

Winnowing Fake vs Fact: Media Literacy and Media Message Evaluation Practices of First-Time Voter College Students

Princess Gerbie C. Durante
Bulacan State University-Sarmiento Campus

This study investigated the level of media literacy and its influence on the most prevalent media message evaluation practices of first-time Filipino college-student voters. It compared the level of media literacy components—using media devices, understanding media, and contributing to media content, and how these influence evaluation of media messages. It is significant in the current learning context as students are immersed in a digital media landscape filled with unverified data, misinformation, and biased, distorted updates. Thus, looking into voters' capacity to discern and discriminate between facts and fake information is necessary so that interventions may be adopted. Results indicate a self-reported mean of 2.83 in using media devices; 3 in understanding media; and 3 in contributing to media content. Further, the most prevalent media information evaluation practice is to consider message and meaning rather than the author and intended audience, or what media represents and if it reflects reality. Finally, understanding media is the most significant predictor influencing the prevalent media message evaluation practices of participants in the study.

Keywords: media literacy of first-time voters, information literacy in the digital landscape, predictors of critical literacy

INTRODUCTION

The crucial role that media information literacy education plays in the educational system has become more evident amidst the current pandemic. In the emergency remote distance learning setup, students learn in a digital media landscape crowded with information and frequent updates, and it is a necessity that literacy programs in place equip learners with the capacity to discern and be critical of the information available to them. Effective literacy programs shall enable learners to "place information in context, discern fact from fiction, make an assessment around bias and distortion, and to recognize deliberate misinformation when it is encountered" (National Literacy Trust, 2018, p. 3).

As critical times demand critical minds, the need to ensure that learners develop media literacy, information literacy and critical thinking skills to evaluate multimodal forms of information that may save their lives and their family members is more vital than ever before. Shaping nations' political, economic, health, and academic realities also rely heavily on the youth's ability to engage in critical discourse and participate in nation-building, preserving its history and protecting its future. These are possible only with a robust literacy program, and to ensure that such is delivered, an evaluation of learner's level of media information literacy and practices is necessary. This view catalyzes the conception of this study.

Through media information literacy (MIL) citizens are empowered as they are equipped with the capacity to fully understand how media information providers function, how to ethically evaluate contents produced, and create contents that induce critical discourse and make informed decisions as they utilize their freedom of expression in the 21st century digital world (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017). More specifically, conventional meaning of media literacy refers to enabling citizens to have the ability to gain access, understanding, critically evaluate, define and negotiate media content meaning, and communicate using various media tools and modalities in contexts relevant to them (European Commission, 2007; Aufderheide, 1992) while information literacy capacitates individuals to efficiently locate, critically and ethically evaluate and effectively use information when they are needed (American Library Association, 1989).

Currently, studies on MIL illustrate how the internet, media and mobile technologies are being used to propagate the dissemination of fake information, hate speech, and extremism that is why media literacy education that empowers and educates on how to respond is urgent (Grizzle, 2016). Thus far, media and information literacy skills are being studied and seen as a good addition to the university curriculum (Ashrafi-rizi, Ramezani, Koupaei, & Kazempour, 2017; Lin, Mokhtar & Wang, 2013). In fact, results of media communication courses integrated in senior high school illustrated that exposure to media literacy instruction significantly increased learners' capacity to evaluate media messages and enabled students to spot omitted information from news media broadcast regardless of modality (Hobbs & Frost, 2003).

Moreover, Buckingham and Bragg (2004) forwards that the obvious starting point in strengthening the concepts on MIL would be to educate young people so that they would have the capacity to protect themselves against fake information, digital crimes, hate speech, etc., and be able to deal with the broader digital media landscape effectively and positively (Buckingham, 2000). Considering this, a deeper understanding of mass and social media communication practices, process, and effects may be able to address issues about media and information literacy and its effect on cultural knowledge and our roles as global citizens (Hirsch, Kett & Trefil, 1987; 2002).

