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13th Scientific Meeting of the Classification and Data Analysis Group
Firenze, September 9-11, 2021

edited by

Giovanni C. Porzio
Carla Rampichini
Chiara Bocci



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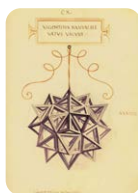
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INDEX

Preface	1
----------------	----------

Keynote Speakers

Jean-Michel Loubes

Optimal transport methods for fairness in machine learning	5
---	----------

Peter Rousseeuw, Jakob Raymaekers and Mia Hubert

Class maps for visualizing classification results	6
--	----------

Robert Tibshirani, Stephen Bates and Trevor Hastie

Understanding cross-validation and prediction error	7
--	----------

Cinzia Viroli

Quantile-based classification	8
--------------------------------------	----------

Bin Yu

Veridical data science for responsible AI: characterizing V4 neurons through deepTune	9
--	----------

Plenary Session

Daniel Diaz

A simple correction for COVID-19 sampling bias	14
---	-----------

Jeffrey S. Morris

A seat at the table: the key role of biostatistics and data science in the COVID-19 pandemic	15
---	-----------

Bhramar Mukherjee

Predictions, role of interventions and the crisis of virus in India: a data science call to arms	16
---	-----------

Danny Pfeffermann

Contributions of Israel's CBS to rout COVID-19	17
---	-----------

Invited Papers

Claudio Agostinelli, Giovanni Saraceno and Luca Greco

Robust issues in estimating modes for multivariate torus data	21
--	-----------

Emanuele Aliverti

Bayesian nonparametric dynamic modeling of psychological traits	25
--	-----------

<i>Andres M. Alonso, Carolina Gamboa and Daniel Peña</i> Clustering financial time series using generalized cross correlations	27
<i>Raffaele Argiento, Edoardo Filippi-Mazzola and Lucia Paci</i> Model-based clustering for categorical data via Hamming distance	31
<i>Antonio Balzanella, Antonio Irpino and Francisco de A.T. De Carvalho</i> Mining multiple time sequences through co-clustering algorithms for distributional data	32
<i>Francesco Bartolucci, Fulvia Pennoni and Federico Cortese</i> Hidden Markov and regime switching copula models for state allocation in multiple time-series	36
<i>Michela Battauz and Paolo Vidoni</i> Boosting multidimensional IRT models	40
<i>Matteo Bottai</i> Understanding and estimating conditional parametric quantile models	44
<i>Niklas Bussmann, Roman Enzmann, Paolo Giudici and Emanuela Raffinetti</i> Shapley Lorenz methods for eXplainable artificial intelligence	45
<i>Andrea Cappelozzo, Ludovic Duponchel, Francesca Greselin and Brendan Murphy</i> Robust classification of spectroscopic data in agri-food: first analysis on the stability of results	49
<i>Andrea Cerasa, Enrico Checchi, Domenico Perrotta and Francesca Torti</i> Issues in monitoring the EU trade of critical COVID-19 commodities	53
<i>Marcello Chiodi</i> Smoothed non linear PCA for multivariate data	54
<i>Roberto Colombi, Sabrina Giordano and Maria Kateri</i> Accounting for response behavior in longitudinal rating data	58
<i>Claudio Conversano, Giulia Contu, Luca Frigau and Carmela Cappelli</i> Network-based semi-supervised clustering of time series data	62
<i>Federica Cugnata, Chiara Brombin, Pietro Cippà, Alessandro Ceschi, Paolo Ferrari and Clelia Di Serio</i> Characterising longitudinal trajectories of COVID-19 biomarkers within a latent class framework	64
<i>Silvia D'Angelo</i> Sender and receiver effects in latent space models for multiplex data	68
<i>Anna Denkowska and Stanisław Wanat</i> DTW-based assessment of the predictive power of the copula-DCC-GARCH-MST model developed for European insurance institutions	71
<i>Roberto Di Mari, Zsuzsa Bakk, Jennifer Oser and Jouni Kuha</i> Two-step estimation of multilevel latent class models with covariates	75
<i>Marie Du Roy de Chaumaray and Matthieu Marbac</i> Clustering data with non-ignorable missingness using semi-parametric mixture models	79

