

The Role of Public Relations in Local Government Communication in South-South Nigeria

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Abstract: *This study examined the role of public relations in the communication of selected local government councils in the South-South Nigeria. Local government as the third tier of government in a federal system of government closes the communication gap between government and the grassroots people. The participation of the local government in the communication process to connect the grassroots people to government is highly imperative. But more important is the role of public relations in the communication interface. With a survey of 250 respondents, it was discovered that there were extremely low public relations activities, inadequate public relations tools and failure to use it at some of the local government councils. The study recommends that grassroots politicians should be encouraged to promote efficient public relations interface at the local government level with the support of public relations professionals to connect government activities to the grassroots.*

Keywords: Public relations, local government, grassroots, federalism, South-South

INTRODUCTION

Local governments, the third tier of government works with traditional institutions to bring development to the people at the grassroots. They strive to close the gap between the governed and governments. The Nigerian federalism, like other federal systems of government all over the world is characterized by diverse ethnic groups, languages, culture, political affiliations and struggles for political power. The need to cater for these diverse elements and ensure service delivery at the grassroots level necessitated the creation of local government (Obiboh, Ezenagu & Okuobeya, 2019).

Nigeria's 1999 Constitution stipulates the functions and powers of three levels of government in such a way that none can single handedly perform the functions of service delivery to the people. Therefore, cooperation and communication are necessary for governance (Odiboh, Salawu and Doghudje 2019).

Traditional institutions are valuable support system to the local government because they could influence their subjects at the grassroots positively or negatively to either support a sitting government or to vote them out. Therefore, in order to have a continuously beneficial relationship with the people and to be able to communicate these developments with them, there is need for effective use of public relations at the local government level. Public relations is the management of relationships between an organization and its publics for the purpose of achieving mutual understanding between all concerned (Johnson & Sheehan 2016).

Public relations at the local level helps to communicate good administrative performance for public appreciation (Ndubueze, Odiboh, & Olabanjo, 2019). However, the government must first do a good job for the people and thereafter, call attention to it. They explain that it is necessary for local government to be sound and honest, if they are to earn the people's confidence, respect and support. There cannot be good local government without public awareness of their activities. Public relations involve listening to the voice of the people of the community (Ndubueze, Odiboh, Nwosu & Olabanjo, (2019). The local government is a structure that provides for the goods and services needed by the people and also brings development and good governance to the local levels. This notwithstanding, development has not met public expectations at the grassroots level in Nigeria due to lack of accountability and transparency in administration of local government in Nigeria (Nwosu, Odiboh, Olabanjo & Ndubueze, 2019). This study examines the contributions of public relations to Local Government Councils communication in the South -South Nigeria.

This research has observed that in so many organizations, management neither recognizes nor appreciates public relations efforts in Nigeria. The management does not realize the public relations activities in building and enhancing a good image for the standard of the organization. It has been observed that the management attitude is lukewarm and nonchalant toward public relations department and their activities. Besides, they do not want to spend money on its activities such as organizing seminars, workshops, symposium etc. This derives from the erroneous misconception that public relations efforts are of little benefits to the organization. To explore the contributions of public relations to local government councils in the South-South Nigeria, the study was focused at establishing the forms of organizational communication and the relevant support public relations gives to local government councils in the South-South Nigeria.

In course of achieving the above stated objectives, two questions assisted in the interrogation of the process to secure the relevant answers that could resolve the gap observed. They are:

1. What are the forms of organizational communication that are promoted in the South-South Local Government Councils?
2. What are the contributions of public relations to organizational communication in the South-South Local Government Council?

Public Relations is one of the most difficult concepts to define. The reasons for this are not farfetched. This is because it seems so easy to understand and yet, quite difficult to describe in practical terms. Also, many people including Public Relations Practitioners believe they have the best understanding of the concept and so, have come up with many different definitions. Experts say there are more than six hundred recorded definitions. The list of Public Relations definitions will even be much longer if what Nwosu (2019: 4), describes as the “nonsensical description of the concept that are based on the abject ignorance, shallow knowledge, misperceptions or pure mischief by the describers or definers” is added to the list.

