

“What Happens When the Pictures Are No Longer Photoshops?” Slender Man, Belief, and the Unacknowledged Common Experience¹

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YOU never know when the perfect ethnographic moment will arrive.² While attending a party that occurred shortly after the Slender Man stabbing incident, I witnessed a group of children playing. One child pulled his white t-shirt over his head, screaming “Look out! I’m Slender Man! I’m coming to get you!” as he blindly began chasing the other (now screaming) children around the yard. Upon catching his first victim, he linked arms with her and the two of them started screaming and chasing the other children as a team. I later asked the originator of the game who Slender Man was. He shrugged and said, “He’s a bad man. He comes and gets you.” Further discussion brought more children close by, all of whom voluntarily contributed to the conversation. As the group debated exactly who Slender Man was and what he looked like, they all were certain of a few things: he watched you, he would take you away (where or why was much debated), and he was tall, thin, wore a black suit, and didn’t have a face. When I asked if they had read anything about him on the Internet, they all reported that they had not (but the older children with access to smartphones quickly looked him up) and they had not seen anything about him on television.³ When I asked where they had heard about Slender Man, they all shrugged, stating that everyone knows about Slender Man. One six-year-old girl patiently explained to me that he is “like the Boogeyman, but he lived in the woods, but he could be under your bed or in your closet.”⁴

Slender Man is not only an Internet or popular culture phenomenon; certainly he is more than that.⁵ Despite his known origins on the Something Awful forum and early depictions, Slender Man has taken on a life of his own. While people continue to pay Slender Man homage on the Internet, Slender Man has a life outside the Internet in

children's games, oral storytelling, and belief, highlighting a specific type of experience: the unacknowledged common experience. Slender Man is part of a larger narrative.

While there certainly is an element of collective subversive collaboration in the creation of Slender Man on the *Something Awful* forum and other venues for creepypasta, there is a shared aesthetic and, at times, a shared experience that taps into something deeper than mere play. Just as Slender Man himself is complicated, so is belief in Slender Man. As Jeffrey A. Tolbert (2013) has argued, Slender Man may be a type of reverse ostension where we have to create both the experience and the narratives. I would also argue that, at times, Slender Man is the name given to a shared experience which bridges both the experience centered hypothesis used by David Hufford (1989) with the cultural source hypothesis. Clearly there are incidents where the story comes first and the experience comes after, but we also see moments where a previous experience is attributed to Slender Man, a sort of reverse quasi-ostension. I would argue that either way, the experience still *feels* real.

Belief, Experience, and Slender Man

As Hufford (1982) has shown, American society has a “tradition of disbelief”; while it is traditional to believe in certain things, it is also traditional to *not* believe in certain things. Additionally, individuals regard the experiences of others to be up for questioning, while our own experiences are treated as dogma, or, as Hufford states more succinctly, “I know what I know, what you know, you only believe” (1982:47). These experiences become even more complicated when a shared belief narrative takes place online, perhaps more so for digital immigrants than digital natives.⁶ To many digital immigrants, anything found online is immediately suspect or thought to be inauthentic. Additionally, experiences, while they can be shared online, are not thought to necessarily happen online. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the use of the abbreviation “IRL” or “in real life” in computer-mediated communication to differentiate between events that have occurred in the corporeal world as opposed to what happens on the Internet. I would argue that this distinction between “real life” and what happens online is fading and is, likely, no longer true at all for digital natives. The Internet *is* their real life and Internet transmission is just as real as transmission face to face.⁷

As a legend complex, Slender Man has two main issues complicating belief: both that it is supernatural and found on the Internet. In memorates, there can be a sense of anonymity; the line between what has happened online versus IRL is further blurred. As

Michael Kinsella states, “Communication technologies allow us to see more clearly how the reciprocity between experience and tradition results in the ongoing construction of what we call the supernatural” (2011:147). Tolbert asserts that Slender Man is just as real as any other entity found IRL or on the Internet because it is a “conscious expression of a culture shared among a particular group of people, which bears special significances that depend in part on an understanding of the group context in which the expressive culture arises” (2013:8).

