

Magdalena Daszkiewicz

Wroclaw University of Economics and Business

e-mail: magdalena.daszkiewicz@ue.wroc.pl

ORCID: 0000-0003-1466-2454

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WHEN AGE IS JUST A NUMBER. PREMISES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR USING INTERGENERATIONAL MARKETING¹

Summary

Purpose | The paper aims to identify the premises and implications of using intergenerational marketing.

Research method | The study was conducted using a scoping review supported by desk research, based on online publications and reports on intergenerational marketing and content analysis of brands' campaigns relaying the ideas of intergenerational marketing.

Results | The author describes various conditions and trends that provide premises for the rise of intergenerational marketing and identifies intergenerational marketing strategies and related challenges. The article proposes categorising age-inclusive strategies into age-inclusive, pro-ageing, cross-generational and age-agnostic marketing, illustrating them with selected marketing practices. The synthesis and summary of the considerations allow the comparison of the identified strategies by main focuses, distinctive features, and marketing content guidelines.

Originality/value/implications/recommendations | The article moves from the generational approach commonly used in scientific literature and marketing practice. The author identifies the premises influencing the development of intergenerational marketing. The article's value derives largely from the identification and categorisation of intergenerational marketing strategies and the implications for using each strategy. Beyond the practical implications, research on integrated marketing also responds to societal challenges by addressing inclusiveness, ageism, generational stereotyping and other biases.

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1. Introduction

While knowledge of consumer demographics is widely considered important, this does not mean that the definition of consumer behaviour can be derived from a profile reduced to age or from the sum of individual demographic categories. Consumer behaviour results from a complex interaction of diverse and changing demographic, psychographic, economic and sociocultural forces. Arbitrarily, defining generations based on chronological age is increasingly recognised as inadequate for describing consumer behaviour and, consequently, for defining marketing strategies.

Previous marketing research has often focused on generational differences or on distinctive features of generations' representatives and much less on similarities, interfaces and bridges between generations. Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition that generational thinking can involve the danger of stereotyping different age groups and problems of exclusion. Moreover, the consequence of overemphasising intergenerational differences can be to amplify the divisions between younger and older generations.

In the past, marketers often strategically focused their attention on specific generations. However, demographic, social and technological changes force them to change their mindset, and brands are increasingly basing their strategies and activities on intergenerational marketing.

The paper aims to identify the premises and implications of using intergenerational marketing. The study used a scoping review and desk research based on online publications and reports on intergenerational marketing and content analysis of brands' campaigns relaying the ideas of intergenerational marketing. The scoping review is used especially for complex and previously

unexplored areas and in cases when descriptions in scientific publications are scattered [Mays et al., 2001, p. 194]. Incorporating this method typically leads to a synthesis of knowledge that answers the exploratory research questions [Colquhoun et al., 2014, p. 1292].

The study adopts an exploratory approach, as the issue of intergenerational marketing is relatively new and less developed in the academic literature than the research on generational approaches. Studies addressing the premises for intergenerational marketing are very fragmented, and there is a lack of research identifying differences in intergenerational approaches. The considerations address the following questions: What are the challenges and limitations of generational marketing? What are the premises for using intergenerational marketing? What are the differences in approaches to intergenerational marketing? What strategies may be used in intergenerational marketing?

The paper explores the challenges and limitations of generational marketing and the various conditions and trends that provide premises for the rise of intergenerational marketing. The author attempts to identify intergenerational marketing strategies and proposes categorising them into age-inclusive, pro-aging, cross-generational and age-agnostic marketing and illustrates them with examples. In conclusion, the author identifies the challenges of intergenerational marketing practice and research.

2. Challenges and limitations of generational marketing

In previous research, much attention was paid to various aspects of the relationship between demographic characteristics and marketing practices. The researchers and practitioners have been seriously interested in segmentation based on belonging to “generational cohorts”, referring to the groups of consumers born during the same period who share similar experiences and events during adolescence [Noble and Schewe, 2003, p. 979]. The literature review exploring cohort theory conducted by Thach et al. [2021] indicated its frequent application in market segmentation and consumer analysis [Thach et al., 2021, pp.1–2]. Consequently, this has meant widespread interest in generational marketing, understood as adapting offers and other marketing

mix components to a specific generation. A generational approach has been applied to marketing at both strategic and operational levels [Chaney et al., 2017, pp. 179–180].

