Improving African American Survey Response Rates for Leisure Marketing and Planning Studies

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Abstract: Public agencies frequently use mail surveys as a way to gather citizen input. The results of these studies may be integrated into the policy, program and budgetary processes of an agency. However, the lack of participation among African Americans in traditional mail survey research raises the possibility of nonresponse bias. This case study examines two issues: first, the belief that nonparticipation in mail survey questionnaires by African Americans is based upon a lack of perceived personal connection felt by participants to the subject content being surveyed; and second, there are more effective ways to obtain input from the hard-to-survey populations than written mail surveys. Findings show higher response rates among African Americans when an alternative survey method, a phone survey, was used instead of a mailed survey.

Keywords: citizen input, nonresponse bias, leisure marketing, African American participation, telephone survey.

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Introduction

Successful planning for the development of park and recreation facilities as well as recreation programs requires that the public or users provide input and express their views. In the past, public sector planners and administrators did not see the need to open the process of policy formulation and resource allocation to all their constituencies, but that is not the case today. Legislation passed since the 1960s now sets the minimum standards for public participation and access, and common sense suggests numerous other reasons for complying.

The rationale for seeking public participation and the methods for doing so come from many sources. Political scientists such as Watson, Juster and Johnson (1991), Brundy and England (1982), and Webb and Hatry (1973) have detailed the needs and methods of obtaining public input. Agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service that plan and administer

outdoor recreation resources have been leaders in soliciting public comment. This literature includes many references to public involvement such as Jubenville, Twight and Becker, 1987; Soden 1990; McMullin and Neilsen, 1991. Also, those planning municipal recreation systems have for many years recognized the need to listen to their constituencies and practice "bottom-up" forms of planning. Like others of their time, Bannon (1976) and Graham and Klar (1979) discuss in their books the need to get feedback from program participants and community leaders. However, much of the recreation planning literature of the 1970s focused somewhat narrowly on post-hoc participant evaluation. Since that time the need to assess more accurately the public's view has been recognized (Hudson & Witt, 1984). Particularly, the work of Crompton (Crompton & Lamb, 1986; Howard & Crompton, 1980) in the 1980s popularized public sector marketing for leisure services that expanded the level of information needs to all potential participants. These marketing philosophies and strategies, now almost universally accepted throughout the field, have put the client or consumer first in the eyes of the service provider. For many agencies, new park amenities and programs are now provided only after clientele are asked what they want, where they want it and how much they are willing to pay for it. The need for public involvement having been well established suggests the next consideration is how to reliably gather that input.

The connection between full public participation and successful planning and marketing is now widely accepted. Methods of securing public input have been used successfully in various settings, including public meetings, charretts, and focus groups as well as a variety of more quantitative methods of survey research. Although each method has its own set of strengths and weaknesses, survey research has the potential for being the most definitive. Qualitative methods like focus groups are very good at providing an in-depth understanding of a particular issue, but the scientific approach that is based upon research that is both systematic and controlled provides greater confidence in the outcome (Kerlinger, 1986). If well conducted, a sample of interviews or phone and mail surveys can provide valid and reliable information about a large population. Generalizations may be drawn from such data that can provide powerful justifications for making significant policy or programmatic decisions. Within this group of survey methods the self-completed mail questionnaire is frequently employed by leisure service agencies. In general, the appeal of this method lies with its ability to gather relatively large amounts of data economically.

The data obtained from any survey method are only as good as the sample from which they are drawn and the response rates of those contacted. Much has been written about the need to randomly select respondents (Kerlinger, 1986) and the use of specialized methods such as cluster or quota sampling which compensates for uniqueness within the study population (Salant & Dillman, 1994). As important as a good sample is, the greatest threat to valid research may be nonresponse bias. Theoretically, the issue of nonresponse bias deals with the relative difference

between respondents' answers and the answers that non-respondents would have given had they participated (Lambert & Harrington, 1990). The potential for difference between the non-respondent and respondent raises the question of whether or not those who did not respond are different in some important way from those who did (Churchill, 1991). Although Bablie has stated that 50% is an adequate response rate; 60% is good and 70% is very good (1973), there is potential for nonresponse bias to creep in. To complicate further the reliability of citizen surveys is the trend of declining completion rates and the difficulty in obtaining accept-able levels of response (Lavrakas, 1993; Verhoff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1991; American Statistical Association, 1979).

