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Rachel A. Adler  
*CUNY School of Public Health*

Spring Chenoa Cooper  
*CUNY School of Public Health*

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# “When a Tornado Hits Your Life:” Exploring Cyber Sexual Abuse Survivors’ Perspectives on Recovery

Rachel A. Adler  
CUNY School of Public Health

Spring Chenoa Cooper  
CUNY School of Public Health

**Introduction:** Forty-eight US states and 11 countries have enacted legislation criminalizing the act of revenge porn, or cyber sexual abuse. This represents a shift in recognition of the effects of cyber sexual abuse, as survivors continue to face societal norms of victim-blaming. By capturing stories of individuals who consider having overcome their experience of cyber sexual abuse, we aim to understand the process of recovery. **Methods:** We conducted qualitative interviews with 15 adults who indicated, through a digital eligibility form, that they had “overcome” their incident of cyber sexual abuse. Utilizing a grounded theory approach, the authors coded the data, met to determine consistency, and arrived at consensus on the themes. **Results:** Analysis identified six themes, with the fourth theme characterizing the temporal relationship between the first three and the last two: (1) Survivors exhibited externalized and internalized stigma; (2) Survivors experienced varying levels of professionalism and support from law enforcement and legal professionals; (3) A substantial burden on the survivor to educate and explain about cyber sexual abuse; (4) The “Fuck it!” point: The point where there is a noticeable shift in survivors’ attitudes and behaviors in their stories; (5) All survivors were forced to become their own advocate, many an advocate for others; (6) Survivors embraced an acceptance of a “new normal.” **Discussion:** Future research needs to focus on how changing structured protocols and trainings can contribute to shifting the burden of blame in cases of cyber sexual abuse from the survivor to the abuser.

*Keywords:* cyber sexual assault, sexual assault, qualitative, interviews

## Introduction

The normalization of cyber-based engagement has changed the ability of communities to interact with one another on a global level. One such result has been the steady rise of cyber sexual abuse, mainly in the form of non-consensual image sharing (henceforth referred to as NCIS). Also known colloquially as revenge porn or non-consensual pornography, NCIS entails the sharing of intimate and/or explicitly images or video “via electronic media to be viewed by people without the participant’s consent” (Holladay, Hagedorn, & Boote, 2021, p. 2). 2020 saw the rise of non-consensual image sharing by 114%. In a study performed across New Zealand, Australia, and the UK, 1 in 3 individuals had reported experiencing image-based sexual abuse (Martin, 2021). Survivors of cyber sexual abuse report similar negative mental health outcomes as survivors of generalized sexual violence, including depression, suicidal ideation, and degeneration of well-being (Washington, 2014).

Legislative efforts to criminalize cyber sexual abuse, and NCIS in particular, while gaining traction since 2015, have been slow compared to the rate by which cyber-socializing has become normalized as a means of global communication. Nearly 60% of the global population in 2021—4.6 billion

people—actively utilize the internet, a rise from 413 million in 2000. In the United States, 82% of people 12 years and over are active on social media platforms (Johnson, 2021). In a hearing to introduce the Intimate Privacy Protection Act, Senator Martin Heinrich stated that cyber sexual abuse “isn’t a digital problem, it isn’t a social media problem... it is a conduct problem, it is a criminal problem, and unfortunately it is a cultural problem” (Meiselman, 2017, para. 6). Approaches to reducing incidents of cyber sexual abuse reflect deeper societal beliefs that place the onus of blame on the survivor. Factors such as shame, social isolation, and fear of re-experiencing their trauma also affect rates of reporting (Haskell & Randall, 2019).

### Corresponding Author

Spring Chenoa Cooper  
CUNY School of Public Health & Health Policy  
55 West 125th Street  
New York, NY 10027  
E: Dr.Spring@gmail.com  
P: (646)364-9608

## Extent of the Problem

Approximately 90% of cyber sexual abuse survivors identify as women (Holladay et al., 2021). Campaigns and curriculums addressing the prevention of sexual assault often utilize “risk management” tactics, in which emphasis is placed on the survivor to alter their behavior to avoid situations in which sexual assault may occur (Bates, 2016). This may include advising women not to walk alone late at night, to dress modestly, and to minimize behaviors that would arguably lead to poor decision-making skills and lower levels of situation awareness (such as alcohol and drug use). Tactics to prevent cyber sexual abuse and NCIS take on similar patterns, emphasizing responsibility on the part of the survivor instead of the perpetrator. In a study examining the effects of revenge porn on mental health, Samantha Bates recalls an online blog that “lists ‘8 sexting rules’ to avoid becoming a victim of revenge porn, suggesting that women should not send naked photos unless they have been in a relationship with the recipient for more than one year, and to only send naked photos if their head is not in the photo” (Bates, 2016, p. 25).