The challenges of applying generational marketing often address the context of demographic change and rapidly ageing societies [Chaney et al., 2017, p. 180]. Over the past few decades, marketers have tended to target “young consumers” due to their segment size, purchasing power, “lifetime value” and potential for adopting innovations and creating market trends [Guillén, 2023, p. 171]. The demographic transition, which concerns ageing populations, longer life expectancy, and low fertility rates [Dyvik, 2024], is becoming a challenge for marketing. Market players who want to remain competitive should consider adapting their marketing strategies to these changes.

The existing studies on generational marketing focus on one generation or involve several generations, and include static or longitudinal studies. Single-generation research is concerned with identifying the unique expectations, experiences, values and lifestyles that influence consumer behaviour. Research on several generations usually identifies generational differences concerning different behaviours [Chaney et al., 2017, pp. 185–186].

Despite recognising the importance of consumer age in marketing practices and research, several authors questioned the relevance of chronological age as the dominant segmentation criterion. Some authors suggested that the traditional age divisions often proved insufficient to describe differences in consumer attitudes, preferences and market behaviour. Based on their own and previous research, Straughan and Roberts [1999, p. 567] pointed out the limitations of traditional demographic profiling methods, suggesting the use of psychographic criteria or combinations of demographic and psychographic criteria.

Further limitation and challenge for marketing is that chronological age determined by birth date may differ from subjective age based on self-perception. According to the research, older consumers often feel younger than their actual age, influencing their behaviour and attitudes towards marketing. Besides, consumers who perceive themselves as younger demonstrate

different characteristics and consumption behaviour than the traditional older consumers [Ying and Yao, 2010, p. 326]. Subjective age may, therefore, be more relevant to marketing practice than the chronological age outlined by traditional age boundaries.

The studies on chronological and subjective age also provide evidence concerning the relationship between feelings of youth and biopsychosocial factors [Heimrich et al., 2022, pp. 8–9]. In a study in Germany conducted by Heimrich et al. [2022, p. 8], with a representative sample of older people, the majority reported feeling younger than their chronological age would indicate. The increased number of literature links indicated that age was perceived through various psychological and behavioural outcomes [Soylu, 2022, p. 111782].

The number of appearing publications that take up the critique of the application of the generational approach in marketing, recommending discarding generational labels and proposing alternative approaches for more effective market segmentation and targeting [Ikram et al., 2019, p. 134] is definitely increasing. Some researchers, recognising the generational approach's limitations, recommend conducting studies that examine within-group differences apart from analysing differences between groups [Taylor, 2018, p. 167].

Based on many years of research, Duffy, in the book "The Generation Myth", does not reject the idea of generations but offers a less superficial view and suggests analysing the factors that shape long-term changes in their attitudes and behaviour. In his view this means considering generational cohorts, period and life cycle effects [Duffy, 2021, pp. 8–10].

A significant limitation of generational marketing results from the fact that the boundaries between generations are blurred and arbitrary. As a result of the arbitrariness, generational categories are not precisely defined, and simple attribution to a generation in marketing can lead to stereotyping and oversimplifying consumer differences [Dimitrieska, Efremova, 2022, p. 55; Dimock, 2023]. The risk of stereotyping people by their age also stems from the fact that conceptions of "young" and "old" are increasingly rejected as biased, discriminatory or wrong [Guillén, 2023, p. 170; Guillén, 2020, p. 95]. In the context of generational marketing, this may involve making erroneous or

inaccurate assumptions about people's needs, desires, values and lifestyles. In addition, the research shows considerable diversity between people within the same generations [Guillén, 2023; Lobaugh et al., 2019, p. 6].

According to the Pew Research Center's research on generations, these assumptions are lenses through which to understand social change rather than tools of consumer labelling [Dimock, 2019]. Discussions on generations often focus on differences instead of on similarities, resulting in more attention being paid to contradictions rather than to areas of understanding and agreement [Dimock, 2023]. Further consideration can be given to whether research and publications that assume or exaggerate intergenerational differences may contribute to highlighting the divisions between younger and older generations.

