

NOSTALGIA IN SONG LYRICS: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF NIKI'S 'HIGH SCHOOL IN JAKARTA'

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif untuk mengeksplorasi makna dan pengalaman nostalgia yang terkandung dalam lirik lagu *High School in Jakarta*. Data penelitian terdiri dari lirik lagu sebagai sumber data utama. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi observasi terhadap lirik dengan mencatat bagian relevan, tinjauan literatur untuk memahami konteks budaya, dan analisis teks sistematis. Proses analisis data dilakukan melalui tiga tahap. Pertama, analisis denotatif yang menelaah elemen konkret dalam lirik, seperti nama, tempat, dan peristiwa yang merefleksikan pengalaman remaja. Kedua, analisis konotatif yang menggali emosi dan makna lebih dalam di balik kata-kata yang digunakan. Ketiga, analisis mitos yang mengidentifikasi mitos budaya yang hadir dalam lirik, seperti pandangan masyarakat tentang masa remaja dan peran hubungan sosial dalam pembentukan identitas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa lagu ini berfungsi sebagai alat reflektif bagi pendengar mengenai masa remaja, serta bagaimana nostalgia terbentuk melalui lirik yang kaya makna dan konteks budaya. Kesimpulannya, analisis semiotik memberikan pemahaman lebih dalam tentang nostalgia sebagai respons emosional yang kuat yang berakar pada kompleksitas masa remaja.

Kata Kunci: nostalgia; semiotika; lagu.

Abstract

The present research uses a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the meanings and experiences of nostalgia contained in the lyrics of the song High School in Jakarta. The research data consists of the song lyrics as the primary data source. Data collection techniques include observation of the lyrics by noting relevant sections, literature review to understand the cultural context, and systematic text analysis. The data analysis process is conducted through three stages. First, a denotative analysis that examines the concrete elements in the lyrics, such as names, places, and events that reflect adolescent experiences. Second, a connotative analysis that delves into the emotions and deeper meanings behind the words used. Third, a myth analysis that identifies cultural myths present in the lyrics, such as societal views on adolescence and the role of social relationships in identity formation. The research findings indicate that this song serves as a reflective tool for listeners regarding adolescence, as well as how nostalgia is formed through lyrics

rich in meaning and cultural context. In conclusion, semiotic analysis provides a deeper understanding of nostalgia as a strong emotional response rooted in the complexities of adolescence.

Keywords: *nostalgia; semiotics; song.*

A. Introduction

Song is one of the most universal forms of artistic expression, encompassing a wide variety of genres and styles spread across the globe. In every culture, songs serve as a medium to convey messages, emotions, and stories, whether in the context of entertainment or rituals (Burgos, 2024). Generally, songs can be viewed as a combination of lyrics and melody, where both complement each other to create a profound experience for the listener (Moore, 2016). Each song carries a message that can be personal or collective, reflecting individual experiences or even broader social phenomena. With the advancement of technology, the distribution of songs has expanded beyond geographical boundaries, allowing audiences around the world to listen to and enjoy music from different cultures (Miller & Shahriari, 2020). The diversity of themes in songs reflects the complexity of human life, from love, friendship, and struggle to social critique. All of this makes songs a powerful medium for creating and conveying narratives that resonate with many people (Barrett, 2011).

From a linguistic perspective, songs represent a unique combination of spoken language and art. Song lyrics often utilize grammatical structures different from everyday speech, highlighting the richness of language through rhyme, rhythm, and

alliteration (BaileyShea, 2021). The use of figurative language, such as metaphors, personification, and symbolism, is also frequently encountered in lyrics to strengthen the message or emotion being conveyed (Ketaren et al., 2021). Additionally, due to their connection with melody, song lyrics often feature repetitive structures, both in rhyme patterns and the repetition of certain phrases, designed to emphasize the song's central theme or emotion. On the other hand, prosodic elements like intonation and pitch further enrich the linguistic experience within a song (Haiduk et al., 2020). Through the combination of these elements, songs not only become artistic products but also reflect the richness of language as a tool for expression. Therefore, songs can be seen as fascinating objects of study for linguists, particularly in the analysis of how language is used artistically within a context structured by melody (Rohrmeier et al., 2015).

