

## Audience Perception of Broadcast Media Coverage of the Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Women in Rural Communities in Edo State, Nigeria

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:**

This study examines audience perception of broadcast media coverage of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in rural communities in Edo State. The researcher embarked on this study with the intent of achieving three objectives, and based on the objectives of the study, three research questions were formulated to serve as a guide for this study.

**Methodology:**

The study is anchored on the attitude change theory, and data was collected through the secondary data collection method. Findings show that Women in rural areas have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, as they often face unique challenges such as limited access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities.

**Findings:**

These challenges have been exacerbated by COVID-19 and the measures implemented to contain its spread, such as lockdowns and travel restrictions. This study recommends that broadcast media coverage of the effects of COVID-19 on women in rural communities should focus on human stories that resonate with the audience.

**Implication:**

It can be achieved by featuring real-life women from rural communities affected by the pandemic. The media can showcase how COVID-19 has impacted these women, their challenges, and how they cope. By highlighting individual stories, the media can make the issue more relatable to the audience, which will help to increase engagement and understanding.

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### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented challenge for the world, affecting every aspect of human life, including health, social, economic, and political spheres. The pandemic has particularly affected vulnerable groups, including women in rural communities, who face unique challenges due to their location, social status, and economic conditions. In Edo State, Nigeria, women in rural communities have been struck by the pandemic, with many struggling to cope with the crisis's adverse effects. The broadcast media have played a crucial role in covering the pandemic's impact on women in rural communities in Edo State, but the audience's perception of the coverage varies widely.

According to Uche (2021), the broadcast media, including radio and television, have been essential in disseminating information about the pandemic to the public, particularly in rural communities with limited access to information. The media has provided updates on the pandemic's impact and ways to prevent its spread through various programs and segments. In Edo State, the pandemic exposed women's vulnerabilities and challenges in various rural communities, particularly regarding access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. The media have also highlighted the challenges faced by women in rural communities during the pandemic, including food insecurity, loss of income, lack of access to healthcare, and increased gender-based violence.

However, the audience's perception of the media's coverage of the pandemic's effect on women in rural communities in Edo State is mixed. Omeiza (2022) noted that some viewers and listeners appreciate the media's efforts in raising awareness about the pandemic's impact on women in rural communities. They believe that the media have helped highlight the unique challenges women face in these communities and have contributed to the efforts to address these challenges. They also appreciate the media's role in providing information on preventing the spread of the virus and the support available to those affected by the pandemic.

On the other hand, Bernard et al. (2022) noted that some viewers and listeners criticize the media for not providing enough coverage of the pandemic's impact on women in rural communities. They argue that the media have focused more on the pandemic's overall impact on the country, neglecting the specific challenges faced by women in rural communities. Some also believe that the media must do more to highlight the government's failures in addressing the pandemic's impact on women in rural communities.

Overall, the audience's perception of the media's coverage of the pandemic's effect on women in rural communities in Edo State is a mixed bag. While some appreciate the media's efforts in raising awareness about the pandemic's impact on women in these communities, others feel that more could be done to address the challenges women face in rural communities. As the pandemic continues to ravage the world, the broadcast media must continue to play a crucial role in informing the public and raising awareness about the unique challenges faced by vulnerable groups, including women in rural communities.

**Statement of the Problem.** The role of the broadcast media has remained indispensable in teaming and eradicating pandemics. These media have often disseminated information on positive public health practices such as social distancing, hand washing, respiratory hygiene, and government policies tackling outbreaks.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected people all over the world in various ways. In Nigeria, the pandemic has significantly impacted rural communities, particularly women, who have faced unique challenges due to their pre-existing socioeconomic status and limited access to resources. However, despite the importance of understanding the impact of COVID-19 on rural women, there needs to be more research on how the broadcast media has covered this issue.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the audience's perception of the broadcast media coverage of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in rural communities in Edo State.

