



Research article

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Influencer Model Management: Grounded Theory Approach to Communication Influencer

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ABSTRACT

The term "influencer" has become widely recognized in the realm of influencer marketing, which refers to a form of social media advertising that capitalizes on the credibility of popular social media influencers to effectively reach a large target audience while maintaining an aura of authenticity. However, despite the significance of this concept, there is a noticeable lack of articles that have delved into the conceptual and theoretical development of an influencer model. Therefore, this study aims to address this research gap by adopting a classic grounded theory approach to identify and explore the common factors that contribute to the emergence of social media influencers. Furthermore, this study aims to illustrate three key elements of a theoretical influencer model. By employing a grounded theory approach, this study delves into the multifaceted phenomenon of social media influencers. Through an in-depth analysis and coding process, it uncovers the defining characteristics that enable individuals to ascend to the status of influencers. The identified factors shed light on the strategies and traits that contribute to the success and influence of these individuals on various social media platforms.

INTRODUCTION

The Wall Street Journal quoted a Silicon Valley journalist, saying the most loathsome business word in 2014 was "influencer" (Zimmer, 2016). The Journal declared in April 2016 that influencers were everywhere thanks to LinkedIn, one of the most popular social networking sites, which allowed its 70,000 profiles to propagate the word "influencer" as a career description (Zimmer, 2016). Before the rise of influencers on social media, bloggers were seen as online opinion leaders who had the power to reach and follow key audiences in the digital era. Even before bloggers, opinion leaders were defined as those who would influence human behavior through mass media such as television, newspapers, and radio (Miller & Behm-Morawitz 2017). The social media community gradually adopted the opinion leader's concept and practice from a staple of the media landscape, and the term "influencer" has rapidly replaced "opinion leader" in the community of social media since 2016.

Recently, there has been a spate of interest in scholarly social media research on influencers' qualifications and capacity (Geysler, 2022; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019). The presence of influencers on social media leads academic researchers to focus on unveiling the effectiveness and functions of online content manufactured by influencers. For example, Sokolova and Kefi argued that influencers who evolved from bloggers and opinion leaders can be active creators of online content: "personal stories, ideas, reviews, opinions, feelings, emotions, etc., intended for a given audience" (2019, p. 1). Such influencers' online platforms are mainly located on YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, covering a wide range of sectors such as health, fitness, fashion, politics, beauty, food, technology, religion and others. While creating online content and uploading posts on social media in the form of an image or video or textual description, influencers offer unique value to both social media users and corporate people (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). The

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same article also mentioned that commercial brands introduced a new practice of business called influencer marketing as opposed to traditional celebrity or public figure marketing via traditional media. Geysler (2022) argued that influencers in social media have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic and made regular posts on their preferred social media platforms in hopes of gaining large followers of enthusiastic engaged people.

As many researchers tend to study influencers and their marketing influence corporations also try to apply some benefits of influencer marketing to their sponsored investment instead of traditional advertisements (Abidin 2016; Muller *et al.*, 2018; Cawthon 2022). Corporations learned that more and more consumers prefer social media channels to mass communication ones in terms of gaining information and influencer marketing yielded 11 times the return on investment of traditional advertising (Ahmad 2018). As a result influencer marketing focuses on how to best use social media influencers to promote brands, products and services more effectively from a strategic management perspective (Jansen 2022; Lin *et al.*, 2018). However, few studies have introduced what makes influencers who deserve considered as influencers how online users not celebrities become influencers, and why influencers are followed. In other words, a fundamental and basic understanding of influencers and their origins is yet to be discovered. Many researchers interchangeably used influencers with opinion leaders without the process of clear conceptualization of influencers. They instead jumped to investigate the influence of influencers' marketing ability especially for transitional marketing strategies from word-of-mouth (Khamis *et al.*, 2017; Liao *et al.*, 2021; Oraedu *et al.*, 2021).

