



The Digital Uprising: Subaltern Voices Reshaping Power in West Asia

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ABSTRACT

The rise of digital media has significantly transformed the political landscape of West Asia, opening new avenues for dissent, resistance, and empowerment. This study explores how subaltern voices, those historically marginalized by patriarchal, political, and colonial systems, use digital platforms to express identity, mobilize collective action, and challenge established power structures. Through a qualitative analysis of key movements, including the Arab Spring, Women2Drive, My Stealthy Freedom, and Palestinian online activism, the study investigates the complex and transformative role of digital media in political mobilization. The findings reveal that digital platforms have enhanced the visibility of marginalized communities, enabling decentralized and transnational forms of activism that redefine traditional notions of political participation. Nevertheless, these benefits are accompanied by ongoing structural inequalities, state surveillance, algorithmic bias, and digital repression, which often reinforce subalternity in new forms.

The study concludes that the “digital uprising” in West Asia represents not merely technological progress but a profound reconfiguration of voice and power where the subaltern negotiates agency within shifting boundaries of control, visibility, and resistance.

Keywords - Digital media, subaltern voices, political mobilisation, West Asia, digital activism, empowerment, online resistance, postcolonial theory

Introduction

The digital age has redefined how societies communicate, mobilize, and resist. Across the globe, digital platforms have emerged as transformative spaces where narratives of power, resistance, and identity converge. In West Asia, a region long marked by authoritarianism, social stratification, and limited civic freedoms, the advent of digital media has generated new avenues for political expression and collective action. What was once confined to streets, mosques, and underground networks has increasingly shifted to virtual spaces where the subaltern, the politically marginalized, economically disadvantaged, and socially silenced, finds new modalities of voice and agency (Ponzanesi, 2020). This transformation represents a “digital uprising”: a shift not only in communication technologies but in the very grammar of power and participation.

The term subaltern, rooted in the postcolonial writings of Antonio Gramsci and later expanded by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to those excluded from dominant structures of representation and decision-making (Place & Cizek, 2021a). In the context of West Asia, subalternity encompasses women challenging patriarchal norms, ethnic minorities negotiating identity, refugees asserting dignity, and citizens contesting political oppression. Historically, these voices have been suppressed through censorship, gender segregation, and political surveillance (Iovine, 2022). However, digital media through platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube have partially disrupted this silence by providing tools for self-representation, mobilization, and transnational solidarity.

Existing scholarship on digital activism in West Asia has largely focused on the Arab Spring and subsequent state responses. While these studies have provided valuable insights into the mobilizing power of digital media, they often neglect the nuanced experiences of subaltern groups who navigate multiple layers of marginalization, ie, gender, class, ethnicity, and displacement (Lal, 2001). Moreover, the literature tends to treat digital activism as episodic, overlooking its long-term sociopolitical implications and its intersections with global power dynamics, platform governance, and algorithmic control. As digital platforms evolve into

arenas of both empowerment and exclusion, a systematic reassessment is required to understand how subaltern voices are reshaping the digital public sphere (Rabindran, 2023).

The present paper contributes to existing scholarship in three key ways. It situates digital activism within broader postcolonial and feminist frameworks, recognizing the intersectional dimensions of subalternity. Finally, it underscores the dialectical tension between empowerment and control in the digital age, emphasizing that the “digital uprising” is not merely a technological phenomenon but a profound sociopolitical reconfiguration of power. In doing so, this study advances our understanding of how digital media serves as both a platform of resistance and a terrain of contestation in the evolving political landscape of West Asia.

The evolution of subaltern studies has laid the intellectual foundation for understanding how marginalized voices contest power, both offline and in digital spaces. Lal (2001) offered an early critique of subaltern historiography, arguing that academic discourse often reabsorbs subaltern voices into elite narratives, thereby limiting their emancipatory potential. His argument about the tension between representation and appropriation continues to frame analyses of digital resistance, where new media may amplify voices yet still operate within structures of domination.

