'Lad culture' and sexual violence against students[1]

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Introduction

This chapter addresses the issue of sexual violence against students and the concept of 'lad culture' which has been used to frame this phenomenon in the UK and has connections to similar debates around masculinities in other countries. This issue is much-researched and debated but under-theorised and, due to a lack of intersectionality, radical feminist frameworks around violence against women are useful but incomplete. The chapter sketches a more nuanced approach to the understanding of campus sexual violence and the masculine cultures that frame it, which also engages with the intersecting structures of patriarchy and neoliberalism. It argues that framing these issues structurally and institutionally is necessary in order to avoid individualistic and punitive approaches to tackling them which may seem feminist but are embedded in neoliberal rationalities.

Background

From concerns about 'eve teasing' or gendered and sexual harassment on South Asian campuses, to debates about 'lad culture' and freedom of speech in the UK, to Lady Gaga's performance at the 2016 Oscars when dozens of US survivors joined her silently on stage, the issue of sexual violence against students has recently been high on the international agenda. Starting in the 1980s, the sexual victimisation of women students has been studied in many countries including Japan, China (Nguyen et al, 2013), South Korea (Jennings et al, 2011), Haiti, South Africa, Tanzania (Gage, 2015), Jordan (Takash et al, 2013), Chile (Lehrer et al, 2013), Canada (Osborne, 1995), Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain (Feltes et al, 2012), Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka (Chudasama et al, 2013; Nahar et al, 2013), the US and the UK (Phipps and Smith, 2012). Beginning in the US, initial studies were often psychological

and individualistic, focused on motivations of male perpetrators, acceptance of 'rape myths' and experiences of post-traumatic stress. This orientation, as well as a largely positivist slant, continues in much academic and policy work, as the 'problem' is established and explorations begin in new international contexts. However, there has also been a strong thread of feminist analysis grounded in the concept of patriarchy, and the continuum between more 'everyday' forms of sexual harassment and more 'serious' manifestations of sexual violence. More recently, there have been attempts to contextualise campus violence within theories of masculinity, shaping discussions of 'lad culture' in the UK, 'bro culture' in the US and a new/renewed interest in 'rape culture' internationally.

Our study

In the UK, the first major study of women students' experiences of harassment and violence was released by the National Union of Students (NUS) in 2010. This found that one in seven women students had experienced a serious physical or sexual assault during their studies, and 68% had been sexually harassed (NUS, 2010). Following this, Isabel Young and I were commissioned by NUS to explore the links between sexual violence and 'laddish' masculinities characterised by competitive displays of sexism and misogyny. Our research (NUS, 2013) was a qualitative interview study with 40 female students at British universities, exploring their experiences of and feelings about 'lad culture' in their communities. We defined 'lad culture' as a group mentality residing in behaviours such as sport, heavy alcohol consumption, casual sex and sexist/discriminatory 'banter', and found that many of the behaviours collected under this banner actually constituted sexual harassment. We also found that much of this was normalised within student communities, with 'casual' non-consensual groping being commonplace at parties and in social venues, and expectations around sexual activity which required young women to be constantly available yet almost entirely passive. This, we suggested, created the conditions in which potentially serious boundary violations, including sexual assault, could occur. The release of our report was met by a wave of grassroots activism and policy conversation, and a deluge of media stories which incorporated both genuine concern and moral panic (Phipps and Young, 2015a, b).

These debates in the UK echoed similar ones around 'bro cultures' (Chrisler et al, 2012), 'hookup cultures' (Sweeney, 2014) and 'rape culture' (Heldman and Brown, 2014) in the US and internationally. In

many countries there has tended to be a sensationalisation of the issue amidst calls for retaliatory and punitive responses, exemplified in the 2015 film *The Hunting Ground*, for which Lady Gaga's song provided the soundtrack. However, as yet there is little useful theorisation of why and how particular types of masculinities might shape and produce sexual violence among students, which means that the evidence base for prevention is thin. Radical feminist work on violence against women, in which anti-violence policy in Western countries tends to be grounded (Phillips, 2006; Jones and Cook, 2008; Bumiller, 2009), has established sexual violence as a gendered phenomenon primarily perpetrated by men against women and framed by the power relations between the sexes which also construct typically masculine and feminine sexual roles and expectations. However, this theory lacks nuance and does not give insight into why particular types of men perpetrate sexual violence in specific contexts for different reasons. Similarly, the term 'lad culture' is not helpful analytically, as it tends to collapse a variety of behaviours and motivations together (Phipps, 2016). There is a need, then, to (re)theorise 'laddish' masculinities and revisit theoretical frameworks around violence against women. To do this properly, we need to take an intersectional approach.

