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## Evaluation of the Usage of Twitter in the Crisis Communication of the 2019 Dusitd2 Hotel Terror Attack in Kenya

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### Abstract

This study evaluated the usage of Twitter in crisis communication which served as an information tool during the Dusit D2 terror attack at the hotel complex. The building theory for this research was Image Restoration Theory (IRT). The research, employed a case study of the Dusit D2 Terror attack crisis and did a qualitative content analysis deriving data from the Twitter platform to come up with findings and conclusions. The sample size included data derived from Twitter from January 2019 where the target population included the total number of tweets that were collected in the two-day period and also the messages post crisis period. The tweets were given as user types as per the coding scheme which noted the official user of the original tweet. The study showed that there was high adoption of Image Repair strategies that were used in terms of image restoration, denial, reducing offensiveness, evading responsibility, corrective action and mortification. This study recommends the diversification of the use of twitter in sending messages during crisis. It was a very effective tool as the messages were relayed well. The respondents were also able to give their views and were not limited.

**Keywords:** Crisis Communication; social media and Terrorism; Dusit D2 Terror attack; Twitter (X); Hashtags.

### 1.0 Introduction

Crisis communications are the process and messages that are delivered at times of high stress, either because the hazard is already occurring or is imminent (Walaski, P, 2011). For the last two decades, crisis communication has grown as a field of study (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007), and has been addressed from different scientific domains, making it difficult to oversee the bulk of the research that has been conducted. Moreover, research on the effectiveness of communication strategies to restore reputations during crises is still in its infancy (Hobbs, 1995). Our focus on this study was on Terrorism, which is discussed as threats of terrorism, assassinations, kidnappings, hijackings, bomb scares and bombings and many other. Crisis and terror activities cause trauma whether they are exhibited in the work place by employees or by other persons caught off-guard.

In Kenya, several crises have been recorded and it took a lot of measures by both the government and the civilians to curb them down. Combating Terrorism Centre had stated that the Dusit attack was not the deadliest in Kenya. Other crises were like the Westgate shopping mall raid in 2013, Mpeketoni in 2014, and the Garissa University attack in 2015 which claimed many lives both of students, workers, and other people in the area. Terrorism in Kenya is defined as use of violence unlawfully, with intentions of causing harm or fear to the general public. Terrorism threats have become more complex and more intertwined with technological advances. They have enabled studies into terrorism and treatment of the preventive tools that can be used to suppress these kinds of threats.

According to Brendon J.C. & Dominic R.P. (2019) Al-Shabaab targets Kenya more than other frontline states because of the opportunity spaces linked to Kenya's international status and visibility. In Kenya the media openly talked about terror attacks, the tourism industry also booms at high rates which provide easy target for the terrorist groups, Kenyan people

being among the terrorist groups, the expanding democratic space and high levels of corruption are also reasons as to why it becomes a target.

The main case of study was Dusit D2 hotel which was an exclusive development in the downtown area of Nairobi flanked by high end residences, universities, government offices and embassies around its area. Dusit was the last terror attack recorded to have happened on Kenyan soil therefore it created attention and also led to researches as to why it may have been targeted by the Al-Shabaab. It also featured a situation where one of Kenya's national who is a member of the group attacks his own country therefore making the study worthwhile. The hotel was located in Nairobi's exclusive Westland's neighborhood, 14 Riverside Complex which is a major commercial hub, housing numerous shops, offices and the hotel itself. CTC (2019) noted that on January 15, 2019, a group of Al-Shabaab attacked the Dusit Hotel. 21 people were killed and 28 injured during the overnight attack. The raid brought together three parts of the Al-Shabaab organization; its Somali provenance, its ideological affiliation with al-Qa'ida, and its growing cohort of trained experienced East African fighters.

The main focus of the study was on the social media platform, Twitter, and while traditional media articles, interviews and broadcasting clips (which were used in transcribed mode) were studied, the same themes and aspects which emerged from the Twitter discourse and controversy, were highlighted in the traditional media. According to social media Today (2010), Twitter is the third most popular social networking site in the world and has over 175 million registered users. The information network connects users to a vast amount of information and allows individuals to connect with other users, organizations and the media through 140 characters 'tweets' or by uploading photos and other media (Twitter, 2011).

Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012); Hamidian and Diab (2019); Vieweg et al. (2010) have noted that Twitter has become an important channel for breaking news and giving updates in both normal and crisis times. According to an article by Graham Scott from Global Government Forum (2014) Twitter is used by thousands of governments and national leaders where more than 75% of world leaders have a Twitter account. During the Dusit D2 hotel attack twitter was widely used not only in Kenya but across the world as the government was passing information to its citizens through use of the platform. There were several statements that were issued by government bodies in Kenya through their official twitter pages.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

According to Bernstein (2013), no organization is immune to crises. Therefore, the importance of efficient crisis communication cannot therefore be downplayed as it assists organizations in tackling the crisis that has the probability of bringing, a lot of harm to the organization's image and reputation hence overall business performance (Fearn-Banks, 2007). He further states that if no preparation is done more damage was incurred. Studies done in crisis communication have indicated the importance of strategically matching crisis information form and source when organizations respond to crises, but do not focus on content of the message or are not

experimental in nature (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2011).

Crisis communication is increasing in necessity as new media and the communication environment has evolved. People are no longer seeking crisis-related information solely from official sources within traditional media but are actively getting it publicly via information and communication technology (Heverin & Zach, 2010). Focusing on the content of messages via Twitter provide communication professionals a larger picture of what should be said depending on different crisis levels.

According to Anthonnissen, (2008) while experienced crisis communication professionals can still apply their well-learned principles of quick response and corporate transparency, the internet is changing the game. It's creating risk, challenges and opportunities for the public relations counsellor. However, evaluation of the usage of Twitter in communicating the DusitD2 Hotel terror attack is required so as to show the effectiveness of the communication tool. Crises generally have three stages. Pre-crisis allows warning signs to go unchecked. The actual crisis occurs and the organization rushes to make sense of the issue and attempts to limit the damage to the organization and its stakeholders. Post-Crisis is when the crisis has passed and business returns to normalcy (Smudde 2001). It also informed future processes and studies related to the same topic hence the need for this study.

### 1.2 Research Objective

The objective of this study was to evaluate the usage of twitter in the crisis communication of the 2019 Dusit D2 hotel complex terror attack in Nairobi, Kenya through;

1. Identifying the trending Twitter hashtags by Government of Kenya and the public(s) in the crisis communication of the 2019 Dusit D2 Hotel complex terror attack in Nairobi, Kenya.
2. Assessing the communication messages in the Twitter hashtags that were used during the crisis communication of the 2019 Dusit D2 Hotel complex terror attack in Nairobi, Kenya.
3. Analyzing the communication message in the Twitter hashtags that were used after the crisis communication of the 2019 Dusit D2 Hotel complex terror attack in Nairobi, Kenya so as to show the effectiveness of the platform.

### 2.0 literature Review

Erin Black of CNBC (2018) notes that the hashtags were an invention by Chris Messina in 2017 as a group organizing framework and he later introduced it to Twitter. It has since become a worldwide thing as people are using the sign to connect and track conversation The Dusit D2 terror complex attack was categorized using the following; `dusitd2attack`, `RiversideAttack`, `DusitD2Attack`, `riversideattack`, `14Riverside` attack and many others. These hashtags were used during and after the crisis to enable the continuation of communication of the situation.

The hashtags show the key performing index (KPIs) of Twitter and they are the values that make tweets to trend. Twitter allows a specific topic to be used by several individuals, especially if it a common topic of interest through the use of hashtags. This enabled the information given out by both the Government Organizations and the people of Kenya to be able to receive firsthand information at a fast rate in real time. Twitter is a free platform that

accommodate everyone and thereby allowing anyone to send a direct tweet to the world at large through the platform.

Twitter is a free platform that accommodate everyone and thereby allowing anyone to send a direct tweet to the world at large through the platform. Kurtz (2009) noticed that twitter had already become a global factor in news and news release, ordinary users get very powerful and important players in reporting crisis and reporting information about it. The specific messages put through the platform are aimed at bringing calmness to an already distressed nation. Therefore, the audience would include everyone in the nation as they are the direct receivers of the information passed through the platform.

