Article

Leadership and work engagement: Exploring explanatory mechanisms

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Abstract

Construct proliferation in the leadership field raises questions concerning parsimony and whether we should focus on joint mechanisms of leadership styles, rather than the differences between them. In this theoretical research article, we propose that positive leadership styles translate into similar leader behaviors on the work floor that influence employee work engagement through a number of shared pathways. We take a deductive approach and review several established theories as well as relevant up-to-date empirical work from a bird's-eye view to generate a general framework. We introduce a model with three processes (one direct process and two indirect processes) and five pathways (practical, motivational, affective, cognitive, and behavioral). With regard to the indirect processes, we propose that work characteristics (material pathway) and psychological need satisfaction (intrapersonal motivational pathway) mediate the relationship between positive leadership styles and engagement. Regarding the direct interpersonal process, we propose that leaders directly influence employee engagement through three pathways: emotional contagion (affective interpersonal pathway), social exchange (cognitive interpersonal pathway), and role modeling (behavioral interpersonal pathway). Our parsimonious research model furthers the integration of different theoretical viewpoints as well as underscores joint mechanisms with regard to the effect of positive leadership styles. Practically speaking, this article also provides insight into which processes leaders can work on to stimulate employee work engagement through progressive policies and work practices.

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Introduction

Leaders provide a competitive advantage for firms (Ireland and Hitt, 1999). As a consequence, organizations invest in leadership courses based on the idea that it will help leaders to increase the productivity of their employees (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018; Gottfredson and Aguinis, 2017). Within these developments, there is more and more room for discussions concerning employee well-being, and specifically work engagement, as this is also related to interesting firm outcomes. For example, work engagement is associated with employee health and turnover intentions (Halbesleben, 2010), a service climate and customer loyalty (Salanova et al., 2005), organizational commitment (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004), taking personal initiative and extra-role behavior (Bakker et al., 2004; Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008), as well as employee performance (Halbesleben, 2010; Robertson and Cooper, 2011; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). This shows that employee well-being and productivity can go hand in hand. Put more strongly, work engagement might be a critical driver of business success (Choi et al., 2015; Strom et al., 2014). The most agreed-upon conceptualization of work engagement indicates that it is a construct with three dimensions, including a behavioral-energetic component (i.e. vigor), an emotional component (i.e. dedication), and a cognitive component (i.e. absorption) (see Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010, for an overview). Leaders can influence employee work engagement not only through changing work conditions but also directly through inspiring, connecting, and strengthening their employees (Schaufeli, 2015). In addition, several positive leadership styles have been linked to employee work engagement in longitudinal studies (Biggs et al., 2014; Chughtai et al., 2014; Fletcher, 2016; Li and Liao, 2014; Mehmood et al., 2016).

Of these positive leadership styles, transformational leadership is the most popular and well-researched leadership style to date (see Gardner et al., 2010). It finds its theoretical basis in the full range model of leadership—which also includes transactional and laissez-faire leadership—and is comprised of four behavioral dimensions, that is, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration (Avolio et al., 1999). Another leadership concept is charismatic leadership, which is based on transformational leadership. Charismatic leaders instill a sense of purpose, which can lead to followers feeling energized and identifying with the leader's vision (Avolio et al., 1999). Furthermore, authentic leadership is also based on research on transformational leadership and differentiates between "pseudo" transformational leaders and authentic leaders (Avolio et al., 2009; Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999). Authentic leadership has four dimensions, that is, self-awareness, balanced processing of information, relational transparency toward followers, and internalized moral perspective (Neider and Schriesheim, 2011). Recently, instrumental leadership was introduced as an addition to the full range model of leadership (Antonakis and House, 2014). This leadership style focuses on leader behaviors related to environmental and outcome monitoring, formation and implementation of strategy, and path-goal facilitation of employees (Antonakis and House, 2014; Bormann and Rowold, 2018).

Several other leadership concepts have been developed as well, such as ethical leadership which focuses on normative behavior (Brown et al., 2005), servant leadership with a focus on the needs of others (Liden et al., 2014), and empowering leadership with a

focus on employee empowerment (Tuckey et al., 2012). Most recently, concepts like humble leadership (Walters and Diab, 2016), benevolent leadership (Cenkci and Özçelik, 2015), and engaging leadership (Schaufeli, 2015) have surfaced. In other words, a host of positive leadership styles emerged that include benevolent leadership behaviors that are all supposed to foster employee motivation, performance, and well-being.

This rapid growth of proposed positive leadership styles also leads scholars to urge for an integration and an investigation of construct redundancy in leadership constructs (Derue et al., 2011; Rowold et al., 2015; Yukl, 2002). Moreover, positive leadership styles may not be so different after all (see, for example, Bormann and Rowold, 2018; Gottfredson and Aguinis, 2017; Rowold and Borgmann, 2013), which makes synthesis even more important.

Despite several attempts to develop theoretical models on leadership and employee outcomes in leadership literature (see "Theoretical models on leadership and employee outcomes" below), no integrated process model of *multiple positive leadership styles* (and the translation of these styles into specific leader behavior) with regard to their *shared effect* on employee *work engagement*, based on *theory*, exists. Yet, meta-analyses with several positive leadership styles and leader behaviors indicate that there may be some construct redundancy (Banks et al., 2016, 2018; Derue et al., 2011; Hoch et al., 2018; Rowold et al., 2015). In addition, several positive leadership styles have relatively large correlations with work engagement (Banks et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018), which indicates the possibility of shared or common ground with regard to their effect on employee work engagement. Indeed, scholars have argued that what is missing in the leadership field is "a detailed description of well-established theories that would help to clarify the processes underlying leadership constructs" (Bormann and Rowold, 2018: 154). With this article, we intend to do just that: to provide insight into the shared pathways that underlie different leadership constructs that propose to have a positive influence on employees. Instead of focusing on explaining general underlying processes aimed at different employee outcomes, we aim to focus specifically on employee work engagement. The reasons are both practical and theoretical: (1) a specific outcome helps to identify relevant theoretical work; (2) employee work engagement has been related to multiple positive outcomes for employees and their organizations: it is related to positive health consequences for employees (Halbesleben, 2010), as well as higher productivity (Halbesleben, 2010; Robertson and Cooper, 2011; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007) and financial gains for companies (Wiley, 2010), which makes it a highly relevant and practical construct; (3) there are several theoretical models explaining work engagement from different angles that can and should be considered together; and (4) connections between positive leadership styles and employee work engagement have only recently been theorized (see, for example, Carasco-Saul et al., 2015; Schaufeli, 2015). We aim to build on this work.

