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Academic Libraries on Social Media: Finding the Students and the Information They Want

Heather Howard,
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Librarians from Purdue University wanted to determine which social media platforms students use, which platforms they would like the library to use, and what content they would like to see from the library on each of these platforms. We conducted a survey at four of the nine campus libraries to determine student social media habits and preferences. Results show that students currently use Facebook, YouTube, and Snapchat more than other social media types; however, students responded that they would like to see the library on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Students wanted nearly all types of content from the libraries on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, but they did not want to receive business news or content related to library resources on Snapchat. YouTube was seen as a resource for library service information. We intend to use this information to develop improved communication channels, a clear social media presence, and a cohesive message from all campus libraries.

INTRODUCTION

In his book *Tell Everyone: Why We Share and Why It Matters*, Alfred Hermida states, “People are not hooked on YouTube, Twitter or Facebook but on each other. Tools and services come and go; what is constant is our human urge to share.”¹ Libraries are places of connection, where people connect with information, technologies, ideas, and each other. As such, libraries look for ways to increase this connection through communication. Social media is a key component of how students communicate with classmates, families, friends, and other external entities. It is essential for libraries to communicate with students regarding services, collections, events, library logistics, and more.

Purdue University is a large, land-grant university located in West Lafayette, Indiana, with an enrollment of more than forty thousand. The Purdue Libraries consist of nine libraries, presented collectively on the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter since 2009 and YouTube since 2012. Going forward, the Purdue Libraries want to ensure it establishes a cohesive message and brand that is communicated to students on platforms they use and on which they will engage with it. The purpose of this study was to determine which social media platforms the students are currently using, which platforms they would like the library to use, and what content they would like to see from the libraries on each of these platforms.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Libraries and Social Media

Academic libraries have been slow to accept social media as a venue for either promoting their services or academic purposes. A 2007 study of 126 academic librarians found that only 12 percent of those surveyed “identified academic potential or possible benefits” of Facebook while 54 percent saw absolutely no value in social media.² However, the mission of academic libraries has shifted in the last decade from being a repository of knowledge to being a conduit for information literacy; new roles include being a catalyst for on-campus collaboration and a facilitator for scholarly publication within contemporary academic librarianship.³ Academic librarians have responded to this change, with many now believing that “social media, which empowers libraries to connect with and engage its diverse stakeholder groups, has a vital role to play in moving academic libraries beyond their traditional borders and helping them engage new stakeholder groups.”⁴

Student Perceptions about Academic Libraries on Social Media

As the use of social media has grown with college-aged students, so has an increasing acceptance of academic libraries using social media to communicate. A Pew Research Center report from 2005 showed just 7 percent of eighteen to twenty-nine year olds using social media. By 2016, 86 percent were using social media.⁵ In 2007 the OCLC asked 511 college students from six different countries to share their thoughts on libraries using social networking sites. This survey revealed that “most college students would be unlikely to participate in social networking services offered by a library,” with just 13 percent of students believing libraries have a place on social media.⁶

However, just two years later (in 2009), a shift was seen: students were open to connecting with academic libraries, as observed in a survey of 366 freshmen at Valparaiso University. When asked their thoughts on the library sending announcements and communications to them via Facebook or MySpace (a social media powerhouse at the time), 42.6 percent answered they would be “more receptive to information received in this way than any other response.” A smaller group, 12.3 percent, responded more negatively to this approach. Students showed concern for their privacy and the level of professionalism, as a quote from a student illustrates: “Facebook is to stay in touch with friends or teachers from the past. Email is for announcements. Stick with that!!!”⁷

