



## Journalists' Lived Experiences of Credibility and Ethical Identity in the Digital News Era

Triana <sup>1\*</sup>, Susanto <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Duta Bangsa Surakarta, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup>[triana@gmail.com](mailto: triana@gmail.com) \*, <sup>2</sup>[susanto@gmisil.com](mailto: susanto@gmisil.com)

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### ABSTRACT

Digital journalism has undergone a profound transformation as algorithms and audience engagement metrics increasingly shape how news is produced and perceived. Within this evolving media landscape, the concept of journalistic credibility has shifted from being an institutional guarantee to a dynamic and contested experience shaped by technological and social forces. However, little is known about how journalists personally experience and interpret credibility crises in the digital newsroom, particularly as they navigate tensions between ethical responsibility and algorithmic visibility. This study applies an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of journalists confronting these challenges and to uncover the meaning structures underlying their sense of professional integrity. The study employed clearly defined IPA procedures, including bracketing, idiographic coding, and cross-case thematic synthesis, to ensure methodological rigor. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve journalists from print, electronic, and digital media. Analysis identified three core experiential themes: (1) credibility as an ongoing ethical struggle shaped by algorithmic pressures, (2) emotional vulnerability triggered by fluctuating digital visibility, and (3) the negotiation of professional identity amid demands for authenticity. These findings demonstrate with greater precision that credibility is experienced not as an abstract principle but as a daily moral decision-making process shaped by both personal conviction and platform metrics. These insights extend the theoretical understanding of credibility from a procedural construct to a lived moral condition, emphasizing the human dimension of journalistic practice in the digital age. The study offers new directions for research on media ethics and underscores the need for reflective newsroom cultures that sustain authenticity amid algorithmic systems.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary media ecosystem, journalism stands at the intersection of technological transformation and societal trust (Amit-Danhi et al., 2024). The proliferation of digital platforms, social media networks, and algorithm-driven content systems has reshaped not only how news is produced and distributed but also how it is perceived and valued by audiences. Within this complex environment, credibility once grounded in institutional reputation and professional norms has become increasingly fragile, subject to the fluctuating dynamics of engagement metrics, virality, and algorithmic visibility (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). Rather than reflecting mere technological change, these dynamics reveal a shifting landscape in which journalists must continually negotiate their professional identity and moral responsibilities.

From a sociocultural perspective, this shift signifies more than a technological transition; it reflects a deeper transformation in the relationship between journalists, audiences, and information power structures (Forja-Pena et al., 2024). The boundaries separating journalists from consumers have blurred, as audiences now actively participate in the circulation, critique, and verification of news

through digital platforms (Gehrke et al., 2025). This participatory environment redefines credibility as a negotiated and interactive process, rather than a static attribute of the media institution. Consequently, journalists increasingly experience psychological, ethical, and professional tensions in navigating the demands of authenticity and transparency while maintaining visibility within algorithmic logics (Hermida, 2020; Tandoc, 2021).

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its profound implications for the lived experience of journalists. Their day-to-day work has become a site of continuous negotiation between moral obligation and digital performativity, where ethical ideals often conflict with pressures to optimize for clicks and engagement (Yetimova & Ísakov, 2024). Understanding these tensions requires more than quantitative measurement or institutional analysis; it necessitates an exploration of how journalists perceive, internalize, and make sense of their role within an evolving digital ecology. This experiential dimension offers insight into how human agency persists within technologically mediated systems, highlighting the existential and emotional dimensions of professional identity in journalism.

Given this context, a phenomenological exploration becomes essential. Unlike functional or behavioral analyses, phenomenology seeks to reveal the essence of lived experience: how individuals construct meaning within their personal and professional realities. Applying a phenomenological lens to digital journalism allows for an in-depth understanding of how journalists experience the crisis of credibility not as a structural defect alone, but as a deeply human struggle involving values, identity, and moral coherence. Such an approach situates the phenomenon within its social and cultural context while remaining attentive to the subjective meanings that shape professional life in a digitized media landscape.