<i>Pierpaolo D'Urso, Livia De Giovanni and Vincenzina Vitale</i> Spatial-temporal clustering based on B-splines: robust models with applications to COVID-19 pandemic	83
<i>Leonardo Egidi, Roberta Pappadà, Francesco Pauli and Nicola Torelli</i> PIVMET: pivotal methods for Bayesian relabelling in finite mixture models	87
<i>Tahir Ekin and Claudio Conversano</i> Cluster validity by random forests	91
<i>Luis Angel García-Escudero, Agustín Mayo-Iscar and Marco Riani</i> Robust estimation of parsimonious finite mixture of Gaussian models	92
<i>Silvia Facchinetti and Silvia Angela Osmetti</i> A risk indicator for categorical data	93
<i>Matteo Fasiolo</i> Additive quantile regression via the qgam R package	97
<i>Michael Fop, Dimitris Karlis, Ioannis Kosmidis, Adrian O'Hagan, Caitriona Ryan and Isobel Claire Gormley</i> Gaussian mixture models for high dimensional data using composite likelihood	98
<i>Carlo Gaetan, Paolo Girardi and Victor Muthama Musau</i> On model-based clustering using quantile regression	102
<i>Carlotta Galeone</i> Socioeconomic inequalities and cancer risk: myth or reality?	106
<i>Michael Gallagher, Christophe Biernacki and Paul McNicholas</i> Parameter-wise co-clustering for high dimensional data	107
<i>Francesca Greselin and Alina Jędrzejczak</i> Quantifying the impact of covariates on the gender gap measurement: an analysis based on EU-SILC data from Poland and Italy	108
<i>Alessandra Guglielmi, Mario Beraha, Matteo Giannella, Matteo Pegoraro and Riccardo Peli</i> A transdimensional MCMC sampler for spatially dependent mixture models	112
<i>Christian Hennig and Pietro Coretto</i> Non-parametric consistency for the Gaussian mixture maximum likelihood estimator	116
<i>Yinxuan Huang and Natalie Shlomo</i> Improving the reliability of a nonprobability web survey	120
<i>Maria Iannario and Claudia Tarantola</i> A semi-Bayesian approach for the analysis of scale effects in ordinal regression models	124
<i>Jayant Jha</i> Best approach direction for spherical random variables	128

<i>Maria Kateri</i>	
Simple effect measures for interpreting generalized binary regression models	129
<i>Shogo Kato, Kota Nagasaki and Wataru Nakanishi</i>	
Mixtures of Kato–Jones distributions on the circle, with an application to traffic count data	133
<i>John Kent</i>	
How to design a directional distribution	137
<i>Simona Korenjak-Černe and Nataša Kejžar</i>	
Identifying mortality patterns of main causes of death among young EU population using SDA approaches	141
<i>Fabrizio Laurini and Gianluca Morelli</i>	
Robust supervised clustering: some practical issues	142
<i>Daniela Marella and Danny Pfeffermann</i>	
A nonparametric approach for statistical matching under informative sampling and nonresponse	146
<i>Mariagiulia Matteucci and Stefania Mignani</i>	
Investigating model fit in item response models with the Hellinger distance	150
<i>Matteo Mazziotta and Adriano Pareto</i>	
PCA-based composite indices and measurement model	154
<i>Marcella Mazzoleni, Angiola Pollastri and Vanda Tulli</i>	
Gender inequalities from an income perspective	158
<i>Yana Melnykov, Xuwen Zhu and Volodymyr Melnykov</i>	
Transformation mixture modeling for skewed data groups with heavy tails and scatter	162
<i>Luca Merlo, Lea Petrella and Nikos Tzavidis</i>	
Unconditional M-quantile regression	163
<i>Jesper Møller, Mario Beraha, Raffaele Argiento and Alessandra Guglielmi</i>	
MCMC computations for Bayesian mixture models using repulsive point processes	167
<i>Keefe Murphy, Cinzia Viroli and Isobel Claire Gormley</i>	
Infinite mixtures of infinite factor analysers	168
<i>Stanislav Nagy, Petra Laketa and Rainer Dyckerhoff</i>	
Angular halfspace depth: computation	169
<i>Yarema Okhrin, Gazi Salah Uddin and Muhammad Yahya</i>	
Nonlinear Interconnectedness of crude oil and financial markets	173
<i>M. Rosário Oliveira, Ana Subtil and Lina Oliveira</i>	
Detection of internet attacks with histogram principal component analysis	174
<i>Sally Paganin</i>	
Semiparametric IRT models for non-normal latent traits	178