As students report becoming more open to academic libraries on social media, the question of whether they will engage through social media emerges. A recent study from Western Oregon University’s Hammersley Library asked this question with promising results. Forty percent of students said they were either “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to follow the library on Instagram and Twitter, as opposed to wanting communications being sent to them directly through social media (for example, a Facebook message). Pinterest followed, with 33 percent of students saying they were either “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to follow the library using this platform.⁸ Throughout the literature, students have shown an interest in information about the libraries that is useful to them. In another survey given to undergraduate students from three information technology classes at Florida State University, one question examined the perceived importance of different library social media postings to students. The report showed students considered postings related to operations updates, study support, and events as the most important.⁹ In the Hammersley study noted above, 78 percent and 87 percent of respondents said

they were either “very interested” or “somewhat interested,” respectively, in every category relating to library resources presented in the survey, but “interesting/fun websites and memes” received the least interest from participants.¹⁰

The literature shows an increase in students being receptive to academic libraries on social media. Results vary campus to campus and students are leery of libraries reaching out to them via social media, but they have an increasingly positive view about content posted that will help them with the library.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this project was to investigate the social media behaviors of Purdue University students as they relate to the libraries, and to develop evidence-based practices for managing the library’s social media accounts. The project focused on three research questions:

1. What social media platforms are students using?
2. What social media platforms do students want the library to use?
3. What kind of content do students want from the library on each of these platforms?

METHODS

We created the survey using the web-based Qualtrics survey software. It was distributed in electronic form only, and it was promoted to potential respondents via table tents in the libraries, bookmarks at the library desk, Facebook posts, and in-classroom promotion. Potential respondents were advised that the survey was anonymous and voluntary.

The survey consisted of closed questions, though many questions contained an open-ended field for answers that did not fall into the provided choices. Inspiration for some of the options in our survey questions came from the Hammersly Library study, as we felt they did a good job capturing information about the social media usage of their patrons.¹¹ Our survey asked what social media platforms students use, what they use them for, how often they visit the library, how likely they are to follow the library on social media, which platforms they want the library to have, and what content they would like from the library on each of those platforms. The social media platforms included were Facebook, Flickr, G+, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Qzone, Renren, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, and Yik Yak.¹² There were also open-ended spaces where participants could write in additional platforms. The survey originally ran for three weeks in only the business library early in the spring 2017 semester, as its intended purpose was to inform how the business library would manage social media. After that survey was completed, we decided to replicate the survey in three additional libraries (humanities, social science, and education; engineering; and the main undergraduate libraries). This was done to expand the dataset and reach additional students in a variety of disciplines. These libraries were chosen because they were the libraries in which the authors work, with the hope to expand to additional libraries in the future. The second survey also lasted for three weeks starting in mid-April of the spring 2017 semester. As a participation incentive, students who completed the initial survey and the second survey had an opportunity to enter a drawing for a \$25 Visa gift card.



The survey was advertised across four different campus libraries and promoted in several ways to reach different populations. Though the results are not from a random sample of the student population, the results are broad enough that we intend to apply them to our entire student population.

RESULTS

Survey

The survey was completed by 128 students. An additional 13 students began the survey but did not complete it; we removed their results from the analysis. The breakdown of respondents was 10 percent freshmen ($n = 13$), 22 percent sophomore ($n = 28$), 27 percent junior ($n = 35$), 20 percent senior ($n = 25$), and 21 percent graduate or professional ($n = 27$).

Library Usage

The students were asked how frequently they visit the library to determine if the survey was reaching a population of regular or infrequent library visitors. The results showed that the students who completed the survey were primarily frequent library users, with 93 percent ($n = 119$) visiting once a week or more.

Social Media Platforms

The students were asked to identify which social media platforms they used and how frequently they used them. The most popular social media platforms were determined by combining the number of students who said they used them daily or weekly. The top five were Facebook ($n = 114$, 88 percent), YouTube ($n = 102$, 79 percent), Snapchat ($n = 90$, 70 percent), Instagram ($n = 85$, 66 percent), and Twitter ($n = 41$, 32 percent). Full results are in table 1.

