

## THE ITINERARY METHOD: A METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION FROM SOCIAL SCIENCES TO CONSUMER RESEARCH IN MANAGEMENT

### ABSTRACT

Consumer choice has been a focus of interest in the study of consumer behavior for over 50 years. Over time, however, the focus has widened to include not only the moment of purchase itself but also gradually a reflection on the consumer decision process, concerning the selection, consumption and disposal of products and services. More recently, researchers trained in areas like anthropology and sociology have contributed with perspectives that view the process of choice as a social and cultural phenomenon. This paper presents the Itinerary Method — a research approach originally applied in anthropology studies investigating consumption. The method can contribute to consumer research in management inasmuch as it allows investigation of the consumption process - selection, consumption and disposal - within a systemic perspective, that can expand consumer research's comprehension of choice, since it stresses culture as a central element. The method is described, along with its assumptions, operational steps and concrete examples of researches on consumption.

**Key words:** Itinerary Method; Consumer Behavior; Qualitative Research; CCT.

## O MÉTODO DOS ITINERÁRIOS: UMA CONTRIBUIÇÃO METODOLÓGICA DAS CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS À PESQUISA DE CONSUMO EM GESTÃO

### RESUMO

A escolha do consumidor tem sido um dos principais interesses dos estudos em comportamento do consumidor nos últimos cinquenta anos. Ao longo do tempo, entretanto, o foco desta pesquisa tem se ampliado a fim de incluir não somente o momento da compra, mas, também, gradualmente, uma reflexão sobre o processo de decisão do consumidor, no que tange à seleção, consumo e descarte de produtos e serviços. Recentemente, pesquisadores treinados em áreas como antropologia e sociologia têm contribuído com perspectivas que encaram o processo de escolha como um fenômeno cultural e social. Este artigo apresenta o Método dos Itinerários: uma abordagem de pesquisa originalmente inspirada nos estudos antropológicos de consumo. O método pode contribuir para a pesquisa de comportamento do consumidor, no campo de administração, ao viabilizar a investigação do processo de consumo – seleção, consumo e descarte – dentro de uma perspectiva sistêmica, que permite expandir a compreensão da temática da escolha do consumidor, tomando a cultura como elemento central de análise. O método é descrito, juntamente com a apresentação de suas premissas, etapas operacionais, e exemplos concretos de pesquisas sobre consumo.

**Palavras-chave:** Método dos Itinerários; Comportamento do Consumidor; Pesquisa Qualitativa; CCT.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Consumer choice has been a focus of interest in the study of consumer behavior for over 50 years (Allen, 2002; Bettman, Luce, Payne, 1998; Hansen 1972; Howard & Sheth 1969; Nicosia 1966). Over time, however, the focus has widened to include not only the moment of purchase itself but also gradually a reflection on the consumer decision process, concerning the selection, consumption and disposal of products and services. More recently, researchers trained in areas like anthropology and sociology have contributed with perspectives that view the process of choice as a social and cultural phenomenon.

This paper presents the Itinerary Method — a research approach developed by Dominique Desjeux (Desjeux, 1997, 2000, 2006a; Alami, Desjeux, & Garabuau-Moussaoui, 2008) and originally applied in anthropology studies investigating consumption. The method can contribute to consumer research in management inasmuch as it allows investigation of the consumption process - selection, consumption and disposal - within a systemic perspective, that can expand consumer research's comprehension of choice, since it stresses culture as a central element (Beji-Becheur & Campos, 2008).

In order to situate the contributions of the itinerary method, the present study first of all seeks to contextualize the discussion in the field of consumer behavior and the different approaches used to reflect on the concept of choice. This is followed by a description of the itinerary method itself, its assumptions and operationalization. This article also present various studies that have applied the method, concluding with a discussion of its contributions to academic and management practice.

## 2 A BRIEF PORTRAIT OF APPROACHES TO CHOICE AND DECISION PROCESS

Macinnis and Folkes (2010) single out three dominant specializations within the consumer behavior sub-discipline, each with their own assumptions and connections to other adjoining disciplines: Behavioral Decision Theory (BDT), Information Processing, and Consumer Culture Theory. In addition to a brief description of each of these specializations, we will further discuss examples of their approach to the theme of choice.

