

Full Length Research Paper

Gender and age variations in perceptions of situational appropriateness of academic integrity among students in Kwara State, Nigeria

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This study investigated the extent to which male and female students differ in their endorsement of academic integrity across the variables of age, institution type and marital status. One thousand students from ten secondary and tertiary institutions in Kwara state, Nigeria, responded to three hypothetical scenarios created to measure their academic integrity status. Findings of the study indicated that high proportion of participants manifested medium to high levels of academic integrity. Specifically, significantly more male, than female, many younger than older and more secondary than tertiary students endorsed academic integrity; while marital status had no significant influence on their endorsement of academic integrity. These findings underscored the need to mainstream value orientation into the curricular at every level of education in Nigeria.

Key words: Endorsement, perception, situation appropriateness, academic integrity.

INTRODUCTION

Academic integrity is about honesty in all issues pertaining to the education enterprise. Van-Jaarsveld (2004) identified three major elements of integrity. These are; discerning what is right and what is wrong; acting on what one has discerned, regardless of personal cost and; stating openly that one is acting on one's understanding of what is right or wrong. Nevertheless, these values can be interpreted in different ways by students when they do not completely share the same perception of how the values should be acted upon in specific situations. For instance, despite the various sanctions put in place, endorsing academic integrity still remains a major challenge among students at various levels of education in Nigeria, as in many other countries of the world. The need to find deeper insight into this behaviour was a major impetus for this study. "In what ways do students differ in their perception of situations requiring endorsement of academic integrity?" "What explanations

do they have for their actions and what do their responses tell us about their academic integrity status?" These and other similar questions agitated the minds of these researchers.

No doubt, literature is replete with academic integrity studies especially relating to students' attitude to, and manifestation of, academic dishonest behaviours. Braseth (1996) for instance, studied academic dishonesty among undergraduate journalism students at the University of Mississippi. Two hundred and seventeen students participated in the study. The finding showed no significant difference in student cheating attitudes based on class level, gender and major (courses) but found significant differences in actual cheating behaviour between males and females. Callaway (1998) also investigated the attitude, behaviours, extent and types of academic dishonesty that occurred at community colleges in Midwestern United States of America and found that students aged 25 and older were significantly less likely than respondents aged 24 and younger to engage in each of the 15 acts of dishonesty listed on the survey. It was also found that respondents were not likely to report incidents of academic dishonesty to the

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appropriate authorities.

Zimmerman (1998) found that young males cheated more than older females and felt more pressure to do so; just as Ones and Chockalingan (1998) found that women scored higher on overt integrity tests than men and found very small differences between older job applicants (40 years and above) and younger job applicants (younger than 40).

In a related study, Olasehinde-Williams et al. (2003) investigated the extent to which students' attitude to cheating was consistent with their actual cheating behaviour among final year students in a Federal University in Nigeria and found that the high rate of cheating manifested by the students was not consistent with their expressed negative attitude to cheating; while higher percentage of male students manifested cheating tendency than the females. Kisamore et al. (2007) also studied the relationship between individual and situational factors on misconduct contemplations and found that, age, integrity, culture and personality variables were significantly related to academic integrity. However revealing as these, and similar studies were, they fail to adequately shed light on students' perception of appropriate responses when confronted with social dilemmas requiring reconciliation of personal interests with the group interests.

The need to make up for part of this gap in our understanding of academic integrity status of students provided the major impetus for this study. To this end, the study explored a new way to use imagination and reflection to engage students in self disclosure of their academic integrity status and shed light on their reasoning, and justification either for endorsing or failing to endorse academic integrity in specific situations. The use of this technique offered students opportunity to think through complex decisions about ethical issues and facilitated our access to their hearts in the bid to gain deeper understanding of academic integrity problems among students.

The concept of situational appropriateness was used in the study to mean what action a respondent considered appropriate to take when confronted with academic dilemma in different situations. Thus, the study investigated the extent to which younger (12 to 21 years) and older (22 years and above) students differed in what actions they considered important to take when faced with integrity issues in different situations; the contributions of gender (male or female), institution type (secondary or tertiary) and marital status (single or married) to the actions they so considered important; and the degree of concurrence in the reasons they provided for their actions. The study derived theoretical underpinnings from cognitive psychologists' emphasis that active information processing is critical to response to any given stimulus.

