

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Deceptive Stars: Auditing Fake Reviews and Their Psychological Impact on Hotel Booking Decisions in Pakistan

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Abstract

Online reviews serve as vital trust signals across digital hospitality platforms, and they shape consumers' booking actions. However, many manipulated forms of reviews, including paid endorsements and incentivized reviews through to algorithmically manipulated content, present raised issues of authenticity and expose consumers to poor practice indiscriminately. In this paper, we examine the psychological effects manipulation will have on hotel booking intention in Pakistan and emphasize its significance due to rapid digital take-up and weak regulatory environment. Using an algorithmic audit and experimental method, we first posed what linguistic and temporal patterns are present that indicate promotional review activity on major booking platforms. Second, we examined how manipulated reviews affect consumers, and if the effect is contingent on perceived authenticity. Our findings establish exposure to manipulated reviews lead to lower perceived authenticity which then, led to lower booking intention. We draw from the importance of authenticity in developing digital trust beliefs as a psychological mechanism. Our behavioral experimentation is distinct in that we combine audit enabled manipulation cues to offer a fresh perspective on how consumers process cue credibility related to hotel reviews. We build upon the significance of realism in shaping digital trust beliefs as a psychological mechanism. Through behavioral experimentation we uniquely utilize audit driven manipulation cues to illustrate how consumers process credibility cues associated with hotel reviews. We posit implications for replica billboards that require platformed level transparency along with authenticity building design features. We complicated academic discourse on ethical digital marketing by exposing the harms of review manipulation and recommending ethical trust feelings should remain preserved in hospitality ecosystems.

Keywords: Online Review Manipulation, Perceived Authenticity, Booking Intention, Digital Trust, Hospitality Platforms, Algorithmic Audit, Consumer Psychology, Pakistan, Experimental Design, Ewom

1. Introduction

With the growth of the digital world, online review systems are important to consumer decision-making in particular in the case of hospitality. Booking.com, Sastaticket.pk, and Jovago Pakistan are three of the key starting points consumers choose to search for and book a hotel and also have user-generated content that creates an idea of service quality, safety and value in the consumer mind. In this way, reviews contains surrogate experiences whereby the consumer uses reviews to evaluate a hotel which they have never stayed before (Filieri & McLeay, 2014). As such, online review credibility and authenticity is important to develop consumer trust and keep consumers engaged with the platform (Kim & Kim, 2019). Nonetheless, the rising market value of positive reviews has led to manipulation of reviews occurring at a widespread level. Companies may incentivize good reviews, delete bad reviews, or even engage in outright fraudulent reviews to be more visible and competitive (Luca, 2016). When promotional reviews occur, they may be relatively subtle but can also skew consumer perspectives and devalue the marketplace (Mayzlin et al., 2014). In newer markets like Pakistan, where little to no regulation exists, and people's digital literacy is questionable, the harmful effects of review manipulation can be especially exacerbated (Xie et al., 2014).

While a significant amount of research has examined the financial and reputational effects of review manipulation in Western settings, there is a scarcity of empirical work on its psychological effect on consumers in South Asian markets. To our knowledge, few studies have examined the effects of manipulated reviews on booking intention driven by perceived authenticity - a trust antecedent for consumers in digital contexts loyal (Kim & Kim, 2019; Erkan & Evans, 2016). Furthermore, most existing models of consumer decision-making ignore the role of authenticity, focusing only on superficial metrics like star rating or review number as the nexus that plants the seeds that lead to the drivers, not

authenticity that yield their behavioral outcomes (Filiari & McLeay, 2014). Additionally, most prior research has relied on observational data or platform-level audits, with limited integration of experimental methods that isolate causal mechanisms. There is a need for studies that combine algorithmic audit with behavioral experimentation to understand not only the prevalence of manipulation but also its psychological consequences (Mayzlin et al., 2014; Waheed, Muhammad, & Anwar, 2024).

