From Print to Screen: Motivational Factors Influencing Online Newspaper Consumption among Open and Distance Learners

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Abstract

The rapid shift from print to digital media has transformed the landscape of news consumption, particularly among learners in technology-mediated education settings. This study explores the motivational factors that influence online newspaper consumption among Open and Distance Learning (ODL) learners in Malaysia. Drawing on a quantitative research design, data were collected from 212 respondents through a structured questionnaire focusing on five key motivations: information, entertainment, social utility, personal utility, and escapism. Data analysis was conducted using Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program (JASP) version 0.19.1.0. The results reveal that all five motivational factors significantly and positively influence online news consumption. Information motivation emerged as particularly influential, indicating that users primarily engage with digital news platforms to stay informed and access content relevant to their needs. Personal Utility, entertainment, social utility, and escapism also contributed meaningfully, reflecting the multidimensional nature of digital news engagement. These findings offer practical implications for media organisations, educators, and policymakers in designing content and strategies that resonate with the motivations of ODL learners. The study adds to the growing knowledge on digital media behaviour in educational contexts and supports the development of targeted media literacy and engagement initiatives.

Keywords: Online Newspaper Consumption, Information, Entertainment, Social Utility, Personal Utility, Escapism.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has dramatically reshaped the global media landscape, fundamentally altering the way news is produced, disseminated, and consumed. Traditional print media, once the dominant source of information, has steadily lost ground to digital platforms, especially among younger and more technologically adept audiences (Asad

& Parker, 2025; Sunstein, 2017). In Malaysia, this transformation is particularly pronounced. Between 2017 and 2024, the percentage of Malaysians obtaining news from print media declined sharply from 45% to 19%, while 89% of respondents reported relying primarily on online and social media platforms for their news (Siddharta, 2024). The decline of major print publications such as *Utusan Malaysia* and *Kosmo!* underscores the urgency for news organisations to adapt to the digital age. As digital news consumption becomes increasingly prevalent, questions surrounding credibility, trust, and media literacy have emerged as central concerns in both academic and professional discourse.

Although the general movement toward digital news platforms is well-established, a limited understanding remains of how different population segments engage with these platforms in context-specific ways. For instance, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) learners represent a growing demographic whose educational and informational practices are primarily mediated through digital technologies. Existing literature has explored broad patterns of digital media use (Chyi & Lewis, 2009; Flavián & Gurrea, 2009; Nguyen, 2008), yet there is a notable gap in understanding the motivations behind online news consumption among ODL learners. At the same time, increasing concerns about misinformation, diminishing trust in news institutions, and varying levels of digital literacy add further complexity to the way people interact with online content. Thus, understanding what drives individuals, especially those in self-directed learning environments, to consume and trust digital news becomes essential.

This study investigates the motivations behind online newspaper consumption (ONC) among ODL learners in Malaysia. It focuses on five key drivers: information motivation (IM), entertainment motivation (EM), social utility motivation (SUM), personal utility motivation (PUM), and escapism motivation (ESM). By examining how these factors influence digital news engagement, the study hopes to offer insights into the behaviours and preferences of a group often underrepresented in media research. The insights gained will contribute to informing educational strategies, media literacy initiatives, and content development tailored to the needs of ODL learners. Besides, the study supports broader efforts to understand better how digital news is integrated into everyday life, particularly in a Malaysian context where media consumption habits are evolving alongside rapid technological change.

Literature Review
Online Newspaper Consumption
The consumption of online newspapers has risen substantially in recent years, reflecting broader changes in media production and audience behaviour (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018; Thurman & Fletcher, 2017). Digital platforms have enabled continuous, real-time updates that far exceed the daily publication cycle of traditional print newspapers. This has resulted in higher engagement levels, as users increasingly rely on online newspapers for timely and accessible news content. Ukonu, Ani, and Ndubisi (2013) highlight that while online newspapers provide clear advantages, such as convenience, low cost, and immediacy, these do not necessarily lead to the direct abandonment of print editions. Instead, factors like cover price and shifting audience preferences, particularly among younger readers, play a significant role in the decline of print sales (Ukonu et al., 2013). Additionally, integrating social media into news dissemination further enhances the reach and immediacy of online newspapers, reinforcing their position as a dominant news source.