Research exploring the subjective experiences of journalists has increasingly gained scholarly attention, particularly as media professionals navigate complex ethical and emotional terrains shaped by digital transformation (Fernández-Castrillo & Mantoan, 2024). The study of lived experience in journalism provides a vital avenue for understanding not merely what journalists do, but how they experience, interpret, and assign meaning to their professional realities in environments characterized by constant technological and cultural flux. Within the context of digital news production, journalists' experiences with credibility, authenticity, and professional autonomy represent a critical sub-area of phenomenological inquiry—one that exposes the inner dimensions of professional life often obscured by institutional or audience-centered analyses.

Despite the growing academic interest in the sociology of journalism and media ethics, methodological limitations persist in capturing the depth of such experiences. Much of the existing research has relied on quantitative surveys, content analyses, or audience perception studies, which while valuable for identifying patterns often fail to reveal the subjective and interpretive essence of the phenomenon (Martí-Danés et al., 2024). These approaches tend to objectify experience, reducing complex moral and emotional processes into measurable variables that overlook the nuanced meanings journalists attach to their work. As Tandoc notes, understanding credibility in journalism requires moving beyond institutional metrics toward grasping the lived moral consciousness of practitioners operating under algorithmic pressures.

This methodological gap underscores the need for qualitative, phenomenological approaches that prioritize the richness of individual narratives and the contextual nature of meaning-making. By engaging directly with journalists' first-hand accounts, a phenomenological framework facilitates an interpretive exploration of how ethical dilemmas, identity conflicts, and emotional strains are embodied and experienced within digital newsrooms. Such an approach transcends the surface-level understanding of credibility crises, enabling scholars to uncover the essence of being a journalist in an era where technological systems and human values intersect (Canavilhas et al., 2024). Consequently, the interpretive phenomenological perspective offers not only methodological adequacy but also epistemological depth, bridging the gap between observable behavior and lived moral experience in the evolving field of digital journalism.

While previous research has made considerable progress in addressing issues of credibility and trust in digital journalism, much of it has relied on practical and structural approaches such as improving verification systems, applying fact-checking protocols, or developing algorithmic

transparency models (Carlson, 2022; Lewis, 2018). These pragmatic solutions, though valuable, primarily treat credibility as a technical or institutional problem rather than a lived human experience. As a result, they overlook the deeper psychological and moral dimensions that shape how journalists actually experience and interpret credibility crises in their professional lives.

Current studies tend to emphasize external mechanisms metrics, audience trust indices, or editorial policies while neglecting how journalists themselves feel, negotiate, and construct meaning amid these pressures (Asari, 2025). Quantitative approaches, for instance, may identify correlations between media trust and audience engagement, but they fail to capture the inner conflicts, ethical dilemmas, and emotional burdens that accompany daily journalistic practice in algorithmic spaces (Tandoc, 2021). Consequently, what remains insufficiently understood is the subjective essence of these experiences: how journalists internalize the dual imperatives of truth and visibility, how they preserve professional integrity amid shifting technological demands, and how these experiences reshape their sense of self and vocation.

This conceptual and methodological limitation underscores the necessity of employing a phenomenological framework one that moves beyond measuring attitudes or institutional outputs to exploring the meaning structures underlying journalists' lived experiences. A phenomenological approach, particularly the interpretative variant (IPA), allows for the articulation of how journalists make sense of being credible in digital contexts where authenticity and algorithmic performance intersect (Mark-FitzGerald, 2025). Through this lens, credibility is not merely an operational attribute but a moral and existential condition that can only be understood through the voices and reflections of those who live it. Thus, this research aims to fill the gap by revealing the essence of journalistic experience as it unfolds within the complex realities of digital transformation, offering insights unattainable through conventional empirical or technical methodologies.

