

Socio-emotional Competence and Adjustment of Students in COVID-19 Rethinking School-based Learning

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented mental health crisis, posing a unique challenge to global psychological resilience. In this context, this study focused on understanding the significance of socio-emotional competencies on students' mental health and wellness during COVID-19. Validated instruments measuring emotional competence, social competence, life satisfaction and adjustment were used to collect data from 210 adolescents (13–14 years). Results showed that during the pandemic, nearly one-third of the students reported inadequate social, emotional and educational adjustment. The ability to manage difficult emotions, which is critical for work and life success, had the lowest score on the emotional competence dimension. Regression analysis showed the significant role of social and emotional competencies in explaining the variance in adjustment. This study strengthens and outlines the need to include socio-emotional learning interventions into educational programmes at school, especially in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

During the pandemic and lockdown restrictions in India, about 33 per cent of 5 to 13 year olds and 50 per cent of 14 to 18 year olds had poor

or very bad mental health (UNICEF report, 2021). The well-being of students, which is a major problem, became even more pressing in light of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

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Like various other aspects of personality, emotions play a vital role in the manifestation of individual's behaviour. The emotional growth happens to be rapid during early years and decreases throughout life. Basic emotions reflect adaptive demands of key environmental situations to achieve control over different kinds of events related to survival (Plutchik, 1980).

To accomplish and preserve a feeling of efficacy, every individual has to develop workable inferences about the world. Emotional competence is the efficiency that an individual requires to deal with emotional situations adequately. These organised abilities work as a productive force in moulding human behaviour, while disorganisation may lead to severe ramifications in the dynamics of human behaviour.

Emotional competence is a blending of five competencies (Coleman, 1970), which are listed below:

- (a) Adequate depth of feelings— A feeling of being able to deal with all reality assumptions. It is closely correlated with potent judgement and personality integration ensuring fervent participation in living.
- (b) Adequate expression and control of emotions— It refers to the natural dynamic stability of an individual to express and control emotions spontaneously as demanded by the situation
- (c) Ability to function with emotion— It refers to distinctive pattern of emotional awareness, which assists an individual to an optimal level of functioning. This helps in achieving the tasks of daily routine adequately.
- (d) Ability to cope with problem emotions— It refers to understanding the detrimental effects of problem emotions by a person and developing an ability to resist the harmful effects later
- (e) Encouragement of positive emotions— It refers to the ability of a person to develop a prominence of positive emotions to ensure a meaningful and well-integrated life

The functionalist approach to emotion suggests that emotions represent an attempt by an individual to 'establish, maintain, change or terminate the relation between the person and the environment on matters of significance to the person' (Campos et al, 1994). Research on the systemic interaction between affect and behaviour shows that individuals who have mastery over managing their emotions and expressions are less susceptible to anger outburst than individuals who are unsuccessful at doing so (Eisenberg et al., 1996). Literature strongly supports the contribution of socio-emotional competence to life success, work performance and academic performance (Juvonen and Wentzel, 1996).

COVID-19 AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

During the COVID-19 epidemic, special attention had to be devoted to teenagers' emotional competency for two reasons. Firstly, to achieve as advocated by academic success Oberle et al., 2014 and also for effective adult functioning (Kotsou et al., 2011) mentioned is the study of this emotional competency is attained by an adolescent through socialisation (Valiente et al., 2020). Also adolescents have been shown to be less aware and accepting of their own emotions as a result of the inescapable social isolation that was created by COVID-19 (Valiente et al., 2020) and found severe difficulty in regulating their emotions (Casey et al., 2019). Several early studies on COVID-19's immediate effects in adolescents and young adults (Janssen et al., 2020) found an increase in low emotional competence-related mental health difficulties in adolescents and young adults.

Second, adolescents must be emotionally competent to deal with the additional emotional distress caused by COVID-19, such as illness, loss of relatives, and financial difficulties during the pandemic, as well as feelings of anxiety, depression, and sadness (Li et al., 2021). Students with strong emotional competence will be better able to control and regulate their grief, sadness, and stress in order to cope more effectively with the new online learning environment (Moron and Biolik-Moron, 2020).

