

Explaining Product Value Evolution: A Comparative Analysis of the Zoom Kobe Series and the iPhone through a Four-Stage Analytical Framework

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Abstract. This paper compares Nike's Zoom Kobe 4–7 series and Apple's iPhone 4–17 to examine how successful product lines evolve from technological breakthroughs to long-term symbolic and system-level value. Based on this comparison, the paper proposes the Product Value Evolution Framework, a four-stage model consisting of technological innovation, user experience optimization, product system evolution, and brand narrative. The study argues that both product lines follow a similar developmental path. Early breakthrough generations, such as the Zoom Kobe 4 and the iPhone 4–5s, established new standards in performance and consumer expectations. As the market expanded, both brands refined usability and product experience at scale, before introducing system-level upgrades that reshaped key touchpoints, as seen in the Zoom Kobe 6 and the iPhone X–13. In later stages, both firms increasingly relied on tiered product lines, ecosystem value, and narrative framing to sustain long-term demand, as illustrated by the Kobe 7 System and the iPhone 14–17 lineup. Economic theories including product differentiation, monopolistic competition, price discrimination, diminishing marginal utility, and behavioral economics are used to explain shifts in demand, pricing, and consumer attachment across these stages. Beyond these two cases, the framework offers a broader analytical tool for understanding product evolution, industry trends, and new market development across sectors.

Keywords: signature sneakers, smartphones, product-line strategy, price discrimination, product value evolution framework

1. Introduction

Although the Zoom Kobe line and the iPhone belong to very different industries, both became iconic products by moving beyond pure functionality and developing strong symbolic and market value over time. The Zoom Kobe series began as a performance-driven basketball shoe line centered on speed, lightness, and responsiveness, while the iPhone entered the market as a technological breakthrough that integrated the functions of multiple devices into a single product. Yet despite these differences, the two product lines reveal a comparable pattern of evolution. In both cases, early success depended on visible innovation and performance advantages, but later growth increasingly relied on user experience refinement, system-level integration, and narrative value that encouraged

consumers to continue upgrading. This comparison makes the two cases especially useful for understanding how successful products evolve across time and how firms sustain demand after the initial breakthrough stage. Building on this observation, this paper examines the shared logic behind these two product lines and develops a Product Value Evolution Framework to explain how products move from technological differentiation to cultural and emotional significance.

2. Product line analysis

2.1. Nike Zoom Kobe series

The Nike Zoom Kobe series, also known as the ZK series, targets elite basketball performance with a clear design vision, including maximized speed, precise footwork, and responsiveness from players while keeping the shoe stable under the intense level of NBA. It serves athletes who need a low-profile feel for fast cuts with cultural meaning to signature models. As a product family, it must balance functional engineering with identity and storytelling to sustain demand across multiple generations.

2.1.1. Zoom Kobe IV

Unveiled in December 2008, The Nike Zoom Kobe IV (ZK4) was a phenomenal innovation back then because it was a low-top basketball shoe that was put on Kobe's performance line. It emphasized lightness, fast-cut, and speed, which made it different from those heavy high-top shoes in the market. In the material use, the shoe used a lightweight plastic upper with Flywire technology, which meant to control players' feet inside the shoes. The cushioning was the most advanced at that time. With Lunarlite foam in forefoot, full length phylon midsole, and a bouncy heel zoom air unit, ZK4 offered players a fantastic court feel.

Built for guards who wanted speed and court feel without the stereotype of "high-top is safer," ZK4 reshaped the trend by using low-top [1]. With the filling material around heels, low-tops shoes were able to keep the ankles stable and safe. Nike also paired Flywire containment with the cushioning stack that felt more advanced compared to previous shoes: Lunarlite in the forefoot, a full length Phylon midsole, and a heel zoom air unit [2]. Nike depicted this pair of shoes as "light and strong" performance priorities. In addition, the fashion of light weight low-tops shoes became the dominant design for most brands after the success of Kobe on court. At that time, the retail price of \$120 lowered the barrier for students and players in the society who loved Kobe or chased for elite hoop shoes, which allowed Nike to create a larger market. In 2018, Nike started to bring back some Kobe series. In 2019, a bunch of Kobe 4s were released, causing a phenomenon. Even before Kobe Bryant passed away, ZK4 was still ranked the first place of performance basketball shoes with the design from 10 years ago [3]. This case can demonstrate that the high status of Kobe series.

