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Muhammed Ngoma, Peter Dithan Ntale & Earnest Abaho

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ARTICLE

SOCIAL-ECONOMIC FACTORS, STUDENT FACTORS, STUDENT ACADEMIC GOALS AND PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING IN UGANDA

Muhammed Ngoma
Makerere University Business School, Faculty of Graduate Studies & Research Uganda
mngoma@mubs.ac.ug

Peter Dithan Ntale
Makerere University Business School, Faculty of Graduate Studies & Research, Directorate of Doctoral Training. Uganda
pntale@mubs.ac.ug

Earnest Abaho
Makerere University Business School, Faculty of Management, Department of Entrepreneurship Uganda
eabaho@mubs.ac.ug

ABSTRACT

This article evaluates the relationship between social-economic factors, students' factors, student academic goals and performance of students. The study adopts a cross-sectional survey, with largely quantitative approaches. A sample of 950 students was randomly and proportionately drawn from undergraduates in four institutions of higher learning. A response rate of 61% was recorded. We observed significant positive relationships between student factors (except competence in quantitative subjects and grades earned in high school) and student performance, as well as student learning goals and student academic performance. We did not observe a significant relationship between socio-economic factors and student performance at higher institutions. The model was significant, and explained 47% of the variation in student performance. The study recommends that higher institutions should place considerable emphasis on inculcating a reading/preparation culture among students, enforce attendance at lectures and encourage students to set learning goals, if they are to improve the performance of their students.

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Keywords: social-economic factors; student factors; student academic goals; student performance

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, higher education is of growing significance, with economic, political and social changes driving an increasingly global knowledge economy. There has been an upsurge of universities and other tertiary institution in the past two decades, with a major purpose of meeting global challenges in all business and non-business sectors. Between 1970 and 2013, the world number of tertiary students multiplied by 6.12 while the global population multiplied by 1.93 (UNESCO 2015). An increase of 1% a year means 20% in 20 years. This suggests that the worldwide the Gross Tertiary Enrollment Ratio will reach 50% within the next generation, a staggering change. An expanding higher education system has become one of the norms of modernisation, pre-eminent as a social differentiator and allocator.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda in particular, expansion of higher education is on the increase. Before independence, Uganda's Makerere University was the only public institute of higher learning, with a few other public technical colleges, which have since been transformed into fully fledged universities. Currently, Uganda has over five public universities that are fully or partially sponsored by the state. These include; Makerere, Kyambogo, Gulu, Busitema and Muni Universities. After liberalising the education sector, Uganda has seen an increase in the number of private institutions of higher learning, currently standing at 102. It is important to note that Uganda's higher education system, as designed by the British during the colonial era was the best in Africa, attracting many students from neighboring countries and it continues to be the best in the region today (Nakajubi 2016). The students' enrolment numbers in these institutions have also increased over the years. Currently, up to 400,000 students join institutions of higher learning every year (Wane and Martin 2013)

While access to higher education has increased, the quality of graduates as reflected by the academic performance is worrying. The increased enrolment in higher institutions comes with the challenge of maintaining or even improving the performance of students, as well as the graduation rates. A good number of the enrolled students today fail to graduate/complete on time or fail to complete at all, while a good number graduate with poor grades (Adelman 2004). It is not surprising that universities continue to receive complaints from employers regarding graduates who are too theoretical, rather than practical (Wane and Martin 2013). Besides work experience and the right attitude, most employers emphasise grades/scores of the graduates when recruiting, especially for the lower-level entry jobs. Academic grades are considered a proxy indicator of competences acquired during education in terms of knowledge, skills and abilities (Beswick 2006).

Declining performance of students in institutions of higher learning in Uganda has attracted much attention. Absence of critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving

ability characterise most of the graduates. Student performance not only determines the human resource capacities and employability of the students, but is a reflection of the levels of knowledge acquisition, knowledge transformation, knowledge transfer, skills and attitudes picked up by the student, as well as their overall learning experience (UNESCO 2015). Some scholars attribute poor performance of students to the commercialisation of university education, that has led to lowering of admission requirements, seeing large numbers of students in the classrooms (Mamdani 2007). However, the situation manifests itself even among the students that come from high school with very good grades. While institutions' administration blames this scenario largely on students, the students and the public have continued to blame the institutions for the declining performance of the students. Without empirical evidence for this scenario, the blame game is likely never to end.

