

ONLINE NETWORK MANAGEMENT: EVERYWHERE, INSTANT YET LOOSE**Mehmet Lütfi Arslan, PhD**

Marmara University

Turkey

Introduction

With rapid changes in the information technology, the Internet has brought religious networks an unprecedented opportunity, creating an alternative for networking among their followers and share their discourse, beliefs and teachings from anywhere, instantly. As one of the leading Sufi orders in the Muslim world, particularly in the Central Asia, India, Afghanistan, Eastern China and the then lands of Ottoman Empire, *Naqshbandiyya* has always achieved to overcome the negative consequences and influences of modern world and their followers have preserved core beliefs and teachings of the order. Put it simply, it has achieved to do so every time by rearticulating its discourse with respect to different challenges. Yet, the very base of the order has always remained constant: a sheikh centered structure, which functions in-demand and disciples who are attached to the order either hierarchically or casually.

Realizing the benefits of this new medium, a handful branches *Naqshbandiyya* have quickly attempted to appear on-line, as has been in the case of its reaction towards other forms of modernization. The Naqshi branches, followed by disciples throughout the world, have seen the Internet a new opportunity for their networks not only for permanence but for expansion worldwide. However, that opportunity might possibly threaten its core beliefs by replacing the hierarchical structure of the order with a virtual one. Can the virtual relations created by the Internet loose the hierarchical relations of the order? Can the Internet disintegrate the core teachings of *Naqshbandiyya* and thus cause the deformation of its structure? Marking the opportunities and challenges created by the Internet at the same time, in this paper, I try to explore the meaning of *Naqshbandiyya* and the Internet marriage in terms of the order's core beliefs. I also explore to what extent it is possible to have a *Naqshi* discourse in the cyberspace, by examining the content of some on-line *Naqshbandiyya* sites.

In this context, this study is specifically concerned with exploring the implications of having an online site not for spreading distinct teachings of a particular Sufi way, with distinct teachings being understood in the sense of a process of keeping "real" relations and networking between *murshid* and *murids*, but for keeping existing weak ties or establishing new ones with those who are attached the order with loose relations. Focusing on web site of a *Naqshi* branch, *Haqqaniyya*, its thesis is that online *Naqshi* sites do not attempt to provide a realm where core relationship of the order, which is *murshid* and *murid* relation, occurs. Yet, they see the Internet as a supplementary factor in providing secondary relations or "weak ties" in a sense that they can open up new opportunities for "strong ties". The paper has three parts. The first part sets an argument in terms of strong and weak ties of social networks. The second section examines the *Naqshbandiyya* order, its history, core beliefs, and structure. This part is specifically concerned with which functions or practices remain unchanged and how they give *Naqshbandiyya* a transcended nature. In the last section, to get beyond theoretical generalizations, I analyze a *Naqshi* web site, www.naqshbandi.org.

1. Theorizing A Religious Discourse on the Net: Strong and Weak Ties of Networks

One of the most famous buzzwords of globalization process is network. Networks are the rising stars of new global order. Indeed, the concept of networks captures most, if not all, of the complex elements involved in globalization. It reflects not only fundamental changes on a variety of social levels but also re-define them. Its effects are so apparent that it constitutes "social morphology of societies", since dominant functions and processes are organized around networks. (Castells, 2000) However, networks, as social constructs, are not a new phenomenon. Academic studies on networks have been pursued on a range of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and economics. For instance, according to Social Network Analysis, all social organizations and structures can be seen as networks, having definitive elements, actors or nodes, links or ties, "whose relationships have a patterned structure." (From Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2001) What differs the global networks from the networks as social forms is rooted at the rapid development of information technology. The revolutionary changes brought by information technology generate a new concept of networks.

