

Customer Citizenship Behavior: An Expanded Theoretical Understanding

Jie Gao Fowler, PhD

Assistant Professor of Marketing
Department of Marketing and Economics
Langdale College of Business Administration
Valdosta State University
Valdosta, GA 31698, USA

Abstract

This paper reviews the literature on and evaluates the concept of customer citizenship behavior. Next, it examines general categories and dimensional qualities of customer citizenship based on insights about civic and organizational citizenship. Then, it presents four views on reasons for customer citizenship (an integrative taxonomy of motivation, social capital, resource exchange, and altruism). Next, it reviews possible positive and negative effects of customer citizenship. Finally, it examines managerial and research implications of these considerations.

Key words: customer citizenship, civic citizenship, organizational citizenship, altruism, social exchange, and social capital.

1. Introduction

In service firms, customers often act as “partial employees” (Bowen & Schneider, 1985) and this participation is categorized as either in-role and/or extra-role behaviors (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). In-role behaviors are those behaviors required to perform in a service encounter such as arriving on time for a doctor’s appointment, while extra-role behaviors involve sacrifices on the customers’ time, effort, material possessions, or physical welfare (Staub, 1978). Generally, extra-role behaviors are collectively referred to as customer citizenship behaviors (CCB; Bettencourt, 1997). Scholars agree that CCB involves voluntary actions by customers (e.g., serving as partial employees, cooperating with employees, and helping other customers) that are not directly or explicitly expected or rewarded but may have an impact on a firm’s interests and performance (Groth, 2005; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007). For instance, a customer may inform another customer of a lower price at another location but not tell the organization itself (Bove, Pervan, Beatty, & Shiu, 2009).

Despite its apparent importance, the marketing literature gives limited attention to customer citizenship behavior. Arguably, this neglect is due to our inadequate conceptual understanding of its nature, the reasons why it occurs, and its potential impact on firms. This paper addresses multiple issues in this regard. For example, what behaviors and dimensions does customer citizenship encompass? Do they vary in different retail settings? How does customer citizenship affect and how is it affected by relationships among (versus dyadic ties between) customers and employees? What are the motives for customer citizenship behavior? Can customer citizenship behavior have both positive and negative effects on a firm and its present and potential customers? This paper begins with a literature review and evaluation of ideas about customer citizenship behavior. Next, it examines general categories and dimensional qualities of customer citizenship based on insights about civic and organizational citizenship. Then, it presents four views on reasons for customer citizenship (an integrative taxonomy of motivation, social capital, resource exchange, and altruism). Next, it reviews possible positive and negative effects of customer citizenship. Finally, it examines managerial and research implications of these considerations.

2. Customer Citizenship

After Organ and his colleagues (cf. Bateman & Organ, 1983; Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983) coined the term organizational citizenship behavior, references to citizenship-like behaviors appeared in human resource management, hospital and health administration, community psychology, industry and labor law, strategic and international management, leadership, and economics. Like scholars in these other fields, researchers who deal with customer citizenship (in the management, retailing, human resources, and services areas) directly and indirectly refer to aspects of citizenship in varied terms.

For example, Groth (2005) describes customer citizenship behavior as voluntary and discretionary actions by individual customers, which are not directly or explicitly expected or rewarded but may aggregate into higher service quality and promote the effective functioning of service firms. Customer citizenship behaviors are not required to produce and/or deliver a firm's service, but they may help the firm and enhance its performance. Thus, customer citizenship and customer co-production differ. Customer citizenship involves extra-role behaviors in that customer do things for the firm or other customers that are not typically expected of customers. Co-production involves customers cooperating with the firm by producing services for themselves (e.g., in self-service). Bettencourt (1997) refers to customer citizenship as the voluntary behaviors of customers who act as partial employees and cooperate with employees in ways that help a firm. As partial employees, customers contribute to the development and delivery of a firm's service quality through actions that are similar to those of a firm's employee (Bowen, 1986). Rosenbaum and Massiah (2007) also describe customer citizenship as customers' voluntary actions to promote a firm's interests, act as partial employees, and/ or cooperate with employees.

