

**Applying Identity Theories in  
Expatriate Management Studies:  
A Demonstration of the Role of Ethnic Identity Confirmation**

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**ABSTRACT**

Traditionally, researchers apply cultural theories to study expatriates. However, these are group level theories and are not precise in examining individuals' behaviors. Therefore, this conceptual paper calls for studying expatriate management from an identity perspective. This paper also discusses the limitation of studying expatriates using social identity and social categorization theories. To illustrate this argument, it introduces an ethnic identity confirmation mechanism as a method to study expatriates who share an ethnic identity with host country employees. It demonstrates how this mechanism can capture the complexity in their interactions, and how it can influence variables that are important to the expatriate management literature. Finally, this paper discusses a broader application of the identity confirmation mechanism and encourages researcher to introduce and develop identity theories in the context of international management.

**Key words:** *expatriates, ethnic identity confirmation*

**APPLYING IDENTITY THEORIES IN  
EXPATRIATE MANAGEMENT STUDIES:  
A DEMONSTRATION OF THE ROLE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY CONFIRMATION**

Multinational corporations (MNCs) need to manage their geographically dispersed units worldwide, in terms of strategy implementation, controlling, or transferring knowledge (Harzing, 2001). Many of these tasks can be taken by expatriates working on international assignments (Hocking, Brown, & Harzing, 2007). To achieve these goals, expatriates need support from host country employees (HCEs) (Toh & DeNisi, 2007; Varma, Budhwar, Biswas, & Toh, 2005). Therefore, how to facilitate expatriate-HCE interactions and achieve good relationships between them has been a major research area in the expatriate management literature.

Traditionally, national cultural differences have been recognized as a threat to expatriate-HCE relationships. However, although cultural differences do influence individual behaviors, researchers have admitted that cultural theory is a better predictor of group behaviors than of individual behaviors (Grenness, 2012). For example, not every expatriate or HCE is a typical representative of his/her national culture. Thus, predictions based on cultural differences may not apply to every expatriate-HCE relationship.

Another line of research has focused on social identity and social categorization. Both expatriates and HCEs can categorize each other based on social identity when interacting. As a result, perceived in-group/out-group characteristics can affect their interactions and relationships (Hogg, 2010; Toh & DeNisi, 2007). This research studies expatriate-HCE relationships from an identity perspective. Different from the cultural perspective, this perspective attends to individual level perceptions and behaviors. However, current research

also has limitations. Social categorization only addresses the cognitive process in one party involved in a social interaction, such as either the expatriate or the HCE. Since there are two parties participating in an interaction, a single social categorization process cannot reveal the whole picture. This gives rise to the necessity of applying other identity mechanisms to understand further expatriate-HCE interactions. Therefore, the purpose of this article is twofold. First, to advocate the importance of the identity perspective at the individual level of research in expatriate management, such as on expatriate-HCE interactions. Second, to call for the application of a variety of identity-related mechanisms in this line of research. To illustrate this, we apply a mechanism of ethnic identity confirmation to explain how it influences expatriate-HCE interactions and relationships and what consequences it may generate.

Ethnic identity indicates an individual's membership in an ethnic group (Tajfel, 1981). In social interactions, both our social partners and we may have differing perceptions of our ethnic identity (Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004), such as the importance of a social group membership in our social interactions (Thatcher & Greer, 2008). Ethnic identity confirmation is the degree of agreement between how we (such as expatriates) view the importance of our ethnic identity and how other people (such as HCEs) view it (Milton & Westphal, 2005; Thatcher & Greer, 2008). According to this mechanism, expatriates and HCEs may differ in their view of ethnic identity at work. For example, an HCE may believe that his/her ethnic identity is important, but his/her expatriate colleague may not agree. The level of agreement between self-view and view of others can affect social expectations and behaviors when expatriates and HCEs interact (Ellemers & Barreto, 2006). Subsequently, it can influence their interactions and relationships.

