

7.3. Female artists, social media and alternative economy: the case of Amanda Palmer

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A b s t r a c t

In this paper we seek to investigate the strategies that the independent artist Amanda Palmer uses in order to gain visibility and financial capital to promote her music. Our theoretical background is mainly related to the process of self-presentation in social media, along with Bourdieu's (2013) notion of symbolic capital. Based on the analysis of posts made by the artist on social network sites, such as Twitter and Instagram, apart from her blog and book / memoir (Palmer, 2014), we argue that her approaches for getting the audience engaged with her pledges can be gathered in three axes: a) public exposure of intimacy; b) negotiations of asking and c) advertising her crowdfunding projects.

Keywords: *Female artists, alternative economy, Amanda Palmer, social media.*

GENDER IS
DEAD,
PINK IS 4EVER

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1. Introduction

The present paper aims to debate the techniques used by musician Amanda Palmer who, in 2012, obtained more than a million dollars to release her album *Theatre is Evil*, by using the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter. The event engendered commotion and granted a visibility the independent musician had not encountered through her career until then.

Her musical career started by the end of the year 2000, when she approached the drummer Brian Viglione and both decided to start a band. The *Dresden Dolls* soon won a place on the small musical alternative scene in Boston, and Palmer decided to get in touch with the people that went to their concerts. She relates, in her autobiography *The Art of Asking* (2014), that everything started with a mailing list – she and Viglione would gather all the e-mails of people that enjoyed their performances – to keep the public updated about their upcoming gigs, new songs and videoclip.

In early 2000, mailing was one of the most efficient and immediate ways of online communication, creating a sense of community and importance to the e-moderator (Berge & Collins, 2006). With the popularization of online forums and blogs, Amanda Palmer created the Shadow Box forum in 2002, where she shared news about *The Dresden Dolls* and got in touch more easily with their fans. She also started a personal blog, sharing details of her daily life – not only focusing on the band anymore (Palmer, 2014)¹⁶⁷.

With the frequent use of online gadgets as a way to reach out her fanbase, Amanda Palmer gained the trust of the audience. After the *Dresden Dolls* hiatus phase¹⁶⁸, Palmer continued on using online platforms as a mean to keep contact with her fans, merchandising her solo career and sharing her daily life continuously. Amanda seems to share everything related to her professional life (and almost everything related with her personal life) with her internet followers. When she decided to leave the Roadrunner Records – record company she was signed with since 2003 – she explained all the process and asked her online fanbase to help her with the breach of contract¹⁶⁹.

The Palmer process of asking climaxed in a very successful crowdfunding in 2012. The album *Theatre is Evil* was ready and the musicians asked for the amount of one hundred thousand dollars only to release the work she had made with The Grand Theft Orchestra¹⁷⁰ band. The project, however, reached over one million dollars surprising not only Amanda Palmer herself, but also the media and general public. The artist, then, was invited to give a TEDTalk (Palmer, 2013) where she explains what she calls “The Art of Asking”, and to write a homonymous book about her life and work.

After more than six years, Palmer still uses the crowdfunding method to profit with her art. She joined the platform *Patreon* in 2015, where the creator receives money from the “patrons”¹⁷¹ for each production published on the platform and has more than 11 thousand patrons paying around 23 to 99 thousand dollars for creations¹⁷².

This fact shows that not only Amanda Palmer can actually profit without having to be attached to a major record company – enhancing the idea of *Do It Yourself*, that is often connected with the artist –, but she also succeeded in causing engagement with the audience to the point of achieving significant capital.

Being that so, in this paper, we intend to analyze Palmer’s strategies of “entrepreneurship” from the point of alternative economy and the female

167 Both forum and blog can still be accessed through the respective links: <<http://www.theshadowbox.net/forum/index.php>>, <<http://amandapalmer.net>>.

168 That happened in 2007 – the band got back together in 2015 to perform gigs.

169 The public showed many forms of support, including the Rebellion movement (the record company wished to cut the bits that showed Palmer’s stomach on the video clip for Leeds United), and the hashtag movement #LOFNOTC – Losers Of Friday Night On Their Computers (Potts, 2012).

