

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF USING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR TEACHING CROSS-CULTURAL SENSITIVITY TO MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Economies all over the world over are driven by knowledge at many levels, the need for and importance of skilled human capital and skill-based training have become paramount to the socio-economic well-being. The current study focuses on the job-ready, employable human capital and its knowledge base. Since the geographical boundaries have blurred, facilitating setting up of multicultural workplaces, the demand for cross-culturally sensitive workforce has risen. The sample consisted of 112 management students in India who were assessed on cross-cultural sensitivity. This pre-test was followed by an exposure to experiential learning (intervention) before administering the post-test assessing cross-cultural sensitivity as a result of experiential learning.

The results of the study were analyzed using the descriptive and inferential statistics. For this, statistical analytical tools like paired 't' test have been used. This research indicates that experiential learning has a positive effect on cross-cultural sensitivity among management students in India. The active engagement of the participant/ learner in the entire learning process ensures a lasting effect on the learner.

The result of the research could be used by the higher educational institutions aiming to produce employable youth by opening doors for new strategies of teaching and learning apart from the traditional curricula and pedagogy. The study can be further used by academicians for building upon new models for understanding and theories on the effect of experiential learning on life skills in general and cross-cultural sensitivity in particular.

It is an attempt to include and study the aspects of experiential learning and how it impacts life skills such as cross-cultural sensitivity, specifically in the Indian context.

KEYWORDS: *Learning Strategies, Experiential Learning, Cross-Cultural Sensitivity, Higher Education, Management Education*

Article History

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INTRODUCTION

At a time when economies the world over are driven by knowledge at many levels, the need for and importance of skilled human capital and skill-based training have become paramount to the socio-economic well-being today. Aided by technology and multi-pronged advances taking place daily, geographical lines have been blurred, facilitating setting up of multicultural workplaces. It is for this reason that it has become imperative for countries globally to work on developing and sustaining skilled and diverse workplaces.

Higher education, which plays a key role in building human capital and promoting innovation, becomes central to the success and sustainability of a knowledge economy (Dill & Vught, 2010). Higher education has, therefore, acquired a greater place in national agendas and seen a lot of meaningful reforms globally in the past few decades. According to Altbach et al, “an academic revolution has taken place in higher education in the past half century marked by transformations unprecedented in scope and diversity” (Altbach et al, 2009).

Unlike, say, about 50 years ago, when higher education essentially meant traditional research and universities that facilitating it, higher education institutions today are quite diversified in their scope, reach and an attendance of people coming from various cultures. The profile of higher education of today, therefore, is wider, with more diverse institutions, programmes and students.

Culture was defined as a set of shared beliefs, values, habits, communication forms and artefacts by Eliasoph and Lichtermann (2003). The sharing could partly be conscious and partly unconscious. Culture is more or less stable, mediated between generations by learning and socialisation. According to Greet Hofstede (1991), on the other hand, culture is like collective programming of mind to distinguish the members of a group or social class from one another. In other words, culture is a collective phenomenon partly shared by people who live or have lived within the same social environment where it was learnt (Korhonen, 2010).

The era of monolithic culture of yore is long gone, replaced effectively by the modern age of globalization. In today’s time, multiculturalism has an impact on the general discourse and trends we come across in our everyday lives, be it in education or work. Against this backdrop have emerged new sets of ideas, theories and thoughts on culture, too. Stuart Hall (1997) proposed a reconceptualisation of culture through juxtaposition and co-presence of several cultural forces and discourses.

People of today live, act and travel in multicultural societies by transcending cultural boundaries – not only internationally but also intra-nationally. Considering the vast terrain of India and the diversity it represents, you observe a change in culture every few hundred kilometres. With religion, food, language and other cultural dimensions differing from place to place – diversity in every respect – India indeed is a microcosm of the world itself. Therefore, clearly, multiculturalism is not just a result of internationalisation; it truly holds true in the Indian context as well. That, in fact, explains the Government of India’s initiative to improve cultural connections across various states of the country under the ‘Ek Bharat, Shreshth Bharat’ initiative.

