Going beyond the ‘Self’ in Self-Control: Interpersonal Consequences of Commitment Strategy Use

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Abstract

Commitment strategies are effective mechanisms individuals can use to overcome self-control problems. In this paper we explore the negative interpersonal consequences of commitment strategy use. In an incentivized trust game (Study 1), we demonstrate that individuals are less likely to trust people who use a commitment strategy than those who use willpower to achieve their goals. In Study 2, across four domains we show that people judge commitment strategy users less favorably than willpower users in pursuit of the same goals, particularly when it comes to integrity-based trust. In Study 3, we rule out the alternative explanation that these findings are driven by differences in anticipated future success. In Study 4, we provide evidence that perceived effort underlies this effect. Finally, in Study 5, we demonstrate that people’s anticipation of these negative consequences of commitment strategy use contributes to their reticence to adopt such strategies. Thus, we establish the role of willpower as a positive signal in impression formation, as well as the negative interpersonal consequences of relying on external aides when faced with temptation.
Going beyond the ‘self’ in self-control:

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“It isn’t what you do, but how you do it.” - John Wooden

When working on this very project, one of the authors used pure willpower to design studies, analyze data, and write up results without succumbing to the temptation of watching funny cat videos or memes on the internet. The other author used a combination of a web-blocker to limit access to distracting websites, public commitments to accomplishing certain tasks by specified deadlines, and a timer set for twenty-five minute intervals of intense focus. While we both ended up completing our tasks, this paper examines whether the different methods we used are judged differently by outside observers. In other words, consistent with revered college basketball coach John Wooden’s saying quoted above, we explore whether people’s goal achievement behavior is judged not just on what they achieved, but how they went about achieving it.

Self-control, the ability to prioritize beneficial long-term goals over immediate desires, is valued in a functioning society. Demonstrating the capacity for self-control at a young age has been shown to predict future educational competence (Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988), employment outcomes (Daly et al., 2015), health outcomes (Moffitt et al., 2011), and even credit ratings (Moffitt, et al., 2011). Among adults, stronger self-control is associated with better health outcomes such as lower rates of obesity (VanEpps, Downs & Loewenstein, 2016); better financial outcomes such as lower levels of debt (Gathergood, 2012); as well as interpersonal benefits such as stronger relationships (Finkel & Campbell, 2001, Tangney et al, 2004), greater
honesty (Gino et al., 2011) and increased trustworthiness in the eyes of others (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011).

However, there are many ways in which people can achieve the outcome of being self-controlled (Inzlicht et al., 2021). Of particular importance, some forms of self-control involve trying to resist temptation in the moment, often referred to as using internal willpower (Duckworth, Milkman, & Laibson, 2018). Another form of self-control involves making decisions ahead of time that avoid the temptation altogether. While it is possible to demonstrate self-control by using brute-force internal willpower, recent research has shown that this is less effective than simply not being placed in a tempting situation to begin with (Adriaanse et al., 2014; de Ridder et al., 2012; Galla & Duckworth, 2015; Hofmann et al., 2012). In the present work, we focus on a particularly popular and effective method of avoiding tempting situations: the use of commitment strategies. Commitment strategies are an arrangement one enters into to constrain future behaviors either by changing one’s physical environment or the decision environment (i.e. changing payoffs associated with different behaviors). The use of commitment strategies has been shown to increase goal achievement across a number of domains including smoking reduction, weight loss, academic achievement, and financial savings (for a review see Bryan, Karlan & Nelson, 2010).

While previous work has identified the myriad benefits of using commitment strategies compared to internal willpower, little work has examined the potential social implications of choosing to use one of these forms of self-control over another. In particular, we examine how an individual’s choice of self-control strategy influences the inferences people draw about that individual. We find that, despite the usefulness of commitment strategies, observers consistently form more negative impressions of targets who choose to use commitment strategies than targets
who choose to use internal willpower. We additionally find evidence that this occurs because using willpower is typically viewed as requiring more effort than using commitment strategies. Because the exertion of effort is itself moralized, and morality is an important component of integrity-based trust in particular, this leads commitment strategy users to be seen as less trustworthy than willpower users.

**Willpower and Commitment Strategies**

Though research in the behavioral sciences sometimes treats willpower and self-control interchangeably, willpower is in fact only one of many self-control strategies one could use while trying to avoid temptation in order to pursue long-term goals (Fujita, 2011; Gillebaart & de Ridder, 2015; Hofmann & Kotabe, 2012; Kristal & Zlatev, 2021). In particular, willpower is conceptualized as an internal “brute force” approach used in the moment to resist temptation directly (Duckworth, Milkman, & Laibson, 2018; Katzir et al., 2021). A classic example of willpower in action is the ‘marshmallow test’ designed by Mischel and colleagues (Mischel & Ebbesen, 1970; Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeiss, 1972). In that work, children were seated in a room and asked to avoid eating a small number of marshmallows in order to receive a larger number later. The ability to sit in front of these marshmallows without eating them, knowing a larger reward was coming later, is what we and others refer to as willpower.

The ‘in-the-moment’ nature of willpower can be contrasted with other self-control approaches that are instead planned in advance to avoid being placed into a tempting situation altogether (for a review of alternatives to willpower, see Duckworth, Milkman, & Laibson, 2018). One particularly effective alternative to willpower is the use of commitment strategies (Bryan, Karlan & Nelson, 2010; Rogers, Milkman & Volpp, 2014). Commitment strategies involve taking an action prior to exposure to a temptation in order to increase the cost of, or
preclude the ability to act upon, the future temptation. A well-known example of pre-commitment comes from Homer’s epic poem *Odyssey*. In the story, Odysseus, knowing he would be tempted to certain death by the song of the sirens, had his sailors bind him to the mast of his ship so he could hear the song without being physically able to move. This idea has been inherent in the psychological and economic literature for decades under various names such as “precommitment,” (Strotz, 1956), “self-binding” (Elster, 1979), “anticipatory self-command,” “strategic self-frustration,” (Schelling, 1984), and “commitment devices” (Bryan, Karlan, & Nelson, 2010).