To do this, asking key questions when analyzing media messages must consistently be practiced. The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) forwards that these key questions can be divided into three distinct categories – Authors and Audiences, Representation and Reality, and Messages and Meanings (Korona, 2020). In evaluating authors and audiences of media contents and messages, learners investigate the intention of the creator, who the target audience are, how the media message may influence the target audience – negatively or positively, and how the audience interact with the media message (Rogow & Scheibe, 2007). Representation and reality on the other hand deals with how learners perceive the credibility of the media message, and learners tend to focus on the context of when it was created and how it was disseminated to the public (Rogow & Scheibe, 2007). Lastly, by reflecting on the contents of media messages and meanings, such as how the information affects them, the communication strategies used to elicit their answers or interaction and the awareness of varied interpretations surrounding the media message, learners may be able to discern the intent of media messages (Breakstone et al., 2018; Rogow & Scheibe, 2007).

Effective media education must cover the following domains: Factor 1: Using media, Factor 2: Understanding media, and Factor 3: Contributing medially (Simmons, Meeus, & T'Sas, 2017). Acquisition of Factor 1: Using media involves mastering use of “media devices in the technical sense, conscious choice among various media devices based on their functionality, and purposeful use of different sources of information and media devices” (Simmons, Meeus, & T'Sas, 2017, p.107). Likewise, to achieve competence in Factor 2: Understanding media, learners must be able to “(1) recognize that media represent information in a selective way and can interpret these varying angles of media messages, (2) know how media production and distribution works, (3) understand that contents of media are tailored to a specific audience, (4) various criteria must be taken into consideration in evaluating media messages, (5) have an awareness of the effects of media, and (6) have an awareness on one's own media behavior” (Simmons, Meeus, & T'Sas, 2017, p.108). Factor 3: Contributing medially is considered acquired when learners can create their own media content, communicate, and present this content and participate in public fora and debate through the various forms of media (Simmons, Meeus, & T'Sas, 2017).

In the Philippine context however, MIL as a subject has only been recently integrated in the K to 12 Curriculum, specifically the Senior High School program, implemented in 2016. “The principal goal of MIL is to introduce students to fundamentals of media and information as channels of communication and tools for the development of individuals and societies and to develop students to be creative and critical thinkers as well as responsible users and competent producers of media and information” (Department of Education, 2013, p. 1). However, studies among Filipino MIL instructors illustrate lack of training on MIL instruction as well as unavailability of suitable instructional materials (Bautista, 2021; Labangon & Zabala, 2018). More significantly, teachers admit to “lacking a deep understanding of the subject’s meaning, significance, and scope when asked to teach MIL” (Bautista, 2021, p.22).

Given the unprecedented rise in screen time among the youth, that is an estimated one billion children and young people are now taking classes and socializing online, because of school closure (UNICEF, 2020) and the findings in the recent literature, this study aims to investigate whether learners have the necessary media information literacy – skills, knowledge, resources, and practices – to keep themselves safe and informed online. For this reason, this paper explores the media information literacy level and how these affect the prevailing critical evaluation of media information practices of first time Filipino voters who are first-year and sophomore students at a local university in San Jose del Monte, Bulacan.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study focuses on the MIL level and critical evaluation practices of Filipino BulSU student-first time-voters. The researcher employed a survey research design to achieve the study’s objectives. Survey design is a nonexperimental research method based on questionnaires or interviews that can be utilized to gather data on participants’ “thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, personality, and behavioral intentions” (Johnson & Christensen, 2013, p. 192).

Sample

Participants of the study were purposively chosen first time Filipino voters who are first-year and second year students at a state university in San Jose del Monte, Bulacan. Included in the sample are students from education, information and industrial technology, and business and entrepreneurship. One hundred fourteen students accessed the survey, however, eight students acknowledged that they did not wish to participate, while two students are no longer first-time voters. The data was thus collected from 104 participants. The number of samples of the participants adhere with the G-Power a priori analyses used in the study. Table 1 summarizes the demographic data.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS DEMOGRAPHIC

<i>Age</i>	
17 -18	(25) 24 %
19 - 20	(69) 66.3 %
21 - 22	(7) 6.8 %
23 – 34	(3) 2.9 %
<i>College Course</i>	
Elementary Education	(11) 10.6 %
Secondary Education	(19) 18.3 %
Entrepreneurship	(7) 6.8%
Business Administration	(25) 24 %
Industrial Technology	(18) 17.3%
Information Technology	(24) 23 %