COVID-19 AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE

Social competence has been defined as the social ability and interpersonal skills (Eisler, 1976) of an individual in effectively meeting a person- situation interaction or successfully dealing with individual environment factors. It is defined as an individual's ability to respond effectively or adequately to the numerous problematic situations. White (1963) coined the term 'social competency' to describe a person's interaction with the social environment and to enable him to gain knowledge through successful experiences of other persons to achieve disliked outcomes and effects. One of the components of social behaviour is social competency.

Adolescents' learning experiences are shaped by their social relationships with teachers, peers, and others (perret-Clermont et al., 2004). As a result, without the motivation of in-person interactions with teachers and classmates, kids struggle to be cognitively engaged in class (Kim and Frick, 2011).

CONCEPT OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING (SWB)

The SWB concept is a three-part set of phenomena that comprises emotional responses (e.g., joy, optimism, etc.) and negative affects (e.g., sadness, anger, etc.), domain satisfaction (e.g., work satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, etc.), and global judgments of life satisfaction (LS) (Diener et al. 1999). LS is a subjective assessment of overall quality of life

that is considered a key indication of SWB (Diener et al. 1999). Scores on LS measures are frequently used to suggest pleasure or dissatisfaction.

How did the pandemic affect student well-being in India?

In March 2020, the Indian government proclaimed an early countrywide lockdown in response to COVID-19 emergence. COVID-19 related mental health issues, such as bereavement, social isolation, and increased stress and anxiety (Hamza et al., 2020), made students' academic lives even more difficult. As previously stated, adolescence is a developmental stage marked by a particularly sensitive 'social brain' (Blakemore, 2008), and it is a crucial time for the development of emotional competence (Booker and Dunsmore, 2017). As a result, any interpersonal and social-emotional suffering experienced by adolescents is amplified when compared to people at other stages of development. Students at this developmental stage must have a higher level of emotional competence in order to effectively manage with emotional pain, allowing them to be more robust to the COVID-19 pandemic's obstacles and do better academically (Bao, 2020). For example, the ongoing uncertainty around examinations and school reopenings over the previous two years has harmed the mental health of pupils already on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Mental health for children must take into account the age-specific and life-course markers. A good

sense of self, the ability to control thoughts and emotions, the ability to form connections, and the ability to study and acquire education are all parts of being mentally healthy. According to a UNICEF report (2021), the pandemic's aftershocks will take its toll on the happiness and well-being of children, adolescents, and caregivers for years to come, putting their mental health at danger. Such organisations, as well as the Indian government, concur that the COVID-19 pandemic is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to children's poor mental health.

These forecasts are already coming true. Schools serve as a safe haven: they are a microcosm of the world into which kids are preparing to enter. Students are deprived of not only academic chances, but also of an ecosystem, in which connections and relationships are built. According to the UN the report *The State of the World's Children* (2021), over 1 in 7 (15 to the 24-year-olds) in India reported feeling depressed or having little interest in doing things.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Students' well-being and adjustment are a pressing concern, which has become even more urgent in the context of the current crisis. Understanding adolescents' well-being and adjustment during COVID-19 requires an understanding of the role of their social and emotional competencies. There are a few studies that have explored this in the content of Indian high school students. The current study thus

aimed to explore how the pandemic affected high school students' social and emotional competence and consequently affected the adjustments of adolescents to the COVID-19 related obstacles and their learning environment.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study were 210 students from the schools in Pune city, Maharashtra. The sample included 110 girls and 100 boys. Their age range was 13–14 yrs. Their mean age was 13.6 yrs.

Measures

The Emotional Competence Scale designed by Sharma and Bharadwaj (1995) was used to assess the emotional competence of the subjects. It is a 30-items instrument with the response format ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The scale has separate scores for five sub-components of emotional competence: adequate depth of feelings, adequate expression and control of emotions, ability to function with emotions, ability to cope with problem emotions, and encouragement of positive emotions. High score on the scale indicated high emotional competence. The test-retest reliability of the scale was 0.73 and split half reliability was 0.75. The concurrent validity with 16 personality factor (PF) questionnaire was found to be 0.69.

