Testing Servant Leadership Theory with Bulgarian Students

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This study tests Patterson's (2003) theory of servant leadership in the Bulgarian contexts investigating the causal relationships between the seven constructs in the servant leadership model. University students' perceptions of servant leader characteristics were assessed using the Dennis and Bocarnea's (2005) servant leadership instrument. Results support the causal relationships among servant leadership constructs. Furthermore, the leader-follower gender similarity does not have an influence on these constructs. The study pioneers servant leadership research in Bulgaria, a country experiencing an uneasy transition to democracy and market economy after the collapse of Communism.

Servant Leadership in Bulgaria

Greenleaf (1977), the scholar who first popularized the concept of servant leadership, argued for a new kind of leadership model that makes serving others the top priority of leaders. In his interpretation, servant leadership requires serving others, holistically approach work, promoting a sense of community, and sharing power in decision making. Greenleaf suggested that a true leader is one who is a servant first. He asserted that this leadership style begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then, conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test asks, Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or, at least, not be further deprived? (p.10).

Servant leadership research in the United States is currently in the theory-building phase (e.g., Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Laub, 1999; Page & Wong, 2000; Russel, 2001; Russel & Stone, 2002). Patterson (2003), for instance, suggested a theory of servant leadership based on

transformational leadership. Patterson agreed that transformational leadership theory shows consideration toward the follower. However, she argued that its primary aim remains organizational objectives. Subsequently, Patterson's premise is that "the servant leader focuses exclusive attention on the follower instead of the organization" (p. 5).

Patterson's servant leadership theory has been studied quite extensively internationally. For instance, in the United States, Bryant (2003) tested the theory with city government leaders; Dillman (2004) tested its concepts with pastors in Australia; Nelson (2003) explored Patterson's servant leadership theory among black leaders in South Africa; Koshal (2005) studied the applicability of servant leadership theory's construct of service in the context of Kenyan leaders and managers; and finally, Serrano (2005) examined the validity and the acceptance of Patterson's constructs in Latin America, specifically in Panama. On the other hand, servant leadership research has never been conducted in Bulgaria. Dr. Angel Angelov, Dean of the Leadership School of the University of National and World Economy in Sofia, affirmed that no such research has ever been done in Bulgaria (personal communication, March 26, 2005). A confirming opinion was expressed by Dr. Radka Pitekova from Sofia University, School of History of Education and Management of Education (Personal communication, March 21, 2005). This study is the first to address the servant leadership theory in Bulgaria.

The purpose of this study is to test Patterson's (2003) servant leadership model in the Bulgarian context through investigating the model's causal relationships among its constructs using Dennis and Bocarnea's (2005) servant leadership assessment instrument. The survey was administered to a group of Bulgarian students from Sofia University who were asked to assess their leader of choice using the given instrument.

Theoretical Framework

Transformational leadership is currently dominant theory in organizational studies (Pawar & Eastman, 1997), but it does not fully explain why some leaders value their followers more than the organization (Rost, 1991). Bass (2000) noted this deficiency and distinguished between transformational leaders who try to align their personal interests with the interests of the organization and servant leaders whose primary purpose is to serve. Patterson (2003) noted that servant leaders serve with a focus on the followers, whereby the followers are the primary concern and organizational concerns are peripheral. In her model, servant leaders lead with (a) *agapao* love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment, and (g) service. Winston (2003) stated that, in building this new model, Patterson establishes a key difference between servant leadership and transformational leadership by pointing out Bass' (2000) assertion that transformational leaders do what they do for employees in order to gain greater personal efforts by the employees toward the completion of the organizational goals, whereas servant leadership focuses solely on the well-being of the employees.

Agapao Love

The Greek word *agapao* means love as a moral principle where one intentionally does the right thing at the right time for the right reason (Winston, 2002). Patterson (2003) added that agapao love puts the focus on the employee before the organization. Operationally, this kind of love is characterized by genuine care (Russell, 2001), is unconditional (Lopez, 1995), values

people for themselves (Wagner-Marsh & Conley, 1999), and relates to followers on a personal level (Winston). Winston stated that agapao means to love in a social and moral sense. According to Winston, this love causes leaders to consider each person not simply as a means to an end but as a complete person: one with needs, wants, and desires. Swindoll (1981) stated that servanthood and a true love work hand in hand. Likewise, Ferch and Mitchell (2001) advocated love as a goal for leaders, and Crom (1998) pointed out that servant leaders genuinely care for others and are interested in the lives of followers. Russel and Stone (2002) posited that love is unconditional for a servant leader. Agapao love is of particular importance in Patterson's (2003) model as it is the originating concept of the model.

