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**An Integrated Micro-insertion Teaching Strategy for
Business Ethics:**

**A proposed case study researching the teaching of business ethics,
including the efficiency and effectiveness of integrating ethics-related
micro-insertions, both inside and outside the classroom**

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Abstract

This paper identifies an integrated teaching strategy originally developed for engineers, the so-called ‘micro-insertion’ approach, as a practical approach for the teaching of ethics at business schools. It is argued that instructors can incorporate not only generic or thematic learning objectives for students into this method (i.e., the intended content of what is being taught: in our case, an ethical approach to doing business) but also harness the learning environment outside the classroom when choosing the appropriate mix and timing of micro-insertions. With this in mind, we propose undertaking a qualitative and case-based research project which endeavors to look for evidence of effectiveness and efficiency in the teaching of business ethics. This study will examine (a) a coordinated micro-insertion approach in teaching business ethics in an undergraduate business school and within the context of a small, internationally located branch of a US university, and (b) the influence of the wider learning environment on the achievement of thematic, micro-inserted learning objectives for students.

Introduction

Although business ethics is a relatively young subject area it has attracted attention from business school faculty, accrediting institutions, and managers alike. The latter group is principally concerned with ensuring that students are educated in a way that provides them with the knowledge, skills and ethical sensitivity that will be necessary for them to perform a socially conscious role in their future workplaces and, following on from that, to eventually behave in a legal and ethical manner when faced with the types of morally ambiguous situations that will abound there (Goshal, 2005). The discussion in academic circles falls mainly into the realm of trying to better define what appropriate teaching strategies and practices could be to achieve this (Waples, et al, 2009). This discussion is then reinforced by, for instance, accrediting institutions such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) International, who consistently demand that ethical behavior be delivered as a vital component of a quality business education.

“[...] the time has come for business schools [...] to renew and revitalize their commitment to the centrality of ethical responsibility at both the individual and corporate levels in preparing business leaders for the twenty-first century” (2004: 9).

Indeed, business schools and their faculties are reexamining the teaching of business ethics and are reassessing their responsibilities to produce honest and thoughtful managers who show integrity and social accountability (Swanson, 2004; Giacalone and Thompson, 2006a). Even though business schools have been responding since the mid-nineties they find themselves on the

defensive as a result of the most recent wave of business scandals, continually fielding questions related to why they are not doing more to stem the tide of such occurrences (see Academy of Management Learning & Education's special edition September 2006, as well as March and June, 2005).

Even now, concerns in teaching business ethics continue to arise regarding what the learning objectives of teaching business ethics should be, when in the curriculum business ethics should be taught, what the best teaching strategies are for teaching business ethics, and how the impact of such effects should be assessed (Felton and Sims, 2005; Rossouw, 2006; Ritter, 2006). It is not the intent of the proposed research to address all of these questions, but rather to focus on one subset of these issues: to provide practical advice to instructors by relating our experiences in using the micro-insertion technique in an international, but American, university environment. In so doing, we seek to explore the most effective and efficient ways of using this teaching technique with respect to the achievement of particular, ethics-theme based, student learning outcomes. The proposed research intends to apply and examine the effectiveness of a relatively new teaching technique, the use of 'micro-insertion.' This technique will be applied to ethics problems introduced in an integrated and coordinated manner into technical management classes, and the implications for the achievement of articulated student learning objectives through its use will be studied. In addition, attention will be paid to understanding how the integration of aspects of the broader external learning environment (living in a foreign country, speaking a foreign language, applying a different cultural interpretation to outside-of-classroom events, etc) affect or provoke changes in student learning objectives with regards to ethics.

