"When I Am an Old Woman, I Shall Wear Purple": Red Hatters Cope with Getting Old

M. Elise Radina, PhD, CFLE
Annette Lynch, PhD
Marybeth C. Stalp, PhD
Lydia K. Manning, MGS

ABSTRACT. This ethnographic study examined women’s friendships in Red Hat Society (RHS) chapters. Qualitative data included in-depth interviews (n = 25), a focus group interview (n = 7), participant observation, and examination of RHS publications. Results suggest that participation in the RHS (1) aids in developing and enhancing positive attitudes about self and aging that contribute to overall well-being, (2) offers the opportunity to obtain instrumental and emotional support, and (3) provides social connections that prevent feelings of social isolation. Collectively,
these findings highlight the potential buffering role of RHS participation in women’s lives. doi:10.1300/J074v20n01_08 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2008 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

To grow old as a woman in Western society is to become devalued. While this occurs for both men and women, the impact of this reduced status is often greater for women than for men. Common stereotypes of old women include diminished intellectual capabilities, limited postchild rearing contributions to society, and reduced social value due to changing appearance with age (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Garner, 1999). Women’s aging, in contrast with men’s, has been made more difficult in the U.S. due in part to a culturally maintained reliance on attractiveness as a measure of female accomplishment (Kaiser, 1997). This trend is maintained throughout the female life cycle, leading to a reduction of women’s social value as they age. In marked contrast, aging men are considered “distinguished” or “wise” (Calisanti, 2005). Social perpetuation of such attitudes reinforces ageist and sexist assumptions that underlie this social reality for older women. Some women try desperately to hide the physical signs of aging while men’s consumption of comparable products and services is lower (Andrews, 1999; Garner, 1999).

Women face both the physical realities of the aging process as well as a particular set of negative stereotypes related to aging women in Western culture (Garner, 1999). When combined with higher levels of social isolation, stigma, and ageism, this puts mid- and later life women at greater risk than men for developing negative well-being. Specific threats to well-being for mid- and later life women include the stigma of old age (Mathes, Brennan, Haugen, & Rice, 1985); personal loss due to widowhood (Arber & Ginn, 1994), decreased social networks (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001), occupational retirement (Riddick, 1985), and decreased functional independence (Searle, Mahon, Iso-Ahola, Sdrolias, & van Dyck, 1995).

Women’s friendships positively impact their sense of well-being in terms of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and self-concept (Larson, 1978;
Lee & Ishii-Kuntz, 1987; Russell, 1987). This link between female friendships and positive well-being is connected to one’s satisfaction with leisure time (e.g., social activities) that contributes to overall life satisfaction and thus positive overall well-being (Larson, 1978; Russell, 1987). Friendships among women in mid- and later life may serve as a buffer in coping with negative influences related to the female aging process.

Possibly because of this buffering effect, many mid- and later life women choose to participate in an activity that has been constructed just for them, and just for fun—they join a Red Hat Society (RHS) chapter. Full RHS membership begins at age 50 and provides a place where age is celebrated rather than begrudged. This perspective on aging thus allows women the opportunity to define themselves positively as they age. The RHS also serves as a source of identity that is unique to these women and not necessarily tied to family or paid work obligations. RHS members mark their membership and increased age with red hats, purple dresses, and sometimes outlandish behavior.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the social phenomenon of the RHS has provided women with a widely recognized, socially legitimate space to create and foster female friendships in mid- and later life. RHS members share leisure time through social activities (shopping, happy hours, tea times, brunches/lunches/dinners, etc.) which contribute to overall life satisfaction and, in turn, well-being in mid- and later life. Though under-researched, Johnson (1996) and Roberto and Scott (1984) note the importance of female-female friendships, particularly in mid- and later life. The purpose of this study was to investigate the emergence of the RHS as a place where female-female friendships are fostered and the role of RHS membership in serving to empower women to manage well-being in mid- and later life.

