Ath-Thariq: Jurnal Dakwah dan Komunikasi
Vol.10, No. 01, January-June 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32332/w1zmm351

Negotiating Islamic Religious Authority in the Algorithmic Era: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Digital Da'wah

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Submission: 02-05-2026	Revised: 11-05-2026	Accepted: 27-06-2026	Published:30-06-2026

Abstract

The development of algorithm-based social media has changed the pattern of production, dissemination, and acceptance of Islamic da'wah. Religious authority, which previously relied heavily on scientific capacity, sanad, and institutional legitimacy, is now also influenced by content strategies, algorithmic visibility, engagement metrics, and digital audience responses. This study aims to analyze the development of digital da'wah and changes in Islamic religious authority, particularly in the relationship between platform algorithms, preacher strategies, audience participation, and religious legitimacy. The research uses a literature method with a qualitative-descriptive approach. Data were obtained from journal articles, academic books, proceedings, research reports, and relevant documents that were purposively selected based on the suitability of the theme, credibility, and novelty of the source. The data was analyzed through content analysis and thematic analysis by combining the perspectives of Islamic studies, da'wah communication, sociology of religion, and digital media studies. The results of the study show that religious authority in the digital space is complex, layered, and constantly negotiated. Authority is formed not only by religious competence and institutional recognition, but also by communication skills, adaptation to the character of the platform, level of visibility, and audience support. Algorithms act as intermediaries for the distribution of attention, while audiences play an active role in strengthening, assessing, or weakening the authority of the preacher. The study confirms that digital popularity does not always reflect religious credibility. Therefore, digital da'wah needs to be accompanied by transparency of sources, strengthening religious literacy, and critical skills in assessing Islamic content on social media.

Keywords: religious authority, digital da'wah, algorithms, social media, religious literacy.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has significantly changed the space, patterns, and relationships of Islamic da'wah. Da'wah, which previously took place more through mosques, Islamic boarding schools, taklim assemblies, television, radio, and face-to-face religious forums, is now present through YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, podcasts, conversation applications, and various other social media channels. Religious messages are not only packaged in the form of long lectures, but also in short videos, infographics, excerpts of verses and hadiths, live broadcasts, question-and-answer content, and narratives of personal experiences. These changes expand the reach of da'wah, accelerate the circulation of Islamic knowledge, and allow the public to obtain religious references from many actors outside of formal institutions.

In the Indonesian context, social media has developed into an important space for Islamic learning, the formation of Muslim identity, the strengthening of religious communities, and the production and distribution of various Islamic narratives. Solahudin and Fakhruroji explained that social media is not only a means of learning Islam, but also a productive space for the emergence of religious populism and the formation of religious practices that are in harmony with digital media culture (Solahudin and Fakhruroji, 2020). In other words, digital da'wah is not just a transfer of lecture activities from offline to online spaces, but a transformation of religious communication forms that involve visual culture, information speed, interactivity, and competition of attention among many da'wah actors.

These changes also affect the structure of Islamic religious authority. Traditionally, religious authority has been built through the mastery of Islamic sciences, scientific sanad, pesantren or college education, recognition of scholars, institutional positions, and involvement in religious communities. However, in the digital space, the legitimacy of a dai, ustadz, ulama, or Islamic institution is also increasingly influenced by the number of followers, the level of audience involvement, the frequency of uploads, visual quality, communication style, emotional closeness, and repeated appearances in the user's timeline. Campbell explains that the internet is opening up space for the emergence of new forms of religious authority because capacity of actors to build influence and trust in digital networks (Campbell, 2007).

The literature on digital da'wah in Indonesia shows that visuality and creativity have become important elements in the formation of religious influence. Nisa found that Instagram became a space for the development of visual da'wah that connected piety, the expression of young Muslim identity, aesthetics, and economic activity (Nisa, 2018). A similar thing can be seen in Hew's study of Felix Siauw, who explains that social media allows da'wah to be packaged through visual persuasion, graphic design, popular narratives, and communication strategies that suit the character of

DOI: https://doi.org/10.32332/w1zmm351

digital users (Hew Wai Weng, 2018). The findings show that the appeal of da'wah on social media is not only determined by religious content, but also by the way Islamic messages are constructed, visualized, and disseminated to audiences.

