The Platformization of the Family

Sonia Livingstone ⓘ *and Julian Sefton-Green* ⓘ

Abstract This chapter sets the context for the whole book by describing the broad context of digital transformations focusing on digital platforms across many domains in contemporary life. Platforms are now a key type of societal infrastructure governing many social, institutional and interpersonal interactions. The chapter then introduces literature describing how platforms are increasingly understood in relationship to families. This is both in terms of the family as a social unit and how the family conducts its interior and exterior lives through or 'on' platforms. The chapter describes the theories and concepts that have been used to explain how families use platforms to 'compose' themselves and how families are addressed and identified as a social unit through and by digital platforms. Contemporary ideas of the family itself are of course in a change of flux and the chapter goes onto describe how the sociology of the family is reconceptualising what the family might mean in the context of radical social restructuring

S. Livingstone
Department of Media and Communications, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK
e-mail: S.Livingstone@lse.ac.uk

J. Sefton-Green (✉)
ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: julian.seftongreen@deakin.edu.au

and individualisation. The chapter ends by trying to conceptualise the relationship between families and platforms and how this relationship may be better understood by researching the *activities of platformizatio*n.

Keywords Platforms • Platformization • Family • Relationality • Domestication

On Platforms and Platformization

Increasingly, families conduct their internal and external relationships on and through digital platforms. What do we mean by this claim, and why might this matter? In this chapter, we map the range of scholarship that links platforms to family life. Some scholars, as we will see, regard the power of commercial, global platforms to be so great as to exploit, overwhelm or even 'delete' the family. Countering these dystopian voices, other scholars explore the creative and agentic ways in which families variously 'domesticate' platforms by appropriating them into their lives in ways that make sense to them. Doubtless the truth lies in between, hence the purpose of setting out a research agenda in this book. This agenda, we argue, must examine the digital dynamics both within the family (recognising that 'the family' is itself an increasingly distributed and diverse phenomenon) and between the family and the wider society, now that the state increasingly deploys digital platforms, often via public-private partnerships, to manage its provision of education, welfare, health and law enforcement.

In recent years there has been a spate of literature about the digital platform as a way of trying to embody in a single term a complex range of governance regimes, everyday processes, interlinked power networks and technological developments (e.g., van Dijck et al., 2018; Gillespie, 2010; Srnicek, 2016; Plantin et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Indeed, the idea of a platform has come to stand for so many aspects of 'the digital', it is not clear whether the specificity of the term remains useful, or whether it has become a catch all for everything digital. Key definitions of a platform over the last 10 years draw attention to four dimensions: the *technology,* especially programmability and capabilities for data extraction; *governance*, including management of and standards for trust, safety and security, privacy and rights; *powers*, relating to the uses or abuses of platforms for surveillance, control, misrecognition and prediction; and *economics*,

namely near-monopoly control of certain markets, relationship between private companies and the state, and the monetisation of data—especially the advertiser-driven exploitation of personal data for private profit. These dimensions are given different emphases by different scholars and tend to focus on the impact of the huge US-based commercial platforms, such as Google, Amazon, Uber, Facebook, Spotify, Microsoft, Apple, Netflix, Airbnb and others. While early platform studies focused on technology and its affordances (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), more recent work has drawn attention to the relations among monopoly control, regulatory interventions, and the consequences of datafication on individuals, culture, democracy, and society (e.g., Mejias & Couldry, 2024).

As platforms increasingly provide the very infrastructure for society, their ubiquity means we take them for granted, unable to imagine how we would function without them (Star, 1999). Just glance at your phone screen and think how many of the apps you could delete—the consequences are both personal and public. Plantin et al. (2018) argue that we are simultaneously witnessing the infrastructuralisation of platforms and the platformization of infrastructures (of welfare, education, health, finance and other state and community services): the implications for society are both deep and broad. For some scholarship, this invites critical analysis of the platformization of institutions—the news media, government, workplace, universities, the health service, school (e.g., Gandini et al., 2024). Indicative of our increasingly individualised society in the West, the implications of platformization are typically discussed in relation to individuals, whether imagined as highly diversified (each individual user is different) or as a homogenous mass (consumers, markets, users).

