NO PLACE LIKE HOME: THE CAMBODIAN GARMENT WORKERS' PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

Introduction

Skills training is an integral component for the improvement of employment, productivity and competitiveness. It not only helps to enhance individual workers with work-related skills but also makes them more genuinely productive, especially within the context of changes in technology and job requirements (Adhvaryu, Nyshadham and Tamayo 2019). Despite such importance, not every individual worker is willing to invest in more education or training. Indeed, prior studies have reported similar results on the limited participation especially in programs that target workers with low levels of education and qualifications (Thangavelu et al. 2011; Carneiro and Heckman 2002; Carneiro, Dearden and Vignoles 2010). This suggests a need to understand their situation in order to effectively encourage their skill development.

In Cambodia, the government have tended to accept the premise that investment in education and training is a good thing and has committed to investment in human capital, including Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), as a mean to secure higher economic growth and national prosperity. However, until now, we have gathered only a limited understanding about workers in a particular sector − namely garments and related textiles− regarding their aspirations for skills development, and the challenges they face in taking part in training or learning activities. This paper, therefore, attempts to provide a better understanding about garment workers' employment, skills possession and desire for skills development. It also attempts to raise awareness about the barriers workers face in terms of skills development, and proposes some solutions to encourage and facilitate them in training activities including TVET. In this way, it aims to be an important document for everyone who cares about the garment workers and their skills and career prospects.

The Cambodian TVET system consists of short- and long-term courses as well as higher learning. The former is the most popular in Cambodia, and includes workshops and non-formal training that spans less than a year. It has been found that this type of training generally takes between 3.6 and 4 months, and the quality is below industry expectations (Jeong 2014). In contrast, long-term training requires one full year, and those who complete such a program will be granted a vocational training certificate that comprises 3 levels. This type of training normally absorbs only a small number of participants who are predominantly male. Moreover, the content of the training also seems to be problematic. In the academic year 2018-2019, roughly 80 percent of all participants who took part in short course training conducted by some kind of TVET institution, enrolled on a program related to agriculture, forestry and fisheries, followed by repairing and maintaining electrical or electronic devices, at 12 percent, and beauty and wedding embellishment, at 3 percent (Department of Labour Market Information, 2020). Seemingly, the training is not really intended for industrial workers but rather targets the rural population whose main source of income is farming and growing crops. Therefore, serious attention should be paid to offering skills development for workers who are employed in the garment and apparel industries that have been recognised as the backbone of the Cambodian economy.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section contains a description of why there is low investment in skills training. Thereafter, we present the methodology. The following sections introduce the results from the survey. The final section offers a conclusion and recommendations.

What Make a Low Investment in Skills Training?

Derived from Human Capital Theory (HCT) - a dominant paradigm in the economics of education (Becker 1962) - education and training are seen as individual investments. The belief is that individuals

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choose to trade their potential income for education in the hope that they will be more productive and will be able to secure the higher rewards associated with their educational degree in the future. Therefore, it is posited that a person is willing to incur the high cost of learning if they know that the return will be sufficiently high to justify the short-term loss. Similarly, in respect of skills training, individuals might trade their opportunity costs and out-of-pocket money for new skills to increase their productivity and hence income. Indeed, some studies have proven the correlation between job-related training and higher wages (Leuven and Oosterbeek 2008). Since the economic return on investing in education or training is relevant - with a net gain in lifetime earnings - the theory also argues that young employees are more likely to attend training programs given that they have a longer horizon to enjoy the advantages stemming from such an outlay. Investment in training also provides employees with employment benefits, such as opportunities to move to another occupation where there is a high demand. Likewise, employers can offer internal training to re-skill employees who have become redundant in a particular position to take up occupations in which there is a shortage of labour: this will reduce the skills mismatch within firms.

However, persuading individuals to take part in skills training programs has always been a challenge even for some developed economies. The participation rate has remained surprisingly low and has differed considerably across countries (Thangavelu et al. 2011). Some training programs, provided by public institutions for unskilled employees, have almost universally ended in fiasco, as the ensuing assessments often showed that they had offered very little economic value (Carneiro, Dearden and Vignoles 2010; Torgerson et al. 2004). In relation to this, some economists have argued that credit constraints might be a reason, as low-skilled employees are likely to lack the financial resources to pay for the direct and indirect costs of training (Stevens 2008; Acemoglu and Pischke 1999). But a number of empirical reports have contradicted the claim of financial limitations and have asserted that this is not always true (Dalziel 2017). For example, the Federal Pell Grants and Perkins Loans in the U.S. (Carneiro and Heckman 2002) and the Train to Gain in the U.K. (Carneiro, Dearden and Vignoles 2010), both of which provide financial support for vulnerable students and workers, were unsuccessful from the beginning due to lack of applicantAnother convincing study indicates a problem in firms' internal efficiency as the main cause of under-investment in training, as well as excessive turnover, both of which reduce the private and social return on training itself (Moen and Rosén 2004). From a workers' perspective, many of these skills are highly firm-specific and not transferable, and are therefore unappreciated by other firms to which individuals could potentially move. Therefore, investing in such enterprises is a risky venture and not worth the cost unless the employer can offer worker incentives such as promotion or wage increases after employees have managed to acquire such skills. But there is a possibility that a firm will renege on its promise, or only marginally raise salaries after the training to save labour costs (Sloof, Sonnemans and Oosterbeek 2007). Reviewing the literature, Leuven (2007) finds that the return on training is generally unattractive which justifies workers' lack of enthusiasm about investing in it.

Methodology

This study used a quantitative research design with a structured questionnaire that captured data on five aspects, namely: (1) demographic profile; (2) employment information and personal and working skills assessment; (3) plan for future career prospects and aspirations relating to skills development; (4) family background; and (5) use of social media and the internet. Several questions in Section 2 were adopted from the Background Questionnaire of the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, developed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2010. To evaluate their skills level, individual workers were asked to give a ranking score from 1 (extremely poor) to 5 (excellent) for a set of 40 questions.

