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Interpersonal Communication Learning in Business Education: Schutz's FIRO Theory Perspective

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Abstract:
This study examines the application of Schutz's Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO) theory in business communication education and its pedagogical implications for developing interpersonal competencies. Through comprehensive literature review methodology, this research analyzes how Schutz's three core interpersonal needs—inclusion, control, and affection—can be integrated into business communication curricula to enhance student learning outcomes and group dynamics understanding. The FIRO theory, developed by William Schutz in 1958, provides a robust framework for understanding interpersonal behaviors in organizational contexts. Each individual possesses varying degrees of needs for inclusion (belonging and association), control (power and influence), and affection (emotional closeness and recognition). These needs manifest in both expressed behaviors (what individuals give to others) and wanted behaviors (what individuals desire from others), creating complex interpersonal dynamics that significantly impact group effectiveness and cohesion. Educational applications of FIRO theory demonstrate significant potential for improving business communication pedagogy. Students who understand their own interpersonal orientations and those of their peers can develop more effective collaborative skills, leadership capabilities, and conflict resolution strategies. The theory's practical relevance extends to team formation, group project management, and workplace relationship building—essential competencies for business graduates. However, limitations exist regarding cultural adaptability and contemporary digital communication contexts. Future research should focus on empirical validation of FIRO theory's effectiveness in modern educational settings, cross-cultural applications, and integration with emerging communication technologies. This study contributes to educational theory by bridging psychological interpersonal needs with practical business communication skills, offering educators a structured approach to developing students' interpersonal competencies essential for professional success.

Keyword : Schutz's Interpersonal Theory, Business Communication, Interpersonal Needs, Group Cohesion, Inclusion and Control.

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INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication competence is widely regarded as a core outcome of business education, because graduates are expected to work in teams, negotiate roles, and build working relationships as soon as they enter organizations. Interpersonal communication has also been examined as a factor in the quality of organizational services (Yusuf et al., 2022). Yet business communication courses often concentrate on message-level skills such as writing, presenting, and meeting etiquette, while the psychological needs that shape how students behave in groups receive far less explicit attention.

Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO), introduced by William Schutz in 1958, explains interpersonal interactions within groups based on three main needs: affection/openness, control, and inclusion. Schutz developed the FIRO-B measurement instrument featuring six scales with nine-item questions to assess group members' feelings regarding these three needs and provide feedback on group dynamics.

Human needs significantly influence communication patterns in both business and personal contexts. Two prominent American psychologists developed key theories on interpersonal needs. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory suggests that basic needs like food and shelter must be satisfied first to establish security (Li & Siu, 2022), after which individuals seek companionship, marking the beginning of communication's crucial role in human interaction and the path toward self-actualization.

William Schutz's FIRO theory explains individual behavior through three interpersonal needs: control, inclusion, and affection (Yusuf et al., 2022). Control involves power and influence relationships, manifesting as autocrats (self-directed leaders), abdicates (followers seeking direction), or democrats (teamwork-oriented). Inclusion represents the need for belonging, ranging from over-socials (spotlight-seeking) to under-socials (preferring solitude) (Ditchburn & Brook, 2015). Affection encompasses appreciation and recognition needs, with under-personals avoiding interactions while over-personals strongly seeking social connection and approval.

Previous research has applied FIRO theory and the FIRO-B in several settings. Ahmetoglu et al. (2010) studied 547 participants and found that FIRO-B scores positively predicted consultants' ratings of leadership capability and the managerial level participants had reached, even after controlling for intelligence and demographic variables. This provides initial evidence that interpersonal orientations matter for organizational outcomes. In a cross-cultural setting, Ditchburn and Brook (2015) found that expatriates with higher levels of wanted affection scored higher on all subscales of cross-cultural adjustment, suggesting that interpersonal needs are related to how well people adapt to a new environment. In an educational setting, Vyshkvyrkina and Tushnova (2020) used the FIRO-B alongside other instruments to

study interpersonal relations and aggression among 100 rural school adolescents aged 14–16, and reported gender differences in aggressive reactions.