Instead, we argue for a need to capture the social lives and experiences of families—lived relationally, situated contextually, marked by particularities of gender, generation, class, ethnicity and culture. In this book we inquire both into the platformization of the internal relations within the family and of their external relations (with other families, communities, commerce and institutions). Notwithstanding the heightened visibility of technologically facilitated transformation, little has been said to date about the platformization of 'the family' by social science research. Many would claim that the family is the core unit of society, certainly the primary way in which individuals are interrelated through mutual connection and dependence. Without imposing any normative definition of what a family constitutes or the form it takes, this book asks how people themselves

conceive of their family, whether and how family life is now underpinned by platforms, and what issues or consequences arise.

What consequences can be anticipated? We live connected lives, founded on and through relationships of many kinds—interpersonal, local or community-based, embedded in culture, tradition, religion, class and more. These relationships have long been mediated by systems of transport, writing and print, telecommunications and, most recently, digital networks spanning the world—and examined by theories of mediatisation, now informing those of platformization (Fornäs, 2014). Such mediation vastly extends the possibilities of relationships and connections, bringing also unprecedented risks yet to be understood or mitigated. Mediatisation, Winfried Schulz (2004) argued, *extends* human capacities for communication through time and space, *substitutes* prior or direct social activities or experiences with mediated ones, *amalgamates* primary and secondary (or interpersonal and mass-mediated) activities, and *accommodates* social activities and institutions to the media logic. Does this analysis characterise and explain the extraordinary rise of platforms, and the pervasiveness of its effects on everyday life, including the family? The digital platform is clean, impersonal, standardised, even regimented and sets out defined contractual relationships among all parties—even if these are asymmetrical, opaque and unfair. The efficient interface, strong branding, recognisable logo, orderly placement on our phone screens—in these and other ways, platforms promise to fit helpfully into our lives, conforming to our preferences, solving our problems and making everything possible. Yet behind the logo sits a network extending far beyond our everyday oversight—typically, a large corporation driven by transactional and commercial imperatives largely invisible to its users, with a complex network of commercial partnerships stretching far into the global digital ecosystem.

ON FAMILIES AND THEIR RELATION TO PLATFORMS

Provocatively, Murray Goulden (2021) has suggested that, whether or not we could delete our favourite platforms, platforms are themselves 'deleting' the family by ignoring the diversity of families—and they (or the companies that produce them) do so precisely in order to provide techno-solutions to the very ruptures they introduce. For example, Goulden's analysis of the governance of smart home technologies such as Amazon's *Alexa* or Google *Home* showed that so-called family accounts and their associated mechanisms of control and exclusion can only really

function within the model of a traditional family. So, their very promise of supporting the family deletes the actual practices of contemporary diverse families and their hitherto taken-for-granted ways of 'doing family' (Kapella et al., 2022). How else might families' embrace of platforms be contributing to changes in family life? To what extent are these changes attributable to the business models, design affordances, or emerging social norms of the platformized society? Does it matter? And how could things be otherwise?

While platforms may be orderly, carefully designed and planned by big tech, families are intimate, diverse, messy, physical and organised around emotional and care needs. They are also structured in complicated ways that far exceed the normative model of the white suburban family with a couple of kids, encompassing non-nuclear, diasporic, non-heteronormative and mixed or blended family structures all variously running to the rhythms dictated by workplace, school, home maintenance and care needs. Ensuring sufficient income and allocating resources is nearly always a struggle, however affluent the family. Families are often marked by internal (generational, gendered) inequalities as well as by the more visible inequalities that divide and stratify them. In addition to being significant economic units, families have political significance on the national agenda and are also profound mechanisms for the reproduction or transformation of cultural values, norms and traditions. Meanwhile, everyday family life is also the site of interpersonal and emotional drama, again taking many forms, and—in this regard as in all others—increasingly deploying technologies in ways that support commonality or individuality or even mutual avoidance, facilitating sharing or conflict, expression and control, and allowing parents to bring up children for an uncertain, anxiety-provoking and challenging 'digital future' (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020).

