

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND EFFECTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS, CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES**

**\*Ogbu, Silk. Ugwu, (PhD)**

School of Media and Communication, Pan Atlantic University, KM 52 Lekki-Epe Expressway,  
Ibeju-Lekki, Lagos

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**ABSTRACT:** *Since the advent of the social media, pundits have been arguing over its impact on public relations (PR) practice. While some believe that the profession is heading to the grave, others posit that social media actually facilitate and catalyze PR work. This paper is of the position that the prediction of ‘death’ for PR is a metaphor describing of the consequence of the failure to adopt new methods of PR engagement in a social media era. Drawing evidence from extant literature, the paper scrutinizes the ambiguities surrounding the conceptions of ‘new’ and ‘social’ media, and explores the boundaries of PR influence in a digitized media space. Through the lens of ‘Social Construction Theory’ and the ‘Impression Management Theory’, the essay examines the implications and challenges of social media adaptation, for PR practice in a developing country like Nigeria. It interrogates the impact of the organic social media conversations on brand perception and offers recommendations for optimizing the use of media tools for PR purposes.*

**Keywords:** social media, new media, digital communication, globalization, virtualization, public relations, brand perception

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### **INTRODUCTION**

When the Canadian born Marshall McLuhan predicted that the world would shrink to a ‘global village’ (McLuhan 1962; McLuhan 1964), many did not understand or believe that it will happen so soon. Although he described the contraction of the world through the instantaneous movement of information and communication in the light of emerging electronic and technological advances, the reality of the new digital age has profound implications for almost every sphere of human endeavor today. The internet has completely revolutionized our world and the pace of the transformation is becoming increasingly difficult to manage, especially for media and communication based functions. Nowhere is the rapidity of the changes more impactful than in the practice of public relations. With the advent of the social media, the complexities have so intensified that Phillips (2015) declared that ‘Public Relations (PR) as we know it, is dead’!

For the longest time, PR has been focused on making organizations look good in the eyes of their publics. In the pre-internet era, it was possible and easy for PR to gloss over negative news or ignore public concern about issues affecting the image of their brands. The traditional ‘press release’ was weaponized to defend organizations from the onslaught of public discontent rather

than to ameliorate them. Today, as the public is becoming more discerning, active, educated, publicly related and socially connected, PR must either transform its practice or prepare for burial. What is required is more of public leadership predicated on trust and a commitment to improve public confidence by embracing data and specialists; focusing on different skill-sets and talents to better serve clients and the public; looking at the general public as citizens, not merely consumers, striving for excellence and eschewing bureaucracy, and understanding that advertising is one thing and not the whole thing (Philips, 2015).

In Nigeria, the number of active internet users has been growing exponentially since the deregulation of the telecommunication sector in 2001. As at June 2017, figures released by the National Communications Commission (NCC) indicates that 91, 595,315 Nigerians are active on the internet, with 91,565,010 of them accessing the web via the GSM networks ([www.vanguardngr.com](http://www.vanguardngr.com)). Similarly, of the 145,059,514 active telephone lines in Nigeria as at December 2017, 144, 631,678 of them were traced to mobile phone subscriptions ([www.ncc.gov.ng](http://www.ncc.gov.ng)). The growth in the use of the internet and mobile phones in Nigeria has, to a great extent, accelerated the adaptation of the social media as the modern village square, where people converge to exchange goods and services as well as share interests and information. Assisted by smart phones, media convergence and the advances in digital technology, Nigerians are becoming very active producers and critical consumers of content. The social media have not only given them a voice but also a veritable platform to express their concerns or share opinions on almost anything.

The PR practitioner in Nigeria today must be prepared to manage the fluidity of communications in this social space with the challenge of getting his messages across to a target audience that is more influenced by social relationships and experiences than by asymmetrical press releases. This paper is an attempt to interrogate the implications and challenges of social media for PR in Nigeria and also an effort to explore strategies that may be required for effective practice in the existing circumstances. The argument is put forward here that the social media, in spite of obvious complexities, present a vibrant opportunity for the extension of public relations in Nigeria

### **Conceptual Framework**

Notwithstanding the increase in the usage of ‘new’ and ‘social media’, there is still considerable ambiguity about the exact meaning of these media among academics and professionals. While a lot of people use these terms synonymously or assume that are the same, some others are struggling to draw a clear distinction between the two, especially within the context of emerging trends in PR practice.