Ethnic identity confirmation not only plays a role between expatriates and HCEs who are ethnically different: a phenomenon that has been traditionally studied by researchers

(Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Selmer, 2002). It is manifest even more strongly between expatriates and HCEs who have the same ethnic background: a new phenomenon that has gained attention only recently (Thite, Srinivasan, Harvey, & Valk, 2009; Tung & Lazarova, 2006). This type of expatriate has been termed ex-host country nationals (EHCNs) (Tung & Lazarova, 2006). EHCNs and HCEs share the same ethnic identity. They are physically similar, but many EHCNs have prolonged experiences living outside of the traditional, ethnic cultural environment.

Research has revealed that the employment of EHCNs has been a widespread practice in MNCs (Goodall & Warner, 1998; Selmer & Shiu, 1999; Tung, 1984). They are seen as ideal candidates for overseas assignments by MNCs (Thite et al., 2009). This is because, based on the cultural perspective, EHCNs are expected to be less likely to face challenges that non-EHCNs would because of their familiarity with the local culture. Based on the simple social categorization approach, EHCNs should be able to establish good relationships with HCEs because they can be seen as ethnic in-groups (Varma, Pichler, Budhwar, & Biswas, 2009). However, these predictions have been challenged by empirical results. Although some studies have shown that EHCNs were more effective in building positive relationships with HCEs and that information sharing was more successful (Bell & Harrison, 1996; Fitzsimmons, Miska, & Stahl, 2011; Vance, Vaiman, & Andersen, 2009), other studies have revealed that HCEs did not like or trust EHCNs (Björkman & Schapp, 1994; Leung, Smith, Wang, & Sun, 1996; McEllister, 1998; Thite et al., 2009). However, this conflicting evidence can be explained by the mechanism of ethnic identity confirmation. Ethnic identity confirmation means that when expatriates and HCEs interact, what matters is not simply which group they physically belong to, but how each person views the ethnic background and that of others. Even if EHCNs are familiar with the host country culture, a lack of ethnic identity confirmation can still challenge EHCN-HCE interactions.

This paper discusses why an identity perspective is appropriate as an alternative way to study expatriate-HCE interactions to the cultural perspective with a particular focus on EHCN. It then analyzes the advantages of using ethnic identity confirmation mechanism over the simple social-categorization approach in studying EHCN-HCE interactions. This is followed by a detailed introduction to ethnic identity confirmation and how this mechanism affects major variables that have been important to the expatriate management literature, such as trust, interpersonal relationships and knowledge transfer. This paper concludes with a discussion of how identity confirmation can be used beyond the study of EHCN and a call for other identity related mechanisms or theories to be identified in international management research.

## **CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE VS. IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE**

### **Cultural Perspective**

In the field of expatriate management, cultural perspective research is based on the fact that expatriates and HCEs are from different countries. National culture, such as values influence people's mind and behaviors and challenge interactions between people who are from different countries(Hofstede, 1980). Researchers generally agree that cultural differences can impede expatriate-HCE interactions by limiting communication, causing misunderstandings and threatening interpersonal relationships (Liu & Shaffer, 2005; Vance et al., 2009; Varma, Pichler, & Budhwar, 2011).

Although previous research has provided insights into expatriate-HCE interactions, it has limitations. Cultural theories describe characteristics of a cultural group. Using group level characteristics to predict individuals' behaviors is not precise (Grenness, 2012). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, individual variations within a cultural group become unavoidable. Individual

variations in terms of cultural influence are even stronger among EHCNs. They have different backgrounds and grew up in a variety of cultural environments. Some of them were born and raised in the host country; some were born in the host country and have lived most of their lives abroad, and others were born and raised outside of the host country (Tung, 2009; Tung & Lazarova, 2006). Most EHCNs have been influenced by multiple cultures because they have prolonged experiences of living in multi-cultural environments. What cultural domains, such as values, practices or languages, each EHCN adopts largely depends on individual preference and social environment. EHCNs vary in terms of acculturation outcome (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2007). As a result, it is even more difficult to use cultural theories to predict EHCNs' behaviors. Some of them may be culturally similar to HCEs, but other may not.

### **The Identity Perspective**

Different from the cultural perspective, identity defines individuals rather than a group. Identity describes who an individual is (Milton & Westphal, 2005; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). There are different types of identities, for example, personal identity and social identity. Personal identity indicates attributes that make one individual different from others (Brewer, 2001), such as personality traits (McNulty & Swann, 1994) or leadership abilities (Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002). Social identity is an individual's self-concept that derives from his/her knowledge of his/her membership of a social group (Tajfel, 1981).

