UNVEILING THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' MOTIVE OF USING TABOO WORDS IN DAILY CONVERSATION

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URL: https://jeell.upjb.ac.id/index.php/files/article/view/133
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32682/jeell.v13i1.133

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Abstract

This study was conducted at three private universities in East Java: one non-religious campus and two religious-based campuses. This research aims to explore the reasons behind the use of taboo words in daily conversations among university students. A descriptive qualitative method was employed, using questionnaires and interviews as data collection tools. The data sources for this study included online questionnaires and interviews with several students. The data were analyzed based on Battistella's (2005) classification of taboo words and Jay's (2009) Theory. The findings reveal that the primary reasons for using taboo words were to express emotions, strengthen social bonds among close friends, add humor, and react spontaneously to certain situations. This research indicates that students tend to use taboo words deliberately and contextually, mainly in social settings where they feel comfortable and free from formal constraints. Frequent exposure to social media and peer influence significantly contributes to the development of this linguistic behavior in students' everyday communication.

Keywords: Taboo words, English Education students, Daily conversation

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Introduction

Certain words are considered inappropriate or offensive in specific contexts; these are often called taboo words. Typically, taboo words are defined as expressions that social conventions prohibit or restrict due to their inappropriate, offensive, or vulgar nature. Such words often pertain to sensitive topics, including

sexuality, bodily functions, religion, or death (Battistella, 2005). From a sociolinguistic perspective, the study of taboo language offers valuable insights into society's social norms and boundaries. The choice to use or avoid taboo words can signal social identity, group membership, or emotional states, making them significant in understanding social interactions.

In everyday conversation, especially among young people, informal language is very common. Among the various forms of informal language, the use of taboo words has become a phenomenon that is difficult to ignore. Taboo words, which are often considered inappropriate or offensive in formal settings, are frequently used in casual conversations among peers. (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Taboo words are not only found in casual communication but also appear widely across media, including songs, films, and television series. These words have become increasingly visible and normalized in popular culture.

University students are often in a phase of building new social relationships, asserting their identities, and experimenting with different communication styles. In such an environment, language becomes a flexible tool for self-expression, including the use of taboo words. (Jay, 2009). The use of these words among students may serve various purposes, such as expressing anger, joking with friends, showing intimacy, or even resisting authority. As such, exploring the use of taboo words among students is crucial for understanding their communication behavior and social adaptation.

Students majoring in English Education are particularly interesting subjects for this study because they are pre-service teachers who are expected to model appropriate language use. However, like their peers from other disciplines, they are also part of the youth culture where the use of taboo words is common. (Pinker, 2007). Studying their use of taboo words can provide insights into how pre-service teachers internalize, negotiate, or challenge linguistic norms. Furthermore, their awareness of language sensitivity could influence their attitudes towards language use in both personal and professional contexts.

Several studies have explored the use of taboo language among students. (2022) conducted a study on high school and undergraduate students, revealing that both groups commonly use swear words related to sexuality, animal terms, and insults. High school students often use these words to appear mature, express themselves, or bond socially, while college students use them for humor, self-expression, and pain relief. Hasnah et al., (2022) investigated the use of taboo words in classroom interactions among

students. Their findings indicated that students use taboo words to draw attention, show contempt, or provoke others. The types of taboo words identified included vulgarity, epithets, and profanity. Another study by Safa (2020) focused on students in the English Department at Universitas Pamulang. The study found that male students were more likely to use taboo words, while female students preferred euphemisms. The study suggested that introducing euphemisms could help students communicate more politely in social situations. In line with this, Arvian & Hadi (2024) conducted their study at STBA JIA Bekasi, focusing on the types of swear words. It concluded that these words are primarily used to express emotions, create humor, and build group solidarity.

In addition, Hadiwijaya (2023) explores the cultural and linguistic shift in the perception of taboo words in Surabaya. The study suggested that several words previously considered taboo have undergone semantic changes and are now often used in casual or humorous contexts. Likewise, Perangin-Angin et al., (2024) conducted a sociolinguistic study on locally taboo words within the East Java community. Their findings reveal contrasting perceptions of taboo language between rural and urban societies. Rural communities often adhere to conservative language standards and typically avoid using taboo words, whereas urban communities tend to accept their use more readily in daily interactions.

