

The Digitalisation of Political Engagement in Nigeria

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Abstract

Political participation and engagement are essential pillars of participatory democracy and allow citizens to exercise their power to steer the affairs of the country. Since the beginning of the century, digital technology has, however, impacted every aspect of human activities, including politics, especially with the adoption of digital tools for political participation and engagement. The study used secondary data to examine the political use of digital technology (especially the internet and social media) and its associated dangers in Nigeria. The study found that, in Nigeria, digital technology served as an emancipatory and empowerment tool that helps citizens participate in politics, especially during elections and protests, and in ways that traditional means cannot afford. This is evident in the role digital technology played during the 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections as well as during the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protest, 2014 Bring Back Our Girls Campaign, and 2020 EndSARS protest. At the same time, digital technology has been adopted by actors with malicious intent to spread misinformation and by the government to repress and censor Nigerians, which is detrimental to their right to privacy and freedom of association and speech. Evidence shows how public officials and private citizens spread misinformation, especially during political crisis. Evidence also abounds on government's attempt to procure surveillance and censorship devices, pass bills on regulating online participation, and illegal arrest of journalist, citizens, and dissidents for expression their political opinion. This underscores the complex and nuanced nature of the digital-political landscape in Nigeria.

Keywords: Political engagement, Nigeria, Fake news, Digitalisation, Digital technology

Introduction

The interaction between digital technology and politics in Nigeria is evident in using digital tools for political participation, engagement, and mobilisation. Ajayi and Adesote (2016) advance that adopting digital tools for political engagement in Nigeria results from three factors: participatory, interactive, and cost-effective. These tools, especially the internet and social media, are relatively cheap to access, allow for constant feedback, and the barrier of entry is relatively low. The authors go on to say that these tools are now a crucial component of democratic consolidation since they solidify democratic principles and procedures in terms of information sharing, election monitoring, and evaluation, ultimately promoting accountability and openness.

Digital technology has also created a

culture of online activism in Nigeria. Nigerian civic activists have begun aggressively utilising the Internet, especially social media sites like Facebook, to advance various issues, from environmental awareness to the defence of human rights. Many young Nigerians have adopted online participation and activism as an entry into a more profound political engagement (Dagona et al., 2013). With a phone and access to the internet, one can share one's views with hundreds or even thousands of people or mobilise like-minded people for a particular cause in a way that cannot be done with the traditional media. Digital technology, including the internet and other associated devices and platforms, connects people solely for social activities and political activities ranging from elections and mass mobilisation to protests and demonstrations.

Many studies have established a

relationship between digital technology and political engagement and participation in Nigeria. The internet and social media, to be specific, have been associated with improved online political expression, social capital, voting behaviour, and offline political participation (e.g., voting, campaigns, and protests) (Hari, 2014; Mustapha et al., 2016; Okoro & Santas, 2017). The relationship between digital technology and politics in Nigeria is most visible in the recent general elections and protest movements such as the 2011, 2015, and 2019 general elections, the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protest, the 2014 Bring Back Our Girls Campaign and the 2020 EndSARS protests. In all of these events, Nigerians relied on the internet, smartphones, and social media to organise, disseminate information, and mobilise for protests and campaigns, and, in turn, transformed local issues into global issues (e.g., Bring Back Our Girls Campaign and EndSARS protests).

However, bad actors have adopted digital tools to spread misinformation, manipulate people, and stir anger, fear, and anxiety among the populace (Smith et al., 2019). This necessitated the call from the former Nigerian Minister of Communication and Culture, Lai Muhammed, to regulate social media to minimise vices such as misinformation and bring sanity back into cyberspace (Jaiyeola, 2022). Furthermore, the problems posed by digital technology, especially the problem of misinformation (or fake news), have encouraged the Nigerian government on different occasions to propose bills and implement policies to censor and regulate the internet and, most especially, social media (Alagbe, 2021; European Country of Origin Information Network, 2018; Paul, 2019). It is evident that digital technology not only empowers citizens and encourages political participation and engagement but also empowers the government with better tools and rationale to censor, survey, repress, and manipulate information and the citizens (Feldstein, 2021).