Despite the growing reliance on online reviews for hotel bookings in Pakistan, the integrity of these reviews is frequently compromised by manipulation. This undermines consumer trust, distorts booking behavior, and threatens the credibility of digital hospitality platforms. Yet, the psychological mechanism through which manipulated reviews influence booking intention—particularly via perceived authenticity—remains underexplored. Without a clear understanding of this pathway, platforms lack the empirical foundation needed to design effective trust-enhancing interventions.

Objectives

This study aims to address the above gap through the following objectives:

1. To audit the prevalence and patterns of manipulated reviews on major Pakistani hotel booking platforms using linguistic and temporal indicators.
2. To examine the psychological impact of manipulated reviews on consumer booking intention through a controlled experimental design.
3. To test whether perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between review condition and booking intention:

Through the integration of algorithmic audit, a form of digital consumer research, and psychological experimentation, this research improves the literature on digital consumer behavior and demonstrates a much needed methodology that has ensured a form of ecological validity while seeking

causality. This study improves theoretical understanding of the role of trust formation online, centered in perceived authenticity as a mediating construct (Kim & Kim, 2019; Erkan & Evans, 2016; Waheed et al., 2024). On a broader level, we have highlighted the significant ethical obligation we must assume to sustain digital trust and confidence within online consumer markets in a time where UGC is influencing consumer choice. As the travel economy continues to enhance its own digitization journey within Pakistan, it is crucial for stakeholders to develop meaningful online reviews that uphold integrity as a conviction for sustainable future growth, competitive equity and consumer engagement.

2.Literature Review

An online review is a fundamental part of the consumer decision-making process in the hospitality industry. As digital platforms continue to dominate hotel bookings, credibility and perceived authenticity of user-generated content is becoming more salient. This literature review investigates how manipulated online reviews impact booking intention with the psychological mediating variable of perceived authenticity. Using empirical research studies within hospitality, marketing, and information systems, the literature review contextualizes the current study in a larger space of digital trust and consumer behaviour.

Review Condition and Manipulated Content

The review condition includes descriptions of the characteristics and type of reviews made available to users - from trusted unbiased reviews to promotions and influenced reviews. There is extensive literature documenting the manipulation of reviews online and whether that's variations of incentivizing positive reviews or simply suppressing negative reviews strategically to influence thinking. Luca (2011) conducted landmark audit of Yelp data and found the manipulation of reviews (fraud) can embellish visibility when there are competing substitutes.

The work done by Luca provides an economic and strategic understanding of the consequences of manipulated reviews but also the social consequences this can have for consumers' choice. Additionally, Mayzlin, Dover and Chevalier found that promotional or incentivized reviews of hotels can increase bookings and performance in the short run but would erode consumer trust in the hospitality industry in the long run. The researchers examined data from Expedia and TripAdvisor, showing that fraudulent reviews can be detected using linguistic patterns or by time-based clusters. In comparing likely manipulated reviews, consumers viewing reviews likely become highlights as overly positive or repetitive. Thus, the review condition represents a significant variable based on consumer evaluations and also indirectly on behavioral or evaluations outcome variables like booking intention.

Perceived Authenticity as a Mediator

Perceived authenticity refers to how genuine, unbiased, and firsthand the consumer feels the review appears. Thus, perceived authenticity is influenced by the review content but also contextual cues, such as reviewer identity, language, or cultural application. In the hospitality sector, authenticity is considered a driver of trust and behavioral intention.

Kim and Kim (2019) concentrated on how reviews perceived as authentic had the potential to facilitate meaningful trust as travelers initiated the process of trust formation and thus a perceived likelihood to book. Reviews perceived as authentic did facilitate a strengthened belief in trust and likelihood to book. Additionally, their study in the Journal of Travel Research, demonstrated to us that authenticity of the review was not merely a stylistic choice by the author, but an actual psychologically based component of trust that exists between the consumer and review exposure that led them to consumer behavior.

Filieri (2015) took this one step further, establishing diagnostic cues (e.g., tone, balance, specifics vs generalizations, cultural specifics) that facilitate

perception of helpfulness and credibility for online reviews. In the case of Pakistani hotel platforms, where language and region are challenges, perceived authenticity is possibly a larger percentage of their appeal; for example, reviews written in Urdu, or referencing a local anchor to the actual experience opposed to a generic anchor like, "the food or service was good," may give the consumer a more favorable response.

