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Policing, Protests, and Policy: The Impacts of Institutional Backlash on Student Activists

Due to the increase in police scrutiny as well as the increase in political activity among the youth, the current political environment calls into question a reexamination of the effects of policing on college students' motivations to continue political activism. Criticism leveled against universities for resorting to police retaliation for their students invites an evaluation of policing as an effective tool to curb political activity on campus grounds, and whether future student demonstrations may be met with police retaliation for political expression deemed as misconduct by their universities. Therefore, by comparing arrest data in schools across California during the Pro-Palestinian protests with attendance sizes occurring immediately before and after these high-profile arrests, I will be able to examine the impacts of police activity on student activists' motivations to protest.

Broadly, my research question is as follows: what are the effects of police activity on student protests? More specifically, during the 2023-2024 Pro-Palestinian student protests, how were the motivations of Californian college students to protest impacted by high-profile arrests? To answer this question, I compared the attendance size of seven Californian college protests (UCLA, USC, UCSC, UCI, UCSD, CSLA, and Stanford) throughout 2023-2024 in the days before and after large-scale arrests occurred. I find that policing has a large negative impact upon student activists' motivations to continue protesting, and I conclude with a discussion of the future of the handling of California college institutions' student activists and political demonstrations.

Context and Significance

Following the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict occurring on October 7, 2023, large-scale protests began cropping up around the United States, calling for a ceasefire, divestment, and disarmament in support of Palestinian victims (CalMatters). Among these protests grew encampments at specific college campuses, in which students demanded their respective universities withdraw from Israeli involvement as well as breaking their silences on the ongoing genocide. As the encampments and protests grew in size as well as influence, police action was incited by the institutions to violently arrest and detain over two thousand people across the country (Associated Press). According to CalMatters, over 560 people were arrested across California during these protests, and around 100 were suspended. These arrests were reported on by several news sources, and videos of the encounters spread on social media, drawing criticism and awareness to the scale of the arrest. As reported by NPR, many of these arrests involved physical beating, pepper spray, rubber bullets, and other forms of punishment against students protesting at the encampments.

As public scrutiny of the police increases, more and more attention has been paid to acts of brutality committed by the police through social media, as well as the news. In many cases, interviews with those affected served to shed more light on the extreme violence leveled against the students. Thus, as the protests across the nation grew among college students, criticism fell upon both the police as well as the college institutions for the violence that emerged in the police-protest conflict (NPR). Additionally, within California, student organizations decried the police response as an attempt by their overarching college institutions to silence students' political expression and beliefs (CalMatters).

Literature Review

In exploring the relationship between college student activists and the police, much of the existing research suggests that conflict between the two often results in violence, but not a decrease in motivation to protest. However, the political behavior of student activism concerning police activity has been little examined in previous literature, though the dimensions of the aftereffects of police violence on behavior have been previously discussed by other scholars.

Author Desmond Ang's work in the 2021 article for *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, "The effects of police violence on inner-city students" suggests that proximal violence can negatively impact educational motivations. Students in areas that have been affected by police violence steadily decrease in grade point averages as well as school attendance, resulting in high absentee rates and depleting grades over the following year. This article indicates one of the detriments that may result from police brutality in proximity to students: a blow to their educational motivations. The findings of this article indicate one of the potential consequences that student activists may face from confrontations with police, which could potentially explain a decrease in motivation to protest. This article specifically deals with violence in proximity to high schoolers, which differs greatly from the focus of my project: localized violence among college populations; however, it still provides insights into how students can be affected by violence, which may serve as support for my hypothesis. Additionally, this article indicates another deterrent to student motivations to protest, which could be its effects on students' other educational commitments.

More specifically to the topic of protests and police violence, "How state and protester violence affect protest dynamics" (2022) relied on documentation of attendance sizes to determine that protest sizes experienced decreases as a result of police violence. This is a study that strengthens my current hypothesis on the relationship between an increase in police activity

alongside a decrease in protest attendance. In contrast to this article, Ang and co-author Jonathan Tebes (2024) have also explored the positive correlation between police violence and civil mobilization, as more people will register to vote to motivate police reform after living in neighborhoods affected by police brutality. This is one such article that indicates that police brutality does not serve to stifle political motivation; rather, it encourages it in opposition. In short, those who have been affected by police violence will seek avenues towards preventative measures in the future. In essence, this article, in opposition to my hypothesis, suggests that police activity may not decrease motivations toward political activity—rather, in certain circumstances, it can encourage it.