Table 1. Usage frequency by platform

Social Media Platform	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	< Once per Month	Never
Facebook	94 (72.87%)	20 (15.50%)	5 (3.88%)	5 (3.88%)	4 (3.10%)
Flickr	0 (0.00%)	1 (0.78%)	2 (1.55%)	8 (6.20%)	117 (90.70%)
G+	3 (2.33%)	6 (4.65%)	4 (3.10%)	16 (12.40%)	99 (76.74%)
Instagram	68 (52.71%)	17 (13.18%)	5 (3.88%)	11 (8.53%)	27 (20.93%)
LinkedIn	9 (6.98%)	29 (22.48)	22 (17.05%)	22 (17.05%)	46 (35.66%)
Pinterest	12 (9.30%)	12 (9.30%)	16 (12.40%)	19 (14.73%)	69 (53.49%)
Qzone	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	4 (3.10%)	124 (96.12%)
Renren	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (0.78%)	3 (2.33%)	124 (96.12%)
Snapchat	84 (65.12%)	6 (4.65%)	6 (4.65%)	7 (5.43%)	25 (19.38%)
Tumblr	7 (5.43%)	2 (1.55%)	7 (5.43%)	11 (8.53%)	101 (78.29%)

Social Media Platform	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	< Once per Month	Never
Twitter	28 (21.71%)	13 (10.08%)	12 (9.30%)	9 (6.98%)	66 (51.16%)
YouTube	58 (44.96%)	44 (34.11%)	15 (11.63%)	4 (3.10%)	7 (5.43%)
Yik Yak	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	11 (8.53%)	117 (90.70%)
Other: Email	1 (0.78%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)
Other: Groupme	3 (2.33%)	1 (0.78%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)
Other: Reddit	2 (1.55%)	2 (1.55%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0%)	0 (0.00%)
Other: Skype	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (0.78%)	0 (0.00%)
Other: Vine	0 (0.00%)	1 (0.78%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)
Other: Wechat	3 (2.33%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)
Other: Weibo	1 (0.78%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)
Other: Whatsapp	1 (0.78%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)

Social Media Activity

Next, students were asked how much time they spend on social media doing the following activities: watching videos, keeping in touch with friends/family, sharing photos, keeping in touch with classmates/professors, learning about campus events, doing research, getting news, or following public figures. Table 2 shows that students overwhelmingly use social media daily or weekly to watch videos (94 percent, $n = 120$), keep in touch with family/friends (93 percent, $n = 119$), and to get news (81 percent, $n = 104$). The least popular activities, those that students do less than once per month or never, were research (47 percent, $n = 60$) and to following public figures (34 percent, $n = 45$).

Social Media and the Library

The students were asked how likely they are to follow the libraries on social media. The response to this was primarily positive, with 57 percent of respondents saying they are either extremely likely or somewhat likely to follow the library. One response for this question was inexplicably null, so for this question $n = 127$. Figure 1 contains the full results.



Table 2. Social media activity

Social Media Activity	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	< Once per Month	Never
Watch videos	85 (66.41%)	35 (27.34%)	1 (0.78%)	4 (3.13%)	3 (2.34%)
Keep in touch with friends/family	89 (69.53%)	30 (23.44%)	6 (4.69%)	2 (1.56%)	1 (0.78%)
Share photos	32 (25%)	33 (25.78%)	38 (29.69%)	20 (15.63%)	5 (3.91%)
Keep in touch with classmates/professors	34 (26.56%)	47 (36.72%)	21 (16.41%)	19 (14.84%)	7 (5.47%)
Learn about campus events	24 (18.75%)	53 (41.41%)	29 (22.66%)	18 (14.06%)	4 (3.13%)
Do research	24 (18.75%)	26 (20.31%)	18 (14.06%)	23 (17.97%)	37 (28.91%)
Get news	66 (51.56%)	38 (29.69%)	7 (5.47%)	9 (7.03%)	8 (6.25%)
Follow public figures	34 (26.56%)	30 (23.44%)	20 (15.63%)	19 (14.84%)	24 (18.75%)
Other	2 (1.56%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