BDT established itself as the dominant perspective at the end of the 1960s. This approach transcends a view centered solely and exclusively on

buyer behavior and the moment of purchase (which predominated between 1945 and 1960) to also focus on what happens before and after the purchase. The methodology used comprises mainly surveys and statistical tools of analysis (Østergaard & Jantzen, 2002). Some of the most renowned consumer decision models were developed during the 1960s and were based on theories imported mainly from economics and cognitive psychology (Nicosia, 1966; Howard & Sheth, 1969). These schemes, known as overarching decision process models, tend to portray consumption as a multi-stage process going all the way from the recognition of the problem, through the search for information, evaluation criteria for the purchase and finally its results. In this approach, consumer decisions are considered to be rational, based on well-defined preferences and which do not depend on specific conditions. This perspective also assumes that consumers are able to calculate which option will maximize their value, basing their selection on this process (Bettman et al, 1998).

Information Processing incorporates the study, especially as from the 1970s, of themes such as the emotions, humor/mood, memory, attitudes and conscious and unconscious processes. Thus, besides the usual surveys and statistical tools, consumer behavior research also begins to include some qualitative methodologies (Østergaard & Jantzen, 2002).

The Constructive Choice Theory, proposed by Bettman, Luce, Payne (1998), postulates that alternative choice heuristics are assessed in the light of specific objectives related to the processing of information by individuals. Thus, the aim of maximizing the accuracy of choice is counterbalanced with that of minimizing the cognitive effort expended during the decision process. Besides the trade-off between accuracy and effort, the model proposed by Bettman et al (1998) also highlights two other important factors. The first concerns the influence of surrounding individuals and the wish to provide an adequate justification for the choice. The second is related to the attempt to minimize negative feelings regarding alternatives possessing attributes that conflict with the consumer's values.

Bettman (1993) also called attention to the fact that the investigation of the decision process must take into consideration not only what a product does (its functional aspects), but also what they mean for consumers. Guided by emotional or symbolic needs consumers change the aspects considered in the choice process and adapt their decision-making strategies accordingly. Payne, Bettman and Eric (1993) enrich this view by evidencing that heuristics do not always occur at a conscious level but are often the result of

unconscious processes related to standards/patterns and categorizations.

Finally, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) began to make inroads into the field from the late 1980s onwards and is defined as a family of theoretical perspectives that analyze the dynamic relations between consumer actions, the market and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This approach considers that consumption and its related choices are a social and cultural phenomenon, thus distinguishing itself from purely psychological or economic perspectives. CCT is therefore mainly concerned with social meanings, socio-historical influences and the social dynamics that shape consumer experiences and identities in the most varied contexts of daily life.

Arnould and Thompson (2005) point out that, though embracing methodological pluralism, CCT values qualitative approaches that enable researchers to examine micro-social factors, thus providing a wealth of detail regarding processes and meanings associated with consumption. Many qualitative methods have been harnessed to the challenge of understanding consumption as a cultural phenomenon. Semiotics, content analysis and projective techniques are merely a few examples of the approaches adopted. Ethnography, the classic method developed by anthropology, is now widely used in consumer behavior studies, having served as a model or inspiration for several recent studies (Mariampolski, 2006).

Allen (2002) exemplifies the way the CCT approach deals with the theme of choice. The author articulates concepts proposed by Bourdieu related to Practice, such as habitus, to propose a framework as an alternative to existing models. Called Fits-Like-a-Glove (FLAG), it seeks to explain tacit decisions, and its contribution lies in evidencing choice as a holistic and embodied experience, as something that is constructed during consumers' socialization trajectories, shaping their choices and making them "naturalized" (thus the name FLAG). Allen (2002) affirms that this type of choice (when consumers are absolutely certain about what they desire in an intuitive and immediate fashion) may occur even in the case of high involvement consumption and experiences (such as "falling in love" with an apartment at first sight, choosing a school for the children, and even a husband). According to Allen (2002), this type of choice is not motivated by maximization of value or the optimization of the choice's accuracy versus the cognitive effort, through heuristics, but rather the construction of possibilities and preferences during individuals' life histories, in embodied and unconscious schemes that are the result of the education and socialization to which individuals have been submitted since their earliest days. In this way, Allen (2002) calls attention to the pervasive character of culture in the choices made by consumers.