Among such nonsensical, derogatory and ignorance-based definitions or descriptions are those that present Public Relations in different words as cover up gimmicks and Public Relations practitioner as those hired to tell lies for their organizations. It is perhaps in response to such distortions that Black (2009:5) seems to have emphasized truth and full information in his definition of Public Relations. As he puts it, “Public Relations practice is the art and science of achieving harmony with the environment through mutual understanding based on truth and full information”.

Nwosu (2019:) in his critique of black’s definition observed that it is silent in, or does not quite bring out clearly the management orientation of modern Public Relations practice as well as the current emphasis on the practice of effective organizational or management performance, research planning and communication as the key to success in modern Public Relations management. This is why the researcher shall at this point offer other definitions of Public Relations including those that emphasizes management orientation, good management or organizational performance, planning, research and communication-which shall be used as a working or operational definition in this study.

Two of these definitions which Nwosu (2019:5) described as “standard” include one which the Public Relations News initially produced, slightly modified by John Marston which goes thus: “Public Relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an organization with the Public interest and executes a programme of action and communication to earn public understanding and acceptance”. The second is the Mexico Statement of 1978 which defines public relations as the art and science of “analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organizational leaders, and implementing planned programme of action which shall serve both the organization and public interest” (Seitel, 2017:8).

Implicit in the above definitions is the fact that though they tend to differ in their stress of some functions of Public Relations that have to do with maintaining mutual understanding between an organization and its publics, they point to the same idea of public relations practice. The practice of Public Relations supports intricate and diverse society in making decisions and operating more efficiently through promoting mutual understanding among organizations and groups. It fosters alignment between private and public policies. Public relations has a role in various institutions within society, including businesses, labor unions, governmental agencies, non-profit organizations,

foundations, healthcare facilities, and educational and religious establishments. These institutions must cultivate effective relationships with multiple audiences or publics, such as staff, members, clients, local communities, investors, other organizations, and society as a whole, to achieve their objectives. To attain institutional goals, management needs to comprehend the attitudes and principles of their publics. The objectives themselves are shaped by external factors. Public Relations professionals serve as advisers to management and intermediaries, facilitating the interpretation of policies and actions.

Public Relations Communication Activities

As part of the larger Public Relations activities, employee relations, media relations, community relations, financial relations, corporate public relations, political public relations and consumer relations are significant in defining its contribution to society. These foregoing communication functions of public relations largely offers the best route to understand its contribution to organization communication. This suggests that the best to secure a reliable perspective of public relations contributions to organization communication is to examine each of the listed functions more closely.

Employee Relations is aimed at creating mutual understanding and support between management and employees. Communication between management and employee can be difficult and complicated due to the heterogenous nature of the employees. The employees are varied; and many groups exist due to differences in attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and exceptions. The goals of employee relations are to identify, establish, and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and the employees on whom its success or failure depends.

Employee relations is all about running the organization effectively, it is all about making sure that the people know what needs to be done, understand why it is necessary, feel committed to achieving it and have a chance to use their own knowledge and skills to do it better if possible. The objective of maintaining mutual understanding between the organization and its employees may among others include the following:

1. to create an awareness of the organization's basic operations, problems and goals.
2. to keep all informed on significant developments that affect the organization and the employees.
3. to increase effectiveness of all as ambassadors on and off the job.
4. to solicit and encourage employee input for improving operations.
5. to satisfy employee's desires to be kept informed and to participate in the organization's pursuit of its corporate goals..

A good deal of media relations work is done attempting to gain favourable publicity and news coverage for the organization. Organizations depend most on the media to reach their desired audience. Cordial relations with the media is an asset to organization particularly before, during and after crises. Understanding journalistic rules and practices and being able to exploit them to achieve positive coverage is an important condition for successful public relations.

The way to gain the co-operation of media men and women is to provide them with interesting, timely stories and pictures that they want, when they want them and in the form in which they can readily use them. The media person wants news that is timely, that is interesting and significant to readers in respect to their personal affairs or their relation to society. Haywood (2017) believes that if an organization treat media simply as messengers, that it is unlikely to develop the most effective programme of media communication.

According to Seitel (2017) community relations involves orchestrating interaction with the community. Every organization finds its equilibrium within the environment in which it resides in the same way that an individual can exist within a family unit. Abraham Lincoln once said that with public sentiment nothing can fail, without it nothing can succeed. A community is a miniature of the national public. This is where national opinions are born. Judgments expressed as the voice of the community predict the views and interest of the national publics.