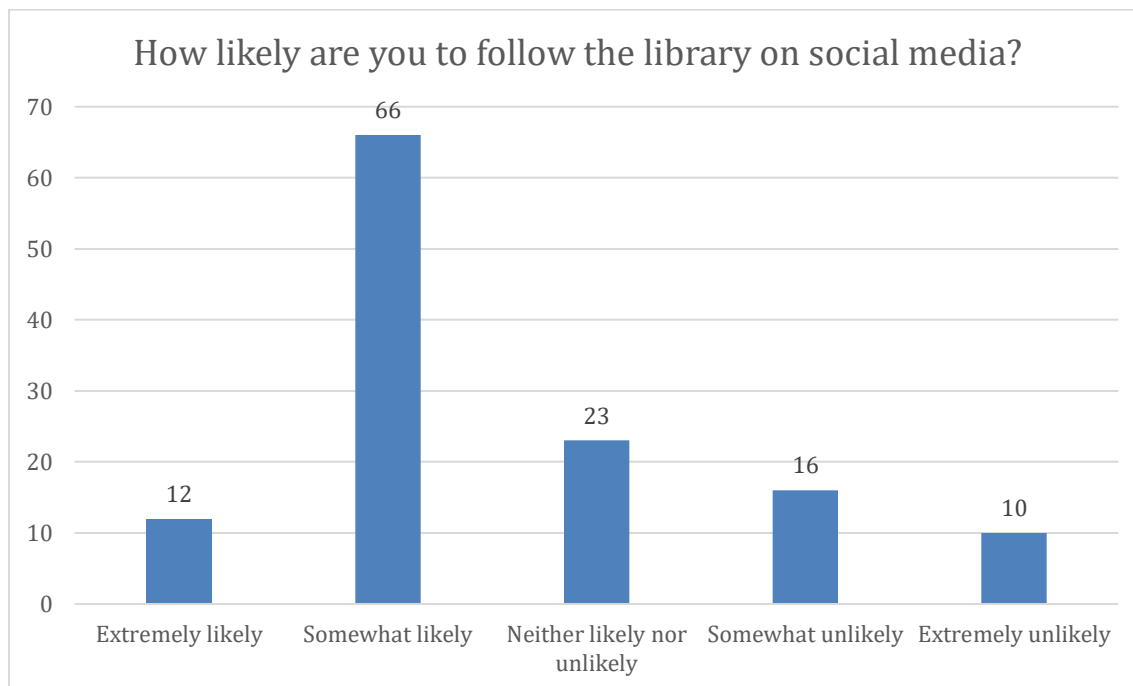


Figure 1. Library social media follows.

The students were asked which social media platforms they thought the library should be on. Five rose to the top of the results: Facebook (82 percent, $n = 105$), Instagram (55 percent, $n = 70$), Twitter (40 percent, $n = 51$), Snapchat (34 percent, $n = 44$), and YouTube (29 percent, $n = 37$). Full results can be seen in figure 2. After a student selected a platform they wanted the library to be on, logic built into the survey then directed them to an additional question that asked what content they would like to see from the library on that platform. Content included library logistics (hours, events, etc.), research techniques and tips, how to use library resources and services, library resource info (database instruction/tips, journal availability, etc.), business news, library news (e.g., if the library wins an award), campus-wide info/events, and interesting/fun websites and memes. For Facebook, students widely selected all types of content, with the most selections made for library logistics ($n = 73$) and the fewest made for business news ($n = 33$). For Instagram, students wanted all content except business news ($n = 18$). Snapchat was similar, except along with business news ($n = 8$), students also were not interested in receiving content related to library resource information ($n = 9$). Twitter was similar to Facebook in that all content was widely selected. YouTube had a focus on library services, with the three most-selected content options being research techniques and tips ($n = 20$), how to use library resources and services ($n = 19$), and library resource info ($n = 16$). Table 3 contains the full results.