**The Evolution of Covid-19 in Nigeria.** The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the Infectious Disease Centre, Yaba, Lagos State, Nigeria, on 27 February 2020. On board a Turkish airline from Milan, Italy, an Italian citizen arrived at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport, Lagos, at 10:00 p.m. on 24 February 2020. He visited his company's site in Ogun State the following day and presented himself at his company's staff clinic. The physician on duty had a strong suspicion of the presence of the virus. It led him to refer the Italian citizen to an Infectious Disease Hospital (IDH), and the COVID-19 status was confirmed (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020).

The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) started the contact tracing of 'Persons of Interest,' which included all persons on the manifesto of the flight that brought the index case to Nigeria, as well as people who had close contact with the index case while in Lagos and Ogun State. After two weeks, a cluster of cases was detected in Lagos and Abuja, and this was noted to be the emergence of the nationwide spread of the virus. The Federal Government, through the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA), restricted International commercial flights into the country, effective from 23 March 2020 (Onyeji, 2020). On the same day, Nigeria registered her first fatality: a 67-year-old male returnee from the United Kingdom who already had underlying medical issues that had been managed before his death. The death occurred in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja (Nigeria Centre for Disease and Control, 2020).

The Federal Government responded by authorizing the closure of all non-essential services (businesses and industries) and restricted movement of people in Lagos State, Ogun State, and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, on 29 March 2020. Most State Governments restricted public gatherings, and there were restrictions on Inter-state movement. The Federal Government later authorized the gradual easing of lockdown in the previously restricted states on 4 May 2020.

The nationwide spread of the virus led to the federal government of Nigeria effecting specific measures to contain the virus. The available information on the virus and the welfare of her citizenry were guiding beacons in periodic restrictions to maximize containment. Educational and religious institutions were first restricted before containment measures were extended to non-essential services (Onyeji, 2020).

**Health Education and the Surveillance Role of the Media.** Health education is critical for the general public to internalize appropriate health information that guides their health behavior. It is because people are likely to exhibit behavior based on available information. The point here is that people's health behavior largely depends on information available to them. He et al. (2020), after their study using a Chinese population, concluded that health information and health behavior are critical to public health education. Information possession is vital in public health because poor knowledge about public health issues could negatively affect health behavior. Conner (2011) corroborates that information is a fundamental cognitive determinant influencing health behavior.

The media, as the fourth estate of the realm, occupies a cardinal role in health education. Many decades ago, Flora et al. (2009) outlined the four roles that the media can play in health intervention: first is what they called media as an educator, the second is media as a supporter, the third is media as a program promoter, and the fourth is media as a supplement. The four elements look different but can typically be implemented in combination or individually. For example, media as an educator entails that the media has to educate the masses about public health issues. The objective of educating the public about public health issues is to ensure that they are mentally armed with information that will serve as a checklist regarding their behavior. The media provide a formidable platform through which health information can be available to the general public. They believe the media are critical in educating the general public about health issues.

The fundamental way through which the media can educate the general public on public health issues is through coverage. It can occur through strategies like frequently reporting public health issues, recommending appropriate health behavior, and suggesting policies that will assist in combating the reported public health issues. Educating the general public about health issues is like preparing them for war. Therefore, this has to be done before, not when the health issue becomes a pandemic. It is essential so that it will prepare them to take proactive steps. The media should educate the general public about health pandemics well before a confirmed case is within their locality. Within the context of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), local media did not need to wait until there was a confirmed virus in their country before educating the general public about its symptoms prevention and recommending action for the government to take. Unfortunately, previous studies that have examined media coverage did not take this aspect into account.

The media must first monitor the environment, spot possible health problems that might be life-threatening, and then offer sufficient information to notify the people about the problems. Sharma and Gupta (2012) say health education is essential to public health and health promotion. They add that health education aims to influence people's health behavior through information and instruction positively. Media coverage is an essential strategy for health education. It is because, through media coverage, the general public will be informed and instructed on issues related to public health issues. It also means that the surveillance role of the mass media is essential in the study of media coverage of health issues.