Although many studies have examined the emancipatory nature of digital

technology, which empowers Nigerians with the ability to engage in politics in a way traditional means cannot afford, few studies have been conducted to examine the problems associated with digital political engagement. Hence, this study, using secondary data and thematic analysis, examines the political use of digital technology in Nigeria and its associated dangers. The study is divided into five sections starting with the introduction. The second section consist conceptual and literature review. The third section discusses the deployment of digital technology for political participation and engagement in Nigeria. The fourth section discusses the problems associated with digital political engagement in Nigeria. The last section is the concluding remark.

Research Method

This study adopts qualitative research design. Data sources are essentially secondary and they include journal articles, books, newspaper articles, and reports. The study adopts document and archival search to gather data using Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, Taylor and Francis, Elsevier, among others. Analysis is interpretative to elicit deep understanding of the nature and dynamics of digital technology's role in political participation and engagement in Nigeria.

Digital Technology, Political Engagement, and Participation

According to Oinas et al. (2018), political engagement is various forms of activities through which people interact with their “immediate and imagined social environments” to derive the best outcome from them” (p. 4). To Parker (2001), political engagement encapsulates the actions and participatory domain of citizenship, ranging from voting, campaigning, voting, and contacting public officials to engaging in civil disobedience, boycotts, strikes, rebellions, and other kinds of direct action. Similarly, the World Bank (2016) defines political engagement as the “participation of citizens in selecting and sanctioning leaders who wield power in the

government, including by entering themselves as contenders for leadership” (p. 55). It also expands that citizen engagement in politics or government could involve non-political actions such as participating in service delivery, providing input and feedback at the request of public officials, and monitoring the performance of government agencies.

The above definitions portrayed a more action-oriented involvement in politics, encompassing various forms of political participation. This may be the reason why political engagement is usually used interchangeably with other related concepts, such as political participation and civic engagement, but these concepts are different. However, political engagement is more than this. According to Afromeeva et al. (n.d.), political engagement is a cognitive process; “when the brain becomes stimulated by external stimuli, in this case relating to politics, elaboration occurs. Elaboration here means connecting thoughts, recognising new information as important and relevant, a process that leads to having an attitudinal reaction” (p. 1). This means political engagement is not limited to political actions but starts with a cognitive process and ends with political participation. Hence, political engagement is an essential prerequisite to political participation. It involves actions, but the actor's emotions and cognition are also considered (Barret, cited in Pontes et al., 2018).

Digital technologies are electronics that have access to cyberspace and use audio/video and information and communication technology (ICT) (MacLean, 2009). These technologies had an immense impact on the lives of people around the world. It has changed the nature and pattern of communication, consumption, transportation, and politics. In politics, digital technology has been adopted by two main categories of people: political actors and general politicians. Digital technology has been a tool for political actors to mobilise the public and garner public support for their political cause. For the public, digital technology has

been used to effect political changes even on an enormous scale (Anderson, 2019).

Many studies have shown a strong positive relationship between digital technology and political participation and expression. Chan's (2016) study on the relationship between Facebook use and political protest and participation reveals that people are more likely to participate in political protest when they are within a large network size, connected to political actors, and receive political news and mobilisation information on Facebook. Also, people who use Facebook to consume political news are more likely to be politically expressive and participate in political activities. Similarly, people who are exposed to cyber participation or receive an invitation to vote through email or social media are more likely to turn to vote and engage in other political activities (Steinberg, 2015; Vaccari, 2017).

Chan, Xenos, and Moy (2007) also expound that the Internet encourages the consumption of political information, which might lead to civic or political action (see Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019). Interestingly, the more citizens are exposed to political news on social media, the more active they become in activities targeting the political system and non-political but politically motivated activities but not in activities targeting the local communities (Andersen et al., 2020). However, it is essential to note that digital technology, more often than not, does not directly lead to political participation. As Wang (2007) puts it, “Political use of the internet promotes political interest and feelings of trust and efficacy and makes an individual more likely to participate in campaigns and politics” (p. 381).