<i>Year Level</i>		
	First-year students	(88) 84.6 %
	Sophomore	(16) 15.4%
<i>Sex</i>		
	Male	(44) 42.3 %
	Female	(60) 57.7%

Instrument

The survey used to collect data on the media information literacy level of participants was called Personal Competencies in the Field of Media Literacy adapted from Simons, Meeus and T'Sas (2017). The instrument is divided into three factors, using media (3 items; $\alpha = >.708$); understanding media (6 items; $\alpha = >.789$) and contributing medially (3 items; $\alpha = >.633$). Likewise, the survey used to gather data on practices involved in critical evaluation of media messages was adopted from teachable strategies in MIL aligned with NAMLE's Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages which was subjected to validation by Korona (2020). The second instrument is divided into three parts namely: Authors and audiences (6 items), Messages and meanings (6 items), and Representation and reality (3 items). The researcher secured the permission of the proponents of the instrument via email.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey was disseminated to first year and sophomore college first-time voters at a state university in San Jose del Monte, Bulacan through a link to a google form disseminated after permission was secured from the campus dean. Advisers and subject teachers assisted in disseminating the google form link to the target participants. The survey was available for two weeks, 114 responses were recorded. However, only 104 agreed to participate. Data was exported from the google form to the google spreadsheet and was then organized according to how data addresses the research questions. From the spreadsheet, the organized data was imported to SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for data analysis. The mean evaluation is computed and then data was also subjected to inferential statistics, Pearson r and linear regression, to determine the relationship of MIL level and most prevailing critical evaluation of media message practices (CEMMP) of the learners and how these variables relate to each other and other demographic variables.

RESULTS

Learners' Media Information Literacy Level

The first question of the study asked: What is the self-reported media information literacy level of first time Filipino voters in terms of using media, understanding media, and contributing medially? To answer this question, descriptive statistics, particularly the mean was computed from participants responses of the "Personal Competencies in the Field of Media Literacy" portion of the survey. Participants reported an overall mean of 2.94 media information literacy level – competent.

In terms of the distinct factors, participants reported a mean evaluation of 2.83 (competent) in Using media. However, of the three elements under factor 1, participants reported "purposeful use of different sources of information and media device" with lowest mean evaluation of 2.5. Factor 2: Understanding media reported a mean evaluation of 3 (competent). Of the elements in factor 2 though, "awareness of the effects of media" and "awareness of own media behavior" scored 3.5 each (very competent) while "knowledge that media represent information in a selective way, knowing how to interpret media messages, and knowing how media production and distribution works" scored 2.5 (competent). Factor 3, contributing medially, reported a mean evaluation of 3 (competent) in all elements.

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive data on learners' media information literacy level.

TABLE 2
LEARNERS' MEDIA INFORMATION LITERACY LEVEL

Factors	Personal Competencies in the Field of Media and Information Literacy	Mean	Description
Using Media	Capacity to use media devices in the technical sense	3	Competent
	Capacity to select media devices to be used based on their functionality	3	Competent
	Capacity to use various media devices and sources of information purposefully	2.5	Competent
	Average	2.83	Competent
Understanding Media	Awareness that media represents information in a selective way and knowledge of how to interpret media messages	2.5	Competent
	Knowledge of how media is produced and distributed	2.5	Competent
	Knowledge of how contents of media messages are tailored to a target audience	3	Competent
	Capacity to evaluate contents of media messages in terms of accuracy of information, comparison of information, appreciation of aesthetic aspects, etc.	3	Competent
	Awareness of the impact and influence of media and media messages	3.5	Very competent
	Awareness of one's own behavior towards media and media messages	3.5	Very competent
	Average	3	Competent
Contributing Medially	I can create media content (e.g., author an article, create a photo, or video document, set up a blog/vlog).	3	Competent
	I can communicate and present contents using media (e.g., structure and adapt a presentation, publish media content through an appropriate channel such as blogs, directories, YouTube, online conference applications such as Zoom and Google Meet).	3	Competent
	Capacity to participate in public discourse using media and media resources	3	Competent
	Average	3	Competent

Learners' Critical Evaluation of Media Message Practices

The second question of the study asked: What is the most prevalent critical evaluation of media message practices of first time Filipino voters in terms of: Author and audience, Message and meaning, and Representation and Reality? To answer this question, descriptive statistics, particularly the mean was computed from participants responses of the “Media message evaluation practices based on teachable strategies in MIL aligned with NAMLE’s Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages” portion of the survey.