Financial Relations involves managing relations with the investment community. In the case of non-commercial organization, it involves showing a transparent account correctly as how the money is spent to those who sponsored or gave you grant with which you carry out your work. It involves an understanding of the means of communicating with the key targets in the financial community.

Corporate Public Relations means the management of reputation of an organization. The reputation of a company is reflected in corporate identity and image. Every item of information, every opinion aired and every article published about an organization contributes to reputation. Good reputation is difficult to establish, taking many years to build, once built, the task of the Public Relations practitioners is to enhance and protect it. Enhancing and protecting the organizational reputation involves issues management as the process of identifying issues, analyzing those issues, setting priorities, selecting programme of action and communicating and evaluating the effectiveness of such programme. It is a corporate response to change in rational environments.

Political public relations practitioners in government have the responsibility of maintaining communication lines between government and the citizenry. Practitioners who serve government agencies, legislative bodies, and government parastatals have the responsibilities of making their views known and heard.

Consumer relations supports in the sale of products and services with novel and new-making projects, but with more attention to trust and accuracy of claims and setting out forms of easy redress for settlement of grievances by private arbitration. This function of public relations ensures there is a balance of interest in the relationship between consumers and producers of product.

Local Government Communication

Communication is the process of transmitting message between individuals. Through communication the meaning of the messages, intentions, desires, feelings and knowledge is transmitted from one person to another. Communication is described as interchange of thoughts, views or opinion. It is a special process which makes interaction possible, and enables people to be social beings. This can be done through oral, printed, electronic, verbal or non-verbal and other signs. To be effective the sender's words or meaning must mean the same thing to the receiver as intended by the sender, to achieve understanding. (Achi, 2016:15).

Osuji, (2011:111) asserts that, "communication is an act of transmitting messages, information or the like to a desired audience". It is also a means by which thoughts, ideas, messages, information and policies could be passed from one person to another person, from government to community. However, what is of concerns here is local communication (rural). Therefore, it will be proper to define it. Rural communication is a process through which information, messages, thoughts, ideas, policies and the like are transmitted or passed to rural dwellers and among them. Communication is very important if any meaningful result is to be achieved in the whole programme of rural development.

Forms of Communication

Communication is a complex matter and if it is not properly managed could cause a lot of confusion. This is more so, when the rural area with a large concentration of most of the illiterates is concern. It becomes imperative that selection of forms of media for rural communication must be closely examined to ensure that information and messages get to the desired people and in the form, they are anticipated. Most common forms of media promoted in the rural areas may include: Newspapers, Radio, Television, Town Crier, Community Council open forum and Mobile film unit.

- A. Newspaper: newspaper, particularly one published locally, known as Community Newspaper, is an important medium for rural communication. It has a lot of advantages over some other media. It can be read and interpreted to an illiterate person. He in turn can pass on the information gathered from the paper to members of his families, his age grade, mates etc. this medium will help a great deal in disseminating Public Relations Programmes, especially in the area of revenue generation.
- B. Radio: Radio is one of the most effective means of reaching the grassroots. It is cheaper to buy and easy to maintain. Radio can penetrate every home and hamlet once it is broadcasting. What is more is that it can be transmitted into several languages and dialects to bring its messages into ears of everybody. However, for radio network to have its expected effect on the rural dwellers, especially those that patronize the local governments, the airing of the messages, programmes must be designed in such a way that will appeal to the people and especially the patrons of the local government, in that particular community.

