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“He was Framed!” Framing Criminal Behavior in Sports News

Anita Atwell Seate, Jake Harwood, & Erin Blecha

An experiment examined the effects of newspaper articles about an athlete involved in a crime on perceptions of athletes. News articles were varied by framing the athlete’s activities in an accusatory versus defensive manner, and framing the athlete as physically versus mentally skilled. An accusatory frame resulted in more criminally culpable perceptions of the athlete. Frame did not influence perceptions of the athlete’s race, and perceptions of the athlete as Black did not increase perceived culpability. Additional findings show that framing does influence more general perceptions of athletes. Discussion focuses on media framing, attitudes toward athletes, and college students’ socially desirable responses concerning race.

Keywords: Athletes in the Media; Framing; Media Effects; Race; Stereotyping

Message framing is the process of selecting and emphasizing certain features to include in a message while deemphasizing other elements (Entman, 1993). Considerable research now demonstrates that the ways in which messages are framed can influence how those messages are understood (Entman, 2007; Tuchman, 1978). This study investigates this process in media messages concerning criminality among athletes. Recent research suggests that analyzing race in the context of sports and sports media is an important avenue for communication research (e.g., Butterworth, 2007). The goals of the study are to investigate (a) whether describing events in more accusatory frames influences perceptions of athlete culpability, (b) whether describing an

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athlete as more physically talented influences perceptions of athlete race, (c) whether perceptions of athlete race are subsequently associated with perceptions of criminal wrongdoing, (d) whether framing effects are moderated by prior media exposure, and (e) whether such news stories affect more general views of athletes. We examine these questions in the context of newspaper crime stories concerning a criminal act committed by a college athlete. Framing of news stories concerning crime is an important topic for communication scholars because the stories may influence perceptions of alleged criminals and the groups to which those individuals belong.

When wrongdoing occurs, media messages concerning perpetrators have the ability to shape public opinion of the crime and the alleged criminal. One way in which this occurs is via framing of news stories surrounding the event, which can emphasize exculpatory or inculpatory information and influence message consumers. A majority of work that has examined culpability judgments of those presented in the news has examined the moderating role of news consumption (e.g., Dixon, 2006) and visual framing of race (e.g., Abraham & Appiah, 2006). For example, Abraham and Appiah found that pictures of social group members influence how people perceive social groups. Specifically, they found that photos of Black people in a news story regarding school vouchers led to Whites seeing vouchers as a "Black issue." Other research has found that Blacks are shown in the news as violent and dangerous criminals (Oliver, 2003), and Dixon (2006) extended this line of research by finding that heavy television news consumers perceive Blacks as *more* culpable for their alleged crimes. Although considerable work has examined framing of news stories, relatively little work has examined the effects of how such stories *describe* alleged criminals and influence perceptions of criminality. Based on the visual framing and race literatures, we predict that an accusatory frame will result in more negative views of an athlete-perpetrator (H1). In this article, negative views are assessed in terms of culpability and the degree to which situational attributions are made for the athlete's behavior. Attributions provide a convenient and somewhat indirect measure of attitude about the athlete. Without directly asking what the readers think about the target, situational attributions for negative behavior indicate positive attitudes, whereas dispositional attributions would indicate more negative inferences (Hewstone, 1991).

Racial differences in portrayals of athletes have been examined extensively (Billings & Angelini, 2007). One salient difference that has been widely examined is the difference between portrayals that focus on mental acuity versus athleticism. Sports commentators, for instance, are more likely to praise White players for mental abilities and leadership skills and Black players for their strength, aggressiveness, and raw natural ability (Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005). The *effects* of such representations have not been studied extensively, but initial work indicates that viewers attend to these cues and use them when asked to describe athletes of various races (Buffington & Fraley, 2008). Given the associations described earlier, we predict that when race is *not* explicitly stated, athletes described with a mental frame are more likely to be perceived as White, whereas those described using a physical frame are more likely to be perceived as Black (H2).