In previous studies, various theories have been applied to analyze taboo words. Perangin-angin et al. (2022) and Perangin-angin et al. (2024) used Allan & Burridge's (2006) theory about taboo language, and Arvian & Hadi (2024) utilized the theory of Wardhaugh (1986), Hughes (1991), and Trudgill (1983) to classify swear words according to their linguistic and sociocultural roles. Hasnah et al. (2022) drew on Battistella's (2005) framework to identify the forms of taboo expressions that emerged in classroom interactions. Meanwhile, Safa (2020) utilized the theories of Burridge (2012) and Lakoff (2014) to analyze gender-based language differences. Lastly, Hadiwijaya (2023) drew on semantic shift theory to analyze how the meanings of certain taboo expressions have evolved in Surabayan urban culture. These varied theoretical perspectives demonstrate how the use of taboo words can be interpreted from linguistic, cultural, and social viewpoints.

Although the use of taboo words is common in daily conversations among university students, there remains a significant gap in understanding the reasons for their use. While many previous studies have focused on identifying and categorizing taboo words or on their frequency and context, very few have explored the underlying motivations that drive students to use

them (Hughes, 2006). This is especially true for English Education Students, who are simultaneously language learners and future educators. Understanding their motives for using taboo expressions is important, not only from a pedagogical and cultural standpoint. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by not only identifying the types of taboo words used but, more importantly, uncovering the reasons why English Education students choose to use such language in their everyday conversations.

Moreover, the use of taboo words among university students—particularly those in academic and religious environments—raises questions about the contrast between expected and actual language behavior. In religious and moral teachings, people are generally encouraged to avoid offensive language and to distinguish between "good" and "bad" speech as a reflection of personal character and values (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Similarly, in academic and professional settings, educated people are expected to use language that reflects civility, respect, and social awareness (Crystal, 2003). Despite these norms, taboo expressions persist in informal use, even among students preparing to become pre-service teachers.

This research is worthwhile, as it sheds light on language use in everyday conversations among university students, particularly on how they interact with peers. (Wardhaugh, R., & Fuller, 2015). It also has practical importance for English Education students, as pre-service teachers, in becoming more aware of how language functions in real social interactions. By understanding the dynamics of taboo language, these students can navigate linguistic sensitivities in diverse social settings more effectively and apply this awareness in their future teaching careers.

This present research aimed to explore the motives of English Education students for using taboo words in their daily conversations. This research uses Battistella's (2005) and Jay's (2009) theories to classify students' reasons for using taboo words. Taboo words here include both English and Indonesian terms that are considered socially unacceptable or offensive. By doing so, we are expected to provide a comprehensive picture of taboo language use among university students, particularly among pre-service teachers.

Research Methods

Design

To encompass our research, a descriptive qualitative design was implemented. It aimed to describe and explain in depth the reasons behind their usage in daily conversations among university students. The descriptive qualitative approach enables us to explore language phenomena in a

contextualized manner. This method facilitates data collection directly from participants through instruments such as questionnaires or interviews. According to Creswell (2012), Qualitative research is a method used to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Using this approach, we gathered rich, in-depth data to analyze the motives behind the use of taboo words.

Participants

We invited English Education students from three different private universities in East Java to serve as research participants. We chose these three universities because of their backgrounds, the English education departments where they will be teachers in the future. Therefore, it is crucial to know their knowledge base and the motive behind taboo words in their daily communication. Interestingly, the three universities comprise two religious-based campuses and one non-religious campus. Although the participants' backgrounds varied, this research does not compare motives for use by educational background. A total of 66 students completed the questionnaire, and 6 participated in face-to-face interviews. The 66 students comprise 47 respondents from university A, 13 from university B, and 6 from university C. They are voluntarily filling out the G-forms and participating in the interview session. For the interview session, we invited representatives from each campus, comprising two students from semesters 4 and 6, voluntarily. They signed the informed consent after we explained that their identities would be kept confidential and all data would be reported using pseudonyms.

