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## Nations, Media, and Platforms

### Introduction

For many of us it is no longer easy to remember how it was to live in a world without social media. How did we share our daily existence, find out what others were up to, get breaking news, watch DIY videos, play games, or even kill time before Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and Twitch, among other platforms, became part of our vernacular? It is often hard to believe that only a few years ago our everyday communication practices were greatly different from what they are nowadays, to the extent that sometimes the early 2000s feel more like the mid-twentieth century than a decade ago in our rearview mirror.

The normalization of social media has also reached the field of communication and media studies. This domain of inquiry, which during the previous century was marked by a concern with broadcast and print media, has recently been almost obsessed with all things platforms. For instance, a keyword search conducted in summer 2021 for “television,” “newspapers,” and “radio” included in the titles of papers published in communication between 2012 and 2021 yielded 2,272, 1,242, and 923 results on the database Web of

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Science, respectively, for a total of 4,437 entries. The same search using “social media” had 4,103 entries, almost as many as the previous three traditional media keywords combined. Furthermore, while the trend for television shows a slow decline in recent years, that for social media exhibits a steep upward trend that has widened the distance between the two: there were almost three times more publications with “social media” than with “television” in their titles during 2020 (616 vs. 214).

The burgeoning scholarship on social media has made fundamental contributions about a broad range of critical issues (boyd and Ellison 2007; boyd 2014; Baym 2015; Burgess, Marwick, and Poell 2018)—covering a wide array of topics such as identity making and self-presentation (Donath and boyd 2004; Marwick and boyd 2011), relationship maintenance and social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007; Quan-Haase and Young 2010), and political participation and activism (Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015). Importantly, a critical strand of social media studies has increasingly shed light on three key and interconnected aspects structuring the production, distribution, and use of platforms—namely, dynamics of racial and ethnic discrimination (Nakamura and Chow-White 2012; Gillespie 2018; Noble 2018; Brock 2020), the platform economy of social media (Gillespie 2010; Fuchs 2016; Plantin et al. 2018; Nielsen and Ganter 2022), and the logics of datafication and algorithmic bias (Bucher 2012; van Dijck 2014; Crawford and Gillespie 2016; Roberts 2019).

However, beneath the diversity of contributions from this scholarship there are three sets of common limitations that have characterized most social media research to date. First, the majority of studies has examined empirical phenomena taking place within the confines of a single country—and often located in the Global North. Second, the bulk of the research has focused on social media without connecting them to dynamics affecting other media and communication technologies, especially traditional or predigital alternatives. Third,

most scholarship has tended to concentrate on patterns related to a single platform at a time—usually either Facebook or Twitter. Taken together, these three limitations lead to a portrayal of the everyday realities of social media that is at best partial, and sometimes even distorted, relative to how platforms have been designed, distributed, and adopted. Let us briefly address each limitation separately.

First, platforms are deployed and used all over the world, with information flows connecting accounts located in multiple countries via reactions, comments, and shares. Single-country studies artificially cut this dense web of communication that does not necessarily stop at national borders—with some exceptions due most commonly to restrictions imposed by authoritarian regimes and/or inequalities in access. Furthermore, the Global North countries that have been the dominant foci of most scholarship collectively constitute only 14 percent of the planet's population. They also have distinguishing structural and cultural features that tend to be different from those that characterize the rest of the world.

Second, from the time of their development and throughout their meteoric rise to becoming a mainstay of contemporary communication practices, social media have entered a mediated communication landscape already featuring a rich array of artifacts and their associated cultures of production, circulation, and use. This broader landscape has shaped the brief but intense evolution of social media in at least two major ways. First, as a handful of studies has shown, prior communication technologies and genres—from the personal diaries of the nineteenth century to the reality television shows of the late twentieth century—have been precursors of what later became key aspects of the design and use of social media platforms (Marwick 2013; Hermida 2014; Humphreys 2018). Second, as platforms have become more popular, a significant portion of their use has been either concurrent with that of other media, for instance, in the increasingly common phenomenon of second screening (Doughty, Rowland, and Lawson 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, García-Perdomo, and

McGregor 2015; Gil de Zúñiga and Liu 2017), or in relation to content originally produced by other media such as social media activity around news stories, television shows, and movies (Highfield, Harrington, and Bruns 2013; Ksiazek, Peer, and Lessard 2016; Gutiérrez-Martín and Torrego-González 2018). Thus, a focus on social media that isolates them from the broader media and communication landscape effectively removes historical and contemporary connections that have variously shaped the everyday life of platforms.