Theorising sexual violence

Radical feminists were not the first to politicise rape. As McGuire (2011) documents, the US Civil Rights movement was rooted in a powerful (and now largely obscured) strand of anti-rape resistance, which prefigured many of the insights of second-wave feminism. Generations of activists such as Ida B. Wells (McGuire, 2011: xviii) and Rosa Parks, who was an anti-rape campaigner 'long before she became the patron saint of the bus boycott' (McGuire, 2011: xvii), situated both the sexual abuse of black women and allegations of rape against black men within a broader analysis of the dynamics of racist oppression (see also Davis, [1981] 2011). 'Decades later', McGuire (2011: 46) writes, 'when radical feminists finally made rape and sexual assault political issues, they walked in the footsteps of [these] black women'. Radical feminists appeared blissfully unaware of this, instead believing that anti-rape organising was a Women's Liberation Movement invention (see for example Brownmiller, 1975: 397). The fact that the huge historical contribution of black women was erased (and the work of feminists of colour continues to be so) speaks to dynamics of racism and privilege within the feminist movement. These have also shaped the production of rather one-dimensional theory.

'I have never been free of the fear of rape', wrote Susan Griffin in 1971 (p 26). Today it is often taken for granted within feminist circles that rape is everyday rather than uncommon and more often committed by someone the victim knows than a stranger. However, this idea has a relatively short life in the political and cultural mainstream. In the 1970s and 1980s, radical feminist theorising and empirical research (see for example Russell, 1983; Hall, 1985) helped give the lie to the widely-held idea that rape was both rare and necessarily graphically violent (Jones and Cook, 2008: 5). Like those of the black activists preceding them (McGuire, 2011), radical feminist definitions of rape were expansive, reflecting women's experiences and refusing to let spouses and family members off the hook. This centring of lived realities defined rape as a violation of women's bodies, not men's property rights; both the testimonial politics of black women within Civil Rights movements (dating back to slavery) and subsequent radical feminist activism based on the slogan 'the personal is political' (Hanisch, 1971) focused on women helping women through sharing, healing and politicising trauma (Jones and Cook, 2008; McGuire, 2011).

Brownmiller (1975) and others focused on the 'violence' in sexual violence, conceptualising it as a tool of gender oppression which functioned to preserve male dominance rather than express uncontrolled sexuality (which was the popular belief). The threat of the 'stranger rapist' was seen as key to maintaining structural relations of patriarchal power; this created generalised fear and also caused women to look to specific men for protection, which often put them at greater risk of abuse (Brownmiller, 1975; MacKinnon, 1989). This structural interpretation echoed (without credit) the black feminist politics of the Civil Rights movement in its conceptualisation of sexual violence as a strategy of oppression and terror, albeit focusing only on the dimension of gender rather than the interconnections between gender and race.[2] Kelly's (1988) continuum of violence defined a collection of behaviours, from sexual harassment to sexualised murder, all with the social and political function of keeping women in their place. Radical feminists argued that a range of acts (some of which had been normalised or defined as 'minor') could be harmful, and that this was not adequately reflected in legal codes.

Important legislative gains were made from this conceptualisation of rape as violence rather than sex, including prohibitions on the use of sexual history evidence in court, although in practice this continued to happen (Kelly et al, 2006). In contrast, other radical feminists centred the 'sexual' in sexual violence, examining in particular the institution and practice of heterosexuality. For Dworkin (1976) and MacKinnon

(1989) heterosexuality constituted the gendered eroticisation of dominance and submission, with the latter regarded as consent. This meant that coercion and violence were a constitutive part of 'normal' sexual relations, and defined rape as committed by men who exemplified rather than deviated from extant social norms. The conceptualisation of femininity as a socialised state of embodied submission has since been rightly criticised for both playing into misogynist tropes and for being a specific representation of the identities and experiences of middle class, white women (hooks, 1981; Skeggs, 1997; Serano, 2009; Phipps, 2009). However, it provided a useful critical analysis of the construction of consent in conditions of inequality, and allowed for an appreciation of the conditioned reality in which many women did not fight back against assaults, challenging prevailing myths which defined 'real rape' as being one in which there was evidence of a struggle (Lees, 1996).