Government agencies have adopted social media outlets as reliable means of passing out communication to the public. Most of the government bodies have verified account so as to ensure that the information passed through their pages is really from them and not from a fake account. During the DusitD2 attack the government through the chief of police and the Ministry of Interior tried to fix the crisis by reassuring Kenyans that the situation was under control and used twitter and press briefings to convey messages about the crisis.

Crisis management intentions and procedures include the creation of preventive programmes or mechanisms that prevent a potential crisis, deal effectively with losses and damage, and restore business performance (Shrivastava, Mitroff, Miller and Miglani, 1988; Valackiene, 2011). Crisis response strategies are used to repair the reputation, to reduce negative affect and to prevent negative behavioural intentions.

Research done shows that 97 of the 114, more than 85% of tweets containing embedded media were informational; meaning that Twitter users could access additional information via Twitter without originally seeking information from the organization's website or broadcast. The use of Twitter as a crisis medium enables individuals to access information via smart phone or tablet when traditional broadcast information is not available. It is dependable on the way the information is passed and thus becomes very important due to the fact that communication is valuable. According to Rais (2007) a crisis can be considered more or less permanent. The management body in any organization is supposed to be on the lookout for any crisis that may disrupt the normal working of the organization. Therefore, an analysis of crisis situations plays a critical role in determining the impact of the crisis on the organization.

### 2.3.0 Theoretical Literature Review

The research was guided by Image Repair Theory (IRT) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) which point out strategies that can be used to rebuild an organizations image in a case where reputation has been damaged.

#### 2.3.1 Image Repair Theory

Image restoration theory is linked to crisis communication in public relation. Crisis communication addresses risk evaluation, people perceptions of the situation and the actions that were likely be taken in the situation (Palenchar and Heath, 2002, p. 127). It is supposed to protect individual or organization facing a situation that could

damage its reputation (Benoit, 1995).

The theory deals with a set of strategies designed to help organizations or individuals restore their public image. This theory underscores the different strategies that individuals, organization, and countries among others use when faced with the possibility of image destruction. The image restoration theory denotes a set of strategies that can be employed to cut down the damage to the reputation of a certain organization or individual (IvyPanda, 2019). The strategies are grouped into five categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification.

#### 2.3.2 Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) uses attributions of the organization's responsibility for a crisis to prescribe the crisis response strategies that should maximize the protection of the organization's reputation. SCCT argues that as stakeholders increasingly perceive the organization as responsible for the crisis, managers need to utilize crisis response strategies that show a greater concern for the crisis victims if the managers want to use communication to protect reputational assets. SCCT is evidence based, meaning that it relies on empirical research to validate its claims.

There are three clusters of crises according to Coombs and Holladay (2012), and they are victim, accident and intentional. The clusters can help determine a mechanism for dealing with the crisis by setting certain response strategies. SCCT builds on Image Restoration Model by Benoit by identifying a set of response strategies: denial, diminishment and rebuilding. Silence is too passive and allows others to control the crisis according to Coombs and Holladay (2012). There are also other strategies like bolstering where one reminds the public of their former glory and good works over a period of time. This is aimed at making them forget or ignore the crisis at hand.

### 4.0 Research Methodology

The study was conducted at The Dusit D2 Hotel which was located at Riverside, Westlands area. Twitter was chosen as the main study site in all social media platforms because of the fact that it supports network analysis. Twitter enables one to do a thorough examination of the way conversations develop online from the first tweet to the last on a given crisis. Twitter's ability to provide instant updates supports DiNardo's (2002) view that the Internet is a useful crisis communications tool for allowing an organisation to provide information to a large audience.

The study adopted a qualitative content analysis. The researcher transfers content through coding into a measurable and verifiable form in qualitative content analysis. The researcher attempted to give meaning to the data obtained and to account for the observations made through description and analysis. The design was considered suitable for this study because it provided a precise and valid representation of the variables that are relevant to the research questions.

The study utilized purposive sampling of tweets in the period of January, 2019 when the crisis occurred. From this the researcher retrieved data concerning the information communicated by different audiences throughout the crisis period. The content analysis included tweets that only had the specific hashtags listed in the sample size. The

researcher selected tweets from the database of twitter because they had characteristics that were desired.