Cultivation theory suggests that the media (particularly television) are an important socialization agent, influencing how individuals perceive the world (Morgan,

Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009). Research regarding media and stereotyping has shown consistently that African Americans are disproportionately represented in the news media as perpetrators of crime, whereas White Americans are disproportionately represented as crime victims (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman, 1990, 1992). Moreover, African Americans (particularly men) are shown as dangerous, violent, nameless, and guilty criminals (Oliver, 2003). As suggested by cultivation theory, a consequence of these portrayals is that heavy news consumers are more likely than their light viewing counterparts to perceive the world as dangerous and to perceive African Americans as criminals (Dixon, 2006). As such, we are interested in whether the effects described earlier are moderated by news consumption. We predict that heavy news consumers will have racial stereotypes of Black crime more accessible and, hence, will judge the target athlete more harshly in the “physical” frame condition due to the (perhaps subconscious) inference that he is Black (*H3*). Heavy news viewers may also be more likely to see news coverage of athlete crime, and hence be more likely to view criminal athletes as representative of athletes in general (*H4*).

Finally, we investigated how portrayals of individual athletes might generalize to perceptions of athletes as a whole. Contact theory posits that contact between individuals from social groups influences general attitudes concerning those groups (Allport, 1954). Central to contact theory is the notion that feelings about individuals can generalize to feelings about the groups to which those people belong (Harwood, 2010). Recent work shows that *mediated* contact can positively influence intergroup attitudes (e.g., Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). However, it is likely that mediated contact can also have negative effects. Consistent with contact theory, depictions of athletes performing negative acts, particularly when described in an accusatory frame, might result in more negative feelings toward athletes in general. However, generalization from individual to group can be impeded by phenomena such as perceiving the individual to be unrepresentative of the group (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). As a result of this uncertainty, we frame our interest here in terms of a research question:

RQ1: Do news portrayals of athletes' criminal behavior negatively influence general attitudes toward athletes?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 116$) were recruited from communication classes at a large Southwestern U.S. university. Because the purpose of the study was to examine intergroup perceptions of athletes and stereotypes associated with African Americans, we removed five African American participants and six athletes (1 of whom was African American) from the sample. The final sample consisted of 33 men and 73 women ($N = 106$; ages ranged from 18–33 years; $M = 21.04$, $SD = 1.78$). Clearly, the gender imbalance in the sample is not ideal; however, some existing data suggest that there are few gender differences in sports attendance and fandom among college students (Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000). The majority of participants (83%) identified

themselves as White or Caucasian, 1.9% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 12.3% as Hispanic, 1.4% as Native American, 0.9% as multiracial, and 1.9% as “other.”

Participants completed the study in groups of 5 to 12 on lab computers using MediaLab software (Empirisoft New York, New York). The participants were instructed by one of two White, female researchers that they were participating in a study that assessed their media consumption and their perceptions of print news. Participants completed the media consumption measures and then were randomly assigned to read a newspaper article that was manipulated in a 2 (Accusatory/Defensive Frame) \times 2 (Mental/Physical Acuity) between-subjects experimental design.

Independent Variables

Experimental manipulation. This study incorporated four versions of a newspaper article (accusatory-mental, defensive-mental, accusatory-physical, and defensive-physical). The articles were written by one of the authors and formatted such that they appeared to be printed from *The New York Times* Web site. The articles were examined and edited by a professional journalist, who evaluated the articles as credible. Each version featured an athlete (Smith) with a prior criminal record who was arrested for fighting. In the accusatory frame, after Smith’s past criminal record was discussed, the article stated, “[t]hough many feel he should have learned his lesson, the current charges show he has not,” and that his arrest “came as no surprise.” In this frame, witnesses described Smith as acting “in an impulsive way,” and said his actions were “uncalled for and unnecessary.” His teammate noted that, “the assault charges were added to an already spotty record.” In the defensive frame, after Smith’s criminal record was discussed the article stated, “[m]any feel this time that Smith got a bad rap and was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” and that his arrest “came as a surprise.” Witnesses discussed Smith’s actions as “an effort to protect his teammates” and “an act of courage [that] is being portrayed as a brutal assault.” His teammate noted that, “it is disappointing that the assault charges were added to an already spotty record . . . [Smith] has my back.”