The sample in this study comprised 787 individuals. We conducted a two-stage sampling procedure to ensure that samples would be randomly selected. In the first stage, a stratified sampling with probability equal to size was implemented to pick enumeration areas and how many samples should be collected in each area. In the second stage, a simple random sampling method was carried out to select individual workers. The survey was taken

in June and July 2019, covering Phnom Penh and seven provinces - Banteay Meanchey, Kampong Cham, Kampong Speu, Kandal, Preah Sihanouk, Svay Rieng and Takeo. Face-to-face interviews with each respondent lasted an average of 45 minutes, and the collected data were then entered into CSPro and analysed with R computer software.

Results and Discussion

Respondents' Characteristics

The participants in this study were mostly young adults with an average age of 27.8 years. More than 60 percent of them were aged less than 30 years. In terms of gender, female respondents comprised up to 89 percent of the total, while males accounted for only 11 percent. Roughly 12 percent of the respondents had achieved educational qualifications equivalent to upper secondary level, revealing that the majority of them were early-school-leavers. Moreover, over 80 percent of respondents reported their income to be between USD200-300. Their average monthly expenditure was USD187.

Employment

From Table 1, showing garment workers' experience by age group, we can see that age has a strong correlation with working experience. Simply put, when the workers become older, their working duration in the garment factory also increases linearly. But it is important to highlight that, on average, many people remain in the same position for a long period of time. Some have spent even more than three years doing the same job, and this means that they are unlikely to have been promoted or to have switched position. In addition, the Table reveals a similar share of working hours across age groups: that is, on average, 58.9 hours per week. This means that they work approximately 10 hour per day and six days per week.

Table 1: Summary Statistics of Garment Workers' Working Experience by Age Group

Age Group	# Months in Garment Work	# Months in Current Position	Working Hours Per Week
15-19	15.99	9.52	60.82
20-24	40.51	23.04	58.67
25-29	72.5	35.12	59.03
30-34	97.95	43.95	57.34
35-39	120.56	48.02	59.46
40+	132.5	57.93	59.02

As presented in Figure 1, we simply asked whether or not they would want to change their job if there were an opportunity to do so. The answer, quite surprisingly, was that the majority of them (almost 70 percent) said "Yes". What is even more surprising is that most of them did not want to change to employment that was higher-paid or

Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of Garment Workers Who Prefer to Change Their Job by Age Group

