

## Big Five Personality Traits and Test Anxiety among English as a Foreign Language Learners

MEHMET ASMALI<sup>a</sup>

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**Abstract:** This study investigated Big Five Personality Traits and test anxiety of Turkish EFL learners. The data were gathered via two questionnaires, Goldberg's (2001) International Personality Item Pool and adapted version of Sarason's (1984) Test Anxiety Scale. The main objectives were to find out participants' test anxiety and to identify personality traits predicting students' test anxiety. Descriptive statistics showed that students had a moderate level of test anxiety. It was obvious that students had a confidence problem. Students believed that they would do better after the exam. On the other hand, the participants were found to be less anxious about the motivation related items. Pearson product moment analyses yielded negative relationships between test anxiety and personality traits of 'emotional stability', 'imagination', and 'extraversion'. Regression analyses significantly identified 'emotional stability', and 'imagination' personality traits as predicting test anxiety.

**Keywords:** Test anxiety, big five personality, multiple regression, emotional stability.

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<sup>a</sup> Okt. Dr., Bandırma Yedi Eylül Ü. Yabancı Diller Yüksek Okulu  
asmalimehmet@gmail.com

## İngilizce'yi Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenenler Arasında Büyük Beş Kişilik Özellikleri ve Sınav Kaygısı

MEHMET ASMALI

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**Öz:** Bu çalışma, İngilizce'yi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin Büyük Beş Kişilik Özelliklerinin, sınav kaygıları ile ilişkisini incelemiştir. Veriler Goldberg'in (2001) Uluslararası Kişilik Madde Havuzu ve Sarason'un (1984) adapte edilmiş Sınav Kaygısı Ölçeği ile toplanmıştır. Temel amaç, katılımcıların sınav kaygısını tespit etmek ve öğrencilerin sınav kaygısını tahmin eden kişilik özelliklerini belirlemektir. Tanımlayıcı istatistikler, öğrencilerin orta seviyede sınav kaygısına sahip olduklarını göstermiştir. Öğrencilerin güven problemi olduğu açıktır. Öğrenciler sınavdan sonra daha iyi yapabileceklerini düşünmektedirler. Diğer yandan, katılımcılar motivasyonla ilgili maddelerde daha az endişeli bulunmuşlardır. Pearson korelasyon analizi, sınav kaygısı ile 'duygusal stabilite', 'hayal gücü', ve 'dışa dönüklük' kişilik özellikleri arasında negatif ilişki ortaya çıkarmıştır. Regresyon analizi, sınav kaygısının anlamlı belirleyicilerini 'duygusal stabilite' ve 'hayal gücü' kişilik özellikleri olarak bulmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sınav kaygısı, büyük beş kişilik özellikleri, çoklu regresyon, duygusal stabilite.

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## **Introduction**

A language test is simply a gauge that shows the amount of language knowledge in the mind of a learner (Nodoushan, 2009). However, some factors play significant roles in determining the success in these tests. Test anxiety is one of the most important constructs affecting millions of students' success in the exams. Especially students at universities underperform because of extreme test anxiety despite their adequate knowledge. For adolescent students, test taking can become a major source of stress in their lives, especially when test scores serve as gatekeepers to future opportunities and career pathways (Smyth, 1995). It does not have to be a major nation-wide exam for the students to be anxious. Many students become extra anxious when they take their regular mid-term or final exams at universities. Regardless of the exam type, there are certain factors with significant effects on test anxiety among foreign language learners, such as personality, thinking style, psycho-social characteristics and his/her capabilities (Aysan, 1988; Aysan, 1993).

On the other hand, test anxiety is a strong determinant of the process of foreign language learning as well (Petridou & Williams, 2007). It causes uneasiness and negative feelings, particularly in second language acquisition that is centred on speaking, listening, and learning (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Additionally, test anxiety as a factor that affects L2 learning is a barrier that stops learners from performing well on tests. Therefore, this study was conducted in order to have an understanding of the level of test anxiety, which is an important factor in determining the success on the tests.

