

# Attitudes on Sexuality, Sex Roles, and Sexual Behaviour Among Higher Education Students

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**Abstract:** The present study examined the relationship between attitudes toward sexuality and sexual behaviour within the framework of sex roles among higher-education students. A sample of 240 students (120 males and 120 females) was selected using a purposive sampling method from three academic disciplines. The study employed an ex post facto, cross-sectional design. Data were collected using the Bem Sex Role Inventory, Sexual Attitude Scale, and Multidimensional Sexuality Questionnaire.

Results indicated significant differences in sexual behaviour across sex-role categories. Male sex-typed individuals reported higher levels of sexual esteem, assertiveness, and satisfaction, whereas undifferentiated individuals reported higher levels of sexual anxiety, depression, and fear of sex. Androgynous individuals demonstrated greater sexual consciousness and motivation. Significant associations were also observed between sex roles and sexual attitudes, with male sex-typed individuals exhibiting more liberal attitudes, while other groups tended toward conservative attitudes.

Further, students with liberal sexual attitudes reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction and positive sexual functioning, whereas conservative attitudes were associated with greater anxiety and control-related dimensions. Gender differences revealed that male students were more sexually expressive, while female students reported higher levels of fear and control-related aspects. The findings highlight the importance of sex-role orientation in understanding sexual attitudes and behaviours and underscore the need for comprehensive sexuality education and counselling interventions among young adults.

**Keywords:** Sexual Attitudes, Sexual Behaviour, Sex Roles, Gender Differences, Higher Education Students.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In India, a substantial proportion of the population falls within the youth demographic, with individuals aged 15 to 24 constituting a significant segment engaged in higher education (Government of India, 2021). Emerging adulthood, typically spanning ages 18 to 25, is characterised by profound developmental transitions, including shifts in interpersonal relationships, identity formation, sexuality, and worldview (Arnett, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2017). This developmental phase is marked by heightened exploration and experimentation, which may increase vulnerability to engagement in high-risk behaviours, including sexual practices (Vasilenko et al., 2017; Lefkowitz & Gillen, 2020).

Sexuality is a central and multifaceted aspect of human life, encompassing biological, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions. It significantly influences individual well-being as well as broader societal functioning (World Health Organisation, 2018). Sexual relationships can provide intimacy, satisfaction, and contribute to family formation, yet they may also entail risks such as unintended

pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. Sexuality is inherently multidimensional, shaped by physiological processes, cognitive frameworks, emotional experiences, and sociocultural learning (De Lamater & Ward, 2020). Sexual attitude refers to an individual's evaluative disposition toward sexual behaviours, encompassing beliefs, emotions, and behavioural tendencies (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2016). Broadly, sexual attitudes can be categorised along a continuum from conservative to liberal orientations. Conservative sexual attitudes emphasise traditional norms, often restricting sexual activity to committed relationships such as marriage (Petersen & Hyde, 2018). In contrast, liberal sexual attitudes reflect permissiveness toward behaviours such as casual sex, multiple partners, and non-traditional sexual expressions (Vrangalova & Ong, 2016). Individuals with conservative attitudes tend to respond less favourably to diverse sexual behaviours, whereas those with liberal attitudes exhibit greater acceptance and openness (Mark et al., 2018). Sex roles refer to culturally defined expectations regarding behaviours, responsibilities, and attributes considered appropriate for individuals based on their gender (Eagly &

Wood, 2016). These roles influence multiple domains of life, including family, education, occupation, and interpersonal relationships (Wood & Eagly, 2020). According to Bem's gender schema theory, sex roles can be categorised into four dimensions: masculinity, femininity, androgyny, and undifferentiated orientation (Bem, 1981; recent applications: Donnelly & Twenge, 2017). Masculinity is associated with traits such as assertiveness, independence, and achievement orientation, whereas femininity encompasses nurturance, sensitivity, and interpersonal warmth (Eagly & Wood, 2016). Androgynous individuals exhibit a combination of both masculine and feminine traits, allowing for greater behavioural flexibility and adaptability (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017). In contrast, undifferentiated individuals score low on both dimensions and may demonstrate reduced adaptability in social functioning (Wood & Eagly, 2020). Traditional gender roles often prescribe distinct domains for men and women, whereas contemporary perspectives advocate for greater fluidity and equality in role participation (UN Women, 2020).