Most studies on student performance have been done at high school-/college-level, rather than at university level. While research on student performance in the Western world and the Middle East is well documented, studies that document antecedents of student performance in higher institutions of learning, such as in universities in the least developed world like Uganda, are not evident. In their attempt to study student performance in a university setting, Semukono, Orobia and Arinaitwe (2013) limited their study only to performance in quantitative course units, rather than student academic performance overall, yet employers are largely interested in the overall performance of the student, as opposed to performance in individual subjects. Whereas extant literature brings out an array of factors responsible for student academic performance, this study emphasises socio-economic factors, student-related factors and student learning goals to attempt to predict student academic performance at university level.

STUDENT-RELATED FACTORS AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE

The variation in student performance could be largely attributed to the variations in individual student-related factors. It is possible that student-related factors – such as scores in high school, competence in quantitative subjects, student's attendance patterns and preparation for exams – affect their performance in college/university (Anderson et al. 1994).

Pozo and Stull (2006) highlighted the importance of initial secondary school studies and competence in quantitative subjects to the successful performance of a student at university. They conclude that the differences in student performance can be explained by the individual characteristics of the student. Adelman (2004) also contends that the high school curriculum reflects 41% of the academic resources that students bring to higher education. He asserts that the curriculum measure produces a bigger percentage of students in higher education not only graduating, but with quality awards. He further found that the highest level of mathematics one studies in secondary school has the

strongest continuing influence on bachelor's degree completion. This argument is consistent with Habte (1988) who concluded that a student's first semester Grade Point Average (GPA) is affected by the School Leaving Certificate Examination (SLCE) GPA among other factors.

On student attendance patterns, Topping (1994) contends that an increase of 1% in absences will reduce the score of the final examination by 0.043%. If a student develops a negative attitude towards attending classes, his/her performance in the course will be lowered. In most of the institutions in the developing world, administration has put in place a certificate of due attendance/performance as a way of curbing student non-attendance. However, enforcing this policy is stifled by the challenge of big numbers of students, yet most of these institutions have not put in place the necessary ICT infrastructure to track students' attendance. It is common for a student to sign their attendance and then disappear, or to ask a friend to sign on their behalf. Students who are consistent in attending lectures are likely to acquire the knowledge in classroom, and easily relate this knowledge to their environment (Grant 2015). Such students normally turn into high performers since they can not only grasp the knowledge, but can transform and relate it to real life experiences. Students who are inconsistent/irregular in class will instead copy notes from their colleagues/other sources, read and cram the notes with a view of reproducing that knowledge in the exam. Such students will fail to perform in situations that require them to demonstrate learning or relate the knowledge to real life situations. We therefore hypothesise that:

H1: Student factors are positively related to student performance

Student learning goals and student performance

Students are believed to acquire certain goals towards learning, referred to as achievement goals. There are two types of achievement goals: mastery goals and performance goals (Dweck 1986). Mastery goals orient students to a focus on learning and mastery of content, and have been linked to adaptive outcomes such as strong self-efficacy, good meta-cognition and good performance. People with mastery goals seek challenging tasks and strive under difficult situations. Performance goals on the other hand, encourage students to focus on scoring better than others or avoiding the appearance of being incompetent. People with performance goals strive to demonstrate ability and avoid negative judgements of their competency. They evade challenges and obstacles, and prefer simple tasks where success is guaranteed. When faced with challenging tasks, they may react in a number of ways: withdrawing due to the risk of failure, demonstrating negative effects, making negative ability attributions and reporting decreased interest in the tasks. Research suggests that goal orientations may exist independently of each other, allowing students to adopt multiple goals simultaneously, such as an orientation

towards mastery of information as well as striving to perform well on a test (Noleen 1988).