In some instances possible error due to nonresponse is explained away as a random occurrence. That is, it is assumed that what may be lost by the respondent in question is made up for by others, and the existing response base actually is representative of the whole. To compensate for the loss of respondents others may suggest the substitution of new respondents for missing ones, but Dillman cautions against this practice as it really has the effect of further diluting response rates (1978).

It is likely that the random error explanation noted above is valid when used with homogeneous populations. However, identifiable subgroups, like minorities that would be expected to occur in a typical urban setting, should not be excluded or underrepresented. One such group that is routinely under represented in most mail surveys is African Americans (Sudman, 1994). Making public policy decisions that rely on survey data devoid of this group's input is, at best, politically naive and, at worst, socially irresponsible.

The problem of underrepresentation is not limited to municipal surveys, it is present in national studies as well. For example, Floyd, Shinew, McGuire & Noe (1994), in their study of race and leisure state: "The low number of blacks in the sample points to a salient problem which pervades the literature" (p. 160). Likewise, private sector market researchers under-stand that traditional mail survey methods simply do not reach the black population (Sudman, 1994). If this population is reached, the validity of their responses may be questioned. Rossman (1994) suggests that minori-ties often offer idealized answers or what they feel might be the "correct" answer. Although researchers in the leisure service field have examined problems associated with sampling error (DiGrino, 1986; Um, Crompton & Fesenmaier, 1988), little mention has been made of the problem of non-sampling error such as low response rates. More specifically these and other studies have failed to examine nonresponse among minority populations.

Resolving the issue of under representation in survey research is difficult and potentially expensive (Bertram, 1974). Technical solutions such as quota sampling that requires equal representation within sub-locations and weighting, which multiplies the value of a selected response group to reflect the actual proportion of their group's size have some appeal (Churchill, 1991), but small "n's" and typically high nonresponse rates

often prohibit the use of such methods on the grounds of not being representative. Clearly, the ideal solution is to improve levels of response rates for those targeted groups (Salant & Dillman, 1994).

Purpose and Limitations

The fundamental goal of this study is to improve the planning and marketing of park and recreation services by examining methods of how to acquire information for lower class African Americans. To help accomplish this goal two questions were addressed. First, why does this population characteristically not respond to commonly employed attitude and interest surveys? Secondly, if the self-administered mail questionnaire is poorly suited for the task of gathering data from this group, would a telephone survey serve as an acceptable alternative?

This study is not about all African Americans. Those belonging to the middle and upper classes were excluded due to their presumed willingness to participate more in the planning and marketing processes. Thus, the results of this study should not be generalized to all African Americans. Another limitation of this study is the exclusion of lower-class individuals from other populations. Although this study will address how to better to reach the target population, it does not examine the important question of how, in general, lower SES is related to nonresponse. For example, it may be that lower-class whites or Latinos are equally underrepresented as might be segments of the senior market. However, these questions are beyond the scope of this paper and will need to be addressed individually.

This case study examines two issues; first, the belief that non-participation in mail survey questionnaires by African Americans is based upon a lack of perceived personal connection felt by participants to the subject content being surveyed, and second, there are more effective ways to obtain input from hard-to-survey populations than with written mail surveys. The first issue was examined by conducting two focus groups that brought together African American residents to explore reasons for their lack of participation in traditional mail survey research. The second issue was addressed by conducting a telephone survey limited to African American households and by assessing the level of participation and quality of information received through this alternative survey approach

This study was conducted in a moderately sized Midwestern city where the governmental agency responsible for public leisure services had just conducted a master plan that included a resident attitude and interest survey (McKinney, Espeseth, & Wicks, 1993). The mail survey procedure yielded predictably low African American response rates. Whereas 3% of respondents were African Americans, census data indicate that the this group represents 14% of the total local population.

Assessing African American's Opinions About Survey Research

It is unlikely that public agencies will abandon their use of surveys to gather citizen input, yet the under representation of blacks remains an

important issue. If citizen survey results are to be integrated into the policy, program and budgetary processes of an agency, it is necessary and prudent to explore and understand the lack of participation among minority populations, especially African Americans, in mail survey research. Through this new understanding it would then be necessary to develop and implement alternative, cost effective methods that would allow for and encourage minority participation in the policy making process (Jackson, Tucker, & Bowman, 1982).