- C. Television: Recently, television has started to be an important medium of communication not only to urban dwellers but also to rural dwellers. This is very important medium for the LGA to disseminate their intentions, ideas, views, programmes and plight to the rural dwellers. Through such medium, the LGA could seek or elicit financial support or even appeal to the patrons to always patronize the local government.
- D. Town Criers: Today and for many years in the past and in future, until both the electronic and print media take over completely the means of disseminating information among rural communities, town-crying will continue to be the most reliable and effective medium of communication. There are several reasons town-crying is reliable and effective. One, the town-crier is a member of the community and therefore, can be trusted. Two, his facts could be cross-checked and in the course of town-crying exercise, he can repeat his message over and over again and it is interactive because he can be asked to elaborate on his message(s). Most local governments make use of the town-crying as one of their Public Relations tools in disseminating their information and enlightening the people on any of the local government plan/programmes most especially in the area of revenue generation. The patrons are persuaded and reminded of their duties and obligations through such medium.
- E. Community Councils Open Forum: A new dimension in the development of rural communication is the recently introduced open forum known also as people's parliament or community council etc. introduced in the country in 1984 now community forum has become a more recently used means of rural communication in all states in Nigeria. It has overwhelming advantages and popular appeal. The people no matter their status, are brought face to face with leaders in government especially governors, commissioners and other government functionaries. Questions could be asked on various issues and answers given. There is always inter-personal interface and relationship between the government and the people during a forum. In the case of a LGA that might wish to enlighten and inform their patrons on a certain issue, regarding the LGA's plans or programmes, they make use of such medium, since it enables the chairman of the local council to engage in a face to face communication with the patron of the local government. In such a medium, whatever uncertainty in the minds of the people would be cleared for better understanding and promotion of support and co-operation.
- F. Mobile Film Unit: Mobile film unit which moves from village to village and town to town is another effective medium for rural communication. People are gathered at the village or town square for the viewing. Different events relating to government programme in different fields of endeavor could be shown. It is good in spreading the message for rural development as people could be shown pictures depicting the horrors of underdevelopment and the comfort of development. In the case of revenue generation of a LGA this avenue is a great PR channel which when handled very well by the PR department, will definitely

pass across the message of the LGA to every public in the LGA inhabiting in all the villages and towns of the LGA. The people will be shown all what the LGA has done with the money the people have been paying, shown what other local governments have done with such local derivatives that have brought about their development. With this, the potential patrons will be stimulated and motivated to pay always their taxes and other fees for development purposes, and for whatever the plans programmes of the LGA might be, so far it is going to be in the general interest of both the LGA and the inhabitants of the LGA.

The above are major communication media which can be found reliable and effective although, some of them have some associated disadvantages. There are several other means of disseminating information among rural dwellers. They include: letters, schools, community and age grade meetings each could be used to a greater benefit. Whatever means is used to reach the people, effort must be made to tell the people the truth always. The rural dwellers see propaganda as lies and they see lies as criminal offence. But the following PR programmes have been useful to LGA in the process of taking policies and change oriented cause nearer to the people. They are: information, education and enlightenment campaign, especially in the area of revenue generation.

Contributions of Public Relation to Organizational Communication

Public Relations does not only establish and maintain goodwill, mutual understanding and long-lasting relationship between a local government and the public both internal and external, it also plays a vital role in enhancing the growth and development of a local government revenue base. And these includes: tenement rates, fees from motor parks and cyclists (Okada riders), Trade permit, liquor licensing, advert (Neon signs, steels, woods), which the fees/prices for them differs and these attract heavy sums of money. Other sources of revenue include: Town halls, Reception halls, Market stalls, Street naming, Rentals (Chairs, Toeing Vans, Canopies) Transport scheme, Housing scheme, Issuance of death certificates, Merriments, Abattoir, Town planning, provision of consumers corporative society goods, at subsidized rate, and lot more. These are the areas through which a local government could generate her revenue (Eze, 2012).

Most notable forms of public relations support to local government council include but not limited to the following:

Public Notice:

This is a Public Relations inputs geared towards informing the general publics (patrons) prior to the time the fees are to be collected. This predisposes the public to be at alert and ready to cooperate with the Local Government Staff.

Documentary Film

The documentary film provides the avenue for local government to present the achievements of the local government to the publics. Besides, it assists in outlining the sources of revenue, and revenue

expenditure of the local government systemically to concerned members of the public. The implication is that the public secure the opportunity to appreciate and have better and clearer understanding of what the government's programmes are and subsequently make them to contribute their best to the development of the local council.

Created Media:

This could be done through posters, leaflets, banners, public enlightenment campaign via mobile vans with loud speakers, and town criers. This approach would keep the public informed and ready for the commencement of the local government's programmes.