To assess the adjustment of the participants, Adjustment Inventory for School Students by Sinha and Singh (1993) was used. It is a 60-items scale with the responses of 'yes' and 'no'. Typical items on the scale include: (1) Do you pay attention to the lesson being taught in class, and (2) Do you often quarrel with your classmates. The split half reliability is 0.95, the test-retest reliability is 0.93 and the K-R formula-20 reliability is 0.94. For each response indicative of adjustment, '0' is given otherwise '1' is given. The inventory was validated by correlating inventory scores with ratings by hostel superintendent and for this product moment, coefficient of correlation was found to be 0.51. High scores on the inventory indicate poor levels of adjustment while low scores indicate good adjustment.

To measure the social competencies, the Social Competence Scale developed by Sharma and Shukla (1992) was used. The scale consists of 50 items with responses ranging from very high to very low, on a 5-point scale. The scale measures pro-social attitude, social competition, social leadership, social tolerance and social maturity. The reliability employing Test-Retest method was 0.56, whereas the coefficient of inter-rater reliability has been found to be 0.67 and a predictive validity of $r=0.72$ was obtained.

To measure subjective well-being, the Satisfaction with Life Scale developed by Pavot and Diener

(1993) was used. The analysis of the reliability of the SWLS showed an internal consistency of 0.74 (Cronbach's alpha).

Procedure

The instruments were administered to participants in their respective schools. A survey was set up on Survey Monkey software. The head teacher first sent out the consent form to students' parents through email. Parents signed the form electronically and returned it to the head teacher. After obtaining consent from parents or guardians, the head teacher sent the survey link to students through email to be filled by students during their free time. The survey data were collected over a period of two weeks in August 2021. School teachers assisted

the researchers and this facilitated the easy administration of instruments.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics, correlational and regression analysis was employed to analyse the data.

Results

Descriptive statistics and zero order correlations for the variables under study are reported in Table 1, 2 and 3.

The highest mean score was for adequate depth of feelings and for adequate expression and control of emotions, signifying the knowledge and awareness of one's emotions. The lowest mean score in the perceived emotional competence dimensions by adolescents was for ability to cope with problem emotions.

Table 1
Mean scores and standard deviation (SD) for emotional competence, social competence, subjective well-being and adjustment

	N	Mean	SD
Emotional competence	210	259.71	22
Adjustment	210	17.98	6.81
Social Competence	210	157.53	22.52
Subjective Well-being	210	24.61	4.54

Table 2
Mean scores and standard deviations for emotional competence dimensions

Emotional Competence Dimensions	Mean	SD
Adequate depth of feelings	50.3	21.2
Adequate expression and control of emotions	51.8	23.4
Ability to cope with problem emotions	47.6	22.1
Ability to function with emotions	49.3	22.4
Encouragement of positive emotions	50.2	21.6

Table 3
Relationship between emotional competence, social competence, subjective well-being and adjustment

	SWLS	SCS	ECS	ADJ
SWLS	1	0.204**	0.206**	0.167*
SCS		1	0.083	0.238**
ECS			1	0.430**
Adj-Emotional			0.380**	
Adj-Social			0.396**	
Adj-Educational			0.310**	

SWLS: Satisfaction with life; SCS: Social competence; ECS: Emotional competence; ADJ: Adjustment
 Significance levels *0.05 **0.01

Table 4
Regression outcomes for Variable Adjustment

	B	SE	T	P
Intercept	12.35	1.184	10.45	<0.001
Emotional competence	0.1820	0.018	10.37	<0.001
Social competence	0.0731	0.018	4.230	<0.001

R2 = 0.227

The correlational analysis revealed that social and emotional competence, well-being and adjustment are positively and significantly related, indicating that adolescents who have good emotional and social competencies tend to exhibit higher adjustment in educational, emotional and social domain.

A regression analysis was carried out to investigate whether adolescents’ social and emotional competence explained the variance in adjustment. The two predictor model explains 22.7 per cent of the total variance in adjustment (R2 = 0.227) where both the predictors are significant.

