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AMBIENT AMPLIFICATION: ATTENTION HIJACKING AND SOCIAL MEDIA PROPAGANDA

Elena Pilipets
University of Siegen

Marloes Geboers
University of Amsterdam

Marcus Bösch
Universität Münster

Tom Divon
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Tomás Dodds
University of Amsterdam

Mark Boukes
University of Amsterdam

Eirliani Abdul Rahman
Georgetown University

Richard Rogers
University of Amsterdam

Nicola Righetti
University of Urbino

Marc Tuters
University of Amsterdam

Boris Noordenbos
University of Amsterdam

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Linda Bos
University of Amsterdam

Furkan Dabanıyastı
University of Amsterdam

Over the last decade, the rise of memetic media in combination with multimodal platform environments have radically transformed our experience of digital culture (Arkenbout and Galip 2024). On TikTok, gestures and sounds go viral. Twitter (X) @tags operate as bonding tools and ignite 'supercharged' critical publics. Coordinated link-sharing and attention-hijacking drive cross-platform engagement. Narratives promoted by state institutions become part of the global digital culture war. Networked content made up of heterogeneous elements sparks new forms of presencing, propaganda, and play, producing conflict-ridden communities of practice.

Methods attending to the platformed orchestrations of user engagement trace technical mediators, social practices, and cultural expressions, "with reference to their surrounding materials, and across their connections within broader digital ecologies" (Duguay and Block-Apel, 2023). While there has always been an affective component to digital objects such as hashtags (Papacharissi 2015), contemporary audiovisual platforms gradually integrate the full spectrum of memetic cultural production. The focus shifts from fleeting encounters with recommended content to ambient arrangements of linked sounds, networked text, clickable icons, and moving images (Parry 2023). Within these structures, hybrid cultures of amplification emerge, relying on both intensification and extension. As expressive modalities evolve, amplification not only animates momentary affective impulses but also manifests through repeated attempts at attention hijacking (Citton 2017).

In view of these transitions, internet scholars turn to the role of affect to describe the rhythms of online exchanges that are not reducible to singular constituents and can both diminish and increase the engaging potential of content- and data-informed connectivity (Hillis, Paasonen and Petit 2015; Boler and Davis 2020). Acts of participation that open up spaces of amplification escape any clear-cut demarcation. Propaganda campaigns animated through 'social bots' and 'real people' alike sidestep binary conceptions of authenticity and (coordinated) performance (Rogers and Niederer 2020; DiResta 2021). Allowing amplification to emerge from multiple discrepancies, the proliferation of filter bubbles easily fits into the crowd modulation project through the exhaustion of collective inclinations (Apprich et al. 2019). At the same time, seemingly straightforward contributions we like and share can be anything but (Phillips and Milner 2021).

Although a great variety of scholarly work is dedicated to polarised engagement, there is still a large gap in studying how different modes of amplification are made to work in more ambiguous contexts (Paasonen 2023). Moving away from the analysis of symptoms–as in the most visible content and events of peak intensity–this panel focuses on the ambient modes of amplification: Amplification, typically referring to the process of increasing or expanding, in platform experience design also involves modulating affective states (Ash 2012). Ambiance, as it emerges from user-platform

interactions, foregrounds the background of online environments, including the subtle flows of social organization driven by user attention and data.

Starting from the premise of plurality, five papers address five different aspects of ambient amplification: Paper 1 explores the role of 'thirst trap propaganda' in military image wars on TikTok. Paper 2 reflects on the role of gestures in targeted war propaganda placements, presenting a visual method of slow circulation for amplified TikTok content. Paper 3 analyzes hashtagging and @-tagging practices on X that undergird a polyvocal infrastructure exposing journalists to networked critique. Paper 4 looks into the spectrum of coordination in the service of attention hijacking, investigating what makes coordinated link-sharing on Facebook look 'authentic enough'. Paper 5 interrogates the weaponization of narratives of a global culture war by Russian embassies, uncovering geopolitical strategies of amplification.

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DANCING IN UNIFORM: THE ROLE OF THIRST TRAP PROPAGANDA IN MILITARY IMAGE WARS ON TIKTOK

Marcus Bösch
Universität Münster

Tom Divon,
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Introduction

The increasing mediatization of warfare online amplifies the struggle for public perception and control (Yarchi & Boxman-Shabtai 2023), turning platforms into militarized spaces for soldier engagement in social media trends (Kuntsman & Stein 2020). Following the Hamas terror attacks on October 7, 2023, there's been a significant increase in female Israeli soldiers sharing videos on their personal TikTok accounts, dancing in uniform, in what's commonly known as 'thirst trap' propaganda. A thirst trap refers to a photo or video shared online intended to attract sexual attention and 'trap' engagement (Boffone 2021) and has been utilized by militaries in the U.S., Israel, Spain, and North Korea (Walker 2023).

At first glance, online dancing might appear unrelated to propaganda strategies in contexts of conflict. However, at the intersection of popular networking activities like online dancing and wartime brutality, the gloss of digital daily life can minimize and trivialize the perception of violence (Kuntsman & Stein 2020). As a key element in thirst trap videos, choreography has a longstanding link to warfare, evident in military rituals, dances and drills (Deiana 2023), that can be traced back to ancient Greek weapon dances in Sparta (Saunders 1972). The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) historically employs dance, predating digital platforms, to repurpose symbols of violence into playful tools for hegemonic control (Melpignano 2023). This utilization of dance as 'soft power' in military contexts vernacularizes the state, fostering an 'everyman' appeal via social media rhetoric (Stein 2012), an understudied aspect during military interventions.

