

Impostor Phenomenon, Self- Compassion and Perceived Stress among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the relationship between impostor phenomenon, self-compassion and perceived stress among young adults; the difference in impostor phenomenon, self-compassion and perceived stress between males and females along with understanding the impact of self-compassion and perceived stress on impostor phenomenon. The data was collected in hybrid mode within the age group of 18- 25 years from 100 males and 100 females residing in city of New Delhi and Bengaluru using Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale, Self- Compassion Scale and Perceived Stress Scale. Statistical analysis of correlation, independent sample t test and multiple linear regression was done to test the hypothesis. The results indicated that the variables, impostor phenomenon, self-compassion and perceived stress were correlated to each other; independent variables- self-compassion and perceived stress influenced the dependent variable- impostor phenomenon; and self-compassion didn't have difference among males and females but impostor phenomenon and perceived had difference among males and females. Implications, limitations and future suggestions of the study were also stated.

Keywords: *Impostor Phenomenon, Perceived Stress, Self- Compassion, Young adults*

Impostor Phenomenon is a psychological experience where one fears being exposed as a fraud as the individual believes that others have inflated perception of their potential. The individual doubts their skills, aptness and achievements. Despite proof of ongoing achievement these people devalue praise, are very critical of themselves, and think their accomplishments are the result of chance, hard work, or interpersonal skills rather than inherent talent, intelligence, or competence.

Clance thought that the Impostor Phenomenon interferes with a person's psychological health rather than being "a pathological condition that is intrinsically self-damaging or self-destructive." High levels of the impostor phenomenon affect feelings of anxiety and self-doubt as well as the capacity to accept accomplishment as the result of one's own abilities. Clance (1985) proposed six potential characteristics for the Impostor Phenomenon, the need

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to be exceptional or the best, Superman/Superwoman elements, fear of failure, denial of ability, discounting praise, and fear and guilt over achievement.

Stress is characterised as a pattern of mental evaluations, physiological reactions, and behavioural tendencies that happen in response to a perceived disparity between current demands and available resources.

According to Lazarus (1966), stress arises from a relationship between an individual and his or her surroundings rather than from the event itself. According to his theory, stress is a two-way process that involves cognitive, affective, and coping aspects. Stressors are created by the environment, and people must develop strategies to deal with them. (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

Perceived stress is a person's understanding of how much stress they may be experiencing in a specific span of time. Feelings of individuals about the unpredictability and loss of control over their life, frequency of hassles to be dealt with and their self- efficacy contributes to perceived stress. The interaction between a person and their surroundings that they see as threatening or overloading their resources in a way that will affect their wellbeing is reflected in perceived stress in this way (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

One of the numerous ideas that have provided a new perspective on human flourishing is the concept of self-compassion which means being open to and moved by one's own suffering, feeling compassion and kindness toward oneself, adopting an understanding, non-judgmental attitude toward one's shortcomings and failures, and realising that one's own experience is a part of the universal human experience are all examples of practising self-compassion. (Neff, 2003a)

Neff asserts that three aspects, two of each, of self-compassion are displayed when faced with suffering and failure. These three ideas are: (a) treating oneself with kindness and understanding rather than with self-criticism; (b) viewing one's fallibility as a normal part of the human condition and experience rather than as an isolating trait; and (c) holding one's painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness rather than avoiding them or over-identifying with them. ((Neff, 2003a)

According to Neff (2003b), self-compassion is a construct that includes three key elements: self-kindness, or not harshly condemning oneself; acceptance that we share a common humanity; and refraining from grasping (i.e., overidentifying with one's thoughts or feelings). Self-compassion is fundamentally distinct from self-centeredness and cannot be mistaken for it since it is based on the idea that because we share a common humanity, we are compelled to be sensitive to the pain and needs of others.