Humility

Humility, according to Sandage and Wiens (2001), is the ability to keep one's accomplishments and talents in perspective. This means practicing self-acceptance, but it further includes the practice of true humility, which means not being self-focused but rather focused on others. Humility in a servant leader is not a weakness, but a strength, according to Patterson (2003). To her, humility is a peaceful virtue that rejects self-glorification and is an almost social reversal of it in that it purports the idea of serving. The servant-leader sees humility as reflecting an accurate self-assessment and therefore maintains a relatively low self-focus (Tangney, 2000). Blanchard (2000) added that humility is evidenced by listening, a feeling of accountability to those served, and receptivity to criticism. Collins (2001) amplified the definition of humility to include modesty, ambition that is not self-channeled, sharing credit for success, and elevating followers to become leaders also. Winston (2003) stated that, since Patterson (2003) found that leaders do what they do because it is the right thing to do, the necessary outgrowths of *agapao* love and humility are altruism and seeking the follower's interest or vision for the organization.

Altruism

Altruism is helping others selflessly for the sake of helping, which involves personal sacrifice with no personal gain (Patterson, 2003; Kaplan, 2000). Specifically, altruism involves behavior directed toward others, high risk of sacrifice to the actor, no external reward, and voluntary action (Monroe, 2002; Oliner, 2002). It also involves going against one's own personal interest in order to satisfy the needs of others. Furthermore, the altruism carries with it the idea that one can gain personal pleasure in helping others. Likewise, Eisenberg (1986) defined altruistic behavior as "voluntary behavior that is intended to benefit another and is not motivated by the expectation of external reward" (p. 1). Elster (1990), on the other hand, argued that not all altruistic actions are done out of love, and, in any event, that they include a measure of self-interest. According to Oliner, altruism involves a range of behaviors along a continuum running from least to most self-sacrificing behavior: on one end lies "conventional altruism," and on the other lies "heroic altruism," in which the altruistic actor is willing to lay down his or her life for another.

Vision

Blanchard (2000) defined this concept as "a picture of the future that produces passion" (p. 5). Greenleaf (1977) offered insight on the person-centeredness of vision, stating that the measure of servant leadership is weather the people who are served grow as people. Vision is necessary to good leadership (Sashkin, 1986). Autry (2001) expanded the usual scope of vision to include the leader's vision of his or her own purpose, mission, and value. The next step, he argues, is to inculcate this vision in others. However, vision in Patterson's (2003) servant leadership model is different. It refers to the leader's vision of the role of the follower in the organization, which is different than vision commonly found in the literature according to Winston (2003). Winston stated that vision in her servant leadership model is operates when the leader finds the various interests and goals of the employee as they relate to what the follower wants to do; then, the leader can modify the organization's procedures and methods to best fit the follower. Patterson argued that vision for the servant leader refers to the idea that the leader can sees this person as a viable and worthy person, believes in his future state, and thus seeks to serve him accordingly.

Trust

Trust is defined as "confidence in or reliance on another team member" in terms of his or her morality (e.g., honesty) and competence (Hauser & House, 2000, p. 230). Melrose (1995) understood the dual nature of trust's definition, stating that servant leaders instill trust in their followers by being trustworthy. At the same time, servant leaders help their followers toward self-actualization by trusting them. Followers are more likely to follow a leader whose behaviors are consistent and trustworthy and who can connect with their aspirations (Kouzes & Posner, 1993). According to Russell (2001), the values of integrity and honesty build interpersonal and organizational trust and lead to credibility. This trust appears to be essential in servant leadership (Story, 2002). Similarly, Wis (2002) stated that trust is an integral element of servant leadership in which the leader believes in the follower's ability to accomplish goals and enable the leader's vision of and for the follower. Trust works with vision; therefore, Patterson's model shows trust occurring at the same time as vision (Winston, 2003). Winston stated that this helps present the process of how the leader engages with the follower to establish the vision with the follower and to establish/place trust in the follower with regard to organizational element. Winston also noted that in these two variables of vision and trust, there is no cost benefit analysis to determine if the follower's vision is worth doing. In Patterson's model, the outcome of the two variables, vision and trust, is empowerment.