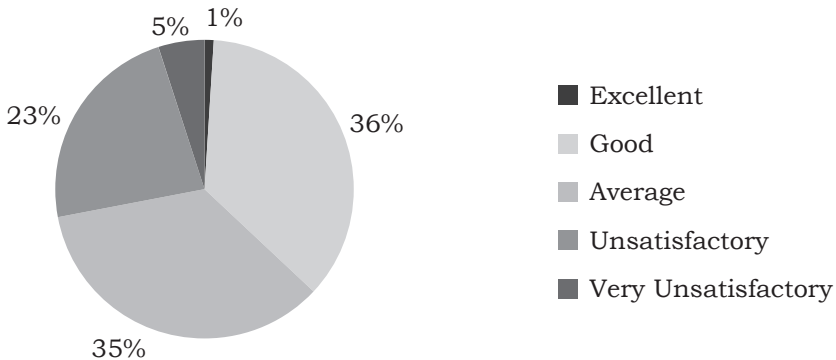


Fig. 1: Classification of adjustment in terms of Categories

28 per cent of the students fall in the combined category of unsatisfactory and very unsatisfactory adjustment.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of adolescents' emotional competence, social competence, adjustment, and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data was evaluated on two aspects. One viewpoint looked at the adjustment profile and emotional competence of adolescents during the pandemic. The second perspective looked at the link between emotional competence, social competence, well-being and adjustment, with the goal of determining if these skills influence adolescents' adjustment.

The first aim of this study was to explore the status of adolescents' adjustment problems and emotional competence, in the context of COVID-19. According to the United Nations Children's Fund report (UNICEF, 2021), one out of every four children in India suffers from depression in some form. Our country also bears the unenviable distinction of having the greatest rate of teen suicide, with many students displaying violent tendencies, substance misuse, and other unpleasant feelings. The data for this study was gathered during the COVID-19 epidemic, which was a particularly difficult moment in the lives of adolescents. Nearly one-fourth (28%) of the students in the current survey said that their

adjustment was inadequate. The findings are consistent with a recent study that found a higher prevalence of adjustment issues among teenagers, owing partly to pandemic prevention measures such as lockdown, social isolation, and quarantine, as well as school closure. (Cusinato et al., 2020).

The study also reflects a growing concern over students' emotional well-being, reports that they are more depressed, agitated, and lack enthusiasm to learn. The ability to manage difficult emotions, which is critical for work and life success, had the lowest mean score on the emotional competence dimension, in the current study. This could have an impact on how students deal with unexpected and challenging circumstances like school closures, as well as their motivation to return to the school and study. The results find support in earlier research that greater stress levels, depression, and anxiety disorders have been observed among adolescents, both during the early stages of the pandemic and over time. (Singh et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020a, b).

The second aim of the study was to examine the associations between social and emotional competencies and adolescents' adjustment and well-being during the pandemic.

As expected, emotional competence was significantly associated with all the three sub-components of adjustment— emotional, social as well as educational, during COVID-19 ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$). This association

found in the high school sample confirmed the findings from previous research that low emotional competence contributes to poor handling of failure and frustration, less creativity, more psycho-phobia and lower self-esteem. (Sjoberg, 2001). Similarly, the findings from the current study show a significant relationship between emotional competence and well-being ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$), support for which is found in the work of Greenberg et al. (1995) and Eisenberg et al. (2000), which established that emotional competence contributes to well-being of individuals. This finding in the current study may be relevant for students returning to school and catching up on lost learning, but it may also be relevant in the context of future school closures. Emotional competence is thus, protective trait that aid teenagers in adjusting to the pressures and challenges in a healthy way. People who have a high level of socio-emotional competence, are more inclined to see neutral events as positive. As a result, emotional knowledge plays a crucial role in structuring interpretations of social events and controlling access to emotions, feelings and behavioural expressions.