The concept of “sexual double standards” based on gender identity and sex roles is ingrained in several cultures and societies (Lefkowitz, Shearer, Gillen, & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2014). This includes the theory of “the male gaze,” a politicized editing tactic to “invite the viewer to identify with men’s characters and marginalize and objectify women’s characters” (Kempton, 2020, para. 4). These concepts encourage perpetuation of a cycle in which women are tasked with the responsibility of presenting as sexual beings for the benefit of others while facing consequences should they choose to express their sexuality/sexual autonomy. While men are celebrated for their health, strength, and vitality when choosing to post their bodies online, women are sexualized and shamed for similar actions (Salter, 2016). The accountability of men is largely ignored, instead connecting sexual prowess to the idea of masculinity and gender norms (de Villiers, Duma, & Abrahams, 2021). Making a case that this messaging creates a cycle of sexual abuse, author Kelsey Thompson notes celebrity instances of revenge porn, in which we see these societal views demonstrated in how the stories are reported, as well as commentary and reactions. When celebrity Blac Chyna accused Rob Kardashian of posting intimate photos on the internet without her consent, reactions followed a pattern in which the survivor is “chastised as sexually promiscuous based on their sexual relationships, while men like Kardashian bask in hyper-masculine glory though betrayal in the form of a tweet” (Thompson, 2017, para. 14).

While many survivors identify as women, NCIS extends to men and non-binary folks as well (Holladay et al., 2021). These populations of survivors may face stigmas in an entirely different way, since societal norms associate victimiza-

tion with being female, as being weak, vulnerable and with an inability “to protect themselves and in need of help and assistance” (Martinez, 2018, p. 2).

Should survivors of sexual assault choose to pursue legal recourse against their perpetrator, they may face unwanted publicity and instances of victim-blaming that potentially deter them from proceeding further with their case (Kamal & Newman, 2016). While 48 states plus the District of Columbia have passed laws criminalizing non-consensual sharing of intimate photos, data is not available on the percentage of survivors in these areas who actively seek legal recourse. Aforementioned risks of re-traumatization and publicity, fueled by gender role expectations, may lead to survivors reporting at a lower rate and enables the victim-blaming cycle to continue without further intervention at the legislative and policy-making level (Haskell & Randall, 2019).

## What about Recovery?

While there is a dearth of literature on NCIS and its impacts overall, virtually no studies focus on the assets that have helped survivors of NCIS to overcome their experience. Although cyber sexual abuse survivors share similarities in mental health outcomes with those of cyber bullying survivors, including suicidal ideation and depression (Edwards, 2016), there has not been a focus in the literature on cyber sexual abuse survivors’ recovery process. Similarly, studies on resiliency of survivors of sexual assault have not included NCIS within their definition, an absence that reflects the ongoing public discourse on whether NCIS is “considered” sexual assault (MSW@USC, 2021).

By conducting a qualitative study on survivors who report having overcome their experience of cyber sexual abuse, we aim to understand how future survivors can overcome the trauma of their experience, while concurrently contributing to the argument that NCIS is on the spectrum of generalized sexual violence.

## Methods

### Positionality

Author SC has a background in interdisciplinary health research, focusing on adolescent sexual health and sexuality, sexual communication, online and offline social networks, and prevention of sexual assault. Author RA has a background in child welfare, specializing in healthy relationships, sexual health promotion and LGBTQ best practices within the foster care community. Both authors RA and SC began the research study by reflecting on our individual perspectives related to the topic of cyber sexual abuse. Our status as NCIS survivors (mentioned in recruitment materials) afforded us unique access to other survivors and gave participants additional comfort in participating in a digitally

based research study. Our experiences of NCIS were vastly different, from the events that transpired, to their effects, to the way the crime was handled, and the eventual “resolution.” Our diverse backgrounds and diverse NCIS experiences offer the study an integrative and orientative value.