Previous studies on journalism and credibility have primarily focused on institutional strategies, technological infrastructures, and audience perception frameworks (Carlson, 2022; Hermida, 2020). While these works have contributed significantly to understanding structural and systemic aspects of journalism, they often underrepresent the lived dimension of the journalist's experience. Studies employing psychological or sociological perspectives have acknowledged the emotional burden of newswork but have rarely explored how journalists construct meaning amid ethical tensions and algorithmic pressures. Theoretical discussions on digital trust and professional identity have begun to emerge, yet they remain fragmented and insufficiently grounded in personal narratives (Bauer & Nadler, 2025). This creates a pressing need to uncover how credibility is not only practiced but experienced as a moral and existential challenge in digital journalism.

To address this gap, the present study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), which centers on understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences within specific contexts (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). This method enables a rich exploration of how journalists perceive, internalize, and respond to credibility crises in the digital newsroom (Lecheler et al., 2024). By engaging with journalists' reflective narratives, this approach captures the essence of meaning-making how ethical values, identity, and emotional resilience coexist within professional realities. In doing so, the study provides insight into questions raised earlier regarding the subjective experience of digital credibility and the negotiation between authenticity and algorithmic visibility (Sendra-Duro, 2025). The phenomenological framework thus serves as a bridge between technological transformation and human consciousness, offering depth beyond what surface-level observation can reveal.

This article is structured into several key sections. The Introduction establishes the social and theoretical context of the phenomenon, situating the crisis of credibility within the digital media landscape (Rodriguez Martinez et al., 2025). The Method section elaborates on the interpretative phenomenological design, including participant selection, data collection, and analytic procedures. The Results section presents emergent themes describing how journalists experience and make sense of credibility in digital environments. The Discussion connects these findings with existing theories of media ethics, digital trust, and professional identity, highlighting the implications for journalism practice and scholarship (Patrona, 2025). Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes the study's essential

insights, emphasizing the role of lived experience in understanding journalistic integrity in the algorithmic age.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This research adopted an interpretative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of journalists confronting credibility challenges in digital news environments (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). Phenomenology, as a qualitative approach, centers on understanding how individuals perceive and interpret their lived realities. In this study, the interpretative (hermeneutic) orientation rooted in Heidegger's philosophy was applied to uncover the meanings that journalists ascribe to their experiences with algorithmic pressures and public skepticism. This design was chosen because it enables the identification of subjective meanings and moral negotiations embedded in everyday newsroom practices. By emphasizing interpretation rather than description alone, this approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of how ethical authenticity and professional identity are continually redefined within platform-driven journalism. Within this interpretative framework, methodological rigor was sought by explicitly attending to credibility, dependability, and reflexivity throughout the design, data collection, and analytic processes.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of professional journalists working in print, electronic, and digital media organizations across national and independent news outlets (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Selection followed a purposive sampling strategy, ensuring that each participant possessed substantial experience with digital reporting and direct engagement with online news production and dissemination. Inclusion criteria required participants to have a minimum of five years of journalistic experience and active involvement in digital or online editorial workflows. Exclusion criteria eliminated individuals in purely managerial or non-editorial positions.

A total of twelve participants contributed to the study, comprising seven male and five female journalists, aged between 28 and 47 years. Most participants held positions such as reporters, editors, or content strategists in major online platforms. This demographic variety provided a balanced representation of professional perspectives regarding credibility and ethical dilemmas in algorithmic news environments.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in person and via secure online video conferencing platforms (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit reflective narratives about participants' experiences with maintaining credibility, navigating algorithmic visibility, and managing emotional pressures in digital spaces. The interview guide contained open-ended questions allowing participants to articulate their thoughts freely while maintaining focus on the core phenomenon.

All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Data collection took place in neutral, comfortable settings either within newsroom meeting spaces or private virtual environments to ensure psychological safety and confidentiality. Observational field notes and reflexive memos were also documented to enrich contextual understanding. These materials collectively formed a comprehensive corpus for interpretative analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following the systematic steps outlined by Daly, (2007) & Longhofer et al., (2012). The analytic process began with immersive reading and re-reading of each transcript to capture holistic impressions, followed by identification of meaning units phrases and expressions reflecting significant aspects of the lived

experience. These meaning units were coded and clustered into preliminary categories using NVivo 14 software to facilitate data organization without compromising interpretive depth.