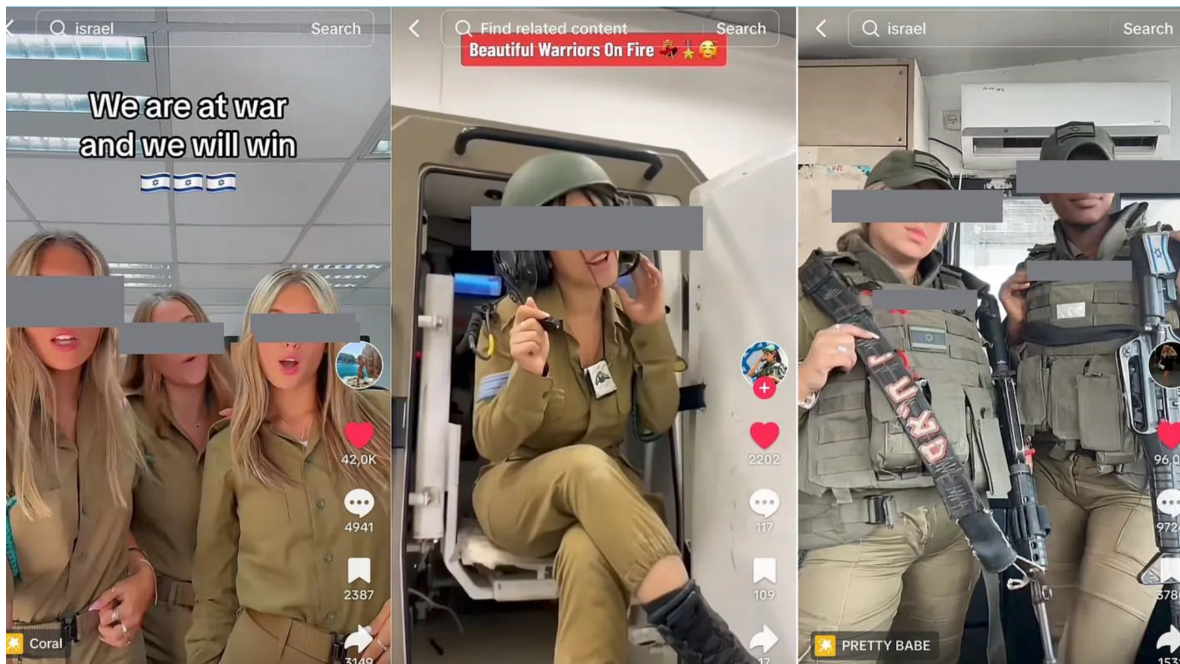

Figure 1. IDF soldiers dancing, lip-syncing and posing with weapons on their private accounts

Theoretical framework

Despite research on IDF's amateur dance aesthetics during conflict on YouTube and Instagram (Melpignano 2023), TikTok's exploration remains largely unexamined. This paper aims to bridge this gap, particularly considering TikTok's significance as leading global video-sharing platforms, boasting a billion unique users in 2021 (Silberling 2021). Moreover, TikTok's recognized role as a tool for mediation and precaution in recent conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine war (Primig et al. 2023; AUTHOR 1 & AUTHOR 2 accepted), highlights this work's relevance.

Recognizing that platforms possess unique socio-technological affordances for users (AUTHOR 2 & Colleague 2023; Bucher & Helmond 2018), our study explores the nuanced use of soft propaganda through thirst trap content by IDF women soldiers on TikTok. Transitioning from historical mass seduction techniques (O'Shaughnessy 2004) for shaping public views on military affairs, TikTok's thirst traps emerge as engaging multimodal narratives enhancing the military's positive image. This study explores how popular platform practices, such as dance routines, serve to humanize, downplay, and trivialize military violence, significantly influencing the construction and perception of public images.

Dance routines, commonly referred to as dance challenges in the platform's vernacular, are central to TikTok (Boffone 2021). This engagement fosters community belonging (Klug 2020) and facilitates the expression of personal opinions through audiovisual means, enhancing the interactivity of political communication compared to other platforms (Medina Serrano et al. 2020). Dance challenges on TikTok were embraced by Ukrainian military personnel following the Russian invasion, manifesting 'low-volume

disorder' of war-information flows (Wardle 2020) while garnering global attention (Neog 2022).

Against this backdrop, our paper seeks to conduct a distinctive analysis by exploring: (Q1) Which aesthetics, features, and trends on the platform do individual Israeli military creators utilize to implement thirst trap propaganda in the conflict with Hamas? (Q2) How effective is the thirst trap propaganda in achieving widespread reach and user engagement on TikTok? (Q3) Are there any indicators for the orchestration of thirst trap campaigns that can be traced back to official actors?

Method

To unpack the thirst trap propaganda in the Israel-Hamas War 2023, we first applied an exploratory user-centric approach based on the walkthrough method as the main data-gathering procedure (Light et al. 2018). From October 15 to November 15, 2023, we analyzed numerous war-related videos using hashtags like #IDF or #israel, discovering 25 distinct accounts featuring female IDF soldiers dancing in uniform, either alone or with others (see Figure1). We collected the account data of these accounts, including over 3,000 videos and their metadata, using a scraping tool.

We then adopted a purposive sampling technique to deliberately look for information-rich cases (Sandelowski 1995). Using multimodal content analysis (Zeng et al. 2021), we extract videos and frames to examine textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual elements. Our aim is to identify how specific dances are utilized in a memetic fashion as the main driver and design element of multimodal videos on TikTok.

Preliminary Findings

Our early observations highlight key strategies Israeli military creators use for thirst trap propaganda in wartime. A notable strategy involved *sound traps*. On TikTok, sound is a key segment of content creation, readily available for users to repurpose via the 'use this sound' feature. Creators leverage trending songs to boost virality, strategically integrating their content into popular audio meme streams for improved algorithmic visibility (Bhandari & Bimo 2022). This sound practice was found to enable semi-automated 'soft' Russian propaganda rapid dissemination (AUTHOR 1 & AUTHOR 2 accepted), demonstrating scalability in computational propaganda (Woolley & Howard 2019).