3. Premises for using intergenerational marketing

In response to demographic, socio-cultural, and technological changes, several premises have emerged for adopting intergenerational marketing, which refers to marketing strategies based on the shared values and experiences of representatives of different generations and which goes beyond traditional age divisions.

The rationale for using intergenerational marketing stems largely from the limitations of generational marketing, which were described in the previous section of the paper. Among these there are arbitrary boundaries between generations, significant differences between representatives of the same generations, distinctions between chronological age and subjective age, and risks arising from stereotyping and simplistic interpretation of generational belonging.

The important premise for applying the intergenerational approach is allied to inclusivity and challenging exclusions, prejudices or age discrimination. The challenges of inclusion and reducing exclusions refer to promoting and providing equal opportunities, fostering a sense of belonging and recognising the value of people of various ages [Oxford Review, n.d.]. This means creating

environments where age and other differences will not affect the feeling of being welcomed, represented, respected, supported, and valued [Daszkiewicz, 2022, p. 95]

Besides, authenticity is a key trend that shapes consumer behaviour and influences marketing practice, as today's customers are increasingly sensitive and adept at detecting falsity and insincerity. According to the IPSOS study, consumers expect brands to pick issues that matter and support them. Understanding the issues with the greatest relevance to customers is fundamental for building stronger and more authentic relationships [IPSOS, 2023, pp. 36, 41].

Following the WFA [World Federation of Advertisers], despite the increased pressure on the marketing industry, change concerning the presence of people of all ages in marketing messages, including older people, has been relatively slow. In addition, the AARP [American Association of Retired Persons] study in 2021 found that 62% of older people believe that ads unrealistically portray people over 50 and 47% believe that ads for people their age reinforce outdated stereotypes [World Federation of Advertisers, 2023]. Low representation of older people and age stereotypes are seen as a problem of marketing practice with potentially negative social consequences [Eisend, 2022, p. 318]. This provides a rationale for intergenerational marketing linked to age inclusivity and social responsibility.

While there is not much research on the impact of older people's representation on the effects of marketing efforts, a few studies are challenging the under-representation of older consumers in advertising. Recent research results confirm that the inclusion of images of older women in marketing messages can positively influence attitudes towards the message and social connections, attitudes towards the brand and purchase intentions of both younger and older consumers. Research indicates positive commercial and social effects of advertising featuring older models. These findings correspond with recent research that indicates the positive effects of advertising featuring consumers from underrepresented groups [Berg and Liljedal, 2023, pp. 74–75].

The relevance of subjective age to consumer behaviour and attitudes towards marketing activities is another premise for intergenerational marketing.

Research shows that consumers with lower perceived age are more open to new products and buying options. They also show a better attitude to marketing practices, which does not directly indicate their older age [Ying and Yao, 2010].

Consumers who perceive themselves as younger are more open with their values and lifestyles, which they do not associate with chronological age [Ying and Yao, 2010, p. 323]. This consumer category is also defined as age agnostics who do not adapt to demographic expectations and want to remain themselves for as long as possible [Euromonitor, 2019]. Contemporary consumers often want to maintain their preferred lifestyle regardless of age. Furthermore, research shows that an active lifestyle contributes to better physical and mental health, which can improve self-esteem related to ageing [Heimrich et al., 2022, p. 9; Piccardi et al., 2023, p. 6].

From the perspective of intergenerational marketing, referring to the modern concept of a post-generational society is also relevant. A post-generational society describes a social structure that goes beyond traditional generational classifications and is characterised by breaking away from the established social divisions and generational identities. According to this concept, consumer behaviour and actions are not limited by belonging to specific generations and conforming to age-related constraints and stereotypes. A post-generational mindset implies flexible treating or even moving away from the sequential model of life and creates the premises for embracing more inclusive approaches to marketing [Guillén, 2023, pp. 194–195].

Furthermore, the technology and real-time data from smartphones and digital platforms offer highly accurate ways of predicting individual consumer behaviour [Guillén, 2024]. Therefore, generic generational characteristics are becoming less attractive in marketing as personalised content is based on many criteria. Nowadays, marketers have growing capabilities to move beyond demographics and consider many other criteria to build richer customer profiles and more personalised marketing [Robbins, 2022]

The challenges of bridging the intergenerational gaps and building communication bridges provide another premise for using intergenerational market-

ing. In this context, marketing can fulfil an important social role in promoting platforms for dialogue, mutual understanding and joint intergenerational initiatives.

