as consultants travel to client sites and spend most time away from home. Moreover, project work is target-driven and very structured, involving constant and tight “delivery” deadlines both to the client and other project team members. At LC and CS the consultants are expected, no matter how stressed or exhausted they are from the “work hard, play hard” lifestyle (see also [Anderson-Gough et al., 1998](#)), to be “switched on”, i.e., always capable to work. In this way, they show both management and the client their willingness to “move outside the comfort zone” (Dan, HR manager, CS). This seemingly limitless expectation of performance and requirement of displaying a “yes attitude” (Tom, consultant, CS), no matter what the cost, can explain consultants' description of the cultures of both firms as “aggressive”. Thus, in this environment it is of high importance to maintain and display a high performing professional body, namely by “functioning” late at night and without much sleep as is typical in “high pressure projects” (Harry, manager, CS).

In sum, LunaCon and ConsultStar can be regarded as typical professional service firms in terms of the ways in which professional work is organized, performed, presented and understood. It appears that, as other studies of such firms cited above have also suggested, the discourses of autonomy and ambition are prevalent. Consultants are expected to both enact themselves as autonomous experts, especially in client and peer interactions, as well as function as reliable, high performing organizational members—something that disciplines the professional body with respect to how to perform and present one's physical appearance and conduct.

5. Sport at LunaCon and ConsultStar

It only takes a quick glance at one of the companies' websites or recruiting brochures to see the extent to which sport features in self-descriptions of corporate life. For example, LunaCon's recruiting website shows a picture with a football titled "what are your big goals?" ConsultStar employs a famous sport star to advertise its business, saying "this sport star's personality highlights our values: high performance, delivery and execution" (see also [Kärreman & Rylander, 2008](#)). Such slogans, images and campaigns are visible all around the offices in form of posters on the walls and leaflets lying around in the cafeterias. In a newspaper, the spokesman of ConsultStar explains that their sport campaign serves as "a metaphor for [their] business". Both companies run sport "clubs", such as a CS football club, and sponsor activities, such as marathons and triathlons.

Sport also plays an important role in consultants' lives. When asked to describe themselves, their interests and extra-curricular activities, consultants often refer to sport:

I like sports. I train for the marathon . . . [and] I try to play football as well (John, consultant, CS).

A lot of my social activities involve sport . . . I am currently training for the marathon (Bob, consultant, CS).

[I like] sports like running, going to the gym and tennis (Anna, analyst, LC).

I try and do one big thing every year, last year I went to do the Kilimanjaro (Alexandra, consultant, LC).

I love watching sport or playing sport . . . I also do lots of running, swimming and [I am] training for the triathlon (Laurence, manager, LC).

At the moment I am training for the Chicago marathon in October (Nancy, manager, LC).

Indeed, consultants often define themselves as "sporty" (Bob) and "athletic" (Nancy). This prominence of sports in both organizational and individual talk led us to ask ourselves: Why do these kinds of sport activities play an important role for consultants? How do they interact with their professional identities and work lives?

5.1. The consulting body: an expression of professionalism

We addressed these questions by first exploring how consultants make sense of sport in the context of their professional work. This is not to say that their sport interests can be thought of simply as a consequence of their work. Both firms recruit graduates of elite universities where sport has already significantly shaped their student life. Notwithstanding this, how consultants relate to sport and how sport parallels and feeds into their professional identities seems to be shaped by the professional service firms' discourses and practices. Individuals describe sport activities as "a big challenge and big achievement" (John)—notions that are also used to refer to their "high pressure" work environment. Consultants draw on sport metaphors, such as "going the extra

mile", to describe how they experience the constant pressure and high workload. For instance, Brigitte (manager, LC) "characterizes . . . [consulting work] like if you are climbing up a mountain . . . and there is another giant mountain in my way and then you just have to get on—somehow".

