Competition, autonomy, and prestige: Mechanisms through which the Dark Triad predict job satisfaction ☆

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ABSTRACT

Organizational researchers increasingly recognize the need to consider the Dark Triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism) when explaining undesirable work outcomes (e.g., counterproductive behaviors). However, little research has focused on the motivations of those who actually hold the traits. In this study ($N = 361$) we examined how the Dark Triad traits predispose individuals to perceive situations as competitive, prestigious, and comprised of restrictions (i.e., autonomy) which differentially predict job satisfaction. Individuals high on psychopathy and Machiavellianism perceived their workplaces as competitive, whereas individuals high on narcissism perceived their workplaces as prestigious and with fewer restrictions. Sex differences in perceptions were fully mediated by psychopathy and Machiavellianism. We discuss our results from an Evolutionary Industrial/Organization Psychology framework.

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1. Introduction

In parallel with the public exposure of Enron, Lehman Brothers, Worldcom, Freddie Mac, Bernie Madoff, and a host of other multi-billion dollar fraud cases, attention has recently been drawn to the role of the Dark Triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) in Industrial/Organizational (I/O) Psychology (O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniels, 2012; Spain, Harms, & Leberton, 2014). These traits are characterized by entitlement, superiority, dominance (i.e., narcissism), glib social charm, manipulativeness (i.e., Machiavellianism), callous social attitudes, impulsivity, and interpersonal antagonism (i.e., psychopathy), and numerous research studies have accentuated their deleterious role in the workplace (Boddy, 2010; Galperin, Bennett, & Aquino, 2010; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). However, research on the Dark Triad traits has generally examined the negative consequences of such traits in the workplace—how "bad apples" spoil the bushel for everyone else—this focus may have led to an imbalance in our knowledge about the Dark Triad traits in various domains including the workplace (Judge & LePine,

2007, chap. 20). That is, we know virtually nothing about the specific tendencies and dispositions linked to the Dark Triad traits that may motivate and allow such individuals to operate in the workplace (Jonason, Wee, Li, & Jackson, 2014).

This study examines the Dark Triad traits from the latter perspective by examining the functional value of these traits in individuals. Specifically, this study focused on how perceptions of work environments are associated with the Dark Triad traits. We examined the congruence hypothesis that people who better fit the work environment will be more satisfied with the job (Kristof, 1996). This study contributes to the literature in at least two ways. First, by focusing on the potential positive outcomes of Dark Triad traits, we extend the little research in this area (Judge & LePine, 2007). Second, in contrast to the largely descriptive work that currently dominates research on the Dark Triad traits; we articulate a view of the Dark Triad traits as evolved psychological mechanisms that may be beneficial in some circumstances (Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2014).

From an evolutionary perspective (Buss, 1995), traits that help an individual survive and reproduce tend to confer more benefits than costs. These traits tend to motivate individuals to seek acceptance, approval, and popularity (i.e., to get along) and also to seek power, status, and control (i.e., to get ahead; Hogan, 1983). But getting along and getting ahead can be incompatible goals. While most people seek an acceptable balance between these goals, those high on the Dark Triad traits enact a strategy where they eschew

the former for the latter (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012; Jonason & Webster, 2012).

The Dark Triad traits may facilitate the effective and unremorseful exploitation of others for personal gain (Jonason & Krause, 2013; Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013). Such a strategy may cost individuals through ostracism or retaliation. However, the unique combination of traits may allow such individuals to operate undetected or otherwise unchallenged – for instance, glib social charm and cunning may allow such individuals to be particular adept at deceiving others and avoiding blame (Jonason, Slomski, et al., 2012; Jonason & Webster, 2012). Thus, potential costs may be minimized at times and may be sufficiently low or irregular to allow an exploitative strategy to be adaptive for some individuals (Buss, 1995).