Ethnic identity is one type of social identity. It is a better way to distinguish EHCNs from non-EHCNs than cultural similarity. EHCNs share an ethnic identity with HCEs, but non-EHCNs do not. Ethnic similarity/dissimilarity can trigger social categorization among both expatriates and HCEs, especially if it is physically visible (Fiske, 1998). In the expatriate management literature, researchers have studied the social categorization mechanism. For

example, HCEs gave more trust to expatriates who they considered to be in-group (Liu & Shaffer, 2005); HCEs preferred one type of expatriate to be appointed to a position within an organization over other types (Carr, Rugimbana, Walkom, & Bolitho, 2001; Tung, 2008).

Researchers have not yet pointed out the complexity in the categorization processes in expatriate-HCE interactions. First, in a social interaction with at least two parties, both self-categorization and other-categorization can happen and influence individuals' expectations and behaviors. Second, expatriates and HCEs may use different standards in self-categorization and other-categorization processes. Whether the results of the two processes converge or not can affect the interaction. Therefore, simply focusing on one process may not be enough to explain the result of the interaction. This research demonstrates this complexity through the ethnic group categorization mechanism between EHCNs and HCEs.

### **The Complexity of Ethnic Group Categorization in EHCN-HCE Interactions**

*Surface-level ethnic similarity.* The complexity of ethnic group categorization is reflected in the difference in surface-level and deep-level ethnic similarity *between* EHCNs and HCEs. When people use the words ethnic identity, they often refer to different things. To some people, it is an ascribed identity, often visible through physical characteristics such as skin or hair colour or name (Fiske, 1998; Toh & DeNisi, 2007). This is surface-level ethnic identity. The ascribed element of ethnic identity creates a boundary concerning who is eligible to be a member of a certain ethnic group.

In many host country units of MNCs, the visibility of surface-level ethnic identity makes it a salient factor that reflects the dissimilarity between non-EHCNs and HCEs and similarity between EHCNs and HCEs. Ethnic dissimilarity between non-EHCNs and HCEs, thus, triggers out-group categorization (Fiske, 1998). Out-group categorization between non-EHCNs and HCEs challenges interpersonal trust and reduces interactions (Jiang, Chua,

Kotabe, & Murray, 2011; Toh & DeNisi, 2007). In contrast, the ethnic similarity between EHCNs and HCEs at the surface-level can give people a feeling of being connected. In this sense, the ethnic heritage gives EHCNs advantages over non-EHCNs.

More importantly, in the overseas units of many MNCs, surface-level ethnic identity can become a dividing factor in inter-group boundaries and acquire additional meanings. It is still common that MNCs draw a clear distinction between expatriates and HCEs. Expatriates often have higher income, and have different career paths from HCEs (Harvey & Moeller, 2009; Toh & DeNisi, 2003). As a result, there are divisions between expatriates and HCEs over income, career path, organizational status and power (Harvey & Moeller, 2009; Toh & DeNisi, 2003). According to faultline theory (Lau & Murnighan, 1998), there are many ways to divide a large group of people into subgroups, such as according to income, power and status. However, then the different ways repeatedly divide people into the same subgroups. Thus, when they form an alignment, it becomes a “faultline”. The more divisions align, the stronger the faultline is and then it is more difficult for people from sub-groups to communicate with each other. This is what happens between expatriates and HCEs. The divisions repeatedly divide expatriates and HCEs into two sub-groups. As a result, interactions between expatriates and HCEs are inhibited. Since surface-level ethnic difference is the most visible division, people may perceive that ethnic difference is the cause of all the differences between expatriates and HCEs. However, the surface-level ethnic similarity between EHCNs and HCEs can mitigate the visible division between expatriates and HCEs and then weaken the inter-group faultline. Thus, if EHCNs can become a faultline breaker between expatriates and HCEs, then they can facilitate interpersonal relationships with HCEs. The question is whether or not EHCNs and HCEs agree that they are similar.