Moreover, digital da'wah does not necessarily erase the position of traditional religious authority. The literature shows a process of adaptation and hybridization between Islamic boarding school-based authorities, Islamic organizations, and ulama networks with the logic of social media communication. Rohmatulloh, As'ad, and Malayati studies on Gus Baha and Santri Gayeng's account say that traditional Islamic actors can maintain and expand their influence through the use of visual aesthetics, communication strategies, digital marketing, and the redissemination of lectures on social media (Rohmatulloh et al., 2022). Thus, the change of religious authority in the digital era cannot be understood as a total change from the old authority to the new authority, but rather as a negotiation process between scientific capital, institutional legitimacy, personal image, media strategy, and audience acceptance.

Previous studies have also said that the digital space can encourage the commodification of religion and a shift in the orientation of da'wah. Raya explained that digital media is a new space for Islamic preachers in Indonesia to produce, package, consume, and commercialize religious materials. In that case, popularity, personal branding, and content management can be intertwined with the claims of religious authority (Raya, 2025). This phenomenon shows that digital religious authority is not only related to competence in conveying Islamic teachings, but also to the ability of da'wah actors to manage public attention, maintain visibility, and build sustainable relationships with their followers.

However, the development of digital da'wah cannot be separated from the role of platform algorithms. Social media algorithms work through the process of sorting, ranking, personalizing, recommending, and distributing content. Through this mechanism, the algorithm helps determine what content appears more often, which actors gain wider reach, and what religious issues have the potential to go viral. Kitchin asserts that algorithms cannot be seen as a neutral technical device because they participate in shaping what becomes visible, relevant, measurable, and valuable in digital social life (Kitchin, 2017) In the context of da'wah, algorithms can affect the chances of a dai or Islamic institution to be present repeatedly in the user's homepage, search, and recommendations.

Bucher, through the concept of algorithmic imaginary, shows that social media users do not always know exactly how algorithms work, but they build understandings, conjectures, and strategies regarding how algorithms determine the visibility of content (Bucher, 2017). This condition is also experienced by preachers, da'wah account managers, and religious institutions who adapt their content to the character of the platform, for example through the use of short videos, catchy titles, popular hashtags, certain upload times, audio trends, collaborations, and invitations

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to comment or share content. Cotter called the process an attempt to play a "visibility game", which is a user's strategy to adapt to algorithmic logic in order to gain greater reach and influence (Cotter, 2019).

In a study that specifically addressed the relationship between algorithms and religious authority, Wahyudi, Hasan, and Fatwanto found that personalizing YouTube recommendations based on watch history can strengthen users' exposure to certain religious content. The findings also point to the possibility of a reduced diversity of information received by users as well as the emergence of opportunities for authority shifts to actors who are more adaptive to algorithmic visibility(Wahyudi et al., 2025). Meanwhile, Rosidi and colleagues showed that the da'wah audience does not only act as passive listeners, but can also be an active party that reproduces, disseminates, and expands the reach of da'wah messages through digital media (Rosidi et al., 2024). Audience participation through comments, reuploads, discussions, recommendations, and community formation is an important part of strengthening or weakening the legitimacy of a preacher.

However, a review of previous research shows that there are some limitations. First, studies of digital da'wah have placed a lot of emphasis on aspects of message visualization, communication styles, Muslim identity, dai popularity, or religious commodification, but have not profoundly linked them to the way algorithms determine the visibility and distribution of religious content. Second, studies of algorithms more often discuss personalization, content recommendations, filter bubbles, and information exposure, but have not always placed Islamic religious authority as the main issue. Third, a number of studies have discussed digital da'wah from the perspective of preachers or religious institutions, while the position of the audience as a party that receives, assesses, disseminates, verifies, criticizes, or rejects religious authority is still not widely analyzed in an integrated manner (Ahyar and Alfitri, 2019). Based on this, the research gap of this research lies in the limited study that integrally unites three main elements, namely: first, the change in Islamic religious authority in the study of Islamic studies and da'wah; second, the role of platform algorithms in determining the visibility and distribution of religious content; and third, the strategy of preachers and audience participation in building, negotiating, strengthening, or weakening religious legitimacy in the digital space. Previous research has made important contributions on visual da'wah, preacher popularity, authority contestation, religious commodification, algorithmic recommendations, and active audiences. However, there is still a need for a synthesis of literature that is able to explain the dynamic relationship between da'wah actors, the algorithmic structure of platforms, and audience participation in the negotiation process of Islamic religious authorities.