Underlying much of applied psychology is the presumption that job satisfaction results from a correspondence between the needs of an individual and what is supplied by the workplace (Edwards, Caplan, & Van Harrison, 2001). When personality characteristics are taken to exemplify individual's needs, and work climate is taken to exemplify organizational supplies (Kristof, 1996), fit would, by definition, imply a more satisfied individual (Edwards & Shipp, 2007). Because individuals high on the Dark Triad traits seek power, control, and status, and generally shun acceptance, approval, and popularity, as a first step toward directly assessing the functional value of the Dark Triad traits in the workplace, we test the overall hypothesis that individuals high on one or more of the Dark Triad traits would tend to be more satisfied in those environments that they perceive supply them with opportunities to gain power, status, and control. Thus, in this study, we measured perceptions of the work climate (Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1998; Hackman & Oldman, 1976) related to power (i.e., competition), control (i.e., restrictions placed on them), and status (i.e., prestige), and examined if individuals high on the Dark Triad traits were more satisfied in such environments. Then we examine whether these perceptions predict job satisfaction.

Personality traits may systematically color the way individuals perceive their world, including their workplace. The Dark Triad traits should, therefore, be associated with unique patterns of workplace perceptions. First, narcissists are driven by the needs to feel in control and prestigious (Raskin & Terry, 1988) but in most workplace environments they are likely to not fully satisfy these desires. These individuals may facultatively deceive themselves in order to go work, thereby viewing their work as disproportionately low on restrictions and high in prestige. Second, psychopathy may align individuals with jobs that lack much prestige; it appears correlated with preferences for more hands-on and practical jobs (Jonason, Wee, Li, Jackson, 2014). This may relate to a tendency to more-or-less accurately perceive their jobs as low in prestige. Third, psychopathy and Machiavellianism may orient individuals to perceive their world as competitive (through disagreeableness; Sibley & Duckitt, 2010). In psychopathy, this may be a function of its characteristic aggressiveness (Jonason & Webster, 2010). In Machiavellianism, this may be a function of its approach-orientation to power (Christie & Geis, 1970). Both may translate into associations between the traits and people's ratings of their workplace as competitive. Fourth, personality traits may create biases in perceptions which then translate into job outcomes like satisfaction and the frequency of which one considers quitting one's job (Edwards et al., 2001; Kristof, 1996). Therefore, we test a Structural Equation Model where the Dark Triad traits predict workplace perceptions which then predict job satisfaction/thoughts of quitting. In addition to the above, we expect job satisfaction/thoughts of quitting to be related to perceptions of (1) limited restrictions, (2) job prestige, and (3) limited competitiveness (Hackman & Oldman, 1976).

Not only should personality traits be correlated with particular perceptions of one's workplace, men and women may also differ on at least one perceptual factor: workplace competitiveness. Evolutionary accounts of sex differences highlight that men can benefit more from competition than women can (Wilson & Daly, 1985), something seen in sex differences in the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Li, & Czarna, 2013). That is, because women (and all mammalian females) bear the majority of the cost of reproduction (i.e., gestation, nursing, and rearing), they tend to be the reproductively more valuable sex and have a lower ceiling on the number of offspring they can have (Geary, 2010). In contrast, members of the less valuable sex (men, or more generally, male mammals) have a much higher reproductive ceiling (limited only by the number of viable female sexual partners) and stand to gain more from risk-taking, and have evolved to be intrasexually competitive in order to obtain access to the more valuable sex (Geary, 2010; Wilson & Daly, 1985). Therefore, it seems reasonable that men's greater perceptions of competitiveness in the workplace may in part be related to their greater alignment with the Dark Triad traits, which enable an especially competitive mindset centered around achieving status. Therefore, we test a mediation model whereby sex differences in perceptions of one's workplace as competitive were a function of individual differences in the Dark Triad traits.