### 3 THE ITINERARY METHOD - ORIGINS AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Within the approach proposed by CCT (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), the itinerary method can provide a valuable contribution due to the fact that it focuses on the situational context and on the social norms that frame their action rather than on individuals or their decision process (Özçağlar-Toulouse & Cova, 2010). Based on the analysis of the concrete and often mundane aspects of consumption — such as constraints of space / budget / time, or preparation / consumption / storage / disposal of goods — the method attempts to describe the cultural categories and principles (McCracken, 1988a) that endow each form of consumption with its particular logic.

The method was developed by anthropologist Dominique Desjeux in the course of his field experience with rural development in African countries. His first inspiration came from itineraries constructed by agronomists, in which different stages of cultivation were inventoried and described in their order of implementation. After returning to his native France, Desjeux developed a methodology in order to investigate consumption and explain its systematic and procedural character. For Desjeux, the phenomenon of consumption is not solely confined to moments of buying and using a good or service, but also, what happens before and after these stages. Desjeux views consumption as a system of linked and socially determined actions that must be inventoried within a wider itinerary (Desjeux, 2004).

The understanding of consumption as a process that is not only rational or based on information-processing mechanisms is fundamental to expand the way the phenomenon is perceived and for the discussion of new methodologies to study consumption. In often-overlooked domains of the consumption process such as shelf stocking or even disposal, multiple clues can be garnered, on many occasions, to aid our understanding of the relationship between the subject and the act of consumption. The systematic collection of data engenders a broad view that enables the researcher to avoid preconceived ideas, allowing apparent serendipity to appear during the examination of moments and spaces that no one would ever think of investigating.

The theoretical framing of the itinerary protocol is rooted in the sociology of organizations, originally developed by Michel Crozier (Crozier, 1963; Crozier and Friedberg, 1981), and particularly, in his notions of the system of action and strategic decision-making process. According to this perspective, the act of consumption occurs within a context of social interaction and, therefore, is

determined by such interaction. Thus, the mapping of players, interaction dynamics, conflicts, strategies, constraints and social norms, presented throughout the itinerary, contribute to building a problematized portrait of it, that also encompasses the social and culture aspects of consumption. The interactive and systemic view of the itinerary method demands a qualitative and micro-social approach to observation (Desjeux, 2004; Özçağlar-Toulouse & Cova, 2010), where interactions between individuals are perceived in their specific groups and social relation networks.

Another important conceptual aspect of the method's underpinnings is the focus on the concrete dimension of the social universe, in other words, on the practices of individuals and material culture (Miller, 1987; 1998a; 1998b; Warnier, 1999; Appadurai, 1986) involved in the situation. Desjeux's research (Desjeux, 1997; 2000; 2004; 2006a) exalts the material universe as a means of gaining access to the symbolic aspects of behavior, often unconscious or non-declared. Thus, his research is more interested in the movement of things, gestures, and spaces than in discourse, explanation, and justification. Desjeux (2004) and Garabuau-Moussaoui and Desjeux (2000) tend to agree with McCracken (1988a) and Miller (1998a) when they say that material culture reveals human relations as being continually manipulated, incorporated, and invested with underlying meaning. Thus the itinerary method maps the rules of movement and use and presence of objects of consumption. A practical implication of investigation through objects and material culture is that interviews must to be carried out in real time/in situ where consumption practices actually occur, where words are illustrated by objects and spaces that become instruments of investigation (Kaufmann, 1992; 1996) and tools of access to social logics.

The itinerary method has been empirically improved over the course of several years by Desjeux and his team of researchers, resulting in the set of protocols currently adopted (Vincent, 2005; Desjeux and Clochard, 2006; Desjeux, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Campos, 2004).

#### 4 HOW IT WORKS

From the standpoint of methodological practice, the itinerary method is concerned with obtaining qualitative observations through in-depth interviews (McCracken, 1988b) and observations within a comparative scenario of itineraries and respective diversities and regularities, in order to reveal the inherent behavioral logics. This procedure is implemented through data collection that includes individual in-depth interviews, ideally combined with real-time/ in situ observation of consumption, purchase, storage and transportation. Photographic

records are an important tool in the method, because they register the context where the consumption process is conducted and complement the analysis, revealing details and logics that organize daily life (Badot Carrier, Cova, Desjeux, & Filser, 2009; Dion, 2008).