The surveillance role of the mass media requires that they monitor society and provide information to members of society on pending dangers. This function expresses the 'watchdog role' of the media. It is because when a dog watches over an area, it tries to let people know each time there is a perceived danger. The dog barks, typically attracting the public's attention with a corresponding possibility for eliciting actions to avert the danger. Therefore, the surveillance role of the mass media means that they constantly scan society, evaluate events, and highlight areas that pose potential dangers to the general wellness of society. In this sense, the media must ensure that people are adequately warned of dangers. Donohue et al. (2011) must have been referring to the surveillance function of the mass media when they submitted that knowledge is an essential condiment that people need to make informed decisions. This assertion makes a strong case for media workers to constantly monitor society and provide relevant and sufficient information to members of the general public.

The idea behind the surveillance function of the mass media is attributed to Lasswell. In the views of Lasswell, the mass media typically plays three roles in society. These are as follows: the surveillance of the environment, the correlation of the different components of society in responding to the environment, and the passing of societal heritage from generation to generation. When this assertion is explained from the perspective of COVID-19, it can be said that the mass media in Nigeria are responsible for examining the spread of COVID-19 and coordinating both the government and the citizenry on how best to respond to the global health crisis. Based on the surveillance perspective, when the virus broke out in China and was fast spreading to other countries, Nigerian media needed to draw the attention of both the government and Nigerian people to the need to act proactively. For the government, the emphasis could have been on making policy decisions that would avoid the

spread of the virus into the country while also making adequate provisions to contain it in case of an outbreak. The focal point for the citizenry could have been educating them about the virus in areas like symptoms while encouraging them to imbibe preventive health behavior.

**Formation of Mass Media Campaigns on Health Promotion.** Every media content aims to influence its target audience's attitude and behavior. To achieve this, media practitioners must understand the psychographic and demographic realities of the target audience. Ipso facto, they must appreciate the prevailing culture of the people and the most valuable and persuasive approach to use in order to influence attitude.

It, therefore, suffices that a strong relationship exists between mass communication and culture. Hence, Baran's (2002) definition of mass communication is "the process of creating shared learning between the mass media and their audiences." In line with its informative, educative, and socialization functions, the media socializes people into accepted norms and values and necessitates changing a cultural pattern where necessary since human behavior and culture are dynamic.

Also, in line with the responsibility of the mass media, various campaigns are mounted to educate, inform, enlighten, warn, persuade, and even dissuade the heterogeneous, critical, and sophisticated audience. In this light, the mass media have been vocal and visible recently, as in times past, in the campaign on various health issues. One such health issue that the mass media have repeatedly campaigned against is the issue of coronavirus. To this end, the mass media have repeatedly given coverage to all efforts to control and prevent the spread of the coronavirus in Nigeria.

Media campaigns are varied, multifaceted, highly planned, and strategically assembled media symphonies designed to increase awareness, inform, or change behavior in target audiences. When a decision has been made to use a media campaign to advance a health, environmental, or development cause, it may seem natural for those closest to the situation to define the campaign's central message. It is a temptation that must be overcome. Studies (Mefalopolous, 2008) have advocated that audience and needs assessment are processes that must be noticed. Premature efforts to identify the message may lead to missing the audience's needs. Experts on the issue often need to learn more about the audience. It is crucial to know the audience- to know what they already know about the issue, what they associate it with, and how they feel about it—to design a compelling message.

As with an educational effort or a training program, developing a media campaign should follow an essential process that involves carefully developing a realistic goal, assessing the audience, developing a strategy that uses appropriate media, and crafting a message that pre-tests successfully with the audience. All of these elements: the goal, the audience, the media, the strategy, and the message, interact with each other to create a successful campaign. After the campaign is launched, it can be evaluated in several ways: by recording the exposure (for instance, the number of adverts in several magazines with a circulation of so many people), by surveying people, asking them to recall the message, and by observing changes in behavior or the environment that could be attributed, in part, to the campaign (Sandman, 2000).

In the first stage of a media campaign, formative research helps define which behaviors the campaign will attempt to change to achieve its broad goals. Exploring what people already know, believe, and care about is necessary to select the most effective behaviors. For instance, a campaign aimed at controlling and preventing breast cancer must discover what the people already know, including cultural and religious predictors of the behavior and the inherent risk factors. According to Sandman (2000), it is essential to understand the difference between those who already perform the desired behavior ("doers") and those who do not ("non-doers").