The transition to online newspaper consumption has also been shaped by generational and technological shifts. While earlier studies on newspaper readership, such as those by Peiser and Lauf, focused on the print era (1970s–1990s), they often failed to differentiate between print and digital formats (Elvestad & Blekesaune, 2008). This distinction is increasingly relevant, as the younger generation in the digital age is more inclined to perceive newspapers as platform-independent content. As digital access has become widespread, these users engage with traditional newspaper brands through websites and mobile apps rather than printed editions. Furthermore, Casero-Ripollés (2012) emphasises that television news consumption declines with age, suggesting that younger audiences are migrating toward new media platforms. Thus, the evolution of online newspaper consumption not only reflects technological advancement but also marks a generational shift in how news is accessed, trusted, and valued.

Information Motivation
Information motivation has consistently been recognised as a primary driver of online news consumption, rooted in the foundational principles of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Lee & Chyi, 2014). This theory posits that individuals seek out media to fulfil specific needs, and in the context of news consumption, the desire for knowledge, understanding of current events, and social empowerment are central motivators (Nam, 2014). Chung and Yoo (2008) emphasised that motivations for consuming online news are multifaceted, with information-seeking being a dominant dimension. Supporting this, Memon et al. (2018) found that users turn to online newspapers primarily for political updates, national affairs, and international developments. Empirical evidence also reinforces that information motivation significantly predicts the frequency and intensity of online news engagement (Lee & Chyi, 2014; Chung & Yoo, 2008; Lee, 2015). Moreover, broader media theories and models, such as the IMB model, highlight information as a core component influencing behavioural outcomes, suggesting that knowledge acquisition is not only a motivator but a modifiable determinant of media use behaviour (Newman et al., 2008). Based on this literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:
H1. Information motivation positively affects online news consumption.

Entertainment Motivation
Entertainment motivation has emerged as a significant factor in understanding media consumption, highlighting aesthetic enjoyment and emotional satisfaction as core media usage drivers (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973). News consumers often seek content that informs, amuses, or relaxes them, indicating a dual-purpose engagement with news media (Chyi & Lee, 2015). Scholars such as Bandura, Bryant, and Zillmann (1994) and Nam (2014) emphasised that individuals actively use media to manage their moods and psychological states, further supporting entertainment as a deliberate media selection motive. While the pursuit of information remains a dominant motivation, the role of entertainment cannot be overlooked, as it significantly enhances the frequency and intensity of media use (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011; Lin, Salwen, & Abdulla, 2005; Rubin, 1984). As digital platforms increasingly blend news with visually engaging and interactive features, the appeal of online newspapers for entertainment continues to rise. Existing research supported that entertainment-driven motivations positively correlate with increased digital news usage (Chyi & Lee, 2013; Lee, 2013; Lee & Chyi, 2014). Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Entertainment motivation positively affects online news consumption.

Social Utility Motivation
In modern media research, social utility is recognised as a key motivation, emphasising individuals' desire to use media for social connection and relationship maintenance (Katz et al., 1973). This motivation has been shown to influence Internet use, with individuals seeking online spaces for interaction, civic participation, and social engagement (Boulianne, 2009). Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) further found that online environments enhance users' capacity for interpersonal communication and social activity. These developments suggest that online newspaper consumption may be driven not only by informational needs but also by the desire to stay socially connected and involved in public discourse. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:
H3. Social utility motivation positively affects online news consumption.

Personal Utility Motivation
Personal utility motivation refers to the individual's drive to engage with information or learning materials based on their perceived relevance and usefulness to personal goals, needs, or interests (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Renninger & Hidi, 2016). In the educational context, self-regulated learners are more effective when they can articulate the personal value of a topic, as this awareness strengthens motivation and learning outcomes (OECD, 2012). Tunnicliffe and Ueckert (2007) also highlighted that in a rapidly evolving knowledge-based society, particularly in science education, students show greater engagement and motivation when encouraged to reflect on how a subject relates to their lives. These findings suggest that individuals are more likely to seek out information they find personally meaningful or beneficial. In digital media, personal utility motivation may similarly drive individuals to consume online news that aligns with their interests, goals, or decision-making needs. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:
H4. Personal utility motivation positively affects online news consumption.