Focus Groups Meetings

To gather information about nonresponse to mail surveys, a face-to-face methods data collection was used. Executing the focus group process followed the eight-step design by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) that included; 1) problem definition, 2) identification of sampling frame, 3) selection of moderator, 4) generate interview guide, 5) recruit sample, 6) conduct session, 7) interpret data and 8) generate report.

The focus groups targeted lower income groups because it is these individuals who may be the most difficult to reach and obtain participation. This population was further segmented into two groups that were potentially different from each other. One group was comprised of public housing development residents and the other was drawn from a largely lower-class black neighborhood comprised mostly of single family residences. This selection process was used to ensure that each group would be homogenous and compatible and, thus, could more effectively complete the task (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Further, homogenous groups require less energy directed to group maintenance which was a concern with this sensitive issue. To recruit minority residents to the focus groups, established and trusted members of the African American community were asked to coordinate the meetings. The director of the community center in the African American neighborhood was responsible for contacting and inviting six community leaders, and the Director of Resident Services at the public housing development was responsible for assembling a similar sized group.

The goals of the focus group meetings were to:

1. Assess the level to which minority residents felt served by the park district programs and facilities.
2. Discuss and explore how information is disseminated within the African American community and determine the best ways for the park district to communicate effectively within that community.
3. Explore ways in which African American residents would be most comfortable giving feedback to the park district.

Public Housing Focus Group

The first focus group consisted of five residents and three staff members (all women) of a 55-unit public housing development. The meeting was held on site in the resident services building at 11:00 a.m. on a weekday morning. The time and place were selected so as to be most convenient for the group members. In this case, the meeting was in the housing project and in a familiar surrounding. Interviewers introduced themselves and asked residents and staff person to respond openly to questions covering the areas of: 1) personal participation history with park district programs and/or facilities, 2) attitudes toward the park district, and 3) methods to best obtain input from the African American community in the future.

The interview team was comprised of two members, both of whom were white. The moderator was female and had considerable work experience in the housing project environment. Although there is the possibility that the focus group would have responded more openly to a study team of its own race, it was anticipated that the staff's involvement would help lessen that problem by providing authority and credibility to their process. Questions pertaining to the areas of concern noted above were formulated and prioritized before the focus group meeting. The meetings were not taped to avoid intimidating group members. Each of the research team members took notes diligently, and at the completion of the session, observations and notes of the meetings were compared, contrasted and clarified to ensure a valid interpretation of data.

Participation in Park District Programs

Most participants identified the Douglass Community Center (located in close proximity to the housing development) as their primary or only place of participation in any park district program. Several reasons were given for the lack of participation in any other areas. Some respondents were totally unaware of the variety of other programs offered through the park district. When asked if they had ever seen the program catalog that is mailed to every household in the district twice a year, over half indicated they had not. Respondents who were aware of other programs offered most often cited the high cost of registration fees as the primary reason for nonparticipation. (It should be noted that local residents, in general, think park district programs are appropriately priced, however, the respondents in this group were all severely limited in their financial abilities). A related issue that surfaced for all respondents was the lack of reliable/available transportation to and from remote program sites.

Finally, several respondents expressed concerns that they did not feel especially comfortable participating or having their children participate in some park district programs because they saw them as being tailored to the white middle class.

Attitudes Toward the Park District

Throughout the two-hour discussion there was a prevailing opinion expressed among respondents that the park district was designed to serve white middle-class families. Respondents cited the types of programs, cost of registration, program location, ages served, and the types of advertising used to support their belief that the park district is an organization that does not address their needs.

When focus group members were asked what the park district could do to better serve the minority community, and more specifically public housing residents, most suggestions centered around providing fee waivers or assistance with registration costs, providing flexible/reliable transportation, and offering programs that included infants and toddlers and/or provided childcare. All participants would welcome programming right in their own housing development. It should be noted that lack of personal financial resources was a topic revisited every time someone brought up a new idea.

