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Do reference groups influence purchase decision?

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Abstract

Brands have been changing the way they connect and relate with their customers. Communication through social networks and the reference individuals and groups has been increasing. Still being one of the most important social networks, Facebook, keeps being a mean of promoting brands. This social network allows consumers to read other opinions about brands and products and share their own opinions. Therefore, using a convenience sample of 719 individuals, aimed to understand the influence of eWOM generated by reference groups on Facebook, in Portugal. It was concluded that, although Facebook is not a major source to search information on products, the larger the search information and online contribution (information sharing) on Facebook, the greater the trust in eWOM obtained on the same social network. Respondents who contribute most online are also those who seek for information online and rely more on that information. It was also found that the opinions expressed by reference groups on Facebook are positively correlated with confidence in eWOM and purchase decision. Finally, we concluded that the reference groups that have more influence on trust in eWOM and seeking information on Facebook are: users on the brands pages, users in discussion groups, friends and other users.

Keywords: reference groups, influencers, social networks, eWOM

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Solomon (2002) the search for other people’s opinions to confirm opinions of impersonal sources and the transmission of that recommendation from one person to another is called word-of-mouth (WOM). Still today a search for WOM is one of the behaviors that strongly influences the buying process of a certain product or service (Mittal et al, 2008). This study focus on eWOM, defined by Hennig-Thurau et al (2004) as a positive or negative statement made by potential, current or possible clients about a product or company and that will be seen and evaluated by a large number of people and institutions through the internet. Consumers seek for information on the Internet about products and brands.

Citizens are increasingly present in social networks, mainly Facebook, as well as brands, products, services and businesses. Given these facts, we will try to understand if consumers seek for information about products and brands on Facebook, and understand the importance of eWOM generated on Facebook. Solomon (2002) indicates that, despite being influenced by several reference groups like family, friends or co-workers, their individual influences are not equally
powerful for all types of products and activities. Further, we will try to understand if different reference groups influence differently the purchase decision.

The paper is divided in four parts. The first part includes a review of literature about the buying decision process, reference groups, eWord-of-Mouth and social networks. In the next part, we explore the hypothesis of the study and the methodology adopted. The next part is followed by the results, and its discussion. Finally, we present the conclusions, the implications for managers, the limitations of the study and clues for future research.

2. **Literature Review**

The buying decision process initiates when an individual feels that there is a discrepancy between his/her current state and the one he/she wants to have. The desire to diminish this difference will influence and give rise to the buyer decision process (Mowen and Minor, 2003). This process has several levels for the individual. The buyer process is activated when the personal and inherent characteristics are confronted with the proper marketing stimulus, on a certain situation (Celsi and Olson, 1988).

The search for real and assertive information is an important step for that decision. This search for information can be characterized in two types: internal and external search (Blackwell, et al. 2008). Blackwell states that the external search is carried out next to friends and family and then the market. The individual may have a passive attitude, resorting only to the available information or active when there is a more intentional search through market research, WOM (Word-of-mouth), internet or even through search next to the point of sale. Assael (1998) describes reference groups as one of the bigger behaviour influences, because they are references for the opinion making process of a certain product, attitude or behaviour. Reference groups encompass all the groups that influence directly or indirectly a person attitude or behaviour (Kotler, 1998) and can be formed by individuals like celebrities, athletes or political leaders (Blackwell, et al. 2008)

- **Reference groups**

Solomon (2002) indicates that, despite being influenced by several reference groups like family, friends or co-workers, their individual influences are not equally powerful for all types of products and activities. According to Blackwell et al. (2008), opinion leaders express/send information and opinion in a word-of-mouth process which influences the other person’s decision. These known personalities are complex to define, because they have several interests that absorb several types of information regarding products, services and brands, despite this being superficial information.

