



## Digital Ascendancy and Madrasah Education: The Influence of Media Technology on the Life-worlds of Female Madrasah Students



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**Abstract:** *Madrasah in its historical origin and perception seeks to preserve religious tradition and is seen as a significant instrument for constructing and preserving the religious identity. Since the event of 9/11, madrasahs in Pakistan became a focus of international concern and media debates that often present them as centers for proliferating radicalization, extremism, and terrorism. Nevertheless, the role of female madrasah in this context has remained under-researched. The present research explores the phenomenological reflections on the everyday life of madrasah students to comprehend their life-worlds in the context of growing media technology in Pakistan and whether they support orthodox religious interpretations? This ethnographic research was conducted in Abl-e-Hadith Madrasah located in Rawalpindi city. The research design employed participant observation (PO), and in-depth interviews of madrasah students and teachers belonging to diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds. The findings suggest that although media and technology have been playing a significant role in the discursive construction of everyday life of madrasah students and their worldviews, a digital divide between madrasah students and general society exists. The fears of moral degradation, ethical obliteration and un-Islamic contents are the defining features of this resistance by madrasah teachers and students.*

**Key Words:** Madrasah, Media, Islam, Life-Worlds, World Views, Everyday Life

### Introduction

The terms “life-worlds” and life conditions refer to the individual’s apparent situation of life and the subjective perceptions pertaining to these circumstances. It further differentiates between the

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current life situations, life experiences, and circumstances in which multifarious discourses engender a particular worldview. Therefore, the life conditions enunciate external circumstances of individuals' life while the life-worlds expound the subjective perceptions concerning to these conditions ([Kraus, 2015](#)). In this backdrop, the undertaking of this article is to explore the phenomenological reflections of madrasah students on the role of media technologies and the discursive construction of their everyday life while exploring their life-worlds and life conditions which eventually influence their life course.

Madrasahs and life-worlds of madrasah students have been a focus of intense debate since the event of 9/11. Although, the attackers of the twin towers were neither from Pakistan nor had an association with Pakistani madrasahs, these traditional institutions became the headline of international media depicting them as center of religious militancy and breeding ground of radicalism ([Sajjad, 2014](#)). It is argued that orthodox madrasah education is promulgating religious violence among the Muslim youth whereas traditional religious teachings have been engendering loathing and abhorrence against non-Muslims. Consequently, madrasahs and their education became a global security concern and international agenda demanding reformation of madrasahs and its educational discourses ([Inamullah et al., 2010](#)). Notably, these concerns were largely remained focused on the male madrasahs and female madrasahs were not a subject of both scholarly deliberations and policy disquiets.

Historically, madrasahs played a principal role in the Indian subcontinent providing education to the Muslims ([Basheer, 2016](#)). Three types of educational structures played pivotal role in the educational discourses of the Indian subcontinent that include formal institutions, which were in the form of maktabas and madrasahs, private teachers that were also known as muallim, muadid, or ataliq and the informal institutions in the form of individual centers of teachings ([Islam, 2010](#)). The courses that were taught in these institutions included grammar, literature, logic, Islamic law and its principles, Quranic commentary, hadiths, mysticism, and scholasticism (religious philosophy). The madrasahs were receiving funding from waqf (trust) that were used to give salaries and scholarships to the instructors and students of the madrasahs respectively. The graduates of madrasahs included ulama (Muslim religious scholars), judges, policymakers and administrative members ([Al-Hasani, 2019](#)).

In the early 13th century, the number of madrasahs also increased in Delhi during the Mughal period. During the reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq (1324-1351), there were approximately 1,000 madrasahs. The curriculum of madrasahs generally comprised of Quran, the hadith, and Arabic grammar along with calligraphy, poetry, astronomy, and geography (Johnston et al., 2006). Later, Emperor Akbar (1542–1605) modified the style, syllabus and form of madrasah schooling introducing ethics, agriculture sciences, geometry, astrophysics, typography and finance and the art of supremacy, reasoning or rationality, philosophy, spirituality and antiquity in madrasah. Madrasahs and great scholars were present in large numbers during the Mughal period in Delhi. Madrasah Rahimiyah, the madrasah of Bazr Khanam, and madrasah Ghaziuddin were the famous madrasahs among them. In this period, the wide expanse of maktabas

and madrasahs was witnessed in which Mullah Nizamuddin Siharvi introduced a new curriculum known as Daras-e-Nizami ([Basheer, 2016](#)). Today, the syllabus of South Asian madrasahs largely follow this curriculum with the addition of several books including spirituality, divinity and hadiths of Khatam-un-Nabiyyeen the last Prophet of Allah, Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) ([Basheer, 2016](#)).