The objective quite clearly is to educate people of one ethnic group or culture about another, creating in the process a cross-cultural sensitisation, a process otherwise misunderstood as adopting the culture of the other. While it is as simple as getting aware of others’ cultures and accepting them with their differences, it assumes greater importance in today’s world, where schools, colleges, workplaces and other public gatherings, even places of worship, are open to people from all cultural backgrounds.

In the context of business, cultural awareness and sensitive handling of multicultural workforce have become some of the important managing aspects today. A sound understanding of diverse cultures leads to better communication, unity and productivity for any workforce. Sensitivity for various cultural influences at a workplace, in essence, results in efficient coordination and amicable functioning among teams, departments and offices. Given the importance of understanding cross-cultural sensitivity and intelligence, businesses of today look to hire and retain employees who have worked on these skills.

Mindful of the demand for a culturally sensitive workforce in the market, educational institutions, particularly the higher education ones, work on inculcating these qualities and skills in their students, to enhance their employability. They emphasise the broader adoption and more integrated use of culture-sensitive communications and educational technologies, along with a greater degree of internationalisation and competition. Therefore, new learning techniques, tools and strategies are being used in higher education to improve the performance of their students and yield better results.

Despite numerous changes in the higher education trends globally, what remains unchanged is the emphasis on learning to prepare employable youth for the global job market. Organisations have varied interests and expectations from their employees. As a result, apart from traditional classroom learning, higher education institutions and universities are often open to exploring other, newer strategies of imparting knowledge.

Types of Learning

There are various theories on how an individual learns behaviours, skills and concepts. Here are some of them:

- **Classical Conditioning:** Under this type of learning, a neutral stimulus is paired with unconditional stimulus to elicit a conditioned response. Here, you learn to associate events and stimuli that frequently work together. This helps you learn how to anticipate events. Ivan Pavlov's experiment on dogs is a classic example of this type of learning.
- **Operant Conditioning:** This learning process lays stress on reinforcement and punishment to strengthen or extinguish a response. B F Skinner and Edward Thorndike were key proponents of this type of learning. According to the 'law of effect', a term coined by Thorndike, behaviours that are followed by consequences satisfying to one are more likely to be repeated. Conversely, behaviours followed by unpleasant results are less likely to be repeated (Catania, 1999).
- **Cognitive Learning:** This learning type depends on the thought process behind any behaviour. Unlike other schools of learning, the cognitive learning theory is based on the idea that human beings process the information they receive rather than merely responding to a stimulus. The learner plays an active role in seeking ways to understand, interpret and process information, and relate it to the information stored in their memory. Learning here, thus, is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The cognitive learning theory implies that the different processes concerning learning have to be explained by first analysing mental processes.
- **Observational Learning:** In this type of learning, you learn by observing the behaviour of others and imitating them, irrespective of the reinforcement. The contribution of Albert Bandura, through his famous Bobo-doll experiment, is significant in this field of learning.

Most of these theories of learning, as indicated by scholars and theorists globally, involve learning of a behaviour or skill. However, the knowledge economy of the 21st century does not rely only on these. Besides behaviour and skill, some other variables like concept and attitude also need to be inculcated in job aspirants. Therefore, institutions of higher education arrange to provide their students with these. In order to facilitate such learning, they employ various methods. One of these methods is experiential learning.

Experiential Learning

This method is based on education through first-hand experience. Skills, knowledge, and experience are acquired outside of the traditional setting of an academic classroom. It may include internships, studies abroad, field trips, field research, and service-learning projects (Firestone, 2015).

Experiential learning is “a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experience” (Wurdinger, 2005). The National Society for Experiential Learning (NSEE) defines experiential learning as “inductive, beginning with raw experience that is processed through an intentional learning format and transformed into working, useable knowledge” (Wurdinger, 2005). Experiential learning, therefore, is acquired through reflection on one’s previous experiences.

Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory

According to David Kolb’s experiential learning theory, one of the best known educational theories in higher education, “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. (Kolb, 1984)

Kolb’s theory, taking into consideration individual differences in learning, highlights four stages of learning associated with distinct learning styles. According to Kolb’s cycle of learning, ‘immediate or concrete experiences’ provide a basis for ‘reflective observations’. These ‘reflective observations’ are then assimilated and distilled into ‘abstract concepts’ to produce new implications for action. These can be ‘active experimentation’ creating new experiences. The feedback provided, according to Kolb’s learning cycle, is the basis for new action and evaluation of the consequences of that action. One should go through this cycle several times, making it a spiral of cycles (Healey & Jenkins, 2000).

To summarise, Kolb conceptualises the process of action research as “a spiral of action and research consisting of four major moments – plan, act, observe and reflect” (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). As part of a study, an experimental design was developed to test if economic simulation games support the learning process corresponding to Kolb’s experiential learning cycle. The empirical results of the study indicate that simulation games do support the four learning stages more efficiently than traditional teaching methods. (Herz & Merz, 1998).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A study by Kurpis & Hunter (2017) suggested that business schools could become more competitive by offering opportunities for intercultural skill development to their students through an integration of these into their traditional curriculum. The study tested the impact of experiential learning empirically. Marketing students and those with advanced English as their secondary language interviewed one another on differences in consumer behaviour.

The study revealed that this activity led to a perceivable increase in the student’s knowledge of cultures, motivation, and confidence, besides better ability to deal with people from other cultures. The students considered this activity a valuable part of their education, and their cultural quotient was positively correlated with the self-reported prior intercultural competence based on experience and studies. Compared with students from within the country, international students scored higher only on the cognitive dimension of cultural quotient.

In 2005, Lu et al studied the impact of experiential model of instruction in teaching culturally sensitive and empathetic communication skills. The study tried to integrate and communicate theoretical, conceptual, and experiential

understanding of cross-cultural empathy through mindful attitudes. The preliminary findings indicated that students were able to verbalise new learning experiences, and they experienced a kind of human connection with the one another.

In a research conducted by Lockhart & Resick (1997) on nurse trainers – responsible for developing culturally competent care givers and culturally sensitive co-workers – participants were given experiential learning activities and local community resources. It revealed immediate as well as long-term effects of experiential learning on graduates' clinical practice.

Gosen & Washbush (2004) also examined the validity of experiential learning while focusing on measurement of the effectiveness of the approach. The empirical research supported the notion that experiential learning was effective. The studies showing these results reflected a long-standing trend of failing to meet the highest of research design and measurement standards. So, the authors believed a conclusion about the effectiveness must be tentative.

Another investigation by Mok (1999) on students' perception of the efficacy of experiential learning compared this with the effectiveness of study journal learning. Functional attributes received positive to high ratings. And the study concluded that experiential learning was more effective than study journal learning in several functional attributes.

Since experiential learning is a major contributor to higher education, Kruger, et al (2015) assessed educationally relevant experiences at a free health clinic run by students. It was found that a majority of students believed their clinic experiences blended well with their academic curriculum and schedule. This was seen as a positive exercise in terms of their gain of personal knowledge, skill and experiences, as well as the direct benefit to the local community.

Paul & Mukhopadhyay (2005) assessed experiential learning's impact on international business education. The result of the study showed that incorporating these techniques in the pedagogy and course curriculum allowed active learning for students and enhanced their overall learning.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

To assess the effectiveness of experiential learning on cross-cultural sensitivity among management students.

Objectives

- To assess cross-cultural sensitivity among management student.
- To impart experiential learning to the management students.
- To assess the same students on cross-cultural sensitivity.
- To compare the result of pre and post learning experience and assess the effectiveness of experiential learning on cross-cultural sensitivity.

Hypothesis

There is no difference in the scores of management students on cross cultural sensitivity pre and post exposure to experiential learning.

Sampling

Sample Size: The sample included a total of 112 participants (management students).

A strict inclusion and exclusion criterions were maintained in order to screen the participants for including them in the study.

Inclusion Criterion

- An upper age limit of 25 years was maintained to select participants for the study.
- The participants were pursuing management studies in India.

Exclusion Criterion

- Foreign nationals were excluded from the study.
- If a student was prosecuted for any criminal charges, he/she was excluded from the research.