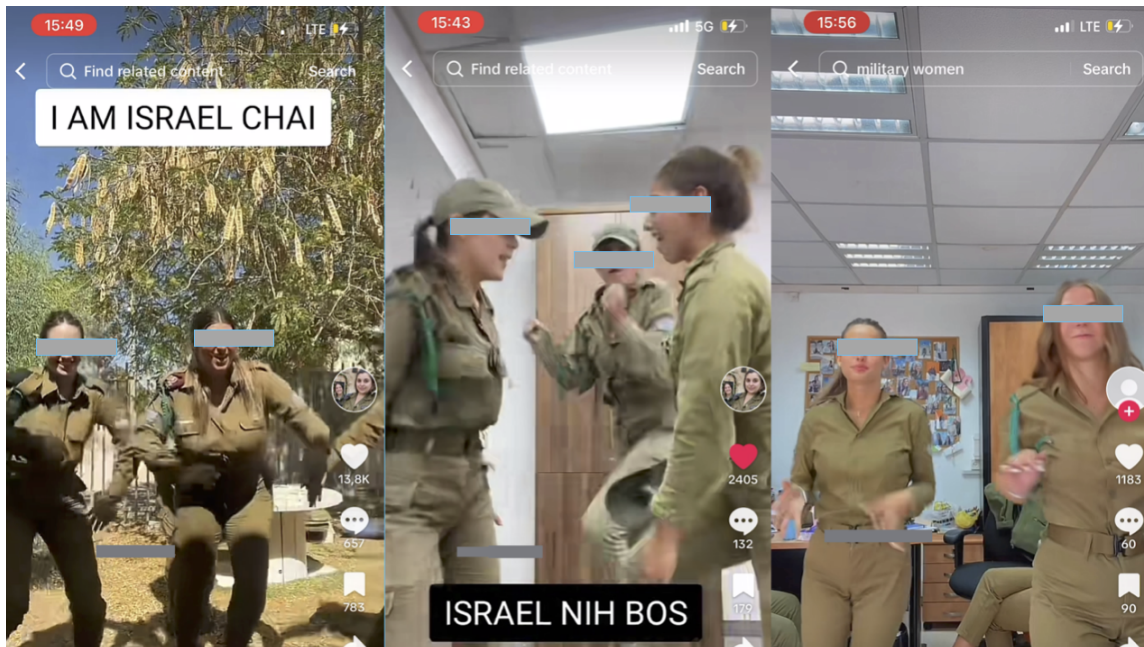

Figure 2. Coordinated dances trapping viewers' attention

Our findings indicate that Israeli soldiers have been utilizing popular sound streams to amplify the videos' reach, with dancing soldier videos scaling up to 11.5 million views. Israeli military content creators have adopted semi-automated tactics to trap viewers' attention (see Figure 2), repurposing successful platform sounds like Manu Chao's 'Me Gustav Tu' that has been used in over 1.5 million videos. The reuse of this sound semi-automates soldiers' video dissemination to wider audiences, providing users with the sound and choreography, thereby reducing the need for original content creation while leveraging algorithmic amplification through the platform's communal practice of content imitation (Zulli & Zulli 2022).

In addition, we identified elements of *orchestrated campaigns* in challenge traps. IDF women soldiers appeared in numerous videos, presenting themselves in sexual postures with ambiguous details like name variations (e.g., Liza, Lia, Lina), age, and occupation (e.g., nurse, teacher), combined with dancing movements and popular music. This recurring theme invited viewers with queries like, 'you want to become friends with me? DM.' Initial analysis suggests that young female soldiers augmented seductive propaganda, aiming to distract and create confusion (O'Shaughnessy 2004), while also humanizing military personnel by minimizing violence (Kuntsman & Stein 2020).

This challenge featured many women performing successful dance routines, romanticizing war-related symbols by incorporating assault rifles as dance props. The challenge's success is evident in *user comments*, primarily focused on complimenting soldiers' physical appearance rather than discussing the war. Hence, this challenge trap demonstrates IDF recruits' strategic gains in shaping images and narratives (Yarchi & Boxman-Shabtai 2023), emphasizing influence over public opinion via appealing, non-confrontational methods rather than hard power tactics.

Discussion

The transition from the mass media age to the platform era (Klinger et al. 2023), has profound impact on political communication. While propaganda has historically been a tool for shaping public opinion, the proliferation of digital communication, and online platforms in the 2010s has introduced novel opportunities for the rapid dissemination of propaganda on an unprecedented scale.

This tendency becomes particularly pronounced during times of conflict, as platform affordances shape strategies in information warfare, wherein techniques such as mass seduction through dance and thirst traps, considered forms of soft propaganda (Mattingly & Yao 2022), leverage platform vernacular to shape opinions through viral dissemination.

Our goal is to better understand subtle propaganda techniques applied by state actors to manipulate opinion in times of geostrategic crisis. By the time of the presentation, we aim to enhance contextualization and comparison for a deeper unpack of the thirst trap phenomenon. Our analysis encompasses the examination of dance, sound, and multimodal design elements, as well as the identification of orchestrated campaigns and the scrutiny of comment sections to assess its impact.

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SLOW CIRCULATION AND THE 'Z' GESTURE: NOTES ON STUDYING RUSSIAN PRO-WAR PROPAGANDA ON TIKTOK

Elena Pilipets
University of Siegen

Marloes Geboers
University of Amsterdam

In one of the videos posted in response to a trending TikTok dance challenge, a young woman performs a series of gestures. The performance is accompanied by a catchy tune, culminating as her hands shape the letter Z. In a similar video, another woman wearing sunglasses replicates the gesture when a sticker in Russian emerges, reading 'The gang sign of real women'. In yet another variation, the gesture repeats with an added video effect, flash-enlarging the final position of fingers decorated with long acrylic nails. The nails extend the gesture. The video caption proclaims, 'Russian Lives Matter'.

Z, however, is not a typical viral TikTok challenge (Zhao and Abidin 2023). A trusted identity marker for Putin's supporters that lingers on the pro-war side of TikTok, it reverberates itself into being by pretending that it has an audience of its own. Its normcore look, aiming to blend into the crowd of aspiring influencers, conveys the message that Z stands for the many. Film yourself Z-ing, add a song from the music library, put a sticker, and post. Not good enough? Apply a flashy effect and republish. The collective body of Z is a broken meme machine—too scripted to feel authentic, it feeds forward attention that clusters on already visible content. By incorporating popular multimodal elements (songs, hashtags, effects) in anticipation of new adaptations, Z templates serve as a means of targeted bonding. The logic is simple: trial, error, remix.

In our presentation, we deconstruct the meme machine behind the 'Z' gesture (Pilipets and Geboers 2024). Following Boler and Davis's (2021) notion of propaganda 'by other means', we make a case for examining Z in its role as a symbolic and affective vehicle. We propose that, within TikTok's participatory environments, Z simulates a community that thrives on the replication of the seemingly banal. Unlike the painted sign on the

military vehicles invading Ukraine, it primarily exists to distract from the plain terror of the Russian 'special military operation' (Holodomor Museum 2023).