In addition, anxiety is of capital importance in personality research which is investigated from several perspectives such as, psychoanalytic, behavioural, trait theory, and social cognitive theory (McIlroy et al., 2000). It shows a great deal of variety among individuals although it is known to depend on situa-

tional variables, such as levels of motivation, task complexity, and practical consequences of high or low performance (Humphreys & Revelle, 1984). Hence, it is possible to observe students having various levels of test anxiety in the same situation though anxiety is a universal emotion experienced by all human beings.

### **Test Anxiety**

Anxiety has become one of the most popularly investigated topics among the researchers recently. Specifically, the question of whether anxiety has positive or negative effects for foreign language learning has taken the attention of the researchers for the past few years (Nodoushan, 2015). It is known as the state of uneasiness or fear in a threatening situation (Scovel, 1991). In an academic context, a threatening situation is the test students take and in relation with the students' performance, anxiety for tests takes a leading position (McIlroy et al., 2000). However, especially in educational researches, anxiety is theoretically divided into two domains, trait anxiety and state anxiety (Spielberger, 1972). While the former is known as individual tendency to perceive various situations as dangerous and threatening, the latter is accepted as the perception of an emotional situation as unpleasant accompanied by a physiological reaction connected to the autonomic nervous system (Lufi et al., 2004). Test anxiety, which is defined as "the set of phenomenological, physiological and behavioural responses that accompany concern about possible negative consequences or failure in an exam or similar evaluative situation" (Zeidner, 1998, p.17), falls into the domain of state anxiety. However, in general, it is highly possible to believe that if an individual has a personality with general anxiety in several situations, he/she may experience anxiety during the process of language learning as well (Shomoossi et al., 2009).

According to the estimation of Shaked (1996), 30% of all students suffer from various levels of test anxiety. This level

depends on situational variables, such as how motivated the students are, how complex the task is, and the practical consequences of high or low performance (Humphreys & Revelle, 1984). The level of the test anxiety changes significantly among people (Chamorro, 2008). It is possible to observe learners having a high level of fear and anxiety, though some would be calmer in the same situation. People with high test anxiety generally have the habit of underestimating their self-esteem. This underestimating eventually affects normal behavior of the human beings especially in exam-like situations and influences their interpretation and responses to events (Spielberger, 1972).

"The construct of test anxiety has undergone considerable evolution since Sarason and Mandler's (1952) early research demonstrating a link between anxiety and poor test performance" (Harpell & Andrews, 2012, p. 518). The researchers discussing the dimensions, sources, and elements of test anxiety came up with different results. Einat (2000) identified high personal standards of persons expecting maximum success as the source of test anxiety due to the fear of not meeting the personally set standards. Concerning the dimensions, Liebert and Morris (1967) defined test anxiety consisting of two major elements: worry and emotionality. Worry represented failure or consequences of failure, and emotionality represented physiological symptomatology. Going one step forward, Sarason (1984) specified four dimensions of test anxiety: worry, tension, test-irrelevant thinking, and bodily symptoms. Additionally, Carver and Scheier (1984) added 'lack of confidence' in the test anxiety framework.

Researches conducted so far have shown that individual differences, such as beliefs, attitudes, expectations, motivation levels, and affective states are the factors with significant effects on the foreign language learning process (Aydin & Zengin, 2008). One of the affective state factors, test anxiety has found to be an important factor on language learning process. Therefore,

several researchers have worked on the test anxiety. In these studies, test anxiety was claimed to appear as a result of several factors, such as the time limit (Shaked & Murray, 1984), students' attitudes toward language learning and the study skills of the learners (Shohamy, 1982), and personal variables, such as age, gender, economic and educational background (Madsen, 1982; Putwain, 2007).

In one of the studies investigating test anxiety, Chamorro et al. (2008) examined the dispositional determinants of test anxiety including American and British undergraduate students. Personality, self-assessed intelligence, and self-evaluation of the participants were specified as the determinants of test anxiety. According to the results, test anxiety was found to be positively correlated with 'neuroticism' and self-evaluation of the participants; and negatively correlated with 'openness', 'agreeableness' and 'conscientiousness'. Structural equation modeling results indicated a strong direct path from 'neuroticism' to test anxiety; and a modest direct effect of 'extraversion' on test anxiety.