<i>Giuseppe Pandolfo</i>	
A graphical depth-based aid to detect deviation from unimodality on hyperspheres	182
<i>Panos Pardalos</i>	
Networks of networks	186
<i>Xanthi Pedeli and Cristiano Varin</i>	
Pairwise likelihood estimation of latent autoregressive count models	187
<i>Mark Reiser and Maduranga Dassanayake</i>	
A study of lack-of-fit diagnostics for models fit to cross-classified binary variables	191
<i>Giorgia Riveccio, Jean-Paul Chavas, Giovanni De Luca, Salvatore Di Falco and Fabian Capitanio</i>	
Assessing food security issues in Italy: a quantile copula approach	195
<i>Nicoleta Rogovschi</i>	
Co-clustering for high dimensional sparse data	199
<i>Massimiliano Russo</i>	
Malaria risk detection via mixed membership models	203
<i>Paula Saavedra-Nieves and Rosa M. Crujeiras</i>	
Nonparametric estimation of the number of clusters for directional data	207
<i>Shuchismita Sarkar, Volodymyr Melnykov and Xuwen Zhu</i>	
Tensor-variate finite mixture model for the analysis of university professor remuneration	208
<i>Florian Schuberth</i>	
Specifying composites in structural equation modeling: the Henseler-Ogasawara specification	209
<i>Jarod Smith, Mohammad Arashi and Andriette Bekker</i>	
Network analysis implementing a mixture distribution from Bayesian viewpoint	210
<i>Paul Smith, Peter van der Heijden and Maarten Cruyff</i>	
Measurement errors in multiple systems estimation	211
<i>Valentin Todorov and Peter Filzmoser</i>	
Robust classification in high dimensions using regularized covariance estimates	215
<i>Salvatore Daniele Tomarchio, Luca Bagnato and Antonio Punzo</i>	
Clustering via new parsimonious mixtures of heavy tailed distributions	216
<i>Agostino Torti, Marta Galvani, Alessandra Menafoglio, Piercesare Secchi and Simone Vantini</i>	
A general bi-clustering technique for functional data	217
<i>Laura Trinchera</i>	
Developing a multidimensional and hierarchical index following a composite-based approach	220

<i>Rosanna Verde, Francisco T. de A. De Carvalho and Antonio Balzanella</i> A generalised clusterwise regression for distributional data	223
<i>Marika Vezzoli, Francesco Doglietto, Stefano Renzetti, Marco Fontanella and Stefano Calza</i> A machine learning approach for evaluating anxiety in neurosurgical patients during the COVID-19 pandemic	227
<i>Isadora Antoniano Villalobos, Simone Padoan and Boris Beranger</i> Prediction of large observations via Bayesian inference for extreme-value theory	231
<i>Maria Prosperina Vitale, Vincenzo Giuseppe Genova, Giuseppe Giordano and Giancarlo Ragozini</i> Community detection in tripartite networks of university student mobility flows	232
<i>Ernst Wit and Lucas Kania</i> Causal regularization	236
<i>Qiuyi Wu and David Banks</i> Minimizing conflicts of interest: optimizing the JSM program	240

Contributed Papers

<i>Antonino Abbruzzo, Maria Francesca Cracolici and Furio Urso</i> Model selection procedure for mixture hidden Markov models	243
<i>Roberto Ascari and Sonia Migliorati</i> A full mixture of experts model to classify constrained data	247
<i>Luigi Augugliaro, Gianluca Sottile and Angelo Mineo</i> Sparse inference in covariate adjusted censored Gaussian graphical models	251
<i>Simona Balzano, Mario Rosario Guarracino and Giovanni Camillo Porzio</i> Semi-supervised learning through depth functions	255
<i>Lucio Barabesi, Andrea Cerasa, Andrea Cerioli and Domenico Perrotta</i> A combined test of the Benford hypothesis with anti-fraud applications	256
<i>Chiara Bardelli</i> Unbalanced classification of electronic invoicing	260
<i>Claudia Berloco, Raffaele Argiento and Silvia Montagna</i> Predictive power of Bayesian CAR models on scale free networks: an application for credit risk	264
<i>Marco Berrettini, Giuliano Galimberti and Saverio Ranciati</i> Semiparametric finite mixture of regression models with Bayesian P-splines	268

