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DIGITAL MINIMALISM: WHAT DOES IT IMPLY FOR LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION?	DİJİTAL MİNİMALİZM: DİL EĞİTİMİ İÇİN NE İFADE EDİYOR?

ABSTRACT

Digital tools and social media have become a fundamental component of our personal, social and educational lives. Information and communication technologies are now a useful component of education. However, it is necessary to exercise caution in technology use in language instruction, due to addictive use patterns, excessive social media use, excessive gaming, digital overload, along with the lack of focus due to distractions from social media. Reducing digital clutter and using technology mindfully could help language educators and students to make the most out of technology in language instruction. Finding the best tools is also among valuable minimalist strategies. This review paper presents an adapted version of the concept of "digital minimalism", introduced by Cal Newport, in language learning contexts, with a particular focus on factors that negatively affect psychological well-being and academic performance among university students. First, it provides an overview of digital minimalism in general terms. Secondly, it provides a summary of its principles that could be adapted to language education. Finally, it discusses what digital minimalism means for language instruction by highlighting its pedagogical implications.

Keywords: Digital minimalism, Language Education, Digital Overload, Social Media, Mindfulness.

ÖZET

Dijital araçlar ve sosyal medya kişisel, sosyal ve eğitim hayatımızın temel bir parçası haline gelmiş durumdadır. Bilgi ve iletişim teknolojileri günümüzde eğitimin faydalı bir bileşenidir. Ancak bağımlılığa sebep olan kullanım biçimleri, aşırı sosyal medya kullanımı, aşırı oyun oynama, aşırı dijital yük ve sosyal medyadan kaynaklanan dikkat dağınıklığı nedeniyle odaklanma eksikliği gibi nedenlerle dil eğitiminde teknoloji kullanımı konusunda dikkatli olmak gerekmektedir. Dijital karmaşayı azaltmak ve teknolojiyi dikkatli kullanmak dil eğitimcilerinin ve öğrencilerin dil eğitiminde teknolojiden en iyi şekilde yararlanmalarına yardımcı olabilir. En iyi araçları bulmak da kıymetli minimalist stratejiler arasında yer almaktadır. Bu derleme çalışması Cal Newport tarafından ortaya atılmış olan "dijital minimalizm" kavramının dil öğrenme bağlamlarına uyarlanmış bir versiyonunu sunmakta ve özellikle üniversite öğrencileri arasında psikolojik refahı ve akademik performansı olumsuz etkileyen faktörlere odaklanmaktadır. Çalışma ilk olarak, dijital minimalizm kavramına genel bir bakış ortaya koymaktadır. İkinci olarak, dijital minimalizmin dil eğitimine uyarlanabilecek ilkelerinin bir özetini sunmaktadır. Son olarak, dijital minimalizmin pedagojik yansımalarını vurgulayarak dijital minimalizmin dil eğitimi için ne anlama geldiğini tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Dijital minimalizm, Dil Eğitimi, Aşırı Dijital Yük, Sosyal Medya, Farkındalık.

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Introduction

The upsurge of digital technologies in the last two decades has encouraged teachers and students to use technology for teaching and learning in different educational disciplines. Language instruction is one of these areas in which digital technologies and pedagogical implementations using these technologies have been quite common (Sule, 2024). This is not only because language learning easily lends itself to technological implementations but also because research into technology-enhanced language learning has provided moderately positive outcomes (Golonka et al., 2014) and a wealth of approaches to language instruction (Zhang & Zou, 2022) that encourage teachers and students to use technology even more frequently. In such a digitally overloaded educational landscape, second language (L2) learners use digital devices very often, not only outside school but also in classroom contexts.

Besides the educational aspects of the issue, there is also a social side of technology use, particularly the use of social media among school-age children. Students spend extended periods of time sharing content, checking notifications, and following the activities of other users. The main issue with social media use is addiction (Ning & Inan, 2023), so social media users must maintain their autonomy (Aylsworth & Castro, 2022) in today's technologically driven world. Digital devices undermine our autonomy as they negatively impact our capacities that are essential for autonomous action (basic functions such working memory, cognitive functioning and sleep patterns, along with freedom from external limitations, lack of cognitive inhibitions, and having a variety of options) (Aylsworth & Castro, 2024). Autonomous use of social media (i.e., being able to make mindful decisions about when to and how to use social media, and for what purposes) can help students better control their time on the Internet, particularly on social media.

