



**“Dark Secrets Behind Light Shades: Hollywood & Modeling  
Media”**

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## Dark Secrets Behind Light Shades: Hollywood & Modeling Media

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### ***Abstract***

*Colorism, a specific form of racism, stems from stereotypes regarding darker-skinned individuals and is normalized through racialized media images. It is the concept that lighter-skinned people of color who possess eurocentric features experience greater privilege than those with darker skin and afrocentric features. Colorism plays a significant role in the underrepresentation of individuals possessing darker complexion of skin in such popular industries as Hollywood film and fashion modeling, and may limit their opportunities in these agencies due to industry-wide tendencies to hire lighter-skinned individuals of color possessing characteristically eurocentric features (lighter skin, tall and thin body structure, pointier facial features). Media agencies are aware of this lack of representation as well as the inherent coloristic prejudice at work, but continue to perpetuate stereotypes to increase profits and acceptance from a majority white audience. This paper's purpose is to investigate how coloristic preferences for individuals of lighter complexion in Hollywood and modeling affect African-Americans, Latinx, and other models of color in the media industry, as well as American millennials' perceptions of beauty. Millennials are constantly exposed to media provided by Hollywood and modeling due to their considerable presence on modern social media platforms, and thereafter subconsciously form mental perceptions and images of these industries' narrow definitions of beauty. Through an analysis of various case studies, qualitative data from interviews and statistics, surveys and small group discussions, examples of Hollywood characters' and models' depictions on screen, and the relatively minimalized media presence of*

*darker-toned celebrities, this paper will explore how experiences of colorism vary based on gender stereotypes. Female celebrities already experience greater societal pressure and heavy scrutiny. Negative societal perceptions of darker skin tones ultimately limit the professional development of an actor or model in these industries.*

## **Introduction**

The US is known worldwide as a nation that provides its citizens with countless opportunities and equality. However, large portions of American society are discriminated against daily due to the societal implications of their physical characteristics. Although individual success correlates with hard work and/or talent, obstacles such as cultural and racial stereotypes, colorism, and a narrow definition of beauty hinder the professional growth of African-American, Latinx, and other individuals of dark complexion. Factors such as the current presidency, deep-rooted racial divides in the US, and socio-economic disparities between different subgroups enable the mass media to exploit and reinforce stereotypes regarding individuals with darker skin tones.. These factors support TeenVogue’s argument that “colorism created the belief that lighter-skinned black people are better, smarter, and more attractive than their darker-skinned counterparts because they have a closer proximity to whiteness” (Onyejiaka). Furthermore, a limited demand for celebrities with darker skin tones in media consequently decreases the quantity and quality of the opportunities provided to those with darker skin. In “Being Seen and Unseen: Racial Representation and Whiteness Bias in Hollywood Cinema,” Rosa R. Lembcke argues that inequalities in racial representation are highly relevant issues due to their impact on the opportunities for celebrities of color in the Hollywood film industry. Lembcke cites numerous examples of characters with darker complexion in films who are depicted as less sophisticated and less worthy than their lighter-

skinned counterparts. Further, the nature of discrimination based on skin complexion differs for male and female celebrities of color, and the constant reinforcement of these inequalities in the media causes highly-generalized and inaccurate ideas to become widely accepted throughout American society. In “Media Stereotypes and ‘Coconut’ Colorism: Latino Denigration Vis-à-Vis Dark Skin,” Ronald E. Hall demonstrates how media depictions of Latinx individuals as hypersexual and powerless females or dangerous, immoral males lead to limited opportunities for Latinx celebrities. With regards to the modeling industry, “Black Models Matter: Challenging the Racism of Aesthetics and the Facade of Inclusion in the Fashion Industry” provides Scarlett L. Newman’s discussion of the fashion industry’s underrepresentation of models of color; it was found that only six percent of models in the US possess darker skin tones. Including external case studies, Newman’s qualitative evidence provided by American models’ personal accounts, as well as the history behind stereotypes regarding dark skin complexion, explains the struggles faced by these models, who are constantly pressured to conform their opinions, appearances, and behaviors to more closely fit the white American standard. In “Whitewashed Runways: Employment Discrimination in the Fashion Modeling Industry,” Vanessa Padula discusses coloristic discrimination in American modeling and describes potential solutions to increase the representation of non-white models. Hollywood filmmakers’ tendencies to perpetuate stereotypes surrounding dark skin complexion as a means to entertain the majority, as well as modeling agencies’ underrepresentation of black and Latinx models and depiction of said models as exotic, normalize racialized and sexualized stereotypes as well as the mistreatment of celebrities of color both on and off screen. Hollywood and modeling agencies exploit these stereotypes for profit, causing these celebrities to face the brunt of colorism and sexism through the consequently limited nature of professional opportunities available to them.