It seems that Slender Man narratives suffer from a double stigma as they are both supernatural and found on the Internet. This stigma is based on the traditions of disbelief. As Hufford rejected the *a priori* notion that nothing supernatural must be happening because supernatural things do not happen, and Diane Goldstein (2007) rejected the *a priori* notion that “folk belief expressed in popular or commodified culture is any less serious, any less important, any less rational, or any less a belief than what is expressed more traditionally” (2007:16), I reject the *a priori* notion that just because something is found on the Internet, created in response to a challenge, or has an individual author it does not mean that it is not a real experience being expressed in a way that is socially and culturally safer than telling a personal experience narrative. Hufford (1995) states that beliefs are supported by “core spiritual experiences,” which are perceptual: these experiences lay the foundation for a belief. Since these experiences may involve emotion or latent cultural values rather than what we consider to be “knowledge,” they are often disbelieved. In actuality, these core beliefs do not conflict with knowledge and do use deductive reasoning and scientific methodology (Goldstein 2007:60-78). However, some may feel that not only are they contrary with knowledge, they are also irrational and have no empirical foundations. By focusing on the subjective experience, Hufford is trying to show that the experience is real and valid. However, even those who accept Hufford’s view of experience may not agree that those experiences are as valid when posted online, primarily *because* they are found online. I would argue that, at times, people might be even more honest online than in person since they may feel more anonymous.

Folklorists seem to accept that experiences *posted* online and *which happen* online can be truthful accounts of actual events. Those who read and participate in these narratives also have experiences with Slender Man. For many, a person’s experience reading a Slender Man narrative or watching a video can *feel* just as real as having an actual experience with Slender Man. As one of my participants mentioned:

I know it was probably because I had just been reading Slender Man stories on the Internet, but I was walking home and it was late and I had that feeling that I was being watched. Being followed. And I thought to myself, “It could be Slender Man,” and I knew that was stupid. I was only thinking about Slender Man because I had just read about it. But I just kept thinking, “You don’t know. Maybe those stories are real. Maybe it is Slender Man.”⁸

This narrative certainly shows a logical progression, the knowledge that Slender Man is “not real,” but also the consideration that the stories written about Slender Man could be based on real experiences. While these potential real experiences do not carry the weight of the individual’s own experience, they are a part of the logic used by the individual. I am not arguing that Slender Man is “real” or that those who have contributed to the Slender Man narrative think that he is real or have had an experience with him. Rather, I think there is a core spiritual experience here that connects with others—the feeling of being watched—that has been turned into a narrative about a specific entity since it was a convenient way to discuss an untellable experience. While this was not the original intention of early participators of the Slender Man mythos, the narratives about Slender Man have grown larger than what is merely placed online.⁹

Perhaps Slender Man contains a core experience which many have felt, but which does not currently have a name. Slender Man narratives online tap into that core experience, giving those who have had a similar experience a way to discuss these events. Similar to David Hufford’s (1989) research with the Old Hag and sleep paralysis, there is an experience of some kind which “has provided the central empirical foundation from which the supernatural tradition arose” (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007:14). Slender Man becomes a “flexible rhetorical tool” (Tolbert 2013:2) or, more simply, the experience of feeling watched now has a name and that name is Slender Man.

Victor Surge (Eric Knudsen), the original author of the Slender Man narrative, and the other early participants do not make any claims to the reality of their experience and have overtly stated that their intent was to create a fictional monster. They have never admitted any real experience with Slender Man themselves; however, they have certainly tapped into something that *feels real* to their audience. Even those who contribute to the narrative have an aesthetic sense of the Slender Man story; they understand that while Slender Man is not real, there is an aesthetic that is being created, maintained, and is understood. It is an experience that is felt by the participants, on some level, even if it is not

an actual experience they have encountered. This could be, in part, because the creators of Slender Man understand how to create a character and story that feels like folklore, something that is “folkloresque” (Foster and Tolbert 2016). Perhaps one of the best ways to describe Slender Man is using Michael Dylan Foster’s (2014) notion of “fuzzy allusion,” where folklore is alluded to in a general way, although there is no specific connection to a particular genre or motif that already exists in folklore. Although Slender Man looks and acts like other liminal creatures, there is no direct connection to those creatures. Slender Man seems to fit in and be a part of a long-standing tradition, without any real connection to that tradition.