In relation to family life, a strong tradition within socio-technical studies of the shaping and consequences of innovation for users is that of domestication research (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992; Silverstone, 2006)—the careful, ethnographic study of the everyday practices through which people appropriate, accommodate, resist or refashion media technologies, whether in mundane or surprising ways. Domestication research—at heart, the critical analysis of how 'wild' innovations are 'tamed' through their use in ways that transform both the technologies and their users—has long sought to decentre the technology and avoid technological determinism. So while technology is the focus of interest, the analysis of what shapes its significance is likely to look elsewhere: in the institutions, norms,

values and meanings enacted in everyday life. The tradition of domestication research is especially suited to the analysis of technology use within families, since the concept itself implies the home—the domestic or private sphere—where family life is concentrated. Neither domestication processes nor family life are limited to the home (Campbell et al., 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2013). Indeed, domestication research is inspired in large part by the diverse ways that uses of technology reshape the boundaries between work and leisure, public and private, institutional and personal, as part of a host of wider societal transformations. While domestication research recognises people living their lives in real world contexts (their concerns, practices, voices or understandings), research on the platform economy, platform capitalism or platform society is more abstractly concerned with the people themselves. Such research concentrates on just one side of the two-sided market: that which generates actual revenue, rather than on the people (whose diverse and contextualised lives are not to be reduced to 'consumers') who find the platforms of value to them, even as their attention is exploited.

In theorising platform *cultures*, Burgess and Baym (2022) emphasise that, in addition to an unequal power struggle between platform providers and users, platforms are also the locus for rich and emergent cultures of use. Recalling the classic move of cultural studies against the political economy of communication, they illustrate how platform cultures are shaped significantly by the collective agency of users in ways that, while not denying the datafication and monetisation that benefits platforms, also exceeds these processes. In the case of Twitter (now X), they argue, for instance, that innovations originally invented by users include the noun 'tweet' and verb 'to tweet', the @ and # features, the retweet function and the later extension of the tweet from 140 to 280 characters (Burgess & Baym, 2022, p. 33). Platform evolution is continual, and once formalised, users again play with and against the grain of these features, such that the platform culture shifts further (Sujon et al., 2018). In short, research on platform cultures recognises everyday practices of resistance—the micro acts of refusal, choice, tactics, complaints, protest, workarounds or withdrawal of trust, and the forms of agency, literacy, organisation and critique that underpin them. It thus distinguishes and recognises the partial autonomy of the two (or more) sides of the transactional market, also keeping open the possibility of mutual shaping (even if on unequal terms).

Within traditions of research on platform cultures, some researchers have been fascinated with how platforms allow dispersed families to

communicate through time and space (Madianou, 2016), thereby satisfying individual and shared needs through the affordances of new technologies. Some scholars are grappling with people's reliance on the very platforms that undermine them (e.g., migrants and refugees, LGBTQI+, journalists), even using platforms to organise solidarity and resistance (Gilbert, 2020). Others caution that we should also take care not to attribute all the problems to platforms, for these generally have deeper roots. As Hall et al. (2022) argue, the success of Uber stems from the crisis of work, the collapse of the unions and the need to plug a social care deficit due to the crisis in social services, as we discussed earlier. There are thus many questions for research concerning the emerging interdependencies and renegotiations of power and meaning as the space-time relations of family life shape and are reshaped by digital platforms. Before exploring these further, we need to consider and problematise the concept of family.

On the Changing Meanings of 'the Family'

How have historical, structural and contextual changes in the nature of 'the family' created the expectations and anxieties with which families now approach, appropriate, and are possibly exploited by today's platform society? In this book, we try to put the long history of families in late modernity first and foremost and approach the relatively short history of digital platforms through their eyes. We are interested especially in platforms as more than a technical product—and more in terms of platform cultures (Chen et al., 2024), as well as that of the mediation of family life. We ground our analysis in the shifts, tensions, and demands with which the family arrives at the age of platforms, ensuring we contextualise people's engagement with platforms *in an account of family life*, thereby avoiding techno-determinism and media centrism. We acknowledge, further, that platforms are *par excellence* global phenomena, while our account of the family in late modernity originates in Western Europe and is situated in the global North. Given that, we have sought to avoid and contest normative assumptions about 'the family', working hard to offer an inclusive account of diverse lived forms of family life as multigenerational and relational.