Sport metaphors are also used to express the high levels of internal competition. At CS, analyst Nora explained that "everyone is trying to run ahead . . . so you have to join the race to be able to survive". This parallels the company's marketing slogans of "only the best people win" and "those who are not able to deliver should go home". The reference to competitive sport activities seems to reveal and normalize a certain understanding of professional work: Only the fittest and fastest "survive" and "win" the "race" in the firms' "up or out" cultures; those who fail are not fit, ambitious and striving enough to "run the extra mile." This blending of discourses of sport and professional work involves the conception of the professional body as a fit, enduring and disciplined one. A certain kind of professional body, namely a young, athletic, slim and typically male body is prevalent in the companies' advertising and recruitment campaigns, and becomes a marker of and marked by a professional identity, bringing about regulatory and discriminatory effects in terms of gender and age.

At both firms, consultants engaged in sport to prove their bodily strength, endurance and resilience, thereby confirming the professional identity of being "an achiever" who can "overcome challenges". As mentioned above, consultant Alexandra, for instance, went on a company-sponsored trip to Kilimanjaro:

It was one of those things you want like having the challenge and you know not everyone who went made it to the top. But I did . . . But it was quite a, what's the word, quite an intense thing.

The kick of doing something extreme that only few people are able to achieve (only some "made it to the top") motivated her to participate. What makes it "intense," as Alexandra goes on to explain, is the physically strenuous and even dangerous nature of climbing at such high altitudes. Moreover, the firm and colleagues placed great importance on whether one had met this challenge or not: When Alexandra returned to the office, "the only thing everyone focused on [was], did you get to the top?" "Everyone" knew about the trip given that LunaCon advertised it "all over the company . . . to raise [charity] money". She therefore felt "so happy and proud" to belong to those who made it to the top. Thus, it appears that in this professional context engaging in sport is not simply about achieving a symbolic appearance of looking fit. Rather, doing sport is also important for demonstrating physical fitness and stamina through successfully engaging in such challenges. One has to "make sure [to] . . . finish" the marathon given that "so many people [from the company] are involved and have sponsored [them]" (Thomas, consultant, CS). Perhaps this need to prove oneself through sport challenges explains why even unfit individuals engage in extreme sport activities:

Nora: I am also doing a lot of running. I am doing the London Marathon.

Interviewer: Have you ever run for so long before?

Nora: No . . . not really. I ran three and a half hours the other week and it was not fun. I really started crying. I was like [pretending she is crying].

Nora started being interested in running, as "everyone else is doing it here" and it seems "to be part of the consulting thing." The training is "not fun", as it involves much "stress", "effort" and "discipline" and makes her cry, but she is nevertheless keen on participating. This indicates the extent to which engaging in sport activities is naturally expected as part of being a professional at the firm.

That sport can be an arena to prove and practice professionalism *beyond* looking fit is also underlined by how it is part of the rite of passage for joining the executive team:

On my project recently we had an executive come and visit us and he had just been made an executive. And we had a conversation about what the process is, because they have to go through some horrible challenges . . . kind of a weekend, where they are assessed constantly . . . on all sorts of activities, also some crazy outdoor [sport] challenges (Nick, manager, LC).

Entering the circle of executives requires succeeding in “horrible . . . crazy outdoor challenges,” which can involve physically strenuous forms of exercising, including marathon running and climbing mountains. Thus, both looking *and* actually being sporty matters not only to the younger, lower level consultants but also to those further up in the hierarchy given the ways in which it serves to express professionalism. This explains why both firms sponsor and support all sorts of sport activities within and outside of the workplace. For instance, as one of us observed at ConsultStar, manager John was allowed to leave ‘early’ from work, despite the project team working towards a tight deadline: Something that was an exception in this professional work environment. His absence was accepted, even approved, by the others as he went on a two-day hiking trip to Norway. Moreover, as consultant Gustav noted at ConsultStar:

You are expected to work long hours, and people will call you out if you don’t. . . The just about only acceptable reason to leave early are family issues [i.e., death and sickness in the family] or for doing exercise. Lot’s of people are exercising (laughter).

Interestingly, whilst this quote confirms the ways in which sport is both important to consultants and promoted by the firm, it also highlights how sport can serve as a legitimate escape from the high-pressure work environment. Gustav’s laughter clearly alludes to the fact that exercising could also be used as a legitimate excuse for leaving work early.