In this new concept, networks are nucleus of societies “where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks.” (Castells, 2001) So, the distinctive characteristics of global networks or networks that constitute “the social morphology” of the society is that they are defined and structured by information technologies. The proliferation of information technologies to such extent has nourished concerns about the social impact of the information technologies. The potential consequences of so-called virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993) or online communities have been debated.¹ The debates about the relationship between communities and computers can be grouped in two basic categories, one being utopian and second being dystopian views. While utopians have argued that the Internet will provide new and better ways of communication (Lévy, 1997), dystopians have claimed that the Internet will create personal alienation by taking people away from their communities. (From Wellman and others, 2001)

Although early studies focused on either utopian or dystopian views in terms of online communities, it has become apparent that the dichotomy of virtual vs. real is not realistic, even it is false. Actually, “many ties operate in both cyberspace and physical space, used whatever means of communication is convenient and appropriate at the moment.” (Wellman, 2001) Echoing Wellman, Rheingold mentions a new type of community, characterized by sort of mixture of online and offline interactions. (Rheingold, 2001) In another study, Wellman, Haase, Witte and Hampton show that online interactions support real interactions, by filling communication gaps between face to face meetings. The definitive characteristic of online social networks is that they mostly contain weak ties. Most importantly, the Internet may be more useful for maintaining existing ties than for creating new ones. Stating that the Internet use supplements network capital by extending real interactions, they conclude, “the effects of the Internet on social contact are supplementary, unlike the predictions of either the utopians or dystopians.” (From Wellman, Haase, Witte and Hampton, 2001).

In this context, two surveys by Pew Internet & American Life Project are worth-mentioning. The first study that surveyed 1,697 Internet users suggests that online communities can play a supportive role in the aftermath of September 11th tragedy. (Horrigan, 2001) Another study about what is called “Religion Surfers”, those who surf the Internet for religious purposes, also mark the same finding: “The Internet is a useful supplemental tool that enhances their (religion surfers) already-deep commitment to their beliefs and their churches, synagogues, or mosques.” (Larsen, 2001) The supportive role of the Internet is also emphasized by Castells. Referring Wellman and Gulia study, he maintains that online interactions might be both functional and supportive. In this regard, he uses the distinction between weak and strong ties. Here, it is useful to go in depth analysis of this distinction. Granovetter (1973) was the first to articulate the concept of strong and weak ties. According to his definition, the reciprocity, the frequency, the time and emotions invested in a relationship determines whether this relationship is strong or weak. Family and friendship relations are strong ties. They are frequent and developed over a long time. Weak ties are infrequent and exercised as needed. They provide dissemination of information or resources; therefore, the communication is more important in weak ties. Since the actors in the strong-tied-network know each other, they tend to use less communication.

According to Castells, “the Net is particularly suited to the development of multiple weak ties.” Because “they are useful in providing information and opening up new opportunities at a low cost.” So the advantage of the Internet is to allow forging of weak ties, “in an egalitarian pattern of interaction where social characteristics are less influential in framing, or even blocking, communication” (Castells, 2000, p. 388) In sum, the Internet is useful in establishing weak ties and keeping the existing ones rather than strong ties, which need more time, frequency, and more importantly face-to-face communication. Thus, having a web site is not to alternate real relations but to supplement them. The more and perhaps better is to allow an “egalitarian pattern of interaction” through which some discourses, beliefs and teachings could be voiced which would not been heard otherwise. In highlighting the *Naqshi* discourse on the Internet, this theoretical point tells much, but it begs to understand the definitive characteristics of *Naqshi* doctrine.

2. Muslim, Sufi, and Network

2.1. History and Key Figures

¹ Preece has defined online communities as "any group of people who communicate with each other via computers." Online communities must consist of people who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles, a shared purpose, policies, and computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness. (Preece, 2000)

Naqshbandiyya is one of the leading mystical Muslim brotherhoods (*tariqa*), found in India, China, and the Central Asian republics, the then Ottoman Empire, and Malaysia. Its history dates back to fourteenth century. It has been second in the extent of its diffusion only to the *Kadiriyya*. (Algar, 1999b) It claims a lineage extending back to *Abu Bakr*, the first caliph. It first arose among Persian-speakers and all its classical texts are written in the Persian language. (Algar, 1999) *Baha'al-Din Naqshband* (d. 1389), eponym of the order, lived in Bukhara, Khorasan. He was called “*an-naqshbandi*-the painter,” connected with his father’s job, the craft of embroidering. Yet, more common usage refers that the repetition of Allah’s prescribed ritual prayer (*dhikr*) leaves upon the heart an impression. *Baha'al-Din* holds the seventh position in a series of Central Asian sheiks of the order, which was inaugurated by *Abu Yusuf Hamadani*. (d. 1140) Soon after his birth (1318), he was adopted as the spiritual son of *Muhammad Sammasi*, the fifth sheik of the order. *Sammasi* assigned his son’s training to his predecessor, *Kulal* who taught him the essentials of the order. Yet *Baha'al-Din* spent several years in the company of other Tajik and Turk sheiks. He left behind no writings. (Algar, 1999)