Definitions of new media remain fluid and are continually evolving, with some definitions focusing exclusively upon computer technologies and digital content production, while others stress the cultural forms and contexts in which these technologies are used (Dewdney & Ride,

2006). The problem with the description of a type of media as new is the difficulty in understanding what makes a medium new and which factors affect the extent to which new media lose their novelty. Against this background, some scholars have argued that “new media” as a technological construction is only a temporary approximation of a medium’s modern relevance because technologies change so fast that what is “new” today will shortly become commonplace and then “old”(Peters, 2009). Moreover, since digital communications have become commonplace, it appears inaccurate to define such media as ‘new’ anymore unless they offer significantly new or innovative benefits. In an attempt to provide a more acceptable definition, Scolari (2009) proposed the use of the term “digital communication” while Valentini and Kruckeberg (2011) opted for “digital media”. However, it is important to note that as the digital environment continues to change, what is referred to as ‘digital’ today may also become outdated tomorrow and may no longer qualify as an appropriate description of ‘new’ media technologies. Nonetheless, this paper agrees with Valentini & Kruckeberg (2011) that in today’s media landscape, we can see digital media as channels of communication comprising Web 2.0, 3.0, mobile communications, computer-enabled user devices, and the social media. In this media landscape, “digital media” is an umbrella term for the digital technology-based environment that allows “networking, multimedia, and collaborative and interactive communications”.

On the other hand, social media, according to Safko & Blake (2009) refer to activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios. Social media are a group of Internet-based applications that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allows for the creation and exchange of user-generated contents (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) These definitions emphasize the cultural, behavioral and interactive elements of social media but it is important to also note that those interactions are inspired and fueled by user-generated content. In other words, for a medium to become social, users must be involved in the creation, distribution and consumption of information around their areas of interest. Furthermore, the assumption that social network sites can be equated with social media is erroneous and often misleading. Although both social network sites and social media connect users, the latter revolves around how the channels of communication and information are used for establishing relationships among individuals and organizations. Similarly, the distinction between new media and social media lies in the fact that while new media incorporate all digitally-enabled communication architecture that fosters innovative production and distribution of content, social media refer to the interactions and behaviors of users of those digital platforms as they engage each other in relationships and in the construction and sharing of meaning within a social milieu.

PR as a function of business has been around for as long as human society itself. However, formal practice of the profession dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with an initial focus on press agency and publicity. Since then, rapid developments have occurred both in the

conceptualization and the practice of PR, driven by a deeper appreciation of its relevance to individual and organizational performance. Modern definitions of public relations incorporate concepts of ‘engagement’ and ‘relationship building’ as a reflection of the instrumentality of the interplay between technological advances and social relationships to the success of PR practice. Chmielecki & Lisowski (2013) notes that even the widely used definition of PR as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” arose from the recognition of public relations as a process of communication that is dynamic, organic and relationship bound. In their view, traditional PR as a management function has always encompassed the following:

- Anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes and issues that might impact, for good or ill, the operations and plans of the organization.
- Counseling management at all levels in the organization with regard to policy decisions, courses of action and communication, taking into account their public ramifications and the organization’s social or citizenship responsibilities
- Researching, conducting and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programs of action and communication to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization’s aims. These may include marketing; financial; fund raising; employee, community or government relations; and other programs.
- Planning and implementing the organization’s efforts to influence or change public policy. Setting objectives, planning, budgeting, recruiting and training staff, developing facilities — in short, managing the resources needed to perform all of the above

The emergence of the social media did not necessarily disrupt the role of PR in managing the image of businesses nor did it reduce its capacity to perform the duties outlined above. On the contrary, it opened up greater opportunities for public relations to meet its core obligations. In the past, PR people were limited to a few channels in the mainstream media, dominated and controlled by big companies with deep pockets. To get their messages across, they had to either wait for a good opportunity or increase their budget. The social media have completely changed all that. Some practitioners believe that the advent of social media is one of the most exciting things that have happened to public relations so far. According to Waddel (2010, cited in Mcnamara, 2010),

“Social media helps public relations ... executives build more new relationships across a wider landscape and in a sustainable fashion never before possible. Social media enables professionals to maintain ongoing, quality relationships with influencers, media, customers and partners regardless of where they are”.