Similarly, though outside of the scope of the United States, the 2022 article “Does State Repression Spark Protests? Evidence from Secret Police Surveillance in Communist Poland” found that uncovered evidence of surveillance in radical groups did not negatively impact the motivations of participants to continue protests; rather, they spurred a fervor among protesters to continue protesting. Motivated by a sense of betrayal and anger, protests continued to ramp up efforts in the following months, indicating that police activity did little to deter protest action. Combined, these articles suggest that police violence does not always serve as an omen or warning of consequence meant to cause a ceasing of political activity. Rather, incited by violence, people surge towards action and change to combat violence. That being said, the circumstances in which these studies took place do not accurately reflect the setting of my research project, which explores the relationship between the police and a specific group: students. Therefore, while this article could explain some of the outliers in my research project, its surrounding external factors and setting cause it to serve as a less than completely similar comparison. However, in alignment with "How state and protester violence affect protest

dynamics” (2022), this article presents an alternative interpretation of the relationship between protestors and state violence, as it suggests policing acts as an increasing factor in motivation to protest.

Other work done in this field establishes that student activism is a unique phenomenon, dealing with a group of people with characteristic trends and relationships to both the police and activism. Feindrich et al. (1973) indicates that political expression in college often translates into political mobility in adulthood, as those involved in radical movements or left-wing student organizations often pursue social work and membership in leftist organizations after graduation. This article establishes within the field of student activism that activism and political expression are not a brief part of these people’s lives, and that motivation persists long after college. However, this article does not explore the impact that policing and violence may have had on these motivations, and thus has no impact on my hypothesis or project.

In addition, other research has been done to characterize the relationship between the police and student protestors, often remarking on the prevalence of brutality in these conflicts. "Student protest, violent interactions, and state repression” (2016) suggests that the conflict between students and police is unique for the low opportunity costs that students recognize and undergo by engaging in activism, as the majority of them are childless and not working, leading to increased chances of spontaneous violent encounters between the two parties. In short, protestors are more likely to engage in sudden violent encounters because they have less to lose. That being said, this article notes that police are often far more violent with students than other populations, suggesting that the student’s motivation is not the only motivator of spontaneous violence between the two groups. This establishes that the relationship between student activists and the police is characteristically violent, which may color future interactions between the two

groups once this sense of violence is established. Concerning my hypothesis, this article can provide a basis for why students are less motivated to protest after police activity occurs at protests they are involved in, as this activity is likely to be characterized by sudden, spontaneous violence. As such, students may avoid continued participation in political demonstrations after the commonality of violence is established between the two parties in previous occurrences of arrests.

Author Wesley Strong (2013) characterizes police violence against protestors as being operationalized not only to cease movements but to demoralize and criminalize free speech. Strong goes on to link the criminalization of political activity to deliberate alienation by the college administrations, categorizing activists as “dangerous” and violent”. Not only that, but this article delineates police violence as the physical manifestation of the existing administration’s political beliefs. This article characterizes police violence against student activists as not only immediate attempts to put a stop to protests but also actions taken to eliminate the possibility of continued protests in the future. According to Strong, police violence against student protestors is directly intended to impact motivations. When students are arrested for protesting, it is not only a punishment for them, but a warning for those who would want to do the same in the future. This article adds a new dimension to the relationship between the police, students, and their administrations, and provides a basis for why students would discontinue protesting efforts after arrests occur. Overall, Strong’s article informs my hypothesis and theory as to why students’ motivations are impacted by policing.

In examining the past literature completed on the relationship between student activists and the police, I have concluded that the place of my project in the existing academic topic would be to further explore the sufficiency of police violence as a tool to cease political

motivations. Exploring protests among the general public, studies have already established that there are mental and emotional consequences to witnessing proximal violence. However, violence against protestors can easily result in either a resurgence of motivation or a decrease, depending much on the demographics of those involved in the protest. In many cases, police violence is as much of a deterrent as it is a motivator to increase political behavior, often in mind to put a stop to such violence in the future. Additionally, existing research has been done on the nature of student activists as a unique group as well as the impacts of police violence on protests—yet little has been done on the two as a singular phenomenon. Therefore, my research project serves as an extension of the literature completed previously, combining detailed explorations of student activism as well as the impacts of state violence. Regarding current events, my research project adds a new temporal dimension, as scrutiny of police has grown in response to recent cases of well-documented police brutality. By looking into the effects of police violence on student protestors, my research may be able to provide policy suggestions for police reform.