Teachers may create different goal structures in the classrooms through their use of various instructional, evaluation, and grouping strategies (Midgley, et al. 1998). For example, some teachers are known to differ in their use of competitive grading practices, which can increase the salience of performance goals. Other teachers focus on skill development, mastery, and improvement, which can lead students to adopt a mastery orientation. Goals provide students with direction and purpose to engage in an activity (Schunk 1996a). Some educational psychologists think that motivation to achieve in school can be understood in terms of the different goals students bring to the situation (Ames 1978). Whereas the overall objective of students is to pass exams and achieve academic progress (performance goals) with less effort and minimise failure at any cost, there is always the likelihood of better placement for those students with masterly skills (Meece et al. 2006). Several experimental studies suggest that students may be more willing to pursue challenging tasks, have positive feelings toward the situation, and exhibit an adaptive attributional pattern when they adopt a mastery orientation (Ames 1978). Although challenging tasks offer opportunities for learning, they also present the risk of failure, thereby threatening students' sense of worth when failure is normatively defined (Covington and Omelich 1984). As a consequence, challenging tasks may be less threatening or more attractive to students who view the situation as emphasising the process of learning, encouraging effortful activity, and de-emphasising the negative consequences of making errors.

Both performance goals and mastery goals are seen as generating two distinct frameworks for processing information. Mastery goals tend to seek more challenges, have higher reported use of effective learning strategies, including metacognitive strategies, report more positive attitudes towards school, and have a higher level of psychological capital than those individuals who pursue performance goals. Performance goals encourage individuals to seek and maintain a positive image of their ability. Students achieve this end by pursuing one of the two types of performance goals. While mastery goals help promote interest, performance goals motivate students not only to have a desire to increase their competence, but also to demonstrate their ability and thus perform well in evaluative situations (Barron and Harackiewicz 2001). We therefore hypothesise that:

H2: Students' learning goals are positively related to student performance.

Social-economic factors and student performance

Socio-economic factors combine parents' education levels, occupation status, and income levels among others (Jeynes 2002). It is believed that low social economic status negatively affects academic achievement because it prevents access to vital

resources and creates additional stress at home (Jeynes 2002). Sewell (1964) found that student academic aspirations that would impact academic performance had a negative correlation with socio-economic status of parents. Considine and Zappala (2002) found that families where the parents are advantaged socially, educationally and economically foster a higher level of achievement in their children since these parents provide higher levels of psychological support for their children through environments that encourage the development of skills necessary for success at school. Thus, children from families with low incomes are more likely to exhibit lower levels of literacy, numeracy and comprehension, lower retention rates, higher levels of problematic school behavior, difficulties with their studies and negative attitudes towards school.

Sentamu (2003) argued that social class determines which school a child attends and whether the child will pass the examinations while Patrinos and Psacharopoulos (1997) found the schooling levels of both parents to have a positive and statistically significant effect on the educational attainment of Peruvian children. They argue that how much education a child's parents have is probably the most important factor in determining the child's educational opportunities. They observed that the higher the attainment for the parents, the greater the aspirations for their children.

Place of residence is yet another socio-economic factor that may affect the performance of students. The urban environment is construed to be supportive of learning and therefore performance, rather than the rural environment. Habte (1988) found a significant difference in the performance of students from Addis Ababa and from other rural regions of the country, the former performing better. He tried to explain the effects of demographic factors on student performance, and concluded that the performance of students was affected by such factors as age, gender and place of residence among others. Thus, students who lived in urban areas near the university performed better than other students who live in rural areas, far from the university. From extant literature, it could be true social economic status is related to the academic performance, whether one studies social economic status as a whole or with distinct dimensions. We therefore hypothesise that;

H3: Socio-economic factors positively relate to student performance.

METHODS

Participants

The study was cross-sectional, and adopted mainly quantitative approaches. Data was collected from both undergraduate and postgraduate students from universities. A sample of 950 students was proportionately and randomly drawn from four universities,

based on an average of samples that have been taken by various studies involving students as respondents. Two of these universities were privately-owned, while two were government-owned. We got 577 usable questionnaires back, giving a response rate of 61%.