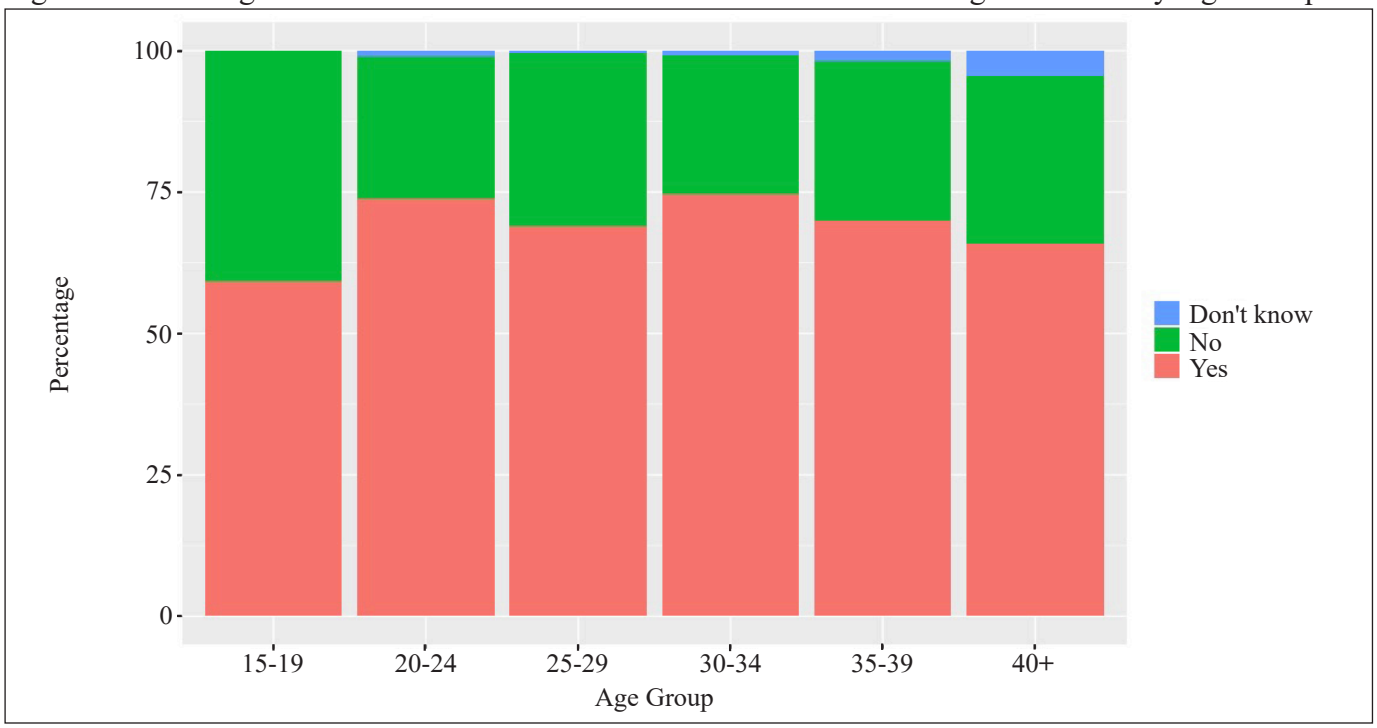
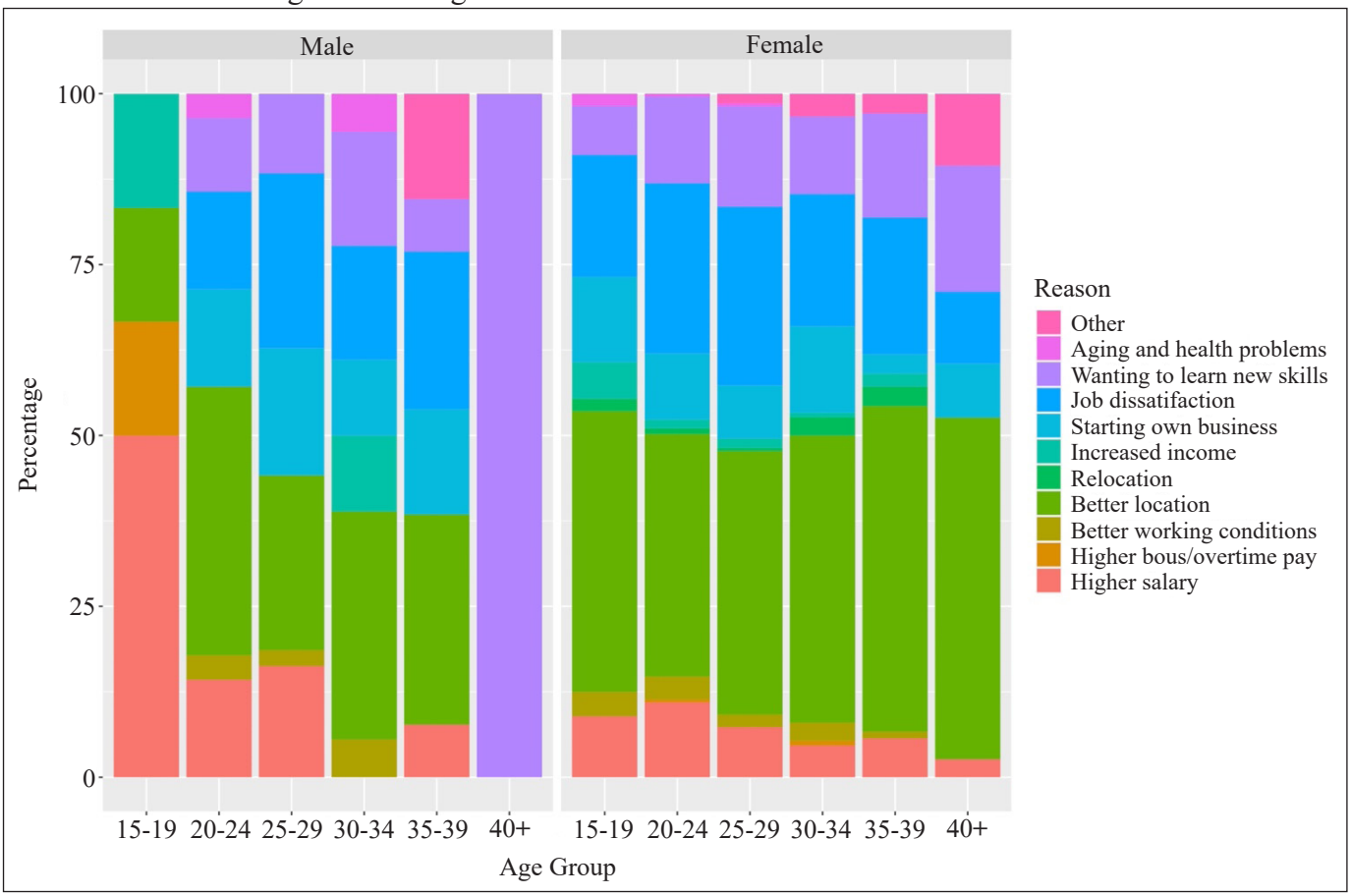


Figure 2: Percentage Distribution of Garment Workers by Sex,Age Group and Reason for Preferring a Job Change



where conditions were better: they just wanted a job in the garment factory which was located near to their houses in the rural areas. That said, there was also a number of garment workers who wanted to change their job due to financial motivation or job dissatisfaction. Figure 2 below indicates their reasons for wanting to change job.

Skills Possession

Figure 3 gives the subjective evaluation of workers' skills level. The result is consistent with information on popular positions held by garment workers. Many of them, approximately 60 percent, rated their "sewing" skills as fairly high, followed by "quality control" and "packaging", while only a small fraction of workers gave a high rating to other skills. This suggests that there is a high concentration on just a few skills in their jobs. This can be the main reason why they stick with the same position, year after year, as they do not possess any other skills necessary to switch jobs. We did explore whether they were capable of using foreign languages, but none of them reported that they possessed any other working skills, including foreign languages such as English, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Thai or Vietnamese.

Figure 4 illustrates the percentage distribution of workers according to their daily life skills and the level of that skill: skills include literacy (reading and understanding simple sentences), numeracy (simple calculations used in daily life), and ICT (simple use of the internet and social network). As depicted in the graph, a large majority of workers possess, to some extent, basic literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. For example, they are able to read and write and can use social media, regardless of their purposes for so doing. But, surprisingly, they hardly ever use the internet for online shopping. It is suspected that their ability to surf the internet is probably limited to only certain popular platforms or websites such as Facebook or YouTube. It is also worth noting that their ability to take advantage of what is offered by each platform might also differ in comparison with those who are more capable of using computers and the internet. Through exploring their ICT skills, it is worth noting that we did aim to determine the level of ownership of smartphones