Based on previous research on influencer marketing and its functions and effectiveness, this study aims to build a theoretical and practical model of social media influencers and their impacts on strategic management by analyzing data from the Top 100 Instagram and YouTube influencers in 2021. A grounded theory approach, as proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), was used to categorize themes and codes of all content. This approach allows for developing a theory grounded in the data collected and analyzed, providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The results of this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on influencer marketing and its functions and effectiveness.

The theoretical background of grounded theory

The classic grounded theory research method was developed "due to a desire to build theories more rigorously and dispassionately by grounding them in objective reality" (Stol, 2016, p.3). The method enables researchers to initiate a description of a theoretical model from observations and then organize data that

are analyzed to build a theoretical model. Departing from the eight steps of developing the theoretically grounded theory approach by Johnson *et al.* (2018), this study relied primarily on empirical data from Instagram and YouTube by integrating the following theoretically grounded approach: (1) Research question formulation; (2) Literature review; (3) Explanation of why a theoretical approach is being taken; (4) Concept identification and reflection; (5) Theoretical conjecture and formulation; (6) Discourse with peers and experts (7) Theoretical conjecture, refinement, and acceptance; and (8) Discussion on the impact and implications of the theory. Johnson *et al.* (2018) suggested that "steps one through four occur during the low-level concept phase," and "step five occurs during the medium-level concept phase (p. 57). Steps seven and eight occur during the third phase of advanced level concepts, while step six, discourse with peers and experts, occurs during all three phases of the classic grounded theory method (p. 57).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs the classic grounded theory approach to develop a theoretical model of social media influencers as a new paradigm of the digital age. Grounded theory is an inductive research method that emphasizes discovering a theory grounded in data. It is based on the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and focuses on generating a theory that explains the phenomenon being studied, without being influenced by preconceived notions or existing theories (Hassan, 2022). This approach allows for the systematic generation of theory using qualitative or/and quantitative data generated from interviews, observation, or written sources such as documents. Through a process of open, intermediate, and advanced coding, this study identifies common factors among social media influencers and illustrates the elements of a theoretical influencer model. The visualized content of the Top 30 influencers, in terms of their authenticity and expertise based on their number of followers, serves as the main source of data for this study. Influencers strive to meet the expectations of their followers with authentic and professional content that resonates with their interests, providing entertainment, connection, and motivation. The theoretical model introduced in this study conceptualizes influencers as having the power to affect the behavior of their followers on social media through visually digitalized content that inspires, entertains, and educates. Influencers communicate their authenticity and expertise to their followers by providing content that resonates with their interests and value interactive communication with their followers to continue developing and customizing visualized content via popular social media platforms that offer opportunities for collaboration with marketers for profit.



Open coding: low-level concepts

The first phase of this study involved the development of initial or low-level theoretical concepts (Johnson *et al.*, 2018). Open coding, also known as initial coding, is a process of analyzing data to identify conceptual possibilities. The first conceptual process of open coding began with the term “influencer,” which has been used in English since the mid-1600s and has recently come to refer to individuals with the power to influence the behavior and opinions of others in online communities (Dictionary.com). Although the term has existed for a long time, it was not until 2016 that it became a popular term to describe an online job title due to an increase in searches for “influencer” on Google. Prior to 2016, there was no definition for the term “influencer” on Dictionary.com. Therefore, this study adopted the definition of “influencer” as “a person who has the power to influence many people through social media” from Dictionary.com (2021). Based on this definition, influencers are likable online personalities who produce interesting and informative content for their followers on social media. To be considered an influencer, an individual must have expertise in a specific area and a captive online following that consumes their photo- and video-sharing content. Influencers also tend to attract potential buyers of a brand or product, aiding in marketing activities (Evans *et al.*, 2017). In line with this, a study reported by Forbes found that 49.3% of respondents had made a purchase based on an influencer’s recommendation and that 44.2% generally trust recommendations from social media influencers (Suciu, 2019).