How to Obtain Minority Input in the Future

When asked, only one respondent said she would answer the mail survey, otherwise all group members confirmed that this mode of citizen input was ineffective for them. The reasons given for not responding were that it was too complicated, took too much time and that the survey was viewed as irrelevant to their needs. Privately, several of the housing development staff members commented that for many residents, reading a lengthy and complex questionnaire would be almost impossible. They cautioned organizations to remember that reading may be difficult for some people.

When asked if a telephone survey would be a more effective means of communicating input there was a mixed reaction among this group of public housing residents. The housing development manager said that only about 3 of every 10 households within the development maintained regular phone service. Respondents overwhelming felt that the best way to obtain input from residents in public housing was to work through a person or organization that is already established and trusted within their community and then conduct personal interviews or group meetings.

Respondents believed that by working through the resident services office, or with the staff at the neighborhood community center, the park district could obtain valuable input. Respondents suggested that agencies seeking input could meet with community center staff and ask them to ask area residents for the needed input. Respondents stressed that they are reluctant to talk openly to strangers, and that there is always some suspicion about why people, particularly government agencies, are asking questions in the first place. Hence, by going through a trusted second party, residents are most likely to be honest and open in responding to questions.

Members of the focus group shared mixed feelings about going through the church to obtain information. Most often they believed the

church is a good place to disseminate information, but not necessarily obtain input. Respondents spoke strongly about their desire to share their own thoughts and opinions and not have them necessarily given through an arbitrarily designated "black leader."

Recreation Center Focus Group

The second focus group was held at the Douglass Recreation Center which serves predominately minority children and young adults. The director of the center invited African American community residents to participate in this discussion. The five adult participants (all men) were active civic leaders in their community. It should be noted that members of this focus group were concerned with serving the African American community as a whole. Moderators introduced themselves and again asked participants to respond openly to the same questions regarding 1) personal participation history with the park district programs and/or facilities, 2) attitudes towards the park district, and 3) better methods of obtaining input from the minority community in the future.

Participation in Park District Programs

Respondents in this focus group spoke openly about the social class division that impacts participation in park district programs. There was agreement among the group that African American families who fit into the middle class group participated in more park district programs than did those families who were working class or poor. The African American community tended to utilize only programs and facilities that were in close proximity to their family residence. Again, transportation and cost were seen as major constraints to not participating in a greater variety of activities. These findings suggest the importance of neighborhood based recreation planning and the inability or unwillingness of this group to use regional or district wide-facilities.

Attitudes Toward the Park District

Respondents spoke of their perceptions of historically poor communication and relations between the African American community and the park district. They suggested that the African American community has felt slighted over the years due to their perceptions of inadequate facilities, and poor quality programming by the park district. When respondents were asked how, or if, the park district could improve relations with the African American community, respondents unanimously agreed that district officials must begin by building relationships based on mutual trust and respect for members of the black community. All agreed that it would be a slow process but one that would be more than worthwhile in the long run. Respondents spoke of the need for district officials to become more familiar with and sensitive to the service needs that are unique within their community.

How to Obtain Minority Input in the Future

After seeing a copy of the original self-completed mail-back park district Citizen Attitude and Interest Survey instrument, all focus group participants agreed that this would be the worst way to obtain information from the black community. They suggested the single best way to get information would be going door-to-door and talking directly with the residents. When asked what other alternatives might help, the group identified the following features important to successfully surveying the black community: 1) speak or write in everyday language. Even something like the words "leisure" or "recreation" may not evoke the response researchers anticipate. For example, if the park district wanted to know the leisure patterns of teenagers, focus group members suggested following wording, "What do your kids do after school or when they have free time?", 2) offering an incentive would greatly increase the likelihood of participation by residents of this community, 3) Present information in a nonthreatening way, try to put people at ease. There is good reason for residents to be suspicious of persons asking for personal information, so make sure the interviewer is very up front and clear on why he or she wants this information, and 4) Work through already established community groups such as neighborhood groups, community activists or Black churches.

Although members of the two focus groups shared an African American heritage, they differed in other significant ways. For example, one group was comprised of males residing in single-family homes who were community activists. The other group were females and residents of a public housing project. It might be expected that such differences would yield different conclusions yet both groups responded similarly to a variety of questions about providing input to the park district, the services they received and their relationship with the public agency that provides park and recreation services.