Escapism Motivation
Escapism has been explored in various domains, including media consumption, where it is viewed as a mechanism for distraction from negative thoughts or daily struggles (Mandel et al., 2017). In earlier studies, escapism was defined as a form of "reality detachment," where individuals immerse themselves in fictional or alternative experiences, such as through literature, poetry, or media (Eliot, 1982). This form of escapism has been found to provide temporary relief, offering a brief respite from real-world stressors (Lisjak et al., 2015). However, it is not always effective in resolving underlying issues, with some forms of escapism, such as pathological gaming, being linked to negative outcomes (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Despite its controversial aspects, escapism remains a significant motivator in consumer behaviour, with people often seeking media experiences like films, video games, or online platforms to mentally escape (Cova et al., 2018). In the context of online newspaper consumption, escapism could serve as a motivation for individuals seeking a break from their daily worries while staying informed. Hence, the following hypothesis is posited:
H5. Escapism motivation positively affects online news consumption.

Conceptual Framework
The theoretical framework of this study is organised following the theory by Ramzan (2019), which integrates motivational dimensions into media consumption behaviour. This study focuses on five key motivations, information, entertainment, social utility, personal utility, and escapism, as predictors of online newspaper consumption. The conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.
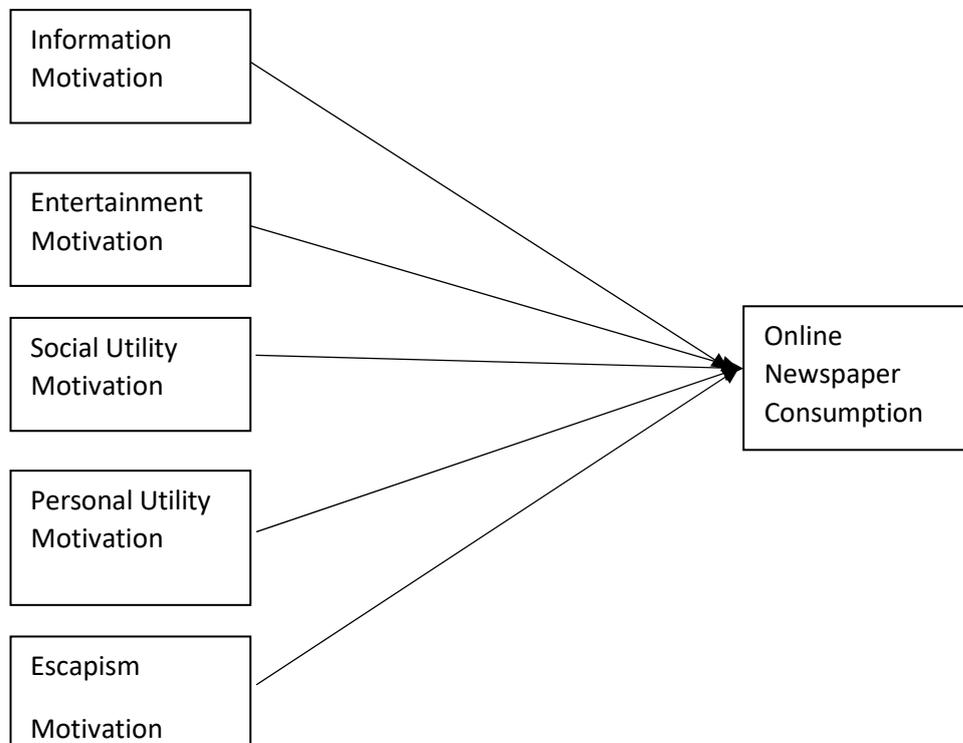