Sexual behaviour refers to how individuals experience and express their sexuality, including both solitary and interpersonal activities aimed at sexual satisfaction (DeLamater & Ward, 2020). These behaviours may include partner-seeking, romantic interactions, and a wide range of sexual activities, influenced by personal motivations, cultural norms, and situational factors (Vasilenko et al., 2017). Empirical evidence from Kerala reflects evolving sexual norms among youth. Qualitative accounts highlight shifting attitudes toward premarital relationships and sexual autonomy (Meppayil, 2016). Quantitative findings from studies conducted at the University of Kerala indicate that a notable proportion of students report engagement in sexual relationships, with gender differences in prevalence (University Health Centre, 2018). Additional community-based research in Thiruvananthapuram suggests increasing awareness and exposure to premarital and extramarital relationships, alongside early sexual debut among a subset of participants (Soman, 2019).

Despite growing research on sexuality, studies integrating sexual attitudes, sexual behaviour, and sex roles within a unified framework remain limited, particularly in the Indian context. The present study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between attitudes toward sexuality and sexual behaviour within the framework of sex roles. Sexual attitudes are conceptualised along conservative and liberal dimensions, while sexual behaviour is examined across twelve domains, including sexual esteem, sexual preoccupation, internal and external sexual control, sexual consciousness, motivation, anxiety, assertiveness, depression, monitoring, fear of sex, and sexual satisfaction. Sex roles are categorised into masculinity, femininity, androgyny, and undifferentiated types based on Bem's model.

## II. METHOD

### ➤ *Participants*

The present study employed an ex post facto, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationship between attitudes toward sexuality and sexual behaviour within the framework of sex roles. The design was non-experimental and univariate, as variables were observed without manipulation and data were collected at a single point in time. Participants were categorised into four sex-role groups based on Bem's model: Androgynous (n = 42); Masculine (male sex-typed) (n = 32); Feminine (female sex-typed) (n = 56); Undifferentiated (n = 110). The study examined the association between attitudes toward sexuality (independent variable) and sexual behaviour (dependent variable) across these sex-role classifications. The study conceptualised sex role as a grouping variable (androgynous, masculine, feminine, undifferentiated) influencing the relationship between attitudes toward sexuality and sexual behaviour (N = 240).

### ➤ *Procedure*

An anonymous strategy was used to collect data, as the present study deals with the most sensitive and personal experiences. So the researcher approached representatives from the sample population and circulated the questionnaires through them. An introductory letter on the cover of the questionnaire informed participants of the purpose of the study. The respondents were informed that their responses would be held with the utmost confidentiality and their identities would remain anonymous. They were asked to complete the questionnaire as honestly as possible and were told they could take as much time as they needed to complete the questionnaire.

### ➤ *Instruments*

A personal information sheet was developed to obtain relevant socio-demographic details of the participants, including age, gender, educational background, place of residence, and relationship status. The Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1981) was used to assess participants' sex-role orientation across masculinity, femininity, and androgyny dimensions. The BSRI has demonstrated strong psychometric properties in previous research. Recent studies continue to support the reliability and applicability of the BSRI in contemporary gender research (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017; Carver et al., 2020). The Sexual Attitude Scale was employed to measure individuals' attitudes toward sexuality along a conservative - liberal continuum. Contemporary literature further supports the robustness of sexual attitude measures in capturing attitudinal variations across sociocultural contexts (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2016; Mark et al., 2018). The Multidimensional Sexuality Questionnaire (Snell et al., 1993) was used to assess twelve dimensions of sexual functioning, including sexual esteem, sexual preoccupation, internal sexual control, sexual consciousness, sexual motivation, sexual anxiety, sexual assertiveness, sexual depression, external sexual control, sexual monitoring, fear of sex, and sexual satisfaction. Recent applications of multidimensional sexuality measures support their continued relevance in capturing complex

sexual behaviours and experiences (DeLamater & Ward, 2020; Vasilenko et al., 2017).