This leads us to the purpose of our study. We aim to identify some of the underlying or *joint mechanisms* of positive leadership styles with regard to their possible effect on employee work engagement. We wish to distill exactly *how* leaders characterized by positive leadership styles influence their followers' work engagement. We will start with proposing that these leaders engage in *similar behaviors* when it comes to stimulating employee work engagement. Then we will elaborate on the possible pathways through

which these shared behaviors might operate. To achieve this aim, we will first discuss research on leadership construct redundancy and overlap, after which we conduct a *deductive analysis* based on theoretical insights from the human resource management (HRM) field. We will bring several theoretical views together, to establish a general framework that identifies multiple pathways through which leaders—characterized by different positive leadership styles, yet perhaps similar behaviors—can influence their employees' work engagement. In addition, we will formulate research propositions to guide future research.

The aim of this study is twofold: (1) we address construct proliferation with regard to positive leadership styles and therefore indicate that they may share overlap in terms of their translation into leader behavior on the work floor and (2) we propose an advanced mediation model of leadership and its effect on employee work engagement. Therefore, we contribute to the field in several ways, both theoretical and practical. First of all, we bring together several rich theoretical perspectives that have been studied individually, yet not combined. Second, this review may serve as an introduction to theoretical underpinnings with regard to work engagement. Third, we ensure parsimony in the field by identifying joint mechanisms with regard to positive leadership styles and their practical translation into leader behavior when it comes to stimulating employee work engagement. Fourth, and practically speaking, our research model shows several pathways through which leaders may influence employee work engagement. Last, our overview also highlights the role of *leader work engagement*. This information can help practitioners develop a clear view on which actions can be easily taken with regard to the engagement levels of leaders and their employees.

Theoretical models on leadership and employee outcomes

There are a couple of (meta-analytic) studies that focused on bringing several pathways between leadership and employee outcomes together in one framework. For example, two meta-analytic studies investigated the effect of leadership on employee *performance* and focused on multiple mediation pathways. Ng (2017) investigated one leadership style, that is, transformational leadership, and empirically tested several theory-driven mechanisms that influence employee performance: affective, motivational, identification, social exchange, and justice enhancement mechanisms. Gottfredson and Aguinis (2017) investigated several *leader behaviors* related to transactional and transformational leadership and tested underlying mechanisms with regard to performance. One of their findings was the importance of Leader–Member Exchange (LMX).

Yukl (2012) also focused on leader behaviors with regard to employee performance and developed a hierarchical taxonomy with four meta-categories, that is, task-oriented, relations-oriented, change-oriented, and external. An earlier version of this model (Yukl, 2002) was tested with a series of meta-analytic structural equation models, which showed that multiple leadership behaviors (i.e. transformational, transactional, consideration, initiating structure, and laissez-faire leadership) can indeed be explained by three meta-categories of leadership, that is, relation-, task-, and change-oriented (Borgmann et al., 2016).

A third theoretical study also focused on leader behavior and identified several pathways on different organizational levels (i.e. an individual/dyadic level, a team/

organizational level, and an environmental/work system level) that lead to employee *health* (Wegge et al., 2014): (1) person-focused action, (2) system-focused action, (3) moderating action, (4) climate control and identity management, and (5) modeling.

Fourth, Derue et al. (2011) propose a detailed model that explains how leader traits and behaviors influence leader effectiveness. First, they describe two general processes through which leader traits and characteristics (i.e. demographics, task competence, and interpersonal attributes) influence leadership effectiveness directly, that is, through attribution processes and identification processes. Second, the authors propose that leader traits and characteristics influence four (mediating) categories of leader behaviors that then lead to leadership effectiveness, that is, task-oriented, relational-oriented (including servant leadership), change-oriented (including transformational and charismatic). and passive leadership. With our review, we focus in detail on explaining the last step in their model, that is, the relationship between leader(ship) behavior and a specific "leadership effectiveness outcome," that is, employee work engagement.

Last, concentrating on leadership *styles* and employee work engagement, Carasco-Saul et al. (2015) established a framework with regard to the effect of a couple of positive leadership styles on employee work engagement. They made a distinction between the possible explanatory mechanisms for transformational leadership on one hand, and authentic, charismatic, and ethical leadership on the other hand. According to their model, transformational leaders provide vision, emotional support, and recognition for contributions. They seem to engage their followers most when they boost their optimism, responsibility, meaningfulness, and innovative behavior. Engagement decreases when the transformational leader's perception of the follower's characteristics seems to be less favorable than the self-evaluation of the follower. Authentic, charismatic, and ethical leaders are theorized to stimulate engagement through role clarification, the organizational culture, empowerment, identification with the supervisor, and psychological ownership (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015).

Despite this previous work on leadership and employee outcomes, no *integrated* theoretical mediation model of positive leadership *styles or related behaviors* and their *shared effect* on employee *work engagement* exists. We will aim to bridge this gap and thereby support future research in this area. Below, we will elaborate on our predictor "positive leader behavior" and why we propose that the overarching positive leadership styles are perhaps more similar than usually posited in the literature. This is also why we propose that positive leader behaviors shared across different leadership styles may result in increases in employee work engagement through similar mechanisms.

Positive leadership styles

In the introduction, we spoke of several "positive leadership styles." Despite giving examples, e.g. transformational, authentic, ethical, empowering leadership, this remains somewhat vague, which is typical for the leadership field. With the term "positive leadership styles," our goal is to lump together all the "leadership styles" that have been developed with the underlying assumption that they *positively* influence employee outcomes. This is in line with research concerning the "model of positive orientation" of organizations, who are supposed to be "positive in five main elements of its configuration," that

is, "leadership, culture, strategy, structure and human resources" (Zbierowski and Góra, 2014: 86).