A coding sheet titled Dusit D2 Hotel Terror attack crisis tweets code sheet was created and implemented in the coding process. Items to be coded include the date of publishing of the tweet, actual text of the tweet, the hashtags (number and terms used), whether the tweet was an original post, retweet/RT or @reply and also if the tweet pertained to the crisis being studied.

Twitter allows one to access of archived posts, and save them in an easily exported format. This option had been available since 2012, and it was a consistent way to build up a good archive of tweets in a CSV file that includes all information. There was a code program that aided the researcher by coming up with the different hashtags and grouping the data as it should be. A code program that was developed through an IT specialist where tweets could be pulled through Python, a computer programming language This allowed one to export and analyse the data through downloading historical tweets by hashtags or keywords and export them to Excel. The target population of the study was determined as the cumulative number of tweets that used specific hashtags and were collected in the two-day period of January 15th and 16th, 2019 when the crisis occurred through the online conversations

Recurrent and/or unique hashtag terms and was then be given a label and included in the spreadsheet so they could be accounted for as well. The Hashtags mentioned in my sample were included in the spreadsheet. All data in the spreadsheet was analyzed using the “frequencies” procedure, a form of descriptive statistics. The spreadsheet was then imported into SPSS and Nvivo then used to generate numerous output tables that included statistical information on all terms, such as valid, missing, mean, range, and sum. The tweets were analyzed and grouped in terms of hashtags (#), number of tweets, responses, retweets/reposts, likes, type of tweet and also the original owner of the tweet. The names/tweeter handles of individuals was not noted due to ethical considerations only the content was looked at.

#### **4.5.0 Research Findings, Analysis and Discussions**

##### **4.5.1 Response Rate and Data Demographics**

The sample was taken from January 15 onwards consisted of a total of 447 tweets was analysed. The tweets were tweeted between 15th and 16th of January while a sample of other tweets were taken as the post analysis of the crisis communication. The tweets were given as user types as per the coding scheme which noted the official user of the original tweet. This gave an in depth understanding as to who was giving out and also asking for information.

A total of 113 hashtags were used in the different tweets although an analysis of 8 hashtags was done. The sampled tweets were coded for the following hashtags: #dusitd2attack, #RiversideAttack, #DusitD2Attack, #riversideattack, #14RiversideAttack, #PrayforKenya, #KenyaUnbowed and #WeShallOvercome. The most prevalent hashtag was #14RiversideAttack. #14Riverside attack was popular due to the fact that the attack happened at that particular place.

The definition for the user types and number of tweets were categorized as follows: government bodies, organizations, prominent persons and civilians (#kot). Civilians consisted of Kenyans on twitter along with any other individual that

tweeted using the hashtags under analysis.

##### **4.5.3 Findings and Data Analyses**

A total of 864 hashtags that were used during and after the attack. Most of these hashtags were used on the 16th of January. This represented the day after the attack. The total number used was 442 according to the analysis done.

The trending hashtags included #dusitd2attack, #RiversideAttack, #DusitD2Attack, #riversideattack, #14RiversideAttack, #WeShallOvercome, #KenyaUnbowed and #PrayForKenya. There were several other hashtags that were used during the attack. Some of the hashtags used during and after the attack were irreverent as they did not contain messages that were directly linked to the attack. There were also others that were relevant but the message contained in the tweet made no sense as it did not contain useful information.

There was a total of 151 hashtags that were used during the day of the attack. The common hashtags used were like #Nairobi, #KenyaAttack, #RiversideAttack, # Dusit and many others. Not all the hashtags used on that particular day were put under analysis. They were however noted as part of the 115 hashtags used that day. Twitter was used highly used. There was no clear knowledge of how to seek outside help with misleading and unreliable information being passed between victims and those outside. This message is supported by the number of tweets or reposts that was shared during the attack. The number of tweets remained high although not all of the them regarding the attack were looked at. This is because there were tweets of the incident but without the related hashtags and therefore, they did not pass the unit of analysis to be under criticism. Giving out and receiving information has no rules. People receive information during crisis regardless of whether they can understand it or not. This statement simply tells communication as it is. Interpretation of the messages is what follows. A big percentage of the people writing the messages consisted of civilians, Kenyans on Twitter among other people. The high-ranking officials and government bodies were cautious in the type of information was being passed by them to the publics. Most of the messages portrayed the attackers as cowards for having committed such an act of terrorism on innocent people.

