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Research Article

CYBER POLITICS AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND VOTERS MOBILISATION IN THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONIN NIGERIA

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Abstract: This study cyber–politics and voting behavior: an exploratory study of social media and voters mobilization in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, appraises the use of new media and political information management in the conduct of political activities especially during elections. It evaluates the tremendous powers inherent in the New Communication Technologies (NCTs), their incredible capacities, latitude and convenience in political information management made possible by the internet in the process of politicking (cyber-politics). These digital objects that include interactivity (social media platforms) facilitate easy mobilization of the electorate and could be used in ensuring free, fair and transparent elections in Nigeria. The paper adopts the qualitative analytical approach in examining the interface between new media and political information management vis a vis their boundless possibilities and opportunities for proper participatory political process and concludes that this emerging trend transcends the old order for bringing political aspirants and electorates into a closer bond without physical contact, leading to a more robust and sophisticated political atmosphere. It recommends among others that cyber-politics should be streamlined and as well, enshrined in our body polity and in the overall process of politicking in Nigeria.

Keywords: Cyber politics, Voting behaviour, Exploratory study, Social media, Voters, Mobilisation, 2023 presidential election, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Technology has revolutionized almost all the activities of humans. The World Encyclopedia cited in Agbanu (2011), refers to technology as all the ways people use their inventions and discoveries to satisfy their needs and desires. In keeping with the foregoing, media or communication technologies refer to inventions or discoveries that are tailored towards improving the dissemination of messages to a large number of people (Kur & Melladu, 2007). Some of these communication technologies include, the Internet, communication satellites, cable system, computers, mobile telecommunications, microwave, video text etc. From the foregoing, it is necessary to talk of electronic newspapers and magazines, cable television, digital television and radios which guarantee greater speed, greater reach, clearer sound and vision, quality output, better reception and provision for a two-way flow of information or what has been called participatory media (Agbanu, 2011).

These great powers (potential and actual) of media technologies have significant implications for the sociocultural, political and economic endeavours of nations and their citizens. It is the unique characteristics of these emerging media technologies that earned them the name "new media". New media, according to Marsh (2005,p.3). are "old media combined with digitalized technologies in their production and audience consumption patterns". New media also refer to a wide

range of technologies and communication that have emerged more recently, including the internet (Oladepo, 2012,p.133). While appreciating the power that new media have granted to the audience, Ross and Nightingale (2003,p.53) explain that the sources of power available to people as audiences are linked to their simultaneous participation in three interlocking spheres of activity: in the public sphere, in consumption and in the media sphere.

New media can equally be described as any digital media object that includes interactivity and are digitally distributed (Holzinger, 2000). They constitute the fastest media channel adopted by corporate organizations, national governments, political campaign organizations, political parties, agencies among others to transmit information and ideas all over the world (Nkala, 2012). In support of the foregoing, Uwakwe (2009) observes that as a functional process of interpreting events in human society, communication has become more dynamic and complex as digital technologies are constantly changing the way we produce and consume media packages. New media have the potential to drive Nigeria's political and economic development and build a robust democracy (MacArthur Foundation,2012).

The rise of new media has increased communication among peoples of the world and the Internet provides the links. It has allowed people to express themselves through blogs, website, pictures and other user generated media. Flew (2008) states the

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evolution of new media technologies has ushered in globalization. New media "radically break the connection between physical place and social place, making physical location much less significant for our social relationships" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p.311).

New media technologies in sub-Saharan Africa, as elsewhere are affecting the nature of political practice. of particular importance, in the context of wider democratization trends may be their potential for invigorating journalistic output with locally relevant content (Dunn, 2010). New media played important role in the Arab Spring in North Africa as well as the 2011 Nigeria's general elections when thousands of Nigerians used them to report and comment on the electoral process. With an estimated 95 million active mobile lines and 45.9 million Internet users, new media are critical tools for positive change in a democracy like Nigeria (Mukina, 2012). According to Mukina (2012), new media technology enabled the promotion of sustainable development, good governance and peaceful coexistence on the African continent.