Songs have a unique ability to evoke nostalgia, transporting listeners back to specific moments in their lives, both individually and collectively (Garrido & Davidson, 2019). Lyrics and melodies often serve as powerful memory triggers, linking past experiences with the emotions felt at that time. In many songs, the theme of nostalgia is expressed through stories that refer to childhood memories, past relationships, or

unforgettable life moments (Sedikides et al., 2022). Moreover, the melodic elements of a song play a crucial role in evoking feelings of nostalgia. Certain tones can create a distinct emotional atmosphere, allowing listeners to relive moments they once experienced (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). This phenomenon is further reinforced by the fact that music is an integral part of various life events, such as family gatherings, celebrations, or introspective moments. As a result, songs often become an effective medium for representing nostalgia, given their ability to unify linguistic and emotional aspects into a complex yet accessible art form (Faudree, 2012).

The representation of nostalgia in a song can be analyzed using the semiotic approach introduced by Roland Barthes. This approach focuses on three levels of meaning, i.e. denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1972, 1986). At the denotative level, the song can be interpreted literally based on the words in the lyrics. For instance, past memories, places, or specific events are explicitly recounted in the lyrics. Meanwhile, connotation refers to the deeper and emotional meaning hidden behind these words, such as feelings of longing, regret, or the desire to return to a bygone time. Through connotation, nostalgia is not merely represented as a description of past experiences, but also as an emotion that connects the past with present feelings. Barthes also introduces the concept of myth, where the lyrics and

elements of the song can represent broader values or worldviews, such as the idealization of youth or views on social change from generation to generation. Thus, Barthes' semiotic approach allows for a richer and more layered analysis of nostalgia in songs, helping us understand how meaning is constructed and interpreted through linguistic and musical symbols.

Niki's song *High School in Jakarta* is an intriguing example of how nostalgia is expressed through music. The song recounts Niki's experiences during her high school years in Jakarta, focusing on the emotions and memories that arise from that time. The lyrics portray various emotional moments, ranging from friendships to romantic dynamics, which often become essential elements in nostalgic narratives. Additionally, Niki highlights cultural differences and life changes when she moved abroad, adding an emotional dimension to how teenage memories are connected to personal identity and changing environments. In this song, nostalgia is conveyed not only through the lyrics but also through a melody that supports a reflective and occasionally melancholic mood. *High School in Jakarta* combines personal storytelling with universal emotions that resonate with many listeners, especially those who have experienced high school in socially dynamic environments. This song serves as a powerful representation of nostalgia, where the past is revisited

through the lens of personal experiences, reflecting major life changes.

Research on Roland Barthes' semiotics in song lyrics has been conducted in various contexts. One example is the analysis of the song *The Man* by Taylor Swift, carried out by Londa and Waleleng (2022). In this study, they explore the denotative, connotative meanings, and myths present in the lyrics, demonstrating how women's appearances are often judged based on their clothing and highlighting women's right to be angry in unfair situations. Additionally, another study analyzes the lyrics of the song *Tak Sekedar Cinta* by Dnanda, focusing on the meaning of love (Harnia, 2021). The researchers found that its denotative meaning relates to the expected strength of love from a partner, while the connotative meaning emphasizes loyalty in maintaining love. In the context of self-improvement, the analysis of the song *Diri* by Tulus reveals the motivation to improve oneself and the importance of self-love as a crucial first step in that process (Rahma et al., 2024). Finally, research on the lyrics of *Aisyah Istri Rasulullah* by Nanda (2023) shows how the lyrics reflect social realities and values contained within the melody. Overall, the application of Barthes' semiotic theory in the analysis of song lyrics provides profound insights into the meanings and messages embedded within them.