Instrument

To obtain valid data, we administered two instruments, a set of questionnaires and an interview protocol. The instruments were adapted from Perangin-angin et al. (2022), Arvian & Hadi (2024), Hadiwijaya (2025), Safa (2020), Hasnah et al. (2022), and Pengangin-angin et al. (2024). The questionnaire was designed to determine the Common contexts and situations in which these taboo words are used, as well as students' general attitudes toward their use, and comprised 25 items in total.

Meanwhile, the interview protocol was administered to map participants' demographic characteristics and their knowledge and behaviors regarding taboo words. The demographic questionnaire collected participants' personal information, including name, age, gender, duration of English learning, semester, and campus name. Additionally, we examined their knowledge and understanding of the personal reasons for using taboo

words. We also examined students' views on the acceptability, function, and impact of taboo language, and, finally, sociolinguistic and cultural influences on their language choices. In total, there are 10 questions, and the interview lasts 20-25 minutes per student.

Data Collection

We collected the data through a questionnaire and an interview. We distributed the G-forms to the English students' department at three private universities in East Java. The form contains questions about taboo words, ranging from what taboo words they know to why they use those words in everyday conversation. The form is available for 1 week, allowing respondents to complete the questionnaire at their convenience. Data collection took place over three weeks. In the first week, we distributed the forms to all participants and received 66 responses from students across all universities. During the second week, we invited volunteers to participate in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, contingent on their availability. Last week, we transcribed and tabulated the participants' responses from the form. Since participants volunteered for this research, they were also invited to complete and sign the informed consent form. It was crucial since the research involved human subjects.

Data analysis

As we conducted qualitative research, there were three main stages we undertook, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014). Firstly, we organized and selected relevant, reliable data from the questionnaire and interview transcripts. As the questionnaire was constructed using the Guttmann scale, we focused on the frequency and consistency of responses to identify the dominant pattern and trend in the types of taboo words used by students in their daily communication. Meanwhile, for the interview, we employed inductive coding and highlighted significant statements based on the participants' narratives. The data were grouped according to the aspects identified during the instrument's development. The questionnaire data had three aspects: emotion and expression, and purpose of use. The interviews yielded three aspects: personal experience of use, usage situations, and motives for using taboo words.

Furthermore, we presented the relevant data in tables organized by category or narrative description. It helped us organize the dataset into a more comprehensive display. The last is verification and drawing

conclusions. We analysed all the data by category, including the types of taboo words used and the motives behind their use in daily communication.

Results and Discussion

The presentation of the research findings aligned with the research goal, exploring the motives for their use in daily communication. They are presented as follows;

Results

The demographics of the participants

The total number of respondents in this study is 66, representing diverse gender backgrounds and semesters. The findings are presented through qualitative analyses, supported by tables and charts to clarify the results. The respondents consist of both male and female students. Based on the collected data, the number of male respondents is 23 (34.8%) and the number of female respondents is 43 (65,2%).

Table 1. Gender of the respondents

Gender	N	%
Male	23	34.8%
Female	43	65.2%
	66	100%

All respondents in this study were from three universities; however, the majority of respondents who completed the questionnaire were from University A (47, 71.2%), followed by 13 (19.7%) from University B and 6 (9.1%) from University C.

Table 2. Participants' University

University	N	%
Non-Religious University (A)	47	71.2%
Religious-based University (B)	13	13%
Religious-based University (C)	6	9.1%
	66	100%

Most respondents are currently in their sixth semester, with 26 (39.4%) indicating they are in the mid-to-final phase of their undergraduate studies. Meanwhile, 25 respondents are in their eighth semester (37,9%), and 15 respondents are in their fourth semester (22,7%).

Table 3. Participants' Semester

Semester	N	%
4th	26	39.4%
6th	25	37.9%
8th	15	22.7%
	66	100%

Out of the 66 respondents, we invited six volunteers from each university to serve as representatives, comprising three males and three females.

The motive for using taboo words

The data highlighted that students use taboo words in their daily communication to express emotions such as anger, happiness, joking with friends, expressing shock, and emphasizing a point. Besides, they also implied a specific purpose, such as expressing feelings or emotions, demonstrating solidarity, and engaging in humor, which facilitated conversation.

1. Emotion and Expression

The participants stated that the use of taboo words in their daily communication reflects their emotions and feelings. They could convey different meanings and express negative or positive feelings, such as happiness.