According to Mittal et al. (2008) the diffusion of information by social media through the available channels, affects not just the opinion leaders but also the remaining individuals, promoting unknown
products and services. The same author indicates a group of online opinion leaders called e-fluentials. Senecal and Nantel (2004) carried out a study where they verified that the choices of consumers are influenced on their choices due to the visualization of online recommendations. However, they add that not all the recommendations have the same effect regarding the way they affect the consumer. The influence of reference groups innately varies across different consumer segments and across different cultures (Childers and Rao, 1992). Studies have indicated that women are receptive to reference group influence through family, siblings, spouses, celebrities, advertisements, friends, and others (Chiang and Yu, 2010; Kokoi, 2011; Zeb, Rashid and Javeed, 2011). A study comparing middle-aged (40 to 49 years) and elderly (>60 years) people in New York revealed that the elderly and the middle aged were equally susceptible to reference group influence (Greco, 2014).

Those who are considered as the main reference groups are: family, professional associations, community associations and friends. It can be any person that serves as a comparison point (or reference) for an individual on the context of the evolution of their general or specific morals, attitudes or behaviours (Schiffman, 2000). For our research, taking into account the individuals being studied as well as the e-fluentials, we will study the impact of the information generated on a virtual environment of family, friends, other users, known personalities and Facebook users of brand pages.

- eWord-of-mouth (eWOM)

According to Solomon (2002) the search for other people’s opinions to confirm opinions of impersonal sources and the transmission of that recommendation from one person to another is called word-of-mouth (WOM). Still today a search for WOM is one of the behaviors that strongly influences the process of acquiring a certain product or service (Mittal et al, 2008).

Unlike traditional WOM, the information source in e-WOM is anonymous, which further enhances the role of source credibility in this communication process (Cheung et al., 2009). This study focuses on eWOM, defined by Hennig-Thurau et al (2004) as a positive or negative statement made by potential, current or possible clients about a product or company and that will be seen and evaluated by a large number of people and institutions through the internet. Henning-Thurau (2004) defined eWOM (electronic Word-of-Mouth) as any positive or negative statement available to a large number of people and institutions on the Internet, and that can be done about a product or company by a potential, current or old consumer.

Yuen (2010) carried out a study on online forums and concluded that, if there are any similar traces between the user and the forum members, it is established a direct relationship with the intention of buying the products addressed on the forum. So it is crucial to understand the way eWOM affects the consumer in the new online environments as, for example, social networks.
The development of virtual environments made the search for information and the spreading of eWOW much easier. When a consumer uses the internet to make an opinion known and that opinion can be either negative or positive, eWOW is being generated (Henning-Thraaut, 2004).

Xia and Nasr (2008) show that the level of identification developed when analyzing opinions posted online is connected to the nature of the research itself (information research, casual visualization, etc.). When an individual is analyzing the information and agrees with it, he/she considers that opinion to be useful and reliable, which has a bigger impact on their buying intentions. Consumers that actively post their opinions, enjoy sharing their experiences as well as knowing that their reviews can be appreciated. This represents a reward to those consumers (Xia and Nasr, 2008).

As a result of this participation on online content, consumers are not just receivers of information. They are simultaneously creators of content through texts, images, videos, music and the broadcast of information like websites or brands (Kliatchko, 2008). This new consumer, the Prosumer, was characterized by Carrera (2009) as an individual that generates information, is close to companies and develops a relationship of mutual proximity and development. This consumer uses social networks on a regular basis.

Marketing research has shown that, over time, consumer reviews posted online, and the sharing of information or personal opinions have become extremely powerful means of communication. E-WOM has taken the industry by storm and has completely taken over the internet, primarily the various social media (Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat) (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). Further, the opinions and perceptions of consumers about the products have an impact on purchase intention (Huete-Alcocer, 2017).

According to Kudeshia and Kumar (2017) perceived quality and consumer value obtained through social media have been found to influence the purchase decisions of consumers. Nuseir (2019) concluded that eWOM has a positive impact on purchase intention and brand image, as consumers opinions lead other consumer to be willing to purchase and product and also change their opinion about it.

- Social Networks

A Social Network is a social structure made of entities (individuals or organizations) intertwined in several ways and that share morals, financial flow, ideas, friendships, family bonds (Carrera, 2009). The Social Network Facebook launched at February 4, 2004, had as its main founder Mark Zuckerberg. According to omnicore.com, in 2020 more than 2,5 billion are monthly active users million people had an active account and each person was connected to an average of 155 people or
“friends”. 74% of Facebook users visit the site daily and spend 38 minutes per day using the platform.

