

## **ABSTRACT**

An academic's ability to secure external research grants is an important indicator of research performance. However, the method by which to write a successful grant is neither uniform nor standardized, and insights for tourism researchers to write a successful grant application is lacking. The objective of this study is to examine how experienced scholars review research grant applications in order to facilitate a better understanding of grant writing for tourism academics. Four critical factors were identified via in-depth interviews with senior tourism and hospitality researchers who have extensive grant review experience. These factors include: the impact of the research, execution of the study, track record of the research team, and budget of the project. Overall, this study contributes by helping new and emerging scholars gain confidence in preparing better applications, and by allowing mid-career and senior researchers to (re)assess their own grant writing styles.

## **KEYWORDS**

research grants; funding; research performance; assessment; reviewers

## INTRODUCTION

The tourism and hospitality research landscape has changed significantly over the last several decades (McKercher & Tung, 2015). In the 1970s and 1980s, the first generation of academics who studied tourism and hospitality as a side interest in their home discipline were able to develop their craft over time in a relatively less competitive environment, and by the 1990s and early 2000s, the second generation of academics rode the wave of expansion of dedicated tourism programs (Tung & McKercher, 2017). Today, the third generation of tourism scholars face a much tougher environment as appointment and promotion decisions are increasingly based on their research output (De Rond & Miller, 2005; Severt, Tesone, Bottorff, & Carpenter, 2009), and university program heads in tourism and hospitality are evaluating research performance based a number of items, such as the volume of papers published in first- and second-tier journals, and single authorship (Law & Chon, 2007).

While previous studies have investigated the impacts and perspectives of tourism scholars on a number of these key metrics, a relatively under-researched academic activity that is important for researchers is winning external research grants. An academic's ability to secure external research grants is an important indicator of research performance (Law & Chon, 2007). Academics are also increasingly encouraged to win external research grants to finance their research programs (Hottenrott & Lawson, 2017). Furthermore, securing research grants continues to remain an important and significant incentive even for the most productive researchers (Kelchtermans & Veugelers, 2011).

However, primarily relying on reviewers' personal experiences, the method by which to write a successful grant is neither uniform nor standardized, and insights for tourism researchers to write a successful grant application is lacking. To address this gap, the objective of this study is to examine how experienced scholars review research grant applications in order to facilitate a better understanding of grant writing for tourism

academics. In doing so, this study seeks to help new and emerging scholars, such as doctoral students and junior faculty members, gain confidence in preparing better applications given the ever-escalating importance of external funding for universities and individual researchers. This could be particularly relevant for junior academics working in non-research intensive institutions or at institutions with few established researchers where the lack of mentoring for grant application writing can be a major career barrier. Finally, mid-career and senior researchers can also (re)assess their own grant writing styles with the insights from this study.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Securing an external research grant is viewed as an important component of one's research performance. Law and Chon (2007) investigated how university program heads in tourism and hospitality evaluate research performance. These leaders carry the academic titles of heads, directors, deans, and chairs of hospitality and tourism schools, departments, and divisions, and reported on their perceived importance of 31 different research activities. Securing research grants in which the faculty member serves as principal investigator was viewed as important during the evaluation process, and was rated as the second most important activity, after full-length articles in first-tier journals.

Winning an external research grant is also an important component of one's self-identification as a researcher. Brew, Bond, Namgung, Lucas, and Crawford (2016) investigated whether academics with different levels of research productivity and identification as a researcher consider research activities differently. The authors conducted an online survey with over 2,000 academics from 12 research-intensive universities in Australia and the UK across three broad disciplinary groups: sciences, engineering and technology, humanities and social sciences, and medical and health sciences. They found

that highly productive researchers tend to view research as a social phenomenon with results from research grants, presentations, and publications shared within academic networks.

Academics who tend to focus on research as a process of publication eventually publishes more research, sustains a reputation within the field, and ensures higher chances of success in future research grant applications.