The rate of adoption of new media in Africa may be significantly less compared to the rate they were adopted in developed societies (Ekeanyanwu, *et al.*,2012). However, Africa still has a representation in terms of Internet adoption rates. The ICT indicator database of the International Telecommunication Union, (2007) in Africa has it that 5.34 per 100 are Internet users. Ekeanyanwa *et al.* (2012) agree that although Africans may not have fully keyed into ICT development, this does not alter the reality that traditional media are fast losing ground to new media. It could therefore be safe to say that if Africa's adoption rates of newmedia continually progresses, Africa will also form a substantial part of the digital population.That new media can influence political campaigns and voting is no longer a contentious issue. New media technologies could be used to make an impact in the political environment by achieving the following:

- Providing sufficient illuminating political information.
- Guiding targets' voting decision by shaping their opinion and setting political agenda for them.
- Educating the targets about election procedures.
- Creating awareness about a candidate and his campaign messages vis-à-vis the overall unfolding political issues and processes (Nwodu,2007) cited in Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2012).

It becomes imperative to note that the increasing advantages of new media can be harnessed in the direction of curbing electoral fraud and subsequently enhance Nigeria's democratic fortune. This is the underlying idea behind the concept of "teledemocracy", which Becker (2009) describes as "democratically aided, rapid two-way political communication." Teledemocracy simply means the application of modern communication hardware and software in the overall democratic process with a view to bringing about faster, far-reaching, easily accessible and more accurate report of election results. It is a clear indication that there is a future for ideal democracy in the world of humans and Nigeria in particular. The Nigerian political environment may not have fully realized the full effect of the new media adopted in the electoral process and overall political environment, but has no doubt responded positively to the new development.

New media have enhanced the communication process used in creating and disseminating political messages in recent times in Nigeria. The 2011 general elections held in April, was characterized by, among other things, an appreciable use of the new media especially the Facebook for political advertising and election campaigns (Hamilton & Daramola,2011). The build up to the election witnessed an increased application of the new media as instruments of political campaigns as political messages was carried online especially on Facebook.

The election campaign that saw Barack Obama voted in as the President of the United States of America (USA) in 2008 was characterized by the use of new media (Facebook, Twitter etc.) to attract the electorate; commonly known as the friends of Obama, with the Slogan "Change is Possible". Political strategies and analysts have dubbed Barack Obama's 2008 presidential victory as the "Twitter election" "a triumph of new media in politics" and "the election decided by Facebook" (Budak, 2008). Following the same trend, President Goodluck Jonathan adopted the use of Facebook in his presidential election campaigns and actually became the first in Nigeria to adopt such strategy that has increasingly made an inroad into our electoral process and in the overall political environment (Ezebuenyi & Ejezieh, 2012). The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria saw a significant influence of social media in campaigning, monitoring results, and predicting winner. Many voters were mobilized on the the social media and through it. Some candidates such as Peter Gregory Obi was tagged "a social media president." by the opposition, who undoubtedly were threatened by Obi's popularity in the build up to the general elections.

The role of social media in political mobilisation cannot be over-emphasised. It is in the fore front of political revolution in the country. The youth zone who are the active social media users are also the most active voter. To this end, it becomes important to embrace them with political information on the social media.

In view of the foregoing, this study intends to investigate how the increasing advantages of new media can be harnessed and applied in making the electorate to possess their political sovereignty by transparently voting in and voting out political office holders and

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governments democratically without undue interference, or hindrance. How the social media can promise a new hope for the people's choice government in Africa, and Nigeria in particular.

Statement of the Problem

Political participation is the only hope for like minds to install a new government in any democracy. Nigeria, like other purpet democracy in Africa is continually faced with leadership problems. It has been the hope of citizens to get trusted individuals at the helm of affairs in the country, but this dream has continually met deadlock. Social media brings with it new political energy in the way it has mobilized individuals for participation in elections and has become a forum for public discourses.

But what is not certain is whether cyber political movements, discourses and uprising significantly interfere with national politics in Nigeria. Or whether, the social media have been successful in their campaign, and mobilisation, especially, in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. It is on the basis of this uncertainty, that this study is established.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the qualitative Analytical research approach, leveraging on the review of a body of literature, and scholarly opinions from the Internet, books, library, the media, and the civil society.