Third, despite the single-platform focus of most scholarship, social media use is remarkably plural. To begin, according to DataReportal, “the typical user actively uses or visits an average of 7.5 different social media platforms each month.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, mounting scholarly evidence suggests that people use a particular platform in relation to how they use the others they routinely access (Boczkowski, Matassi, and Mitchelstein 2018; Tandoc Jr., Lou, and Min 2019). In addition, contrary to the overwhelming attention paid to Facebook and Twitter in the existent academic literature, there are dozens of other platforms that have garnered the interest of users. As of 2022, there are thirty platforms with at least 100 million users each, and while Facebook occupies the first place in this list with 2.9 billion monthly active users, Twitter is in the seventeenth place with less than 400 million.<sup>2</sup> The combination of a single-platform focus that is at odds with the greater plurality of the user experience, and a concentration on Facebook and Twitter in a field that includes a much wider array of alternatives about which we know comparatively much less, has unnecessarily diminished our accounts of the role of social media in the experiences of billions of people around the world.

Beneath these three sets of limitations lies a common denominator characterized by the absence of comparative analyses across nations and regions, across media, and across platforms. Thus, in this book we aim to contribute to scholarship on social media by developing original comparative perspectives that intend to overcome these

limitations. Our contribution builds on studies that have already shown the value of comparing social media phenomena on at least one of the three dimensions highlighted above—across nations and regions, media, and platforms. But, unlike most of these studies, in which comparative work seems to have emerged as a by-product of trying to answer specific research questions, we propose to turn the practice of comparison into the epistemological principle framing our intellectual agenda. In this sense, our proposal is premised on the idea that foregrounding systematic comparative efforts across nations, media, and platforms holds great potential for social media scholarship.

Pursuing this intellectual agenda entails a stance which signals that at a very basic level—as the title of this book encapsulates—to know is to compare. Simply put, by this we mean that whatever it is that we are able to know, we do so as a result of contrasting two or more entities. We view this comparative stance as related to, but distinct from, issues of method and theory. On the one hand, its enactment can be undertaken utilizing a variety of methods, as we will illustrate with specific examples throughout the book. On the other hand, the answers to the questions animated by this stance are amenable to explanation by a range of theoretical frameworks, as we will also show in future chapters. In this sense, the core of our intellectual agenda is a broader epistemological umbrella that encompasses issues of methods (how to gather and analyze data) and theory (how to explain variance in the findings), which leads to a refiguration of, paraphrasing Clifford Geertz, “what is it that we want to know” (1980, 178).

As James R. Beniger argued three decades ago, “*all* social science research is comparative” (1992, 35; emphasis in the original). Comparative scholarship has a long history in communication and media studies, where it has been appreciated for different reasons: its capacity to attain generalizations from past periods and singular

contexts, its power to test hypotheses, its ability to properly contextualize and thus avoid the naturalization of specific cases, and its promotion of international academic collaborations, among others (Esser and Hanitzsch 2012). Within communication and media studies, comparative research has been enacted in a variety of ways. The novelty of our proposal stems partly from foregrounding the role of comparisons coupled with the impetus, continuing with the landmark essay by Clifford Geertz (1980), to “blur genres” of comparative research in the service of accounts of social media phenomena that reflect their global, de-westernized, inter-media, and multiplatform existence. Thus, in the next section we continue our argumentative journey by elaborating on how different varieties of comparative research have informed this book.