The majority of the respondents were male (56%), mainly aged between 20 and 24 (53%). The majority were from public universities (61%), were privately/self-sponsored (62%), and were from an urban setting (68%). Detailed sample characteristics are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Variable/values (N=577)	Frequency	Per cent
Gender of respondents		
Male	324	56
Female	253	44
Age of respondents		
Below 20	20	4
20–24	305	53
25–29	140	24
30–34	71	12
35 and above	41	7
Status of University		
Government/public	351	61
Private	226	39
Sponsorship		
Government-sponsored	219	38
Privately-sponsored	358	62
Geographical setting of student		
Rural	187	32
Urban	390	68

Measures

We adapted measures for variables from the existing validated measures and scales developed and used by earlier scholars. Student performance was measured in terms of students' understanding of the courses and grades as reflected in their final Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) or classes of degree. Student-related factors was constructed in terms of grades at high school, competence in quantitative subjects, lecture attendance patterns and time to prepare for exams. Socio-economic factors were constructed in terms of gender, family income, social status, geographical area, level

of parents' education (Sewell 1964). Student academic goal was constructed in terms of the students' motivation for academics and hence their motivation to read (Youssef and Dahmani 2008). Questions were anchored on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 to 4 where 4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree. A 4-point scale was preferred to avoid room for indecision (neither agree nor disagree) which can be easily confused with "I don't know" by respondents (Raaijmakers et al. 2000). The measurement scales were found to be consistent and stable since all the constructs yielded Cronbach alpha coefficients above 0.7 (Nunnally et al. 1967). The coefficients for the individual items are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Cronbach alpha coefficients.

Construct	Cronbach alpha coefficient
Socio-economic factors	.786
Student-related factors	.703
Student learning goals	.841
Student performance	.766

Procedure

We obtained a letter of introduction from the University Research Office, which assured our respondents of the high degree of confidentiality and guaranteed them that the required information was purely for academic purpose. Self-administered questionnaires were issued to the respondents and were collected later by the researchers. The whole exercise took three months.

Data analysis

We used SPSS version 21 to analyse the data. We screened the data by way of missing value analysis, examining outliers and normality of the data. We extracted frequencies, descriptive statistic (mean and standard deviations) and run inferential statistics mainly correlations and regressions. Correlation results are presented in Table 3 while regression results are presented in Table 4

Table 3: Correlation matrix.

	Mean	S.D	1	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	2	3	4
SOC ECON (1)	4.5	.105	--							
Grades at high sch. (a)	3.6	.139	.302**	--						

	Mean	S.D	1	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	2	3	4
Comp. in quant. subjects (b)	3.5	.133	.093	.112	--					
Lecture attendance (c)	3.6	.072	-.090	.038	.044	--				
Time to prepare for exams (d)	4.6	.091	.091	.251**	.091	.044	--			
STUDT FACTORS a+b+c+d (2)	3.9	.056	.021	.619**	.551**	.519**	.523**	--		
STUDENT GOALS (3)	4.6	.082	.091	.231**	.096	.020	.211**	.179**	--	
STUDENT PERF. (4)	3.9	.119	-.037	.021	.038	.131*	.146*	.128*	.186**	-

*N = 577; **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) ; * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)*

Table 4: Regression model: regression of socio-economic factors, student academic goals and student related factors onto student performance.

	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity stat.	
Model	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
Constant	.381	.407		.503	.465		
Socio-economic factors	.145	.053	.208	1.224	.106	0.536	2.33
Student academic goals	.341	.068	.396	4.987	.002	0.813	1.13
Student related factors	.233	.093	.247	2.318	.005	0.659	1.72
R Square = .501	Adjusted R Square = .476		Std. Error of Estimate = .318,				
R = .675 F = 32.045 Sign. F = .000 df1 = 4							
Dependent Variable: Student Performance							

RESULTS

H1: Student-related factors are positively related to student performance

The results in Table 3 indicate a significant positive relationship between student-related factors and student performance ($r = .128$; $p < .05$), supporting hypothesis 1. It is worth noting that while we observed significant positive correlations between lecture attendance patterns and student performance ($r = .131$; $p < .05$); time allocated to preparing for exams and student performance ($r = .146$; $p < .05$); there was no significant correlation between grades scored at high school and student performance at universities. Also, there was no relationship between the student's competence in mathematics or quantitative subjects and student's performance. Thus, it is mainly the student-related factors of "lecture attendance patterns" and time allocated to preparing for examinations that significantly and positively correlated with student's performance. This means that student performance increases with regularity in attendance of lectures and adequate preparation for exams. Romer (1993) supports this position and calls for mandatory class attendance.