The messages were narrowed down to four categories of authors so as to make the data easy to analyse. They were grouped into organizations, government bodies, prominent person(s) and civilian. All the government organizations included the Kenya Police and other parastatals were summed up as one. Organizations included non-profit organizations, privately owned ones, international organizations and media groups. Prominent people include people like the president and also other high-ranking officials in the government sector that either provided information or gave directions as to how certain things were to be done.

Towards the beginning of the attack, the messages were uncertain in the sense that it came as a shock that the DusitD2 Hotel was being attacked by terrorist. The first tweets were clearly giving information that the area is not safe and should therefore be avoided at all cost. It was also notifying the general public of the happening at that moment and day. A few examples of the tweets are as below. The attack was abrupt and while everywhere else things were happening normal a small section of

Westlands, the Riverside Drive was under chaos. People and organizations went to the scene as soon as they heard the news so that they could update the rest of Kenyans on what was happening. See **Tweet 1** of the notification of the exchange of fire that was happening.

Africa Uncensored [@AfUncensored]. (2019, January 15). ALERT: There is an ongoing attack at DusitD2, 14 Riverside, Nairobi. Exchange of fire and a car on fire. We are on the scene. More to follow. [Tweet]. X. <https://x.com/AfUncensored/status/1085155437002010624>

There was an address by the president on the ongoing DusitD2 attack later on. The press conference by the then President Uhuru Kenyatta told of the news that the attack was over and that the Kenyan Forces were able to take over the situation. The news was met with a sign of relief as it gave hope to the people. The hashtags used by Nation Tv while relaying the information indeed proved that even though we were attacked we would definitely overcome the situation. The tweet is shown in **Tweet 2** below.

Nation Africa [@NationAfrica]. (2019, January 16). Replying to @NationAfrica VIDEO: President Kenyatta addresses the nation over Dusit attack. "The security operation at Dusit complex is over and all the terrorists eliminated" #WeShallOvercome #KenyaAttack #KenyaUnbowed [Tweet]. X. <https://x.com/NationAfrica/status/1085450560541724672>

Messages of caution to the civilians were clearly stated as the area under attack was to be avoided. The National Police Service rendered the Dusit D2 hotel area a crime scene and under tight security. That meant that the area was not accessible and until the Forces had made sure the area was safe again no one other than the people already there was expected. The tweet has 88 replies, of people inquiring or wanting to know more about the situation on the ground, 806 reposts to spread the information to others and 1,200 likes. **Tweet 3** highlights how the police passed this message.

National Police Service-Kenya [@NPSOfficial\_KE]. (2019, January 16). We wish to caution all members of the public including politicians that Dusit Hotel and the area around 14 Riverside Drive is a Crime Scene that is under an active security operation. Until it is declared safe, everyone not actively involved in the operation should avoid the area. [Tweet]. X. [https://x.com/NPSOfficial\\_KE/status/1085387307434287110](https://x.com/NPSOfficial_KE/status/1085387307434287110)

Several news media groups also highlighted the Dusit D2 terrorist attack through their own social media platforms. A good example would be the Swahili Times that gave information that the then President of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta has released a press statement notifying the citizens that 14 people have died due to the attack and that 700 others have been injured. They also specified that the deaths and injuries were due to a terrorist attack that happened and that the situation has already been stabilized. See **Tweet 4**.

Swahili Times [@swahilitimes]. (2019, January 16). Rais wa Kenya, @UKenyatta amesema kuwa raia 14 wameuawa katika shambulio lililotokea katika Hotel ya DusitD2 jijini Nairobi, huku wengine wakijeruhiwa, na 700 wakiokolewa. Ameongeza kuwa, magaidi waliotekeleza shambulio hilo wameuawa na operesheni imekamilika. #DusitTerrorAttack. [Tweet]. X. <https://x.com/swahilitimes/status/1085441359828475904>

The attack made different people/organizations to step up to render services such as counselling to the victims and their families which served as therapy as noted in **Tweet 5** below. The counselling sessions were to be offered for free. This would make the actions that had happened prevent reoccurrence. The failures of not referring to the act as a terrorist attack was later realized and a series of coordinated counter attacks on dealing with the problem was developed.