Theory and Hypothesis

I hypothesize that as arrests occur, attendance will go down in protests, as students fear violent retribution for their actions. As police activity increases, motivation to protest will immediately decrease as students recognize protesting as an action that will lead to possible consequences such as arrests and suspensions. Due to the large scale of arrests involved in the cases that I am studying, students will likely react to potential violence and institutional backlash by limiting their political activity in the day following the arrests, as they will want to avoid similar consequences.

Research Design

My independent variable for the sake of this project is police activity, specifically measured as arrests as they occur at different California universities of interest. To be more specific, I would be indicating the exact date that arrests occurred at each university, as my focus would be the impacts on attendance shortly after arrests occurred. I sourced this data from CalMatters, which provided the date and number of arrests made at specific colleges across California from April to May in 2024. This allowed me to indicate high-scale arrests that would have had a significant impact on protestors' motivation at given locations and allowed me to restrict my sample sizes to schools that had experienced significant political activity.

My dependent variable is motivation to protest, measured by attendance sizes at protests following the arrests. I chose to operationalize my dependent variable as attendance sizes, as it was a documented numerical value that could be compared against the number of arrests. I sourced this data from the Crowd Counting Consortium, which provided an interactive database that allowed me to chart protest size over time, including before and after arrests occurred. The Crowd Counting Consortium, a collaboration between the Harvard Kennedy School and the University of Connecticut, sourced its information from news articles and social media posts, providing rough estimates of crowd sizes at protests on specific dates across the country, including the college campuses in campuses that I chose to use in my study. Using this data, I was able to review the size of protests the immediate day before and after arrests occurred, which allowed me to conclude whether or not a protest decreased in size over time. I chose to operationalize motivation in this way because attendance is a direct indicator of motivation to protest, and was researchable in ways that sentiments would not be. In summary, I would be able to directly glean if people were 'less motivated' to protest by examining the growth or decrease in protest sizes.

Control variables that impacted my research project were the duration of the school year, which could put an early halt or induce a decrease in protest attendance due to students prioritizing finals or graduation deadlines. To control for this variable, I chose to record only the most immediate decrease in attendance, rather than the decrease over time. By measuring protest attendance in its most immediate forms before and after arrests were made, I could be more sure that the decrease in attendance was due to the arrests, rather than exigent circumstances like finals or the ending of the school quarter. Therefore, my points of interest in my research project would be the day before and the day after arrests, to exclude any long term external factors such as school holidays or exams. Furthermore, an additional control variable that may impact my research project would be the underreporting of protest sizes, which would hinder my ability to mark decreases over time or resulting from arrests occurring. To control for this, I limited my cases to those where I was able to find documented evidence of protest attendance, as I would be able to conclude available data only.

I examined multiple cases over time; specifically, schools located in California, protests of which gained extreme amounts of media attention as well as public outcry against the police. Furthermore, as previously discussed, my area of focus is limited to the 2023-2024 Pro-Palestinian protests that took place in California. The majority of arrests, which I focused on as my independent variable, occurred from April to May 2024. Due to available information, I kept the focus of my study down to seven public universities in the California area: University of California, Los Angeles, University of California, Irvine, University of California, Santa Cruz, University of California, San Diego, University of Southern California, California State University, Los Angeles, and Stanford. Of the protests located in California, these were those

that had publicly available information on attendance sizes over time, which I would be able to compare against the dates of arrests that had occurred at these specific universities.