## Varieties of Comparative Research

Our analyses of cross-national and regional dynamics are indebted to a long tradition of scholarship in communication and media studies that has used almost interchangeably the terms *comparative* and *international* to describe research projects that “contrast among different macro-level units, such as world regions, countries, sub-national regions, social milieus, language areas and cultural thickenings, at one point or more points in time” (Esser and Vliegenthart 2017, 2). The field has engaged intercultural communication perspectives since the 1950s and cross-national approaches since the 1970s, driven by an interest in cross-cultural and political communication topics (Blumler and Gurevitch 1975; Hall 1976; Hofstede 1983; Blumler, McLeod, and Rosengren 1992; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Norris 2009).<sup>3</sup>

Cross-national and regional scholarship in communication and media studies has been fueled by at least two interconnected insights, both emphasizing the limitations involved in single-country

approaches. The first insight is the centrality of media and communication in processes of globalization (Livingstone 2012). This sparked, on the one hand, an interest in the question of cooperation across diverse national settings, as illustrated by work in inter-cultural communication (Kim 2012), and, on the other, efforts against “methodological nationalism” (Beck 2000) aiming to display a global outlook. As Sonia Livingstone argued (2012), cross-national studies showed that “it is no longer plausible to study one phenomenon in one country without asking, at a minimum, whether it is common across the globe or distinctive to that country or part of the world” (417). The second insight has been the field’s recognition of a parochial and universalizing Western bias whereby “the same few countries keep recurring as if they are a stand-in for the rest of the world” (Curran and Park 2000, 2). This bias has been paired up with an uncritical uptake of cultural globalization (Curran and Park 2000; Morris and Waisbord 2001; Kraidy 2009), which has often ended up erasing the place of the state. The cross-national and regional variety of comparative research thus denaturalizes the single-country strategy and prevents, *a priori*, any nation or region to acquire a default status.

Different typologies have been put forward to assist in the process of cross-national and regional comparisons. A prominent one was developed by Geert Hofstede, who contended that “the comparison of cultures presupposes that there is something to be compared; that each culture is not so unique that any parallel with another culture is meaningless” (1984, 32). He proposed the existence of four dimensions according to which all cultures could be compared: individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and masculinity versus femininity (Hofstede 1983). In another highly influential cross-national approach, Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) put forward a different typology that sought to correlate nations with media systems. Analyzing eighteen Western democracies, they came up with the “Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist, North/Central European or Democratic Corporatist, and the North

Atlantic or Liberal models” (2004, 2). This account opened the door for a series of studies that made visible a variety of media systems around the world (Sparks 2008; Brüggemann et al. 2014; Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez 2014). In the authors’ words: “As Bendix (1963: 537) says, comparative analysis has the capacity to “increase the ‘visibility’ of one structure by contrasting it with another.” Analysts deeply steeped in one media system will often miss important characteristics of their own system, characteristics that are too familiar to stand out to them against the background. . . . Comparative analysis is essential if we want to move beyond these limitations” (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 302).

In addition to these cross-national and regional varieties of comparative research, our cross-media work has been informed by scholarship produced between the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first century aiming to conceptualize what might be distinct about what was then often referred to as “new media” (Williams, Rice, and Rogers 1988; Rice 1999; Manovich 2002; Chun, Fisher, and Keenan 2004). A recurrent theme across the different perspectives adopted to address this matter, and the resulting answers about their distinct character, was the centrality of the connections between the then new media and their older predecessors. Thus, in their influential treatise of how new media always remediate, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argued that “what is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” (1999, 15).

Maintaining a cultural focus on aesthetics while adding accounts of industries and audiences, Henry Jenkins drew inspiration from the pioneering assertion of Ithiel de Sola Pool that a “convergence of modes [was] blurring the lines between media” (de Sola Pool 1983, 23) to highlight the centrality of this convergence as a defining feature of the new media that entailed “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media



industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (Jenkins 2006, 2). Furthermore, combining social and behavioral science approaches, Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (2002, 8) emphasized in their introduction to the first edition of *The Handbook of New Media* “the essentially continuous nature of new media development. Even technologies that are perceived as being unprecedented are found upon closer analysis to have been designed, built and implemented around existing technologies and practices.” Thus, capturing the spirit of these and other related ideas, David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (2003) criticized what they called “medium-specific approaches” and made a strong plea for a “comparative approach”: “Medium-specific approaches risk simplifying technological change to a zero-sum game in which one medium gains at the expense of its rivals. A less reductive, *comparative approach* would recognize the complex synergies that always prevail among media systems, particularly during periods shaped by the birth of a new medium of expression” (3; emphasis added).