From a broader perspective, a close connection exists between attracting external funds and the perceived status of departments at universities. To examine the influence of market forces on research performance evaluations of universities in the United Kingdom (UK), Hamann (2016) analyzed UK history departments and their assessments in the three most recent Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) (i.e., 2001 and 2008) and Research Excellent Framework (REF) (i.e., 2014). Every three to seven years, an institution's quality of research is assessed across numerous departments, ultimately influencing the public funding for those respective institutions. Since departments file their funding data to the RAE/REF and the data directly influence the assessments, the RAE/REF further strengthen the established institutions that are already successfully attracting external grants. Hamann (2016) suggests that this is a part of a self-fulfilling prophecy by rewarding those departments with the best assessments that have already attracted the most external funding. For example, in the REF 2014, the 'top 6' departments accumulated 18 times more grants than the 'bottom 6', and departments that were rewarded by the RAE/REF were became even more successful in raising their rate of external research grants over time. In effect, departments that perform well in the RAE/REF assessments are further endowed with economic capital by public funding bodies, enabling them to have advantages in future external funding.

The increasing importance of attracting research funding is also a focal point of the research policy agenda in the European Union. According to Enger and Castellacci (2016), national policymakers in European countries are emphasizing more on domestic participation

in EU research in order to strengthen scientific and technological collaboration across Europe. The authors reported that in Norway, the government has explicitly stressed the need to investigate factors that could enhance researchers' participation in the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (EU FP). In light of this need, Enger and Castellacci (2016) investigated what determines participation in EU-funded research through two stages of the participation process: first, the self-selection process, where some organizations decide to apply for funding; and second, the selection process carried out by the European Commission, to understand why some applicants are successful. The authors analyzed data on all 1,402 applications submitted by Norwegian research institutions between 2014 and until early 2015, and found that at the first stage, an institution is likely to prepare and submit an application if it has previously participated in the EU FP. Interestingly, the likelihood of submitting an application was negatively related to the strong scientific reputation and high productivity of Norwegian researchers. This is in contrast to Brew et al.'s (2016) study that found highly productive researchers in the UK and Australia tend to view research grants as a social phenomenon for academic reputation. Enger and Castellacci (2016) suggest that a possible explanation is that Norwegian researchers may see funding applications as quite demanding in terms of networking and management procedures. In the second stage, the two main factors that could strengthen the likelihood that an institution would have a successful application are prior participation in EU FPs and scientific reputation. Prior experience could indicate researchers' persistence and learning effects from previous EU projects, while academic reputation could include research impact, quality, and citation metrics.

Nevertheless, securing an external research grant is very difficult. According to Koppelman and Holloway (2012), the success rate of independent research grants in medicine dropped from 53% in 2000 to 24% in 2008, making the process of grantsmanship

more mysterious to young scholars given that virtually no training on grant applications is provided. In the 2015 New Zealand Marsden Fund, over 1,200 proposals were submitted in the first round but only 209 proposals progressed to the second round (Morton, 2015). At the end, only 92 were selected, for an overall success rate of 7.7%. In the 2016 Marsden Fund, there were 117 successful proposals, for an overall success rate of 10.7% (Joyce, 2016).

Rattihalli and Field (2011) presented a checklist comprising some key points, outlining the detailed steps of the process for applying research funding. According to the authors, finding and receiving funding for new research ideas will take a considerable amount of time and are highly competitive. To have a higher chance of success, grant writers should have demonstrated some prior research experience and related publications. Likewise, being a member of an established research team may enhance the chance of winning a grant.

Bown and Sayers (2012), as well as Wright and Sharples (2004), similarly stated that a major application may take six months to prepare, and winning is difficult given that less than 25% of all grant applications are successful. The reasons for rejections are numerous, and one is that the funding scheme does not match the application. Other problems include failure to follow the guidelines, overestimation of costs, and the lack of expertise to conduct the project. In another study, Keshavan (2013) stated that writing a successful proposal is an art that is often not taught in a research institute. Examples of common mistakes found in grant applications include planning within a short time, unspecific research aims, unclear background and significance, inappropriate research methods, unrealistic proposed budget, and lack of the necessary expertise from researchers.