Therefore, a research entitled "Negotiation of Islamic Religious Authority in the Age of Algorithms: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Digital Da'wah" is important to

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provide a more comprehensive understanding of the changing patterns of Islamic authority in the era of social media. This study uses the perspectives of Islamic studies, da'wah communication, digital media studies, and algorithmic studies to analyze how religious authority is shaped not only by scholarly capacity and institutional legitimacy, but also by content strategies, platform recommendation systems, engagement metrics, and digital audience responses.

Based on this background description, this research focuses on the development of digital da'wah and changes in Islamic religious authority in the era of algorithm-based social media. This study also analyzes how previous literature maps the role of platform algorithms, preacher strategies, and audience participation in the negotiation process of Islamic religious authorities in the digital space. Through this focus, this study seeks to understand the relationship between the development of social media, the visibility of religious content, the legitimacy of preachers, and audience involvement in shaping contemporary Islamic authorities.

METHOD

This study uses a literature research method or library research with a qualitative-descriptive approach (Wahyudi, 2022). Research data were obtained from various written sources relevant to the themes of Islamic religious authority, digital da'wah, social media, platform algorithms, religious communication, and changes in Islamic knowledge consumption patterns. Primary data sources include scientific journal articles, academic books, proceedings, and research reports that discuss digital da'wah and the transformation of religious authority. Meanwhile, secondary data sources include institutional reports, media publications, digital platform policy documents, and survey results on social media user behavior. The selection of sources is carried out purposively by considering the relevance of the theme, the credibility of the publisher, the novelty of the publication, and the relevance of the source to the context of the Indonesian Muslim community.

The data collection process is carried out through searching, selection, classification, and recording of literature based on the focus of the research. The data was then analyzed using content analysis techniques and thematic analysis. The analysis stage includes concept identification, thematic grouping, comparison of arguments between sources, and interpretation of the relationship between algorithmic logic, digital popularity, religious credibility, and changes in Islamic da'wah patterns. This research uses an interdisciplinary perspective by combining communication studies, sociology of religion, digital media studies, and Islamic studies. The approach is used to explain how religious authority is negotiated, produced, disseminated, and perceived in a digital space influenced by algorithmic systems.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of searching, classification, and thematic analysis of various literatures, this study found that the development of digital da'wah has changed the structure of Islamic religious authority. The change is not just moving da'wah activities from the physical space to social media. Digital da'wah also forms a new mechanism in the production, dissemination, recognition, and assessment of religious authority. In the digital space, authority is not only determined by the depth of religious knowledge, educational background, scientific sanad, and recognition of religious institutions. Authorities are also influenced by the ability of preachers to manage the media, build communication with audiences, adjust the form of messages, and gain visibility through the platform's algorithmic system. The results of the literature synthesis show five main aspects in the negotiation of Islamic religious authorities in the age of algorithms. These aspects include changes in the source of legitimacy, the role of algorithms in determining visibility, adaptation of da'wah strategies, audience participation in the formation of authority, and the relationship between traditional religious authorities and digital authorities.

1. Changes in the Structure of Islamic Religious Authority

   In the conventional da'wah pattern, religious authority is generally formed through a long educational process. A scholar or preacher gains legitimacy through mastery of religious knowledge, scientific sanad, Islamic boarding school or college education, recognition of other scholars, and position in religious organizations. This pattern places institutions such as Islamic boarding schools, taklim councils, Islamic universities, Indonesian Ulema Councils, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Muhammadiyah as important parts in the formation of religious authorities.

