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Geek the girl: Language, femininity, and female nerds

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INTRODUCTION

In the popular imagination of American culture resides the archetype of the n socially inept, physically unattractive, and mentally overdeveloped, with a spe affinity for science and technology.[2] The comic strip "Dilbert" by Scott Ada which targets the computer industry, provides a typical representation of nerd popular culture. In one cartoon, three men and one woman are seated arour conference table. In the first panel, one man says, "I think it was fifty gigab and another responds, "I think you mean *mega*bits." The second panel sh everyone at the table laughing uproariously. In the final panel, the third man strip's protagonist, Dilbert) remarks, "We're so fun-loving, you'd think *one* o would have a friend outside of work."

Given such images, it is clear that despite the media's recent hailing of a t toward "geek chic," exemplified by the popularity of the Internet and the finan success of computer software magnate Bill Gates, there is a certain ambival about this turn of events. Nerds are, it seems, feared as well as despised, for intellectual capacity is seen as a potential threat to the social order. The pop "Revenge of the Nerds" movies offer a humorous view of this cultural anx while media descriptions of Unabomber suspect Theodore Kaczynski suggest, apparent earnestness, that his Ph.D. in mathematics somehow accounts for alleged predilection for building and mailing package bombs (e.g., Paulos 19 Even *Discover* magazine, which is dedicated to the dissemination of scien knowledge to lay audiences and whose readership presumably contains a siz number of nerds, takes a decidedly negative view of them in its lighthearted loc nerd evolution and socialization, urging readers at the end of the article in the self-help vein, "If you've gotten to the point that you look in the mirror and see Mel Gibson than Hoot Gibson, less General Eisenhower than David Eisenho less Harrison Ford than Edsel Ford, you may want to rethink your style" (Kl 1993:48).

As the foregoing examples from popular culture suggest, nerd statu overwhelmingly associated with males, designating those who are soc stigmatized for failing to measure up to conventional standards of Amer masculinity. To be thus categorized, according to this cultural ideology, is a sc disaster, both resulting from and perpetuating the social incompetence of th

attention, with scholars employing the medicalized discourse of disease and recovery to describe the movement into and out of nerd identity. Psychologist Randall Osborne, for example, suggests that nerds feel out of place and suffer from low self-esteem; "anything that makes you question your own abilities can lead to a nerdlike loss of confidence and stature," he states (quoted in Kluger 1993). Likewise, David Kinney, drawing on his ethnographic research in a Midwestern high school, argues that students who are labeled nerds in middle school must undergo a process of recovery in high school either by participating in extracurricular activities, especially sports, or by developing numerous social relationships. He writes of one boy who successfully cured himself of nerdiness: "Now in high school, this former lonely dork has a steady girlfriend and many more friends than he had in middle school" (1993:31). Kinney's description makes evident the nexus of cultural ideologies that are threatened by the social practices of nerds, chief among them the necessity of participating in the heterosexual matrix in prescribed ways and the importance of popularity, as measured by number of friends rather than strength of emotional bonds. Although Kinney suggests that acquiescence to hegemonic expectations may be problematic, he ultimately sees this process as "recovery," not capitulation.[3] Moreover, Kinney's focus on how individuals separate themselves from the nerd label obscures the perhaps more interesting issue of how and why many teenagers choose not to distance themselves from what at first glance appears to be the social liability of nerdiness.

In the present paper I seek to undermine the prevailing assumptions—both popular and scholarly—about nerd identities and practices. Basing my claims on a yearlong ethnographic study of a San Francisco Bay Area high school, I argue that female nerds, who have been overlooked in previous research, must be studied in their own right because they are not precisely parallel to their male counterparts. I also demonstrate that nerd identity is not simply a stigmatized label foisted by more popular teenagers on hapless social deviants but is willingly embraced by a number of girls and boys who resist dominant practices. Finally, I show that, far from being socially incompetent, nerds are sociolinguistically and interactionally adept, participating in a set of speech practices that allow them to construct their identities in opposition to other social groups.