Recent studies in population such as of healthcare professionals, bank employees, medical students recognized that perceived stress was higher in females as compared to their male counterparts. (Raina, T. and Sharma, H., 2022). It also recognised that those who have impostor worries suffer with maladaptive guilt feelings linked to false ideas about themselves and important people. (Fimiani, R., et al., 2021)

Studies found a negative relationship between perceived stress and self- compassion, (Bui, T.H.T., et al., 2021) higher frequency of impostor syndrome among medical students, (Qureshi, et al., 2017), significant correlation between self-compassion and perceived stress,

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(Unger, M., 2016) significant correlation between impostor and perceived stress scores in medical students, (Levanth, B., et al., 2020) and men exhibiting slightly greater levels of self-compassion than women. (Yarnell, L., et al., 2015)

Another study conducted by Abdollahi, A., et al., 2020 showed that Self- compassion diminished the effect of perceived stress in nurses.

Impostor phenomenon, self- compassion and perceived stress were not studied together thus, the relationship among these variables wasn't studied among young adults. Impact of self-compassion on perceived stress was studied but there have been no studies that focus on influence of self- compassion and perceived stress on impostor phenomenon. Moreover, very few studies focused on studying these variables among young adults. The difference among males and females wasn't studied much especially among young adults with respect to variables impostor phenomenon, self- compassion and perceived stress. This was designed to explore gender differences among impostor phenomenon, self- compassion and perceived stress and to look for the influence of self- compassion and perceived stress on impostor phenomenon. Based on this study, interventions revolving around self- compassion can be developed to help people better cope with perceived stress and feelings of an impostor. However, it is important to identify the relationship among variables, difference between males and females and the influence of self- compassion and perceived stress on impostor phenomenon.

METHOD

Non- Experimental Quantitative research design including both descriptive and inferential statistics was used to understand the correlation between impostor phenomenon, self-compassion and perceived stress among adults, to understand the difference in impostor phenomenon, self- compassion and perceived stress among males and females and to understand the impact of self- compassion and perceived stress on impostor phenomenon.

Objectives of the study

- To find the relationship between impostor phenomenon, self- compassion and perceived stress among young adults.
- To find the difference in impostor phenomenon among males and females.
- To find the difference in self- compassion among males and females.
- To find the difference in perceived stress among males and females.
- To find the impact of self- compassion and perceived stress on impostor phenomenon among young adults.

Hypotheses

Ho1: There is no relationship between impostor phenomenon, self- compassion and perceived stress among young adults.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in impostor phenomenon among males and females.

Ho3: There is no significant difference in self- compassion among males and females.

Ho4: There is no significant difference in perceived stress among males and females.

Ho5: Self- compassion and perceived stress doesn't have an impact on impostor phenomenon among young adults.

The data was collected from a sample of 200 young adults (18- 25 years), 100 males and 100 females from the cities, Bangalore and New Delhi, India. Demographic details collected for

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the purpose of research were age, gender, marital status and level of education. Non-probability, convenience sampling method was used as the data collection technique.

Inclusion Criteria

- Young adults with age range of 18- 25 years.
- Young adults who can read and understand English.
- Young adults studying in New Delhi and Bangalore, Karnataka.
- Young adults who have both parents.
- Young adults who are students.

Exclusion Criteria

- Young adults who have their own business or work in an organization.
- Young adults who do not identify as male or female.
- Young adults who have mental health issues.
- Young adults who are doing distance learning.

Tools for the Study

The scales used in the study to assess the variables were Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale given by Clance, P.R. in 1985 for measuring the presence of impostorism, Self- Compassion Scale given by Neff, K.D. in 2003 for measuring self- compassion and Perceived Stress Scale given by Cohen, S. in 1983 for measuring the perceived stress among young adults.

Description of the tool

Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale was given by Clance, P.R. in 1985. The scale includes 20 items and is a 5-point scale in which the scoring is from 1 to 5. The scores range from 0-100 where higher scores indicate greater impostor characteristics. Scores of 40 or less indicate low levels of impostor characteristics, scores between 41- 60 indicate intermediate levels of impostor characteristics and scores higher than 60 indicate intense level of impostor characteristics. Scores higher than 80 indicate extreme levels of impostor characteristics. The scale has reliability of Cronbach's α .92 and is a valid scale to measure impostor characteristics. The scale can be used for participants between the age of 17- 50 years.