The study aimed at investigating gender and age variations in perceptions of situational appropriateness of

academic integrity among students in Kwara State, Nigeria. The findings of the study would promote better understanding of students' behaviour and enhance academic integrity in institution of learning. Based on the purpose of the study, the conceptual framework in Figure 1 was developed by the researchers to guide the study.

The following questions sharpen the focus of the study:

1. What is the typical student's perception of situational appropriateness of academic integrity?
2. Do male and female students differ in their perception of situational appropriateness of academic integrity?
3. Does age make a difference in students' perception of situational appropriateness of academic integrity?
4. Does the type of institution influence students' perception of situational appropriateness of academic integrity?
5. Do students differ in their perception of situational appropriateness of academic integrity on the basis of marital status?
6. Under what situation will most students endorse academic integrity?

METHODOLOGY

This was a survey study which employed quantitative and qualitative measures to obtain data. Students of all tertiary and secondary institutions in Kwara State, Nigeria constituted the study population; while all such students in the 2008/2009 academic session constituted the target population. The sample for the study comprised 1,000 students, selected through stratified and proportionate simple random sampling technique on the basis of gender and institution type from ten randomly selected secondary and tertiary institutions across the three Senatorial Districts in the state. In all, 927 students returned viable questionnaire forms comprising 429 males and 498 females of whom, 80 were married and 847 were single students aged 12 to 38 years. The researchers obtained the lists of registered students from five randomly selected secondary schools and two randomly selected tertiary institutions in Kwara State. The lists were stratified on the basis of gender after which, the 1,000 student participants were randomly selected.

The instrument used to source data was a questionnaire comprising three hypothetical situations adapted from Rapport's (1960) anecdote titled 'The Prisoners' Dilemma' used to measure suspects' probability of confessing to a crime when confronted with a social dilemma. Variations of the dilemma had similarly been used by social psychologists in several studies involving students (Dawes, 1991). The hypothetical situations probed whether respondents would take advantage of an opportunity to cheat in a spelling competition or call attention of the judges to it; whether they would ask to be shown questions before an appointment examination; and whether they would confess if involved in examination malpractice. Respondents were required to tick either 'Yes' or 'No' as indication of what action they would take if confronted with each of three hypothetical situations with varying degrees of complexity. For each situation, response manifesting endorsement of academic integrity attracts one point, for a maximum of three points on the questionnaire. In respect of situation 1 for instance, a 'Yes' response (that is, calling the attention of the judges to the word) indicates endorsement of academic integrity and attracts, 1 point. To answer the 5 research questions, students were categorised into three levels of academic