   The presence of the internet and social media does not erase the pattern of authority. Digital media has created new spaces to expand, challenge, or renegotiate religious authority. Campbell explains that the internet provides a space for users to question, form, and distribute religious authority beyond established hierarchical structures (Campbell, 2007). Authority in the digital space has become more diffuse because users can choose sources of religious knowledge without having to rely on one particular institution or figure.

   Social media has become a productive space for the development of Islamic learning as well as religious populism. Preachers who aren't always connected to mainstream Islamic institutions can build influence through popular content and a large community of followers. However, this does not necessarily mean the loss of traditional authority. Religious institutions and leaders who are able to adapt digital communication methods can maintain and expand their influence (Solahudin and Fakhruroji, 2020). Thus, the changes that

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occurred are more accurately understood as a reconfiguration of authority rather than a total replacement of clerics and religious institutions.

The reconfiguration resulted in a hybrid form of authority. Preachers can use their religious education background as a basis for legitimacy, and then use social media to expand their reach. In contrast, religious content creators who lack strong institutional legitimacy can gain influence through communication skills, consistency of content production, proximity to audiences, and digital popularity. As a result, the scientific capacity and popularity of the media work simultaneously, but the two are not always in a balanced position.

2. Algorithms as Intermediaries for Da'wah Visibility

Social media does not display all content equally. The platform uses a recommendation system to organize, filter, and determine the content that appears on the user's page. The system works based on various signals, such as interaction history, relevance, watch duration, sharing activity, comments, and user interest patterns. In this case, the algorithm serves as an intermediary that influences who is seen, what messages are spread, and which content loses attention.

Bucher explains that as a form of algorithmic power associated with the threat of invisibility. Content creators try to adapt their activities to the platform's logic so that their content does not sink in the flow of information (Bucher, 2017). In the context of da'wah, this encourages preachers to pay attention to upload time, video duration, content opening, title choice, hashtag use, visual quality, and audience response. Algorithms do not determine religious truth, but they can determine how broad a religious interpretation is visible to the user.

Cotter explained the relationship between creators and algorithms through the concept of game visibility. Creators try to understand the platform's rules, even if they aren't always open and subject to change. Creators then develop strategies to gain attention, maintain interaction, and expand reach. However, the algorithm does not work alone. Visibility is formed through the relationship between the platform's system, creator actions, and user responses (Cotter, 2019).

In digital da'wah, it results in a difference between scientific legitimacy and digital visibility. A preacher can have strong religious competence, but the content is not widely seen because it does not fit the consumption patterns of users or the character of the platform. On the other hand, creators with limited religious abilities can gain a wide reach because they are able to present content in a concise, emotional, engaging, or controversial way. Therefore, digital popularity cannot be directly used as a measure of religious competence. The

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algorithm also encourages the formation of a strengthening cycle. Content that gets high engagement has the opportunity to get wider distribution. Wide distribution then results in additional interaction and increases the popularity of content creators. This cycle can create the impression that the character who appears most often is the most credible one. In fact, the frequency of occurrence indicates more the success of content distribution than the quality of religious argumentation.

3. Adaptation of Da'wah Strategy to Platform Logic

The results of the literature analysis show that digital preachers adjust the form of messages to the character of each platform. Da'wah in face-to-face lectures can be delivered at length, systematically, and accompanied by in-depth explanations. On the other hand, social media tends to prioritize messages that are fast, concise, easy to understand, and easy to share. The change in format affects the way religious knowledge is structured and consumed.

Nisa explained that Instagram is an important space for young Indonesian Muslims to spread the message of da'wah through pictures, quotes, brief captions, and narratives of self-change. Visual creativity allows da'wah creators to appear as motivators, informal religious educators, and influencers. Engaging content can also connect da'wah to economic activities, product promotion, and the formation of Muslim identity (Nisa, 2018). Fakhruroji also pointed out that the digitization of Islamic lectures through applications and digital media has changed the form of religious involvement. Users can access lectures without being bound by a specific place and time (Solahudin and Fakhruroji, 2020). Digital media expands access to Islamic knowledge, but also changes the relationship between preachers and audiences. Users can select, stop, repeat, cut, or share lectures based on personal needs.