OPPOSITIONAL IDENTITIES IN A SOCIALLY COMPLEX HIGH SCHOOL

The data for the study emerged from research on the social and linguistic practices of students at Bay City High School, a large, culturally diverse public high school located in an urban corridor of the San Francisco Bay Area.[4] The high school has no racial majority, although whites and blacks, each approximately forty percent of the population, constitute the largest racial groups; Latinos and Asians together constitute about twenty percent. In addition to its racial diversity, Bay City High

Most students of color are in the lower middle class and most white students ar the upper middle class. Social groups thus arrange themselves according to a vis racial line, which is most obviously manifested in a normative division of schoolyard into racial groups during the lunch period and before and after sch This racial split is superimposed on a less noticed but more significant boun based on class or class affiliation.

Many studies of social groups in schools have shown that students ten divide into socially polarized clusters on the basis of gender (Eder, Evans & Pa 1995; Thorne 1993), race (Schofield 1989; Weis 1990); social class affilia (Eckert 1989); orientation toward school (Fordham 1996; Willis 1977); or c factors. Recent research has also pointed out the importance of differentia within a group viewed by outsiders as homogeneous; Norma Mendoza-Dent (e.g., 1994, 1996) work on Latina girls' gang affiliations is one of the 1 sustained demonstrations of intragroup symbolic distinctions. In all these studie has been observed that binary social identities are not only distinctive from other but also consciously oppositional. Thus, members of polarized s categories do not merely "do their own thing," but purposefully create and carr their defining practices while monitoring the practices of their social opposites.

For nerds at Bay City High School, the task of creating an oppositional ide is made infinitely more complex by the fact that they must differentiate thems not from a single dominant social group but from a number of groups that c cultural authority at different moments and in different contexts. The sch dominant cultural style—displayed in many students' musical preferences, clotl and so on—is largely shaped by black vernacular culture, especially hip hop. cultural authority of black students is not unique to this school but appears t characteristic of multiracial schools in California (see Stanlaw & Peshkin 1988 addition, black students hold places of social prominence in the instituti structure of the school, as star athletes, cheerleaders, homecoming queens kings, and so on. Many white students separate themselves from these are participating in other extracurricular activities, focusing on college-track acader and developing their own socially distinctive groups that largely replicate the gr found in homogeneous white high schools: punks, granolas, skaters, jo keggers, stoners, and nerds.[5] All of these groups, which are made up primaril members of the upper middle class, are racialized as white at Bay City H although not all members of these groups are actually white.[6] Thus only v students have been identified or identified themselves to me as nerds despite the that I have observed students of color participating in nerd practices and se groups. Nerd identity should therefore be understood as a site for the productio whiteness as a socially meaningful racial category. For this reason, only v nerds are included in the discussion that follows.

Nerds must distinguish themselves from two general groups of students; th

groups differ from—and resemble—each other along a vast array of socially meaningful variables, it might be expected that nerds would be at a loss for a coherent oppositional identity. In fact, however, such students define their identities as multiply oppositional by focusing on a single parameter: coolness. Whereas all other groups in the school can be thought of as cool—that is, as knowledgeable of and participating in current trends in youth culture—in one way or another, nerds are by definition not cool.[7] As Penelope Eckert puts it in her study of high school social categories, "If a Jock is the opposite of a Burnout, a nerd is the opposite of both" (1989:48). This identity, contrary to the claims of Kinney and Osborne, is not necessarily ascribed by outsiders but may be a conscious choice of students who are not interested in pursuing coolness.

Evidence for this claim can be found in students' own accounts of their social identities. In excerpt (1) Fred describes how she deliberately moved from a cool group of friends to a nerdy group: [8]

> (1) Fred: Last year I was good friends with Kate but I never saw her on weekdays for some reason. I was sitting with this other group of people at lunch who were cool but they liked to talk about everyone who passed and make negative comments about everyone who passed and I just kind of sat there. ... At the end of the semester I said, "What am I doing? Why am I not hanging out with [Kate]?" And so I moved in with [her group of friends]. ... We're always the nerds. We like it. We're glad to be the nerds and the squares. We don't drink, we don't do any drugs, we just get naturally high, we do insane, funny things. And we're smart. We get good grades.

As Fred indicates, unlike the cool or popular people, nerds generally do not drink or use drugs. In addition, they usually do not participate in socially prestigious extracurricular activities, they have small groups of close-knit friends rather than wider social networks, and they rarely date or have ongoing romantic relationships. Although this pattern is not true of all teenagers who identify as nerds, such social concerns do not appear to preoccupy them to the same extent as many other teenagers.