It proves difficult for most students to remain in control of their digital devices and social media accounts, and as Montag et al. (2024) observe, losing control is one of the markers of problematic social media use. Frequent notifications and the urge to check social media reduce their concentration (Debbarma, 2020; Erfani & Abedin, 2018) while they are studying. Sandua (2024) notes that extended periods of scrolling and frequent notifications disrupt one's focus and concentration, thereby leading to lower productivity and higher cognitive load. Newport (2019) recommends that digital noise caused by constant notifications from applications and digital devices should be minimised to allow people to remain more focused in their daily lives. This equally goes for students who need to stay focused while studying.

Globally considered, the worldwide digital community, more specifically students, experience serious problems regarding technology use, including but not limited to, digital overload (Alheneidi, et al., 2021; James et al., 2022), problematic Internet and social media use (e.g., Islam et al., 2020), lack of autonomy in using technology, the inability to concentrate due to constantly incoming digital information (particularly constant notifications). Despite such serious problems, there are no effective solutions that could promote mindful use of technology. Against the backdrop of such issues, borrowing the philosophy of minimalism for life and adapting it to the digital world, Newport (2019) offered some principles of technology use to minimise such problems. Newport did not have a particular group of people in his mind while elaborating on his philosophy; the principles he laid down were intended for the public. While digital overload and problematic technology use maybe a concern among people from different age or social-status groups, Generation Z or the so-called digital natives are one of the most vulnerable groups that are

prone to the problems outlined above as they spend so much time on the Internet. In their study on problematic technology use among college students, Aktan and Gökçearslan (2022) found that more than half of the participants were at risk of using technology in a problematic way. They stressed that the amount of time spent while using technology and habits of use were key predictors of problematic technology use among university students.

However, despite such problematic technology use among younger generations, to the best of my knowledge, there are no studies discussing how digital minimalism can be applied to the lives of L2 learners. Therefore, the present study aims to fill this gap. It discusses how the principles offered by Newport (2019) can be adapted to L2 learning and the academic lives of L2 learners. It particularly focuses on problematic social media use and discusses pedagogical implications of digital minimalism. Given that technology has recently become an integral part of language learning contexts, it is important to encourage mindful use of it to achieve the intended learning objectives. The next section provides background information about digital minimalism and offers an overview of its basic principles.

Digital minimalism

The roots of the term 'minimalism' can be traced back to the works of ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, who observed that the difficulties of leading an extravagant lifestyle mostly overshadowed the enjoyment one found in it. However, it was Robert Wollheim, who indirectly used the term in the phrase "minimal art content" to describe a very popular movement in the art world of his time, thereby inspiring the use of the term 'minimalism' (Newell, 2019). More recently, extending its use to the digital world, Cal Newport introduced the term 'digital minimalism' in 2019, as he was alarmed by issues outlined in the previous section, especially how addiction to digital devices and social media upsets the balance of individuals' daily lives. The philosophy of digital minimalism is based on the idea that what is extra clutters your life, and it gets more and more difficult to manage it. Newport (2019) defined the term as "a philosophy of technology use in which you focus your online time on a small number of carefully selected and optimized activities that strongly support things you value, and then happily miss out on everything else" (p. 28). It basically aims to strike a balance between digital technology (especially social media) and life and to avoid addictive behaviour (Brigger, 2020, March 18). It is a transformative approach that highlights functionality and satisfying one's needs by acting mindfully.

Unlike a common misconception, minimalism does not mean living without possessions; it means keeping the possessions that you really need and value, while getting rid of the rest to fully experience what you have at hand (Newell, 2019). Likewise, for language learning contexts, it hardly means being against technology use; it rather means taking control of technology use and continually analysing costs and efficiency. It means teachers and students should identify their priorities and objectives, along with the means to achieve them. Therefore, digital minimalism involves using fewer technologies to attain various instructional objectives.

Digital minimalism involves conscious use and making informed decisions about what and how to use. Sandua (2024) notes that digital minimalism encourages regular disconnection from digital devices and social media, allows students (and teachers) to focus on their educational objectives and enhances their critical thinking skills. Another key point highlighted by Sandua

(2024) is that with digital minimalism students and teachers become the agents of their digital lives.