However, the political emergence of British power in the subcontinent changed the political and academic landscape of the Indian subcontinent ([Akbar, 2015](#)). With the arrival of British, Muslim rule declined and Islamic religious schools lost their credibility and suffered colossally to meet the modern challenges ([Ingram, 2019](#)). In the revolt against the British army in 1857, the involvement of Muslim religious scholars made them suspicious facing punitive scrutiny and financial privations. The British clogged the financial provision for the madrasahs through their introduction of “land reforms” which disadvantaged the Muslim landholders who were the principal supporters of education. The British also used the infamous Resumption Act (1828-1846) to authenticate their confiscation of the tax-free land grants that had sustained madrasahs for centuries ([Bilal, 2019](#); [Baig, 2012](#)).

However, in 1866, Islamic education was invigorated with the establishment of Darul-Uloom Deoband, an Islamic educational institution at Deoband. The institute played a dual role in spreading Islamic knowledge and mobilizes Indian Muslims to take part in the nationalist struggle aimed at expelling the British. The ulama act politically and intellectually to oust the British forces from India ([Malik, 1989](#)).

After 1947, the number of madrasah in Pakistan were increased gradually. The total number of madrasahs in Pakistan were between 137 and 245 and it reached 401 till the year 1960 ([Anjum, 2017](#)). During the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988), this number increased dramatically when students of madrasahs were indoctrinated with a jihadi ideology to fight against Russians in Afghanistan ([Rahman, 2016](#)). Approximately, 1000 madrasahs were established with aid from Middle Eastern countries. Madrasahs were also funded by United States, United Kingdom, and China while providing them military training to fight against Russians ([Ahmed, 2009](#)). There was a considerable presence of madrasahs when Russia withdrew its forces from Afghanistan.

Afterwards, there has been a consistent rise in madrasahs. In 2001, the madrasahs had reached to 6,870. While the reported numbers till the year 2013 were approximately 50,000. The particular increase in the number of Deobandi madrasahs since 1988 played a great role in proliferating religious militancy in Pakistan ([Rahman, 2016](#)). The involvement of Madrasahs and its students in armed conflict belonging to diverse sectarian association primarily Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith school of thoughts in Afghanistan, Kashmir and emergence of various Jihadi outfits laid the foundation of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) which later became the enactments of extremism and terrorism in Pakistan.

The incident of 9/11 negatively portrayed the image of madrasahs due to their linkages with extremism. The United States pressurized General Pervez Musharraf (President of Pakistan from

2001-2008) to bring about new reforms in madrasahs. Impelled by the US government offer and exchange for financial aid, General Pervez Musharraf's government commenced an aggressive campaign for the reformation and transformation of the madrasah system in Pakistan ([Rahman, 2013](#)). However, the proposal confronted serious confrontation from madrasahs and religio-political parties. One of the influential Islamic political parties of Pakistan, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) argued that madrasahs are flagship institutions of the Muslim culture and identity and Islam as a moderate and enlightened religion does not need any amendment from the West ([Afridi, 2016](#)).