H2: Students academic goals are positively related to student performance

There was a significant positive correlation between student academic goals and student academic performance ($r = .186$; $p < .01$), supporting hypothesis 2. This means that as students set acceptable, specific and clear learning goals, their academic performance increases.

H3: Socio-economic factors are positively related to student performance

In Table 3, the socio-economic factors did not correlate with student performance at the university thereby contradicting hypothesis 3. This implies that whether a student comes from a good or poor socio-economic background does not matter in the student's academic performance at the university.

REGRESSION ANALYSIS

The regression results/prediction potential of the model are shown in Table 4. The model is significant ($F = 32.045$; $P < .01$) with no serious risks of multicollinearity as indicated by the variance inflation factors (VIF) and tolerance values.

In Table 4, Student-related factors and student academic goals are the only significant predictors of student's academic performance, giving further support to hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2 respectively. This is in line with Schunk and Pajares (2009) who clarified that goal setting can lead to student motivation and higher academic achievement. If implemented correctly, goal setting has the potential to positively impact learning.

Student academic goals is the most significant predictor (Beta = .396; t = 4.987; p < .01), followed by student-related factors (Beta = .247; t = 2.318; p < .01). The two variables combined predict student's performance at 47%.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that lecture attendance patterns (r = .131; p < .05) and time allocated to preparing for exams (r = .146; p < .05) have a significant relationship with student performance. Thus, lecturers ought to improve and maintain high class attendance rates. A simplistic approach to this would be to put in place a mandatory attendance policy or use appropriate incentives to encourage students to attend classes. It is also imperative to encourage students to allocate adequate time to preparation for exams. However, as Rodgers (2002) found out, simply increasing attendance does not necessarily lead to improved academic performance. Therefore, a better approach to achieve meaningful attendance may be to focus on issues that enhance student engagement. Marks (2000) characterises student engagement as "a psychological process, specifically, the attention, interest, investment and effort students expend in the work of learning". Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) have categorised engagement into behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement. Behavioral engagement entails positive conduct, such as following rules and avoiding disruptive behaviors such as skipping school and getting into trouble. In addition, behavioral engagement is also concerned with involvement in learning and academic tasks and includes conduct such as effort, persistence, concentration, attention, asking questions and contributing to class discussion. Emotional engagement refers to students' affective reactions in the classroom, including interest, boredom, happiness, sadness and anxiety. Cognitive engagement focuses on the psychological investment in learning, a desire to go beyond the required level and a preference for challenge. How then can the lecturer improve student engagement with a view to improving meaningful attendance? The findings on the relationship between class attendance and academic performance would suggest that the process of learning and teaching should be viewed as a socio-cognitive phenomenon that requires a supportive social environment in order to be effective. Battistich et al. (1993) report that supportive environments in which members are friendly, help one another, show concern for one another's welfare and work collaboratively are associated with increased liking for school, greater intrinsic motivation, concern for others and self-esteem. The lecturer could therefore improve class attendance by fostering a community sense within the classroom characterised by supportive student–lecturer relationships, mutual respect between the lecturer and students, and between students themselves, and adopting a cooperative pedagogic approach in which learning is viewed as a shared activity between all members of the community, including the lecturer.