This study aims to analyze the representation of nostalgia in the lyrics of *High School in Jakarta* by Niki, using

Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, which encompasses denotation, connotation, and myth. Through this approach, the research seeks to understand how nostalgia is not only expressed as a memory of the past but also as a complex emotional and social reflection. The research gap to be addressed is the lack of studies on the representation of nostalgia in modern pop songs using Barthes' semiotic approach, especially in the context of songs containing cross-cultural experiences. Most previous studies have focused on general themes in song lyrics, with few examining the theme of nostalgia in detail through semiotic theory. The novelty of this research lies in the application of Barthes' semiotic analysis within the context of contemporary pop music, enriching linguistic and musical discourse with a new perspective. This study is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of how music, particularly lyrics, can represent both personal and universal nostalgia. Additionally, this research is anticipated to open new discussions on how pop music connects individual experiences with cultural values through in-depth semiotic analysis.

B. Method

The research approach used in this study is qualitative descriptive. This approach allows the researcher to explore the meanings and experiences contained in the lyrics of the song "High School in Jakarta" in depth. The research data consists of the song lyrics as the primary

source for the analysis of denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings. Data collection techniques include observing the lyrics by noting relevant sections, conducting literature reviews to delve into the cultural context, and systematic text analysis to understand meanings deeply and identify cultural symbols within the lyrics.

Data analysis is conducted through three stages. First, a denotative analysis examines the concrete elements in the lyrics, such as names, places, and events that imply teenage experiences. Second, a connotative analysis explores the emotions and deeper meanings behind the words used, as well as how they create a sense of nostalgia. Third, a myth analysis identifies the cultural myths present in the lyrics, such as societal views on adolescence and the role of social relationships in identity formation. The research findings provide insights into

how the song *High School in Jakarta* serves as a reflective tool for listeners regarding their own adolescence, as well as how nostalgia is shaped through lyrics rich in meaning and cultural context.

C. Research Finding and Discussion

Roland Barthes describes the process of using signs as comprising three levels, i.e. denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and myth. Denotative meaning pertains to the straightforward, literal interpretation of the sign. Connotative meaning includes the associations and personal values attached to it. Myth reveals how connotative meanings operate within cultural frameworks and influence larger societal narratives. Below is the analysis of denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and myth found in the lyrics of Niki's song *High School in Jakarta*.

Table 1. Roland Barthes Semiotics Analysis on the Lyrics of *High School in Jakarta* Song

| Lyrics | Denotative Meaning | Connotative Meaning | Myth |
|---|--|--|---|
| Didn't you hear Amanda's movin' back to Colorado? | Amanda is moving back to Colorado. | Depicts separation and change. | Mobility as a positive symbol of personal transformation within culture. |
| It's 2013 and the end of my life | The year 2013 signifies the challenges of adolescence. | Feelings of loss and the end of youth. | Nostalgia and the significance of youth in identity formation. |
| Freshman's year's about to plummet just a little harder | The difficulties faced during the first year of high school. | Uncertainty and adolescent challenges. | The value of courage in facing adversity as a part of the learning process. |
| But it didn't 'cause we kissed on that Halloween night | A kiss that changes everything. | The power of love to overcome difficulties. | Love as a valuable experience shaping social relationships. |
| I bleached half my hair when I saw Zoe on your | Changing appearance to attract attention. | Searching for identity and social acceptance. | The value of appearance and individuality in |