<i>Giuseppe Bove</i>	
A subject-specific measure of interrater agreement based on the homogeneity index	272
<i>Antonio Calcagni</i>	
Estimating latent linear correlations from fuzzy contingency tables	276
<i>Andrea Cappozzo, Alessandro Casa and Michael Fop</i>	
Model-based clustering with sparse matrix mixture models	280
<i>Andrea Cappozzo, Luis Angel Garcia Escudero, Francesca Greselin and Agustín Mayo-Iscar</i>	
Exploring solutions via monitoring for cluster weighted robust models	284
<i>Maurizio Carpita and Silvia Golia</i>	
Categorical classifiers in multi-class classification problems	288
<i>Gianmarco Caruso, Greta Panunzi, Marco Mingione, Pierfrancesco Alaimo Di Loro, Stefano Moro, Edoardo Bompiani, Caterina Lanfredi, Daniela Silvia Pace, Luca Tardella and Giovanna Jona Lasinio</i>	
Model-based clustering for estimating cetaceans site-fidelity and abundance	292
<i>Carlo Cavicchia, Maurizio Vichi and Giorgia Zaccaria</i>	
Model-based clustering with parsimonious covariance structure	296
<i>Francesca Condino</i>	
Clustering income data based on share densities	300
<i>Paula Costa Fontichiarì, Miriam Giuliani, Raffaele Argiento and Lucia Paci</i>	
Group-dependent finite mixture model	304
<i>Salvatore Cuomo, Federico Gatta, Fabio Giampaolo, Carmela Iorio and Francesco Piccialli</i>	
A machine learning approach in stock risk management	308
<i>Cristina Davino and Giuseppe Lamberti</i>	
Pathmix segmentation trees to compare linear regression models	312
<i>Houyem Demni, Davide Buttarazzi, Stanislav Nagy and Giovanni Camillo Porzio</i>	
Angular halfspace depth: classification using spherical bagdistances	316
<i>Agostino Di Ciaccio</i>	
Neural networks for high cardinality categorical data	320
<i>F. Marta L. Di Lascio, Andrea Menapace and Roberta Pappadà</i>	
Ali-Mikhail-Haq copula to detect low correlations in hierarchical clustering	324
<i>Maria Veronica Dorgali, Silvia Bacci, Bruno Bertaccini and Alessandra Petrucci</i>	
Higher education and employability: insights from the mandatory notices of the ministry of labour	328
<i>Lorenzo Focardi Olmi and Anna Gottard</i>	
An alternative to joint graphical lasso for learning multiple Gaussian graphical models	332

<i>Francesca Fortuna, Alessia Naccarato and Silvia Terzi</i>	
Functional cluster analysis of HDI evolution in European countries	336
<i>Sylvia Frühwirth-Schnatter, Bettina Grün and Gertraud Malsiner-Walli</i>	
Estimating Bayesian mixtures of finite mixtures with telescoping sampling	340
<i>Chiara Galimberti, Federico Castelletti and Stefano Peluso</i>	
A Bayesian framework for structural learning of mixed graphical models	344
<i>Andrea Gilardi, Riccardo Borgoni, Luca Presicce and Jorge Mateu</i>	
Measurement error models on spatial network lattices: car crashes in Leeds	348
<i>Carmela Iorio, Giuseppe Pandolfo, Michele Staiano, Massimo Aria and Roberta Siciliano</i>	
The L^P data depth and its application to multivariate process control charts	352
<i>Petra Laketa and Stanislav Nagy</i>	
Angular halfspace depth: central regions	356
<i>Michele La Rocca, Francesco Giordano and Cira Perna</i>	
Clustering production indexes for construction with forecast distributions	360
<i>Maria Mannone, Veronica Distefano, Claudio Silvestri and Irene Poli</i>	
Clustering longitudinal data with category theory for diabetic kidney disease	364
<i>Laura Marcis, Maria Chiara Pagliarella and Renato Salvatore</i>	
A redundancy analysis with multivariate random-coefficients linear models	368
<i>Paolo Mariani, Andrea Marletta and Matteo Locci</i>	
The use of multiple imputation techniques for social media data	372
<i>Federico Marotta, Paolo Provero and Silvia Montagna</i>	
Prediction of gene expression from transcription factors affinities: an application of Bayesian non-linear modelling	376
<i>Francesca Martella, Fabio Attorre, Michele De Sanctis and Giuliano Fanelli</i>	
High dimensional model-based clustering of European georeferenced vegetation plots	380
<i>Ana Martins, Paula Brito, Sónia Dias and Peter Filzmoser</i>	
Multivariate outlier detection for histogram-valued variables	384
<i>Giovanna Menardi and Federico Ferraccioli</i>	
A nonparametric test for mode significance	388
<i>Massimo Mucciardi, Giovanni Pirrotta, Andrea Briglia and Arnaud Sallaberry</i>	
Visualizing cluster of words: a graphical approach to grammar acquisition	392