Several key theoretical frameworks support the relevance of colorism; this paper will address three of these. The first is tokenism, which hypothesizes that the underrepresentation of non-white celebrities incites agencies to hire token celebrities of color for the sole purpose of appearing more diverse than in actuality. The second framework is aesthetic labor - the idea that those African-American and Latinx celebrities actually hired are only accepted due to their possession of physical features and characteristics similar to their lighter-skinned or white counterparts. The last framework is the concept of dimensions of difference, in which one group uses certain factors such as appearance, dialect, and socio-economic status to discriminate against other groups for a perceived deviation from the norm. Colorism continues to exist through the media's spread of racialized imagery: colorism molds narrow perceptions of beauty among American millennials through an increasing connection to social media content. Evidence from this paper's sources will demonstrate the connection between stereotypes regarding individuals with dark skin tones and the reduced opportunities available for these celebrities in Hollywood film and fashion modeling.

### **Historical Origins of Colorism in Society and Media Industries**

Colorism - a term coined by Alice Walker, a popular African-American novelist in the 1950s - represents an implicit, internalized form of racism in which a society or ethnicity grants increased privileges to those with lighter skin, inherently mistreating those with darker skin. Eurocentric features often increase the privileges of a non-white person. Thus, agencies often base judgment upon one's level of darkness, discouraging darker-skinned individuals from roles and opportunities. According to Margaret Hunter, world-wide light-skinned privilege originates from histories of colonization and slavery, wherein darker-skinned slaves were forced to perform grueling work in fields while lighter-skinned slaves were permitted less physically taxing work

indoors. Such harmful prejudices were the norm, and occurred due to the white majority's association of lighter skin with a greater degree of purity, worth, and sophistication. Today, racial tensions due to American president Donald Trump's open discrimination of and negative statements regarding people of color worsen coloristic prejudice towards immigrants and citizens alike. This situation also impacts celebrities of color, as success in the film and fashion industries depends heavily on societal perceptions of their physical characteristics, role versatility, and social connections. Rosa R. Lembcke discusses how film creates associations between certain physical features and subcultures in the US, limiting non-white celebrities' opportunities due to stereotypes that "maintain existing power structures and preconceived notions about race" (18). Stereotypes perpetuated by such media images allow producers to portray characters of color as highly-generalized, inaccurate depictions of their respective subcultures rather than real, multidimensional individuals. As per Stuart Hall, stereotypical characteristics of non-white people are seen as "natural as opposed to cultural, and thus inherent, non-negotiable and unchangeable" (qtd. In Lembcke 16) by the majority, implying that there are inherent characteristics pertaining to those with dark skin. In the US, there are clear differences between the socioeconomic conditions of the average black and white individual: "Dark-skinned blacks have lower levels of education, income, and job status. They are less likely to own homes or to marry; and dark-skinned blacks' prison sentences are longer" (qtd. in Allison 382). Thus, it is apparent that the deep-rooted issue of colorism allows negative stereotypes about non-white people to be perpetuated and exploited by the media.

### **Effect of Colorism and Sexism on Opportunities for Non-White Hollywood Celebrities**

Racialized imagery in Hollywood films distort reality by perpetuating misconceptions about various US subcultures, resulting in lighter-skinned actors and actresses generally being

provided more opportunities than their darker-skinned counterparts. According to Catherine Knight Steele, Hollywood's use of dimensions of difference - factors that a majority group uses to discriminate against groups who deviate from the norm - enables inaccurate stereotypes to be sustained in society (6). Classics such as *Pocahontas*, *Great Wall*, and *Indiana Jones* portray white people conquering or colonizing the "exotic Other," sharply contrasting the sophisticated, civilized white person from the primitive other and reinforcing the inferiority of darker-skinned individuals. According to Lembcke, Hollywood's use of "racialized stereotypes in cinema and television can potentially maintain existing power structures and preconceived notions about race," worsening the prejudice faced by celebrities of color in the fame industry (18).