In their popular declaration that: “social media put the public back in public relations”, Solis & Breakenridge (2009) not only sounded optimistic but also echoed the widespread industry excitement about the potential of social media to transform PR when they went further to say:

“Welcome to what just may be the greatest evolution in the history of PR...with the shift from PR to PR 2.0... monologue has given way to dialogue... PR 2.0 is a philosophy and practice to improve the quality of work, change the game, and participate with people in a more informed and intelligent way ... PR 2.0 is really what PR should have been all along”

However, while it is exciting to look at the possibilities and prospects that social media bring into public relations practice, it is also important to acknowledge that there are new challenges that are emerging in that space. There are risks and opportunities inherent in the more complex and uncontrolled communication environment of social media (Macnamara, 2010). But public relations is used to working in an uncontrolled environment so it is crucial that PR people continue to explore this natural territory with a view to developing pragmatic solutions to the problems and strategies for harnessing its potentials.

### **Theoretical Framework**

One theory that provides a strong frame for the assumptions made in this paper is the Social Construction Theory which was originally put forward by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman in 1966. The central proposition of this theory is that the social system enables individuals and organizations to interact and construct mental representations of each other which eventually informs and controls their actions in relation to one another. Over time, the complexity of perceptions shared in the process of the interactions give rise to shared meanings which become institutionalized and embed in the fabric of social relationships. The social construction theory argues that reality is a social construct determined and guided by perception. To that extent, there is no universal lens for interpreting reality. Rather multiple realities exist in a dynamic social system which continually revolves around the active and cooperative enterprise of persons in a relationship. Instead of separating cognition from communication and predicting behavior based on patterns, social construction theorists propose that individuals construct meanings as they interact with one another (Momoh, 2015). Thus, social media can be seen as that hub that enables individuals and organizations to interact and share meanings with the target recipients of their messages who at the end construct reality out of their own understandings, reflections and experiences.

For PR practitioners, this means that the era of email blasting and press releases is gradually coming to an end. The reputations of brands are no longer as dependent on the mass media and publicity stunts as they used to be. The small markets, driven by niche interests and influencers, have become the new mass markets and consumer behavior is becoming increasingly more complex to predict. By enabling user-generated content and convergence of tools, the social media have liberalized the communication space and empowered individuals to share their experiences with each other. Word-of-Mouth and customer feedback have overtaken advertising as the major determinant of buying decisions with consumers now able to construct their own realities based on their direct interactions with the brand or from the shared experiences of others. This trend presents several challenges, especially for PR people all over the world. In

Nigeria, the fluidity of uncensored information and the lack of ‘gatekeeping’ in most social networks have led to the massive flood of false or abusive content into the media space, many of which have been classified as ‘fake news’ and ‘hate speeches’. PR in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must reorient itself to deal with the implications of this democratized media world by strategizing and re-skilling competencies towards creating content that responds to the needs of diverse individuals and organizations who congregate on social platforms. If perception, according to the social construction theory, is as important as reality, nothing must be left to chance or taken for granted in the quest to improve PR practice in this age of social media.