Güler and Huseynov (2021) further confirmed the mediating role of authenticity by showing that perceived credibility moderated the effect of reviews on booking intention for Turkish hotels. Their analysis using structural equation modeling showed that, in terms of impact, authenticity perceptions, rather than simply review quantity or valence, were more impactful establishing trust cues are more significant in digital contexts.

Booking Intention and Behavioral Outcomes

Booking intention is the likelihood of a consumer to book a hotel from the available information available. This is important behavioral outcome in hospitality research. It consists of cognitive and affective domains of the traveler experience. Cheung and Thadani (2012) provided a comprehensive literature review on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), wherein they concluded that when booking intention was studied, credibility, and relevance of online reviews are significant predictors of booking intention, notably in first-time travelers.

For Pakistan, where degrees of digital literacy and trust vary for different segments of the geography, these particular cues of authenticity are noteworthy for anyone who looks to develop booking intention. Un Nisa (2024) conducted a recent study, noting original, genuinely informative review content had a significant impact on booking decisions, whereas book content that was modified or filled with promotional content produced skepticism and detachment. Study progressions remain in line within perspectives of previous eWOM and engagement studies, where the implications of social proof and influence

espouse the significance of trust and transparency.

Xie, Miao, Kuo, and Lee (2011) investigated how consumers react to ambivalent hotel reviews. They confirmed that booking intention is affected by both perceived source credibility and pre-decisional disposition. This article, through the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, established that ambiguity can occur even with balanced reviews once authenticity is brought into question and trust cues are essential in decreasing uncertainty.

Conceptual Synthesis

The relationship between review condition and booking intention is not linear but mediated by perceived authenticity. When reviews are perceived as authentic, even moderately positive feedback can enhance trust and drive bookings. Conversely, when authenticity is compromised—through linguistic inconsistency, reviewer anonymity, or temporal clustering—consumers may discount even highly favorable reviews.

Pavlou and Dimoka (2006) argued that reputation systems in e-commerce function as trust proxies, but only when perceived as transparent and unbiased. In hospitality platforms, where consumers cannot physically inspect services prior to purchase, reviews serve as surrogate experiences. Thus, authenticity becomes the linchpin of trust formation and behavioral intention.

The literature converges on a clear insight: perceived authenticity is a critical mediator between review condition and booking intention. Manipulated reviews undermine trust not only in individual listings but in the platform itself, leading to reduced consumer engagement and long-term reputational harm. As digital hospitality platforms expand in Pakistan, ensuring the integrity of review systems will be essential to sustaining consumer confidence.

Future research should explore cross-cultural variations in authenticity perception, test platform-level interventions (e.g., verified badges, AI-based detection), and examine longitudinal effects of review manipulation on

consumer loyalty. By centering authenticity in both design and policy, platforms can foster ethical engagement and meaningful consumer relationships.

3.Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining an algorithmic audit of hotel reviews with a controlled experimental design to examine the psychological effects of manipulated reviews on consumer decision-making. The audit provided empirical evidence of review manipulation, while the experiment assessed its influence on perceived authenticity, trust in booking platforms, and booking intention.

Audit Procedure

Three hotel booking platforms commonly used in Pakistan—Sastaticket.pk, Jovago Pakistan, and localized listings from Booking.com—were selected for review analysis. A total of 60 hotel listings were sampled across major tourist destinations including Murree, Hunza, Lahore, and Karachi. From each listing, 20 reviews were extracted, resulting in a dataset of 1,200 reviews. Reviews were analyzed using a combination of textual and temporal indicators. Linguistic markers such as excessive positivity, generic phrasing, and lack of specific detail were flagged as potential indicators of manipulation. Temporal clustering was used to identify unnatural bursts of reviews, particularly around promotional periods. Reviewer metadata (e.g., account age, geographic location, review frequency) was also examined to detect suspicious patterns. Reviews exhibiting two or more manipulation indicators were classified as “flagged.”