In addition to the domains discussed earlier, commitment strategies have proven effective at increasing savings rates (Thaler & Benartzi, 2004), facilitating smoking cessation (Giné, Karlan, & Resnick, 2010), increasing gym attendance (Milkman, Minson, & Volpp, 2014), reducing alcohol consumption (Goldstein, 2001), increasing academic performance (Ariely & Wertenbroch, 2002) and increasing productivity (Marotta & Acquisti, 2017), among others. The fact that commitment strategies are an effective way to deal with self-control problems is well-established. However, most relevant to the present paper, this prior work has looked only at the “first-order” effects of commitment strategies, that is, the immediate effect on the individual engaging in them. We build on this work by focusing instead on the “second order” effects, or the ways in which beliefs about commitment strategies may affect how people judge those who use them. We hypothesize that individuals will perceive targets who use commitment strategies less favorably than targets who use willpower to achieve the same goal. We outline our reasoning behind this hypothesis in the following sections.

**Self-Control and Effort**
An important distinction between the use of willpower versus commitment strategies in overcoming self-control problems is the point at which the primary decision takes place. While commitment strategies require implementation of a plan prior to facing temptation, willpower requires active rejection of the temptation as it occurs. Thus, when using willpower, the primary decision of how to act takes place in a “hot” state where the benefits of the immediate reward are more psychologically salient than the benefits of the long-term goal. The effortful nature of this act of resisting temptation in the moment has been shown to lead to fatigue (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012).

There is also evidence that people perceive using willpower to be an effortful act. Even linguistically, “willpower” connotes the need for power to control one’s will, as does “brute-force,” (Duckworth, Milkman & Laibson, 2019) or “effortful inhibition” (Galla & Duckworth, 2015), both common terms used in conjunction with willpower. This suggests that there exists a lay association between willpower use and exerting effort.

Although the literature has not, until recently, made a fine distinction between willpower and other forms of self-control, there is evidence that strategies that do not require willpower are less effortful and more effective (Adriaanse et al., 2014; de Ridder et al., 2012; Galla & Duckworth, 2015; Hofmann et al., 2012). Avoiding or minimizing the temptation via commitment strategies, however, allows the primary decision to be made in a “cold” state, thus creating conditions that eschew the need for effortful engagement or inhibition in a “hot” state (e.g. by selecting or modifying the situation, Duckworth, Gendler & Gross, 2016; Gross, 1998). The fact that the decision point for implementing a commitment strategy occurs well before any temptation can actually occur should lead people to see its use as less effortful than the use of willpower.
Valuing Effort

If using willpower is seen as more effortful than using commitment strategies, the natural next question is why this leads to stronger inferences of trustworthiness and moral character evaluations. We argue that this is because in many cultures and for many people, the exertion of effort is itself moralized. In Western societies in particular, hard work is highly valued (Weber, 1905) and displaying a strong work ethic can signal that one is honest, virtuous, and accountable for their actions (Amos, Zhang & Read, 2019). Further, people prefer donating to fundraising campaigns when the fundraising process is thought to be effortful (e.g., participating in a marathon) than when it is not (e.g., participating in a walk-a-thon; Olivola & Shafir, 2013). Effort more broadly seems to carry an inherent value for many, leading them to positively evaluate others who choose more effortful options (Inzlicht, Shenhav & Olivola, 2018). Interestingly, even effort that is clearly unproductive for reaching the desired goal is moralized (Celniker et al, 2020), further underscoring the perceived importance of effort.

Additional evidence ties the value people place on effort directly to the ability to overcome temptation or delay gratification. For example, delay of gratification has been proposed as a central tenet of the Protestant Work Ethic (Miller et al., 2002), and the effective use of self-control – both in close others and strangers – is associated with increased perceptions of trustworthiness (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011). In addition, previous work has demonstrated that adults view overcoming inner conflict as more morally laudable than doing the right thing in the absence of this conflict (Berman & Small, 2018; Starmans & Bloom, 2016). Beyond the Western context, in China, children also recognize that delaying gratification can have reputational benefits, and therefore are more likely to do so when they know their behavior will be observed, particularly by an authority figure such as a teacher (Ma et al., 2020).
In sum, people place a high value on effort, in particular when it is linked to self-control behaviors. As a result, because willpower is perceived as a more effortful self-control strategy than the use of commitment strategies, individuals choosing to engage in willpower to avoid temptation should generally be viewed more positively than individuals choosing commitment strategies.

**Self-Control and Trustworthiness**

We focus our examination of how people react to others’ use of self-control techniques on evaluations of trustworthiness. Trust is a critical component of sustained social interactions. Relationships characterized by high levels of trust are more persistent, productive, and amicable, whereas distrust can erode or end once-fruitful collaborations (Cook, Hardin & Levi, 2005; Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006; Wieselquist et al., 1999; Zaheer, McEvily, & Perrone, 1998). While past research has identified many facets of trust (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985), we focus on two components that are particularly relevant to impression formation (Dorison, Umphres, & Lerner, 2021; Levine & Schweitzer, 2015; Zlatev, 2019): integrity-based trust and benevolence-based trust.

Integrity is commonly defined as adherence to a consistent set of principles (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). In particular, McFall (1987) argues that one can be said to have integrity if her beliefs meet two criteria. First, one’s beliefs must be internally coherent (both with respect to one’s other beliefs as well as one’s actions and motivations). Second, one’s beliefs must relate to socially valued topics. In other words, they must involve values that people would generally agree are important. It is this second criteria that is particularly relevant to the present work. To the extent that using willpower is seen as more effortful than using commitment strategies, and that expending effort is a socially valued principle, it stands to
reason that the use of willpower will be seen by others as being a higher integrity decision than the use of commitment strategies.

Benevolence is typically defined as the degree to which a trustee has good intentions toward a trustor (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). The proximal link between effort and benevolence—and hence the more distal link between self-control strategy choice and benevolence—is less clear. While people may have other reasons for believing a willpower user is benevolent, because we propose that effort is the key mechanism, we expect the impact on benevolence perceptions to be less pronounced than on integrity perceptions.