Telephone Survey

The lack of participation by African American households in mail survey research has left this vital segment of many communities out of the decision-making process when citizen input is desired. Results of the first phase of this research indicated that typical self-administered mail response surveys would not elicit adequate response from many African Americans. Alternative methods of data collection include telephone surveys and personal interviews. For the purposes of this study the personal interview was not examined due to its cost (Crompton, 1983). Thus, the second goal of the case study was to assess the viability of using an alternative method of survey research, the telephone survey, in the African American community. Although personal interviews may be the best alternative to the traditional mail survey, they are much more difficult to administer due to the need to have trained interviewers. Interviewer bias may also be a problem, particularly when targeting a minority subpopulation (Schuman & Converse, 1971). Thus, this study examines the plausibility of employ-

ing phone survey methods. It has been noted that some households in the lowest economic groups (public housing) did not maintain telephone service, yet the vast majority of Black households do maintain regular telephone service, and hence telephone surveying may be seen as a viable and affordable survey option for them (Sudman, 1994).

The Midwestern city in which this case study was conducted had segregated housing patterns that facilitated the easy identification of African American neighborhoods through the use of 1990 U.S. Census Tract Data. African Americans account for 14% of the total population in the city and minority residences are concentrated heavily in one census tract. By using the 1993 Hill-Donnelly Cross Reference Directory; names, addresses and phone numbers were obtained for all residences within the targeted census tract area. Individual names and phone numbers were then randomly selected from the designated census tract to participate in the telephone survey. From that list an initial 100 names were drawn. Another 40 names were drawn on the fifth day of the calling pattern to increase the sample size and assure 50 completed interviews. Results of the telephone survey interviews are discussed below.

The telephone survey was an abbreviated form of the original Citizen Attitude and Interest Survey conducted by the park district in 1993. It was shortened to 10 questions that were decided upon by park district personnel. It is important to note that the goal of this survey was not to survey residents about their interests and attitudes concerning the park district, but rather to demonstrate the viability of using telephone survey techniques in place of mail surveys for minority populations. In other words, the response rate and relative level of ease or difficulty in answering the survey questions are the results salient to this study.

The telephone survey was conducted during evenings over the course of seven days. Households where no answer was obtained were called back two additional times, for a total of three attempts possible per household. The survey caller was a Caucasian female and identified herself as a park district representative. It was estimated that each call would take between four and six minutes.

Telephone Survey Results
Of the initial 140 numbers selected from the Hill-Donnelly Cross Reference Directory, Table 1 shows that 16 numbers (11.4%) had been disconnected and 22 numbers (15.7%) had no answer after three separate attempts. These combined 38 numbers were removed from the sample when computing the response rate. The contact rate for the telephone interview process was 82% of the net sample or 102 households...However, the data indicate that the participation rate among those contacted was only 52% and conversely, that slightly under half of those contacted refused to be interviewed. This refusal rate for African Americans was higher than that reported by Bertram (1974), although it might not be different from rates expected from other inner-city populations (Pottick and Lerman, 1991).

It is also significant to note that of the 53 completed telephone interviews, 45 of them (84.9%) were completed with female respondents whereas less than one-fifth (15%) were men ...Of the 49 interviews that were declined 37 were declined by males (75.5%) and 12 females (24.5%), a 3-to-1 ratio. It is not clear if the gender of the caller had a direct effect on the response rate of males or females, but it was clear that females were much more willing to answer survey questions than were males. If this pattern is prevalent in other jurisdictions it suggests that a strong gender bias may exist in this form of data collection.

Table 1
Phone Survey Sample and Participation Rate by Gender

140	numbers originally drawn
- 16	number disconnected
- 22	numbers no answer (3 tries)
102	numbers contacted
53	answered and participated
45	females
8	males
49	answered and declined participation
12	females
37	males

Net Participation Rate of households contacted 52%

One of the questions that needed to be answered when using telephones surveys with minority populations was would the interview produce quality answers that would be comparable to the answers given on a written survey instrument. An original pilot testing of this survey is given to 5 persons not familiar with the project. The results of the pilot survey showed the need to change the structure of the interview. It was concluded that the success rate would be considerably higher if the telephone interview was not highly structured, but rather if it was conducted in a more conversational, friendly tone (Jackson, Tucker, & Bowman, 1982).