Digital da'wah strategies generally use several forms of communication. First, preachers use everyday language so that the message feels close to the audience's experience. Second, preachers connect religious teachings with personal problems, such as social relationships, family, work, mental health, associations, and self-change. Third, the preacher uses stories, humor, questions, or emotional statements to maintain attention. Fourth, long material is broken down into short video pieces so that they are easy to consume and disseminate.

The adaptation expands the reach of da'wah, especially to young groups who actively use social media. However, adjustments to the platform's format also carry the risk of simplification. Issues of fiqh, creed, interpretation, and ethics that require context can be turned into a short answer without

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explanation of differences of opinion, legal basis, and limits of application. Snippets of the lecture can also be separated from their original context, giving rise to a different understanding of the speaker's intent.

4. Audience as a Shaping of Digital Authority

In conventional media, audiences are more often placed as recipients of messages. Social media changed that position. Audiences can like, comment, share, criticize, save, and reproduce da'wah content. These activities make the audience an active part in the formation of digital authority. Husein and Slama pointed out that social media has become an important space for the expression of piety of Indonesian Muslims. However, the practice of digital piety has also generated tension, criticism, and anxiety about the way religion is displayed in public spaces (Slama, 2018).[7] Audiences don't just receive messages. They assessed the style of preaching, the background of the preacher, the suitability of the view, and the closeness of the message to daily experience.

Positive comments, testimonials of self-change, the number of followers, and the frequency with which content is shared can serve as a form of social legitimacy. When a user states that a lecture has helped him or her migrate, solve problems, or understand religion, the statement reinforces the image of the preacher as a source of guidance. Legitimacy then comes not only from other institutions or scholars, but also from the experience and recognition of followers.

Conversely, the audience can also weaken authority. Misquotes, controversial statements, mismatches between messages and behaviors, or criticism from other scholars can spread quickly. Audiences can compare the content of the lecture, search for old recordings, conduct source checks, and disseminate responses. Digital authority is therefore more open, fluid, and flexible than authority that is entirely dependent on institutional structures.

Audience participation forms a reciprocal relationship between preachers and followers. Preachers observe themes that get a lot of responses, then produce similar content. The audience pays attention to the material that suits their needs, emotions, or views. The algorithm reads those interactions and again recommends similar content. This relationship forms a circle between the preacher, the audience, and the platform.

5. Negotiations between Traditional Authorities and Digital Authorities

The literature analyzed shows that the relationship between traditional authority and digital authority does not always take the form of direct conflict. There is a process of adaptation, competition, cooperation, and mutual utilization. Traditional religious leaders use social media to broadcast lectures,

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answer questions, upload fatwas, and build relationships with worshippers. At the same time, digital creators use quotes from clerics, institutions, books, or religious teachers to reinforce the legitimacy of their content. Ahyar and Alfitri show that religious activities on social media can develop into clickactivism and religious propaganda that form a new authority. In the case of Aksi Bela Islam, the distribution of digital messages helps build solidarity, common identity, and mass mobilization (Ahyar and Alfitri, 2019).[8] This shows that digital authority does not stop at content consumption, but can influence collective action in social and political spaces.

Lengauer explained that social media supports the formation of digital Islamic sociality. Users share shared pious motivations, religious experiences, and social support (Lengauer, 2018). These digital communities can give legitimacy to certain figures, movements, or interpretations. Authority is then built through network relationships, not just through one-way communication from preachers to worshippers.

Religious institutions that want to maintain their relevance need to develop a digital strategy without compromising scientific standards. This strategy can be carried out through the management of official accounts, the provision of easy-to-understand materials, the inclusion of sources, collaboration with creators, and the development of religious consulting services. The digital presence of the institution is not enough if it only moves long lectures to social media. Institutions need to understand the character of digital communication while maintaining the context and accuracy of the material.