**Brief History of the Red Hat Society**

The RHS began in 1997 when founder Sue Ellen Cooper bought a red fedora on an impulse while browsing in a thrift shop during a vacation. Although she did not technically “need” the hat, for she had nothing to wear it with, she certainly wanted the hat. Cooper found herself changing with the purchase of the hat. While wearing the hat she felt younger, freer, lighter, and able to slough off the social expectations she had been carrying with her since childhood, of being a proper woman (Cooper, 2004). Cooper (2004) wanted other women to have this liberated feeling about their behavior and appearance, and she began buying red hats for her female friends who were reluctantly celebrating 50-plus birthdays.
In doing this for her friends, Cooper was inspired by the poem, “Warning” by Jenny Joseph (1961) that discusses a woman’s greatest desires for her behavior when she is “old”: “And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves; And satin sandals, and say we’ve no money for butter.”

Cooper (2004) formed a small group of friends who used red hats and the poem to reform their understanding of aging for women. These women began meeting in public places wearing red hats and purple (“that doesn’t go”). They decided to call themselves the Red Hat Society, and began to get recognized by others, soon garnering media attention in newspapers and magazines. Once women from across the country began e-mailing Cooper, she decided to begin the official “disorganization” of the RHS as the official Queen Mother.

Mostly through the Internet and word of mouth, the RHS has grown to include more than 41,000 registered chapters as well as any number of regionally based unofficial chapters, with a total official membership of over 1 million members, spanning 30 countries (Walker, 2005). As Queen Mother, Cooper encourages women to think positively about getting older, and to have a little fun along the way by starting their own chapters. RHS membership is currently for women at a specific age. To wear a red hat one must be 50 years of age or older. Those younger than 50 can wear pink and lavender, and are referred to as “pink hats.” Pink hats are red hats in training, and will undergo at 50 what is called a “red- uation.” RHS members are rewarded with red hats as a celebration of their rising age, instead of being punished for it as typically occurs in mainstream society (Calasanti, 2001; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Cooper, 2004; Thompson, 2001).

The RHS creates a positive, woman-defined “girl space” or “time just with the girls”—an important component of Red Hat membership. At the same time, the RHS is intentionally referred to as a “disorganization” in all official publications. This is a deliberate reference reflecting the explicit purpose of becoming a Red Hatter to have fun in the company of other women without excuse.

Women’s Friendships in Later Life

Considering the role and importance of friendships in mid- and later life is essential for understanding, at the micro-level, the experiences and meanings of aging for older adults. Friendships continually evolve throughout the life course (Finchum & Weber, 2000), are cyclical, portable and are part of the individual struggle for internal and external stability
throughout the life course (Atchley, 2000; Holmen & Furukawa, 2002). Friendships range from close, intense, continuous interactions to superfluous, sociable contacts understood as acquaintances (Atchley, 2000). Friendships may either be maintained long term or individuals may experience a series of friendships. In either case, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with friendship has implications for how individuals experience aging (Atchley, 2000; Finchum & Weber, 2000).

Individuals’ overall number of long-term friendships decreases over time due to friends’ death and/or other lifestyle situations that may isolate individuals from friends as they age (e.g., caring for an ill spouse, grandparenting, retirement, relocation) (Holmen & Furukawa, 2002). Despite this loss of long-term friends, no direct relationship between friendship loss and levels of satisfaction with friendships in general has been found (Holmen & Furukawa, 2002). This suggests that older adults are capable of either creating new or enhancing existing social supports in order to compensate for lost friendships.

Ferraro and colleagues (1984) suggest that friendships and other social supports are important in the adaptation process to widowhood for older women; a status experienced by almost half (42.6%) of all women 65 and older (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). Widows in their first four years of widowhood are more likely to increase their involvement with friends and social networks than those widowed for more than four years. As women lose spouses they often experience anticipatory isolation. In an effort to combat these feelings, widows may rely on the social supports of friends who are also widowed. This overall stability in individual social networks appears to aid in the adaptation to change induced by widowhood (Ferraro et al., 1984).