Table 4. Taboo words imply feelings and emotions

Emotion and Expression	N	%
Angry	24	36%
Happy	4	7%
Joking	17	26%
Shock	13	19%
To emphasize something	8	12%
	66	100%

As shown in the table under the Emotion and Expression aspect, the most common reason for using taboo words is for joking (26%). This suggests that, for many students, taboo words are not intended to offend but rather serve as a means of humor or entertainment in casual conversations. Following closely, anger (24%) and shock (19%) were also cited as strong emotional triggers, showing that such words are often used impulsively during intense emotional reactions. Other reasons include madness (12%) and the use of taboo words to emphasize a point (12%), reflecting how students may use such language to lend emotional weight or intensity to their speech. A small proportion (7%) reported using taboo words when feeling

happy, indicating that even positive emotions can lead to the use of expressive language, though far less frequently than in negative or humorous contexts.

The diverse emotions and feelings expressed in taboo words reflected how students communicate casually with their peers. They felt free to express their feelings without regard for the social context, in which politeness is a consideration in conversation.

2. *Purpose of Use*

Each utterance implied a different purpose; participants reported using taboo words for different reasons, depending on their feelings.

Table 5. participants' university

Personal Reason	N	%
To expressing emotions	29	44%
To exert control	4	6%
To demonstrating solidarity	8	12%
To engage in humor	1	1%
To reacting spontaneously	17	26%
Not relevant	7	11%
	66	100%

The open-ended responses revealed that the most common personal reason for using taboo words was to express emotions, reported by 44%. This indicates that many students use such language spontaneously: 26% of responses suggest that taboo words are often used impulsively, without premeditation, especially in emotionally charged situations. Other reasons include demonstrating solidarity with 12% responses, which shows that taboo language may serve as a bonding mechanism within peer groups. A smaller number of students, which is 6%, reported using taboo words to exert control, and 1% engaged in humor. However, 11% responses were considered not relevant and excluded from thematic interpretation.

These findings suggest that emotional expression and spontaneous reactions are the primary drivers for taboo words usage among university students, which is consistent with previous studies highlighting the affective function of swearing in interpersonal communication.

Besides the data from the questionnaire, we verified the participants' responses regarding the motives behind the usage of taboo words in their daily communication through the interview, which revealed some facts that students use taboo words in daily communication regarding the experience of uttering them, the situation context of usage, and the motive behind the usage.

3. *Personal Experience of Use*

During the interview, all participants reported the frequency with which they used the taboo words in their daily communication. The utterances did not reflect gender bias, as the six students were three male and three females. Therefore, the response did not reflect that a specific gender tends to be more polite or impolite since today's communication is more open toward all genders. They used taboo words more commonly in texting than in direct conversation. Even though some of them did not directly use or utter the taboo words, they believed their peers used them daily.

S1   *Pernah, Sering juga sih.*

S2   *Pernah dong, tapi biasanya cuma pas lagi bercanda atau kesel banget gitu*

S3   *Kalo dipake itu mungkin lebih ke dipake ke orang-orang khusus gitu*

S4   *Pernah sih*

S5   *Pernah jelasnya, kayaknya gak mungkin deh anak muda jaman sekarang itu gak pake kata tabu*

S6   *Kalau percakapan sehari-hari dalam bentuk chat biasanya, jarang banget kalau di percakapan langsung*

Student 1 provided a straightforward response, stating that they had used taboo words and emphasized their frequent use. Student 2 also affirmed their use, clarifying that it usually occurs in moments of joking or intense emotion, particularly when feeling annoyed or angry. This suggests that, for some students, the use of taboo words is a situational and emotional response rather than a habitual one. Student 3 noted that they use taboo words only with certain people, suggesting a degree of selectivity or contextual judgment based on social closeness. Similarly, student 4 admitted using them, but without further elaboration, which may indicate casual or unremarkable use in their daily lives.

Student 5 stated that the use of taboo language is common among young people, even suggesting that it would be rare for someone in their generation not to use such language. This response points to a perception of the normalization of taboo language in youth culture. Student 6, on the other hand, stated that they primarily use taboo words in written communication (e.g., chat) and rarely in spoken conversations. This distinction highlights how the mode of communication (spoken and written) can influence the degree to which such words are felt.