NERDS AND THE HETEROSEXUAL MATRIX

Whereas oppositional identities have often been viewed as constraining possibilities for those who assume them, the nerd identity cannot be understood as limiting in any straightforward way; indeed, unfettered by "coolness," nerds are able to act with a degree of social freedom unavailable to many other students. Perhaps most significantly, in offering resistance to hegemonic social expectations, nerds simultaneously challenge dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality. Such students opt out of the heterosexual matrix of the high school, in which pressure to

necessarily less homophobic than their trendy counterparts, but because sext not an organizing principle of nerds' daily lives as it is for cool students, and gay students may find that friendship with heterosexual nerds pro' relatively safe space in the homophobic environment of the high school.[10] for example, commented that he thinks his best friend Miles, whom he has since early elementary school, is gay. "It doesn't bother me," he said with a And Natalie, one of the few out lesbians at Bay City High, is the presiden Star Trek club, a group with a largely nerd membership.

Refusal to participate in the heterosexual matrix is also linked to the flo conventional displays of femininity and masculinity. Nerds do not wear th clothing styles popular among many students of color and they are just as a the highly gendered fashions favored by their cooler white classmates: fo baseball caps, shirts, and jackets with sports insignia; and for girls, tight b T-shirts, close-fitting bell-bottom jeans, and children's pastel barrettes sha animals or flowers. Nerd girls do not wear revealing clothing, and a sometimes they may wear items decorated with Sesame Street characters emblems of childhood, these do not exhibit the combination of infantilizat sexualization evoked by the clothing of the cool white girls. In fact, nerd gin seem consciously to subvert conventions of feminine adornment of th through their own style choices: their jewelry tends toward plastic Crackerja and their use of makeup is generally limited to painting their finger alternating colors of red, blue, green, and yellow, in dramatic contrast to t traditionally feminine fingernail polish preferences of popular girls as youn fifth grade (see Eckert, this volume). And whereas dark colors and pastel two dominant styles among cool girls, nerd girls often delight in brigh mismatched colors.

The tendency to resist conventional displays of heterosexuality carries o language as well. A number of nerd girls have lower-pitched voices than their cooler counterparts, which are often almost babyish; and even in their of pseudonyms for this study, cool girls selected names like "Lumiere requisite French pronunciation), "Zoe," or "Tiffany," while the nerd girl quoted chose "Fred" and another requested to be called "Bob, Conquero Universe." It might be argued from such choices that nerd girls' identities ar to maleness, but what is striking about these names is that they violate ideologies not merely in being masculine but in being masculine in the wro they are humorous rather than macho. As such, Fred's and Bob's pseu appear to indicate not an affiliation with masculinity but a disaffiliati conventional femininity.

Besides threatening the normative social arrangements of Bay City High also pose a problem for the institutional values of the high school, accoi which academic achievement and extracurricular participation are explicitly

are reported, but it may also be an embarrassment to teachers whose errors they regularly catch and correct. And the extracurricular activities they choose to participate in are not generally viewed as accruing greater glory to the school: chess club rather than cheerleading, badminton rather than basketball. The problematic nature of being smart is especially acute for girls. Although they regularly achieve prominence in advanced math and science courses at Bay City High and the school has taken steps to encourage girls to pursue their interest in these fields, male dominance is still the norm, and it is difficult for girls to balance the interactional requirements of hegemonic heterosexuality with the need to compete and achieve academically, a double bind that carries over into college, as Victoria Bergvall (forthcoming) has shown in her study of female engineering students. (No doubt this pattern occurs in other fields as well, such as linguistics.) By withdrawing from conventional femininity and its attendant obligations, nerd girls are able to display their intellectual ability without apology.[11]

THE LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF NERD IDENTITY

The social practices that nerd girls engage in in order to construct their identities are accompanied by socially meaningful linguistic practices. Students draw on resources at every linguistic level, from phonetics to discourse, to display a distinctive nerd identity that is associated at once with intelligence, humor, and a resolute refusal to be cool.