Taken together, these studies show that FIRO theory has mainly been used to predict leadership and managerial outcomes, to explain expatriate adjustment, and to describe adolescent behavior. They do not show how the theory can be translated into the design of business communication teaching. This article addresses that gap, and its novelty lies in three contributions. First, it reads inclusion, control, and affection as learning-relevant needs and links them to learning outcomes and classroom activities in business communication. Second, it uses the three-stage model of team development (inclusion, control, affection) to frame group projects as a setting where students experience and reflect on their own interpersonal orientations. Third, it critically considers the limits of the theory, namely its dyadic origins, its cultural adaptability, and its fit with digital communication contexts.

This synthesis is timely for two reasons. First, group projects and collaborative assignments are now standard in business education, yet students are often placed in teams without any framework for understanding why some members seek belonging, others seek influence, and others seek recognition. As a result, conflict is easily treated as a personality problem rather than an unmet interpersonal need. Second, as communication moves increasingly into digital and cross-cultural channels, the assumptions of a theory formulated in 1958 need to be re-examined before they are carried into present-day classrooms (Ditchburn & Brook, 2015).

Therefore, this article aims to (1) explain Schutz's FIRO theory and its three interpersonal needs, (2) examine how the theory explains compatibility and development in groups, and (3) discuss its pedagogical implications for business communication education, including its limitations and directions for empirical validation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a comprehensive literature review methodology to examine Schutz's Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO) theory and its applications in business communication contexts. The research approach was primarily qualitative, utilizing systematic analysis of existing theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and conceptual papers related to interpersonal communication theory and organizational behavior.

The literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR, PsycINFO, and Business Source Premier, covering publications from 1958 to 2023. The search strategy incorporated key terms such as "FIRO theory," "Schutz interpersonal theory," "business communication," "interpersonal needs," "organizational behavior," "group dynamics," and "workplace relationships." Both seminal works and contemporary studies were included to

provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation and current applications of the theory.

The selection criteria for literature inclusion required that sources directly address Schutz's FIRO theory, its three core dimensions of inclusion, control, and affection, and their practical applications in organizational or business contexts. Priority was given to peer-reviewed academic articles, established theoretical texts, and empirical studies that demonstrated the theory's relevance to workplace communication and group dynamics. The review process involved systematic categorization of sources according to their focus on theoretical foundations, empirical validation, and practical applications.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach where key concepts from the selected literature were organized into coherent themes that aligned with the study's objectives. The analysis focused on identifying patterns and relationships between Schutz's theoretical propositions and their manifestations in business communication scenarios. Particular attention was paid to examining how the three interpersonal needs influence workplace relationships, group effectiveness, and organizational outcomes.

The interpretive framework adopted for this study was grounded in social constructivist epistemology, recognizing that interpersonal behaviors and communication patterns are shaped by both individual psychological needs and social contexts. This approach allowed for the integration of psychological theory with organizational communication practices, providing a holistic understanding of how FIRO theory applies to contemporary business environments. The methodology also incorporated cross-referencing of findings with related theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs to establish theoretical coherence and practical relevance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Understanding the Schultz Inter-Personal Theory

Schutz's FIRO theory serves as a standard framework for understanding need fulfillment in interpersonal relationships through three core behavioral needs: inclusion, control, and affection. The theory claims these three needs are sufficient to explain and predict all interpersonal behavior. Inclusion involves achieving psychological comfort through interaction and association; control relates to comfortable relationships regarding power dynamics; and affection concerns emotional connections involving love and affection (Schutz, 1958, pp. 18-20). The theory includes methodological formulas for measuring interpersonal compatibility, though questions remain about its effectiveness in group contexts.

Exploring Interpersonal Compatibility in Groups

Group research lacks conclusive evidence on how interaction affects group processes and outcomes (Hewes, 1986), leading researchers to rely on Schutz's FIRO theory to explain group differences (Schutz, 1958/1966). However, FIRO is a dyadic methodology applied to groups without proper verification, prompting this research to present two methodological interpretations for explaining group compatibility and predicting outcome.

FIRO theory, developed by American researcher Will Schutz, describes team development through three sequential stages: inclusion, control, and affection. The progression from inclusion to affection typically requires approximately one and a half years to complete.