We are fully aware that "positive leadership" resembles a tautology by having the intended effect in the name of the construct, which is in fact a pervasive problem in the leadership field (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Mackenzie, 2003). In fact, most positive leadership styles seem to have problems with their construct operationalization, since they are defined by their outcomes rather than clear leader behaviors or core processes (van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). In addition, these so-called positive leadership styles feed into the hero myth of leadership (Yukl, 1999), that some scholars have even named "prozac for practitioners" (Alvesson and Einola, 2019: 392; Collinson, 2012). Even though these are important issues that the leadership field needs to contend with, at least the *intended* positive outcomes of the positive leadership styles clearly distinguish them from "negative" leadership styles, for example, abusive or destructive leadership (Schyns et al., 2019). Since we aim to propose mechanisms of all leadership styles that are supposed to have positive effects on employee well-being, this big categorization between "good" proposed outcomes and "negative" proposed outcomes may be enough of a distinction for the purpose of this article.

As a foundation of this research article, we propose that all these so-called different positive leadership styles are actually quite similar in terms of behavior when it comes to their effect on employee work engagement, especially when one investigates theoretical underpinnings, meta-analytical research on redundancy, and research on the actual leader behavior on the work floor (see "Overlap between positive leadership styles" below).

Overlap between positive leadership styles

Theoretical indications of overlap. Although positive leadership styles each has its own specific focus, theoretical comparative research also suggests a common ground between several popular positive leadership styles, that is, transformational, servant, authentic, and ethical leadership. These popular positive leadership styles seem to have elements in common based on their theoretical basis: for example, a moral perspective from the leader, role modeling behavior, supporting employee self-determination, and positive employee exchanges in their respective founding theories (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Brown and Treviño, 2006; Gregory Stone, Russell, and Patterson, 2004; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Relatedly, Rowold and Borgmann (2013) examined the convergent and discriminant validity of transformational and transactional leadership, consideration and initiating structure, and LMX. Different perspectives were taken into account (follower and self-ratings), yet "all leadership constructs were to some degree convergent" (p. 34). More specifically, one (theoretically) shared aspect of these leadership styles may be an active leader-led process of interaction with respective followers. In later research, Bormann and Rowold (2018) reviewed several positive leadership styles in order to assess construct proliferation. They focused on initiating structure, consideration, and transformational, transactional, laissez-faire, ethical, charismatic, servant, authentic, and instrumental leadership and conclude that "leadership research does indeed suffer from proliferation" (p. 155).

We propose that it is likely that other positive leadership styles have elements in common as well, especially when these positive leadership styles are translated to leader behavior on the work floor (see "Leader behavior" below).

Conceptual overlap and other issues. Besides overlap and the possibility of construct redundancy, there are a number of conceptual issues with regard to positive leadership styles. Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013), for example, elaborated on problems with regard to charismatic-transformational leadership, yet we believe that many of the issues raised apply to a number of (or maybe all?) positive leadership styles. First of all, the authors propose that leadership style construct names (e.g. transformational, ethical, authentic leadership) seem to confound the concept with its intended effects. Second, almost all positive leadership styles include several dimensions within their conceptualization, yet theoretical foundations does not seem to indicate how these dimensions relate to one another, or how they distinctly influence processes or outcomes. Third, empirical research suggests a disconnect between leadership theories proposing certain dimensional structures of leadership styles and the measurements of these styles on the work floor (see, for example, van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). Similar concerns have recently been uttered with regard to authentic leadership (see, for example, Alvesson and Einola, 2019) and may be indicative of pervasive problems concerning definitions and identifying essential core processes of different leadership styles. These problems may mask some of the actual differences between positive leadership styles.

Some scholars have been working on solutions with regard to these problems. For example, some leadership research focuses on contextual elements of leadership, which avoids falling into the hero-myth trap (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Yukl, 1999). These scholars, for example, study environmental factors like uncertainty (de Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014) or the role of followership (Blom and Alvesson, 2015; Crossman and Crossman, 2011; Stam et al., 2010a; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Other research focuses more on foundational elements of, for example, transformational leadership (i.e. vision provision) and aims at clearing up some of the conceptual confusion (see, for example, van Knippenberg and Stam, 2014; Stam et al., 2010a, 2010b). In addition, scholars have attempted to rectify the measurement issues by developing a scale that allows for respondents to indicate too little versus too much of a certain behavior. This allows for the exploration of curvilinear effects and boundary conditions for certain leader traits and behaviors (Vergauwe et al., 2018). Although this research will certainly help the field move forward, quantitative work on the current state of affairs in leadership research also indicates a large amount of overlap between different positive leadership styles (see below).

Quantitative indications of overlap. Besides theoretical considerations, quantitative meta-analytic studies on positive leadership styles seem to indicate some construct redundancy or overlap. For instance, Derue et al. (2011) showed that transformational leadership "has a significant relational component to it and overlaps conceptually and empirically with both initiating structure and consideration" (p. 38). Another meta-analytic study that also included transactional leadership, laissez-faire as well as LMX came to the same conclusion: there is considerable overlap between these leadership constructs

(Rowold et al., 2015). A recent meta-analysis investigated more leadership styles and found that ethical, authentic, and servant leadership all correlate highly with transformational leadership (Hoch et al., 2018). Furthermore, this study points out that servant leadership is the only non-redundant concept that does not overlap with transformational leadership. The authors conclude that the utility of authentic and ethical leadership is low, except when analyses are using specific outcomes, such as affective commitment or trust for authentic leadership, and deviance and job satisfaction with regard to ethical leadership (Hoch et al., 2018). In addition, the authors found high correlations between these four positive leadership styles and LMX, illustrating that they are all related to leader's positive social exchange with employees. This is confirmed in a large study from Gottfredson and Aguinis (2017) that focused on employee performance. In this article, the authors analyzed several meta-analyses using MASEM, a method that combines meta-analysis and structural equation modeling. They found that several leader behaviors lead to employee performance with LMX as the most dominant mediator category. Another meta-analysis confirms that authentic leadership is highly related to transformational leadership, which suggests construct redundancy as well (Banks et al., 2016). In later research, Banks et al. (2018) utilized meta-analytic correlations to investigate leader behaviors in several categories (i.e. task-oriented, passive, relational, inspirational, values-based, and moral behaviors). They found high correlations between the different leadership behaviors, as well as high correlations between values-based and moral behaviors with traditional outcome variables (e.g. LMX). Their results show the prevalence of construct redundancy within the leadership domain, as well as the possibility of endogeneity bias contaminating correlations between leadership variables and popular outcomes.