Friendships provide at least four benefits in later life: meeting cognitive needs, supporting emotional well-being, serving in a therapeutic capacity, and combating loneliness. First, friendships meet cognitive needs and help individuals to process their world through shared experiences, activities, and the exchange of ideas (Finchum & Weber, 2000). Second, friendships and social supports in later life are determinants of higher self-esteem of older persons, regardless of gender. An important aspect of friendships in later life is the nature of choice that characterizes these relationships, resulting in higher levels of positive satisfaction (Lee & Shehan, 1989). Third, Berzoff (1989) found that for adult women “friendships provide opportunities for self-knowledge and self-development through their relationships with other women and play an important role in adult development” (p. 275). Fourth, study participants reported high levels of satisfaction with friendships, and
that satisfaction with friendships was important to avoid loneliness in old age (Holmen & Furukawa, 2002).

Social Participation in Later Life

Social participation with its varied collective and individual forms and meanings is considered an important indicator of positive aging (Bukov, Maas, & Lampert, 2002). Participation in electively chosen leisure activities can result in higher levels of overall life satisfaction and well-being in later life. Leisure activities help older adults facilitate companionship, improve perception of sense of control, reciprocity and exchange, intellectual stimulation, and buffer against health-related effects of aging (Purcell & Keller, 1989; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Connection to others also helps older adults develop emotional connections or emotional support networks (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). These attributes of social participants comprise what Schachter-Shalomi (1995) explains as a move toward conscious aging—an awareness of one’s ability as an older adult to continue to grow and develop throughout the life course and to understand the importance of unifying and relating to others in similar places within the trajectory. Given the benefits of social participation for older adults, Cruikshank (2003) calls for the creation of informal groups to help older adults redefine themselves as they age. Older adults need places where they can age in accordance with their own sets of values, attitudes, and beliefs. Such groups provide opportunities for continued growth, learning, and development and encourage participants to celebrate and accept themselves as participatory members of society.

Positive Aging

Aging in Western culture is a journey characterized by dread, often met with an effort to hide the evidence of aging. Western women invest in a variety of anti-aging products and services, ranging from creams to expensive facelifts. In a culture that offers little to no sanctity or celebration for the aging woman, mid- and later life women live in fear and avoidance of their physical and visible signs of aging. It can be difficult for mid- and later life women to find a comfortable place in which to age.

To combat current and future realities of ageism, older adults (and especially mid- and later life women) are encouraged to develop social supports (Butler, 1969; Calasanti, 2005). Social supports often come in the form of organizational memberships that enable women to share experiences and celebrate aging, encourage healthy aging processes, and
provide buffers for the stresses and strains associated with aging. Supportive groups offer a sense of sanctity for women to age where they can be themselves (Manning, 2004).

There are potential risks for negative social and emotional outcomes for older women. At the same time, friendships and social participation play an important potentially buffering role against these risks. The RHS is a venue where older women engage in social participation and where friendships are created and fostered. Thus, the focus of this article is to explore the question: How does RHS membership help mid- and later life women cope with risk factors for negative well-being associated with aging?

**METHODS**

Data were collected in the upper Midwest using an ethnographic approach in which multiple sources and types of data were collected and included in the data set (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 1995). These included in-depth interviews with 25 participants, a focus group interview with 7 participants, participant observation at RHS events and meetings, and examination of RHS publications. Both the in-depth and focus group interviews followed a semi-structured format and lasted between one-half and 2 hours. These interviews focused on feelings of nostalgia surrounding wearing hats, the personal significance of red hats and purple dresses to the women active in RHS, attitudes toward the encouragement of "girliness" by the RHS, how the RHS impacts their own and others’ perceptions of what it means to be old, family involvement in RHS, how participants spend their leisure time outside of RHS, and what being a member of RHS means to them. These focused interview questions also based the initial coding framework.

The data reported here are from structured interviews, coded specifically for themes such as what it means to be old, the social supports the RHS provides members, and the like. Interview participants (n = 25) were almost entirely white, middle-class women in mid- and later life; reflecting the well established trend that older women tend to have homogeneous groups of friends (Dykstra, 1990), and were also representative of the racial demographics of the upper Midwest. The majority (n = 20) of interviews were conducted by students enrolled in an upper-level dress and human behavior course who received course credit for conducting and transcribing the interviews. The remaining 5 interviews were conducted by the authors and their undergraduate and graduate research
assistants. Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. Sources of recruitment began by identifying RHS chapters and contacting the chapters’ Queen Mothers (QM) using information available on the RHS Web site (www.redhatsociety.com) in the areas surrounding the university and as well as the students’ hometowns. Students also relied on referrals from family members and friends who knew red hatters. Additional participants were recruited by trained student research assistants by contacting local, newly created RHS chapters and via snowball sampling.