5.2. Escaping work

As indicated in the quote above, a second way in which consultants approach sport relates to escaping from work. Importantly, beyond using sport as an excuse to leave work early, consultants seem to engage in sport activities as they provide them with a sense of excitement and autonomy. For instance, Thomas remarks that sport allows him to keep up a sense of self beyond that of being a professional:

I am quite keen . . . that I am just not all about work. So, one avenue of realizing that is through sport, through running and doing various athletic challenges.

Indeed, sport is perceived as a way to liberate oneself from the high performance pressures and constraints of professional work. As Thomas went on to explain:

Because you do, by and large, work longer hours and there is an expectation that, if there is a peak in activity, that you will work on the weekend and, when you need to spend more time at work, you do it. So the time I do have free, I want to make the most of, hence doing things like the marathon. Doing the ultra-marathon³ in London is that kind of stuff which gets you out . . . of normal . . . routine.

Here sport is constructed and conducted as leisure time and, hence, outside of professional work. Although consultants feel the expectation from management to engage in the firms’ sport

activities, which blurs the boundaries between work and private lives, they actually seek to actively use sport in order to distinguish the two realms:

My concern is that if there is a model of success within LunaCon that accepts that I have my own friends, my own life, so I am not running the marathon with LunaCon. I am doing it with my girlfriend over in Chicago (Nancy).

However, sport as an escape from work is also understood as a coping mechanism to deal with the frustrations resulting from the high-pressure work environment. Here, the liberation felt through engaging in sport is reported to enable consultants to better deal with the demands of professional work. This is particularly the case when sport is seen as a form of “stress relief” or an “outlet” enabling individuals to find some “inner balance”. As partner Martin from ConsultStar explains:

Some days are more frustrating than others. When that happens, I go for a run when I get home and run it off.

The account of Joanna (manager, LC) further elaborates this dynamic of sport as a coping mechanism with the high-pressure professional work environment:

There was the bank holiday weekend and I had booked a holiday. At 3 pm on the Friday afternoon a partner came to me and asked me if I could do this work that needs to be done by Monday. So there was not: ‘can you do it?’ But it was clear that ‘you have to do it’. So, I did this work then between 9 pm on Friday to Monday. I could have pushed it back but then there are other 40 people who would do it. So, the question is: How do you want to be perceived?

When asked how she dealt with this, Joanna replied:

So, you just have to accept that this is the nature of the work here. What I do then is to run it off, I like to run off all of these things that bother me.

Here sport is approached as a form of bodily exertion that allows one to deal with the frustrations arising from the high demands of professional work environments. In Joanna’s case, the frustrations relate to how her autonomy, which is a central feature of professional identity constructions, is undermined by the strongly enforced hierarchy, the high levels of competition and the pressures to be perceived as always willing to prioritize work over any other demands. Through exercising she feels able to “run off” the tensions experienced at work and, in this way, she can “accept” the frustrating organizational reality. This may also explain the consultants’ seeming preference for individualized rather than team-based forms of sport; these can provide a greater sense of self-control and autonomy (in line with the image of the professional identity and in contradistinction to the constantly expected team work).

At the same time, however, the very sport activities used as an escape from work also reinforce the ethos of the consultants’ professional identity. For instance, running a marathon entails disciplining the professional body as to perform under extreme conditions—something that is also central to the ethos of professionalism. This is apparent in Thomas’s remarks who, as mentioned above, engages in a “kind of extreme activity”, such as “marathons” to escape his “normal routine” of work life. His interest in sport relates to having “a new challenge”, “an opportunity to try something new and challenge yourself”. In this way, sport serves to reinforce an identity in line with that of the ambitious professional, as the professional ethos is similarly based on such notions of constantly challenging oneself and performing under extreme conditions. Through sport (even as a way to escape from work) consultants can not only overcome the frustrations of their professional work life, which may undermine the idealized

³ Ultra-marathon refers to running distances beyond the traditional length of the 42.195 km marathon.

image of the autonomous professional worker, but also embrace ways of relating to themselves and their bodies that are in line with what it means to be an ambitious professional, i.e., being a high performer.