Research question formulation (step one)

This study began with the pragmatic goal of discovering common factors among social media influencers. Data collection involved gathering Instagram and YouTube posts from influencers and categorizing themes based on their expertise, visual content, and professionalism throughout the year 2021. To focus on discovering factors related to social media influencers and their influential power, celebrities in entertainment and sports athletes’ social media accounts were excluded from the data gathering process, despite their status as powerful influencers with over 400 million followers, such as Justin Bieber (singer) and Cristiano Ronaldo (soccer player). Focusing solely on social media influencers who have gained fame and followers through their social media activities as non-traditional celebrities, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ 1: What qualifications or expertise do social media influencers have in terms of having large numbers of followers across one or more social media platforms?

RQ 2: What authentic content regarding credibility and authority do social media influencers post in visual or textual methods?

RQ 3: What are other extra factors that help online content creators emerge as social media influencers?

Literature review (step two)

The literature review serves to inform all three phases of the classic grounded theory coding process: open, intermediate, and advanced (Johnson *et al.*, 2018). After reviewing and comparing various journal articles on social media influencers and the systematic characteristics of social media content, a set of initial codes emerged to establish the categories for this study. Evans *et al.* (2017) noted that influencers hold power and authority over potential followers of a brand or product, assisting in corporate marketing activities as opposed to traditional ad campaigns. The researchers also reinterpreted the persuasion knowledge model (PKM), which suggests that the path of followers’ knowledge online can pass through recognition, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and execution. PKM is similar to the diffusion of innovations theory, which seeks to explain how, why, and at what rate new ideas and technology spread (Rogers, 1971). This theory elaborates on audience decision-making when it comes to their final decision after experiencing the particular steps of awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption.

Zhou *et al.* (2021) noted that social media influencers are increasingly involved in influencer marketing to promote products, describing influencer marketing as “an integral part of the marketing communication mix” (p. 123). Influencers tend to express their opinions in product reviews by offering tips on product usage that contain professional evaluations. Influencers serve as embodied presentations of their personal tastes and are “particularly attractive to brands” (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018, p. 1). To be more effective and authoritative to their followers, influencers focus on creating authenticity as an attribute. In line with self-determination theory (SDT), authenticity is inspired by human motivation and personality and is associated with personal psychological motivation and external influence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT addresses three universal, innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and psychological relatedness. In the context of authenticity, all three needs of SDT revolve around the extent to which social media influencers aim to create and authenticate content on social media in hopes of meeting the needs of followers who seek expertise and gratification (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Why a theoretical approach was chosen (step three)

The use of the classic grounded theory approach guided the direction for this study. Below is the logical reasoning for the three systems of grounded theory (Creswell & Poth 2018):

- data availability: social media influencers, their expertise and authentic content are qualitatively listed and analyzed as the data were gathered from Google social media analytics, social media influencer value (Lou & Yuan, 2019), and the social media ranking site, FanPageList (see <https://fanpagelist.com/>).

- systemic approach: grounded theory is consistent with a systems approach, which “views reality in terms of systems and their interactions as well as has a holistic perspective” (Johnson *et al.*, 2018, p. 60). As a result, this study integrated currently existing influencers and their characteristics of content on social media into the creation of a theoretical influencer model.
- critical analysis: the need to develop a theoretical model for influencers requires an in-depth understanding of the emerging phenomenon on social media, in which this study critically analyzed the data after the process of comparison that led to categorization for the next step of building the model.

Concept identification and reflection (step four)

The previous three steps led to the need for a deeper analysis of social media influencers. The open coding process involved gathering and identifying data, laying the groundwork for developing a theoretical model for influencers. This study identified the first prerequisite for becoming and being called an influencer: the number of followers. One of the primary focuses of an influencer is to increase their number of followers, as the more followers an influencer has, the greater their potential reach and influence. Based on the combined number of followers on Instagram and subscribers on YouTube, Visual Capitalist, a global data firm, announced the Top 50 social media influencers of 2021, including global celebrities (see <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/worlds-top-50-influencers-across-social-media-platforms/>). Cristiano Ronaldo, a soccer player with 517 million followers, ranked as the most powerful influencer on social media, followed by Justin Bieber and Ariana Grande, both singers. It is important to note that although TikTok has emerged as a dominant social media platform for younger generations since 2020, Instagram remains the largest social media platform for celebrity influencers (Southern, 2021).

