

# Students' Perception of Democratic Practices and Its Implication for Nigerian Educational System

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Nigerian society has been on uninterrupted democratic rule since 1999. It is an admitted fact that there is an intimate relationship between democracy and education. The sinew of democracy depends upon the character and intelligence of its citizenry; and the level of democratic perceptiveness in the minds of the people is dependent on the type of democracy delivered to its citizenry. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine the perception of democratic practices obtainable in Nigeria by students of the senior secondary sector in the educational system in Bayelsa State of Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was adopted. A sample of 200 students responded to the self-developed and validated questionnaire. Data collected were analysed by using descriptive statistic (mean and percentage) and *t*-test statistical technique. The finding shows that students foster high perceptivity to the type of democracy practiced in Nigeria. This paper contends that the looming threat to democratic rule in Nigeria x-rays the educational system that is literally dysfunctional. It recommends the promotion of institutionalized democracy that will bring about an overhaul in the kind of education delivered to the younger generation.

**Keywords:** political participation, democratic values, social learning, secondary school education, perception

## Introduction

Students interact carefully with their environments according to their ability to organize information. The process through which the information from the outside environment is selected, received, organized, and interpreted to make it meaningful and which invariably influences their decisions or actions is the issue of perception. Democracy, which is universally defined as the government of the people by and for the people (Abraham Lincoln in his *Gettysburg Speech* in 1863) is derived from two Greek words: “demos” and “kratos”. “Demos” means the common people and “Kratos” means rule. This physiologically defined democracy as the rule of the common people. Essentially, it is a system of government in which the people are in charge. Its major features include:

1. Elected representative. The final decision making power rests with those elected by the people;
2. Civil liberties. It upholds basic individual rights and liberties such as freedom of speech, freedom of expression, etc.;
3. Rule of law. It should rule within the limits set by constitutional law and citizen rights;
4. Independent judiciary. It assures equality before the law for all citizens in every sphere of life like political, social, and economic;

5. Representative elections. It must be based on a free and fair election where each adult citizen must have one vote and each vote must have one value.

The tapping and development of the citizenry intellectual, affective, and psychomotor capacities basically take place within the educational system of a nation. Education can be generally said to be a process of imparting knowledge, skills, value, and orientations to enable individual to develop their potentials to the fullest and in turn contribute their best to the development of their family, community, nation, and the global society. Education equips an individual not only with the ability to read and write which are very critical skills, but also with life-skills which include competences for economic survival, soft skills for excellent interpersonal relations, and sense of civic responsibility, so as to participate effectively both as follower and leader (as the case may be) in societal governance. Education comes in various forms—informal (which takes place in the private settings), non-formal, and adult (which happens out of school but fairly organized) and formal (which takes place in schools formally recognized and accredited by government).

Nigeria's philosophy of education is based on the following set of beliefs:

1. Education is an instrument for national development and social change;
2. Education is vital for the promotion of a progressive and united Nigeria;
3. Education maximizes the creative potentials and skills of the individual for self-fulfillment and general development of the society;
4. Education is compulsory and a right of every Nigerian irrespective of gender, social status, religion, colour, ethnic background, and any peculiar individual challenges;
5. Education is to be qualitative, comprehensive, functional, and relevant to the needs of the society.

The five main national goals of Nigeria as stated in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria are the building of: (a) a free and democratic society; (b) a just and egalitarian society; (c) a united, strong, and self-reliant nation; (d) a great and dynamic economy; and (e) a land full of bright opportunities for all citizens.

Thorough perusal of the national goals of the Nigerian society, it can simply be deduced that these goals are premised on democratic principles. Commitment to democratic practices, such as political participation, human rights, access to justice, a good education and improved quality of life, a healthy environment and personal security enhance democracy as a system of government to flourish and deliver on promises. Whilst its citizens must be informed, engaged, empowered, and assertive. This is the synergy between democracy and education.