Self- Compassion Scale was given by Neff, K.D. in 2003. The scale includes 26 items which have six subscales: self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness, self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification. Scores 1- 2.49 are considered low, scores between 2.5- 3.5 are considered moderate and scores 3.51- 5 are considered high on self- compassion. SCS has good internal reliability of Cronbach's α =.92, as do the six subscales with Cronbach's α ranging from .75 to .81. Test- retest reliability over a three-week interval for the total score was Cronbach's α =.93 and six subscale scores with Cronbach's α ranging from .80 to .88. The scale is valid to measure self- compassion. The scale can be used for participants above the age of 14 years.

Perceived Stress Scale was given by Cohen, S. in 1983. The scale has 10 items and is a 5 point scale ranging from 0- 4 (never to very often). The scores on perceived stress scale range from 0- 40 where higher scores indicate higher perceived stress levels. Scores ranging between 0 and 13 show lower levels of perceived stress. Moderate stress is indicated by scores that lie between 14 and 26. High levels of perceived stress are represented by scores which lie between 27 and 40 on perceived stress scale. PSS has reliability of Cronbach's

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alpha 0.81 and validity of .76. The scale can be used for participants above the age of 12 years.

Statistical Analysis

The results were analysed using correlation to understand the relationship between the variables, independent sample t-test to find the difference among males and females and multiple linear regression to understand the impact of self- compassion and perceived stress on impostor phenomenon using the software SPSS 26.

RESULTS

The final data was analyzed using the statistical software SPSS. The sample data was determined to be drawn from the normally distributed population. According to the skewness and kurtosis the data was normally distributed hence, parametric statistics was used for the entire study.

Table 1: Socio-demographic details of the participants

		Gender	N
Age range (18- 25 years)	Post Graduation	Male	43
		Female	35
Level of education	Under Graduation	Male	57
		Female	65

Table 1 shows the sociodemographic specifications of the participants. A sample of 200 young adults (N=200) aged between 18- 25 years was collected in the study of which 100 were males and 100 were females. Under the category of the level of education, 43 males and 35 females were postgraduate students whereas 57 males and 65 females were graduate students.