170 According to Amanda (2014), the band is formed by four of her musician friends. The name and formation are seasonal, only appearing in things related to the *Theatre is Evil* and was chosen by her fans on Twitter at Palmer’s request.

171 Contributors are people that pay for creations on Patreon.

172 Amanda Palmer does not publish the exact total amount of money she makes, but some statistics can be seen at <https://graphtron.com/creator/amandapalmer>.

place by using the musician's perspective (mainly her book / memoir, blogs and tweets), as well as theoretical background regarding specially dynamics of self-presentation in social media and how to analyze contents from such media.

2. The strategies

In 2009, three years before the crowdfunding event, Amanda Palmer (2009) created a blog entitled *Why I am Not Afraid To Take Your Money*. In her blog, she talks about a live webcast on Twitter she held, and the fact that she earned ten thousand dollars from it. She was then advised by a friend to do something free, so people would not complain since "the ask-the-fans-for-money thing has gotten out of control". In that same year, 2009, Palmer had asked the *Roadrunner Records* to retreat her contract (Dombal, 2009), which means she did not have a steady income to survive every month. Regarding this, she tells her fans on the blog:

Unless you've been living under a rock, you've surely noticed that artists ALL over the place are reaching out directly to their fans for money. How you do it is a different matter. Maybe i should be more tasteful. Maybe i should not stop my concerts and auction off art. i do not claim to have figured out the perfect system, not by a long shot. BUT ... i'd rather get the system right gradually and learn from the mistakes and break new ground (with the help of an incredibly responsive and positive fanbase) for other artists who i assume are going to cautiously follow in our footsteps. We are creating the protocol, people, and right here and now. I don't care if we fuck up. I care THAT we're doing it (Palmer, 2009).

As one can see, Palmer not only explains the way things are working out for her, but she also seems to be imposing the "new way" of "colleting" money from her fanbase. This delicate situation is soothed when she included her fans in the logistics of "figuring out the system". As she has been doing on her whole career, she creates a sense of society – in Simmel's (2006) terms of a group joined by common interest – by including her fans in her processes of choice making. She makes it clear then that this might not work out, but Amanda reinforces the idea that she is not doing it alone, but together with all her fans.

The break with Roadrunner Records was not only important to create a sense of duality (mainstream versus indie or "alternative"), which is very appealing to the industry itself (Janotti Jr. & Cardoso Filho, 2006), but also gave Palmer a good deal of visibility. This strategy also works with her already existing fanbase, as Liza Potts concluded: "Connecting with fans while disconnecting from her label is helping her build and cultivate her community" (Potts, 2012, p. 361). Nonetheless, how does Amanda Palmer engage her online fanbase?

To answer this question, we collected data from her tweets, blog and Instagram posts, in addition to Palmer's memoir *The Art of Asking* (2014), trying to figure out the strategies she resorted to create connection with her fanbase.

After this immersion, we were able to categorize the musician strategies to engage her own public in three aspects: a) public exposure of intimacy with daily posts on Twitter, including trivial events, aiming to create a sense of familiarity and proximity; b) negotiations with the audience by asking what she/her band needs (she would often ask for a place to sleep, which is called *couchsurfing*, or food or instruments for gigs, indication of places to rehearse etc.); and c) last, but not least, the advertising of the crowdfunding itself. These three categories often mingle on the musician's feed and blog posts, creating an online performance that does not detach personal daily rambling from professional appointments and issues on topics. We are going to discuss each topic in detail, displaying examples of the strategies appointed.

2.1. Public exposure of intimacy

In *The Art of Asking* (2014), Amanda Palmer explains how her career was shaped and how she embarked on the idea of a crowdfunding – and, at some point, why people helped her so much. When explaining the “essence of *crowdfunding*” (Palmer, 2014, p. 198), she comments on a “tip” that may help the project work: “It is a question of finding *your* people, *your* listeners, *your* readers and make art with *them* and for *them*. Not to the masses, not to the critics, but to your circle of friends that is always growing” (Palmer, 2014, p. 198). Following this logic, we start to understand the employed strategy executed by Amanda Palmer in order to captivate her fans. She not only desires to achieve a number of followers that can be helpful to promote herself, but she also wants to make them feel they are part of her personal group of friends.