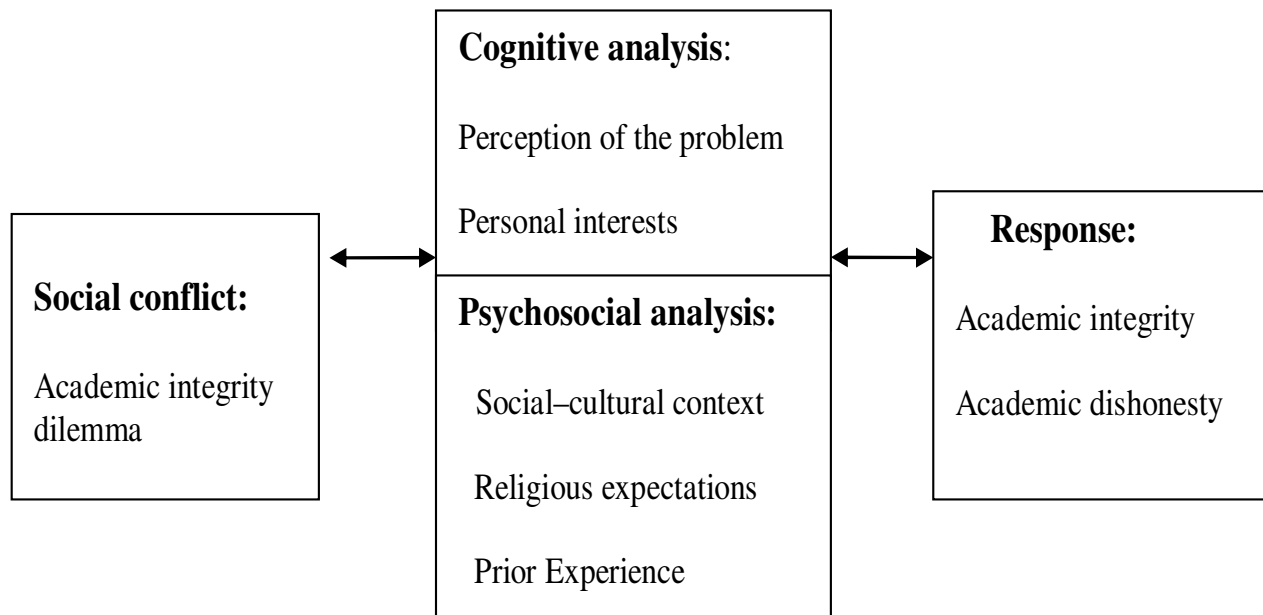


Figure 1. Cognitive and psycho-social determinants of conflict resolution.

integrity (high, medium and low) based on their responses to the three hypothetical scenarios on the questionnaire for a maximum of 3 points. Students who scored the full 3 points were categorised as manifesting high level of academic integrity, 2 as medium level and, 1 or 0, as low level of academic integrity respectively. In order to ascertain the statistical significance of the observed differences in the study, 5 hypotheses were tested using the Chi-square statistic. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; Version 15) was used in analysing the collected data.

Respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses as no name or any other form of identity was required. The second part of the questionnaire only elicited respondents' gender, age, institution type and marital status. No time limit for completing the questionnaire was given and adequate seat spacing was provided to enhance independent responses. Importantly, participants were thoroughly briefed of the purpose of the study, their informed consent was obtained and their right to opt out of the study at any point was guaranteed. In addition, Focus Group Discussions were held with male and female groups in two institutions to gain insight into the reasoning behind the students' responses to the hypothetical scenarios.

RESULTS

The distribution of the respondents on levels of academic integrity, across the variables of, gender, age, institution type and marital status is shown on Table 1 which indicates that, out of the 927 students whose responses were used in the analysis, 19% manifested high level of academic integrity (with a maximum score of 3 marks by their responses to the hypothetical scenarios: that is, 'would call attention of judges to the word' in Situation I; 'would not ask to be shown questions before taking appointment examination' in Situation II; and 'would

confess if involved in examination malpractice' in Situation III); while another 38.4% was categorised as manifesting Medium level of academic integrity (with 2 points out of 3). Conversely, the other 42.6% manifested low level (with a score of 1 out of 3). Answers to Research questions 1 to 5, were derived from the data in Table 1 as thus explained.

Research question 1

Considering the fact that over 57% of students in this study was categorised as manifesting either High or Medium level of academic integrity, it was apparent that the typical student in Kwara State schools has Moderate level of academic integrity.

Research question 2

In relation to gender, comparable proportions of male and female students manifested High level of academic integrity (18.4 and 19.5% respectively); but slightly higher proportion of male manifested Low level of academic integrity than the female students (that is, 44.1 and 41.4% respectively).

Research question 3

On the basis of age, slightly higher proportion of younger students (19.4%) was categorised as High on academic integrity than the older students (17.4%). Conversely, a

Table 1. Distribution of students on integrity status by gender, age, institution type and marital status.

Variable	Integrity level			
	No	High (%)	Medium (%)	Low (%)
Gender				
Male	429	79 (18.4)	161(37.5)	189 (44.1)
Female	498	97 (19.5)	195 (39.2)	206 (41.4)
Total	927	176 (19)	356 (38.4)	395 (42.6)
Age				
Younger (12-21)	645	125 (19.4)	251 (38.9)	269 (41.7)
Older (22+)	282	49 (17.4)	98 (34.8)	135 (47.9)
Institution type				
Secondary	555	111 (20)	228 (41.1)	216 (38.9)
Tertiary	372	65 (17.5)	128 (34.4)	179 (48.1)
Marital status (Tertiary institutions only)				
Single	292	50 (17.1)	99 (33.9)	143 (49)
Married	80	15 (18.8)	29 (36.3)	36 (45)

Table 2. Proportion (%) of students who endorsed academic integrity by situation.