Figure 1: Representation of Gender

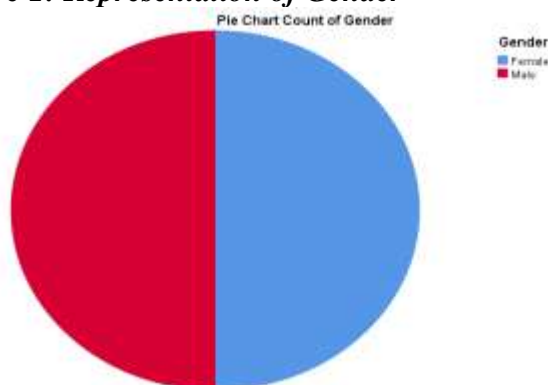


Figure 2: Representation of Age

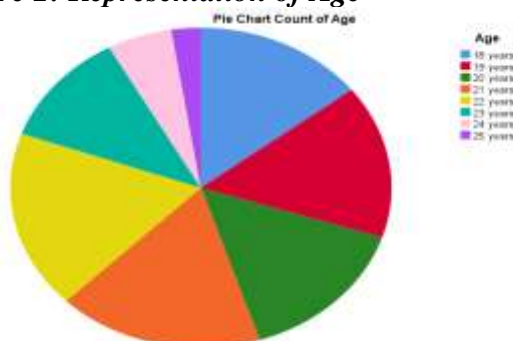


Figure 3: Representation of Level of Education

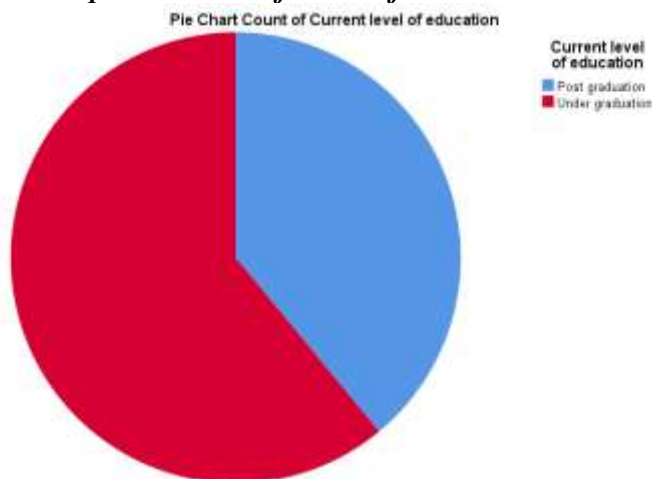


Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

N=200	Mean	Std. Deviation
Impostor Phenomenon	65.99	13.478
Self Compassion	2.97	.542
Perceived Stress	22.06	6.388

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of the impostor phenomenon, self-compassion, and perceived stress in young adults in the age category of 18- 25 years. The total sample of the study was 200 young adults. In the impostor phenomenon, the mean value of 65.99 signified that there were frequent feelings with respect to the impostor phenomenon and the standard deviation of 13.478 signified that the scores of the impostor phenomenon were spread out away from the mean. In self-compassion, the mean value of 2.97 signified moderate levels of self-compassion among young adults and the standard deviation of .542 indicated that the scores were mostly clustered around the mean. In perceived stress, the mean value was 22.06 which signified moderate levels of perceived stress among young adults and the standard deviation was 6.388 which signified a moderate scattering of perceived stress scores away from the mean.

Table 3: Correlation between Impostor Phenomenon, Self- Compassion and Perceived Stress among young adults

	Impostor Phenomenon	Self Compassion	Perceived Stress
Impostor Phenomenon	1		
Self Compassion	-.444**	1	
Perceived Stress	.384**	-.541**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 shows the correlation scores of Impostor Phenomenon, Self- Compassion, and Perceived Stress among young adults. The table shows a correlation, $r = -.444^{**}$, ($p < 0.01$) for Impostor Phenomenon and Self- Compassion. The r value was $-.444$ which indicates that there was a significant negative correlation which means when Impostor Phenomenon increased, Self- Compassion decreased in young adults and vice- versa. The table also shows a correlation, $r = .384^{**}$, ($p < 0.01$) for Impostor Phenomenon and Perceived Stress. The r value was $.384$ which indicates that there was a significant positive correlation which means when Impostor Phenomenon increased, Perceived Stress increased in young adults and when

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Impostor Phenomenon decreased, perceived stress also decreased. Table shows a correlation, $r = -.541^{**}$, ($p < 0.01$) for self- compassion and perceived stress. The r value was $-.541$ which indicates that there was a significant negative correlation which means when self- compassion increased, perceived stress decreased and vice- versa. Hence, the null hypothesis (H_01), there is no significant relationship between Impostor phenomenon, Self- Compassion and Perceived Stress among young adults was rejected, indicating that there was a significant relation between impostor phenomenon, self-compassion and perceived stress among young adults.

Table 4: Difference in scores of Impostor Phenomenon, Self- Compassion and Perceived Stress among males and female young adults

	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	SE	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Impostor Phenomenon	Males	64.05	13.614	1.36	-2.057	198	.041
	Females	67.94	13.121	1.31			
Self Compassion	Males	3.02	.488	.048	1.088		.278
	Females	2.93	.590	.059			
Perceived Stress	Males	19.94	6.131	.613	-4.978		.000
	Females	24.19	5.942	.594			