4. Intergenerational marketing strategies

In response to the growing expectations and challenges of intergenerational mindset, brands use different marketing approaches. Based on the desk research and on the content analysis of intergenerational marketing practices, an initial categorisation of intergenerational marketing strategies was created. The following types were specified: age-inclusive, pro-aging, cross-generational and age-agnostic marketing. They are illustrated with the selected examples of marketing practices. The synthesis and summary of the considerations allow comparison of the identified strategies by main focuses, distinctive features, and marketing content guidelines

The observed marketing practices increasingly refer to **age-inclusive strategies**, which consider supporting inclusivity by:

- targeting age-diverse audiences and representing different generations in their marketing communications,
- adapting products to the needs of consumers of various ages,
- developing multi-generational offerings to meet the needs of various ages,
- running projects involving different generations,
- supporting positive attitudes and respect for people of various ages,
- developing campaigns addressing age-related exclusions.

The Nike “You Can’t Stop Us” campaign featuring athletes of all ages is one example of an age-inclusive strategy, emphasising that sport is for everyone, regardless of age, gender, race, abilities, and orientation [www 1]. Disneyworld provides a multi-generational offering that meets the needs of people of all ages. Disneyland theme parks have been designed in such a way so that children, their parents, and seniors alike can enjoy various attractions [www 2].

The Ikea is considered to provide examples of an age-inclusive strategy by adapting products to the needs of consumers of different ages. Ikea offers ergonomic products designed to accommodate users of various ages, ensuring comfort and accessibility for all. IKEA also promotes practical and safe solutions and improvements that can be introduced gradually at each stage of life [www 3]. IKEA's "Where Life Happens" campaign authentically portrays the diverse realities of modern family life, featuring various age groups using functional IKEA products in everyday situations. The campaign presented insights into the everyday lives of people of different ages struggling with the problems of reality [www 4].

Leveraging age-inclusive strategies can also involve marketing efforts to prevent age-related exclusions. The campaign by eye drop manufacturer Ursapharm to draw attention to the problem of professional exclusion of people over 50 is one of the examples. The campaign emphasises the importance of objectively assessing candidates' skills and experience, regardless of age, and promotes equality in recruitment processes [www 5]. Also, the "Beyond Labels" campaign created by the brand Ania Kruk in collaboration with OLX Praca addresses the problem of ageism-related occupational exclusions in the workplace and aims to raise awareness of age discrimination and to promote diversity in the work environment [www 6].

Inclusive strategies include pro-ageing approaches focused on encouraging self-acceptance and celebrating beauty at any age. The **pro-ageing strategy** can also be distinguished as a separate category due to its widespread use and implementation following different patterns. In their context, keywords such as age-positive, age-friendly, beauty of ageing, etc., are often used. The pro-ageing strategy is related to promoting a positive image of people who are categorised as seniors due to their chronological age. Pro-aging marketing is intended to influence positive attitudes and respect towards these people. Showing getting older as positive can influence self-perception and self-esteem and encourage engagement in various activities.

Key ideas of pro-ageing strategies are briefly described and illustrated by campaign examples in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Selected examples of implementing pro-aging strategies

Key idea	Brief description	Examples
Beauty of ageing	Emphasising the beauty of ageing by highlighting the positive values and attributes such as wisdom, experience, skills, gratitude, resistance, etc.	Cola's "Grandpa" – campaign highlights older people's ability to enjoy and appreciate life and a healthy lifestyle.
Forever young	Challenging age stereotypes and defining youth beyond the context of chronological age. Inspiring to pursue aspirations for all ages and emphasising courage, self-confidence and determination.	NIKE's "Unlimited Youth" campaign celebrates athletes who push boundaries and embody the open-mindedness of youthfulness.
Authenticity and age-acceptance	Focusing on authenticity and freedom of self-expression with a positive attitude towards ageing. Challenging the stereotypical view of beauty and confronting ageism.	Dove's #KeepBeautyReal campaign uses authentic images of women of all ages to broaden the definition of beauty and break down stereotypes. In the #KeepTheGrey campaign, Dove challenges the ageism faced by women who choose to have grey hair.