Algar concerns why he became principal figure and the central link in the order instead of, for instance, *Ghujduwani*, who established the eight principles of the order. He further states that this happened despite the fact that three principles added by *Bah'a'l-Din* seem to reinforce the primacy of *Ghujduwani*.

Baha'al-Din's son-in-law, *Ala'al-Din Attar* became his successor. Yet, the order’s diffusion began during the period of *Ahmad Sirhindi* (d.1624), who played a vital role in the reformation of the orthodox Sunni Islam in India. *Sirhindi* was very influential against Akbar, the renowned Mughal emperor, who attempted to form a new syncretistic faith. Known as *Mujaddid-i Alf-i Sani* (reformer of the second millennium), a reference to the fact that he lived at the beginning of the second millennium of the Muslim calendar, *Sirhindi* expanded the order and gave a distinct ideology, a motive power and an effective organization. In refuting the *Ibn-i Arabi*’s position of *wahdat al-wujud* (the concept of divine existential unity of God and the creation), he instead advanced the notion of *wahdat ash-shuhud* (the concept of unity of vision). Of his several written works, the most famous is *Maktubat* (Letters)

In the 19th century, two *Naqshbandi* sheiks contributed the doctrine of the order. *Shakh Wali Allah* (d. 1762) played an important role in revitalizing the religious sciences. He developed a new scholasticism that aimed at a fresh interpretation of Islamic teachings in the light of the new problems of the age. (Nizami, 1999) Another prominent sheik of the order was *Mawlana Khalid* (d. 1827) who initiated a new sub-branch called *Khalidiyya* whose legacy still strong in both Turkey and Syria. (Ozdalga, 1999)

2.2. Doctrine

Naqshbandiyya is known its strict master (*murshid*) centered-structure, which is stronger than that of other Sufi orders. The training process of disciples is bound to their commitment to their master. This is so certain that master is regarded as spiritual father who is more important than biological one. A renowned illustration frequently used in *Naqshi* texts to stress this fact is that disciples are dead people in the hands of dead-washer (master).² The essentials of the order are the link of companionship (*suhbat* circles), instruction in the customs of the path, and the inculcation of remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*). (Algar, 1999b) *Dhikr* is practiced as “silent *dhikr*”, not as the so-called “vocal (loud) *dhikr*”³

The eight principles put by *Ghujduwani* and three more added by *Baha'al-Din* mark the spiritual conduct of disciples: *Yad Kard* (remembrance, or making mention of Allah); *Baz Gasht* (restraint or to help to keep one's thoughts from straying); *Nigah Dasht* (watchfulness over wandering, passing thoughts when repeating the blessed phrase); *Yad Dasht* (recollection, concentration upon the Divine Presence); *Hosh dar dam* (awareness while breathing); *Safar dar watan* (journeying in one's homeland, the movement from blameworthy to praiseworthy qualities); *Nazar bar qadam* (watching one's steps); *Khalwat dar anjuman* (solitude in a crowd); *Wuquf-e zamani* (awareness related to time); *Wuquf-e adadi* (awareness related to number); *Wuquf-e qalbi* (awareness related to the heart). (Trimingham, 1973)

² One of the most important *Naqshi* classical texts is *Adab* (Behaviors) written by one of the disciples of *Mawlana Khalid*. See Hani, Muhammed (1995), *Adab*, Erkam: Istanbul.

³ Although *Naqshis* are known by their preference of silent *dhikr*, *Naqshi* sheiks have practiced both forms. For a discussion of which form of *dhikr* *Naqshis* practiced, see Togan Isenbike (1999), “The *Khafi*, *Jahri* Controversy in Central Asia Revisited”, in Ozdalga Elisabeth (ed.) 1999, *Naqshbands in Western and Central Asia Change and Continuity*, Papers Read at a Conference Held at the Swedish Research Institute, Istanbul: Numune.