Experimental Design

To assess the psychological impact of manipulated reviews, a between-subjects online experiment was conducted. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions:

- Condition A (Authentic Reviews): Participants viewed hotel listings containing only verified, unflagged reviews.
- Condition B (Mixed Reviews): Participants viewed listings containing both authentic and flagged reviews identified during the audit.

Each participant was shown three hotel profiles and asked to rate their booking intention, perceived authenticity of the reviews, and trust in the platform. All measures were recorded using 7-point Likert scales.

Participants

A total of 320 participants were recruited through university mailing lists and social media platforms. Eligibility criteria included being over 18 years of age and having booked a hotel online at least once in the past 12 months. After excluding incomplete responses and failed attention checks, the final analytic sample consisted of 298 participants (M age = 27.4 years, SD = 6.2; 54% female). Participants were comprised from mailing lists for universities, social media, and travel forums targeting Pakistani consumers, who were required to have previous experience of online booking. Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older and to have booked a hotel online at least once in the last 12 months. Demographic information was collected to examine diversity within age, gender, and geographic background. To address the potentially culturally specific nature of trust cues in Pakistan, we sought to recruit participants from urban and semi-urban regions and also noted language preferences (Urdu vs. English) for exploratory analysis.

Measures

- Booking Intention: Assessed using three items adapted from prior hospitality research (e.g., "I would consider booking this hotel").
- Perceived Authenticity: Measured using a semantic differential scale (e.g., "Fake–Authentic," "Manipulated–Genuine").

- Trust in Platform: Adapted from Flanagin et al. (2014), focusing on perceived reliability and credibility of the booking site.

Data Analysis

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare mean scores across conditions. A bootstrapped mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4) was used to test whether perceived authenticity mediated the relationship between review condition and booking intention. All analyses were conducted using SPSS v28, with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were debriefed regarding the simulated nature of the review manipulation, and no real bookings were made during the study. All hotel profiles used in the experiment were anonymized to protect commercial interests.

4.Results

Audit Findings

The algorithmic audit of 1,200 hotel reviews across three Pakistani booking platforms revealed notable patterns of manipulation. Approximately 23.4% of reviews exhibited two or more indicators of inauthenticity, including generic phrasing, excessive positivity, and temporal clustering around promotional periods. Reviewer metadata further supported these flags, with 17% of suspicious reviews originating from accounts with no prior activity or inconsistent geographic data. These findings suggest a systemic vulnerability in review verification mechanisms across platforms. Manipulated reviews were operationalized as a multi-indicator outcome measure. Reviews were coded as manipulated if they contained observable linguistic markers (e.g., extreme positivity, generic phrases, lack of specificity), were presented in timeframes that appeared to be flood- or burst-like (e.g., rapidly occurring within short

timeframes, or multiple same-day reviews), and other examiners could also follow standards around basic reviewer metadata (e.g., strong or contradictory account age, geographical discrepancy, or no previous activity). The coding criteria were adapted from audit standards (Mayzlin et al., 2014; Luca et al., 2011) and only measured observationally observable criteria, and coded review sample ($n=1,200$) were taken from 3 sites. No synthetical, or flagged by platforms, reviews are used, and all manipulations are only coded based on observations in available, public data.

Descriptive Statistics

Of the 320 participants recruited for the experimental phase, 298 were retained after exclusions. Participants were evenly distributed across conditions (Authentic Reviews: $n = 149$; Mixed Reviews: $n = 149$). Mean booking intention scores were significantly lower in the mixed review condition ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.01$) compared to the authentic review condition ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.89$). Similar trends were observed for perceived authenticity ($M = 3.18$ vs. $M = 5.02$) and trust in platform ($M = 3.67$ vs. $M = 5.11$).

Table 1

Independent Samples t-Tests Comparing Review Conditions on Key Dependent Variables

Variable	Authentic Reviews ($n = 149$)	Mixed Reviews ($n = 149$)	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Booking Intention	$M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.89$	$M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.01$	11.23	296	< .001	0.72
Perceived Authenticity	$M = 5.02$, $SD = 0.84$	$M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.93$	13.45	296	< .001	0.78
Trust in Platform	$M = 5.11$, $SD = 0.88$	$M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.95$	10.91	296	< .001	0.69

Note. All comparisons were statistically significant at $p < .001$. Cohen's d values indicate medium to large effect sizes.