5.3. The professional body and its breakdowns

At LunaCon and ConsultStar, sport and the image of the professional body expressed through exercising can, however, also remain an unfulfilled wish. Not only do the temporal demands of consulting work often conflict with actually conducting sport, but also the fit, active and always performing professional body may constitute an aspirational fantasy in itself. For instance, because consultants tend to work long hours, usually travel to their client site for around four days every week, and sleep in hotels, our interviewees also admitted having little remaining time and opportunity to do sport both in the context of the companies' sport events and activities as well as outside of work. Thus, engaging in sport can remain "an aspiration" (Lisa, analyst, LC) that is "quite hard to keep . . . up", especially when working on a "project outside of London" (Thea, consultant, LC). Their membership of a "sports club in London . . . is a complete waste" (Jason, manager, CS) and they are "doing a lot less . . . like sports" (Athena, analyst, LC). This tension between the aspiration of engaging in sport and the difficulty of actually doing so is also highlighted in the following quotes:

One thing I have sacrificed is my health. You sit still all the time, you eat unhealthy food and you don't have the time to exercise (Anna, consultant, CS).

Work takes a lot of time and energy. I used to practice aikido and take part in a theater group but I don't have time for that anymore (Susanna, HR manager, CS).

Consultants at LunaCon and ConsultStar seem to face an inherent dilemma between the celebration of the ideal of a sporty, healthy and fit professional body, on the one hand, and the demands of a working life that to a large extent impedes achieving this ideal, both inside and outside work. It is this tension that reveals the ambiguous way in which sport operates both as an expression of ambition and autonomy, or the lack thereof.

Moreover, bodily limits, which are often reached through the high demands of professional work life, e.g., the lack of sleep from working late, can come to the fore in the very sport challenges. The account of Alexandra, the consultant participating in the trip to Kilimanjaro quoted above, particularly captures this aspect. Here some individuals failed to reach the top of the mountain because "their body couldn't take it" and they "got really ill". This made them "feel quite bad," since they had to tell everyone in the firm that "they did not make it." They experienced not climbing to the top as if "it was their fault". Thus, having a fit, resilient and enduring professional body is understood as a question of personal responsibility; not being fit affects people's perceptions of themselves, and their relations to others, namely of not being regarded as an achiever.

Underpinning the emphasis on sport is an ideal of the professional body as a limitless entity. However, although it often proves unattainable and unfulfilled, this ideal remains largely unquestioned. What is more, not fulfilling this ideal can induce guilt in certain cases. This explains why consultants conduct physically strenuous forms of sport even when they are injured. For example, it was not uncommon among those training for the marathon to report some kind of injuries, such as "knee problems," which, however, did not stop them from "still training" (Mitchell, consultant, LC). This tension between the breaking-down of the professional body, sport and professional work is expressed in the following account:

Fine, we deliver, but we do it at the compromise of people's health and well-being. And I have seen examples where two of my staff members got ill and one of them had to go through a knee operation and the other one had to leave ConsultStar because she was too ill, she could not sustain it. And the guy that had the knee operation, twelve months later he was still reprimanded by the senior manager for not coming back after the operation. He said: 'I had a knee operation, I was back to work after two weeks and started exercising soon afterwards. I cannot see why he cannot be back after two weeks' (Helena, manager, CS).

This quote shows how consultants are expected to display a resilient and performing professional body at all costs, *although* the very organization of their work "compromise[s] . . . people's health and well-being". In this context, sport serves as a platform to indicate and glorify such a professional body ("started exercising soon afterwards"), even at the risk of injury. Consultants are confronted with their bodily limits in sport challenges, but these limits are supposed to be passed over as a sign of dedication, motivation and, indeed, ambition in line with the professional ethos.

Whilst bodily resistance revealed through breakdowns in sport challenges can induce a sense of failure and shame among most consultants, in certain rare cases, it also bears the potential to make them question the taken-for-granted organization of consulting work and company policies. For instance, the episode from the project with the consultant who had a knee operation made Helena (CS) question the professional emphasis on limitless ambition:

The human side is compromised . . . They say that they are concerned about the engagement of people but they work them like *taking blood from a stone*. They really work them hard, really hard. At the moment we have the lowest engagement across ConsultStar world-wide, we have up to 49% attrition. *The culture is not right.* (emphasis added)

Helena went on to say how this attitude of performing and exercising, no matter at what cost, makes her "just [feel] like . . . *a warm body for them* [i.e., management]—a warm body that was going to help them achieve results" (emphasis added). In sum, it appears that the precariousness of the professional body can be antagonistic to the limitless ambition articulated in the professional self and the efforts to enact it. By breaking down, the professional body can not only challenge but in fact lead to failure in fulfilling the project of the professional self.