Through iterative interpretation, emergent themes were refined into superordinate themes that reflected the shared structures of experience across participants (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The analytic trajectory moved from descriptive accounts toward hermeneutic interpretation, emphasizing how participants made sense of their experiences within broader professional and technological contexts. The outcome of this analysis was a set of interrelated thematic narratives representing the essence of journalists' experiences with digital credibility crises.

## RESULTS

### Navigating Algorithmic Pressures on News Credibility

Participants consistently described the algorithmic environment of digital newsrooms as both an enabler and a source of ethical strain. Journalists conveyed that metrics clicks, shares, and engagement rates had gradually replaced traditional editorial judgment in determining a story's worth. One journalist reflected:

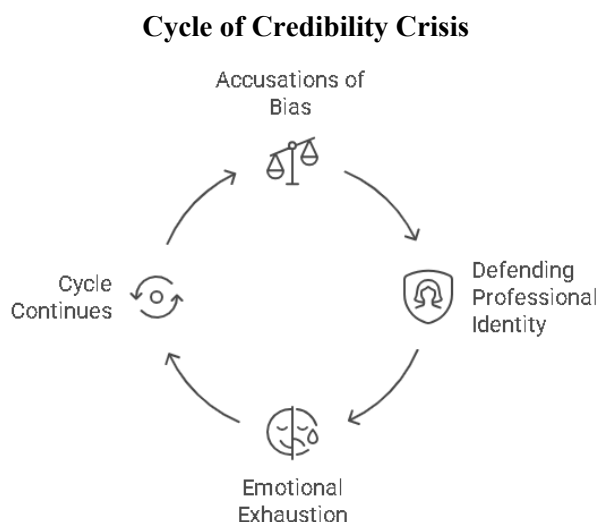
"It's not about what the public needs to know anymore, but what the algorithm wants to promote. Sometimes it feels like I'm negotiating with a machine rather than reporting for people."

This narrative encapsulates a broader experiential pattern: the moral tension between professional ideals and the invisible logic of algorithms. Many participants described this as a daily negotiation, balancing their ethical commitment to truth with the necessity of maintaining traffic and visibility in competitive online ecosystems. However, some journalists experienced this pressure differently: one younger reporter described it as "a creative challenge," seeing algorithms as a tool to experiment with formats, while a senior investigative journalist felt it as "an existential threat" to in-depth reporting, noting that long-form stories rarely survived the platform's logic. The phenomenological texture of their experiences revealed an internalized anxiety an awareness that credibility had become a commodity shaped by machine optimization rather than journalistic integrity.

### Ethical Dilemmas and Emotional Fatigue

Another recurring theme concerned the emotional and ethical exhaustion arising from persistent credibility crises. Journalists felt trapped in a cycle of defending their professional identity amid accusations of bias, misinformation, or "clickbait journalism."

"Even when you write the truth, someone online calls it fake. It's exhausting to keep proving you're credible every single day," one participant lamented.



This emotional dimension was not simply frustration but a deep existential dissonance a disconnection between journalists' self-understanding as ethical actors and their perception by the audience. Several participants revealed that they developed coping strategies, such as withdrawing from social media or anonymizing their online profiles, to protect their psychological well-being. These findings illustrate how credibility struggles manifest not only institutionally but affectively, shaping journalists' sense of self and belonging within the digital profession.

### **Adaptive Strategies for Maintaining Credibility**

Despite the structural and emotional challenges, participants demonstrated adaptive agency in negotiating digital credibility. Many embraced transparency practices showing sources, disclosing editorial processes, or engaging directly with readers through digital platforms to rebuild trust.

"I started explaining the 'why' behind my stories in the comment section. Surprisingly, people began to listen differently," shared one respondent.