The negotiations resulted in multiple authorities. A preacher can gain legitimacy from religious education, institutions, communication skills, community support, and algorithmic visibility simultaneously. None of these elements work absolutely. Digital authority is formed through combinations and interactions between factors.

6. A Negotiation Model of Religious Authority in the Age of Algorithms

Based on the synthesis of literature, the negotiation of Islamic religious authority in the digital space can be explained through the following four dimensions.

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Dimensions	Source of legitimacy	Form in digital da'wah	Key issues
Epistemic	Religious education, mastery of Islamic resources, sanad, and competence	Explanation of evidence, study of the book, fatwa, and religious arguments	Competencies are difficult to assess through short content
Institutional	Recognition of Islamic boarding schools, universities, organizations, and fatwa institutions	Official accounts, lectures by institutional figures, and consulting services	Institutions can lose out quickly to individual creators
Performative	Speaking ability, visual style, closeness, and consistency	Short videos, humor, personal stories, design, and popular language	Communication style can be more dominant than content
Algorithmic-participatory	Platform visibility and user response	Recommendations, number of impressions, comments, shares, and community	Popularity can be mistaken for a competency

The model shows that religious authority on social media is not only in the preacher. Authority is formed through the relationship between religious competence, institutional legitimacy, performative ability, recommendation systems, and audience participation. Algorithms are not the owners of religious authority, but become the infrastructure that regulates the distribution of attention.

These findings also show the importance of distinguishing epistemic authority and visibility authority. Epistemic authority is concerned with the ability to explain religion based on methods, sources, and science that can be accounted for. Visibility authority is related to the ability to gain attention on social media. A character can have both, either of them, or have neither. Mistakes in distinguishing between the two forms of authority can lead users to consider popularity as proof of truth.

7. Implications for the Development of Digital Da'wah

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The development of digital da'wah provides a great opportunity for expanding access to Islamic knowledge. The public can obtain religious materials through various formats and from various figures. Groups that previously had difficulty attending the recitation in person can access the lecture via smartphone. Social media also allows religious discussions to reach young groups with language and formats that suit their customs.

However, expanding access must be followed by religious literacy and digital literacy. Users need to check the background of the preacher, the source of the evidence, the context of the discussion, and the possibility of differences of opinion. The number of followers, verification marks, video quality, and content position on the recommendation page cannot be used as the sole measure of credibility.

Preachers and religious institutions also need to implement source transparency. Short content can be used as an introduction, while a full explanation can be provided through articles, lengthy studies, books, or reference links. These strategies can reduce context cutting and provide the audience with the opportunity to learn more about the material.

Thus, the negotiation of Islamic religious authority in the age of algorithms cannot be explained as a simple move from clerics to influencers or from religious institutions to social media. The change is a process involving clerics, preachers, content creators, religious institutions, audiences, and platform companies. Contemporary Islamic authority is formed through the confluence of religious knowledge, institutional recognition, communication skills, user participation, and algorithmic distribution.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, Islamic religious authorities in the algorithm era have changed from a pattern that originally relied on scientific competence and institutional legitimacy to a more complex and layered pattern. Religious authorities are now also influenced by the ability of preachers to manage content, build closeness with audiences, tailor messages to the platform's character, and gain visibility through algorithmic recommendation systems. However, digital popularity cannot be equated with religious credibility. The number of followers, impressions, comments, and engagement rates are more indicative of the power of content distribution than the quality of religious knowledge a preacher has.

The negotiation of religious authority in the digital space is formed through relationships between preachers, religious institutions, audiences, and social media platforms. The audience no longer only acts as the recipient of the message, but also participates in strengthening, assessing, criticizing, and even weakening the authority of the preacher through various forms of digital interaction. Therefore, the development of digital da'wah needs to be followed by strengthening digital literacy,

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religious literacy, source transparency, and critical ability to assess content. Religious institutions and preachers also need to use social media adaptively without reducing the accuracy, depth, and scientific responsibility in conveying Islamic teachings.

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