**Contribution**

While prior work has proposed that self-control more broadly is moralized (Mooijman et al., 2017), and that those exhibiting self-control in general are seen as more trustworthy (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011), it has not distinguished between the different self-control strategies available to an individual. This is important because our research demonstrates that people hold beliefs not only about what it means to be self-controlled, but also about the method used to achieve this. Moreover, prior work has focused on the outcome (i.e., the success or failure) of using self-control, rather than the process by which self-control is used. We demonstrate that beliefs about the success of different self-control strategies play a less prominent role in trustworthiness perceptions than beliefs about the type of person who would choose each strategy.

Our paper also contributes to the nascent literature on the importance of distinguishing between different self-control strategies (Duckworth, Gendler, & Gross, 2016; Fujita, 2011; Katzir et al., 2021) and highlights that not all strategies are perceived to be equally laudable. While this work begins to explore the interpersonal consequences of using different types of self-
control strategies, it also lays the groundwork for a new lens of exploring why people may fail to use certain strategies at their disposal. Despite the effectiveness of commitment strategies for achieving self-control, there is emerging evidence that people often fail to use them (Gine, Karlan & Zinman, 2010; Marotta & Acquisti, 2017; Moser, Schoenebeck & Resnick, 2019; Royer, Stehr, & Sydnor, 2015). The interpersonal consequences may be one piece of this puzzle, a point we return to in our final study and the General Discussion.

**Research Overview**

Across five studies, we explore whether people who choose to use commitment strategies are judged more negatively than people who choose to use internal willpower to overcome self-control problems. To summarize, we hypothesize that people who choose commitment strategies over willpower are trusted less and viewed as less moral. In Study 1, we demonstrate this effect in an incentive-compatible trust game. In Study 2, we examine the generalizability of this phenomenon by demonstrating its persistence across a variety of different self-control situations. In Study 3, we introduce another situation and examine the main effects of strategy use and success on perceptions of integrity and morality. Then, in Study 4, we use a manipulate-the-mediator approach to demonstrate that perceived differences in effort underlie the negative perceptions of people who use commitment strategies. Finally, in Study 5, we demonstrate that although people are more likely to use a commitment strategy when their decision will not be made public, even when their use is kept private people still are hesitant to use commitment strategies. All studies received relevant IRB approval and were pre-registered, and all materials, data, and code are available at https://researchbox.org/470&PEER_REVIEW_passcode=NDECVI. We sought to maximize
power by collecting at least 100 participants per condition (as per the recommendation provided in Simmons, Nelson & Simonsohn, 2018).

Study 1

Study 1 seeks to test whether people are more likely to trust those who use willpower as opposed to commitment strategies to achieve their goals. The pre-registration for Study 1 is available at https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=6ux42j.

Study 1: Method

Participants. Our final sample for this study comprised of 220 participants (48.6% female, 16.8% non-white; $M_{age} = 41.8$, $SD_{age} = 12.1$) recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk who took part in an online experiment in exchange for monetary payment. Information about how we ended up with this final sample is detailed in the Results section below.

Procedure. Participants first read instructions for the trust game (Berg, Dickhaut, & McCabe, 1995), which involves two players, referred to here as the blue player and red player. Participants took on the role of the blue player, who received a $1 endowment and had the option to keep it for themselves or pass it to the red player. If the participant decided to keep the money, then the game ended and they received the $1 as a bonus. If the participant instead decided to pass the money to the red player, the value of that money tripled to $3; the red player who received the money would then have the choice to keep the entire $3 or split it with the participant (thereby each receiving a bonus of $1.50). After answering two comprehension check questions about the trust game, participants read about two different Amazon Mechanical Turk workers who could serve as the red player in their game. Specifically, participants read:

We are recruiting other Mechanical Turk workers to serve as the RED player.

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2 We recruited a separate group of participants to make decisions as the red player in order to match participants for bonus payments to avoid deception.
Some of those Mechanical Turk workers choose to use willpower to resist tempting websites (like Facebook or YouTube) when working online.

Some of those Mechanical Turk workers choose to download an app that blocks tempting websites (like Facebook or YouTube) when working online.

**

You have the option to choose whether you would like to keep the $1 for yourself or to pass the $1 to a RED player who uses willpower or to pass the $1 to a RED player who uses the app. (And the RED player will then decide to keep the $3 or return $1.50 of it to you). Which option would you choose?

After participants decided if they wanted to keep the $1, pass it to the person who uses willpower, or pass it to the person who uses the commitment strategy, they provided their demographic information.

**Study 1: Results**

**Final sample determination.** Our goal was to end up with a final usable sample of at least 200 participants, as specified in our pre-registration. Based on pilot testing, we opened up the study to 880 people. Eight-hundred eighty-one participants (46.4% female, 21.1% non-white; \(M_{\text{age}} = 40.3, SD_{\text{age}} = 12.2\)) from Amazon Mechanical Turk initially took part in the study. As outlined in our pre-registration, we excluded participants for two reasons. First, we excluded participants who failed the two attention and two comprehension checks (\(N = 375\)). Second, we excluded participants who chose to keep all of the money for themselves (\(N = 286\)). Because these participants did not actually make a choice of who to trust, we were not able to include them in the analysis. These exclusions left us with the final sample of 220 participants described above.
**Effect of willpower on trust.** Our primary dependent measure was which of the two red players participants preferred to pass the money to: the red player who used willpower or the red player who used the commitment strategy.

Of the 220 participants in our final sample, 161 (73%) chose to pass the money to the red player who used willpower, and 59 (27%) chose to pass the money to the red player who used the commitment strategy. A chi-squared test indicated that this difference was significant ($\chi^2 = 46.37$, $p < 0.0001$) such that people were significantly more likely to trust those who use willpower compared with those who use an external commitment strategy.

**Study 1: Discussion**

We demonstrated in an incentive-compatible study that people are more likely to trust those who use willpower as opposed to commitment strategies to achieve their goals. However, there are a few limitations of this study, which we address in Study 2. First, Study 1 only looked at one type of commitment strategy within a single context. Second, Study 1 examined trust more broadly, but did not look at the two components of trust, integrity and benevolence, discussed above. We next seek to explore if our predictions hold across various scenarios and when looking specifically at integrity-based trust.