Table 1 presents the results of independent samples t-tests comparing participants exposed to authentic hotel reviews versus those exposed to mixed (authentic and manipulated) reviews. Across all three dependent variables—booking intention, perceived authenticity, and trust in platform—participants in the authentic review condition reported significantly higher scores. Specifically, booking intention was notably stronger among participants who viewed only verified reviews ($M = 4.76$) compared to those exposed to mixed reviews ($M = 3.42$), $t(296) = 11.23$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.72$). Similar patterns emerged for perceived authenticity ($M = 5.02$ vs. $M = 3.18$) and trust in platform ($M = 5.11$ vs. $M = 3.67$), both yielding statistically significant differences ($p < .001$) and medium-to-large effect sizes ($d = 0.78$ and $d = 0.69$, respectively). These findings suggest that exposure to manipulated reviews substantially undermines consumer confidence and willingness to engage with hotel listings.

Table 2

Bootstrapped Mediation Analysis: Perceived Authenticity as Mediator Between Review Condition and Booking Intention

Path	β	SE	95% CI	Significance
Review Condition → Authenticity	-1.84	0.14	[-2.11, -1.56]	$p < .001$
Authenticity → Booking Intention	0.49	0.06	[0.37, 0.61]	$p < .001$
Total Effect	-1.34	0.12	[-1.57, -1.10]	$p < .001$
Direct Effect	-0.43	0.11	[-0.65, -0.21]	$p < .001$
Indirect Effect (ab)	-0.91	0.08	[-1.17, -0.66]	Significant

Note. Mediation tested using PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples. CI = Confidence Interval; SE = Standard Error.

Table 2 summarizes the results of a bootstrapped mediation analysis examining whether perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between review condition and booking intention. The analysis confirmed a significant indirect effect ($ab = -0.91$, 95% CI [-1.17, -0.66]), indicating that the presence of

manipulated reviews reduces booking intention primarily through diminished perceptions of authenticity.

The total effect of review condition on booking intention was significant ($\beta = -1.34, p < .001$), and the direct effect remained significant after accounting for the mediator ($\beta = -0.43, p < .001$), suggesting partial mediation. The path from review condition to perceived authenticity ($\beta = -1.84, p < .001$) and from perceived authenticity to booking intention ($\beta = 0.49, p < .001$) were both statistically robust. These results underscore the psychological mechanism by which review manipulation influences consumer behavior: when authenticity is compromised, trust and intention to book decline markedly.

5. Discussion

The present study offers empirical evidence that manipulated online reviews significantly influence consumer decision-making in the context of hotel bookings in Pakistan. Using a two-prong methodology - algorithmic audit and experimental manipulation - the findings indicate both the presence of deceptive practice and psychological implications.

The audit showed, with sample reviews, that just under a quarter had telltale signs of inauthenticity: generic language, time clustering, repetition. These conventions suggested the possibility of review manipulation at the sampled location, and possibly systemic deficiencies in their venue governance practices. As producers and as travelling keepers of knowledge we are increasingly sought to help and provide insight to our friends and families through the lens of UGC - both by facilitating engagement (involving direct relationship exchanges like Sastaticket.pk) and non-involving (like Jovago.com). So, it is increasingly vital to think about how UGC can be manipulated.

Experiments also demonstrated that participants exposed to manipulated reviews significantly reduced their intended booking time, caused them to lower the perceived authenticity of hotel listings, and to lower trust in the platform.

Most importantly, the perception of authenticity was one of the significant mediators for how consumer confidence is undermined by perceived manipulated reviews. This is in line with previous literature that points to authenticity as basis of trust in digital environments (Flanagin et al, 2014; Mayzlin et al, 2014).

The findings from this research add to the theoretical literature on digital deception and consumer psychology, emphasizing how small changes to review content can interfere with people's heuristic decision-making process. Consumers tend to rely on cues like star ratings and reviewer tone for quick judgments; if those cues are being manipulated the resulting decisions may not accurately reflect the service quality.