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology
A quantitative research design was employed to investigate the influence of five motivational factors—information, entertainment, social utility, personal utility, and escapism—on online newspaper consumption among Open and Distance Learning (ODL) learners in Malaysia. Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method, targeting individuals who were readily accessible and demonstrated a willingness to participate. Eligibility was restricted to respondents who had engaged with online newspapers for at least six months, ensuring relevance to the study's focus. Recruitment was conducted through multiple digital channels, including email, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and online student platforms, focusing on the target population's frequent engagement with digital media, specifically the ODL learners. The instrument used was a structured questionnaire based on validated constructs from Ramzan (2019), consisting of 43 items, including demographic questions, motivational factors, and online newspaper consumption behaviours, rated on a five-point Likert scale. This methodological design supported the study's aim to identify and analyse motivational drivers of online news consumption among digitally engaged learners.

Respondent Demographic Profile

The study involved 212 respondents, all of whom were Open Distance Learning (ODL) learners in Malaysia who had engaged with online newspapers for at least the past six months. The demographic composition reflected a higher proportion of female participants (58%) compared to male participants (42%). In terms of ethnicity, the majority of respondents were Malay (77.4%), followed by Chinese (9%), Indian (8%), and others (5.6%), mirroring the multicultural fabric of Malaysian society. Educationally, the sample was diverse: 36.8% held diploma qualifications, 32.5% had bachelor's degrees, 25.5% possessed master's degrees, and 5.2% held doctorates. This demographic distribution underscores the heterogeneous nature of the ODL learner population, offering a nuanced perspective for analysing motivational influences on online newspaper consumption within this educational context.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program (JASP) version 0.19.1.0, a comprehensive open-source software for statistical computing. The analysis included descriptive statistics, reliability assessment, correlation analysis, and linear regression to explore the relationships between motivational factors and online news consumption.

Examination of the Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal consistency of the constructs. All six constructs demonstrated acceptable to excellent reliability, with alpha values exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.70 recommended by Hair et al. (2022) (Table 1). Specifically, Information Motivation showed excellent reliability with α = 0.904, while Entertainment Motivation recorded a good reliability score of α = 0.818. Social Utility Motivation (α = 0.872) and Personal Utility Motivation (α = 0.865) also exhibited excellent internal consistency. Escapism Motivation demonstrated the highest reliability among all constructs with α = 0.930, indicating outstanding consistency across its nine items. Finally, the dependent variable, Online News Consumption, showed good internal consistency with α = 0.840. These results confirm that all measurement scales used in the study were reliable and suitable for further analysis.

Table 1
Construct Reliability and Validity (Cronbach's Alpha)

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Information Motivation (IM)	7	0.904
Entertainment Motivation (EM)	5	0.818
Social Utility Motivation (SUM)	6	0.872
Personal Utility Motivation (PUM)	5	0.865
Escapism Motivation (ESM)	9	0.930
Online News Consumption (ONC)	7	0.840

Note. $\alpha \geq 0.7$ indicates acceptable reliability (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 2
Pearson Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Information Motivation	4.33 (0.62)	—					
2. Entertainment Motivation	3.46 (0.85)	.370***	—				
3. Social Utility Motivation	3.52 (0.87)	.382***	.578***	—			
4. Personal Utility Motivation	3.82 (0.78)	.605***	.534***	.632***	—		
5. Escapism Motivation	2.98 (0.99)	.237**	.513***	.469***	.606***	—	
6. Online News Consumption	3.29 (0.83)	.480***	.390***	.387***	.450***	.297***	—

Note. **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among all study variables. All independent variables demonstrated significant positive correlations with the dependent variable, online newspaper consumption. Specifically, Information Motivation showed the strongest correlation with online news consumption (r = .480, p < .001), followed by Personal Utility Motivation (r = .450, p < .001), Entertainment Motivation (r = .390, p < .001), Social Utility Motivation (r = .387, p < .001), and Escapism Motivation (r = .297, p < .001). The correlations among the independent variables were also statistically significant and ranged from moderate to strong. Importantly, all correlation values were below the 0.80 threshold, indicating no multicollinearity concerns (Hair et al., 2022). These results provide preliminary support for the hypothesised positive relationships and validate the inclusion of all constructs in the subsequent regression analysis.