Participants reported an overall mean of 2.97 critical evaluation of media message practice – sometimes practiced. In terms of the three categories of evaluation, messages and meaning scored 3.08, sometimes practiced, as the most prevalent critical media message evaluation practice, followed by representation and reality, 3 – sometimes practiced, and author and audience with mean evaluation of 2.83 – sometimes practiced.

Within author and audience category, “distinguishing the intended audience of media messages” and “identifying and evaluating potential bias in media messages reported the lowest mean evaluation of 2.5, sometimes practiced. Under messages and meaning category, “assessing the relationship of personal bias and message bias” reported the lowest mean evaluation of 2.5, sometimes practiced. In representation and reality all items equally reported a mean evaluation of 3, sometimes practiced.

On the other hand, the most prevalent critical evaluation of media message practice falls under messages and meaning, specifically, “identifying and evaluating the intended purpose of media messages” and “determine the quality of reasoning present in media messages” with a self-reported mean evaluation of 3.5 – always practiced. Table 3 summarizes the descriptive data on critical evaluation of media message practices.

TABLE 3
LEARNERS’ CRITICAL EVALUATION OF MEDIA MESSAGE PRACTICES

Categories	Critical Evaluation of Media Message Practices	Mean	Description
Authors and Audiences	I locate and evaluate the background of the author of media messages I encounter.	3	Sometimes Practiced
	I locate and evaluate organizational institutions affiliated with media messages.	3	Sometimes Practiced
	I know to distinguish the intended audience of media messages.	2.5	Sometimes Practiced
	I recognize and interpret author(s)' point of view (i.e., Whose voices are presented? Whose voices are omitted?)	3	Sometimes Practiced
	I identify and evaluate potential bias in media messages.	2.5	Sometimes Practiced
	I identify and evaluate motives for media messages.	3	Sometimes Practiced
	Average	2.83	Sometimes Practiced

Messages and Meaning	I identify and evaluate the intended purpose of media messages.	3.5	Always Practiced
	I distinguish fact from opinion in media messages.	3	Sometimes Practiced
	I recognize and analyze the impact of media format and design as information strategies in delivering media messages.	3	Sometimes Practiced
	I identify and evaluate persuasive techniques used in media messages.	3	Sometimes Practiced
	I assess the relationship of personal bias and message bias.	2.5	Sometimes Practiced
	I determine the quality of reasoning present in media messages.	3.5	Always Practiced
	Average	3.08	Sometimes Practiced
Representation and Reality	I determine trustworthiness of evidence in media messages.	3	Sometimes Practiced
	I identify and evaluate how public opinion trends shape media messages.	3	Sometimes Practiced
	I identify and evaluate how visual images convey the author's or organization's viewpoint.	3	Sometimes Practiced
	Average	3	Sometimes Practiced

Relationship Between Media Information Literacy Level and Evaluation of Media Message Practices

The third question of the study asked: Is there a significant relationship between the media literacy level and critical evaluation of media message practices of first time Filipino voters? To answer this question, Pearson product correlation was computed from participants responses after normality of data were tested to determine the strength of relationship between the two variables. Using SPSS v. 26, at $\alpha = .05$ the results of the correlation identified a significant high positive relationship between media information literacy level and critical evaluation practices ($r = .759$; $p\text{-value} = .000$, 2-tailed).

