THE INFLUENCE OF FEMALE ACADEMIC LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS ON ACHIEVING SAUDI VISION 2030: A SCOPING REVIEW

A INFLUÊNCIA DE LÍDERES ACADÊMICAS FEMININAS EM INSTITUIÇÕES DE ENSINO SUPERIOR PARA ALCANÇAR A VISÃO SAUDITA 2030: UMA REVISÃO DE ESCOPO

LA INFLUENCIA DE LAS LÍDERES ACADÉMICAS FEMENINAS EN LAS INSTITUCIONES DE EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR PARA LOGRAR LA VISIÓN SAUDI 2030: UNA REVISIÓN DE ALCANCE

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ABSTRACT: Education is an essential element to the development of nations. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in the development of its education sector. Nevertheless, continuous development of education, especially the higher education sector, significantly depends on the quality and adequate supply of leadership that cuts across the gender divide. However, analysis of the literature indicates a lack of discussion on the leadership role of women in Saudi higher educational institutions. This paper reviews the opportunities and challenges against female academic leadership in Saudi higher education institutions and their influence towards achieving the Saudi Vision 2030. An eclectic scoping review was adopted to synthesize the relevant materials published in the past ten years in the context of Saudi Arabia. The findings indicate that the main obstacles to female academic leaders include structural challenges, shortage of resources, and lack of empowerment, with personal and cultural challenges ranked last.

KEYWORDS: Female leaders. Higher education. Cultural barriers. Organizational barriers. Saudi Vision 2030.

RESUMO: A educação é um elemento essencial para o desenvolvimento das nações. Assim, a Arábia Saudita tem investido fortemente no desenvolvimento de seu setor de educação. No entanto, o desenvolvimento contínuo da educação, especialmente o setor de ensino superior, depende significativamente da qualidade e oferta adequada de liderança que ultrapasse a divisão de gênero. No entanto, a análise da literatura indica uma falta de discussão sobre o papel de liderança das mulheres nas instituições de ensino superior sauditas. Este artigo analisa as oportunidades e desafios contra a liderança acadêmica feminina nas instituições de ensino superior sauditas e sua influência para alcançar a Visão Saudita 2030. Uma revisão eclética de escopo foi adotada para sintetizar os materiais relevantes publicados nos últimos dez anos no contexto da Arábia Saudita. Os resultados da revisão indicam que os principais obstáculos para as lideranças acadêmicas femininas incluem desafios estruturais,

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escassez de recursos e falta de empoderamento, com desafios pessoais e culturais em último lugar.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Líderes femininas. Ensino superior. Barreiras culturais. Barreiras organizacionais. Visão Saudita 2030.*

RESUMEN: *La educación es un elemento esencial para el desarrollo de las naciones. En consecuencia, Arabia Saudita ha invertido mucho en el desarrollo de su sector educativo. Sin embargo, el desarrollo continuo de la educación, especialmente del sector de la educación superior, depende en gran medida de la calidad y el suministro adecuado de liderazgo que atraviese la brecha de género. Sin embargo, el análisis de la literatura indica una falta de discusión sobre el papel de liderazgo de las mujeres en las instituciones de educación superior sauditas. Este documento revisa las oportunidades y los desafíos contra el liderazgo académico femenino en las instituciones de educación superior sauditas y su influencia para lograr la Visión Saudita 2030. Se adoptó una revisión de alcance ecléctica para sintetizar los materiales relevantes publicados en los últimos diez años en el contexto de Arabia Saudita. Los hallazgos de la revisión indican que los principales obstáculos para las mujeres líderes académicas incluyen desafíos estructurales, escasez de recursos y falta de empoderamiento, con los desafíos personales y culturales en último lugar.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Mujeres líderes. Educación superior. Barreras culturales. Barreras organizacionales. Saudi Vision 2030.*

Introduction

The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) revolution played a significant role in bringing about the social changes that led to the rise of women in various professions (AL-JOHANI, 2015; LORENZO RIAL, 2020). The emergence of the Internet also had significant effects on women in various spheres of life. Women's foray into the workplace has led to significant gains in several countries where women can now engage in all social activities. The status of women has thus risen significantly in the last fifty years in most countries. The woman is characterized by her proven ability to participate in the management of organizations, delegate authority, and make effective decisions. She is also distinguished by her innate compassion and appreciation for the needs of others. A woman's feminine nature predisposes her towards a more rapid pace in forming relationships and more open and accurate in detecting mistakes. Moreover, this pattern of leadership is what knowledge economy societies need today and, in the future. These qualities place the woman in an excellent position to contribute significantly to the management of society's various institutions, more especially in Saudi Arabia which is rapidly transforming towards a knowledge economy (BASLOM; TONG, 2019).