In addition to stereotypes surrounding dark skin tones in US subcultures, sexism also plays a role in further limiting the opportunities of non-white female celebrities. Sexism is a struggle for all women, but is especially so for women of color due to the amplified combination of stereotypes surrounding women and dark skin. Due to the high frequency of such images in films, racist and sexist themes become normalized, circulating back to society and hurting individuals of color. This dual form of prejudice towards those of a certain skin color and gender further decreases opportunities for those falling within these physical descriptions and creates an even greater struggle to reach the same level of fame. According to Ronald E. Hall, "coconut colorism" is a specific form of colorism directed towards Latinx individuals in the US, demonstrated by how the "Euro-American community continues to view [the Latino male] as the embodiment of negativity and inferiority" (2008). These societal constraints are incorporated into films, and filmmakers have historically depicted male Latinx individuals as bandits, rapists, killers, or thieves; movies like *Island of Love*, *Death of a Gunfighter*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Full Fathom Five*, and *12 Angry Men* depict Latinx characters as nefarious and immoral.

Further,, differences between Latinx males and females are quite apparent. Males are portrayed as “sadistic enforcers who were no match for the feminist vanguard despite their dark skin, mustaches, and slicked back Latino greasy hair” (Hall 2011) Stereotypes about Latinx males are synthesized with those of African-Americans and other people of color, creating highly generalized, inaccurate depictions. For example, the movie *Guns* includes a “stout, dark-skinned Erik Estrada who portrayed an international arms dealer,” and a “Jack of Diamonds, who smuggles state of the art weaponry from China to South America” (Hall 2011). Meanwhile, Latina women are depicted as promiscuous and hypersexual, as Hollywood movies often contain nudity, misogyny, and two-dimensional “sidekick”-like Latina female characters. In *Crack House*, a group of characters of color start a national epidemic by creating a drug intended to harm Euro-Americans; numerous scenes illustrate how “Black and Latino (drug dealers) raped Euro-American and Latino American women, took part in drive-by shootings, murder, and [inflicted] pain... There were numerous Latino American and African American putas on display to make the point” (Hall 2011-2012). Through this description, Hall implies the Euro-American belief that the drug problem depicted in the scene was initiated by these groups of individuals with dark skin tones. Thus, the quotation illustrates how Hollywood perpetuates different stereotypes about African-American, Latinx, and other men and women of dark complexion, associating dark skin with danger and violence and contrasting it with the so-called purity of white individuals.

Beyond coconut colorism, gender-related differences in colorism exist among black African-Americans in Hollywood as well. For example, it is more common in media for a black man with a darker complexion to find a light-skinned black woman attractive than the opposite situation, normalizing the idea that lighter skin makes women more attractive. This normalizes



colorism in relation to gender, and reduces the perceived beauty of a woman with darker skin tones. Additionally, in the case of black or Latinx female characters, expressing sexual desires and behaving promiscuously is portrayed as immoral and dirty, while women possessing lighter skin tones are depicted as positive characters for expressing the same desires. Hence, although lighter-skinned female characters are portrayed as inferior to men by “being female objects for the gaze of an implicit male subject” (Lembcke 21), women of color are judged harshly for hypersexuality. Sexual desires have little to do with one’s race, and are instead indicative of one’s individual behavior and feelings towards others (Steele 12). When media portrays specific subcultures as possessing undesirable traits, it aids the preservation of racism and societal conflicts based on injustice. In Hollywood cinema, “[dark-skinned] women of color have... not [been] regarded as serious love interests or marriage-potential” (Lembcke 18) which demonstrates the consequences of gender-related bias in colorism.