2.1.2. Zoom Kobe V

The Nike Zoom Kobe V (ZK5) aimed at the same customers of ZK4, but this generation tightened the concept to efficiency engineering. In ZK5, the shoe body is composed fully with plastic, reducing weights compared to ZK4. There were two other changes in ZK5. The TPU was a one piece of plastic that can support the ankle, removing the traditional leather. Cushioning evolved towards responsiveness and durability compared to ZK4. There were zoom air units at both forefoot and heel, keeping the same court feel while avoiding the decaying of materials [4]. With the similar retail prices, Nike still targeted to serve not only players but also amateur players worldwide [5].

Even though Nike brought the Protro version of the Kobe 5, which suit better and tougher performance for players nowadays. In 2020, after Kobe passed away, ZK5 still remained the best performance shoes in the StockX annual list of 2020 [6]. A list of best shoes in 2024 showed that ZK5 Protro X-ray is the sixth in the list of "best sneaker in 2024" [7], as the only Nike performance basketball shoes, which showed its importance and popularity.

2.1.3. Zoom Kobe VI

The Nike Zoom Kobe VI (ZK6) continued with the same design as the low-top; at the same time, the product stood out as a structural and material upgrade. In this phase, it kept the Flywire and had the same cushioning as ZK5. Since the low-top design and cushioning were in consecutive years started to bring tiredness aesthetic fatigue, Eric Avar decided to focus on shoe body, which he later created a mesh base covered by numerous polyurethane pieces that form the texture of snake-skin, representing Kobe's nickname "The Black Mamba" [8].

ZK6 was not just for elite players. After two successful years, Nike continued using the low-top and fast-cut design with the same cushions. This time Nike focused more on innovations in architecture and durability: Nike media coverage described and reported the most famous design of polyurethane "islands" that mimic a snakeskin, representing Kobe, whose nickname is known as the "Black Mamba" [9]. With the eye-catching snakeskin shoe body, ZK6 became the most heated product, symbolizing strong court performance and perfect appearance [8].

Some people, however, at that time had already sensed the increasing marginal utility, which means as the more unit of products customers consume, the less interest the customers will feel. In 2023, when Kobe Brand first established, ZK6 reverse grinch was released at the end of 2023. Within a short period of time, it reached a trade number of 22,158 with the average price of \$444. The total revenue was almost 9.8 million dollars [10]. In 2026, StockX released the data of the 2025 shoe market. The Zoom Kobe product line still dominated the market and was marked as the first place. Nearly 37% of the signature basketball shoes sales market comes from Kobe Bryant in 2025 [10]. The second, third, and fourth place are ZK6 Dodgers, ZK6 All Star, and ZK6 Total Orange [11]. The first place is Kobe 8 Protro What The. Hence, the sales of these shoes showed people are still obsessed with the court feel that ZK6 bring people.

2.1.4. Zoom Kobe VII system

After three consecutive years with the same styles and cushioning, the responses from markets began to warn the designer that customers were in deep aesthetic fatigue, indicating a drastic change should occur. As a result, the idea of "System" emerged as the time required. The product designer Eric Avar made a shoe into two different systems. One with low-top was called "Attack Fast" and the other one with high-top was called "Attack Strong". Named after their functions, these two interchangeable inserts were designed for different play style. The "Attack Fast" had forefoot and heel zoom with phylon; meanwhile, the "Attack Strong" version had full length midsole cushioning, the protective, foam-based layer between a shoe's outsole and upper that absorbs shock. What's interesting was the whole designing team invited a lot of celebrities like Kanye West and Leehom Wang, and made a short advertisement for Kobe and his new shoe, focusing mainly on narratives.

The ZK7 System is where the product stops being just a simple shoe. It aimed for multiple types of players that includes fast guards, strength users, and buyers who are interested in stories. Nike had to do this because after three years of similar designs, court feels, and emotional values, customers began to lose interest according to market data [12]. As a result, innovative and fun

functions were introduced by ZK7 System. Nike had to admit that producing shoes is still the business, meaning that the product had to generate profits. A pair of shoes may be perfect in every aspect such as designs, colorways, cushions, court feels, materials, and so on. If the customer's responses were poor, the whole direction should be altered.