### **Literature Review**

In modern democracy, education is a major key element. Education and democracy are intrinsically linked. There is a close relationship between democracy and education. Education is a prerequisite for the survival and success of democracy. The sinew of democracy depends on the character and intelligence of all its citizens and it takes an educated citizenry to understand and abide by the tenets of democracy. Thus, the integral and reciprocal relationship between democracy and education cannot be overemphasized. According to Bawa (2019), in a democracy education is given primacy, for it is prerequisite for the survival and success of the former and similarly, education fosters a democratic temper in the minds of people. For Hytten (2017), democracy is more than a political system or process; it is also a way of life that requires certain habits and dispositions of citizens, including the need to balance individual rights with commitments and responsibilities toward others. The school has the vital role in cultivating in students the habits and dispositions of citizenship

and democratic values like liberty, equality, fraternity, justice, dignity of individual cooperation, sharing of responsibility, etc., and is applied to education to make it more effective, meaningful, relevant, and useful.

The school as an educational institution mirrors the societal values, beliefs, and practices. A society that upholds the tenets of democracy in the true sense teaches and produces such tenets in the products of the school. However, except deliberate, conscientious efforts, and commitment are made towards an explicit and purposeful process of teaching and promoting the development of democratic knowledge, skills, values, and practices among the participants (students) of the various institutions of education, the students' learning may be restricted to what they do observe in their immediate environment—the social environment.

This study is predicated on the social learning theory of Bandura (1989). According to Bandura (1989), considerable evidence exists that learning occurs through observing others, even when the observer does not reproduce the model's responses during acquisition, and therefore, receives no direct reinforcement. It is a learning theory which focuses on the learning that occurs within a social context. For Bandura, social cognitive learning means that the information one processes from observing other people, things, and events influence the way we act. The outside environment is where a person can observe an action, understand its consequences and become motivated to respect and adopt it. Students in all cultures learn and develop by observing experienced people engaged in culturally important activities. Observational learning has particular classroom relevance, because children do not do just what adults tell them to do, but rather what they see adults do. If students witness undesirable behavior that either is reinforced or goes unpunished, undesirable student behavior may result, the reverse also is true.

Relatively, learning of democratic values and practices; anchored on society like Nigeria which has been practicing uninterrupted democratic rule since 1999, but is seemingly scourged with undemocratic principles and practices, and more so, when deliberate teachings and transmission of democratic values in schools is overtly absent, the resultant effect could be a monumental threat to democracy and education. The political elites who are the drivers of our democratic governance are far-fetched from true tenet practice of democracy and which is evident in their unbridled values and actions. Ajayi (2015) argued that elections and democratic practice in the fourth republic are characterized by electoral malpractice, political intolerance, economic mismanagement, using political office as gateway to personal enrichment, political thuggery, lack of intra party democracy, insecurity, manipulation of religion, and ethnicity to achieve selfish political ambitions and other countless misdemeanors were order of the day. These are the same set of people that the younger citizenry looks up to and this may likely distort their perception of what true democratic practices are. The democratic practices surveyed in the study included:

1. Political participation by the citizens. The opportunity to participate in an authoritative decision making is opened to all who are willing and interested to share. It supposedly involves high level of political consciousness and activism of the masses. It is a system of representation and electoral system that is based on the principle of one man, one vote and one vote, and one value.

2. Access to justice. An independent judiciary is an important component of a true democratic system of government. Promotion of rule of law at all levels ensures equal access to justice to all. When an individual has access to courts then his fundamental rights can be enforced. Accesses to justice also imply access to social and distribute justice. Okogbule (2015) reported that access to justice simply refers to the substantive and procedural mechanisms existing in any particular society designed to ensure that citizens have the opportunity of seeking redress for the violation of their legal rights within that legal system. It focuses on the existing rules

and procedures to be used by citizens to approach the courts for the determination of their civil rights and obligations.

4. Human rights. They are basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death. They apply regardless of where one comes from, what he/she believes or what choice of life is made. These basic rights are based on shared value, like dignity, fairness, equality, respect, and freedom. The entrenchment of human rights provisions in Nigeria constitutions was aimed at creating a society which protects political freedom as well as social and economic well-being of Nigerians. National Action Plan for the Promotion and Protection of Human rights in Nigeria (2006) defined these rights into: civil and political rights; life; dignity of human person; personal liberty; fair hearing; private & family life; freedom of thought, conscience, & religion (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2006).