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| Vespa | | | adolescent culture. |
| It was orange from three percent peroxide, thanks to you | Describes the process of changing hair color. | An action inspired by love. | Beauty and appearance as symbols of social status. |
| I needed a good cry, I headed right to Kendra's | Facing emotions by crying. | Seeking support among friends. | The value of friendship and emotional connectivity during adolescence. |
| I hated you and I hoped to God that you knew | Conflicting emotions in a relationship. | The intertwining of love and hate. | The complexity of relationships within a social context. |
| Now there's drama (drama), found a club for that | Finding a way to express oneself. | Drama as a part of teenage life. | The myth that adolescent life is inherently filled with drama and conflict. |
| Where I met ya (met ya), had a heart attack | Meeting someone who changes one's life. | The exhilarating feeling of love. | First love as a universal and cherished experience. |
| Yadda, yadda, at the end, yeah, we burned | Simplifying valuable experiences. | Significant moments in a relationship. | The myth that romantic relationships often have dramatic endings. |
| Made a couple U-turns, you were it 'til you weren't, mm | Rapid changes in a relationship. | The instability of teenage love. | The value of uncertainty in relationships, reflecting the reality of adolescent love. |
| High school in Jakarta, sorta modern Sparta | A competitive school environment. | Difficulty adapting to social pressures. | The value of competition and achievement in education. |
| Had no chance against the teenage suburban armadas | Facing challenges from other social groups. | Feelings of defeat and helplessness. | The myth of social dominance among adolescent groups. |
| We were a sonata, thanks to tight-lipped fathers | Harmonious relationships hindered by parental figures. | Tension between love and parental expectations. | The value of communication and openness within families. |
| Yeah, livin' under that was hard, but I loved you harder | Facing life's challenges with strong love. | Resilience and sacrifice in love. | The value of love as a force that can overcome obstacles in life. |
| High school in Jakarta, an elaborate saga | A rich and complex story. | Nostalgia for turbulent adolescent years. | The myth that every adolescent experience contains profound and meaningful stories. |
| I still hate you for makin' me wish I came out smarter | Facing regret | Pain related to decisions made. | The importance of education and regret over unwise choices. |
| You love-hate your | Complex relationships | Shared experiences of | The myth that familial |

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| mother, so do I | with parents. | familial struggles. | relationships are always complex and contradictory. |
| Could've ended different, then again | Awareness of choices that could have been made. | Reflection on the past. | The value that decisions shape the future. |
| We went to high school in Jakarta | Affirming location and shared experience. | A sense of togetherness and place-based memories. | Memories as an essential part of cultural identity. |
| Got a group assignment, I'll be at Val's place | Daily school activities | Social dynamics and collaboration. | The value of teamwork and friendship in education. |
| You don't text at all and only call when you're off your face | Lack of communication in a relationship. | Uncertainty and emotional confusion. | The myth that poor communication is common in adolescent relationships. |
| I'm petty and say, 'Call me when you're not unstable' | Expression of frustration. | Emotional turmoil within a relationship. | The value of emotional maturity as part of adolescent growth. |
| I lie and tell you I'll be getting drunk at Rachel's | Lying to maintain emotional distance. | Dishonesty as a protective mechanism. | The myth that adolescents often lie to create desired self-images. |
| I wasn't, she doesn't even drink | Facing a different reality. | Self-deception and a desire to escape. | The value of honesty and the realities often clashing with expectations. |
| But I couldn't have you sit there and think | Inability to face the truth. | Feelings of helplessness. | The myth of the need to maintain self-image within society. |
| That you're better 'cause you're older | The gap between age and maturity. | Feelings of inferiority. | The perception that maturity is associated with higher social value. |
| Are you better now that we're older? | Reflective question about growth. | Uncertainty about the future. | The value that growth should be measured by personal progress. |
| High school in Jakarta, sorta modern Sparta | Reiterating the competitive environment. | Feelings of helplessness and struggle. | The myth that competition is crucial in character development. |
| Had no chance against the teenage suburban armadas | Constantly facing social challenges. | Feelings of defeat in social dynamics. | The myth of social hierarchy among adolescents. |
| We were a sonata, thanks to tight-lipped fathers | Reiterating the theme of hindered relationships. | Continuous tension. | The value of communication within families for emotional |