Conceptual Framework
Theoretical Foundation
Technological Determinism Theory

The 'concept technological determinism theory explains the setting of this study. The theory which was propounded by Marshall McLuhan (1964), a Canadian communication scholar, who observed new media technologies in communication, would soon determine social changes, turning the world into a global village. He believes socio-political, economic and cultural changes are inevitably based on development and diffusion of technology. McLuhan argued technology undoubtedly causes specific changes on how people think, how society is structured and the form of culture created. This theory portends that, given the emergence of Internet and its adoption and relevance in mobilizing people for political activities, there is bound to be an impact on the electoral process and overall political environment.

Communication is the basic tenet of technological determinism theory. The theory seeks to explain social and historical phenomena in terms of the principal determining factor (technology). The theory states that communication technologies in general are the prime causes of changes in society. Reinforcing this position, Chandler (1995) affirms that technological determinists interpret technology in general and communication technologies in particular as the basis of society in the past, present and even the future.

However, as far as communication is concerned, we are increasingly dealing with a world without frontiers. The amazing technological revolution, which McLuhan was so fascinated about, has not stood still, same goes to the people that handle the process and what they do (Oliver, 2011). According to Baran (2004,p. 22),technological determinism is the thinking in some quarters that it is machine and their development that drive historical, economic political and cultural changes.There is however,a perspective to technological determinism, which sees technology as more neutral and claim the way people use it is what gives it significance. This perspective that accepts technology as one of the many factors that shape historical, economic, political and cultural changes is ultimately determined by how much power it is given by the people and cultures that use it (Baran, 2004). These two perspectives of technological determinism pose an important question: are we more or less powerless in the wake of technological advances like Internet? If we are at the mercy of technology as the former perspective argues, the culture that surrounds us will not be of our making, and the best we can hope to do is to make our way reasonably well in a world outside our own control. But if these technological advances are indeed neutral and their power resides in how we choose to use them as maintained by the latter perspective, we can utilize them responsibly and thoughtfully to construct and maintain whatever culture we want. In relation to this study therefore, the theory presupposes that since there are other countervailing factors that restrain and shape the effect or influence of new media, the latter perspective of this theory is more appropriately.

The Concept and Nature of the New Media

The Concept and Nature of the New Media The term "new media" has been described as a generic term for the many different forms of electronic communication made possible through the use of computer technology. Use of the term "new media" implies that the data communication is happening between desktop and laptop computers and handhelds, such as PDAs, and the media they take data from, such as compact discs and floppy disks. New media refer to on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, creative participation and community formation around the media content. Another important premise of new media is the "democratization" of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of media content, in addition to the real-time generation of new, unregulated content.

Most technologies described as "new media" are digital, often having characteristics of being manipulated, networkable, dense, compressible and interactive (Flew, 2008). Some examples may be the

Internet, websites, computer multimedia, video games. CD-ROMS, and DVD, online communities, web advertising, streaming audio and video, chat rooms, digital camera, virtual reality environment, integration of digital data with the telephone, such as Internet telephony. New media do not include television programmes, feature films, magazines, books or paper based publications unless they contain technologies that enable digital interactivity (Manovich,2003). Facebook is an example of the social media model, in which users are also participants.

According to Aronson (2012), the very nature of social media with its speed, inclusiveness, and ease of access makes it logical that it is a tool capable of revolutionizing the electoral process. These qualities make easier for the average citizen to participate politically whether in terms of having political discussions online, volunteering online, donating to campaigns through their website, or even impacting the national news cycle by posting a video of a candidate speaking at a campaign event on YouTube for the whole world to see. Now that the general public can be the press, the press is even more omnipresent making it difficult for the political candidate to get away with anything. As far as election results go, while new media may not be the one resource that will mean if a candidate wins or loses, it is very likely that it could make a difference at the margins (Aronson,2012). Speculations about the influence of an emerging media technology seldom tend to underestimate the potential influence.