### III. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The data collected from the participants were scored and organised for data analysis. The collected data were subjected to statistical analysis using SPSS 20 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Each variable in the study was examined separately using univariate analysis, normality, frequency distribution, mean, and standard deviation. Parametric statistics, namely one-way ANOVA, t-test and critical ratio, were employed to find out the significance of the mean difference in attitude towards sexuality and sexual behaviour. But the same variable, namely attitude towards sexuality, could also be converted into a discrete or categorical variable. So, chi-square analysis was carried out to find out the association between attitude towards sexuality, sex role and gender, which is discrete in nature.

### IV. RESULTS

The study sample comprised 240 higher-education students drawn from three academic disciplines, including an equal number of males (n = 120) and females (n = 120). Although a non-probability sampling method was employed, the sample was relatively heterogeneous and was considered reasonably representative of the broader student population. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 30 years. With respect to educational status, 43 participants (17.9%) were undergraduate students, 177 (73.8%) were postgraduate students, and 20 (8.3%) were research scholars. Regarding relationship status, 155 participants (64.6%) reported not being in a serious relationship, 26 (10.8%) were in a dating relationship, 48 (20.0%) were in a serious committed relationship, and 15 (6.3%) were married. In terms of residential background, 53 participants (22.1%) were from rural areas, 53 (22.1%) from semi-urban areas, and 134 (55.8%) from urban areas.

Table 1: Results of One-Way ANOVA on the 12 Dimensions of Sexual Behaviour of Students in Higher Education Belonging to each of the Four Types of Sex Roles

Dimensions	AMS	WMS	F
Sexual Esteem	3160.02	29.11	108.52 **
Sexual Preoccupation	1056.50	12.56	84.07 **
Internal Sexual Control	1656.63	21.13	78.22 **
Sexual Consciousness	2617.67	22.45	116.55 **
Sexual Motivation	1503.59	21.91	68.60 **
Sexual Anxiety	539.25	22.71	23.74 **
Sexual Assertiveness	1228.98	13.53	90.80 **
Sexual Depression	1384.01	18.36	75.34 **
External Sexual Control	860.24	19.14	44.92 **
Sexual Monitoring	1342.62	20.61	65.12 **
Fear of Sex	863.94	20.95	41.22 **
Sexual Satisfaction	2678.63	35.31	75.84 **

\* p< 0.05, \*\*p<0.01

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to examine differences in the 12 dimensions of sexual behaviour across the four sex-role groups (androgynous, masculine, feminine, and undifferentiated). The results indicated that sex role had a statistically significant effect on all 12 dimensions of sexual behaviour. Specifically, significant group differences were observed for sexual esteem, F = 108.52, p < .01; sexual preoccupation, F= 84.07, p < .01; internal sexual control, F = 78.22, p < .01; sexual consciousness, F = 116.55, p < .01; sexual motivation, F = 68.60, p < .01; sexual anxiety, F = 23.74, p < .01; sexual assertiveness, F = 90.80, p < .01; sexual depression, F = 75.34, p < .01; external sexual control, F = 44.92, p < .01; sexual monitoring, F = 65.12, p < .01; fear of sex, F = 41.22, p < .01; and sexual satisfaction, F = 75.84, p < .01. These findings suggest that individuals' sex-role orientation is significantly associated with variations across all measured dimensions of sexual behavior.

method. Bonferroni post hoc comparisons revealed significant differences among all four sex-role groups across each dimension of sexual behaviour (p < .01). On the whole, male sex-typed individuals reported higher sexual esteem, internal sexual control, sexual assertiveness, and sexual satisfaction, and lower sexual anxiety, sexual depression, fear of sex, and sexual monitoring compared to other groups. In contrast, female sex-typed individuals generally exhibited lower levels of sexual esteem, sexual consciousness, sexual motivation, sexual assertiveness, external sexual control, and sexual satisfaction. Androgynous individuals demonstrated higher sexual consciousness, sexual motivation, and sexual monitoring, indicating greater awareness and engagement with sexual experiences. Undifferentiated individuals reported higher sexual preoccupation, sexual anxiety, sexual depression, external sexual control, and fear of sex, along with lower internal sexual control, suggesting comparatively less adaptive sexual functioning.