Specifically, we have been thinking about 'the family' through a relational lens. By relationality, we follow what Roseneil and Ketokivi (2016) have called the 'relational turn' in the sociology of the family. This refers to the internal and external interpersonal (and intrapersonal) dynamics

through which families are constituted. Analytically, we see families as ontologically relational, together with the contexts within which they are simultaneously embedded and which they co-construct. When it comes to family uses of digital technologies, this means looking beyond the idea of a household of individuals, each with their own device uses and preferences (which is widely researched), and beyond the generally well-researched focus on individual motivations, beliefs and activities to examine the variously collaborative or conflictual negotiation of relationships. In other words, we ask: what does it mean to consider families to be 'platformed' or 'platformized'?

In a recently published evidence review of families in the age of platforms (Erstad et al., 2024), we explored what has been described as an 'intra-actional approach' (Mauthner, 2021) or 'strong definition' of relationality (Twamley et al., 2021), which sees practices and subjectivities as negotiated between and within subjects, continuously dynamic and performative. For example, research details the co-construction of family intimacy through digital technology, with emotionality, everyday habits and intra- and intergenerational hierarchies being interwoven in the platform environment. While platforms increasingly provide a significant infrastructure for family connections, enabling distinctive platformized practices of intimacy, belonging and care, these intensified connections also give rise to power struggles over resources, knowledge and agency. After all, digitally mediated forms of interdependency and vulnerability can generate tensions or conflict and these, too, may be expressed through—even shaped by—the affordances of platforms (Taipale, 2019).

In such ways, family and kinship are understood as dynamic and constituted through relational practices (Finch & Mason, 2000) in which, increasingly, digital technologies play an influential part (Evans et al., 2019; Goulden, 2021). While families encompass diverse relationships, some of us are also exploring a multigenerational approach for its insights into how ideas and experiences of relationality change over time and the life course (Nilsen, 2021), including media and technological transformations (Bolin, 2017, 2023). Aroldi and Colombo (2020) assert that, "the era of platforms undoubtedly constitutes the ecosystem in which the next generations all over the world are forming" (p. 576). They unpack how 'generations' are now mediated, eschewing a media-centric account by recognising the reflexive and participatory co-creation practices of generations, as media and mediation catalyse and engage but do not determine these practices, shaping generational identities and structures of feeling.

This is to highlight both the reflexive and participatory co-creation practices of 'media generations' living through socio-technological transformations, including the potential consequences of platformization as a distinctive discontinuity in the media ecosystem (Aroldi & Colombo, 2020). So, we are also interested in kinship as a relational practice, noting further that, as Finch and Mason (2000) point out, kinship practices: "are made and remade over time as each of us works out our own relationships with others with whom we share ties of blood, legal contract or other commitment" (p. 167).

What can we learn from positioning the individual platform user as part of a growing (family) system that shapes how each family member (re) defines family by dynamically creating meaning through mundane mediated acts of communication and engagement? How far should we focus on platforms not only in relation to the internal dynamics of families but, also, the platformization of families' external relations with other societal institutions—work, education, welfare, law, state, politics, etc.—as families increasingly rely on platforms to organise care, education, or work? Or, even, how far should we seek to tie family relationality to the relationality inherent to platforms which, after all, have no value if they are uninhabited, but gain a double value as soon as they are used to link people to each other?

This interest in how families work—how, as it were, people *do* family—derives from our interest in family practices—the activities, interactions, routines as well as the reflections about what these practices mean. In the context of new research into the family, focus has moved away from concerns with the functional or structural role family might play in society (Parsons et al., 1956) towards what the family looks like from the inside as it were. David Morgan's (1996) work on how families construct themselves as a collective identity is built on empirical research capturing the everyday. This practice-centred approach is of course equally processual (Turner, 2013) and, in the context of this book, places significant attention on being able to describe and interpret practices as they are enacted. While this book might shed light on some of the broader sociological trends accounting for historical changes in the structure of the family, it is through attention to how a family constitutes themselves through events and practices, and how they make sense of such experiences through reflection, that we can see how a family comes into existence as a collective identity. David Morgan characterises these practices in terms of "life events", "life's regularities", and "normative life" (1996, p. 37–38).