The introduction of ICTs produced (and still produces) much speculation about the influence on society. To mention just a few, ICTs have been forecasted to overload citizens with information, revitalize democratic participation and deliberation and end the age of mass communication. It appears that when the potential influence of an emerging media technology is considered, there is a risk of exaggerating the influence through technological deterministic visions of the impact. On the other hand, there is a danger of being too critical and dismiss any influence of the technology because nothing new has really happened (Karlsen,2010).

Early speculations concerning ICTs were confronted with empirical studies claiming that nothing new really came with the new technology; the new media represented politics as usual (Lister *et al.*,2003). In the literature of campaigning, media technology is considered a driving force for change. Indeed, the introduction and impact of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are considered the defining aspects of an emerging new stage of campaigning (Friendman, 2005).

However, little has been done to link the influence of ICTs on campaigning with extensive literature on the impact of technology on society. To relate the influence of technology on society to a discussion of campaign change, there is need to emphasize that influence of new media technology is constrained by countervailing forces that restrain and shape the effects (Flew, 2008). Furthermore, such countervailing forces will differ from one political system to the next depending on the features of the campaign environment. Hence the need to relate the influence of technology in general and the influence of the new ICTs in particular to the hybridization perspective on campaign change.

New Media and Information Management in Politics
The emergence of new digital technologies signals a potentially radical shift of who is in control of information, experience and resources (Nwodu, 2007). He further posits that "we are witnessing the evolution of a universal interconnected network of audio, video, and electronic text communications that will blur the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication and between public and private communication". He argues new media will:

1. Alter the meaning of geographic distance;
2. Allow for a huge increase in the volume of communication;
3. Provide opportunities for interactive communication;
4. Allow forms of communication that were previously separate to overlap and interconnect.

Consequently, it has been the contention of scholars such as Douglas Kellner and James Bohman that new media and particularly the Internet, provide the potential for a democratic postmodern public sphere, in which citizens can participate in well informed, non-hierarchical debate pertaining social impacts of new media. Scholars such as Ed Herman and Robert McChesney who have suggested the transition to new media have seen a handful of powerful transitional telecommunication corporations who achieve a level of global influence hitherto unimaginable. Scholars such as Lister *et al.* (2003) and Friendman (2005) have highlighted both the positive and negative potential and actual implications of new media technologies, suggesting that some of the early work into new media studies was guilty of technological determinism whereby the effects of media were determined by the technology themselves, rather than through tracing the complex social network, which governed the development, finding, implementation and future development of any technology.

It becomes imperative to note that the sophistication and tremendous impact of the new media technologies in creating and disseminating political information, organization and management of election campaigns and in the overall political process in Nigeria is taking an interesting dimension. For instance, the new media have proved to be partners in progress in the task of designing and delivering creative and persuasive

messages to the target audience towards effective participation in the political process. This information management process and abilities of the new media technologies, no doubt have the tendency of transforming the hitherto unwholesome reliance on godfatherism by Nigerian politicians, electoral fraud, violence and other electoral malpractices (Ezebuenyi & Ejezieh,2012).

Role of New Media in Mobilization for Electoral Participation

The new media technologies have arguably enhanced the communication process in a wide range of endeavours and the political environment no doubt is experiencing a great deal of the impact of new media phenomenon (Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2012). The growing recognition and utilization of social media and their application in the political processunderscore the role the new media have assumed in the world today. In Nigeria for instance, the unwholesome reliance on god fatherism is gradually giving way to online tactical crafting and packaging of persuasive messages by campaign managers and political parties with an aim to consciously persuade Nigerian voters to vote in their candidates (Ezebuenyi & Ejezieh,2012).