**Study 2**

Study 2 adds to the findings in Study 1 in three important ways. First, it moves beyond a single domain to gauge how individuals perceive a target who chooses to pursue their goal using willpower or a commitment strategy across a variety of common goal-setting contexts. Second, as opposed to looking at trust more generally, it examines multiple components of trust—benevolence-based and integrity-based trust—as well as impressions of the target’s morality. Finally, it looks at whether people hold different beliefs about the efficacy of various goal
achievement methods, a question we return to in Study 3. The pre-registration is available at https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=p5ej6f.

**Study 2: Method**

**Participants.** Six-hundred two participants (49.5% female; 25% non-white; M_{age} 40.5, SD_{age} 12.8) from Amazon Mechanical Turk took part in an online experiment in exchange for monetary payment.

**Procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four vignettes regarding two individuals facing self-control problems. In each vignette, one individual tried solving the problem by relying on willpower, while the other did so by using a commitment strategy (namely, paying a friend $5 upon failing to exercise self-control). The four scenarios included avoiding drinking alcohol, avoiding junk food, increasing gym attendance, and obtaining a flu shot (see Table 1 for the full text of each scenario).

After reading the scenario, participants rated each individual in the vignette on a 1-7 scale regarding how much *integrity* they had (“has a great deal of integrity,” “can trust their word,” and “cares about honesty and truth,” alpha = 0.93), how *benevolent* they were (“is kind,” “is nice,” and “is selfish” (reverse-coded), alpha = 0.75), and how *moral* they were (“is moral” and “is ethical,” alpha = 0.97; items are from Levine & Schweitzer, 2015). Participants then indicated on a bipolar 7-point scale who would be more likely to achieve their goal (1 = Definitely the person using willpower, 4 = both equally likely, and 7 = Definitely the person using the commitment strategy).

**Table 1. Scenarios used in Study 2.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alcohol Avoidance</th>
<th>Junk Food Avoidance</th>
<th>Flu Shot</th>
<th>Gym Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Max and Tom both want to drink less alcohol. At a party on New Years Eve, they can each decide whether they want to use pure willpower to avoid drinking alcohol or to set up a system where they pay a friend $5 if they drink alcohol.

Max chooses to use pure willpower to avoid drinking alcohol at the party.

Tom chooses to pay a friend $5 if he drinks alcohol at the party.

Christine and Jane both want to stop eating as much unhealthy food. They can each decide whether they want to use pure willpower to avoid eating junk food in their house or to set up a system where they pay a friend $5 if they eat junk food.

Christine chooses to use pure willpower to avoid eating junk food at home.

Jane chooses to pay a friend $5 if she eats junk food at home.

Angela and Katy both want to get a flu shot this year. They can each decide whether they want to use pure willpower to go to the clinic and get the shot or to set up a system where they pay a friend $5 if they fail to get the shot.

Angela chooses to use pure willpower to get the flu shot.

Katy chooses to pay a friend $5 if she doesn't get the flu shot.

Andrew and Brett both want to exercise more, specifically by going to the gym three times a week. They can each decide whether they want to use pure willpower to go to the gym or to set up a system where they pay a friend $5 each time they plan to go to the gym but do not make it.

Andrew chooses to use pure willpower to go to the gym three times a week.

Brett chooses to pay a friend $5 each week he does not make it to the gym three times.

Study 2: Results

To test our predictions, we employed a series of mixed-effects linear regressions with random intercepts for participant and scenario fixed effects.

Effect of willpower on integrity-based trust. As predicted, we found that participants rated targets who used a commitment strategy to achieve their goal as having significantly lower integrity-based trust than targets who used willpower ($\beta = 0.40$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(601) = 8.04$, $p < 0.0001$; see Figure 1a). This difference was significant within each individual scenario: flu shot scenario ($\beta = 0.53$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(300) = 4.76$, $p < 0.0001$), gym attendance scenario ($\beta = 0.39$, $SE$
Effect of willpower on benevolence-based trust. We additionally found that targets who used a commitment strategy were rated significantly lower on benevolence-based trust than targets who used willpower ($\beta = 0.17$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(601) = 4.28$, $p < 0.0001$; see Figure 1b). However, this difference was only significant in the flu shot scenario ($\beta = 0.29$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(300) = 2.58$, $p = 0.010$) and was marginally significant in the alcohol avoidance scenario ($\beta = 0.22$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(304) = 1.961$, $p = 0.051$). We failed to detect a difference in benevolence-based trust by condition in either the gym attendance scenario ($\beta = 0.08$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(300) = 0.75$, $p = 0.448$) or the junk food avoidance scenario ($\beta = 0.08$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(292) = 0.68$, $p = 0.498$).

Effect of willpower on morality. We next found that targets who used a commitment strategy were rated significantly lower on morality than targets who used willpower ($\beta = 0.49$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(601) = 8.91$, $p < 0.0001$; see Figure 1b). Similar to integrity-based trust, this difference was significant for all four scenarios: flu shot scenario ($\beta = 0.49$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(300) = 4.42$, $p < 0.0001$), alcohol avoidance scenario ($\beta = 0.38$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(304) = 4.42$, $p < 0.001$), gym attendance scenario ($\beta = 0.27$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(300) = 2.38$, $p = 0.018$), and junk food avoidance scenario ($\beta = 0.25$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(292) = 2.18$, $p = 0.03$).

Figure 1a. Overall impact of target’s strategy use on ratings of integrity in Study 2.
Figure 1b. Overall impact of target’s strategy use on ratings of benevolence and morality in Study 2.

Likelihood of goal achievement. On average, we did not find a significant difference in participant beliefs about the likelihood of targets achieving their goal by condition (M = 4.06, SE = 1.62, t(1203) = 1.21, p = 0.28). There was some variation when looking at individual scenarios. The difference by condition was non-significant in the alcohol avoidance scenario (M = 4.03, SE
However, in the flu shot scenario participants believed targets who used willpower were significantly more likely to achieve their goal (M = 3.68, SE = 0.19, t(301) = -3.37, p < 0.001). Alternatively, in the gym attendance (M = 4.17, SE = 0.19, t(301) = 1.76, p = 0.080) and junk food avoidance (M = 4.35, SE = 0.17, t(293) = 4.09, p < 0.001) scenarios, we found that participants believed targets using the commitment strategy were (marginally and significantly, respectively) more likely to achieve their goal.