5. Improved quality of life. Democracy plays a vital role in promoting sustainable development and increasing standard of living of citizens. It is generally accepted that improving the quality of life should be the most important component of a successful democracy. Indicators of quality life include public safety, health, and infrastructures, such as available public utilities, housing, and education for all (EFA), economic environment, such as employment rate, per capita income, percentage living below poverty rate, and healthy environment.

The aim of this study therefore is to examine senior secondary school students' perception of democratic practices in Nigeria and its implications for the Nigerian educational system. The study is guided by three research questions and two hypotheses.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the level of students' perception of democracy as a system of government?
2. What is the perception level of students about democratic practices (citizen's political participation, access to justice, human right, and improved quality of life) in Nigeria?
3. How do students perceive the features of democracy in Nigeria?

### **Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant difference in the perception of democratic practices between students in the urban and rural schools;
2. There is no significant difference in the perception of democratic practices between students in private and public.

### **Methods**

A descriptive survey design was adopted for this study. A sample of 200 students from senior secondary school, classes II and III in Bayelsa State, Nigerian was selected through the disproportionate stratified random sampling technique. The choice of students for the study is significant. For the continuity of democratic rule in the next generation, the younger generation should understand democratic ideals and behave democratically. A self-developed and validated questionnaire tagged "Students' Perception of Democracy Questionnaire" was the instrument of data collection for this study. Section A gives details of the bio data of respondents, while Section B is divided into sub-sections: Section A has 10 item-statements on students' perception of democracy. Section B has a total of 36 item-statements on selected democratic practices in Nigeria: eight items on political participation by citizens; nine items on access to justice; 10 items on human rights; and nine items on improved

quality of life. The students responded to these items by using the Likert scale response format of strongly agree to strongly disagree. Section C outlined the features of democracy in Nigeria and students responded to the 15 item-statements by using the alternate response format of True/False. A reliability coefficient of 0.63 was obtained for the instrument. Descriptive statistics (mean, frequency count/percentage) and *t*-test statistical technique were adopted to analyze data.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perception of Democracy*

	SA	A	D	SD	<i>M</i>	<i>S</i>
1. Democratic rule is presently practice in Nigeria.	64(32%)	99(50%)	23(12%)	13(7%)	3.06	0.86
2. Democracy is synonymous with majority rule.	55(28%)	109(55%)	21(11%)	6(3%)	2.97	0.95
3. Democracy as a form of government is not associated with good governance.	31(16%)	55(28%)	69(35%)	42(21%)	2.34	1.02
4. Democracy is a representation system of government.	74 (37%)	113(57%)	11(6%)	-	3.28	0.66
5. Democracy is a system of rule of law.	74(37%)	92(46%)	25(13%)	6(3%)	3.14	0.85
6. It is a system of government that recognized individual rights.	80(40%)	86(43%)	23(12%)	7(4%)	3.15	0.90
7. It is the active participation of the people as citizens in politics and civic life.	73(37%)	93(47%)	21(11%)	5(3%)	3.09	0.96
8. It is a process by which people select and control their representatives.	71(36%)	69(35%)	41(21%)	16(8%)	2.94	1.00
9. Election gives an electorate the sovereign power to decide who will govern.	109(55%)	61(31%)	21(11%)	9(5%)	3.35	0.84
10. It is associated with one vote, one value.	83((42%)	89(45%)	10(5%)	10(5%)	3.14	1.00

*Notes.* SA = Strongly agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly disagree; *M* = Mean; and *S* = Standard deviation.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics of Political Participation of Citizens*

	SA	A	D	SD	<i>M</i>	<i>S</i>
1. Only the politicians are actively involved in politics in Nigeria.	79(40%)	72(36%)	30(15%)	18(9%)	3.05	0.97
2. Participation in the election process attracts money inducement.	86(43%)	78(39%)	18(9%)	16(8%)	3.15	0.95
3. There is low level of political consciousness and activism of the Nigerian masses.	89(45%)	54(27%)	36(18%)	16(8%)	2.85	0.98
4. Many Nigerians put up indifferent attitude towards elections.	86(43%)	87(44%)	13(7%)	9(5%)	3.20	0.92
5. No public disagreement with the politician's conduct.	39(20%)	66(33%)	55(28%)	33(17%)	2.48	1.08
6. Politicians develop deliberate decisions and campaign based on issues for national interest.	77(39%)	66(33%)	30(15%)	21(11%)	2.93	1.10
7. Majority of the citizens mortgage their rights and future with a token of money.	93(47%)	64(32%)	27(14%)	8(4%)	3.13	1.05
8. Election is associated with one man, one vote.	79(40%)	67(34%)	15(8%)	34(17%)	2.90	1.17