Results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4
PEARSON CORRELATION COEFFICIENT BETWEEN MEDIA INFORMATION LITERACY LEVEL AND CRITICAL EVALUATION OF MEDIA MESSAGE PRACTICES

		<i>Media Information Literacy Level</i>	<i>Critical Evaluation of Media Message Practices</i>	Interpretation
<i>Media Information Literacy Level</i>	Pearson Correlation	1	.759*	<i>High Positive Correlation</i>
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	<i>Significant</i>
<i>Critical Evaluation of Media Message Practices</i>	Pearson Correlation	.759*	1	<i>High Positive Correlation</i>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		<i>Significant</i>

*Correlation is Significant at the level of 0.05 (2-tailed)

Relationship Among Demographic Variables and Media Information Literacy Level and Evaluation of Media Message Practices

The fourth question of the study asked: Is there a significant relationship between demographics of first time Filipino voters and their media literacy level and critical evaluation of media message practices? To answer this question, Pearson product correlation was computed from participants responses to determine the strength of relationship among the different variables. Using SPSS v. 26, at $\alpha = .05$ the results of the correlation among the demographics and media information literacy identified a significant weak negative relationship between age and media information literacy level ($r = -.197$; $p\text{-value} = .045$, 2-tailed). There are no significant relationships in any of the other variables. Results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5
PEARSON CORRELATION COEFFICIENT AMONG THE DEMOGRAPHICS AND MEDIA INFORMATION LITERACY LEVEL AND CRITICAL EVALUATION OF MEDIA MESSAGE PRACTICES

		<i>Age</i>	<i>Course</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Year Level</i>
<i>Media Information Literacy Level</i>	Pearson Correlation	-.197*	.054	.016	-.156
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.045	.585	.876	.113
<i>Critical Evaluation of Media Message Practices</i>	Pearson Correlation	-.107	-.006	-.011	-.155
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.280	.948	.913	.116

*Correlation is Significant at the level of 0.05 (2-tailed)

Influences of Media Information Literacy Factor to Evaluation of Media Message Practices

The fifth question of the study asked: Which media information literacy factor influences critical evaluation of media message practices? To answer this question, linear regression was used to determine which of the identified media information literacy factors is the predictor of critical evaluation of media message practices. Results of linear regression analyses show that practices involving evaluation of author and audience can be significantly predicted by Factor 2: Understanding media with a p-value of .000. Similarly, practices involving critical evaluation of messages and meaning can be significantly predicted by Factor 2: Understanding media with p-value =.000. Finally, critical evaluation of media messages involving representation and reality can be significantly predicted by Factor 2: Understanding media (p-value=.000) and Factor 3: Contributing medially (p-value=.049).

Results of the regression coefficient analysis are presented in Table 6.

TABLE 6
LINEAR REGRESSION COEFFICIENT AMONG CRITICAL EVALUATION OF MEDIA MESSAGE PRACTICES AND FACTORS OF MEDIA INFORMATION LITERACY

		<i>Using media</i>	<i>Understanding media</i>	<i>Contributing medially</i>
<i>Author and Audience</i>	Sig.	.520	.000*	.517
<i>Messages and meaning</i>	Sig.	.746	.000*	.089
<i>Representation and reality</i>	Sig.	.538	.000*	.049*

**Regression Coefficient is Significant at the level of 0.05*

DISCUSSION

Participants report an overall media information literacy level of 2.94, competent. However, the mean evaluation of 2.5 is reported in the following elements: purposefully use of various sources of information and media devices such as search for information using social network sites and the internet. This may be interpreted that a learner needs to improve knowledge of how to use the information available to them. Access to information without capacity to utilize the information meaningfully and purposefully is useless. A similar 2.5 mean evaluation was reported in the items about awareness of the selective way media messages may be represented, capacity to interpret media messages, and understanding how media production and distribution works. This means that the learner’s capacity to look at media information from varying perspectives and investigating different sides of a message being presented needs to be improved.

These differences in perspective will then contribute to the learners’ ability to interpret the media message critically. Moreover, learning about media message creation and how these messages are spread to the public is necessary as understanding the process of creation may lead to better appreciation of the product. In contrast, the items about awareness of one’s own media behavior and the effects of media got the highest mean evaluation, 3.5, very competent. This means that when learners post, share or interact with content or media messages, they know what they are doing and understand exactly the effect of the media message. These personal competencies in the field of media and information literacy items identified “very competent” juxtaposed with the least evaluated items reflect the exercise of freedom to share media messages knowing its impact, but without or lacking the understanding of the processes behind the media

message creation, lack of understanding others' perspective and lack of capacity to accurately interpret encountered media messages.