Also, Day and Monroe (2000) suggest that formative research for a communications campaign should explore the media "diet" of the audience. Are they literate? Do they listen to the radio? If so, which station(s) and at what time(s)? Do they read any publications regularly? Do they have access to TV, Internet, or other media, and do they use it regularly? This information and your budget will help define the strategy and choice of media. With the goal in mind and information about the "media diet" of the audience in hand, strategic decisions can be made about selecting markets, media, sequence, frequency, and times. These factors form the essence of the campaign.

Critical information about funding and how to obtain access to various media opportunities will be needed at this time. Is the effort blessed with a charismatic spokesperson? Is free radio time available? How many newspapers cover the target region, and can they advertise in them? Does the audience frequently travel along a particular route, making road signs an option? How often should the message be repeated to achieve your goal? Is it necessary for the campaign to generate more resources to enable you to achieve the goal? (Day & Monroe, 2000).

Media campaigns include more than just radio, television, and newspaper information. As Day and Monroe (2000) observed, many environmental organizations effectively use "media events" to encourage news reporters to cover their stories. Despite the potential of media campaigns, often, this power takes much work to use effectively. In some cultures, people are bombarded with over 3,000 advertising messages per day. What would make a health-cum cultural behavior change message like breast cancer prevention stand out among that competition?

Furthermore, health behavior is often a series of complex actions and opportunities. Is it realistic to expect a short message to make a significant change? Public broadcast communications reach the masses, but since the public usually holds various beliefs and knowledge about any health topic, reaching the right group with relevant information takes work. How can a message be crafted to communicate the right points to the proper audience? These are issues that communication intervention in curtailing the spread of coronavirus may grapple with, and campaign managers are responsible for surmounting these challenges if the media campaign achieves its objective-creating awareness and increasing knowledge that will result in the prevention of Covid-19 cum health outcomes.

**Broadcast Media Coverage of the Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Women in Rural Communities.** The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted women in rural communities in Edo State. Women in these communities face unique challenges, including limited access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. The pandemic has worsened these challenges, with many women experiencing increased poverty and limited access to essential services. For example, a study by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) found that the pandemic has disrupted essential health services for women in Nigeria, with many women in rural communities unable to access reproductive healthcare services due to lockdowns and movement restrictions.

The broadcast media has played a crucial role in disseminating information about the pandemic's impact on women in rural communities in Edo State. The media has highlighted the challenges women face in these communities and the government's response to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. For example, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) has reported on the government's efforts to provide relief materials and financial assistance to vulnerable communities, including women in rural areas (NTA, 2020). Radio stations such as Edo Broadcasting Service (EBS) have also provided information about the pandemic and its impact on women in rural communities, including measures to prevent the spread of the virus and access to healthcare services.

The audience perception of the broadcast media coverage of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in rural communities in Edo State is critical in shaping public opinion and influencing policy decisions. The media's portrayal of women in rural communities can impact the government's response to the pandemic's impact on these communities.

Media's coverage of the pandemic's impact on women in Nigeria has been mainly focused on urban areas, with limited coverage of the impact on women in rural communities (Ajibade & Egbo, 2020). The study found that this lack of coverage has contributed to a lack of awareness of women's challenges in rural communities and a lack of understanding of the measures needed to mitigate the pandemic's impact on these communities.

However, other studies have found that the media's coverage of the pandemic's impact on women in rural communities has effectively raised awareness and shaped public opinion. A study by the International Journal of Communication found that media coverage of the impact of the pandemic on women in Nigeria has effectively raised awareness of the challenges women face in these communities, including limited access to healthcare and economic opportunities (Odedina, 2020).

One of the main ways that the media has affected women in rural communities is by exacerbating existing gender inequalities. Women in rural areas often face challenges that their urban counterparts do not, including limited access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. These challenges have only been made worse by the pandemic, as lockdowns and other restrictions have made it even harder for women to access the necessary resources and services.