Women are increasingly playing critical roles in public institutions across the world. In the United States, women make up to 75 per cent of undergraduates in colleges, and they earn most of the doctoral degrees awarded. In Saudi Arabia, there is no gainsaying the fact that the Kingdom has made some remarkable changes in women's status in many spheres of the life, political, and economic life over the past two decades. Nevertheless, Abalkhail (2017) stated that women are severely under-represented in practically every field of life, and the prospects of women's leadership are still far from the expectation. Men dominated in the most coveted leadership positions in the public service, which makes it difficult for women to gain some foothold (HODGES, 2017). For example, women are less represented in higher education leadership in Saudi Arabia, even though they are capable and highly committed leaders (BUTT *et al.*, 2014).

The main goal of this paper is to review the influence of a female academic leader in achieving the Saudi Vision 2030, through a synthesis of existing literature, and the current state of women's higher education leadership in Saudi Arabia. The second goal of the paper is to bridge the gap of the literature in the field of female leadership in higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This study is an answer to the call of the Saudi Consultative Council made during its fifty-first session, that work should be intensified to empower women to hold senior leadership positions in pursuance of one of the most important goals pursued by Vision 2030. Vision 2030 also seeks to address the complex conditions of Saudi women in all educational, career and social levels, targeting to raise the percentage of women's participation in the labor market from 22% to 30% (KSA, 2016, p. 39).

Alchoui (2009) mentioned that under the stimulus of ICT, Saudi Arabia had witnessed significant changes during the past few decades, enabling more women taking up more responsibility in public spheres and occupying higher positions in organizations. Several studies carried out in Saudi Arabia have shown that there is significant progress in women's education and participation in the public sector workforce, especially in the Ministry of Education. However, women are still less privileged to assume middle or senior management and leadership positions. Thus, their participation in policy- and decision-making is less in proportion to their educational accomplishments. A large portion of educated and qualified Saudi women are restricted to work at the lower administrative level. Therefore, there is a growing feeling of women and Saudi society at large to allocate higher quotas for women in terms of higher leadership/administrative positions. Consequently, the researcher is trying to get to know the problems and challenges that hinder Saudi women from occupying leadership

positions. Such an investigation may contribute towards addressing the paucity of research on women in leadership in higher education institutions of Saudi Arabia.

Methodology

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

–   To review the influence of the female academic leaders on the realization of the Saudi Vision 2030.

–   To identify the difficulties hindering female academic leaders from holding leadership positions in Saudi higher education institutions.

–   To overview the benefits and the opportunities that female academics have when they become leaders.

The study seeks to provide answers to the following research questions:

–   What does the literature say on the influence of female leaders academic on the realization of the Saudi Vision 2030?

–   What are the difficulties that hinder the academic female from holding leadership positions in Saudi higher education institutions?

–   What are the benefits and the opportunities that female academics enjoy when they become leaders?

Results and Discussion

Copper and Schindler (2014) see research design as the blueprint for the research process, which the researcher follows to attain the research objectives. In this study, the usual systematic review is not followed because the researcher is interested in a small area of interest (female academic leaders in Saudi higher education institutions) that has not been extensively researched. The relevant materials are few and scattered, and this informed the researcher to use the scoping review technique. Therefore, the scoping review technique was used. The technique is increasingly used in education (HAN; RØKENES, 2020; SALISU; AWANG, 2018) to provide informed syntheses of topics of interest. Scoping review entails the researcher developing a set of research questions which form the basis for the themes around which the literature directly relevant to the research themes are extracted from the available online sources and synthesized (COOPER *et al.*, 2019).