Another theory that supports the assumptions of this paper and builds upon the foundation of the Social Construction theory is the Impression Management Theory (IMT). The IMT which originated from Erving Goffman’s (1959) seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, opines that individuals and organizations are like actors on a theatrical stage determined to leave a definite impression on their target audience through their performances. Thus, through the interactions with their publics, organizations are constantly striving to establish and maintain impressions that are congruent with their overarching objectives using their actions and communications. Impression Management theory supports the Social Construction theory’s view that reality is what you make of it but further opines that impressions are deliberately created in line with the goals of the projecting party which are projected in such manner that they finally become the target audiences’ reality (Momoh, 2015). Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical analysis drew a correlation between the acts that people put on in their daily lives and theatrical performances where the impressions created by the actors on stage are greatly determined by the level of preparations and rehearsals that go on behind the scenes. The understanding that the audience is not passive but actively engaged in constructing meaning out of the performances on stage compels the actor to work assiduously on his role behind the scenes to ensure that both his behavior and communications are consistent with the impression he wants to create. Since the emergence of the social media, individuals and organizations desirous of building trust and mutually beneficial relationships with their publics must be careful not to leave the wrong type of impression on the stage. Any disconnect between what an organization is saying and what they are doing could easily be discerned by their active publics who are always willing and able to share their impressions with one another across social platforms. The implication is that PR people projecting impressions about brands must now start from the back end to ensure that there is coherence in the performances of all the actors engaged in delivering the brand promise. In Nigeria, the focus of PR is still very much on the front end. Public relations officers and spokespersons of organizations usually find themselves in difficult situations where they are expected to defend the indefensible. Unfortunately, poor customer service is no longer excusable in this age of social media because individuals can now document and share their experiences on the go. The lack of congruence between communication and organization behavior often become the subject of social media discussions with severe reputational consequences for the organizations concerned. Therefore, PR practitioners must ensure that there is consistency in all

the messages and actions of individuals projecting a given impression of a brand throughout the touch points along the targeted audiences' interaction with the brand.

### **Social Media: Implications and Challenges for Public Relations in Nigeria**

With the present rate of internet penetration and social media adoption in Nigeria, any PR practitioner who is not positioning his/her practice to align with the dynamics of the social media space may soon be out of work. Nigeria is the 7<sup>th</sup> most populous country in the world, representing about 2.57% of the global population of 7,632,819,325 people. As at the end of 2017, the population of Nigeria was estimated to be around 190,886,311 and is projected to hit 195,875,237 by the end of 2018, given the annual growth rate of 2.63% (<http://www.worldometers.info>). Nigeria is not only the biggest market in sub-Saharan Africa but also one of the fastest growing economies in the world today. As the world looks towards Africa for the next frontier of industrial and economic evolution, there is no doubt that Nigeria will remain the preferred destination for local and foreign investment portfolios in the years ahead. The forces of globalization and virtualization are riding on top of digital and communication technologies to break down barriers to trade and relationships. With the internet and social media, individuals and organizations can now transact their businesses across national boundaries without the limitations of time and space. They can easily access information about anything, and can also compare the quality of the products and services they receive with what are available in other parts of the world. The implication of this surge in awareness is that expectations are arising far above pedestrian performances. Organizations and individuals who want to cease this growing market may act local but must begin to think global. From the postulation of the Social Construction theory, we can assume that Nigerians are constructing multiple realities out of the various interactions on the social media. It is the responsibility of PR people to decode and manage these constructs to the benefit of their clients. For example, the task of managing the reputational assets of the multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has become more difficult for PR practitioners since the advent of the internet and social media. In Ogoni and other communities suffering from severe cases of oil spillage and environmental degradation, we have seen protests degenerate into armed insurrections, leading to tragic loss of lives and property. In many of these cases, the militants were inspired by variants of violent attacks perpetuated in other climes and shared on the social media. All through the reign of militancy in the Niger Delta, the insurgents relied heavily on the same social media to recruit new members, attract local and international attention to their cause and communicate their demands and activities to targeted stakeholders. In this context, the best way PR can assist in building a better relationship between the oil companies and their host communities is not through the use of publicity or high budget PR campaigns, which are usually designed to polish corporate image, but to insist that affected companies observe and adopt good standards, in line with global best practices, in all their operations and interactions with their host communities. That approach will help build trust and consistency between the back end and the front end of PR activities of the oil companies operating in the Niger Delta, in line with the

recommendations of the Impression Management theory. This may be the narrow path, but in this era of social media, it is probably the surest one to thread.

