



## Navigating Digital Presence: An Ethnographic Exploration of Adolescent Social Media Use and Emotional Well-Being

Siju Varghese and Diston Kunjachan\*

Assistant Professor, Naipunnya Institute of Management and Information Technology,  
Pongam, Thrissur- 680308, Kerala, India

\*Corresponding Author's Email: [distopaul@gmail.com](mailto:distopaul@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Adolescents today navigate complex digital landscapes where social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat play central roles in shaping identity and emotional well-being. This ethnographic study investigates how habitual social media behaviours—particularly passive activities such as scrolling and lurking—intersect with depressive symptoms and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) among adolescents in Kerala, India. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research combines qualitative insights from a pilot study of young adults with quantitative data collected from 210 adolescents. Findings reveal that passive social media use is strongly correlated with emotional distress, identity uncertainty, and mood fluctuations. Gendered patterns highlight differing emotional responses, with females showing heightened sensitivity to peer validation and body image concerns. Grounded in symbolic interactionism and theories of liminality and liquid modernity, the study frames digital engagement as a ritualised, emotionally charged practice embedded within cultural contexts. The results underscore the urgent need for critical digital literacy programs and culturally sensitive mental health interventions aimed at fostering mindful and balanced social media use among youth. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of the emotional ecosystems surrounding adolescent digital behaviour and advocates for platform-specific, longitudinal studies to inform future policy and practice.

**Keywords:** Adolescents, Social Media, Gender, Liquid Modernity, Mental Health

### Introduction

In recent years, social media has evolved into an indispensable dimension of adolescent life, transforming from a mere communication tool into a dominant cultural space for identity expression, peer engagement, and emotional regulation. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat have become central arenas where young individuals construct and curate their identities, seek social validation, and interact with evolving digital norms and aesthetics (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Unlike earlier generations, where identity development was largely influenced by immediate physical and social environments, today's adolescents often navigate a dual landscape—one rooted in offline contexts and the other in a persistent digital realm. These platforms function as identity-

forming spaces, where adolescents engage in strategic self-presentation and real-time performance of social roles. Posting, liking, following, and even passively observing are socially and emotionally loaded actions that influence self-worth, popularity, and peer status (Nesi, 2020). Social media, in this sense, is not merely a technical interface; it is a symbolic and emotional ecosystem.

However, alongside its potential for creative expression and connection, social media introduces significant emotional vulnerabilities. Adolescents are at a developmentally sensitive stage, where their cognitive, emotional, and social faculties are still maturing (Crone & Dahl, 2012). In such a context, digital environments can either nurture well-being or exacerbate emotional difficulties. Recent studies show a consistent correlation between increased social media use and psychosocial issues such as anxiety, stress, loneliness, and depressive symptoms (Twenge et al., 2018; Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020). A particularly concerning trend is the rise of passive social media engagement—behaviors such as scrolling, lurking, or consuming content without direct interaction. While these actions might appear benign, research shows that they are closely associated with negative affect, social comparison, and perceived social isolation (Verduyn et al., 2017). Passive consumption tends to magnify the gap between one's real life and the idealized lives showcased online, thereby contributing to emotional dysregulation and lowered self-esteem.

These concerns are especially pertinent in regions like Kerala, India, where adolescent internet penetration is high and psychosocial distress among youth has been increasingly reported. Studies conducted in Kerala indicate a growing prevalence of smartphone dependency, particularly among school and college students, and a notable correlation between screen time and emotional distress (Jose & Raj, 2018; Kumar et al., 2021). Mental health reports and informal discussions in public forums such as Reddit also reflect concerns about rising anxiety levels, exam stress, body image issues, and peer pressure linked to digital lifestyles among Kerala's adolescents. The present study builds upon this context by combining ethnographic observation with quantitative psychological measurement to investigate how digital rituals—particularly passive ones like habitual scrolling—shape emotional well-being among adolescents. Ethnography allows for a deeper cultural interpretation of behaviors, uncovering how adolescents use digital platforms as symbolic tools for emotional regulation, identity work, and social positioning.