In the mental acuity frame, Smith was described as “quick thinking” and as showing “unwavering concentration and composure even during the closest of games.” His coach described Smith as one who “get[s] the job done and make[s] it look effortless. He can read plays before anyone else sees that they are happening.” In the physical frame, Smith was described as having “physical prowess and natural raw talent,” along with “speed, agility, and sheer strength [that] have proven to be a potent combination on the field.” His coach noted that watching him was like “watching a bull take on its opponent.” After reading the story, participants were asked to select the topic from a list of options (“an athlete charged with committing a crime,” “an athlete’s nonprofit organization,” “an athlete discussing his team’s prospects of winning a game,” or “I don’t know”). All successfully responded, indicating that they had read the story on at least a superficial level.

To ensure that the four news stories represented distinct frames, three undergraduate coders, blind to the hypotheses, coded each story on how well the article

emphasized each frame. After reading definitions of the frames (available from the authors), the coders read each story and responded to four Likert items regarding the framing of the news story: “How evident was each frame in the story,” ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The coders were reliable for all frames (accusatory, Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .90$; defensive, Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .91$; mental, Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .99$; and physical, Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .89$). The means associated with the coder’s ratings are presented in Table 1. The correspondence between the coders’ ratings and the intended manipulations was assessed by calculating the statistical association between the mean ratings in Table 1 and the hypothesized scoring of each cell (expressed as “high/low”). The correspondence was large and highly significant, $r_s = .88$, $p < .001$.

Television news consumption. This was measured with two items—one for local news and one for national news (e.g., “How often do you watch local television news?”—with responses ranging from (1) *never*, 1–2 days per week, 3–4 days per week, 5–6 days per week, daily, or (6) *multiple times per day* ($\alpha = .71$).

Overall television consumption. This was measured using two items. The first asked how much television the participant watched in a typical week, and the second asked how much television the participant had watched the previous day. Both were answered in hours; the responses were standardized and the two standardized items were averaged ($\alpha = .68$).

Overall exposure to sports news and discussion shows. This was measured with a single item—“How often do you watch sports talk shows on television (e.g., *Sports Center*, etc.)?”—assessed on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*multiple times per day*) ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.80$; indicating average consumption a couple of times per week).

Demographics. The race, gender, age, and athletic status of the participants were assessed. Political ideology was also measured using a one-item semantic differential, with responses ranging from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*) ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.51$).

Dependent Variables

Athlete culpability. This was assessed with five Likert-type items (e.g., “Smith was definitely guilty of the crime he was accused of committing”), with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) ($\alpha = .78$; $M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.05$).

Table 1 Mean Coder Ratings for Experimental Frames

Coder rating	Accusatory frame		Defensive frame	
	Physical	Mental	Physical	Mental
Accusatory	6.00	6.33	2.00	1.33
Defensive	2.00	1.67	6.33	7.00
Physical	7.00	4.33	7.00	3.00
Mental	1.00	6.33	1.00	6.33

Situational attributions for athlete behavior. This was assessed with three items (e.g., “On the night of the fight, how important was the behavior of others in causing Smith’s behavior?”), with responses ranging from 1 (*very important*) to 7 (*very unimportant*) ($\alpha = .72$; $M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.05$).

Athlete representative of athletes. Two questions asked whether the athlete was seen as representative of athletes: for example, “Please rate the extent to which Smith represents athletes in general,” with responses ranging from 1 (*very accurate*) to 7 (*very inaccurate*); and “Please rate the extent to which Smith is typical of athletes in general,” with responses ranging from 1 (*typical*) to 7 (*not typical*) ($\alpha = .80$; $M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.04$).

General attitudes toward athletes. This was assessed with five items measured on a 1 to 7 semantic differential scale. (In general, people described athletes as *mean/nice*, *violent/nonviolent*, *trustworthy/untrustworthy*, *passive/aggressive*, or *self-centered/concerned for others*; $\alpha = .71$; $M = 4.65$, $SD = 0.78$.) Items were recoded such that high scores indicated more negative attitudes.

