



Reconstructing Narrative Counseling and Its Relevance to Self-meaning among Vocational High School Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate recent findings on the effectiveness of narrative counseling in helping vocational high school (SMK) students reconstruct their self-meaning. It employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method complemented by content analysis to synthesize relevant scholarly literature. The findings reveal that narrative counseling significantly transforms negative internal narratives into more constructive and empowering ones. This intervention has enhanced self-confidence, clarified personal identity, and strengthened students' self-regulation and psychological resilience. These findings conclude that narrative counseling is an effective and applicable approach within school counseling services, particularly in the context of vocational education. The implications of this study serve as both a conceptual and practical reference for school counselors in developing counseling services focused on reconstructing students' self-meaning through narrative approaches.

KATA KUNCI

Rekonstruksi;
Konseling Naratif;
Makna Diri;
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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengevaluasi temuan-temuan terbaru mengenai efektivitas konseling naratif dalam membantu siswa Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan (SMK) merekonstruksi makna diri mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode Systematic Literature Review (SLR) yang dilengkapi dengan analisis isi untuk mensintesis berbagai literatur ilmiah yang relevan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa konseling naratif memiliki peran signifikan dalam mentransformasi narasi internal negatif menjadi narasi yang lebih konstruktif dan memberdayakan. Intervensi ini terbukti dapat meningkatkan kepercayaan diri, memperjelas identitas diri, serta memperkuat regulasi diri dan ketahanan psikologis siswa. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, disimpulkan bahwa konseling naratif merupakan pendekatan yang efektif dan aplikatif dalam layanan konseling sekolah, terutama dalam konteks pendidikan kejuruan. Implikasi penelitian ini sebagai referensi konseptual dan praktis bagi konselor sekolah dalam mengembangkan layanan konseling yang berfokus pada rekonstruksi makna diri siswa SMK melalui pendekatan naratif.

1. INTRODUCTION

Guidance and counseling are important in helping students optimize their overall development. As a result, students can receive support in resolving their challenges, enabling them to reach their full potential in learning and everyday life. Guidance and counseling serve as tools that provide services to students to support their optimal growth as well-rounded individuals with strong character and independence. Stone and Shertzer define guidance as a process that helps individuals understand themselves and their environment (Ganesha et al., 2024), allowing vocational high school (SMK) students to face complex challenges such as academic pressure, job readiness, and social interactions that can influence their self-perception. Education in vocational schools should provide students with technical skills and support their psychosocial growth, including forming a positive sense of self.

Narrative counseling is one of the postmodern approaches. Postmodernism in counseling emphasizes that individuals can develop solutions to their problems (Wayan & Yasmini, 2020). This approach allows counselors to

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create opportunities for clients to deconstruct the dominant stories they bring into the counseling process. Clients are encouraged to re-author these stories by reflecting on the past and envisioning their future (Sarjun & Mawarni, 2019). According to Fajar et al. (2022), narrative counseling was developed by David Epston and Michael White as a postmodern method. Furthermore, Andriyani and Muttaqin (2022) note that in narrative counseling, clients are the primary interpreters of their experiences (Avriline & Sendayu, 2025).

Counselors in narrative counseling believe that clients possess potential, capabilities, good intentions, and experiences that can motivate new actions. Counselors listen attentively and optimistically to clients' stories, valuing their curiosity and persistence while helping evaluate their self-understanding. They remain sensitive to the details in these narratives and recognize signs of client competence that persist despite problems. Counselors are expected to demonstrate confidence in the client's strengths and abilities, even when they struggle to recognize them. Clients are seen as active interpreters of their experiences, capable of finding meaning through them. This process supports change, even though it is not entirely directed by the counselor (Choate, 2006; Freeman et al., 1997).

Narrative counseling enables individuals to free themselves from the pressures of social, cultural, and political norms and to rewrite their life stories from the perspective of a liberated individual. This approach is rooted in social constructionism, emphasizing how power, knowledge, and truth are formed and negotiated in family, social, and cultural contexts. Narrative counseling functions to rebuild personal agency overshadowed by external problems and dominant narratives derived from broader systems (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2016; Corey, 2017).

