

Beyond Giving Back: Alumni Perspectives on One-Way Engagement and Reciprocal Relationships with Their Alma Mater

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ABSTRACT

Alumni engagement is commonly recognised as an important strategy for supporting higher education institutions. However, alumni relationships are often framed around the expectation that graduates should give back to their alma mater. This study explores alumni perceptions of such engagement and examines the need for a more reciprocal alumni and alma mater relationship. Drawing on qualitative interview data, the study investigates how alumni perceive institutional efforts to maintain connection after graduation and how these perceptions influence their willingness to contribute. The findings suggest that alumni do not reject contributing to their alma mater, but they are concerned when engagement is experienced as one-way, transactional, or activated mainly when institutional support is needed. Alumni emphasise the importance of close connection, recognition, continuous communication, and mutual benefit. The study contributes to alumni engagement literature by shifting attention from alumni giving to reciprocal alumni partnership. It proposes that higher education institutions should develop relationship-based engagement practices that position alumni not merely as donors or supporters, but as continuing stakeholders in institutional development.

Keywords: alumni engagement, alma mater, reciprocity, alumni relationship, higher education, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Alumni are increasingly recognised as important stakeholders in the development and sustainability of higher education institutions (Gallo, 2012; Obeng-Ofori & Kwarteng, 2020). Their role extends beyond ceremonial participation or financial donation. Alumni can support their alma mater through mentoring, professional networking, guest lectures, curriculum input, advisory roles, industry linkages, student employability initiatives, and institutional reputation building. In the current higher education environment, where institutions face growing pressure to remain competitive, relevant, and financially sustainable, alumni engagement has become an important mechanism for strengthening institutional development (Oetjen et al., 2023).

However, alumni engagement is typically defined by institutional concerns. Many higher education institutions tend to emphasise what alumni can contribute or “give back” to the university (Cownie & Gallo, 2020). Though this is reasonable, it can result in an imbalance that alumni feel are only there to support them instead of being valued by the university as a part of the community. The relationship might be transactional when the alumni are approached mainly at times of fundraising, during institutional events or when there is a specific need for assistance (Sun et al., 2007; Souto-Otero et al., 2024). This will diminish alumni commitment to the institution in the long haul because it fails to meet the expectations of alumni for recognition, connection, professional value and continued belonging (Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2021).

A broader understanding of alumni engagement requires attention to the quality of the relationship between alumni and their alma mater (Pedro et al., 2018). Alumni loyalty is not sustained merely by past affiliation. It is shaped by ongoing communication, meaningful interaction, institutional recognition, and a sense that the relationship remains valuable after graduation. In this regard, alumni engagement should not be understood only

through the idea of giving back. It should also be examined through the lens of reciprocity, where both alumni and the alma mater contribute to and benefit from the relationship (Drezner et al., 2020; Sikandar et al., 2019).

Despite the growing recognition of alumni as valuable institutional stakeholders, much of the discussion on alumni engagement remains centred on alumni contribution to the institution. This creates a gap in understanding how alumni themselves experience the relationship and what they expect from their alma mater. The issue is not whether alumni should contribute, but how institutions can build a relationship that encourages sustainable and meaningful engagement. A reciprocal perspective is therefore important because it positions alumni not merely as donors, supporters, or occasional contributors, but as partners in institutional development (Broom et al., 2023; Nemakhavhani, 2024; Wolff et al., 2025).