Situation	Endorsement of integrity				Total	(%)
	Yes	(%)	No	(%)		
I	504	54.4	423	45.6	927	100
II	606	65.4	321	34.6	927	100
III	362	39.1	565	60.9	927	100

higher proportion of older students (47.9%) manifested Low level of integrity than the younger students (41.7%).

Research question 4

In relation to institution type, higher proportion of secondary school students (20%) manifested High level of academic integrity than students in tertiary institutions (17.5%). Higher proportion of the tertiary institution students (48.1%) than secondary school students (38.9%) manifested Low level of academic integrity.

Research question 5

In respect of marital status, only the responses of 372 students in tertiary institutions were involved in the analysis since no married student was in any of the secondary schools that participated in the study. As shown in Table 1, comparable proportions of single and married students (17.1% and 18.8% respectively) manifested High level of academic integrity. Conversely,

higher proportion of single students (49%) manifested Low level of academic integrity compared with the 45% of married students in the same category.

Research question 6

To answer the 6th research question, the proportion of students who endorsed academic integrity in their responses to each of the three hypothetical situations was calculated and presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that, the highest proportion of students (65.4%) endorsed academic integrity in Situation II (that is, would not ask to see questions before taking an appointment examination); higher proportion (54.4%) would call attention of judges to the word to be spelt (Situation I); while the least proportion (39.1%) similarly endorsed academic integrity in Situation III (that is, would confess if involved in examination malpractice).

Hypotheses testing

The summaries of the analyses of the generated

Table 3. Chi-square summary of differences in students' levels of academic integrity by gender, age, institution type and marital status.

	Integrity level				df	X ²	R
	High	Medium	Low	Total			
Gender							
Male	79	161	189	429	2	0.66	NS
Female	97	195	206	498			
Total	176	356	395	927			
Age							
Younger	125	251	269	645	2	3.04	NS
Older	49	98	135	282			
Total	174	349	404	927			
Institution type							
Secondary	111	228	216	555	2	7.77	S
Tertiary	65	128	179	372			
Total	176	356	395	927			
Marital status							
Single	50	99	143	292	2	0.39	NS
Married	15	29	36	80			
Total	65	128	179	372			

p < 0.05.

hypotheses are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

H₁: There is no significant difference in students' levels of academic integrity.

Table 3 shows that no statistically significant differences were observed in the students' levels of academic integrity except on the variable of institution type. Hypothesis one was thus rejected on the variable of institution type and it was concluded that secondary school students differed significantly from tertiary institution students in their levels of academic integrity. The direction of the difference was in favour of secondary school students with higher proportions manifesting High and Medium levels of academic integrity.

H_{2.5}: The hypotheses sought to establish the extent to which students differed in their perceptions of situational appropriateness of academic integrity in specific situations on the basis of gender, age, institution type and marital status.

Table 4 indicates that significantly higher proportions of male students endorsed academic integrity than their female counterparts in each of the three situations at 0.05 alpha level with 1 df. Younger and older students were statistically comparable in their responses to Situation II whereas, for each of Situations I and III, significantly higher proportions of younger students endorsed academic integrity than their older counterparts. Also,

significantly higher proportions of secondary school students endorsed academic integrity in their responses to all the three situations than tertiary institution students. In respect of marital status, only responses of 372 students in the tertiary institutions were involved since no married student existed in the secondary schools that participated in the study; and as shown in Table 4, significant difference was only observed in the students' responses to the second situation in favour of single students.

Findings from focus group discussions

To gain deeper insight into the reasoning behind their preferred responses to the hypothetical situations, FGDs were held with four groups of students (2 male and 2 female groups, with ten students per group) in two randomly selected secondary and tertiary institutions, at the convenience of the participants. The same hypothetical situations in the questionnaire were used as guide. Records of interactions during the FGDs were summarised and used to corroborate findings from the survey. Table 5 shows the summary of responses to the three hypothetical situations at the FGDs on the basis of gender and age.

Table 5 shows that, of the 40 participants at the FGDs, 16 (40%) endorsed academic integrity in their responses

Table 4. Chi-square summary of differences in students' perceptions of appropriateness of academic integrity by situation on the basis of gender, age, institution type and marital status.