Figure 3: Subjective Evaluation of Workers' Own Skill Level

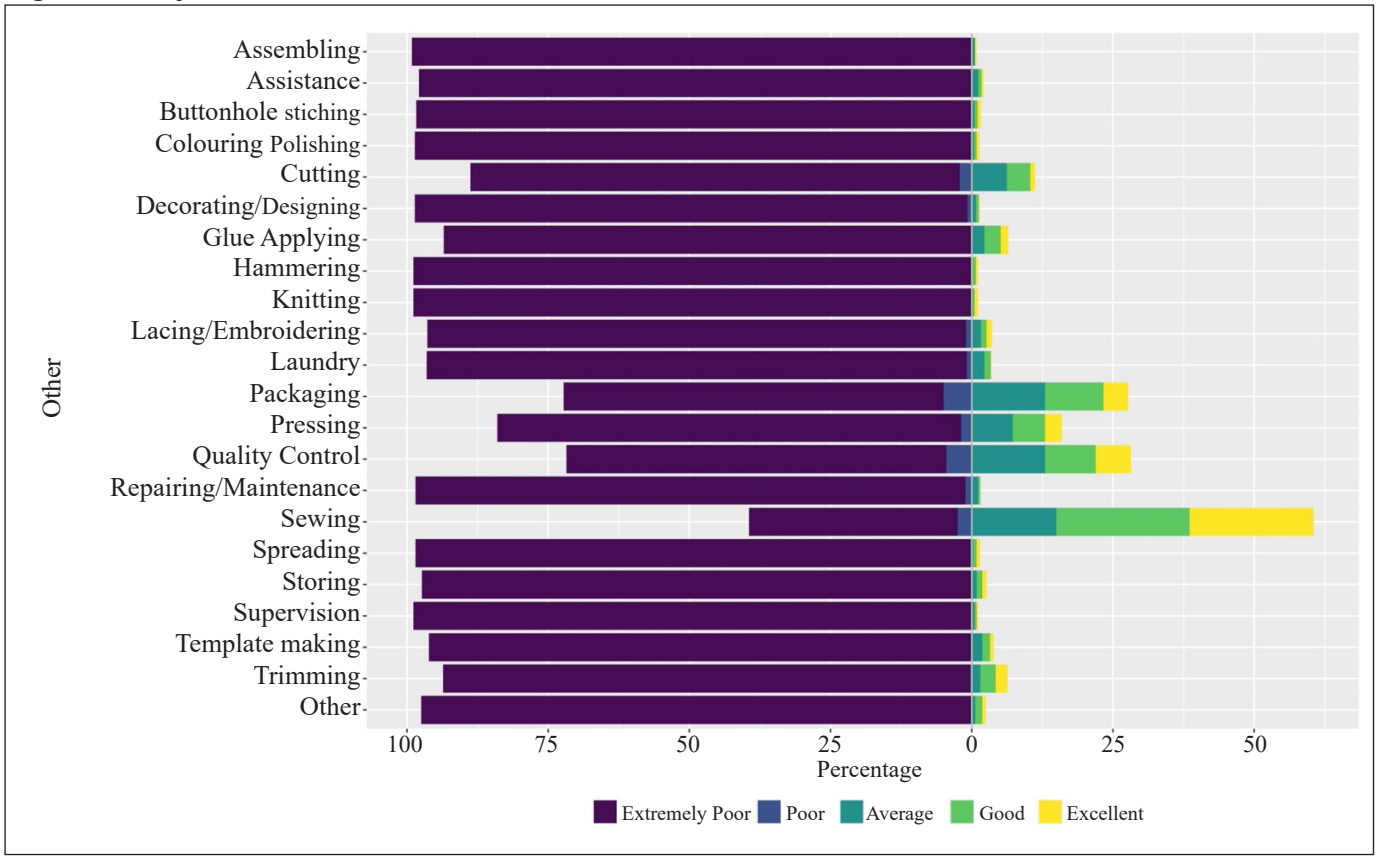
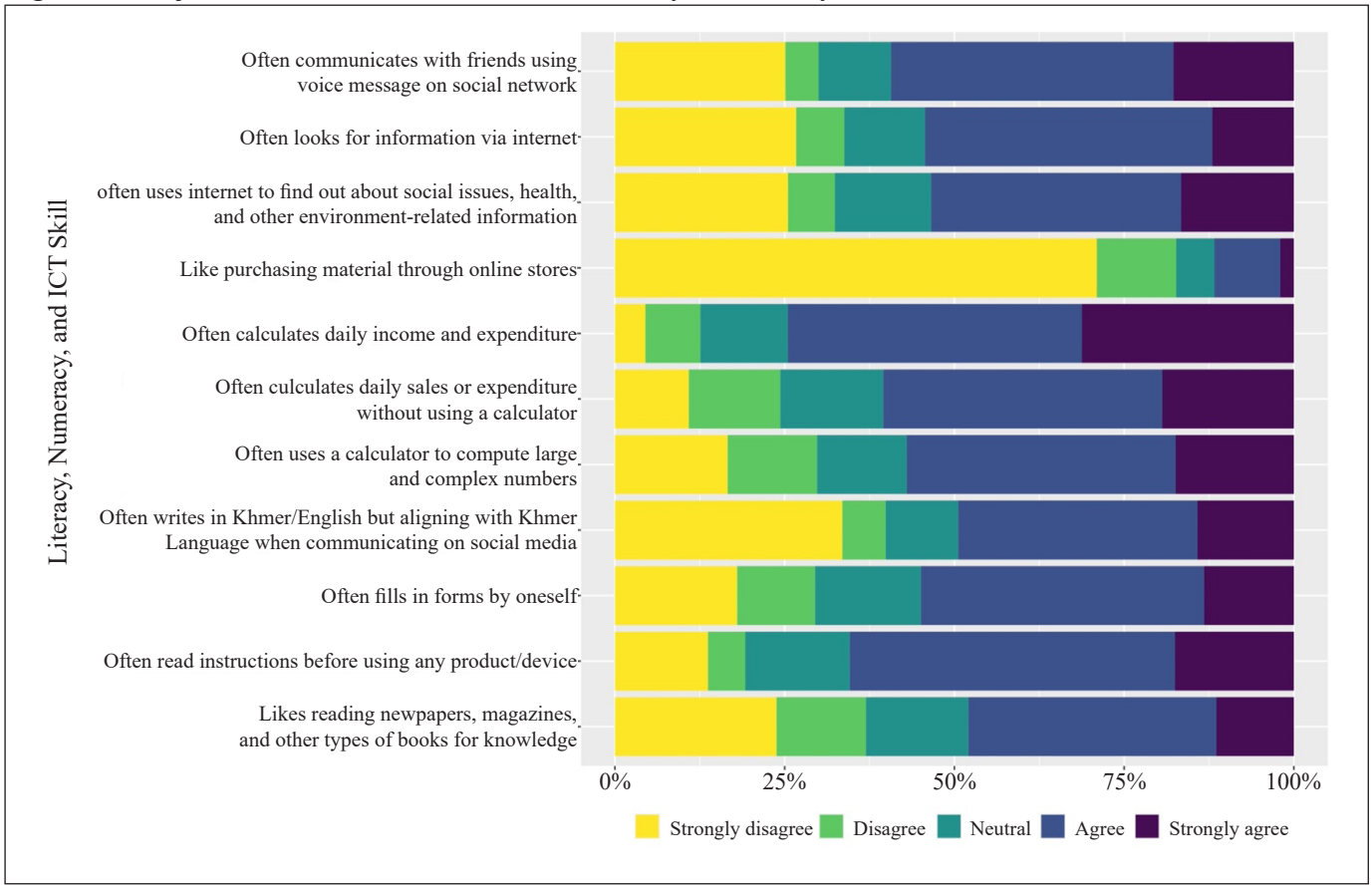