According to Dunu & Oraka (2004), the tremendous fact of the new media technologies has definitely furnished the communication industry with revolutionary positive changes unprecedented. According to them, Nigeria, like other countries of the world, has also benefited in terms of improved technology output, variety offerings, improved resources and quality output occasioned by the new media revolution. This art and science of information management through the new media seem to be gaining more grounds in our political landscape. Political advertisingistoday carried online (Kur,2004,p.31) The election campaign that saw Barack Obama become the President of the United States of America (USA) in 2008/2012 was characterized by effective and efficient information management ability interfacing the deployment of the new media technologies by his ability to use online platforms to attract the electorate commonly known as friends of Obama with the slogan 'change is possible'. Following the same trend, President Goodluck Jonathan also adopted online information management skills in his 2011 presidential election campaigns and actually became the first in Nigeria to use such a strategy that has increasingly made an inroad into our electoral process and in the overall political environment. (Ezebuenyi & Ejezieh,2012).

Social media help large groups to gather in a short amount of time. They also provide a platform for people to express their solidarity both within the country and with others in the region and beyond. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter are being credited with helping to propel the Arab Revolution (Hunter, 2011). Still harping on the role of the new media, Ikem, (2011,p. 5) argues:

The place of the social media (new media) totally political support is no longer in doubt.

To advance the conversation and mobilize political support; social media have become a crucial political tool. Facebook, Twitter and other social networks reinforce political messages and build online and offline support that will help drive interesting debates about any politician and/or political party. In fact, social media provides a potential to stream and broadcast real live political rallies and party conventions online, in such a way that supporters, who cannot participate physically can be involved from a distance effortlessly.

Commenting further, Ikem (2011) observes that whereas the dependence of the politicians on traditional media for political campaigns will certainly be noticeable and cannot be completely discarded, modern trends of the new media seem to be eroding the gains of the traditional media. In a changing world, it is impossible to advance democratic change and development with old tools. Today leaders need to understand the role of changing communication technology for politics and society. This is the use of the new media in the field of governance and political development to increase citizens' participation in the political process. The topic e-government was presented as a vision that will give impetus to greater socio-political interactivity.Furthermore, through the diffusion of the Internet, new media have been variously involved in the restructuring of socio-cultural economic and political relationships and environments all over the world (Nkala, 2012).

This has been evident in the pervasiveness of user generated content and the ways it is used to support social networking. The diffusion of this development is already revolutionizing all facets of human endeavour and the political process is not left out (Nwabueze, 2005).With the rise of social networking technologies, isolated actors with common aims increasingly use online tools to connect, share, discuss and organize. The study by Alexandra Dunn of the University of Oslo,"Public as Politician? Impoverished Hierarchies of Participatory Influence in the April 6th Youth Movement Facebook Group", seeks to better understand the mechanisms of influence and participatory structures of a single, open political Facebok group that has successfully organized offline action without relying on a defined hierarchical structure.

The April 6th Youth Movement Facebook Group has over 80,000 members and no leader, yet it is still capable of acting in concert with the intent of reforming the repressive offline political sphere in Egypt (Saharanreporters,2011). Exploring quantitative data collected in 2009/2010 by Alexandra Dunn to investigate the role of social media on the Egyptian crisis, the analysis found a small group of highly active users that

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directed discussion on the Facebook wall-the central hub of organizational activity (Sahara reporters,2011). The volume of participation increased significantly on sample days of heightened offline political activity and when the top participants were prevented from contributing to the wall on these days (because of demonstration, detention or arrest), another small subset of users filled the leadership vacuum. These findings indicate that there is potential for Facebook and other Social Networking Services (SNSs) to act not only as complementary spaces of political discussion or campaigning, but as platforms for organizational structures that exist independently of any party and act to successfully secure collectively defined goals.

New Media and Democracy

The friendly and conversational mode of communication of the new media, and their potential and capacities to effect changes in human activities in society make it compelling for the purpose of this investigation to examine the democratic environment, where the new media impact on election process. To this end, it becomes necessary to review the concept of democracy and its component (elections) vis-à-vis the deployment of new media modes of communication to the political process. The concept of democracy is often expressed in terms of "thin and "thick" definitions. At its most fundamental (or thin) incarnation, democracy is synonymous with popular sovereignty or majority rule: a system of governance in which the people choose their leaders by casting votes. Also known as electoral democracy, this definition describes the processes by which a government derives its authority or mandate (Diamond & Plattner,2006). Democracy, according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2004), is a form of government in which the people have a say in who should hold power. Appadorai (1975) defines democracy as a system of exercising the government power either directly or through a representative periodically elected by the people. Its basic principles are equity, freedom and supremacy of the interest of the numerical majority. Burns *et al.* (1989) posit that democracy consists of three primary principles:

- Belief in the fundamental dignity and importance of the individual;
- Belief in the desirability of liberty, that is, the belief that freedom is good; and
- The right of each individual to be treated as a unique and inviolable person.