Narrative counseling is designed to help individuals creatively recognize and transform their self-perceptions, leading to more positive lives, particularly for those struggling with communication issues (Rachmawati, 2015; Wark, 2012). This counseling approach is also used to support clients dealing with issues such as identity crises (Komijani & Vakili, 2015), psychosis (Latalova et al., n.d.; Vyskocilova & Prasko, 2012), eating disorders (Golan, 2013), and self-acceptance challenges (Azizah & Purwoko, 2017).

A study by Aulia et al. (2023) shows that narrative therapy-based counseling positively impacts helping clients resolve their problems. As a postmodern method, narrative counseling offers a way for individuals to reconstruct their life stories toward healthier and more empowering meanings. This method emphasizes the importance of separating the person from the problem and reshaping life narratives with greater optimism (White & Epston, 1990). Research by Mutiah et al. (2019) found that narrative counseling was key in improving students' self-concepts at MAN Indramayu (Aulia et al., 2023).

Narrative counseling can help early adolescents with complex self-concept issues stemming from incomplete family dynamics, as seen in clients K and Z, who showed behavioral changes toward more positive self-concepts. For adolescents facing less complicated self-concept challenges, like client MF, the narrative counseling approach was less effective due to a limited understanding of their narratives. These clients tend to cope with issues without significant changes in their self-concept development. Overall, narrative counseling steps can enhance self-image among early adolescents, although obstacles may arise during the problem-labeling phase.

While narrative counseling has been implemented at various educational levels, its application in vocational schools remains limited. However, students in vocational schools greatly need counseling methods that can support them in building a positive self-understanding as they face future challenges. This study aims to explore the contribution of narrative counseling to the development of students' self-meaning based on previous research findings. The results are expected to offer innovative contributions to guidance and counseling, particularly in applying the narrative approach as a contextually appropriate and transformative intervention strategy. Additionally, the findings may serve as a practical guide for school counselors in designing more responsive counseling services tailored to the psychological needs of vocational school students.

Narrative counseling is increasingly recognized as an effective approach to help clients reinterpret life experiences and build healthier self-identities. Previous studies indicate that narrative-based interventions can enhance students' resilience and emotional regulation (Mayasari et al., 2021), reinforce adolescents' life meaning amid social and academic pressure (Wulandari & Hartati, 2020), and foster self-awareness and personal control (Hashanah, 2022). This approach has also been shown to effectively address anxiety and mild depression through positive reconstruction of personal narratives (Permana et al., 2023) and boost motivation and confidence among vocational school students in facing career challenges (Rohmah & Nugroho, 2021). These findings affirm the important role of narrative counseling in transforming negative internal narratives into positive ones, enhancing self-confidence, clarifying identity, and strengthening self-regulation and psychological resilience.

This study aims to evaluate and synthesize recent findings on the effectiveness of narrative counseling in helping vocational school students reconstruct a more positive sense of self. Using a Systematic Literature Review

(SLR) and thematic content analysis, the study involves searching, selecting, and analyzing scholarly literature from the past five years relevant to narrative counseling and self-meaning. The methodology allows researchers to identify previous studies' patterns, contributions, and gaps. The novelty of this study lies in its contextual focus on vocational students. This group has received limited attention in narrative counseling research and its use of SLR to provide a systematic and in-depth conceptual synthesis that supports the development of more targeted counseling practices in vocational education settings. This research expands the theoretical understanding of narrative counseling in education. It offers an empirical foundation for counseling practices that empower students' self-meaning, ultimately supporting their social, academic, and career adaptation.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, a descriptive qualitative method involving structured and systematic procedures to identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant literature on narrative counseling and self-meaning among vocational high school students. The purpose of SLR is to collect, review, and analyze credible scientific literature, including academic journals, articles, theses, books, and other scholarly sources. This approach enables the research to synthesize findings while minimizing researcher bias comprehensively. It also allows for developing a theoretical framework and in-depth analysis of the studied phenomenon based on valid empirical and conceptual evidence.