These micro-level acts of accountability reflected a phenomenological reorientation toward authenticity. Rather than resisting digital transformation, journalists actively sought ways to reinterpret credibility within new communicative norms. However, they also expressed concern that constant self-explanation risked normalizing audience skepticism as an unavoidable part of journalism.

### **Redefining Professional Identity in a Platformized Newsroom**

Participants' narratives further revealed that the shift toward algorithm-driven journalism had reconfigured professional identity. The meaning of being a journalist was no longer tied solely to editorial autonomy but extended into the management of personal visibility and online engagement.

"Now, being a journalist means being half reporter, half influencer," stated one senior editor.

This redefinition signifies a broader ontological shift: journalists exist simultaneously as truth-tellers and digital performers. While some viewed this dual identity as empowering, allowing for greater connection with audiences, others perceived it as undermining traditional journalistic boundaries. Through hermeneutic interpretation, these experiences suggest that credibility has become performative a dynamic construct negotiated in public digital spaces rather than a stable professional attribute.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Summary of Key Findings**

The findings of this study reveal that journalists experience credibility in the digital era as a moral, emotional, and existential tension between ethical authenticity and algorithmic visibility. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, the study uncovered that maintaining credibility is not merely a procedural responsibility but a deeply personal negotiation an ongoing process of reconciling professional ideals with technological imperatives. These results directly address the central research question: How do journalists experience and make sense of credibility crises under algorithmic pressures and engagement-driven cultures?

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Questions**

The results contribute to a richer understanding of how journalists conceptualize credibility as a lived experience rather than an institutional condition (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). The findings demonstrate that journalists internalize credibility as a fragile construct constantly renegotiated through acts of transparency, reflexivity, and moral resilience. This interpretation provides a direct response to the core inquiry of the study by revealing that credibility, for journalists, exists in a dynamic balance between ethical intention and technological adaptation. Moreover, the study shows that journalists perceive themselves as both ethical actors and digital performers, navigating public scrutiny while striving to uphold professional integrity. This dual identity underscores a novel insight: the phenomenological essence of credibility lies not in its

procedural definition, but in the subjective act of “being credible” within algorithmic systems that commodify attention (Calil et al., 2025). Through this lens, the research advances theoretical discussions on journalistic autonomy and redefines credibility as a relational, lived, and adaptive process. Yet, these contributions must be interpreted alongside possible alternative readings: for example, it is plausible that journalists’ articulation of “moral resilience” reflects coping mechanisms shaped by institutional demands rather than purely personal meaning-making. The methodological reliance on self-reported lived experiences also raises the possibility that participants framed their narratives in idealized terms, consciously or unconsciously aligning with normative journalistic values.