**Study 2: Discussion**

Study 2 provided a conceptual replication of Study 1, using different measures of trust and a wider variety of scenarios that differed from Study 1 in terms of both the type of commitment strategy as well as the domain. Furthermore, we examined different components of trust, finding that the effect is more pronounced on integrity-based trust than benevolence-based trust. We also found a robust effect of self-control type on ratings of morality, which is not surprising given how closely morality and integrity are linked (Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermeier, 2015). In all, Study 2 demonstrates that those who use commitment strategies are viewed by others as lower on integrity-based trust and moral character compared with those who use willpower to achieve their goals. Additionally, Study 2 provides some initial evidence that these beliefs do not appear to be related to differential predictions of likelihood of success. In Study 3, we examine this last finding more systematically.

**Study 3**

Study 2 provided some evidence that likelihood of success does not seem to be associated with differences in integrity-based trust or morality. Study 3 seeks to investigate this further by manipulating whether the person who used willpower or the commitment strategy succeeded in reaching their goals. Study 3 also introduces a new scenario and commitment strategy not used in
the previous studies. Pre-registration is available at


Study 3: Method

Participants. Five hundred ninety-six participants (53.4% female; 25% non-white; M\text{age} 32.9, SD\text{age} 11.5) from Prolific Academic took part in an online experiment in exchange for monetary payment.

Procedure. All participants read the following scenario:

“Rory and Sam are both online workers. They both spend 6 hours a day completing tasks. Rory uses internal willpower to stay focused and complete tasks. Sam uses an app that blocks distracting websites (like Facebook, Instagram, etc.) across multiple devices to stay focused and complete tasks.”

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the commitment strategy success condition, participants read, “On their most recent task that required an hour of deep concentration, \textbf{Sam} succeeded in performing well and achieving a high bonus, while \textbf{Rory} failed,” [bolding for emphasis here] and in the willpower success condition, participants read that \textbf{Rory} succeeded while \textbf{Sam} failed. Participants then completed the same Likert three scales on integrity-based trust, benevolence-based trust, and morality introduced in Study 2, and then filled out a section about their demographic information.

Study 3: Results

To test our predictions, we employed a series of mixed-effects linear regressions with random intercepts for participant. Figures 2a and 2b summarize the results below.

\textit{Effect of willpower on integrity-based trust}. We find a significant main effect of chosen strategy on trust, such that when a target uses willpower (independent of success), that
participant is rated higher on integrity-based trust. As predicted, we found that participants rated the person who used willpower to achieve their goals as having more integrity ($\beta = 0.27$, SE = 0.05, $t(595) = 5.33$, $p < 0.0001$).

**Effect of success on integrity-based trust.** We find a significant main effect of success on integrity-based trust, such that when a target succeeds (independent of which strategy chosen), that participant is rated as having higher integrity. ($\beta = 0.47$, SE = 0.05, $t(595) = 9.96$, $p < 0.0001$). There was no significant interaction between willpower and success on integrity ($\beta = -0.12$, SE = 0.13, $t(594) = -0.86$, $p = 0.39$).

**Effect of willpower on benevolence-based trust.** We fail to detect a significant effect of chosen strategy on benevolence-based trust ($\beta = 0.06$, SE = 0.04, $t(595) = 1.62$, $p = 0.106$).

**Effect of willpower on morality.** We also detect a significant effect of willpower on moral judgments ($\beta = 0.12$, SE = 0.04, $t(595) = 2.81$, $p = 0.005$), such that targets who used willpower were perceived as more moral than targets who used a commitment strategy.

**Effect of success on benevolence-based trust.** We also find a significant main effect of success on ratings of benevolence-based trust ($\beta = 0.16$, SE = 0.04, $t(595) = 4.26$, $p < 0.0001$). There was no significant interaction between willpower and success on benevolence ($\beta = -0.16$, SE = 0.12, $t(594) = -1.33$, $p = 0.18$).

**Effect of success on morality.** Finally, we detect a significant main effect of success on moral judgments ($\beta = 0.28$, SE = 0.04, $t(595) = 7.01$, $p < 0.0001$). There was no significant interaction between willpower and success on morality ($\beta = -0.22$, SE = 0.15, $t(594) = -1.48$, $p = 0.14$).

*Figure 2a. Overall impact of target’s strategy use on ratings of integrity, by outcome in Study 3.*
Figure 2b. Overall impact of target’s strategy use on ratings of benevolence and morality, by outcome in Study 3.

Study 3: Discussion
Unlike Study 2, Study 3 finds some evidence that success may play some role in how people evaluate a target’s choice of self-control strategy. However, even taking this into account, the choice of strategy independently influenced integrity and morality ratings. In other words, commitment strategy users were rated as lower in integrity and morality than willpower users both when the chosen strategy failed as well as when it succeeded. This finding, along with the results form Study 2, provide evidence that the phenomenon we document in this paper cannot be explained solely by differences in beliefs about the likelihood of success of a target’s chosen strategy.

After ruling out this alternative explanation, we now move to testing our proposed mechanism that the choice of willpower versus commitment strategies signals differences in the amount of effort targets are putting forth in overcoming their self-control problems.

**Study 4**

Study 4 investigates the mechanism underlying the negative impressions people form about individuals who use commitment strategies instead of willpower to achieve their goals. To do so, we employ a manipulate-the-mediator approach (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005) to better establish the causal influence of our proposed mechanism. Specifically, we hypothesize that people hold the belief that willpower is more effortful to engage in than the use of commitment strategies. As discussed earlier, because effort is itself moralized, we propose that it is this difference in perceived effort that underlies the difference in how these targets are viewed. Pre-registration is available at [https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=n5qd5v](https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=n5qd5v).