These conceptual developments relate to another trend in scholarship that blossomed during this period and that has also informed our cross-media comparative perspective: historical accounts of specific innovations in media, information, and communication technologies that inquired into dynamics of both continuity and discontinuity with previous artifacts (Boczkowski 2004; Fischer 1992; Sterne 2003; Thompson 2002; Turner 2006). In *When Old Technologies Were New*, Carolyn Marvin (1988) articulated the historiographic foundation of this kind of scholarship as follows: “New media, broadly understood to include the use of new communications technology for old or new purposes, new ways of using old technologies, and, in principle, all other possibilities for the exchange of social meaning, are always introduced into a pattern of tension created by the coexistence of old and new, which is far richer than any single medium that becomes a focus of interest because it is novel” (8).

This coexistence of old and new within broader and ongoing social, cultural, and institutional patterns became a generative lens with which to probe specific issues about distinct technological innovations. One example of particular significance to social media is Susan Douglas's (1989) account of the role of amateurs in the early development of radio. Much like the case of contemporary platforms such as Facebook, built largely by technically savvy innovators initially outside of the corporate landscape and premised upon notions of an active user base, Douglas sheds light on the key role that amateurs played in switching radio from telegraphy into a broadcasting model. Their participation amounted to "a revolutionary social phenomenon. . . . A large radio audience was taking shape whose attitude and involvement were unlike those of other, traditionally passive, audiences. . . . This was an active, committed, and participatory audience" (205). Thus, in the span of a few years, "the amateurs and their converts had constructed the beginnings of a broadcasting network and audience" (302).

Shifting from radio to print, Adrian Johns's (1998) analysis of the social relationships and conventions that undergirded the credibility of knowledge in the early days of book publishing has an uncanny significance for digital media—including platforms—especially considering issues of distrust about them. To Johns, the "political and moral economies of publishing and reading are enormously different now from their state in Newton's day. Nevertheless, a close examination will almost certainly reveal not an elimination . . . but a transformation of the kinds of sociability and civility involved" (1998, 636). For instance, he notes that "Financial institutions and other corporations are laboring to establish a means of rendering electronic communication secure enough to supplant more traditional media. It is not too fanciful to *compare* these efforts to the Royal Society's endeavors to secure the credit of printed communications in the seventeenth century" (Johns 1998, 637; emphasis added).

Supplementing these cross-national and cross-media approaches, our cross-platform work has been informed by a series of theoretical developments that since the 1980s have tried to explain how users make sense of an increasingly diversified media environment. Central to this development was the growing multiplicity of channels available on cable television, which sparked questions around issues of choice and awareness of alternatives (Webster and Wakshlag 1983; Perse 1990). Scholars articulated the notion of repertoires to address this multiplicity (Ferguson 1992; Ferguson and Perse 1993). First defined by Carrie Heeter (1985) in relation to “the set of channels watched regularly by an individual or household” (133), the notion reflected the idea that users were drawn to a relatively smaller set of options from which they made consumption decisions. The “high-choice media environment” (Prior 2005) became manageable in everyday life through the construction of media repertoires (Webster 2011). The concept has been recently applied to newer media, with studies (Kim 2016; Lin 2019) showing how repertoires are “essentially structures that are recursively activated within their daily social practices” (Taneja et al. 2012, 964).

Another influential approach developed to analyze how users deal with an ever-expanding array of media alternatives is the notion of polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2013; Renninger 2015; Madianou 2016). Initially applied to account for family communication dynamics that take place within the context of transnational migration processes, Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller (2012) coined the term to describe “a new communication environment” (1) in which different options coexist—among them, social media—and whose use shapes, and is shaped by, family relationships. In the authors’ words: “Polymedia shifts the attention from the individual technical propensities of any particular medium to an acknowledgement that most people use a constellation of different media as an integrated environment in which each medium finds its niche in relation to the others” (Madianou and Miller 2012, 3).