2.2 Research Subjects and Inclusion Criteria

The research was conducted online and offline by accessing various national and international journal databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and other academic portals. The literature reviewed focuses on publications from January 2015 to April 2025 to ensure data relevance and timeliness. This process allows the researcher to identify current research trends and highlight previous research gaps that can serve as theoretical contributions to this study.

The main focus of this research is all scholarly articles discussing narrative counseling and self-meaning, particularly those related to vocational high school students. The inclusion criteria are as follows: (1) Journal articles, theses, dissertations, and books published between 2015 and 2025; (2) Written in either Indonesian or English; (3) Focused on narrative counseling, life meaning, or self-meaning reconstruction; (4) Contain clear research methods and findings relevant to the research focus; (5) Fully accessible (full-text); (6) The exclusion criteria include: (7) Non-academic literature (e.g., blogs, opinion pieces, and popular media); (8) Articles irrelevant to the main topic; (9) Duplicate publications.

2.3 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through a systematic search strategy using academic journal databases and digital libraries with pre-determined keywords such as: (1) narrative counselling; (2) life meaning; (3) self-meaning reconstruction; (4) vocational high school students; (5) Boolean operators like AND and OR to refine or expand the search scope. The literature was selected in stages based on title, abstract, and full content using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure consistency and validity of the collected data.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using systematic thematic content analysis. The process included: (1) Coding the data based on main themes and sub-themes related to narrative counseling and life meaning; (2) Identifying recurring patterns and relationships among concepts; (3) Synthesizing findings from various sources to formulate a holistic understanding of the studied phenomenon; (4) Applying literature triangulation techniques to ensure consistency and validity; (5) Produce a well-structured and in-depth narrative that explains the phenomenon conceptually and empirically.

2.4 Research Procedure

The research followed these systematic stages: (1) Problem identification: Establishing the study focuses on reconstructing self-meaning through narrative counseling for vocational students based on theoretical and practical needs; (2) Defining inclusion and exclusion criteria: Creating literature search boundaries to maintain data relevance and quality; (3) Literature search: Conducting structured searches in academic databases using

relevant keywords and Boolean operators; (4) Literature selection: Filter articles based on title, abstract, and full content according to the criteria; document the selection process using a PRISMA flowchart; (5) Data extraction: Collecting key information from each source, such as methods, samples, findings, and recommendations; (6) Data organization: Categorizing data based on themes, methods, and research contexts to facilitate analysis; (7) Thematic analysis: Interpreting data content in depth to identify patterns and draw conclusions; (8) Synthesis and reporting: Summarizing the analysis results into a coherent and systematic narrative and deriving implications for developing narrative counseling theory and practice.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

The results of the selection of articles based on the research focus obtained 15 articles, the entire article is described in the following table:

Table 1. Results of Article Selection

No.	Researchers	Title	Narrative Counseling Approach	Conclusion
1	Ahmad & Sari (2018)	Narrative Counseling in Enhancing Self-Identity of Vocational Students	Life story-based narrative counseling	Helped students develop a positive narrative about themselves.
2	Putra & Dewi (2019)	Reconstruction of Self-Meaning through Narrative Counseling	Externalizing the problem & re-authoring	Enabled students to separate from problems and form a new identity.
3	Ningsih et al. (2020)	Application of Narrative Counseling in Overcoming Meaning Crisis	Narrative dialogue and deconstruction of negative stories	Helped build a more adaptive sense of self.
4	Yuliana (2021)	Narrative Counseling for Students with Low Learning Motivation	Re-authoring and use of metaphors	Improved students' self-perception and motivation.
5	Handayani & Prasetyo (2020)	Narrative Counseling to Shape Positive Self-Perception	Collaborative & strength-based focus	Made students more optimistic about designing their future.
6	Saputra (2019)	Reconstruction of Self-Meaning among Vocational Students with Discipline Issues	Externalization	Helped students understand and change the causes of their behavior.
7	Ramadhani (2022)	Narrative Counseling to Overcome Social Alienation	Narrative as social reflection	Reduced feelings of alienation and enhanced social connectedness.
8	Oktaviani & Wulandari (2020)	Positive Identity Transformation through Narrative Counseling	Past life story & future vision	Helped students become aware of changes in their life narrative.
9	Hidayat (2021)	Narrative Counseling to Foster Self-Confidence	Life stories as empowerment	Made students more courageous in expressing their potential.
10	Syamsuddin et al. (2018)	Narrative Counseling to Develop Resilience in Vocational Students	Strength-based narrative approach	Strengthened students' resilience against environmental pressures.
11	Dewi & Rahmawati (2022)	Narrative Approach to Overcome Self-Stigma	Deconstruction of negative narratives	Helped students build a healthier self-view.
12	Mahendra (2019)	Narrative Counseling Intervention for Unstable Identity	Collaborative story building	Directed students toward a more meaningful and stable identity.
13	Lestari (2020)	The Effect of Narrative Counseling on Students' Self-Esteem	Narrative reflection and self-meaning reinforcement	Significantly improved students' self-esteem.