With the above exposition of democracy as a reliable principle of political organization and governance within nation states, an attempt is made in this review to locate the meaning and role of electoral process to make for an assessment of the new media and their operations within a democratic setting as well as how impactful they have become within their confines. Democracy must include popular participation in politics by all those members of a polity who can incontrovertibly claim right of universal adult suffrage (Okoye, 1996). This postulation underscores the pivotal role of elections as the driving force of democratic governance.

Election is an institutionalized process of recruitment into political office through voting.However, it is necessary to state that elections on their own do not make democracy even where they are free and fair, neither do they guarantee political stability but suffice it to say that elections are indispensable lubricants of democracy because they give sovereignty to the people by giving them the right to remove their leader and or install a new one Dwelling further on the foregoing, Nwodu (2007,p.86) stresses that the concept of democratic order presupposes man in society should exercise a wide latitude of freedom in choosing who becomes a leader within the social framework.

From the foregoing, it becomes necessary to state that the crux of whatNwodu (2007) tries to buttress is that election is a serious component which gives democracy the legitimacy which makes the electorate to trust it as the best instrument of leadership. This view also is clearly enunciated in Article 21 (3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) as,"The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of the government. This shall be expressed in period and genuine elections which shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent procedures". Much as elections are seen as a credible and legal process in which the masses collectively participate in deciding who governs them and how they should be governed, Nwodu (2007,p.87) observes that most elections held in most African countries are often marred by unprecedented violence and widespread (irregularities) rigging. The same position was echoed by Jega (2007) that a major tragedy of our electoral process is the feeling among the vast majority of Nigerians that their votes do not count and there are no remedies available for them for redress.

DISCUSSION

Apparently, it may not be preposterous to laud the huge impact of the new media phenomenon and information management vis-a-vis their application in the conduct of socio-political activities in Nigeria particularly, and the world over. It becomes imperative to infer based on this analysis that new media have restructured our socio-political relationship and environment leading to a well-managed information creation and dissemination process. Our political process, like never before, has responded to the sophistication brought about by the deployment of the new media for awareness creation and mobilization.

However, while highlighting the impressive influence of the new media on the political information management process, it is equally noteworthy to state that the influence of technology (new media) on society is constrained by countervailing forces that restrain and shape the effects. Such countervailing forces will differ

from one political system to the next depending on the features of the political environment. New media promise a whole new and interesting political horizon characterized by boundless possibilities and opportunities for proper participatory political process. This emerging trend transcends the old order and tends to bring both the politicians and the electorate into a closer bond without physical contact, leading to a more robust and sophisticated political process (Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2012). Primarily, because the new media have the potential to drive Nigeria's socio-political and economic development and build a robust democracy according to MacArthur Foundation (2012), this paper recommends among others that cyber-politics should be enshrined in our body polity and in all the process of politicking in Nigeria. The Nigerian electorate should be encouraged to key into the unending advantages provided by the new media in monitoring and reporting elections and other political activities in Nigeria. This is information management inaction, which if well incorporated into our polity, will practically minimize electoral fraud and other malpractices during elections in Nigerian. The Nigerian government and its agency (INEC) charged with the responsibilities of conducting elections in Nigeria should not only embrace the adoption of new media in political information management but also give it is a legal framework.

CONCLUSION

Cyber politics is giving Nigeria an opportunity to become a better democracy where the voice of the people speak loudest in the selection of leaders. A system where every actor is held accountable for his action. Cyber politics has continue to give young people the opportunity to become active participant in the politics of the state, and to become obedient citizens with a sense of social responsibility.

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