Examination of the Structural Model
The structural model was assessed using standardized beta coefficients (β), coefficient of determination (R^2), and Cohen's f^2 to evaluate the explanatory power and effect sizes of each motivational factor on online news consumption. As shown in Table 3, Information Motivation emerged as the strongest predictor (β = 0.480, t = 7.933, p < .001), accounting for 23.1% of the variance in online news consumption (R^2 = 0.231), with a medium-to-large effect size (f^2 = 0.30; Cohen, 1988). Personal Utility Motivation also showed a substantial influence (β = 0.450, t = 7.297, p < .001), explaining 20.2% of the variance (R^2 = 0.202; f^2 = 0.25). In comparison, Entertainment Motivation (β = 0.390, t = 6.138, p < .001, R^2 = 0.152; f^2 = 0.18) and Social Utility Motivation (β = 0.387, t = 6.079, p < .001, R^2 = 0.150; f^2 = 0.18) had moderate effects, while Escapism Motivation had the smallest yet still significant impact (β = 0.297, t = 4.511, p < .001, R^2 = 0.088; f^2 = 0.096), reflecting a small-to-medium effect size. According to Cohen's (1988) benchmarks (f^2 = 0.02 = small, 0.15 = medium, 0.35 = large), these results demonstrate that all five types of motivation significantly and positively contribute to predicting online news consumption behaviour among ODL learners.

Table 3
Structural Model Results

Hypothesis	Structural Path	β (Standardized)	t-value	p-value	R²	Cohen's f²	Hypothesis test
H1	Information → ONC	0.480	7.933	< .001	0.231	0.30	Supported
H2	Entertainment → ONC	0.390	6.138	< .001	0.152	0.18	Supported
H3	Social Utility → ONC	0.387	6.079	< .001	0.150	0.18	Supported
H4	Personal Utility → ONC	0.450	7.297	< .001	0.202	0.25	Supported
H5	Escapism → ONC	0.297	4.511	< .001	0.088	0.096	Supported

Note. ONC = Online News Consumption. Effect size per Cohen (1988): small = 0.02, medium = 0.15, large = 0.35.

Discussion

The present study explored five motivational factors influencing online news consumption: information, entertainment, social utility, personal utility, and escapism among ODL learners. The findings confirm that all five motivations significantly and positively affect online news consumption, supporting the research framework of this study. Among these factors, information motivation emerged as the most influential factor (β = 0.480), highlighting that users primarily engage with online news to stay informed about current events, public affairs, and relevant social issues. This finding aligns with prior research emphasising that information-seeking is a core driver of digital media use (Park et al., 2009; Diddi & LaRose, 2006). The immediacy, accessibility, and real-time nature of online platforms make them well-suited to fulfil this motivation, especially in a fast-paced, digitally connected society like Malaysia.

Other motivational drivers like entertainment, social utility, personal utility, and escapism also demonstrated meaningful roles, albeit with varying effect sizes. For instance, personal utility motivation (β = 0.450) and entertainment motivation (β = 0.390) reflect a shift toward more individualistic and leisure-oriented media consumption habits, particularly among younger users who value news that is useful, engaging, and interactive. The influence of social utility motivation (β = 0.387) supports the notion that news consumption also serves a communicative function, helping individuals stay socially relevant and participate in discourse. Finally, the effect of escapism motivation (β = 0.297) reveals a nuanced perspective: while news is typically associated with serious content, users may also engage with it for emotional distraction, relaxation, or psychological detachment. These results reflect the multidimensional role of online news in everyday life, serving not only cognitive but also emotional and social needs (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). As digital platforms evolve, understanding these motivations is essential for content creators, news platforms, and policymakers to tailor content strategies that engage diverse user preferences.

Based on the findings, this study offers insights for media practitioners and digital content strategists aiming to enhance engagement with online news among ODL learners.