Common (explicit and implicit) themes in depictions of customer citizenship behavior are its voluntary nature, the typical absence of direct rewards, and varied ways that it enhances the production and development of a firm's offerings/ services and positively affects firm performance. For instance, in acting as partial employees and promoting a firm's interests, customers may cooperate with employees, help other customers, give a firm suggestions, willingly spread positive word-of-mouth (WOM) about it, and act in other ways that enhance a firm's services, offerings, and performance (cf. Bettencourt, 1997; Bowen, 1986; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007). The literature offers valuable insights and stresses the importance of customer citizenship but, arguably, it has five limitations. First, it primarily focuses on dyadic ties between customers and employees, the firm, and other customers. It gives little attention to how customer citizenship may affect and be affected by relationships *among* customers, employees, and potential customers. Second, it cites examples of behaviors but it lacks a sufficient conceptualization about the nature and possible dimensions of customer citizenship. Third, it offers limited explanations for why customer citizenship occurs. Fourth, it stresses the possible positive effects of customer citizenship on a firm and its customers (e.g., those who receive help), but neglects its possible negative effects. Fifth, it gives little attention to whether and why the nature, reasons for, and effects of customer citizenship may differ depending on the circumstances and setting.

3. Toward an Expanded Understanding of Customer Citizenship Behavior

To address the prior issues, in the following discussion we examine the broadly defined categories of customer citizenship, work on civic citizenship and organizational citizenship, complementary views on motivation, and customer citizenship's positive and negative effects.

3.1 Categories of Customer Citizenship Behavior

Prior literature indicates customer citizenship behavior can be categorized (Bove et al., 2009). This review of the varied examples in the literature suggests that there are seven broad categories of customer citizenship behavior. First, positive WOM communication among customers is a behavior that indicates consumer attraction and loyalty to the firm and may enhance a firm's image and elevate customers' service quality expectations and evaluations (Bailey, Dwayne, & McCollough, 2001; Groth, 2005; Gruen 1995; Keh & Teo, 2001). Second, display of affiliation (Gruen, 1995) occurs when customers communicate to others of their loyal relationships with an organization. Third, cooperation refers to discretionary actions by customers in their relations with employees and other customers, which reflect respect for service quality, e.g., fulfilling their co-production roles and requests to dispose of trash and turn off cell phones in theaters (Bettencourt, 1997; Groth, 2005). This concept is consistent with benevolent acts of service facilitation posited by Lengnick-Hall, Claycomb, and Inks (2000). Fourth, participation refers to customers' active involvement in a firm's governance and development (Bettencourt 1997). Customers may participate the firm' activities involving attending various organizational events (Gruen, 1995). Fifth, customer voice refers to direct ideas or suggestions to service providers (Bove et al., 2009; Singh, 1988). Suggestions may or may not be derived from consumption dissatisfaction. Experienced customers may be an inexpensive and valuable source of counsel for managers. Sixth, policing of other customer includes observing potential customer misbehaviors (shop lifting) in order to reduce potential risks for the organization.

Finally, flexibility (Bettencourt, 1997) refers to customers' willingness to adapt to situations beyond their control. This category embraces a level of tolerance and acceptance.

3.2 Civic Citizenship

Ideas about civic and organizational citizenship offer useful insights about customer citizenship. Philosophers since Aristotle indicate that responsible citizenship entails balancing interrelated duties (Van Dyne, Graham, & Dienesch, 1994). Graham (1991) also depicts citizenship responsibilities as three interrelated categories of beliefs and behavioral tendencies (obedience [respect for orderly structures and processes, recognition of rational-legal authority, and respect for laws], loyalty [serving community interests and values, promoting and protecting it, and volunteering efforts for the common good], and participation [active and responsible involvement in community self-governance]). Similarly, Van Dyne et al. (1994) argue that responsible citizens keep informed about issues that affect the community, exchange information and ideas with one another, contribute to community self-governance, and encourage others to do likewise. Marshall's (1949) less general view takes the setting into account; it suggests that notions of rights and duties arise from a society's image of ideal citizenship versus universal tenets. For example, British ideas of citizenship are rooted in a sense of community, loyalty of members who are endowed with rights and protected by common law, and the struggle to win those rights.