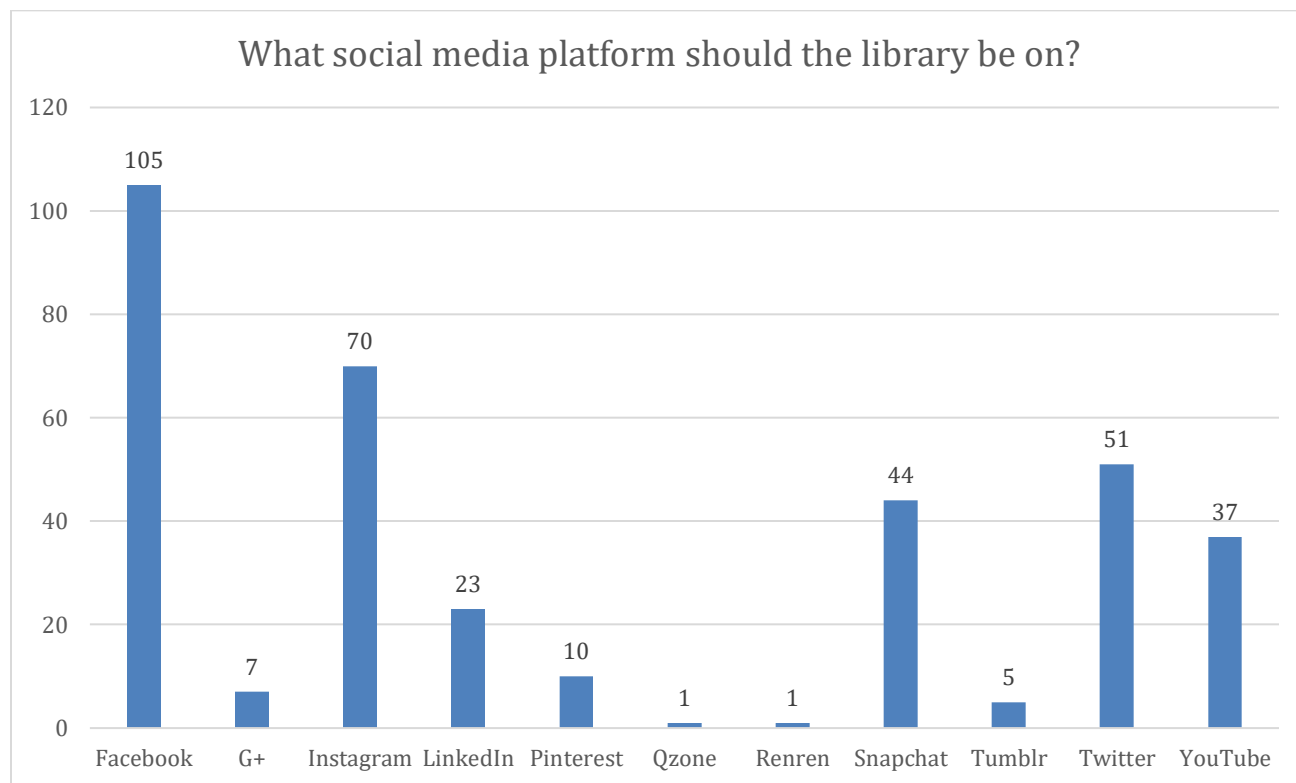


Figure 2. Library social media presence.