According to statista.com (2020) recent numbers from March 2020 indicate that, in Portugal, the presence of Facebook reaches 7 million users, with 22.9 percent of those users being between 25 and 34 years of age. The source also notes that 48.8 percent of these users were male, and 51.6 percent were female. Brands, companies and products Facebook pages have won over more than half of the three million Facebook users in the country.

Users of 65-year-old and older are the fastest growing on Facebook, but millennials and boomers are still increasing around 2% per year and 88% use Facebook to stay in touch with family and friends (sproutsocial.com, 2020). Camila Ferreira (2010) analyzed the structure of business communication in a way that would conquer the client’s credibility and encourage the WOM. She concluded that communication should be carefully planned based on the needs and desires of the different publics in order for them to be positive WOM “vehicles”. Since there are still no studies in Portugal regarding eWOM data, it becomes necessary to gather information about it.

Marketers have used Digital content Marketing (DCM) and story-telling methods in brand promotion because consumers are more willing to search for products when marketers share valuable content with them (Du Plessis, 2017), and social networks have been the perfect stage for it.

The need of socially existing through Facebook, the search for information and the exposure to shared information, inevitably generates eWOM. The theme of our study will take into account all these premises.

3. RESEARCH

The main goal behind this study was to grasp a relationship between: the consumer, reference groups, Facebook e-Word-of-mouth and also evaluate if the level of confidence on eWOM depends on the online contribution, studying the importance of reference groups on the eWOM confidence level generated on Facebook by Portuguese users.

Hypothesis

Many websites of brands use testimonies of individuals that have consumed their products and brands showing, for example, discussion lists, in order to influence other consumers (Siegel, 1999). Neto (2009) concluded that consumers are more exposed to eWOM through e-mail and that virtual consumers are not relevant for the search of information, research or clarification regarding questions or doubts. This study, made in Brazil in 2009, indicates that consumers use the Internet to ask questions about the products and that they frequently read opinions available online about a product before buying it (Neto, 2009).
Xia and Nasr (2008) mention that consumers that actively post opinions enjoy sharing them and seeing that their indications might be appreciated, which represents a reward to them. The individual analyses the information and when he feels that he agrees with it, he considers the information to be useful and reliable, which creates an impact on his buying intentions (Xia and Nasr, 2008). According to Ainsworth (2005) consumers that value review websites about products and services are more susceptible to be influenced by the available information.

Solomon (2002) mentions that each one of the reference groups’ influences are not equally powerful for all types of products and consumption activities. According to Senecal and Nantel (2004) consumers are influenced when choosing their products by online recommendations, however, not all of them are equally powerful or have the same level of influence. There are groups that due to bigger sociability, influence consumers with the information and opinions that they broadcast. The opinion leaders are more confident, and they influence other consumers.

Current researches do not address the eWOM influence on the buyer decision process generated on Facebook. Besides, in Portugal, the description of Facebook users does not exist.

Taking into account the above mentioned, it is pertinent to study the following hypothesis:

H1- Facebook is used for searching information about products, services and brands.

H2- The larger the search for information through Facebook, the greater the confidence on eWOM achieved through that same social network.

H3- Opinions stated on Facebook by reference groups have a positive influence on buying decision.

H4- Different reference groups have different levels of influence on Facebook users’ buying decision process.

H5- The larger the online contribution on Facebook, the greater the confidence level on eWOM.

H6- The larger the online contribution on Facebook, the greater the information search on the same social network.

H7- The larger the online contribution on Facebook, the greater the influence of reference groups

To characterize the sample there were sociodemographic variables: age, gender, educational attainment, marital status, occupation, monthly net income and country of residence. And also the variables that characterize the use of Facebook: time surfing on Facebook, frequency of content sharing and content type. To search for answers to the hypothesis above, 5 variables were used: Search for Information through Facebook (Braga Neto, 2009), Confidence on eWOM and Buyer Decision Process (Braga Neto, 2009), Influence of Reference Groups (Park e Lessig, 1977), Influence of Reference Groups II (Park e Lessig, 1977) and Online Contribution (Braga Neto, 2009). These studies led to the creation of 13 and 9 items respectively, measured by a 5-point Likert scale.
In that the value 1 corresponds to total disagreement ("totally disagree") and the value 5 to complete agreement ("totally agree "). Each variable was studied based on questions from the elaborated questionnaire.

4. METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire was shared online through Facebook (posted on private walls, groups, on Facebook chat and private messages) and sent to several e-mail lists. It was asked for the individuals to share a link for the questionnaire with their Facebook contacts as well as their e-mails. The sample results of a self-elected sample, not probabilistic (Malhotra, 2001 and Barañano, 2004) nor representative of the population (Manson and Bramble, 1989).

- **Sample**

A sample by convenience was used and encompasses Portuguese citizens with ages over 18 years old, both genders and Facebook users. The research turned to a non-probabilistic sample constituted by 755 individuals. The data analysis was made with the help of a data analysis program S.P.S.S (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

The questionnaire had a filter question: “Do you have an active Facebook account?”. Only the individuals that answered “Yes” could proceed in filling in the questionnaire. The study used 719 answered questionnaires. The questionnaire was advertised through Facebook and sent to a large e-mail list. On Facebook it was advertised on discussion groups, friend’s profiles as well as unknown people profiles.

The questionnaire was answered by individuals of several age groups and a large answer percentage was verified by individuals between 18-25 years old (63,8%) and between 26-40 (31,6%). The age range with the smallest percentage was >41 years old (4,6%). Regarding gender, 58,7% is female and 41,3% is male. We verified that the average time of browsing on a normal day of the present sample is 2,14 hours; 32,0% of the inquired generate content on Facebook on a daily basis, 29,9% several times per week and 16,4% only once a week.

- **Internal Consistency of Scales**

With the intent to measure the internal consistency of the scale variables for Search for Information through Facebook, Confidence on eWOM and Buyer Decision Process, Influence of Reference Groups, Influence of Reference Groups II and Online Contribution, we proceed to a calculation of the reliability coefficient trough Alpha of Cronbach. And respectively we obtained values of $\alpha =0,903$, $\alpha=0,914$, $\alpha=0,902$, $\alpha=0,916$ and $\alpha=0,932$. Which translates into a great internal variable consistency.
5. Results

One of the main goals of this study is the analysis of the correlation between the different variables and, on this case, we elaborated tests of correlation between the variables which can go from very low to very high, Cohen (1988).

The Pearson Correlation allows to obtain statistically interesting results. It allows seeing the relation between the variables, regarding quantitative variables, or the order of those variables for ordinal variables (Pestana e Gageiro, 2005). So, all the studied variables were related between themselves allowing all the desired answers. In this study we detected the existence of moderated correlations, high and very high (Table 1).
Table 1: Correlations between the dimensions of the study

**Correlation for a level of \( p < 0.01 \) (2-tailed)
We verified that the bigger the confidence on eWOM, the bigger the search for information through Facebook (r=0.761; p<0.01); the bigger the Influence of Reference Groups (r=0.791; p<0.01); and the bigger the online contribution (r=0.654; p<0.01);

There is also a positive relation between the search for information on Facebook and the influence of reference groups (r=0.784; p<0.01); as well as with the online contribution (r=0.656; p<0.01);

We also verified a positive and high correlation between the Influence of reference groups and a greater online contribution (r=0.699; p<0.01).

6. DISCUSSION

The results of this study, regarding all the hypothesis, will be presented next. The data for each hypothesis will be analyzed.

H1 - Facebook is used for searching information about products, services and brands.

This hypothesis had the goal to understand if, for the Portuguese Facebook users, this social network is one of the means of information research regarding products and brands.

The sentence “I use Facebook to get information about products and services before I buy them”, was measured using a Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). The average obtained for the entire sample was 2.3; which indicates that individuals disagreed with this sentence. We believe that the reasons for this result is related with the fact that Facebook is a recent tool, so consumers don’t look at it as a source of information, yet. If we take into account that the average answers to the sentence “I usually read opinions on Facebook about a product before I buy it” was 2.61; we may conclude that consumers may not be aware that they use that tool to search for information. This result is consistent with Neto (2009). Although, as the next results show, we must take into account that despite individuals say they don’t search information about products or brands on Facebook they see that information on the brand murals and on comments other Facebook users make.

H2 - The larger the search for information through Facebook, the greater the confidence on eWOM achieved through that same social network.