Research Context and Questions

Opaque in its origins and (intended) meanings, Z (and V) symbolism have been visual 'vehicles' of symbolic power ever since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The markings on the board of military equipment were initially referred to by military parties as signs to avoid friendly fire, where Z would signal 'zapad' (westwards) and V would point out the east-bound infantry or 'vostok'. Z especially was quickly adopted and reappropriated in propaganda slogans, tethered to Russia's remembrance of World War II: first in the usual spelling, for example, 'за мир' or 'for peace' and then with the replacement of the Cyrillic 'з' in hashtags with the Latin 'z'—#zамир. In the process of mainstreaming, it has taken the colors of the Saint George ribbon, visually conflating past and present and framing the war in Ukraine as part of a continuous 'Russian' fight against Nazism (Kovalev et al. 2022).

On social media, Z is a multimodal performance (Han and Zappavigna 2024). The utilization of Z imagery, hashtags, and hand gestures have become integral to pro-Russian war propaganda, thriving on TikTok where imitation publics (Zulli and Zulli 2022) and the principles of replication and remix play a significant role. While Z circulation hinges on chance encounters rather than on mass appropriation, the memetic traits of videos associated with the gesture remain remarkably consistent. Attuned to existing platform trends, Z strategically positions itself amidst 'currently happening' content, gesturing toward 'a shared state of mind'.

Vilem Flusser, writing in 1991, describes the capacity of gestures to capture 'states of mind' by releasing affects from their contexts and allowing them to become formal. Affective states express themselves via a play of gesticulations. Conversely, gestures act out affects, asserting themselves through repetition. Both dynamics occur at the same time, manifesting in a 'state of mind' for those who can relate. Affect becomes artificial–as in someone rolling their eyes–and the gesture becomes a mediator of collective belonging.

Ultimately, any action performed in public on repeat captures attention. It fuels the gesture with an affective overspill of sorts—much like animated GIFs utilize facial and bodily expressions (Miltner and Highfield 2017; Ash 2015), gestures on TikTok provide a playful medium for articulating sentiments, warnings, and instructions. Gesturing Z hands, as per McLuhan's old dictum, then not only 'massage the message' into the masses (McLuhan and Fiore 1976) but also seek to 'blend in' across a range of unrelated content formations. If embodied movement is the main means of memetic war propaganda on TikTok, then the following questions arise: How does the body become a meme? What does it take to understand Z in its networked choreography? And how can we study propaganda through gestures, while avoiding further amplification?

Methods

As speed and imitation on TikTok breathe life into memes, the methods in our work foreground analytical techniques of video blurring and 'slow' circulation (Bradshaw 2018). Analyzing a selection of cross-hashtagged and sound-linked Z performances, we reflect on the embodied aspect of propaganda through a technique of visual and contextual fabrication (Markham 2012), which allows scholars to study embodied patterns in networked video collections as de-identified composite forms (Figure 1). Embedded in a TikTok post, an embodied performance can be modified and enhanced through overlays of sounds, effects, and stickers (Hautea et al. 2021). These layers constitute the material with which the act of video sharing, including cutting, annotating, sound-linking, etc., is engaged. Much like a flame that comes into contact with oxygen (Phillips 2018), TikTok circulation through multimodal digital elements distributes videos across contexts, increasing the gesture's memetic potential.

Figure 1: Z gesture in a de-identified formation of propaganda videos networked through the same hashtag and sound (a fragment).

Our method deconstructs networked video performances into layers of distinct frames – still images that capture every second of the gesture as it unfolds. It then re-stacks the frames in a new order, retaining the temporality of the movement. The resulting visual device morphs and transforms the gesture, akin to TikTok video effects, but with a difference: it freezes the movement and breaks its momentum. In other words, it throws the gesture out of gear, muting the strategically networked elements involved.

Findings

The video performances in question have not achieved viral status, but they still exist as numerous content formations within the broader tapestry of TikTok trends (Richards 2022). Search for a song trending in March 2022 and you most likely will find a Z video right next to an unrelated dance challenge. Designed for imitation, Z performances are ripe with viral ambitions. At the same time, their actual impact has remained limited partly because of their lack of authenticity and partly due to the emergence of the 'splinternet'—as of March 7, 2022, non-Russian IP addresses could no longer be accessed from Russia.

The participatory means of propaganda are in place, along with an attempt to target emotions rather than reason. However, Z videos decorated with many likes and linked through hashtags and sounds amount to nothing more than a series of coordinated attempts at propaganda placement. A sense of national pride woven into these performances is a mere reference to an imagined collective–a 'crowd' of like-minded others (Dean 2021) that only exists as a projection.

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JOURNALISTS ‘ATTAGGED’: THE @-TAG AS BONDING TOOL FOR ‘SUPERCHARGED CRITICAL PUBLICS’

Marloes Geboers
University of Amsterdam

Tomás Dodds
University of Amsterdam

Mark Boukes
University of Amsterdam

Eirliani Abdul Rahman
Georgetown University

Introduction

Violence against the press has been at the center of academic interest for the last couple of years. Recent studies showed that social platforms’ attention-based economy and subsequent use design would spur mistrust and attacks against media workers (Henrichsen and Shelton 2023; Lewis et al. 2021). Twitter (or ‘X’), especially, seems to facilitate a discursive climate that is divisive and polarized (Shepherd et al. 2015). The platform’s logic constitutes a ‘turbulent space’ where online attacks have become rife to the point where some news organizations pulled out altogether (Waisbord 2020). The infrastructural affordances of platform ecologies connect ‘legit critique’ to more violent content. We analyzed hashtagging- and @-tagging practices on X that undergird a polyvocal infrastructure exposing journalists to networked critique. Unlike Facebook, Twitter does not allow the effective “untagging” of oneself from other people’s tweets, resulting in a material addressability (Honeycutt and Herring 2009) that allows anyone to “link up” to anyone else by mentioning their Twitter handle. This function facilitates and amplifies harassment (Phillips 2018), which is known to have heavier effects on users whose social identity is defined by intersectional markers of gender, race, or sexual identity/orientation (Miller & Lewis 2022).