Leader behavior. Furthermore, we propose that *all* positive leadership styles, even those not researched, share considerable overlap when translated to the behavioral and practical domain. More specifically, we posit that "good" leaders characterized by one or the other "positive leadership style," behave quite similarly on the work floor. Research, for example, indicates that simple behavior such as merely listening has positive effects on psychological safety (Castro et al., 2018), which is, of course, related to work engagement (Kahn, 1990). Especially, communication behaviors are likely shared across all leaders characterized by one or the other leadership style, since research indicates that leaders spend most of their time communicating (in)directly with employees (Wajcman and Rose, 2011). Indeed, leadership scholars have posited before that leadership is mainly a relational endeavor (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Specific leader behaviors aimed at improving the relationship quality with employees through communication are probably shared across all leaders who score high on one or the other leadership style. In addition, research shows that merely "liking" the leader is important, and even explains additional variance over LMX, for several employee outcomes (Dulebohn et al., 2017). In a similar vein, researchers showed that interpersonal affect may indeed be a potential bias in followers' leadership ratings (Rowold and Borgmann, 2014). We propose that very simple leader behaviors (e.g. related to communication) are probably shared over all positive leadership styles. Consequently, the effects these leaders have on employee engagement may run more or less through the same general mechanisms we propose in this review.

Taken together, it seems that—despite theoretical differences—(theoretical and empirical) research indicates that several positive leadership styles may show considerable overlap not only with regard to their translation into actual leader behavior, their effects, but also with regard to mediating constructs associated with work engagement. Therefore, the current article sets out to propose an overarching research model, aimed at identifying shared underlying mechanisms, specifically focused on employee work engagement as an outcome. In essence, we propose that leaders who have an engaged workforce behave more alike than different and with this research article, we dive into the possible pathways in which these leaders influence the work engagement levels of their workforce.

Leadership and engagement

Positive leadership styles have been related to various indicators of employee well-being such as employee work engagement, which can be defined as a "persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behavior" (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004: 295). Based on the most widely used conceptualization of work engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010), it is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Vigor is related to high energy levels and mental resilience, dedication is described as a sense of significance, inspiration, pride, and enthusiasm. Absorption, finally, is characterized by being happily engrossed in the work, which can be seen as a pervasive flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

However, there are also other conceptualizations of work engagement, one of which can be found in Kahn's (1990) work. He defined *personal engagement* as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles," in addition, he explains that "in work engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (Kahn, 1990: 694). Based on this theory, work engagement is a motivational concept, since employees allocate personal resources to their work tasks (Christian et al., 2011). According to Kahn (1990), work engagement means that employees are (1) physically involved, (2) cognitively vigilant, and (3) empathically connected to other people on the work floor. Some scholars worked on this conceptualization and propose therefore that work engagement has three dimensions: a physical, cognitive, and emotional component (May et al., 2004).

Macey and Schneider (2008), on the contrary, view engagement more broadly (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010) and make a distinction between psychological state engagement, behavioral engagement, and trait engagement (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Psychological state engagement is more related to the concept of work engagement described above, whereas behavioral engagement is more related to extra-role behavior, and trait engagement has to do with positive views of life and work.

Several longitudinal studies have shown that different positive leadership styles act as an antecedent of work engagement, for example, ethical leadership (Chughtai et al., 2014), authentic leadership (Mehmood et al., 2016), and transformational leadership (Salanova et al., 2011). Moreover, positive leadership styles have been shown to enhance employees' engagement not only directly but also indirectly through increasing job resources and decreasing job demands (Schaufeli, 2015; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

In the following section, we will bring together several theoretical developments in the field of HRM and organizational behavior that can explain exactly how leaders characterized by different positive leadership styles may influence employee work engagement. Based on these theoretical developments, we will propose an overarching research model based on two processes: an *indirect effect* through proposed shared mediators, and *a direct effect* from leader work engagement to employee work engagement. These effects can be qualified through five different pathways: a *material pathway* (through work characteristics: Job Demands-Resources Theory), a *motivational* pathway (based on Self-Determination Theory, SDT), a *behavioral* pathway (based on Social Learning Theory, SLT), a *cognitive* pathway (based on Social Exchange Theory, SET), and an *affective* pathway (through emotional contagion).

Theoretical considerations

First, we base ourselves on the Job Demands–Job Resources Theory (JD-R; Demerouti et al., 2001) to substantiate the material pathway. In the JD-R Model, two categories of work characteristics combine to have an effect on work engagement; for example, job demands and job resources. A positive balance with regard to job resources may then lead to increased work engagement.

Second, SDT (Deci and Ryan, 2008) emphasizes the importance of psychological need satisfaction. It states that three psychological needs, for example, autonomy, relatedness, and competence, are important for the development of autonomous, intrinsic motivation at work, which influences work engagement as well. This constitutes the motivational pathway.

Third, SLT (Bandura, 1986) is the theoretical rationale for the behavioral pathway. SLT proposes that leaders influence employees through behavioral modeling (i.e. vicarious learning). This is why leader behavior (and leader engagement) might play a role in employee engagement as well.

Fourth, according to SET (Shore et al., 2006), there is an exchange relationship between the (immediate) supervisor and the employee. They constitute an interdependent dyad in which, for instance, favors and support are reciprocated.

Fifth, emotional contagion is the basis for the affective pathway between positive leadership styles and engagement. Therefore, we posit that positive experiences at work, including the experience of work engagement (Shirom, 2011), may be contagious in the workplace.