Accordingly, this study aims to explore alumni perceptions of one-way engagement and examine how reciprocal relationships can strengthen alumni connection and contribution to their alma mater. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how alumni experience their relationship with the institution after graduation, how they perceive institutional expectations for alumni support, and what forms of connection, recognition, and mutual benefit are needed to sustain meaningful alumni engagement. This objective is consistent with the approved study design, which focuses on identifying potential contributions between alumni and their alma mater and developing a reciprocal collaborative framework between alumni and higher education institutions.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews the literature on alumni engagement and reciprocal relationships in higher education. This is followed by the methodology, findings and discussion. The final section presents the conclusion, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recently, with the advent of the information technology era, alumni engagement has emerged as an area of interest in higher education as alumni are regarded as significant stakeholders in the development of the institution (Obeng-Ofori & Kwarteng, 2020; Oetjen et al., 2023). Alumni engagement has traditionally been linked to fundraising, institutional support and giving money. Nevertheless, this is a limited perspective of what alumni can contribute. Examples of how alumni can help their alma mater include mentoring, professional networking, guest lectures, curriculum input, industry connections, career assistance, and knowledge sharing (Chi, et al., 2012; Kelleher, 2011; Obeng-Ofori & Kwarteng, 2020). These non-financial forms of contribution are important because they strengthen the connection between higher education institutions, graduates, students, and industry.

Existing literature suggests that alumni engagement is closely linked to graduates' experiences and their continuing relationship with the institution (Sharma et al., 2026; Oetjen et al., 2023). Positive student experiences, institutional image, satisfaction, trust, and shared values may influence alumni loyalty and their willingness to remain connected after graduation (Brown & Mazzarol, 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Schlesinger et al., 2016). This implies that alumni engagement does not begin only after students graduate. Rather, it is shaped by the relationship built during their period of study and sustained through meaningful institutional efforts after graduation. When alumni feel proud of their alma mater and maintain a sense of belonging, they are more likely to support institutional activities.

The quality of the alumni and alma mater relationship is therefore central to sustaining engagement. A close connection allows alumni to continue identifying with the institution even after they have completed their studies. This connection may be built through regular communication, alumni events, professional development opportunities, recognition of alumni achievements, and meaningful involvement in university activities. When such efforts are absent, alumni may gradually feel disconnected from the institution. As a result, their willingness to participate in institutional activities may decline, not necessarily because they lack loyalty, but because the relationship is no longer actively maintained.

Another important issue is how alumni perceive the institution's intention when engagement takes place. If alumni are contacted only when the institution needs donations, event participation, industry contacts, or other

forms of support, the relationship may be perceived as transactional (Souto-Otero et al., 2024). This perception can affect alumni motivation because it gives the impression that the institution values alumni mainly for what they can provide. In contrast, when the alma mater maintains continuous contact and offers alumni opportunities for networking, visibility, lifelong learning, and professional collaboration, the relationship becomes more balanced and meaningful (Gallo, 2010; Pedro et al., 2018; Sikandar et al., 2019).

However, alumni engagement may become problematic when it is practised mainly as a one-way relationship. In many cases, institutions focus on what alumni can give back, while paying less attention to what alumni may expect or gain from the relationship. Gallo (2012) argues that the value of alumni should be recognised beyond philanthropy, while Geurink (2021) highlights concerns that alumni relationships may become single-sided when universities primarily approach alumni for favours or support. This indicates a need to move beyond a contribution-based view of alumni engagement and examine the relationship from the alumni perspective.

A reciprocal perspective offers a more balanced way of understanding alumni and alma mater relationships (Govender, 2015; Wolff et al., 2025). Reciprocity suggests that alumni engagement should involve mutual value, where alumni contribute to institutional development while also receiving recognition, connection, professional opportunities, and continued support from their alma mater (Geurink, 2021; Obeng-Ofori & Kwarteng, 2020). This view is consistent with the approved study direction, which focuses on identifying potential contributions between alumni and their alma mater and developing a reciprocal collaborative framework. In this sense, alumni should not be treated merely as donors or occasional contributors, but as continuing partners who remain part of the wider institutional community (Gallo, 2012; Wastyn, 2009).