The current study's findings also reveal a substantial link between social competence and life satisfaction ($r = 0.204$, $p < 0.01$) and adjustment ($r = 0.238$, $p < 0.01$). For people of all ages, social and emotional learning abilities are crucial in determining

their quality of life. People with strong social and emotional sides are more successful in a variety of areas, including social problem solving, interpersonal connections, self-knowledge and self-understanding, and life happiness (Kabakc and Korkut, 2008). These results concur with the current study's conclusions that low competence in social situations is linked with poor well-being and adjustment, during COVID-19. The lack of interaction caused due to school closure may affect students' social skills in times of crisis, social skills may be crucial for eliciting assistance from others.

The focus of this research was also to look at the impact of social and emotional skills on adolescents, adjustment and well-being during the the pandemic. Regression analysis revealed that social and emotional skills explained variance in adolescents' adjustment, which is consistent with the earlier research (O'Connor et al., 2018). Adolescents will be better able to respond to the emotional, social, and educational demands of the learning environment if they can understand and manage their own emotions and actions, appreciate others' views, make responsible decisions, and effectively negotiate relationships.

As a result, the current study demonstrates that social and emotional competence skills have an impact on teenage adjustment and well-being in the setting of a severe pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the critical role that schools play in fostering children's development, beyond academic learning. The crisis has exposed fundamental flaws in education systems all across the world. More broadly, the COVID-19 pandemic forces us to reconsider the meaning and purpose of education, as well as the skills and competencies that we expect education and learning to provide. The purpose of education should be to prepare students to function well in a complex social environment both during and after the current epidemic. In the light of the findings of the current study, addressing social and emotional concerns should also be an important component of schooling and the schools as leading light should also extend their efforts and support in this massive educational mission.

Then how can we create a framework for adolescents to develop a strong identity as well as gain skills that will help them prepare for their future?

In this context, education institutions will have to address the challenge of training students to function well in a complex personal and work environment. It will be critical for school education to prioritise social and emotional competency as a major theme in the curriculum. Furthermore, emotional competence-related interventions are needed to address students' mental health difficulties, particularly for adolescents (Lau and Wu, 2012).

To boost students' mental health and assist them navigate the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment, schools and institutions should consider offering interventions and training on emotional competence (Hadar *et al.*, 2020). Online instructions and exercises, especially for high school students, should provide effective ways for identifying, comprehending, controlling, and utilising emotions.

The current findings have significant implications for the development of adolescent-focused socio-emotional learning interventions. In the last two decades, there has been a tremendous increase in studies in the area of socio-emotional learning. Academic achievement, peer relationships, adaptive life skills, drug misuse and high-risk sexual activity, violence, and other forms of maladaptive social behaviour have all been linked to social and emotional learning (SEL), Maurice *et al.*, 1996). The National Education Policy 2020 has popularised the concept SEL. It emphasises the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) in assuring children's holistic development and claims that the educational system should strive to 'create excellent human beings capable of logical thought and action as well as compassion and empathy.'

The NGO Pratham's Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2019: Early Years, title of the report released in January 2020, underlined

the critical need to include SEL in the school curriculum. This is the first large-scale study in rural India to collect data on a variety of learning-related developmental markers, including social and emotional abilities of young children aged four to eight years.

SEL, on the other hand, continues to receive little attention, despite the evidence that its benefits go far beyond academic achievement. SEL is yet to gain its appropriate place in the Indian education system, as it is usually found on the fringes of formal education. The need of the hour is for a comprehensive curriculum (for preschool and school) that integrates SEL activities with expected outcomes and a rigorous evaluation. Although concepts like self-regulation and conflict resolution are included in the National Council of Educational Research and Training's (NCERT) Learning Outcomes for Pre-schoolers, SEL is absent from the primary school curriculum. It is critical to ensure that the importance of SEL promotion is not overlooked while tackling the numerous concerns highlighted in NEP 2020. Early investments in SEL can go a long way towards making Indian residents more responsible community members. This should be a top priority for the entire country.

The Education Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4), 2021 foresees countries developing education systems that not only support academic advancement but also give birth to the future

civilisations of conscious humans. It is critical that learners 'be exposed to three types of interrelated learning experiences: cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural' in order to achieve this aim. As the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic spreads over India, we must prepare to build a strategy to address children's and caregivers' fear and anxiety through an SEL framework adapted to India's needs.