Inferred athlete race. Participants were asked to recall the athlete’s race (which was *not* mentioned in the article) after having read the article.

Results

To test the experimental effects, data were analyzed in a 2 (Frame: Accusatory vs. Defensive) \times 2 (Frame: Mental Acuity vs. Physical) \times 2 (Inferred Athlete Race: Black vs. Not Black) design.¹ Covariates were overall television viewing, overall exposure to sports news and discussion shows, and political views. See Table 2 for the correlations between the covariates and the dependent variables and Table 3 for the correlations between the dependent variables. As predicted by *H1*, the accusatory frame yielded

Table 2 Correlations Between Covariates and Dependent Variables

Variable	Perceived athlete race ^a		Dispositional attribution	Situational attribution	Representativeness of athletes	Negative attitudes toward athletes
	Culpability					
TV sports news consumption	-.01	-.26**	.06	.11	-.18	-.04
TV viewing	-.02	-.08	-.02	.20*	.07	-.01
Political view (conservatism)	.14	.17	-.08	-.10	.08	.04

Note. $N = 106$.

^aPerceived athlete race (Black = 1, not Black = 2).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3 Correlations Among Dependent Variables

Variable	Athlete culpability	Situational attributions	Athlete representativeness of athletes in general
Situational attributions	-.14		
Athlete representativeness of athletes in general	.25*	-.00	
General negative attitudes toward athletes	.12	.08	.05

Note. $N = 106$.

* $p < .01$.

higher perceptions of athlete culpability ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.02$) than the defensive frame ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.93$), $F(1, 95) = 13.73$, $p < .001$ (partial $\eta^2 = .13$).

Contrary to $H2$, the athlete was not more likely to be perceived as Black in the physical frame condition. A marginally significant chi-square suggested a trend in the opposite direction; in the physical condition, only about 14% of the athletes were recalled as Black, whereas about 28% were thought to be Black in the mental condition ($\eta^2 = 2.95$; $V = .17$; $p < .10$). Notably, 71% of participants indicated being unsure or not recalling the athlete's race, suggesting either very accurate recall of the article (in which race was not mentioned) or a desire to avoid appearing racist. It is interesting to note that when participants did report that the athlete was Black, they also perceived him to be less representative of athletes ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.51$) than those who perceived him to be not Black ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.17$), which might also suggest a degree of social desirability, $F(1, 95) = 4.12$, $p < .05$ (partial $\eta^2 = .04$).

One additional result bears on $H2$. The interaction between the mental acuity/physical variable and frame was significant for the situational attributions measure, $F(1, 95) = 5.50$, $p < .05$ (partial $\eta^2 = .04$). To decompose the interaction regression analyses were performed using the MODPROBE macro (Hayes & Matthes, 2009). In the mental acuity condition, situational attributions for the athlete's behavior were stronger in the accusatory than the defensive frame. However, in the physical condition, the behavior situational attributions were stronger in the defensive than the accusatory condition. In other words, the accusatory frame reduces consideration of mitigating factors for an athlete portrayed as "physical," but not for a more "mental" athlete (see Figure 1). This suggests an association between "physical" descriptions of athletes and their criminality; as noted earlier, this would be consistent with a stereotype of Black criminality, although the explicit measure of race did not play out here as expected.

Analysis pertaining to $H3$ revealed no significant moderating effect of television news viewing on the association between the mental/physical variable and either athlete culpability or situational attributions (both $ps > .20$). In examining $H4$, the criterion variable was the extent to which this athlete was perceived to be representative of athletes as a group. The interaction between television news viewing and the accusatory/defensive frame in predicting this variable was significant ($b = -.54$), $t = 1.98$, $p = .05$. Examination of simple slopes demonstrated that for heavy viewers of television news (1 SD above the mean), the athlete was seen as less representative of athletes in the defensive