Radical feminist ideas were important in understanding the co-constitution of gender, sexuality and violence and were responsible for a number of legislative and political achievements (Cahill, 2001). However, from the 1980s onwards they came under increasing critique from black feminists and others for their lack of appreciation of differences between women which shaped experiences of gender, sexuality and violence in divergent and often directly contradictory ways (Davis, [1981] 2011; Carby, 1982; Crenshaw, 1991; Skeggs, 1997). Furthermore, the meanings of structures such as the family and the state, taken for granted within radical feminist theorising, were exposed as largely specific to the white middle classes, erasing the often completely different experiences of other women (Carby, 1982; Crenshaw, 1991). Although it had established strong links between masculinity and violence, radical feminist work had largely failed to explore how sexual violence was central to relations of power other than gender, for instance colonial and racist systems (see for example Mohanty, 1988; Ahmed, 1992). The space for thinking through issues connected to class, race or colonialism was limited within radical feminist frameworks in which, as MacKinnon (1989: 12) maintained, the 'woman question' was *the* question.

The concept of intersectionality, codified within black feminist thought from the 1980s onwards partly in response to these debates (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1998), is invaluable in its exhortation to move away from one-dimensional notions towards ideas of a co-constitution of social categories, positions and encounters which produces important differences in subjectivity, experience and practice. In relation to sexual violence, an intersectional perspective allows for an understanding of why particular types of men may be violent in specific

situations, and how violence is experienced by victims and survivors in different social locations. It also encourages us to examine how both acts *and allegations* of sexual violence are part of gendered and other oppressive systems, including the oppressive power of the state wielded against some groups of citizens more than (or for the protection of) others. When applied to discussions of 'lad culture' and sexual violence in universities, an intersectional framework raises important questions around how performances of classed and racialised, as well as gendered and heterosexualised, superiority are at play, as well as the influence of broader intersecting structures such as patriarchy and neoliberalism. It also raises issues around the carceral solutions currently being proposed and implemented, in terms of which men they may construct and target as 'violent', and how these men may be dealt with.

Theorising laddish masculinities

Laddism in the UK has long been associated with the white working classes, at least since Paul Willis' iconic study *Learning to Labour* (1977), which focused on rebellions against academia and authority performed by young men who had been constructed as 'failures' in a hostile education system and job market. This type of laddish rebellion is still at work in many school and university classrooms, in higher education particularly within institutions with a more diverse social class intake (see for example Barnes, 2012; Jackson et al, 2015; Jackson and Sundaram, 2015).[3] Interpretations of laddism in schools have largely followed the Willis framework, and 'laddish' behaviours in university classrooms can similarly be positioned as an expression of alienation from neoliberal, middle class (and allegedly feminised) higher education. When laddism has been reported in the classrooms of more elite universities, this has tended to be a more domineering behaviour which has been defined as intimidating rather than disruptive, and which also appears more likely to be overtly sexist (NUS, 2013), although of course sexism and violence against women are issues that cross class boundaries.

In contrast to the mainly lower–middle and working class framing of classroom disruption, the sexist 'lad culture' which has been identified recently in the social and sexual spheres of university life appears to be largely (although not exclusively) the preserve of privileged men. This is reflected in our research findings and in recent media reports (NUS, 2013; Phipps and Young, 2015a, b), although more research is needed especially on the differences between 'new' and 'old' universities and those in campus and more urban settings. Recent discussion of

university laddism brings to mind the 'new lad' of the 1990s, a more middle class version incorporating binge-drinking, drug-taking, casual sex and extreme sports (Phipps and Young, 2015a). There are also associations with masculinities which would not historically have been granted the epithet 'laddish', due to its working class connotations. The rugby players, drinking and debating society members from elite universities who exemplify contemporary UK laddism (Phipps and Young, 2015b) bring to mind the men and masculinities typified by the Bullingdon Club, a centuries-old all-male exclusive dining club at Oxford University which boasts high-profile former members including former British Prime Minister David Cameron.