In Figure 7.3.1, we can see a *selfie* that Palmer takes and posts on her Instagram profile. We can see that she complements the post with a sentence that gives the idea of her own “authenticity”, or reality. The picture seems to illustrate the sentence: Amanda is looking directly at the camera; her eyes are wide open, and she wears no make-up. The angle is a “close-up shot realizing intimacy” (Zappavigna, 2016, p. 276), with natural light as the primary light and what seems to be only a light filter. This lo-fi aesthetics reminds the *kitsch* movement that, as Emily Dolan (2010) well explains, was adopted by artists – especially musical artists – because its simplicity gives off the sense of realness and proximity with the audience. Amanda Palmer commonly uses this type of aesthetics and try to create a sense of proximity by the use of personal images, as we noted earlier (Medeiros & Dias, 2017) when analyzing the video of her crowdfunding campaign (Palmer, 2012a). In the video, Palmer shows paper cards with her request for the people to participate on her crowdfunding. Meanwhile, a compilation of songs from *Theatre is Evil* plays on the background – this way people can listen to what they are supporting, while reading the pledge from Amanda herself¹⁷³ (Medeiros & Dias, 2017). More than once, the musician gazes at the camera, as if she is sharing something directly with the viewer. She also tries to include her fanbase on the video with the usage of written discourse of plurality. She writes on the paper cards: “This is the future of the music (...) we are the media” (Figure 7.3.2), as if including the audience that helps her with this “new” form of making music.

¹⁷³ We also understand that this limits Palmer's fanbase and people that want to help, since she will only reach those who have knowledge of the English language.



Figure 7.3.1 - Selfie that instigates intimacy
Source: Instagram (30 October, 2017).



Figure 7.3.2 - Video take – “This is the future of music”
Source: YouTube (Palmer, 2012a)

This shows a performance that tends to create a sense of intimacy, by presenting some sort of unity with her fanbase. She is asking for their money but is also offering a symbolic capital in return – in the crowdfunding case, we can see the involvement of “affective capital” (Polivanov, 2012) with social capital, since the people would be helping the person they trust or desire to consume.

As Polivanov argues, the idea of “affective capital” can be understood as an additional form of capital to Bourdieu’s proposition. It is a symbolic type

of capital related to feeling part of a certain community, but, more than that, belonging and being loved or cherished within that group. It can be materialized, for example, through positive comments and likes in social network sites. This way, we argue that when Palmer shows a card saying “I love you” in her video (Figure 7.3.3), she is appealing to this notion of capital, which, in this case, can be directly converted into economic capital as well.



Figure 7.3.3 - Video take – “I love you”

Source: YouTube (Palmer, 2012a).

This creation of this sense of intimacy would not have worked out if Amanda Palmer, since the early days, had not showed what people assume to be her intimacy, a way to “*share the look. Feel the connection*” (Palmer, 2014, p. 49). According to the artist, her insertion on digital platforms happened not only to promote her own work, but also to know who her fans were. This establishes a coherence of performance that is expected by the audience, as Goffman (1956, p. 16) well puts: “In addition to the expected consistency between appearance and manner, we expect, of course, some coherence among setting, appearance, and manner”.

Pereira de Sá and Polivanov (2012) discusses the importance of a maintenance of the expressive coherence to construct the “authentic” idea of self in social networking sites (SNSs). They describe it as a process which is “intensely complex” and involves “the adjustment of the self “image” towards the meanings that one social actor desires to express to the other, and that is strongly attached in the usage of cultural-mediated values” (Pereira de Sá & Polivanov, 2012, p. 581). However, as they point out based on Goffman’s ideas, other social actors always permeate the process. The performance of the self thus suffers influences depending on the context, the people that are seeing it and giving meaning to it, apart from the performer herself. This means that it is never built only by the presenter her/himself, but also with her/his audience. And also, that a process of “self-disclosure”, as Nancy Baym (2010) puts it, is necessary. Amanda Palmer seems to understand this and the importance of maintaining her followers engaged while she declares showing every bit of her own being¹⁷⁴.

¹⁷⁴We do not intent to discuss if she really shows every bit of herself. She probably filters the aspects that she feels her fanbase will not welcome the way she wants, but this cannot really be proved or judged by us.



Figure 7.3.4 - Tweet printscreen – “Favorite place to be kissed”

Source: Twitter (2011).

