

# Quest to Belong: Nursing Students' Perceptions while Transitioning from College to University

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## Quest to Belong: Nursing Students' Perceptions while Transitioning from College to University

### Cover Page Footnote

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The need to belong is essential to human beings and has been identified by Maslow as one of five basic human needs (Maslow, 1943). This is especially true for students who experience transition during their academic journey in higher education.

In the 1990s, registered nurses' education in Canada made a shift to a baccalaureate degree as the entry to practice. This change was adopted by most nursing regulatory bodies and supported by the provincial governments (Baker et al., 2012, Government of Canada, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, 1999). In Ontario, January 2005 was set as the effective date for the degree as the educational requirement for entry to practice. Colleges that offered a three-year diploma in nursing merged with universities, negotiated partnerships, and signed collaborative agreements. The collaborations designed various curriculum models. The collaborative nursing degree program (CNDP), where this study took place, has a unique integrated model in which students attend the first two years at one of the three collaborative partner sites, and then at the college site students transition to the university for the last two years. Faculty from both the university and the college teach in various courses throughout the four years of the program.

Numerous studies have explored students' sense of belonging in higher education, and some have examined students' sense of belonging in the clinical environment (Ashktorab et al., 2017; Freeman et al., 2007; O'Keeffe, 2013; Pourteimour et al., 2021; Samura, 2016; Slaten et al., 2014). However, few studies have examined undergraduate nursing students' perceptions related to their sense of belonging while they transition from the college to university environment within a CNDP. Examining the transitional experiences of nursing students from one academic institution to another is vital as this will assist faculty, nursing programs, and institutions in identifying approaches that may better support and enhance students' sense of belonging.

## **Background**

Students may face many challenges throughout their undergraduate nursing programs. Informal conversations between the researchers and students about the transition revealed challenges faced by students in adapting to university life. These included experiencing financial adversities, learning about and accessing resources, adjusting to the university, and navigating the busy downtown environment. Other challenges included dealing with the extended commute times to the university, finding classes, and adjusting to the new clinical practice model (preceptorship model). Integrating with students and faculty from the three partner sites, maintaining established relationships, and building new ones were seen as important yet difficult during the transition. These challenges can be amplified during the transitional process and may impact students' sense of belonging. According to Meleis et al. (2000), these could be considered "periods of heightened vulnerability" (p. 21). By understanding the concept of transitions, effective strategies can be developed to facilitate successful transitions, which in turn improves the educational experience (Hart & Swenty, 2016).

### **Sense of Belonging**

The literature reveals a variety of terms used to define belonging such as *school connectedness*, *sense of community*, *bonding*, *attachment*, and *a feeling of being respected, included, supported, accepted, and valued by others* (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen & Boyle, 2016; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Gowing & Jackson, 2016; Osterman, 2000; Slaten et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2019). Hagerty et al. (1992) defined a sense of belonging as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment" (p. 173). Studies have examined the associated academic benefits that

stem from a strong sense of belonging. Having a sense of belongingness to learning environments has been linked to higher academic performance: students are more engaged, are motivated in educational activities, and experience improved health and overall happiness (Ashktorab et al., 2017; Hall, 2014; Osterman, 2000). Not having a strong sense of belongingness negatively impacts students' learning, skills, and motivation to learn (Ashktorab et al., 2017; Osterman, 2000). Higher education may be a time of uncertainty and stress in the lives of students. Students may have to relocate, separate from family and friends, adjust to this new learning environment and faculty expectations, and make new friends. These factors have an impact on students' capacity to adjust to higher education (O'Keeffe, 2013).