There are several reasons why digital minimalism is needed in educational contexts. Being born into the digital world, current high-school and college students frequently use mobile devices, social media and educational applications, so they are digitally overloaded by notifications and useless information from these sources. Much worse is the mindless use, which leads to digital clutter. The following sections elaborate on these problems and discuss what digital minimalism offers language learners.

Digital overload

One of the factors that can justify the introduction of digital minimalism into language education, is digital overload, which refers to excessive use of digital devices, online platforms, and social media. Such excessive use can negatively affect not only students' academic performance but also their psychological well-being (Bharaty & Das, 2023). Smartphone ownership is very high among university students. For instance, all the participants in Aktan and Gökçearslan's (2022) study owned a smartphone. Therefore, it is probable for some students to show addictive behaviour (Bushell, 2024, April 3). Younger people often use their smartphones to entertain themselves, they get distracted by elements of such use when they want to do academic work (Sarnou, 2021). This distraction gets worse when they continually check social media or e-mail accounts inside and outside the classroom.

Excessive use of social media

Studies have suggested that prolonged social media use leads to stress among students. For instance, Oyinbo et al. (2024) found that more than two hours of daily social media use led to higher levels of stress among female college students compared with their peers who use social media up to 20 minutes every day. In another study carried out by Tomczyk and Hoferichter (2022), approval anxiety and connection overload (defined by the authors as "at least one-hour social media use") were found to be statistically significant predictors of higher stress levels in adolescents, measured using subjective and objective means. Likewise, Winstone et al. (2023) found that social media use led to stress caused by different sources, depending on the purpose of use. That is, passively browsing social media websites was perceived as a waste of time, which is accompanied by feelings of guilt. Although using social media for communication helped boost connectedness, it led to digital stress exacerbated by the failure to meet peers' expectations of online availability and unwanted social contact from strangers. Finally, sharing content caused stress due to expectations of perfection, fear of negative evaluation and risks of privacy. Zhao (2023) investigated the relationship among a set of key variables related to social media and found that higher durations of social media use led to social media addiction and that both addiction and stress negatively impacted the academic performance of college students. As suggested by Zhao's (2023) study, higher levels of stress can be a barrier against learning.

Globally considered, as Zsila and Reyes (2023) note, social media use significantly affects mental health. While it can help increase self-esteem, ensure better connectedness among people and promote a sense of belonging to a community, longer periods of social media use can lead to psychological problems among students (e.g., higher stress levels, sadness and feelings of

isolation). Therefore, a significant aspect of digital minimalism in education should aim to train students to have control over social media use.

Principles of digital minimalism

The problems outlined in the previous section collectively led to the rise of digital minimalism. It is possible to practise digital minimalism by applying its principles to one's digital life. Below are the basic principles of this philosophy that can be adapted to language education.

Eliminating digital clutter

Eliminating clutter in one's digital life is a critical step to applying digital minimalism (Newport, 2019) because clutter might lead to confusion and burn out. People should limit their digital use to what is essential. This is critical because eliminating digital mess to replace it with valuable activities can help achieve educational objectives. Proponents of digital minimalism recommend that digital users should eliminate every digital device or application unless it serves for an intended objective and adds value to their lives. This entails revisiting how they use digital devices or applications to set a boundary between what is valuable and what is just a fad. Some applications can be very functional and useful, yet unless they serve for intended purposes, they become a part of digital mess.

Mindful and purposeful use

Aimless technology use (e.g., surfing the Internet without a specific aim in mind) might lead to a tremendous waste of time. We often find ourselves turning on our mobile devices and look through incoming messages or surfing aimlessly on the Internet, without even realising it. This is one of the most problematic aspects of smart device and internet use. A good strategy to eliminate this problem would be to divide your day up into portions which are specifically devoted to digital or analogue activities. The purpose of such periods is to increase one's focus, which is essential for better life. Globally considered, having an objective in mind and establishing a balance between digital and analogue activities could help eliminate, or at least minimise, problematic technology use.