As all the F- values were found significant according to Table 1, a post-ANOVA test was done using the Bonferroni

Table 2: Results of Chi-Square Analysis on Sexual Attitude with Sex Role of Students in Higher Education

Attitude towards sexuality	Sex Role				$\chi^2$
	Androgynous	Male sex-typed	Female sex-typed	Undifferentiated	
Conservative	22	12	31	62	165.68**
Liberal	20	20	25	38	

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the association between sex role and attitudes toward sexuality (conservative vs. liberal). The results indicated a significant association,  $\chi^2(N = 240) = 165.68$ ,  $p < .01$ . Inspection of the frequency distribution showed that undifferentiated individuals were more likely to endorse conservative sexual attitudes, whereas male sex-typed individuals showed a relatively higher proportion of liberal attitudes. Androgynous and female sex-typed individuals displayed a more balanced distribution across conservative and liberal attitudes. These findings suggest that sexual attitudes vary significantly across sex-role orientations.

Table 3: Results of T-Test Showing Attitude Towards Sexuality and Sexual Behaviour of Students in Higher Education.

Variables	Sexual attitude	M	SD	t
Sexual esteem	Liberal	10.62	5.47	21.23**
	Conservative	8.49	5.27	
Sexual preoccupation	Liberal	3.85	3.74	9.41**
	Conservative	3.22	3.39	
Internal sexual control	Liberal	10.35	4.72	10.54**
	Conservative	9.44	4.53	
Sexual consciousness	Liberal	10.41	5.00	8.12**
	Conservative	9.68	4.59	
Sexual motivation	Liberal	7.12	4.96	11.94**
	Conservative	6.07	4.36	
Sexual anxiety	Liberal	4.74	4.24	11.67**
	Conservative	5.78	5.17	
Sexual assertiveness	Liberal	9.75	3.78	.286
	Conservative	9.77	3.66	
Sexual depression	Liberal	3.11	3.84	11.20**
	Conservative	4.02	4.68	
External sexual control	Liberal	4.10	4.04	8.23**
	Conservative	4.77	4.67	
Sexual monitoring	Liberal	3.98	4.14	10.43**
	Conservative	4.87	4.90	
Fear of sex	Liberal	7.46	4.28	22.92**
	Conservative	9.39	4.68	
Sexual satisfaction	Liberal	10.62	5.47	21.23**
	Conservative	8.49	5.27	

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences in sexual behaviour between students with liberal and conservative sexual attitudes. The results indicated that students with liberal sexual attitudes scored significantly higher on sexual esteem,  $t = 21.23$ ,  $p < .01$ ; sexual preoccupation,  $t = 9.41$ ,  $p < .01$ ; internal sexual control,  $t = 10.54$ ,  $p < .01$ ; sexual consciousness,  $t = 8.12$ ,  $p < .01$ ; sexual motivation,  $t = 11.94$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and sexual satisfaction,  $t = 21.23$ ,  $p < .01$ . In contrast, students with conservative sexual attitudes reported significantly higher levels of sexual anxiety,  $t = 11.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ; sexual depression,  $t = 11.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ; external sexual control,  $t = 8.23$ ,  $p < .01$ ; sexual monitoring,  $t = 10.43$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and fear of sex,  $t = 22.92$ ,  $p < .01$ . No significant difference was found for sexual assertiveness,  $t = 0.29$ ,  $p > .05$ . Overall, the findings suggest that liberal sexual attitudes are associated with more positive and adaptive dimensions of sexual behavior, whereas conservative attitudes are linked to higher levels of anxiety, control, and avoidance-related aspects of sexuality.