Researchers have repeatedly highlighted the undesirable nature of the Dark Triad traits in the workplace (O'Boyle et al., 2012; Spain et al., 2014). This is implicitly motivated by company's interests (i.e., the "bottom" line). However, this tendency to focus on group-level outcomes may be in error and creates an imbalance in what we understand about these traits (Jonason, Wee, Li, 2014; Jonason, Wee, Li, Jackson, 2014). Personality traits—especially the Dark Triad traits—may serve individuals more than they serve groups (Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012). Where personality traits align with group outcomes, that is all well and good, but this should not be taken as evidence that focusing on group-level outcomes is best for understanding personality traits. Understanding how personality traits function in individual's lives is an important area to examine for even the most socially undesirable personality traits. In this study, we provide unique evidence to understand the way the Dark Triad traits are linked to three perceptions of workplace climate and how those perceptions may be associated with job satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample was composed of 361 employed Americans (56% male), aged 23–67 years old ($M = 33.70$, $SD = 9.82$) with an average tenure at their job of 58.63 months ($SD = 59.33$, $Range = 1$–518) who were paid US$1 for their completion of a series of measures advertised on MTurk. The average participant was employed full time (70%), making between US$25,000–$49,999/year (38%), and were ranked as an employee (70%).[1]

2.2. Measures

The Dark Triad traits were measured with the Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The measure is composed of 27 items measuring Machiavellianism (e.g., "It's not wise to tell your secrets."), psychopathy (e.g., "Payback needs to be quick and nasty."), and narcissism (e.g., "People see me as a natural leader.") where participants report their agreement with each statement

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[1] Data from Jonason, Wee, Li, Jackson (2014) was trimmed to remove missing data in the work-related variables in this study.

Table 1
Overall descriptive statistics and sex differences for the Dark Triad and job factors.

	Mean (SD)			t	d
	Overall	Women	Men		
Dark Triad					
Psychopathy	2.02 (0.63)	1.84 (0.60)	2.18 (0.62)	−5.18[**]	−0.55
Machiavellianism	3.03 (0.57)	2.88 (0.55)	3.15 (0.55)	−4.52[**]	−0.48
Narcissism	2.69 (0.63)	2.60 (0.57)	2.77 (0.67)	−2.53[*]	−0.27
Job Factors					
Autonomy	2.68 (1.06)	2.63 (1.02)	2.72 (1.09)	−0.85	−0.09
Prestige	3.46 (0.73)	3.45 (0.76)	3.47 (0.70)	−0.27	−0.03
Competiveness	2.53 (0.79)	2.39 (0.76)	2.64 (0.79)	−3.04[**]	−0.32
Job satisfaction	3.56 (1.09)	3.57 (1.16)	3.56 (1.05)	0.08	0.01
Thinking of quitting	1.88 (1.03)	1.92 (1.09)	1.84 (0.98)	0.70	0.07

Note: d is Cohen's d for effect size.
[*] $p < .05$.
[**] $p < .01$.

(1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Items for each scale were averaged to create measures of Machiavellianism (Cronbach's α = .79), narcissism (α = .79), and psychopathy (α = .79).[2]

In order to measure prestige (Herrbach, Mignonac, & Gatignon, 2004) we asked participants (e.g., "People in my community think highly of my organization.") about their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with six statements. We averaged items together to create an index of perceptions of workplace prestige (α = .84).

Workplace competitiveness (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) was measured with eight items (e.g., "The competition at my company is intense."). Again we inquired about agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with the statements. The corresponding items were averaged to create an index of perceptions of workplace competitiveness (α = .88).

In order to measure autonomy, we used the Factual Autonomy Scale (Spector & Fox, 2003) which has two parts, both measuring the number of restrictions individuals feel are placed upon on them in the workplace. The scale measures how often (1 = *never*; 6 = *always*) participants have to ask permission to do things like take a lunch break or a vacation (7 items) and how often (1 = *never*; 6 = *always*) others at their jobs order them around (3 items). We treated both parts as a single measure of the amount of restrictions individuals perceive at their work (α = .85).