**Study 4: Method**
Participants. Five hundred eighty-four participants (57.5% female; 22.4% non-white; M_{age} 41.1, SD_{age} 12.6) from Amazon Mechanical Turk took part in an online experiment in exchange for monetary payment.

Procedure. Participants read one of the four vignettes used in Study 2 about two individuals facing self-control problems. In each vignette, one individual tried solving the problem relying on willpower while the other individual used a commitment strategy (namely, paying a friend $5 upon failing to exercise self-control).

Participants were additionally randomly assigned to one of two effort conditions. In the willpower effort condition, participants read that the person using willpower exerted more effort to achieve the goal, while in the commitment strategy effort condition, participants read that the person using the commitment strategy exerted more effort to achieve the goal.

After reading the scenario, participants rated each individual in the vignette on a 1-7 scale regarding how much integrity they had (“has a great deal of integrity,” “can trust their word,” and “cares about honesty and truth,” alpha = 0.95), how benevolent they were (“is kind,” “is nice,” and “is selfish” (reverse-coded), alpha = 0.74), and how moral they thought they were (“is moral” and “is ethical,” alpha = 0.95; items are from Levine & Schweitzer, 2015). Participants then indicated on a bipolar 7-point scale which of the two individuals would be more likely to achieve their goal.

A combination of two results would be consistent with effort as the driver of the effect of strategy choice on integrity impressions. First, giving people explicit information about the amount of effort each target exerted should nullify the effect of strategy choice on ratings of integrity. In other words, when participants are randomly assigned to learn that either the willpower or commitment strategy user exerted greater effort, we expect a null result of strategy
choice on impressions of integrity. Second, amount of effort exerted should now play a role in ratings of integrity. In other words, regardless of strategy used, we expect people will rate the high effort target as having greater integrity than the low effort target.

**Study 4: Results**

To test our predictions, we employed a series of mixed-effects linear regressions with random intercepts for participant. Figures 3a and 3b summarize the results below.

*Effect of willpower on integrity.* Consistent with our expectations, we find no effect of strategy choice on ratings of integrity ($\beta = 0.03$, SE = 0.06, $t(583) = 0.479$, $p = 0.632$). In other words, we failed to detect a significant main effect of willpower on integrity when collapsing across effort conditions.

*Effect of effort on integrity.* Consistent with the second pattern of results described earlier, we find a large effect of perceptions of effort on integrity, such that, high-effort targets were rated significantly higher on integrity than low-effort targets ($\beta = 0.98$, SE = 0.05, $t(1166) = 19.09$, $p < 0.0001$). There was no significant interaction between willpower and effort on benevolence ($\beta = 0.18$, SE = 0.10, $t(1164) = 1.77$, $p = 0.08$).

*Effect of willpower on benevolence.* Similarly, once we account for effort exerted, we also no longer find a significant impact of willpower on benevolence ($\beta = 0.00$, SE = 0.03, $t(583) = 0.043$, $p = 0.97$).

*Effect of willpower on morality.* Somewhat surprisingly, even when the amount of effort exerted is evenly distributed across the strategy conditions, we still find a significant impact of willpower on perceptions of morality ($\beta = 0.16$, SE = 0.05, $t(583) = 3.016$, $p < 0.0001$), the magnitude of which is comparable to the effect of willpower on benevolence-based integrity in Study 2.
**Effect of effort on benevolence.** Hitherto, the effects of willpower on benevolence were modest at best, and here, we find that perceptions of high effort do not seem to impact perceptions of benevolence. Using a hierarchical linear model with scenario fixed effects and participant random slopes, we fail to detect a significant effect ($\beta = -0.04$, SE = 0.03, $t(584) = -1.12$, $p = 0.263$). There was a significant interaction between willpower and effort on benevolence ($\beta = 0.41$, SE = 0.15, $t(581) = 2.70$, $p = 0.007$).

**Effect of effort on morality.** Interestingly enough, the effect of effort on morality, while significant and fairly large ($\beta = 0.66$, SE = 0.05, $t(584) = 14.15$, $p < 0.0001$), is smaller than the effect of effort on integrity by almost 40%. This is not surprising given the residual impact of willpower on perceptions of morality. There was no significant interaction between willpower and effort on morality ($\beta = -0.07$, SE = 0.12, $t(582) = -0.53$, $p = 0.60$).

**Figure 3a. Overall integrity ratings for targets deploying high vs. low effort to achieve their goal in Study 4.**
Figure 3b. Overall benevolence and morality ratings for targets deploying high vs. low effort to achieve their goal in Study 4.

**Likelihood of goal achievement.** On average, participants still believed that targets deploying the commitment strategy were more likely to achieve their goal than targets using willpower (M = 4.16, SD = 2.27, t(1167) = 2.45, p = 0.014). However, this overall effect was qualified by which target was exerting more effort. Specifically, in the willpower effort condition, participants were significantly more likely to indicate that the willpower user would achieve their goal (M = 2.46, SD = 1.55, t(294) = -17.08, p < 0.0001), whereas in the commitment strategy effort condition, participants were significantly more likely to indicate that the commitment strategy user would achieve their goal (M = 5.90, SD = 1.40, t(288) = 23.05, p < 0.0001).

**Study 4: Discussion**
Study 4 provides evidence that effort plays a key role in the different impressions people form of willpower and commitment strategy users. Providing explicit information on how much effort each person actually exerted in achieving their goal eliminates the effect of strategy choice on integrity-based trust. Additionally, effort plays a role in integrity impressions independently of strategy chosen.

However, even after accounting for effort, there is still a residual significant effect of using willpower on perceptions of morality that should be further investigated in future work. Furthermore, that we do not see an impact of strategy use or effort on ratings of benevolence-based trust suggests that we are not merely observing a halo-effect of willpower or effort on all impressions, but rather we are observing a phenomenon more narrowly linked to integrity and, in part, morality.

**Study 5**

Studies 1 through 4 examined this phenomenon from a third-party perspective; that is, these studies looked at others’ impressions of an individual’s strategy choice. Study 5 shifts to the decision maker’s perspective, and seeks to investigate whether individuals anticipate these negative interpersonal consequences of commitment strategy use and change their behavior as a result. Specifically, we look at whether people are more likely to employ a commitment strategy when the decision will be kept private compared with when the decision will be made public. Pre-registration is available at [https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=SZS_DPQ](https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=SZS_DPQ).