Our research exemplifies how hash- and @-tagging not only channels violent language but is also complicit in the perpetuation of more 'subtle' and ambient modes of (Siapera, 2019) undermining journalistic authority. In our case study, both the hashtag and the @-tag are used to signal belonging to a community of 'supercharged critical thinkers'. Boyd (as cited in Phillips and Milner 2021: 163) describes 'supercharged critical thinking' as emerging from the ambivalent paradox underlying much of online interactivity: "Remaining sceptical of capitalist motives [...] makes for good, informed citizenship [..] Too much cynicism turns establishment journalism into the enemy of the people." Our study revolves around Partygate (December 2021), a political scandal where journalists were turned into protagonists in a story about festive meetings held at Downing Street 10 during lockdown restrictions. By @-tagging specific journalists, several members of the British press were 'pulled into' the scandal. This was most notably the case for political editor of the BBC Laura Kuenssberg.

Repurposing the linkages between hashtagged and @-tagged tweets led us to about 1510 replies at Kuenssberg's address asking the same question: *'Were you at the party Laura?.* This evolved into a meme channelling a 'repetitive drum' where users organized themselves around. While seemingly benign, and as a standalone piece of content not derogatory, the sheer repetition amplifies a form of harassment that escapes moderation. Moreover, these 'innocent' tweets are connected to a wider discursive environment that hosts more extreme content. The 'memed question tweets' are part of reply-threads that boast vitriol and misogyny, and some tweets pull in hashtags and images, that connect the 'mere bullies' to a network of anti-press and conspiratorial actors.

Studying hashtagging and the '@-tagging' of journalists as a networked practice of critiquing the 'mainstream press' foregrounds the participatory practice of identity-formation (Bozzi 2020). In the ritualistic sphere of social media, value sits in "sharing, association, fellowship, and possession of a common faith among audiences" (Cover 2023: 33). The content of a text is secondary to the bonding value that it entails (Dean 2021). Seen in this way, the question implying Kuenssberg was at the parties, serves as a bonding tool for supercharged critical publics. The threshold to engage is lowered when a critical mass seems to be willing to propagate a message of critique.

Methods and preliminary findings

Platform-embedded methods of connection and the communicative architecture they construct hold analytical value for the study of amplification strategies. Platforms' socio-technical functionalities are geared to exploit a "synchronous convergence in affective responding across individuals toward a specific event, (subject) or object" (Zheng et al. 2020). Such convergence can be established with the help of various tools, the most renowned in the context of visibility being the tag. Introduced in the mid-2000s by bookmarking site del.icio.us, tags allowed users to share links and label them individually through the use of textual keywords that made them easily searchable and accessible (Bozzi 2020: 72). Bozzi recognizes how tagging is a performative gesture that, "often without appearing as an act of categorisation, formats identity so that it can be searchable and networkable (ibid: 73)."

We bring to the fore the ways in which tagging features as a platform-embedded practice of amplification. The @-tag establishes a communicative connection in the shape of a 'reply or a response to', while at the same time enhancing reach significantly, especially when tagging entangles content with accounts that have a high 'reach potential'. We gathered the @-tagged replies to prominent UK journalists between November 25 and December 26, 2021 and mapped the temporalities of hashtags to get a sense of the overall discourse and pertinence of hashtags that connect tweets to allegations of bias and partiality. Most notable were the hashtags that emerged from replies to Laura Kuenssberg. From a close reading of the 118k replies at her address, we found the memetic question already mentioned, (N=1510 tweets).

Alongside this, we mapped the persistence of users engaging multiple times in this mimetic behaviour, further exemplifying how repetition is an intentional technique for the prolongation of critique. From there we decided to zoom out by way of interpreting a hashtag co-occurrence network derived from the wider dataset of Kuenssberg's @-tag-collected tweets. This shows how the memed question is connected to a broader environment that not only hosts 'just' critique, but also vitriolic content. The intersections between the memed question and hashtags displays the entanglement of 'the bully meme' with straightforward harassing hashtags such as #scummedia (N=105) and #torylaura (N=13).

Figure 1: Tweets @-tagging Laura Kuenssberg. To the left the question is charged with critique by the image, to the right this materializes in #TheLies. The latter also connects the question to wider discourses of public distrust

Discussion: guilt by association

When journalists get tagged, entanglements emerge with other layers of expression and other digital objects, such as news items about Partygate that as stand-alone items do not evidence nor imply Kuenssberg being involved in the parties at Downing Street 10, but that through assembly (Parry 2023) contribute to a ritualistic display of guilt by association. The rhetorical question (and variations thereof) recontextualizes and weaponizes headlines so as to bolster shared suspicion (Brandtzaeg and Lüders 2018).

The ‘memeing’ of ‘Laura, were you at the party?’ found a wider audience through the hypertextual affordances of the hashtag and the @-tag. Users sharing anti-press sentiments can latch onto a crowd that exerts affective allure through its simulation of being with many, expressed through engagement metrics. The seemingly ‘innocent inner-grin-tweets’ are part of a wider discursive network that connects to more vile content, the likes of which we are not going to outline in this paper. The logic of repetition but also the @-tag thus inherently fuels seemingly benign bullying of journalists, and breathes oxygen (Phillips 2018) into downright toxic stuff.

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COORDINATED INAUTHENTIC AND AUTHENTIC BEHAVIOURS ONLINE: A TYPOLOGY OF ATTENTION HIJACKING

Richard Rogers
University of Amsterdam

Nicola Righetti
University of Urbino

This paper advances the contemporary discourse on coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) by extending its study beyond explicit instances of disinformation, looking into the spectrum of coordination in the service of attention hijacking. Thus, on top of an analysis of inauthentic coordination, we examine coordination behaviours more generally. Using techniques first developed for CIB analysis, we do so through an empirical analysis of the many signature forms of amplification as acts of coordination.

Coordinated behaviour can be undertaken by both covert and less covert actors with varying objectives, ranging from mimicking organic engagement and support for content (Chan 2022) to distributing content across social media pages through multi-actor broadcasting and re-posting, for example. In this paper, we present an analysis of a diverse array of coordination forms, highlighting the analytical ambiguity of approaches that measure inauthenticity through the use of platform research affordances such as (timed) link-sharing and reposting.