3.3 Organizational Citizenship

Organizational citizenship themes or dimensions seem relevant to customer citizenship, since customer and organizational citizenship may enhance a firm's performance but not be formally recognized or rewarded and customer citizenship involves customers as partial employees. For example, helping is voluntarily assisting others with problems or preventing problems from occurring. Assistance reflects facets of helping others, altruism, peacemaking, and cheerleading. Preventing problems reflects courtesy. Organizational loyalty consists of boosterism, spreading goodwill, promoting the organization to outsiders, and endorsing, supporting, and defending its objectives. It also entails protecting and defending it against external threats and remaining committed to it even under adverse conditions (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Graharn, 1989; George & Brief, 1992; Organ, 1988; Podsakoff, Paine & Bachrach, 2000; Smith, Organ & Near, 1983).

Organizational compliance is internalization, acceptance, and adherence to rules, regulations, and procedures (even if one is not observed or monitored), which indirectly benefits others in the system versus an individual. Individual initiatives are voluntary actions that exceed generally expected or minimal requirements, e.g., communications to others in the workplace to improve individual and group performance and voluntary acts of creativity and innovation designed to improve personal and organizational performance, persistence and enthusiastic efforts to accomplish one's job, volunteering for extra responsibilities, and encouraging others to do the same. Civic virtue is interest in or commitment to the organization. It is reflected in a willingness to accept responsibilities of being part of the larger whole and participating in governance, e.g., going to meetings, engaging in policy debate, and giving opinions about the best strategy for the organization (Moorman & Blakely, 1995; Podsakoff, Paine & Bachrach, 2000; Smith, Organ & Near, 1983).

Organization citizenship dimensions may have counterparts in customer citizenship. Customers, in partial employee and other customer citizenship roles, may engage in helping behavior, and demonstrate loyalty, compliance, individual initiatives, and civic virtues that are related to a retail establishment, employees, and other customers. Moreover, customers' civic virtue with regard to a retail establishment and employees' acceptance of responsibilities as organization members may reflect awareness of being part of the larger whole. Customer citizenship may also involve two more dimensions of organization citizenship: sportsmanship (willingness to tolerate inevitable inconveniences and impositions of work without complaint; Organ, 1990) and self-development (voluntary efforts to improve one's knowledge, skills, and abilities, to make more contributions to the organization/larger social entity; George & Brief, 1992; Katz, 1964). Yet, their relevance is unclear; the citizenship literature gives little attention to sportsmanship and does not empirically confirm that self-development is a dimension of citizenship.

3.4 Correspondence among Customer, Civic, and Organizational Forms of Citizenship

The prior insights about civic and organizational of citizenship have implications for customer citizenship.

For example, customer citizenship is apt to have interrelated dimensional qualities, which may imply that they relate to all three responsibilities of civic citizenship and six dimensions of organizational citizenship. Yet, it is likely that WOM most strongly corresponds to civic loyalty and participation and to organizational initiative and organizational loyalty.

Customer cooperation is likely to be most strongly related to civic obedience and participation and to organizational compliance and helping. Customer participation is apt to most closely link to civic loyalty and participation and to organizational initiative and organizational civic virtue. Finally, policing to other customers is likely to most closely correspond to civic virtue and to organizational initiative and to organizational civic virtue.

Moreover, like the interrelated responsibilities of civic citizenship and the dimensions of civic and organizational citizenship, the dimensions of customer citizenship may require balancing or they may be in conflict and create negative versus positive outcomes. (Consequences are discussed in a later section.) It is also unlikely that there are universal or general explanations for the nature, antecedents, and effects of customer citizenship. Instead, the specific nature of customer citizenship (how it is enacted), the reasons for these behaviors, and their effects on a firm and its customers may differ depending on the circumstances and setting. Additionally, they are apt to depend on the culture, norms, and social relationships of a firm and its customers. For example, a collective norm may create more benevolent act of service or participation aspects of customer citizenship behavior.

4. Sources of Motivation for Customer Citizenship Behavior

Knowledge about reasons for customer citizenship behavior may give researchers and managers a fuller grasp of its nature and how to facilitate it. Integrative taxonomic, social capital, resource exchange, and altruism explanations for customer citizenship supplement one another and offer multidisciplinary view of motives that may be involved.

Integrative taxonomy of motivation. Perhaps the most accepted psychological taxonomy of motivation was developed and operationalized by McClelland (1961) and validated by Barbuto (2001). It offers an integration of intrinsic process, instrumental, external self-concept, internal self-concept, and goal internalization perspectives about motivation.