Furthermore, while plenty of black male celebrities in Hollywood, such as Idris Elba, John Boyega, and Shameik Moore, are able to thrive, most female celebrities of color are light-skinned and play the roles that darker-skinned women could play. For example, in 2016, Afro-Latinx actress Zoe Saldana played the role of Nina Simone, a well-known singer and activist who possessed darker skin; Saldana altered her look using skin-color-altering makeup and a prosthetic nose to recreate Nina’s appearance. According to Tiffany Onyejiaka, *X-Men* features Storm, a character of Kenyan descent possessing darker complexion who is instead portrayed by biracial actresses of lighter complexion such as Halle Berry and Alexandra Shipp. Evidently, colorism and sexism play significant roles in reducing opportunities for black and Latinx actors and actresses, as they are denied roles due to physical appearance rather than talent.

### **Cultural Appropriation in Modeling & Culprits of Coloristic Casting Prejudice**

While colorism results in fewer professional opportunities for darker-skinned actors and actresses of color in Hollywood, models of color face greater coloristic prejudice because the modeling industry relies heavily on social networks and physical characteristics. Currently, the low number of non-white modeling directors and influencers creates a difficult environment for models of color to thrive. Agencies hire token amounts of these models to falsely appear diverse to the public and increase profit and socioeconomic status, exemplifying tokenism. However, according to Scarlett L. Newman these models are presented with a smaller range of opportunities and are often depicted as “exotic” on screen (12). For example, in 2008 *Vogue Italia*’s Editor-in-Chief Franca Sozzani responded to accusations of racism by using solely darker-skinned black models in the July issue of *Vogue Italia*; this “Black Issue” had lower sales than other issues, and did not improve the outlook for darker-skinned models due to its sarcastic nature (Newman 11). Sozzani intended to show the world that an issue solely consisting of black models would not be financially profitable for his company, attempting to justify his discriminatory actions on the terms of less than optimal financial gain from portraying diversity. Another example is provided through Malaika Handa’s analysis of 228 *Vogue* issue covers over 19 years, finding that from 2000 to 2005 there were only slight variances in models’ complexion. Only 3 out of 81 cover models were black; after 2005, *Vogue*’s increased skin color variance was only attributed to four specific covers. However, all four featured the same model: Lupita Nyong’o. These statistics indicate that tokenism determines the racial makeup of modeling shows and represents the effect of a truly low demand for models of color. The industry audience’s tendency to be more likely to purchase magazine issues containing images of white or light-skinned models of color also plays a significant role in narrowing the range and demand for models who possess darker skin tones. However, to maintain a facade of diversity,

these companies are almost forced to feature models of color on rare occasions despite the lack of guarantee that they will stay with a company in the long-term.

In those rare instances that dark-skinned models are depicted in fashion shows, their appearance often correlate with the most traditional versions of their ethnic backgrounds, and are often depicted as dramatically cultured versions of themselves. Further, in regular society “black girls are punished and mocked for their originality [gelled-down baby hairs and braids]... others profit from and co-opt their traditions,” creating a disconnect between the “normal” behaviors of dark-skinned and light-skinned women (qtd. in Newman 2). This idea exemplifies cultural appropriation, which is the exploitation of one’s race and/or ethnicity for selfish reasons, mocking one’s race and accepting negative portrayals such as blackface and yellowface. Agencies often exploit race and reduce the value of dark skin to trends and aesthetics, ignoring the culture, traditions, and identity behind one’s racial appearance. Another example of this unfair treatment is shown by the prevalence of blackface, or the use of darker makeup on light-skinned celebrities, in media to “satisfy the fantasy of ‘brown skin with white features,’” further indicating that these industries are not willing to hire people who are actually darker-skinned (Newman 18). Blackface, as well as yellowface, are common inclusions in modern Hollywood movies, although their prevalence has somewhat decreased. The effects and implications of blackface are far greater than previously imagined; unnecessarily including ethnic characteristics on screen normalizes “historic act[s] of racism used to dehumanize and humiliate [dark-skinned] black people” (Newman 18). When pressured to fit eurocentric standards of beauty, models with afrocentric features mold their appearances by “straightening the hair, [adopt an] extensive diet and exercise [regime], [and] keeping out of the sun” (Newman 5). This behavior, otherwise known as aesthetic labor, implies that dark skin is only attractive when attached to

characteristically eurocentric features. Aesthetic labor highlights the deep-rooted racial and coloristic inequality in the modeling industry, acting as a microcosm for society's definitions of beauty. According to Vanessa Padula, when Alber Elbaz, a designer for Lanvin, presented five black women on the runway during a show, the scene was described as “‘purely aesthetic.’ [Thus, the industry] treats models as nothing short of mannequins... painted in the designer's shade of choice” (123). On the rare occasion that dark-skinned models of color are hired, agencies utilize them one of two stereotypical roles: “The first is the African tribal look, where women are often featured with tribal painting and bald heads. The second, the ‘Anglo’ look, consists of longhaired weaves & European features” (Padula 123). Provided these roles are filled, other models of color are turned away, leading to minimal variability in their on-screen appearances.