In order to further explore the relationship between positive leadership styles and engagement, we will introduce a research model based on these five pathways (see Figure 1). In essence, we argue that a leader can have a direct and an indirect impact on employee's work engagement. Two *indirect mechanisms* can be distinguished: (1) a material pathway in which the influence leaders have on work characteristics is recognized (i.e. JD-R Model) and (2) a motivational pathway that constitutes of *intrapersonal processes* based on psychological need satisfaction (i.e. SDT). Furthermore, we propose that leaders influence employee engagement *directly* by (3) a cognitive pathway concerning SET, (4) a behavioral pathway involving SLT, and (5) an affective pathway through emotional contagion. A summary of these proposed pathways with regard to their categorization and theoretical underpinnings can be found in Table 1. Below we elaborate on each pathway separately.
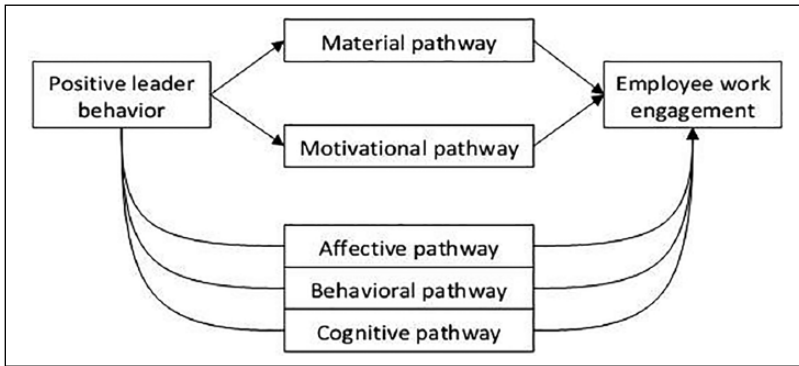
Figure 1. Research model: five pathways influence employee work engagement. First, there are two indirect, mediating, pathways: (1) the material pathway (an indirect process concerning work characteristics) based on Job Demands–Resources Theory and (2) the motivational pathway (an indirect interpersonal process concerning psychological need satisfaction) based on Self-Determination Theory. Second, we propose three direct pathways: (3) the affective pathway (a direct process through emotional contagion), (4) a behavioral pathway (a direct process through social learning), and (5) a cognitive pathway (a direct process through social exchange).

Job demands–resources model: influencing work engagement through work characteristics

The job demands–resources (JD-R) model describes two broad categories of work characteristics: job demands and job resources. Job demands are "aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs" (Demerouti et al., 2001: 501), while job resources are "aspects of the job that may do any of the following: (a) be functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs; (c) stimulate personal growth and development" (Demerouti et al., 2001: 501). These two categories of work characteristics spark two processes at work: a stress process in which excessive demands and lack of resources may lead to burnout and a motivational process in which an abundance of job resources (regardless of the amount of job demands) may lead to work engagement.

A lot of research has been performed on the JD-R model, for an overview, see Taris and Schaufeli (2016). Based on the JD-R model, leadership has traditionally been seen as a job resource, where it has been classified as supervisor support (see, for example, van Gelderen and Bik, 2016). However, it can also be argued that leadership should be regarded as an independent element in the JD-R model, since leaders may actually alter job demands and resources: one of the tasks of (team) leaders is to allocate job demands and resources to their employees in such a way that their motivation, health, and productivity are ensured. Leadership therefore has "the effect of optimizing working conditions for engagement" (Tuckey et al., 2012: 15), not only through reducing the workload, but particularly by "strengthening the positive effect of a work context in which both cognitive demands and cognitive resources were high" (Tuckey et al., 2012: 15). Engaging

Table 1. Research proposition summary.

Proposition	Pathway	Influence	Source of change	Theoretical origins	Authors
1	Material	Indirect	Organizational	JD-R model	Demerouti et al. (2001)
2	Motivational	Indirect	Intrapersonal	SDT Psychological conditions	Deci and Ryan (2008) Kahn (1990)
3	Affective	Direct	Interpersonal	Emotional contagion	Hatfield et al. (1994)
4	Behavioral	Direct	Interpersonal	Social learning theory	Bandura (1977)
5	Cognitive	Direct	Interpersonal	Social exchange theory	Shore et al. (2006)

JD-R: job demands–resources; SDT: Self-Determination Theory.

leadership has indeed been proposed as yet another positive leadership style (Schaufeli, 2015). This study suggests that engaging leadership, which consists of inspiring, strengthening, and connecting followers, has an indirect influence on engagement through increasing job resources and decreasing job demands. Unfortunately, this study used a cross-sectional design, which precludes the identification of any causal direction. However, based on JD-R theory, we do propose

Research proposition 1: Leaders influence work engagement indirectly through diminishing job demands and enhancing job resources.

Intrapersonal process: psychological need satisfaction

As explained above, SDT focuses on the importance of psychological need satisfaction (Deci and Ryan, 2008). Autonomy is defined as "experiencing a sense of volition and psychological freedom" when carrying out an activity (Van Den Broeck et al., 2010: 981), while relatedness refers to being connected to others, for example, "feeling loved and cared for" (Van Den Broeck et al., 2010: 981). Competence can finally be described as "succeeding at optimally challenging tasks and attaining desirable outcomes" (Baard et al., 2004: 2046) or "feeling effective" (Van Den Broeck et al., 2010: 981). Need satisfaction is a relevant construct in the context of the relationship between positive leadership styles and engagement, since it is related to engagement (e.g. Schreurs et al., 2014; Van Den Broeck et al., 2008): the satisfaction of employees' basic psychological needs fosters an affective-motivational state of work engagement.

Moreover, several studies confirm that need satisfaction mediates the relationship between positive leadership and work engagement. First, competence and relatedness need satisfaction mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement (Kovjanic et al., 2013), while psychological need satisfaction (as a composite construct) mediated the effect of servant leadership on engagement (van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Furthermore, transformational leadership was related to more

need fulfillment, especially when followers' need for leadership was high (Breevaart et al., 2015). We propose that this mechanism might be shared across several positive leadership styles.