Sampling Technique: Accidental sampling technique, a type of non-probability sampling technique wherein the researcher selects the sample as per his/her convenience was used for the selection of sample in this study

TOOLS USED

- **Socio-Demographic Data Sheet:** It was used for collecting various information regarding the participant's socio-demographic details such as sex, religion, age, etc. In addition to the ones mentioned above, it took into consideration the variables like educational details, family structure etc.
- **Questionnaire Identifying the Performance of Students:** A self-devised questionnaire, upheld by five experts in the industry, was used to assess cross-cultural sensitivity among the management students.

ENROLMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

The inclusion and exclusion criterions were considered while selecting the sample. The test was administered on the participants followed by a task to visit various state emporiums of India, Dilli Haat and Surajkund Mela wherein they were exposed to a variety of cross-cultural stimuli thereby enabling experiential learning, which classroom setting, due to its own imitations, could not ensure. The test was re-administered on the same participants within a short period of one week and the difference in response was noted. The test was re-administered within a week to ensure that any changes in the score are because of the intervention (experiential learning) only. No other factor would normally impact the response of the participants in such a small span.

DATA COLLECTIONS

A pilot phase was conducted before the conduction of the main phase of the research. It was administered on two participants in order to gauge whether any subsequent changes are required to be made in the questionnaire/ research methods before the administration of the main phase of research.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The identity of the participants for the purpose of this study or otherwise was kept completely confidential throughout the test and even after it. The participants were not harmed physically, mentally or psychologically even in a single way. The results were analyzed objectively and in a bias-free manner without any kind of prejudice or stereotype. The participants selected for the study were well informed with respect to the nature and procedure of the test. They gave their voluntary consent by signing the informed consent form and were by no means misguided or forced to be a part of this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Socio-demographic diversity details of the participants have been discussed in the first part of this section followed by the analysis of results obtained from the study on the effect of experiential learning on cross-cultural sensitivity among management students in India.

Socio-Demographic Particulars of the Participants:

The universe of the research was management students in India. However, the sample for this study consisted of 112 participants. These participants were included in the research after a thorough consideration of the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The sample selected for the purpose of the research was diverse and inclusive in nature, with respect to age, sex, religion and ethnicity.

Analysis of Results

First, the cross-cultural sensitivity was assessed among the 112 participants followed by exposure to experiential learning through visits to various state emporiums of India, Dilli Haat and Surajkund Mela. The cross-cultural sensitivity test was re-administered on the same participants within a short span of one week and the difference in response was noted.

Analyzing the cross-cultural sensitivity level among the 112 participants, one could witness low to moderate levels of cross-cultural sensitivity in most of the participants. Also, referring to Table 4.1, one could infer that the mean cross-cultural sensitivity level among the 112 participants is 101.7857 reflecting that the participants are moderately culturally sensitive while the standard deviation accounts for 20.7778. A high standard deviation could imply the presence of outliers in the study owing to their individual differences.

Table 1 Showing the Mean and Standard Deviation in the Cross-Cultural Sensitivity Scores of the Participants

Coming to second dimension of the study, the students were sent to visit places like Dilli Haat, State Emporiums in Delhi and the Surajkund Mela to observe the cultural differences in people across Indian states. All these places are known to have cultural diversity in all sense thereby providing sufficient concrete experiences to the participants as per Kolb's experiential learning theory.

Further, the same cross-cultural sensitivity test was administered on the participants within one week of their exposure to the experiential learning (intervention). Analyzing the cross-cultural sensitivity level among the participants after being exposed to cross-cultural stimuli, one could witness very high scores spread throughout. Also, Referring to Table 4.1, one could infer that the mean cross-cultural sensitivity level after intervention (experiential learning) among the 112 participants is 121.6071 while the standard deviation in this case is higher than that for pre-intervention scores, owing to the deviation of 23.01796 from the mean.

A higher standard deviation in this case, could imply the presence of outliers who lie on the two extreme poles in cultural sensitivity. Some among the group lie on the ethnocentrism side of the pole wherein no acceptance of any other culture is tolerable while others are too culturally sensitive. This balance (or imbalance) between cultural sensitivity for other's culture differs from person to person depending on several factors like exposure to different cultures, belief system etc.