Table 3. Library social media content by platform

What type of content would you like to see from the library?									
Content Type	Facebook (n=105)	G+ (n=7)	Instagram (n=70)	LinkedIn (n=23)	Pinterest (n=10)	Snapchat (n=44)	Tumblr (n=5)	Twitter (n=51)	YouTube (n=37)
Library logistics (hours, events, etc.)	73 (69.52%)	2 (28.57%)	34 (48.57%)	7 (30.43%)	4 (40%)	23 (52.27%)	2 (40%)	32 (62.75%)	8 (21.62%)
Research techniques & tips	52 (49.52%)	3 (42.85%)	28 (40%)	13 (56.53%)	7 (70%)	19 (43.18%)	3 (60%)	27 (52.94%)	20 (54.05%)
How to use library resources & services	53 (50.48%)	3 (42.85%)	26 (37.14%)	8 (34.78%)	7 (70%)	16 (36.36%)	3 (60%)	25 (49.02%)	19 (51.35%)
Library resource info (database instruction/tips, journal availability, etc.)	53 (50.48%)	3 (42.85%)	22 (31.42%)	8 (34.78%)	6 (60%)	9 (20.45%)	2 (40%)	23 (45.10%)	16 (43.24%)
Business news	33 (31.43%)	2 (28.57%)	18 (25.71%)	13 (56.52%)	3 (30%)	8 (18.18%)	2 (40%)	17 (33.33%)	7 (18.92%)
Library news (e.g., if the library wins an award)	49 (46.67%)	3 (42.85%)	37 (52.86%)	12 (52.17%)	5 (50%)	19 (43.18%)	3 (60%)	24 (47.06%)	7 (18.92%)
Campus-wide info/events	73 (69.52%)	3 (42.85%)	42 (60%)	5 (21.74%)	5 (50%)	26 (59.09%)	2 (40%)	35 (68.63%)	13 (35.14%)
Interesting/fun websites & memes	48 (45.71%)	0	41 (58.57%)	2 (8.70%)	10 (100%)	30 (68.18%)	3 (60%)	26 (50.98%)	12 (32.43%)
Other	1 (0.95%)	0	2 (2.86%)	0	1 (10%)	2 (4.55%)	0	2 (3.92%)	1 (2.70%)

DISCUSSION

Historically, libraries have used social media as a marketing tool.¹³ With social media’s ever-increasing popularity with young adults, academic libraries have actively established a presence on several platforms.¹⁴ Our survey shows that our students follow this trend, using social media regularly and for a variety of activities. We were surprised that Facebook turned out to be the

most widely used by our students, as much has been written in the last few years about teens and young adults leaving the platform.¹⁵ A November 2016 survey, however, found that 65 percent of teens said they used Facebook daily, a large increase from 59 percent in November 2014. Though Snapchat and Instagram preferred, teens continue to use Facebook for its utility in scheduling events or keeping in touch regarding homework.¹⁶ Students do seem receptive to following the library on different platforms and report wanting primarily library-related content from us, including more in-depth content such as research techniques and database instruction.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Findings from this study give insight into opportunities for libraries to reach university students through social media. We acknowledge that only limited generalizations can be made because of the way the survey was conducted. Our internal recruitment methods led to a selection bias in our surveyed population, as advertisement of the survey took place either in the chosen libraries or on the Purdue Libraries' existing Facebook page. Because of this, our sample consists primarily of students who visit the library or already follow the library on Facebook. We hope to alter this in future surveys by expanding our recruitment to other physical spaces across campus. In addition, we plan to add questions that first establish a better understanding of students' opinions of libraries being on social media before asking what social media they would like to see libraries use. This would potentially avoid leading students to an answer. Further, we are concerned we took for granted students' understanding of library resources; that is, we may have made distinctions librarians understand, but students may not. In future studies, we plan to rephrase, and possibly combine, questions in a way that will be clear to people less familiar with library resources and services. We believe confusion with these questions created contradictory responses. For example, "research help through social media" received a low response rate, but "information on research techniques and tips" received a much higher response rate. Additionally, a limitation of using a survey to collect behavior information is that respondents do not always report how they actually behave. Using methods such as focus groups, interviews, text mining, or usability studies could provide a more holistic view of student behavior. Duplication of this study on a yearly or semi-yearly basis across all libraries could help us see how social media preferences change over time and across a larger sample of our population. This study aimed to provide a broad view of a large university's student body by surveying across different subject libraries. With the changes discussed, we think a revised survey could give us the detailed information we need to build a more effective social media strategy that reaches both library users and non-users.

CONCLUSION

This study improved our understanding of the social media usage and preferences of Purdue students. From these results, we intend to develop better communication channels, a clear social media presence, and a more cohesive message across the Purdue libraries. Under the direction of our new director of strategic communication, a social media committee was formed with representatives from each of the libraries to contribute content for social media. The committee will consider expanding the Purdue Libraries' social media presence to communication channels where students have said they are and would like us to be. As social media usage is ever-changing, we recommend repeated surveys such as this to better understand where on social media students want to see their libraries and what information they want to receive from them.



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