Aydın et al. (2006) investigated test anxiety and its reasons and effects on foreign language learning in Turkish context. The results showed that test anxiety provoking factors were the low level of English proficiency levels of the learners, students' attitudes toward language learning, and negative attitudes of teachers toward test applications, test invalidity, parental expectations, time limitation, and fear of negative evaluation. Test anxiety was found to be causing physical and psychological problems by affecting motivation, concentration, increasing errors in language learning. In a cross-cultural study, El-Zahhar and Hocever (1991) found out that test anxiety in the USA, Brazil, and Arabic countries are due to the extreme consequences to performance on examinations especially in high schools. In addition, test anxiety was found to be the strongest form of anxiety among the other anxiety provoking activities in language classroom (Çubukçu, 2007).

In the light of these studies and their findings, it may be claimed that language learning is negatively affected by test anxiety. Moreover, the findings also showed that learners' personality traits showed some positive and negative relationships with test anxiety as well. This study has the aim of enlightening the relationships between these constructs, which would also explain language learning success of the learners.

### **Big Five Personality Traits**

The complex construct, personality, refers to a person's all interests, attitudes, skills, speaking style, outer appearance, and his/her adaptation in to the environment (Burger, 1993). It has diverse meanings for the fields of theology, sociology, or psychology. The term 'consistency' is emphasized in the definitions of personality in all these fields. It is basically known as "consistent patterns of feeling, thinking and behaving" (Pervin & John, 2001, p. 4).

Personality is one of the most extensively studied concepts in psychology. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century was the point when the personality started to be investigated. These investigations on personality yielded some theories. One of these theories is the five factor personality theory. The source of Big Five Model goes back to 1930s and 1940s, but a number of personality psychologists have adopted the five-factor personality model since 1980s (Köksal et al., 2014). The starting point of this theory is that the consistent behavior of people can be reflected in adjectives in any language people use. The collection of these adjectives and use of factor analysis gives us a limited number of personality dimensions. This process occurred in years and Goldberg (1992), McCrae and Paul Costa (2003) were the main researchers who were responsible for the final breakthrough. "The Big Five Personality Model is composed of five dimensions of personality: 'openness to experience', 'conscientiousness', 'extraversion-introversion', 'agreeableness', and 'neuroticism-emotional stability'" (Ellis, 2008, p. 676). The adjectives

describing high and low scorers of these personality domains are presented below:

1. *Openness to experience*: High scorers are imaginative, curious, flexible, creative, moved by art, novelty seeking, original, and untraditional; low scorers are conservative, conventional, down-to-earth, unartistic, and practical.

2. *Conscientiousness*: High scorers are systematic, meticulous, efficient, organized, reliable, responsible, hard-working, persevering, and self-disciplined; low scorers are unreliable, aimless, careless, disorganized, late, lazy, negligent, and weak-willed.

3. *Extraversion-introversion*: High scorers are sociable, gregarious, active, assertive, passionate, and talkative; low scorers are passive, quiet, reserved, withdrawn, sober, aloof, and restrained.

4. *Agreeableness*: High scorers are friendly, good-natured, likeable, kind, forgiving, trusting, cooperative, modest, generous; low scorers are cold, cynical, rude, unpleasant, critical, antagonistic, suspicious, vengeful, irritable, and uncooperative.

5. *Neuroticism-Emotional stability*: High scorers are worrying, anxious, insecure, depressed, self-conscious, moody, emotional, and unstable; low scorers are calm, relaxed, unemotional, hardy, comfortable, content, even tempered, and self-satisfied. (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 15)

Every personality trait defines a person and helps us get acquainted with and understand that particular person. The Big Five Personality Model was investigated by several researchers in relation with different constructs, such as willingness to communicate (Öz, 2014), communicative competence (Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2002), language learning strategies (Asmalı, 2014), and emotional and academic intelligence (Zee et al., 2002). However, the literature on the studies conducted to find out the relationship between big five personality traits and test anxiety is scarce.

Among these limited number of studies, Khosravi and

Bigdely (2008) examined the relationships between the test anxiety and some personality factors such as introversion, extraversion and neuroticism. The results indicated that test anxiety was significantly and positively correlated with neuroticism. No significant correlations were found between test anxiety and introversion and extraversion.