**Study 5: Method**

**Participants.** Three-hundred one participants (45.2% female; 22.6% non-white; $M_{\text{age}}$ 44.5, $SD_{\text{age}}$ 12.8) from Amazon Mechanical Turk took part in an online experiment in exchange for monetary payment.
Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to read about one of three commitment strategies: a commitment contract website, a web blocker application, and a lock box. In the commitment contract scenario, participants read:

“There is a website that allows you to make a "commitment contract" to stick to your goals. You can create a goal and then give the website your credit card details. If you fail to reach your goal then the website automatically donates money to either to a charity you support or a charity you do not support. You can select the amount of money to put on the line and whether you want your money to go to a charity you support or do not support if you fail to reach your goal.”

In the web blocker scenario, participants read:

“There is an app you can download that can block tempting websites (like Facebook or YouTube) across all of your devices during working hours that you set.”

In the lock box scenario, participants read the following and then were shown a photo of the lock box:

“Below is a photo of a product that helps people with self-control. For example, you can put cookies into the lock box, and then set a timer, so that you can only access the items in the box for a certain amount of time each day.”

Participants then answered two questions (the order was counterbalanced across participants):

“How likely are you to use this _____ if you knew that other people would find out that you used it?” and “How likely are you to use this _____ if you knew that nobody would find out that you used it?” These were answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Very Likely” (which we coded as 2) to “Very unlikely” (which we coded as -2). Then participants were faced with a final, forced choice question: “Assuming you had to use _____, under which condition
would you prefer to” and could select between when the decision would be kept private or made public. The blank space included one of the following, depending on the assigned scenario: “this website” (commitment contract), “this app” (web blocker), or “this lock box”.

**Study 5: Results and Discussion**

*Effect of privacy on decision to use a commitment strategy.* When the decision would be kept private, participants were fairly unlikely to use the commitment strategy ($M = -0.37, SD = 1.37$). Broken down by strategy, we see the same pattern for the commitment contract scenario ($M = -0.67, SD = 1.26$), the web blocker scenario ($M = -0.16, SD = 1.32$), and the lock box ($M = -0.27, SD = 1.38$). When the decision would be made public, participants were even less likely to use the commitment strategy by a significant margin ($M = -0.63, SD = 1.27, t(598) = -2.47, p = 0.013$). Broken down by strategy, we see the same pattern for the commitment contract ($M = -0.76, SD = 1.20$), for the web blocker ($M = -0.46, SD = 1.28$), and for the lock box ($M = -0.67, SD = 1.31$). Using a hierarchical linear model controlling for commitment strategy type and with participant random intercepts, we see the same effect - that participants are significantly less likely to indicate that they would use a commitment strategy when the decision would be public compared to when it would be private ($\beta = -0.20, SE = 0.04, t(300) = -4.75, p < 0.0001$). Table 2 summarizes these results and examines whether each rating differed significantly from the midpoint of the scale.

**Table 2. Effect of privacy decision to use a commitment strategy, by scenario, and difference from midpoint in Study 5.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Private Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Difference from Midpoint</th>
<th>Public Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Difference from Midpoint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>-0.37 (1.37)</td>
<td>$t(300) = -4.74, p &lt; 0.0001$</td>
<td>-0.63 (1.27)</td>
<td>$t(300) = -8.59, p &lt; 0.0001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment contract</td>
<td>-0.67 (1.26)</td>
<td>$t(99) = -5.30, p &lt; 0.0001$</td>
<td>-0.76 (1.20)</td>
<td>$t(99) = -6.34, p &lt; 0.0001$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Condition under which participants would use a commitment strategy (forced choice).

Overall, 78% of participants preferred to use the commitment strategy when the decision would be kept private compared to made public, the majority by a significant margin ($\chi^2 = 94.89, p < 0.0001$). In the commitment contract scenario, 71% of participants indicated they would prefer to use it if their choice were kept private ($\chi^2 = 17.64, p < 0.0001$), while in the lock box and web blocker app scenarios, the percent who would use it if their choices were kept private were 82% ($\chi^2 = 40.96, p < 0.0001$) and 81% respectively ($\chi^2 = 39.30, p < 0.0001$). In all three scenarios, this was the majority by a significant margin.

Discussion

Although there were subtle differences between different types of commitment strategies, across the three scenarios examined in this study, overall, participants were hesitant to use commitment strategies regardless of whether their decision would be public or private. However, consistent with the prediction that people anticipate the negative interpersonal consequences of commitment strategy use, participants expressed stronger hesitancy if the decision would be made public compared to if it were kept private. This study provides initial evidence that people are at least somewhat aware of the negative interpersonal consequences of commitment device use; however, the low likelihood of using a commitment strategy even when its use would be kept private indicates that there are additional concerns fueling the underuse of effective commitments strategies.

General Discussion
The understanding that people can use commitment strategies to overcome self-control problems has existed for thousands of years. Since at least the time of Homer and *Odysseus*, the focus of this domain has been mainly on the efficacy of these strategies for the person choosing to engage in them. This prior work has demonstrated, for example, that Odysseus made the right decision by tying himself to the mast rather than attempting to use willpower to resist the sirens in the moment (e.g., Ashraf, Karlan, & Yin, 2006).

However, what has until now gone unexamined is whether there are interpersonal consequences to these otherwise helpful strategies. What did Odysseus’s crew think about his decision to eschew willpower in favor of precommitment? Our findings suggest that individuals who use commitment strategies are often seen as less trustworthy (Study 1), particularly with regard to integrity-based trust. These negative perceptions of commitment strategy users vis-a-vis willpower users persist even in cases where individuals recognize the efficacy of the commitment strategies. We further find that this effect is at least partially driven by the fact that people perceive those who use commitment strategies as employing less effort toward achieving their goal than those who use willpower. Accounting for this differential perception in effort exerted mitigates the negative effects of commitment strategy use.