Despite the lack of connection to any long-standing tradition, there is a shared understanding of who or what Slender Man is, even among those who have not participated in the communal creation of Slender Man on the Internet. When I mention Slender Man to any of my university classes, I rarely have to explain who he is. The students already have a preconceived notion of who or what Slender Man is and many have strong opinions on what he does and his appearance. In one of my classes on the supernatural I asked my students to describe Slender Man while I wrote what they said on the board. The only features the class debated was whether or not Slender Man had tentacles and if he kidnapped people or drove them insane.¹⁰

While we can ask (and have asked) Eric Knudsen, the creator of Slender Man, what his intentions were, we can now see that Slender Man has transformed into something more. Perhaps, for those engaging in the later Slender Man narratives, Slender Man is not about a specific experience event, but rather, is about a series of events that adds up to a cumulative experience.

Types of Experience

In past scholarship, academics primarily describe experience in two different ways: as a singular life-changing experience and as everyday experience. The English language typically uses the phrases “an experience” and “mere experience.”¹¹ In the majority of the material that we see concerning an experience and mere experience, we can see that there is a tendency to favor an experience over mere experience. Mere experience is simply what happens to an individual, whereas an experience, “like a rock in a Zen sand garden, stand[s] out from the evenness of passing hours and years” (Turner 1986:35). Victor Turner defines “an experience” as experiences that are “formative and transformative, that is, distinguishable, isolable sequences of external events and internal responses to them... some of these formative experiences are highly personal, others are shared with group to which

we belong by birth or choice” (1986:35). In these shared experiences that Turner mentions, we see that “an experience” can be defined in the terms of a “typical experience,” or an experience that is shared with the community that results in sentiments also shared by the community. There is an interaction between what has happened and the feelings related to that experience. In a “typical experience” there is a sense that others have gone through this experience before, making the experience, although unique to the individual, typical to the community (Abrahams 1986:60). Perhaps one of the reasons why we regard supernatural experience as “less real” than other types of experience is because we don’t often share them in the same way as we do with “typical experiences.” While the telling of ghost stories is socially acceptable in certain situations, such as around campfires or near Halloween, ghost stories still belong to traditions of disbelief. The situations where we engage in a typical experience with them are still rare, so we do not experience the interaction between the experience and the feelings related to it with others, except in certain circumstances.

I would like to attempt to define these concepts more simply. “An experience” is a unique experience, like Turner’s rock in a Zen garden. It stands out and can be told as a singular experience with the option of including other experiences. “Typical experience” is an experience that is shared by a community; it does not go unexamined or untold; rather, it is shared in a way that is socially acceptable and may be assumed to be a part of most people’s experience. While I do agree that some experiences are frequent, I would like to argue for another definition of “Mere experience,” which I think belittles the actual experience. “Mere experiences” are not simple, nor are they trivial; they are just frequent. I would argue that “mere experiences” are not simply what happens to you, but rather, what happens to you frequently enough that you may not have an outstanding narrative about it like you would with “an experience.” However, unlike typical experiences, they are not always shared. David Hufford tapped into this concept with his term “core experiences,” which he defines as experiences which “form distinct classes with stable perceptual patterns” (1995:31); however, his definition does not include whether or not these consistent patterns are shared by a group (making them “typical experiences”) or if they are consistent patterns for the individual (making them “mere experiences”). Additionally, Hufford’s focus is on the accurate observations made by people, not the sharing of these experiences. He certainly suggests that some experiences are stable, even cross-culturally, because they precisely describe observations that are similar

(1995:31), but he has little to say about the sharing of those stories outside of the idea behind the traditions of disbelief.

Diane Goldstein discusses how these experiences are shared, demonstrating that there are typical patterns to memorates, including a defensive structure and the use of logic and reason (Goldstein 2007:60-78). However, the focus of her work is more on the structure of the stories, in that they don't "exist *in the face of* modern scientific knowledge, but in content and structure it exists *because of* modern scientific knowledge" (Goldstein 2007:78, emphasis in original). This concept is certainly important, but it does not yet accurately describe the belief experience.