Finally, an analysis of the results of an online database search on ScienceDirect and Google Scholar show that no published article on reviewing grant applications exists in the tourism literature. Only a few prior related studies exist in functional areas of business research such as organizational behaviour and strategic management (Hottenrott & Lawson,

2017; Winter, 2013). This gap hints on the need to conduct a study on the mechanism of grantsmanship in tourism.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To bridge this void in the literature, in-depth interviews with 16 senior tourism and hospitality researchers were conducted to gather their experiences in reviewing grant applications. In-depth interviews were chosen rather than focus groups, for example, in consideration of potential social desirability bias in the research process (Hollander, 2004). Social desirability could be particularly relevant as participants are individuals at senior-levels who would represent their institutions in front of their peers and other researchers (Thompson & Phua, 2005).

The senior scholars have on average of over ten years of academic experience as senior researchers and hold professorial positions. The interviewees came from several different regions including Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Mainland China and from reputable research institutes, such as Penn State University and University of Surrey. They were selected based on their substantive rank (e.g., professorial-level) and connected through on personal contacts from the authors. They have all been previously involved in evaluating research grants, so their knowledge and experiences allow them to share deeper insights into academic research, and grant preparation strategies. Furthermore, to capture a broader perspective of ideas from different backgrounds, these senior researchers have worked at various major universities internationally across the major continents in the world.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private environment (e.g., office space) for about 30 minutes on average. At the beginning of each interview, the researchers briefly introduced the importance of winning external research grants for tourism and hospitality academic careers. Further explanation into the topic was not required given the senior-level

background of the respondents. After this introduction, the interviews were conducted based on a series of open-ended questions. For example, respondents were asked to share aspects that they considered critical in their review of grant applications. Instead of asking respondents to specifically share their views on pre-determined elements of grant reviewing as per the literature from other fields, the senior tourism researchers were asked to identify characteristics of successful grants in general. This open-ended question encouraged insightful responses as participants also shared their views of negative, and poorly prepared grant applications. Additionally, participants were asked in an open-ended format to discuss why they thought the aspects that they identified were critical in winning a research grant. They further provided recommendations for reviewing grant proposals that address these elements.

The authors adopted an inductive data analysis approach and categorized key examples from the interviews based on content analysis. Each word or phrase that indicated a single exemplar was noted. A phrase was deemed to suggest a concept if it contained similar references; for example, the words to represent the idea of methodology could be captured by the words “research design” and “research approach.” This approach sought quality from the data and involves categorizing examples into fewer dimensions.

## **RESULTS**

Respondents elaborated on four key dimensions that they considered critical when reviewing external research grants. Their comments reflect a summary of their collective experiences across four fundamental dimensions: impact of the research, execution of the study, track record of the research team, and budget of the project.

Reviewers of tourism grant applications strongly emphasized the importance of impact. From a theoretical perspective, respondents indicated that they are looking for



proposals with a strong conceptual foundation and research justification. Researchers should provide a thorough review of the literature to demonstrate that they have a good understanding of previous research in the field and are thus, well positioned to extend the previous work into a new area. Respondents also commented that they are often asked to comment on the originality and innovativeness of the proposal. They are looking for proposals that are promising as it relates to advances that the project will bring to knowledge development in tourism and hospitality if the research is successful. From a practical perspective, reviewers are assessing whether the proposal would have a positive impact on tourism and hospitality. For example, practical contributions could include managerial implications for practitioners, or policy implications to aid in the design of public policies related to tourism and hospitality.

Nevertheless, it is important for principal investigators (PIs) to keep the funding body in mind when then they try to balance the theoretical and managerial contributions from the proposal. For example, a proposal that focuses heavily on practical implications for businesses may risk diluting reviewers' perceptions of the academic value of the project. If reviewers deem that a proposal can get funding from private companies that have interests in the project, they may question whether the proposal needs to be a government-funded research project, assuming the external funding body is publically-funded. In this case, reviewers would expect more unique points in the research proposal in an academic perspective. On the contrary, if the external funding body has a clear practical mandate, such as public policy planning, innovation, and sustainability, then reviewers could be looking for less exploratory work but more insights and/or recommendations for stakeholders.

In addition to the impact of the research, respondents stressed the importance of execution. For example, reviewers will closely examine the stated objectives of an application and then comment on whether the objectives can be addressed by the research

agenda, as well as whether the objectives are closely aligned with the research plan. They will also comment on whether a project offers a reasonable and carefully constructed program of research to address the goals of the project. To paraphrase one respondent:

As a reviewer, I feel that I am accountable to the funding body to ensure that the projects that I reviewed, particularly for those that I provided favorable evaluations, could be completed as proposed by the investigator. To help me make that recommendation, grant writers need to be straightforward in their methodology. This includes details in the research process, including data collection and data analysis.