Kahn's theory on engagement

The relevance of SDT for employee engagement can also be illustrated by Kahn's (1990) theory. According to Kahn (1990), three psychological conditions are important in order to achieve engagement, for example, on the shop floor: psychological meaningfulness, availability, and safety. *Psychological meaningfulness* is defined as "a feeling that one is receiving a return on investments of one's self in a currency of physical, cognitive, or emotional energy" (pp. 703–704). This is experienced when employees feel worthwhile, useful, and valuable. According to Kahn (1990), both interpersonal and professional elements contribute to psychological meaningfulness, which can be enhanced through task characteristics (e.g. task variety, autonomy, creativity, skill utilization), role characteristics (i.e. formal position, identity, fit with self-image, status, and influence), and the nature of work interactions (e.g. feeling of dignity, self-appreciation, and a sense of value). Psychological meaningfulness resembles two psychological needs from SDT: the need for autonomy and the need for relatedness. The former includes meaningful task characteristics and the latter meaningful social relationships. When leaders foster meaningfulness (and satisfy the need for autonomy and relatedness), they are likely to enhance engagement. This is illustrated by research that found that psychological meaningfulness (Aryee et al., 2012) and perceptions of meaning in work (Ghadi et al., 2013) mediate the relationship between positive leadership styles (i.e. transformational leadership) and work engagement.

Psychological availability is defined as "the sense of having the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to personally engage at a particular moment" (p. 714). According to Kahn (1990), there are four types of distractions from work; a lack of physical energy (physical resources) or emotional energy (emotional resources), insecurity (based on a lack of self-confidence, self-consciousness, and an ambivalence regarding the fit with the organization and its purpose), and outside life (being too preoccupied). Conceptually, psychological availability is related to the need of competence, that is, succeeding at optimally challenging tasks and attaining desirable outcomes (Baard et al., 2004) and feeling effective (Van Den Broeck et al., 2010). This psychological condition might not be easy for a leader to influence, since other non-work-related variables influence psychological availability. However, leaders may create a resourceful and stimulating work environment. Furthermore, leaders may enhance the levels of self-efficacy of their followers, that is, "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required in managing prospective situations" (Bandura, 1997: 2), which, in fact, may be seen as self-perceived competence. Research does indicate that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between leadership and engagement (Salanova et al., 2011; Tripiana and Llorens, 2015).

Finally, *psychological safety* is defined by Kahn (1990) as being "able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career" (p. 708). Other scholars define psychological safety in terms of feeling safe to

engage in interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999). According to Kahn (1990), trust that no harm will come from engaging oneself in the workplace is related to situations (e.g. predictable, consistent, and clear), interpersonal relations (e.g. supportive, flexible, and open), group dynamics, management style (e.g. supportive, resilient, consistent, showing trust, and competence), and organizational norms (i.e. clear norms and boundaries). This psychological condition is associated with the need for relatedness, which refers to "the human striving for close and intimate relationships and the desire to achieve a sense of communion and belongingness" (Van den Broeck et al., 2008: 280), in that good (safe) interpersonal relations characterized by support and openness will enhance both psychological safety and the need for relatedness at work. Psychological safety is also related to supportive supervisor relations (May et al., 2004). Edmondson (1999) hypothesized that such supportive behavior might also enhance self-determination (and thus the need of relatedness) of employees at work: "Supervisors who foster a supportive work environment typically display concern for employees' needs and feelings, provide positive feedback and encourage them to voice their concerns, develop new skills and solve work-related problems" (Deci and Ryan, 1987; May et al., 2004: 16).

Conclusion. Kahn's theory of engagement overlaps with SDT and illustrates its importance for the development of work engagement. Moreover, Kahn's theory addresses specific work characteristics that can be influenced by the leader in order to enhance engagement, which is also in line with our (more general) first research proposition. SDT, however, is more suited for our research model (see below) since it has been widely researched and empirically validated as such (i.e. psychological need satisfaction) with regard to its relationship with engagement (see, for example, Schreurs et al., 2014; Van Den Broeck et al., 2008).

> *Research proposition 2: Psychological need satisfaction mediates the relationship between positive leadership styles and engagement.*

Direct pathways from leader behavior to employee work engagement

In addition to the indirect processes (see above), we propose direct interpersonal processes between leader and employee that influence employee work engagement as well. These three proposed direct pathways are supported by theoretical work on emotional contagion (affective pathway), role modeling (behavioral pathway), and social exchange (cognitive pathway). For some of these pathways, we will also illustrate the importance of leader work engagement for employee work engagement.

The importance of leader work engagement

In some views, engagement may be seen as a part of leadership, which is the case in, for example, engaging leadership (Schaufeli, 2015). However, we also posit that leadership and leader engagement positively influence each other.

First, we propose that leadership positively influences leader work engagement. Leaders who feel effective in their positive leadership skills satisfy their need for competence. This way, succeeding in the leader's task may increase the leader's psychological need satisfaction (Baard et al., 2004; Van Den Broeck et al., 2010). In a similar vein, positive leader–employee relationships may satisfy the leader's need for relatedness (Van Den Broeck et al., 2010), and the decision-making latitude that leaders generally experience may satisfy their need for autonomy. Psychological need satisfaction has been related to work engagement (Baard et al., 2004; Van Den Broeck et al., 2010). In addition, previous research has indicated that leader psychological need satisfaction is associated with the enactment of positive leadership styles (Trépanier et al., 2012; Decuypere et al., 2019). In these cross-sectional studies, leader psychological need satisfaction is seen as an antecedent of positive leadership styles, yet cross-sectional data do not imply causality, so the relationship between leadership, leader psychological need satisfaction, and the resulting leader work engagement may also work the other way aorund.

Second, we also propose the opposite: leader work engagement may lead to higher scores on positive leadership styles as well. In this sense, we argue that high levels of vigor, dedication, and absorption also represent a leader's personal resources (see JD-R theory), which will provide the leader with higher energy levels and the mental resilience necessary to score high on different positive leadership styles and behave positively toward the employee in a way that increases their work engagement.

In sum, we posit that leader work engagement, positive leadership styles, and leader behavior influence each other through a positive feedback loop. Therefore, we take the liberty to propose that leader work engagement influences some of the direct processes from positive leader behavior explained below. Practically speaking, leaders may be able to influence both the *direct* and *indirect* processes in our research model by either working on their own engagement or through positive leader behavior. We elaborate on the different direct processes and the possible role of leader work engagement below.