Unfortunately, media coverage of COVID-19 has often overlooked these challenges, focusing instead on more sensational stories and neglecting how the pandemic has disproportionately affected women in rural communities. It has meant that women in these areas have yet to receive the support and resources they need to cope with the pandemic and have been left to bear the brunt of its effects.

Another way that media coverage of COVID-19 has also affected women in rural communities is by exacerbating social isolation and loneliness. Social isolation has been a significant issue throughout the pandemic, as people have been forced to stay at home and limit their interactions with others. It has been particularly

challenging for women in rural areas, as they often have limited social networks and rely heavily on community connections for support.

Media coverage of COVID-19 has further reinforced this isolation by focusing on the negative aspects of the pandemic and spreading fear and anxiety. It has led many women in rural communities to feel even more disconnected and alone, exacerbating mental health issues and reducing their ability to cope with the pandemic's effects.

Finally, media coverage of COVID-19 has significantly impacted women's economic situation in rural communities. Women in these areas often work in industries hardest hit by the pandemic, such as agriculture and tourism. The lockdowns and restrictions to control the spread of the virus have made it even harder for these women to make a living, exacerbating poverty and inequality.

Media coverage of COVID-19 has often overlooked these economic challenges, focusing instead on the impact of the pandemic on more giant corporations and industries. It has meant that women in rural communities have yet to receive the support and resources they need to cope with the economic effects of the pandemic, further increasing poverty and inequality in these areas.

**Theoretical Framework.** This study is anchored on the Attitude Change Theory. According to Baran and Davis (2012), this theory was developed in the 1940s during World War II. This theory emphasizes that some pre-existing attitudes must be changed for a selective message to affect an audience. It further explains that these pre-existing attitudes can effectively hinder the dissemination of a desired message. The theory also states that for a change to occur, emotional and intellectual communication strategies must be designed to influence the target audience and channeled adequately to this audience. However, change in an individual's perception will be effective if only the message meets the individual's expectation(s), is tied to someone he admires or is bound to be beneficial to him (Wood, 2000).

This theory also explains three bases for attitude change: compliance, identification, and internalization. These three processes demonstrate the different levels of attitude change (Wood, 2000).

In a nutshell, this theory shows that existing attitudes of an individual or an individual's mental predispositions must be changed or channeled to a particular cause through an intellectually and emotionally binding strategy (Baran & Davis, 2012).

Relating this theory to this study, it clearly shows that for a positive attitude and effective mass media campaign on the control and prevention of COVID-19, there must be an emotional, physical, and psychological appeal in the campaign messages. It becomes emotional when victims fear being diagnosed with COVID-19; it becomes physical when medical facilities are not affordable and available. However, it takes a psychological dimension when the victims see issues with opening up to modern medicine when they detect or observe body changes that may harm their bodies and conceal their observations due to shyness or cultural beliefs.

The campaign messages must, therefore, be structured to detect these obstacles to effective communication and assess how effectively selected messages can overcome them. The strategy must appeal to the people's attitude, a significant determinant of effective practice.

## METHODS

This paper adopted the secondary source of data collection. The research data for this paper were collected through secondary data. It includes consulting textbooks, journals, newspapers, magazines, and internet surfing.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Research Question 1.** How have the broadcast media covered the effect of Covid-19 on women in rural communities in Edo State?

The pandemic has disproportionately affected Women in rural areas, as they often face unique challenges such as limited access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. These challenges have been exacerbated by COVID-19 and the measures implemented to contain its spread, such as lockdowns and travel restrictions. Additionally, women in rural areas may have limited access to information and resources, which can further impede their ability to cope with the pandemic's effects.

Media coverage of COVID-19 has been critical in informing people about the latest developments and providing guidance on staying safe. However, how the media has covered the pandemic may have had unintended consequences for women in rural areas. For example, media coverage may have focused more on the impact of

the pandemic on urban areas or more prominent industries rather than on the unique challenges faced by women in rural areas. It can further marginalize these women and make it harder for them to access the support and resources they need to cope with the pandemic's effects.