The research then went on to explore the effectiveness of cross cultural sensitivity among the participants by comparing their cross-cultural sensitivity before and after the interventions, i.e., experiential learning in this case. Both the values of cross cultural sensitivity were computed followed by their statistical significance using paired 'T' Test as it is a parametric statistical tool, the use of which is advocated because in this case, the sample size is large and normally distributed.

Table 2 shows the pre and post intervention cross cultural sensitivity for all 112 participants was computed as reflected in Table 4.1. Further, Table 4.2 shows the paired t-test value 't' for pre and post intervention cross cultural sensitivity which was found to be -10.448.

The results show that difference in pre and post intervention group is statistically significant at 95% confidence level. Also, the negative 't' score indicates that the post-intervention group has scored higher than pre-intervention group, thereby confirming positive impact of experiential learning on cross-cultural sensitivity. Hence, the null hypothesis which states that "there is no difference in the scores of management students on cross cultural sensitivity pre and post exposure to experiential learning" cannot be accepted.

The results of the study indicating increase in cross cultural sensitivity post intervention (experiential learning) could also be because of factors other than experiential learning. In order to ensure that such error is eliminated, the gap between the pre-test, intervention and post-test was kept very less. The participants were sent for experiential learning right after the conduction of pre-test while the post-test was conducted within a week from experiential learning. Therefore, any difference in scores in this short span could easily be attributed to the exposure to experiential learning alone.

The results of the current research are in accordance with Kurpis & Hunter's (2017) observations that students cultural quotient was positively correlated with the prior experience-based and studies-based intercultural competence. Further, as suggested by Lu et al. (2005) the experiential instructional model in teaching led to more connectedness among the students is held true by the current study wherein the students appeared more sensitive to cultural differences in general and among each other in particular. The current study also strengthens Mok's (1999) assessment that experiential learning is more effective than study journal learning in many functional attributes.

Likewise, the current study is in sync with the available literature on the topic wherein many researchers have identified the importance of experiential learning, be it Lockhart & Resick's (1997) study on nurse educators or the research of Kruger, et.al (2015) which maintained that majority of higher education students believed that their clinical experiences fit well into their academic curriculum and schedule thereby enabling broader learning. The conclusions of Paul & Mukhopadhyay (2005) indicating that incorporating experiential learning techniques in the pedagogy and course curriculum facilitates active learning for the students and augments overall learning are also in line with the current study.

To summarize, the results of the current study indicate that experiential learning has positive impact on cross cultural sensitivity among management students. The error in terms of any other factor affecting the post-test results were

minimized by ensuring that the participants were sent for experiential learning right after the conduction of pre-test while the post-test was conducted within a week from experiential learning. Therefore, any difference in scores in such a short span could easily be attributed to the exposure to experiential learning alone.

Table 1

Impact of Experiential Learning on Cross Cultural Sensitivity		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Cross Cultural Sensitivity	Pre-intervention	101.7857	112	20.17778	1.90662
	Post-intervention	121.6071	112	23.01796	2.17499

Table 2

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Cross Cultural Sensitivity	Pre-intervention – Post-intervention	-19.82143	20.07787	1.89718	-23.58082	-16.06204	-10.448	111	.000

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

After a complete examination of results of this study along with an in depth review of literature, the positive linkage between experiential learning and cross-cultural sensitivity is undisputed. After a thorough analysis of the available literature on the subject, it can be concluded that experiential learning is an effective tool not just to impart training on a subject but also for life skills. This method seems to be very effective since this method of learning involves direct expose of concrete experience to the learner, which forms the basis for reflective observations which is unique to each individual. Further, the reflected observations are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts in order to produce new implications for action. The learner is an active participant throughout the learning process.

This active engagement in the learning process ensures a lasting effect on the learner. This is probably the reason why higher educational institutions are moving towards innovative learning strategies rather than the traditional curriculum in old classroom setting.

