EFFECTIVENESS OF EMOTION-FOCUSED TRAINING FOR SELF-COMPASSION AND SELF-PROTECTION IN INDIVIDUALS ADDICTED TO THE INTERNET

Efekt tréningu zameraného na emócie sebasúcitu a sebaprotekcieu jednotlivcov závislých na internete

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The aim of the study was to examine the effectiveness of the Emotion-focused training aimed at self-compassion and self-protection (EFT-SCP) in individuals addicted to the internet. The intervention is focused on emotions and is aimed to increase self-compassion and decrease self-criticism.

Method: The research sample comprised 67 participants (22 men and 45 women); aged 19 to 55 yrs.; the mean age was 25.61 yrs. (SD = 6.07), who were randomly divided into an experimental and control group. Internet addiction test, Sussex-Oxford compassion for the self scale, and The forms of the self-criticizing and self-reassuring scale were used to measure the effect of the intervention.

Results: The results showed an increase in self-compassion as well as a decrease in self-criticism in the experimental group but not in the control group. The two-week intervention was successful in increasing self-compassion and decreasing self-criticism in people addicted to the internet.

Conclusion: The short online Emotion-focused training aimed at self-compassion and self-protection (EFT-SCP) intervention seems to be an effective tool for decreasing self-criticism and increasing self-compassion in sample prone to Internet addiction.

Keywords: internet addiction, self-compassion, self-criticism

ABSTRAKT

Cieľ: Cieľom štúdie bolo zistiť efekt Tréningu zameraného na emócie sebasúcitu a sebaprotekcie (EFT-SCP) u jednotlivcov závislých na internete. Intervencia je zameraná na zvyšovanie sebasúcitu a znižovanie sebakritickosti.

Metódy: Výskumný súbor pozostával zo 67 participantov (22 mužov a 45 žien) vo veku od 19 do 55 rokov, priemerný vek 25,61 (SD = 6,07). Participanti boli náhodne rozdelení do experimentálnej a kon-

trolnej skupiny. Test internetovej závislosti, Sussex-Oxfordská škála sebasúcitu a Škála foriem sebakritickosti a sebapotvrdenia boli použité na meranie efektu intervencie.

Výsledky: Výsledky preukázali zvýšenie sebesúcitu, ako aj zníženie sebakritickosti v experimentálnej skupine. 14-dňová intervencia bola úspešným nástrojom v zvyšovaní sebasúcitu a znižovaní sebakritickosti u ľudí so závislosťou na internete.

Záver: Krátka online forma Tréningu zameraného na emócie pre sebasúcitu a sebaprotekciu (EFT-SCP) sa javí ako efektívny nástroj na znižovanie sebakritickosti a zvyšovanie sebasúcitu u ľudí s náchylnosťou na internetovú závislosť.

Keywords: internetová závislosť, sebasúcit, sebakritickosť

In today's fast-pace world, people may turn away from their feelings and experiences in difficult times. This may result in emotional isolation from others and turning inward. Not being able to cope with such difficult times or failures in various areas of one's life may lead to gradual moving toward self-criticism. This may lead to harsh self-evaluation associated with placing high demands on oneself, which can be accompanied by feelings of worthlessness, shame, and guilt (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992). In the self-critical mode, one's own failure becomes unacceptable, and the idea of human erring is ignored, while one's own success and happiness are left without great emphasis (Bergner, 1995). Self-criticism leads to many negative effects on our lives, and it is associated with, for instance, depression and social anxiety. It has also been found to contribute to internet addiction (Błachnio et al., 2016; Gilbert et al., 2006; Iancu, et al., 2015). On the other hand, self-compassion supports being open to one's own suffering and wanting to ameliorate it. It entails accepting and understanding one's own failures and inadequacies and, therefore, contributing, in general, to better coping with difficult times while recognizing that throughout life, everyone experiences difficult times and failures (Neff, 2003). It is considered to be a certain antidote against self-critical attitudes and thoughts. Self-compassion is beneficial in several ways, such as decreasing self-criticism, depression, anxiety, stress, etc. (Neff et al., 2007; Werner et al., 2012). To escape difficult times, people may spend a lot of time on the internet in order to avoid reality and the currently experienced difficulties associated with it. However, this can lead to internet addiction, a behavior used by individuals as a problem avoidance strategy. Internet addition entails an excessive urge to spend time on the internet followed by excessive use of the internet, which is then usually reflected in problems in various areas of life (Shapira et al., 2003).