Autonomous use

The Internet is full of useful content that can be used for satisfying one's curiosity, learning new skills and getting more knowledgeable. However, as Newport (2019) remarks, the issue is not usefulness; it is rather autonomy. If students can behave autonomously when using online platforms and sources, they can make the most out of the online content. Online video platforms, massive open online courses, blogs and other similar sources of information could help learners nurture themselves without restrictions of time and space. This is the "use" component, to which no one can raise their voice, yet getting lost and continuously being disturbed by personally more engaging elements on the Internet are thorny problems that should be addressed. Digital users should be the agents of their own digital activities. This means they should be able to control what they use and how they use it in the virtual world. To be able to control their use, learners should be able to set boundaries for when and how much they will use digital devices and social media. Planning and strong will are necessary to be able to establish limits. Forming the core of digital minimalism, these principles have some potential implications for language education, which are discussed in the sections below.

Pedagogical implications of digital minimalism

A language learner's aim is to improve his/her language skills to communicate effectively in real-life situations, so they can cut back on activities that fail to serve this purpose. Exposure to linguistic input that is comprehensible is essential for L2 learners to improve their language skills (Krashen, 1985), and much of this input comes from online sources in today's world. Therefore, while it is necessary to use digital devices and the Internet to access such input, the key point is to be mindful when using Internet sources to improve language skills. Students should establish a balance between their digital consumption (social media use) and analogue activities. Even if they benefit from being exposed to L2 input in a digital environment, this should not be at the expense of their psychological well-being or physical health.

In this respect, in Sandua's (2024) words, the first step to applying digital minimalism to educational contexts could be to encourage learners and teachers "to critically assess their digital habits and prioritize quality over quantity" (p. 31). To improve their learning, L2 learners could minimise applications on their phones to an essential minimum. They can have the following basic digital assets/devices to help them improve their language skills:

(a)   A mobile vocabulary learning tool (e.g., Quizlet, Memrise, etc.),

(b)   An offline dictionary they can use without connecting to the Internet,

(c)   A document reader they can use to view word documents, PDFs or text documents,

(d)   A limited number of highly useful and relevant channels on video platforms (e.g., on YouTube),

(e)   A digital reader (highly recommended because of its limited capacity for Internet surfing compared to smartphones),

(f) and a pair of headphones for listening.

Being aware of how one uses digital devices and social media can help them take essential steps to get rid of addictive behaviour. As noted earlier, problematic social media use reduces academic performance, not only by causing loss of time that could otherwise be spent for personal development and academic studies but also by leading to stress. Supporting this, Ansary and Rakshit (2024) found a negative correlation between internet use and academic performance.

Besides these, students should be the agents of their digital use. They should be able to disconnect from the Internet (and digital devices) at regular intervals. Skivko et al. (2020) offer two types of disconnection from the digital world. The first is digital dieting, which refers to the practice of temporarily decreasing digital consumption to achieve a specific objective. The second is digital detox, which involves temporarily avoiding digital devices to escape information overload and to reset the mental system. Depending on their purpose, language learners can go through a period of disconnection in either way. They should train themselves to be determined enough to turn notifications off whenever needed (e.g., while studying lessons or while listening/watching L2 materials) to be safe from the impact of digital distractions. Similarly, they should stay away from digital devices as much as possible while doing analogue activities, such as leisure reading or studying hardcopy textbooks. However, it should be noted that these necessitate some planning and determination (See Table 1).

Table 1: *Basics of digital minimalism for technology use in language instruction*

	Digital minimalism ENCOURAGES...	Digital minimalism DISCOURAGES...
Overall philosophy	• reducing technology use to an essential minimum and using what basically fits one's (or a school's) overall philosophy of technology use.	• unconsciously using devices, content or software without critically questioning their value to the individual and organisation (school).
Autonomy and Control	• taking control of digital device/social media use and being autonomous in it.	• making digital devices and social media a part of one's life without limitations and being addicted to them.
Dealing with digital overload	• establishing a healthy balance between the digital and traditional learning materials.	• overloading classes and educational activities with digital stuff.