‘Integrated Micro-insertion’ as a new approach to teaching business ethics to business school students

Several options seem to compete for the preferred method to incorporate ethics into business programs (Felton and Sims, 2005). One approach is to provide students with a stand-alone business ethics module. A review of business ethics education by Collins and Wartick (1995) revealed a constant rise in the number of ethics courses offered throughout the 1970s and early 1980s by US business schools, and a later decline in the number of both undergraduate and graduate ethics courses during the late 1980s. Alternatively, business ethics content can be integrated into existing functional courses by constituting a key component to be taught. This is usually accomplished through large-scale insertions of ethics content such as an entire lecture class on for instance ‘Globalization and Society’, followed by an hour-long discussion of a related case study. The justification for integration is that students might easily consider a stand-alone ethics course to be nonessential to their overall core business studies curriculum (Thompson, 2006), whereas an integrated approach inserts ethics into functional managerial contexts that can, in theory, better demonstrate the business relevance of this subject (Giacalone and Thompson, 2006b). The final, hybrid, option used in business schools is a combination of these two approaches, where students are obligated to take a business ethics course within their curriculum and ethics content is then reinforced through the addition of specific large-scale components inserted into other technical business modules (Evans and Robertson, 2003).

However, educators in engineering and science have developed an adapted integration approach to teaching ethics based on so-called ‘micro-insertions’, which are “small-scale insertions of ethics instructions” throughout a course, producing a larger number of ethics mini-lessons during a semester, each taking only a few minutes (Riley et al., 2009: 95). Apart from

being an effective method to “improve students’ ability to recognize, understand and respond to ethical issues” (Riley et al., 2009: 103), the particular advantage of this approach lies in its applicability in practice, as many individual instructors are less inclined to spend lengthy amounts of time discussing ethics. “Micro-insertion fits the technical curriculum in a way that larger-scale approaches to ethics do not” (Riley et al., 2009: 97). Micro-insertion can also fit with a hybrid approach to teaching ethics, in that it can be integrated into an individual class and then combined into an overall curriculum that requires students to complete at least one full class in Ethics.

The example in Appendix 1 shows a micro-insertion problem that could be used for management classes. Introductory courses to management, such as Management Theory and Practice (MGT300) often include a human resource management element that is introduced as a key component of the organizing task carried out by managers. Students understand that for any HRM practice personnel data need to be analyzed in order to identify appropriate managerial actions. Our example shows clearly that by adding slightly more data and enlarging the context, the underlying preconditions of having sufficient personnel data may become an ethical issue: students now have to make a professional decision within a larger context that considers the effects on those affected by the decision. While micro-insertion is similar to the integrated and hybrid approaches, in that it is integrated into an already existing curriculum and it does combine easily with the stand-alone course approach, it differs substantially in the time it requires, its frequency, as well as in its adaptability to be inserted into virtually any three to five minute moment in the curriculum. Our objective is therefore to study whether it increases both pedagogical efficiency in use as well effectiveness in results when applied to the teaching of ethics in a wider environment.

We assert that micro-insertion's efficiency as a teaching strategy also serves to make it attractive to business school faculty. First, this is because managers operate in a social context in which their day-to-day actions affect their colleagues and subordinates, suppliers and customers. By introducing ethical issues frequently throughout the curriculum, social consciousness is treated as a routine part of management activity rather than as something that arises rarely and comes marked as "ethics" or "corporate social responsibility". Second, such a low-dose approach to ethics may enable students to understand management matters not only as a technical problem but also as a potential ethical issue. Indeed technical management problems that students will experience in their prospective professional activities can be put into larger contexts, enabling them to be as sensitive to the ethical dimension of an issue as they are to the financial, operational and marketing dimensions. Consequently, this paper proposes that the multiple options for teaching business ethics should include the micro-insertion approach.

Apart from considering the most appropriate teaching strategy, however, the debate in the literature also points to the importance of context, which is seen to be central to student learning and is an integral part of the learning process (Sims and Felton, 2006). Sims and Felton (2006) support the argument that students are shaped by the contexts in which the imparting of business ethics occurs. Inherent in a given context are features that promote or inhibit the understanding of business ethics relevance and content. With regard to the class-room environment, Sims and Felton (2006: 303-304) highlight seven components of the ideal learning environment that should be created. According to them the learning environment should be based on a psychological contract of reciprocity, should be experience based, should emphasize personal application, should be individualized, should be self-directed, and should expect students to accept responsibility for the learning of others. Also, the class should be viewed as a laboratory

thereby becoming a process rather than an event. In order to create a supportive classroom environment containing these elements, they identify a number of classroom activities and teaching methods that instructors should consider. However, these activities are not linked back to particular student competencies to be developed. Instead, the discussion focuses on how to construct a supportive classroom environment for the imparting of business ethics in general.