Press Conferences:

This medium helps the chairman of the local government to share fact-based information on the council's programmes with the members of the press. With good knowledge of the chairman and the council's programmes the press is able to deliver reputation building information to the general public and thereby trigger the support of the target publics. The support and co-operation the media cannot be underestimated, since the press stands as the people's parliament.

Community Day:

This form of PR programme affords the council chairman the opportunity to meet the various publics of the local government, such as the opinion leaders, schools, organization/societies, churches, Islamic leaders, banks, companies to inform, educate, and enlighten them on any of the local government's plans and proposals. Through this avenue, the overwhelming support and co-operation of the public is secured for the pursuit of established aims and objectives. This PR programme also presents the public with information on the contributions and achievement of the local government in the area. This helps to establish and maintain trust and confidence.

Newspaper/magazine interviews, personal communication and visit to opinion leaders are equally necessary Public Relations programmes used to canvass for support for a certain issue or cause. Newspaper/magazine interview, personal communication and visit to opinion leaders, are necessary tools used to solicit support for success. With keen interest to opinion leaders, as they are often quite influential, they are perceived as reference points by their followers who are likely to tilt support towards the preference of their leaders. Though, not often used, when faced with the decision as to what is the right technique to use, hardly is there any technique as cost effective. Through the above mentioned programmes the publics of the local council, will definitely give out their support and cooperation by patronizing the local government, in order for the government to carry out effectively their plans or proposals.

Theoretical Framework

Excellency theory of public relations forms the foundational framework of the study. It is about how organizations are better managed in their environments through public relations (Gruning, 1992). The

theory explains that organizational value is created through public relations. Good relationship with strategic publics helps to develop and achieve organizational goals, reduce costs of negative publicity and increase revenue by providing the right image for stakeholder's products and services (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). The summary of the theory is that, to maximize value of public relations organizations must identify strategic publics and build long-term relationship with them through symmetrical communication programmes. In relations to the work, the excellence theory basically explains the relationship that exists between grassroots governments and the people, how they can see public relations to strengthen these long-term relationships between the government and the people become foreseeable and possible through practical two-way communication which in turn fosters a mutual understanding between them.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, survey method of data collection was used. Survey is the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions. Survey allows the use of quantitative approaches to recruit participants, collect data and present resulting information.

Based on the research questions, a questionnaire was drawn up to elicit public responses on awareness of public relations communication activities of local government councils in general terms. Specifically, the survey instrument offered open and close ended questions on applied public relations tools used to create awareness, build mutual understanding and goodwill between the people and grassroots administrations in South-South Local Government Council. Copies of the questionnaire were self-administered to the target study population by the field assistants to the researcher through purposive sampling of selected local government councils.

The sample size for this study is 300 respondents drawn from Six local government councils from the six South-South States were selected. The need for informed responses to research questions necessitated the gathering of data on respondents' educational background in the demographics of the survey. A total of 50 respondents were drawn from each of the six South-South States. The six states comprise Akwa Ibom State, Bayelsa State, Cross River State, Delta State, Edo State and Rivers State.

Through frequencies and percentages, collected data were analyzed and presented in tables using the Statistical Package of the Social Science (SPSS) software. The tables show respondents awareness of the public relations activities of selected local government councils. Out of 300 copies of distributed questionnaire, 250(83.3%) were returned filled without any flaw. Fifty (50) rejected questionnaire copies represented 16.7% mortality rate of the instrument.

Table 1: Awareness of PR in Local Government Councils Communication in South- South Nigeria.

PR in Communication	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Settlement of disputes	35	14
Coronation	105	42
Festivals	30	12
Security	20	8
Community Development	60	24
Total	250	100

Table 1 above indicates that 105 respondents representing 42% believed that they are aware that Coronation is a form of public relations in the local government communication in the South – South region of Nigeria. Sixty (24%) respondents maintained that community development is a PR in the local government council communication in the region. Thirty-five (14%) of the respondents were of the view that settlement of disputes represents PR in the local government communication in the South -South of Nigeria. Thirty (12%) asserted that festivals are PR in the local government council communication. Twenty (8%) agreed that security is the PR in the local government council communication.