All respondents acknowledge personal experience with the taboo word, but their patterns of use reflect individual differences in context, emotional state, social setting, and communication medium. The findings indicate that, although the use of taboo words is widespread, it is not always habitual; some students appear to use such language strategically or selectively, depending on the situation.

4. Usage Situations

All six participants reported using taboo words in specific social and emotional contexts, primarily among close friends and during casual interactions. The most frequently mentioned situations were when joking, feeling angry, being surprised, or casually chatting in relaxed settings.

S1   *Nggak ada situasi khusus, ya kayak daily conversation biasa sama teman, kayak bercanda terus marah, biasanya sih seringnya pake taboo words sama teman gitu di lingkungan kampus*

S2   *Biasanya pas bercanda dengan teman satu circle, kadang juga pas lagi emosi atau kadang pas kaget, tapi nggak asal ucap, biasanya kalo ngucapin itu ya di tongkrongan, café, kantin kampus dan lain-lain*

S3   *Situasinya lebih ke kayak bercanda atau kaget gitu, biasanya seringnya pake di kafe lebih ke kayak nongkrong, kalo dalam ruang atau pembelajaran itu biasanya sih enggak*

S4   *Biasanya marah, kesel, terus kayak bercanda gitu*

S5   *Biasanya kalo bercanda atau ngobrol biasa sama temen, biasanya sih lebih sering dipake di kampus, karena lebih sering ketemu temen di kampus*

S6   *Bisa marah bisa bercanda, tapi seringnya sih marah gitu*

Students 1, 2, and 5 reported that they frequently use taboo words in everyday conversations with friends, particularly in informal settings such as campus areas, cafés, and canteens. For example, student 1 stated, "There is no specific situation. I use them in daily conversation with friends, especially when joking or angry". Similarly, student 2 added that they do not use taboo words carelessly but only in settings such as hangouts or campus cafés, where the context allows for more casual language.

Students 3 and 4 also highlighted joking and shock as common triggers for the use of taboo words. Student 3 explicitly stated that they avoid using such language in classrooms or formal learning environments,

reflecting an awareness of situational appropriateness. Student 6 noted that they use strong language.

In summary, the findings reveal that the use of taboo words among university students is strongly tied to emotionally charged or informal situations, especially within peer group settings. Their use is not arbitrary but appears to be context-sensitive, shaped by social closeness, location, and emotional state. While students feel comfortable using taboo words in relaxed settings with friends, they tend to self-regulate in formal or academic contexts.

5. Motives for using taboo words

Participants reported using taboo words in their daily communication for various reasons, including expressing feelings, peer influence, immersion in the communication vibe, or to foster intimacy among friends.

S1	*Nggak ada alasan khusus sih, cuma ya buat bercanda buat ya sebagai ungkapan ekspresi lah*
S2	*Kadang buat ngegambarin perasaan biar lebih nendang aja,kayak kalo Cuma bilang wah itu kurang greget, tapi kalo disisipin kata tabu, ekspresinya jadi lebih cepet lebih dapet*
S3	*Iya itu tadi, tergantung sama temannya juga, karena mereka kayak teman dekat, jadi mereka ada sebuah ungkapan tersendiri gitu, panggilan tersendiri gitu, kadang orangkan nggak selalu memanggil nama, tapi kadang pakai kata-kata tabu*
S4	*Ya ikut-ikut teman aja sih biasanya*
S5	*Nggak ada alasannya sih, sebenernya ya Cuma untuk mencairkan suasana aja, sama kalo bercanda sama temen juga kadang biar kerasa lebih akrab aja*
S6	*Ya kebawa suasana aja sih kak, soalnya kalo marah kan apa aja bisa keluar gitu*

Students 1 and 5 both said they had no specific reason for using taboo words; they typically used them to lighten the mood, make conversations feel more relaxed, or joke around. For instance, student 5 noted that using taboo words can help make interactions with friends feel closer and more casual. Student 2 offered a more expressive justification, explaining that adding a taboo word amplifies emotions and makes their message more impactful. They observed that a regular word sometimes fails to capture the intensity of their feelings, whereas including a taboo word "makes it hit harder."