Insightfully, respondents indicated that PIs oftentimes overlook the significance of the proposed timeframe of the project, or consider this aspect as an after-thought in an application. To paraphrase one respondent, even the proposed timeframe of the project needs to be clearly written and well-developed:

Proposals for projects in tourism and hospitality typically ranges from 12 to 36 months. I need to have confidence that the research plan can be completed in the proposed timeframe. I may have reservations on whether a project could be completed if it is overly ambitious but the proposed duration is too short. On the other hand, I may not consider a proposal favorably if the proposed duration is too long because that could show a lack of confidence on the part of the grant writer to promptly carry out the project. The proposed timeframe needs to be well-thought out.

After reviewing the research project, participants indicated that they will evaluate the track record of the research team in detail. First, they will assess the consistency and past

successes of the PI. For example, they will consider a number of questions: does the PI have expertise in the subject area? Does the project fit the PI's existing research program track record? Is the PI working on other funded projects related to this area (i.e., PIs often have to declare previously funded projects so reviewers are able to compare the current grant application with past projects)? Has the PI published in this research topic? Has the PI successfully completed past funded projects? Reviewers are looking for documentation to give them confidence that the PI can complete the research project.

In addition to the track record of the PI, respondents indicated that they will assess the suitability of the research team (e.g., Co-Is and collaborators). The grant application should clearly specify the role of the PI compared to the roles of other research team members. The PI also needs to specify how he/she will lead the research team as well as how the skillsets from individual team members complement or supplement each other. In doing so, the PI can demonstrate synergies between members and highlight how team members are qualified to participate in the study. If the project is an extension of previous work conducted by the research team, reviewers could view the likelihood of successful completion favorably.

The budget of the project represents the resources that the PI considers are necessary to carry out the study. The resources could include a budget for hiring a research assistant, equipment, general expenses, and other costs. While respondents acknowledged that the budgeting process often includes a degree of subjectivity, they stressed that the costs must be deemed "reasonable." For example, the budget should align with the duration of the research project. They may consider questions such as: do I think the PI can complete the project if the approved budget is reduced? Can the project be completed in a shorter duration, and hence, lower budget? Are budget items fully justified? How did the PI estimate the budget items? Are the estimates reasonable for this stream of research? Reviewers will evaluate the project in relation to the scope of the investigation. They recognize that resources from the

funding body could be limited; hence, they are weighing the value from the proposed impact of the study with the PI's requested resources.

Finally, reviewers will provide overall comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal. Respondents indicated that they are now frequently asked to provide suggestions for improvement. If the amount of novelty in a proposal is insufficient, reviewers are obliged to comment. For example, they could suggest for further work if the theoretical contributions are thin. If a proposal is fresh and provides an innovative approach to solving a specific research question, reviewers could be positive and provide suggestions to help the PI think of ways going forward.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study examined how experienced scholars review research grant applications in order to help new and emerging scholars gain confidence in preparing better applications. Insights from this study also sought to help mid-career and senior researchers in their grant applications as some may have been appointed and promoted prior to the need to demonstrate external grantsmanship. Senior researchers are increasingly expected to identify sources of funding for projects and generate grant income in line with their higher salaries, which are oftentimes critical at the professorial-level.

From a broader-level, an academic's ability to secure external research grants is also an important indicator of research performance that could affect the perceive status of departments at universities. For the first time, the latest QS Top Universities (2017) added Hospitality and Leisure Management as a specific subject area within Social Sciences and Management. This indicates further recognition of the field in international academia. While the debate about the QS ranking is beyond the scope of this paper, the reality is that the ranking is now in the public domain and could be used by administrators across jurisdictions

in their assessments of institutional funding. As a result, institutions that are more successful in securing external research grants will have more resources to produce research, thereby enabling them to better advance their academic reputation and citations over time.