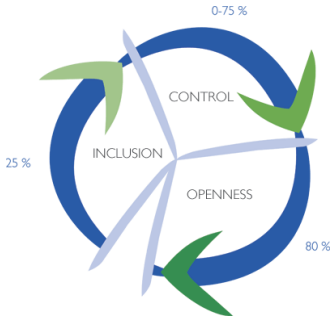


Figure 1. Describing a Team's Development in Three Stages – From Inclusion to Control to Affection.

The inclusion phase occurs when teams are formed or changed, focusing on belonging and group acceptance. While generally pleasant with members enjoying each other's company, relationships remain superficial as individuals avoid conflicts to prevent unpleasant situations from escalating.

To progress from inclusion to affection, teams must navigate the challenging control phase, characterized by conflict and hierarchy establishment where members' skills are tested and ranked across different tasks. This phase involves self-determination and proving competence within the group (Vyshkvyrkina & Tushnova, 2020). Upon reaching the affection stage, balance is restored as roles and individual strengths/weaknesses are accepted, allowing the group to focus energy on goal achievement rather than internal discussions.

FIRO Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation

FIRO is a three-dimensional theory of interpersonal behavior that explains individual orientation and applies to compatibility, cohesion, sociometric patterning, and developmental stages of relationships (Schutz, 1958/1966). Originally a dyadic theory, FIRO has been extended to group contexts, though most research focuses on dyadic relationships rather than validating it as a group compatibility measure. The theory implies that compatibility is a stable personality trait that remains constant over time and situations (Ryan, 1977; Schutz, 1958/1966).



Figure 2. FIRO--Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation

According to Schutz, people have three interpersonal needs—inclusion, control, and affection—each evaluated on two planes: expressed and wanted. These six variables "constitute a sufficient set of areas of interpersonal behavior for the prediction and explanation of interpersonal phenomena" (Schutz, 1958/1966, p. 13). The FIRO-B instrument measures both expressed behavior toward others (e) and wanted behavior from others (w), with "a matching of e's and w's for groups of people seems likely to give information about compatible interaction" (Schutz, 1958/1966, p. 58).

Inclusion involves establishing satisfactory relationships through interaction and association; control focuses on relationships through power, authority, and decision-making; and affection encompasses close personal and emotional feelings ranging from love to hate. In group contexts, inclusion needs are behaviorally manifested "by talking a great deal. Frequently these people are not interested in power or dominance but simply prominence" (Schutz, 1958, p. 21), with even negative attention helping satisfy inclusion needs.

Need For Inclusion

Schutz defines inclusion as the inner drive "to establish and maintain a satisfactory relation with people with respect to interaction and association. It has to do with being in or out." Individuals with strong inclusion needs, like the example of "Irv," are anxious about exclusion and prioritize face-to-face interaction to feel accepted and significant within groups. The concepts of expressed inclusion (giving attention) and wanted inclusion (receiving recognition) represent fundamental motivations that influence social behavior in both group and organizational settings, where individuals seek significance, belonging, and workplace influence.

In this context, Mbuba (2022a) explores how human capital development significantly influences employee productivity in public organizations. This aligns with Schutz's theory by illustrating how workplace environments that nurture inclusion—through training, recognition, and participation—tend to enhance employee morale and output. Employees, like Irv in Schutz's theory, who are socially included and allowed to express their inclusion, are more likely to demonstrate "normal social behavior" and contribute effectively to group or organizational objectives. Furthermore, Mbuba (2016a) addresses organizational conflict and its impact on business growth, which can be interpreted through the lens of control behavior as outlined by Schutz. Conflict often emerges when there are discrepancies in control needs—whether through excessive dominance or reluctance to assume responsibility. Employees who express a high need for control or exhibit controlling behaviors might disrupt group harmony, just as those who resist control can hinder decision-making processes. This tension can stifle productivity and growth if not managed effectively.