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| Yeah, livin' under that was hard, but I loved you harder | Reaffirming love despite difficulties. | Resilience of love amidst challenges. | The value of love as a strength to overcome difficulties. |
| High school in Jakarta, a comedy drama | Humorous and bittersweet moments. | Complexity of adolescent experiences. | The life of adolescents as a mix of humor and tragedy. |
| I still hate you for makin' me wish I came out smarter | Reiterating the theme of regret. | Reflection on decisions made. | Awareness of the importance of education in life. |
| You love-hate your mother, so do I | Affirming shared experiences. | Complexity of emotional connections. | Family relationships as crucial to identity. |
| Could've ended different, then again | Implying choices and consequences. | Awareness of decisions made. | The myth that choices have long-lasting impacts. |
| We went to high school in Jakarta | Reiterating a binding statement. | Awareness of shared past. | Shared memories as part of a larger identity. |
| Natasha's movin' to New York (New York) | Describes mobility in life. | Separation and change in relationships. | Mobility as a symbol of opportunity and challenges in life. |
| Probably sometime in August (ah) | Uncertainty in planning. | Facing unexpected changes. | The value of flexibility and adaptation in life. |
| And I'm spendin' the summer in Singapore (ah) | Geographical and social mobility. | Searching for a new identity. | Cultural exchange as a part of personal growth. |
| I'm so sad I can't tell you shit anymore | Describes loss of communication. | Feelings of loneliness in relationships. | Difficulty in communication as a reflection of social norms in relationships. |
| I made friends with Abby this year (this is how I met your mom) (oh, my God) | Describing new relationships. | Friendship as a vital part of adolescent life. | The value of friendship in shaping adolescent identity. |
| We're movin' in in March or so | Future plans with friends. | Changes in relationship dynamics. | Planning for the future as a symbol of hope and growth. |
| And although you bring me to tears | Facing deep emotions in a relationship. | Sadness related to love. | The myth that love is often painful and complex. |
| I'm glad that we gave it a go | Appreciating the experience despite difficulties. | Awareness of the value of relationships. | Experience as a valuable lesson in a cultural context. |
| High school in Jakarta, American summer | Reiterating the theme of unique experiences. | Cultural differences in adolescent experiences. | Cultural encounters in teenage life as a symbol of diversity. |

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| Had no chance against the Marxist girl with marijuana | Facing challenges from others. | Helplessness under the influence of others. | Tension between cultural values and differing social norms. |
| I was your piñata, she was a star-charter | Painful moments in relationships. | Competitive dynamics in love. | Social injustice in adolescent relationships. |
| Glad she gave it to you real hard, but I loved you harder | Facing competition in love. | Stronger feelings of love amid conflicts. | Emotional tension in complex relationships. |
| High school in Jakarta, I won't, but I wanna | Uncertainty in desires. | Confusion between wants and reality. | Unfulfilled desires in social contexts. |
| Ask you when you talk about it, do I ever come up? | Questions about self-presence in others' minds. | Need for acknowledgment and remembrance. | Emotional dependence in relationships. |
| Say thanks to your mama, now we're through | Ending a relationship with mixed feelings. | Simultaneous gratitude and anger. | Complexity of familial relationships in love. |
| Could've ended different, then again | Summarizing with retrospective reflection. | Awareness of choices made. | Choices that shape identity and relationships. |
| We went to high school in Jakarta | Reaffirming a shared experience. | Awareness of shared past. | Shared memories as a part of identity. |

Nostalgia serves as a powerful emotional catalyst, often rooted in our memories of youth and formative experiences. In Niki's *High School in Jakarta*, the lyrics intricately weave together a tapestry of recollections that evoke a longing for the complexities and vibrancy of adolescent life. This song captures the essence of nostalgia, allowing listeners to reflect on their own youthful experiences. By employing Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, we can analyze how denotative meanings, connotative significances, and underlying myths work together to construct a nostalgic narrative that resonates deeply with the audience.

The denotative meanings in the lyrics provide concrete imagery and

events that anchor the song in relatable experiences. Phrases such as “*Didn't you hear Amanda's movin' back to Colorado?*” and “*It was orange from three percent peroxide, thanks to you*” evoke specific moments in the life of a teenager. These straightforward representations of everyday experiences in high school create a sense of familiarity and nostalgia for listeners. The details capture the innocence, excitement, and sometimes tumult of adolescence, allowing individuals to connect with their own memories of growing up and navigating relationships.

However, the connotative meanings embedded within the lyrics deepen the emotional resonance of the song. Lines like “*the end of my life*” and “*had no chance*

against the teenage suburban armadas" carry weight beyond their literal interpretations. They reflect the anxiety and pressure that often accompany high school life. The contrast between joy and heartache is palpable, especially in lines expressing conflicting emotions about love, such as "I hated you and I hoped to God that you knew." This duality captures the essence of adolescent relationships, where love and pain coexist. It is emphasizing how nostalgia can stem from a complex interplay of emotions that define our youth.