6. Discussion

The empirical analysis has shown how sport in the two professional service firms we studied matters as a practice for constructing a professional body that is both ambitious and autonomous. Being a professional requires displaying and enacting a particular professional body performance and image. The discourse of professionalism includes elements that mobilize the disciplining of the professional body towards one that is fit, enduring and skillfully performed. This article has suggested that sport discourses and practices are central here. Sport is directly concerned with the disciplining of the professional body as it carries an array of connotations, such as fitness, strength, challenge, competition and performance. Through sport the professional body can become a marker of and is marked by the discourse of professionalism. This explains both why professional service firms, such as LunaCon and ConsultStar, appear so interested and supportive of the sport activities of their members, and why professional workers themselves turn to sport, which

allows them to enact and spell out their professional selves with their own bodies. Interestingly, our empirical analysis has also shown that professionals understand their turn to sport in a different manner, namely as a way to escape from the professional service work environment. Here, sport is not only considered as a legitimate excuse to leave work early, but also as a way of coping with the frustrations arising from the high-pressure work environment. It is in exercising that the consultants felt to be regaining a sense of autonomy, one that is constantly compromised by the pressures of everyday work life.

We suggest that the interplay of the discourse of autonomy, on the one hand, and that of ambition, on the other hand, prevalent in professional service work is key to understanding the dynamic between sport, the professional body and the professional self. Professional service work is characterized by an emphasis on career, development and growth – what we have referred to as the discourse of ambition – but also on exercising expertise and professional judgment in client and peer interactions – what we have referred to as the discourse of autonomy. The discourse of ambition articulates an expectation that professional service workers should discipline their bodies by turning them into high performing, competitive and reliable entities (i.e., being able to work all night over long periods of time, not getting sick). The discourse of autonomy articulates an expectation that professional service workers should discipline their bodies towards a skillful display of expertise, persuasion and performance (i.e., the posture, voice, bodily movement), as in enacting the professional self in a confident and persuasive manner. In this sense, our paper has further drawn attention to how control in professional environments not only attempts to regulate the ‘hearts and minds’ of individuals as often emphasized and shown in extant research (e.g., [Alvesson & Willmott, 2002](#); [Bergström et al., 2009](#); [Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian & Samuel, 1998](#); [Kunda, 1992](#)), but also their bodies. Whereas extant research has pointed to the importance of the professional body and its performances for understanding organizational control (e.g., [Kachtan & Wasserman, 2015](#); [Michel, 2011](#)), in particular with respect to gender (e.g., [Ashcraft, 2005](#); [Grey, 1998](#); [Hancock & Tyler, 2007](#); [Trehewey, 1999](#)), we have more explicitly shown how this plays out in the context of the professional self through the evocation of sport. In particular, we have added insight on how, through sport, the professional body can be the disciplinary site not only for displaying the ambitious professional self, but also for enacting an autonomous self.

However, there is a tension between the discourse of autonomy and ambition and their respective expectations concerning the display and enacting of the professional self. Whilst ambition is strongly promoted and required at the professional service firms, as expressed by their career system and ‘up or out’ culture (e.g., [Costas & Grey, 2014](#)), autonomy often remains an aspirational ideal, though still expected as an integral part of the professional self-understanding ([Costas & Kärreman, 2015](#); [Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009](#)). Not only do professional service firms provide relatively little organizational support for achieving autonomy, but also the strong emphasis on ambition promoted by the firms in fact runs counter to the discourse of autonomy. In other words, autonomy is often constrained through the need to promote the ambitious professional self. As a result, professional service workers, unable to achieve a state of being autonomous and ambitious simultaneously, need to constantly oscillate between the two conflicting discourses.