## **Transition**

Meleis (2010) defined transition as a "passage from one fairly stable state to another fairly stable state, and it is a process triggered by a change" (p. 11); it has its own uniqueness, complexities, and multiple dimensions (Meleis et al., 2000). Hart and Swenty (2016) stated, "Transitions involve complex processes that ultimately result in significant life changes and redefinition of self" (p. 180). Academic transitions can occur within an educational system or between educational institutions and may be characterized by periods of rapid change and intense learning. Transitions are therefore social processes that intensify and speed up phases of change in one's life, which may cause a variety of stress responses (Mays et al., 2018). Students in the third year of this CNDP had spent the first two years in a community college environment with a cohort of approximately 160 students. At the time of this study, they had recently transitioned to our partner university with a cohort of approximately 500 students.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to examine third-year undergraduate nursing students' perception of a sense of belonging while transitioning from college to university in a CNDP in Canada. More specifically, the study aimed to (a) identify factors that have affected students' experiences of their sense of belonging and (b) identify strategies that have influenced the college site students' sense of belonging while transitioning to the university.

## **Methods**

### **Design, Sample, and Setting**

The study was approved by the participating institutions research ethics boards. Interpretive description qualitative methodology was used for this study. Interpretive description was introduced by Dr. Sally Thorne as a methodology to gain a deeper understanding of nurses' experiences in practice. Interpretive description studies generally employ small samples and use interviews to capture themes that give an in-depth description of participants' subjective experiences with the phenomenon under study (Teodoro et al., 2018; Thorne et al., 2004). Purposive and convenience sampling approaches were used to capture the essence of the students' experiences (LoBiondo-Wood et al., 2017). An invitation was emailed to all third-year nursing students from the college site who had transitioned to the university. The invitation was also posted on the learning management system, and the research assistant conducted an in-person recruitment after one of the students' classes. Thirteen students were interviewed.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected in February 2020. Before data collection, participants chose a pseudonym to maintain anonymity and gave written informed consent. Open-ended semi-

structured questions were developed after reviewing the literature (Table 1). Data were collected through audio-recorded in-depth in-person individual interviews by researchers who were not the students' teachers but who were familiar with the program. All four researchers were professors in the CNDP and taught in third year, when students transitioned from the college site to the university. The researchers also taught in the other years of the program and had knowledge of the student's experiences. The interviews were conducted by three members of the research team who had no connection to the students but had unique knowledge about the students' experiences during the transition. Interpretative description requires the interviewers to be familiar with the phenomenon under study (Teodoro et al., 2018). The principal investigator was the Year 3 coordinator and did not conduct any of the interviews.

**Table 1**

*Individual Interview Questions*

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1. Take a moment to think back to your first few weeks on the university campus. Now tell me, what did that transition from college to university feel like?
  2. During the transition from college to university, was there anything you found you needed? Anything missing from that process?
  3. Was there anything you found that helped you with this transition?
  4. How do you think the university's environment has influenced your experience?
  5. Do you have a sense of belonging on the university campus? Can you tell me why or why not?
  6. Describe a time when you felt a sense of belonging at the university site.
  7. Do you have any recommendations you'd like to make to the university to help students transition from the college site to the university site?
  8. Do you have any recommendations you'd like to make to the college to help students transition from the college site to the university site?
  9. Is there anything else we have not discussed yet that you think is important about your transition experiences from the college site to the university site in Year 3 of the collaborative nursing degree program?
- 

Interviews were held at the university or the college and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Participants completed a five-item demographic questionnaire that included age, gender, ethnicity, and previous postsecondary education. In keeping with Interpretive description methodology, the interviewers took field notes during the interviews and reflective notes after the interviews (Teodoro et al., 2018). The interviews were transcribed verbatim by research assistants.

**Positionality and Reflexivity**

Researcher positionality was important as the faculty researchers were familiar with the issues relevant and important to the participants (Berger, 2015). Before the start of the study to reconcile each researcher's positionality, all four researchers acknowledged their views, values, and beliefs about the research design and how the study would be conducted. In line with interpretive description methodology, all four researchers were mindful of their situatedness and

consulted and collaborated with each other within all aspects of the research process, including the manuscript development. Using a reflexive process, the researchers wrote down their biases and assumptions and revisited these during the study. This approach was ongoing throughout the study and helped the researchers in articulating their positionalities. This assisted in ensuring that the students' voices were being heard and not those of the researchers (Berger, 2015).