The result is that instructors are left without support to decide which components of the classroom environment they might wish to emphasize in order to achieve the specific learning objectives they have set for their classes. A further shortcoming of Sims and Felton's argument is the neglect of the wider university environment that students experience outside the class room but that nevertheless can support student learning about business ethics. Indeed current practice at a very small number of US business schools shows the importance of supporting business ethics teaching through learning experiences outside the classroom. The Haas School of Business at the University of California at Berkeley, for instance, includes a planned series of visits to correctional facilities which allow students to observe how some white-collar criminals fell short of the law and impresses upon them the consequences of doing so (Haas, 2002). Similar program activities are offered at the University of Maryland, where each semester its Robert H. Smith Business School hosts a three-part *Business Ethics Lecture Series* featuring corporate and government speakers (University of Maryland, 2009). Another example is the Graziado Business School at Pepperdine University that, in August 2009, hosted a conference with prominent corporate speakers and researchers contributing to the overall conference theme "The Intersection of Ethics and Knowledge Management". Business ethics training at this school is additionally supported through its overall reference in the school's mission statement, while many students are actively involved in ethics-related clubs and activities outside the classroom,

enhancing the overall learning experience and collaborative spirit fostered at the Graziadio School (Pepperdine, 2009). These activities demonstrate that there are a number of universities that believe students' wider university experience has an impact on their learning in class, and have placed a particular emphasis on business ethics in doing so. We therefore propose that any discussion about efficient teaching strategies needs to take into account the broader learning environment students are exposed to outside the classroom and how this affects student learning with regard to defined learning objectives.

The above points suggesting a superior efficiency and effectiveness of the micro-insertion approach imply that the micro-insertion approach can and should be integrated, in that it should form part of a coordinated effort across different classes and subjects in the curriculum, as well as outside of the academic environment. From a practical point of view, we believe an integrated approach to micro-insertion can be a very effective way to help students bridge the realities and paradoxes they encounter between their academic and their social, living or work environments. While it can be assumed that students come to university with at least some prior knowledge about ethical issues and models and, while they are generally able to articulate these concerns, they often know very little about how to implement academic solutions to them within a real-world setting, not least of which will be the workplace (Moberg, 2006). As Moberg points out,

“work contexts are much less hospitable to the expression of ethical opinions than academic contexts. While universities are structured to nurture criticism and free expression, businesses are set up to nurture commitment to shared goals” (2006: 307).

Hence, we propose moving toward a more context-focused approach in which socially conscious decisions are made by managers or other individuals with whom students come into contact, such as a landlord, a teacher, a foreign employer, a foreign politician, or even an illegal internet site. We then propose that these context-focused issues be ‘micro-inserted’ into academic as well as non-academic situations students encounter, in a coordinated manner. That these will then be open to scrutiny by employees or other affected individuals (such as the students themselves, or their close friends) might help students to adopt a more realistic point of view about the constraints they will encounter in the workplace, and the ways they can think about how to address them. Consequently, we propose that the multiple options for teaching business ethics should include an *integrated*, micro-insertion approach. The example provided (Appendix 1) shows how a micro-insertion can be integrated in another business core module, such as Marketing 300, by adding only some further context considerations.

Establishing the appropriate set of learning objectives

Many academics have emphasized the need to establish effective learning objectives in order to achieve effective teaching (Felton and Sims, 2005; Weber, 2007; Nielsen, 1998). However, their contributions to the debate also demonstrate that there are various sets of learning objectives for business ethics, many of which seem to compete with each other. Rossouw summarizes the literature and establishes three positions in teaching business ethics that are based on “*different notions of what ethical behavior entails*” (Rossouw, 2006: 416). These can be summarized as ‘the cognitive competence position’, ‘the behavioral competence position’ and ‘the managerial competence position’. As seen from the cognitive competence position, for example, the purpose of teaching business ethics is for students to learn enough so that they are ultimately enabled to make a proper assessment about the ethical dimensions of managerial