Therefore, the literature indicates that sustainable alumni engagement depends on more than alumni loyalty or willingness to give back. It requires a relationship that is continuous, meaningful, and mutually beneficial. By examining alumni perceptions of one-way engagement and reciprocity, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how higher education institutions can strengthen long-term alumni relationships.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore alumni perceptions of engagement with their alma mater. A qualitative approach was considered suitable because the study seeks to understand alumni experiences, views, and expectations in depth rather than measure relationships between variables. Since the focus of the study is on one-way engagement and reciprocal alumni relationships, qualitative inquiry allows participants to express how they interpret their connection with the institution after graduation (Cooper et al., 2012; Levy & Petrulis, 2012).

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. This method was appropriate because it provided a flexible structure for exploring alumni views while allowing follow-up questions to be asked when new issues emerged during the interview. The interview questions focused on alumni experiences with their alma mater, their perceptions of institutional engagement, their willingness to contribute, and the forms of connection or support they expected from the institution. This approach is consistent with the approved research design, which identifies interviews as the main method for examining alumni and alma mater collaboration.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The selection focused on alumni who had some form of experience, awareness, or involvement with their alma mater after graduation. This was important because the study required participants who could provide meaningful reflections on alumni engagement, institutional connection, and reciprocal relationships. The approved study allows for a sample size ranging from 3 to 25 respondents, which is suitable for qualitative exploration where the emphasis is on depth of information rather than statistical representation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

The participants consisted of alumni who were willing to share their experiences and views regarding their relationship with the institution. Alumni who had maintained some form of engagement, such as attending alumni events, participating in institutional activities, mentoring students, offering advisory input, or maintaining informal contact with the institution, were considered relevant for the study. Individuals who had no involvement

or contact with their alma mater after graduation were excluded because they might not be able to provide sufficient information on alumni engagement practices.

The interviews were conducted in a manner that allowed participants to speak freely about their experiences. Before the interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to participate voluntarily. Their responses were treated confidentially, and the data were used only for research purposes. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process, in line with the approved ethics application.

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was suitable because it enables the researcher to identify, organise, and interpret patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Joffe, 2011; Terry et al., 2017). The analysis involved reading the interview transcripts carefully, generating initial codes, grouping related codes into potential themes, reviewing and refining the themes, and interpreting the findings in relation to the research objective.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several steps were taken. First, the researcher reviewed the transcripts repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data (Rowlands, 2021). Second, the coding process was checked to ensure consistency between participants' responses and the themes developed (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Third, the interpretation of findings was guided by the research objective and supported by relevant excerpts from the interviews. These steps helped ensure that the findings reflected the participants' views and provided a credible basis for understanding alumni perceptions of one-way engagement and reciprocal relationships with their alma mater.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the alumni interviews revealed three main themes. First, alumni still had a sense of attachment to their alma mater, but the connection became weaker after graduation. Second, alumni felt that engagement was sometimes one-way, especially when the institution contacted them mainly for support. Third, alumni preferred a more reciprocal relationship, where both alumni and the institution could benefit from the engagement.

Weakening Connection After Graduation

The first theme relates to the weakening of connection between alumni and their alma mater after graduation. The participants generally still had good memories of the institution and felt proud to be part of it. However, this feeling was not always supported by regular or meaningful contact after they had graduated. In other words, the emotional connection was still there, but the actual relationship with the institution had become less active.

One participant explained:

"Right now, I'd describe my relationship with my alma mater as 'distant but nostalgic.' I still feel a connection because of the years I spent there... but, there is no real bond."

This response demonstrates that even though graduates no longer attend the institution, they may still appreciate it, but if not kept up, the connection can be lost. Another participant shared a similar view:

"I feel connected to my former lecturers - at personal level... but disconnected from the institution as a whole."

This suggests that some alumni remain connected because of their relationship with former lecturers, rather than because of a formal alumni engagement system. The institution is still meaningful to them, but the connection depends more on personal contact.

For recent alumni, the gap after graduation was more obvious. One participant stated:

"Honestly, I feel quite far from the university now. Once we graduate and start working, we are busy adjusting to the corporate world. From there, the relationship with the university becomes distance."