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process, which allowed for codes and themes to emerge from the data, making it a good fit with interpretive description methodology. Overall, the analytical process remained fluid and evolved while the researchers systematically worked through the steps, with discussions among all four researchers. To capture the authenticity of the data and to familiarize themselves with the data, three researchers individually read and reread each transcript, making notes of initial ideas. The three researchers then met to generate initial codes, which were collated into potential themes. Themes were then defined, reviewed, and named to ensure that they worked in relation to the coded data. The codes and themes were cross-checked by the fourth member of the research team, and agreement was reached among all researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Credibility was established by including verbatim quotes from the participants and using researcher triangulation throughout data collection, coding, and analysis (Woo, 2017).

### Results

A diverse student population completed the interviews, as illustrated in Table 2. Thematic analysis of the data revealed four emergent themes: journey of emotions, perceptions of challenges and barriers, facilitators to a sense of belonging, and students' suggestion for change. Subthemes are categorized from a social, program, and institutional perspective.

**Table 2**

*Demographic Information for Interview Participants (n = 13)*

Demographic characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	2	15.4
Female	11	84.6
Age		
16–20	5	38.5
21–26	7	53.8
33–38	1	7.7
Ethnicity		
South Asian	4	30.8
East Asian	3	23.1
Southeast Asian	3	23.1

West Indian	1	7.7
Asian	1	7.7
Undisclosed	1	7.7
Previous postsecondary education		
Yes	2	15.4
No	11	84.6

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### Journey of Emotions

During the transition from the college to the university site, the students experienced myriad emotions, which had an impact on their sense of belonging. The most prevalent emotions included ambivalence, indifference, uncertainty, and anxiousness, and feeling overwhelmed. Some of the students seemed to experience opposite or opposing emotions such as being judged and not judged, being comfortable and not comfortable. Feelings of not being safe were also conveyed. One student shared an example of ambivalence and uncertainty regarding navigating the downtown traffic and crowds:

There are people downtown, people who are not students. You have to fight the traffic... it made travelling in between classes really stressful... pushing through people and having to assert myself to get to class, that made me feel really small and overwhelmed. Not to say that I don't like it because I feel like I am just describing all the big people, but I love it because it makes you feel like you are in the centre of everything.

Feelings of being judged surfaced while the students attempted to adjust to the university environment. One student shared, "People that go to your classes, they will make you feel like you are different because you are from the college... they will stress on the fact that you are from the college as if you are different from them." Alternatively, one student did not feel judged but felt encouraged in the university setting, stating, "I feel like the professors and students are very encouraging and non-judgemental and so I feel like you know, my voice is always heard, and I feel like everyone just tries to do their best." Most of the students expressed feelings of comfort as they tried to settle into the new environment. One student articulated this by stating, "I definitely feel respected, valued and accepted. I have a great social circle. I have lots of people that I can connect to if I need help and they have always been there for me which is really nice." Another student noted feeling uncomfortable adjusting to "all those environments" and so dropped one of her courses:

I have some class, like, in the movie theatre, I feel really, really uncomfortable and I just can't focus at all in those environments, and I don't feel comfortable studying there and I feel very lost and so, I decided to drop that course,... it's just something uncomfortable.

Some students expressed feelings of being unsafe, scared, and afraid while downtown, and this had an impact on whether they stayed on campus or went home after class. Some students were nervous to walk alone at night.

## **Perceptions of Challenges and Barriers**

From a social perspective, several challenges were highlighted. The inability to be recognized by and establish a connection with professors, difficulty building new relationships, and problems maintaining established ones were challenging for students. Some students shared struggles with being recognized and making connections with professors because of the large class sizes at the university. As one student stated, “To be recognized as a student in class, cause even though you answer questions, at the end of the day, the teacher doesn't know who you are unless you go up to the professor.” In addition, some students shared their struggles to maintain pre-established relationships during the transition. This hurdle and the challenge of different class schedules resonated for several students. One student stated, “Even the old social support that you had from [college] is hard to maintain as well because unless you have classes with them, it's harder to meet.”