Last, we measured "job satisfaction" with two single items. We asked how satisfied individuals were with their jobs (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*). We asked how often individuals contemplated quitting their job (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*). These items were correlated ($r(360) = -.62, p < .01$). We treated these as independent measures of "job satisfaction" for more detail given this modest correlation.[3]

3. Results

We replicated sex differences in the Dark Triad traits and found men rated their workplace as more competitive than women did (Table 1). We correlated the Dark Triad and perceptions of workplace climate using zero-order correlations and standard multiple regression to control for the overlap of the three traits (Table 2). Psychopathy was negatively linked to perceived company prestige and positively correlated with competitiveness. On the other hand,

Machiavellianism was associated with perceived workplace competitiveness, less job satisfaction, and more frequently thinking about quitting. Narcissism was linked to perceived prestige of one's company and reporting few workplace restrictions. Restrictions was correlated with quitting thoughts ($r(360) = .20, p < .01$) and job satisfaction ($r(360) = -.19, p < .01$). Prestige was correlated with quitting thoughts ($r(360) = -.38, p < .01$) and job satisfaction ($r(360) = .48, p < .01$). Competiveness was correlated with quitting thoughts ($r(360) = .18, p < .01$) and job satisfaction ($r(360) = -.22, p < .01$).

In order to test for mediation, we ran a hierarchical multiple regression with the sex of the participant in Step 1 and the three Dark Triad traits in Step 2. We found evidence of full mediation (ΔR^2 = .12, $F(1,356)$ = 15.90, $p < .01$) such that the direct path (β = .16, $p < .01$) for the sex of the participant became non-significant when the Dark Triad traits was added (β = .06). This effect was localized to Machiavellianism (β = .23, $p < .01$) and psychopathy (β = .17, $p < .01$).

In order to test whether job satisfaction/thoughts of quitting were a function of a pairing of personality and the (perceived) environment we created nine cross-products of each Dark Triad trait and each work climate measure. No interactions were significant when we included the main effects in hierarchical regressions. However, when we just included the interactions we found a number of things. The interaction of Machiavellianism and perceptions of workplace competitiveness significantly predicted job satisfaction (β = −.27, $p < .01$) and thoughts of quitting (β = .30, $p < .01$). The interaction of Machiavellianism and autonomy significantly predicted satisfaction (β = −.30, $p < .01$) and thoughts of quitting (β = .41, $p < .01$). The interaction of narcissism and perceptions of workplace prestige significantly predicted satisfaction (β = .29, $p < .01$) and thoughts of quitting (β = −.23, $p < .01$). The interaction of Machiavellianism and workplace prestige

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[2] Psychopathy was correlated with narcissism ($r(360) = .30, p < .01$) and Machiavellianism ($r(360) = .45, p < .01$) and narcissism was correlated with Machiavellianism ($r(360) = .14, p < .01$).

[3] Restrictions were correlated with prestige ($r(360) = -.16, p < .01$) and competitiveness ($r(360) = .11, p < .05$). Competiveness and prestige were correlated ($r(360) = .11, p < .05$).

Table 2
Zero-order and standardized regression weights using the Dark Triad to predict job factors.

Job Factors	r (β)		
	Machiavellianism	Narcissism	Psychopathy
Restrictions	.10 (.11)	−.10 (−.13[*])	.03 (.02)
Prestige	−.14[**] (−.09)	.12[*] (.18[**])	−.16[**] (−.18[**])
Competiveness	.33[**] (.24[**])	.14[**] (.05)	.30[**] (.18[**])
Job satisfaction	−.15[**] (−.14[*])	.06 (.09)	−.09 (−.06)
Thinking of quitting	.14[*] (.16[**])	−.06 (−.08)	.03 (−.02)

Note: Correlations did not differ as a function of participant's sex when $p < .001$.
[*] $p < .05$.
[**] $p < .01$.

significantly predicted satisfaction (β = .14, p < .01). These results partially support the person–situation fit model of job satisfaction. To better understand these associations we tested the aforementioned Structural Equation Model (including the significant paths only) where the Dark Triad traits predict perceptions of the workplace climate and those perceptions predict job satisfaction and rates of thinking about quitting. The resulting model (Fig. 1) provided a good fit (χ^2(14) = 22.58, p < .01, χ^2/df = 1.61, NFI = .96, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .04 [90% CI = .00, .07], p-closeness of fit = .65), suggesting the Dark Triad traits were indirectly linked to job satisfaction and rates of considering quitting through perceptions of one's work climate. Indeed, in two hierarchical multiple regressions accounting for job satisfaction and thoughts of quitting, the Dark Triad traits (Step 2) accounted for no unique variance above the workplace climate variables (Step 1).