The advent of the digital era has introduced new dimensions to subaltern expression. Nayar (2014) conceptualized the “Digital Dalit,” highlighting how cyberspace enables marginalized communities to challenge caste hierarchies and assert agency in the online public sphere. However, his study cautions that the liberating potential of digital platforms is constrained by the persistence of offline social inequalities. Expanding the understanding of digital activism in developing contexts, Neyazi, Kumar, and Semetko (2016) demonstrated how digital media in South Asia decentralizes communication and empowers previously excluded voices, offering an analytical lens for similar mobilization patterns in West Asia.

Paul and Dowling (2018) advanced this discussion by describing digital archiving as a form of social protest, wherein marginalized groups document and preserve their struggles online to counter institutional erasure. This idea of memory as resistance becomes critical in regions where state narratives dominate public discourse. Similarly, Ponzanesi (2020) explored the concept of digital diasporas, revealing how postcolonial subjects use online spaces to negotiate belonging, identity, and affect across borders, thus transforming transnational activism into a deeply emotional and political process.

Recent scholarship has critically examined the limitations and contradictions of digital empowerment. Place and Ciszek (2021a) presented a “subaltern critique” of digital dialogue, showing that online participation is often mediated by algorithmic hierarchies and embedded inequalities in platform design. Rehman and Riaz (2021) echoed this ambivalence by demonstrating that while social media amplifies marginalized perspectives, it also facilitates misinformation and state surveillance, particularly in conflict-affected societies such as those in West Asia. Building on these concerns, Iovine (2022) investigated transnational subaltern identities, showing how digital diasporas challenge hegemonic narratives through cross-border solidarity and shared discourse. Naulakha (2022) contextualized these developments within the historical trajectory of subaltern studies, emphasizing its enduring commitment to restoring voice and agency to marginalized communities. Masiero (2023) extended this line of critique through a decolonial information systems perspective, calling for methodologies that acknowledge the epistemic marginalization of subaltern users in digital ecosystems.

More recent studies underscore the dual nature of digital resistance. Rabindran (2023) analyzed Dalit counter publics on social media, finding that online spaces both empower identity assertion and expose activists to harassment and surveillance, a paradox mirrored in West Asian feminist and ethnic movements.

Collectively, these studies reveal that digital media serves as both a site of empowerment and control. While it opens avenues for subaltern participation and transnational solidarity, it simultaneously reproduces systemic exclusions and surveillance. For West Asia, where political expression remains constrained, this literature highlights the transformative yet precarious role of digital technologies in reshaping power, voice, and resistance.

The study critically examines how digital media serves as a crucial tool in amplifying the voices of subaltern communities across West Asia. It seeks to analyse how historically marginalized groups utilize online platforms to articulate resistance, mobilize collective action, and challenge dominant political structures. Additionally, the study aims to explore the multifaceted challenges faced by these activists, particularly the growing threats of digital surveillance, state censorship, and the spread of misinformation, all of which significantly undermine the emancipatory potential of digital mobilisation in the region. Through this comprehensive inquiry, the research endeavours to deepen academic understanding of subaltern agency within increasingly monitored and contested digital spaces.

Much of the existing literature on digital mobilisation in West Asia has focused narrowly on the Arab Spring and its immediate aftermath, emphasizing the role of social media as a catalyst for mass protests and regime change (Rehman & Riaz, 2021). While these studies underscore the transformative potential of digital technologies, they often overlook the complex and enduring struggles of subaltern actors whose participation in digital spaces is mediated by factors such as gender inequality, language barriers, digital literacy, and state censorship. Moreover, most analyses tend to treat digital activism as a homogeneous phenomenon, ignoring the intersectional dimensions of identity and oppression that shape participation across different social strata. Another critical issue lies in the dual nature of digital media itself. While platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram offer unprecedented opportunities for visibility and global solidarity, they also function within surveillance-oriented architectures that can reproduce systems of exclusion. Governments across West Asia

have increasingly weaponized digital tools for monitoring dissent, manipulating information, and suppressing oppositional narratives through cyber laws, internet blackouts, and digital propaganda (Lal, 2001). This paradox, where technology serves as both an instrument of emancipation and a mechanism of repression, remains insufficiently explored in scholarly research, particularly from a subaltern and postcolonial perspective.