Finally, in his critique of the Federal Character Principle in public employment, Mbuba (2021a) indirectly underscores the institutional dimensions of inclusion and control. The Federal Character Principle, which seeks to ensure representation across ethnic and regional lines in Nigeria's public service, attempts to satisfy the collective inclusion needs of diverse groups. However, the implementation of this policy sometimes raises concerns about meritocracy and control over recruitment decisions—suggesting a tension between expressed and wanted control within bureaucratic structures.

Need For Control

Schutz defines the control need as "the need to establish and maintain a satisfactory relation with people with respect to control and power. It has to do with being on top or on the bottom." Individuals with high control needs, like "Connie," may subtly or blatantly attempt to lead and dominate activities, stemming from a self-concept emphasizing responsibility and competence. While inclusion-focused individuals like "Irv" simply want to participate, control-oriented people want to establish the rules and direction.

Schutz's FIRO (Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation) theory identifies three basic interpersonal needs: inclusion, control, and affection—each of which can be either expressed or wanted. In organizational contexts, these needs play a crucial role in shaping behavior, motivation, and interpersonal dynamics. The need for control, for example, is not limited to a desire to dominate; some individuals exhibit a strong need to be guided, prefer structured environments, and willingly allow others to make decisions for them. Similarly, affection in groups is observed when individuals engage in personal, friendly relationships, differentiating it from

general inclusion which involves social belonging without deep emotional connection.

Mbuba (2018), in his study on public servants and the code of conduct in Anambra State, illustrates how individuals' interpersonal orientations toward control can influence ethical behavior in public service. Public officials with a strong need to be directed may easily conform to rules and regulations, while those with an expressed need for control may find institutional limitations challenging. The study underscores the importance of institutional design in accommodating diverse control orientations for improved compliance and ethical conduct in the civil service. Mbuba (2014) explores the committee system as a tool for managing both private and public organizations. This system reflects a collective approach to decision-making where members' control dynamics become especially relevant. Those with a high expressed control need may take leadership roles, while others with a high wanted control need may prefer to be guided through the process. Understanding and balancing these orientations enhances cooperation, reduces dominance conflict, and increases the overall effectiveness of committees.

In his critique of public sector reforms in Nigeria, Mbuba (2016b) highlights the challenges and opportunities for sustainable development. These reforms often require not only structural adjustments but also a transformation of interpersonal behaviors among public officials. Schutz's notion of affection is applicable here, as reforms are more likely to succeed in environments characterized by trust, mutual respect, and personal connection among stakeholders. When affection is present, individuals may be more committed to shared goals, supportive of colleagues, and responsive to change.

Need For Affection

The third FIRO need is "the need to establish and maintain a satisfactory relation with others with respect to love and affection. Whereas the need for inclusion had to do with being in or out, the need for affection has to do with being close or far." Individuals may receive affection without reciprocating, like "Al" who might absorb interpersonal warmth without returning it, or some who crave affection yet remain cool and distant. However, affiliation needs are often matched by desires to nurture and make others feel loved.

Need Profiles Last a Lifetime

Schutz claims that observing people's past behavior allows prediction of their future actions with reasonable certainty. He embraces determinism, believing that individual interpersonal needs develop from parental treatment during toddlerhood and remain fixed throughout life. This relational continuity principle traces adult interpersonal behavior patterns back to early childhood experiences.

Schutz's FIRO theory emphasizes how interpersonal behaviors are shaped by early childhood experiences with inclusion, control, and affection. These relational needs, when met either in excess or in deficiency, can lead to maladaptive behaviors in adulthood. For instance, overexposure to affection or attention may lead to social anxiety, while neglect can foster emotional withdrawal. Similarly, authoritarian parenting can produce individuals with an unhealthy craving for control, whereas a lack of guidance may result in resistance to authority. Ike, Mbuba, and Nwot (2021) investigate the link between federal housing policies and building collapse in Awka Metropolis. While the study primarily addresses structural and policy-related failures, the underlying issue of institutional neglect echoes Schutz's notion of unbalanced control. Government inaction or inconsistent enforcement of building regulations may reflect a systemic pattern of insufficient guidance (wanted control) that fosters unsafe practices. Builders and developers, functioning in a poorly regulated environment, may either exploit the lack of control or become overly dependent on inconsistent supervision.