Additionally, even in authoritarian regimes, digital technology promotes political participation and dissident behaviour. Bekmagambetov et al. (2018), in their study on how critical information flow affects trust and protest behaviour among Kazakhstani college students, argued that the more students exchange information critical of the government on social media, the less trusting they are, and the more likely

they are to engage in protest movements. Also, Chan et al. (2012), in their survey of 499 Weibo users in China, found that the more people used the online platform, the more they were likely to express their political opinions about government and politics. Using the online platform also strengthens the belief one is capable of political participation and the belief that the government is not responsive. Similarly, Wagner et al. (2021) study on gender differences in digital political engagement in China reveals that critical digital political engagement can increase the likelihood of supporting a protest. Thus, digital technology for political use can promote political expression and dissident behaviour, such as protests, even in authoritarian countries such as Kazakhstan and China, where the state tightly controls the flow of information.

Digital technology is a leveller and promotes more equal and inclusive participation among people. Bode (2017) argues that even politically uninterested people engage in passive participation in digital media, such as liking or commenting on political content, which may lead to more active political activities offline. Also, content creation, digital freedom, and access to mobile internet devices facilitate the inclusion of marginalised groups and create platforms where diverse voices can be expressed (Nemer & Tsikerdekis, 2017; Vromen, 2018). Steinberg (2015) observes that factors predicting traditional political participation, such as race, income, and education, negatively impact online participation. This is because it is cheaper and easier to engage in online political participation because there is an absence of resource-induced hindrance, thereby allowing those traditionally left out to participate in political activities. However, Gibson and Cantijoch (2015) argue that digital technology may widen the pool of politically active citizens but can also lead to new forms of political activities that can reinforce the existing inequalities such that non-internet users are excluded from new forms of participation.

Conversely, studies have shown that

digital tools can harm democratic participation. Despite its enormous benefit, digital political engagement promotes misinformation and rumours that evoke negative feelings toward outgroups (Smith et al., 2019). Valenzuela et al. (2019) expound that the more people use social media for political news, the more they are likely to spread misinformation. People who are politically engaged online are not necessarily misinformed. However, they are more likely to share misinformation because they want to promote their agenda, try to debunk misinformation, try to defend their identities and groups, or they are exposed to misinformation.

As digital technology empowers citizens with more accessible means of engaging with political institutions, processes, and actors, so does it empower the government with better censorship, surveillance, political repression, and information manipulation (Feldstein, 2021). Treré (2016), in a study on the #Yosoy132 movement in Mexico, argues that digital technology enhances the government's ability to spread propaganda, curtail dissidence, threaten activists, and collect citizens' data without consent. It is an emancipatory tool for citizens but also a tool of repression and control for the government. Moreover, governments can even further restrict the use of digital technology.

Simon (2010) argues that less democratic governments in countries can also prevent information dissemination and block access to certain information. However, restrictions on access to online content do not only occur in authoritarian countries. Democracies such as Germany ban online content that implies or promotes the denial of the holocaust and neo-Nazis and compels technology companies to abide by government regulations. Ultimately, digital technology is neutral, and its purpose depends on the users – individuals, groups, and governments – and the users' motives. Thus, it could be an emancipatory tool that equips the citizens with the capacity to participate more effectively in politics, a tool of misinformation, or a repressive tool

used by the government to control the flow of information and prevent dissidence.

Digital Political Engagement in Nigeria Elections

The role of digital technologies in Nigerian politics became prominent during the 2011 elections. The Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC) (2012) observes that Nigerians used social media platforms in three ways: dissemination of election-related information; campaigning and sensitisation; and election observation in form of dissemination of information on results from polling units. Particularly, the three leading presidential candidates in the 2011 elections (Nuhu Ribadu, Goodluck Jonathan, and Muhammad Buhari) heavily used social media to engage the citizens and convince them of their popularity and competence (Abubakar, 2012). There were four key actors who extensively utilised digital media sites to pursue their goals during the 2011 elections. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) used digital tools to share information on the elections and obtain people's evaluation of the electoral process. Politicians and political parties used digital tools to campaign and solicit votes and support. Electorate used these tools to obtain election-related information and to share their opinions and experiences. Civil society organisations used digital media to sensitise electorate and share their observations of the electoral process (Aleyomi & Ajakaiye, 2014).