The implementation of the method begins by applying a grid of predetermined variables that guide the interview. The grid ensures rigor in data collection on the part of the researcher, who thus cannot leave out aspects that could be judged, a priori, and however unconsciously, less relevant to the investigation. Desjeux (2006a) proposes seven stages, which are described below. In different contexts of consumption the different stages of the itinerary vary in importance. However, the goal is to ensure that the interview covers all stages in a systematic way. For each itinerary stage, the following should be explored: actors involved, negotiations, objects and spaces used, tensions and norms or rules followed or subverted.

**Stage 1** – The purchase decision in the context of social relations: the triggering of the whole itinerary, which may include, for example, the preparation of shopping lists, the routine involved in decisions, actors, and influential factors.

**Stage 2** – Transportation to the place of purchase: the means of transport of people and goods purchased from the place of purchase to the place of consumption.

**Stage 3** – The choice, the purchase: the moment when the consumer is faced with the product in the area of sale, on a shelf, in a shop window, on a counter, or on the internet.

**Stage 4** – The storage of the purchased goods: this involves the observation of all the spaces used and ways of storing the product. The rules involved, the people responsible, proximity with other objects, and accessibility to other members of the household are also observed.

**Stage 5** – Preparation for consumption: this involves preparing the product for consumption. Preparation can involve the simple unpacking of the product, refrigeration, or other procedures that mediate between the goods in the storage/purchase state and the consumption state.

**Stage 6** - Consumption: the actual moment of use or consumption of the product or object.

**Stage 7** - Disposal: the stage when the remnants of the object's consumption are discarded, including both packaging and waste fragments of the consumed object. Disposal procedures, those responsible for disposal in the household, and resources used for disposal are investigated.

In addition to observing the object's consumption trajectory, the itinerary method holds that the movement and occupation of space by the objects in question should also be described. The method argues that the location of certain objects is socially codified and can be described according to three groups of categories. The first refers to the rules of presence: the presence of a given object can be permitted in a given location; presence can be prohibited in another; finally, presence can be obligatory or recommended in a third. Additionally, rules of exposure may come into play: a given object may be exposed, shown, or hidden. Finally, there are rules that govern the spaces where individuals may circulate: in a house, for example, there are public spaces, where people from outside the home are admitted; private spaces, where only residents are admitted; and finally, intimate spaces, reserved for the use of only certain residents. During the individual interviews, the management of objects and spaces is observed according to these categories, in order to gain insights into how the material universe is managed, according to social norms. The particular allocation of spaces and objects on the three groups of categories contributes to the unveiling of the functional logic of the material and social relations involved in that universe.

Data collected via interviews, observation and photographs are analyzed separately, then compared and triangulated. It is precisely through the comparison and contrast of these three data sources that new and more complex aspects can emerge in the analysis, such as hesitations related to less conscious or more automatic gestures, or other inconsistencies such as aspects that, though not mentioned by the interviewee, are present in the observation.

## 5 SOME RESEARCH EXAMPLES

### 5.1. An anthropology of medicine in France

The itinerary method was applied by Vincent (2005) to the material culture of medicine in the French homes of respondents aged 20 to 40. The presence of medicine in the various rooms of the house was mapped, revealing an ambivalence in the cultural perception of medicine. On the one hand, medicine is a substance that cures diseases and is thus enveloped in a positive and beneficial imagination. However, exceeding the correct dosage can cause undesirable side effects. In addition, the author establishes levels of classification of the different types of medicine that are associated with their perceived position in this risk – cure/benefit dichotomy. Each type of medicine is kept in a specific location in the domestic space according to its classification in this dichotomy. Antibiotics are the drugs that best embody this dichotomic perception of medicine, as they are deemed effective in the curing process, but can have significant side effects if consumed in excess. They are kept in rather inaccessible places, such as boxes on the top shelves of cupboards. Next we have analgesics as intermediate drugs that are beneficial but have less serious side-effects. Finally, there are cough mixtures and ointments that are perceived to be harmless and also less effective. Products that cause less concern or are perceived to be harmless are stored in easily accessible places such as the bathroom, alongside personal hygiene products. Medicine that is administered as part of a continuous treatment and should be taken at regular intervals is placed in accessible and visible places, such as the kitchen, near the breakfast area.