Figure 4: Subjective Evaluation of Workers' Literacy, Numeracy and ICT Skills



and internet access and found that the vast majority of workers owned at least some kind of smartphone and did have internet access.

Training: Access and Demand

Our data showed that half of the workers, especially females, had never received any training. Figure 5 shows that such training as existed related mostly to garment/textile-related skills, followed by hygiene and safety practices inside the factory. Figure 5 also shows that female workers tended to attend training in beauty-related skills while males tended to be trained in mechanical skills. This offers an idea of how skills development is being provided in the garment and apparel manufacturing industry. We can assume that their lack of skills necessary for better productivity is partly driven by the limited and ineffective content of the training. In other words, the existing training provided by the factories is less likely to contribute to the enhancement of individuals' performance and work flow. This training simply aims to fulfil two common objectives: (1) to introduce workers to their specific roles; and (2) to raise their awareness in terms of safe and sanitary practices and regulations in the workplace.

In Figures 6 and 7, we present the workers' desire for skills training for their current employment (jobs in the factory) and future employment (other jobs not in the garment industry) by age group. The result shows that most workers are not interested in receiving training in relation to their current jobs. Instead, they wish for training in skills that would prepare them to take a different job in the future. The wish to receive skills training tends to decline with age. It is also observed that males have a higher desire than females to receive training for future jobs. Responses to enquiries about the reasons why some workers did not want to learn new skills indicated that many simply had no interest in pursuing more education/skill development. This was followed by a lack of commitment and no time for training. Very few people cited expensive tuition fees as a reason.

Figure 8 shows the percentage of sample respondents who wanted to learn new skills by sex, age group and reasons. Many people across all age groups wanted to learn a new skill merely because they intended to use it to find another job. The second reason was related to individual enthusiasm and passion to learn something new. Notably, some people wanted to learn a new skill in the hope that it would open up more opportunities, or would help them to start their own small business.

Figure 5: Percentage Distribution of Garment Workers Who Have Received Training by Age Group, Sex and Type of Training