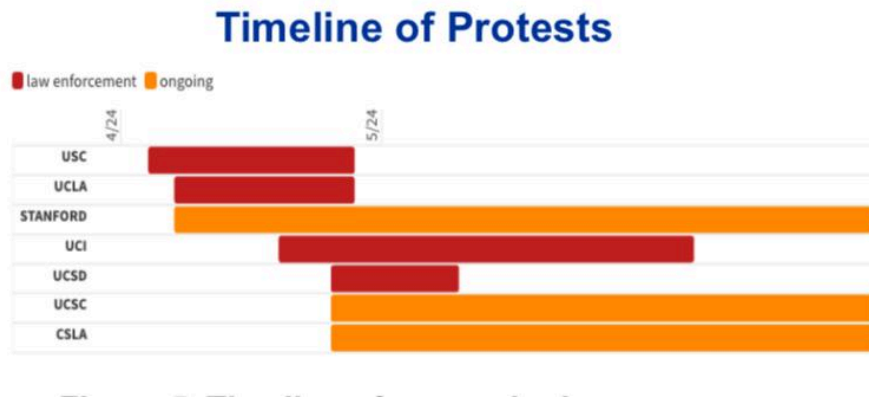


Fig 1. Timeline of researched campus protests, categorized. Data sourced from CalMatters.

In addition to my examination of protest attendance before and after the dates of arrest, I also planned to test for a correlational relationship between the number of arrests and the numerical size of the decrease in population. To test for a significant relationship between arrests and attendance, I ran a Pearson’s r correlation test between the number of arrests and the numerical size of the decrease in attendance (Fig. 1). To indicate a significant relationship, the correlation coefficient returned would need to be closer to 1, meaning that the relationship between the two variables would be positively correlated.

Results

Correlation Between Number of Arrests and Sum of Decrease for CA University Protests

Variable	Sum of Decrease	Average of Police Activity
UCLA	700	210
UCI	200	47
UCSD	190	64
USC	115	93

UCSC	50	122
Correlation		0.838401486

Fig 2. Pearson correlation table showing strong correlational relationship between the sum of decrease of attendance in a protest and the number of arrests. Data sourced from CalMatters and the Crowd Counting Consortium.

Using Excel, I created a table to show my findings and ultimately found a strong positive correlational relationship between the two variables, indicating that as police arrests go up, so do numerical sizes of decrease in attendance. This supports my hypothesis that police activity negatively impacts attendance and that the number of arrests has a significant impact on how much a protest shrinks in size immediately after the fact. After establishing this positive correlation between my variables, I created a line graph to indicate the attendance trends among my seven protests of interest.

After creating a comparative line graph showing the attendance of my seven protests of interest before and after arrests occurred, I found that most protests experienced a decrease in attendance immediately after the arrests (Fig. 2). To review the immediate effects of arrests made during these protests, I indicated the day before and after to create my two points of interest, as I intended to examine the immediate effects of policing on student encampments following the arrest, as opposed to viewing the decline over time. The dotted line indicates the date in which arrests occurred, and according to my hypothesis, where attendance begins to decline. For the majority of the schools indicated in my study, attendance declined on the day subsequently following the date of arrest. Among my findings, UCLA experienced the most dramatic decrease in attendance, while also experiencing the highest amount of arrests, and experienced a massive decrease of around 210 protestors on the day immediately following the large-scale arrests made

the previous day (Fig. 1). Among the other schools, each encampment experienced similar decreases in attendance, including UCSC, UCI, UCSD, and USC. As such, the majority of my findings supported my hypothesis that police activity can negatively impact motivation to protest, as shown through the subsequent and immediate decreases in attendance.