It is at this juncture that sport, we argue, becomes such an interesting phenomenon in professional service firms; it caters to and provides a space for seeking to integrate both discourses *at the same time*. As we pointed out above, sport is not only an activity that allows to craft the professional body (in line with the discourse of ambition), but also a legitimate medium to escape

from and cope with the frustration in the workplace, as it provides an opportunity to exercise autonomy. However, consultants’ use of sport as a way to alleviate the frustrations arising from the tension of the autonomy and ambition discourse appeared to paradoxically reinforce this very tension: By “running off” whatever bothered them at work, consultants could become better performing professionals.

Our findings add to extant studies of the role of sport in organizations in two ways (e.g., [Knoppers, 2011](#); [Waring & Waring, 2009](#)): First, the empirical material showed that, at LunaCon and ConsultStar, looking fit was necessary but not sufficient for performing the professional self. There seems to be an additional expectation that professional service workers actually demonstrate and prove physical fitness through sport activities, such as marathon running and climbing Kilimanjaro, which are almost seamlessly incorporated into corporate life. In other words, the actual practicing of sport can matter as well. These findings imply that research should try to move beyond looking at symbolic aspects of the professional body (i.e., its physical appearance, dressing, etc.) and study more thoroughly the actual embodied practices in which the materiality of the professional body matters too (see also [Meriläinen et al., 2015](#)). Second, we have drawn attention to the ways in which sport may be understood not only as a way to discipline the professional body, but also as an escape from work. In other words, sport is not only practiced to articulate ambition (one side of the professional self, which extant studies have focused on), but also to regain a sense of autonomy. These findings are in line with recent urges to look at the professional body not simply as “as an object of discipline, symbolization, managerial strategies or gender codification [but also] (. . .) as an actor, itself creating signification” ([Meier Sørensen & Villadsen, 2015: 254](#); see also [Godfrey, Lilley, & Brewis, 2012](#)). In our case, consultants, looking for a way to escape from a stressful work environment and regain a sense of their compromised autonomy, turned to their bodies by engaging in sport activities. Here the professional body appears as a repository of authentic experiences of autonomy that promise to provide a contrast to the everyday world of professional work. However, as our findings also indicated, the attempt to look and be fit through sport might be based on an aspirational ideal that can often fail to be enacted as the professional body can break down.

Thus, the empirical analysis also pointed out various ambiguities involved in treating sport as an escape. Seen as an outlet of frustrations, sport can represent a correction factor, allowing individuals to cope even better with these frustrations. In the context of professional service firms, these relate to the routines of working life and the enforcement of hierarchy—aspects of the work in line with the discourse of ambition that in fact contradict the image of the autonomous professional. Thus, there is a clash between the image of professionalism consultants aspire to and the experienced everyday work reality (see also [Costas & Kärreman, 2015](#)). Sport serves to address this clash by strengthening the rather precarious – and constantly undermined – sense of the autonomous professional. Against the backdrop of a frustrating working life, the allure of sport can lie in providing a sense of autonomy over their bodies—something that both supports the ideal of an autonomous professional and plays into the discourse of ambition. In other words, sport can provide the promise to professional service worker to integrate the conflicting discourses of autonomy and ambition.

However, this promise cannot always be kept. Given the high-pressure work environment, the escape into sport may not be a viable option (i.e., there is simply no time to exercise). The empirical analysis has also shown how bodily breakdowns may occur; the professional body may “rebel” ([Michel, 2011](#)) against overly taxing physical strain. Thus, it can fail the professional

service worker seeking to find both a sense of autonomy and a way to express ambition in sport. This highlights the fictitious bodily image promoted by the professional service firms and also pursued by the professional workers themselves; the always fit, enduring and performing professional body constitutes an aspirational fantasy rather than an accomplishable state. The broken professional body marks a double failure, namely of not being able to display and enact neither autonomy *nor* ambition. This may be understood and experienced by professional workers as an individual failure (indeed, the body is often seen to be a private matter despite the fact that it is a target of professional regimes). However, our data also indicates in one instance a professional service worker attributed bodily breakdowns not to personal failure, but to the high-pressure professional service work environment with the prominence of the discourse of ambition. In particular, the harsh treatment and non-acceptance of bodily breakdowns – even when they are unavoidable – can make professional service workers aware of how their well-being is compromised at work as they are treated like an exchangeable object (a “warm body”).