We analyzed data using an inductive approach and mindful of inter-coder reliability (Kurasaki, 2000; Warren & Karner, 2005). During the initial coding process, all members of the research team independently read through each interview in its entirety, noting perceptions of common themes that seemed to appear in multiple interviews, and cognizant of the interview questions. The research team then met to discuss collectively these common themes and came to an agreement about initial codes. This included looking for evidence that both supported and did not support working definitions of these sub-themes. Collectively, these sub-themes contribute to our understanding of the importance of RHS in mid- and later life women’s lives. The first author then returned to the interview data to further code the interview data. Consistent with the constant comparative method, all authors were involved in coding interviews while collecting additional data, which included attending RHS events as a research team and discussing our fieldwork experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data Quality

As a research team, several steps were taken both prior to and during data collection and analysis to ensure the trustworthiness and quality of the data and its analysis. Dependability was enhanced by the continued collection of data until data saturation was reached (Morrow, 2005). Transferability (i.e., external validity or generalizability) was achieved using detailed descriptions in the presentation of these findings. This includes the clear and detailed description of data collection, analysis processes, and participants. These processes allow readers to determine if and how the findings presented here transfer or are generalizable to other populations, contexts, or situations (Gasson, 2004). It is not appropriate for qualitative researchers to make claims of extensive generalizability of their data. Thus, great care has been taken in the presentation of the
present findings to avoid the implication that our findings are generalizable to populations, contexts, or situations beyond those that are similar to the ones directly studied here (Morrow, 2005). Dependability (i.e., reliability) was achieved during data analysis through the inclusion of a multidisciplinary research team representing Family Studies, Textiles and Apparel, and Sociology. Following their independent reading of the entire data set, the researchers met to discuss areas of agreement and disagreement regarding themes and sub-themes and to resolve any conflicts that arose. The result was clarification of themes and sub-themes that each researcher then elucidated by returning to the data set to find examples and non-examples of the themes and sub-themes. Finally, the authors acknowledge, as is consistent with qualitative research philosophy, that no research is entirely objective (Morrow, 2005).

RESULTS

Analysis of these data revealed a common theme: the role of the RHS as a protective factor in women’s well-being in later life, which is the focus of this article. Within this overarching theme, the research team identified several sub-themes, including positive attitude about self and aging, the RHS as a venue for emotional and instrumental support, and membership in the RHS as a buffer against social isolation.

Positive Attitude About Self and Aging

The sub-theme of having a positive attitude toward self and aging consisted of two distinct aspects: (1) Being More Than a Mom and Wife and (2) Attitude: Celebrating and Being Silly. Both aspects of the positive attitude appeared, from the analysis of participants’ perceptions within these data, to contribute to an overall improved sense of well-being as an older woman.

Participants described how the RHS helped them to see beyond their identities that are defined by their relationships with others (e.g., mother, grandmother, homemaker, employee, wife). Phyllis explained that, “It [joining the RHS] brought me to the point where I was many years ago, when I’m more open towards people. Not in a shell as I was just being a mom and homemaker and employee.” Theresa echoed this sentiment when she explained why she joined the RHS, “I wanted to be known for more than just making cookies and rocking grandchildren.” Seeing themselves as More Than a Mom and Wife appears to contribute to
RHS members’ overall positive attitude, particularly with regard to how they see themselves as older women.

In addition to helping women to be seen as more than a mother and/or wife, the RHS helps its members to have a positive attitude toward themselves and aging through its primary mode of expression—Attitude: Celebrating and Being Silly. Margaret seemed to best capture the role that the RHS has on these women’s feelings about aging,

I don’t feel like an old lady until I look in the mirror and say, “Who is that?” This [the RHS] is sort of like, “Hey, I can still be out there and do things and have fun. Just because things are creaky, we can still party with the rest of them.