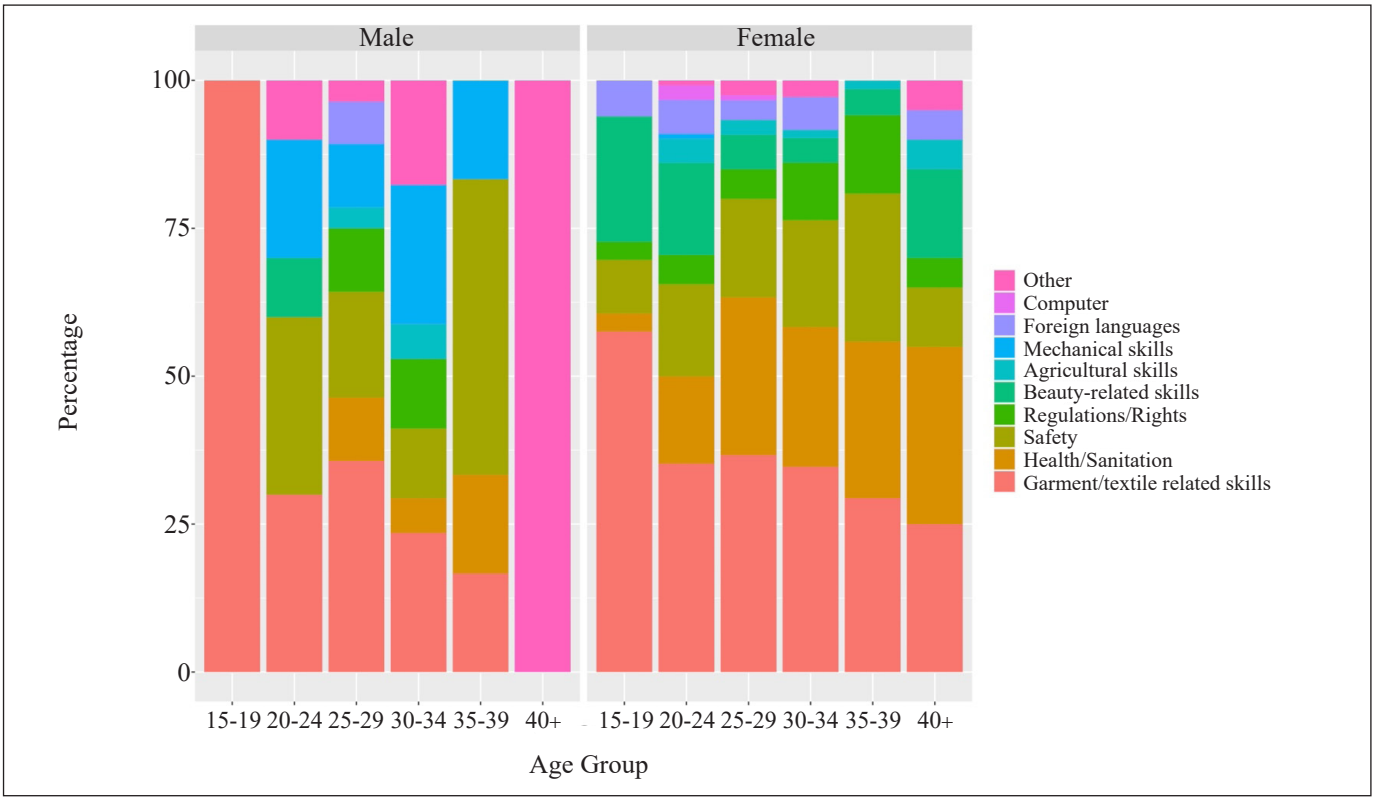


Figure 6: Percentage Distribution of Garment Workers Who Want to Receive Training for Their Current Jobs by Sex and Age Group

Figure 7: Percentage Distribution of Garment Workers Who Want to Learn New Skills for Future Jobs by Sex and Age Group

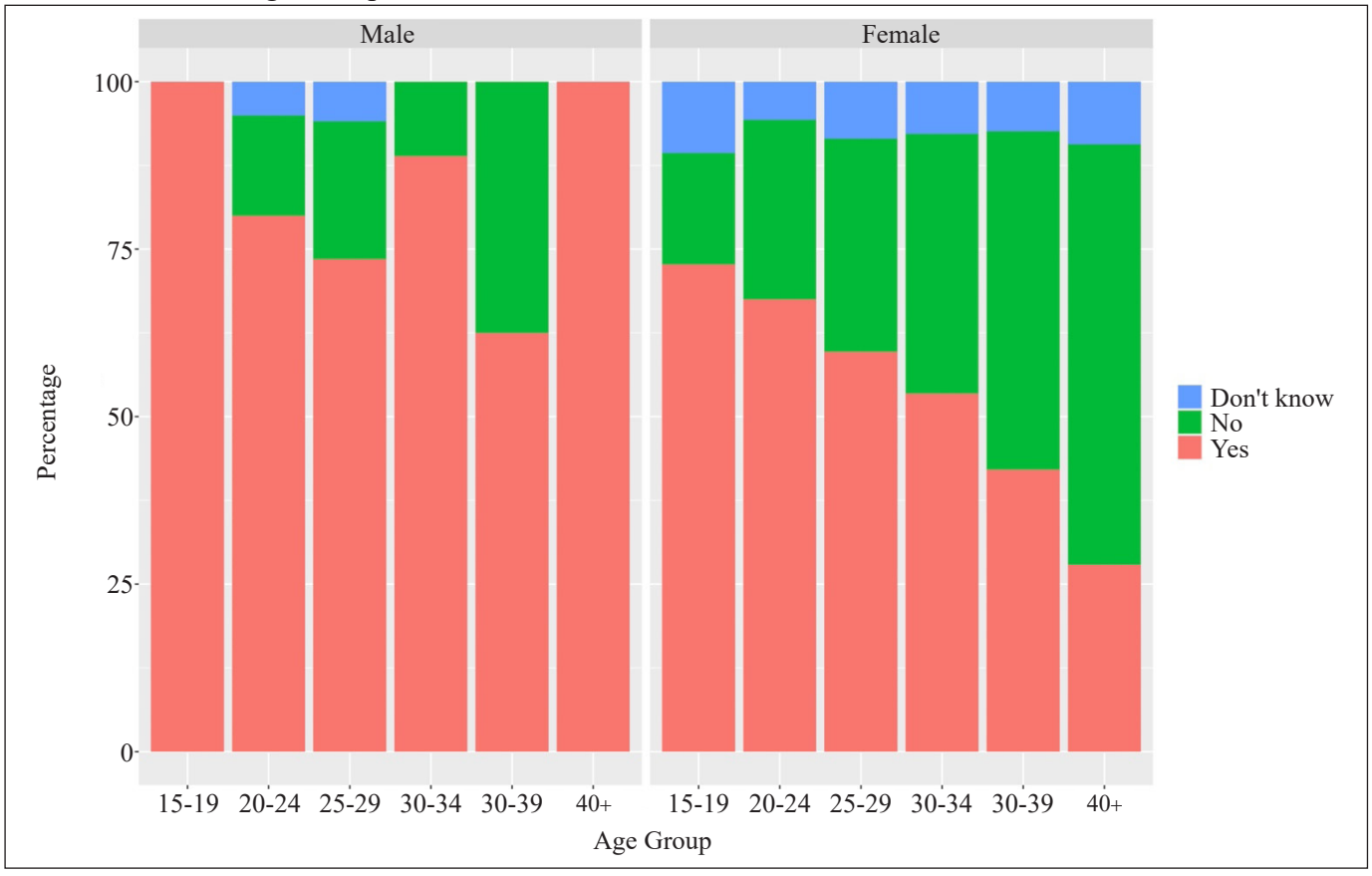


Figure 8: Percentage Distribution of Garment Workers Who Want to Learn New Skills for Future Jobs by Age Group and Reason