Regardless, the military government of General Musharraf (1999 - 2008) introduced various laws to regulate the madrasahs. The Pakistan Madrasah Education (Establishment and Affiliation of Model Dini Madaris) Board Ordinance (PMEBO) and The Voluntary Registration and Regulation Ordinance were introduced in 2001 and 2002 to mainstream the madrasahs of the country ([Fakhr-ul-Islam, 2009](#)). These ordinances affirmed that the approval of concerned district authorities is the basic requirement for establishing new madrasahs. However, the prevailing madrasahs were asked to voluntarily register with the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board Ordinance (PMEBO) with their respective sects within six months of the enactment of the ordinance to make regular financial declaration or else they will not be allowed to operate ([Candland, 2005](#), p.155). Also, Madrasahs were not allowed to take any foreign funding ([Mustafa, 2016](#)). The government's anxiety of a nation-wide protest and of reprisal by the madrasahs has proved an impediment to the forceful execution of the ordinances. Consequently, the implementation of the ordinances largely remained ineffective until today. In 2009, the Ittihad-e-Tanzeemat-Madaris-e-Denia (the Union of Islamic Seminaries) reached a consensus with the Pakistan Peoples Party's government to create an inter-Madrasah Board encompassing members of five major madrasah boards: 1) Wafaq-ul-Madaris (Deoband); 2) Wafaq-ul-Madaris (Shi'a); 3) Tanzim ul Madaris (Barelvi); 4) Rabitatul-Madaris-al-Islamia (Jamaa`at e-Islami) and, 5) Wafaq-ul-Madaris-al-Salafia (Ahl-e-Hadith). The purpose was to register all madrasahs under the same body to mainstream their undertakings. However, madrasahs to a large extent continue to work freely, with little or no government interference ([Bilal, 2019](#)).

Against this backdrop, a large body of research was conducted both by local and foreign academics and policy makers on male madrasahs. However, the role of female madrasahs remained under-researched in overall religious discourse and their role in engendering life-worlds. Thus, the present research explores the role of such madrasahs in generating life-worlds.

This study employs Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice as theoretical framework. Bourdieu's work emphasizes the practices in the social world. The theory of practice refers to everyday practices in the social environment and the ways in which they are performed in a society ([Bourdieu, 1997](#); 1990). It scrutinizes the social and cultural world by probing the actions based on knowledge and are incorporated to form institutions such as group, way of life, social fields and eventually configure the whole societies ([Holtz, 2014](#)).

The article used field, habitus and capital as the central theoretical underpinnings that function collectively in an overlapping way. The study further theorizes how religious institutions

and teachers contribute in the construction of social categorization. Bourdieu defines field as a system of shared meaning. In field, power competition exists which enables the actors to attain power by exhibiting robust capital that portrays their habitus. The selected field (madrasah) entails a particular Doxa that describes the rules of institution and individuals are supposed to follow them. Bourdieu elucidates habitus as the assortment of dispositions that impacts an individual's perceptions and actions. It depends upon historical background as our socialization starts from the primary stage of life which empowers individuals to choose a field as a platform to act (Swartz, 1997). Bourdieu's concept of capital signifies the effort for power and those individuals and groups who have the desirable form of capital hold an advantageous position (Bourdieu, 1979; Brar, 2016).

While conceptualizing Bourdieu's theory of practice, the Doxa of field (rules of madrasah) shapes the worldviews of madrasah students because they are bound to follow the rules and regulations of madrasah institute. The rules help madrasah students to build an environment of madrasah that differs from other academic institutes. The rule of madrasah (Doxa) creates a particular environment, which leads towards the development of a particular habitus. The study explores the configuration of habitus students develop and how this habitus in form of life dispositions influence the formation of life-worlds of female madrasah students. The cultural capital relates with madrasah in such a way that it demonstrates the power of the field which shows their historical perceptible and it also depicts that why students have taken admission in madrasahs. The current study theorizes madrasah education as a form of capital in which madrasah students intend to receive a great reward in this world and in the hereafter and explores students' interpretation of this capital in the field.

## Research Methodology

Ethnographic research methodology has been employed to understand the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of madrasah students with an endeavor as participant-observer to understand the construction of meaning in a particular socio-cultural and religious conformation that eventually influences their life-worlds (Murchison, 2010; Hammarberg et al., 2016). The researcher used participant observation and in-depth interviews as main fieldwork methods in order to gain a grassroots representation of the discursive construction of madrasah environment. The ethnographic research was based upon 3 months of fieldwork conducted at an Ahl-e-Hadith Madrasah, Rawalpindi. The participant observation proved to be of great help to attain in-depth information from the madrasah students allowing comprehending interpretations of their life-worlds, which allows posing further questions for new researches (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