As a result, in April of 2012, Nike introduced one of the most famous plans of all time in Nike's history—"Elite". The ultimate goal of Elite Program was to bring the ultimate court feel for players when they were in playoffs. ZK7 System Elite leveled up compared to Supreme, where the cushion became full length zoom air with carbon fiber TPU. Unfortunately, Kobe VII Elite failed because customers believed the Kobe VII Supreme was astonishing enough, making Elite version a similar choice instead of a new choice; meanwhile, the retail price of standard Kobe VII standard, supreme, and elite is \$140, \$180, and \$200. Customers were not willing to pay extra 20 dollars for similar court feels.

The Nike Kobe VII System (ZK7 System) was a milestone for the shoe industry because it introduced insertable midsoles to the whole market, making a lot of companies to research about. The Elite program is an innovative plan that can bring players and customers fantastic experiences. The only problem was the other two versions were too edgy, which largely reduced the advantage of Kobe VII Elite. Therefore, when Kobe VII was introduced to the market, the sales began to decrease. Data from 2012 showed that the ZK7 System was only ranked at top 5 performance basketball shoes in the year [13], which was poles apart from the place of Kobe series in previous years [14]. It implies that the customers thought the Elite version was a duplicate because the new ZK7 System was already amazing and innovative enough.

2.2. iPhone product line

The iPhone's purpose is to function as an comprehensive and all-in-one personal computing platform that people can use frequently in daily lives for communication, working, navigation, entertainment and other circumstances. Unlike other devices, it creates value through an integrated model of hardware, iOS, APP ecosystem, and services, where convenience, security and continuity are across the devices. As the market matured, upgrading logic of the iPhone shifted from simple basic functions to improvements that strengthened long term utilization.

2.2.1. iPhone 4-5s

These two generations of iPhones established a brand new era. When people talk about the origin of modern smartphones, the first thing that comes to their mind is the iPhone 4 or iPhone 5, first released in June 2010. The image of clean design language, screen, and platform features that later generations build on; at the same time, other brands also imitated this style. Most importantly, this group established the idea that the iPhone is not just a simple phone, but a stable and premium platform capable of doing anything, setting the standard for future models. Steve Jobs, leader and founder of Apple, once said that Apple does not only sell products but also sells experiences, lifestyles, and dreams (services/benefits).

The targeted customers are early adopters, new tech enthusiasts, and loyal customers of Apple. These people were truly willing to pay for premium devices at that time. While many smartphones at the time were still unstable, iPhone 4-5s set a high standard in design and functions and made the smartphones a key role in daily lives. In the market, responses confirm this 'platform reset': Apple reported selling over 1.7 million iPhone 4 units in its first three days [15], rising to 5 million iPhone 5 units (2012) and 9 million iPhone 5s/5c units (2013) over their respective opening weekends

[16,17], which shows how new technological advances have shaped people's perceptions of smartphones. As a result, people have become increasingly reliant on smartphones such as the iPhone.

2.2.2. iPhone 6-8s

After the main goal was set, this stage focused on usability and efficiency inside the basic platform. Since the first two generations had formed a strong structure for the iPhone series, iPhone 6-8s emphasized smoothness and aimed to refine and level up. For example, the larger screens, faster performances with better cameras are all upgrades. It is crucial because Apple started to improve different aspects of their products, and they were eager to offer customers with the most advanced technology and user experiences. The targeted customers became larger since the big screens and other advancements attracted those who require better, more reliable, and more comfortable devices for daily communications or work. The new devices brought people smooth interactions, consistency, and usability upgrades in daily lives. Eventually, this 'optimization' phase scaled massively: Apple announced over 10 million [18] iPhone 6/6 Plus sales in the first three days, and expected availability to reach 115 countries by year-end, indicating that usability upgrades (not a new concept) could still drive record adoption [19].

2.2.3. iPhone X-13s

With the similar big idea as previous generations, this stage is where every aspect of the device began to change. From iPhone X, Apple redesigned the core, introducing Face ID unlocking and assertive touch (gesture language). iPhone X-13 became the long run structure model. The camera system has also improved. Nowadays, younger generations may not know the home key, but they all know how Face ID works and gesture languages like swipe or touch. It simply scanned people's faces and made people unlock their phones in a few seconds, whereas other brands still rely on passwords for system security.