activity. The behavioral competence position, by contrast, argues that students need to develop the capacity to behave in a socially conscious way in a business setting, because “*cognitive competence to deal with ethical issues in business will not necessarily translate into a willingness to behave morally as well.*” (Rossouw, 2006: 413). Finally, the managerial competence position emphasizes the importance of placing a specific focus on the organizational context as a system of interpersonal interactions and highlights the managerial skills needed to effectively deal with ethics in practice. Whereas in the past these positions have been seen as irreconcilable, Rossouw (2006) argues convincingly that each of these three needs support from the other two positions. Consequently, the learning objectives established for business ethics teaching should not fall into only one category but rather should attempt to develop competencies that effectively encompass the three positions above. Moreover, as each of these positions requires its own pedagogical approach, Rossouw (2006) identifies some teaching strategies with regard to each of these positions. However, while he focuses on traditional strategies, such as self-study, lecturing and case study use, amongst others, his suggestions overlook the use of an integrated micro-insertion strategy, as outlined above, and its effectiveness for achieving specific learning objectives within the three positions.

The proposed research project

Given the above explanations, our proposed research attempts to address what we believe are some shortcomings in the current literature. Our study aims to provide more practical advice to academic faculty responsible for the instruction of ethics within the business curriculum, using a concrete and repeatable method. With respect to defined learning outcomes that fall into the three positions mentioned above, we will attempt to explore these different teaching strategies, evaluating them for their effectiveness and efficiency. With regard to teaching effectiveness, our

research aims to demonstrate that an integrated, micro-insertion approach can provide a link between the three identified teaching strategies in class and/or that it can involve a combination of any of these to achieve specific, ethics-related, learning outcomes. Secondly, we will examine the influence of a wider, ‘beyond’ the university environment, in the belief that this might support or even substitute for specific elements in the teaching strategy portfolio and therefore lead to greater efficiency in teaching efforts by instructors. In this manner, instructors can concentrate on their in-class learning objectives, while easily incorporating broader ethical learning objectives that are accomplished through integrating the students’ experience in both the academic and external environment.

Methodology and approach

To carry out this research, we propose undertaking a qualitative and longitudinal case-based project (Yin, 1994, Miles and Huberman, 1994) in a small university environment. This will entail using a combination of micro-insertions (Riley et al., 2009) across business subjects, and will incorporate into these a series of planned or unplanned external or environmental events that are considered relevant to the students in question. The objective will be to use this combination of method and context in an integrated manner, across various business classes, and observing the progress of students as they are taught. We would then endeavor to look for generic, practical and repeatable evidence of effectiveness and efficiency in the teaching of business ethics via integrated micro-insertions. To do so, this study will examine (a) a coordinated micro-insertion approach in teaching business ethics in an undergraduate business school and within the context of a small, internationally located branch of a US university, and (b) the influence of the wider learning environment on the achievement of thematic, micro-inserted learning objectives for students.

The context of this case will be that of a small undergraduate business school forming part of a larger US, religiously affiliated university, and located on one of its foreign campuses in Madrid, Spain. For the purposes of this paper, we will call them, respectively, 'Business School', 'Madrid Campus' and 'Home Campus'. While the Home Campus has more than 7,800 undergraduates and 4,900 graduate students from all 50 US states and nearly 90 foreign countries, the Madrid Campus is small, comprised of approximately 700 students, out of which approximately 200 are Business and/or Economics majors. The Business School is an off campus branch of the Home Campus Business School, and therefore differs principally only in its size and location. Students may take classes from any subject area or major, although, to graduate, they must take a series of required and core courses for business. To graduate with a Business degree (over a period that generally takes four years), students must take at least one course in Business Ethics. In addition, they are required to take basic courses such as 'Introduction to Management 300' as well as other courses in Marketing, Management, Economics, Decision Sciences and Accounting, most of which already incorporate, in some form, chapters or modules on business ethics or social responsibility. The final, capstone course is 'Business Strategy 400', a case-based course which requires students to summarize and call upon what they have learned in many subject areas. Most classes are made up of approximately one third full-time business students, one third 'visiting' or semester-abroad students, and one third temporary or part-time students who plan to study for less than two years at the Madrid Campus. The student body is highly international, where over 50 nationalities can be represented in any one year, and no one nationality makes up more than 30% of the student body. As an American university, however, all instruction is in English, and English is therefore a second language for about 60% of students.