A direct affective pathway

Emotional contagion is defined as "the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally" (Hatfield et al., 1994: 5). This definition addresses the "infectiousness" by mimicry and synchrony of, for example, positive emotions in the workplace (Frederickson, 2003). Emotional contagion also augments the influence of the "mimicker" and increases how liked one is (Guéguen and Martin, 2009; Tee, 2015). It is related to perceptions of closeness (Stel and Vonk, 2010) and also satisfies the need for relatedness, which is associated to work engagement (Deci and Ryan, 2000). The idea of bottom-up, automatic contagion processes is also supported by neurological research. Specifically, the mirror neuron system and parts of the default mode network (DMN) seem to support the notion of automatic emotion appraisal and emotional contagion (Arizmendi, 2011; Boyatzis, 2015; Tee, 2015). The mirror neuron network allows mimicry, and the social aspects of the DMN allow for picking up the moods and feelings of others (Boyatzis, 2015). Emotional contagion particularly occurs when

people are observing each other and social norms are being developed, for example, in a company (Boyatzis, 2015). Since a leader is in a position of high visibility, emotional contagion might be stronger as compared with the effect of a "regular" employee.

Hence, we propose that leader behavior infused with positive leader emotions, for example, as a consequence of leader work engagement (Shirom, 2011), leader psychological need satisfaction (Deci and Ryan, 2000), or positive interactions with employees (Gooty et al., 2019), is contagious and influences employee work engagement directly.

> *Research proposition 3: Leaders influence follower work engagement directly through emotional contagion.*

A direct behavioral pathway

According to SLT, role modeling is important to explain the direct influence of positive leader behavior on follower's engagement. Role modeling is defined as "a cognitive process in which individuals actively observe, adapt, and reject attributes of multiple role models" (Gibson, 2004: 136). This is important in organizations since role modeling can be helpful in learning new tasks and skills, but it can also be useful for increasing normative behavior and ethical conduct (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, it is not surprising that transformational leadership (Avolio et al., 1999) and ethical leadership have been described in terms of (ethical) role models (Brown and Treviño, 2014). It can be theorized that engaged leaders, if they are seen as role models, may influence and guide the behavior of their followers. Leaders can thus be a role model for employees' work engagement when they showcase their vigor, absorption, and dedication themselves. It is for this reason that engagement may trickle down the organization, just as leadership itself does (Ruiz et al., 2011).

> *Research proposition 4: Leaders influence follower work engagement directly through role modeling.*

A direct cognitive pathway

According to SET, the exchange relationship between supervisor and employee is maintained through a state of interdependence where there is an expectation of reciprocation of favors, work, or support (Shore et al., 2006). Organizational commitment and perceived organizational support can be seen as indicators of the social exchange quality (Colquitt et al., 2013). In addition, mutual loyalty, affective commitment, and strong (personal) identification are important in the leader–follower exchange relationship (Tse et al., 2013). A high-quality relationship, especially when perceived so by both parties (Matta et al., 2015), is related to employee engagement (Breevaart et al., 2015). To take this a step further, it can be hypothesized that the exchange relationship between leader and employee will enhance the possible effect of leader engagement on employee engagement. Specifically, we propose that if a leader is highly engaged and fully immersed in his or her role, followers might feel (unconsciously) obliged to reciprocate with equally strong vigor, dedication, and absorption.

Related to SET, positioned more in the field of leadership, is LMX theory (Gerstner and Day, 1997), which specifically stresses the importance of the quality of the dyadic leader–employee relationship. It posits that leaders develop different exchange relationships with employees, which possibly influences the exchange of attention, favors, and resources. Practically speaking, LMX has mostly been measured as an interpretation of followers of the quality of the relationship (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Gottfredson and Aguinis, 2017; Scandura and Graen, 1984). LMX has been related to employee work engagement in various studies (Bezuijen et al., 2010; Breevaart et al., 2015; De Villiers and Stander, 2011). When the LMX relationship is perceived as positive, there are positive effects with regard to employee behavior. Therefore, we posit there is an important, cognitive pathway concerning the leadership–engagement relationship that has to do with the level of social exchange. See Figure 1 for a visualization of the different research propositions in a research model.

Research proposition 5: Leaders influence follower work engagement directly through social exchange.

Discussion

In this conceptual article, we set out to develop an overarching research model based on a deductive, theoretical approach, to explain the relationship between positive leadership styles and employee work engagement. Meta-analyses show that there is a common ground between several positive leadership styles (Hoch et al., 2018). This is why the processes laid out here might be shared across positive leadership styles such as transformational leadership, authentic leadership, servant leadership, and ethical leadership. Our main proposition upon which we built our research model therefore states that different (positive) leadership styles differ substantially less from each other than is generally assumed. It evokes memories of the clinical debate that was held about differences between various therapeutic approaches, in which the common "non-specifics" ultimately turned out to be more important than the claimed differences (see, for example, Chatoor and Kurpnick, 2001). These non-specifics had to do with the therapeutic alliance and therapist competence. Perhaps there is something similar going on here in which the similarities between the various leadership styles outweigh their differences, especially when they are translated to leader behavior on the work floor. Maybe there is something like leadership "non-specifics," that is, the general importance of the leader–employee relationship and leader competence that explain some of the shared effects we proposed. In essence, in this article, we argue that leaders who have an engaged workforce behave more alike than different.

Based on theoretical and empirical arguments, we then posit that a relationship exists between positive leader behavior and leader's own engagement on one hand and follower's engagement on the other hand. We propose that there are two indirect and three direct processes leading to employee engagement. First, we propose that work characteristics (material pathway) and psychological need satisfaction (intrapersonal, motivational pathway) mediate the relationship between positive leader behavior and follower engagement, based on the JD-R model and SDT, respectively. Second, we propose a direct interpersonal effect

from leader's own work engagement on follower engagement through emotional contagion (affective pathway), role modeling (behavioral pathway), and social exchange (cognitive pathway). Third, we propose that positive leadership styles and leader engagement influence on each other, which shows the importance of a leader's well-being in this context as well.