Coordinated inauthentic behaviour campaigns on social media are driven by actors (and perhaps bots) pushing the same or related content in synchrony and causing it to gain virality, or some threshold of interactions and impressions to indicate a degree of popularity. The primary purpose is ambient. It is to ‘flood the space’, thereby exerting or appearing to exert a large measure of influence. The broader aim, for state and other political actors, could well be to develop a full-fledged counter-program to accrue symbolic power and assert political dominance (McIntyre 2018).

Research into coordinated inauthentic behaviour has demonstrated its operational as

well as geographical breadth but also its platform dependence and orientation toward single platform studies (Thiele et al. 2023). It has been tied to corona-politics (Magelinski & Carley 2020), election misinformation (Nizzoli et al. 2021), protest repression in authoritarian regimes (Kulichkina et al. 2023), and cryptocurrency manipulation (Terenzi 2023). It is far-flung geographically but rather platform-specific in its targeting. Research has described coordinated networks on social media in Australia (Graham et al., 2021), Nigeria (Giglietto et al. 2022), South Korea (Keller et al., 2020), Philippine (Yu 2022), Brazil and France (Gruzd et al. 2022). Most of these studies focus on Twitter or Facebook solely. The study of cross-platform coordination is relatively seldom, though there are exceptions (DiResta et al. 2018; Howard et al. 2018).

The algorithmic architecture of each of these platforms suggests coordination efforts around certain digital objects. For example, coordination on Twitter typically aims to push a hashtag into the trending topics, occasionally with 'weaponised bots' (Graham et al. 2021). On Facebook, website URLs are typically placed in posts on Pages and Groups, where the idea is to elicit emotive reactions, long comment threads and further sharing, which is the platform formula for algorithmic amplification (Merrill & Oremus 2021). The Facebook Feed is thereby persuaded to elevate these shared links now charged with emotive currency.

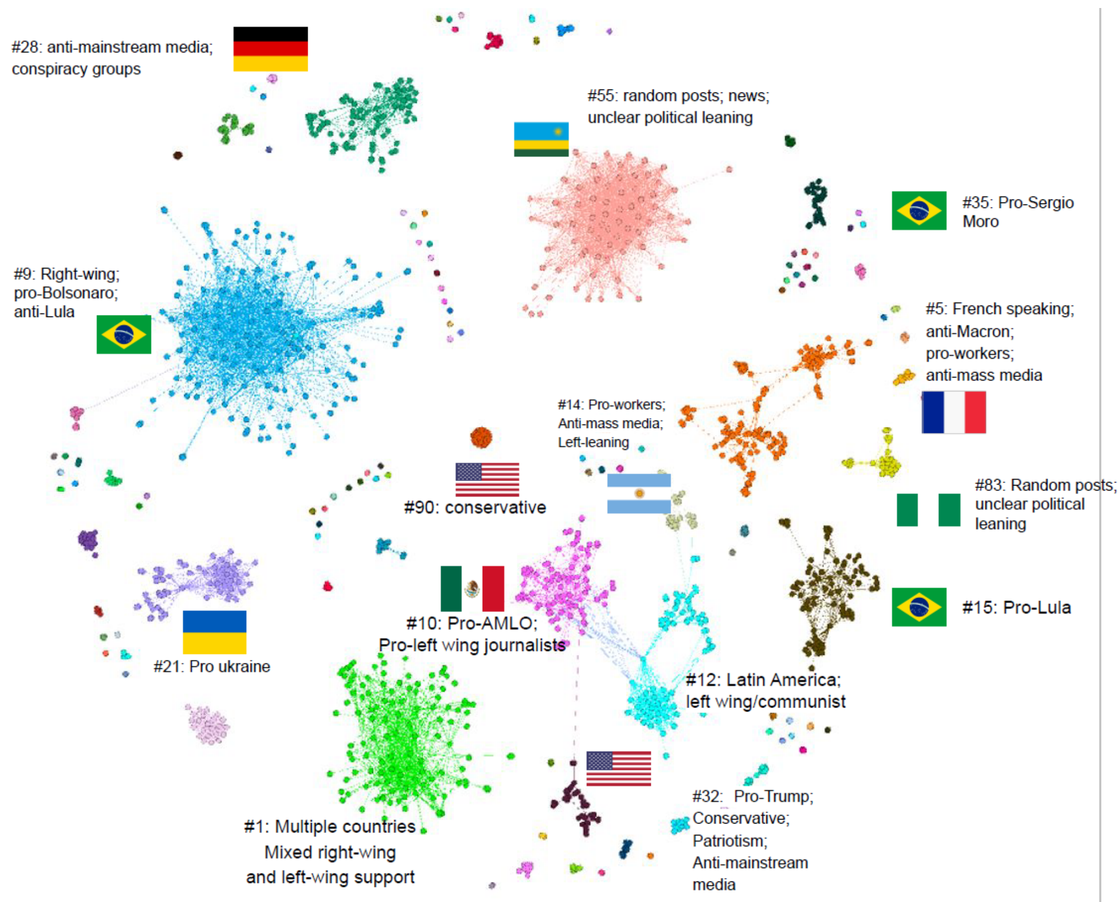

Figure 1. Coordinated link-sharing networks detected from the CooRnet technique. Source: Giglietto et al. 2023b

Most of these examples are taken from coordinated behaviour that is termed ‘inauthentic’. While misinformation and social media manipulation are often practised within coordinated networks, there are other types that may appear similar, at least when studying their traces. Political parties, political supporters and popular publications also coordinate (Righetti et al. 2022), as do religious organisations that aim to proselytise (Giglietto et al. 2023a).
This paper develops a typology of the varying purposes behind coordinated behaviour online. On the basis of empirical analyses of posts on Facebook, where the term coordinated inauthentic behaviour originates (Meta 2018), it identifies coordination through a variety of means including activist networking, viral marketing, fan support, influencer following, analytics-driven publishing and others. For each of these types, there are questions concerning the line to draw between the manufacture of attention and its organic growth. How to distinguish between what one could call authentic and inauthentic coordination?

Especially for coordinated efforts on Facebook that seed social media posts with content from websites, URLs play a significant role in the study of online information ecologies and (alternative) infrastructures (De Mayer 2013; Rogers 2017; Rogers 2023). Our approach, developed through methods built into software applications, concentrates on coordinated activities on a social media platform, where URLs are shared. In an approach termed ‘platform perspectivism’ (Rogers, 2024), we deploy the study of a single platform to understand coordination across social media and the web. We also employ digital investigation techniques to distinguish between URLs that may be verified through source provenance and those which are masked.