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics on Access to Justice*

	SA	A	D	SD	<i>M</i>	<i>S</i>
1. Nigerians exercise the right to appear in court with ease.	45(23%)	95(48%)	39(20%)	17(9%)	2.80	0.95
2. Nigerians have access to legal advice/help/information for those who cannot offer it.	45(23%)	80(40%)	39(20%)	33(17%)	2.65	1.04
3. The legal system operates under limitations and inadequacies.	43(22%)	85(43%)	38(19%)	28(14%)	2.65	1.05
4. The legal system operates by the fairness principle for societal stability.	38(19%)	71(36%)	56(28%)	28(14%)	2.52	1.06
5. There is deep commitment by leadership to justice for the citizens.	45(23%)	68(34%)	46(23%)	34(17%)	2.55	1.11

(Table 3 to be continued)

6. Access to justice in times of crisis (armed conflict).	39(20%)	74(37%)	53(27%)	30(15%)	2.57	1.02
7. Access to justice and compensation for violation of law.	49(25%)	81(42%)	45(23%)	23(12%)	2.76	1.02
8. Access to environment justice.	45(23%)	94(47%)	45(18%)	19(10%)	2.76	1.98
9. Access to justice for victims of torture (e.g., rape).	83(42%)	58(29%)	25(13%)	31(15%)	2.96	1.13

Table 4

*Descriptive Statistics on Human Rights*

	SA	A	D	SD	M	S
1. Rights of Nigerians are guaranteed by the legal system.	64(32%)	87(44%)	26(13%)	18(8%)	2.49	1.04
2. The rule of law protects the rights of citizens.	90(45%)	85(43%)	13(7%)	10(5%)	3.25	0.86
3. All citizens are equal under the law to fight for his/her right.	114(57%)	48(24%)	22(11%)	12(6%)	3.28	1.01
4. The poor in the society has little or no power.	66(33%)	62(31%)	29(15%)	40(20%)	2.74	1.16
5. Every citizen has certain basic rights that the state cannot take away from them.	105(53%)	65(33%)	16(8%)	13(7%)	3.30	0.90
6. Everyone has right to freedom of speech.	115(58%)	53(27%)	20(10%)	10(5%)	3.34	0.92
7. Everyone has right to association.	109(55%)	72(36%)	12(6%)	6(3%)	3.41	0.77
8. Everyone has right to their own beliefs of their own choice.	119(60%)	67(34%)	8(4%)	6(3%)	3.49	0.71
9. Everyone has right to assemble and protest government actions.	74(37%)	66(33%)	37(19%)	20(10%)	2.94	1.04
10. Everyone has obligation to exercise their rights peacefully with respect for law and the rights of others.	102(51%)	71(36%)	15(8%)	8(4%)	3.29	0.91

Table 5

*Descriptive Statistics on Improved Quality of Life*

	SA	A	D	SD	M	S
1. The average Nigerian lacks the resources to afford the basic necessity of life such as education and medical facility.	80(40%)	81(41%)	26(13%)	12(6%)	3.13	0.89
2. As a result of the state of poverty, many Nigerians see election process as an opportunity to demand from the office seeker a piece of the national cake (money).	110(55%)	73(36%)	10(5%)	6(3%)	3.41	0.80
3. Democracy in Nigeria represents the government of the wealthy by the wealthy and for the wealthy.	89(45%)	56(28%)	27(14%)	27(3%)	3.02	1.08
4. The rich in power remains power making the poor poorer.	110(55%)	50(25%)	19(10%)	19(10%)	3.23	1.03
5. Democracy is characterized by declining economic power of the citizens.	44(22%)	80(40%)	55(28%)	14(7%)	2.70	1.00
6. Majority of Nigerians are in abject poverty.	116(58%)	51(26%)	16(8%)	15(3%)	3.32	0.97
7. Practice of democracy in Nigeria has widened the gap between the rich and poor.	11(6%)	16(8%)	73(37%)	96(48%)	3.23	0.95
8. The standard of living of citizens is very low.	106(53%)	63(32%)	18(9%)	10(5%)	3.29	0.93
9. Democracy has widened the gap between those who have access to power and public funds and those who do not.	83(42%)	79(40%)	20(10%)	16(8%)	3.12	0.95