Empowerment

Bass (1990) posited that empowerment is power-sharing with followers in planning and decision-making. Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) asserted that servant leaders empower followers in accordance with acting on their values. In doing so, relationship becomes transforming. At the heart of empowerment is the way people are valued (Patterson, 2003). As a goal of empowerment, servant leaders create many leaders at all levels (Russell, 2001), which entails powersharing that enables people to excel. Thus, empowerment becomes the central

element in excellent leadership, and specifically servant leadership (Russell & Stone, 2002). Vision and trust lead to empowerment or providing the follower with the power, authority, accountability, responsibility, and resources to achieve what the follower wants to achieve relative to his/her vision within the organization (Winston, 2003). Winston argues that in the process of empowering, the servant leader is willing to give up control and power so that the follower can be effective and successful in the accomplishment of the tasks at hand. According to Winston, this 'freedom' is not carte-blanche and anarchist in design, but progressive in nature, with the follower being empowered in small amounts, allowing him or her to learn and grow to the point of being capable and willing to handle larger levels of empowerment.
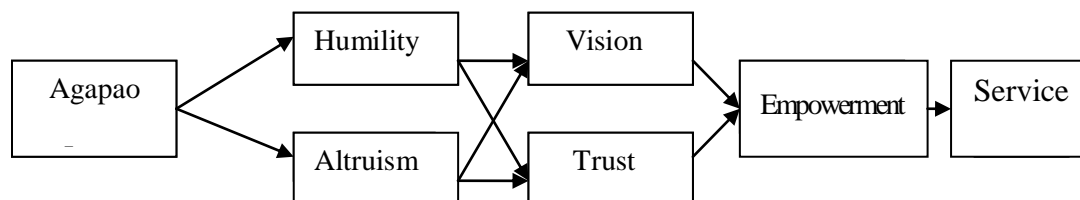
Service

Swindoll (1981) defined service as giving of one's personal involvement and authenticity – a giving of the leader's self and schedule. According to Swindoll, service involves giving time, energy, care, compassion, and perhaps even one's belongings. The act of serving includes a mission of responsibility to others; people are accountable to those they serve, whether they serve customers or subordinates (Wis, 2002; Greenleaf, 1996). Leaders model their service to others in their behavior, attitudes, and values (Lytle, Horn, & Mokwa, 1998). According to Block (1993), service is the hallmark of servant leaders (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Russel & Stone, 2002; Covey, 2002; Buchen, 1998; Wis, 2002; Guillen & Gonzalez, 2001; Fairholm & Fairholm, 2000). Winston (2003) noted that the servant leader sees his or her role to the follower as one of providing the follower with what is needed for the follower to accomplish his/her task.

Servant Leadership Model

Figure 1 summarizes Patterson's (2003) model providing the proposed causal relationships among its concepts. This model details how the servant leadership constructs work together beginning with *agapao* love and ending with service. This model illustrates the variables presenting the servant leader's role toward the follower (Winston, 2003).

Figure 1: Patterson's Servant Leadership Model

Gender Similarity

In communication studies, gender similarity has been found to be a positive predictor of involvement (Singhal & Rogers, 1999) and homophily (Rogers, 1995). Additionally, the

influence of gender similarity in predicting affective involvement in the communication process has also been supported (e.g., Brown & Cody, 1993). Furthemore, Laub (1999, p.84) stated that servant leadership is not perceived differently by gender, age, organizational tenure, and education. The present study also explores the effect of gender similarity between leaders and followers on the servant leadership constructs.