This shows that the period after graduation is important. Recent graduates may still need guidance, networking and career support. When the institution does not continue the relationship at this stage, alumni may feel that the connection ends once they leave university.

Another participant also explained:

“I am still proud of my degree and where I studied. But now, I feel that my relationship with the university is not really close anymore.”

It can be seen that the above findings suggest that alumni connection does not disappear completely after graduation. However, it becomes weaker when the institution does not make regular efforts to stay connected. Alumni still feel proud of their alma mater, but they want the relationship to be maintained in a more consistent and meaningful way.

One-Way Engagement and Transactional Relationship

The second theme concerns alumni views on one-way engagement. The participants did not reject the idea of helping their alma mater. In fact, most of them were willing to contribute in different ways. However, they were concerned when the institution contacted them mainly when assistance was needed, such as for donations, sponsorships, events, surveys, guest talks or industry contacts.

One participant described this clearly:

“It is completely unbalanced. I am only contacted when the faculty needs something, usually funding for a building, sponsorship for an event, or when they need industry figures to fulfil an accreditation quota.”

The participant further added:

“If you only call me when you need a check, that isn’t engagement; it’s fundraising.”

This statement shows that alumni may feel uncomfortable when the relationship is mainly based on requests. Alumni may be willing to support the institution, but they also want to feel that the relationship is genuine and not only active when the institution needs something.

Another participant pointed out that communication with alumni was often one-way:

“Normally, the university just sends general email updates to alumni. But there is not much space for us to respond or give feedback.”

This shows that alumni engagement should not be limited to sending announcements or invitations. Alumni also want space to respond, give views and be involved in a more meaningful way.

A recent alumna also shared:

“I rarely hear from them, and when I do, it’s an automated email asking me to fill out a graduate employability survey.”

So, it appears some alumni may think that the institution is more interested in obtaining information than helping them grow after graduation. This may have an impact on the alumni's perception of the relationship.

Another participant explained:

“We get invited to annual dinners where it is always about fundraising.”

Taken together, the findings show that the issue is not that alumni do not want to contribute. Rather, alumni are concerned when the relationship feels one-sided. When alumni are seen mainly as donors, data providers or

event supporters, the engagement may become less meaningful. A more balanced approach is needed to maintain long-term alumni commitment.

Reciprocal Engagement as the Basis for Sustainable Contribution

The third theme highlights the need for reciprocal engagement. Participants felt that alumni engagement should benefit both the alumni and the institution. Reciprocity in this study does not mean that alumni expect financial return. Instead, they referred to recognition, networking, professional development, career support, access to knowledge and meaningful involvement in university activities.

One participant explained:

“As senior alumni, we are not really looking for gifts or souvenirs. What we value more is meaningful networking, access to current knowledge from the university, and opportunities to collaborate with the faculty or other alumni.”

This shows that senior alumni may value professional and intellectual opportunities more than symbolic gifts. Another participant highlighted the importance of professional development:

“I expect the alma mater to support my continuous professional development. For example, give alumni discounts or access to university library databases. This will help us with the corporate world.”

This suggests that alumni engagement can be stronger when the institution continues to support alumni learning and career growth even after graduation.

The findings also show that alumni have different needs at different career stages. A recent alumna stated:

“At this point in my career, I think the university can help by connecting us with more experienced alumni, especially those who are already managers or directors. It would be useful for young alumni like us to get some guidance from them.”

This indicates that alumni engagement should not be the same for all alumni. Recent graduates may need mentoring and career guidance, while more senior alumni may prefer networking, collaboration or advisory roles.

Participants also explained that alumni contribution should not be limited to money. One participant stated:

“I am willing to give back, but maybe not through money. I think my time and experience can help the university more.”

Another participant shared:

“I don’t have the financial capacity to make large donations yet, but I am eager to give back my time.”

These views show that alumni can contribute in many non-financial ways, such as mentoring students, giving career talks, reviewing curriculum, offering internship opportunities, sharing industry experience, supporting research or joining advisory activities.