Models of color become easily replaceable when they are constantly deprived of opportunities, privileges, and power. This constant fear causes such models to hesitate when speaking out about prejudice in the modeling industry; even if legal action is taken, models' identities are kept hidden from the public to save their reputation. For example, in 2004 a group of models of color sued modeling agencies for an estimated \$22 million for price fixing, an illegal act in which competing modeling agencies lower take-home salaries for models. However, due to poor communication between the courts and the plaintiffs, the money was instead given to charity. Unfortunately, many models fear demanding salaries from agencies due to the immense power the industry holds over models' careers (Padula 126). Worsening the situation, the US's legal system does not offer models much protection as models are generally considered independent contractors (136). The misrepresentation of dark-skinned models of

color in the fashion modeling industry exists due to a cycle of events, in which the casting and modeling directors become the primary catalyst.

### **Studies & Societal Implications of Dark-Skinned Celebrities' Physical Features**

There are numerous studies demonstrating light-skin privilege in American society as well as the existence of certain stereotypes associated with dark skin. This causes problems for black and Latinx individuals, as they are often relegated to roles related to said stereotypes. Given the whiteness studies discussed in Lembcke's work, Margaret Hunter concludes that light-skinned Americans of color indeed receive greater privileges due to their physical features and socio-economic status, arguing that they do not struggle in the same ways that Americans possessing darker skin tones do. Through the media's constant reinforcement of stereotypes, white subcultures in the US are perceived as sophisticated, whereas non-white subcultures are typically associated with poverty, crime, and aggressive and/or promiscuous behavior. In addition, stark differences between the portrayals of lighter and darker people of color on screen have become prevalent due to the underlying societal notions that "dark skin represents savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority" while lighter skin implies "civility, rationality, beauty, and superiority" (Hunter 238). According to Ronald E. Hall, "in a social milieu that is threatened by the masculine and dominant implications of [one's] dark skin... dark skin is feared. That fear is widespread and extends from the most professional personnel and institutions to the least educated" (Hall 2014). Pervasive media images in the fame industry reinforce associations between darker skin and danger and criminality, as opposed to associations between lighter skin and purity and civility.

These media-spread images stimulate the formation of definitions and mental conclusions of beauty standards in the minds of millennials, the most prevalent group participating in social media platforms. Sydney Janelle Dillard's study, in which four groups of educated African-American millennials were interviewed and qualitatively analyzed, demonstrated that subjects were aware of American beauty standards that favored eurocentric features and lighter skin over afrocentric features of dark skin. Subjects were also found to believe that the media oversexualizes African American women, "portraying them as erotic and exotic [and depicting them as] forbidden fruit... that is looked upon as prohibited and not allowed, which could be perceived as mainstream media attempting to trivialize Black women as undatable" (Dillard 57). The perceptions of women with dark skin tones found in the study illustrate how a dark complexion becomes associated with hypersexuality, and that dark-skinned women are short-term sexual interests, rather than reliable long-term partners. With regards to male models of color, Dillard's results indicate that "dark skin [equals] hyper-sexuality and lower social class or light skin [equals] power and prestige" (Dillard 80). Pervasive media images reinforce negative perceptions regarding dark skin; agencies in various sectors of the fame industry take advantage of these seemingly acceptable ideas for personal gain in popularity.

