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SPM LEAVERS; TO STUDY OR NOT TO STUDY?

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Abstract:

This conceptual paper focuses on the issue of students' motivation in pursuing their education after Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination. SPM is an examination system that determines students' path after completing their studies at the secondary level and a starting point of continuing their studies at the higher education level in Malaysia. It is an exam organised by the Malaysian Examinations Board and categorised as the final test of upper secondary education. Students with good SPM results have more choices and can pursue their tertiary education easily. The Ministry of Human Resources (KESUMA) expressed concern when faced with the challenge of producing skilled workers because nowadays many school leavers are more interested in not continuing their studies. Some claim that students can do better in life even without a bachelor's degree. Parents and teachers need to address this issue as soon as possible and remind students of the importance of education to support their future. Parents should ensure that their children understand the importance of education and show appreciation for knowledge. Teachers should also ensure that their students understand the consequences of their actions and the importance of having a quality education because life is more demanding in the future.

Keywords:

SPM, Malaysia, Secondary Education, Transition, Challenges, Opportunities

Introduction

SPM leavers in Malaysia refer to students who have completed their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) after completing primary and secondary school for about eleven years. Usually, these students will apply to continue their education in government or non-government institutions or universities locally or in other countries. This will help them to secure better opportunities to be better prospects in the work field after completing their tertiary education. This is what has been known as an ideal practice for centuries. However, recently some SPM leavers have chosen not to further their studies at the tertiary level and this trend is a bit worrisome.

According to Senior Minister of Education, Datuk Dr. Radzi Jidin 45,526 SPM candidates in 2021 could not get their certificate because of failure in either Bahasa Melayu or History or both subjects. He added that 10,681 candidates did not attend the SPM test last year (Buletin TV3, 2022). In 2022, 45,514 candidates could get their certificate for the same reason and 24,941 candidates did not take the test out of 407,097 registered candidates in 3,382 centres. Director General of Education Nur Zamani Abdol Hamid mentioned 1,655 or 0.43% candidates failed all subjects in the SPM test in 2022 (Taiming, 2022). Meanwhile, in 2023, the figure showed an increase where 70,000 candidates were unable to get their SPM certificate and 30,000 candidates did not sit for the test. Over 52,000 candidates failed their English subject, and almost 90,000 candidates failed in Mathematics (FMT, 2023). Even the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, expressed his concern over this matter (Hibrahim, 2023). In 2024, 41,403 candidates failed the English paper, and 85,706 of them failed in Mathematics (Fong, 2024).

Data from the Student Career e-Profile System (ePKM) revealed that 180,680 students, or 48.74 %, who completed their SPM in 2021 decided not to pursue further education. Compared to the previous year, when 115, 939 students, or 35.15%, were reported as not continuing their education in 2020. As a result, according to a statistics department survey completed on July 31 of last year, 72.1% of SPM graduates decided to discontinue their studies at that time (Maarof, 2023). The Ministry of Human Resources (KESUMA) expressed concern when faced with the challenge of producing skilled workers because many school leavers are more interested in not continuing their studies. The situation is believed to affect and slow down the ministry's target to produce 35% of skilled workers by 2030 considering that the country is currently at 28% (Yaacob, 2023)

These alarming statistics demonstrate that the students struggled in the required courses, and their subpar performance made it more difficult for them to continue their education. Theoretically, this situation has an impact on both their prospects and the labour market in our nation. Therefore, to stop it from getting worse, this issue needs to be brought to light.

Literature Review

The transition from secondary education to tertiary education is a critical juncture in the academic and career development of students. In Malaysia, the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination is a crucial milestone that determines the education and career paths of many students. However, some SPM leavers choose not to pursue further tertiary studies, and this phenomenon has been the subject of research and discussion. Several studies have identified various reasons why some SPM leavers in Malaysia refuse to further their tertiary studies. They encounter several obstacles that hinder their ability to transition into higher education or professional settings seamlessly.