In another study (McIlroy et al., 2000), test anxiety was investigated to ascertain whether it suits to four-factor structure in Irish sample and its relationships with personality and academic performance. The results indicated that self-efficacy had the clearest and the most consistent relationship to four test anxiety factors. There was also a relationship between 'conscientiousness' and test anxiety.

In the light of this information, this study aimed to fill the gap in the literature concerning the relationship between the big five personality traits and test anxiety in the context of English language learning especially in the context of Turkey. Therefore, participants studying at a Turkish state university was examined concerning these two constructs and following research questions were answered:

- 1.) What is the perceived level of test anxiety of the EFL learners?
- 2.) Which personality trait or traits predict the students' test anxiety in Turkish context?

## **Methodology**

The present study employed a quantitative approach in determining the Big Five personality characteristics and the test anxiety levels of the students. This descriptive study not only found out the overall test anxiety levels of the students, it also focused on specific aspects in relation to when and how students felt anxious during the tests. Additionally, Big five personality investigation showed what personality trait owners were more inclined to experience test anxiety.

### *Participants*

Participants of the present study were 180 enrolled students of a Turkish state university studying in different departments. Demographic characteristics of the student sample were determined for gender, age, and the department they were studying. The results indicated that relatively more males (58.9%) than females (41.1%) took part in this study. They ranged in age from 17 to 33 ( $M=19.26$ ,  $SD=1.62$ ). The students were studying in the first grades of the programs of tourism, natural gas installation, air conditioning, computer programming, business administration, and accountancy.

### *Instruments*

The data were gathered by means of two questionnaires. Participants' Big Five personality traits were assessed by the 50-item version of Goldberg's (2001) International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) including 10 items for each trait initially. Participants were asked to rate personality descriptions on a five point Likert scale according to suitability to their personality.

The anxiety participants had for the tests was assessed by the adapted version of Sarason's (1984) Test Anxiety Scale (Aydin et al., 2006). The test anxiety scale designed in Likert type and included 22 multiple choice items aiming to measure the degree of test anxiety.

Table 1. Composites of variables with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients

Constructs	Cronbach's $\alpha$	No. of items
Extraversion	.69	9
Agreeableness	.68	9
Conscientiousness	.74	7
Emotional Stability	.77	7
Intellect-Imagination	.73	8
Test Anxiety	.91	16

Table 1 above illustrates Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients of Big Five personality traits and test anxiety scale. Alt-

though initially test anxiety scale and each personality trait included 22 and 10 items respectively, some items were eliminated so as to increase reliability coefficients. According to the final reliability evaluation, among the Big Five personality traits, emotional stability and agreeableness were the most and the least reliable traits, i.e.,  $\alpha = .77$  and  $\alpha = .68$ , respectively. Reliability coefficients should be above .70 to be considered acceptable (Cronbach, 1951). Almost all reliabilities for the Big Five personality traits and test anxiety scales were above .70 with the exceptions of personality traits of extraversion ( $\alpha = .68$ ) and agreeableness ( $\alpha = .69$ ).

Skewness and kurtosis values of all variables were computed to assess the normality of the scales. These values are expected to be between the values of -2 and +2 in order to be acceptable (Bachman, 2004). According to the analysis results, all Skewness and kurtosis values were found to be between the acceptable range.

### *Analysis*

In order to characterize the participants' perceived levels of test anxiety and Big Five personality traits, descriptive statistics, namely frequencies, percentages and mean scores were used. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the predictive power of Big Five personality traits on test anxiety.

### **Findings**

According to the descriptive statistics results, the overall perceived test anxiety level of the participants was moderate ( $M = 2.36$ ). The detailed investigation of the test anxiety items showed that the item number 8 'I cannot feel confident even if I have good grades' had the highest mean score. According to the responses of the participants, item number 9 'after the test, I feel I would do better' had the second highest mean score. Following these items, item number 21 'I worry when I am not prepared well' took the third place in the mean score ranking.