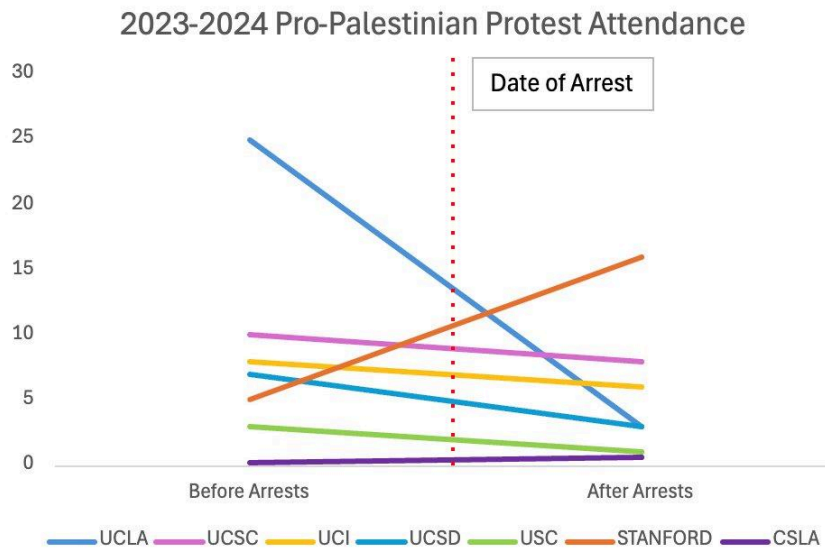


Fig 3. A comparative line graph showing the decrease in attendance (per thousand students) following the date of arrests at seven CA college protests from 2023-2024.

However, there were two outliers; specifically, CSLA and Stanford experienced increases in their protest attendance immediately following police activity. For these specific cases, I hypothesize that this increase in attendance is due to the fact that these two colleges' attendance was experiencing a decrease before the police arrived on their campuses, and thus the arrests acted as a motivation booster rather than a motivation detriment. Additionally, according to *Inside Higher Education*, the student organization behind the CSLA encampment had elected to quietly disperse and shut down to avoid conflict, thus providing an additional explanation for the previous deliberate decrease in attendance and subsequent slight increase following the clearing away of the encampment.

To illustrate the numerical differences in attendance, I created a table of the protest attendance sizes at each school, using data sourced from the Crowd Counting Consortium (Fig 3). Similarly to the line graph, this table indicates UCLA as the protest that experienced the most significant decrease in attendance, while the other schools experienced similar decreases in attendance following the date of arrest. As indicated, though there was a noticeable decrease in population size at each protest following the arrests, CSLA and Stanford experienced an increase, as opposed to a decrease. Additionally, compared to the other cases of interest, CSLA and Stanford experienced substantially less police activity than other cases of interest (Fig 1). Overall, the student protests that did experience a decrease in attendance lost about 251 participants, on average.

Protest Sizes of CA Universities Over Time

Schools	Before Arrests	After Arrests
UCLA	1300	200
UCSC	200	150
UCI	300	200
UCSD	300	110
USC	150	45
STANFORD	100	300
CSLA	7	18

Fig. 4. A table of the protest sizes of seven CA college schools, before and after arrests. Data sourced from the Crowd Counting Consortium.

Overall, the results of my findings show that high-scale arrests have a significant negative impact on the attendance of student protests on the day following the event, as compared to the

attendance sizes of the protest on the day before. Protests that experienced a higher number of arrests also experienced a larger decrease in protest attendance, indicating the strong positive correlation between the two. In alignment with my hypothesis, the findings of my research would suggest that police activity, specifically arrests, has a strong negative impact on student activists' motivations to continue to protest.

Discussion and Research Implications

My research question when beginning this project was, "What are the effects of policing on student protests?" In researching the activity of student activists before and after arrests occurred, I sought to explore the relationship between arrests and the motivation of student protestors, and whether or not motivation to continue protesting is negatively impacted by violent arrests. I hypothesized that as arrests occurred, attendance would immediately decrease, as students feared police retribution and institutional backlash for their behavior.

Ultimately, the results of my research support my initial hypothesis, as the majority of schools in my study experienced an immediate and noticeable decrease following high-scale arrests occurring at protests. In the day following the arrests, many protests declined in attendance drastically and often were not able to regain their original numbers. Per my theory, this was likely due to a fear of police and institutional backlash, as students realized the potential danger of continuing protesting activity. Therefore, in response to arrests, students would limit their political activity and behavior in the day following police activity in order to avoid institutional punishments and police violence, resulting in a decrease in attendance at student encampments on campus. However, as mentioned previously, two significant outliers did not support my hypothesis, those being Stanford and California State University, Los Angeles. These protests had experienced significant declines in attendance leading up to the arrests and therefore

did not experience a similar blow to motivation to protest afterward. Not only that, but these campuses were able to experience an increase in attendance, which may be due to the purposeful decline in attendance leading up to the clearing away of encampments.