Servant Leadership Model

As discussed earlier, the primary purpose of this study is to add to the body of knowledge on servant leadership by (a) testing the causal relationship between the constructs of Patterson's (2003) servant leadership model and (b) validating Patterson's theoretical constructs of servant leadership in the Bulgarian context. Based on the theoretical foundation previously discussed, six research hypotheses (RH) were used to empirically investigate servant leadership in the Bulgarian context:

RH1: A leader's agapao love is positively related to his or her humility.
RH2: A leader's agapao love is positively related to his or her altruism.
RH3: A leader's humility and altruism are positively related to his or her vision for the followers.
RH4: A leader's humility and altruism are positively related to the leader's trust in his followers.
RH5: A leader's vision and trust are positively related to his or her empowerment of the followers.
RH6: A leader's empowerment of the followers is positively related to the leader's service to the followers.

Additionally, the following research question was asked about the role of gender similarity on the servant leadership concepts, wherein gender similarity was defined as the same gender being shared by the follower and his or her leader.

RQ: Does gender similarity between leader and follower have an effect on the seven servant leadership concepts?

Methodology

The methodological approach taken in the quantitative design is non-experimental. With its primary objective being to test a servant leadership theory, this study is an explanatory research of causal relationships. Based on its time dimension, the study is cross-sectional.

Sample

The sample for the present research was selected from students of the School of History of Education and Management of Education (SHEME) at Sofia University. Sofia University, established in 1888, is the first Bulgarian university. It is the largest and most prestigious educational and scientific center in the country, offering 83 degree courses in humanities and sciences. The sampling frame consisted of students in the second and third years of their programs at SHEME. These students have been taking leadership courses in their school as the school programmatically prepares them to become the new leaders of Bulgaria. Of these

students, 335 participated in this research. However, 16 surveys had incomplete data and removed from any data collection calculation, therefore yielding a final sample size of $N = 319$.

Table 1
Participant's Gender

Gender	n	Percent
Male	90	28.2
Female	229	71.8

Table 2
Leader's Gender

Gender	n	Percent
Male	89	27.9
Female	230	72.1

Data Collection

Data were collected by a personal distribution method. This approach was selected because of convenience, timeliness, ease of response, standardization, and increased participation level. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured for all research participant responses. All students in the second and third year of their studies in SHEME were invited to participate in the survey during a period of two weeks. Each student had an equal opportunity of becoming a participant. An instructor from SHEME, the researchers' contact at the university, distributed the survey to all participants. Participants had 15 minutes to evaluate his or her leader by answering the given questions. Survey participants evaluated their mentor as their leader. This mentor was a faculty who has been guiding and helping students through their academic and administrative process at SHEME. After answering the questions, participants submitted the surveys to the instructor. The instrument included (a) demographic questions (gender for the participants and gender for the leader) and (b) Dennis and Bocarnea's (2005) Servant Leadership Assessment Instrument (SLAI). The instrument was translated from English into Bulgarian. Students' age and ethnicity in SHEME are homogeneous and, therefore, controlled through the design of the study.

Instrument

According to the SLAI's authors, this instrument is the first one to specifically measure the seven concepts of Patterson's theory of servant leadership. This survey addresses followers' opinions about their leaders, addressing each of the seven servant leadership concepts in six questionnaire items. Followers were asked to respond to each of the SLAI statements as they believed their leader would think, act, or behave. While a relatively new instrument in the field of servant leadership studies, Dennis and Bocarnea's (2005) SLAI demonstrates acceptable reliability. Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients ranging from .89 to .92 have been reported (Dennis, 2004) for four of the seven factors: love, empowerment, vision, and humility. Face and content validity was built into the test development process, following methods set in DeVellis'

(1991, 2003) scale development guidelines. The criterion-related validity and construct-related validity of the instrument were established empirically and have been supported (Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Irving, 2005). However, the authors suggested future research to strengthen the instrument.

Per Patterson's request (personal communication, October 2, 2006), the original SLAI was modified to reflect follower-centered vision rather than organization-centered vision, therefore better fitting Patterson's theory. Hence, the original six SLAI items addressing vision were modified accordingly. The original SLAI questionnaire was translated from English to Bulgarian. All questions were tested in a focus group of instructors from SHEME to clarify the meaning of the questions and avoid any misunderstandings of the terms due to translation.