It is important to note that if other methods like Active Training and Learning are used as learning methods, then emphasis on classroom attendance may not be

important since learning and knowledge exploration is the responsibility of the learner. This method should be encouraged because it has empirically demonstrated ability to increase student engagement, preparation and readiness for exams, which ultimately increase student performance. This is evidenced in a meta-analysis of 225 studies of undergraduate science students that tested the effect of Active Training and Learning method versus lecture method. The effect sizes indicate that on average, student performance on examinations and concept inventories increased by 0.47 SDs under active learning (n = 158 studies), and that the odds ratio for failing was 1.95 under traditional lecturing (n = 67 studies). These results indicate that average examination scores improved by about 6% in active learning sections, and that students in classes with traditional lecturing were 1.5 times more likely to fail than were students in classes with active learning.

The second hypothesis tested the relationship between student's learning goals and student's performance. The results indicated a significant positive relationship between student learning goals and student academic performance ($r = .186$; $p < .01$). In Table 4, we further see that student's learning goals is the most significant predictor of student academic performance. Thus, orienting students to possess mastery goals and performance goals is very crucial. This will hike their psychological capital which will drive their academic performance. Goals provide students with direction and purpose to engage in an activity. Specific and challenging goals along with appropriate feedback contribute to higher and better task performance, and the willingness to work towards attainment of goal is the main source of student motivation (Schunk 1996b). Thus, students who set acceptable, clear, specific and ambitious learning goals will attain a higher academic performance. These learning goals may act as motivating factors to students' learning, revision and preparation for examinations.

The third hypothesis (H3) was rejected in this study. Socio-economic factors did not correlate with, nor had an effect on, student performance. This means that the students' socio-economic background does not affect the student's grades at the university. Indeed, research in the West African societies of Ghana and Ivory Coast has found a zero to weak influence of socio-economic status on educational aspirations (Stenlund et al. 2017). However, this is in contrast to studies conducted by Considine and Zappala (2002) who found that families where the parents are advantaged socially, educationally, and economically foster a higher level of achievement in their children. They also found that these parents provide higher levels of psychological support for their children through environments that encourage the development of skills necessary for success at school. To the contrary, Pedrosa et al. (2006) found that at times, students coming from disadvantaged socio-economic and educational backgrounds perform relatively better than those coming from higher socio-economic and educational strata. The results however indicate a significant correlation between the socio-economic factors and the grades scored at high school. Hence while there was no significant correlation between the student's socio-economic factors and the performance at university, the socio-

economic factors significantly and positively correlated with the student's grades at high school ($r = .302$; $p < .01$). This however assumes that the socio-economic conditions at the time of this study are the same conditions that prevailed at the time the student attended high school. It is possible that some of the socio-economic constructs may have changed between the time the student sat high school exams and the time they sat the university exams. It is important to note that grades at high school are historical data, while the other variables were measured as at the time of this study. Studies of high school students in the US have also found that socio- economic status origins exert a decisive influence on educational aspirations and ultimately impacts positively on academic performance.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS – DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There was a significant positive relationship between student-related factors, student learning goals and academic performance of students at university. Student-related factors and student learning goals were significant predictors of student academic performance at university, explaining 47% of the variation in student performance. At a managerial and policy level, the government should be conscious of these factors while allocating resources to higher learning education and while admitting students to higher institutions of learning. Programs aimed at boosting or encouraging students to set acceptable, clear and challenging learning goals will offer positive direction towards enhancing their performance. Students, parents and university administrators should strategise to increase time allocated to studying and time allocated for exam preparation. Incentivising classroom attendance and rewarding the best performing students based on their academic goals, learning abilities and the amount of time put in both personal and group studies will better enhance student performance. The Active Training and Learning methodology would be a solution to give learners the chance to explore knowledge. Here, learners take charge of their learning and the lecturers will be mere supervisors, which solves the class attendance dilemma as well as getting students develop both mastery and performance goals. This will produce confident graduates with self-driven skills and knowledge.

Given the importance of student academic goals in driving student performance, future studies should explore extending Locke's (1968) goal-setting theory of motivation to examine student academic performance. Future studies can consider conducting a more qualitative study to dig out the detail of the other antecedents of student performance that explain the other percentage that is not explained by the factors in this study. Future studies can also explore the academic and non-academic, intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate students to read and attend lectures.

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