Self-compassion is associated with adaptive psychological functioning. It has been found that those individuals who experienced an increase in self-compassion also manifested a decrease in self-criticism, depression, rumination, thought suppression, and anxiety. Self-compassion also encompasses a view of oneself that is interconnected with others rather than directed inward when evaluating one's own weaknesses (Neff et al., 2007). Moreover, it positively influences our well-being, healthy psychological functioning, and

mental health (Marshall & Brockman, 2016; Neff, 2004).

Akin's (2010) study showed that supporting self-compassion can also benefit in decreasing loneliness. Moreover, self-compassion affects loneliness by means of its constructs, as described by Neff (2003), in that individuals with a high level of self-judgment, isolation, and excessive self-identification have more probability of being lonely.

In general, however, self-compassion plays an important role in situation coping strategies since self-compassionate individuals are less likely to consider a negative situation to be a catastrophe, to feel anxious following a stressful event, and to avoid demanding tasks for fear of failure (Allen & Leary, 2010). These individuals are able to accept responsibility for their failures and consequences. They do not avoid suffering but rather accept it with kindness and goodwill, thus, creating a feeling of well-being because they understand suffering to be part of our human existence (Neff & Costigan, 2014). Self-criticism is defined as consistent and harsh examination and judgment of the self, which is often accompanied by feelings of worthlessness, shame, inferiority, failure, and guilt (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992). According to Longe et al. (2010), people can even feel as if controlled by and exhausted from their own self-criticism.

Self-critical people tend to describe themselves using degrading adjectives such as lazy, erring, unable to be loved, etc. They consider their own failures intolerable, and they don't take notice of human fallibility and imperfection. They focus only on the negative events in their lives, on their weak points and failures, and avoid looking at

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positive events, successes, and their strong points (Bergner, 1995). This involves an intense and continuous relationship with oneself, which is characterized by uncompromising high-performance demands, disaffection as well as contempt for oneself when not able to reach a high standard (Shahar, 2015).

Whelton and Greenberg (2015) found that self-critical people accept self-criticism with more acquiescence, experience more sadness and shame in their reaction to it, and have a more difficult time separating themselves from their inner critic. In addition, there are study results showing that these individuals manifest behavior, which is submissive and argumentative (Zuroff et al., 1999). They are afraid of dependency on and closeness to their partners and, therefore, they are generally dissatisfied and distrusting in their relationships and are not interested in opening up to their

partner because they would then possibly reveal their weak points and thus be susceptible to criticism and rejection (Zuroff & Fitzpatrick, 1995).

Iancu and colleagues (2015) found that people experiencing social anxiety manifest higher self-criticism and lower self-esteem. The authors state that negative self-image contributes to the discrepancy between perceiving the self and the standards of others, which in the end leads to increased fear of negative judgment. When faced with a social threat, individuals with higher social anxiety direct their attention inward and begin to examine themselves excessively. In the course of this process, an individual creates an excessively negative self-image, which s/he considers being trustworthy and accurate.

Individuals who judge themselves too critically and consider themselves worthless are more susceptible to being addicted to the internet (Błachnio et al., 2016). Murali and Goerge (2007) add that for the great majority of internet users, the advantages by far outweigh the negative impact of internet use. Internet addiction is a growing problem regardless of culture, race, or gender, and because of the multiple practical advantages of the internet (searching for information, e-library, communication, etc.), it is often hidden or justified (Young, 2011).

The most current version of the American Psychiatric Association manual of mental disorders (DSM-5) does not include internet addiction among the official diagnoses. However, its subtype – internet gambling disease – has been placed in the manual's appendix with the recommendation of further research (APA, 2013).