Participant observation was carried out in various classes, madrasah events as well as travelling with the students along the lines of follow the people (Marcus, 1998). The visiting of students' homes while interacting with their family members, participating in their families' funeral and marriage ceremonies permitted to understand the representations of their lifeworlds. The participation in Takmil Quran-e-Pak (ceremony of the completion of the Holy Quran) of the

respondents also helped to gain an insider understanding of madrasah environment. Using purposive sampling technique researcher conducted 25 interviews, in total, from the elderly women and young girls who attend madrasah. It also includes an informal discussion with teachers of the madrasah. Moreover, to maintain the heterogeneity of the sample, students of various educational and socio-economic background and varied age groups were selected.

Methodological triangulation was used blending participant observation, in-depth-interviews in order to cognize the life inspiration and philosophies of female students. The technique of thematic analysis was applied to undertake the analysis procedure that can be extensively employed across a range of epistemologies and research questions for identification, organization, analysis and reporting themes located within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the current research, thematic analysis was used for investigating the viewpoints of students underlining parallels and dissimilarities and engendering grassroots comprehension of their life-worlds.

### **Power of Media and Technology in Shaping the Worldviews of Madrasah Students**

The reflection of social media in the Muslim context shows that it is an imperative game-changer in the expression of religious values and ideas. It is difficult to envisage the world these days without virtual and contextual media and technologies. The digital divide and access improvements have made social media increasingly a global trend through Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and Instagram. In this era of technological revolution, the media's influence in engendering public opinion and perceptions is widely witnessed because people profoundly rely on media both for entertainment and swift information about their surroundings. It has been argued that media is a double-edged sword that can be used as a hegemonic apparatus controlling people's minds or can be employed as a constructive tool providing masses a liberal space for deliberation and negotiation. This dimension of media eventually allows both constructive and disparaging usage carrying a capacity of engendering social conflict or harmony (Sadaf, 2014). In this regard, media also played a very vivacious role in the field of religion. The increase in mobile phone access, availability of Internet, and the concept of real mobility of access have led to an extraordinary upsurge in the languages, cultures and virtual spaces that have become imperative daises for the initiation and propagation of discourses about Islam (Bunt, 2018). The use of mobile technology has integrated into the lives of different age groups due to their widespread availability (Baran, 2014) and madrasah students in this regard are not an exception.

Currently, various cellular networks are operating in Pakistan under the names of Jazz, Telenor Zong, Ufone, and Telenor. With technological advancement, connectivity assistances and lower prices, the quantity of cellular network consumers has increased dramatically. Cellular networks also began to spread in rural Pakistan as well. The record gives the numbers that in Pakistan there are more than five corers (50,000,000) customers (Mohammad &Wajidi, n.d.). The use of different media platforms on smart phones such as WhatsApp and Twitter are important spaces, which are being used for spreading the religious messages. It is critical to comprehend that technology influences the outlook of individuals in varied way (Moosa, 2016) and the same has proved to be true in the realm of religious understanding. Technology has altered inherited religious imaginaries, sensitivities, traditional concepts and ethical patterns that were once believed to be fixed. Consequently, it also raised a religious panic and

resistance among certain religious fractions. One of my respondents, Rashida pronounced this disquiet in the following words:

I do not have television and Internet connection in my home because my husband does not allow me to watch television because of media' vulgar and obscene contents which have been destroying ethical and moral values.

It is widely held understanding in Pakistan that Internet and unrestricted access to media platforms have been providing children with premature awareness. In agreement with the aforesaid observation, one of the teachers (*baji*) at madrasah said that girls post their videos on *TikTok* which is an insult for their Islamic character as it provides strangers an opportunity to see their faces and bodies, a practice stringently forbidden in Islam. Congruently, another teacher narrated an incident that a girl was rejected just one day before her marriage when **her** future husband saw her videos on TikTok. The ethical qualms and moral trepidations are the defining features for resisting such media platforms. However, it must not be presumed that religious stratum is a homogenous entity. Rather, one will find significant variations among those who embrace a religious outlook. Sania Zahra, a madrasah student, is a signifier of this diversity:

I have Internet connection in my home and I use my smartphone for finding information about Islam. I also use WhatsApp and Facebook because such platforms are imperative not only for the enhanced connectivity with our loved ones but also are principal sources of information. I also watch cooking videos on YouTube.