### **Recruitment**

We began recruitment for this study in March 2019 through an online support group for survivors of cyber sexual abuse. Thirteen participants were digitally recruited from the only existing support group focused on NCIS, “Bat-tling Against Demeaning and Abusive Selfie Sharing,” or BADASS, which is housed on Facebook. Two additional participants were recruited via snowball sampling. Prospective participants were provided with a link to an online eligibility form. Inclusion criteria were: 18 years of age or older; proficient in reading/writing/speaking English; having “overcome” their experience of cyber sexual abuse. This last criterion was of particular importance, as participants could define what that meant. The strengths-based approach to recruitment meant that we had participants in our study who could explain how they were able to overcome the trauma of cyber sexual abuse. Eligible participants were provided with a digital informed consent document to be signed electronically and returned to the Research Associate. Eligible participants must have indicated a willingness to be audio-recorded for their interview. Prior to the interview, participants were provided with a link to a digital demographic survey in which they provided their age, race/ethnicity, gender, and place of residence. Interviews, demographic questionnaires, and eligibility surveys were not linked together, and interviews were coded as numerical IDs to ensure anonymity. Following completion of the interview, participants were provided with a list of resources and a code for a \$20 Amazon gift card as appreciation.

Of 29 prospective participants who expressed interest, 28 were found to be eligible as per the inclusion criteria, and 15 completed the interview process. All interviews were conducted by either the Research Associate or Principal Investigator.

### **Interview Process**

We interviewed participants with a semi-structured interview guide via video-conferencing. To protect participants and make them feel more comfortable, only the audio component was recorded. Face-to-face video allowed the participant to be sure of who they are interviewing with, as well as allow a human connection, allowing the interviewer to further capture nuances of the participant’s experience. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Audio recordings were digitally transcribed and manually verified to ensure verbatim transcription.

### **Data Analysis**

We utilized a grounded theory approach, beginning with line-by-line coding. Author RA coded all interviews and Author SC read all interviews and coded four (over 25%). We met to find agreement in our coding. Next, grouping techniques were applied to summarize the codes. Common themes were recorded as they emerged from the analysis, using an inductive method. The research team met several times to discuss our individual observations of the emerging themes, triangulating them, and then finalizing them. This study was approved by the CUNY IRB, approval number 2019-0126.

### **Results**

We had a total of 15 participants; they were between the ages of 21 and 41. Twelve participants identified as female, two identified as male, and one participant identified as non-binary. Additionally, one of our participants identified as transgender. Fourteen participants reported residency in the USA, and one participant reported residency in Canada. Of the 14 who reported the USA, states of residency included New York (4), North Carolina (4), Pennsylvania (2), California (1), Ohio (1), Florida (1) and the District of Columbia (1).

We asked participants to report their ethnicity (with the ability to check all that apply). Options included Asian, Black/African, Caucasian, Hispanic/Latinx, Native American, Pacific Islander, Prefer not to Answer, and Other. The latter allowed the participant to fill in the response of their choice. Twelve participants identified as Caucasian, and one participant each identified as Native American, Asian, and Multiracial, respectively.

Analysis identified six themes, with the fourth theme characterizing the temporal relationship between the first three and the last two: (1) Survivors exhibited both externalized and internalized stigma; (2) Survivors experienced varying levels of professionalism and support from law enforcement and legal professionals; (3) There is a substantial burden on the survivor to educate and explain about cyber sexual abuse; (4) The “Fuck it!” point: The point where there is a noticeable shift in survivors’ attitudes and behaviors in their stories; (5) All survivors were forced to become their own advocate; many became an advocate for others; (6) Eventually, survivors embraced an acceptance of a “new normal” (see Figure 1).

### **Survivors Exhibited Both Externalized and Internalized Stigma**

Many participants sought to distance themselves from preconceived notions of who they thought fit the “profile” of a cyber sexual abuse survivor:



Figure 1. This figure shows the six identified themes, with the fourth theme characterizing the relationship between the first three and the last two.