The 2015 general election cemented the role of digital technologies in Nigerian politics. All major political parties and candidates used their social media accounts (especially on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube) for campaigns, sensitisation, and mobilisation (Opeibi, 2019). Twitter and Facebook, in particular, were heavily used for campaigns and dissemination of political information by both political parties and civil society organisations. Election result were quickly disseminated on social media before official announcement (Dunu, 2018), and there were little or no discrepancies between the

official results and results circulated on social media (Eddings, 2015). Also, locally developed voter monitoring applications such as “Revoda” and “Nigeria Elections” were used to monitor elections by the citizens (Edozein, 2015). Even the INEC, for the first time, adopted a smartcard reader to authenticate voters electronically (Guardian, 2015). For the first time, the country experienced a profound digital politicking.

The use of digital technology was further entrenched during the 2019 and 2023 general elections. Political parties, individual politicians, and civil society organisations relied more on the power of digital media in their bid to reach and mobilise voters. During the campaigns for the 2019 general elections, the candidates of the major political parties (Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Congress [APC] and Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party [PDP]) adopted digital media platforms to persuade voters. As expected, these platforms were also used by candidates, political parties, and their supporters to delegitimise opposition by persuading voters and manipulating information and narratives in their favour (Bamigbade & Dalha, 2020). Social media use also contributed to the emergence of a third force (Labour Party) during the 2023 general elections. Labour Party, its presidential candidate, Peter Obi, and its supporters extensively used social media which earned the candidate the title “Twitter President”. The party was able to transform social media popularity to real life political mobilisation which earned the party 3rd place in the presidential election. Peterside (2022) observes that the social media has become the new political battleground in Nigeria.

Protests and Mass Mobilisation

Apart from elections, digital technologies have also transformed the organisation and coordination of protests and mass mobilisation. Digital tools were essential during the 2012 subsidy removal protest (dubbed #OccupyNigeria protest in social media parlance) against the removal of the

petrol subsidy which led to the increment of fuel pump price from 65 naira to 141 naira. Digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook were used to mobilise people and amplify the protest beyond the shores of Nigeria (Hari, 2014). These platforms became a place of convergence for Nigerians at home and abroad to support the #OccupyNigeria protest. Also, websites and blogs ran by young Nigerians gave real-time reports of the protest online (Omojolumoju, cited in Hari, 2014). The protest eventually compelled the government to partially reverse the infamous policy.

Nigeria also witnessed another social media-led campaign called the Bring Back Our Girls campaign (#bringbackourgirls or #BBOG in social media parlance). The campaign started after 276 school girls were abducted in 2014 by the Boko Haram terrorist group in the Chibok community, Borno, Nigeria. The campaign convener sought to urge the government to rescue these girls. The campaign gained more traction when social media popularised it with #BringBackOurGirls. Social media took a local issue to the global stage. This was evident in the amount of #BringBackOurGirls posted online by hundreds of thousands of people worldwide, including the former First Lady of the USA, Mrs Michelle Obama (Collins, 2014). The ability of these digital platforms to create awareness is unmatched because the concerns of a few people can be made that of many in a matter of days.

The 2020 EndSARS protest also marked critical juncture in digital political engagement in Nigeria. The nationwide protest was against brutality and killings committed by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit of the Nigeria Police Force. Social media was used during the protests in three ways: to coordinate the protests, to spread the campaign globally, and to criticise brands and public figures whom the protesters perceived as opposing the protests. Twitter, in particular, was used to share information about protest venues, regular updates, and breaking news as events unfolded. Hashtags such as

#EndSARS and #EndPoliceBrutality were used to amplify and globalise the conversations surrounding the protests. As of 9 October 2020, #EndSARS became a global topic with over 2 million retweets on Twitter (Obia, 2020).

Digital tools such as online bank services and apps facilitated financial resource mobility. Moreover, protesters adopted Bitcoin as an alternative to fiat currency when the government closed the donation accounts (Adebowale, 2020). The Feminist Coalition, a group of women coordinating donation for the protest, adopted “Sendcash”, a platform that allows the conversion of Bitcoin payments into naira and then deposit to recipient bank accounts, and “BTC Pay Server”, a self-hosted payment system that protects privacy of donors (Harper, 2020).