Taken together, these findings also complicate dominant understandings of how the formation of the professional self takes place. As Ashcraft (2013) has pointed out, most of the literature tends to assume an “individual-independent view,” whereby the professional self is seen as constructed through the formation of individual-level cognitions about self and work that retain independence from other social identities. Here, the focus is on the processes of how single individuals embrace or resist pre-given identity targets. In contrast, our findings support what Ashcraft (2013) labels the “collective-associative” view, whereby the professional self “incorporates” discursive material from other social identities not strictly associated with the world of work (in our case: sport). Here the focus is on how collective identity targets themselves are constructed. A parallel argument can also be found in Land and Taylor (2010) who suggest that organizations are increasingly importing non-work activities into the world of work for purposes such as employee branding. In our case, sport is imported into the formation of the professional self to the extent that it supports the discourses of both ambition and autonomy and seems to provide a way to deal with the tensions arising at their intersection. The import of sport is further facilitated by the fact that it provides standardized measurements for ambition. Indeed, sport’s allure may lie in its seemingly clear, objective and measurable criteria for evaluating performance (e.g., did one finish the marathon or not, climb up to the top of the mountain or not, how long did it take etc.). Albeit couched in terms of extra-curricular exciting and adventurous activity, engaging in and succeeding in some kind of sport challenge can constitute an implicit criterion for being professionally fit (in the double meaning). This suggests that the “incorporation” of external activities and discursive materials, such as sports, into an existing occupational identity might be more likely to happen when the former can be rationalized in the terms of the dominant discourses already shaping a given identity. Thus, our findings point towards a scenario where the professional self is crafted ‘inside-out’ rather than simply ‘top-down’ and/or ‘bottom-up’ (see Ashcraft, 2013).

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that through the lens of sport the professional body can constitute an important arena for professional service workers to articulate, enact and engage with the discourses of ambition and autonomy that define the professional self. Our findings show how the central tension between these discourses with respect to the professional body and the self plays out through sport. We have suggested that professional service

workers engage in sport both to explicate and articulate the discourse of ambition through being fit and to enact a sense of an autonomous professional, one which is constantly at risk given the frustrations involved in professional service work resulting from the discourse of ambition. In doing so, we contributed to a more nuanced understanding of how the professional body is mobilized as a resource for constructing a professional self that is both ambitious *and* autonomous, but also how this process can entail failure and breakdowns: The body appears to follow its own logic, thus evading full control through single individuals and organizations. Moreover, we have added to extant discussions by drawing attention to the significance of sport in this regard. What is surprising here is how certain resources typically understood as extra-curricular and therefore ‘outside’ of work, such as sport, are used, mobilized and promoted to construct a professional self. We could link this “incorporation” of sport to its ambiguous positioning at the interface of the discourses of ambition and autonomy.

Whilst this study’s findings are situated within the context of professional service firms, one might argue that they can also apply to other work environments that equally place emphasis on sport, and where discourses of ambition and autonomy are prevalent. However, it is also important to point out that not every sport activity needs to be necessarily related to and, thus, have implications for the construction of the work self. By drawing attention to the interplay of the professional body, the work self and sport, future studies may provide more insights onto how discrimination along the lines of gender, age and class can occur in organizations—something that our data did not allow us to engage with at much depth (on aging, see also Riach & Cutcher, 2014). Moreover, further research may look at the ways in which sport may constitute a kind of bodily test for evaluating organizational members and for organizational members to prove themselves. The process of evaluation through sport may be seen to differ from and counterbalance vague and subjective ways in which individuals’ work outcomes and performance are assessed, in particular in knowledge work environments. Whereas most project work is carried out in large teams, making it difficult to delineate individual contributions to work outcomes, the individually (rather than team) based sport activities allow organizational members to prove and display their individual abilities. This may be particularly important for those on lower levels, facing strong peer competition, having to make sure that they are the ones selected for career advancement. In conclusion, in this paper we have provided insights into the interplay between the professional body, sport and the professional self. Bringing together the streams of literature on these themes, we hope to have shown, provides an exciting new avenue to understand the relation between the body, work and organizations.

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