I knew about [cyber sexual abuse] from girls that send nudes... I thought you actually had to do something, and then in response, they expose these pictures" (Interview 5, Female)

This participant, who had her photos stolen from her phone, exhibits victim-blaming when describing her shock at becoming involved with NCIS without having sent nude images. Other participants internalized societal gender role perceptions in reconciling their experience as a survivor:

... as a male, you can't really show vulnerability in these types of situations... you're not going to be taken seriously. Because you're a male, and you're not supposed to be affected or upset" (Interview 2, Male)

Survivors of NCIS who identify as male face additional barriers to reporting, perhaps rooted in societal beliefs associating victimization with weakness.

It appeared to take participants a length of time in their journey to acknowledge the burden of wrongdoing was on the person who shared the images; however, many survivors continued to reconcile with preconceived stigmas which placed blame on the survivor:

Okay, so I was like, there's no way you could do that. He's not my enemy. Like, I haven't done anything to him" (Interview 7, Female)

These stigmas take on a societal relevance, in which it is not only the survivor's internal perceptions, but also fear of others' perceptions.

### Survivors Experienced Varying Levels of Professionalism and Support from Law Enforcement and Legal Professionals

The tone with which participants spoke of their engagement (and often frustration) with laws and the law enforcement system spoke not only to expectations of reception by officers and detectives, but also reflections of their actual experiences.

But the fact that that [revenge porn] could happen means that we need some laws and law enforcement, and some recourse to protect people from that kind of disaster. We have things to protect people from earthquakes, and tornadoes, right? When a tornado hits someone we have all kinds of things in place to help them, and well, we need the same kind of thing when a tornado hits somebody's life" (Interview 5, Female)

There were both situations in which survivors felt dismissed or blamed as well as those in which they felt supported and validated by the officer(s) with whom they were working.

Speaking to the latter, one participant noted that the officer:

made me feel like I was being taken seriously... and so I'm grateful to him because he's been extremely supportive throughout the whole process" (Interview 13, Female)

That our participant not only felt "grateful" for what is otherwise a professionally expected reaction from an officer speaks to the inconsistency in reporting expectations that survivors encounter prior to reporting their experience. The participant noting that she felt that her reporting was being taken seriously additionally speaks to an inherent expectation

of victim-blaming and minimizing, particularly in cases of sexual violence.

To that end, underlying feelings of victim blaming on behalf of law enforcement were frequently noted. As one participant stated:

...they were pretty accusatory. . . telling me about how. . . once you put things online, you can't take them back" (Interview 4, Female)

Interactions with law enforcement at the onset of the experience continued to affect the survivor's ability to cope, long after the initial interaction took place. When asked about the memory of working with law enforcement in the aftermath of her incident, one participant talked about her trauma, noting that she

...was really traumatized, and still kind of am, by the treatment. . . that I received from law enforcement in particular" (Interview 1, Female)

The experience of preparing themselves for interactions with law enforcement spoke to a larger theme that was largely present in the immediate onset of their experience addressing their incident of cyber sexual abuse.

### **There is a Substantial Burden on the Survivor to Educate and Explain about Cyber Sexual Abuse**

Following a perceived lack of support from law enforcement and/or society, many participants felt it was their responsibility to anticipate and intervene in cases where the presence of nonconsensual image sharing would impact their livelihood. Following a period in which a participant was repeatedly absent from class due to the mental health outcomes of her experience, she describes:

...frequently sending out emails to my professors. . . all of them were women, so I was a little more comfortable sharing" (Interview 4, Female)

That the participant noted the gender of her professors speaks to the inherent emotional risk taken in explaining her incident, and why she was missing classes – specifically stating that she was “a little more comfortable.” Another participant took it upon herself to address her experience in different professional environment, stating:

...and you know, the first thing I did was I went to my boss, terrified. You know, I'm thinking, I'm probably going to lose my job. I gotta tell her what's happening, just in case this comes up" (Interview 9, Female)

This experience of having to relive trauma with multiple individuals – many of whom are not intimate relationships,

coupled with ongoing frustrations on the societal level, led to a fourth theme, which facilitated the process of coping and reclamation, otherwise known as “the “Fuck it!” point.