Another aspect of the problem is that teachers and students must be able to make a distinction between what is pedagogically valuable and what is digital junk or fad. The Internet is full of smaller web-based tools for learning; there are literally tens and sometimes hundreds of varieties of a tool with a particular function. As Aylsworth and Castro (2024) state, people are unable to make good choices when they have a lot of options to choose from. Students who want to improve their language skills might get lost among hundreds of applications, websites and innumerable instructional materials on the Internet. Similarly, educators are mesmerized by functional little tools that usually come with a free version, which leads to a "sign up frenzy" and "digital hoarding" in education.

In this respect, a digital minimalist is to be aware of scientific criteria for evaluating materials and software. Enjoyment and innovation alone do not mean much if a digital source is not pedagogically valuable (i.e., if learning gains are minimal). Therefore, learning gains should be the instructional focus when choosing digital tools for learning and teaching. However, it is difficult for learners to assess learning gains, and without being appropriately guided by educators, they might fail to make wise decisions as to what materials to use for learning the target language. Therefore, teachers and students need some criteria when selecting online sources, software programs, websites or similar tools or when deciding if a particular tool is useful or not.

Unlike the literature on digital nativeness, younger generations are not very good at using digital technologies (Bakla, 2019; Ng, 2012; Selwyn, 2009), particularly educational software. Therefore, teachers should guide language learners on how they should use digital materials (e.g., books, applications, videos, worksheets etc.). Recent research into educational technologies can help them in this respect as it has painted an overall picture of trending topics and useful applications in language instruction (e.g., Golonka et al. 2014; Zhang, & Zou, 2022). There are also frameworks for evaluation: a taxonomy and framework for evaluating mobile language learning applications (Rosell-Aguilar, 2017) and a benchmark for creating and assessing vocabulary learning applications (Tu et al., 2020). Besides these, there are criteria for selecting video platforms (Coşkun et al., 2021), and online learning platforms or learning management systems (Gu et al., 2023; Taghaddomi & Mazandarani, 2024). Language teachers should also prepare student-friendly guidelines to help their students to make informed decisions about how to select materials to improve their language skills (See Table 2).

Likewise, considering empirical research on evaluation criteria could help educators make informed decisions about what software or materials to use in digital learning environments. As noted earlier, adopting many software applications and integrating them to learning contexts, solely based on self-perceived usefulness on the surface, can lead to lower learning gains. A

significant portion of the content and applications on the Internet apparently satisfies the usefulness criterion, yet the questions about their pedagogical value remain unanswered. If a tool saves time in learning, it could be considered useful, yet in some cases spending less time would mean less engagement or more shallow depth of processing during learning. Every technology that educators introduce into educational environments or ask their students to use must solve a problem. Gupta (2023, April 3) gives an example of what solves a problem versus what offers nothing and remains an addictive tool. She cites digital education platforms as an effective solution to access problem, while she considers Snapchat, which has hundreds of millions of users, as an unnecessary tool that leads to addictive behaviour. In this respect, the following questions can be asked to decide if software is pedagogically useful and valuable:

- Is it essential?
- Is it pedagogically valuable? (Are there empirical research results supporting its use?)
- Is it sustainable? (e.g., The trial version of software might not be sustainable unless the full version is free or affordable for students.)
- Is it the best of its type (e.g., the most functional, the cheapest, the most user-friendly etc.)
- Could it successfully pass a test of cost-benefit analysis? (e.g., Are the benefits gained out of it worth the time and money invested in it?)
- What do experts and its users think about it?

Table 2: *Digital minimalism for materials selection and use*

	Digital minimalism ENCOURAGES…	Digital minimalism DISCOURAGES…
Device and software use	• making informed decisions about what to use and how to use it to facilitate learning.	• using software or content solely based on popularity or surface value.
Using scientific criteria	• using the current educational theory and the results of scholarly research to evaluate software, platforms and digital sources.	• being biased towards individual properties of software, platforms and digital sources and applying no criteria to test their value.
Quality	• highlighting the quality of digital L2 materials and platforms.	• disregarding quality considerations while selecting language learning materials and software.

Storing and using useful data is another aspect of digital minimalism. This is because there are many individuals who could suffer from digital hoarding, which defined as the practice of collecting "digital files to the point of loss of perspective, which eventually results in stress and disorganization (van Bennekom, 2015, p. 1). Such people tend to store digital data, regardless of whether they will use it or not. The Internet is full of low-quality materials that can hardly contribute to one's intellectual development. Therefore, teachers and learners are recommended to store what is essential, functional and pedagogical. Otherwise, it gets difficult to find valuable materials among huge amounts of digital data stored in personal computers or cloud storage.