4. Discussion

Studying the role of personality traits has a long history in I/O psychology including studying the "darker" aspects of personality variation (Hakstian, Farrell, & Tweed, 2002; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005), however, when the darker aspects are studied research usually focuses on group-level outcomes (O'Boyle et al., 2012; Spain et al., 2014). We have provided some initial details about how the Dark Triad traits might relate to individual-level workplace outcomes as a function of (perceived) workplace climate and job satisfaction. Instead of assuming these traits are bad and studying their dysfunction (O'Boyle et al., 2012), we have tried to provide a less biased assessment of the Dark Triad in the workplace through an Evolutionary interpretation of Industrial/Organizational psychology (Jonason, Wee, Li, 2014; Jonason, Wee, Li, Jackson, 2014).

This study made a number of contributions. First, for the first time we have documented how scores on the Dark Triad traits are related to three different workplace climate variables. We assessed perceptions of workplace competitiveness, prestige, and autonomy (i.e., restrictions). Each of the Dark Triad traits had unique links to these three factors. Machiavellianism and psychopathy were associated with perceiving their workplace as competitiveness. This link may be a function of the competitive orientation those high on these traits have (Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010). Narcissism was linked to a feeling one worked at a prestigious job with few restrictions. Narcissistic individuals are concerned with being superior to others and prestigious (Raskin & Terry, 1988). In order to get up and go to work every morning at a job that likely is limited in prestige and autonomy, those high on narcissism may

delude themselves into thinking their job is both prestigious and light in restrictions. While it is possible those who are high in narcissism might systematically prefer such jobs (Jonason, Wee, Li, Jackson, 2014), there is no reason (1) to think those people disproportionately get those jobs or (2) that we disproportionately sampled individuals who occupy autonomous and prestigious jobs. Last, those high on psychopathy reported a feeling their job was not all that prestigious. This may be a function of the types of jobs they prefer and potentially inhabit. Those high in psychopathy appear to prefer realistic and practical jobs (Jonason, Wee, Li, Jackson, 2014). These jobs tend to not be characterized with large amounts of prestige (e.g., construction work, electrician) as they are laborer and blue-collar (and no collar) positions.

Second, we tested the fundamental presumption in I/O psychology that job satisfaction results from a correspondence between the needs of an individual and what is supplied by the workplace (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). When personality characteristics are taken to exemplify individual's needs, and work climate is taken to exemplify organizational supplies (Kristof, 1996), fit would, by definition, imply a more satisfied individual (Edwards & Shipp, 2007). When those characterized by high rates of Machiavellianism feel they are in highly prestigious and highly autonomous jobs they are generally satisfied with their jobs. In addition, those high on narcissism reported more job satisfaction when they feel they are in prestigious jobs. However, in contrast to this, when those high on Machiavellianism felt they were in a competitive workplace they were generally dissatisfied with their jobs. This may reveal that the positive benefits of fit for those high in the Dark Triad revolve around autonomy and prestige and not competitiveness. Competitiveness may be stressful for all individuals despite any disposition towards it they might have. Competitiveness at its extremes may be deleterious for companies and groups in that it undermines the mutualistic, long-term nature of the groups thereby undermining the efficacy of said group. The competitive-minded person may actually prefer a less competitive environment in order to enable job satisfaction but they may simultaneously and paradoxically perceive competition everywhere.