### **"The “Fuck it!” Point: The Point Where there is a Noticeable Shift in Survivors' Attitudes and Behaviors in their Stories**

Participants learned not to rely on external sources for resilience, but to speak up actively against their aforementioned lack of support.

I got to the point where I was angry and I just said “fuck it.” I'm going to do what I want, I don't want this to hold me back. I'm like, okay, if someone came up to me and said “I saw pictures of you naked,” or “I saw pictures of you having sex,” I'd be like “Okay, congratulations, what are you going to do with the rest of your day?” – like, “Okay, congratulations, I'm gonna do my own thing now” (Interview 7, Female)

The point where this occurred was characterized by a sense of exasperation and resignation. Temporally, this point in the survivors' stories was where a shift occurred in their narratives from victim to advocate.

### **All Survivors Were Forced to Become their own Advocate; Many Became an Advocate for Others**

A common theme among participants was taking control of their experience to best of their capacity:

I was no longer paralyzed by the fear of harm – I was just pissed. I wanted to speak out about my experience on a public platform. Being angry and fighting back was empowering – and talking to other survivors was empowering, as well” (Interview 1, Female)

It was a very full circle moment. We marched over the Brooklyn Bridge, it was the first day of Sexual Awareness Month. It was an incredibly full-circle moment, like I had taken my life back. And I had taken the power into my own hands to tell my own story” (Interview 10, Non-binary)

Mobilization of emotions formally acting as a barrier to coping became a mechanism by which the participant was able to own their experience and become proactive in seeking justice against their perpetrators. In one instance, not feeling supported by law enforcement due to an absence of legal protections, a participant and her partner “. . . were a team in getting [the photographs] off the internet,” by directly contacting webmasters and site operators. In addition to taking it

upon themselves to directly advocate, participants appeared to take proactive measures in identifying what emerged as the fifth theme.

### **Eventually, Survivors Embraced an Acceptance of a “New Normal”**

A reflection that came up frequently was the notion that, to “overcome” their experience meant—in part—to understand that parts of their lives may never be the same, and that the threat of emerging photos may always be a distant, yet present fear. Many participants spoke of living in the present and owning their experience:

One thing I have embraced is trying to accept me as I am at any given moment. . . there is an aspect of fear that you kind of have to overcome. And being scared is such a natural response to invasions of privacy. . . but having to overcome that scared part, I really do think it’s just time. If something happens, that’s going to trigger you and bring you back to that. But if nothing happens for an extended period of time, then you kind of are more comfortable feeling like, well, everything’s OK” (Interview 4, Female)

This acceptance was often accompanied by changes in online habits, which spoke to altered routines to accommodate this concept of a “new normal.” Behavior modifications appeared to fall under two categories: monitoring the potential presence of past exposed media and ensuring the minimization of new information/media to be shared. The former was accomplished by, as a participant stated,:

...googling myself a lot more, searching myself a lot more. There was a point in time when I would google myself every other day” (Interview 3, Female)

This specific behavior appeared to be inversely related with the amount of time since the initial occurrence of cyber sexual abuse. However, as the participant who spoke of what a “new normal” looked like for her, re-emergence of images can “trigger you and bring you back,” which can also see the form of increased vigilance in ensuring the absence of shared images. The latter behavior appeared to be aligned with the concept of a “new normal” and in some cases appeared a permanent behavior modification.

I started to get a little more concerned about security, I became more aware of my privacy setting. The biggest change I made with Facebook was making my profile more private” (Interview 3, Female)

Efforts toward strengthening privacy extended to sharing locations on media platforms:

If somebody tagged me in a post that says where we are, I don’t approve of it on my timeline to show up. It’s, you know, going to be lingering and lasting. So I may just be really squirrely about putting myself out there like for, I don’t know, a long time, I think” (Interview 1, Female)

### **Discussion**

Extensive participant interviews revealed coping assets rooted in—simply put—the failure of adequate societal and cultural support toward survivors. Shifting of attitudes appeared to emerge from coping barriers established through interaction with law enforcement, as well as potential re-traumatization through educating and reconciling the experience with individuals at a higher level of authority (such as a professor or job interviewer, as noted throughout the interviews).