Despite these challenges, there have also been examples of media coverage that have highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on women in rural areas and provided guidance and support to help them cope. For example, some media outlets have provided information on how women in rural areas can access healthcare, education, and economic opportunities during the pandemic. Others have highlighted the stories of women who have taken on leadership roles in their communities to help respond to the pandemic's effects.

**Research Question 2.** How do audiences perceive the coverage of the effect of COVID-19 on women in rural communities in Edo State by the broadcast media?

The audience's perception regarding the coverage of the effects of COVID-19 on women in rural communities would depend on various factors, such as the source of the coverage, the audience's background, and their personal experiences.

If the coverage is from a reputable and trustworthy source, such as a well-known news outlet or a government agency, the audience may perceive it as credible and reliable. On the other hand, if the coverage is from a less reputable or biased source, the audience may view it with skepticism or doubt.

The audience's background and personal experiences also shape their perception of the coverage. For example, if the audience predominantly comprises women in rural communities, they may view the coverage as particularly relevant and essential. They may also be more critical of the coverage if they feel it does not accurately reflect their experiences or women's experiences in their communities.

Overall, the audience's perception regarding the coverage of the effects of COVID-19 on women in rural communities is likely to be influenced by a range of factors, including the credibility of the source, the audience's background, and their personal experiences.

**Research Question 3.** What factors influence audience perception of the coverage of the effect of COVID-19 on women in rural communities in Edo State by the broadcast media?

Several factors can influence audience perception of the coverage of the effects of COVID-19 on women in rural communities, including:

- **Media framing:** How the media frames COVID-19 and its effects on women in rural communities can influence how the audience perceives the issue. If the media frames the issue as a serious problem that needs urgent attention, the audience is more likely to perceive it as such.
- **Cultural background:** The audience's cultural background can also influence their perception of the issue. For example, if the audience comes from a culture that values gender equality and women's rights, they will perceive the issue as necessary.
- **Political affiliation:** The political affiliation of the audience can also influence their perception of the issue. If the audience is more politically conservative, they may be less likely to see the issue as essential or may attribute the issue to personal responsibility rather than systemic issues.
- **Personal experience:** The audience's experiences can also influence their perception of the issue. If the audience has had personal experiences with COVID-19 or knows someone affected, they may be more likely to see the issue as necessary.
- **Accessibility to information:** The accessibility of information about the issue can also influence audience perception. The audience may not consider the issue relevant or need to comprehend its scope if they have limited access to information about it.

## CONCLUSION

Audience perception of broadcast media coverage of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in rural communities is influenced by various factors. Media framing, cultural background, political affiliation, personal experience, and accessibility to information are some of the critical factors that can shape audience perception. Media outlets need to be aware of these factors and consider them when reporting on issues related to the pandemic and its effects on women in rural communities. By doing so, they can ensure that their coverage is accurate, balanced, informative, and resonates with their audience. Ultimately, by raising awareness about women's

unique challenges in rural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, media coverage can help drive policy changes and support that can make a real difference in these women's lives and their families.

#### Recommendations.

- i. Broadcast media coverage of the effects of COVID-19 on women in rural communities should focus on human stories that resonate with the audience. It can be achieved by featuring real-life women from rural communities affected by the pandemic. The media can showcase how COVID-19 has impacted these women, their challenges, and how they cope. By highlighting individual stories, the media can make the issue more relatable to the audience, which will help to increase engagement and understanding.
- ii. The media needs to highlight the unique challenges faced by women in rural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges may include limited access to healthcare, education, and social services and increased caregiving responsibilities. By highlighting these challenges, the media can help the audience better understand the pandemic's impact on women in rural communities and why it is essential to address these issues.
- iii. Lastly, the media should provide practical solutions and resources for women in rural communities affected by the pandemic. It can include information on where to access healthcare services, educational resources, and financial assistance. By providing this information, the media can help women in rural communities navigate the challenges of the pandemic and improve their overall well-being. It is also essential for the media to highlight the efforts being made by local and national organizations to support women in rural communities during this difficult time.

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