The use of Twitter in this case is of utmost importance. On the platform, she can quickly connect with her fanbase, giving the sense of immediate interaction – it is also an easier way to respond to the ones that follow her, by giving quick answers and *retweeting* the things that interests her and her constant performance. In the Figure above, Palmer “confesses” to a follower what seems to be an intimate characteristic of herself – the favorite place in her body where she likes to be kissed.

Hence for Palmer the Twitter is not only a platform that assists the construction of expressive coherence aiming the idea of intimacy between artist and audience – remembering that it can only be taken as an *ideal* “in order to build any assumption of stability, control or concreteness of the subject as a result of the process” (Pereira de Sá & Polivanov, 2012, p. 581). As we will see in the next topic, the consistent use of Twitter also prompts Palmer’s fanbase in attending her requests, because of the constant negotiations of asking that the artist makes.

2.2. Negotiations of asking

As we stated earlier, Palmer started connecting with her fans on the internet since the beginning of her career. As argued here, she does not limit the topics she posts to those related to the art productions she is involved with. Palmer has always tended to involve people in the imbrications of her personal life – whether talking about her problems or explaining how her daily routine works. When she started using Twitter, she discovered that this connection with her fanbase could be more effective than using a blog (that took time for her to write and for people to read) or posting something on the forum (that is not as practical as the SNS tool). As the musician wrote: “Explaining how I use Twitter to those who’ve never used it, is difficult. It’s a blurry Möbius strip of love, help, information, and social-art-life exchange” (Palmer, 2014, p. 134).

One of the first Amanda’s interactions with the audience on Twitter was in 2009 – when she first joined the SNS. She organized a pillow fight in Austin, where she was performing at the SXSW festival and, according to Palmer herself, it involved about a hundred people and no music: “there hasn’t any music. I just tweeted, I hit at fans with pillow, I gave some hugs and I left” (Palmer, 2014, p. 135). She describes these interactions on Twitter like an evolution of something that she has always done. When she was still part of The Dresden Dolls and she did not use Twitter, she would use other media to try to find places to stay during a tour: “Sometimes, when we didn’t have where to spend the night, we simply asked at the stage: IF YOU CAN HOST US TONIGHT AT HOME, RAISE YOUR HAND” (Palmer, 2014, p. 94). Amanda Palmer transferred this type of request to her Twitter profile, as we can see on Figure 7.3.5:



Figure 7.3.5 - Tweet printscreen – “looking for places to crash”

Source: Twitter, 2011.

As Chen (2011, p. 757) discusses “the more time people spend on Twitter, the greater their potential to gratify a need to connect to other people on the social-networking site”. Which means that, as Amanda Palmer solidifies her presence on Twitter, her connection with her followers grows. The connection formed on the internet – in a variety of SNSs – is capable of engaging collaboration (Junco, Elavsky & Heiberger, 2012), making the process of asking easier. As we can see in the Figure above, Amanda is asking not only for information (Liu & Jensen, 2012), but for a specific information – a place to stay – that we do not normally see celebrities engaging on.

As Palmer makes it clear, she trusts the people she engages with on SNS, even if she is not sure who is watching, writing and responding to her. This can be explained, because on online spaces of interaction “people form social relationships with media actors who are other people on the social network” (Chen, 2011, p. 756). The internet has then helped her “build a connection” with her fans as an artist, to “feel directly the community repercussion and to take the livelihood from it” (Palmer, 2014, p. 123).

At this topic, it is important to clarify that the *Theatre is Evil* project was not the first crowdfunding steered by the musician. Way before her success on Kickstarter, in September 2010, she developed the first crowdfunding activity on the platform. With the title *Amanda Palmer Presents: Tristan Allen’s Debut EP (Recording/Release)*, Palmer (2010) helps a fellow musician to record and release what ought to be his first EP. The project is introduced with a video recorded by Amanda Palmer of herself explaining how she met Tristan Allen and offered him help. The project presents a set of four rewards depending on if people donated five, 15, 25 or 100 (or more) dollars, and it obtained 8.581 dollars – the pledge was for 3.300 dollars – from 437 backers. It is an impressive number, since the project had been up in the platform for only three days (September 17th, 18th and 19th), the Kickstarter platform had about one year of activity¹⁷⁵, and Tristan Allen was not a well-known artist.