From a program perspective, students experienced a disconnect between the college to university transition and placement requirement process. A student explained, “No faculty has really talked about it, especially if they are a [university] professor or faculty, they don't really talk about the transition process for us.” Another student stated, “[University] instructors themselves don't know about how the transition works.” Several students expressed challenges with the practice requirement process. Some expressed frustration around travel times to drop off documents, long wait times, and the need to return to submit the documents on another day. In expressing frustration, one student stated, “I had to go three days in a row at 6:30 in the morning, and I was there from 6:30 to almost 3 o'clock, almost all three days, and they sent us home... it was first come, first serve.”

From an institutional perspective, challenges experienced by students were navigating the campus environment, handling program information and process, and accessing financial support. As one student noted, “I feel like there's a lot of people and the campus is more scattered, so I feel like in the first few weeks, I feel like it's very difficult to find classrooms and locations and where should I be.” Students perceived limited availability of program information and process. Several had challenges with the course scheduling system at the university. A student described this experience: “There was actually a visual schedule builder for [university]... I hadn't known about that until winter and then one of my peers had to show that to me... you kind of just learn things through your friends sometimes and not necessarily through the school.” Several students also encountered challenges in accessing financial support at the university. One student stated, “Financial demand definitely increased... and it's not like we can pick up, like, so many more hours at work. I am struggling financially to balance all of that... financial aid would be, in my opinion, a top priority.” Furthermore, students who required accessible learning accommodation (ALA) experienced various challenges. The naming and structural differences of how ALA was offered impacted students with accessing this service at the university site.

## **Facilitators to Sense of Belonging**

Social supports were vital in promoting students' sense of belonging. These were highlighted by students as maintaining and preserving established relationships, being willing to build new relationships, and being involved in extracurricular activities. Students emphasized the role of friendships developed with peers before the transition. One student shared, “My sense of belonging comes from my friends, my college friends. I feel like I just became closer to the friends I already had from the college... Yeah, like a sense of connectedness.”

Some students had an intentionality and willingness to build new relationships with the new cohort and felt they were in a safe environment to do so. One student reported:

The times I felt a sense of belonging was meeting people outside of my program. So, usually during electives and professionally developed courses, you meet other people, it is very welcoming and warming to have that sense of belonging... and because of that I felt like I was in an environment that I felt safe, secure and I felt belonged.

Several students shared that being involved in extracurricular activities promoted their sense of belonging. These included school clubs, nursing student associations, cultural/ethnic associations, and volunteer opportunities. One student gave an account of how her involvement in a club helped to validate her sense of belonging when she stated, "Being part of the nursing student association, I was able to plan blood drives with other nursing students, planning first year orientation... it made me feel like I really belong to this university community."

Students acknowledged the important role of program supports. Faculty, academic advising, and the practice placement office played a key role in building their sense of belonging. Having supportive faculty and staff and positive teacher-student relationships were important to the students' sense of belonging. One student articulated this by stating, "Having professors that you could go up to and talk to and they would answer your questions and just make you feel like your questions were valid... , that made me feel like I belong."

Institutional support such as student services (e.g., tutoring, counselling, writing centre, financial aid, scholarships, bursaries, and transportation discounts) was seen as important. Having knowledge of and access to these services were vital in facilitating and promoting their sense of belonging. Some students felt that it was easier to access resources at the college when compared to the university site. One student shared:

I feel you know how there are support programs in the university and until now I'm not aware of what is really being offered in the school. At least in the [college], we were more aware... [the university] has lot more programs but it's just hard to find it.

### **Students' Suggestions for Change**

At a social level, a key suggestion was for students to engage in self-directed activities. This included finding opportunities to familiarize themselves with the program and the university environment. Another suggestion was for students to join formal study groups offered by the program. Establishing informal group sessions and taking electives with peers from the college site were also recommended. Students suggested the importance of maintaining relationships by keeping connected through social media (i.e., Facebook) and text messaging. Being involved in extracurricular activities, such as clubs or student associations at the university, was also recommended.

The suggestions at the program level were directed towards college and university. Students highlighted the importance of theoretical and practical faculty support. This would include timely email responses and availability to meet before or after class. Many students found professors' and instructors' flexible office hours helped to foster their sense of belonging to the program. Several of the students asked for orientation sessions that focus on program information and process. A pre-transition presentation about the university, advising services, nursing program due dates for forms submissions, and selection of courses were recommended. Many of the

students recommended providing more information about community health nursing courses and a frequently asked questions (FAQ) document from their nursing program.