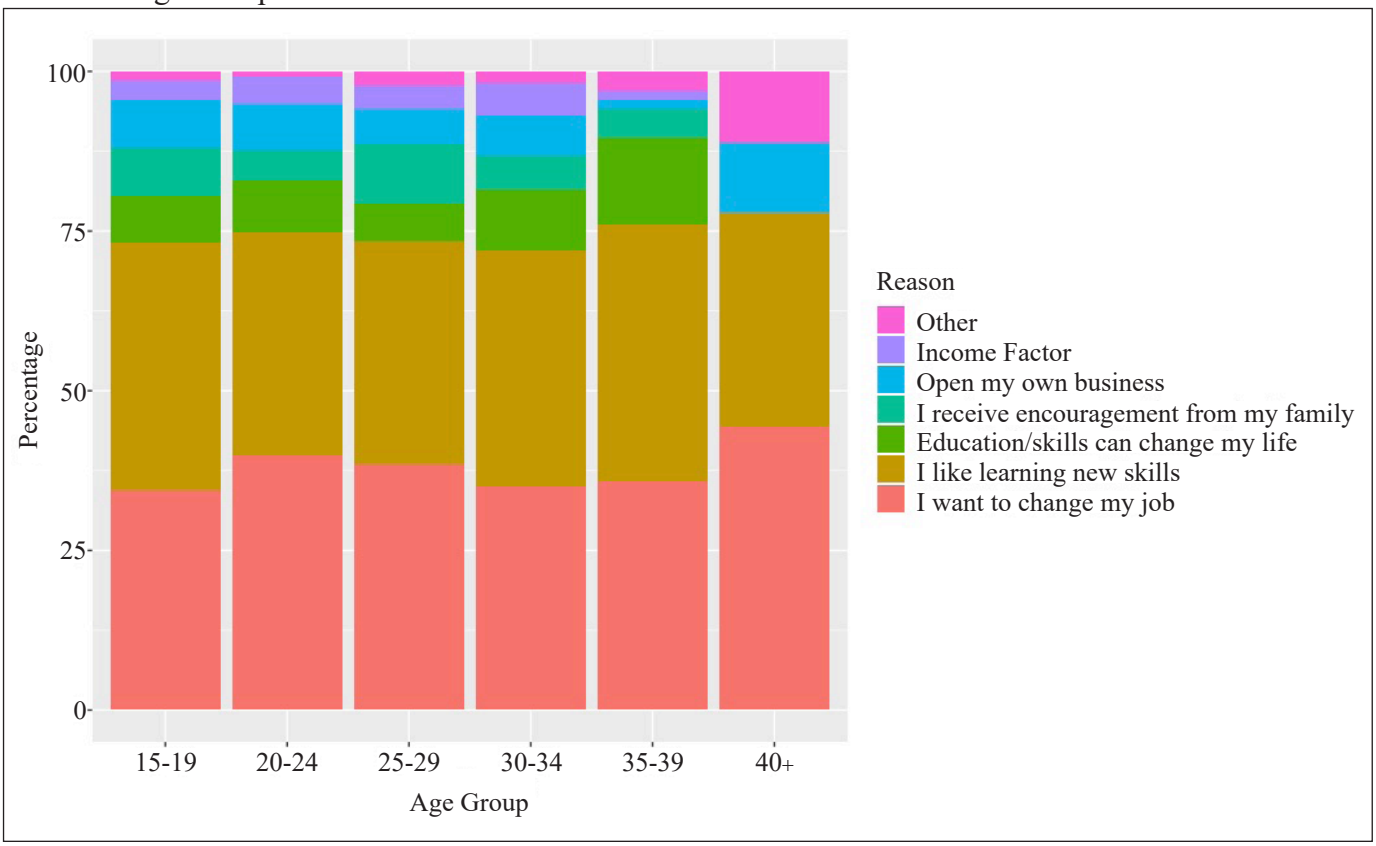


Figure 9: Percentage Distribution of Garment Workers Who Want to Learn New Skills for Future Jobs by Sex, Age Group and Type of Skill