An intrinsic process motivation explanation suggests that individuals are motivated to work or engage in behavior for the pleasure of it. Thus, for example, since customer satisfaction and participation are positively correlated (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003), arguably, customers may cooperate and take part in co-production because they enjoy the processes rather than for other task performance or outcome reasons. The instrumental motivation view suggests that instrumental rewards motivate individuals if they think that their behavior will lead to certain tangible extrinsic outcomes, e.g., pay or promotion (Barbuto, 2001). In solely psychological terms, this explanation does not apply to customer citizenship behaviors that are voluntary, discretionary, and not reward-oriented. Yet, it compliments rationales for why instrumental motives may be sources of social capital, as subsequently discussed. The external self-concept motivation view indicates that individuals try to meet others' expectations by acting in ways that elicit social feedback consistent with their self-concepts (Barbuto & Scholl, 1998). For instance, they may act in ways that satisfy reference group members to gain first acceptance and then status, e.g., customers may behave as customer citizens to get positive feedback from employees or other customers in their aspired groups. According to the internal self-concept motivation view, individuals set internal standards for traits, competencies, and values that form the basis for their notions of self (Barbuto, 2001). They are motivated to engage in behaviors that reinforce these internal standards and help achieve higher competencies (Barbuto & Scholl, 1998). The goal internalization motivation view suggests that individuals, who are driven by internal goals, adopt attitudes and behavior based on their personal value systems (Barbuto & Scholl, 1998). Those who are motivated by performance goals are apt to concentrate on outcomes, whereas, those who pursue learning goals are likely to enjoy the learning process. Thus, these two types of individuals may engage in customer citizenship behaviors for different reasons.

Social Capital (SC). SC theory is used to explain varied communal behaviors related to citizen action groups, protest marches, voting, and leisure and other group-play activities (Putnam, 2000). Definitions vary, but it is generally recognized that SC has resource-like qualities (Bourdieu, 1985). SC focuses on actual and imaginary social ties and in-group relations.

Some scholars conceive of SC as individuals helping others due to obligations, expectations, trustworthiness, and norms that lead persons to forgo self-interest and act in the interests of a collectivity (Coleman, 1988). As used here, SC refers to the ability of actors to secure benefits due to membership in social networks or other social structures (Portes, 1998). This ability emanates from the motives of other actors who provide or facilitate these benefits. In this sense, SC explains why individuals (e.g., customers) help others.

The sources of SC lie in consummatory and instrumental motives (or expectations) that may be appropriated by members of a network or collectivity. These motives differ from those that are involved in a simple dyadic exchange that is not embedded in a larger social structure (e.g., a group, network, social entity, or collectivity). Consummatory motives include value introjection (VI) and bounded solidarity (BS). They relate to the expression and maintenance of values, commitments, and orientations that guide a social entity. VI operates when individuals help others due their socialization into consensually established beliefs about norms or obligations. BS is based on identification with other members of a social entity. It leads individuals to assist others due to their actual or perceived shared membership in a group or awareness of their common situation or fate. Factors that raise members' senses of external opposition (e.g., amount of prejudice they face and lack of opportunities to exit from the situation) and social construction (e.g., extent to which they create a collective identity and common cultural memory) increase in-group solidarity and appropriate SC (Portes, 1998).

Instrumental motives include expected reciprocity (ER) and enforceable trust (ET). They are linked to means-ends relationships. ER operates when individuals help others due to their beliefs that they will receive benefits for providing assistance. These benefits may differ from those that they originally provide, may not come from the person they assist, and may sometimes take the form of group approval. ET exists when individuals assist others due to their confidence that repayment is insured by the sanctioning capacity of the network or collectivity. ET and resulting appropriate SC are positively related to outside discrimination and the extent to which a social collectivity (e.g., an immigrant community or members of a vegan-oriented food co-operative) is able to confer unique awards on its members, monitor their behaviors, and publicize the identities of deviants. They are negatively related to options outside the groups for securing social honor and economic opportunity (Portes, 1998).