Finally, digital minimalism in language education has also some implications for educational leadership. Educational leaders are recommended to introduce educational technology into an area or school if it facilitates access to content for large numbers of people and ensures more effective and faster learning. Technologies that would be a must in an educational institution should meet the following criteria: (a) They should be of value to the organisation; (b) they should

be user-friendly, and they should provide advantages, such as being pedagogically valuable, time efficient, and cost-effective.

Educational leaders should also consider how to ensure effective communication within their area or school. Bombarding teachers and students with messages from multiple channels (e.g., e-mail messages, SMS messages, instant messaging, official website announcements, etc.) might create a barrier against effective communication although each channel might bring its own advantages. Moreover, according to Sandua (2024), such excessive information deluging people's lives may lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety due to the urge keep up with it. Too much incoming information from multiple channels might covertly give the unintended message that it is impossible to successfully deal with such information bombardment, which itself legitimizes being unable to cope with too much information. Such a message might lead to burn out as teachers' and students' attention would split between different channels of interaction. A better strategy that educational leaders could adopt is to negotiate an effective and feasible channel of communication and giving the intended audience regular updates on that channel, highlighting key tasks and critical deadlines. Afterall, it proves difficult to pinpoint what is essential/critical versus optional/unnecessary in a sea of incoming information.

Conclusion

Therefore, the next best thing could be a minimalist approach to digital tool use in language instruction. For educational institutions, it might mean, in Brigger's (2020, March 18) words, adopting "a philosophy of technology, something like a digital mission statement allowing management, members of staff, faculty, as well as students to know where they are, where they are asked to go and how" (para. 9). This can give staff and learners a sense of direction. It should be noted once again that this approach does not equal to an anti-tech attitude towards the use of technology. It rather means taking advantage of the best tools identified by empirical research and user experience. A minimalist approach in language education would mean that teachers should introduce tools if they are better (more influential in teaching learners) than traditional ways. L2 researchers, on the other hand, should be encouraged to carry out research on various educational theories, applications, platforms and materials. This could help them experiment with what is available on the Internet.

On the one hand, L2 educators should be knowledgeable enough to make informed decisions in selecting effective digital learning materials, online platforms and various educational software. The use of expert reviews is quite important to enable learners and teachers to choose the most appropriate tools for a particular purpose. Lured by the surface value of applications and materials, teachers might introduce numerous digital tools simultaneously into instructional environments. However, it is wise to conduct a deeper analysis by taking into consideration educational theory in general, and evaluation criteria in particular. On the other hand, students should be trained as autonomous individuals, who could take their own responsibility and guide themselves in planning their digital lives and learning journeys. Similarly, they should be in full control of what digital devices and applications they use, along with when and how frequently they use them.

It is perfectly legitimate for students to use technology for self-entertainment purposes. What is unacceptable is to exhibit problematic social media and internet use and addictive behaviour. Once students can acquire the ability to control their daily digital consumption, they can use the

Internet, not only for academic work but also for self-entertainment purposes. As the notion of multitasking is not a good option for most individuals, students are recommended to allocate some high-quality time to their studies by turning their digital devices off, not only to block notifications from different applications but also to get rid of the urge to check e-mail, social media accounts or instant messaging services while studying. This is critically important in order not to split their attention among multiple tasks.

Globally considered, digital minimalism encourages individuals to adopt, Sandua's (2024) words, "a mindful approach to learning and knowledge acquisition" (p. 31). Raising students' awareness about the nature of social media and how social media tools make money could make a difference in disseminating the idea of digital minimalism. In other words, without helping students realise the underlying philosophy of how social media tools engage its users and make them frequently check their accounts, it is difficult to persuade them to use social media in a way that does not interfere with their studies. Therefore, the best practice could be to train students to set limits on when and how to use their digital devices and social media accounts wisely. In sum, educators and educational leaders are to adopt a philosophy that could regulate their practices in educational contexts. As the name suggests, digital minimalism involves using what is essential and efficient in digital learning, and, as Newport (2019) stresses, digital minimalism should be a life-long endeavour rather than a one-time attempt.

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