This class profile is mirrored in the debate around 'rape culture' in the US, where elite white fraternities have been singled out (Valenti, 2014). In one high-profile story, Delta Kappa Epsilon at Yale was suspended en masse for an incident in which pledges chanted 'No means yes! Yes means anal!' around campus (Burgoyne, 2011). Elite men have been the focus of concerns around sexism and sexual harassment and violence in other Anglo-Western countries; in 2013, students at the prestigious church-run Wesley College at Sydney University won the annual 'Ernie' award for sexism for distributing beer holders branded 'It's not rape if it's my birthday' (AFP, 2013). Within an intersectional analysis, behaviours such as these cannot and should not be interpreted using the same ideas of alienation and resistance which are pertinent to discussions of working class laddism. The aggressive sexism of more privileged men can be seen as an attempt to preserve or reclaim territory, contextualised in relation to the patriarchal backlash against feminism, and attempts to diversify the UK student population along gender, race and class lines.

Intersections of power and privilege

Laddism cannot be theorised by a framework that only names gender and the patriarchal construction of men's violence against women; although gendered violence is perpetrated by men of all social classes, it is also necessary to appreciate the motivations and contexts informing different performances of masculinity. There is a distinction between *being* dominated as a working class young man navigating a middle class education system, and *feeling* dominated as a middle or upper class young man dealing with a loss of privilege (Phipps, 2016). Both can be seen in relation to the construction of white middle class young women as ideal neoliberal educational subjects, but there are also classed relations between these masculinities which warrant investigation. This

means that an analysis of laddism as a reassertion of traditional gender binaries, which accords well with the radical feminist conception of sexual harassment and violence as tools to keep women in their place (Kelly, 1988), is resonant but ultimately incomplete.

There are strong currents of classism and racism in contemporary middle class 'lad culture', perhaps linked to the growth of widening participation agendas focused on increasing the numbers of working class and black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students. In the classroom, it could be argued that the domineering behaviour of more privileged men (Jackson and Dempster, 2009; NUS, 2013) is both an attempt to intimidate women and a way to position middle class 'lads' as the intellectually superior counterparts of their 'disruptive' working class peers. Similarly the jokiness and self-conscious irony of this laddism could be viewed as a counterpoise to the construction of black masculinity as dangerously sexual (Williams et al, 2008), both invisibilising white men as perpetrators and preserving the idea of black men as inherently more threatening (Phipps, 2016). Its postfeminist 'raunchiness' could also be examined as it relates to perceptions of Asian men as fragile and sexually inadequate (Wong et al, 2014). In racialised terms then white middle class laddism may be an assertion of superior virility that nevertheless positions itself as less threatening than (and therefore also superior to) the black hyper-masculine Other (Phipps, 2016).

Homophobia is also a central component of laddish cultures and behaviours (NUS, 2013; Muir and Seitz, 2004), which can be seen in relation to ideas about 'inclusive masculinity' or 'hybrid masculinity' as a new middle class norm (Anderson and McGuire, 2010; Bridges, 2014). Retro-sexist performances may reply to this softening of masculinity, as well as the potential blurring of gender lines which has accompanied the greater visibility of trans, genderqueer, non-binary people and others, especially within student communities (Dugan et al, 2012; Rankin and Beemyn, 2012). Inclusive masculinities may be more style than substance, and thus obscure continued gender oppressions (Sweeney, 2014). Celebrations of these masculinities should also be related to geopolitical discourses constructing Western men as evolved and Other cultures as inherently misogynistic and homophobic (Bhattacharyya, 2008). Nevertheless, the representation, if not the reality, of these masculinities may be significant in understanding contemporary laddism in social and sexual spaces.