The RHS gives women confidence about themselves and helps them to feel they are still participating fully in their lives, despite the fact that they are not as young as they once were. Particia offered another example, “It’s [the RHS] has made it [life] much more fun. I’ve done things in the last several years that I probably wouldn’t have done. I mean, I know I wouldn’t have been parading around a hotel in my purple pajamas!” Similarly, Lois stated, “[It’s a] freedom that I thought I would never have ... be silly in public that you know you wouldn’t think you would do when you get to be fifty years old.” This idea of cutting loose simply to have fun with themselves and other women is the primary purpose of the RHS. Alice told us;

The point is it is just to have fun. When they said that when you get to a certain point and [that you do] not care about what other people think of you, what you look [like] or what you say or do, and basically that is the presence and basically if you can get to that point you can wear red and purple and not care what anyone says.

These participants described how their lives have changed by being a member of the RHS with regard to their attitude toward themselves and aging. The primary way this happened was through full immersion of the members into the purpose of the group—to simply have fun for fun’s sake.

Venue for Emotional and Instrumental Support

The RHS served as a venue for emotional and instrumental support for many participants. This theme captures the role that membership in the RHS has in creating networks of individuals who may be called upon to
take care of each other in times of need. Georgia explained, “That’s one of the advantages of having a group like this . . . that you do have a support group when something happens.” In fact, the opportunity to both receive and give support is one motivation for becoming a member of the RHS. This was the primary motivation for Martha to join. She explained, “I think I wanted [to start an RHS chapter] because my girlfriend had said to me . . . I had just kind of been through my divorce and was finally coming to grips with that, and I thought to myself that I needed something besides my kids to entertain me.” Lois’s experience was similar: “I was divorced after about thirty years of marriage. So, I had kind of a rough road for a while. And this kind of was a healing part for me.” Being a part of the RHS is not always about what each member can take in terms of support from other members. Sometimes being a member, and asking others to become members, is about providing help when it is needed. Nora explained how she enjoys being a part of the RHS for this reason,

When [one of our members] is down, the gals come out of the woodwork to cheer her up! It’s not just a lifestyle, it’s life. We’ve all tried to raise our husbands, raise our children, we have some gals never married, no children, just divorced, long divorced, yet we all understand what they went through, what they are going through, they don’t have to talk about it, we understand. [One of the members] used to be really depressed so I asked her to join. At first she didn’t want to, she didn’t know anybody. I said, “Just come with me and see what you think.” She has come out of her depression and is doing fantastic! [Her husband] said it’s because she can come to this [and] laugh, be with other women.

These data suggest that RHS membership is often about not just having fun but being there for each other in times of need.

Buffer Against Social Isolation

The RHS can also serve as a buffer against social isolation. This sub-theme primarily revolved around two main aspects: combating social isolation, loneliness, and the security and well-being associated with belonging to a socially recognized and positively affirmed group. For many of the participants, being a member of an RHS chapter was a means of establishing social connections with others. For Georgia,
becoming a Red Hatter meant creating and reestablishing social connections with others following the death of her husband,

Well, I’m widowed now and [the RHS is] something to socialize and to get out and just have a good time with a group of people. I think [the RHS] has really helped because when we’re out, people will come up and talk to you and ask you questions about the group and so forth. I think it’s helped me to kind of come out of my shell and not be quite so shy. [The RHS] gives you something to start a conversation about. And then it can kind of go from there into other areas. So, yeah, it has really helped. ’Cause I have a lot, I think there’s a lot of people who wouldn’t approach you otherwise. But they see you with your purple and your red hat they kind of know about the Red Hat Society so they’re wanting to know more about it. So they’ll come up and ask you about that. It’s a neat way to just, an icebreaker, to get acquainted with people.

While being a part of the RHS can help some women develop new social connections to replace others that have been lost, the RHS can also provide a place for women to develop friendships with other women for the purpose of having companions to do things with. Phyllis described the reason she became a Red Hatter, “The main thing [that prompted me to join the society] was not having girlfriends or relationships with anyone my age. The world is a couple’s world [and I am divorced], so I thought it would be a good avenue to go out and have fun and meet some people.” Similarly, Elizabeth looked to the RHS as a source of leisure that could be engaged in with others: “I don’t have that much to do in my old age and the Red Hat meetings give me something to do. I enjoy the company and talking with other women.”