Nizami (1999) puts some of the differences of *Naqshbandi* mystic ideology from other orders as follows:

- “1. It developed a dynamic, active and assertive outlook as opposed to the quiet, unobtrusive and cosmic approach of the Shiites.
2. It closed the channels of ideological contact with other religions by rejecting *Ibn Arabi*'s thinking.
3. While other orders had propagated their teachings through utterances of sheiks, the *Naqshbandi* sheiks communicated their views through letters. That gives chance to study the *Naqshi* doctrine from the letters left by sheiks.
4. While the earlier Sufi masters had propounded the idea of spiritual territories assigned by the mystic master, the *Naqshis* propounded the concept in which a type of spiritual axis on whom the world depended for its functioning. This concept, instead of strengthening the order, honeycombed its structure and diffused its activities.”

Naqshbandiyya is known its strict adherence to the norms of Sunni propriety and on sober respect for the sharia. (Nizami 1999) Furthermore, its insistence on maintaining a presence within society is noteworthy.(Algar, 1976) Its closeness to the states or involvement in political issues are frequently emphasized. (Ortayli, 1999; Bottcher, 2000; Stenberg, 1999) Especially in the late Ottoman period, *Naqshi* sheiks were seen as the representatives of state policies in the area of *tariqas*. (Ortayli, 1999)

2.3. Structure

As an organization, *Naqshbandiyya* has established many networks, especially in three main regions of the Muslim world, the then Ottoman Empire, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. The order's teachings are reflected not only in its spiritual construction, but also in its involvement and influence in political and economic organizations. Though it is involved in worldly affairs, it has successfully preserved its core teachings, by overcoming the negative effects of modernization and secularization. This success in building and maintaining networks lies on the fact that *Naqshis* have had always formal and informal organizations at the same time. (Ozdalga, 1999) While formal organization or network in the form of traditional master-disciple relation provides its legitimacy as a religious institution, informal network provides a sort of room for flexibility, consisting of loosely associated groups to which *muhibs* (sympathizers) or prospective *murids* can attach themselves. In other words, “the relationship between a *sheikh* and his disciple is an example of a compelling, imperative kind of relationship, while the fact that there is a lack of strong restrictions against the setting up of new *tekkes* (*dervish lodges*) illustrates a looser kind of relationship between lodges.” (Ozdalga, 1999, Preface)

In terms of theoretical construction mentioned before, this type of relations is very much same of strong and weak ties of networks. While former emphasizes a direct, strict and individual relation between disciple and master, in the latter type, personal ties and commitments play a determining role. (Deoneux, 1993) Since the former relationship requires frequent exercises and it is developed over a long time, it can be called strong ties. Indeed, this is a voluntary relationship in which disciple is motivated willingly to continue his or her tie. Yet, the former is loose relation. They are infrequent and exercised as needed. So, the master or decision-makers of the master-centered structure mostly carry on the relation, choosing a means to transmit the messages of the order in order to keep the weak ties or transform them into strong ties.

If we take the *murshid* and *murid* relationship in terms of sender-receiver roles of conventional communication model, that would provide a heuristic model to clarify the strong vs. weak ties of *Naqshis*. In strong-tied-structure, the initiative and carrier of the ongoing communication process is the disciple (receiver), since he or she is voluntarily attached to the master (sender). Therefore, the communication needs of strong-tied-structure is demanded and hence initiated by the receiver. In weak-tied-structure, whereas, the initiative and carrier of the process is the master (sender), since it is required to keep the loosely attached participants (receiver) of the process. Therefore, from the lens of the *murshid*-centered structure, the communication is one-way process, directed to strengthen weak ties. In other words, the scope of communication in *Naqshi* discourse is to establish new weak ties and to keep the old ones. Hence, it is not to exaggerate to argue that the communicative process of *Naqshis* in terms of dissemination of information and core teachings of the order has nothing to do with the disciples who are attached with strong ties. So far, we have two concrete findings. The first is that the Internet has a supplementary function in keeping weak ties. The second is that determining the initiative of the process depends on the type of attachment. If strong ties are on the process, the initiative is disciple.