*Deep-level ethnic similarity.* Rather than using surface-level ethnic characteristics, another view uses individuals’ subjective connection to an ethnic group as an indicator of



ethnic identity, such as the perceived importance of this identity (Ashmore & Boca, 1979; Phinney & Alipuria, 2006; Tajfel, 1981). This is deep-level ethnic identity. It is invisible so it does not come to the surface directly in social interactions. This view admits that not everyone who is eligible to be a member of an ethnic group, based on his/her physical characteristics, views the ethnic identity as important or important in all situations.

Although people tend to assume that individuals who are physically connected to a given ethnic group should identify with that ethnic identity, this assumption cannot be said to be true for all individuals. There are individual variations in deep-level identity among people who display surface-level ethnic characteristics. This is because people belong to multiple social groups and have multiple social identities simultaneously (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Each individual consciously or unconsciously manages their identities in their own way (Pratt & Corley, 2007; Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

Many factors can influence how individuals view their ethnic identity. For example, people can gain a new cultural identity by living in multicultural environments (Sussman, 2000). As a result, their identity system becomes more complicated. In order to fit the new identity element into their identity system, individuals may re-prioritize the existing identities, meaning ethnic identity may become less important to some individuals. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between the surface-level and deep-level ethnic identity of EHCNs. Although EHCNs as a group share the surface-level ethnic identity with HCEs, when individuals' deep-level ethnic identity is considered, differences can exist between them.

*EHCN-HCE relationship challenges related to ethnic group categorization.* When EHCNs and HCEs view each other, they may hold different social categorization views. Both surface-level and deep-level ethnic identity similarity can exist in an interaction. Thus, single social categorization cannot capture the complexity in their interactions. However, this complexity can explain many relationship challenges between EHCNs and HCEs that have

been identified by researchers. For example, HCEs may assume EHCNs to be members of their ethnic in-group based on surface-level similarity. They then form certain expectations, such as expecting EHCNs to speak the local language, to know the ethnic culture and to behave appropriately according to the ethnic social norms (Thite et al., 2009; Tung, 2008). If EHCNs can meet these expectations, they may be received positively by HCEs. However, if they violate these expectations, they may be viewed negatively by HCEs. For example, in China, EHCNs who have insufficient knowledge about China or who behave in a way that is culturally different are often called “bananas”, meaning yellow outside but white inside (Tung, 2008). This term reflect HCEs’ dissatisfaction and disappointment towards EHCNs who violate their expectations. Nonetheless, these views may ignore the fact that some EHCNs have the surface-level ethnic elements, but may not view them as important; as a result, they do not want to adhere to an ethnic cultural standard or learn ethnic culturally-related knowledge.

On the other hand, it is also possible that EHCNs view their ethnic identity as important but HCEs do not. EHCNs who were born and grew up in a non-ethnic cultural environment may have limited knowledge about the ethnic culture and cannot speak the language, so they are not able to demonstrate expected behaviors, but they may still identify with the ethnic group and want their ethnic group identity to be recognized (Hong, Wan, No, & Chiu, 2007). They can be upset if their ethnic identity is rejected because of their lack of ethnic cultural knowledge. Overall, many EHCN-HCE relationship challenges that have been identified in the literature are related to the divergent views of self-categorization and other-categorization of ethnic group membership. This is why a mechanism that can incorporate views of both expatriates and HCEs are important in studying expatriate-HCE relationships. We propose that this complexity can be addressed through the mechanism of ethnic identity confirmation.

## ETHNIC IDENTITY CONFIRMATION

The concept of ethnic identity confirmation acknowledges the importance of both self-categorization and other-categorization (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003; Ellemers & Barreto, 2006). When the two views reach an agreement, ethnic identity is confirmed. When it happens, individuals know that their theories about themselves are congruent with others' views of themselves. However, a disagreement can challenge people's understanding of themselves (Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003) and have a detrimental effect on interpersonal interactions.