**Theoretical Implications**

Our work contributes to three main literatures. First, we add to the self-control literature. This has been an active field of research for over half a century, with numerous psychologists such as Walter Mischel recognizing the effectiveness of different types of self-control strategies (Mischel & Mischel, 1987). However, much of the ensuing work in this domain has considered “self-control” as synonymous with “willpower” (Duckworth & Kern, 2011; Inzlicht, Schmeichel, & Macrae, 2014; Lian, Yam, Ferris, & Brown, 2017; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). Only in the
past few years has there been an attempt to distinguish between internal willpower and other external self-control strategies (Ainslie, 2021; Duckworth, Gendler & Gross, 2016; Duckworth, Milkman, & Laibson, 2019; Inzlicht et al., 2021, Kristal & Zlatev, 2021). This paper demonstrates that people evaluate these external self-control strategies differently (i.e., less positively) than willpower, providing corroborating evidence for their distinctiveness.

Second, we contribute to the literature on effort and, more specifically, lay beliefs about effort. While effort has previously been shown to have intrinsic value (Inzlicht, Shenhav, & Olivola, 2018), even when it is not productive (Celinker et al., working paper; Inzlicht, Shenhav & Olivola, 2018), we introduce these ideas in a new domain, namely, that of self-control. In the absence of any explicit mention about the amount of effort a target exerts to achieve his or her goal, participants judged the target using willpower to be more trustworthy, to have more integrity, and to be more moral. However, when we explicitly stipulated which target exerted more effort, as we did in Study 4, the impact of willpower on integrity disappeared. This implies that, in the absence of additional information, people infer that using willpower exerts more effort than using a commitment strategy.

Furthermore, we contribute to a growing literature examining what signals people use to evaluate others’ trustworthiness (e.g., Dorison, Umphres, & Lerner, 2021; Zlatev, 2019). Though previous work has demonstrated that increased self-control can lead to greater perceptions of trustworthiness (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011), this work did not distinguish between different types of self-control strategies, namely the use of internal approaches (e.g., willpower) compared to external approaches (e.g., commitment strategies). We demonstrate that, beyond simply using self-control or not, the way in which one demonstrates self-control impacts how trustworthy they appear to others, primarily driven by implicit perceptions of effort.
Finally, as we see in Study 5, people are hesitant to use commitment strategies particularly when their use will be made public. Although we demonstrate that there is an element of anticipated interpersonal consequences driving this effect, we still find self-reported resistance to using commitment strategies even when their use will be kept private. Therefore, we identify only one of many potential barriers preventing people from using commitment strategies effectively.

**Practical Implications**

A conclusion that one might draw from the voluminous literature demonstrating the advantages of commitment strategies is that these tactics are unequivocally positive, and thus always preferable to the alternative. We show that, in fact, there are real consequences to being seen as the type of person who chooses to use a commitment strategy to overcome temptation. Being seen as untrustworthy can harm one’s social relationships (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1995) as well as economic outcomes (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013). As a result, while using commitment strategies may have first-order benefits, it is important to keep in mind that they may simultaneously have second-order drawbacks. The current work, however, does suggest one way to lessen the negative impact of addressing self-control problems with commitment strategies. In particular, commitment strategies that appear effortful may be valued more by others. This presents a promising path toward identifying win-win self-control tactics that are both effective and widely accepted.

This work also suggests that judgments about a target’s morality and trustworthiness are based less on that target’s competence and more on her internal preferences surrounding how to deal with internal conflict. In particular, people did not seem to weigh the likelihood of actual success very heavily in their judgments of someone. Instead, they used that person’s autonomous
decisions as indicative of her internal traits. This is in line with previous work finding that people judge others’ morality less on the outcomes of their decisions and more on what led to those outcomes and what the decisions say about the type of person they are (Critcher, Helzer, & Tannenbaum, 2020; Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011; Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermeier, 2015).

This has important implications for the structure of programs and initiatives whose goal is to increase the uptake of precommitment strategies. Especially because, as we have demonstrated in Study 5, people are sensitive to whether their decision to use a commitment strategy would be made public. For example, people may avoid signing up for a program such as Stickk, where people set up commitment contracts to help reach their goals, not because they don’t think it would be helpful, but rather because they are afraid of what others might think of their choice to do so. Designing these programs to minimize the interpersonal consequences of engaging in them would help increase their use.

**Limitations and future directions**

Across five studies, we demonstrate that the type of self-control strategy one uses influences interpersonal perceptions of trust. Though we obtain these results in both self-reported and behavioral measures, one of the main limitations is that our research is mostly scenario-based with an online sample and a small subset of commitment strategies.

We also consciously decided to limit our research to an American sample, because we predict that lay beliefs regarding the link between effort and self-control would be particularly strong in countries with high levels of Protestant Work Ethic and Judeo-Christian values. However, recent work has found that delay of gratification is valued as a form of reputation management among children in China (Ma et al., 2020), suggesting that the desire to be seen as
self-controlled by others spans these cultural differences. As a result, future research should examine if this effect holds, or how it may differ, in other cultures that may have different norms around when and how effort is valued.

Moreover, though we test a series of different types of strategies, and do observe some variance between them (e.g. in Study 5 where we can explicitly compare commitment contracts to lock boxes and web blockers), we do not systematically evaluate different types of commitment strategies. Additional research is needed to understand how various features of commitment strategies are perceived by potential users, as well as third-party observers, to determine what elements of a commitment strategy are seen as more or less favorable.

Finally, despite our demonstration that people are more likely to use a commitment strategy when its use is kept private, Study 5 indicates that people are still fairly unlikely to express interest in commitment strategies altogether. Future research needs to explore the other, non-interpersonal factors influencing commitment strategy use.

**Conclusion**

Self-control is an important feature of everyday decision-making but, until recently, many researchers and individuals conflated willpower (a specific strategy) with self-control (a desired outcome). We demonstrate that not only is willpower only one means of self-control, but also those who use it are rated more favorably than those who use alternative commitment strategies. This benefit seems to be derived from the assumption of how much effort a person is putting in to achieving their self-control goal. By examining the role of interpersonal judgments in self-control strategy use, we can begin to understand why people may not use these beneficial strategies and how to promote effective strategy use.
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