The strong influence of information and personal utility motivations suggests that news platforms should prioritise producing timely, relevant, and practically useful content for users' academic, personal, or professional needs. Since convenience and accessibility were also emphasised by respondents, optimising content delivery for mobile devices and ensuring low-barrier access, such as through free or flexible subscription models, can help increase reach and retention. Additionally, integrating interactive elements such as visuals, summaries, or multimedia content may cater to the entertainment and escapism motivations that also influence usage. Building credibility through transparent reporting and fact-checking is equally critical, especially in a digital environment where misinformation can undermine trust. By aligning content strategies with the distinct motivations and digital behaviours of ODL learners, news organisations can enhance user satisfaction and foster more consistent consumption of credible online news.

Implications and Limitations
The findings of this study carry important implications for several key stakeholders involved in the digital media ecosystem. For media organisations, the significant influence of information and personal utility motivations underscores the need to tailor timely, relevant content aligned with the informational needs of specific user groups, such as ODL learners. Enhancing platform accessibility and integrating interactive features can further support user engagement. For educators and institutions, the results suggest opportunities to incorporate credible news content into digital learning environments, promoting current awareness and critical thinking among students. Policymakers can leverage these insights to support digital literacy initiatives, especially for populations vulnerable to misinformation or excluded from traditional media access. Subsidising or promoting affordable access to verified news sources can also ensure equitable engagement with reliable information. Finally, for digital platform developers, the diverse motivations behind online news consumption highlight the importance of designing user-friendly interfaces that support utility and enjoyment. Collectively, these implications point to the need for a more integrated and user-centred approach to digital news strategy across sectors.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted of ODL learners from select institutions, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across the broader Malaysian population or other learner groups. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response biases, which may affect the accuracy of measured motivations and consumption behaviours. Third, the scope of the study focused on a limited range of motivational factors, potentially overlooking other influential variables such as emotional regulation, political interest, or psychological well-being. Moreover, the rapidly evolving nature of digital media means that the findings may be context-dependent and subject to change as new platforms and consumption habits emerge. Lastly, external factors such as internet access disparities or socioeconomic background were not explicitly examined, which could further mediate or moderate online news consumption.

Future research should aim to expand the scope and depth of investigation into digital news consumption among ODL learners and beyond. Comparative studies between ODL learners and traditional students can illuminate how educational contexts influence news engagement. Longitudinal designs would be especially valuable in capturing how motivations

evolve in response to technological change or shifts in the news landscape. Researchers may also explore how demographic characteristics, such as age, profession, and digital literacy, interact with motivational factors to shape patterns of news consumption. Moreover, studies should investigate the role of digital platforms as channels for accessing or sharing news, especially within academic environments. Finally, exploring how ODL learners perceive and respond to misinformation and the strategies they use to assess credibility would offer critical insights into trust-building and content quality in digital news ecosystems.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence on the motivational factors that influence online news consumption among open and distance learning (ODL) learners in Malaysia. The findings confirm that all five examined motivations—information, entertainment, social utility, personal utility, and escapism—significantly and positively impact users' engagement with online news platforms. Information motivations emerged as the strongest predictors, highlighting the practical and informational value users seek from digital news. The results also reflect the evolving nature of media consumption, where convenience, interactivity, and accessibility shape user preferences. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of digital news behaviour in educational contexts and offer valuable guidance for media practitioners, educators, and policymakers to develop strategies that enhance access to credible, engaging, and user-centred news content.

Beyond empirical findings, this study contributes conceptually by identifying and validating a multidimensional set of motivational drivers that influence digital news engagement among a specific learner group. The research advances current understanding of online media consumption by offering a focused analysis of ODL learners, a growing yet underexplored demographic in Malaysia. Contextually, the study provides timely insights into how digital transformation is shaping media usage in educational environments, particularly within developing countries. The results offer a foundation for designing tailored media strategies and digital literacy initiatives that align with the informational, social, and emotional needs of ODL learners, while also serving as a reference point for future research in similar educational and cultural settings.

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