Furthermore, there is limited empirical research on the sustainability and outcomes of digital mobilization. Many online movements gain temporary visibility but do not lead to long-term institutional or policy changes. The reasons for this gap between digital participation and real-world impact are not yet fully understood. Likewise, questions about the authenticity and agency of subaltern voices in algorithmically mediated spaces remain unanswered. Scholars like Spivak (1988) have long questioned whether the subaltern can truly “speak” within dominant structures; in the digital age, this question gains renewed importance as algorithms, platform governance, and state control influence what can be said, seen, and shared.

Given these gaps, the present study seeks to critically examine the role of digital media in enabling or constraining subaltern political participation in West Asia (Naulakha, 2022). It explores how different forms of online activism, ranging from feminist campaigns and minority rights movements to refugee advocacy and anti-regime protests, negotiate power within authoritarian and patriarchal systems. By synthesizing findings from a wide range of empirical studies, this research aims to uncover patterns of empowerment, co-optation, and resistance within the region’s digital sphere. Ultimately, the study addresses the pressing question of whether digital platforms genuinely function as tools of emancipation and political agency, or whether they merely simulate participation under new modalities of surveillance and control.

This study holds significance for both academic and policy discourses. Theoretically, it extends Subaltern Studies originally rooted in South Asian historiography into the West Asian context, bridging postcolonial and digital media scholarship. Practically, it provides insight into how online activism shapes public opinion, governance, and social reform under conditions of repression. For policymakers and human rights organizations, the findings may help frame strategies to safeguard digital freedom, inclusivity, and equity. For the academic community, it illuminates how technology redefines resistance in an age of digital authoritarianism.

The research focuses on West Asia (comprising nations such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey), emphasizing movements where digital platforms have been instrumental in subaltern mobilisation. It explores key movements, including the Arab Spring, Women2Drive, MyStealthyFreedom, and Palestinian digital activism. The scope is limited to social media and online-based mobilisations between 2010 and 2023, excluding traditional print or broadcast media. The study adopts a qualitative interpretive framework, focusing on case studies, online content analysis, and thematic discourse analysis.

Theoretical Perspective

The conceptual framework of this study is anchored in three interconnected theoretical strands: Subaltern Theory, Digital Media Theory, and Political Mobilisation Theory. Together, these perspectives provide a lens through which the role of digital media in amplifying subaltern voices and reshaping political power in West Asia can be critically examined.

Subaltern Theory

The foundation of this study lies in Subaltern Studies, a theoretical and historiographical approach that emerged from South Asian scholarship in the 1980s, led by Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Partha Chatterjee. The term “subaltern” originally referred to social groups that exist outside the hegemonic power structure, those excluded from political representation and the dominant narratives of history. Spivak’s (1988) seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” interrogates the very possibility of subaltern expression within systems of power that silence them. She argues that even when the subaltern attempts to speak, their voice is often mediated or appropriated by elites. This concept is deeply relevant in West Asia, where patriarchal, authoritarian, and religious hierarchies have historically suppressed marginalized groups such as women, ethnic minorities (Kurds, Palestinians), migrant workers, and refugees. The rise of digital media challenges this silence by offering new channels through which subalterns can narrate their own experiences, share grievances, and engage in political discourse.

In this context, the study conceptualizes the digital sphere as a subaltern counter-public, a space where marginalized communities negotiate visibility and resist domination. Yet, the framework remains cautious, acknowledging that digital speech does not automatically equal empowerment; power relations are reproduced even in virtual spaces through surveillance, censorship, and algorithmic control.

Digital Media Theory

The second theoretical pillar draws from Digital Media and Communication Studies, particularly the idea of the public sphere and networked society. Jürgen Habermas’s (1962) notion of the public sphere provides a basis for understanding how citizens engage in rational-critical debate. However, in authoritarian West Asian contexts, traditional public spheres are often closed or state-controlled. Digital media, therefore, creates alternative or counter-public spheres (Fraser, 1990) where suppressed voices can emerge. Manuel Castells (2009) expands this idea in his Network Society Theory, arguing that power in the digital age is exercised

through communication networks, where information flow determines influence and control. Digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram act as tools of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), allowing individuals to mobilize around shared grievances rather than formal organizations. In West Asia, where traditional media is heavily censored, these platforms have enabled the rise of citizen journalists, women activists, and minority advocates, effectively redefining political participation. However, the same networks are also used by states to monitor dissent, spread propaganda, and impose digital authoritarianism. Thus, the framework interprets digital media both as a medium of empowerment and a site of contestation, where subaltern voices navigate between expression and control.