Although ethnic identity confirmation has not been introduced to expatriate management studies, it has been discussed in other areas. For example, a lack of identity confirmation of ethnic minorities or immigrants has been recorded in many studies, such as Turks in the Netherlands, Brazilian-Japanese in Brazil, Korean-Japanese in Japan, and Asians in the U.S. (Barreto, Spears, Ellemers, & Shahinper, 2003; Chen, 2006; Matsunaga, 2007; Rieke, 2006). In some cases, ethnic minorities desire to be seen as a member of the society they live in, but their ethnic group membership is stressed by others in that society. The identity confirmation challenge not only happens when ethnic minority members interact with ethnic out-group members, but also happens when they interact with ethnic in-group members. For example, some Canadian-Chinese identify with their Canadian identity, but they are still viewed as Chinese by other Canadian-Chinese. Their ethnic in-groups believe that they should not reduce or change their identification with the ethnic group (Noels, Leavitt, & Clément, 2010). These incidents are similar to what happens between EHCNs and HECs.

In the management field, researchers have studied two types of identity confirmation, namely personal identity confirmation and social identity confirmation. Personal identity confirmation is individuals' agreements on personal characteristics. It is related to team

socialization, interpersonal relationships and team performance (Milton & Westphal, 2005; Polzer et al., 2002). Thatcher and Geer (2008) established the connection between social identity confirmation and employee performance. They asked team members to rate how important several social identities (including gender, ethnicity, race, age and parental status) were to themselves and then rate how important these identities were to each of their team members. They found that when the perceived importance of a social identity was confirmed, individuals were more satisfied working in the work group. Additionally, other researchers have also proposed that employees are more motivated to work for organizations which confirm their personal and social identity (Seyle & Swann, 2007).

### **IMPACTS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY CONFIRMATION**

Ethnic identity confirmation can be used as a mechanism to influence outcomes that have being important in expatriate management, such as trust, relationship conflict and knowledge transfer.

#### **Trust**

Trust is desirable for expatriates and HCEs. This is because expatriates generally work temporarily on international assignments (Harrison, Chadwick, & Scales, 1996). When they transfer to a new position, they are often the newcomer in the host country organization ((Black et al., 1991), and they need support from HCEs on many tasks (Shen, 2011; Toh & DeNisi, 2007). Researchers have revealed that trust can encourage cooperation, and support-giving behaviors between expatriates and HCEs (Shen, 2011). There are two types of trust: emotional trust and rational trust (McAllister, 1995). We argue that ethnic identity confirmation has a strong influence on emotional trust. Interpersonal similarity, such as ethnic similarity, is an important facilitator of perceived interpersonal connection (Brewer,

1979). It can generate an emotional bond especially in the presence of an out-group (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). This psychological connection can generate trust. This type of interpersonal bond can be formed if both EHCNs and HCEs believe that their ethnic identity is important: an achieved ethnic identity confirmation. However, a lack of ethnic identity confirmation situation will hamper trust. There are two possibilities in this situation; HCEs categorize EHCNs as in-group and believe that the ethnic identity is important but the EHCNs do not, or vice versa. In the first situation, HCEs are more likely to form negative attitudes towards EHCNs, as an in-group member who failed to favor the in-group (Castelli, 2007; Postmes, 2002).

In MNCs, HCEs are a seemingly disadvantaged group compared with expatriates in terms of career path and income. Thus, they are likely to be more sensitive to power and status divisions along the lines of ethnic identity (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). If HCEs attributed EHCNs' refusal to emphasize the shared ethnic identity to their pursuit of power and status, they may view EHCNs as a traitor to the ethnic group. It is not difficult to imagine that HCEs may be reluctant to trust EHCNs.

### **Conflict**

Relationship conflict is an awareness of interpersonal incompatibilities, such as being aware of tension, friction, annoyance, frustration or irritation (Jehn, 1995). It can be caused by perceived relationship tension or perceived hostility from others (Jehn, 1995).