Socioeconomic Barriers

One of the main reasons why students may not want to further their studies is financial constraints. Said an economist, low household income and the government's lack of efforts to create job opportunities are among the reasons why only 40% of SPM graduates continue their studies to a higher level (Shahbudin, 2023). Many students may come from low-income families and cannot afford the cost of further education, including tuition fees, accommodation, and other expenses. Higher education institutions in Malaysia often have tuition fees that can be prohibitively expensive for students from low-income backgrounds. These fees can vary depending on the institution and the course of study, making it challenging for some students to afford. While scholarships, grants, and loans are available to help students finance their education, the competition for these resources can be fierce. Students from low-income families may face challenges in accessing financial aid due to limited availability or eligibility criteria. Financial constraints can create a significant barrier for students from low-income families who aspire to further their education after completing their SPM exams in Malaysia. This can limit their opportunities for personal and professional growth and perpetuate cycles of poverty.

Many young individuals need to find employment immediately after secondary education due to the impact of an unstable national economy on the increasing costs of further education (Othman et al., 2023). The need to contribute to the family income or the lack of financial support can lead some SPM leavers to forgo pursuing higher education. Geoffrey Williams from Universiti Sains dan Teknologi Malaysia said SPM graduates from poor backgrounds had to work to support their families, thereby preventing them from continuing their studies (Shahbudin, 2023). Some SPM leavers may have family responsibilities that require them to prioritise working and supporting their families financially instead of furthering their studies. These responsibilities could include taking care of younger siblings, contributing to household expenses, or helping out with family businesses. As a result, they may choose to enter the workforce earlier to fulfil these obligations rather than pursue higher education. Some may feel the need to start working immediately to alleviate financial burdens on their families or to gain practical work experience. These family responsibilities and financial considerations can play a significant role in their decision not to further their studies at that time.

Deputy Education Minister, Lim Hui Ying in a parliamentary session last June said, the main cause of student dropout in secondary school was because school students from poor families had already started working to support their families, causing them to choose not to continue their studies (Maarof, 2023). Some students may choose to enter the workforce immediately after completing their SPM exams, especially if they can secure a job that offers stability and financial security. They may perceive job opportunities in the workforce as more immediately accessible and financially rewarding compared to pursuing tertiary education. Entry-level positions or vocational training programs might appear as a quicker path to earning a steady income and gaining practical work experience. Additionally, they may believe that certain industries or trades offer promising career prospects without the need for a higher education degree. As a result, they choose to enter the workforce directly after completing SPM instead of pursuing tertiary education, based on their assessment of job opportunities available to them. In overall, socioeconomic issues limit their options and choices include financial limitations and familial expectations (Nawi, 2018).

Academic Readiness

One of the primary challenges is academic readiness. Many students struggle with subjects critical for higher education, particularly in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and English courses. According to Firdaus et al. (2020), deficiencies in foundational knowledge and skills in these areas can impede students' ability to pursue further studies or compete in the job market. Students often find STEM subjects demanding due to insufficient grounding in fundamental concepts, lack of effective teaching methodologies, and limited exposure to practical applications. Proficiency in English is essential for higher education and many professional environments. Students with limited English skills face difficulties in understanding course materials, communicating effectively, and accessing global opportunities.

In some communities, there may be societal or cultural norms that do not emphasise the importance of higher education. Some SPM leavers may not have performed well in their SPM examinations, which can limit their options for tertiary education or discourage them from pursuing further studies. Commenting on the issue, Associate Professor Dr. Norwaliza Abdul Wahab from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, said the dropout problem at the SPM level occurs because there are still students who fail to master the basic skills of education, namely reading. She added that the situation was caused by, among other things, the high level of the Malay textbook syllabus (Hibrahim, 2023). As a result, the students who do not perform so well in their academics are drawn more to vocational or technical training programmes that offer hands-on learning experiences and practical skills that directly apply to their desired career paths (Ho, 2024). This lack of interest in academic pursuits does not necessarily indicate a lack of intelligence or capability, but rather a different learning style and preference for more practical, hands-on learning opportunities.