According to Young (e. g. 1998, 2011), internet addiction is related to pathological gambling. Based on the pathological gambling model, the author defines internet addiction as an impulsive disorder that does not involve using a substance such as intoxication. Shaw and Black (2008) claim that many of its characteristics are similar to those which are part of other disorders in this category, such as pathological gambling, pyromania, and kleptomania. Internet addiction is characterized by an individual's inability to resist the impulse to certain behavior in spite of dire personal consequences. A person considers these impulses to be pleasant and rarely fights them.

People often use the internet for entertainment. The male gender, youth, university education, and unsatisfactory financial situation are all connected with problematic use of the internet (Bakken et al., 2009).

Positive effects of interventions aimed at the cultivation of compassion and self-compassion were found in multiple settings before. According to previous studies based on Emotion-Focused Training for Self-Compassion and Self-Protection (EFT-SCP) (Halamová, 2018), in clinical and non-clinical samples, there is evidence that the cultivation of self-compassion and self-protection is a helpful tool in protection from different psychopathologies (e. g. Halamová, 2018; Halamová et al., 2019; Strnádelová et al., 2021).

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of our study is to examine the effectiveness of the online version of the EFT-SCP intervention (Halamová, 2018) in people with internet addiction. Our research is based on the study by Halamová and colleagues (2018), the aim of which was
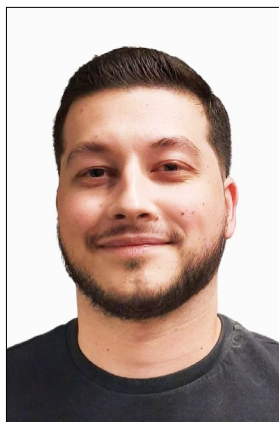
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to measure the immediate and long-term effect of a 14-day online version of the intervention on a non-clinical population. The authors found that the online version of the EFT-SCP helps cultivate self-compassion, increase self-protection and decrease self-criticism. The recommendation, based on the research, was to carry out a study using a clinical sample, in our case, using participants addicted to the internet.

METHOD
RESEARCH SAMPLE
The first research sample comprised a total of 138 subjects. Of this number, there were 41 men (29.7%) and 97 women (70.3%) aged 16 to 55 yrs.; the mean age was 26.10 yrs. (SD = 6.78). Participants were recruited through convenient sampling. Recruitment took place through the snowball method on social networks.

The number of participants was reduced during the study due to not meeting several criteria. Our criteria were a minimum of 18 years of age, Slovak or Czech nationality (because of the language of the battery of questionnaires and tasks), and reaching at least a mild level of internet addiction on the Internet Addiction Test (Young, 2011) which represents at least 31 points out of 100. The total number of participants who met all the criteria and completed all the tests of our research (pre-test, post-test, and the intervention in the experimental group) was 67. Of these participants, 22 were men (32.8%) and 45 women (67.2%), aged 19 to 55 yrs.; the mean age was 25.61 yrs. (SD = 6.07). If participants met the criteria mentioned above, they were randomly assigned to an experimental or control group. The experimental group consisted of 37 participants, of which 28 were women (75.7%), and 9 were men (24.3%), aged 19 to 55 yrs.; mean age was 26.05 yrs. (SD = 7.68). The control group consisted of 30 participants, of which there were 17 women (56.7%) and 13 men (43.3%) aged 20 to 33 yrs.; mean age 25.06 yrs. (SD = 2.98).

PROCEDURE
The sample was selected using the snowball method. We also approached individuals by means of internet social networks focusing on groups where we expected to find people meeting our research criteria.

Our experimental design involves two parallel groups technique, where we divided our participants randomly into an experimental (which took part in the 14-day intervention) and control group (which did not take part in the 14-day intervention) based on meeting the above mentioned criteria. The effect of the intervention was measured using a battery of questionnaires distributed online.

All participants filled out a battery of questionnaires along with demographic data (gender, age, nationality, address, marital status, etc.). After the participants met the criteria determined by the Internet Addiction Test (IAT), we divided them into experimental and control groups. Prior to the beginning of the study, the participants were informed about its individual parts and gave their informed consent. Throughout the 14-day period, the intervention group received the same form of exercise every day at 8 AM. The participants were to complete each exercise and write a short opinion about it each day. Participants who did not send back their exercise and opinion by a certain time were sent a reminder at 5 PM that particular day. Notes from individual exercises and the reflection served as verification of completing the tasks every day. The control group participants did not receive any exercises or instruction, and at the end of the two-week period, they received a battery of questionnaires described in the following section.