Source: the author's own elaboration on the basis of: [www 7; www 8; www 9; www 10].

The other frequently used approach, which may be categorised as a **cross-generational strategy**, relies on building bridges between age groups, fostering links and highlighting shared values and experiences. This strategy exploits the potential of intergenerational connecting and communication, experience sharing and cooperation, which can lead to synergy effects and greater value creation. Intergenerational marketing can also refer to nostalgic references and the "good old days", provide a platform for shared interests and values, and refer to personal references and the good old parent-child or grandparent-grandkid relationships [Chang and Tung, 2016, p. 345].

An excellent example of a brand that uses the cross-generational strategy is Lego. Lego designs its sets so that children and adults can play together. In its marketing efforts, Lego encourages representatives of different generations

to cooperate, play, and spend time together. The brand emphasises that representatives of different generations can form a team where, by having their imagination and sharing their resources and talents, everyone brings something different. Through shared experiences it is possible to build together and even “bridge the unbridgable” [www 11].

The Polish brand Allegro also refers to strengthening cross-generational relationships, focusing on family, shared experiences, dreams and passions. Allegro emphasises the importance of interpersonal relationships, expressed by the guiding idea “give your loved ones what they need most”. In Allegro’s case, an essential aspect of implementing the cross-generational strategy regards repairing and strengthening the bonds between the younger and older generations [www 12; www 13; www 14].

Cross-generational marketing can also use gran-influencing, which is based on the assumption that intergenerational influence grows faster than intra-generational influence. Therefore, younger consumers are increasingly influenced by their parents or grandparents and the so-called gran-influencers. One example is the 90-year-old gaming influencer Hamako Mori, known as “Gamer Grandma”, who has played games since the 1950s. Brands that use gran-influencers in their marketing strategies often rely on linking their wisdom and life experience to their image [Guillén, 2023, pp. 180–181].

Further on, a new category of cross-generational influencers, namely grandparents and grandchildren, run their social media channels together. They benefit from the knowledge and experience of older people and the technological skills of younger generations while fulfilling an important social role by creating cross-generational bridges.

The last of the identified strategies is **age-agnostic marketing**, to which the terms age-neutral and age-independent can also be applied. The age-agnostic approach assumes that a characteristic by age should not determine the marketing strategy adopted, as it does not define consumer attitudes, interests or behaviour. Implementing this strategy means considering consumers as individuals, not as members of a generation [Guillén, 2024]. Age-agnostic marketing can focus on the capabilities of products without reference to

the audience’s age and refer to the universality of the offering, as exemplified by Spotify’s “Music for Everyone”. The music platform emphasises that there is something for everyone, age-independently focusing on emotions and on universal love of music rather than on specific demographic groups [www 15].

It may seem that age-agnostic marketing targeted at ageless consumers is quite demanding. Certainly, it poses a challenge for marketers linked to the understanding of characteristics and values that go beyond the demographics. However, the challenges of age-agnostic marketing are becoming more feasible in a digital age with the growing use and importance of real-time data and personalisation. Personalisation now goes beyond knowing a customer’s age and relies on detailed data about their preferences, purchase history and online behaviour. According to the Nielsen report *Bridging the Gap: Better Audience Targeting with Context and Behaviour Data* the combination of behavioural and contextual data in marketing activities leads to a higher return on investment [Nielsen, 2022]. Focusing on direct relationships with consumers provides a better chance to collect more accurate data and build richer customer profiles, more precise insights create well-suited and engaging content and experiences [Rawat, 2024; Robbins, 2022].

TABLE 2
Comparison of intergenerational marketing strategies: age-inclusive, pro-aging, cross-generational and age-agnostic marketing

Strategy	Focus	Brief description	Marketing campaign content
Age-inclusive marketing	Age-inclusiveness	• Incorporating various age groups • Addressing the diverse needs of people of various ages • Multigenerational offers • Adapting products to the needs of consumers of various ages • Counteracting and preventing age-related exclusions	• Featuring and representing people of various ages • Highlighting the value of age diversity • Supporting positive attitudes and respect for people of various ages • Promoting marketing projects involving different generations • Addressing age-related exclusions