Jenetta Barry [@Jenetta\_TEP]. (2019, January 17). Urgent Advice to All Terrorist Attack Victims In Nairobi: I am available to give free trauma consultations to those affected by the Nairobi terrorist attack this week. I can be contacted on Whatsapp at +254 798675142. Healing hugs and much love to all. [Tweet]. X. [https://x.com/Jenetta\\_TEP/status/1085808239533539328](https://x.com/Jenetta_TEP/status/1085808239533539328)

The tweet gathered 51 replies, 1000 reposts, 1200 likes and was bookmarked 5 times. She later edited the text by posting another tweet on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January, 2019 stating that the counselling services she was offering were free of charge after being asked on the fee.

Organization messages were targeted at giving information and correcting the damage that was already done by the attackers. They were mainly offering services that aided in correcting or trying to reduce the effect that the attack had on both the victims and the whole country at large. Civilians followed this example by tweeting messages that gave information on how the procedure of rescuing the victims was going.

The results of this research study revealed that Twitter was used for a variety of reasons, and quite strategically. Through these tweets, one can identify various emergency management phases, reputation repair strategies, crisis types, types of attribution of responsibility, and public perceptions. It also reveals reputation repair strategies that work best for this type of crisis. Therefore, this study may serve as a future reputation repair guideline for a company/country facing a similar situation.

## 5.0 Conclusion

There were a total number of 864 hashtags that were used during the attack period. The day of the attack a total of 151 were used, 442 were used after the attack and the post attack period had 271 hashtags in total. #14Riverside attack was the most trending hashtag noted during the attack period. The others followed consecutively as #WeShallOvercome, #RiversideAttack, #KenyaUnbowed, #riversideattack, #DusitD2Attack, #dusitd2attack then #PrayFor Kenya with the lowest entries used. With the hashtags the total number of tweets were 447 which resulted in a total number of 16,624 replies/retweets.

There was high adoption of Image Repair Theory strategies that were used in terms of image restoration, denial,

reducing offensiveness, evading responsibility, corrective action and mortification. The message strategy that was used in actualizing the tweets, responding to the tweets through replies indicated the strategies. There was however a clear communication strategy used by the government bodies in their communication both internally and externally.

Organization messages were targeted at giving information and correcting the damage that was already done by the attackers. They were mainly offering services that aided in correcting or trying to reduce the effect that the attack had on both the victims and the whole country at large. Civilians followed this example by tweeting messages that gave information on how the procedure of rescuing the victims was going.

Twitter has proven to be a critical tool in crisis management, offering real time and widespread communication dissemination, and enhanced public engagement. However, the effectiveness is dependent on several factors, including the credibility of sources, timelines of updates, and the platform's ability to filter information.

### 6.0 Recommendations

Communication is very important tool in passing information across. It is also a two-way traffic that requires one to say something and get information back. The introduction of social media has made things a lot easier as different types of messages can be sent across the world in a matter of second. Specific recommendations were given below:

1. To encourage and diversify the use of twitter in sending messages during crisis. It was a very effective tool as the messages were relayed well. The respondents were also able to give their views and were not limited. As such, this study encourages more organizations to utilize social media as a tool for communication.
2. There should be collaborations with technology companies by governments and organizations which could ensure that their verified accounts are prioritized in user feeds.
3. Social media platforms must invest in more sophisticated algorithms and human oversight to detect and mitigate the spread of misinformation during crises. Collaboration with fact-checking organizations could enhance this effort.
4. Efforts should be made to increase digital literacy among the public, particularly in identifying credible sources and verifying information before sharing. Educational campaigns could be integrated into social media platforms themselves.
5. Social media platforms should enhance their verification mechanisms for both content and users during crises. This could involve temporarily relaxing verification criteria for key crisis-related accounts.
6. Establishment of real-time monitoring systems to track the spread of information on social media during crises. This should be coupled with feedback loops that allow crisis managers to adjust communication strategies based on public response and information flow.

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