Political Mobilisation Theory

The third component of the framework is derived from Political Mobilisation and Social Movement Theories, which explain how individuals and groups organize collective action to pursue political or social change. Classical theorists such as Charles Tilly (1978) and Sidney Tarrow (1994) conceptualized mobilisation as coordinated action emerging from shared identities, grievances, and political opportunities. Contemporary scholars like Castells (2012) and Bennett & Segerberg (2013) highlight how digital communication transforms mobilisation into networked movements, where digital connectivity replaces hierarchical structures of leadership.

In the West Asian context, these theories help explain how marginalized groups—often lacking institutional representation use digital platforms to build solidarity networks, mobilize protests, and attract global attention. Examples include: The Arab Spring (2010–2011), where digital tools facilitated rapid mass mobilisation against autocratic regimes. The Women2Drive campaign in Saudi Arabia is demonstrating digital mobilisation's ability to achieve tangible policy reform. Palestinian and Kurdish activists are leveraging social media to document human rights violations and foster international solidarity.

Political Mobilisation Theory, therefore, frames digital activism as a process through which subaltern groups convert symbolic visibility into political agency, even in restrictive environments.

Digital Authoritarianism Theory

Digital Authoritarianism Theory explains how states use digital technologies to extend political control, suppress dissent, and manipulate public opinion. In West Asia, governments deploy surveillance systems, cybercrime laws, internet shutdowns, and data monitoring tools to track activists and dismantle online movements. This theory argues that while digital platforms create opportunities for mobilisation, they simultaneously strengthen authoritarian regimes by centralizing power through biometric systems, metadata tracking, and algorithmic monitoring. For subaltern groups, this creates a climate of fear where online participation carries significant personal risks. Understanding digital authoritarianism allows this study to examine how the digital sphere becomes both a space of resistance and a terrain of repression.

Surveillance Capitalism Theory

Surveillance Capitalism Theory highlights how corporate platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) extract user data to predict behavior, influence engagement, and commodify identity. In the context of West Asia, marginalized communities navigating digital activism become vulnerable to data exploitation, profiling, and algorithmic manipulation. Their political expressions are filtered through commercial logics where visibility depends on engagement metrics rather than social justice concerns. This theory reveals how corporate power, much like authoritarian power, shapes what voices are amplified and what voices remain obscured, reinforcing digital inequalities even within movements of resistance.

Critical Discussions

Digital media has redefined the contours of political participation and resistance in West Asia, emerging as both a tool of liberation and an instrument of control (Masiero, 2023). The proliferation of social networking platforms has created new opportunities for grassroots mobilisation, transnational solidarity, and the articulation of subaltern voices that were historically silenced by authoritarian regimes and patriarchal structures. Movements such as MyStealthyFreedom in Iran, Women2Drive in Saudi Arabia, and the ongoing digital advocacy for Palestine exemplify how online spaces have enabled marginalized groups, particularly women, ethnic minorities, and displaced populations, to document injustice, mobilize support, and challenge dominant power narratives (Paul & Dowling, 2018). These platforms have become spaces of storytelling, memory, and resistance, where the subaltern not only “speaks” but also constructs new political subjectivities. However, this empowerment remains deeply ambivalent. The same digital infrastructures that enable participation also facilitate state surveillance, algorithmic control, and ideological manipulation. Authoritarian governments across West Asia have developed sophisticated mechanisms to monitor dissent, infiltrate activist networks, and suppress oppositional discourse through cyber laws, censorship, and targeted disinformation. These repressive practices mirror what scholars describe as the “paradox of digital modernity,” wherein technology simultaneously empowers citizens and extends the reach of state control. The digital divide, manifested through disparities in internet access, gender, education, and language, further compounds inequality, rendering many subaltern groups invisible in the so-called digital public sphere (Place & Ciszek,

2021b). For instance, women in rural or conservative contexts often lack the technological literacy or social freedom to participate in online debates, leading to a selective representation of “subaltern voices” that skews toward the urban and elite (Nayar, 2014).