In addition to the findings in this study, Figure 1 provides an example of a rating scheme used by reviewers for assessing external research grant proposals. This scheme is used for evaluating research proposals for an annual highly competitive, publically-funded academic research grant competition that is open to research-based academic faculty members across all higher-education institutions in one jurisdiction in Asia. Four of the institutions are within the top 100 institutions in ranking by QS Top Universities (2016), and six of them are within the top 50 institutions for business and management studies. Tourism and hotel management proposals are classified within the Business Studies subject area, which includes other field areas such as management, marketing, finance, and information system management.

--- Insert Figure 1 here ---

As shown in Figure 1, a strong proposal needs to be innovative and address clear objectives. The PI needs to have a good command of the related literature and should be well-qualified to lead a research team, if applicable, to conduct the research. The proposed methodology should be feasible with a reasonable estimated budget and timeline. Most importantly, the outcome of the project should be capable of making a meaningful contribution to the field. These aspects are the factors that reviewers will use to examine the value of a grant application.

Figure 2 provides a second example of a rating scheme in assessing external research grant proposals. There are common dimensions between this external report and Figure 1.

For example, the research rationale, academic merit, and implementation plan are relevant in both samples. Additionally, Figure 2 indicates “relevant to (the funding jurisdiction)”, which suggests that PIs need to consider not only the scientific merits of their project to the broader international research community, but also the impact of their project to the local jurisdiction.

--- Insert Figure 2 here ---

PIs need to be particularly mindful when they write the impact statements of their research proposals. Although PIs may seek to only state the positive outcomes on industry and public policy initiatives from a project, experienced reviewers are still able to read into what is “unwritten” to identify potential lurking impacts from proposals. This is a challenge for PIs that is common in other fields outside of tourism and hospitality. For example, Chubb and Watermeyer (2016) conducted semi-structured interviews with senior academics from the areas of arts and humanities, social science, natural and life science, and physical sciences including mathematics and engineering in the UK and Australia. The interviewees were located in two research-intensive universities. The authors found that interviewees perceived the requirement to outline potential impact in grant proposals as restricting because it could encourage some academics to engage in the creative act of over-speculating the promise of the research outcomes. This could be done to self-legitimize the potential social and/or economic impact of the prospective research.

### **Additional considerations**

Other elements that PIs may need to address when preparing their external research grant proposals could include ethics and confidentiality considerations (Greenwood, 2016). For example, many jurisdictions require PIs to obtain approval from a research ethics review

board if the project involves human and/or animal subjects (Canosa & Graham, 2016). If so, has the PI obtained ethics approval prior to the submitting the external grant application, or will the PI seek approval only after the securing the research grant?

PIs may be also required to discuss how they will ensure confidentiality of data. Ayscue, Boley, and Mertzlufft (2016) indicate that researchers need to be extra careful to ensure confidentiality of data when using mobile technology to explore resident attitudes. The authors suggest removing identifiers, buffering physical locations of residency, and ensuring maps are not to scale to ensure that results from spatial information cannot be linked back to the original coordinates. Depending on the jurisdiction, it could be relevant for PIs to discuss these elements in their proposals.

In addition to considerations regarding the elements of the proposal itself, PIs can explore whether there are other researchers at their department, faculty, and/or institution that are interested in a similar project to enable synergies from an interdisciplinary perspective (Oviedo-García, 2016). Are there other research institutions in the region that are doing similar projects that could bring an international perspective? The key is to compare and contrast the interests of a project with the broader research community to ensure the grant proposal is up-to-date with the latest developments in the field.

The nature of reviewing grant proposals is also very different from reviewing manuscripts submitted to peer-reviewed journals (McKercher, Law, Weber, Song, & Hsu, 2007). While reviewers may provide feedback to the PI on ways to improve the project, they are typically not asked to comment on whether a proposal should be ‘revised and resubmitted’, or requires a ‘major’ or ‘minor’ revision (Goeldner, 2005). In manuscript submissions, authors could be given an opportunity to address reviewers’ comments through multiple rounds of revisions (Che, 2010). To a certain extent, this suggests that reviewers and/or editors are supporting authors to bring their manuscripts to publishable quality

(Yuksel, 2003). In contrast, PIs only have ‘one chance’ in each round of a funding competition. Although some funding bodies may allow PIs to address reviewers’ comments and resubmit if their proposals were unsuccessful, there is no guarantee that the revised grant proposals would go back to the same reviewers as the previous round. In this sense, reviewers’ comments from the first round could be considered as feedback by subject matter experts to help improve the PI’s proposal for a new submission. In doing so, however, there is the potential risk that the revised proposal may not address the issues, or it may even produce additional concerns, for new reviewers in the second round.