The notion of constellations, mentioned by Madianou and Miller, is also key to understanding how social media repertoires are enacted in everyday life. Pablo Boczkowski, Mora Matassi, and Eugenia Mitchellstein (2018) show how the constellation of meanings that users attribute to different social media platforms shapes their repertoires of practices. These meanings are relational since the meaning attributed to a given platform is partly determined by the meanings attributed to the other platforms that constitute the social media repertoire. The creation of users' "social media ecosystems" (Zhao, Lampe, and Ellison 2016; DeVito, Walker, and Birnholtz 2018) also illustrates the extent to which platforms are deeply situated within a dense and broad web of social media use in everyday life and can be associated with the longer tradition of media ecology (Innis 1964; McLuhan [1964] 2003; Ong 1982; Postman 1986; Lehman-Wilzig and Cohen-Avigdor 2004; Strate 2004; Scolari 2013) and its double approach to consider both how media can be "an environment that surrounds the subjects and models their cognitive and perceptual system" and "the interactions between media, as if they were species of an ecosystem" (Scolari 2012, 209–210).

In sum, the varieties of comparative scholarship that we have included in this section differ empirically, methodologically, and theoretically. Yet, there is a common denominator that cuts across this diversity: the centrality of comparing as the key epistemic operation that guides the inquiry. Thus, in this book we will blur the boundaries between these varieties—albeit without erasing their differences—to develop multifaceted comparative perspectives that can contribute toward de-westernized, global, cross-media, and multiplatform scholarship on social media.

## **Outline of the Book**

The remainder of this book consists of two multichapter parts and a concluding chapter. Each one of chapters 2 through 6 opens with

contrasting vignettes that illustrate the most salient aspects of each chapter's topics with highly visible events that unfolded within—and in many cases also across—several different parts of the world. Taken together, these vignettes that range from the mundane to the extraordinary, and from the relatively insignificant to the highly consequential, show some of the main ways in which social media have been appropriated in almost every sphere of everyday life, from activism to entertainment, from religion to politics, from news to gaming, and from design to regulation, among others. The decision to start these chapters in this fashion is both to signal the reticular and multifaceted imbrication of social media in contemporary society and to underscore the pragmatic currency of our comparative perspectives.

In *Foundations*, the first part, we will establish the empirical, methodological, and theoretical bases that emerge from an account of the existent scholarship on social media that has compared phenomena either across nations and regions, media, or platforms. More precisely, chapter 2 will focus on cross-national and regional comparisons, chapter 3 on cross-media accounts, and chapter 4 on cross-platform examinations. In each of these chapters we will introduce a selection of eight studies to show the descriptive, explanatory, and interpretive gains that accrue from adopting at least one of these three forms of comparison, even if (as has usually been the case) this has not been done as part of an explicit comparative research agenda. Thus, we will argue that a comprehensive account of this scholarship creates the foundations on which to build an agenda for comparative social media studies.

The selected twenty-four papers that we will showcase in chapters 2 to 4 aim to maximize breadth and depth in the portrayal of the existent research. In that sense, our goal is not to furnish a representative or exhaustive depiction of the field. In other words, the following pages will not present the results of meta-analyses or systematic reviews. Instead, we chose to feature studies that examined relevant social media processes in a wide array of countries and regions of

the world, connecting different traditional and social media, and a multiplicity of platforms. This is a deliberate strategy to decenter a domain of inquiry that, as explained earlier, has tended to intellectually prioritize locations in Global North settings, traditional media such as newspapers and television, and platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. While helpful in the production of certain kinds of knowledge, taken together these location, media, and platform choices have unnecessarily restricted what we know about objects of study that have global reach, connect variously to a plethora of traditional media, and are embodied in a growing spectrum of platforms.