The combined number of followers and subscribers on Instagram and YouTube prompted this study to diversify across multiple social platforms for influencers through social posts, stories, or videos. Influencers with over a million followers tend to create and share new and innovative content every moment. Based on the Visual Capitalist Top 50 influencers on Instagram and YouTube, this study identified the 10 most followed social media influencers across four primary platforms including YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and TikTok as of December 31, 2021. It is important to note that this study’s main purpose of conceptually and theoretically developing an influencer model led to the sole selection of non-celebrity influencers, meaning that sports stars, singers, and Hollywood A-listers were excluded as authentic social media influencers. The reason for this is their authenticity on social media platforms that help non-celebrities become authentic influencers based on social media rather than traditional media such as television,

Table 1: Top 10 social media influencers (YouTube) of 2021 by followers

Rank	Name	Nationality	Areas of Content	# of total followers
1	Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg	Sweden	Gamer-commentator	108 Million
2	Eva Diana	Ukraine	Kids Diana show	73.4 Million
3	Anastasia Radzinskaya	United States	Children play	68.2 Million
4	Brother Vlad and Niki	United States	Toys and nursery rhymes	61.8 Million
5	Dude Perfect	United States	Humor and surprise creator	54.9 Million
6	Jimmy Donaldson	United States	Stunt-based creator	52.1 Million
7	Germán Alejandro	Chile	Comedic video creator	42.9 Million
8	Whindersson	Brazil	Comedic video creator	41.7 Million
9	Felipe Neto	Brazil	Comic video creator	41.2 Million
10	Luis Fernando	El Salvador	Gamer-commentator	40.3 Million

movies, music, and sports. More importantly, this study focuses on YouTube influencers since YouTube is not only a much larger platform but also has much higher engagement rates than any other social media platform (Barker, 2021). Table 1 identifies the 10 authentic social media influencers who gained their fame and popularity through original social media content.

Four factors, based on the Table list, make up influencer impact within the theoretical influencer model:

- Gratification: How gratifying is the influencer to the target followers?
- Engagement: How engaged is the influencer with the target followers?
- Quality: How authentic is the influencer’s expertise to the target followers?
- Number: How many people are in the following group?

Intermediate coding: medium-level concepts

Intermediate-level coding is designed for the second phase of this study. This phase focused on studying the theory and concepts that form the foundation of influencers on social media, particularly for integrating YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. This phase relied on tactics for identifying characteristics, properties, patterns, and relationships within the conceptualization of influencers.

Theoretical conjecture and formulation (step five)

A characterization of influencers requires more data. Thus, this study investigated 20 additional influencers based on their number of followers. Nine out of 20 were comic and humorous content creators, while six specialized in beauty and cosmetics. The remaining five focused on social causes such as LGBTQ rights and new technology reviews. Each



influencer had at least 12 million followers. The data were coded and compared with other data that described the characteristics of influencers on social media (Freberg *et al.*, 2011; Jung & Im, 2021; Singh, 2013; Kupfer *et al.*, 2018; Ge & Gretzel, 2018; Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018; Tasja-Selina *et al.*, 2022).

A process of conceptual integration, further data mining from the literature review, and evaluation clarified the common characteristics of influencers and formed the basis for developing the conceptual design of a theoretical influencer model. In this model, this study engineered a new type of core perceived attributes for influencers who have shifted the roles of opinion leaders from the traditional offline public sphere to the highly digitalized online sphere. They also played a pioneering role in creating electronic word-of-mouth mechanisms by affecting social, political, cultural, and economic phenomena. More importantly, their cooperation or partnership with brands has altered the traditional marketing paradigm that heavily relied on television and newspaper advertising. In particular, beauty and fashion brands make significant investments in partnerships with influencers as more recent studies have found their effectiveness and efficiency in influencing followers' behavior to be substantial (Abidin, 2016; De Jans *et al.*, 2021; Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018; Phung & Qin, 2018; Sokolova & Kefi 2019).