The methods developed to identify coordination rely on network analysis together with content and temporal signals, and many studies have employed the CooRnet software to surface coordinated link-sharing behaviour in a variety of countries and contexts (Giglietto et al. 2020) (see Figure 1). The software identifies Facebook accounts that repeatedly share the same URLs within a certain time frame, typically ranging from a few seconds to minutes. The foundational principle is that although a cluster of accounts may coincidentally share identical content, their recurrent sharing suggests an organised intent. When such coordinated detection tools are applied, these surface accounts that are engaged in influence campaigns, such as state actors, front groups and other actors masking their identities. They also surface other forms of coordination for a variety of purposes.

Drawing on an empirical study of coordination behaviours sourced on Facebook with the software tool, we identify examples of the purposes (both more and less authentic) and develop a typology of in/authentic coordination. We would like to know whether the current techniques of ambient immersion (and zone flooding) are similar across coordination types. How similar are those behaviours typically flagged as ‘inauthentic’ compared to the authentic, asking the question of what makes coordination ‘authentic enough’ (Lindquist 2021). We discuss the implications for the study of especially coordinated inauthentic behaviours when many may employ the same strategies as the seemingly authentic.

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GLOBAL DIGITAL CULTURE WAR: HOW THE KREMLIN WEAPONIZES DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

Marc Tuters
University of Amsterdam

Boris Noordenbos
University of Amsterdam

Linda Bos
University of Amsterdam

Furkan Dabanıyastı
University of Amsterdam

Introduction: global digital culture war

Following the Kremlin's illegal full-scale ground invasion of the Ukraine, national governments, international corporations and media organisations have made Russia a pariah, preventing their sophisticated state-sponsored media from reaching audiences in most parts of the Western world. Notably absent from these unprecedented banning efforts have been the social media accounts of Russian embassies, which are often considered to be official diplomatic channels, and thus enjoy special status either due to national laws or diplomatic norms. These channels – as our earlier research revealed – have been used to disseminate online misinformation about the war in Ukraine (Author 1 2022; Author 1 & Author 2 2024). Since then, there have been reports on coordinated efforts among Russian embassies to increase pro-Kremlin messaging in Latin America (US Dept of State 2023), in the Balkans (Euractiv 2023), in Slovakia (Hajdari 2023) and in Canada (Major 2023), amongst others. However, to our knowledge, no systematic research has hitherto been conducted into the Kremlin's messaging strategy for their network of embassies across their globe and across platforms. This paper is intended to

address this gap. One outcome of the research would be to inform discussion of whether platforms should take a more active role in moderating Russian embassy posts going forward.

As established in the growing body of literature on digital diplomacy, embassies no longer merely project their presence via social media platforms, but are increasingly involved processes of observation, listening, and digital data gathering, or what Marcus Holmes refers to as "retrieval" (Holmes in Bjola & Manor 2024, epub). Adopting its communication strategies on the basis of received “feedback” (e.g. comments, reposts, likes), digital diplomacy goes beyond the long-established linear sender-receiver model of communication — a process that the authors have referred to as “ambient” in a related study on how pro-Kremlin propaganda on TikTok (Author 1 & Author 2, submitted).

The current research project, which is in progress, aims to generate a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which Russian embassies’ social media accounts are weaponized for the promotion of a global political communication strategy that presents Russia – in a particular light. It analyzes narratives promoted by Russian embassies across the world from their various social media platforms (including X/Twitter, Facebook, often Telegram, VKontake, Instagram and YouTube) over specific time windows during the 2020s. Apart from the typical communications of an embassy, – acknowledgements of national holidays, the promotion of tourism, etc. – our preliminary analysis of these channels reveals a consistent pattern: Russian embassies present a multi-faceted narrative that portrays the Kremlin as standing up to "the collective West". Moreover, this narrative appears to specifically target national and cross-national communities in the Global South.

While governments in Europe, North America, and Oceania have almost uniformly condemned Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine, the consensus has been less definite in the Global South. A map of the countries that have either abstained, were absent, or voted against UN resolution ES-11/4 condemning Russia aggression in the Ukraine (see Figure 1), suggests that attitudes have at least been ambiguous for diplomats representing over half of the world's population. This situation cannot be attributed solely to the geopolitical interests and energy dependencies of individual countries.

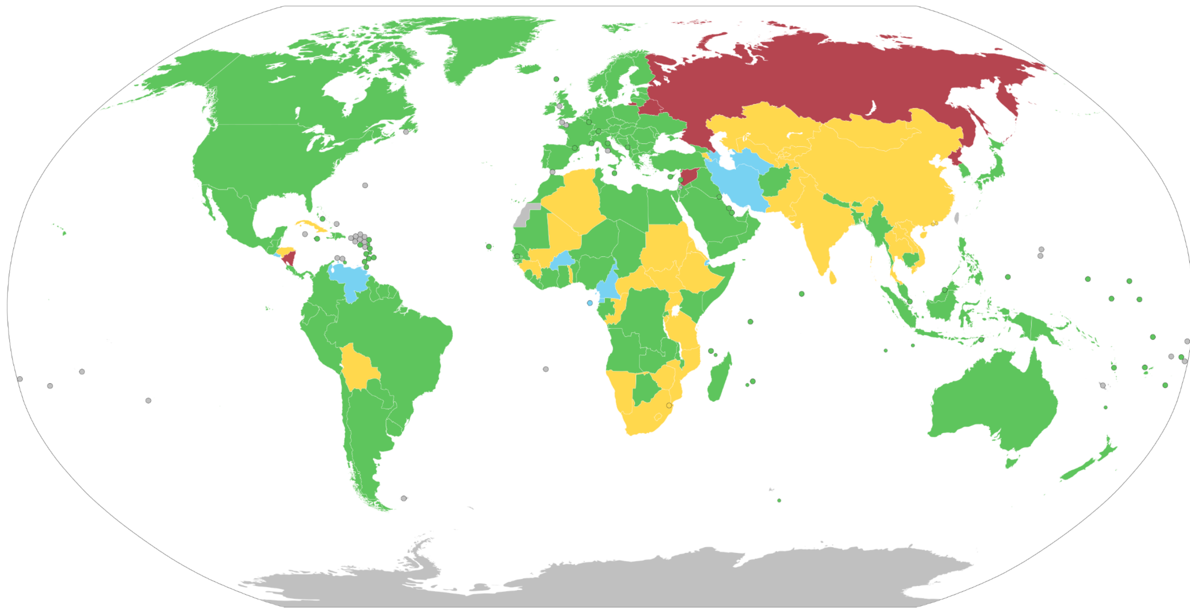

Figure 1. A map votes on UN resolution ES-11/4 (red = against, yellow = abstain, blue = absent). by KajenCAT , CC BY-SA 4.0