The scoping review technique was implemented using the procedure outlined by Colquhoun *et al.* (2014): namely, formulation of the research question; identification of relevant materials; selection of relevant materials; thematically collating and summarizing the evidence and reporting the results. Scoping review ensures that only literature directly relevant to the research are reviewed. The researcher sourced materials from the Google Scholar and the Scopus databases. The researcher assessed the scope, content, accuracy, as well as the authority and relevance of the articles, reports, and web-based material used in this paper following guidance for finding, retrieving, and evaluating journal and web-based information (COX; HASSARD, 2005). Almost all sources were from published articles in international journals. The researcher supplemented those with reports with government reports where appropriate.

Women in Higher Education

Hamdan *et al.* (2020) surmised that education is a requirement for personal and social growth of individuals and society. Also, educational institutions, more specifically higher educational institutions, play notable roles in preparing individuals for occupational, social, and personal roles in society. Higher educational institutions, both public and private, have a characteristically diverse hierarchy of staff from the level of the presidency to administrators, faculty members, and other staff. Women in Saudi higher education generally concentrates around the lower level of the hierarchies. There is a marked absence of women in the top leadership positions in Saudi higher education.

Saudi Women Leaders in Higher Education Institutions

The number of women leaders is slowly increasing in universities around the world. However, the situation differs from one country to another. There tend to be higher rates of women participation in educational leadership in western academic institutions and lower participation rates in developing countries. Saudi Arabia is one of these developing countries. Omair *et al.* (2020) calculated that the ratio of females to males in senior positions in the government sector is 0.14, indicating that "only 14% of the gender gap is closed in senior positions in the government sector" (OMAIR *et al.*, 2020, p. 1244). Indeed, the World Economic Forum (2020) ranked Saudi Arabia 146 out of 153 countries in its *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*. However, the country has begun to attach great importance to female academic leadership participation in decision-making centers. Indeed, the era of male

hegemony in academic institutions is gradually coming to an end (AL-QAHTANI *et al.*, 2020; CHESTERMAN *et al.*, 2003). In Saudi Arabia, the increasing the number of educated females in Saudi Arabia over the last decade has seen a growth of women's participation in leadership positions and the decision-making process (VAN GEEL, 2016). However, despite embracing modern education systems, the Saudi educational system is struggling to align itself with the Western education system in terms of inclusion of women in leadership positions.

Although Aldawsari (2016) reported that, as at 2015, there were 150 full female Professors and 443 female associate Professors in Saudi Arabian universities, the first female university president was only appointed in July 2020 in the person of Dr. Lilac al-Safadi as President of the Saudi Electronic University (ABUEISH, 2020). Going further back, Aljuhani (1994) reported that "the number of female Saudi professors in the different universities and colleges in the Kingdom increased from 4 in 1970 to 1,356 in 1990". However, by 2017, Alsubaie and Jones (2017) reported that there was only one Saudi woman as a "director of the university" in the entire higher education industry. This scenario gives credence to the contention that Saudi female academic leaders are grossly underrepresented in elite leadership positions not due to lack of ability or supply of qualified females but due to societal stereotypes and vested interests. As Alsubaie and Jones (2017) observed, "the rise in educated women and female faculty is not matched by the proportion of women in higher education leadership".

According to statistics provided by the Ministry of Education (2019), only one woman has achieved the highest leadership position as the Director of University in Saudi Arabian higher education. Twelve women are in the position of Vice President, and 61 are working as deans, and 228 women have been able to achieve the position of Deputy Dean of Faculty (NEUBAUER; KAUR, 2019). The positions that are offered to the women are mainly for the campus specially dedicated to women. Some of the universities in Saudi Arabia are just for females. Therefore, the positions of the Dean or Deputy Dean are only awarded to women with limited decision-making control and power (NEUBAUER; KAUR, 2019). However, studies have identified in some roles given to women with more power and responsibility than men. For example, according to Almaki *et al.* (2016), women are preferred for the roles of the Dean and Deputy Dean. It is believed that some functions can be effectively carried out by women rather than by men, such as the role of Dean of Community Service, Art and Design, etc. Therefore, the pieces of evidence inform us that, women are now achieving higher positions of Dean and Deputy Dean, which were earlier given to men only. However, the

number and participation of Saudi women in higher education leadership is still minimal and with limited powers (ABALKHAIL; ALLAN, 2015).