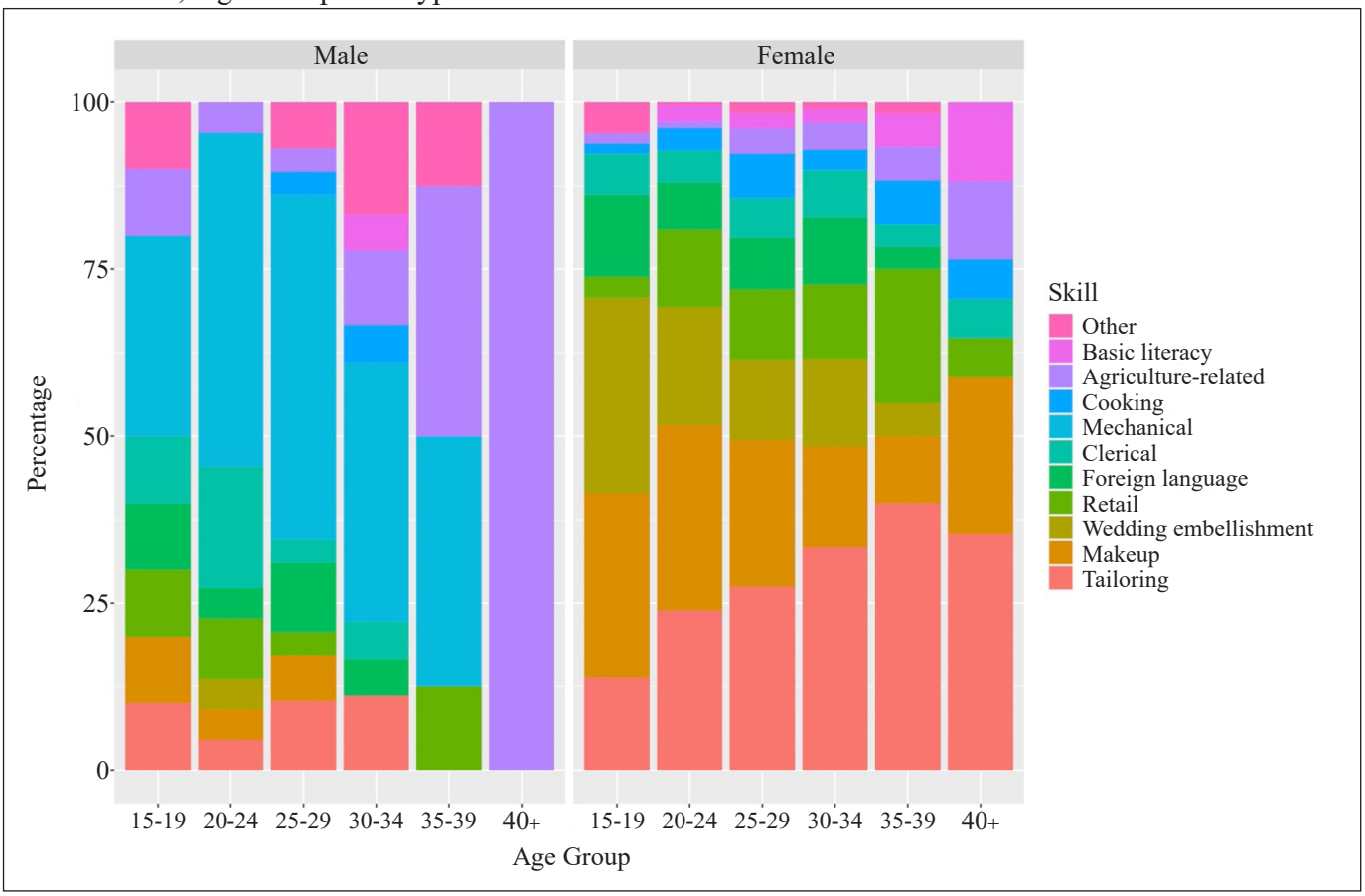


Figure 9 shows the skills garment workers would like to gain, according to sex and age group. There was a clear gender difference in skill preference. Females tended to prefer training for female-oriented occupations such as tailoring, make-up and wedding embellishment, as opposed to men who preferred mechanical skills. For young women, training in make-up and wedding embellishment is more popular while older women tended to prefer tailoring and retail.

Conclusion and Implications

This study found that most garment workers were not very well-equipped with workplace skills and competencies for advancement, either for personal development or career growth in the garment industry. This can be attributed to the narrow concentration of their jobs and the little exposure they received to valuable skills training prior to joining the industry. Also to blame are a lack of motivation to receive further training for current employment, limited industry-related skills, and inability to use foreign languages and online technologies. Those factors seem to affect not only their productivity but also their tenure in the long run. Yet, despite this, they do not wish to receive training to improve skills relevant to their current employment either. Rather, they prefer skills training that would help them to relocate closer to their home and that is focused on developing other competencies that would help them to start a small family business or to find other opportunities. Such a low intention to take skills training for their current job is not due to financial constraints, but rather to the desire for job change and the low motivation they feel to develop any garment-related skills. The results also show that the desire to prepare themselves for future jobs tends to decrease with age and is more intense among men than women. There is also a clear gender difference in skill preference, with women tending towards wedding embellishment and make-up and men towards mechanical skills.

Due to the low level of motivation to develop any garment-related skills, and a workplace structure that does little to incentivise people to attend skills training, the findings suggest that it can be hard to promote voluntary training for the current employment. Thus, to promote skills training for garment workers, we outline some policy implications that concentrate on two different areas:

Training for an increase in productivity: The first and the highest priority is to identify specific industrial training needs, which ought to be different from existing training content. It can be soft skills training for workers, for example leadership, relationship management, effective time allocation, and communication for workers at supervisory level, that have been proven to enhance overall working productivity (Adhvaryu, Nyshadham and Tamayo 2019). In this matter, training providers like TVET institutions should work closely with firms to design training courses. Some general guidelines from the International Labour Organization (2013) can be taken as a guiding document for effective and inclusive training design. Additionally, training should be conducted at the workplace during working hours at a temporary small loss to productivity. More importantly, firms should create an incentive system that can encompass financial and/or promotional strategies to motive workers to seek training and to apply the skills they gain to boost productivity. The government has an important role to play in ensuring the implantation of workplace training, which is already stipulated in the law. In the meantime, sharing information about the importance of skills training with firms by using examples of their successful counterparts, should be the key focus in order to encourage other firms to follow suit (Holzer et al. 1993). Last but not least, the government should diversify investment in training into developing other higher valued-added skills besides those that can be used only in the garment and textile industries.

Training for marketable skills: A major challenge to skills training in the garment worker context is apparently not credit constraints but rather the training content. TVET providers concentrate overwhelmingly on agriculture rather than on industrial employment. Also, there might be an issue of imperfect information that hinders details about the availability of TVET programs from being widely accessible: for this reason, workers tend to remain unaware of these. One possible approach to overcome this problem is to use social media, such as Facebook and Telegram, to spread information, as those are the most popular platforms among workers. Moreover, workers should be encouraged to pursue training through the provision of incentives for industrial employment rather than

for the informal economy. Such skills should be aligned with industrial development policy and recent economic direction, otherwise it will be hard to meet the market demand.

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