Problems with Digital Political Engagement in Nigeria

Fake News

Social media has played a crucial role in spreading fake news in Nigeria over the last decade. The purveyors of fake news are not limited to ordinary citizens but also popular social media influencers, religious leaders, celebrities, traditional media outlets, and even government officials. For instance, on 19 December 2020, Garba Sheu, a special adviser to the president, took to Twitter to apologise for misinforming Nigerians about the number of school children kidnapped in Katsina state on 11 December 2020. While the school children were still in captivity, the chairman of the Nigerian Diaspora Commission, Abike Dabiri-Erewa, claimed on social media that the children had been rescued. This misinformation made rounds various digital platforms (Onwubiko, 2022).

Fake news also travelled like wildfire during the 2020 EndSARS protest, and its destructive impact was felt during and after the protest. For instance, Yemi Alade, a famous Nigerian singer, took to her social media and posted a picture of a lady wrapped in the Nigerian flag and drenched in “blood”, claiming she was a protester shot by the Nigerian army at the Lekki Toll

Gate, Lagos on 20 October 2020. It was later revealed that the picture was from a stage drama. Misinformation such as this enraged the public, and many believe they contributed to the carnage that ensued immediately after the protest (This Day, 2020b).

Furthermore, the former Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Muhammed, claimed the hijack of the EndSARS protest by hoodlums and the violence that ensued thereof was facilitated by disinformation circulated on social media (Ukpe, 2020). Some other fake news that gained traction and was promoted on social media during the EndSARS protest are as follows: (a) an image of a lady claiming to have lost her brother to police brutality; (b) carrying the national flag will protect the protesters against attacks from the Nigerian army; and (c) a post showing a picture of Nigerian bishops marching on the street to protest against police brutality, among others. Most fake news was posted and promoted to rile the populace (Mwai, 2020).

Nevertheless, digital tools have served a great purpose in fact-checking and countering fake news. Social media, for instance, was used to counter fake news from traditional media and government institutions during the 2020 EndSARS protest. During the protest, a police officer was shot by his colleague during a confrontation between the police and the protesters. However, this incident was wrongfully reported by the traditional media and the police, who claimed the protesters killed the officer. Video footage of the officer getting hit by a friendly fire surfaced online. It was widely shared and used to debunk disinformation. Protesters also shared videos of them being attacked by hoodlums they believed to be sponsored by the government to dispel the narrative that the protesters are violent (Kazeem, 2020b).

Censorship

Internet censorship can be found in both democratic and non-democratic societies because it has been a veritable policy instrument to tackle vices promoted on the

internet, such as cyberterrorism and extremism, child pornography, and scams, among others. However, some countries, including Nigeria, have, in the name of national security, used censorship as a form of repression and intimidation (Vareba et al., 2017). A report released by the European Country of Origin Information Network (2018) shows that the Nigerian government has been engaging in comprehensive internet censorship. In 2017 alone, the government blocked 21 websites (including Naij.com, a popular news website). However, most of these websites promote the secession of Biafra in the southeastern part of the country. The same report claimed that online journalists, bloggers, and private citizens were arrested, and some were charged with cyberstalking under the 2015 Cybercrime (Prohibition) Act with no convictions. For instance, in July 2017, a primary school teacher who allegedly insulted the then Senate President, Bukola Saraki, on Facebook was sacked and charged to court in Ilorin, Kwara. The teacher was eventually released, and charges were dropped. In January 2018, two online journalists, Timothy and Daniel Elobah, were arrested and charged with cybercrime for posting an article critical of the Inspector General of Police. These are just a few of many.

Additionally, there have been attempts, albeit unsuccessful, from the government to control the content on the internet, especially social media, through legislation. In 2016, the National Assembly struck out the Frivolous Petitions (Prohibition) Bill because of its unpopularity. In 2019, two bills to regulate online activities were introduced to the National Assembly: Social Media Bill and Hate Speech Bill. The Social Media Bill (Protection from Internet Falsehoods and Manipulations and Other Related Matters Bill) was designed to curtail fake news or falsehoods, considered threats to the country's national security. While it seems like a good policy, citizens can be unjustly punished because the perception of fake news can be subjective. Moreover, this bill targets institutions and entities that are crucial for the free flow of

information outside the control of the government. They include radio/television stations, online newspapers, YouTube channels, and internet service providers (Paul, 2019).