DATA COLLECTION

We used the *Sussex-Oxford Compassion for the Self Scale – SOCS-S* (Gu et al., 2019) to measure the self-compassion level. It is a 20-item self-evaluating questionnaire using a Likert scale with values from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (always true), which rates our relationship to ourselves and to others. It comprises 5 subscales (recognizing suffering, understanding the universality of suffering, feeling for the person suffering, tolerating uncomfortable feelings, and motivation to act to alleviate suffering), and each of these subscales is represented in the questionnaire by 4 items. The reliability value of this questionnaire ranges between $\alpha = 0.75$ and 0.93 for the total value of the self-compassion scale as well as its individual subscales (Gu et al., 2019). Slovak version of the SOCS-S scale was used in our research (Halamová & Kanovský, 2021).

To measure self-criticism, we used The Forms of Self-Criticising and Self-Reassuring Scale (FSCRS) (Gilbert et al., 2004). The FSCRS is a 22-item self-evaluating questionnaire using a Likert scale with values from 0 (not at all like me) to 4 (extremely like me), which measures the way people think and feel about themselves when they are having trouble achieving a goal. Self-criticism involves two negative subscales (inadequate self and hated self), which together are represented by 14 items in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire reliability value for the Inadequate self subscale is $\alpha = 0.85$, for the Hated self subscale it is $\alpha = 0.75$, and for the Reassured self subscale it is $\alpha = 0.83$ (Halamová et al., 2017).

To measure internet addiction we used the *Internet Addiction Test* (IAT) (Young, 2011). It is a 20-item self-evaluating questionnaire using a Likert scale with values from 0 (not true) to 5 (always true), which measures the degree of internet addiction. This test is one of the most used and most valid tools to measure this type of addiction. It is standardized in several countries, however, its Slovak version has not been adapted as of yet so we had it translated into Slovak using the back translation method. This questionnaire was used to identify the degree of internet addiction based on which we could include participants in our study.

The Emotion-Focused Training for Self-Compassion and Self-Protection (EFT-SCP) is an intervention created on the ba-

sis of the most current research findings on self-criticism from emotion-focused therapy. Its aim is to simultaneously increase self-compassion and decrease self-criticism. Decreasing self-criticism is accomplished through cultivation of protective anger, which helps with self-protection (Halamová, 2018). To serve the purpose of our research we used the abridged online version of the EFT-SCP.

This abridged online version of the intervention consists of 14 different exercises administered during a period of 14 days, during which the task of the participant is to complete a given exercise every day and write an opinion on it. Therefore, for the time of two weeks the participants work with their own emotions. These 14 exercises are divided into sections depending on which area they are focusing (self-criticism, self-protection, self-compassion). Individual exercises were presented in the form of a modified paradigm of expressive writing, meaning, they required the participants to write emotively about their inner experience during the exercise. In his work, Pennebaker (1997) writes that writing or talking about difficult times has a positive influence on health and well-being.

The participants received the same instruction with each exercise, asking them to use expressive writing the goal of which is to relax, eliminate disturbing influences and write continuously and concretely. The reflection upon a particular exercise that day consisted of a series of questions to verify whether the participant really did complete the task and what kind of effect it had on him/her. After the completion, we asked the participants the following questions: How was it doing this exercise? How did you feel? What did you realize doing this exercise? What can you apply from this exercise in your everyday life? One of the questions was always specifically aimed at the content of the exercise for that day.

RESULTS NORMALITY VERIFICATION TESTS

To test the data distribution normality we used the Shapiro-Wilk test, analyzing the data distribution for the overall Self-Compassion and Self-Criticism. Table one shows the normally distributed data for all variables, except for the Self-Compassion variable in the POST-Test in the experimental group, where we discovered a violation of the assumption of normality.