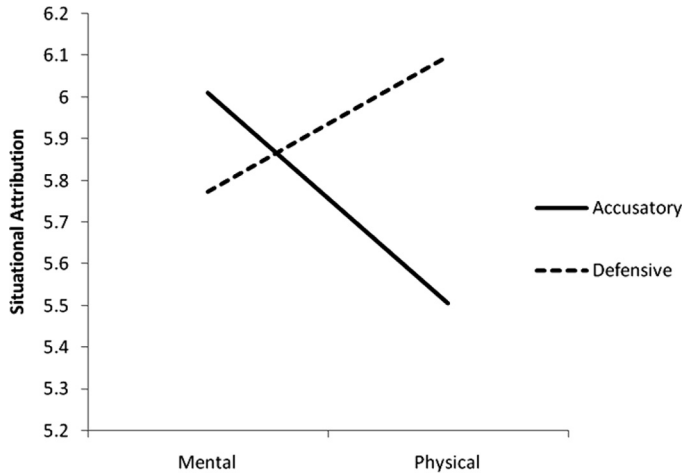


Figure 1 Effects of Frame and Mental/Physical Variable on Situational Attributions.

condition than in the accusatory condition ($b = -.77$), $t = -2.23$, $p < .05$. In contrast, moderate or light viewers (at or below the mean for television news viewing) showed no effect of frame. This supports the hypothesis—negatively framed athlete behavior is viewed as more typical by heavy news viewers.

For *RQ1*, the dependent variable is general attitudes toward athletes. The interaction between mental/physical acuity and perceived athlete race approached significance, $F(1, 95) = 3.79$, $p < .10$ (partial $\eta^2 = .04$; see Figure 2). Attitudes toward athletes in general were most negative when faced with a White–mental athlete behaving badly, and were more positive when faced with a Black–mental athlete.

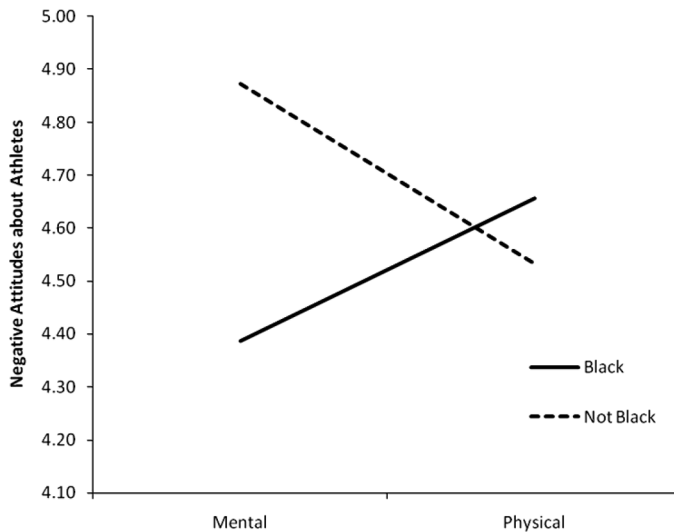


Figure 2 Effects of Frame and Perceived Athlete Race on General Negative Attitudes Toward Athletes.

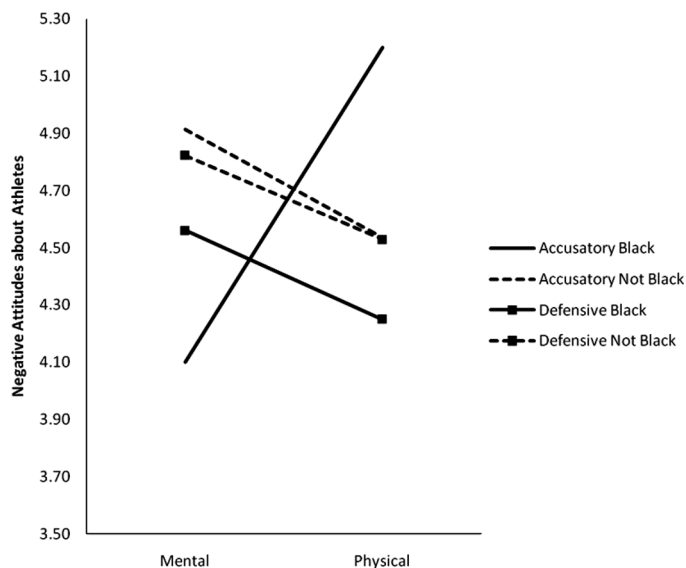


Figure 3 Three-Way Interaction Effect on General Negative Attitudes About Athletes.