Specifically, this research addresses the interplay between social media engagement and depressive symptoms, with a focus on the phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)—a prevalent psychological pattern in adolescents characterized by the anxiety that others are experiencing more rewarding lives or events in one's absence (Przybylski et al., 2013). FOMO, closely tied to passive engagement and emotional reactivity, emerges as a key mediator in understanding how adolescents are emotionally affected by the digital content they consume. In integrating both behavioural data and subjective narratives, this study aims to unpack not only what adolescents do on social media, but why they do it, and how it makes them feel. By focusing on the ritualistic and emotional nature of digital behaviour, especially within Kerala's socio-cultural fabric, the study aspires to inform more context-sensitive digital literacy and mental health interventions.

Adolescence refers to young people typically aged between 10 and 19 years. This group is undergoing significant physical, psychological, and social development. Adolescents are particularly sensitive to social influences, making their engagement with social media crucial to understanding their emotional well-being. Social media implies platforms like Instagram, TikTok,

and Snapchat where users create, share, and interact with content. For adolescents, social media is not just entertainment but a primary space for social interaction, identity expression, and peer validation. Emotional Well-being is a person's emotional health, including feelings of happiness, mood regulation, and overall mental health status. The study explores how social media habits affect adolescents' emotional well-being, especially focusing on feelings like anxiety, sadness, and depression.

Passive social media use refers to scrolling, lurking, or consuming content without actively engaging (like commenting or posting). This kind of use is linked with increased feelings of loneliness, social comparison, and depressive symptoms in adolescents, as shown by ethnographic insights in the study. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) is a psychological phenomenon where individuals feel anxiety or worry that others are having rewarding experiences without them. FOMO drives compulsive social media checking and is strongly correlated with emotional distress and depressive symptoms among adolescents. Identity Formation is the process by which adolescents develop a sense of self, values, and social identity. Social media platforms serve as arenas where adolescents construct and negotiate their identities, seeking peer approval and validation through curated digital personas. Social Comparison is a cognitive process where individuals evaluate themselves relative to others. On social media, adolescents often compare their lives with idealised images posted by peers, which can lead to lower self-esteem and emotional struggles. Depression is a mental health condition characterised by persistent feelings of sadness, loss of interest, and emotional fatigue. The study investigates how social media use—especially passive consumption and FOMO—is associated with depressive symptoms in adolescents. Digital Rituals are regular, habitual behaviours associated with social media use, such as routine scrolling upon waking or using social media as a mood regulator. These rituals embed social media deeply into adolescents' emotional and social lives.

## Materials and Methods

Adolescence is a developmental period marked by heightened emotional sensitivity, identity exploration, and the search for peer belonging (Steinberg, 2005). During this time, individuals begin to form more complex self-concepts and seek external validation to reinforce their emerging identities. Social media has become a key space for these processes, offering adolescents both visibility and feedback. However, these platforms often present idealised portrayals of life, which can lead to persistent self-comparison, insecurity, and psychological strain (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Research has shown that the adolescent brain is particularly susceptible to peer evaluation and social reward systems, with digital engagement activating the same neural circuits involved in emotional regulation and reward processing (Crone & Dahl, 2012). As a result, social media becomes not just a communication tool but a neurocognitive stimulus that can significantly shape mood and self-esteem.

Passive Use and Emotional Dysregulation implies a growing distinction in the literature is between active and passive social media use. Active use involves posting, commenting, and engaging directly with others, while passive use refers to browsing, scrolling, and consuming content without interacting. While both forms of use can affect mental health, passive use has been more consistently linked to negative emotional outcomes. Verduyn et al. (2017) conducted a meta-review highlighting that passive use is associated with feelings of envy, loneliness, and lower life

satisfaction. The lack of interaction during passive browsing contributes to feelings of detachment and alienation, as users observe curated content from others without participating in the conversation. This detachment fosters internalisation of inadequacy, particularly when users compare their daily experiences with the perceived success or happiness of others (Chou & Edge, 2012).