This era reshapes how people use the phone instead of showing how fast it is. This step allowed Apple to develop from a point to a line. The range of targeted users covered more people in the society, including people from different ages and jobs. For example, these generations of users attracted a huge number of young users who cared about the quality of screens, cameras, and modern interaction models. When people mention Apple, they may think about how convenient and fast it is, allowing customer loyalty to grow. Apple's own earnings statement suggests that the interaction redesign was commercially validated: Tim Cook said iPhone X 'has been our top-selling iPhone every week since it shipped,' alongside an installed base reaching 1.3 billion active devices in early 2018 [20].

2.2.4. iPhone 14-17s

After years of consecutive success, Apple became the most dominant brand in producing smart phones, reaching the biggest percentage in oligopoly. As a result, Apple changed its main target. Apple did not want to keep maintaining high-quality products only; at the same time, Apple increasingly sold various values such as safety, standards, identities, benefits, passion, loyalty, and stories. It pushes the iPhone into a model like a broad system narrative. Within ten years, Apple has always been the most dominant and popular brand in smartphones. Building the brand image through cutting-edge technology, Apple became millions of people's first option when buying new

devices; meanwhile, Apple remained its previous loyal customers. Nowadays, the impact of the device is globally thanks to the development of the Internet, allowing people of various ethnicities, nations, genders, or ages to use the devices without any barriers. While other brands were competing on price and hardware, Apple's key differentiation is system-level value, turning iPhones into an ongoing relationship rather than a simple device in daily lives. People see their phones as strong supporters or friends, and that's why Apple can keep customers' loyalty in the circumstances where the market is diverse. In first quarter of 2024 and 2025, iPhone14-16 dominated the first three places of the list [21]. In the system-narrative era, demand is sustained by portfolio and ecosystem value: Counterpoint reported iPhone 14 as the best-selling smartphone of 2023, while Omdia estimated 26.5 million shipments for the iPhone 14 Pro Max in H1 2023, showing strong willingness-to-pay for premium tiers [22,23].

3. Product value evolution framework

The analyses of the development of Nike Zoom Kobe and iPhone products and their market performance show strong parallel of the two cutting-edging universally popular product lines. This section compares the two product lines and identifies a 4-stage product value evolution framework based on the previous section. Table 1 presents the four stages – Successful products evolve from technological innovation to user experience optimization, then to system-level integration, and ultimately to brand narratives that create emotional connections with consumers. Following the four stages is the legacy stage, where product innovation is incremental but slows down, and the product gradually becomes a legacy icon rather than a disruptive innovation.

Table 1. Product value evolution framework

Stage	Strategic focus	Zoom Kobe series	iPhone
1. Technological Innovation	Breakthrough technology creates differentiation	Low-top design, lightweight structure, focus on speed and court feel	Integrates phone, camera, music player, and internet into one device
2. User Experience Optimization	Improve usability and performance for users	More durable materials, lighter weight, expanded colorways	More stable system, clearer interface, smoother performance
3. Product System Evolution	Structural upgrades and feature integration strengthen the product ecosystem	Polyurethane structures inspired by snake skin, maintaining speed and responsiveness	Face ID security, faster processors, increasingly integrated operating system
4. Brand Narrative & Emotional Value	Product becomes a cultural symbol that drives loyalty	Mamba Mentality, multiple versions targeting different players and fans	Strong brand identity, customer loyalty, and emotional attachment

3.1. Technological innovation

Both ZK4 and iPhone 4-5s are playing important roles in bringing technological innovations and rooting the whole product line in the market. ZK4 changed what people think about a pair of basketball shoes. The low-top design influenced the future designs of Nike and even other brands. The success of ZK4 led to the trend of low-top shoes. In the same way, iPhone 4-5s established what a modern smart phone should look like. Both the products redefined the core values of the whole industry. ZK4 reframes the signature shoes for basketball players, while iPhone 4-5s reframes smart

phones into daily life necessity. Due to the monumental success of these products, their later generations can focus on refining instead of exploring or discovering.