Goulden further refers to an intersecting weave of "major life experiences", "the quotidian and the mundane", and how the "ideas the family attaches to itself and its activities define 'normal'" (Goulden, 2021, p. 13). Researching the practices of platformization simultaneously with the practices of doing family will enable scholars in this field to address claims made in both academic and public discussion about the effects of platforms and changes in family structure and family life.

It is worthwhile noting here that the key terms in our discussion are family and platforms even though the language of family, home and household are often used interchangeably. The term 'household' refers quite literally to the people living in the same place, so while this can correspond with a family, it is clearly not equivalent. Similarly, home refers on several levels (emotional, physical, normative) to a place where people live, though it can also be used for places of the imagination and belonging (Ahmed, 1999). While it may frequently correspond with 'family', it may also diverge sharply. Furthermore, the home should not be treated as a synonym for the family, which is a group of individuals strongly related by kinship, law and/or choice. The distinctions between these terms are important even if they are used interchangeably in everyday discourse.

Although many platforms can be accessed through mobile technologies, the home and household often occupy a determining role in the use of particular platforms and technologies. At an infrastructural level, it is likely that homes might arrange broadband access and there is a preponderance of contracts governing the use of platforms organised by family units. From technology companies' point of view, the meaning and nature of the family of course is not necessarily the same as those defined above and can relate more strictly to the occupants of a household. In other words, family, as perceived by a digital platform, is usually defined more as an economic unit. Homes, households and families are understood by many digital platforms in slightly different ways from, for example, the use of family subscriptions for streaming services to citizens on the electoral roll at any given address. Such practices are clearly not on the same level as the values and emotions that define many people's sense of family and it does not capture the ongoing accretion of networks and relationships and social interactions through which families continually bring themselves into being.

To some extent then this theory of family construction or self-making draws from historical perspectives first articulated in the 1990s by, amongst others, Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, who argued that the structural

functionalist analyses of family as fulfilling particular social and economic roles no longer made sense in an era of detraditionalisation (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). On one level the idea of family self-making derives from these theorists of late modernity who argue that individuals play a greater role in defining the meaning and value of constructs like family, in opposition to the idea of behaving according to the allotted roles mandated by social conventions. Equally, however, the idea of self-making derives as much from theoretical innovations in methodology from social psychology and other sociocultural disciplines which began to pay attention to the discourses of meaning making, as it does from the notion that social life is more dynamic and fluid, continuously being constructed by social actors in specific contexts and over time. These methodological innovations paid attention to different kinds of processes through which people were living their lives rather than solely concentrating on top-down models of how society worked. In other words, contemporary theories of the family that emphasise the sort of tripartite processes outlined by Morgan discussed above can be seen as deriving from a particular historical moment in academic theory.

This book invites researchers to investigate the validity of such claims in relation to the platformization of the family. In this chapter, we have suggested that research to date about platforms and families can be read from twin perspectives: exploring the mechanisms by which families constitute themselves at the same time as seeking to standardise and restrict how families are composed—in Goulden's terms (2021), as a form of deletion. Although, as the following chapters will describe, there isn't a great deal of research to date examining the day-to-day effect of platforms on families, it is possible to detect this double centripetal and centrifugal force. Platforms clearly play a role in the narrative of how families constitute themselves just as they can be seen to rewrite traditional ways of defining relations, enacting routines and contributing to changing norms about what the family is and what it does. Contemporary research in geography has theorised the idea of 'unbundling' services (Graham & Marvin, 2001). This approach examines a previously taken for granted set of practices—their example focuses on all the different services bundled together underneath a road (sewers, gas, electricity telecoms, etc.) and shows how neoliberal economic reforms conjoined with the taken for granted unitary phenomena can now be unbundled into a series of discrete processes. This way of thinking might be useful as we examine the interrelationship between platforms and families in that the family, which usually and

customarily has been thought of as a unit in social and analytical terms, has been unbundled by platformization. The rest of this book begins to take up this challenge, examining the kind of work a family does in terms of its distinctive practices of economic, social and caring work, to ask whether it is being 'unbundled' given what we now understand about how platforms divide, measure and standardise. Navigating the challenge of researching this unbundling is also explored in Chap. 5.