In providing a buffer against social isolation, the RHS also creates a sense of belonging to something that is not just a small local chapter but sometimes something regional, national, and international. Nora explained the role of the unique dress of RHS members as one way to help members feel they belong, “The clothing gets them through the door. Once they get through, the camaraderie that they share ... they pick up on it immediately. They want to be a part of it.” After Lois attended a regional event for RHS members, she describes how the costuming helped her to feel a part of something even bigger than she realized,

And when you stand up and you see 400 red hats, I mean, it’s just a sea of red. You know, you just know that there’s a sisterhood there.
And you see somebody and they’re friendly, I mean you can strike up a conversation, you talk to people that you would never talk to any other time. It’s just a good feeling that it gives you.

The wearing of the red hats and purple outfits provides women with a sense of connection to others and a way to begin establishing new social relationships with others. This sense of belonging appears to help these older women enhance their social networks, which may serve as a buffer against social isolation that can occur for women in later life.

**DISCUSSION**

Growing old in Western society is a challenge, especially for women (Calisanti, 2005). The social phenomenon which is the RHS is worthy of academic investigation, for we have found in the RHS a group that not only provides both an understanding of what mid- and older life women face, but also allows women to develop strategies for coping with the social realities of ageism (e.g., redefining what old means, making space for girl time and having fun). Friendships among women in mid- and later life have been found to be a source of emotional support for women as they age (MacRae, 1996; Roberto, 1996), with most research focused on the exchange of emotional support (Himes & Reidy, 2000).

With our broad conceptualization of emotional support we have expanded the viewing and analysis of social support. As discussed in the findings, emotional support can have an impact on the maintenance of well-being for RHS members in later life. Having the space and support to develop a positive attitude about one’s own aging in this case sometimes included defying the unspoken rules of being over 50 and confidently running around a hotel in purple pajamas in the company of your friends. Additionally, and more explicitly, RHS provides emotional support in providing an understanding of the aging process in female-female friendships, which assists in combating the loneliness that accompanies social isolation in later life. Coping with the widowhood, developing new friendships, and taking some fun time for one’s self are all part of the “disorganization” of the RHS.

This study investigated the emergence of the Red Hat Society as a source of friendships among older women and the role these social connections play in the management of well-being for its members in mid- and later life. This study contributes to limited research on female-female friendships (Johnson, 1996), particularly in mid- and later
life (Finchum & Weber, 2000). Our findings illustrate that the RHS is a gathering place for these women with the purpose of fostering female-female friendship for older women. Additionally, the RHS provides more than a buffer against ageism, social isolation, inequality, and negative experiences with aging. The RHS serves as an avenue for the celebration of aging and the embracing of friendship/sisterhood in mid- and later life. Overall, our findings indicate that the RHS also encourages members to reject common stereotypes of female aging, explore new possibilities, challenge the limitation of these stereotypes and insist on redefining what it means to be an older woman in an ageist world.

This point cannot be overstressed. The RHS encourages a positive way for aging women to deal with their aging, and to, as our article title suggests, "wear purple." In this we mean that in wearing purple, in being an RHS member, mid- and later life women are not disappearing from public view as they age, they are instead wearing vibrant colors, and acting in extravagant ways as they draw public and positive attention to themselves. The RHS is dismantling the negative impetuses in aging women's lives, redefining what “old” means, and allowing women to develop new female-female friendships, all of which have been documented as important in securing a satisfied life.

The emergence of the RHS and other similar groups for mid- and later life women (e.g., the Ya-Yas: http://ya-ya.com/) legitimize women’s pursuit of leisure, self-identify, and meaning in mid- and later life. Future research regarding similar social phenomena should involve exploration of the meaning and purposes of membership including: why some women choose to participate in leisure in this way while others do not, intergenerational participation by mothers and daughters, the membership and friendship experiences of women of color, and the role that consumption of RHS paraphernalia has in developing individual and group identity. Certainly, these will contribute to the base of knowledge about the unique ways in which emotional support is transmitted by both members and non-members of the RHS and similar “dis-organizations.”

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