Barthes' concept of myth further elucidates the cultural narratives present in *High School in Jakarta*. The portrayal of high school as a "sorta modern Sparta" suggests an environment where competition and social hierarchies reign supreme. This myth resonates with the societal values that frame high school as a pivotal arena for personal growth and identity formation. Such depictions reinforce the idea that the struggles faced during these years are not only personal but also culturally significant, as they contribute to the collective narrative of adolescence. The song taps into the mythos of high school as an arena for both triumph and failure, inviting listeners to reflect on the shared cultural experiences that shape their identities.

The nostalgia expressed in the song also invites listeners to confront the bittersweet nature of memory. The line "we went to high school in Jakarta" serves as a refrain that ties together personal

experiences with collective memories, creating a sense of unity and shared identity. This nostalgic longing is intertwined with reflections on choices made and paths not taken, as evidenced in the repeated acknowledgment of how things could have ended differently. Such reflections highlight the complexities of growing up and the decisions that shape one's life trajectory. The wistfulness inherent in these lyrics encourages listeners to embrace the lessons learned from their past while acknowledging the inevitable passage of time.

Moreover, the song's exploration of nostalgia extends to the relationships depicted within it. The mention of friends, rivals, and romantic interests paints a vivid picture of the social landscape of adolescence. The lyric "You love-hate your mother, so do I" encapsulates the tumultuous nature of familial relationships during this stage of life. This acknowledgment of shared struggles with parents underscores the idea that nostalgia is often intertwined with the complexities of familial ties. By navigating these intricate dynamics, the song illustrates how nostalgia is not merely a longing for the past but also a recognition of the challenges that define those memories.

Ultimately, Niki's "High School in Jakarta" serves as a poignant reflection on the nostalgia of youth. Through Barthes' semiotic lens, the interplay of denotative and connotative meanings, alongside the cultural myths embedded in the lyrics,

creates a rich tapestry that encapsulates the essence of adolescent experiences. This analysis reveals how nostalgia functions as a bridge between personal history and collective memory, allowing listeners to engage with their own journeys while resonating with broader cultural themes. The song invites individuals to reflect on their own high school experiences, making it a universal anthem of nostalgia and emotional resonance.

The application of Roland Barthes' semiotics theory is central to this analysis, especially in the exploration of how meanings are layered through denotation, connotation, and myth. Barthes (1972) posits that language and symbols are not neutral; rather, they carry cultural meanings that reinforce dominant ideologies. In *High School in Jakarta*, the lyrics embody both literal meanings (denotations) and cultural symbols (connotations), such as how high school is portrayed as a social battleground, and mythically, adolescence is a time of identity crisis and intense emotional experiences. Bennett and McDougall (2013) emphasized how Barthes' semiotics is crucial in unpacking the deeper layers of meaning embedded in cultural texts like song lyrics, which use metaphors and symbols to reflect broader societal narratives.

The portrayal of adolescence as a critical period for identity formation in *High School in Jakarta* resonates with Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (Munley, 1975). Erikson

describes adolescence as a phase where individuals face an 'identity versus role confusion' crisis. This aligns with the protagonist's struggle for self-definition in Niki's song, expressed through symbolic actions like dyeing hair to cope with heartbreak, which Erikson identifies as part of the adolescent's search for personal identity. Recent research, such as Merrill and Fivush (2016), reinforces Erikson's argument, showing how external experiences, such as relationships and social pressures, play significant roles in shaping adolescent identity. *High School in Jakarta* exemplifies this by focusing on how school, friendships, and romance impact the character's emotional and personal development.

D. Conclusion

In conclusion, the semiotic analysis of *High School in Jakarta* offers a deeper understanding of nostalgia as a powerful emotional response rooted in the complexities of adolescence. Niki's lyrics navigate the delicate balance between joy and pain, love and loss, ultimately capturing the essence of what it means to grow up. By exploring the denotative meanings, connotative nuances, and cultural myths embedded within the song, we can appreciate the depth of the narrative and its resonance with listeners. The song stands as a testament to the enduring power of nostalgia, reminding us that our youthful experiences, both cherished and regrettable, shape our

identities and continue to influence us long after the passage of time.

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