At the phonetic level, nerd girls are distinguished by their lesser participation in a set of vowel shifts that are characteristic of younger Californians' speech. I focus here on preliminary investigation of the back vowels (uw) and (ow), which are fronting and unrounding. Leanne Hinton, Birch Moonwomon, and their research team (Hinton et al. 1987) have shown that this process is associated with white middle-class California teenagers to such an extent that fronted variants have become linguistic stereotypes of California speech. Luthin (1987) has also demonstrated that young women lead the fronting of (uw) and (ow). Thus, although the girls in my study conform precisely to the profile of speakers leading the change, they may resist participating in it because of their desire to distance themselves from the trendiness of the cool people, who are sociologically, or at least demographically, identical to them. Table 1 shows the pattern of fronting of (uw) and (ow) for three white girls at Bay City High.

TABLE 1. *Scores of vowel fronting for three white girls at Bay City High School (50 tokens each ranked for three values of frontedness)*

	Beth	Bob	Zoe
(uw)	28	24	69
(ow)	26	21	65

that Bob identifies as "popular," has a fronting index of 69 for (uw) and (ow). It does not appear that these results could be explained by lack of conta those who are leading the change, because these girls were raised in the sam attended the same range of public schools, and continue to have a great contact with each other in classrooms. Instead, the differences in use of this salient marker of mainstream youth identity point to differences in identity its

However, nerd girls do not merely reject these socially normative lin resources; they also create their own strategies for the production of a nerd One linguistic phenomenon that makes nerd speech distinctive is its me quality, which lends weight to speakers' words, and the resistance to phono processes characteristic of colloquial speech such as consonant simplification and unstressed vowel reduction. I offer two examples, the fir boy, Erich, and the second by a girl, Beth.

(2) 1 Erich: U:h Hong Kong is a franchise too. Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong.
               (sniff)
     2 Mary: Is it meant to be a funny book or is it [sort of a:]
     3 Erich: [Yeah. I:t's] meant to be somew
     4   humor.
     5 Mary: Yeah.
     6 Erich: But (.) it's very good. It's very fun. Sumatran computer virus.
     7   (nasal laugh) Yeah. It's a compu- it's that's a whole (.) long involved
     8   about this thing that's called [namʃub]. Which is kind of like a compu
     9   program that will program your brai:n. (sniff) And uh
    10 Mary: Oka:y, (laugh)
    11 Erich: it's it's very complicated. You have to really read the book to understa

(3) 1 Beth: I can't quite deal with it yet but it's (keeping [more and more])
     2 Mary: [What is it.   ] I've never
     3   heard of it.
     4 Beth: It's (.) it's this weird book. It takes plac:e in (.) [Den-]
     5 Christine: [Iceland] or somethin
     6 Beth: Denmark.
     7 Christine: Denmark?
     8 Beth: Yeah.
     9 Christine: Oh. Oh, she's *from* Iceland.
    10 Beth: Yeah. She- she's from Greenland actually.

Both Erich and Beth use a measured speech style, slowing their rate of s between certain words: in line 11 of Erich's transcript (*you have to read the bo understand it*) and in line 1 of Beth's (*I can't quite deal with it*). This produc effect of careful enunciation by inhibiting assimilation of final stops to adj initial stops. Erich also produces fully released final [t]s in *understand it* (line

[grinlænd ækʃuwəlij]). The nonreduction of -land echoes Christine's use of this pronunciation in *Iceland* in line 9.

These teenagers' resistance to colloquial speech forms does not merely mark them as untrendy, as their resistance to vowel fronting does. Additionally, it plays the more important role of constructing them as intelligent. The association of this precisely enunciated speech style with intelligence may be due in part to its relationship to literacy. Indeed, as shown in Erich's speech, nerd students may occasionally employ reading pronunciations, such as [folk] for *folk*, and incorrect pronunciations of words they encounter in their extensive reading: for example, one nerd girl I interviewed chose the pseudonym *Loden*, which she pronounced [lɑdn].[12]

At the lexical level, nerd girls again show both resistance to trendy language forms and frequent use of lexical items associated with intelligence. An illustration of the first pattern can be found in the response of Fred and her friends to my request to discuss current slang, which other students usually find the most enjoyable part of our interview. They expressed dismay at the task, made numerous joking apologies for their lack of knowledge, and insisted on providing literal, nonslang definitions for the slang terms I suggested to them, as shown in (4).