If weak ties are on the process, the initiative is the master. What is the possible outcome of these two findings in terms of *Naqshi* online sites? If the Internet is more useful to keep weak ties and if definitive characteristic of *Naqshi* communication started by master is to establish weak ties, then the answer must be clear: *Naqshi* web sites must be designed to make sure that new weak ties are established and existing ones are kept. In exploring the contents of web sites of two *Naqshi* branches, next section tries to verify that hypothesis.

3. Naqshis on the Internet

The information revolution has accelerated dissemination of information and messages throughout the globe including the Muslim World. That phenomenon has not only proliferated the media employed in that region, but re-shaped and re-defined the messages and discourses. (Anderson, 1999) As most capable of the communication networks throughout the history, the Internet immediately has become an alternative for Muslim networks to spread their messages. Inspired by the possibility of reaching all the rest of humanity, *ummah da'wat*⁴, Muslim networks have quickly reserved their places in the cyberspace. Their motivation was not only inspiration but also a threat that in this new jungle, the classical relations of the networks might be weakened.

Naqshis have had their sites, as well. Of these sites, *Haqqaniyya* is one prominent branches of the order. How did this branch perceive the Internet? Has been that an opportunity or a threat? How does it re-articulate its core teachings on the cyberspace? The following part tries to answer these questions, by exploring the online content of *Haqqaniyya* site.

Haqqaniyya branch of *Naqshbandiyya* is led by *Nazim al-Qubrusi al-Haqqani*, a Cypriot sheikh. The branch has sub-branches in US, UK, Germany, Lebanon and other Middle East and Far-East countries. Of the other orders, *Haqqaniyya* is significant with its global growth and impact and most importantly its disciples with very diverse backgrounds. For Bottcher (2000), this is because of three reasons: charisma of the sheikh, the structure of the orders and their capacity for absorbing diverse nationalities, ethnicities, and beliefs, and the message of the sheikh, which creates cohesion of the order.

Hisham Kabbani who is son-in-law of al-Qubrusi leads US branch of the order. The web site of the order is managed by US branch. According to it, “the mission of the *Naqshbandi-Haqqani* Sufi Order of America is to spread the Sufi teachings of the brotherhood of mankind and the Unity of belief in God that is present in all religions and spiritual paths.” The manifesto follows to introduce *Hisham Kabbani*, summarizing the position, and background of the sheikh. Although *Kabbani* is representative of *al-Qubrusi*, his method with use of media differs from the indirect method of the grand sheikh. Further, US branch attempts to construct “a Sufi religious enterprise”, launching a number of projects around several different organizations in public service, religious law, technology, Islamic business, and women issues. (Bottcher, 2000)

The web site of the *Haqqaniyya* mirrors the global picture of the *tariqah*. Yet, the presentation looks like that of a global educational foundation, whose aim is to promote brotherhood, peace and tolerance. Its Islamic and spiritual emphasis seems to attract non-Muslims and Muslims who are not affiliated to the order. The index page starts with following statement: “This site is dedicated to Shayk Nazim al Haqqani” accompanied with “*La ilaha ill Allah Muhammadur Rasul Allah*” (There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger). It has a top bar that reads following sections: Home, The Tariqa, Activities, Golden Chain, Practices, Teachings, Multimedia, Resources, and Donation. On the middle of the page, it is announced the program of the leader of the order in North America, Hisham Kabbani. The “*Naqshbandi* Sufi Way” has a number of sub-links about Islam and Sufi path.

In Sufi masters section, a bit exaggerated language describes the qualities of masters without giving any concrete detail: “The Sufi masters, those Beings of Light and Hope in every time and century, have sought to provide solace and respite, like oases for the thirsty souls seeking comfort and provision for the journey across the desert of this mundane existence. They are like wellsprings, bubbling forth cold, refreshing pure water to quench the eager thirst of the weary travelers on the way. They fulfilled their vows and their responsibilities before the One, accepting to carry the burden of human-ness.” Then an invitation follows: “Come and sit in association with some of these masters of wisdom and intellect.” Why to come and sit?

⁴ One of the definitive distinctions in the literature of Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) is the distinction of *ummah ijabah* vs. *ummah da'wat*. The former marks the Muslims who have accepted the message of Islam, the latter marks the rest, who are yet to accept the message.