Moreover, the commodification of activism through hashtags, influencer culture, and algorithm-driven visibility risks transforming genuine political resistance into symbolic performance. Movements often experience a surge of visibility but limited structural change, as corporate platforms prioritize engagement metrics over social justice outcomes (Neyazi et al., 2016). This phenomenon highlights the need to distinguish between digital visibility and political agency: the former may create awareness, but the latter requires material transformation and institutional accountability. Similarly, the circulation of misinformation and propaganda undermines the credibility of online movements and fragments collective resistance into polarized echo chambers.

Despite these contradictions, digital media continues to offer hybrid models of resistance, blending online advocacy with offline protest. Activists in Iran, Lebanon, and Palestine use encrypted channels and community-based digital networks to coordinate protests, disseminate banned information, and preserve evidence of human rights violations. Such hybrid forms of mobilisation exemplify a resilient adaptation to repression, demonstrating that while control persists, resistance too evolves (Ponzanesi, 2020). Ultimately, the digital sphere in West Asia embodies a contested terrain where empowerment and control coexist; where subaltern agency is negotiated, not guaranteed; and where the struggle for voice continues in both virtual and physical spaces. The study thus underscores that the digital uprising is not a singular revolution but an ongoing process of negotiating power through visibility, connectivity, and resistance.

The findings of this systematic review reveal a complex yet revealing portrait of subaltern mobilisation in West Asia’s digital ecosystem. First, digital platforms have amplified the visibility of marginalized groups, enabling local struggles to gain regional and global recognition. Hashtag campaigns, citizen journalism, and digital storytelling have allowed individuals, particularly women and youth, to transcend geographical and political boundaries, bringing suppressed issues into the global public domain. This enhanced visibility has redefined how oppression and resistance are perceived, compelling both domestic and international audiences to engage with subaltern narratives.

Second, the study finds that digital media has redefined political agency by dismantling traditional hierarchies of leadership. Online activism thrives on decentralized networks where collective identities, rather than individual leaders, drive mobilisation. This shift empowers ordinary citizens to become agents of change, transforming passive spectators into active participants in sociopolitical discourse. However, this form of agency is not without limitations, as state control and corporate platform algorithms continually mediate the boundaries of expression.

Third, despite greater visibility and participation, structural inequalities persist. Many subaltern groups remain excluded from decision-making processes due to technological illiteracy, linguistic barriers, or fear of reprisal. Digital spaces often replicate offline hierarchies, marginalizing voices from rural, poor, or conservative communities. Thus, online participation does not automatically translate into political inclusion or social justice.

Fourth, the emergence of hybrid resistance models combining online advocacy with offline activism has proven crucial for sustaining movements under repressive conditions. These models allow activists to navigate censorship and state surveillance while maintaining collective momentum. They illustrate that digital activism alone may not achieve change, but when coupled with physical mobilisation and community engagement, it strengthens the resilience of resistance.

Finally, the study identifies a digital paradox at the heart of subaltern mobilisation. The very technologies that empower marginalized voices also serve as tools of surveillance, commodification, and control. Digital media, therefore, is not a neutral platform but a contested site where emancipation and domination coexist. The findings suggest that the digital uprising in West Asia signifies not the eradication of subalternity but its reconfiguration a transformation in how power is expressed, challenged, and renegotiated in the digital age.

In essence, digital media has provided the subaltern with new channels to “speak,” but the ability to be truly “heard” remains constrained by broader political and structural realities. Real transformation, the study concludes, requires not merely technological access but fundamental shifts in representation, inclusion, and governance.

Future Pathways for Subaltern Digital Activism in West Asia

The future of the digital uprising in West Asia holds significant potential for reshaping political participation, amplifying subaltern agency, and fostering more inclusive digital ecosystems. As technological adoption deepens and internet penetration expands across the region, subaltern groups may gain greater access to digital tools that enhance their capacity to mobilize, communicate, and document injustices. Advancements in digital literacy programs, especially those targeting women, rural populations, and refugees, can play a transformative role in broadening participation and reducing barriers created by social and economic divides. Growing global attention toward digital rights, data protection, and freedom of expression offers new avenues for advocacy and international collaboration. Human rights organizations, tech companies, and transnational networks are increasingly pressuring governments to regulate surveillance technologies and uphold ethical

standards in digital governance. This evolving global landscape could strengthen protections for activists and subaltern communities who operate under authoritarian regimes.