The students provided several recommendations for the institution to improve the transition process and promote a sense of belonging. First, students suggested that integration of nursing students across all three sites should start in Year 1 of the program. Recommendations were for college site students to be informed about events at the university. Second, pre-transition supports that encompassed peer mentorship and communication from various platforms at the college and university were seen as important. Students suggested having a designated person at the institutional level. This person would coordinate the transition process and provide information on resources and the course selection process. Students recommended having an in-person peer guide and a written guide to support navigating the new environment. Finally, recommendations for financial aid highlighted having information about and access to transportation assistance and provincial financial aid support. Students recommended having more information about the application process on bursaries and scholarships at the university.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine third-year undergraduate students' perceptions of a sense of belonging while transitioning from college to university in a CNDP. The themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews offer insights into students' experiences of a sense of belonging as they transition from one academic institution to another. It was evident from the data analysis that collaboration between college and university that focused on social, program, and institutional supports is paramount in facilitating students' sense of belonging in their transition from college to university. From a social perspective, as with other studies, the students described interacting and connecting with peers, making new friends, feeling connected to clubs, and participating in extracurricular activities as important contributors to their sense of belonging while transitioning (D'Amico et al., 2014; Ingram & Gallacher, 2013). Several studies revealed students' involvement in extracurricular activities increased students' sense of belonging and connectedness (Anderman, 2002; Martinez et al., 2016).

Being able to connect with faculty and engage academically is essential to succeeding in the program and feeling like a member of the university community. Our findings reaffirm Maetas et al.'s (2007) claim that students' sense of belonging improves when they feel connected to the institution and are able to develop social networks. Similarly, Gowing and Jackson (2016) and Freeman et al. (2007) noted that many students experienced a sense of connection through the opportunities given to them by the school. Opportunities existed in relationships with peers and staff and participation in extracurricular activities (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; D'Amico et al., 2014; Freeman et al., 2007; Ingram & Gallacher, 2013).

The integral role of the academic program and institutions is to facilitate transition by providing relevant and up-to-date information, which was underscored in our study and is in line with previous findings. Ingram and Gallacher (2013) stressed that transitioning students require information to make informed decisions about their program of study. In our research, program information and institutional processes were crucial for college site students to know well in advance of their transition. Students may be unfamiliar with the differences in deadlines at the university site, which may decrease their chance of enrolling in courses or meeting practice placement requirements. Likewise, Percival et al. (2016) emphasized that students need information about course registration and financial aid. The clarity of the process for financial aid

and scholarships were highlighted by other studies (D'Amico et al., 2014; Pokorny et al., 2017; Slaten et al., 2014). Our study adds to the current literature as the students underscored the need for more information about accessing financial aid, scholarships, and bursaries, and for the creation of transportation discounts. Also, we build on current knowledge as the students transitioning in the CNDP must navigate this information from two institutions, which may cause challenges.

Having knowledge of and being able to access student services, such as advisement, academic accommodation, counselling, and the writing centre, are important to students' sense of belonging (Anyinam et al., 2020; D'Amico et al., 2014; Gowing & Jackson, 2016; O'Keeffe, 2013; Osterman, 2000; Pokorny et al., 2017; Slaten et al., 2014). Ashktorab et al. (2017) and Samura (2016) found that to support students as they engage in processes of belonging, the institutions should offer readily available, personalized advisement programs, such as personal counselling, career advising, or mentoring. A peer mentorship strategy to facilitate familiarity with the university environment and unique processes is highlighted by other researchers (Ingram & Gallacher, 2013; Jacobs et al., 2015; Osterman, 2000; Raymond & Sheppard, 2017; Samura, 2016; Slaten et al., 2014). Anyinam et al.'s (2020) Canadian study aligned with our finding that students with ALA needs experienced barriers as they transfer from college to university and revealed that 62.5% of students lack of information about who can support their ALA process.