Table 4 shows that there was a significant difference in the scores of impostor phenomenon for males ($M = 64.05$, $SD = 13.614$) and females ($M = 67.94$, $SD = 13.121$); $t = -2.057$, $p = .041$ as the p -value was less than 0.05. Females had higher scores of impostor phenomenon than males. Hence, the null hypothesis (H_02) that there is no significant difference in impostor phenomenon among males and females was rejected. There was no significant difference in scores of self-compassion for males ($M = 3.02$, $SD = .488$) and females ($M = 2.93$, $SD = .590$); $t = 1.088$, $p = .278$. Hence, the null hypothesis (H_03) that there is no significant difference in self- compassion among males and females was accepted. There was a significant difference in scores of perceived stresses for males ($M = 19.94$, $SD = 6.131$) and females ($M = 24.19$, $SD = 5.942$); $t = -4.978$, $p = .000$. Females were higher on perceived stress than males. Hence, the null hypothesis (H_04) that there is no significant difference in perceived stress among males and females was rejected. Thus, there was a difference in impostor phenomenon and perceived stress among males and females but there was no difference among males and females for self-compassion.

Table 5: Influence of Self-Compassion and Perceived Stress on Impostor Phenomenon among young adults

Variable	R	R square	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	F	Sig.
			β	SE	B		
Self Compassion Perceived Stress	.476 ^a	.226	-.319	.071	-.334	28.819	.000
			.428	.157	.203		

a. Dependent Variable: Impostor Phenomenon

Multiple linear regression was calculated to predict the impostor phenomenon based on self-compassion and perceived stress. According to Table 5, a significant regression equation was found, $F = 28.819$, ($p < .000$), with an R square of $.226$. Self-compassion was a significant predictor of the impostor phenomenon $= -.334$, $t(197) = -4.48$, $p = .000$. An increase in self-compassion corresponded on average to a decrease in impostor phenomenon

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score of .319 points, $B = -.319$. Perceived stress also significantly predicted Impostor phenomenon $= .203$, $t(197) = 2.72$, $p = .007$. For each extra score of perceived stress, the impostor phenomenon score increased by .428 points, $B = .428$. Hence, the null hypothesis (H_05) that self-compassion and perceived stress doesn't have an impact on impostor phenomenon among young adults was rejected.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The purpose of the study was to analyse the relationship between the impostor phenomenon, self-compassion, and perceived stress among young adults. Another purpose of the study was to find out the difference in levels of the impostor phenomenon, self-compassion, and perceived stress among young adults. The study also wanted to analyse if self-compassion and perceived stress influenced the impostor phenomenon. The data was collected in hybrid mode using Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale, Self- Compassion Scale, and Perceived Stress Scale. The total sample size was 200 young adults, 100 males, and 100 females within the age group of 18- 25 years residing in the cities of New Delhi and Bengaluru. The data was entered into Microsoft Excel and then exported into SPSS 26 for statistical analysis.

The correlation was calculated for three variables i.e., the impostor phenomenon, self-compassion, and perceived stress for 200 young adults. The Pearson correlation results showed that there was a moderate negative relationship between Impostor Phenomenon and Self Compassion ($r = -.444$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher levels of Impostor Phenomenon were related to lower levels of Self Compassion; weak positive relationship between Impostor Phenomenon and Perceived Stress ($r = .384$, $p < 0.01$) indicating that higher levels of Impostor Phenomenon were related to higher levels of Perceived Stress; moderate negative relationship between Self Compassion and Perceived Stress ($r = -.541$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher levels of Self Compassion were related to lower levels of Perceived Stress. Therefore, rejecting the null hypothesis (H_01) which stated that there is no significant relationship between the Impostor Phenomenon, Self-Compassion, and Perceived Stress among young adults.

The findings were supported by a study conducted among 384 undergraduate students in 2021 by Bui, T.H.T., et al. which showed a negative relationship between perceived stress and self-compassion. Another study conducted in 2017 by Patzak, A. et al., supported the finding that Impostor Phenomenon and Self Compassion are negatively correlated.