Resource Exchange Theory. Foa's (1971) resource exchange theory posits that people exchange six types of resources with one another. These resources include love, status, information, money, goods and services and are organized on concreteness/ symbolism and particularism/ universalism dimensions. Concreteness refers to the degree of tangibility (e.g., concrete goods vs. symbolic information). Particularism refers to the resource's value in relation to the person who delivers it (e.g., exchange of love with a particular individual versus exchange of money with a stranger). Exchange is more likely to involve resources that are proximal to one another (rather than more distant) in terms of concreteness and particularism, e.g., a person who receives love from another person is apt to return love (versus money) to that person.

Rosenbaum and Massiah (2007) extend and apply resource exchange theory to service settings. They argue that a customer who receives social support in a service establishment will respond by providing resources to the establishment's other customers with feelings of love and genuine concern. Also, customers who receive social-emotional support and instrumental support from other customers in a commercial establishment may respond by expressing their appreciation via customer citizenship toward the establishment and customers. In addition, they may help or support other customers besides those who originally who supported them.

Altruism. The altruism view is based on biological considerations and ideas that altruism is a facet of human nature and personality. Biological research suggests that an altruism personality and altruism gene exist. Masters (1978) notes that altruism and sharing reflect a moral virtue which involves the development of human nature versus mere conventional restraints on individual pleasure or gain. The altruism motivation is activated or facilitated by the some persons' needs for assistance and other persons' inclinations to give help. In this sense, arguably, altruism behavior reflects human nature. Human behavior does not always conform to Darwinian assumptions that a "self gene" dictates behavior that would further the proliferation of the species at the expense of others or to seventeenth-century economists arguments that behavior is based on egoistic self-interest and that humans are "splendidly neutral to others" in their behavior. Instead, there is the readily observable evidence of people helping others without getting anything tangible in return. Guy and Patton (1989) argue that a strong (or perhaps the strongest) human motive is the basic need to help others without expectation of reward other than the pleasure of helping. Research suggests that, compared to individuals who assist others because they follow social norms or expect to gain status, self-esteem, or other personal benefits, persons who give assistance because they seem to have the intrinsic need to help others are more motivated to help, more involved in helping others, and more likely to provide appropriate helping responses. In this sense, altruism involves a form of the previously described intrinsic process motivation (Barbuto 2001) and may explain why some customers help employees or other customers.

5. Possible Consequences of Customer Citizenship Behavior

As the prior discussion indicates, the literature on customer voluntary behavior and citizenship emphasizes positive effects of WOM, cooperation, participation, and other altruism behaviors. In doing so, it underscores how varied types of customer citizenship behavior enhance firm performance and benefit its other customers. It also offers examples of why and how customers can become an importance source of competence for a firm. For instance, the credibility of positive customer WOM and participation behaviors helps to facilitate the sales of a wide range of products, including professional services, movies, automobiles, and travel (Cheung & Anitsal, 2007; Chung & Darke, 2006). Customer cooperation, participation, and altruism behaviors may also help to reduce a firm's costs, maintain or improve its service quality, and elevate its customers' satisfaction. In this regard, customer citizenship may positively contribute to norm observance via VI and ER and lessen the need for formal or overt controls due to rule enforcement among customers that is rooted in BS and ET facets of social capital. More generally, a firm and its customers may also benefit from ways in which customer loyalty, cooperation, participation, and altruism lead to a sense of community and bonding among customers, employees, and the firm, and joint efforts to solve service delivery and other problems.

Possible negative effects receive less consideration. Yet, conflicts may result due to the potential of customer citizenship to provide social control and to create solidarity and benefits for some rather than all of a firm's customers. These conflicts may undermine the expected benefits of customer citizenship. Therefore, we should avoid a solely positive interpretation of customer citizenship and recognize its less desirable consequences, its potential beneficiaries, and those who may be disadvantaged. For example, customer citizenship may lead to the exclusion of some new potential or existing customers. The ties and solidarity that benefit all (or a subset of) existing customers due to customer citizenship may pose barriers for potential or existing customers who are outside the favored subset. In some case, subgroup solidarity may create divisions in a firm's broader set of employees and customers. Furthermore, some customers may face high costs to maintain ties with employees and others customers and excessive requests from others who free ride on altruism and norms for mutual assistance. In addition, customer citizenship (and, in particular, cooperation) may lead to social controls and demands for conformity that restrict individual customers' freedoms and abilities to patronize other firms. Solidarity among employees and customers may also create downward leveling of service delivery norms, because better performance by some employees may erode group cohesion. Likewise, it may create an inward focus and aversion to new ideas, methods, and innovation.