The second project Amanda (2011) released on Kickstarter was in conjunction with her now husband, the English writer Neil Gaiman. With the title of *An Evening with Neil Gaiman & Amanda Palmer*, the crowdfunding promoted the idea of backers helping the couple to perform a tour on the US West Coast. 3.873 people backed up this crowdfunding and Amanda Palmer received 133.341 dollars – she had pledged the goal of 20.000 dollars, setting a new success. The crowdfunding was up in the platform for 26 days (from September 6 to October 3 of 2011) and involved two well-known people in the alternative/geek scene¹⁷⁶. This project won 13 rewards, including the most expensive one (of 2.500 dollars), where the backer would receive a:

‘Golden Ticket’ VIP experience for ALL five shows including 2 tickets to each, admission to soundcheck

¹⁷⁵The Kickstarter was launched in April 28th, 2009.

¹⁷⁶Especially Neil Gaiman. He has been a HQ and romance writer since the late 1970s and has a considerable number of works converted to the screen, for example, *Stardust* (novel: 1999, movie: 2007), *Coraline* (novel: 2002, animation: 2009) and more recently, *American Gods* (novel: 2001, series: 2017). The writer is also famous for his comic book series *Sandman*, published by DC Comics (1989 – 1993) and Vertigo (1993 – present).

& meet and greets with Amanda and Neil, the best VIP seats in the house, EVERY piece of merch available (including all solo NG & AFP items, TBD), a special hug from Amanda & Neil for being SO supportive, and a tour laminate & lanyard + signed, personalized, and NUMBERED (of 100) limited edition 'An Evening With...' CD set & poster + limited edition signed & numbered fine art print of AFP & NG, taken by Allan Amato + surprise from AFP & NG + digital download (Palmer, 2011).

Besides the material rewards, including limited editions of pass entries to the backstage, albums, posters, and so on, the backer would also receive the experience of meeting and interacting with Palmer and Gaiman. In fact, the backer could accompany the couple throughout the tour, paying for the experience of being part of the crew. This can be configured as an exchange of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2013) between the artists and their fans, since it is a form of “the search for distinction to be distinctive” (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 300) resulting in some form of privilege and uprising in the hierarchy of Palmer’s fandom.

This type of negotiation and capitalization is also present on the “main” crowdfunding project of Amanda Palmer, *Theatre is Evil*. Palmer also uses it constantly when she asks out on Twitter for inspiration to music lyrics or indications of people that can play with her on her gigs. The exchange does not focus only on the materiality, but also on the social recourses that will bring gratification to the fans that are able to help, and the musician herself. By doing it since the beginning of her career, and even involving the “smallest” and what seems to be most insignificant things, Palmer creates a culture inside of her constructed society – the culture of exchange.

2.3. Advertising the crowdfunding

The last point that we bring to try to understand the strategies used by Amanda Palmer to engage people on her crowdfunding endeavor is the advertisement of the crowdfunding itself. At this point, she no longer “prepares” her public, but asks directly for the money she needs using the SNSs and her personal blog. We highlight right now the use of blog posts, where the musician would detail the daily routine of her productions linked with the *Theatre is Evil* project.

One example is the post “*IT’S MY BIRTHDAY AND HERE’S WHAT I WOULD LOVE*” (Palmer, 2012b), made on 30 April 2012 – 29 days after the crowdfunding project started. On this post, Amanda brings together two important events of her life: the project and her own birthday. The picture that illustrates the blog – a selfie made by Amanda, with the phrase “Happy Kickstarter Birthday to me” –, enhances this. The blog post follows the ensuing point:

***guess fucking what? it’s my birthday!!!!
i’m 36. happy birthday me. la la la la la.
guess what else?
(...)
like a rock n’ roll paul revere with tits,
i launched my brand-new-album-pre-order on***

kickstarter in the wee hours of the boston-night.

so before you ask me WHAT YOU CAN GET ME FOR MY BIRTHDAY, um, here's a hint:

***FOR
FUCK'S
SAKE
BACK
THE
KICKSTARTER***

(Palmer, 2012b, highlights in the original)