### **Reasons the Fame Industries Knowingly Support Coloristic Discrimination**

Despite the supposed open-mindedness of filmmakers and modeling agencies, coloristic discrimination has not, in fact, lessened over the years, potentially due to industries' need to impress the white majority in the country over any other subgroup. Ashley Mears claims that "modeling is the professionalization of a certain type of gender performance, one that interlocks with other social positions like race, sexuality, and class" (Mears 23). In addition, "Bookers and clients face intense uncertainty as they look for the right models in the high-end segment of the

fashion market, where the stakes of impressing elite consumer tastes are high” (Mears 22). However, Vanessa Padula discusses how the Supreme Court often concludes that directors and recruiters are protected under the First Amendment (right to free speech), allowing them to “engage in artistic expression” during the recruiting process; thus, “a model may not be hired because she is not what the designer ‘aesthetically and artistically’ envisioned,” because filmmaking is considered a form of artistic expression (Padula 131). Yet, despite some validity in these arguments, agencies should instead focus on the long-term effects of their actions and aim to improve diversity as well as the representation of celebrities of color without primarily focusing on financial profit. Increasing the diversity of representation in the film industry will not only increase reach and popularity across borders, but will enable dark-skinned people of color to experience greater inclusion at the societal level. In another argument, Kelly J. Baker discusses the belief that increased success of women in an industry historically dominated by men is, in itself, a huge step forward. Baker states that “while the Women's March garnered press attention because of its progressive focus and unrepentant call for women's rights, there's an assumption, still, that women's activism is somehow inherently progressive” (Baker). Although this accomplishment is noteworthy, feminism is intersectional and involves women of all shapes, sizes, and colors. Therefore, agencies should not continue to sideline issues related to and involving colorism aside, as such acts directly and/or indirectly hurt the prospects of darker-skinned celebrities. Fame industries must stress that talent is of the utmost importance in order to uphold social and cultural responsibility.

### **Conclusion and Overall Implications:**

It has, in conclusion, become apparent through the synthesization of evidence that American millennials’ perceptions of beauty are indeed impacted by colorism in a negative

manner through the distribution and perpetuation of sexist and racist imagery in mass media; it is also through the phenomenon that the professional opportunities available to celebrities possessing darker tones of skins are decreased and minimized in the Hollywood film and fashion modeling industries. Dillard's descriptions of African-American millennials' opinions on American standards of beauty, as well as the prevalence of negative media imagery, relate to Handa's statistical analysis of Vogue's lack of coloristic representation over the past 19 years. Similarly, Lembcke describes numerous examples of differences in the portrayal of characters with dark and light skin tones in Hollywood that, alongside Dillard, Onyejiaka, and Hall's discussions regarding similar topics, indicate that gender determines how a celebrity or film character is presented on screen. Onyejiaka specifically cites examples of gender-related differences in colorism in Hollywood, such as the greater prominence of light-skinned black actresses compared to those possessing darker complexion. These examples demonstrate that Hollywood bears a tendency to hire slimmer, straight-haired black women of lighter complexion and, as opposed to curvy and curly-haired women of darker complexion. Padula and Newman indicate possible reasons for the underrepresentation of darker complexion in the fashion modeling industry, and claim that practices such as aesthetic labor and tokenism limit the nature and amount of opportunities offered to dark-skinned models. Societal perceptions of individuals of color are negative when compared to their lighter-skinned counterparts, and often harm said individuals' prospects of success. The agencies of these industries should, therefore, focus instead on the long-term effects of their actions regarding representation, as the incorporation of greater representation of individuals of color on screen may improve society in a positive manner. The prevalence of stereotypes surrounding individuals possessing darker skin tones from non-white subcultures is perpetuated and intensified by the media, and thus differences in



the nature of portrayal and the quantity of light-skinned and dark-skinned celebrities' opportunities become evident due to the varied socio-economic status and lack of media presence of these groups. Analysis indicates that defining an entire group of people by commonality in physical traits and characteristics, or creating preemptive assumptions of their backgrounds and talent, produces highly inaccurate results. Agencies must hire greater numbers of dark-skinned filmmakers and modeling photographers to allow greater diversity in the array of talent available to these industries; such actions could potentially expand the international popularity and societal reach of films and modeling companies. The prominent use of stereotypes should be minimized on media platforms due to the detrimental effects caused on individuals of color who aim to move ahead in their careers. Too often, people believe that an individual's appearance is directly and definitively related to who they are or what they are capable of, but such mindsets are detrimental in the long term. The continued success of dark-skinned models and celebrities of color continues to prove contrary to this idea, but as long as the industry remains colorist, these individuals in the Hollywood and modeling media industries, as well as within society, will be unable to reach their full potential

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