However, such contribution is more likely to continue when alumni feel that their involvement is appreciated and useful.

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Key Findings from Alumni Perspectives on Institutional Engagement

Theme	Key finding
Weakening connection after graduation	Alumni still feel proud of the institution, but the relationship becomes weaker without regular engagement.

One-way engagement	Alumni are concerned when they are contacted mainly because the institution needs support.
Reciprocal engagement	Alumni are more willing to contribute when the relationship provides mutual benefit, recognition and meaningful involvement.

The findings suggest that alumni engagement should move beyond the idea of simply asking alumni to “give back”. Alumni are willing to support their alma mater, but they also want the relationship to be continuous, balanced and meaningful. The institution should therefore see alumni not only as former students or potential donors, but also as partners who can contribute to student and institutional development.

Figure 1. Proposed Framework for Transitioning from Transactional to Reciprocal Alumni Engagement

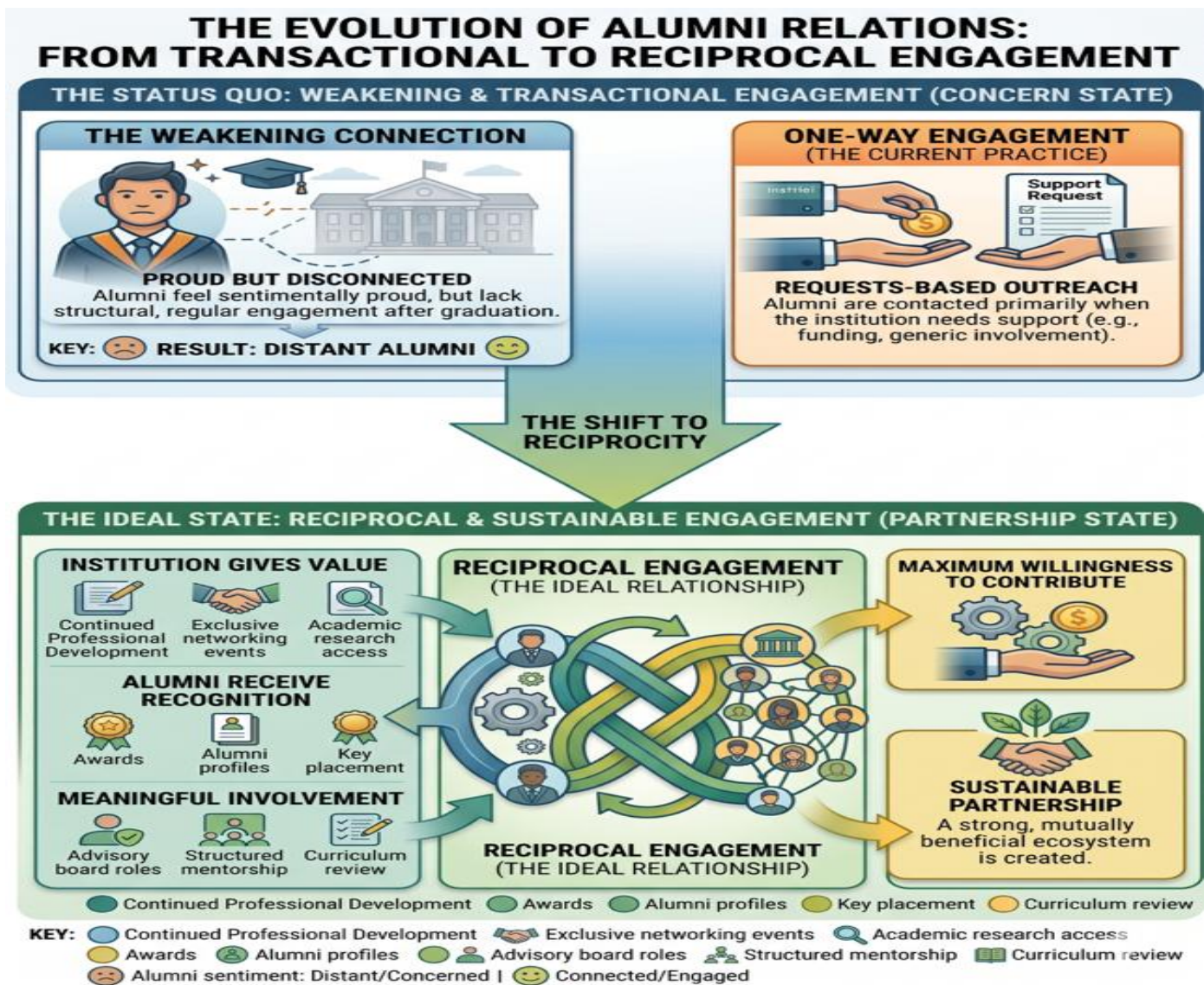


Figure 1 presents a proposed framework derived from the study findings. The framework illustrates how alumni relationships often evolve from weakening connection and one-way engagement towards a reciprocal partnership model. It highlights the importance of institutional value creation, alumni recognition, and meaningful involvement in fostering sustainable alumni engagement and long-term contribution.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on the perceptions of alumni engagement with their home institution, especially regarding the issue of one-way engagement and the desire to have a more balanced engagement with their home institution. Results indicate that alumni continue to appreciate the link between their service and the institution and are still

proud of their education. This relationship can be weakened, however, after graduation, as there is limited communication, no formal interaction and few meaningful connections for the alumni to stay engaged.

The study also revealed that alumni are willing to give their alma mater. They are worried, however, when engagement becomes more of an occurrence at the moments when the institution must be engaged in some way, for example, by making a donation, by providing a speaker, by responding to a survey, by offering sponsorship, or by having a contact in industry. This indicates that the problem isn't that alumni don't want to give back. Instead, graduates seek a more authentic, ongoing and equitable connection. If only when an institution needs something, the relationship can be regarded as one-way and less meaningful contact with alumni.