To study the phenomenon of how these diverse students learn business ethics, we propose using a series of short questionnaires, to be filled in by students at regular intervals before, during, and after a semester during which they take courses where micro-insertions related to ethics have been added to the curriculum. The questionnaires will incorporate both Lickert-scale answers as well as qualitative, open-ended questions. It is our intention to give the questionnaire to students twice—once, where they answer for themselves, and once, where they answer for an anonymous friend, thereby allowing students the opportunity to subjectively analyze someone other than themselves. The purpose here would be to ‘objectivize’ their subjectivity by asking them to analyze a third party in addition to themselves, thereby obligating them to at least begin to consider some of what may be unconscious references to their own individual constructs or cultural values, by putting themselves in the place of another colleague. This is an adaptation of Lee’s Self Reference Criterion (Lee, 1966) applied with Kelly’s Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955). We expect each written survey to take approximately 10 minutes to complete. We may ‘incentivize’ students to spend time on these with a meal, a T-shirt, or access to a special lecture.

We will begin the study by identifying a group of approximately 40 Freshmen or new students, as our main study group, and also a separate group of approximately 20 others, to use as a control group. These numbers will vary slightly, but are based upon classes we expect students to take—two classes will receive the micro-insertions, one class will not—and is limited by the number of Freshmen starting at the school. We will first ask them about ethical issues in business, before they have taken any classes at the Madrid Campus. Then, throughout the semester, we will integrate a series of micro-insertions into the first ‘group-of-40’s’ already-existing business curriculum. This will consist of creating small micro-insertions that incorporate

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ethical issues likely to be faced by a student in Madrid (such as dealing with a foreign landlord, downloading software in a different legal environment, observing anomalies in foreign elections, being faced with a real life foreign work situation, or taking advantage of a Spanish employer’s sick-leave policy. As an example, see Appendix I). The micro-insertions will be placed into at least three different classes that students are taking, and we will seek to make the insertions during a similar week—i.e., M-i I during week 3, M-i II during week 5, etc. and corresponding to times when students are likely to be faced with those issues on an external basis (i.e., when moving in to new housing, when starting a new job, just after local elections, etc). The methodological format could look like the table below:

Micro-insertion or questionaire	Examples of Content or Theme	Week	Week	Week	Week	Week	Week	Week	Week	Week
		1	3	5	7	9	11	13	15	17
M-i I	Housing		M-i I							
M-i II	Elections			M-i II						
M-i III	Downloads				M-i III					
M-i IV	Sick-leave					M-i IV				
M-i V	Lying to employer						M-i V			
M-i VI	Cheating on exam							M-i VI		
M-i VII	etc.								M-i VII	
M-i VIII	etc.									M-i VIII
Q-0	Before teaching	Q-0								
Q-1	after two micro-ins			Q-1						
Q-2	after five micro-ins						Q-2			
Q-3	at end of semester									Q-3

Our definition of ‘integration’ therefore, requires employing a coordinated effort between various faculty members to agree the timing and content, from different angles, of the micro-insertions to be placed in different business classes during the same week. The questionnaires would be interspersed between the micro-insertions, and would also include a ‘before’ and ‘after’ questionnaire, as well as be applied to the control group.

We also propose supplementing the questionnaires with regular, semi-structured interviews of some of the individual students studied. These interviews would allow us to delve more deeply into the meaning students have placed on the micro-insertions given in their contexts, and would be carried out by an author or other professor who is NOT teaching that student at that time, allowing students to retain confidentiality in their answers. We will use these interviews to try to build a ‘story’ of the progress of some individual students, as it relates to business ethics, and also as it relates to their foreign, external environment.

Who might benefit from our research?

Since many researchers are often held captive by their teaching, our intention is to provide more practical support for practitioners instructing business ethics. This concerns not only the teaching strategies adopted by instructors but also the potential effects that arise from the overall learning environments which students come into contact with. More effective and efficient strategies to teaching will not only enhance student learning but may help instructors to manage their teaching time in a more efficient way. Selecting teaching strategies in relation to the targeted learning outcomes for students and considering the learning effects arising from the broader university environment will help instructors increase their teaching productivity. Moreover, we expect that our results and findings will hopefully encourage instructors to

embrace novel teaching strategies, since this research incorporates a relatively new teaching strategy that at present has not been discussed in a European context and has found little consideration so far in the US academic context.