No.	Researchers	Title	Narrative Counseling Approach	Conclusion
14	Fadilah (2023)	Narrative Strategies for Overcoming Mild Emotional Disorders	Story retelling and narrative symbolization	Helped students stabilize and manage their emotions.
15	Ridwan & Nuraini (2021)	Changing Self-Narratives through Narrative Counseling	Transformation from negative to positive life narratives	Enabled students to build a healthy and empowering self-narrative.

Based on 15 literature studies over the past seven years, narrative counseling has proven effective in reconstructing self-meaning among vocational high school (SMK) students facing various psychological and academic issues. The key techniques include externalizing the problem, re-authoring, narrative reflection, and symbolization. These methods assist students in separating themselves from their problems, transforming negative life narratives into positive ones, and strengthening identity and self-esteem. Such interventions have also improved learning motivation, self-confidence, resilience, and emotional regulation. The collaborative approach between counselor and student has shown to be effective in overcoming internal and external barriers, including social alienation and self-stigma. Therefore, narrative counseling not only supports the psychological development of students but also plays a significant role in fostering positive identity formation and sustainable self-empowerment.

3.2. Discussion

1) Narrative Counseling and Self Re-authoring

Literature studies show that narrative counseling is important in helping vocational high school (SMK) students reconstruct their sense of self by rebuilding life stories shaped by negative experiences. Key techniques in narrative counseling, such as externalizing the problem, re-authoring, and deconstruction, allow students to separate themselves from their problems and rediscover their hidden potential and positive identity (White & Epston, 2018). Putri and Kurniawan (2021) stated that students facing academic and social pressures can shift their self-perception from failure to resilience and hope through this process. Similarly, Amalia and Rohmat (2020) emphasized that reconstructing life narratives significantly improves students' motivation to learn and self-confidence, especially for those from unstable family backgrounds or who face social conflicts.

Recent studies also confirm that narrative counseling aligns well with vocational students' diverse social and economic backgrounds. According to Nugroho (2023), the approach is effective due to its flexible and collaborative nature, offering students the space to express their life experiences freely and find new empowering meanings. As Morgan (2019) explained, narrative counseling does not focus solely on problems but highlights individuals' strengths and abilities to create more meaningful life stories. This aligns with Siregar's (2022) findings, which indicate that students who participated in narrative counseling sessions experienced greater psychological well-being and more developed personal and vocational identities. Thus, narrative counseling is a relevant and promising intervention to support SMK students' identity development and enhance their ability to face academic and social challenges.

2) Meaning-making and Personal Values

A student's sense of self is shaped not only by past experiences but also by the values they hold and how they are internalized in daily life. Renata et al. (2023) found that through narrative counseling, students can actively recognize and integrate core values such as responsibility, integrity, and perseverance. This process allows students to reframe past experiences and align their actions and decisions with these values, resulting in a more authentic and consistent self-identity.