3.2. User experience optimization

ZK5 and iPhone 6-8 optimized user experience because they refine an accepted platform into something smoother and more efficient. ZK5 keeps the low-top design but pushes weight reduction and responsiveness through more aggressive synthetic construction and a more consistent, fast foot court feel; the upgrade is about making the same idea feel easier to execute repeatedly. Likewise, iPhone 6-8 doesn't reinvent; instead, they focused on utility upgrades that compound in daily life: larger screens for comfortable interactions, stable performance, and better cameras that benefit communications, scrolling, and photography. The contrast is that ZK5 optimizes experience under long duration repetition, but the shared logic is identical: once the platform is validated, the company wins by reducing friction and making users feel better.

3.3. Product system evolution

ZK6 and iPhone X-13 map onto systematic evolution because the upgrades concentrate on the key touchpoints that most shape users' perceptions and behaviors. ZK6 keeps the low-top design same as ZK4 and ZK5, using the same cushions as ZK5, but it changed the upper structure and aesthetics: the polyurethane scales construction is both functional and symbolic, making the shoes more recognizable and special on foot. iPhone X does the same for smartphones. It redesigns core interaction through camera systems and computational photography like face ID, so the experience feels not just new but mature. To contrast that ZK 6 uses aesthetics as a performance identity, while these generations of smartphones can change daily interaction behavior. In both cases, the products will offer people a sense of difference and advancements.

3.4. Brand narrative & emotional value

ZK7 and iPhone 14-17s both shifts from selling single products to selling an ecosystem with unique brand narratives and emotional values. ZK7 System makes the product modular: "Attack Fast" and "Attack Strong" allow people to change their shoes interchangeable between low-top and high-top. Consumers, as a result, can choose the mode that fits them the most according to their preferences. This logic remains in the Elite series where Nike provided the players with the most advanced technology and stronger support, aiming to fit into the playoff intensity. The shoes also embody stories from Kobe Bryant's performances on the court. His legendary and clutch moments helped build the concept of the Mamba Mentality. iPhone 14-17s parallel with ZK7 by emphasizing system-level-values such as security, assurance, and ecosystemic benefits. The shared outcome is that the purchase decision shifts from selling products to selling based on brand narratives and emotional values.

4. Economic theories supporting the product value evolution framework

The Product Value Evolution Framework are supported not only by the two cases but also economic theories. Figure 1 presents the economic theories behind the framework. They explain the transformation cycle of a product line from technological innovation to legacy. Through comparing the product line development of Zoom Kobe IV to VII and iPhone 4-17, this section elaborates on how economic theories support and explains each stage of the Product Value Evolution Framework.

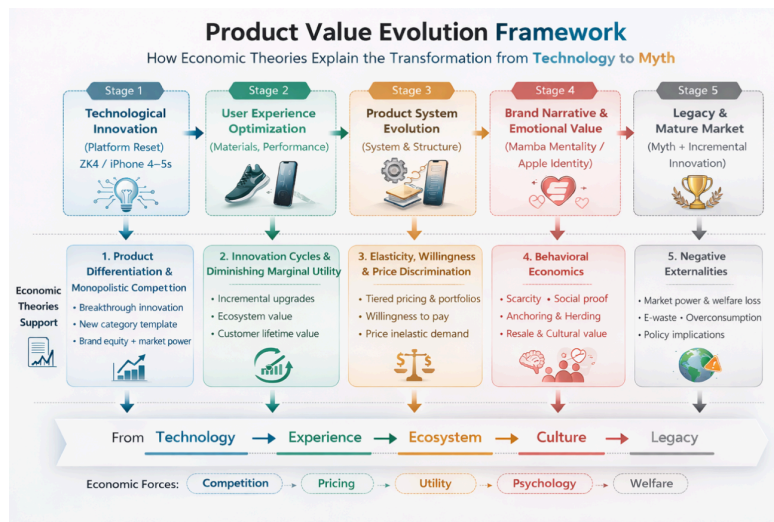


Figure 1. Economic theories supporting the product value evolution framework

4.1. Product differentiation and monopolistic competition

From an economic perspective, both the Zoom Kobe line and the iPhone illustrate the economic theories of product differentiation under monopolistic competition: firms sell function and identity, so there are no perfect substitutes for products from other competitors in the market. The platform reset stage of the ZK4 and iPhone 4-5s created new reference standards in consumers' minds, which shifts the competitive battlefield from price to perceived quality and brand equity. Once the new baseline was accepted, Nike and Apple were able to capture a higher share of consumer surplus through branding, narratives, and performance credibility. This is why early breakthrough generations often generate unusually strong demand: they reduce uncertainty about the products' value and create a "category template" that competitors must follow, effectively strengthening the firm's market power in later cycles.