6. Discussion

This paper seeks to expand our conceptual understanding of customer citizenship behavior. In this effort, it reviews the literature and suggests limitations in current views about customer citizenship. To deal with these limitations, it identifies general categories and dimensional qualities of customer citizenship using insights about civic and organizational citizenship. Next, it offers an overview of four perspectives about possible motives for customer citizenship (an integrative taxonomy of motivation, social capital, resource exchange, and altruism). Then, it outlines some potential positive and negative effects of customer citizenship. The following sections examine the managerial implications and research implications and extensions of these considerations.

6.1 Managerial Implications

Managers may find it useful to understand the general categories, dimensional qualities, and the interrelated nature the behaviors encompassed by customer citizenship. Furthermore, they should understand that the nature of and motives for customer citizenship behaviors might vary depending on the circumstances and retail setting. Managers are apt to find that there are significant practical distinctions between developing organizational strategies that focus on different types of customer citizenship behaviors and pursuing vague goals of complete customer satisfaction or loyalty. As Groth (2005) implies, pursuing such vague goals may impact some but not other customer behaviors that are critical to organizational performance.

Moreover, managers should focus on how the antecedents and positive and negative consequences of customer citizenship behavior affect their firms' performances and core competencies. They may be able to influence but not manage customer citizenship in a conventional sense, as subsequently discussed. Yet, at a minimum, they should try to monitor the antecedents and consequences of customer citizenship in their organizations and in the marketplace.

Perhaps most importantly, managers should recognize that customers, as well as the firm and employees, participate in determining the character of customer citizenship behaviors. Thus, customer citizenship is unlikely to be a resource that firms can manage in a conventional sense. In addition, managers and customers may have different perceptions of customer citizenship behavior and customers' in- and extra-role behaviors. Consequently, managers may find it valuable to consider how to work with and through customers and employees to establish an environment that fosters customer citizenship behaviors with positive consequences and discourages those with negative consequences. Communicating with diverse and evolving customer bases and trying to affect customers' views of what behaviors are required versus voluntary are apt to be major challenges for firms in the future (Groth, 2005; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000)

6.2 Research Implications and Extensions

Research is needed to study the character, antecedents, and consequences of customer citizenship behavior, investigate customer citizenship in different cultural contexts, examine the effects of customer citizenship on firms, and validate measures of customer citizenship behaviors. For example, researchers should investigate how customer citizenship is exhibited and how interrelated customer citizenship behaviors are balanced or conflict with one another in different retail settings. Research is needed to develop and verify measures for the five categories/ dimensions of customer citizenship behavior. For instance, although WOM is often discussed in the marketing literature, arguably, measuring WOM is a largely unresolved matter. Empirical work is also needed to study how the previously described psychological and sociological reasons for customer citizenship combine to influence customer citizenship behavior. Moreover, possible moderators of customer citizenship behaviors should be examined, e.g., consumer alienation and mood, customer and employee role clarity, and personal traits such as introversion/ extroversion

Furthermore, research should explore the potential impact that cultural context might have on customer citizenship behavior. For example, individuals may be less likely to engage customer citizenship through WOM and altruism behavior in cultures like the U.S. in which individualism is more prevalent than in places like China in which collectivism is more evident. Differences between the urban and rural cultures should also be examined. Those who live in rural areas may be subjected to more social pressure and be more likely to exhibit customer citizenship behavior than urban residents. Further, a broader range of consequences should be scrutinized. For example, altruism behavior may facilitate community consolidation. On the other hand, it may increase social pressure. How does the setting affect these outcomes? Negative consequences of customer citizenship behaviors in different cultures also require attention. For instance, research shows that Singapore citizens are more likely to shop abroad for counterfeit products than U.S. citizens. Do consumer citizenship and its antecedents help explain this difference? For instance, is it partially attributable to differences in customer WOM, loyalties to retail institutions, and civic virtue? How can retailers in different settings and cultures prevent or reduce the negative consequences of customer citizenship behavior? These and other issues should be of interest to researchers.

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