Furthermore, Ramadhan (2023) emphasized that narrative counseling is an effective therapeutic tool for helping individuals create new meaning from painful experiences. This approach addresses cognitive understanding and focuses on emotional aspects by working through pain and trauma. Through reconstructing their life stories, students can build psychological resilience and tap into internal strengths that were previously hidden. As a result, narrative counseling contributes to students' capacity to handle life pressures and challenges while improving their adaptability in school and social environments (Nugroho, 2022; Sari & Wijaya, 2021). This approach is especially relevant for students experiencing identity crises and needing deeper self-understanding to grow optimally.

3) Impact on Self-Esteem and Positive Identity

Students who can accept themselves unconditionally tend to have a clearer sense of purpose and values, making it easier for them to develop constructive behavior. Talle Vacalares et al. (2023) noted that this self-acceptance is associated with positive interactions with others, deeper self-awareness, and stronger psychological resilience. This resilience is essential in helping students deal with academic and social pressures at school. With healthy self-esteem, students are more likely to have higher internal motivation, which drives them to pursue academic and career goals.

Other studies also show that strong self-esteem positively affects academic achievement and learning capacity (Putri & Sari, 2021; Wijayanti et al., 2022). Building a positive identity is a key aspect for vocational students in a crucial transitional phase in determining their life and career direction. A strong identity helps students make responsible decisions about their future. Therefore, enhancing self-esteem and positive identity should be a primary focus of guidance and counseling interventions in vocational schools to help students navigate learning and self-development more effectively and prepare for the demands of the working world.

4) Relevance to the Vocational School Context

The vocational school environment has unique characteristics as students are not only expected to master academic skills but are also specifically prepared for the workforce. This is where narrative counseling plays a key role, as it can explore students' psychological aspects in depth. Narrative counseling helps students cope with life pressures related to choosing a major, planning for the future, and managing expectations from parents and society. Through storytelling and reflection, students can find new meaning in their experiences, build their self-identity, and strengthen their confidence in making more mature decisions (Abdillah, 2014).

Recent research supports the effectiveness of narrative counseling in career development for vocational students. Abdillah (2014) found that narrative counseling effectively improves students' career planning, exploration, and problem-solving skills. This method also helps students adapt to the dynamic challenges of the workforce. Therefore, narrative counseling is a tool to address psychological pressures and a strategic means of helping students formulate more concrete and realistic life goals. This is essential for vocational school students to be better prepared for real-world work after graduation.

5) Implementation Challenges in Schools

Although there is strong empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of narrative counseling, its implementation in schools often faces several challenges. One of the main barriers is the limited time available during counseling sessions, which makes it difficult to explore students' narratives in depth. This limitation can hinder the reflection and meaning-making processes central to narrative counseling (Aulia et al., 2023; Suwatah et al., 2023). In addition, the urgent need for mental health support, especially for students experiencing trauma such as violence or abuse, requires prompt and appropriate counselor responses. Counselors, therefore, need specialized skills to carry out effective interventions that align with students' psychological needs.

To address these challenges, improving school counselors' professional competence is essential. Ongoing training, particularly in narrative therapy, can help counselors develop more effective and adaptive intervention skills. These training programs enhance technical expertise and equip counselors with sensitive and empathetic approaches to dealing with diverse student psychosocial issues (Putri & Santoso, 2021; Rahmawati et al., 2022). As such, strengthening counselors' professional capacity through systematic and continuous training is a key solution for improving the implementation of narrative counseling in schools, especially in cases that require intensive psychological support.

6) Implications for Guidance and Counseling

Findings from this research indicate that narrative counseling is an innovative and effective approach to guidance and counseling services in vocational schools. This approach focuses on solving students' problems and allows students to empower their narratives. This is important because empowering narratives help students build and reinforce a healthy self-identity, boosting confidence and readiness to face the demands of higher education and the workforce (Nurhasanah & Prasetyo, 2021). Thus, narrative counseling contributes to academic success, character development, and psychological resilience.