She further added that she watched films whose contents are related to Islam and specifically based on Prophets' lives. She discussed in the class that filmmakers portray the whole story of Prophets by delineating their characters in the film and asked a question that is it permissible in Islam to watch such films? The teacher replied:

It is a sin because no one in this world saw Prophets and making their character is blasphemous activity. Such movies are made to insult Islam and Prophets and must not be watched.

The students, however, were not convinced with the teacher's arguments believing that such movies are a source of religious motivation. Another 22-years-old unmarried respondent named Neha Mazhar who was studying in madrasah for more than a year stated that she watched *Mery Pass Tam Ho* and *Ehd-e-Wafa* on television. She further added:

I use Internet connection for finding answers for my religious curiosities as there are numerous authentic religious websites. Not using such websites for learning is certainly a negative attitude.

She further argued that those people who resist technologies are not doing a favour for Islam because such orthodox approach hinders Muslims' intellectual development. The aforementioned discussion reveals that female madrasah students also view Internet technology and social media platforms as a significant development of their era and consider



that these technologies must be learnt and used for learning and promoting religious teachings in a constructive fashion. However, there are religious voices both among madrasah students and teachers who consider such technologies a threat for the moral and Islamic character of Muslim youth.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Role of Madrasah Education in Constructing the Life-worlds of Female Students**

The life-worlds perspective accentuates the learner's attitude, experiences and ways of understanding the world. This employs that individual acquires knowledge based on a particular cultural sphere

holding subjective aspects in the form of conventional morals, ethics, wisdom and cognitive structures ([Ekebergh, 2007](#)). Thus, life-worlds are considered as the universe of practices where an individual internalizes a variety of experiences. It engenders a particular life discourse which shapes an individual's beliefs and propensities towards various fields of life ([Gadamer & Hans-Georg, 2008](#)). The word 'life-worlds' when attached to the adjective Islam, it forms an Islamic worldviews which stipulate a description of Islam and its role in the discursive formation of life ([Hanapi, 2013](#)).

The madrasah education influences various aspects of an individual's life including social, cultural and spiritual. Students of madrasah perceive various dimensions of the world in a heterogeneous fashion. The research reveals that madrasah environment and its teaching play an important role in the ontological configuration of female students. However, this construction of realities is not without resistance. There are students who exhibit disapproval and annoyance against those teachings that hinder the modern lifestyles or technological usage. The madrasah education, according to several teachers, aims to instill forbearance and good morals and an intellectual life to prepare them for an eternal life. While making a comparison with the worldly education, there was a dominant belief among the madrasah teachers that in the name of technology and modernism, moral demolition has been destroying the moral edifice of Muslim youth. Whereas, religious education aims to influence the religious, moral and intellectual aspects of students' life to craft a compassionate and civilized society ([Ullah & Abid, 2019](#)).

Both the madrasah students and teachers argued that the madrasahs played a historic role in the Muslim past promoting kindness, justice, equality and remarkable civilization through religious principles. Religious instructions provided by madrasahs develop student life-worlds that hugely influence the social ethos and social structure. Madrasah seeks to cultivate a religious spirit by inculcating those fundamental values, ethics and morality that are rooted in Islamic spirit ([Mahesar & Dehraj, 2018](#)). Regardless of the aforementioned arguments made by the madrasah students and teachers, they clearly displayed their disquiet regarding the negative impact of media technologies. In this regard, music appeared as one the contentious topic that has been discussed in the following discussion.



## Media Technologies and Students' Perceptions of Music

Music and singing are considered to be the grey areas in Islamic discourses where the legality of music has been debated as a contested phenomenon for centuries. Understanding of the music as a religious expression is not entirely acceptable in Islam, however, there are discourses where musical, religious, or spiritual activities are considered interlinked because of their ability to evoke strong emotional reactions in participating individuals, and have great impact on them, both at socio-cultural and private or personal levels. The role of music within ritual and religious practices is featured heavily as a medium for the transformation of boundaries between the natural and supernatural, the sacred and the profane ([Morley, 2014](#)).