Certainly, Hufford's (1995) "core experience" is close to what I'm attempting to describe; however, it seems that many of the experiences Hufford is talking about are still "an experience" instead of "mere experiences," and he is talking about ones shared within a community ("typical" experiences) and ones that people do not share. While I am tempted to call these experiences "everyday" experiences, I will not as that indicates that there is a specific frequency to them. I am also tempted to refer to them as "vernacular experiences," like Leonard Primiano's (1995) use of the term vernacular religion; however, I also wonder if terms like "vernacular" or "common" suffer the same issues as the term "mere." I am also reluctant to refer to them as untellable, as they are certainly told, to varying degrees of success. "Unexamined experiences" boast a similar issue, as these experiences are examined by the individual; they are just not examined by the community in a way that makes them typical experiences. Although it suffers from the same issues as "mere," I will call these experiences "unacknowledged common experiences," since I do want to highlight that they are frequent, but also, while sometimes spoken, they are not always accepted by their community.

In this context, I would argue that Slender Man is an unacknowledged common experience that has turned into a "typical experience" on the Internet. This now typical experience is without "an experience," so there is not a single definitive experience, rather a series of typical experiences. The idea of Slender Man fills in that gap of having "an experience," providing an object to describe this subjective typical experience, heretofore an unacknowledged common experience.

These unacknowledged common experiences are crucial to both experience and the maintenance of belief. "An experience" is not always the most important part of experience, nor is it more valuable than unacknowledged common experience or typical experience. An experience is perceived to be more unusual or interesting, but it is not

always what solidifies belief. For example, a close friend told me a series of stories about growing up in a haunted house and, while some of the experiences were exemplary and unique, the convincing aspects to her were the everyday experience of living in a house that was haunted. She recalled a series of incidents, which she uses as an example but common of the experience of living in this house, where the ghost would move items around:

So, this used to happen all the time, any time I would leave the room while I was getting dressed. I would lay out all of my clothes on the bed and if I left the room for some reason, because I forgot something in the laundry or because I got distracted, when I came back into the room, my bra would be gone. And I knew I had laid it out on the bed with the rest of my clothes. Well, this would happen every time if I would leave the room while the clothes were out on the bed. It got to be a joke. The second I noticed it and said something about it to my daughter, the bra would reappear. So it got to the point where I would walk back out of the room, it only worked if I wasn't in the room, and I would say out loud "Oh no! Wherever did my bra go? I swear it was right here!" [she laughs] Then it would reappear. It happened all the time.¹²

My informant clearly was no longer frightened by this mysterious disappearance of her clothing because it happened so often, she even describes it as a joke among family members, making it a typical experience with her family.¹³ However, the familiar experience of living with this ghost was the most convincing part of this story. Her other narratives about this ghost which are specific, unique events are described very differently:

So, there would be sometimes, it was not very often, where, well, he would just get mad. I don't know exactly how to describe it. Jealous, I think. That we were alive and he wasn't. It didn't happen often, but you could feel it. You could feel someone watching you and he was just so angry, you could feel the anger and it was scary. One time I was in my bedroom reading, and I could feel him in the doorway. He was glaring at me. I could actually almost see him and I never saw him before or since. It was weird, because I couldn't actually see him, it was like there was so much energy there that my feeling almost turned into seeing. Most of the time things just moved around and you knew he was

there, but it was nothing bad. But every once in awhile, it was bad. He was angry and you felt it.¹⁴

These singular, unique “an experiences” were clearly different. My informant even goes on to say that she would often convince herself that they had not happened and question if the “an experience” was real or not, or even wondered if it was a separate entity, but she never questioned whether or not there was a ghost in the house. She had so many instances of experiences with this particular ghost that she knew he was real.

Slender Man functions in a similar way. The unacknowledged common experience of reading a Slender Man story, playing a game where Slender Man is a character, or otherwise engaging with the narrative is the convincing part of the interaction. Individuals are not having “an experience” with Slender Man, rather, this character is a part of a larger experience with the supernatural. Like legends, which are not literally true but rather “typify life in modern society” (Smith 1999), Slender Man also is a part of the experience of life in the modern world.