<i>Marta Nai Ruscone and Dimitris Karlis</i> Robustness methods for modelling count data with general dependence structures	396
<i>Roberta Paroli, Luigi Spezia, Marc Stutter and Andy Vinten</i> Bayesian analysis of a water quality high-frequency time series through Markov switching autoregressive models	400
<i>Mariano Porcu, Isabella Sulis and Cristian Usala</i> Detecting the effect of secondary school in higher education university choices	404
<i>Roberto Rocci and Monia Ranalli</i> Semi-constrained model-based clustering of mixed-type data using a composite likelihood approach	408
<i>Annalina Sarra, Adelia Evangelista, Tonio Di Battista and Damiana Pieragostino</i> Antibodies to SARS-CoV-2: an exploratory analysis carried out through the Bayesian profile regression	412
<i>Theresa Scharl and Bettina Grün</i> Modelling three-way RNA sequencing data with mixture of multivariate Poisson-lognormal distribution	416
<i>Luca Scrucca</i> Stacking ensemble of Gaussian mixtures	420
<i>Rosaria Simone, Cristina Davino, Domenico Vistocco and Gerhard Tutz</i> A robust quantile approach to ordinal trees	424
<i>Venera Tomaselli, Giulio Giacomo Cantone and Valeria Mazzeo</i> The detection of spam behaviour in review bomb	428
<i>Donatella Vicari and Paolo Giordani</i> Clustering models for three-way data	432
<i>Gianpaolo Zammarchi and Jaromir Antoch</i> Using eye-tracking data to create a weighted dictionary for sentiment analysis: the eye dictionary	436

THE DETECTION OF SPAM BEHAVIOUR IN REVIEW BOMB

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, a new phenomenon called 'Review Bomb' has affected online rating systems. It occurs when a massive amount of accounts reviews a single product, usually negatively to make its reputation slump.

This study analyses the differences among legitimate users and 'review bombers', using common classifiers and techniques from spam detection to identify suspicious reviews, by looking at both content and user's features.

KEYWORDS: review bomb, online ratings, cold start, machine learning.

1 Introduction

Often, before purchasing a product or service, consumers ask for the opinion of their peers who already purchased it. This is commonly referred to as *word-of-mouth* (WOM). A positive opinion among WOM networks is regarded by marketing experts as a valuable and powerful source of reputation for brands. Online rating platforms, or 'review aggregators', are a case of technological innovation for electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM): by browsing a review aggregator, a consumer can read opinions of people who already purchased items (i.e., *evaluands*, such as products, services, place to visits, etc).

Aggregators take this name from the service of recommendation (i.e., a recommender system) they offer. They ask their registered users for submitting a numerical score in a constrained multipoint scale, and then summarise the scores into ratings and rankings (Tomaselli & Cantone, 2020). Scores collected in experimental settings respect methodological assumptions or normality (i.e., independence of observations) but scores collected in online (open) platforms are subject to two biases:

- Purchasing bias, people review what they purchase but they purchase what is already reviewed or, at least, already popular (a case of 'Matthew

Effect’);

- Under-reporting bias, people review when they are extremely satisfied or unsatisfied.