After analyzing the principal component structure of the data collected in this research and the reliability of the seven servant leadership concepts, 19 items were kept out of the initial 42: Agapao love (3 items, Cronbach α = .81); humility (3; α = .64); altruism (1 item), vision (3, α = .83), trust (3, α = .77); empowerment (3, α = .78), and service (3, α = .66). These items were used to build the composite variables representing the seven servant leadership concepts used in the hypotheses-testing part of the analysis. Descriptive statistics of these composite variables are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Servant Leadership Constructs' Descriptive Statistics

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std.
Love	319	0	18	12.17	4.24
Humility	319	0	18	11. 31	3.87
Altrusim	319	0	6	3.93	1.22
Vision	319	0	18	11.56	4.25
Trust	319	0	18	12.32	4.24
Empowerment	319	0	18	11.67	4.06
Service	319	0	18	11.78	3.77

Results

In order to test the hypothesized causal relationships between the seven constructs of Patterson's servant leadership model (hypotheses H1–H6), simple and multiple regression analyses were conducted. Additionally, t-tests were performed to answer the research question addressing the influence of leader-follower gender similarity to the seven servant leadership constructs.

Research Hypotheses

Simple regressions were run to test hypotheses H1, H2, and H6, yielding the following results:

H1 is supported: A leader's agapao love is positively related to his or her humility [R-square = .31, $F(1, 318)$ = 142.68, p = .000 < 0.05, β = .56];

H2 was supported: A leader's agapao love is positively related to his or her altruism [*R-square* = .21, *F* (1, 318) = 82.44, *p* = .000 < 0.05, β = .45]; and,
H6 was supported: A leader's empowerment of the followers is positively related to the leader's service to the followers [*R-square* = .11, *F* (1, 318) = 39.39, *p* = .000 < 0.05, β = .33].

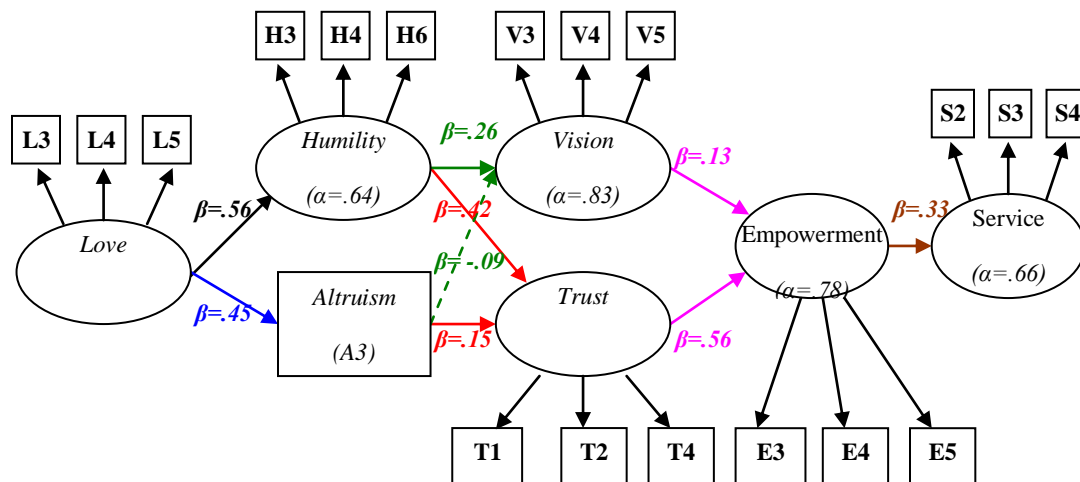Multiple regressions were run to test H3, H4, and H5. Results were as follows:

H3:   A leader's humility and altruism are positively related to his or her vision for the followers [*R-square* = .06, *F* (2, 317) = 9.14, *p* = .000 < 0.05; β (humility) = .26; *p* < .05; β (altrusim) = -.09, *p* >.05];
H4:   A leader's humility and altruism are positively related to the leader's trust in his followers [*R-square* = .25, *F* (2, 317) = 52.93, *p* = .000 < 0.05, β (humility) = .42 *p* < .05; β (altrusim) = .15, *p* < .05];
H5:   A leader's vision and trust are positively related to his or her empowerment of the followers [*R-square* = .45, *F* (2, 317) = 131.30, *p* = .000 < 0.05, β (vision) = .13, β (trust) = .61]

Figure 2 presents the results of the linear regression analyses of the causal relationship shown in Patterson's (2003) servant leadership model.