Moreover, the emergence of alternative platforms, encrypted networks, and decentralized communication technologies such as blockchain-based social media, secure messaging apps, and community-driven digital spaces may reduce dependence on mainstream platforms vulnerable to censorship and algorithmic biases. These innovations can empower activists to organize safely, preserve digital evidence, and build resilient networks of solidarity.

Future prospects also include the integration of hybrid mobilisation strategies that connect online activism with sustained offline movements, policy advocacy, and community organizing. As subaltern voices gain greater visibility, regional movements may increasingly influence international discourse on gender rights, minority protection, and democratic governance. The strengthening of digital diasporas can further expand transnational support networks and amplify local struggles onto global stages.

However, the realization of these prospects depends on sustained commitment from civil society, international institutions, and local communities to protect digital freedoms, address inequalities, and challenge repressive digital authoritarianism. If these efforts gain momentum, the digital uprising in West Asia could evolve into a powerful and enduring force for social justice, political reform, and inclusive representation.

Conclusion

The study concludes that digital media has emerged as both a transformative and paradoxical force in the sociopolitical landscape of West Asia. It has opened new spaces for subaltern voices, women, minorities, refugees, and the politically disenfranchised to articulate resistance, mobilize collective identities, and challenge dominant power structures. Through online campaigns, digital storytelling, and transnational advocacy, marginalized groups have been able to transcend physical borders and political censorship, reshaping the dynamics of political participation and awareness.

However, the findings reveal that this digital empowerment remains fragile and conditional. The digital sphere in West Asia continues to be shaped by authoritarian surveillance, patriarchal norms, linguistic hierarchies, and economic disparities that constrain the potential of true emancipation. Online activism, while offering visibility, often fails to translate into enduring structural change due to systemic barriers, co-optation by elites, and the commodification of dissent. The digital paradox where platforms function simultaneously as spaces of empowerment and control, captures the essence of this contradiction.

Ultimately, the “digital uprising” in West Asia signifies not the end of subalternity but its reconfiguration. Power is no longer exercised solely through physical domination but through digital architectures that shape what can be said, seen, and shared. The study underscores that genuine transformation requires more than connectivity; it demands inclusive representation, participatory governance, and critical digital literacy that empower the subaltern not just to speak, but to be heard, recognized, and protected.

The findings of this study indicate that while digital media has opened new spaces for subaltern expression in West Asia, its transformative potential remains constrained by systemic inequalities, state control, and technological divides. To strengthen digital activism, there is an urgent need to enhance digital literacy among marginalized communities, particularly women and rural populations, ensuring equitable access to online platforms. Governments and policymakers should adopt inclusive digital policies that protect freedom of expression and data privacy while preventing the misuse of cyber laws for political repression. Civil society organizations must play a proactive role in bridging online and offline activism, linking virtual mobilization with grassroots initiatives to translate digital awareness into tangible social change. Academic institutions and media organizations can contribute by fostering critical media education that encourages responsible engagement, counters misinformation, and promotes ethical digital citizenship. Finally, international cooperation and cross-border collaborations can help amplify subaltern voices, providing global visibility to localized struggles and fostering a more democratic digital sphere.

Although this study offers valuable insights into the intersection of digital media and subaltern mobilization in West Asia, it also opens several avenues for further exploration. Future research could use comparative methods across different West Asian countries to identify variations in digital resistance under different political regimes. Scholars might examine how intersectional identities such as gender, ethnicity, and class influence online activism and its results. The role of algorithmic bias, artificial intelligence, and digital surveillance technologies in mediating subaltern voices deserves detailed investigation. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the development of digital movements over time could show whether online activism leads to lasting social or policy changes. Further research could also look into the emotional and psychological aspects of digital participation, including online solidarity, trauma, and resilience. By combining multidisciplinary perspectives from political communication, sociology, and technology studies, future scholars can improve their understanding of how digital platforms both empower and limit the pursuit of justice and representation in modern West Asia.

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