In terms of policy, I do not believe that my findings will have a significant impact on policy decisions due to the lack of available data. As discussed previously, my sampling was heavily affected by a lack of reporting on attendance numbers of protests day by day. Though organizations such as the Crowd Counting Consortium provide substantial data on this subject, its numbers are estimates and are often limited. Generally, students and campuses do not report the scale and size of the protests as they occur, which leads to a lack of available information on the trends of attendance as they are affected by external factors. Therefore, it is difficult to extrapolate my findings to the point where I would recommend policing as a truly effective method of curbing political activity on college campuses. As such, before moving to implement policy decisions based on available arrest and attendance data, I would recommend further research into the documentation of the size and scale of protests as they occur.

Research Limitations

In terms of research limitations, data availability and recency of events impacted my findings and could be points of improvement in future research. As previously mentioned, there is a lack of transparent data on the exact numbers of protestors at college campus protests, which hindered my ability to make large-scale examinations of the relationship between arrests and the decrease in attendance. My main data source for my dependent variable—the Crowd Counting Consortium—made its rough estimates based on a combination of news reporting and social media posts, and therefore could not make exact statements as to how many people were attending protests. Since my data was based on empirical estimates, I did not always have

specific figures for the dates I wanted to research. For example, schools like the University of California, Berkeley, which experienced high-scale protests and would ideally be included in my project, did not have available data on any decreases or increases in attendance the day following police activity on campus. As such, I was not able to include this school or others that had similar lacking data. Therefore, my sample size was heavily limited to those that had been documented on the exact dates before and after the arrests, which is what allowed me to document my dependent variable and come to a conclusion. In the future, I believe that an extensive look into student organizations, such as a survey or poll, would allow me to gain a more accurate understanding of the number of people at a protest at a given time. Additionally, running a survey would allow me to gauge student activist motivations in a more accurate representation other than attendance. That being said, the same reluctance to self-report on protest attendance or participation may similarly impact these future research projects' ability to collect reliable data on the size and scale of student protests.

Furthermore, my research is limited by the recency of the events that were the point of focus in my study. The cases that I was observing had only occurred in the previous months of the year and thus were still developing as I studied them. In the time since I finalized my project, events have continued to evolve beyond the scope of existing data. As of the time of this project, most college protests were just ending, or 'closing for the summer'; however, in the case of UCLA, student organizations announced the restarting of their encampments as of May 23, 2024, on Instagram, indicating that motivations to protest had not been impacted to the point of retreating altogether. As such, the findings of my project do not take into account recent developments such as the reignition of protest efforts, and similar long-term fluctuations in protest size were also not taken into account in my findings. By measuring the most immediate

impact on attendance by policing, I was not able to take into account potential increases in a longer period following arrests. Should there be a future reexamination of the same timeline of events, I believe that the resulting findings would be far more substantiated by updated information. By relying on the completed events of the protests, future research projects would be able to take into account long-term changes in student attendance and motivations.

In terms of future or excluded control variables, I would want to include more cases that had experienced or ended due to peace deals, as attendance may have been affected by the student organizations calling for an end to the protests themselves. These cases may shed more light on the effectiveness of policing as a strategy to curb political activity, as protests themselves may come to an end or experience a more drastic decrease in attendance due to other factors. Therefore, future research into these cases would allow for the factoring in of protests unaffected by policing, which could suggest other, more effective solutions to negotiations between encampments and college institutions.

Conclusion

Overall, my findings indicate that policing has an immediate and negative impact on the motivation of student activists to continue protesting, as represented by a decrease in attendance following the day of high-scale arrests. This indicates that policing, at least in the case of the most recent 2023-2024 pro-Palestinian protests, made an effective institutional tool to curb political expression. That being said, student activism has continued to persist beyond the effects of law enforcement, when taking into account long-term trends. Though my findings indicate the immediate decrease in attendance the day following arrests, cases such as UCLA that have restarted their encampments indicate that policing does not completely stifle political activity. A lack of transparent data thus prevents me from recommending that my findings serve as the basis

of establishing policing as a reliable tool in the grand scheme of curtailing student activism, especially considering the extreme violence and criticism that resulted from such institutional decisions. In response to such criticism against its decision to level police forces against its students, the UC system has recently stated its intentions to strengthen policies restricting student activist tactics, such as shortening the duration of protests and only allowing demonstrations to proceed in certain areas of campuses (NBC). Though these decisions have been met with similar accusations of attempts to limit free speech, it seems that the UC system in particular has recognized the limitations of policing as a method of managing student activism on its campuses.

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