All these intersecting issues complicate interpretations of contemporary middle class white laddism as solely an anti-feminist backlash. Of course, this is also at work; white middle class girls and

young women now frequently outperform boys and young men and embody the confident adaptability that is a contemporary employment requirement (Skelton, 2002; Williams et al, 2008). The idea that women are winning the 'battle of the sexes', popular in many Western countries, is a key framing factor in relation to 'lad culture' (Phipps and Young, 2015b) as well as retro-sexism more generally. Within this narrative the successful white middle class woman becomes universal, disregarding evidence that many gendered inequalities remain and that women from minoritised groups continue to struggle (Karamessini and Rubery, 2013). Furthermore, there is no acknowledgement of the fact that the masculinised values and power structures of education persist (Skelton, 2002; Leathwood and Read, 2009). Such sensationalist notions of a 'crisis of masculinity' thought to have been prompted by gains in women's rights have had a significant purchase on policy and popular debate (Skelton, 2002; Francis and Archer, 2005; Phipps, 2016), and in the context of these ideas, there is evidence that white middle class boys are being hothoused by parents who see them as frail and imperilled (Williams et al, 2008).

Viewed more sympathetically, performances of laddism could be seen as a pressure release for white, middle class young men who may be struggling to occupy neoliberal educational subjectivities, or a reaction against being cosseted by over-protective parents. This potential element of rebellion provides continuity with working class forms; however, a *sense* of victimisation on the part of the privileged does not mean victimisation has occurred. Furthermore, this oppression narrative has recently been used to great political advantage by the dominating classes, in debates about 'free speech' on campuses in both the US and the UK which have featured defences of 'lad culture' as a form of sexual self-expression in a repressive and repressed society (see for example Hayes, 2013; O'Neill, 2014; Palmer, 2015). It should be acknowledged that radical feminist initiatives around sexual violence have been co-opted in the past by moralistic and carceral agendas; this will be discussed later in the chapter (Bumiller, 2009; Phipps, 2014). However, to note, this is not to position laddism as progressive when it is in fact a reactionary phenomenon.

Intersections of patriarchy, neoliberalism and carceral feminism

Also challenging the generalised 'crisis of masculinity' narrative is the fact that white middle class and elite masculinities are often seen as harmonious with the contemporary context of corporate neoliberalism

(Connell, 2005; McGuire et al, 2014). In our work on laddism, and drawing on research exploring how norms of individualism, competition and consumerism are shaping and reshaping sexualities (Gill and Donaghue, 2013), Isabel Young and I have argued that it embodies neoliberal rationalities through its characteristic modes of sexualised audit (Phipps and Young, 2015b). Many of the elements of student 'lad cultures' are not new; however, conventional patriarchal modes of misogyny and one-upmanship (Jackson, 2010) have been reshaped by neoliberal values in the university environment. We argue that the market-political rationality of neoliberalism (Brown, 2006), which has come to predominate in the academy (Lynch, 2006; Ball, 2012), can be observed in laddish performative regimes.

Within contemporary middle class laddism, older practices such as the legendary 'fuck a fresher' race exist alongside more neoliberalised systems of monitoring and measurement such as charting sexual conquests and giving women grades for their sex appeal. Our research highlighted a variety of sexual scoring matrices and practices by which men appraise women. These were widely exposed in May 2013 when a number of Facebook pages entitled 'Rate Your Shag' appeared, linked to various universities, which were 'liked' by over 20,000 users of the social network in 72 hours before being deleted by administrators (Datoo, 2013). Similarly, more traditional modes of male entitlement have been reframed within these youth cultures, with ideas about 'having' women augmented by the notion of maximising sexual capital. This, in turn, reflects the idea of maximum outcomes for minimal effort which now underpins educational consumption (Molesworth et al, 2009). It can be suggested that the domineering 'effortless achievement' which characterises middle class laddism in educational contexts (Jackson, 2003; Jackson and Dempster, 2009) also animates the quest for an 'easy' lay.

As well as framing contemporary student laddism, neoliberal and patriarchal universities are complicit in overlooking the harassment and violence that can result from it. In the US, where higher education markets are well established and despite a legislative framework mandating the publication of campus crime statistics (Phipps and Smith, 2012), institutions have been criticised for covering these up, or encouraging students to drop complaints in order to preserve reputation in a competitive field (Sack, 2012). There have also been reports of this in the UK (Younis, 2014), and it is likely that the privatisation of essential services such as campus security and student support and counselling (Williams, 2011) will threaten student safety and the quality of pastoral care. The developing 'pressure-cooker

culture' among academics (Grove, 2012) and fears about casualisation (Lynch, 2006) are also creating an individualism which may mean that academics turn a blind eye while trying to keep our jobs (at best) and advance our careers (at worst).