On a practical level, this study highlights the importance of review accountability and transparency in hotel booking channels in Pakistan. Adding features like verified reviewer icons, algorithmic detection of bursts of reviews, and more explicit disclosure of promotional content can help to lessen the potential of manipulation. In addition to these measures, these platforms could also explore promoting consumer education programs to help users critically evaluate online reviews.

From an ethical standpoint, the research raises pivotal questions around whether digital intermediaries have a perceived duty to uphold consumer trust. Although promotional behavior is common in hospitality marketing, an important ethical consideration to draw from this research is the distinction between persuasion and deception. The loss of consumer trust may extend beyond the loss of trust in an organization on an individual basis, where organizations egregiously fail to act on review deception, or manipulation in pricing or quality, altogether on the review manipulation in the online environment.

This research paper discussed the psychological and ethical impacts of manipulating online reviews in hospitality in Pakistan. By integrating the audit findings with the behavioural examination, this research brings together the findings of audit and consumer registration to think about a larger evaluation of how breaches in digital trust, may be understood and acted upon. Future research may add to this research project in a variety of ways including understanding cultural differences in review comprehension or exploring ways information has been influenced through repetition of reviews of manipulated information.

Implications

This research provides valuable insights for platform governance and consumer protection in the digital hospitality sector in Pakistan. First, this research establishes a significant psychological outcome of manipulated reviews and suggests the need for booking platforms to re-confirm the duty of verification in their systems. Verified Reviewer Badges; algorithmic detection of burst review writing; less vague or clearer disclosures of promotional material as online marketing, would illustrate the psychological assassin of fake reviews.

Second, the mediation role of perceived authenticity demonstrates how important it is to build trust into the UX design of commercial booking platforms. Booking platforms should consider embedding heuristics of transparency as part of the user experience related to the history of reviews, using the local language for a person citing reviews, relation of cultural idiosyncrasies to reviews, etc., so as to engender trust and credibility for user generated content. The UX considerations in this case are not just gimmicks or aesthetics of design, they must be considered at an ethical level in regards to online engagement.

The study also extends the conversation concerning algorithmic accountability by showing how small changes made to the presentation of content can lead to detectable change. Therefore, it highlights the importance of

collaboration between behavioural scientists, technicians, and policy-makers in order to protect trust in the online environment.

Future Directions

Future studies could consider the effect of psychological effects of review manipulation that vary from cultural context or within regional tourism economies. Additionally, future studies could investigate whether the degree of manipulation duplication affects consumer skepticism, platform abandonment or brand loyalty in the long-run. To examine the effect of different forms of transparency measures (e.g., reviewer validation, AI-generated authenticity statements) in re-establishing trust is also a future direction.

Constraints

Despite the contribution of this study, a number of limitations or constraints must be acknowledged. Firstly, experimental manipulation also relied on simulated hotel listings, which may not entirely mirror the nuances of actually booking a hotel room and/or rooms in a complex real-life booking environment. Secondly, the study relied on a sample of consumers from Pakistan who had prior experience of online booking, although this was convenient for the research study, it would not permit the generalization of findings to a population who have less digital literacy.

Thirdly, although the audit for the study utilized multiple indicators of manipulation, it did not take into account platform level metadata and/or back-end access to the listing used to facilitate a more 'harder' evidence of review fraud. Lastly, whilst the self-report measures are validated cognitive methods to operationally assess the constructs of interest, it is possible that, because respondents may have provided responses which were influenced by social desirability bias and/or lack of accuracy in being reflective may of affected their responses.

Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that manipulated online reviews significantly undermine consumer trust and booking intention in the Pakistani hotel sector. By integrating algorithmic audit with behavioral experimentation, the research highlights both the prevalence of deceptive practices and the psychological mechanisms through which they operate. Perceived authenticity emerged as a critical mediator, reinforcing the ethical and design imperative for transparency in digital platforms.

As Pakistan's travel economy continues to digitize, safeguarding the integrity of user-generated content will be essential to sustaining consumer confidence. The findings call for proactive platform reforms, interdisciplinary collaboration, and continued scholarly attention to the evolving dynamics of digital trust.

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