The results of the study indicating increase in cross cultural sensitivity post intervention (experiential learning) could have been because of factors other than experiential learning. In order to ensure that such an error is eliminated or minimized, the gap between the pre-test, intervention and post-test was kept very less. The participants were sent for experiential learning right after the conduction of pre-test while the post-test was conducted within a week from experiential learning. Therefore, any difference in scores in this short span could easily be attributed to the exposure to experiential learning alone.

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the results of the study. Statistical analysis tools like paired ‘t’ test have been used for the purpose of this study. The results revealed that there is a significant impact of experiential learning on cross cultural sensitivity among management students in India.

The current study strengthens the idea that one learns more when actively engaged in the learning process. Any action that one takes actively is remembered and later recalled better than the one in which he/she was just an agent on whom the action was done is based on the idea that human beings process the information they receive rather than merely

responding to a stimulus. Thus the learner plays an active role in seeking ways to understand, interpret and process information, and relate it to the information stored in their memory. Learning in such case is not just extrinsic but also intrinsic thereby having a long-lasting effect.

The results of this study can be used to understand the reason behind enormous change that higher education system has gone through in the past couple of decades. The global job market today requires workforce with not just a certain level of IQ (intelligence quotient) but also adequate EQ (emotional quotient), SQ (social quotient) and CQ (cultural quotient). Therefore, the universities and higher educational institutions try to prepare their students for the job market by inculcating such skills and sensitivity among them. This dynamic requirement of the job market keeps the educational institutions on their toes to revise and reform every few years. This is probably the reason why alternate learning strategies are being resorted upon. The traditional curricula and teaching/learning pedagogy is not sufficient. The need of the hour is to 'change' thereby leading to many new trends in the past few decades like internships, inviting industry experts as guest lecturers, cultural-exchange programs, site-visits etc.

This is probably the first study to include the dimensions of experiential learning and how it impacts cross cultural sensitivity, especially among Indian management students.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Economies all over the world over are driven by knowledge at many levels, the need for and importance of skilled human capital and skill-based training have become paramount to the socio-economic well-being. The current study focuses on the job-ready, employable human capital and its knowledge base. Since the geographical boundaries have blurred, facilitating setting up of multicultural workplaces, the demand for cross-culturally sensitive workforce has risen. The cross-cultural sensitivity depends on several factors like exposure to different cultures, belief system etc. But, it can be learned and worked upon to a great extent. The use of experiential learning as a learning strategy to build up one's cross-cultural sensitivity could be used by institutions preparing employable youth as indicated in the current study.

The research findings indicate that experiential learning has a positive impact on cross-cultural learning among management students in India. Experiential learning as a learning strategy could be used not just in higher education institutions but also in organizations to help their students and employees learn life skills. Since the active involvement of the participant is required in experiential learning, it has a lasting effect.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH:

Accidental sampling – a non-probability sampling technique is the primary limitation of this study. It does not ensure equal probability to each participant for getting selected in the research. Nevertheless, accidental sampling was used in this study only for the sake of convenience.

The results of the study indicating increase in cross cultural sensitivity post intervention (experiential learning) could also be because of factors other than experiential learning. Though, in order to ensure that such error is eliminated, the gap between the pre-test, intervention and post-test was kept very less and the participants were sent for experiential learning right after the conduction of pre-test while the post-test was conducted within a week from experiential learning; there is a probability of chance factor. In order to eliminate it completely a control group could be set wherein the experiential learning intervention could be skipped or replaced by any other learning technique. But, the same could not be done in the current study considering the ethical issues of providing one set of randomly selected participants with a

particular kind of learning while the other students lacked the same. This leaves a further scope for future research.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The area of holistic life skills could be studied in future assessing the impact of experiential learning on them with a comparison in learning strategies too. Different groups could be provided with different treatment (learning strategy) to assess the effectiveness of each on life skills of the participants. Also, a control group could help eliminate the chance factor in the research to a great extent. A comprehensive research on a randomly selected larger sample including both Indian as well as foreign nationals might be used for further research findings and generalizations preferably across institutions, sectors, businesses and nations.

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