Abalkhail (2017) studied women leadership in Saudi higher education institutions and found that despite possessing comparatively better qualifications and experience than their male equivalents, women were the less favored choice for leadership roles. Indeed, Saudi women have high attainment in education as indicated by the level of literacy among them. The rate for adult Saudi females was 92.71%, and 99.28% for youth females aged 15-24 (WORLD BANK, 2019). However, Almansour and Kempner (2016) noticed that women have to overcome several personal challenges and have to exhibit an exceptional commitment to overcoming individual challenges in their path to leadership. For example, women find it difficult to travel to conferences due to cultural and familial restrictions.

Similarly, Al-Asfour *et al.* (2017) highlight several barriers for women attempting to rise to leadership positions such as lack of freedom to travel, gender stereotyping, limited growth opportunities, and lack of consideration for work-life balance. Such issues create both endogenous and exogenous challenges for women seeking leadership positions (ALSUBAIHI, 2016). Policymakers need to consider work-life policies and flexible work designs for female academics to accommodate their peculiar needs (ALLAM, 2019).

von Alberti-Alhtaybat and Aazam (2018) identified three different concepts that affect Saudi Arabian women's prospects in educational leadership. These concepts can have negative as well as positive influence over leadership and its effectiveness among the women. They are experienced and expectations from the leadership position; challenges of managing the work-life balance; and differential treatment at the workplace. Different female leaders have a different experience in their leadership positions. Secondly, they have the dual pressure of managing the work-life balance, and their positions are also significantly influenced by the differential treatments. One of the interesting findings that von Alberti-Alhtaybat and Aazam (2018) have presented is that most of the women employees or leaders working in the field of higher education have experienced unresponsiveness and lack of support from the fellow female leaders, which can be a new insight to the barriers that women face towards achieving leadership positions.

Barriers to Women Leadership in Higher Education

This section concerns barriers that hinder women in Saudi Arabia from taking part in the leadership of higher education institutions. The patriarchal Saudi society easily acquiesce,

and indeed expect the allocation of higher executive positions to follow what Poorhosseinzadeh and Strachan (2020) called the 'ideal executive,' a notion largely built on male characteristics which thereby become barriers to entry for otherwise qualified women candidates. Thus, Saudi women experience similar barriers and obstacles that many other females around the world face in their bid achieve senior leadership positions (SOBEHART, 2015). These barriers can be categorized as cultural, organizational, and personal barriers.

Cultural Barriers to Women's Academic Leadership in Saudi Arabia

In their study, Akram *et al.* (2017) found that "female leaders were less future-orientated, less assertive and have limited as compared to their male counterparts" (p. 25). Indeed, women have to figuratively tiptoe around the corridors of leadership in Saudi public institutions because of cultural orientation that defines leadership as the exclusive preserve of men. The cultural barriers are rooted in the customs of the tribal communities that prevailed in the Arabian Peninsula over the ages (AL-BAKR *et al.*, 2017). Conservative Saudi scholars draw on the prevailing customs to encourage women to remain at home "regardless of globalization, the media revolution, the social transformations, the demographic shifts and the economic waves of affluence that the country has passed through over the last few decades" (ALOTAIBI *et al.*, 2017, p. 32). These scholars often view women who go out and strive to excel professionally as contrarian to moral mores. They see women's career advancement and higher education as undermining men's patriarchal domination and as a direct challenge to men's control of power (ARAR; OPLATKA, 2016). Thus, the prevailing cultural milieu throws some challenges to female participation in the workforce and leadership.