H2 was tested correlating two variables: Information research through Facebook and eWOM trust and buying decision. The first variable allows us to observe the sample behavior concerning Facebook use to search for information about brands and products. The second variable allows us to understand if there might be a change in behavior after seeing or reading information from other Facebook users. The correlation between variables is high (R=0.761; p<0.01). H2 was confirmed,
meaning that the information read on Facebook affect buying decision. This conclusion is interesting because it helps us to understand the interpretation of H1. Facebook users do not search for information about products or brands actively, but they read them and are influenced by them.

H3- Opinions stated on Facebook by reference groups have a positive influence on buying decision.

Information and opinions of more sociable groups have more influence on consumers (Churchill and Peter, 2000). The relationship between the influence of reference groups, eWOM trust and buying decision through Facebook was tested. The correlation between variables was 0.784 with a significance level of 0.01; so H3 was accepted. Involved and dedicated members within a community may influence consumers. This result is consistent with Yuen’s (2010), who studied online forums and concluded if there is similarity between the users and forum members, there is a direct influence on buying intention of products discussed in the forum. While Yuen (2010) focused on buying intention, our research focused on buying decision, and also did Neto (2009). Our research concluded that reference group’s opinion on Facebook, influence buying decision. This conclusion is consistent with previous research, although it focused on purchase intention (Kudeshia and Kumar, 2017; Nuseir, 2019). This difference is relevant because brands focus on buying decision and previous research point out the existence of a gap between buying intention and buying decision (Lafferty, 1996; Proença e Pereira, 2008).

H4- Different reference groups have different levels of influence on Facebook users’ buying decision process.

Consumers’ choice of products is influenced by online opinions, but not all the opinions have the same level of influence (Senecal and Nantel, 2004). So, to understand consumers’ behaviour of different reference groups, one of the questions was separated for each one of the reference groups included in our research. We analysed the correlation between eWOM trust and buying decision, for each one of the reference groups. Our research obtained the following correlations: family (r=0.579; p<0.01); friends ((r=0.671; p <0.01); other users (r=0.655; p <0.01); famous people (r=0.549; p <0.01); users of brand Facebook pages (r=0.658; p <0.01) and users of discussion groups (r=0.695; p <0.01). All of them show significance level inferior to 0.01 indicating a high level of correlation.

On Facebook we could confirm that different reference groups show different levels of influence, consistent with Senecal and Nantel’s conclusions (sup.cit.). One interesting conclusion is that page users and discussion groups’ users show higher correlation then other groups (except friends). This indicates that the individuals from our sample are influenced by opinions left on Facebook by people they don’t know, which shows the importance of e-fluencial (Mittal et al., 2008). Another interesting conclusion is the low influence of family opinion on Facebook. This may be related with the average age of our sample (very young) to which the influence of friends is more relevant, included on the identification group (Mittal et al, 2008).
Previous research indicates that opinion leaders have influence on consumers (Solomon, 2002, Mittal et al, 2008). Our research confirms this conclusion, but other groups have a higher level of influence on our sample.

H5- The larger the online contribution on Facebook, the greater the confidence level on eWOM.

To study H5 we calculated the correlation between Online Contribution on Facebook and eWOM trust. Before we have studied the relationship between information search and WOM trust. This analysis allows us to complement the previous one. In this case we are focusing on consumers who use Facebook more actively, giving their own opinion about products or brands. The correlation between these two variables show a high level of correlation (r=0.654) with a significance level lower than 0.01. So H5 was accepted. Ainsworth (2005) stated that consumers who value review websites tend to be more influenced by the opinions written on them. This shows that the individuals from our sample that write their opinion on Facebook, do it sincerely, because they trust on other users’ opinion.

H6- The larger the online contribution on Facebook, the greater the information search on the same social network.

Hypothesis 6 related Facebook online contribution and information search through Facebook. The correlation is 0.656 for a significance level lower than 0.01, showing a high correlation level. This indicates that a consumer that uses Facebook actively, either to write information or to search for information about brands, tends to use Facebook as a mean to search for information online, about products and/or brands.

H7- The larger the online contribution on Facebook, the greater the influence of reference groups.