The most prominent example of internet censorship in Nigeria recently was the Nigerian government's ban on Twitter on 4 June 2021. The Twitter ban came as a result of the decision by Twitter to remove the President's 'offensive' tweets, which were believed to be a threat of violence against a segment of society. The Nigerian government justified the ban by claiming the platform is being used persistently for activities that threaten the country's corporate existence (Ijaiya, 2021; Kene-Okafor, 2021). Many believe that the ban on Twitter was a total disregard for people's freedom of speech and right to access information, which is crucial to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Twitter has been the platform for organising political activities online and has become the favourite tool for dissidents and activists. Indeed, the Nigerian Twitter ban is not an isolated event but a part of a web of events aimed at limiting access to information and freedom of expression globally (Blankenship & Golubski, 2021).

Surveillance

Despite their relatively low capacity, many developing countries (including Nigeria), have been deploying digital tools to collect data on their citizens, spy on them, and violate their privacy. Although the collection of citizens' data is acceptable as it is crucial for public safety, crime prevention, identification and arrest of criminals, and provision of evidence in criminal cases, this power could easily be abused, as seen around the world (Alagbe, 2021). Online surveillance activities of the Nigerian government also came into the limelight in 2020 when a report by the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab revealed that Nigeria had procured tools to spy on citizens' calls and text messages. The report Nigeria employed the service of a company called Circles (Israel-based telecom surveillance company) to pry on

communications of opposition figures, protesters, and journalists (Alagbe, 2021; Karombo, 2020).

A report by Action Group on Civic and Space claimed that Nigerian government have been procuring and using surveillance technologies to spy on citizens' data and communications and to track human rights activists, journalists, and oppositions under the guise of national security. Recent actions from the government suggest that the government is not willing to protect citizens' digital rights but willing to formalise its authority to access citizens' private data (Erezi, 2021). For example, in 2019, the President refused to sign the Digital Rights and Freedom Bill into law because it "covers too many technical subjects and fails to address any of them extensively". The bill was meant to protect internet users' rights and ensure the application of human rights within the digital space (Ojekunle, 2019). However, between 2018 and 2021, billions of naira were earmarked for surveillance tools such as DSS Social Media Mining Suit, Mobile Surveillance Facilities, Thuraya Interception Solution, and WhatsApp Interception Solution (Alagbe, 2021; Erezi, 2021). Although the purpose of these items is vague, government officials often claim that these are necessities for the war against the Boko Haram terrorists.

Internet censorship and surveillance are inseparable as states use policy instruments to control their digital space. As Stoycheff et al. (2020) put it, "Surveillance online is the first step to censoring citizens through the internet" (p.11). So, it should not be surprising that the Nigerian government have invested heavily in digital surveillance as surveillance is a prerequisite to online censorship, which the government has explicitly engaged in for the past few years (European Country of Origin Information Network, 2018).

Conclusion

The past decade's events have filled the country with more optimism that these digital tools will improve her politics and governance process. Nigerians are

becoming more optimistic that these technologies are improving political participation, discourse, engagement, mobilisation, and dissemination of information, as well as the delivery of public service on the part of the government. These digital technologies, mainly social media platforms, have allowed for more inclusive civic and political participation. Nigerians now know that irrespective of distance, creed, tribe, gender, and socio-economic class, they can easily be part of a political movement and make their voice heard without little or no barrier. It is worth the optimism because, with phone and internet access, Nigerians have forced the government to act, put a spotlight on political leaders and issues, and make leaders yield to their demands, as in the case of the Not Too Young to Run campaign and the recent EndSARS protest. However, digital technology is a mixed bag; it promotes citizens' participation in political activities and facilitates the spread of misinformation. Not only that, these technologies are adopted as a tool of repression and in the case of Nigeria, they have been used for censorship and surveillance, which negate the ideals of freedom of expression and the right to privacy of Nigerian citizens. As Stoycheff et al. (2020) observes, the practice of digital repression negate the idea that internet and other digital technologies reduce the cost of political participation and engagement. Instead, they also provide new forms of deterrent used by the government to undermine political mobilisation.

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