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the differences between the Impostor Phenomenon, Self-Compassion, and Perceived Stress among young adults based on gender. The results revealed that there was a significant difference in scores of Impostor Phenomenon among males ($M = 64.05$, $SD = 13.614$) and females ($M = 67.94$, $SD = 13.121$) indicating that females have higher Impostor Phenomenon scores compared to males. Thus, the null hypothesis (H_02) that there is no significant difference Impostor Phenomenon among males and females was rejected. It was also revealed that there was a significant difference in scores of Perceived Stress among males ($M = 19.94$, $SD = 6.131$) and females ($M = 24.19$, $SD = 5.942$) indicating that females have higher Perceived Stress scores compared to males. Thus, the null hypothesis (H_04) that there is no significant difference in Perceived Stress among males and females was rejected. Whereas there was no significant difference in scores of Self-Compassion among males ($M = 3.02$, $SD = .488$) and females ($M = 2.93$, $SD = .590$). Thus, the null hypothesis (H_03) that there is no significant difference in Self-Compassion among males and females was accepted.

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In 2021, Kumar, C.A. conducted a study among high school students in which the findings showed that males had higher levels of self-compassion than female students. Whereas this study which was conducted among young adults shows that there was no significant difference in scores of Self-Compassion among males and females.

A study conducted in 2017 by Patzak, A. et al., supported the finding that females have higher impostor phenomenon scores than males. Another finding that there is no significant difference in scores of self-compassion scores among males and females of this study wasn't supported by previous research conducted in 2017 by Patzak, A. et al. which stated that females had lower levels of self-compassion as compared to males.

Multiple linear regression was also conducted to check whether Self- Compassion and Perceived Stress have an impact on the Impostor Phenomenon. Both Self- Compassion and Perceived Stress had an influence on the Impostor Phenomenon, where an increase in Self Compassion led to a decrease in the Impostor Phenomenon, and an increase in Perceived Stress led to an increase in the Impostor Phenomenon. Therefore, the null hypothesis (Ho5) was rejected which stated that Self Compassion and Perceived Stress doesn't have an impact on the Impostor Phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

- The results interpreted showed that there was a moderate negative relationship between Impostor Phenomenon and Self Compassion, a weak positive relationship between the Impostor Phenomenon and Perceived Stress, and a moderate negative relationship between Self Compassion and Perceived Stress. Therefore, Ho1 was rejected.
- The study revealed that there was a significant difference in scores of the Impostor Phenomenon and Perceived Stress among males and females where females had higher scores compared to males. Therefore, Ho2 and Ho4 were rejected. On the other hand, there was no significant difference in scores of Self-Compassion among males and females due to which Ho3 was accepted.
- The study also revealed that Self Compassion and Perceived Stress have an impact on the Impostor Phenomenon. While Self-compassion reduces Impostor Phenomenon, Perceived Stress increases Impostor Phenomenon. Therefore, Ho5 was rejected.

Implications of the Study

- Self- Compassion interventions can be used to help reduce feelings of an impostor among young adults and can also help reduce Perceived Stress, for example, kindness, mindfulness et cetera.
- Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) can be used to reduce stress and feelings of an impostor as it is a talk therapy that can help reduce intense negative emotions. It can also help cope with stress easily. DBT focuses on the aspect of self-acceptance as well which can help deal with feelings of an impostor.
- As the results show that females have higher levels of impostor phenomenon and perceived stress, a self-compassion intervention can be prepared for them.

Limitations

- The data was collected in a hybrid mode because of which online responses could have been inaccurate due to participants' lack of attention and concentration or external factors.

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- The sample was taken only from two cities i.e., Delhi and Bengaluru which may not represent the whole population of India.
- The socio-economic status of the participants wasn't included in the study which could have been an important influencing factor.

Suggestions For Future Studies

- Socioeconomic status can be added as a demographic variable in further studies.
- Further studies can be conducted among people with other gender identities as study included only males and females.
- Self-Compassion intervention can be planned and implemented to explore the possibility of its benefits in reducing the prevalence of perceived stress and impostor phenomenon.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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