In each of the chapters we will organize the presentation of the selected research studies into four categories of analysis that allude to key elements of the research enterprise: topics, the main issues examined in each of the papers; approaches, the dominant ways of comparing social media, either implicitly or explicitly; methods, the main methodological strategies utilized; and interpretations, the typical frames used to make sense of the findings and their implications.

Establishing these empirical, methodological, and theoretical foundations enables us to probe three central concepts for understanding social media: the nation-state, traditional media, and platforms. Thus, in chapter 2 we will argue that whereas much research and commentary has highlighted the decline of national borders regarding digital dynamics in a context of globalization, it is still worth attending to the heuristic power of the nation-state. However, its explanatory role can no longer be taken for granted within the scholarly inquiry and instead should be justified as part of the process of this inquiry. Moreover, in chapter 3 we will contend that despite the typical focus on what is new about social media, our comparative perspective emphasizes the continued relevance of their traditional media counterparts in both determining the genealogy of whatever novelty there is and the coexistence of this novelty with long-standing patterns of communication artifacts, practices, and norms. Finally, in chapter 4 we

will claim that cross-platform perspectives are better suited than their single-platform counterparts to counter dystopic narratives that have recently dominated accounts of social media. This is because whereas the latter are more prone to attributing strong deterministic power to technology over the agency of users, the former create more opportunities for the emergence of variance in the findings which, in turn, make more visible the interplay between the structure of technology and the agency of users.

In *Pathways*, the second part, we will build on the bases established in *Foundations* to further articulate the contours of a programmatic agenda integrating cross-national and regional, cross-media and cross-platform dimensions of social media dynamics. We will do this by focusing on two areas of inquiry that have long been central to the study of media and communication, and to the constitution of our sense of self and social relationships more broadly: histories in chapter 5 and languages in chapter 6. Aware that prior social media scholarship has on occasion delved into either area, in each of these chapters we will first acknowledge lessons learned from these antecedents and then proceed to articulate concrete epistemic visions for comparative perspectives.

Following up on the larger conceptual issues tackled in the chapters within the first part, those in the second part will address two cross-cutting intellectual tendencies that have marked the study of social media. More precisely, chapter 5 will probe the role of histories to offset the overwhelming present-day focus that has tended to dismiss the past and naturalize the present in the relevant literature. We will argue that foregrounding historical matters can help illuminate continuities and discontinuities that are fundamental to a better understanding of what might be unique about specific platforms and social media in general. This applies to both their development and their current instantiations. Furthermore, chapter 6 will address matters of language to broaden the dominant attention to English and writing in most of the scholarship. To this end, we

will articulate approaches that challenge these English-language and written-text biases through an exploration of dynamics pertaining to multiple languages and to the role of the novel visual signifiers such as emoji, hashtags, and reaction buttons that have rapidly become part of the vernacular of social media and digital culture more generally. We will contend that this aids not only in bringing new languages and signifiers into view—languages and signifiers which are the norm and not the exception in everyday social media practice—but also in properly accounting for factors that might affect variance in the case of communication only in English and/or textual form.

In chapter 7 we will bring this book to a close by taking stock of lessons learned from the previous chapters and reflecting on their broader implications for scholarship on social media. A review of the main arguments presented in chapters 2 through 6 suggests the presence of a significant level of heterogeneity cutting across social media as both objects of study and the ways in which the inquiries about them have unfolded. Building upon the notion of the heterogeneity of social media, we will probe the challenges and potential of fostering comparative work that integrates two or more of the dimensions treated separately in the previous chapters: comparisons across nations and regions, across media, and across platforms. We will argue that the challenges that might hinder the potential of these various integrations stem from long-standing trends toward the intellectual fragmentation of the different traditions of inquiry that subtend the comparative analyses undertaken in each dimension. However, we will propose that by virtue of sharing the organizing principle that to know is to compare, the perspectives advocated in this book can blur boundaries between disparate traditions of inquiry and also create trading zones (Galison 1997) among them. These trading zones can lessen the downsides of intellectual fragmentation by facilitating the exchange of ideas across often unconnected domains of inquiry in ways that do not flatten their diversity.



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# To Know Is to Compare

## Studying Social Media across Nations, Media, and Platforms

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