Table 4: Chi-Square Test Showing Gender Differences in Attitude Towards the Sexuality of Students in Higher Education

Attitude towards sexuality	Gender of the respondent		$\chi^2$
	Male	Female	
Conservative	41	61	294.26**
Liberal	79	59	

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the association between gender and attitudes toward sexuality (conservative vs. liberal). The results revealed a significant association,  $\chi^2(N = 240) = 294.26, p < .01$ . Inspection of the frequencies indicated that male students were more likely to report liberal sexual attitudes, whereas female students were more likely to endorse conservative sexual attitudes. These findings suggest that attitudes toward sexuality differ significantly by gender, with males demonstrating relatively greater liberal orientation compared to females.

Table 5: Results of T-Test Showing Gender Differences in the Sexual Behaviour of Students in Higher Education.

Dimensions of Sexual Behaviour	Gender	M	SD	t
Sexual Esteem	Male	10.44	5.52	17.67**
	Female	8.65	5.28	
Sexual preoccupation	Male	10.43	3.94	18.93**
	Female	2.93	3.09	
Internal sexual control	Male	10.43	4.45	12.29**
	Female	9.37	4.75	
Sexual consciousness	Male	10.79	4.55	16.21**
	Female	9.34	4.93	
Sexual motivation	Male	7.45	4.98	19.31**
	Female	5.77	4.31	
Sexual Anxiety	Male	5.28	4.55	.061
	Female	5.29	4.97	
Sexual assertiveness	Male	10.13	3.62	10.14**
	Female	9.42	3.78	
Sexual Depression	Male	3.87	4.30	6.60**
	Female	3.33	4.33	
External Sexual Control	Male	4.02	4.44	10.93**
	Female	4.92	4.32	
Sexual Monitoring	Male	4.65	4.56	4.51**
	Female	4.26	4.58	
Fear of Sex	Male	8.06	4.52	8.89**
	Female	8.83	4.64	
Sexual Satisfaction	Male	10.23	5.75	14.83**
	Female	8.58	6.10	

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine gender differences in sexual behavior among higher-education students. The results indicated that male students scored significantly higher than female students on sexual esteem,  $t = 17.67, p < .01$ ; sexual preoccupation,  $t = 18.93, p < .01$ ; internal sexual control,  $t = 12.29, p < .01$ ; sexual consciousness,  $t = 16.21, p < .01$ ; sexual motivation,  $t = 19.31, p < .01$ ; sexual assertiveness,  $t = 10.14, p < .01$ ; sexual depression,  $t = 6.60, p < .01$ ; sexual monitoring,  $t = 4.51, p < .01$ ; and sexual satisfaction,  $t = 14.83, p < .01$ . In contrast, female students scored significantly higher on external sexual control,  $t = 10.93, p < .01$ , and fear of sex,  $t = 8.89, p < .01$ . No significant gender difference was observed for sexual anxiety,  $t = 0.06, p > .05$ . The findings suggest that male students exhibit higher levels of positive and expressive dimensions of sexual behavior, whereas female students report higher control- and fear-related aspects, with no difference in sexual anxiety.

## V. DISCUSSION

Sex refers to biological differences within a species based on genital, hormonal, and physiological characteristics (e.g., male, female, intersex), whereas gender denotes the social, psychological, and cultural attributes associated with masculinity and femininity (American Psychological

Association, 2020). Unlike sex, which is typically conceptualised as binary, gender is increasingly understood as fluid and continuous, varying across individuals and sociocultural contexts (Hyde et al., 2019). It is also important to distinguish sex from sexual behaviour, which refers to specific acts and expressions of sexuality (e.g., intercourse, masturbation, or other forms of sexual activity). Sexual attitudes represent individuals' evaluative tendencies toward sexual behaviours, incorporating both cognitive and affective components (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2016). Over the past decade, research on sexual attitudes and behaviours has gained increasing attention due to changing sociocultural norms, particularly among young adults. Contemporary trends indicate a decline in traditional dating patterns and a rise in casual sexual interactions, commonly referred to as "hooking up," which includes a range of behaviours from kissing to sexual intercourse (Garcia et al., 2018; Vrangalova, 2015). These encounters are often non-committal and short-term, and are sometimes described using terms such as "friends with benefits" or casual sex.