Strategy	Focus	Brief description	Marketing campaign content
Pro-aging marketing	Positive perception of ageing	• Considering age as an asset • Redefines ageing as something positive and worth celebrating • Challenging age-related stereotypes	• Highlighting older people's ability to enjoy and appreciate life. • Breaking down age-related stereotypes • Emphasising the beauty of ageing by highlighting the positive values and attributes • Encouraging courage, confidence, and determination to achieve goals, realise dreams and be active in older age (showing examples of active seniors) • Concentrating on authenticity and freedom of self-expression with a positive attitude towards ageing
Cross-generational marketing	Cross-generational relations	• Bridging different generations by promoting interactions between representatives of generations • Bringing generations together in shared experiences • Offering that is relevant to more than one age group	• Showcasing shared use of products by representatives of different generations (e.g. within one family) • Storytelling that shows intergenerational cooperation and spending time together
Age-agnostic marketing	No age focus	• Deprioritising or omitting age as a customer characteristic and factor influencing customer attitudes, choices, behaviours etc. • Concentrating on universal values, needs and interests • Shifting away from age as the key segmentation criterion • Applying attention and attributing meaning to features beyond demographics	• Avoiding age-related marketing content (non-age-related messages) • Building messages on universal values, needs or interests common to people of all ages. • Building relationships through tailored and engaging content and experiences • Content personalisation based on insights into customer preferences, purchase history and online behaviour

Source: the author's own elaboration

The age-inclusive, pro-aging, age-agnostic and cross-generational strategies differ in their approach to age in marketing communications. The main focus, distinctive features, and marketing content guidelines can be defined for each strategy. Table 2 summarises the considerations of intergenerational marketing discussed so far, allowing for a comparison of the identified strategies.

5. Conclusions

In the light of demographic, socio-cultural and technological changes, several premises have arisen for the broader application of intergenerational marketing. They stem from arbitrary boundaries between generations, from chronological and subjective age distinctions, stereotyping dangers, and simplistic interpretations of generational belonging. The important premise for an intergenerational approach is age-inclusivity, challenging ageism, building age-positive attitudes and encouraging cross-generational relations.

In response to the growing expectations and challenges of an intergenerational mindset, marketers can leverage various intergenerational strategies, which the study attempts to categorise. Based on the considerations, four strategies were identified that vary in their approach to age in marketing and offer unique pathways for fostering age diversity and bridging generational divides: age-inclusive, pro-ageing, cross-generational, and age-agnostic marketing.

The application of intergenerational marketing poses many challenges. Brands face not only the choice of specific strategies but also the identification of platforms for intergenerational marketing: shared values, meaningful experiences, and communication interfaces. In this context, it becomes essential to identify the impact of determinants and barriers to effective intergenerational marketing and their overcoming, including perceptions of older people, the strength of age stereotypes related to age, and attitudes towards intergenerational marketing practice. Significant challenges also concern identifying and bridging intergenerational gaps.

The development of intergenerational approaches poses a challenge to researchers who have so far often focused on generational differences rather

than on similarities, shared values and intergenerational interfaces and bridges. The valuable results of the undertaken research regard the identification of the premises for leveraging intergenerational marketing, the proposal of categorising strategies and specifying the implications of their use.

Beyond the practical implications, research on integrated marketing also responds to societal challenges by addressing inclusiveness, ageism, generational stereotyping and other biases. As highlighted in the article, intergenerational marketing emphasises and promotes inclusivity, empowerment of seniors, and shared values across diverse age groups. Furthermore, by bridging intergenerational gaps, integrated marketing facilitates dialogue and mutual understanding between age groups, ultimately fostering stronger social bonds and reducing generational divisions.

Despite the promising potential, the study acknowledges limitations that shape the scope of evidence and generalisation of its findings. The research relies on desk research and specific practical examples, which may not fully capture the diverse practices of intergenerational marketing across different sectoral, cultural or economic contexts. Further empirical studies concerning the applications and effectiveness of intergenerational marketing and specific strategies can contribute to developing intergenerational approaches in the future. Research carried out in the context of cultural differences can provide a more in-depth understanding of consumer behaviour, implying the applicability of different intergenerational strategies. Future research could also explore how consumers perceive intergenerational marketing and their collaborative potential in co-creating marketing initiatives.

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