Meanwhile, some of them may not have developed a strong academic or career-oriented mindset, leading them to view tertiary education as unnecessary or undesirable. Some students may not have a passion for academic subjects and find them to be less engaging or relevant to their interests and career goals. Research studies have highlighted the impact of lack of educational aspirations on students' attitudes towards tertiary education. Many of them showed a need for more interest in learning and aspirations to become knowledgeable and virtuous individuals (Abdul Taib & Saad, 2019). Students who do not have well-defined academic or career goals may perceive higher education as unnecessary or unappealing. This lack of motivation and direction can stem from various factors, such as limited exposure to educational opportunities, low self-efficacy, or a lack of role models in their environment. Studies have shown that students with low educational aspirations may face challenges in accessing and navigating the higher education system. They may also be less likely to seek out resources and support to pursue post-secondary education. Youth Secretary General Rizan Hassan said, higher education institutions do not attract many SPM graduates. This is because the environment is not conducive to learning, the laboratory and workshop facilities are not upgraded and the staff are not very competent. He added that the higher institutions also failed to adapt to the demands of young people (Shahbudin, 2023).

Youths today prefer to look for flexible and stress-free jobs, such as becoming influencers or gig economy workers, earning lucrative returns from their hard work. This is clear based on a study conducted by the UCSI University Polling Research Center which found that those who did not further their studies chose to become influencers or social media influencers (2023).

Out of 490 respondents, 34% wanted to become influencers or social media affiliates, while 22% had no plans. A lecturer from the Department of Accounting and Finance at UCSI, Dr. V. Subramaniam said as the world today is becoming increasingly technology-driven, more youths tend to choose jobs that are not tied to any structured work environment (Muhammad & Abdul Rahman, 2023).

Parents Engagement

In addition, the role of parents in youth's decision making to pursue their studies is part of the issue. Supportive parenting can only be materialised when parents perceive and understand their role in their children. Referring to the lack of role models, past research identified that parental aspiration and parenting self-efficacy are two major criteria of parental involvement (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). Ambitious parents have always set goals for their children since they were small by creating the best environment and giving proper guidance and encouragement. However, some unfortunate youth may not have this supportive parenting that they feel they are given the freedom to decide their path since the grownups are not concerned about their children's future. Other than that, self-efficacy makes parenting skills more effective and comprehensive as they are more confident and authoritative with their children (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). Sim (2023) investigated the relationship between parents' educational level and parental involvement whereby the research concluded that home is where most parents engage with their children regarding their education and school-related topics. Researchers agree that educated parents are more skilful in approaching, guiding and supervising their children's educational matters (Sim, 2023). Nevertheless, Mohd Satar, Zakaria & Ishak (2020) highlighted that the most important factors of home-based parental involvement are motivation and communication despite these being heavily influenced by other factors such as family incomes and parents' education levels. According to the researchers, higher income households are more likely to be involved in their children's studies by checking their homework, having discussions on educational matters and even providing facilities for better learning compared to dual-earners and low-income families.

Academic Context

The setting of schools and the quality of teaching are critical factors that influence the opportunities and challenges experienced by SPM leavers in Malaysia. Schools and teachers play a vital role in preparing students for the transition to higher education or the workforce.

Education Quality

The quality of secondary school education significantly impacts how well-prepared SPM graduates are for further study or employment. The following elements are crucial:

- **Resources:** Access to adequate learning materials, technology, and support services can enhance students' learning experiences and outcomes. Schools with better resources can provide a richer educational experience, contributing to higher academic performance.
- **Instructional Strategies:** Effective teaching strategies, such as differentiated instruction, can cater to diverse learning needs and improve student outcomes. Schools that implement innovative and evidence-based teaching methods often see better student performance and engagement.
- **Extracurricular Activities:** Participation in extracurricular activities helps in the holistic development of students, promoting skills such as teamwork, leadership, and time management. Schools that offer a variety of extracurricular programs can better prepare

students for the demands of post-secondary education and professional life (Shahabuddin, 2023).

Teaching Methods

The methods used by teachers to deliver instruction have a profound impact on students' academic achievement and their preparedness for the SPM exams.

- **Innovative Teaching Strategies:** Incorporating project-based learning, collaborative learning, and other student-centred approaches can increase engagement and deepen understanding. For example, project-based learning allows students to work on real-world problems, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- **Professional Development:** Continuous professional development for teachers is essential to keep them updated with the latest educational practices and pedagogical techniques. This can enhance their effectiveness in the classroom and improve student outcomes (Khalid, 2016).