The concept of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has emerged as a dominant psychological experience among digital natives. Defined as the pervasive apprehension that others might be having more rewarding experiences from which one is absent, FOMO has been identified as a key factor in compulsive digital engagement (Przybylski et al., 2013). Adolescents with high FOMO scores often report checking social media more frequently and feeling greater dissatisfaction with their social lives. FOMO is closely related to the emotional consequences of passive engagement. When adolescents passively observe their peers' posts—such as vacations, achievements, or group activities—they may develop a distorted perception of reality. This perception contributes to emotional dysregulation, characterised by anxiety, sadness, and a heightened need for validation (Baker et al., 2016). Studies suggest that adolescents experiencing FOMO are at increased risk of developing depressive symptoms, especially when digital feedback mechanisms (likes, comments) do not meet expectations.

Gender also plays a crucial role in how adolescents experience social media emotionally. Research indicates that female adolescents are more likely to engage in social comparison and are more emotionally reactive to digital content, especially related to body image, popularity, and peer approval (Fardouly et al., 2015). In contrast, male adolescents tend to report lower emotional investment in feedback and more interest in competitive or performance-based content. A study by Nesi and Prinstein (2015) found that girls are more likely to base their self-worth on online validation and are disproportionately affected by the absence of social feedback. These gendered experiences underscore the need for tailored interventions that consider emotional and psychological differences in platform engagement.

In the Indian state of Kerala, adolescents are increasingly immersed in digital culture due to widespread smartphone availability, high literacy rates, and robust internet infrastructure. However, this digital fluency has also given rise to a series of mental health concerns. Reports from Kerala-based studies indicate rising levels of social media dependency, disrupted sleep patterns, and increased emotional fatigue among school-going youth (Jose & Raj, 2018; Kumar et al., 2021). A study on college students in Kerala found a significant association between excessive smartphone use and symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression (Thomas et al., 2020). These findings mirror global patterns but are shaped by local cultural pressures, such as academic competition, family expectations, and the influence of Western beauty and success ideals promoted through global platforms.

This study adopted a mixed-methods ethnographic approach to examine the emotional implications of social media use among adolescents. The rationale for combining qualitative ethnographic observation with quantitative psychological measurement lies in the multifaceted nature of digital behaviour. Social media use is not only behavioural but also symbolic, emotional, and cultural. Hence, an ethnographic lens allows for the exploration of underlying meanings and rituals, while quantitative tools offer empirical evidence regarding emotional well-being and

depressive symptoms. The research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, a pilot ethnographic study was conducted, involving semi-structured interviews with 25 university-aged young adults (aged 19–25). This phase helped identify common patterns of digital engagement, emotional language, and culturally specific digital practices, serving as a reference frame for adolescent experiences. In the second phase, a larger, adolescent-centred quantitative and qualitative study. Surveys and in-depth interviews were administered to a sample of 210 adolescents aged 14–17, drawn from various urban and semi-urban schools in Kerala. This phase examined the emotional and psychological effects of habitual social media behaviours such as scrolling, lurking, and content consumption.

The participants for both phases were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring they met the criteria of active social media use (minimum two platforms daily) and represented diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Pilot Group includes 25 participants, aged between 19–25, 60% female and 40% male, and the platforms used are predominantly Instagram and WhatsApp. The Main Adolescent Group includes 210 participants, between 14–17 years of age, 58% female and 42% male. Students from private and public schools in Kochi, Thrissur, and Kottayam. Platform Engagement are Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok (before its ban), YouTube, and WhatsApp. 89% accessed social media via smartphones. Parental consent was obtained for all adolescent participants, and the study received ethical clearance from the institutional review board at NIMIT (Autonomous), Kerala.

The study utilised the following tools, such as the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9): A validated screening tool used to assess the presence and severity of depressive symptoms. The PHQ-9 has been widely applied in adolescent populations and allows for quantifiable analysis of emotional well-being (Kroenke et al., 2001), and Social Media Habits Inventory (SMHI): A custom-designed survey used to capture daily patterns of passive and active social media use, including behaviors such as frequency of checking, emotional responses to content, and use during boredom or stress.