The concept of “overcoming” included acknowledgement of a “new normal,” which included an acceptance that the threat of emerging images would always be present, and was accompanied by behavior changes that altered social interaction on media platforms, with both friends and strangers alike. These behaviors included setting profiles to a more restrictive setting and not sharing locations as to maintain an increased level of privacy. These behavior modifications mirror survivor reactions to generalized sexual violence. In a dyadic study with adult female survivors of sexual violence, adopted preventive strategies included security measures, protective strategies, and day-to-day routine changes. The latter often resulted in a measure of restriction to the survivor’s life and/or “losing prior activities...in the hope of avoiding future assaults” (Ullman, Lorenz, & O’Callaghan, 2018, p. 7). For a survivor of physical sexual violence, this may mean avoiding social engagements or routines which served as a backdrop for the assault in question. Similarly, for survivors of cyber sexual abuse, this may look like ceasing activity on social media platforms, as well as increasing anonymity when engaging virtually (i.e., not wanting to be tagged in photos/have their location shared).

Our study uncovered a parallel in the resilience and healing strategies of cyber sexual abuse survivors to those experiencing other forms of sexual violence. Previously identified strategies include social support, coping strategies, and behavioral modifications to increase perceived control over recovery and reduce perceived risk of re-victimization (Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger, & Long, 2004).

Utilizing preventive strategies appears to denote an internal manifestation of victim-blaming. By restricting or eliminating otherwise enjoyable aspects of life is to place an additional burden on the survivor. Not only are they navigating a traumatic experience, but they must also tailor their lives to feel a perceived measure of protection. In a study of

1,800 women, 71% reported “avoiding things they wanted to do because of their fear of victimization” (Runyan, Casteel, Moracco, & Coyne-Beasley, 2007, p. 272-273). It should be noted that while more than half of participants had reported being subject to a victimization experience, two-thirds of the total study disclosed altering their day-to-day decisions around the fear of being victimized. This onus of perceived safety perpetually resting on the survivor—whether prospective or current—speaks to the internalization of victim-blaming. While our participants exhibited victim-blaming mentalities in rationalizing their experience, it is clear that these stigmas followed—and perhaps defined—their journey of healing.

### Limitations

Limitations to this study include recall bias: survivors recounted their past experiences. Additionally, state and country variances in laws criminalizing NCIS may provide inconsistency in themes regarding barriers and assets to coping as related to pressing charges for the assaults.

### Implications and Future Recommendations

Given the wide variety in interaction that survivors experienced, further studies focusing on standardized training (or gaps in training) among law enforcement and its effect on survivors would provide a baseline for reforming training manuals on a systemic level. This information may be used to inform detective and police officer training and protocols for working with survivors of cyber sexual abuse. These studies should emphasize the notion of victim-blaming and other gender-based acts of discrimination that may potentially interfere with the ability to work with survivors in an affirming, validating space.

While many states have criminalized NCIS, societal views continue to shape incidents of NCIS within the framework of victim-blaming and risk management; this appears evident specifically through experiences between survivors and high-ranking individuals such as employers, professors, mental health professionals, and law enforcement. Increased research needs to occur to recognize the effects of recounting and working through experiences of cyber sexual abuse in a potentially undertrained environment; alternatively, how structured protocol and training cannot only shape a survivor’s experience, but contribute to shifting the burden of blame in cases of cyber sexual abuse from the survivor to the abuser. Survivors of sexual assault face increased risk of revictimization and subsequent negative emotional dysregulation (Walsh, DiLillo, & Scalora, 2011). Long-term effects of experiencing NCIS have been found similar in survivors of child pornography, including “powerlessness, permeance . . . leaving victims engaged in a lifelong battle to control their dignity” (Kamal & Newman, 2016, p.362). In receiving training focused on the complexities surrounding

the survivor experience and parallels of mental health effects to other forms of sexual violence, mental health professionals will be able to meet the needs of an increasingly growing population of survivors.

Incidents of NCIS should be considered a form of sexual violence and integrated into campaigns, curriculums, and conversations regarding sexual violence accordingly. As experiences further differ depending on factors like race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, aforementioned campaigns should cater to the needs and inequities of its survivor population. Societal adaptation and normalization of NCIS being viewed in the same lens as sexual violence will lead to increased advocacy for support of cyber sexual abuse survivors, as well as shifts in policy and law to criminalize further all forms of cyber sexual abuse.

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