There are mainly two significant cultural restrictions on professional working women in Saudi Arabia. The first restriction is the limitations placed on women's mobility and the restricted choices with regards to education and occupation (ALEXANDER, 2013; MOGHADAM, 2009). Women may not freely move around without the consent of their male guardians, and they can only choose the type of education and occupation approved by their guardians or husbands (HUTCHINGS *et al.*, 2010; WHEELER, 2020). However, these restrictions are gradually easing, even though the problem is unwarrantedly stereotyped (ABEDALTHAGAFI, 2018). Omair *et al.* (2020) calculated the index of Saudi women's freedom to work, to study and mobility at 8.68, 7.54, and 6.46 (out of 10 points), respectively. The second restriction takes place in workplaces and comes in the form of segregation at the male workers from the female workers. These practices, though designed to maintain the

moral health and fiber of the Saudi society, nevertheless limit the Saudi woman's ability to aspire to leadership positions (ABALKHAIL; ALLAN, 2015). These two restrictions also limit women's abilities and capabilities to acquire new skills, get access to new opportunities for their professional and social advancement, and ultimately curb any leadership aspirations they may entertain (ABALKHAIL, 2017).

Organizational Barriers to Women's Academic Leadership in Saudi Arabia

Several organizational barriers have been identified that affect the leadership progression of Saudi women in higher educational institutions (ALFARRAN *et al.*, 2018). One major organizational barrier is the limited institutional opportunities for growth and development available to women (Al-ASFOUR *et al.* 2017; KATTAN *et al.,* 2016). Not only are women restricted to work in certain sectors such as education, even within such sectors, but there are also discriminatory appointment procedures and promotion options, plus the traditional condescending attitude of the male bosses towards working women (ALMUNAJJED, 2010). At workplaces, and in many cases even at home, women are excluded from strategic decision-making, thereby hampering their ability to acquire decision-making capabilities as well as affecting their confidence in their leadership abilities (ABALKHAIL, 2017). The centralized governing system practiced commonly in most Saudi organizations concentrates power at the top positions, which are often occupied by men.

Al-Ahmadi (2011) states that "probably the single most important hurdle for women in management in all industrialized countries is the persistent stereotype that associated management with being male". Also, Kattan *et al.* (2016) identified the resistance of the men towards women in management, and the lack of appropriate policies and legislations for encouraging the participation of women in organizational management as other barriers militating against women assumption of leadership positions in organizations. Furthermore, Almenkash *et al.* (2007) point out that even in female institutions (such as all-female schools), there are organizational shortcomings including the lack of clarity in the organizational relationship between women's and men's departments, poor coordination, and the subordination of women's sections on the organizational chart (and in some cases not including women sections in the organizational chart altogether), as well as a lack of control over financial and material resources. Thus, the lack of inclusion of women results in a dearth of managerial skills among women which are required to exercise leadership.

Personal Barriers to Women's Academic Leadership in Saudi Arabia

Shabbir *et al.* (2017) said that the personal barriers to the career advancement of women are significantly higher than organizational barriers. Albakry (2016) and Tlaiss (2014) have earlier explained that the social circumstances and women's personal experiences in restricted society often affect the development of their leadership behaviors and skills. Women become incapable of exercising their leadership role effectively because of low self-confidence, fear of taking responsibilities, and difficulty to maintain the balance between family obligations and professional responsibilities. Women in Saudi Arabia also have the sense of being isolated, when they reach the administrative positions because the structural and organizational challenges often isolate the women departments.

Women in Saudi Arabia also have increased mental and psychological pressure because they are often subjected to social, professional, and cultural pressures (MARINAKOU, 2014). Low self-efficacy further burden women with the inability to cope with all these pressures, a situation which further prevents women from aspiring to higher positions in their chosen careers (TLAISS, 2014). Thus, the status of women remains limited to domestic responsibilities (MARINAKOU, 2014), and social pressure and traditional and cultural expectations prevent the development of the proper leadership attitude and values among women (AL-AHMADI, 2011). Again, lack of self-confidence precludes a woman from taking up professional responsibilities.

Another problem associated with the personal characteristics of women is the problem of role conflict, as women face problems in balancing professional and personal life. This is mainly due to the lack of structural support within the organizations that creates difficulty for women in fulfilling family obligations and professional demands (KATTAN *et al.* 2016). Another theme identified in terms of personal barriers is the feeling of suffering and frustration, which occurs due to the increasing pressure of dual roles and the sense of marginalization that affects their personality. Women often feel inferior because they have been brought up in an environment where men are considered as superior and women are supposed to be passive and submissive (ALOTAIBI *et al.* 2017). Therefore, there is a mix of many personality traits that impact women's leadership and ability to acquire senior management and leadership positions.