Additionally, interactions with the supernatural have a certain *feel* to them, which has often been described as a numinous quality. While we might engage our sight and hearing while reading a Slender Man story or watching a video, it is the *feel* of the story that makes the experience real.¹⁵ Since North American culture primarily relies on sight and hearing over touch (Nuesdtat 1994), the feel of a supernatural experience can be difficult to describe. One of my students, who arrived in my office after our classroom discussion on the topic, was excited to show me some of the video games that included a Slender Man character. He told me:

You have to imagine what this is like. It’s different here, now. But if you’re up late and there’s no one around and you’re playing this game, well, it gets to you. This guy will follow you or show up suddenly and when you’re home alone playing and it’s late at night, it all feels real. It feels like if I just get up to get a drink or go to the bathroom or something, he could be there, for real, in my kitchen or whatever.¹⁶

I assured him that I understood. Since I had read up on the phenomenon, mostly in the very office where we were discussing his experiences, I knew how convincing some of the narratives and pictures online could be. While I could not understand his exact experience, I understood the unacknowledged common experience (or, if one is fortunate, the typical experience) of being frightened by

something I read about on the Internet. This experience is common, but not often shared. One of my students collected the following narrative from a friend:

One time, I was out late at night walking down the road to my house from my friend's house (only a few minutes away). Obviously, I was already scared because I was walking alone but I didn't have another option so I walked as fast as I could to get home. I looked over and on the back of a street sign was a painted picture of Slender Man. I don't think that this would have frightened me in the daylight but since it was night I was really freaked out. I began to convince myself that someone was after me and out to get me. I sprinted the rest of the way home and triple checked my doors to make sure that they were locked and that I was safely inside without any creepy guy. I heard somewhere that if you looked at Slender Man directly then he would come after you. I had nightmares all night that night. I was being chased by Slender Man.¹⁷

While the cause of this experience, be it Slender Man or something else, can be individual it can also be affected by popular culture, further demonstrating the exchange between popular and folk culture. The source of the fear differs; however, the experience of fear, especially unfounded fear, is not uncommon. That being said, it is not always a typical experience since we cannot always discuss it or because we are forced to discuss it in dismissive terms.¹⁸

Clearly, this experience is not uncommon, but it is not typical either since the narrative alienates rather than incorporates the teller, all of those who admitted they were scared after watching a scary movie knew that it was "stupid" or that they shouldn't feel that way. In the instances where the listener also has a similar experience, the experience can be typical, however, the structure of the story is told in a way that protects the teller from the derision of the listener. If the listener laughs or ridicules them, the teller can reiterate that they also believed the experience was "stupid" in spite of the fact that there is nothing stupid about insomnia or terror.

In addition to Slender Man symbolizing the experientially cross-cultural feeling of being watched, he could certainly be a metaphor for other experiences as well. Perhaps Slender Man is an easier way to express the feeling of being watched on the Internet—where Slender Man was invented—by a faceless entity, such as the National Security Administration (NSA). Perhaps he expresses the general feeling that one is being watched or even followed, especially late at night. Since

he is often situated in wooded areas, Slender Man may even express our fears about nature, getting lost, or our inability to survive in a world without electronic devices. The possibilities are great and certainly individual, but they all connect with an overall fear that we are not alone and we are being watched, perhaps even stalked.

Although the Slender Man narratives become more specific at times, they do contain overall themes. There is something that has been around for a long time, it watches us, and sometimes it causes people to do terrible things. The photoshopped “historical” pictures of Slender Man, from the woodcuts to photography, express the perceived longevity of the experience, in particular that this feeling is as old as humankind itself. We are not alone in this expression of fear. However, there are many possibilities as to the function of Slender Man since he does not represent any one thing, but rather fills in for anything frightening, anything that could be watching the individual.

For adults and digital immigrants, Slender Man can also be used to express a fear of unprovoked violence. Much like the Satanic Panics or moral panics of the past (see Ellis 1989; 2000), Slender Man has been used as a way of demonstrating or questioning the motives of children and young adults who have engaged in violent acts. While the “Slender Man Stabbings” in May 2014 were the most closely associated link between violence and adolescents, later acts of violence, such as a Florida teen who set her house on fire in September 2014 and a stabbing by an unnamed teen in Ohio in June of 2014, have been linked to their interest in Slender Man (see Murray 2015). Slender Man may also symbolize a fear of the Internet and technology by older adults or those who do not understand Internet usage. For them, the visage of Slender Man represents all of the dangers of the Internet in one form, from dangerous strangers to their fear that digital natives do not understand that there is a difference between the Internet and “real life.” This may also express that digital immigrants believe that digital natives do not understand that the Internet and what happens there is not real to the digital immigrant.