Data were collected over a period of three months. In the first phase, the adult participants shared reflective narratives about their adolescence and current digital behaviours. This phase helped in identifying key categories such as “scrolling as therapy,” “emotional withdrawal,” and “digital comparison.” In the second Phase, Survey Administration: PHQ-9 and SMHI were administered in group settings at schools with the support of school counsellors. A sub-sample of 35 adolescents (balanced by gender and platform preference) participated in one-on-one interviews, each lasting 30–45 minutes. In a few cases, researchers conducted virtual follow-ups via video calls to clarify responses or observe digital behaviours in real time, with consent. All interviews were conducted in English or Malayalam, depending on participant preference, and later transcribed for analysis.

Quantitative Data from PHQ-9 and SMHI were analysed using SPSS. Correlational analysis was used to examine relationships between variables such as passive use, FOMO scores, and depression levels. Qualitative Data were analysed using thematic coding, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) methodology. Recurring emotional themes, symbolic rituals, and identity narratives were extracted, coded, and interpreted within a cultural and developmental framework.

Triangulation of findings from surveys, interviews, and field notes strengthened the internal validity of the research, allowing for a nuanced understanding of digital-emotional behaviour in adolescents.

## Results and Discussions

### *Liquid Modernity and Emotional Flux*

The quantitative data revealed notable trends in adolescent social media behaviours and their emotional correlates. Participants reported habitual digital rituals such as checking social media immediately upon waking (Mean = 3.2, SD = 1.32), indicating an automated or compulsive behaviour pattern. This early morning engagement often set the emotional tone for the day, Using social media during moments of boredom or emotional distress (Mean = 3.8, SD = 0.79), suggesting that platforms function as mood regulators or distractions, Mood fluctuations influenced by online content (Mean = 2.9, SD = 1.10), reflecting moderate sensitivity to social media stimuli, and Experiencing Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) (Mean = 3.3, SD = 0.98), highlighting significant psychological tension tied to digital inclusion. A statistically significant positive correlation ( $\rho = .62, p < .05$ ) was found between FOMO and depressive symptoms, confirming that adolescents who frequently experience FOMO are more prone to depressive moods. This aligns with prior studies (Przybylski et al., 2013; Twenge & Campbell, 2018), suggesting that the compulsive need to stay connected can paradoxically undermine emotional well-being.

Qualitative interviews illuminated the lived experiences behind the numbers. Many adolescents described “scrolling” as a habitual, almost unconscious action, often used as an emotional escape or coping strategy: Female, 16, stated, “When I’m feeling down, I scroll through my feed to see what others are doing. It helps distract me but also makes me feel left out.” Male, 15 stated, “Likes and comments feel like currency. If a post doesn’t get enough attention, it feels like rejection.” These narratives reveal that social media serves as a symbolic space for identity affirmation and mood management. However, they also highlight the emotional dissonance between idealised online personas and adolescents’ real-life experiences. This dissonance fosters feelings of inadequacy and social exclusion.

Analysis of gender differences showed that female adolescents exhibited heightened emotional reactivity to curated content, particularly around body image and peer validation. Female participants frequently discussed anxiety related to online comparisons and pressures to maintain an appealing digital presence. In contrast, male participants tended to show more emotional detachment in digital interactions but reported stress related to social competition and status. Males often engaged more with gaming and competitive platforms, using social media for achievement-oriented validation rather than social comparison. These findings mirror existing literature on gendered digital behaviour (Fardouly et al., 2015; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015), suggesting the need for gender-sensitive mental health support.

From an anthropological perspective, adolescents’ digital engagement can be understood as ritualistic and performative. The study identified several key cultural practices: “Profile curation” as a ritual of self-presentation, where users carefully select images and captions to construct an aspirational identity, “Lurking” or passive consumption as a liminal activity, reflecting emotional states of uncertainty, exclusion, or identity negotiation, and “Checking rituals”, such as

compulsively refreshing feeds, as practices of social surveillance and mood regulation. These rituals resonate with symbolic interactionism, where meaning is co-constructed through mediated interactions (Blumer, 1969). Adolescents do not merely consume content—they actively participate in identity-making processes through these rituals.