> (4) Bob: [blu:d]. B-L. O-O. D. The word is [blʌd]. ... That's the stuff which is inside of your veins. That's the stuff that—I don't know. I haven't gotten to that chapter yet.

The second pattern, the use of lexical items that make the speaker sound smart, is exemplified by the tendency for nerd girls to choose formal-register variants over more colloquial forms. Some examples are listed in (5).

> (5) (a) Carrie: Is anybody here knowledgeable about (.) the seeds on top of bagels?
> (b) (In response to my question about what she calls male high-school students.)
> Beth: I tend to refer to the whole (.) Y chromosome (.) as a guy.
> (c) (In response to my question about whether she has African American friends.)
> Christine: I know them. I know (.) I know people. It helps alleviate situations sometimes.

In short, nerd girls are well on their way to mastering the scientized academic discourse style discussed by both Fleischman and Kyratzis (this volume).

THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE OF NERDS

To suggest that nerds draw on features of formal speech, however, is not to imply that they are uncreative and inflexible in their language use. On the contrary, such girls (and boys) manifest an extraordinarily playful attitude toward language: they

trendy teenagers at Bay City High, they did volunteer their own definition word they had invented (example 6):

> (6) Fred: Oh, and we make up wo:rds, like- (laughs) Okay, every day Kate and Bob ha to go retrieve their violins? From their [arts building] lockers, up on t second floor of [the arts building]? So we said, "We need a new verb, tl means 'to retrieve one's violin.'" So we go *schnarfing* every day after school

Nerds also engage in punning and other joking practices that require attent linguistic form, as shown in (7) and (8):

> (7) (Talking about what *popular* means to them.)
>
> → Bob: Isn't that a kind of tree?
> Loden: No, that's a pop[lar].
> Kate: [Po:p]lar.
> Bob: Whatever. (Laughs)
> ...
> Bob: I think they're popular.
> Kate: Who?
> Bob: Elizabeth Hudson and like Blair, all them.
> Loden: Yeah.
> Kate: Oh yeah.
> Mary: What are they like?
> Bob: They're okay.
> Fred: Are they steps people? (i.e., students who sit on the arts building steps lunchtime)
> Bob: *What?*
> Fred: Do they- [xxx   ]
> → Bob: [I thought you were talking about step relatives.]
> (laughter)

> (8) (Discussing the club they formed.)
> Mary: So it's you four plus: Carrie and Ada?
> Bob: And sometimes Melinda.
> Fred: (laughs)
> Kate: (laughs)
> Loden: What?
> → Fred: That was like A E I O U and sometimes Y. (laughing and gasping for bre

These examples should be sufficient to disabuse Kinney of his notion that lack even the most basic sociolinguistic competence. Kinney suggests tha "recovered" nerd boys whom he interviewed had a high-involvement intera style with each other because "finding friends and frequently talking are rel; new experiences for them" (1993:35). I would propose instead that the inten;

representation of nerds as friendless and not very funny in the cartoon described at the beginning of this paper is not borne out by my observations. Nerd humor is not the same as mainstream teenagers' humor, but both are of crucial significance in forging bonds of friendship and shared identity in their respective social categories.

CONCLUSION

Previous research on the important relationship between language and oppositional identities among rival groups of high school students has shown that many of these identities are positioned not only against other students but against the institutional culture of the school as well. However, as I have shown, the identity of the nerd, which is omnipresent in U.S. high schools, fulfills many of the school's institutional expectations even as it disrupts the cultural expectations of mainstream student social groups. Popularly conceived of as academic overachievers and social underachievers who would rather interact with computers than human beings, nerds are often trivialized and dismissed. But this social category also represents a serious threat to dominant gender arrangements in U.S. high schools. Through language and other social practices, nerds construct alternative femininities and masculinities that critique normative gender identities. Indeed, the nerd identity paradoxically allows girls to achieve authority and avoid trivialization to a greater extent than is possible under traditional ideologies of femininity. Far from being a source of humiliation, as other researchers would have it, nerd identity can be an empowering resource, especially for girls, who draw upon the linguistic practices associated with nerdiness in order to construct themselves as intelligent and academically successful. This strategy subverts traditional feminine practices and displaces gender stereotypes that contribute to the perpetuation of inequality in educational settings.