### **Connection with Existing Literature and Theoretical Frameworks**

These findings align with and extend prior theoretical perspectives on digital journalism ethics and algorithmic accountability. Scholars such as (Djumanova, 2025) have emphasized the impact of algorithmic influence on editorial decision-making, but the present study deepens this discourse by articulating how journalists experience such pressures internally as moral unease and emotional labor. Similarly, Tandoc’s observations about the “click economy” resonate with participants’ reflections on engagement metrics as both validation and constraint. However, this study diverges from conventional institutional analyses by situating credibility within phenomenological consciousness, revealing that journalists actively reinterpret ethical norms through lived encounters with algorithms and audience interactions (Marino-Jiménez et al., 2025). The findings also enrich Hermida’s (2020) notion of “boundary work” by illustrating how these boundaries are not only socially constructed but existentially navigated in daily journalistic practice. Overall, the research bridges the gap between media ethics and human experience, reinforcing the idea that credibility is not only a normative standard but a lived moral condition continuously reshaped by the interplay of human intention and technological mediation.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The phenomenological insights from this study carry significant implications for both scholarly understanding and professional journalism practice. At a theoretical level, the findings illustrate that credibility in digital journalism functions as an experiential construct, one shaped by journalists’ moral awareness and emotional negotiation within algorithmic environments (Dourado et al., 2025). This interpretation challenges traditional epistemologies of journalism that treat credibility as a static or institutional attribute, instead situating it as a fluid, relational, and performative process grounded in human experience. Culturally, the results reveal how journalists navigate a moral economy of visibility where ethical intentions are mediated by technological systems and public expectations. Professionally, these insights highlight the necessity for news organizations to prioritize reflective and ethical support structures, including mentorship, dialogic newsroom practices, and mental health frameworks, to sustain credibility in digital spaces (Taha & Abdallah, 2025). Beyond journalism, the study contributes to broader discussions on human agency in technology-mediated professions, offering an understanding of how individuals maintain authenticity and ethical integrity amid systemic constraints.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the study provides rich interpretative depth, several limitations must be acknowledged (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). First, the research employed a purposive sample of twelve journalists, which, although sufficient for phenomenological inquiry, restricts the transferability of findings beyond similar professional and cultural contexts. The study’s focus on journalists from digitally active newsrooms also means that perspectives from smaller or non-commercial media environments may be underrepresented. Additionally, as with all interpretative phenomenological studies, the analysis is inherently shaped by the researcher’s interpretive framework, which, while reflective and rigorous, introduces subjectivity that may differ in other analytical lenses (Teruel Rodríguez et al., 2025). Finally, the fast-evolving nature of digital journalism suggests that these experiences are temporally situated; future technological developments could alter the moral and professional dynamics observed here. These limitations, rather than diminishing the study’s value, clarify the contextual boundaries of its findings and invite continued exploration.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

The findings of this study open several promising avenues for future inquiry. Further research could expand on the interplay between human ethics and algorithmic governance, exploring how journalists' moral reflections evolve as artificial intelligence and automation further shape editorial processes. Comparative studies across different cultural or political media systems could also illuminate how contextual values mediate experiences of credibility, broadening the phenomenological understanding beyond Western-centric journalism models (Domalewska, 2025). In addition, integrating phenomenology with other interpretive traditions such as narrative or hermeneutic discourse analysis may deepen insights into how professional identities are constructed and sustained in digital spaces. Future investigations might also examine institutional responses to journalists' lived ethical tensions, assessing how newsroom policies, leadership practices, and digital training programs influence experiential integrity (Carvalho et al., 2025). Collectively, these directions reinforce the potential of phenomenological research to not only capture experience but also transform ethical and cultural practices within contemporary journalism.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored how journalists experience and make sense of credibility crises within the digital news environment, emphasizing the moral, emotional, and professional dimensions of their lived realities. The findings revealed that credibility is not a static institutional norm but a dynamic, interpretative process negotiated daily between ethical intention and algorithmic demand. By applying an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study illuminated the subjective essence of credibility, exposing how journalists sustain integrity amid technological and audience-driven pressures. These insights extend prior scholarship by reframing credibility as a lived moral condition rather than a procedural standard, filling a critical gap left by quantitative and structural analyses. Practically, the study encourages digital news organizations to recognize the emotional and ethical labor of journalists, promoting reflective newsroom cultures that value authenticity over metrics. Based on these findings, newsrooms are advised to implement explicit credibility-supporting practices, such as structured ethical reflection sessions, improved editorial workflows that reduce algorithm-driven pressure, and internal guidelines that safeguard journalists' autonomy when negotiating digital metrics. News organizations should also develop training programs that strengthen emotional resilience and ethical decision-making, ensuring that journalists have institutional support when confronting credibility threats. At a policy level, media institutions are encouraged to revise newsroom governance frameworks to prioritize transparency, slow journalism principles, and accountability mechanisms that align technological use with ethical purpose. Future research may expand this inquiry by comparing cross-cultural experiences or examining how emerging AI-driven media ecosystems continue to reshape journalistic consciousness and ethical identity.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All aspects of the research, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation, were conducted independently of any personal or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict. The funding sponsor had no role in the study design, data interpretation, or manuscript preparation, ensuring the objectivity and integrity of the research outcomes.

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