Bauman's (2000) theory of liquid modernity offers a compelling lens to interpret adolescent social media use. In an era marked by rapid social change and instability, adolescents struggle to establish stable identities. Digital platforms offer a fluid space for self-exploration, but also amplify uncertainty and emotional volatility. The study's findings on passive use, FOMO, and emotional dysregulation suggest that adolescents' digital rituals are attempts to anchor themselves amid social fluidity. However, the constant flux and impermanence of online interactions perpetuate emotional instability, exacerbating depressive tendencies. This study highlights the complex interplay between habitual digital behaviours and emotional well-being among adolescents. Passive social media use, compounded by FOMO, acts as both a symptom and driver of emotional distress. Ethnographic narratives deepen our understanding of these behaviours as culturally embedded rituals that shape adolescent identity and mood.

### ***Cultural Lens and Theoretical Integration***

Social media platforms function as more than communication tools—they are performative stages where adolescents actively construct, negotiate, and project their identities. This performativity aligns with symbolic interactionism, a sociological theory posited by Blumer (1969), which suggests that individuals create meaning through social interaction. In digital contexts, these interactions are mediated by content such as images, status updates, and comments, which adolescents interpret and respond to emotionally. The ethnographic data revealed that adolescents view their digital presence as a reflection of their social worth, with “likes,” comments, and follower counts serving as quantifiable markers of validation. This process transforms social media into a symbolic economy of approval and belonging. The ritualised behaviours like “profile curation” and “scrolling” are, therefore, not mere habits but cultural practices embedded with emotional meaning. Anthropological frameworks, particularly van Gennep's (1909) concept of liminality, provide valuable insights into adolescent social media behaviours. Liminality describes transitional phases characterised by ambiguity and fluidity, where individuals exist betwixt and between social roles.

Scrolling through social media without active participation mirrors this liminal space. Adolescents engage in a “betwixt” state, observing peer lives and social trends without full integration, which may reflect their ongoing identity development and search for belonging. This passive engagement can intensify feelings of exclusion, as the observed digital personas often represent idealised and curated versions of reality, unattainable to many. The ethnographic accounts of adolescents feeling both drawn to and alienated by social media echo this liminal tension. Social media becomes a “third space” (Oldenburg, 1989), neither fully private nor public, where identities are performed but not always securely anchored. Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity captures the precariousness and transience of contemporary social life, particularly relevant to adolescent development in the digital age. According to Bauman, modern social structures are characterised by rapid change, uncertainty, and fragmentation, which disrupt individuals' ability to form lasting identities and stable communities. Social media platforms

exemplify this liquid environment. Adolescents are continually exposed to shifting social norms, trends, and peer groups, reflected in ephemeral stories, transient content, and algorithmically curated feeds. Their identities become “liquid” — flexible and adaptable but vulnerable to fragmentation. The study’s findings on the emotional instability linked to passive social media use and FOMO are consistent with this theory. Adolescents seek digital visibility as a surrogate for certainty and belonging, yet the fluid and ephemeral nature of online interactions perpetuates emotional uncertainty. The compulsive rituals of checking and scrolling may be understood as attempts to anchor oneself in an otherwise unstable social landscape.

Drawing from Hochschild’s (1983) theory of emotional labour, adolescents’ engagement with social media involves managing not only their online presentation but also their emotional responses to content. The pressure to appear happy, successful, and socially accepted on digital platforms requires ongoing emotional regulation. This labour is particularly strenuous during adolescence, a developmental phase marked by heightened emotional sensitivity and identity formation. The emotional fatigue and depressive symptoms reported by participants suggest that social media use imposes psychological costs. In this light, passive behaviours such as scrolling and lurking may be double-edged: they provide emotional respite by allowing detachment but also risk deepening emotional dysregulation due to social comparison and FOMO. Kerala’s unique cultural milieu, characterised by high literacy rates, rapid digital penetration, and evolving youth aspirations, provides a nuanced backdrop for this study. The state has witnessed increasing reports of adolescent mental health issues, including anxiety and depression (George & Abraham, 2018). The interplay between traditional collectivist values and the individualised culture promoted by social media creates tensions for adolescents navigating their identities.