By announcing the release of the project together with the disclaiming of her own birthday, Palmer asks for her fans to support her Kickstarter project as her present. We understand that she is using a trace of intimacy as something to engage the public. The musician appeals to the emotional side of her fanbase that constantly backed her up when needed, by asking directly for their support as a favor – or, at this specific case, as a gift. Later, on the blog post, she reinforces the request by saying: “i cannot tell you how much it will mean to me if you're broke but you still choose to give me a dollar to back the project.” She also demonstrates that, even if the person cannot help financially, “if you can't even do that...spread the link” (Palmer, 2012b). The action of sharing at this point is important to the musician that supposedly does not count with expensive and big means of promotion, but with online word of mouth that her fans can offer.

This sharing of favors and experiences seems to be a characteristic of her constructed “society”. We can see that it takes shape while she constructs a type of online ambient affiliation (Zappavigna, 2011) of people that exchange symbolic capital with the musician and themselves. One example is hashtags movements, such as #LOFNOTC (Losers of Friday Night On Their Computers), where Amanda Palmer successfully creates discussions with her fanbase about her own life and the life of the people that followed her or the hashtag. She would often ask for responses, photographs, music, movies and books indication, creating a sense of trust and equal exchanges with her fans (Medeiros, 2018). According to Coleman (2015), the crowdfunding would not be so successful were it not for these early exchanges (the #LOFNOTC was created by Amanda in 2009). But we believe that the way she promoted the Kickstarter project also stars as an important figure in the outcome.

Besides the Twitter movement and the blog posts where she would directly ask for her public for money or engage in helping with the publicity (it was not rare to read requests such as “share it with your friends and family”, creating a sense of domestic exchange), the video is an important feature to the crowdfunding visibility. As we previously discussed (Medeiros & Dias, 2017), the promotion video created by Amanda to explain *Theatre is Evil* project can be seen as a performance, since it engages responses from the viewers on the Kickstarter page and on YouTube. In the video itself, Amanda tries to bring forth the sense of community to engage her created society. When she states, “We are the media” (Figure 7.3.6), she may be trying to engage the sense of responsibility on her public. Since she is bringing a different approach to the music industry, the audience – and herself, hence the usage of the “we” – is responsible to share her work and make herself be known as an artist.



Figure 7.3.6 - Video take – “We are the media”

Source: YouTube (Palmer, 2012a).

Besides that, the promotion video was posted in every profile Amanda had on SNSs by the time of the project. This means that people could find the video on Kickstarter platform, Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Palmer’s personal blog. This creates a sense of spreadable media (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013) capable of creating not only visibility, but also meaning and value to the video and the crowdfunding itself, giving the visibility desired by Amanda Palmer that resulted on her gaining more than a million dollars.

3. Closes

Throughout this paper, we understand that there is a clear notion about the importance of visibility to attain funds when it comes to “independent” artists. Amanda Palmer is not connected with any major or big publicity or record companies, which means that she is dependent on the public when it comes to her promotion. It is important for us to highlight, however, that the crusade of Palmer towards her crowdfunding success was not without any kind of conflict. She was severely criticized by the media, other music colleagues and the public in general for the use of the crowdfunding. The critics justify themselves by noting that even after receiving more money that she actually asked for, she maintained independent artistic practices, common on her career, as calling volunteer musicians on the stage, but not paying them.

This specific analysis did not fall into our scope in this paper, but we believe that there can be future works to critically think about how “independent” women artists are seen in comparison with “independent” male artists – especially inside the rock scene and looking from the entrepreneurship perspective. We argue that independent female musicians tend to have to prove themselves through some specific values. In Palmer’s case, the construction of authenticity by using a coherent online performance seems to be a way to attain this legitimacy (Medeiros, 2018). She displays, as we saw in this paper, consistent and logical public appearances, notably on her SNSs, blog, and other social media.

In conclusion, we understand that the use of social media to sell products, ideas or even services is widely spread among not only independent artists, but also big companies, in different areas. This creates a pattern of promotion and entrepreneurship that configures a way of capitalization. It seems, however, that for independent artists the SNSs and other online gadgets that can produce visibility are a necessary means. They build a sense of “co-presence”

(Miller, 2012) and interaction with the public in a way to make oneself known in order to be consumed.

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