Because, “they provide soul-soothing answers to the compelling queries of the seekers of love, happiness and peace.” In a Naqshi site, the language of love, happiness and peace must have not been directed to disciples who have already found what they have sought. Same stylish language continues in the life stories of Naqshi lineage from Prophet *Muhammad* to *al-Qubrusi*. Especially, in the life story of *al-Qubrusi*, the wonders reach its peak. This sort of description and exaggerated explanation seems to forge the centrality of master in the structure. One of the remarkable characteristics of the site can be found in “eshaykh” page. The very first page of that section has following sub-sections: Home, About Us, Ask a Question, Prayer Request, Dream Interpretation, and Advanced Search. This section has “relevant answers to issues of creed, law, society, family, and spirituality.” The section of About Us explains its mission: “eShaykh.com is a project of the Islamic Supreme Council of America (ISCA), a non-profit organization devoted to providing educating the public regarding Islam, Muslims, Islamic belief and law, and Islamic spirituality (tasawwuf).”

Most interesting part of the site is online initiation (*bay’ah*) section for joining the order. This part begins as following: “For those people who cannot reach one of our authorized representatives, the Shaykh has granted permission to take initiation by reciting the Baya` text along with this recording. Once you have done this, you must fill out the form with your detailed contact information in order before we can inform the Shaykh of your initiation over the Internet. Click on the hands to make Bay’ah (initiation) with Mawlana Shaykh Nazim, head of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order, by reciting along with Shaykh Hisham Kabbani.” Those who have taken initiation online are reminded to send mail messages to the order and renew their bay’ah when they meet the Sheikh in person.⁵ In general, though *Haqqaniyya* web site portraits a classical *Naqshbandiyya* order, it targets to the specific needs of an online community, a community that is attached to the order with weak ties. As a *Naqshi* characteristic, the site strongly emphasizes the prominence of sheik that we clearly see from the reminder online initiators to renew their bay’ah by meeting the Sheik in person. In this regard, the site is a medium that turns froms weak ties into strong ties.

Conclusion

The information revolution has opened a new arena to Muslim networks, providing opportunities to reach their members as well as non-Muslims. For *Naqshi* networks, however, the Internet has only become a tool to establish new channels or weak ties. Always achieved to transcend the negative consequences and influences of modern world by rearticulating its discourse with respect to different challenges, different branches of the order has deployed the new medium meaningful to traditional structure with strong and weak ties. This paper argued that the meaning of *Naqshbandiyya* and the Internet marriage in terms of the order’s core beliefs is to strengthen the weak ties of the order, weak ties being understood as casual, non-hierarchical and temporary relations of non-members of the order. It also argued that the possibility of *Naqshi* discourse in the cyberspace is confined to the borders of weak-tied-structure. In this type of structure, the master initiates and continues the communicative process to keep the existing casual relations or establish new ones. The process of keeping “real” relations and networking between *murshid* and *murids* are bound to disciples. In this regard, the Internet cannot be used to keep the strong relations of the order that are believed to require “real” or face-to-face communication.

In exploring the content of *Haqqani Naqshi* site, the findings and results of analyses seem to confirm the arguments mentioned above. The results are as follows:

- The site uses the Internet a supplementary function in keeping their weak ties or establishing new ones.
- The site attempts to communicate with their strong-tied-members in terms of their changing needs.
- The site reflects historically verified characteristics of *Naqshis*, interest and tendencies.
- The site stresses the importance of the master, which is meaningful to historical teachings of the order.

In sum, in the example of *Haqqani Naqshi* site, this religious order does not attempt to use the Internet for networking among their disciples attached to the order with strong ties that are understood in terms of *murid-murshid* relationship. Yet, the Internet has been an opportunity to strengthen the weak ties of their networks. Thus, the definitive characteristics of the *Naqshi* discourse on the Internet are not unique or new one. It is a repetition of an old story. Hence, online *Naqshi* sites cannot be seen new realms where core relationship of the order, *murshid* and *murid* relation, occurs. Instead, they might be used as a supplementary factor for opening up new opportunities in terms of legitimacy and new members.

⁵ Naqshbandi Haqqani Sufi Way, <http://www.naqshbandi.org/>, Accessed: 4th August 2009.

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