Figure 2: Graphic Representation of the Results in the Tested Servant Leadership Model

H1: *F*(1,317) = 142.68, *p* < .05; *R*-square = .31; β = .56

H2: *F*(1,317) = 82.44, *p* < .05; *R*-square = .21; β = .45

H3: *F*(2,316) = 9.14, *p* < .05; *R*-square = .06; β $_H$ = .26, *(β $_A$= -*

Research Questions

Descriptive statistics were run first on the seven servant leadership concepts by gender similarity (see Table 4).

Table 4

Servant Leadership Constructs' Descriptive Statistics by Gender Similarity

	Gender Similarities	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Love	Same Gender	198	12.25	4.37
	Different Gender	121	12.04	4.05
Humility	Same Gender	198	11.46	3.79
	Different Gender	121	11.07	4.01
Altruism	Same Gender	198	3.81	1.78
	Different Gender	121	3.96	1.54
Vision	Same Gender	198	11.49	4.50
	Different Gender	121	11.66	3.71
Trust	Same Gender	198	12.35	4.35
	Different Gender	121	12.26	4.06
Empowerment	Same Gender	198	11.71	4.18
	Different Gender	121	11.60	3.88
Service	Same Gender	198	11.60	3.88
	Different Gender	121	12.07	3.56

To answer the research question (RQ: Does gender similarity between leader and follower have an effect on the seven servant leadership concept?), t-tests were performed on each of the seven constructs. The results of these tests are presented in Table 5. None of them yielded significant differences.

Table 5

Servant Leadership Constructs by Gender Similarity: t-test Resuts

	t	df	p	Mean Diff.	Std. Err. Diff.
Altruism3	-.75	317	.46	-.15	.10
Love	.42	317	.67	.21	.49
Humility	.86	317	.39	.38	.45
Vision	-.34	317	.73	-.17	.49
Trust	.20	317	.84	.10	.49
Empowerment	.22	317	.82	.10	.47
Service	-1.09	317	.28	-.47	.43

To summarize the results of the study of the Bulgarian sample, the causal relationships posited in Patterson's servant leadership model (2003) were supported with one exception, the relationship between altruism and vision. Furthermore, gender similarity was not found to

determine differences in servant leadership characteristics. These two findings appear to support the portability of the servant leadership theory beyond the specificity of the given sample.

Discussion

This study provides an important addition to the field of leadership studies as it further supports the servant leadership model proposed by Patterson (2003). The research confirms the causal relationships among the seven constructs of Patterson's servant leadership model. Additionally, the study shows no influence of the leader-follower gender similarity on the seven constructs of servant leadership. This study also validates the theory of servant leadership as offered by Patterson (2003) within the Bulgarian context. Leaders lead and serve with *agapao* love, humility, altruism, vision for the followers, trust, and service toward the empowerment of the leader. The values of the servant leader stem from his or her ability to focus on the needs of the follower. Servant leaders know the followers well, help them grow, and develop clear understanding of purpose, direction, and dignity (Batten, 1997). Although the scope of this study is not to present servant leadership as the "correct" leadership style, it helps solidify the theoretical dimension of the servant leadership model by advancing the understanding of the servant leadership phenomenon.

The present study suggests two main directions for future research. First, stronger statistical testing of the theory using structural equation modeling would better test the measurement of the servant leadership concepts and the causal relationships among them as the literature is still weak on both the ontological and the epistemological aspects of the theory. Second, while the present study provided an analysis of the causal relationships between the seven constructs of Patterson's (2003) servant leadership model in the Bulgarian context, the generalizability of the servant leadership theory proposed by Patterson would benefit from future tests in other organizations and other countries. Such cross-national and cross-cultural testing would ensure Patterson's servant leadership theory's portability. Finally, future research should test alternate servant leadership theories in an attempt to unify the theoretical understanding and explanation of the servant leadership phenomenon.

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