In the context of human trafficking and child rights, Mbuba (2022b) underscores the vulnerability of children who are denied emotional security and protection. Schutz's theory helps explain how children subjected to neglect or over-control often carry unresolved relational needs into adulthood. Victims of trafficking frequently come from backgrounds marked by emotional deprivation, lacking both inclusion and affection. The inability to form healthy social bonds or assert autonomy stems from early disruptions in these fundamental interpersonal needs. Similarly, Mbuba (2021b) discusses the impact of communal conflicts on community development. Conflict-prone communities often exhibit intergenerational patterns of mistrust, dominance, and aggression. These behaviors, when traced back through Schutz's framework, may be rooted in histories of disrupted affection and authoritarian control within families or cultural institutions. The absence of nurturing and democratic family systems can perpetuate cycles of aggression and exclusion, inhibiting collaborative development efforts.

Schutz (1958/1966) offers three compatibility equations: reciprocal compatibility measures mutual need satisfaction by comparing how individuals want to be treated with how others prefer to act, with "a measure of mutual need satisfaction emerges" from this comparison (Schutz, 1966, p. 107); originator compatibility focuses on giving/receiving preferences with specific partners; and interchange compatibility involves mutual exchange within need areas, being most suitable for groups as the "preferred amount of interchange is a characteristic of both an individual and a group" (Schutz, 1966, p. 110). Interchange compatibility requires group agreement on involvement levels, authority structure, and interpersonal closeness.

For a group situation, the interchange compatibility measured on each dyadic pair gives an index of dispersion f.-7om which to assess group atmosphere.

> "*Since an individual entering a larger group usually finds it difficult to relate directly to one person, he must interact with the group terms hence as a whole. The atmosphere of the group of the amount of interchange occurring his satisfaction would be determined to atmosphere into which he enters. A may be described in each need area; large extent by the incidentally, This fact suggests, that the often used term 'group atmosphere' may be explicated by the concept of interchange. That is, what may be usually meant by group atmosphere is the degree to which there is inclusion interchange (amount of contact and interaction), control interchange (giving and taking orders, advice, and the like), and affection interchange (expressions of closeness, intimacy, and emotional involvement with one another) present in the group*". (Schutz, 1958/1966, p. 112)

Interpersonal compatibility has intuitive appeal, with people naturally discussing their attraction to others. FIRO theory and methodology are used for personnel selection in diverse occupations including nuclear submarine crews, police, firefighters, and team teaching programs, indicating that personnel decision-makers value compatibility for work groups (Ryan, 1977). Ryan notes that "FIRO can be used to establish groups, to analyze group dynamics, or to measure the outcome of group methods" (1977, p. 5).

Schutz's theory assumes that compatible groups are more efficient, with research generally supporting this assumption, though some investigators have failed to find expected relationships between interpersonal needs and group behavior (Shaw, 1981). Schutz (1958/1966) hypothesizes that greater member compatibility leads to increased group cohesiveness, while Shaw (1988) endorses that compatible groups are more effective in achieving goals and experience greater satisfaction.

Group Effectiveness

Group effectiveness serves as an outcome measure in group studies, expected to result from high-quality communication processes. Compatible groups should engage in quality interactions leading to superior outcomes in both task accomplishment and affective dimensions. Hackman and Walton (1986) define group effectiveness through three criteria: meeting quality, quantity, and timeliness standards; enhancing future collaborative capability; and contributing to members' personal growth and well-being. This translates into multiple effectiveness measures: cohesiveness feelings, satisfaction feelings, and external task review. Groups believing they performed effectively experience enhanced cohesiveness and satisfaction, with cohesiveness measuring individual-to-group attitude and satisfaction measuring expectation fulfillment.

Cohesion

Cohesion is defined as a group property involving individual feelings of belongingness and attraction to the group, measured through a five-item questionnaire. Group cohesiveness lacks research and methodological consensus, with multiple definitions existing. Group cohesion represents the sum of positive and negative attraction forces among members, related to communication patterns, behavior, perceived homophily, perceived status, and perceived group task success (Bahia & Babay, 2023). However, no methodology is provided for measuring this operationalization, though three alternative conceptualizations offer measurement approaches.