TABLE 1
SELF-COMPASSION

In determining the within subject differences in self-compassion, we found a statistically significant difference between the PRE-Test and the POST-Test in the experimental group ($Z = -3.077$; $p = 0.002$), with a medium effect size ($r = -0.357$). The self-compassion score in the POST-Test (Mdn = 79; IQR = 12.5) increased compared to the PRE-Test (Mdn = 71; IQR = 13.5).

We found no statistical difference between the PRE-Test and the POST-Test in the self-compassion value ($Z = -0.739$; $p = 0.460$) with a small effect size ($r = -0.095$) in the control group.

When examining the between group differences in the value of self-compassion in the POST-Test, we found a statistically significant difference between the experimental and the control group ($U = 398.5$; $p = 0.048$) with a small effect size ($r = -0.241$). The experimental group participants tended

Table 1 Normality Verification Tests – Self-Compassion and Self-Criticism (Shapiro-Wilk Test)

Variable	Group	df	Sig.
Self-Compassion PRE-Test	Experimental	37	0,715
	Control	30	0,317
Self-Compassion POST-Test	Experimental	37	0,038
	Control	30	0,633
Self-Criticism PRE-Test	Experimental	37	0,493
	Control	30	0,543
Self-Criticism POST-Test	Experimental	37	0,541
	Control	30	0,596

to reach a higher score (Mdn = 79; IQR = 12,5) compared to the participants in the control group (Mdn = 75; IQR = 14).

No statistical difference was found between the groups in the PRE-Test (U = 528.5; p = 0.738) and the effect size was small (r = -0.041). Based on this, we can assume that in this variable the participants were well distributed.

SELF-CRITICISM

When examining the within subject differences, we found a statistically significant difference between the PRE-Test and POST-Test with a medium effect size (F(1.65) = 5.039; p = 0.028; η_p^2 = 0.072). In the experimental group the attained score in self-criticism decreased in the POST-Test (M = 21.43; SD = 11.73) compared to the PRE-Test (M = 23.67; SD = 12,09). In the control group, however, the self-criticism score in the POST-Test (M = 25.80; SD = 12.36) actually increased compared to the PRE-Test (M = 24.96; SD = 12.03).

We found no statistically significant difference in self-criticism between the experimental and the control group and the effect size was small (F(1. 65) = 0.966; p = 0.329; η_p^2 = 0.015). In the POST-Test the experimental group participants did have a tendency on average to reach a lower score (M = 21.43; SD = 11.73) compared to the control group participants (M = 25.80; SD = 12.36). We can assume, just as we did in the self-compassion variable, that in the self-criticism variable the participants were well distributed since the results in the PRE-Test showed no statistically significant difference.

Based on these findings, we can state that, as far as self-criticism is concerned, there is no difference between the experimental and the control group in the POST-Test.

TABLE 2
DISCUSSION

Our goal was to test the effectiveness of a 14-day online version of the Emotion-Focused Training for Self-Compassion and Self-Protection (EFT-SCP) (Halamová, 2018) in people addicted to the internet. It is empirically proven that self-compassion, in many ways, positively influences our well-being, self-criticism, anxiety, depression, etc. (Neff, 2004; Neff et al., 2007). The opposite of self-compassionate behavior is self-critical behavior, which has a negative effect on our well-being, depression, anxiety, internet addiction, etc. (Błachnio et al., 2016; Gilbert et al., 2006; Shahar et al., 2003).

We found that intervention had a positive effect on increasing self-compassion

Table 2 Results for the between group differences and comparison of the differences between the PRE-Test and the POST-Test in Self--Criticism scale

Group	PRE-Test		POST-Test		Results ANOVA		
	M	SD	M	SD	F	Sig.	η_p^2
Experimenal	23,67	12,09	21,43	11,73	0,966	0,329	0,015
Control	24,96	12,03	25,80	12,36			

in people, who manifested at least a mild internet addiction. These results are in line with the findings of research by Halamová et al. (2018), who carried out a study on a sample of the general population, which also manifested higher self-compassion values following a training intervention. Due to the fact that people addicted to the internet tend to have problems in several areas of life, self-compassion can help them cope with difficult times when they are able to adopt an open and understanding attitude towards themselves (Allen & Leary, 2010).