Teacher Quality and Training

A teacher's effectiveness is largely determined by their initial training, teaching experience, and ongoing professional development.

- **Initial Training:** Comprehensive teacher education programs equip teachers with the foundational knowledge and pedagogical skills necessary for effective teaching. These programs include theoretical coursework and practical teaching experiences.
- **Experience:** Experienced teachers are typically more adept at classroom management, curriculum delivery, and addressing diverse student needs. Their accumulated knowledge allows them to employ a variety of teaching strategies to enhance student learning.
- **Continuous Professional Development (CPD):** Ongoing professional growth is essential for teachers to stay current with educational trends, new teaching methodologies, and subject matter advancements. Research indicates that proficient educators who receive continuous support and training are better equipped to meet the needs of diverse students and improve learning outcomes.

Continuous professional development for teachers is essential. By staying updated with the latest teaching methods and career counselling techniques, teachers can better support their students. Professional development programs should also include training on how to address the diverse needs of students.

Career Advisory Services

High-quality career advisory and counselling services are essential for helping SPM leavers make informed decisions about their futures. However, many Malaysian schools struggle to provide comprehensive career counselling due to limited resources and a lack of qualified counsellors.

- **Access to Information:** Schools need to provide students with up-to-date information about career options, educational pathways, and the skills required for various professions. This includes organising career fairs, workshops, and industry visits.
- **Personalized Guidance:** Effective career counselling should be tailored to individual students' interests, strengths, and aspirations. Schools with well-trained counsellors can offer more personalized and relevant advice, aiding students in making better-informed decisions (NG, n.d).

Role in Career Guidance

Teachers often provide informal career counselling and mentoring to SPM leavers, influencing their career choices and readiness.

- **Informal Career Guidance:** Teachers can offer valuable insights and advice based on their understanding of students' strengths and interests. This informal guidance is crucial, especially in schools lacking dedicated career counsellors.

- **Training in Career Counselling:** The effectiveness of teachers in this role varies based on their knowledge of career options and training in counselling skills. Without proper training, teachers may struggle to provide comprehensive career advice (Lindsey et al., 2019)

- **Access to comprehensive career guidance and counselling services is crucial.** Schools need more trained counsellors who can provide personalised advice and expose students to a wide range of career possibilities. This can help students make informed decisions about their future.

Support for Student Diversity

Malaysian secondary schools host a diverse student body with varied backgrounds, aspirations, and academic abilities.

- **Diverse Backgrounds:** Students come from different socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Teachers must be sensitive to these differences and adapt their teaching methods accordingly.

- **Tailored Support:** Effective differentiation strategies, such as providing varied instructional materials and personalised learning plans, help meet the needs of all students, including those with different academic strengths and future aspirations (Udeze, 2024)

Infrastructure and Facilities

The physical environment of schools, including infrastructure and facilities, plays a significant role in shaping students' learning experiences and academic performance.

- **Adequate Facilities:** Schools equipped with modern facilities, such as science laboratories, libraries, and computer labs, provide students with better learning opportunities and hands-on experiences. This can enhance their understanding and interest in various subjects.

- **Learning Environment:** A well-maintained and safe school environment contributes to a positive learning atmosphere. Conversely, inadequate facilities can hinder the creation of an effective learning environment, negatively impacting student motivation and achievement (Gatundu, 2023).

Cooperation with Stakeholders

Collaboration among educators, school administration, parents, and community stakeholders is crucial for supporting the transitions of SPM leavers.

- **Educators and School Administration:** Effective communication and collaboration within the school can ensure a cohesive approach to student support. Administrators can facilitate professional development opportunities and resource allocation.

- **Parents:** Engaging parents in their children's educational journey can reinforce the importance of education and career planning at home.

- **Teachers:** They play a pivotal role in preparing students for their post-secondary transitions. Their quality, training, role in career guidance, support for student diversity,

and collaboration with stakeholders significantly impact the readiness of SPM leavers for further education or the workforce.

- **Community Stakeholders:** Partnerships with local businesses, higher education institutions, and community organisations can provide students with internships, job shadowing opportunities, and career networking. Successful collaborations enhance students' professional preparedness and make resources more accessible (Eke, 2023).