The study was performed in an attempt to explain, at a micro-social level, how medicine is consumed in France, focusing especially on the issue of excessive consumption which pharmaceutical sector and government figures show to be a significant cause for concern. The use of the itinerary method and a micro-social approach made it possible to obtain a close-up view of the daily use of medicine, revealing the reverse side of the statistics. It was argued, after analyzing this study's findings, that statistics generally only show the moment when medicine is purchased. However, it is only possible to observe excessive consumption, for example, when the medicine is taken home. At the moment of consumption what really occurs is under-consumption, due to the reluctance to take too much medicine and, ultimately, to a certain fear of the risks associated with its consumption.

### 5.2. The childhood universe according to Peugeot

According to Desjeux (2000), the itinerary method often ends up contributing to more technical areas, such as product design and research and development. This was illustrated by the research performed by his team in 2003 and 2004 for a study of the childhood universe commissioned by Peugeot (D. Desjeux & F. Clochard, personal communication, February 18, 2004). In this case, there was no specific product for the itineraries to focus on but a description was made of material presence in the domestic space, with an exploration of itineraries for objects that were very important in this space.

This research revealed innovative elements for the client company, suggesting that its new product development department should seek inspiration in household spaces like the bathroom rather than the living room or children's bedroom. In the bathroom it was observed that a mother washes her child without the latter noticing because all the objects associated with the obligation of the bath are disguised as toys. Thus the child believes that it is in a ludic world, when in fact it is fulfilling its obligation to wash itself, which, given the presence of ploys such as a fish-shaped shampoo bottle or a "bear" piece of soap, make the experience seem less conflictual than the obligation to eat or sleep, for example.

In a car, there is a similar tension. The child needs to be transported, sometimes for long periods of time, seated and complying with safety conditions (on the back seat, wearing a safety belt, in its special chair). In this case, as in the example of the bathroom, new car models could "disguise themselves", transforming this space into a place to play where a child could imagine it is in a spaceship, or watch cartoons, distracting the child from the obligation to be transported. In the specific case of this research, the use of the itinerary method and its specific approach to the objects and gestures involved in this universe, revealed a result that the company had not expected and which contradicted the usual way of thinking. A car is usually more associated with the living room or the bedroom due to an emphasis on elements related to comfort or shelter. The association with the bathroom was not evident for the company nor for the interviewees themselves but an analysis of the objects changed the way this consumer was viewed by the company, thus encouraging the research and development department to try out innovations in the car models designed for families.

### 5.3. An itinerary of catalogue purchases

Some may suggest that a limitation of the itinerary method lies in the difficulty of applying this methodology to services or retail consumption. Due to

its material focus, the itinerary method would be more appropriate for the study of consumer goods. However, this study adapted the itinerary stages to the context of services or even retail consumption, demonstrating that the method could also be useful in these areas of knowledge. For example, a study investigated the itineraries of catalogue purchases for the French company Trois Suisses (Desjeux & Clochard, 2006). In this study, itinerary mapping revealed a detailed trajectory of the catalogue purchase process comprising a total of nine stages: the delivery of the catalogue to the postbox, finding a place to put the catalogue, reading the catalogue, underlining items in the catalogue, the decision to keep or discard (the keeping or disposal decision), the purchase and order following process, the receipt of the purchased articles, the organization of the articles in the house and, finally, the keeping, giving or discarding of purchased articles. In the case of this investigation, the inductive observation of the purchase process, governed by a systemic viewpoint of consumption, ended up including stages that were relevant and specific to the catalogue purchase process and did not exist in the initial itinerary method model, following an inductive qualitative research protocol. Its material approach does not concentrate on any object in particular but rather on the set of material elements and practices involved in the process of providing the service. In the case of this study, this approach offered innovative contributions by revealing that the catalogue is an object that belongs to the private universe of the home, associated with moments of leisure and which reinforces social and family links, whether in the act of choosing items to order or in the exchanging of gifts bought through this process