Allen and Leary (2010) state that some people are naturally more compassionate than others. They also state that, in general, people can become more compassionate and Germer and Neff (2013) consider self-compassion to be a skill, which can be taught. Overall, these statements contribute to the assumption that these interventions are effective and are in agreement with our findings that following such interventions people addicted to the internet began to show more self-compassionate behavior. Therefore, we can assume that intervention helped these individuals recognize their current attitude and reactions towards themselves. This can be the first step towards change and development of their self-compassion and subsequently sup-

port their decision to further their efforts to work on themselves above all, since individuals addicted to the internet tend to undervalue and underperceive their self-concept (Yates et al., 2012). In general, adopting a self-critical attitude and thoughts contributes to the tendency to be addicted to the internet (Błachnio et al., 2016).

In addition to increasing self-compassion, the EFT-SCP intervention is assumed to also decrease self-criticism. We found that this intervention had a positive effect on self-criticism in people addicted to the internet. As in the case of the results concerning self-compassion, this finding is in line with Halamová et al.'s (2018) study findings, which revealed a decrease in self-critical thoughts and perception among the general population, following an intervention. However, in our study we also saw a change in attitudes in the control group but in the other direction: the self-critical values actually increased. One of the possible explanations would be that they were in a better psychological state of mind at the time of the pre-test than at the time of the post-test.

In the framework of self-criticism in our study, the intervention in people with internet addiction only improved their inadequate attitude and coping with the self. This finding is not in line with Halamová et al.'s (2018) findings, since in their research intervention positively affected only unfriendly, hateful or even sadistic attitude towards the self. On the other hand, Gilbert

and Procter's (2006) research found a decrease in both of these critical attitudes towards the self, which is also not completely in line with our study results, since we found the intervention to be effective only in case of the milder form of self-criticism. The impact of the intervention in our study did not influence hateful thoughts towards the self, probably because the participants, in general, did not have to manifest to a great degree such cruel, ruthless, and totally disgusted attitude towards the self. Another reason could lie in the fact that self-criticism develops early in life and within the family (Koestner et al., 1991), and thus can be more deeply rooted than inadequate attitude towards the self, which may in the long run actually take longer to change. Therefore, a 14-day intervention may not be enough time when working with oneself to improve upon such unfriendly even sadistic attitude towards the self, which may actually lead to self-harm.

The first limitation of our research is the self-reporting type of battery of questionnaires. In certain situations, people may tend to behave according to certain norms and rules, which are considered to be socially normal and correct (social desirability). This could have contributed to participants reaching a lower score on the Internet Addiction Test (Young, 2011), since they might not have wanted to reveal the actual time they spend on the internet. Their lower score on this test would have prevented them from meeting the criteria to be included in the study.

Another limitation may involve the online form of the intervention. It could have happened that a participant did not find peaceful surroundings while doing the individual exercises, his/her psychological state could have been affected by various internal or external circumstances, which might have distorted the end results. In spite of this possible limitation, we do consider the online form of the intervention advantageous in terms of the simplicity of approach and availability to everyone.

In present study, we didn´t measure the direct effect of EFT-SCP intervention on internet addiction, just the effect of the intervention on self-compassion and self-criticism in specific sample of people with at least mild internet addiction. The next step is to test whether the EFT-SCP has an effect on the internet addiction directly in short-term and also in long-term.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of our research, we can assume that the EFT-SCP intervention is suitable for use for specific population of people with increased level of internet dependency, since it positively affects increasing self-compassion and simultaneously decreasing self-criticism. We consider verifying the effectiveness of this intervention to be important on account of the fact that it can help people around the world since its online version is accessible to everyone in the comfort of his/her home without having to see a therapist. In this way, it is easier for a person interested in doing something for his/her development and searching for a deeper connection with the self to find time to do just that.

Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no potential conflicts of interests.

Ethical approval: All procedures per-

formed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent: Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Availability of data and materials: In order to comply with the ethics approvals of the study protocols, data cannot be made accessible through a public repository. However, data are available upon request for researchers who consent to adhering to the ethical regulations for confidential data.

Author Contributions: First author designed research project. Second author collected data and performed the statistical analysis. Both authors wrote the first draft of the article, interpreted the results, revised the manuscript and read and approved the final manuscript.

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