The initial telephone survey introduction read *"...Hello my name is _____. I am calling on behalf of the park district. We are contacting citizens throughout the area to find out about their attitudes and interest concerning the park district..."* That introduction, long and formal, was changed to incorporate a much more conversational tone. It began, *"Hi, this is _____, who am I speaking with? I am working with the park district would you're able to help me out by answering a few questions?"* This approach yielded a much more positive response than the pretest and not only put the respondent at ease, but set a more casual tone for the remainder of the interview.

The original time estimate for one phone interview was six minutes, however, over half of the completed interviews took 11 minutes or more. This additional time was necessary to answer questions the respondents had, or to clarify questions that were unclear. This suggests that those contemplating a phone survey of minorities or other groups unfamiliar with the survey content area should plan for the extra staff time needed for communicating with these potential respondents.

Conclusions

The need to successfully market fee-based recreation programs to the growing African American population as well as offering publicly provided services to this population in the most efficient and productive way will require that service providers better understand their needs and preferences. Whether this process is called market research or participatory planning it will necessitate some forms of research to gauge, evaluate and monitor the public's views. This study set out to answer the questions of why African Americans did not participate in mailed survey research and to determine a better way to elicit input from this population. The results of the focus groups clearly indicated that written questionnaires, particularly lengthy and complex ones, were the least likely way to receive input. Also, respondents did not see these questionnaire as relevant and hence there was no internal or external motivation for them to complete the form. Although this study dealt specifically with one park district, the statements made concerning the perceived trust a person has in the organization conducting the survey may be generalizable to other organizations. Trust is an important issue in the African American community. The more an organization can work to create and maintain an environment of trust and respect, the more likely it is to receive the requested input (Rossman, 1994).

The telephone survey may be a viable alternative to mail surveys. It is important to note that the proper and in-depth training of the telephone surveyor is of utmost importance (Lavrakas, 1993). A less-structured, more informal approach yielded higher response rates with this population, and it is important to train surveyors how to successfully use this approach. If minority populations are concentrated, the phone survey may be economically executed. However, if this population is "marbleized" throughout the study area, techniques to screen out these populations may prove very expensive (Bertram, 1974).

It is no longer an option to exclude any segment of a community when asking for input in organizational decision making processes. The familiar and inexpensive mail survey approach works well with traditional populations, but we must develop new and creative ways to obtain this information from minority populations. Beginning this process with focus groups helped researchers to understand better the population they wanted to survey and provided valuable insight developing a valid telephone survey.

The telephone survey produced superior results with minority respondents compared to the traditional mail survey. However, much more research is needed to further test the efficacy of other survey methods.

These results suggest that planners and elected officials will need to consider the extra expense associated with adequately reaching some minority populations. This approach is consistent with the increasing use of mixed mode surveys to improve response rates and validity (Dillman & Tarmai, 1988). At a minimum, greater time will be needed to meet with members of this community and develop more culturally sensitive instruments. The more likely scenario is that significant additional resources will be needed to conduct labor intensive data collection such as personal interviews at the respondents' home. Under ideal conditions a telephone survey may provide an adequate level of response but the data suggest nonresponse may be higher than with the general population and results biased by gender.

From a methodological perspective, research that more inclusive of minorities will also necessitate a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data collection procedures which converge on the issues of concern. Rossman (1994) highlights the importance of qualitative methods for this population when she states: "The standard research techniques used for the mainstream market may not be useful with African, Asian or Hispanic customers because of the tremendous differences in lifestyles, values and frames of reference. Research needs to be adjusted to the lifestyle and to the values of the segment in question, or else the data gathered will be virtually worthless (p. 24)." Thus, qualitative methods are likely to be more effective with minorities and will create challenges in interpretation that will be a test for even the best researchers. New ways to assess and compare different data will need to be devised as traditional methods are shown to be ineffective at reaching targeted populations. This also suggests that agencies wishing to do a better job of measuring my opinion will have to screen consultants and researchers closely to ensure that they are knowledgeable about these procedures.

Organizations both public and private increasingly look constituents for feedback and input into the decision making process. study helped to identify new ways in which organizations can are representative input of all African Americans.

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