As Johnson *et al.* (2018) argued, the process of intermediate coding is intended to introduce an initial theoretical model of the special research entity. A theoretical influencer model for this study began to identify characteristics and principles after discovering internet personalities based on their total number of followers from Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. These influencers among the Top 30 gained at least over 10 million followers from the ground up without any celebrity status, although some later leveraged their online celebrity status to become actors or writers such as Cameron Dallas as an actor and Lele Pons as an author.

Discourse with peers and experts (step six)

The researcher of this study engaged in a series of communication with academic peers and market experts in social media and influencers from the very beginning of the research journey through personal dialogue. Ideas were exchanged and detailed discourse took place. Academic and practical recommendations for developing a theoretical influencer model were provided to the researchers. In many cases, the dialogue led to an exploration of the practical impact of influencers on their followers. Furthermore, tangible and intangible factors guiding social media users' decisions to follow their favorite influencers were analyzed. The dialogue helped this study understand and unveil the main factor driving social media users' choice to engage with influencers. Not surprisingly, it is content that interests and gratifies users.

Advanced coding: high-level concepts

As grounded theory allowed this study to explore a phenomenon and build a theoretical model through processes and transitions (Yingling, 2018), the final conceptualizing phase is advanced coding and theoretical integration. This phase integrates the coded data and concepts from the intermediate phase into coherent theories for a new paradigm of the theoretical influencer model.

Theoretical conjecture and refinement and acceptance (step seven)

The advanced coding and theoretical integration engineered a final grounded theory for influencers. The final process guided this study to consolidate all possible and salient factors of influencers and their followers on social media into the creation of a theoretical influencer model. Literature review, information exchanges with peers and experts, and data analyses from various sources on influencers were incorporated as amendments and refinements to the theoretical influencer model. As one of the aims of this study was to identify common factors among influencers who solely used their social media skills to gain fame and reputation with over 10 million followers, this study found that visually user-generated content based on the influencer's authenticity and expertise encourages social media users to turn to influencers as a way to resonate with their personal interests. In other words, personalization of content relevant to followers' interests can be key to an influencer's success, where authentically visualized content in videos and photos maximizes the opportunity to fulfill followers' unique interests. The pattern of following influencers matches the application of uses and gratification theory by Blumler and Katz (1974), which focuses on understanding why people seek out the media they do and what they use it for. The theory suggests that people use media to fulfill their needs for gratification, seeking knowledge, relaxation, awareness, escape, entertainment, and interaction with others through media. The relationship between influencers and followers can be partially analyzed using this theory.

This study also found another interesting characteristic of powerful influencers based on their number of followers: they are experts in their field who focus on sharing professional information in high-quality posts that receive "likes." Male influencers tend to have more followers on YouTube, while female influencers have more followers on Instagram. There is no doubt that influencers show their authenticity and expertise in their field through visualized content, with most having amassed a huge collection of user-generated content over the last 10 years. One interesting connection this study found among powerful influencers was Vine, a short-form video-hosting service acquired by Twitter in October 2012 and shut down in 2016. Vine served as an essential digital platform for social media content

creators who became influencers by starting their online careers on Vine, gaining popularity, then transitioning onto Instagram and YouTube, including the Top 10 social media influencers listed in Table 1. One common phenomenon among powerful influencers is that the combined number of followers on YouTube and Instagram commonly outnumbers that of Facebook and Twitter.

Discussion on impact and implications (step eight)

The final step in the grounded theory approach is a discussion of the theory's impact and implications. Uses and gratification theory, self-determination theory, and diffusion of innovations theory guided this study in laying a theoretical foundation for the theoretical influencer model. The visualized content of the Top 30 influencers, in terms of their authenticity and expertise, based on their number of followers, served as the main source of data for this study. Influencers strive to meet the expectations of their followers with authentic and professional content that resonates with their interests, providing entertainment, connection, and motivation. Each influencer with over 10 million followers tends to have a high reflection of their followers, a high degree of expertise in their field (such as fashion, comedy, sports, lifestyle, technology, or gaming), and a balance between interaction with followers and marketers. As the trend towards searching for video content that embraces sound and vision grows, influencers focus on producing more video content on Instagram and YouTube for their target market, as opposed to Facebook and Twitter. Thus, this study introduces the theoretical model of influencers on social media as follows:

- **concept:** Influencers have the power to affect the behavior of followers on social media as visually digitalized content by the influencers inspires, entertains, and educate the followers
- **strategy:** influencers communicate their authenticity and expertise with their followers by supplying content resonating with followers' interests
- **relationship:** Influencers appreciate interactive communication with their followers to keep developing and customizing visualized content via popular social media platforms that offer an opportunity to seek collaboration with marketers for profit

Therefore, this study introduces the three elements of the theoretical influencer model. The theoretical influencer model seems to be well-formulated and captures the key elements of the concept, strategy, and relationship between social media influencers, their followers, and marketers (Figure 1). The model highlights influencers' power to affect their followers' behavior through visually digitalized content that inspires, entertains, and educates. It also emphasizes the importance of authenticity and expertise in the communication strategy of influencers, as well as the value of interactive communication and

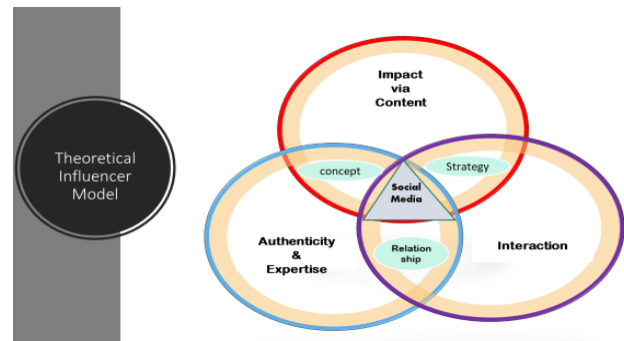


Figure 1: The illustration of the three elements of the theoretical influencer model

collaboration with marketers for profit. This model provides a useful framework for understanding the dynamics of social media influencer marketing. As the core concept of social media incorporates such factors of impact via contact, authenticity, and interaction, influencers by understanding these factors can create content that resonates with their audience and has a positive impact on their behavior. This positive impact can be seen in the form of increased engagement, brand awareness, and ultimately, profit. Since social media continues to evolve, it is important for influencers to stay up-to-date with the latest trends and technologies to remain relevant and effective in their role as influencers.

CONCLUSION

This study employed a grounded theory approach to deeply explore the phenomenon of social media influencers and establish a comprehensive theoretical model for comprehending their characteristics, strategies, and relationships with their followers. Through a rigorous process of open, intermediate, and advanced coding, we identified key factors shared among influencers who have successfully utilized their social media skills to amass a significant following of over 10 million individuals. To gather data for this study, we primarily relied on the visually captivating content generated by the Top 30 influencers, evaluating their authenticity and expertise in relation to their follower count.

A noteworthy observation was that influencers continually strive to meet the expectations of their followers by delivering authentic and professional content that resonates with their interests, fostering entertainment, connection, and motivation. The theoretical model proposed in this study conceptualizes influencers as possessing the ability to influence the behavior of their followers on social media through visually digitalized content that inspires, entertains, and educates. By showcasing their authenticity and expertise, influencers effectively communicate with their followers, providing content that aligns with their interests. They value interactive communication to further refine and tailor

their visualized content. This collaborative landscape is facilitated by the popular social media platforms that offer opportunities for increased engagement and foster profitable collaborations with marketers.

This study significantly contributes valuable insights into the characteristics and strategies employed by successful social media influencers. It holds considerable implications for gaining an in-depth understanding of the dynamic relationship between influencers and their followers. As the field of social media continues to evolve rapidly, it is essential to remain vigilant and adapt to the ever-changing landscape. Future research should focus on exploring emerging trends and the impact of recent technological advancements on the dynamics between influencers and their followers. By constantly updating our knowledge and understanding of these dynamics, we can better navigate the realm of social media influencer marketing and ensure its continued effectiveness as a persuasive tool in the digital era. However, further research is warranted to explore emerging trends, evolving technologies, and the dynamic relationship between influencers and their audience. These avenues of investigation will contribute to a more holistic understanding of the complex interplay between influencers, social media platforms, and marketers.

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