Table 6

*Descriptive Statistics of Features of Democracy in Nigeria*

Democratic practice in Nigeria is characterized by:	True	False	M	S
1. Election is often dominated by irregularities.	151(75%)	46(23%)	1.74	0.47
2. Low level of political consciousness and activism of the Nigerian masses.	116(58%)	79(40%)	1.55	0.54
3. Dividends of the democracy are accessible and enjoyed by the citizens.	45(48%)	99(50%)	1.45	0.56
4. Electoral malpractices/rigging.	169(85%)	26(13%)	1.92	0.44
5. Political thuggery/violence.	164(82%)	34(17%)	1.81	0.41
6. Lack of internal party democracy.	151(76%)	43(22%)	1.83	0.41

(Table 6 to be continued)

7. Insecurity.	158(79%)	38(19%)	1.77	0.46
8. Manipulation of religion and ethnicity to achieve selfish political ambitions.	160(80%)	38(19%)	1.79	0.46
9. Leader's personal interest against national interest.	161(81%)	37(19%)	1.79	0.42
10. Using political office as gateway to personal enrichment.	163(82%)	30(15%)	1.78	0.49
11. Impoverishment has become a prominent feature of democracy.	140(82%)	54(27%)	1.67	0.53
12. Vote buying.	170(85%)	27(14%)	1.83	0.41
13. Democracy is marked by high card of corruption in all spheres of our national life.	159(80%)	35(18%)	1.75	0.41
14. Ballot box snatching.	161(89%)	35(18%)	1.78	0.45
15. Security agency (police and army) aid electoral malpractices during election.	167(84%)	30(15%)	1.82	0.42

Table 7

*Independent T-Test Statistics on School Type and Perception of Democratic Practices*

School type	N	M	Standard deviation	Std. error	DF	t-value	Sig. level
Public	100	26.21	3.52	0.35	198	-0.39	0.969*
Private	100	26.23	3.76	0.37			

Note. S\*: Not significant at 0.05 alpha level.

Table 8

*Independent T-Test Statistics on School Location and Perception of Democratic Practices*

Location	N	M	Standard deviation	Std. error	DF	t-value	Sig. level
Urban	100	26.81	2.69	0.26	198	2.32	0.021*
Rural	100	25.63	4.31	0.43			

Note. S\*: Statistical significance at 0.05 alpha level.

### Discussion of Findings

Findings on Table 1 show that the students have clear understanding of the concept of democracy. Eighty-three percent, 94%, 83%, 83%, 84%, 86%, and 87% of the students comprehend that democracy is synonymous with majority rule, a representation system of government; a system of rule of law; a system that recognizes individual rights; a system that fosters active participation of citizens in politics and civic life; a system that is based on election through the electorate sovereign power to decide who will govern; and a system that is associated with one note, one value, respectively. However, while 56% of the students disagreed with the statement that democracy as a form of government is not associated with good governance; and 44% agreed with the statement. This shows no clear cut opinion of the students on this issue. This could be attributed to the reality on ground where the democracy experienced by the students is not associated with good governance. Ajayi and Ojo (2014) posited that although democracy may not be strange to an overwhelming percentage of Nigerians, what may be strange to them is the brand of democracy that invests, first and foremost in human and material resources for the purpose of political stability, economic viability, scientific advancement, technological breakthrough, educational development, and life-enhancing social services. The above statement is underscored by the students' responses on democratic practices in Nigeria. On political participation by the citizens, 76% agreed that only the politicians have the monopoly in active participation; 82% responded that election participation is money induced; 87% for election apathy; 63% for low level of political

consciousness and activism of the masses; and 79% agreed that many of the Nigerian citizens mortgage their rights and future with a token of money. These are about the many challenges and problems threatening democracy in Nigeria on one hand. On the other hand, because there is no explicit and deliberate teachings and impartation of true democratic values within our educational institutions, most often the students' understanding and learning of tenets of democracy is basically dependent on what they observe the political elites and gladiators behave and do.