Ethnic identity confirmation can reduce relationship conflicts by regulating social norms. First, if both EHCNs and HCEs believe ethnic identity is important, then this salient identity becomes a behavioral regulator that shapes their behaviors (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Both parties are more likely to acknowledge the importance of ethnic cultural norms. Thus, interpersonal frictions, which often happen as a result of cultural differences between non-

EHCN expatriates and HCEs, are less likely to occur. Even if conflicts do occur, the common identity is likely to help them find solutions that are acceptable to both parties. Therefore, compared with non-EHCN and HCE pairs, EHCNs and HCEs will have fewer interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, when an unhappy incident happens, individuals may not be able to attribute it to a lack of ethnic identity confirmation. As a result, failing to make the connection may impede people from finding solutions to deal with conflicts. This attribution may limit them from finding effective solutions to ease relationship conflicts.

### **Knowledge Transfer**

Knowledge transfer is an important outcome to MNCs. It occurs when one person gains knowledge from another person or from existing materials (Argote & Ingram, 2000). Knowledge can be transferred in many ways, but human interaction has been recognized as an important channel (Argote, McEvily, & Reagans, 2003). Knowledge transfer between expatriates and HCEs benefits both parties, and it ultimately can benefit the MNCs. At the individual level, HCEs' knowledge can help expatriates' personal development and even help their family adapt to the new environment (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012). At the organizational level, expatriates can transfer host country local information to other parts of MNCs (Reiche, 2011). Similarly, expatriates can transfer knowledge to HCEs to implement organizational strategic plans and help their personal development (Shen, 2011).

Ethnic identity confirmation can influence knowledge transfer, but the effect differs in EHCNs-HCEs from non-EHCNs-HCEs. If both expatriates and HCEs believe that their ethnic identity important, then ethnic similarity and dissimilarity create a clear distinction between EHCNs and non-EHCNs. Taking HCEs as an example, they can see EHCNs as ethnic in-group, but non-EHCNs as an out-group. This perception has consequences on knowledge transfer. HCEs may be reluctant to interact with non-EHCNs, because out-group

categorization can also increase perceived interpersonal distance. Interacting with ethnically dissimilar others can give people a feeling of uncertainty. They may feel a lack of control over the situation and worry about receiving negative evaluations from dissimilar others (Gudykunst, 2005; Stephan & Stephan, 1985). This social anxiety can become a barrier for information sharing and learning between non-EHCNs and HCEs. In contrast, they may be more willing to interact with EHCNs and, consequently, more knowledge transfer will happen. However, a lack of ethnic identity confirmation between EHCNs and HCEs will inhibit knowledge transfer between them. Of course, if both EHCNs and HCEs downplay the ethnic identity and achieve confirmation on another identity, such as professional identity, it can also encourage knowledge transfer between them. Of course, ethnic identity confirmation can influence knowledge transfer indirectly through trust and good interpersonal relationships.

### CONCLUSION

This paper reviewed the two main theoretical bases that researchers have used when studying expatriate-HCE interactions and analyzed their limitations. Cultural theories can explain some interpersonal differences, but they do not attend to individual differences. In the current literature, researchers have mainly applied the social categorization mechanism which has been a useful tool, but has limitations in some contexts. This paper has demonstrated the complexity in EHCN-HCE interactions and introduces ethnic identity confirmation as a new mechanism to explain this complexity.

Ethnic identity confirmation is one type of identity confirmation mechanism. We have shown in this paper how to study the role of ethnic identity confirmation, but there is still room for future study in this area of research. For example, research could investigate the role of personal identity confirmation or other types of social identity, such as gender identity and professional identity.

Beyond identity confirmation, more identity-related theories could be applied to expatriate management as well as international management both at the individual level and the organizational level. However, we not only advocate the application of identity theory, but also the development of it in the context of international management. There are special elements in this context which are not available in domestic settings. These can provide opportunities for theory development. For example, studying ethnic identity confirmation in the context of EHCN-HCE interactions can extend identity confirmation research. It provides an opportunity to study what the consequences are of a lack of identity confirmation when both parties in a social interaction share the focal identity. In this situation, if the EHCN believes ethnic identity is not important, but the HCE believes it is, then both parties receive low identity confirmation. In this case, one person's view of the ethnic identity has implications for both parties. Moreover, Kraimer and her colleagues have also demonstrated how to incorporate identity theory in international management research. They studied the identity strain of repatriates in the context of international role transition (Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison, & Ren, 2012). Therefore, we call for more research using an identity perspective in the field of international management.

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