Secondly, this research may improve confidence in the teaching of this subject area and support the objectives put forward by accrediting institutions. Systematic research on teaching strategies and the application of its findings by instructors should improve the confidence that business managers have in the training of students. In addition, it will certainly aid the efforts by business schools to obtain and maintain accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) in the US or through similar agencies in other European countries. For example, one assessment criterion for quality evaluation of business schools used by the HLC focuses on ‘student learning and effective teaching’, in particular on the creation of an effective learning environment (core component 3c) (HLC:2005). Instructors who show openness to new, probably more efficient and effective teaching strategies will demonstrate their university’s commitment to students’ learning and effective teaching.

Finally, even though conducted in the academic field of business ethics the research findings of this exploratory research might be useful for researchers in other academic fields, to explore the effectiveness and efficiency of the coordinated micro-insertion approach and the influence that the learning environment outside the class room can have, as it sets forth an analytical framework that can be applied to other areas as well.

Conclusion

While there are many issues involved in the teaching of business ethics, this study has proposed a new method, combining an integrated micro-insertion approach with a coordinated incorporation of the external environment. Our proposal to carry out this study will involve

studying approximately 60 students in a small undergraduate business school, over time and across subjects. We believe this challenge will be made easier by the small size of our business school, and its high dedication to the teaching of ethics. We hope that this study will serve to highlight the practical benefits of this new, added approach to teaching students about business ethics.

Appendix 1

No such thing as a confidential survey?

Topics: MGT 300: HRM and the use of employee data

MKT 300: Market research and the collection of data

Characters: Wendy Mros, HR assistant project manager at *Seguro First*; a dual national from the United Kingdom and Germany

Carlos Martinez, HR project manager and Wendy's supervisor; from Spain

Case outline for MGT 300:

Wendy Mros has worked for *Seguro First*, a large European insurance company headquartered in Spain, for three years. She originally accepted the job because it allowed her to live in Spain and make use of her three languages, English, German and Spanish. She began by working for the payroll administration team at the HRM department covering all employees based in Europe. She has just been promoted from this position to assistant HR project manager. As assistant HR project manager, Wendy is responsible for helping the project manager, Carlos Martinez, plan and implement full employee survey data on various issues, ranging from traditional employee data for personnel records to employee workplace matters. Wendy is very enthusiastic about her promotion. She believes it will allow her to attain an overview of how the whole European workforce functions, as well as learn the details of the data collection process, rather than being confined to just one area of HR, such as payroll administration.

Wendy's first project in her new position is to carry out an employee satisfaction survey. The objective is to understand how work-life balance is achieved for individual employees. This is a matter that has been heavily promoted by *Seguro First* for the last two years. For this purpose not only individual employee data are collected but also details about family members and their situations at home. Carlos tells Wendy that, amongst her other duties, she must devise a coding system to surreptitiously identify each respondent. Wendy is surprised, as she learned in her research method and analysis class at her university that surveys should be confidential. Carlos replies that, because they are not promising confidentiality in the cover letter they will send out to employees, this procedure is perfectly fine. Wendy says no more but she feels uncomfortable about the situation. She is unsure how to proceed.

Case extension for MKT 300:

One week later, Carlos invites Wendy for lunch with colleagues from other departments within *Seguro First* to help her integrate and to get to know people. During the course of the conversation, Wendy concludes that Carlos is planning to pass on some of the information obtained from the employees' work satisfaction survey to *Seguro First's* marketing department. This information will include the names, addresses, and income levels of employees as well as their family members. The marketing department can use this information to develop a direct mail advertising campaign and to decide what insurance service products could be offered to employees. When Wendy later questions Carlos about her suspicions, Carlos says that by using some of the information collected from the employees' survey, *Seguro First* can recover costs associated with the survey. This will help the HR department to do more projects in the future. He also argues, sounding annoyed, that this is common procedure to assist other departments in

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boosting their performance. It is apparent, however, that the employees are not being told of the additional internal use of the data.

Who is wrong in this situation – Wendy, Carlos, the marketing manager requesting the data, or none of them?

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