Our research showed that online participation through Facebook and the influence of reference groups is positive (r=0.699; p<0.01). Though, it is possible to identify an interesting situation. Users that ‘liked’ brand pages and users of group discussion are the ones who have a higher influence on consumers. Further, the larger the online participation the greater the influence of the information read on Brand pages and discussed on group discussions. This result is interesting as in previous research Experienced and novice Internet users are more influenced by e-WOM than consumers with moderate experience in this medium (López and Sicilia, 2014). Despite that, consumers are affected by information they read on Facebook’s Brand murals and group discussions, what is very interesting concerning research on consumer behaviour and eWOM on Facebook. E-fluentials, individuals who have an active online participation, compare information obtained both in opinion websites and corporate websites and participate in online group discussions on Facebook, have a great influence on Facebook users.
7. CONCLUSIONS

Our research aimed to analyse the influence of eWOM generated by reference groups through Facebook on information search on Facebook, reference groups influence, eWOM trust and buying decision and online contribution.

Concerning information search about products and/or brands on Facebook our sample showed that women use more Facebook to search for information, than men.

The majority of individuals of our sample don't consider Facebook as the first mean to search for information about products/brands. Although, Facebook is one of the information external sources, on consumers buying decision process.

Our research allowed us to conclude that the larger the search for information through Facebook the greater is Facebook’s eWOM trust. In fact, the information displayed on Facebook by reference groups influences consumers buying decision, and there is a positive correlation between eWOM trust and buying decision and the influence of reference individuals. Despite that, different reference groups have different levels of influence. Users of brand pages, users on discussion groups and other users are the ones with a higher level of influence on consumers. Family and famous people are the groups that show a small correlation level. These correlations occur both when we establish the correlation between influence of different influence groups and online contribution or online information search.

Finally, consumers who use Facebook more actively (online contribution), show higher levels of trust on information seen on that social network. We could also conclude that users who participate more actively on Facebook, meaning they write more opinions about products/brands, are the ones who search for information more often and also trust on that information. Further, the larger the online contribution the greater the influence of information read on Facebook brand pages and discussion groups; online contribution showed high levels of correlation with brand page users and group discussion users.

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS

As our research focused on eWOM on Facebook and reference groups, we can establish a list of suggestions useful to include this social network in communication campaigns of organizations.

First of all, the users are more influenced by page users or group discussion users, then by family and famous people. This can be interesting to companies, because the use of a famous person in a campaign may be expensive and may not have an impact as higher as an unknown person.
The information showed on a Brand mural influences consumers who read it. The company should have an active part on the creation of positive eWOM. It is necessary to write about the products/brands on the Facebook page. The results show that creating a discussion group may be an interesting tool, with daily discussion topics to promote the brand and its products. This would increase costumer-brand relationship. As eWOM trust is greater as online contribution increases, companies should motivate online contribution of their Facebook page users. This participation will increase the relationship with the brand and will increase trust on information read on this social network.

As Facebook is not yet seen as the main mean to search for information, it is very important that brands keep other sources of information about their products/brands.

This research shows that there is information search about brands, products and services with other consumers, through Facebook. This reinforces the idea that despite of existing interest and information sharing, some consumers after doing ‘like’ in the page, don’t keep their interest. So, it is necessary that companies develop campaigns that motivate this relationship.

9. LIMITATIONS AND CLUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several clues came up to develop future research. This research allowed us to obtain more information about the influence of reference groups. In the future, it may be important to understand the differences on consumer behaviour for different products or services. According to Solomon (2002) reference groups influence is different according to the different products or services. So, it is important to understand for which products Facebook influence is greater and how f-commerce applications can be incorporated. Also analysing the return on investments possibility taking into account costumer’s predisposition to shop online on Facebook.

The number of Facebook users has been increasing, as well as their online contribution. It would be interesting to make a longitudinal study and analyse consumer’s behaviour using the variables in this study, in particular, concerning online search for information and eWOM trust.

In this research we used a convenience sample. The use of a representative sample that characterizes Portuguese Facebook users and that allows us to compare different users with different characteristics, may lead to different results (e.g. geographical area).

Finally, as there are several social networks with specific targets, it may be interesting to analyse the behaviour of each of one these social networks targets, as their eWOM trust.

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