Slender Man is not a simple entity that can be looked at as belonging to a single folk group. He is, possibly, an acknowledgement of the unacknowledged common experience of being watched. The reason why he “feels real” to so many people is because he helps to give a voice to a real experience that is difficult to understand otherwise. While an individual can ask another “Have you ever felt like you were being watched?” and have them understand that experience, there is a tradition of disbelief that either you are being watched by something human or it is nothing at all. Slender Man gives the possibility that you are being watched, not by anything human, but by

something that should be taken seriously. Slender Man not only gives us a place to assign value to these unacknowledged common experiences, he is standing there, acknowledging these experiences.

Notes

¹ The quote in my essay's title comes from Tolbert (2013:6), quoting Soakie (2009), "Create Paranormal Images." Something Awful Forums. <http://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php?threadid=3150591&userid=0&perpage=40&pagenumber=16>.

² Diane Goldstein had a similar experience of watching children play, which she documents in her book *Once Upon a Virus* (2004).

³ I'm fairly sure at least some of them had heard something about the 2014 stabbings from overhead conversations, radios, or televisions left on in the background.

⁴ Previous to this accidental interaction with this group of children at a party, I was fairly certain that there was a connection between Slender Man and older traditions of supernatural creatures who watch events without interacting with them, such as Mothman and Thunderbirds or, as they have appeared in the television show *Fringe*, "The Watchers." I also saw an association with the Men in Black (MIB) tradition (men or aliens, dressed in black suits, who attempt to silence recent UFO witnesses) at least in the dress and uncanny appearance. While I do still see the connection to these traditions, until this moment it had not occurred to me that Slender Man could be explained as simply as a Boogeyman, a threatening creature who was a "old spirit in a new bottle" (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007:1-22) or, in this case, a Boogeyman with a new suit.

⁵ As described above, children play games with Slender Man as "it," while college students (sometimes jokingly, sometimes not) warn of seeing Slender Man in wooded areas or while walking alone. Many examples such as these were provided by my students, who are the inspiration for this work.

⁶ Digital natives are those who have grown up with technology such as computers and the Internet, whereas digital immigrants have not. For more information, see Blank (2013a) and McNeill (2009:80-97).

⁷ See Blank (2013b) and Howard (2008) for more on this, especially the notion of hybridity.

⁸ I have chosen to redact the names of my informants due to the sensitive nature of their stories. For the sake of clarity, I have given them letters instead. Author Interview with A. September 17, 2014.

⁹ For example, the late 2014, early 2015 sightings of Slender Man in Cannock Chase, Staffordshire, UK. (Mukherjee 2015)

¹⁰ The students in my Fall 2014 class on the Supernatural came to the consensus that Slender Man kidnapped children and drove adults insane, but they did not reach a consensus on whether or not Slender Man had tentacles. The Spring 2015 Supernatural class could not decide about what Slender Man did or if he had tentacles or not.

¹¹ The German language seems to have a better grasp of the concept. The word *Erlebnis*—which is the secondary form of the word *Erleben*, which literally means "to still be alive when something happens"—gives the idea that this type of experience is life-changing and important: this experience stands out from other experiences. In contrast, *Erfahrung* gives the idea of mere everyday experience (Gadamer 1975:60-69, 346-61).

¹² Author interview with B. December 18, 2014.

¹³ Although not "an experience" she describes often to those outside her family, making it an unacknowledged common experience in that context.

¹⁴ Author Interview with B. December 18, 2014.

¹⁵ Lynne S. McNeill (2006) finds something similar with her study of ghost hunters, where the numinous quality of the experience trumped scientific proof either found or not found.

¹⁶ Author interview with C. March 15, 2014.

¹⁷ Student D interview with F. Fall 2014.

¹⁸ For example, one student shared in class that they always had to watch something after watching *The Walking Dead* on Sunday nights or they would end up dreaming about zombies chasing them all night. Several other students stated the same thing happened to them and talked about the things they would do after watching *The Walking Dead* in order to fall asleep and not have nightmares about zombies. They all stated they did not believe zombies were real, however, that did not help them sleep. Jeanie Banks Thomas (2007) discusses similar strategies.

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