### 5.4. The Universe of Beauty

The Itinerary Method was also used to investigate feminine beauty in a conscious effort to abandon the investigation centered on discourses and, instead, dive into the study of the actual practices and products used by women in their intimate universe. The study identified a change in female behavior in relation to the use and purchase of products based on the stage of the life cycle. In addition, the itineraries revealed a particular relationship between storage and disposal. In certain groups, "product cemeteries" were encountered in bathroom cupboards, waiting for that special moment, referred to as "the right occasion" or the opportunity to "pass them on to somebody." Certain beauty products are never thrown away, for emotional reasons, because they are either expensive or difficult to obtain, or because they constitute an "emergency supply" for women who could be surprised at any moment by an "unexpected" need

(Casotti, Suarez & Campos, 2008; Suarez, Campos, & Casotti, 2006).

One of the contributions of this study is that it presents storage and disposal as an element of differentiation and learning about consumption practices, making it possible to establish differences in the behavior of four distinct groups. The analysis of disposal, for example, evidenced dynamics of family influence and how mothers supervise their younger daughters' use of beauty products.

### 5.5. Automobiles in Brazil

In a recent research project developed for Fiat, the Itinerary Method was used to structure interviews with various members of the same family, all describing the same consumption itinerary — that of buying a new car. The objective was to stretch the method's theoretical assumption that social interaction contextualizes consumption practices to its limits. One moment all agreeing with each other — the next all disagreeing — buyers and their relatives will influence each other, all the way from perception of market offers, through construction of judging criteria and the purchase decision itself, to the final satisfaction with the choice. The individual stories functioned as a sort of jigsaw puzzle that must be assembled to understand the complex family relationships and their relationship with the car purchase (Suarez, Casotti, Mattos, 2013).

## 6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The field of marketing and consumer behavior has analyzed choice using various approaches and methodologies. One challenge facing the so-called Consumer Culture Theory is to develop new research methodologies able to capture a more contextualized dimension of choice, based on the understanding that culture is a central element in the consumption process.

This article has sought to present a new research approach used in anthropology for the investigation of consumption as means of analyzing society (Desjeux, 1997, 2000, 2004, 2006a). In the area of marketing, and more specifically in consumer behavior research, the itinerary method provides marketing researchers with an instrument that underscores the importance of investigating not just the purchase act itself, or the choice, but the entire chain of events involved in consumption. According to McCracken's (1988a) definition, consumption includes the processes through which products are created, purchased and used. This systematic perspective is defended and followed by Desjeux (2006a), in the itinerary method.

The itinerary method presents other possible contributions to the field of consumer behavior and marketing because it focuses on practices and material culture, in other words, the concrete aspects of consumption. In doing so, it offers potential complementary contributions to the body of research on marketing. The use and daily handling of objects, the accompanying gestures, and the spaces, in which they are allowed, may inform very specific restrictions or recommendations for areas such as engineering, new product development and packaging design. Desjeux (2006a) believes that by using the itinerary method, the study of the concrete universe of consumption can provide support and insight to areas that are not usually exposed to marketing research.

The method is different from the ethnographical approach used in anthropological field studies in that it does not envisage researchers' total immersion in the universe investigated or require them to stay for long periods with a given group to perform exhaustive data collection. The itinerary method is applied in more short-term field studies, with each interview lasting only a few hours. The aim is to observe the dynamics of the handling of consumer goods within the proposed framework of itinerary stages. Although distinct from ethnography, the method uses some of the same resources, such as in-depth interviews, observation, the cataloguing of objects and an inductive perspective. Thus, it is better fitted to the deadlines and urgency that characterize market research routines.

Methodologies that are not widely recognized in the field of consumer behavior, can, nonetheless, create fresh inspiration and foster more creative and effective strategies for companies. In this context, the itinerary method, born out of the need to use consumption as a tool for understanding society, can also offer an alternative path: revealing hidden mechanisms and different logics that explain choice. This new path of research attempts not just to describe itineraries, but also to understand and explain them, through social norms. The understanding of consumption cannot be limited to paths that follow a straight line; on the contrary, it should seek to understand consumption as a social phenomenon with its abundant contradictions, surprises and multiple perspectives.

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