4.2. Innovation cycles and diminishing marginal utility

The transition from sixth generation to seventh generation, and from iPhone X-13 to iPhone 14-17, can be modeled as a response to diminishing marginal utility from incremental upgrades. When consumers feel that each new generation adds less additional satisfaction than before, demand growth slows unless firms introduce a new reason to upgrade. That is exactly where system selling service narratives become rational business strategies: instead of only improving hardware, the firm reframes values as an ongoing experience. Economically, this is an attempt to maintain revenue in a mature market by shifting competition from features to bundled utility over time, which also can increase customer lifetime values.

4.3. Elasticity, willingness and price discrimination

As the market matures, both firms increasingly relied on price discrimination. Nike's ZK7 System and Elite series reflect price discrimination: different versions such as Attack Strong, Attack Fast and Elite separate the consumers by willingness to pay. Elite hoopers and players purchase for performance assurance, while amateur players pay for identity. Apple's iPhone 14-17 era uses the similar approach through portfolio tiering, developing standard, Pro, Pro Max, and Air. It can

maximize revenue by matching features to various demand curves. More importantly, demand for premium tiers is more price inelastic since it is recognized as luxuries, and customers are purchasing not only function but also status, compatibility, and reliability. That is why raising the price still remains the quantity demanded. As the marginally utility decreased, however, the quantity of demand started to fall, which is why these two companies started to use systematic narratives.

4.4. Behavioral economics: scarcity, social proof, and the resale market

Behavioral foundations such as FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), Anchoring, Availability, and Herding fits to the market mechanism: marketing tactics can shift demand outward by manipulating perceived scarcity and expected future values. Limited releases and system narratives do not merely inform consumers; they also create belief-based demand, where buyers treat products as assets. The resale market intensifies this by providing a visible price signal that eventually strengthens anchoring and herding: customers are still willing to pay for the products at certain prices since they recognize rising resale prices as true values that deserve to increase. In economic terms, these platforms can increase demand volatility by converting culture symbols into trading representatives. The secondary market of Apple is less speculative, but trade-in pricing and upgrade programs can still anchor value, indirectly sustaining upgrade cycles.

4.5. Negative externalities

Both industries raise broader welfare questions. Strong market power can increase the prices above marginal cost (MC), reducing consumer surplus and potentially creating allocative efficiency, especially when consumers are behaviorally biased. At the same time, frequent upgrade cycles generate negative externalities, such as electronic wastes in smartphones and overproduction and overconsumption in fashion sneakers. These costs are not fully priced into the market, so private decisions may lead to socially suboptimal outcomes. A policy-relevant implication is that better repairability, longer software support, transparency in resale market prices, and anti-decision rules in marketing could reduce welfare loss—without eliminating innovation or cultural values.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper argues that the Zoom Kobe line and the iPhone illustrate a comparable process of product value evolution, progressing through innovation, optimization, system expansion, and brand narrative. From this comparison, the Product Value Evolution Framework is proposed as a broader analytical model for understanding how products build, expand, and preserve market value over time. Economic theory provides strong support for this framework. In monopolistic competition, firms such as Nike and Apple differentiate through both functional performance and symbolic identity, enabling breakthrough products like the ZK4 and the iPhone 4–5s to redefine competitive standards and shift consumer attention from price to perceived quality and brand equity. As markets mature, firms increasingly rely on segmentation and price discrimination to match products with heterogeneous willingness to pay, as seen in the Kobe 7 performance tiers and the iPhone's standard, Pro, and Pro Max lineup. As the marginal utility of incremental hardware upgrades declines, firms turn to narratives, ecosystem integration, and emotional value to sustain demand, while behavioral mechanisms such as FOMO, anchoring, and herding further intensify loyalty and volatility. Beyond the two cases studied here, this framework may be applied by

economists, firms, and business analysts to evaluate existing products, identify industry trends, and inform strategies for creating new products and entering new markets.

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