Empirical evidence suggests that such behaviours are becoming increasingly normative among college students, raising concerns about potential risks such as sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies, particularly when behaviours are not aligned with safe-sex

practices (Herbenick et al., 2019; Vasilenko et al., 2017). Sexual attitudes and behaviours are shaped by a complex interplay of societal norms, family influences, and individual experiences (DeLamater & Ward, 2020).

The findings of the present study indicate that sex-role orientation is significantly associated with sexual attitudes and sexual behaviour. Specifically, students classified as androgynous, female sex-typed, and undifferentiated demonstrated a tendency toward more conservative sexual attitudes, whereas male sex-typed individuals exhibited more liberal sexual attitudes. This aligns with prior research suggesting that traditional masculine norms are associated with greater permissiveness toward sexual expression (Petersen & Hyde, 2018; Eagly & Wood, 2016). Gender differences were also evident, with male students reporting higher levels of sexual activity and engagement, including behaviours such as pornography use and sexual interaction with partners. In contrast, female students tended to report lower levels of such behaviours, reflecting persistent sociocultural norms surrounding gender and sexuality (Herbenick et al., 2019). About sexual satisfaction, male sex-typed individuals reported significantly higher levels compared to other sex-role groups, while female sex-typed individuals reported the lowest levels of sexual satisfaction. Androgynous individuals demonstrated relatively higher satisfaction compared to undifferentiated individuals, suggesting that gender-role flexibility may contribute to more adaptive sexual outcomes. These findings are consistent with Bem's theoretical framework, which posits that androgyny facilitates greater behavioural adaptability and psychological well-being (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017). Furthermore, individuals with liberal sexual attitudes reported higher sexual satisfaction compared to those with conservative attitudes. Liberal attitudes, characterised by openness toward diverse sexual experiences, may promote greater comfort, communication, and satisfaction in sexual relationships (Mark et al., 2018). In contrast, conservative attitudes, which emphasise restriction of sexual activity within committed relationships, may be associated with increased anxiety or inhibition in sexual expression.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Within the limitations of the present study, several conclusions can be drawn. Sex-role orientation plays a significant role in shaping sexual attitudes and sexual behaviour, with male sex-typed individuals demonstrating greater liberal attitudes and higher sexual satisfaction. Additionally, liberal sexual attitudes are associated with more positive sexual outcomes, including greater satisfaction. However, the study is limited by its use of purposive sampling, which restricts generalizability, and its ex post facto design, which precludes causal inferences among the variables studied. Future research may benefit from longitudinal and experimental designs to better understand causal pathways.

## VII. IMPLICATIONS

The findings highlight the importance of integrating sex-role perspectives into sexuality research and education. The observed association between sex-role orientation and sexual satisfaction suggests that promoting gender-role flexibility and healthy sexual attitudes may enhance sexual well-being among young adults. From an applied perspective, these findings underscore the need for comprehensive sex education programs that incorporate psychological, relational, and cultural dimensions of sexuality. Such programs, coupled with counselling interventions, may foster healthier sexual attitudes and behaviours, thereby contributing to overall well-being and responsible decision-making among students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Future studies should use probability sampling to improve the generalizability of findings. Longitudinal designs are also recommended to better understand changes over time and possible causal relationships among sexual attitudes, sex roles, and sexual behaviour. Researchers should examine the role of sociocultural factors, such as family, religion, and media, especially in the Indian context. Using qualitative or mixed methods may help provide a deeper understanding of students' experiences. Further research should explore gender-role flexibility and androgyny in relation to well-being. Studies should also include diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.

### ➤ *Authors' Contributions*

All authors contributed to the development of this manuscript. SG and KH conceptualised the initial review and led the development of the manuscript. SG and KH conducted the methodological analysis of the reviewed studies and contributed to drafting the manuscript. Dr Samuel George <sup>1</sup>, Consultant Psychologist & PGT Psychology, Carmel School, Peyad.

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