The students' need for belonging was crucial because they experienced quadruple levels of transitions (Meleis et al., 2000; Haussmann et al., 2009; Pokorny et al., 2017). Each of these transitions involve challenges and barriers in themselves; however, the students experienced the intersection and intertwined nature of multilayer transition. First, they transitioned from a clinical practice model to a triad preceptor-student-faculty adviser model (Zawaduk et al., 2014). Several studies elucidated the notion that the exposure to a new practice model has been found to encompass challenges and opportunities for nursing students (Ashktorab et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2020; Gilbert & Brown, 2015; Kern et al., 2013). Similar to our study, these authors found that the nursing students valued peer learning and development of relationships as strategies to be successful in belonging in the new practice. Our findings are supported by several studies that highlight the importance of clear communication as the students transition to learning new content at a new institution (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Freeman et al., 2007; Slaten et al., 2014). Next, there are contradicting findings in research about students' experiences of belonging between urban and suburban schools (Anderman, 2002). Similar to previous studies, we found that arriving at an urban institution from a suburban environment elicits new challenges for students' sense of belonging (Anderman, 2002). However, these challenges may be addressed with social, program, and institutional supports (Ingram & Gallacher, 2013; Samura, 2016).

The students' mixed emotions were consistent with the findings from other studies. Baumeister and Leary (1995) validated that being accepted, included, and welcomed led to positive emotions, such as happiness, elation, and tranquility. Being rejected, excluded, or ignored, however, leads to intense negative feelings of anxiety, depression, grief, and loneliness. Transition elicits emotions as individuals attempt to belong (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Hart & Swenty, 2016; Mays et al., 2018). The students' experiences of fluid and overlapping emotions of uncertainty, excitement, and confidence, and being nervous and overwhelmed are consistent with the emotions of transition of students in other studies (Alkan, 2016; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Hart & Swenty, 2015; Meleis et al., 2000; Slaten et al., 2016). The transition from college to university evokes new experiences for students, which requires the attention and support of faculty and administrators.

## **Recommendations and Implications**

This study has implications for nursing education and research. It is important that schools of nursing provide essential resources for students at the beginning of the program and throughout the course of study, especially when there is a transition from one institution to another. Resources related to coping strategies, socialization opportunities, orientation sessions, mentorship programs, and required program information need to be shared before the transition and via different communication platforms. Similar to our study, the findings from D'Amico et al.'s (2014) study elucidated the importance of early integration of students as they transitioned from a college to a new university environment. Creation of guidelines designed to build supportive teaching and learning environments that foster students' sense of belonging are recommended. The recommendations we have put forward have emerged from our study. These findings may be relevant or beneficial to other schools of nursing within a national or global context where students experience transitions from one academic institution to another.

Nursing research suggestions include conducting further qualitative and quantitative research related to a sense of belonging in online/distance learning environments, research with students from diverse populations, and research with students from multiple collaborative programs and sites.

## **Limitations**

There are some limitations in this study. The study was conducted in an undergraduate nursing degree program in a large metropolitan city. This may affect transferability of the findings as it was specific to a collaborative program, with students transitioning from a college site to the university site in an urban setting. The students may have participated in the study for many reasons beyond their feelings of a sense of belonging, such as voicing their concerns.

## **Conclusion**

It is essential for educators, academic programs, and academic institutions to understand student's transition experiences and the impact on their sense of belonging. Study findings revealed perceived challenges and supports from social, program, and institutional perspectives in students' transition journey from college to university. Creation of guidelines designed to enhance confidence, allay anxiety, and promote students' positive attitudes as they transition within the program is important. These findings provide insights to guide faculty, collaborative programs, and academic institutions in ways to design specific strategies to support nursing students' success and to enhance their sense of belonging as they transition from college to university. Policies need to be in place to build supportive teaching and learning environments that foster a comfortable sense of belonging for students. It is important for schools of nursing and academic institutions to recognize that the transition from one institution to another is challenging for many students and impacts their sense of belonging. Providing supportive environments that foster feelings of belonging are fundamental to a positive learning experience and a successful transition.

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