Finally, this study focused on the reviewing process for nationally funded grants, but grants from the private sector are also highly relevant for academics. Private sector grants have long been identified as a major sources of funding and considered important for scholarly research (Mansfield, 1995; Cohen et al., 1998). Nevertheless, the grants application and administration process for private funding are different from public funding due to sponsors’ different expectations (Blumenthal et al., 2006). Private funding could involve contractual agreements and research guidance; thus, industry partners may direct academics towards more applied research, for example, in order to recover the firms’ investments and produce output that could be commercialized (Hottenrott & Lawson, 2017).

## **CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The main objective of this study was to examine how experienced scholars review research grants in order to facilitate a better understanding of grant writing for tourism academics. Four fundamental dimensions to successful grant applications were identified: impact of the research, execution of the study, track record of the research team, and budget of the project. Overall, this study sought to provide academics with insights into this process given the ever-escalating importance of external funding for universities and individual researchers.



There are limitations to this study and future research opportunities should be acknowledged. The dimensions identified in this study for a successful grant application are subjective and based on the opinions of 16 senior tourism and hospitality researchers; hence, generalizability of the results could be limited. Insights in the discussion, particularly with reference to Figure 1 and Figure 2, are Hong Kong focused. The figures were intended as examples of rating schemes used in assessing external research grant proposals, but they are by no means exhaustive of the indicators that may be used in other jurisdictions as application criteria and assessment could vary widely.

The insights from this study are qualitative, and future research can supplement the present research with a quantitative approach. For example, future research can assess the salience of each dimension on reviewers' overall perceptions of the proposal. While the most highly rated proposals would undoubtedly convey impact to society, provide a clear execution of the study, demonstrate a positive track record of the research team, and deliver a reasonable budget, many proposals may be stronger or weaker in one area over another. For example, how would reviewers rate an overall proposal if it is strong on execution but weak on impact? How would reviewers rate a proposal if it demonstrates a strong impact but the track record of the research team is relatively weak? It would be valuable for future studies to assess how reviewers weigh these criteria to provide PIs with a better understanding of balance.

The findings from this study are limited to dimensions that reviewers deem critical when reviewing external research grants; hence, future research can assess the perceptions of PIs to identify their perceptions of critical factors when they write external research grants. For example, do grant writers spend more time on conveying the impact of their project, or do they spend more effort on detailing the execution of the study procedures? Do they think their previous track record would affect their future chances? If so, do PIs use specific

strategies to build up their track record to increase their chances of winning an external research grant? Do PIs typically tend to over-estimate, under-estimate, or try their best to present a precise budget to reviewers? Future research could address a number of these research questions.

Anecdotal indications also suggest that an interesting paradox may exist: while most academic tourism research output comes out of tourism, hospitality and business management schools, departments and divisions, funding received for tourism-related projects from one recent Australian Research Council (ARC) funding round were from outside tourism, hospitality, and business and management studies, programs, and schools. Why does this discrepancy exist? It is perhaps researchers from tourism, hospitality, business and management studies did not apply to ARC? It is perhaps tourism and hospitality researchers have had more success with securing funding from agencies and departments with specific applied projects which may be more generous and easier to get than from national government research entities. Is it perhaps individuals from a range of different backgrounds in humanities and social sciences, such as psychology, history, and cultural studies, may have been invited as additional reviewers to supplement scholars in tourism and hospitality? For scholars from outside the field, their diverse knowledge and background could affect their assessment of grant proposals in tourism and hospitality. Nevertheless, a limitation of this study is that it solely focused on tourism and hospitality, and future research could investigate why this gap may exist.

Finally, future research can compare and contrast the salience of these dimensions from the perspectives of reviewers and grant writers. Do PIs typically tend to under or over-estimate the importance of certain factors compared to the importance that reviewers place on them? Are the expectations of reviewers and PIs largely aligned? Insights from these future studies could further help tourism and hospitality academics, particularly new and emerging

scholars, gain more confidence and skills in preparing better grant applications.

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