Other challenges facing PR practice in Nigeria since the arrival of Web 2.0 emanate from the very nature of social media as a free, organic and unregulated platform. In the excitement to join the conversations online, some individuals hardly crosscheck the sources of their information or respect the rights of others in the media space. The social media is prone to abuse by scrupulous elements deliberately spreading falsehood to undermine the reputation of others or their competitors. In Nigeria, ‘hate speech’ and ‘fake news’ are increasingly taking dominance of social media conversations and are becoming issues of great concern to the government and many other stakeholders. Attempts to regulate social media usage through legislative intervention have received push backs and massive resistance from the populace. Individuals who engage on social networks come from different backgrounds and have different levels of education or understanding of the issues in their conversations. Sometimes, their contributions drift from the subject to attacks on each other or concerned stakeholders, thereby denigrating the space, the quality of the interactions and the reputation of others. The #OccupyNigeria and the #Bringbackourgirls protests powered mainly by the social media networks are examples of recent campaigns whose objectives became distorted as a result of uncensored and incoherent messages coming from their protagonists. Managing the social media and the fluidity of information, especially during crisis, is a nightmare for PR people. Articulating appropriate response strategies to the multiplicity of viewpoints concerning their clients that are pushed through the social media is a time and resource vampire for PR practitioners in Nigeria.

### **Strategies for Optimizing Social Media in Public Relations**

No doubt, the challenges of managing public perception of a brand in the social media era are enormous and still evolving. The peculiarities of the Nigerian business environment further complicate the issues that PR practitioners need to deal with at different levels. However, given the opportunities earlier identified for PR in this growing marketplace, professionals must keep brainstorming on how to mitigate the negative consequences and at the same time leverage the humongous potentials of web 2.0 for the promotion of their brands. It is important to note that social media is simply a *channel* of communication and a tool for social interaction. The plethora of social media tools available on the web can be really confusing and difficult for brand managers to keep up with. Some of the popular ones include the following:

- *Social Networks*
- *News & Bookmarking*
- *Blogs*
- *Micro-blogging*
- *Video Sharing*
- *Photo Sharing*
- *Message boards*
- *Wikis*



- ***Virtual Reality***
- ***Social Gaming***

PR people who desire to inspire and direct online conversations to the benefit of their brands need to learn how to use social media tools effectively. In that light, this paper offers 10 key tips as follows:

1. **Experiment with Social Media:** PR Practitioners who want to be proficient in exploiting social media benefits must be curious and ready to always experiment with them first before using them professionally. The number of social media tools available on the web has been doubling year on year. One should be careful to select those that are relevant to his or her objectives and also be open to trying out new ones. The dynamism of social interactions will continue to propel changes in social networks and engagement protocols so it makes sense to stay on top of them.
2. **Make a Plan:** Social media adaptation for PR activities requires a deliberate, purposeful and strategic plan. Practitioners need to have a clear understanding of their PR objectives and how they can effectively mobilize resources, including people, opportunities and policies to drive them in the social media space. That means working around a plan to address important resource gaps as well to monitor, integrate and measure outcomes.
3. **Listen:** The most important skill in using social media for PR is to listen effectively. Professionals need to develop big ears to enable them hear what people are saying about their brands across the relevant platforms. It is, therefore, important to continually search for where the publics of one's brand congregate online and to carefully listen to their conversations in order to pick out the crucial messages and also the major influencers of the conversations for further engagement. Professionals need not do this alone. They can hire social media crawlers or use online tools, such as google search, for this purpose.
4. **Be Transparent and Honest:** The temptation to exaggerate the numbers or cook up stories to push PR campaigns to trend on social media is usually strong. Since the social media have no gatekeepers, one can easily assume that there are no consequences or that the individuals involved in the conversations may not know any better. Unfortunately, this is always a big risk and many firms have paid dearly for that assumption. It is advisable for practitioners to avoid puffery because people will ignore it, and also avoid lying because people will not ignore it. If there are issues of concern to one's publics, the best approach is to be honest and transparent in addressing them. Even if one is unable to solve the problem, people tend to appreciate honesty and a transparent process of resolution regardless of the outcome.
5. **Share your Content:** To get value out of social media, PR people should be able to share their content easily with their target audiences. In developing content and campaign materials, it is important to keep this in mind in order to adopt the right formatting and style. If videos are too long or commercial-oriented, for instance, people may not feel like sharing them. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the PR content creator to make them exciting, emotive, relatable and sharable. Tools such as 'Share This', 'Email a friend', 'RSS Feeds', etc. enable and promote easy sharing of content and are recommended for this purpose.