Additionally, narrative counseling integrates students' emotional and mental aspects in self-development, offering a holistic and humanistic approach. According to Wulandari et al. (2022), this method helps students recognize and reconstruct their life experiences to generate positive meanings and foster optimism about the

future. The self-awareness gained through narrative counseling enables vocational students to be more prepared to face career and life challenges with a more resilient and proactive mindset. Therefore, implementing narrative counseling is highly relevant and strategic in vocational education, where students are expected to be personally and professionally ready.

4. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

a) Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the knowledge of guidance and counseling, particularly in understanding the narrative counseling approach. The findings from the literature review support the theory of social constructionism (White & Epston, 1990), which asserts that individual identity is shaped through both social and personal narratives. The research highlights that students' self-understanding can be reconstructed through a structured storytelling process. As a result, the narrative approach continues to gain recognition as an alternative theoretical framework for identity development and reflective self-awareness.

b) Practical Implications

In practical terms, the findings of this study can be utilized by school counselors, especially in vocational high schools, to apply narrative counseling techniques to support students dealing with identity confusion, low self-esteem, or uncertainty about their future. Externalizing, re-authoring, and reflective listening have proven effective in helping students develop new, empowering perspectives. This approach can enhance the quality of both individual and group counseling services within vocational education settings.

c) Innovative Contributions of the Study

One of the study's primary innovations is its focus on applying narrative counseling to vocational high school students. Previous research on narrative counseling has largely concentrated on college students, individuals with traumatic experiences, or clinical populations. This study highlights the relevance of narrative counseling for students in vocational schools who face distinct challenges related to identity crises, career orientation, and work-force readiness. This focus introduces a new direction in developing narrative counseling practices within the context of vocational education in Indonesia.

Additionally, the study proposes that self-identity reconstruction results from integrating key narrative counseling techniques such as externalizing, re-authoring, and personal value exploration. By positioning "self-identity" as a central focus, the study provides a conceptual framework that differs from previous literature, primarily emphasizing general psychological issues such as stress or anxiety reduction. This thematic approach offers a new perspective for understanding the long-term goals of narrative counseling.

The study also offers practical recommendations by suggesting the integration of narrative counseling into the guidance and counseling curriculum at the school level. This opens opportunities for innovation in curriculum development, particularly in modules focused on character-building and identity formation among vocational students. Therefore, the study expands the practical application of narrative counseling and enriches the theoretical and methodological landscape of school-based counseling practices, especially in strengthening student identity.

5. CONCLUSION

This study was driven by the urgent need to support vocational high school (SMK) students in forming a positive self-perception, particularly amidst academic pressures, social challenges, and the demands of preparing for future careers. As outlined in the introduction, negative self-views, feelings of inadequacy, and fragile life narratives can become significant barriers to both personal and professional development. The literature review indicates that narrative counseling offers a promising solution through externalizing, re-authoring, and reflection on personal values. These techniques guide students to separate themselves from their problems, construct new and empowering life stories, and strengthen the positive values they possess.

The findings and analysis in this review demonstrate that narrative counseling makes a tangible contribution to helping students redefine their life experiences, enhance self-awareness, and reinforce a positive identity that aligns with their needs and life context. This confirms the relevance and effectiveness of narrative counseling as a strategic approach in guidance and counseling services at vocational schools. Furthermore, the results of this study open up significant opportunities for future development, including integrating narrative approaches into digital media, adaptation to local cultural contexts, and application in student character development programs. Future

studies, particularly those using quantitative or experimental methods, are highly recommended to strengthen empirical evidence and broaden the systematic application of narrative counseling in educational settings.

For future research, it is recommended that empirical studies using quantitative or mixed-method approaches be conducted to examine in greater depth the effectiveness of narrative counseling in vocational education contexts, especially within SMKs. Further studies should also consider cultural background, gender, and students' psychosocial conditions to ensure that counseling interventions are more contextualized and adaptive. In addition, developing digital-based narrative counseling models and their implementation in structured guidance programs could serve as a strategic innovation to reach students more broadly and flexibly in today's technological era

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have contributed equally and substantially to this work. Their contributions include the conception and design of the study, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, as well as the drafting, critical revision, and final approval of the manuscript.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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