Student 3 described using taboo words as nicknames or familiar expressions among close friends, emphasizing that they are part of a shared in-group language. This usage demonstrates that taboo words can sometimes serve not only as expressions of emotion but also as relational markers within close-knit social circles. Student 4 indicated that peers primarily influenced their use of taboo words, while student 6 emphasized that their usage often stemmed from emotions, particularly during moments of anger.

In conclusion, the use of taboo words among these students is primarily driven by spontaneity, emotion, peer dynamics, and the informal nature of communication with friends. Instead of being deliberately planned, such language often arises naturally during social interactions and emotional expressions in relaxed settings.

Discussion

The finding indicates that students used taboo words primarily to express emotions, exert control, demonstrate solidarity, engage in humor, and react spontaneously. These findings reflect the multifunctional nature of taboo language among youth, where swearing serves not only as a linguistic tool but also as a social strategy.

The most commonly cited reason was to express emotions, particularly anger, frustration, and disappointment. Many students reported that they use taboo words when they feel emotionally overwhelmed, as a way to vent or release tension. This finding supports Jay's (2009) notion that swearing can function as emotional catharsis. Safa (2020) similarly found that male students, in particular, relied on profanity to convey strong emotions, often using harsh words to assert their feelings during conflicts.

The second function observed was to exert control, where taboo words were used to intimidate, confront, or assert authority. Some students admitted to swearing when giving commands or emphasizing disapproval in heated conversations. This reflects how profanity can dominate an interaction, as Jay (2009) describes it as an effort to gain or maintain control in social exchange. For example, phrases such as 'kick your ass' or 'shut up' are used not only for emotional expression but also to silence or overpower others, a pattern that also appeared in Safa (2020) and Hasnah et al. (2022).

The third reason was to demonstrate solidarity among peers. Several students mentioned that swearing with close friends is considered normal and even strengthens social bonds. The use of mild taboo expressions, such as anjir, asu, or gila, was reported as a shared linguistic habit that fosters group identity. This supports the sociolinguistic findings of Perangin-angin et al. (2022), who emphasized that among teenagers and undergraduates, taboo

words are often used as in-group markers to create intimacy and reduce social distance.

Humor was another prominent reason. Many participants reported using taboo words playfully and non-offensively, typically in joking or teasing others. This finding aligns with Hadiwijaya (2023), who noted that in the Surabaya speech community, certain taboo words have shifted in function, from being offensive terms to humorous expressions, depending on the context and intonation. Jay (2009) explains that humor-driven swearing can provide comic relief and strengthen relationships when both parties share an understanding of the language use.

Lastly, students reported that they swear spontaneously, particularly in response to sudden pain, surprise, or stress. These spontaneous reactions, such as blurting out sialan or damn when stubbing a toe or making a mistake, occur without premeditation. Jay (2009) categorizes such expressions as reflective language, a natural and involuntary part of emotional speech. This function was also observed by Arvian & Hadi (2024), who noted that students often used swear words as automatic responses in unpredictable daily situations.

In conclusion, these findings not only reflect the dynamic nature of language use among youth but also highlight how taboo language is shaped by emotional, social, cultural, and contextual factors. Although considered inappropriate in specific formal settings, taboo words remain prevalent and functional in students' informal discourse.

Conclusion

As this research drew on Battistella's (2005) and Jay's (2009) frameworks, it revealed that students' fundamental motives for using taboo words in their daily communication are to express emotions, exert control, demonstrate solidarity, engage in humor, and react spontaneously. Taboo words were also used to strengthen social bonds among close friends, express humor, and as spontaneous reactions to unexpected events. We knew that students used taboo words for various reasons, even though most knew that some words were inappropriate. Since it is used in casual communication among friends and may reflect one's identity and beliefs, we think it doesn't reflect how professional they will be in the future as teachers.

As the present research only focused on the motive of using taboo words among university students in a daily conversation context without considering the educational background and gender gendered usage, future researchers are recommended to dig into this field. Moreover, given the significant advances in social media and technology, further research on

taboo words in social media and online games warrants consideration as a future focus.

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