Third, sex differences in perceptions of workplace competitiveness (Hershcovis et al., 2007) might be facilitated by scores on the Dark Triad. The Dark Triad traits might provide "competition colored glasses", biasing the perceptions of some men to see their world and their jobs in competitive terms; see opportunities for advancement everywhere through their individualistic and competitive approach to social interactions (Jonason et al., 2010).
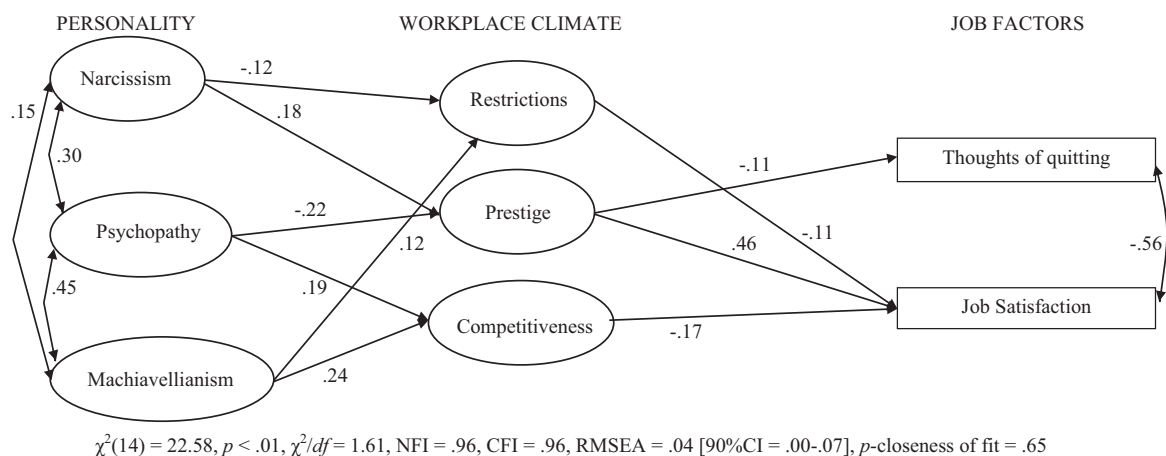

χ^2(14) = 22.58, p < .01, χ^2/df = 1.61, NFI = .96, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .04 [90%CI = .00-.07], p-closeness of fit = .65

Fig. 1. Structural Equation Model to describe the relationships between the Dark Triad traits, perceptions of workplace climate, and job satisfaction/frequency of considering quitting. All links significant at p < .03.

This perception—however accurate it may be—may facilitate the fast life strategy those high in the Dark Triad embody (Jonason, Webster, et al., 2012). This bias would prime individuals to compete leading to both positive and negative outcomes depending on the situation. It is likely this bias is responsible for numerous counterproductive workplace outcomes (O'Boyle et al., 2012; Spain et al., 2014).

Fourth, we presented a Structural Equation Model to account for the way the Dark Triad might relate to job satisfaction (measured two ways). Although we initially reported links between Machiavellianism and job satisfaction (Table 2), subsequent analyses confirmed our contention that the Dark Triad are indirectly related to job satisfaction through perceptions of workplace autonomy, prestige, and competiveness. Increased autonomy and prestige were linked to more job satisfaction but competitiveness was linked to less satisfaction. In this case personality traits like the Dark Triad do not directly bear on individual-level workplace outcomes but they may facilitate a way of perceiving their work environments that may facilitate or attenuate job satisfaction.

5. Limitations and conclusions

This study had a number of limitations. First, the measure of the Dark Triad traits does not allow for the examination of lower-order facets of narcissism and psychopathy (Jonason, Jones, & Lyons, 2013). Such analyses will provide finer grained nuance to the relationships reported here. Second, those high on the Dark Triad traits tend to have negative views of job satisfaction, in part because of their negative affect (O'Boyle et al., 2012). By failing to control for negative affect, we may have limited our results. Third, we relied on an internet sample. Future research would benefit from a more focused study of employees in specific companies or fields.

Most work on the Dark Triad traits implicitly assumes they are unequivocally bad, leading researchers to focus on group-level outcomes in the workplace (Jonason, Wee, Li, 2014). In contrast, by adopting an evolutionary paradigm (Buss, 1995) we have provided individual-level detail about perceptual/cognitive biases linked to the Dark Triad traits that may relate to workplace outcomes. We encourage researchers to take a step back from their assumptions about the Dark Triad traits to provide less biased detail about the role of these traits in I/O psychology.

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