Social media becomes a space where globalised youth culture intersects with local cultural norms, producing hybrid identities and emotional conflicts. This socio-cultural context amplifies the importance of context-sensitive interventions that address not only digital literacy but also the cultural narratives shaping adolescent experiences. Through the combined lenses of symbolic interactionism, liminality, liquid modernity, and emotional labour, this study contextualises adolescent social media use as a culturally embedded, emotionally charged set of rituals. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing effective mental health strategies and educational programs tailored to the digital realities of youth in Kerala and beyond.

## **Conclusion**

This research provides an in-depth analysis of the complex relationship between adolescent engagement with social media and their emotional well-being, situated specifically within the socio-cultural framework of Kerala. The findings reveal that social media use among adolescents transcends simple recreational activity and instead functions as an intricate digital ritual. This ritual actively contributes to the shaping of personal identity, the regulation of emotional states, and the navigation of peer relationships. Importantly, the study identifies passive social media practices—such as continuous scrolling and lurking without direct interaction—as emotionally charged behaviours. These passive engagements show a robust association with symptoms of depression and increased experiences of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Adolescents employ social media both as an emotional refuge and as a public stage for seeking affirmation from peers. However, this dual role often results in paradoxical emotional outcomes, including intensified feelings of social

exclusion, heightened anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Gender-specific findings indicate that female adolescents tend to exhibit greater emotional sensitivity to social media content, especially regarding body image and peer validation, while male adolescents may display emotional detachment but experience stress related to social status and competition. These gendered emotional patterns highlight the importance of recognising the diversity of adolescent experiences and responses to social media. Moreover, Kerala's cultural backdrop—a blend of traditional collectivist values and the pervasive influence of digital globalisation—uniquely frames these interactions and their mental health implications.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study draws upon multiple conceptual frameworks to deepen understanding. Symbolic interactionism elucidates how adolescents create and interpret meaning through mediated social interactions. The anthropological notion of liminality describes the transitional emotional states adolescents undergo while engaging with social media as a “third space” for identity negotiation. Bauman's theory of liquid modernity explains the instability of adolescent self-concepts in a rapidly changing social landscape, where online visibility becomes a surrogate for social certainty. Additionally, the concept of emotional labour highlights how adolescents manage and regulate their emotions within the digital sphere to conform to social expectations. Based on these insights, several critical recommendations emerge for educators, mental health professionals, policymakers, and researchers. First, the integration of critical digital literacy programs into school curricula is imperative. These programs should extend beyond teaching technical proficiency to include fostering adolescents' ability to critically analyse and differentiate between curated online representations and offline realities. Educating youth about the psychological effects of algorithm-driven content and helping them balance active and passive social media use can promote healthier digital habits.

Second, mental health initiatives should adopt mindful engagement strategies. Encouraging adolescents to develop emotional self-awareness related to their social media behaviours and to apply self-regulation techniques can mitigate negative psychological effects. Schools and families can support these goals by facilitating workshops, peer support groups, and providing resources that help identify early warning signs of depression linked to social media stress. Third, the heterogeneity of social media platforms necessitates platform-specific research and tailored interventions. Each platform fosters distinct social norms, cultural codes, and emotional dynamics that influence user experiences differently. Understanding these nuances will enable the design of more precise and effective mental health interventions that resonate with adolescents' lived realities on Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and others. Fourth, culturally sensitive mental health policies must be formulated with an acute awareness of Kerala's distinctive socio-cultural environment. This involves reconciling traditional collectivist social values with the increasing individualism fostered by digital technologies. Collaborative efforts among schools, families, community leaders, and mental health professionals are crucial to establishing supportive ecosystems. Additionally, longitudinal research is needed to monitor the evolving patterns of adolescent digital engagement and emotional well-being over time, informing adaptive and contextually grounded intervention strategies.

As digital landscapes continue to transform, adolescents' interactions with social media will remain a significant factor shaping their emotional development and mental health. Recognising

social media engagement as a ritualistic, culturally embedded, and emotionally charged practice is vital for advancing research and developing interventions that genuinely reflect adolescents' lived experiences. This study bridges important gaps at the intersection of technology, culture, and mental health, calling for holistic, empathetic, and evidence-based approaches to empower young people in navigating the complexities of their digital environments with resilience and mindfulness.

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