The paper posits that there is a pronounced "cultural" dimension to the conflict that Russia is actively seeking to promote through its official social media channels. We refer to this aspect of Russia's propaganda strategy —that seems to be tailored specifically to (post-colonial) communities in the Global South— as the "Global Digital Culture War." The term "culture war" initially gained currency in 1990's in discussions of how "polarisation" and "realignment" had transformed US politics and culture (Hartman 2016). Perceiving liberals and progressives as having gained control of the cultural institutions that shape people's values —from brands to education— conservative and far-right politicians have increasingly made culture war central to their digital political communications strategies, through the weaponization of "hot button" issues such as "transgender bathrooms", a strategy that has been called "metapolitics 2.0" (Maly 2024).

Hypothesis: the weaponization of digital diplomacy

The paper hypothesizes that the Kremlin is using the social media accounts of its worldwide network of embassies to weaponize digital diplomacy by presenting itself as an opponent of the liberal West's imperial ambitions and as a defender of "traditional" values. Compelling initial evidence of this hypothesis can be found in a Tweet from the Russian Embassy in Canada which superimposes the 'no symbol' over an LGBTQI+ flag with the caption: "It is all about the family. Family is a man and a woman and children." For a Russian Embassy, this tweet received an exceptionally high degree of retweets (n=17k), which when filtering by location show a relatively clear pattern of engagement in nations of the Global South, from Nairobi to Riyadh (see Figure 2 below). While this tweet has nothing to do with the war in Ukraine, through the lens of culture war (as well as Holmes' retrieval theory of digital diplomacy), it can be read as part of an indirect strategy to win over the Global South (cf Tocci 2023).

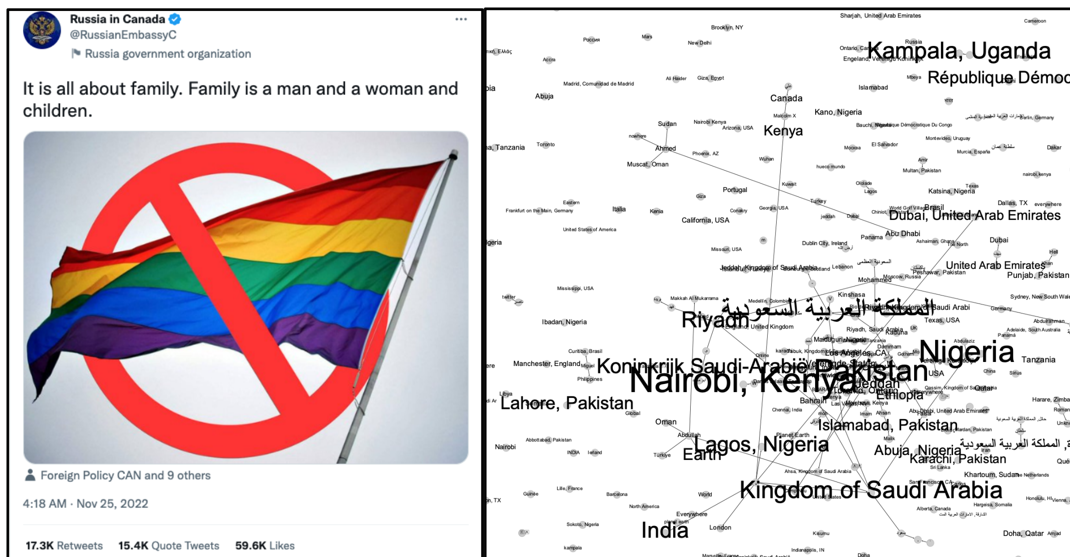

Figure 2. On the left, a highly retweeted Tweet of the Russian Embassy in Canada. On the right, a network graph of the locations where retweets originated from

Dataset and Method

In order to test our hypothesis the research has compiled a corpus of all the social media channels of all the embassies across the world, as listed by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The press service of The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the Russian Federation (https://mid.ru/en/press_service/accounts_social/) provides a comprehensive list of social media accounts representing Russian embassies and consulates all around the world (see Table 1.)

CONTINENT	Website	X	Facebook	Instagram	YouTube	Telegram	VK
Africa	40	37	37	22	5	27	17
Asia	46	45	42	21	13	41	22
Europe	40	40	38	23	21	35	21
North America	9	9	8	4	5	9	6
South America	11	11	11	5	2	10	6
Oceania	2	2	2	0	1	2	2
TOTAL	**148**	**144**	**138**	**75**	**47**	**124**	**74**

Table 1. Russian embassies' social media presence

The first stage of the research will begin by performing a manual qualitative analysis of only all the Facebook embassy pages (n=138), focussing on one month at three points before and after the war. Two coders will employ a qualitative coding scheme in three columns: 1.) topics (geopolitics, history, diplomacy, media, values, beautiful Russia, sports and religion) and 2.) us/them antagonism (the US, NATO, etc. vs Russians, non-western allies, etc.). The objective of coding is twofold: 1) gaining a deeper understanding of a prominent Russian narrative about global culture war with “the West”, and 2) tracing the extent and ways in which Russian embassies’ messaging around culture war issues is tailored to the Global South. A subset of the collected material will subsequently be subjected to close reading. The second, more experimental stage of the project will download or scrape all of the posts of all of the embassies across all of their social media channels and then perform topic modelling analysis —following Nelson’s (2020) computational grounded theory approach— as well as an analysis of variance in engagement intensities, comparing across platforms, across regions and across periods of time. (All data collection and analysis will be done in keeping with AoIR’s best ethical practices.)

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