Variable	Situation	Gender	Endorsement of integrity			df	X ²	R
			Yes	No	Total			
Gender	I	Male	256	173	429	1	9.06	S
		Female	248	250	498			
		Total	504	423	927			
	II	Male	298	131	429	1	5.94	S
		Female	308	190	498			
		Total	606	321	927			
	III	Male	189	240	429	1	8.43	S
		Female	173	325	498			
		Total	362	565	927			
Age	I	Younger	313	332	645	1	6.64	S
		Older	111	171	282			
		Total	424	503	927			
	II	Younger	243	402	645	1	0.03	NS
		Older	108	174	282			
		Total	351	576	927			
	III	Younger	414	231	645	1	31.81	S
		Older	125	157	282			
		Total	539	388	927			
Institution	I	Secondary	270	285	555	1	5.08	S
		Tertiary	153	219	372			
		Total	423	504	927			
	II	Secondary	164	391	555	1	16.41	S
		Tertiary	158	214	372			
		Total	322	605	927			
	III	Secondary	352	203	555	1	6.25	S
		Tertiary	214	158	372			
		Total	566	361	927			
Marital status	I	Single	117	175	292	1	0.34	NS
		Married	35	45	80			
		Total	152	220	372			
	II	Single	132	160	292	1	5.00	S
		Married	25	55	80			
		Total	157	215	372			
	III	Single	171	121	292	1	1.37	NS
		Married	41	39	80			
		Total	212	160	372			

P < 0.05.

Table 5. Distribution of participants on perceptions of situational appropriateness of academic integrity by gender and age.

Variable	Endorsement of academic integrity					
	Situation I		Situation II		Situation III	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	NO (%)
Gender						
Male (20)	8(40)	12(60)	9 (45)	11(55)	19 (95)	1(05)
Female (20)	8(40)	12(60)	15(75)	5 (25)	8(40)	12(60)
Total (40)	16(40)	24(60)	24(60)	16 (40)	27 (67.5)	13(32.5)
Age						
Younger (20)	11(55)	9(45)	12(60)	8(40)	11(55)	9(45)
Older (20)	5 (25)	15(75)	12(60)	8(40)	16(80)	4(20)

to Situation I, 60% to Situation II and 67.5% to Situation III. In relation to gender, equal proportions of male and female participants (40%) endorsed academic integrity in Situation I. While more females (75%), than males (45%), endorsed academic integrity in Situation II; more males (95%) than females (40%) endorsed academic integrity in Situation III.

Comparable proportions of younger and older students endorsed academic integrity in Situation II. Conversely, many younger students (55%) and many older students (80%) endorsed academic integrity in Situations I and III, respectively.

DISCUSSION

In general, only 19% of the respondents to the questionnaire manifested High academic integrity in their responses to all three hypothetical situations; but more than 38% others, manifested Moderate level of academic integrity. Never the less, that over 40% of the students manifested Low level of academic integrity, should still be a cause for concern. Respondents in Olasehinde-Williams et al. (2003) similarly observed extensive cheating behaviour among their respondents; just as Gardner et al. (1988) also reported, more than 50% of their sample was involved in cheating. Justifying their non-endorsement of academic integrity, most of the participants in the FGDs called attention to 'fear of losing', the fact that 'dishonesty is everywhere', 'opportunity comes but once' and 'any opportunity lost cannot be regained' further buttressing the assertion by Olasehinde-Williams (2005) and Baldwin et al. (1996) that academic dishonesty is a complex psychological, situational and social phenomenon.

Significantly higher proportion of younger students manifested High level of academic integrity than older students (20 and 17.5% respectively). The largest disparity was observed in Situation III where, 64% of younger students would confess if involved in examination malpractice compared to only 44% of older

students. This disparity could possibly be related to perception of greater risk by older students. In support of this view, Myers (1999) warned that acting on what one has discerned to be right does not follow naturally especially in a situation of social conflict including having to reconcile personal interests with communal well-being.