Table 7 illustrates a comparative illustration of the least and most acquire media information literacy competencies of first time Filipino voters studying in a state university in Bulacan.

**TABLE 7
COMPARISON OF LEAST AND MOST ACQUIRED MIL COMPETENCIES**

Least acquired MIL competence	Most acquired MIL competence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Purposeful use of various sources of information and media devices such as search for information using social network sites and the internet</i> • <i>Awareness of the selective way media messages may be represented</i> • <i>Capacity to interpret media messages</i> • <i>Understanding how media production and distribution works</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Awareness of the effects of media</i> • <i>Awareness of one's own media behavior</i>

The data gathered regarding critical evaluation of media message practices of first time Filipino voters in a state university in San Jose del Monte Bulacan, illustrate that the least prevalent practices include *distinguishing the intended audience of media messages, identifying, and evaluating potential bias in media messages, and assessing the relationship of personal bias and message bias* which has rendered the lowest mean evaluation of 2.5, sometimes practiced, as shown in Table 8.

**TABLE 8
COMPARISON OF LEAST AND MOST PREVALENT CRITICAL EVALUATION OF MEDIA MESSAGE PRACTICES**

Least practiced	Most practiced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Distinguishing the intended audience of media messages</i> • <i>Identifying and evaluating potential bias in media messages</i> • <i>Assessing the relationship of personal bias and message bias</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Identifying and evaluating the intended purpose of media messages</i> • <i>Determining the quality of reasoning present in media messages</i>

Meanwhile the most prevalent critical evaluation practices include *identifying and evaluating the intended purpose of media messages and determining the quality of reasoning present in media messages* with a mean evaluation of 3.5, always practiced. This implies that although informants often recognize the purpose behind the media message and make a judgement behind its rationale, they rarely question for whom the message was intended or addressed, and whether bias exists in the contents of the message. Moreover, participants reported that they rarely reflect on their own biases that may affect how they interpret the purpose and rationale behind the media messages.

Media information literacy level has a significant high positive correlation to critical evaluation practices of the participants in the study. This means that the higher the level of competence learners have

in terms of media information literacy, the more they practice critical evaluation of media messages. This implies that to be able to forward the fight against dissemination of fake news and disinformation, hate and extremist language, strengthening literacy programs are necessary to upgrade the media information competence of our students. Further, among the demographics that characterize the participants of the study, only age illustrated a significant weak negative correlation with media information literacy competence. This means that younger participants of the study tend to have higher media information literacy, possibly because they have just recently completed MIL topics or subject matter integrated in their communication classes. This means that topics or subject matter involving media information literacy and critical evaluation activities must be consistently integrated into lesson content to ensure that learners do not disregard or discontinue practicing them.

Finally, analysis of data illustrates that MIL competency Factor 2: Understanding media is a significant predictor of whether participants practice critical evaluation of all the elements of media messages – the Author and audience, the Message and meaning, and the Representation and reality. Moreover, Factor 3: Contributing medially also significantly predicts practice of critical evaluation of media message in terms of Representation and reality. This implies that to ensure that individuals consistently practice critical evaluation of media messages, Factor 2, and Factor 3 – understanding media and contributing medially, respectively – must be aligned with, integrated, and embedded in the delivery of not just media information classes, but all literacy and content subjects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the study, it is recommended that the Media Information Literacy curriculum be reviewed to check whether the competencies identified align or illustrate the development of least acquired MIL competencies and the further development of all the personal media information competencies identified in the study. Second, critical evaluation of media message activities be consistently integrated in both literacy and content subjects to ensure that it becomes habitual or automatic for learners. Third, as data show that younger learners tend to have higher MIL competence, the subject MIL may be introduced at the primary level, or as early as learner's access to digital and media tools, so they may be able to comprehend media messages made available to them. Finally, the study may be replicated in a different context, with a larger population size, and using probability sampling techniques to establish generalizability of result to the larger population.

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