6. **Be Personal and act like a Person:** While it is understandable and natural for PR practitioners to always want to personify their brands, in social media conversations, it does not help to sound like a press secretary or marketing shill all the time. To be part of the conversation and to influence its direction, one should participate like a normal member of the community who understands and can relate to the interests and concerns of others from a personal angle.

7. **Contribute in a Meaningful Way:** The social media arena is a platform for networking and sharing of ideas among people who are connected by all sorts of interests. Although it can be leveraged to push marketing or PR objectives, one must be perceived as a significant member of that community and a meaningful contributor to the discourse before he can do that. That means that the PR person should think more like a social influencer committed to making relevant input to enhance the wellbeing of others rather than a marketer desperate to sell something. Promoting one's brand with every post or comment tends to dehumanize the interactions and reduce the influence of the practitioner, especially when the conversation does not warrant such interjections. Where necessary, one should also promote other brands as a way of building authenticity and goodwill or future support for his own brand, as long as there is no conflict of interest.

8. **See Criticism as an Opportunity:** Sometimes, social media conversations can derail from the subject matter and PR people or their brands may be attacked or criticized by disgruntled members of the community. In such circumstances, brand managers may be tempted to delete some of the offensive comments from the trail of the conversation to save the image of the brand. Such actions only make matters worse because the internet has a long memory. Besides, being overly defensive can be interpreted as admission of guilt. Rather than delete criticisms, it is better to listen to the brand detractors with a view to understanding their grievances and also providing credible explanations. Where genuine infractions have been committed by the brand handlers, the PR person should be ready to admit the shortcomings, offer sincere apologies and work towards a legitimate resolution of the concerns.

9. **Be Proactive:** To optimize social media for PR purposes, practitioners should be proactive in their engagement and interactions on that landscape. It is advisable to build a network of friends, influencers and target audiences across the relevant sites, and regularly interface with them long before the launch of a PR campaign. Social media thrives on relationships and those who wait till they need to push some marketing messages out to build them hardly get the results they seek to achieve.

10. **Accept that you cannot do it by all by yourself:** Effective PR practice on social media requires teamwork. No one can do it all by himself. The PR person needs all the support he can get from his organization, team members, social contacts and the brand owners to drive a successful campaign on the web. It is important to build a strong and reliable team first and also get the buy-in of critical stakeholders before venturing into any significant PR campaign on social media.

## CONCLUSION

The internet has revolutionized our world. Although the information age is still evolving, its impact on business, politics and social relations has been phenomenal. One profession that is, perhaps, affected the most is Public Relations. Depending on how one prefers to look at it, the effect of the recent advances in digital media technologies can be a great benefit or challenge to PR practice. Practitioners who continue to do ‘business as usual’ in this era of social media will probably face severe difficulties while those who migrate to the new digital landscape to leverage the enormous potentials of the social media are likely to take their careers to a whole new level. Rather than being afraid of the social media, PR people are actually in the best position to use social networks for the positioning of their brands and campaigns if they devise appropriate strategies.

From the postulations of the ‘Social Construction Theory’ and ‘Impression Management Theory’, we can discern that the perception of a brand’s target audience is as important as the projected reality of the brand, and that organizations’ publics are not passive at all. In this ‘experience’ economy, largely driven by social media interactions, PR must key into the business of perception and impression management on social network as the best way to align practice with the reality of our changing times. Notwithstanding the challenges in the adaptation of social media in PR practice, this paper believes that there are profound opportunities to achieve PR objectives, especially in a developing country like Nigeria, where internet penetration and social media adoption are growing sporadically. Without doubt, the peculiarities of the Nigerian social, economic and political climate have unique implications for PR, but if professionals continue to strategize around the challenges of playing in the social media space, this paper predicts that social media will become the most favorite PR tool in the years ahead.

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