The findings further suggest that alumni engagement should move beyond financial giving. Alumni can contribute through their time, experience, professional knowledge, industry networks, mentoring, curriculum input, internship opportunities, advisory roles, and career talks. These forms of contribution are valuable because they can support student development and strengthen the link between the university and the workplace. However, alumni contribution is more likely to be sustained when the institution also provides value to alumni, such as recognition, networking opportunities, professional development, access to knowledge, and continued connection.

Generally, this study highlights the importance of developing a reciprocal alumni and alma mater relationship. Alumni should not be viewed merely as former students, donors, or occasional supporters. They should be recognised as continuing members of the university community and as partners in institutional development. For higher education institutions, this means that alumni engagement should be planned as a long-term relationship-building process, not only as an activity carried out when support is needed. A more balanced approach can help strengthen alumni loyalty, increase meaningful participation, and create mutual value for both alumni and the institution.

In practical terms, the institution may consider establishing more structured alumni engagement initiatives based on alumni career stage and area of expertise. Recent alumni may benefit from mentoring, career guidance, and links to senior alumni. Mid-career alumni may value professional development and networking opportunities. Senior alumni may prefer advisory roles, industry-academic collaboration, or opportunities to contribute strategically to the institution. Such an approach would allow alumni engagement to become more relevant and meaningful to different groups of alumni.

For future research, this study can be extended by involving a larger number of alumni from different programmes, faculties, or institutions. Future studies may also compare the views of recent alumni, mid-career alumni, and senior alumni to better understand how expectations differ across career stages. In addition, future research could include the perspectives of university administrators or alumni officers to examine how institutions design and manage alumni engagement. A mixed-method study may also be useful to test whether factors such as sense of belonging, institutional communication, recognition, and perceived reciprocity influence alumni willingness to contribute. These future directions would help strengthen understanding of how higher education institutions can build more sustainable and mutually beneficial alumni relationships.

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