Addressing the challenges and optimizing the opportunities for SPM leavers requires a comprehensive understanding of the school and teacher context. By focusing on improving education quality, expanding career guidance, sponsoring teacher professional development, and encouraging collaborative partnerships, policymakers and educators can create a more conducive environment for the success of SPM leavers. This approach will contribute to greater educational fairness and economic mobility, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Methodology

This study was carried out in the form of library research where information was gathered through materials and journals of the issue. The study was carried out in the form of a qualitative study method. It is very important to know about this situation in detail to provide opportunities for in-depth study through qualitative and quantitative methods in the future on the issue.

Findings and Discussions

The decision of SPM leavers to forgo tertiary studies can have significant implications for their future career prospects and personal development. Studies have highlighted the potential long-term consequences, such as limited job opportunities, lower earning potential, and the risk of social and economic marginalisation. To address this issue, researchers and policymakers have proposed various interventions, including:

Improving Access To Financial Assistance

Expanding scholarship programs, student loans, and other forms of financial aid can help alleviate the financial burden of tertiary education. Financial burden can limit students' opportunities for personal and professional growth, as well as their ability to access higher-paying job opportunities in the future. Addressing financial constraints requires a multi-faceted approach that includes providing financial aid, scholarships, and other forms of support to students from low-income backgrounds. Policymakers and institutions can guarantee that every student has an equal opportunity to achieve their academic and career goals by lowering the financial obstacles to tertiary education. Supporting economically disadvantaged students requires a fair allocation of financial aid programmes and scholarships (Lindsey et al., 2019). There should be more outreach about financial management guidance and financial aid programmes offered by institutions, governmental bodies, and private businesses (Ariffin & Saleh, 2023).

Enhancing Career Counselling And Guidance

Providing comprehensive career guidance and counselling services to secondary school students can help them make informed decisions about their educational and career paths. Addressing this issue requires targeted interventions that focus on fostering a positive academic mindset, providing mentorship and guidance, and promoting the value of tertiary education in

enhancing future opportunities and career prospects. Teachers and counsellors are responsible for helping them to understand their potential and guide them (Leow & Leow, 2023). According to Lindsey et al. (2019), the lack of access to high-quality career assistance and counselling exacerbates confusion regarding one's future options. Students should be made aware of the link between education and careers at an early age to instil in them the belief that skipping school will negatively impact their professional futures. "Youth are taught the importance of having a career too late in life. In order for them to comprehend how the world functions, we must demonstrate that there is a future beyond education to (their) jobs", stated Mohammad Rizan Hassan, secretary-general of the National Association of Skilled Workers (The Star, 2024). By making students aware of the link between education and careers early on, educators can instil a sense of purpose and motivation. When students understand that the skills and knowledge they acquire in school directly influence their future job prospects, they are more likely to take their studies seriously. This understanding can significantly reduce the tendency to skip school or disengage from educational activities. By addressing the root causes of low educational aspirations, educators and policymakers can help empower students to pursue their academic and career goals with confidence and determination. Thus, improving the standard and availability of career counselling services in secondary schools can help students get ready for decisions made after the SPM (Eke, 2023).

Educational Awareness And Assistance

Implementing programs and initiatives that raise awareness about the importance of higher education and foster a culture of educational aspiration among students and their families. As for the former Director General of Education, Tan Sri Alimuddin Mohd Dom, the campaign and encouragement to enter higher education institutions need to be intensified by having them out into the field to provide information on the courses they offer. He said many form five students did not get enough exposure such as the future direction after finishing high school and the offer of scholarships and educational funding (Abu Bakar, 2023). Datuk Dr Radzi said students who do not sit for SPM or fail in some subjects can take the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia Ulangan (SPMU) which is held every year. In addition to SPMU, students can also sit for the SPM as a private candidate in subsequent years. According to him, SPMU offers three subjects, namely Malay, History and Mathematics (Buletin TV3,2022). This step is taken to help students improve their grades for the previous SPM results, especially in the compulsory subjects mentioned.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) does not plan to abolish the subject of History as a compulsory subject to pass the SPM examination. However, it will continue to strengthen efforts in implementing specific interventions to increase students' interest and understanding of History subject. The ministry also provides various support materials in printed and digital form. These materials can be accessed through the DELIMa platform and the SumberKU repository. In addition, MoE has also implemented several support programs, including the sharing of short videos as support material and e-learning for online tuition classes (Penyata Rasmi Parlimen, 2022).