Table 2. Test anxiety level of EFL learners

Test anxiety items	N	Mean	S.D.
1. I worry while I am taking a test.	180	3.14	1.27
2. While taking a test, I am thinking that other students are better than I am.	180	2.93	1.27
3. When I know that I will take a test, I do not feel confident and relaxed.	180	2.81	1.38
4. During the test, I am thinking unrelated things about the class.	180	2.65	1.25
5. I feel worried when I learned that I would take a test	180	3.04	1.29
6. During the test, I think I will fail.	180	2.98	1.27
7. After the test, I feel worried.	180	2.94	1.35
8. I cannot feel confident even if I have good grades.	180	3.75	1.43
9. After the test, I feel I would do better.	180	3.54	1.20
10. During the test, my emotions affect my performance negatively	180	3.08	1.32
11. During the test, I forget what I know.	180	2.96	1.26
12. I feel worried when I study for a test.	180	2.83	1.35
13. The more I work, the more confused I get	180	2.73	1.31
14. During the test, I cannot be sure if I will succeed.	180	3.00	1.19
15. Tests bother me much.	180	3.36	1,40
16. I feel pressured by time limits during test.	180	3.30	1.39
17. When I have bad grades, I study less.	180	1.86	1.28
18. I would learn more if I should not have tests.	180	3.12	1.61
19. Tests affect my performance negatively.	180	2.95	1.36
20. I worry even when I am prepared well.	180	3.32	1.35
21. I worry when I am not prepared well.	180	3.41	1.41
22. I feel crammed before an exam	180	3.03	1.36

The results also showed that students were less anxious about the motivation-related items such as item 17 'when I have bad grades, I study less', and item 4 'during the test, I am thinking unrelated things about the class'.

Table 3. Composites of variables with means and standard deviations

	Std. Deviation	Mean
Extraversion	5.94	27.04
Agreeableness	5.25	35.92
Conscientiousness	5.23	26.83
Emotional Stability	6.14	18.15
Intellect-Imagination	5,03	29.09

According to the descriptive results of Big Five personality traits, 'agreeableness' was found to be the most popular personality trait among the students. 'Agreeableness' was followed by 'imagination' and extraversion'. The least preferred personality trait was 'emotional stability' among the participants.

Before multiple regression analysis was carried out to find out whether Big Five personality traits were related to test anxiety, correlation analyses were done first. As presented in Table 4 below, results indicated that test anxiety was significantly negatively correlated with the personality traits of 'emotional stability' and 'imagination' ( $r = -.391$ ,  $r = -.297$ ),  $p < .01$ ; 'extraversion' ( $r = -.155$ ),  $p < .05$ . The magnitudes of correlation coefficients of these two personality traits were negative. This showed that as the preference of 'emotional stability' and 'imagination' personality traits increased, the test anxiety showed a decrease.

Table 4. Correlation matrix of the Big Five Personality traits and test anxiety

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Extraversion	-	.21**	-.06	.27**	.32**	-.15*
(2) Agreeableness	.21**	-	.34**	-.10	.26**	.07
(3) Conscientiousness	-.06	.34**	-	-.01	.09	-.04

(4) Emotional stability	.27**	-.10	-.01	-	.09	-.39**
(5) Imagination	.32**	.26**	.09	.09	-	-.30**
(6) Test Anxiety	-.15*	.04	-.04	-.39**	-.30**	-

\*\* p<0.01 level, \* p< 0.05 level

In order to answer the second research question, i.e., which personality trait or traits predicted the students' test anxiety in Turkish context, multiple regression analysis was run. The Big Five personality traits and the test anxiety of the students took the roles of independent and dependent variables respectively and the results were obtained as presented below.

Table 5. Multiple regression model of Big Five Personality traits as predictors of test anxiety

	Beta	SE of Beta	B	t	p
Extraversion	.04	.19	.02	.20	.83
Agreeableness	.24	.21	.09	1.14	.25
Conscientiousness	-.14	.20	-.05	-.67	.50
Emotional stability	-.88*	.17	-.36*	-5.12	.00*
Imagination	-.85*	.21	-.29*	-3.97	.00*

\* p< .05, R= .478, R<sup>2</sup>=.229, Adjusted R<sup>2</sup>= .207, SE= 13.30

In the regression model, 'emotional stability' and 'imagination' personality traits were found to be significant and the remaining Big Five personality traits were not significant predictors of test anxiety. The data accounted for R<sup>2</sup>adj = 20%, but emotional stability and imagination significantly predicted test anxiety,  $F(10,330)$ ,  $p < .05$ . With other variables held constant, emotional stability and imagination were negatively related to test anxiety, decreasing by 0.87 and 0.84 for every point in the test anxiety respectively.