In contrast, when faced with an athlete described as physical, athlete race made little difference in influencing attitudes toward athletes in general.

The effect described in the previous paragraph was further moderated in a three-way interaction including the accusatory/defensive frame, $F(1, 95) = 3.93$, $p = .05$ (partial $\eta^2 = .04$). Figure 3 shows that an (inferred) Black athlete in an accusatory frame results in substantially greater negative attitudes toward all athletes when that athlete is portrayed as *physical* (versus *mental*); in all other conditions, there are small trends toward more negative attitudes in the *mental* condition.

Discussion

This study shows that how messages are framed in the media, including traditional newspaper coverage, influences how the targets of that coverage are perceived. Supporting *H1*, this study found that messages framed in an accusatory manner lead to increases in the perceived culpability of the target of the news coverage.

Contrary to *H2*, there was no association between the mental acuity/physical frame and perception of the athlete's race. These findings are surprising in light of past research that consistently shows a link between race and perceptions of physicality versus mental acuity. It is possible that these findings suggest a growing awareness of race stereotyping among undergraduate students, particularly those in the social sciences. These students may be increasingly unwilling to make racial inferences or connections, and when offered the opportunity of a "race-free" response they will take it (Norton, Vandello, Biga, & Darley, 2008).

H3 proposed that heavy news consumers would perceive the target as more representative of athletes because criminal news stories regarding athletes are quite

common. *H3* was not supported. Heavy news consumers were not radically different from light consumers in their evaluations of athlete typicality. However, with regards to *H4*, a significant interaction was found between television news viewing and the accusatory/defensive frame, such that for heavy viewers of television news, the athlete was seen as more representative of athletes in the accusatory than in the defensive condition. In contrast, for viewers who consume low amounts of news, there were no effects of frame. This is consistent with cultivation theory research showing that heavy television news consumers view the world more in line with mediated reality (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006).

With regards to *RQ1* there was a complex interaction between frame, perceived race and attitudes toward athletes in general. Those who perceived the athlete as Black and were exposed to the accusatory frame had the most negative attitudes to athletes in general when the athlete was praised for his physicality. This is consistent with research suggesting that Black men are perceived as violent, dangerous and scary criminals (Dixon, 2006; Oliver, 2003). The nature of the crime in our story (Smith was arrested for assault) probably contributed to this effect. It is interesting to note that those who perceived the athlete to be Black, and who were exposed to the defensive frame, had more positive attitudes toward athletes in general when the Black athlete was lauded for his mental acuity. When people are exposed to counter-stereotypical outgroup members this can lead to more positive attitudes toward the group more generally (e.g., Cook, 1978), including when such contact is mediated (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). A Black athlete who is praised for his mental acuity is likely to be perceived as counter stereotypical and this may have led to the more positive perceptions toward athletes in general in this condition. Therefore, the study contributes a couple of substantive findings to contact theory. More broadly, it is (we believe) the first study to examine the effects of mediated contact using purportedly nonfiction stimuli. Previous work has examined mediated contact with fictional characters, but not with individuals portrayed in print news. Given the enhanced realism of nonfiction content this might offer some new avenues to those interested in how media portrayals influence intergroup attitudes.

In total, this study provided insights into how linguistic framing of news stories can influence perceptions of the target of the story him- or herself, as well as the groups to which that person belongs. Although we found fairly limited effects concerning racial inferences about the target or consequences of those inferences, future research should continue to examine the link between language used in news stories and perceptions of race and racial groups, particularly using less direct measures than the ones we used.

Note

- [1] Levels of television sports news consumption, television sports commentary consumption, newspaper sports consumption, and live sports attendance were also measured and initially treated as moderators of the experimental framing effects. However, these items did not consistently predict or moderate the framing effects in any theoretically meaningful way, and were subsequently removed from the analyses.

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