Conclusions

The findings of this research indicated that that the main obstacles to full emergence of female academic leadership in Saudi higher education institutions are: structural challenges, shortage of resources, and lack of empowerment as well as personal and cultural challenges. The findings also emphasize the importance of training as a means for leadership development, as well as creating policies for discussion and enhancement of female academic leadership, and establishing supportive legislation for women's active role in society. Furthermore, the review highlights the many difficulties faced by female academic leaders in Saudi Arabia which severally and collectively limit their effectiveness as leaders and hinder them from achieving their potentials in helping the government attain Vision 2030 objective of increasing women participation in the workforce. These difficulties include organisational structure, culture, policies, and practices, as well as personal determinants such as personal skills, abilities, self-esteem, support, ability to achieve balance and a sense of empowerment (METCALFE, 2008).

The current study spotlighted the role of female academic leaders in Saudi higher education institutions and how these roles feed into the achievement of some of the strategic objectives of the Saudi Vision 2030. The study captured the documented experiences of female academic leaders in Saudi Arabia and highlight the challenges they encounter and posit directions that could pave the way for future generations of women academics to aspire to the highest leadership positions in the higher education industry. The study points out that despite their high qualifications, job experiences, and full readiness to assume leadership roles in their organizations, female leaders in Saudi Arabian higher education institutions are not fully engaged to contribute their quota towards the transformation of the Saudi society into a knowledge economy.

For Saudi Arabia to move on with its current policy of permitting women, the government should address the structural and cultural barriers identified in this study. This review found that researchers have emphasized the importance of training as a means for women leadership development in academia. The study comes at a time where Saudi Arabia is undergoing major reforms on all fronts but mostly on women's issues. In this vein, the unparallel efforts of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in facilitating women's participation in public life are noteworthy. This effort is expected to give further fillip to the full participation of female academics in the leadership responsibilities of Saudi higher education institutions.

Importance of the Study

The primary significance of this study lies in providing a synthesis of the literature on female leadership in higher educational institutions of Saudi Arabia given the targets enshrined in the Vision 2030. Specifically, the study may be of significance due to several practical and theoretical reasons. The practical importance of the study includes the following:

1.   Results of the study may provide information about female academics in leadership positions in Saudi higher education.

2.   The study may assist decision-makers to implement some of the Vison 2030 strategies that aim to achieve equal opportunity for women to reach top leadership positions.

3.   The study may help the government and educators to classify the relevant factors that hinder the women leaders from taking part in a leadership position in higher education institutes to develop appropriate response strategies.

4.   The study might assist the decision-makers by offering insights into the significance of women in leadership positions in higher education.

5.   The study may assist in mapping the skills women leaders possess and the difficulties they faced in reaching these positions. It can thus help women leaders in academia to develop their career in a more informed manner.

Theoretically, the importance of this study rests on the following two points:

1.   The study may assist in filling the gap in the literature in the field of women's leadership in higher educational institutions in Saudi Arabia.

2.   The study may pave the way for future research in the field of women and educational leadership as well as their role in the economic growth of Saudi Arabia.

Recommendations

Leadership development programmes in Saudi Arabia's higher education institutions should take cognizance of the challenges identified in this study and to include different skills sets and activities necessary to overcome the challenges. Accordingly, the following recommendations are proffered:

1.   Training of female academic leaders should be integrated into strategic planning efforts of higher education institutions.

2.   Institutional assessment in the Saudi higher education sector should include the level to which an institution has contributed towards realizing the strategic objectives of the Saudi Vision 2030 as it relates to the empowerment of female academic leaders.

3.   Policymakers and administration legislatures play a crucial role in the establishment of social policies, development strategies, and legislation that shape opportunities for female academics' leaders in Higher education institutions.

4.   Higher education institutions should embrace affirmative human resources management practices that modify work cultures through the change of administration, team building, sensitivity training, and cross-gender communication.

5.   Organizing conferences, seminars, and discussions are also essential to cope with the developing roles of female academic leaders in Saudi Arabia and with current trends in management development and to discuss difficulties encountered by women leaders and techniques to overcome them.

6.   Particular training programs to develop the capabilities of women leaders and qualify them to assume senior leadership positions should be conducted regularly.

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