When universities do take action, it is usually in an individualistic and punitive fashion that both fails to address the roots of problems and has tremendous potential to exacerbate other inequalities. Calls for such measures in the US, exemplified in the 2015 film *The Hunting Ground*, are based on the research of Lisak (2008) who argues that campus offences are committed by a handful of violent sociopaths who 'groom' their targets and coerce and terrify them into submission. These claims however have been challenged; Lisak and Miller's initial paper (2002) was based on four different student dissertations, none on campus sexual assault specifically. It also did not distinguish between assaults committed on different victims and multiple assaults on the same person (LeFauve, 2015). In contrast to this picture of the violent serial rapist, the theorisation in this chapter suggests that many acts of sexual violence at university stem from a variety of more spontaneous boundary-crossings shaped by intersectional cultures of masculinity and scaffolded by the patriarchal and neoliberal rationalities of the institution. A retribution-restitution approach which is embedded in these frameworks may be entirely inappropriate in this context.

Furthermore, there are important intersectional questions about appealing to carceral systems, either within or outside institutions, which may be riddled with racism, classism and other injustices. It is here that radical feminist and neoliberal models meet, and from the 1980s onwards radical feminist theorisations of sexual violence were critiqued by black feminists for mounting uncritical appeals to state apparatuses which were deeply implicated in racist oppression (see for example Carby, 1982; Davis, [1981] 2011; Crenshaw, 1991). Radical feminist-inspired service provision has also been challenged on its co-optation by, or in some cases active collaboration with, neoliberal agendas around crime control, which have been focused on criminalising particular groups of men (usually black and working class) in the service of protecting particular types of women (usually white and middle class) (Bumiller, 2009).

Elizabeth Bernstein (2010) has coined the phrase 'carceral feminism' to describe these relationships between a rather one-dimensional gender theory and neoliberal projects which, in protecting white middle class women, exacerbate the domination of others. Such an intersectional analysis also needs to be applied to policy frameworks and interventions in higher education; questions need to be asked about who may be

defined as violent within these and targeted for surveillance and punishment, and who will be considered worthy of protection. Just as black and working class boys and young men are more likely to be labelled 'disruptive' in the classroom (Monroe, 2005; McDowell, 2007),[4] the construction of these men as inherently more aggressively sexual than their white, middle class counterparts (see for example Phipps, 2009; Roberts, 2013; McGuire et al, 2014) may be reflected in the application of disciplinary codes. These punitive approaches also lack pedagogy, reflecting the callousness of the neoliberal institution which is not conducive to student welfare or the creation of healthy and positive communities. Intersectionality, then, needs to be embedded in our theorisations of laddism *and* in attempts to tackle it.

Conclusion

Contemporary student laddism can be seen as an enactment of power and privilege over multiple intersecting lines. This means that radical feminist frameworks are useful but incomplete; we must acknowledge the universality of men's violence against women but we also need to explore the differences that produce particular masculine cultures and forms and experiences of violence in specific contexts. Student 'lad culture' also reflects the intersections between patriarchy and neoliberalism, and attempts to address it need to take account of how it is institutionally and structurally framed rather than resorting to individualistic approaches which are embedded in neoliberal rationalities and are punitive rather than pedagogic. Indeed the carceral solutions favoured by both neoliberal institutions and radical feminists detract from addressing the intersecting hegemonies in higher education which shape, produce and conceal a variety of forms of bullying and violence.

Notes
[1] This chapter was originally published as Chapter 13 in N. Lombard (ed) (2018) *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Violence*, Routledge: Oxford, pp 171–182.
[2] As Davis (1981 [2011]: 180) pointed out, the prevailing construction of the 'police-blotter rapist' as black and the function of this within structures of racist oppression was generally ignored.
[3] Research conducted by Jackson and Sundaram (2015) found that classroom laddism was more common in universities with lower entry grades, which tend to be those with a more diverse class intake (Sutton Trust, 2011).
[4] This also applies to young black women (see Morris, 2007). Furthermore, due to prevailing stereotypes of black women as aggressive and overly sexual, they are less

likely to be the 'ideal victim' in criminal justice terms (Phipps, 2009), an inequality that may be replicated in the university context.

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