On access to justice, greater percent of the students agreed that Nigerians exercise the right to appear in court with ease; they have access to legal help; but the legal system operates under limitations and inadequacies. This is not surprising because evidences and individual's experiences abound about tales of prolonged court cases, justice denial, crowded and pending cases in court; thousands of citizens in prisons awaiting trials but had spent more than one or more years waiting.

The range of 70% to 94% of the students responded positively and affirmed that citizens are given opportunities and freedom to exercise their rights peacefully with respect for law and the rights of others. Pertaining to improved quality of life as a democratic practice, the students "responses indicate that democracy has not yet impacted positively on the living standard of the masses". Eighty percent agreed that the average Nigerian lacks the resources to afford basic necessity of life, such as education and medical facility. Ninety-one percent agreed that as a result of the state of abject poverty in Nigeria, many see election as a making money event. Seventy-three percent agreed that democracy in Nigeria represents the government of the wealthy by the wealthy and for the wealthy. Eighty percent responded that democracy has widened the gap between those who have access to power and public funds and those who do not. However, 85% disagreed that the practice of democracy in Nigeria has widened the gap between the rich and the poor.

The significant greater percentage of the students agreed that features of democracy in Nigeria include election irregularities, low level of political activism by the masses, electoral malpractices/rigging, political thuggery/violence, lack of internal party democracy, insecurity, vote buying, ballot box snatching, electoral malpractices of security agency, etc. If actually democratic values, practices, attitudes, and skills are to be taught in school and pass to the younger generations through school, and the same school is supposedly a reflection of what the society stands for, there is a pending dilemma that is a threat to the operating educational system in Nigeria.

Table 7 shows that students' perception of democratic practices in Nigeria does not differ on the basis of school type ( $t(198) = -0.39, p = 0.96$ ). The students in private and public schools have similar perception of democracy as practiced in Nigeria. This can easily be explained on the fact that all students are exposed to the same learning experiences through observing the behavior and attitudes of drivers of our democracy. However, there is a significant difference in the perception of democratic practices between students in the urban and rural schools ( $t(198) = 2.319, p = 0.02$ ). With a higher mean, finding shows that the students in the metropolis have higher level of democratic perceptiveness than those in the rural areas. It is a known fact that the intrigue and machination of governance are often play out in the cities. Many of these politicians neglect their constituencies, but rather reside in the urban reserved residential areas.

The students' perception of what democracy is based on how democracy is being practiced in Nigeria is a cause for concern. The implication is that the educational system is building up future leaders of tomorrow that are not prepared for true democratic values and practices. The reality is that Nigeria as far as the practice and delivery of dividends of liberal democracy is concerned, is yet a cripple that can barely stand let alone walk or



run. The story is not different within the institutions that provide education to our teeming younger generation. The democratic values like liberty, equality, fraternity justice, dignity of individual, and co-operation, sharing of responsibility that should be applied to education to make educational system more effective, meaningful, relevant, and useful are absent from the content what is transmitted to the future leaders of tomorrow, the students. The development within the young of the attitudes and disposition necessary to the continuous and progressive life of the Nigerian society may be threatened.

### Recommendations

Democracy should be deeply rooted and institutionalized in the country. The educational system should be overhauled. The curriculum should be restructured to accommodate the ideals and practices of true democracy. The need for political education to enlighten the citizenry on democratic ethos in order to create a social democratic environment that is sensitive to the dictates and principles of true democracy. Players and actors of governance should be made to be accountable for their actions. Accountability fosters a sense of duty and responsibility rather than the pursuit of self interest they are used to.

### Conclusion

This study has attempted to look at the synergy between democracy and education. In democracy, education is given primacy. However, when the learning of democratic abilities, skills, values, ideals, and principles by the younger citizenry is done majorly outside the four walls of the school, and more often by observing the actors of our democracy; its implication on the educational system could be alarming. This paper contends that the looming threat to democratic rule in Nigeria x-rays the educational system that is literally dysfunctional.

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