Promoting Vocational Education And Training

The nation's varied higher education environment provides a range of schools and programmes to suit students' interests and academic levels. The government needs to have a greater emphasis on vocational education and training (VET) which can provide viable alternatives for students who may not be interested in traditional academic routes. VET programs can equip

students with practical skills that are in demand in the job market, offering pathways to stable and often lucrative careers. Initiatives for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) offer routes for gaining real-world experience in line with industry demands (Ting, 2019). Furthermore, the goal of apprenticeship programmes, grants, and scholarships is to assist underprivileged students in continuing their education or joining the workforce (Udeze, 2024). Developing robust vocational and technical education programs that offer alternative pathways to success and employment can be an attractive option for some SPM leavers. Deputy Minister of Education, Datuk Mohamad Alamin said continuous and integrated efforts have been carried out by the MOE across ministries and involving agencies such as Giat Mara, the Technical and Vocational Education Program (TVET) and others that offer appropriate courses. The opportunities to continue their studies, especially in skills and vocational fields, are still wide open (Taiming, 2022).

Deputy Minister of Human Resources Mustapha Sakmud Mustapha said SPM graduates are encouraged to work while studying, especially involving short-term courses to ensure they obtain at least a skills certificate in the field of TVET for a more secure future. According to him, the government through the Ministry of Human Resources and the Department of Manpower is actively promoting TVET among school students to attract their interest in continuing their studies in the field (Bernama, 2023). According to the TVET Graduate Tracking Study up to October 31, 98.29% of vocational college graduates have been employed, continue students to higher education or become young entrepreneurs. Thus, the distance between education and work can be closed by boosting industry-academia collaboration and increasing TVET opportunities (Udeze, 2024). Accordingly, the government's plan to implement the Academy in Industry (AIL) program is seen as an alternative option for SPM graduates who need job opportunities in their fields of interest. AIL is an initiative based on a demand-driven approach implemented based on industry demand to meet the characteristics of employees who meet the needs of the industry. AIL gives SPM graduates the opportunity to be trained as skilled workers within 18 months before being given a Malaysian Skills Certificate and job opportunities (Maarof, 2023).

Conclusion

The phenomenon of SPM leavers in Malaysia opting not to pursue tertiary education involves various social, economic, and personal factors. Many students come from low-income families that cannot afford the costs associated with higher education and in some cases, they might be expected to enter the workforce immediately to support their families. Cultural factors and familial obligations can pressure students to prioritise work over further education. Some may not have adequate career guidance and counselling. In addition, not all students are inclined towards academic studies and may have interests and skills that are better suited to vocational training or other non-academic paths. Understanding these underlying reasons is crucial for improving access to higher education and supporting students' long-term development.

In addition, parents play a crucial role in shaping their children's attitudes towards education. It is essential for parents to foster a curiosity for learning and underscore the importance of education, whether academic or vocational. Teachers must ensure that students understand the long-term implications of their educational choices. By promoting a positive attitude towards learning and highlighting the importance of perseverance, teachers can help students appreciate the value of education in overcoming future challenges. Next, policymakers must focus on enhancing the overall quality of education. This includes providing better resources, improving

instructional strategies, and integrating technology into the learning process to make education more engaging and effective.

Examining SPM leavers' experiences exposes their goals, fears, and resiliency during post-secondary transitions. In addition to quantitative data on school attainment and socioeconomic indicators, personal encounters and interviews with SPM leavers offer qualitative insights (Zakaria et al., 2019). Studies tracking the educational and professional trajectories of SPM leavers can provide valuable insights on the issue. Comparative assessments with secondary school dropouts from other countries can also highlight best practices and innovative approaches to deal with this matter. Therefore, this research helps policy actions aimed at enhancing social mobility and educational equity.

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