Although the research model was developed based on the premises of a common ground between several positive leadership styles, we do acknowledge that there are (theoretical) differences between several leadership styles. Scholars have also provided arguments and evidence against construct proliferation (see, for example, Bormann and Rowold, 2018). Different positive leadership styles might therefore influence the proposed processes in the research model more or less, depending on the focus of the leadership style.

For example, the moral (ethical) character of ethical leadership might exert its influence on employee engagement through primarily enhancing the psychological safety component of need satisfaction (Edmondson, 1999), based on fair treatment of every follower (van Knippenberg et al., 2007). Empowering leadership, on the contrary, focuses more on enabling employees (De Klerk and Stander, 2014), which might exert its influence through the satisfaction of the need for autonomy and competence. Authentic leadership, for example, is concerned with expressing one's true self in the workplace (Kernis and Goldman, 2006), which may enhance the need for relatedness more. All these specific positive leadership styles have different focal points which may influence employee engagement differently, albeit, in this example, still through one overarching mechanism, i.e. the motivational process based on psychological need satisfaction and psychological conditions necessary for engagement.

Instrumental leadership (Antonakis and House, 2014; Rowold et al., 2017), on the contrary, may influence employee engagement more through the material pathway, that is, through fostering work resources. This may make the influence through other pathways less salient, however, not necessarily absent. In the case of instrumental leadership, leaders characterized mostly by this style may also influence employee work engagement through the motivation pathway and more specifically through satisfying the need for autonomy (through granting freedom) or competence (through providing training and everything else employees need to perform).

In sum, with this research article, we proposed that even though each leadership style still has a specific focus, their impact on employee work engagement may still run through various of the proposed pathways.

Limitations and future research

Antecedents of positive leader behavior. It can be argued that several possible antecedents of positive leader behavior were not considered in our research model, for example, leader life orientation, optimism and resilience (Zbierowski and Góra, 2014), or behavioral integrity (Milton, 2015). Research on transformational leadership also shows that agreeableness, emotional recognition, and positive affect might also play a role in positive leader behavior (Rubin et al., 2005), whereas research on ethical leadership showed the importance of agreeableness and conscientiousness (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck,

2009). Finally, research on leader emergence theorized that leader domain competence, fluid intelligence, willingness to serve, credibility, and goal attainment might play an important role as well (Norton et al., 2014).

Team-level constructs. Team engagement has not been incorporated in our research model for reasons concerning simplicity and parsimony as well. However, it can be argued that the processes of emotional contagion (emotional level), social exchange (cognitive level), and role modeling (behavioral level) also take place at the team level (Bakker, Van Emmerik, and Euwema, 2006), and possibly even trickles down the organization like leadership does (Ruiz et al., 2011). Totterdell (2000) explained, for example, that collective moods can be developed based on shared events or mood convergence, which can then lead to team burnout or team engagement (Bakker et al., 2006).

Mediating mechanisms. Furthermore, it is possible that there might be other mediating mechanisms like, for example, trust (Engelbrecht et al., 2017), that partly explain the leadership–engagement relationship. Our research model, however, sets out to provide an overarching framework, based on theory, to explain how various positive leadership styles might influence engagement through similar mechanisms. This will further our understanding of what positive leadership styles share with regard to their effect on employee engagement. Therefore, we propose that future research validates the various pathways proposed in our research model, particularly the mediating role of psychological need satisfaction, and the direct effects of leader engagement on follower engagement.

Boundary conditions. It is highly probable that multiple boundary conditions influence the leadership–engagement relationship at several levels within the organization, that is, the organizational context, the interpersonal context, and the intrapersonal context for both leaders and employees. For instance, with regard to the *organizational context*, research has already indicated that, for example, HRM consistency (Li et al., 2012) or citizenship pressure (Horn et al., 2015) may play an important role. In this category, one can also classify group or team-level constructs, such as team diversity or team climate (van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). Research has shown, for example, that group job satisfaction moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee work engagement (Qin et al., 2014). With regard to the *interpersonal context*, the level of LMX (Uhl-Bien, 2006) or the attitude toward each other, as, for example, exemplified in leader hostility toward employees (Liang et al., 2016) may influence the leadership–engagement relationship. Furthermore, when there is more leader–follower social capital (i.e. goal congruence and social interaction), servant leadership has been shown to lead to higher employee work engagement (De Clercq et al., 2014). The *intrapersonal context* concerns the personal context for both the leader and the employee, which again, influences leadership or the leadership–engagement relationship. For example, leader's stress levels as well as mindfulness levels influence leadership (Decuypere et al., 2019; Harms et al., 2017). With regard to the interpersonal employee context, research has shown, for example, that when followers are intrinsically motivated, authentic leadership leads to more engagement (Shu, 2015). Or when there are more positive follower characteristics

(i.e. independent thinking, willingness to take risks, active learning, innovative), transformational leadership leads to more engagement (Zhu et al., 2009). In addition, how much the employee "likes" the leader (Dulebohn et al., 2017) may influence the impact of leadership on engagement.

Multiple moderating variables on different levels (i.e. organizational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels) might therefore influence the leadership–engagement nexus in various ways. Even the quality, or the timing or leader behavior, may be an important contingency factor with regard to employee outcomes (Yukl, 2012). However, to our knowledge, there has not been any single contingency factor that has been thoroughly accounted for theoretically. Future research could and should focus more on identifying and theorizing on boundary conditions in leadership research.

Practical implications

Our research model implies that leaders may impact follower work engagement in various ways. First, engagement may be enhanced indirectly through altering job demands and job resources as well as through elevating psychological need satisfaction of employees, which can be achieved by developing interventions aimed at increasing autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Second, leaders may want to augment their own levels of engagement, since this may impact their leadership, as well as follower engagement through emotional contagion, role modeling, and social exchange processes.

Final note

To conclude, we hope that the research model and future research propositions can add to the understanding of how leaders may influence follower engagement. The focus on the influence of positive leader behavior and leader's own engagement may also help broaden our knowledge and help support leadership development initiatives.

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