Cohesion combines risk taking, member attraction, and group instrumental value. High correlations among these constructs indicate cohesion relates to group outcomes through both task and interpersonal dimensions, with group attraction as the central focus.

Attraction to group represents "an individual's desire to identify with and be an accepted member of the group" and is equated to group cohesiveness due to its significance in group development and participation outcomes. Evans and Jarvis developed the Group Attitude Scale to measure group feelings rather than behaviors, demonstrating high internal consistency across various groups and developmental stages. Self-report scores correlate highly with observer evaluations, and third-party observations help identify behaviors of attracted group members, making this instrument useful for measuring group cohesion (Ahmetoglu, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010).

Cohesion forms the basis for solidarity, defined as "solidarity relationships to those in which closeness derived from similarity finds expressions in sentiments, behavior, and symbols of that closeness." Testing shows group solidarity perceptions are significantly and positively related to group satisfaction, with solidarity as the predominant predictor of groups' social-affective dimension. Like cohesion, satisfaction results from group interaction, and the two variables are often perceived as related—cohesive groups are expected to have satisfied members.

Satisfaction

Satisfaction is expected to result from effective group interaction. Wall and colleagues developed a Likert-type self-report measure for student task group satisfaction including process and product items, with substantial reliability (generally upper .80s) but low ability to capture respondent variation (Navavongsathian, Thornjareankul, Chupradist, Rungruang, Chupradist, KunChen, & Jayavelu, 2022). It's unclear whether low variability stems from the instrument or the study population. The Wall measure represents the only instrument measuring group member satisfaction in group contexts and has been used only as a one-time satisfaction representation.

Interpersonal Compatibility

Interpersonal compatibility is defined by Schutz's behavioral needs of inclusion, control, and affection. The FIRO-B instrument, administered before group formation, measures expressed and wanted behaviors on each dimension using nine items with six response options from "usually" to "never." Acceptance-rejection cut-off points from past research determine item scoring, with nine thematic variations and cut-offs minimizing subject invalidation (Kalu & Ajake, 2022). FIRO (rhymes with Cairo) is an elaborate theory claiming to explain both the what and why of individual actions toward others through three universal needs: inclusion, control, and affection.

Applied to Business Communication

Since communication serves to meet our needs, understanding Maslow's and Schutz's theories helps in dealing with coworkers and clients. Business communications span from interviews to daily workplace interactions, where we encounter colleagues who feel excluded from meetings or react strongly to authority challenges (Mitra & Chatterjee, 2019). Understanding interpersonal needs aids in coaching, managing individuals, maximizing team performance, improving workplace morale, organizing effective meetings, and resolving office conflicts.

CONCLUSION

Group member compatibility requires more attention as Schutz's theory may explain group joining decisions, but initial compatibility may not sustain through group development. Schutz's measurement method treats compatibility as static, not responsive to group interaction. While Trenholm notes that "compatibility between group members is largely a matter of their ability to intermesh and satisfy each other's interpersonal needs," initial measures don't guarantee relationship development. Computing group compatibility from dyadic equations may be inefficient, as other group members can intervene and prevent compatible dyads from being effective. This contradicts group synergy—that groups exceed the sum of their parts. The compatibility literature assumes FIRO's three variables (inclusion, control, affection) are responsible, but little validation exists. We should question whether compatibility is: a) composite, b) prominent on one dimension, or c) some combination of other dimensions. Task compatibility may underlie group interaction complexity, as socially compatible groups may fail when externally imposed tasks are introduced.

This study acknowledges several limitations including its reliance on theoretical literature without empirical validation in contemporary business contexts, limited cross-cultural examination of FIRO theory applications, and the absence of quantitative data to support theoretical propositions. Future research should focus on conducting empirical studies that test FIRO theory's effectiveness in modern

organizational settings, exploring cultural variations in interpersonal needs across different business environments, investigating the relationship between digital communication technologies and traditional interpersonal orientations, and developing updated measurement instruments that reflect contemporary workplace dynamics. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining how interpersonal needs evolve throughout career development and organizational change would provide valuable insights for both theoretical advancement and practical application in business communication strategies.

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