Plausible explanations for the observed low endorsement of academic integrity among students of tertiary institutions in this study might be the possibility of 'hardening effect' (that is, getting used to cheating), possibility of past records of 'successful' involvement in academic dishonest behaviours (Olasehinde-Williams, 2005), greater awareness of existence of similar dishonest behaviours in the society, or perception of greater personal interest at stake (Myers, 1999). For instance, as claimed by one of the male participants at the FGD in a tertiary institution, 'everyone is a potential criminal', just as a female participant claimed that "dishonesty is everywhere, even at home".

In general, while a high proportion of students would not ask to see questions before taking an appointment examination; a higher proportion would not confess if involved in examination malpractice. A plausible explanation for this finding could be that, whereas there is a general awareness among students that what one can do, rather than examination score, goes a long way to determine job selection, retention and promotion rather than strictly performance in examination. As reasoned by a female participant at a FGD, 'If I secure the job through the back door, it may lead to misfortune.' Conversely, the very low endorsement of academic integrity in Situation III further buttressed Meyer's (1999) warning that, taking moral action is least likely when individuals' well-being, including their right to pursue their personal interests, must be reconciled with communal well-being. In support of this assertion, most participants at the FGDs reported that the risk involved in confessing to examination malpractice was too great.

Significantly more male than female respondents endorsed academic integrity in each of the three hypothetical situations. As found in this study, Leming

(1980) similarly found that females exhibited more cheating behaviour than males. This finding, however, contradicts those of Olasehinde-Williams et al. (2003), Chockalingan (1998) and Lobel (1993) in which, higher proportions of male students manifested cheating tendency than females. Still, in some other studies, Braseth (1996) as well as Evans and Craig (1980) found no statistically significant differences between male and female students in cheating behaviour; just as no consistent influence of gender on endorsement of academic integrity in the situations was established among participants at the FGDs. More research is apparently required to fully understand the actual extent of gender influence on academic integrity. In the mean time, reasons offered by male participants at the FGDs for thus endorsing academic integrity include, 'to satisfy conscience', 'fear of expulsion', 'any building on sand will collapse', and, 'I do not want to build my future on falsehood.'

No significant difference was observed in the proportions of single and married students who endorsed academic integrity in their responses to Situations I and III. In respect of Situation II however, significantly higher proportion of single, than married, students (45.2% and 31.3% respectively) would not ask to be shown questions before the appointment examination. The fact that tertiary institution students, irrespective of marital status, were comparable in their tendency to endorse academic integrity in most situations suggests homogeneity in the school and life experiences of students at this level of education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the need to initiate holistic measures to enhance students' endorsement of academic integrity in any situation, cannot be over emphasized. Specific recommendations in this regard are hereby proposed:

1. The fact that a high proportion of students in this study failed to endorse academic integrity in spite of their matured moral reasoning calls attention to the need for mainstreaming values education into school curricular at every stage of education in the country, so as to boost students' tendency to take action consistent with their moral reasoning.
2. To create a true culture and show institutional endorsement, of academic integrity in schools, a well-structured mentoring program in which lecturers are encouraged to model appropriate ethical standards in their respective areas of specialization should be evolved.
3. It will also be important for appropriate reward and deterrent measures to be put in place, as well as insistence on merit in appointment, in the society, to

encourage students to endorse academic integrity in all situations.

4. Institutions of learning will do well to explore multiple sources of assessment including, problem solving tasks, for instance, to encourage students to engage in active learning at all levels of education.

Conclusion

The study revealed that a large percentage of the participants endorsed academic integrity. No statistically significant differences were observed in the students' levels of academic integrity except on the variable of institution type. However, a significantly higher proportion of male students endorsed academic integrity than their female counterparts in each of the three situations. This and many other findings, call for the intervention of the educational psychologists and counsellors in modifying students' behaviours especially, as regards academic integrity and the need to mainstream value orientation into the curricular at every level of education in Nigeria. The fact that this study was limited in scope, limits the generalizability of its findings to tertiary institutions in Kwara State, Nigeria. Further study would therefore be necessary to take a broader focus on the whole country to broaden our understanding of students' perception of academic integrity among students to validate findings obtained in this study. That notwithstanding, the findings of this study are profound and hold significant promise for scholarship, as spring board for future research, and as advocacy of the need to mainstream values education into the school curricular in Nigeria.

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