The overall model was statistically significant ( $F=10,330$ ,  $P=.000$ ). Emotional stability and imagination were the significant predictors of the test anxiety. Multiple regression analysis showed that Big Five personality traits predicted 20% of the variance in test anxiety levels of 180 first-year students of English as a foreign language (EFL) at a Turkish state university. The two personality traits, namely 'emotional stability' and 'imagination' both negatively predicted the test anxiety.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

Results showed the participants mostly had a confidence problem that triggered the test anxiety to be high. They did not trust their language ability. For this reason, they were anxious before each English test even though they had good grades from the previous exams. It could also be claimed that there might be too much test anxiety or any other problem affecting the test performance of the students because they thought they would do better after the exam. It may also not be directly related to the high test anxiety of the students. It may be an indicator of unpreparedness for the exam as well. The participants in this study also showed a common reaction of feeling anxious, which is typical for all students when they are not prepared well for the exams because of lack of knowledge.

It was interesting to find out that almost all low scored items were motivation-related items which were negatively stated in the list. Thus, it can be concluded that students never gave up studying more despite of the bad grades, and they were not distracted because of thinking about unrelated issues during the test.

Concerning Big five personality traits, it could be deduced that the participants mostly consider themselves as friendly, good-natured, likeable, kind, forgiving, trusting, cooperative, modest, and generous according to suggestion of Dörnyei (2005). It is of note that students do not consider themselves worrying or anxious which are among the adjectives describing

'emotional stability'. On the other hand, contrary to the fact mentioned above, their level of test anxiety was found to be moderate. Additionally, it was not surprising to find 'emotional stability', which is directly related to anxiety and calmness of the people, as a significant predictor of test anxiety in the model.

Moreover, the perceived test anxiety level of the participants in the present study demonstrates some similarities and differences with the other studies conducted. The results of the present study, in terms of test anxiety, are in accordance with the study of Aydın et al. (2006). The participants in both studies feel that they would do better after the test taken or they are worried when they are not prepared well enough for the exam. The conditions that make the students the least anxious show also similarities between the two studies. The results indicated that, in both studies, students were not worried much when they had bad grades and they can focus on the exam by eliminating other disturbing factors from their mind. However, despite the similarities between the findings of the current study and the study of Aydın et al. (2006) in terms of perceived test anxiety of the participants, there is one major difference which is related to students' confidence. Students in the present study have a confidence problem in language classes though they have good grades. However, the participants in the research of Aydın et al. (2006) overcame confidence problem.

The results concerning the relationship between Big Five personality traits and the test anxiety showed similarities and differences with the study of Chamorro et al. (2008). Although Chamorro et al. (2008) and Khosravi and Bigdely (2008) found a positive correlation between test anxiety and 'neuroticism' which is also known as 'emotional stability', the relationship in this study was negative. On the other hand, the similarity between the two studies is the negative relationship found between 'imagination' which is also known as 'openness to experience' and test anxiety. Moreover, despite the positive (McIlroy et al., 2000) and negative (Chamorro et al., 2008) relationships

between the personality trait of 'conscientiousness' and test anxiety, no significant relationship was found in the present study.

The findings of this study provided a pedagogical implication that increasing students' self-confidence regarding their language ability may be a way of eliminating high test anxiety in language classes. This may be done through classroom activities having appropriate level of challenge for the students. When students feel success in language classes, they may feel more self-confident which may in return decrease the test anxiety. Therefore, setting the classroom activities with ideal level of challenge plays a major role in language classes. Moreover, further researches may deal with possible factors affecting test anxiety levels of the students, because according to the results of this study, personality accounts for only 20% of students' test anxiety.

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