When I first mentioned my research topic to my colleagues, many women were quick to embrace nerd identity as their own, while others were just as quick to disavow any connection with nerdiness. This anxiety, which plagues linguists perhaps more than other social scientists, reflects the cultural stigma attached to nerd identity. I must admit that I have experienced this anxiety myself but gradually, during the course of the study, I am proud to say that I began to get in touch with my own nerdiness. It is important to keep in mind, after all, that the nerd girls I talked to during this research, and others like them, will *be* us in a few years, a new generation of scholars challenging the barriers that women in academia still face. We can only hope that some of them will apply their linguistic abilities and their original minds to the problems of language and gender.

NOTES

1. My title is taken from a 1994 album of the same name by rock musician Lisa Ger but her negative representation of a girl "who finds out she isn't cool and gets constantly advantage of sexually" does not conform to my own understanding of female nerds' identiti social worlds.

2. This social category has a variety of labels, including *nerd, geek, dork,* and *dweeb,* and others. *Nerd* was the most commonly used and recognized term in the high school w conducted my research, and is the one I have adopted in this discussion.

3. The language of recovery may also emerge from the popular and scholarly dread supposed deviance of the nerd body, which is often viewed as sexually unattractive and phy awkward. Thus Kinney hails the onset of puberty as the endpoint of nerdiness for some students he interviewed. The determinism of pointing to bodily difference to account f ostracism of groups that pose a threat to the social order is well documented in Terry an (1995).

4. The focus of my research actually concerned the appropriation of African An Vernacular English by European American students, but my method included investigation social organization of the high school as a whole, and I conducted interviews with ove students of all backgrounds in addition to carrying out participant-observation in a vari settings on campus. See Bucholtz (in preparation) for details. These two apparently di studies converge in their articulation of the processes of white identity formation.

5. These groups are not as well defined as the labels may suggest, but they roughly de social clusters whose members share a recognizable style of dress, hang-out pattern, and activities. Many of the above-mentioned researchers in high school settings describe social having similar characteristics and labels.

6. The claim that these social categories are linked to whiteness is supported by the fa students of color who participate in them run the risk of being labeled *sellouts* or *wanna* other students of color or of being accused of "failing to represent" their race. In addition, students tend to be able to distinguish these categories in minute detail while lacking ev most cursory knowledge of social differentiation among black, Latino, and Asian students.

7. In this analysis I take a much broader definition of *cool* than do some recent commer who tend to focus on the use of the term as applied to males and describe it as a st detachment and unemotionality (e.g., Danesi 1994; Majors & Billson 1991).

8. All names for people and places are pseudonyms, and some identifying details hav changed. In examples (2)-(8) the transcription conventions are as follows:

.	falling intonation
,	level intonation
?	rising intonation
:	lengthened sound
-	break in word, sound abruptly cut off
—	break in intonation
[ ]	vertically aligned brackets indicate overlapped material
[ ]	phonetic transcriptions indicate details of pronunciation
(.)	untimed pause (less than 0.5 second)
( )	text in parentheses indicates transcriber comment
italics	emphasis (increased pitch or volume)
→	data under discussion

10. Homophobia at Bay City High is rampant, both in curricula and in social arenas, as it is in most U.S. high schools (Friend 1993). Some efforts have been made to counter this trend through political activism and education, with a small degree of success. To take an example of the level of homophobia students experience, during my fieldwork I witnessed a girl make a vicious physical attack on another student who was a lesbian, on the grounds that she had tried to flirt with her. The lesbian student later left the school and chose to finish her degree through independent study.

11. Although I did not conduct a systematic study of math and science classes at Bay City High, I impressionistically observed a general tendency for high-achieving non-nerd girls to manifest the linguistic patterns widely associated with women in mixed-sex groups (first noted in Lakoff 1975), especially hedging and using interrogative rather than declarative sentence structure when displaying their knowledge. I did not see nerd girls engage in similar practices.

12. In fact, there is an intimate connection between nerds and reading; nerds were the only students whom I interviewed who reported reading for fun, and I have often noticed them carrying around mass-market paperbacks or library books, usually science fiction or fantasy novels.

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