However, this approach to the family in terms of process—exploring relationality and everyday habits through which families compose themselves, their routines and interactions—along with our approach to how platforms are used and understood through use, requires a commitment to a mode of research that can capture the meanings and significance of these processes. It then needs to be able to analyse them in terms of contributing towards a discussion of the historical changes implied by such a research orientation. In broad terms, we have brought together scholarship from platform studies and the sociology of the family in terms of academic disciplines. Our attention to the processual in both fields is simultaneously theoretical and methodological: indeed, it is probably impossible to disentangle them. It is theoretical in the sense of relying on analyses that pay attention to processes of self-making, co-construction and relationality deriving from our understanding of historical change, especially the relationship of collective units to the individual. It is methodological in as much as we propose examining modes of process through which these new forms of self-making and individuation are taking place in practice, thus allowing us to see what the effects might be. The book is thus a provocation to new ways of thinking about families and platforms and how both sets of social concepts might be mutating and reforming as they interact with each other. It is also offered as a primer to support the difficult kinds of research which we argue are necessary to explore these claims and which to date has lagged behind rhetoric about the effects of digital transformation.

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARD

Thirty years ago, John Corner commented on the centrifugal forces by which television "project[s] its images, character types, catch-phrases and latest creations to the widest edges of the culture, permeating if not dominating the conduct of other cultural affairs" while, simultaneously, centripetal forces enable "the powerful capacity of television to draw towards

itself and incorporate (in the process, transforming) broader aspects of the culture" (1995, p. 5). Twenty years later, Stig Hjarvard observed the "double-sided development in which media emerge as semi-autonomous institutions in society at the same time as they become integrated into the very fabric of human interaction in various social institutions like politics, business, or family" (2012, p. 30). More recently still, José van Dijck et al. (2018) said of the digital platform, "it looks egalitarian yet is hierarchical; it is almost entirely corporate, but it appears to serve public value; it seems neutral and agnostic, but its architecture carries a particular set of ideological values; its effects appear local, while its scope and impact are global; it appears to replace 'top-down' 'big government' with 'bottom-up' 'customer empowerment', yet it is doing so by means of a highly centralised structure which remains opaque to its users" (p. 13). In this way, digital platforms continue a trend that has been evident in earlier media forms. But are there also differences? Platforms are distinctively profit-led, with public or social purposes subordinated to market imperatives, with global ambitions trumping national allegiances and are famously unresponsive to the concerns of either governments or individual users. Can they still be influenced by the collective efforts or concerns of families or communities? Can there be productive alignments of interests between business profit and individual concerns? Or are families today newly losing agency to socio-technical systems that dictate the conditions of their lives and obscure the very possibility of alternatives?

Scholars who have noted the rise of platforms in social, interpersonal, political and economic life are still trying to pin down their significance in contemporary social life. Does the platform society represent a new kind of economic order, as a new era of social control ushering in new kinds of polity and politics (e.g., Couldry & Mejias, 2018; Srnicek, 2016; Zuboff, 2019)? Recent moments of great political import such as the Arab Spring (Tufekci, 2017) or the effects of social media on recent post-2016 forms of political populism (Davies, 2018) are very focused on the platform as a paradigm shifting historical moment. Or do such questions and observations carry too much baggage from technologically determinist perspectives, underplaying both the political and business interests that dictate platform development and deployment and the everyday cultural processes that shape their use and consequences?

While both public and academic commentary on platforms is becoming increasingly dystopian, stimulating urgent calls for governments and regulators to regain control over national sovereignty and security, institutional

integrity, personal wellbeing and the public interest, it would be premature to conclude that the spaces for human agency and the organic generation of value and meaning have been entirely oppressed by the relentless capture of big tech. It is vital that we retain a dispassionate gaze, including attention to the people living through this societal transformation. Richard Butsch (2008) has insightfully traced anxieties about the supposedly lost agency of media audiences and users not merely over recent decades but also centuries past. Yet, as his and others' historical work also shows, human agency is a strong force, whether expressed in predictable or surprising ways, individually and collectively. No history of technology has been written without acknowledging the contribution of user practices, workarounds, inventiveness and resistance. It seems unlikely that the history of platforms will buck this trend. In this context, we approach the process of platformization to examine how the study of *uses in action* of digital technologies *may* shape the lives of contemporary families as much as how those actions may shape our understanding of the reach and power of the platforms themselves.

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