Suggestions for School-based effective SEL: the Indian way forward

It is critical to hold open talks about mental health in order to establish a dedicated policy that focuses on social and emotional learning in order to improve students' mental health. This is particularly important in India, where, according to the *State of the World's Children 2021 Report* (UN, 2021), 'just a minority of young people agreed that those with mental health concerns should approach out to others.' Clearly, any national policy for SEL must emphasise the Indian government's awareness of mental and physical health of the people as well as the prevalence of social stigma linked with mental health disorders.

It is important to find an SEL framework that is specific to India: the education sector currently has a plethora of SEL frameworks. As a result, identifying a framework that caters to the spectrum of social and emotional competencies that varied Indian kids will need in order to manage school,

life, and work, is critical, according to the NEP's mission. Efforts should be undertaken to integrate the NEP's vision into a centralised, empirically-grounded curriculum that can be tailored to the needs of students at all levels, particularly those who move between rural and urban settings.

Teachers are crucial stakeholders in social and emotional learning because they play essential roles in the socialisation of students, hence SEL should be effectively implemented in schools. In order to effectively execute a programme, instructors must be trained to not only promote SEL, but also to identify the needs of their pupils. To attain this aim, school instructors have been entrusted to ensure that the SEL curriculum is implemented successfully under the NEP. Despite this, the government instructors have received little to no SEL training to help them understand the importance of their role. Teaching is unquestionably a difficult job, especially in schools with little resources or in conflict-affected areas. Therefore, teacher training for social and emotional learning must be planned with these constraints in mind in order to avoid the bottleneck situations related to implementation since it is the teacher who set a role model for students in the classroom by displaying social and emotional skills as well as competencies. This teachers' mental health is equally as important as students' mental health.

It is essential that we integrate SEL into the academic curriculum

as we prepare for a pandemic-stricken world, we should focus on incorporating SEL into the teaching of formal academic topics, rather than considering it as a 'standalone subject'.

Implementing SEL programmes in a school setting is difficult because a variety of stakeholders are involved in the process, including school principals, staff members, instructors, students, parents, and government officials. The time has come to invest in each of these stakeholders while developing an easy-to-implement SEL policy framework.

SEL activities should be monitored and evaluated: The Happiness Curriculum in New Delhi does not use any quantitative, measurable, or defined approach to monitor or assess the work and progress achieved by students. Rather, it grants the teacher control to evaluate the students' development subjectively. Teachers' biases, prejudices, and belief systems may influence such individual evaluations. As a result, a chance to assess the impact of SEL and enhance current programme outcomes is lost. SEL programmes should have comprehensive accountability rubrics built in from the start to track programme efficacy.

Digital technology is being used to implement SEL programmes all around the world. For example, digital games centred on SEL competencies, have been released, and virtual teaching content for SEL programmes has been created.

Similar considerations can be made in India; however, the efficiency of such digital solutions would be heavily reliant on smartphone ownership, internet availability, and digital literacy. Enabling student ownership of SEL while helping them find a platform where they may think out loud to better manage their mental health struggles is an important aspect of developing long-lasting core competencies.

We increase our chances of creating healthy, responsible, and compassionate learners by incorporating socio-emotional learning into the life of our schools and homes. These programmes encourage specific socio-motional skills, understanding, and ideals, which are an important for life.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The importance of a systematic socio-emotional competency programme in improving adolescent competencies was thus demonstrated in this

study. For many stakeholders in the education sector, the findings of this study would give useful and practical information. These statistics would allow teachers and other academics to justify the inclusion of emotional intelligence-related content and teaching in their instructional designs and delivery.

One of the challenges in this field is to conduct longitudinal research to determine developmental trajectories for students with emotional competence deficiencies. Another ongoing problem will be determining if the patterns of emotional competence are exclusive to a certain setting or represent a more generic or trait-like personality attribute. Given this difficulty, there is a pressing need to assess emotional competency in a variety of settings. It may be able to demonstrate a pattern of individual differences in competence by widening the evaluations of emotional competence to cover a variety of circumstances and contexts.

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