The consequence of these biases is a J-shaped distribution of scores in online ratings (Hu *et al.*, 2017; Smironva *et al.*, 2020). These biases make easier to fraud the network of eWOM by injection of fake reviews submitted by the so-called ‘sock puppet’ accounts. Experimental results confirm that positive fake reviews have an impact on the success of online business (van de Rijt *et al.*, 2014). A consensus on the impact of negative fake reviews has not been reached yet.

Some recommender systems have information if the reviewer purchased the item (e.g., Amazon) but recommender systems generally do not know how much the user is experienced about the item (e.g., how much time spent interacting with that). This issue is related to the fake reviews: one could ask an uninterested friend with an account in the system to rig a review of a item. Should a case like this be considered fake? To overcome such issues, researchers have adopted the broader perspective of ‘spam reviews’ attack (Hussain *et al.*, 2019). Spam is not necessarily fake but it is an excess of information which is undesired or harmful for the purposes of the system. According to Aggarwal, 2016, a good spam attack, hard to detect, is deployed slowly in the time, so that the sock puppet mimics the behaviour of a regular user.

Recently, another type of review spam attack has emerged, known as ‘Review Bomb’, occurring when a massive amount of accounts reviews, usually negatively, attack a single product to make its reputation slump (Tomaselli *et al.*, 2021). During a ‘Review Bomb’, is often unclear how many accounts are sock puppets and how many accounts are people ideologically driven to review the specific item, but most of them involved lack a history of previous reviews/ratings in the system (*cold-start* problem).

2 Dataset

The dataset includes $N = 59k$ English reviews on the video game *The Last of Us Part II* (TLOU2). TLOU2 was ‘review bombed’ since its publication date (June 19th, 2020) for ideological reasons (Tomaselli *et al.*, 2021). These reviews were written by registered users on the online platform `metacritic.com`.

From each review, the following metadata are extracted: *i*) username; *ii*) the date the current review was written; *iii*) text of the review; *iv*) score, in a scale

[1:10]; *v*) number of upvotes (i.e., likes) assigned to the review from users, *vi*) number of downvotes (i.e., dislikes) assigned to the review from users; *vii*) number of past ratings that a user provided on Metacritic; *viii*) number of past reviews that a user wrote on metacritic.com. Once collected data, the labelling procedure, consisting of assigning a binary class label whether the review was legitimate (0) or related to the bombing phenomenon (1), is performed.

3 Methods

In the present paper, we propose a methodology for analysing data from a real dataset of TLOU2 reviews, focusing on the online review bomb phenomenon. The data pre-processing stage (data cleaning and handling of missing values) consists of reducing noise words by removing all parts of text which are not relevant for the scope, i.e., punctuation, symbols, and stopwords. Simple Bag-Of-Words and weighted strategy such as Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) measures are applied to determine term's representativeness. In terms of review's content, some statistical features (e.g., number of punctuation marks, number of unique words, words per sentences) are also extracted.

Techniques for detecting spammer activities on online social networks (Abkenar *et al.*, 2020) and online review platforms (Liu *et al.*, 2017; Harris, 2018) allow to identify accounts involved in review bombing within this dataset. Extra engineered features, therefore, are created to better discriminate not legitimate reviews from legitimate one by looking at users' features, such as username length, username starting with/containing numbers among others.

To reduce the dimensionality of the data and improve the results of the analysis, the most relevant features are selected to enter the model. Popular statistical tests, such as Pearson's test and Chi-squared, are used for this purpose, since they can handle numerical and categorical variables, respectively.

Once got the most important features, these ones are then passed into the classification algorithms to produce a range of models to predict not legitimate reviews. A k-Fold Cross Validation technique is considered to compare different machine learning algorithms ((e.g., Logistic Regression, Naive Bayes, Random Forest, Support Vector Machine); Nematzadeh *et al.*, 2015), generally used in spam (Al-Zoubi *et al.*, 2021) and fake news/reviews detection. Finally, model performance is evaluated by scoring the outcomes from a test set, using precision, accuracy, recall, and F_1 score (Zheng *et al.*, 2015) metrics.

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