The discernments towards music in the Islamic world have constantly been controversial, as articulated in a series of controversial thoughts and perceptions; immorality and disbelief divine Satanism. Perceptions regarding the admissibility of music or sound art in the Islamic world as well as dance range from complete contradiction, partial acceptance and complete acceptance. Several Muslims fear the magical powers of melody and prohibit it by considering it as an instrument of *Satan* (devil). However, many Muslims discover melody exciting and purely religious referring it to the use of musical instruments in the times of last Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), but the majority Muslims allow it in various controlled forms ([Nasr, 1976](#)).

Music is crucial and influential component in many beliefs, although the part played by music in distinct faiths change deeply. It permits parishioners to state their way of life, their innermost opinions, and sentiments by either composing, contributing in the concert or merely by listening and reflecting ([Moberg, 2012](#)). Music plays a role in shaping society's beliefs and identities. Music provides a criterion that can be used to frame experiences, perceptions, feelings, and behaviors ([Nasr, 1976](#)). An unmarried 18 years old respondent Kinza Uzair who recently joined madrasah and did intermediate while sharing her perceptions on music stated:

I do not like listening to any kind of music because those who listen to songs will have molten lead in their ears on the Day of Judgment.

She further added that listening to music is a great sin and in Islam it is *Haram*. She further elaborates that she does not even listen to *Naat* and *Qawwali* due to the different musical sounds/instruments used while singing, which, in her view, are not allowed in Islam. That is why she does not prefer to hear any type of music. In this regard, an unmarried 23 years old respondent named Aleena Sheikh who was studying in madrasah for two years has been observed while reciting *Tajdar-e-Haram*. The *qawwali*, *Tajdar-e-Haram* was recited by Sabri Brothers. Sabri Brothers are well-known music bands who are performers of *qawwali*. It was loved all over the globe in the early 90s. But, famous Bollywood pop singer, Atif Aslam also gains popularity and momentum from this *qawwali* through the platform of coke studio, season 8 ([Anwar, 2018](#)). In correspondence to this, Aleena Sheikh stated:

I do not think there is any objection in listening to Naat and Qawwali. Yes, of course, listening to songs is haram.

Based on above-mentioned view, it has been viewed that many respondents consider *Naat* and *qawwali* as religious while listening to music which contains different musical sounds as Haram. In contrast, an unmarried 52 years old respondent named Rizwana Javaid who did matriculation and was studying in madrasah for more than two years stated:

I do not like to listen to any kind of music because if seen, Naat and Qawwali are also recited in the style of songs.

She further added that *Naat* can be recited without musical sounds. Sacred music does not need to be recited with the use of music but now almost every *Naat* is recited with the help of different musical instruments. Based on above-mentioned views, the researcher found that when music is used delicately, it is being able to generate an impression of respect but if it is used inconsiderately, the environment can be damaged. There were many instances that represent Pakistani society where taxi drivers, barber shops, shopping malls, grocery stores and most of the people while walking and travelling listen to loud music as well. Furthermore, music is also used in social gathering including marriage ceremonies, farewell parties, and inauguration events. The use of spiritual music is also observable in religious congregation that includes *Urs* and *Milad*.

## Conclusion

Madrasahs in its historical origin and perception aim to safeguard religious traditions and are seen as a momentous apparatus for generating religious identity. The madrasah as a system of Muslim religious education has been playing an essential role in the lives of millions of Muslims of the subcontinent. After the establishment of British rule in the subcontinent, a modern education system that created serious challenges for Muslim identity. Consequently, the division between the two institutions affected the lives of Muslims of the subcontinent and formed two politically contrasting ideologies among those who studied in the different educational systems. The divergence between the two systems of education was inherited by Pakistan after independence in 1947. This division also produced serious suspicions about the modern education and technologies and these concerns can be observed very evidently till the present day among the religious community and became a reason for resistance against the adoption of new media technologies.

The present research concluded that although the life-worlds constructed by madrasah institutes influence the students' preferences, and decisions, there is a considerable resistance against those radical teachings, which hinders the use of media technologies. There is a difference between the knowledge students obtain from madrasah and the practices they perform in their daily life due to the influence of modernization and advancement in technology.

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