Table 2: Awareness of organizational communication in South-South Local Government Councils

Media Channels	Frequency	Percent
Television	20	8
Radio	60	24
Newspaper	30	12
Word of Mouth	70	28
Instagram	20	8
Seminars	10	4
Billboards	25	10
Relatives	15	6
Total	250	100

Table 2 above shows that 70(28%) of the respondents believed that they become aware of organizational communication of the local government council in the South -South of Nigeria through the word of mouth. Sixty (24%) maintained that they become aware of the organizational communication of the South-South through the Radio. Thirty (12%) believed that they became aware of the local government council communication through newspapers publications. Twenty-five (10%) of the respondents became aware through billboards, twenty (8%) each became aware through Seminars and Television respectively. Fifteen (6%) of the respondents were aware of the local government council communication through relatives.

Table 3: Contribution of Public Relations to organizational communication in South - South Local Government Councils

PR Contributions	Frequency	Percent
Youth Empowerment	25	10
Security	7	2.8
Education	60	24
Social Amenities	4	1.6
Promotion of Cultural Heritage	14	5.6
Healthcare	55	22
Moral Support	23	9.2
Community Support	42	16.8
Promotion of Traditional Image	20	8
Total	250	100

The Table 3 above shows that 60(24%) of the respondents believed that public relations contributions to organizational communication was education. Fifty -five (22%) maintained that public relations contributions to organizational communication was healthcare provision. Forty-two (16.8%) believed that public relations contributions to organizational communication was community support. Twenty-five (10%) agreed that public relations contribution to organizational communication was youth empowerment. Twenty (8%) of the respondents believed that public relations contribution to organization communication was in the promotion of traditional image. Fourteen (5.6%) of the respondents maintained that public relations contributions to organizational communication was promotion of cultural heritage. While 7(2.8%) of the respondents believed that public relations contribution to organizational communication was security, four(1.6%) pointed at social amenities as the public relations contributions to organizational communication in the South - South of Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

According to the data generated from the questionnaire, the study indicated that the rate at which the local government council carry out public relations activities is very low. Findings in this respect can be seen in table 1. The institutions' public relations activities easily identified by the respondents include: community development programmes, healthcare, youth empowerment, ID cards registration and collection, public service, settlement of disputes, festivals, coronation, security amongst others. Salient functions which the respondents could not recall are road construction and maintenance, wastewater drainage and environment upkeep (of local governments); and family dispute rulers. This suggests that the people are not paying adequate attention to the highly important public relations functions of the institution.

The study established that the forms of organizational communication in the South - South Local Government Councils through which respondents became aware of the PR activates of the Council includes: radio, newspapers. Others are word of mouth, Instagram, seminars, billboards, and through

friends and family. Radio takes the lead among the media of respondents' awareness of the Councils' public relations forms of organizational communication activities. The contributions of public relations to the local government council as indicated in Table 3 above included settlement of disputes, coronation, festivals, security and community development. A large majority of the respondents are unaware of the PR contribution to the Councils.

CONCLUSION

Results of this study are both enlightening and instructive. Findings show clearly that respondents' awareness of the public relations activities of the local government and traditional council is extremely low. Public relations tools as currently applied by the institutions are inadequate for reaching target publics. Unreached people still lack access to these institutions' public relations programmes. Either public relations failed local government and traditional councils or the grassroots institutions failed to use and benefit from public relations appropriately. Either way, this study has opened new opportunities to correct the observed institutional wrongs.

Recommendations

Based on the objectives, findings and conclusion of this study, below the following recommendations are considered appropriate in this context:

1. Grassroots governments need to create stronger bond with the people through effective and efficient use of public relations tools. Local Government wards and their elected Councillors should be used as a bridge between the people and the local rulers. Ward identity, recognition and participation should be ensured during all PR programmes of local governments and traditional councils. Ward networking and involvement will go a long way to ensuring the public relations tools are applied beneficially.
2. Public relations professionals should pay greater attention to the grassroots in order to cancel the deficits recorded by this study. Rather than jostling for consultancy businesses from corporate organizations and federal/state governments, public relations practitioners should work for local governments and traditional rulers.
3. Teachers and students of public relations should also focus more attention on the grassroots where so much has been revealed by this study for more contributions to knowledge. Local Government Public Relations should be propped up as an important aspect in the discipline's pedagogy.

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