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Research on Identity Construction and Cultural Practice in Youth Outdoor Sports Consumption

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Abstract. In recent years, outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, cycling, paddle boarding, frisbee and trail running have gained growing popularity among young people. These activities have gradually shifted from pure leisure to a lifestyle that combines consumption, social interaction and identity expression. From the perspectives of sociology of sport and cultural identity, this paper explores the process of identity construction among young people in outdoor sports consumption. The study points out that the rise of young people's outdoor sports consumption is not only due to the popularization of sports events themselves, but more importantly, it meets the comprehensive needs of urban youth for physical release, interactive experience with nature, social visibility and a sense of belonging in social circles. Identity is mainly generated through physical experience, equipment consumption, spatial check-in and community interaction: physical experience allows young people to re-recognize their own state; equipment consumption carries taste distinction and circle identification; spatial check-in transforms outdoor experience into visible identity; and community interaction promotes individual participation, leading to sustained lifestyle identity. Meanwhile, the younger generation also faces a series of problems in outdoor sports consumption, such as spectacularization, threshold formation and insufficient safety management. In the future, we should start from multiple aspects such as the provision of public space, safety education, guidance of platform content and cultivation of youth communities, to promote outdoor activities from a short-term consumption focus to a safer, more accessible and sustainable lifestyle practice.

Keywords: youth outdoor sports, sports consumption, identity, lifestyle sports, cultural practice

1. Introduction

In recent years, outdoor sports have gradually become an important sports cultural phenomenon, and have become increasingly prominent in young people's daily lives. Outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, cycling, paddle boarding, frisbee and trail running have moved out of the original single professional field, and gradually become a major part of young people's weekend leisure, social interaction and self-presentation on online platforms. Young people participate in outdoor sports in mountains, grasslands, seaside, camps, greenways and urban parks. They not only regard them as ways to exercise and relax, but also turn their personal outdoor experience into life materials that

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can be watched, evaluated and recognized by others through taking photos, recording videos, sharing travel routes and displaying equipment, thus forming a special social and cultural practice and communication method. Therefore, it can be seen that outdoor sports have developed from their initial fitness function into one of the ways for young people to demonstrate their lifestyle philosophy, deepen social relationships and shape their self-identity.

Under the current academic background, continuous support and promotion from national policies have provided a solid realistic foundation and clear direction guidance for the development of outdoor sports. In recent years, the national level has successively issued documents such as the *Outdoor Sports Industry Development Plan (2022–2025)* and the *Action Plan for Promoting the Construction of Outdoor Sports Facilities and Service Improvement (2023–2025)*, emphasizing the release of outdoor sports consumption potential, improvement of facility supply and enhancement of safety guarantee capabilities [1, 2]. The *Guiding Opinions on Building High-Quality Outdoor Sports Destinations* further integrates outdoor sports into the policy framework of coordinated promotion of sports, culture and tourism, ecology and local development [3]. Outdoor sports are no longer simple personal entertainment activities; they are closely related to the sports consumption market, the improvement of national health, the allocation of public resources, and changes in social lifestyles.

If the upsurge of youth outdoor sports is only attributed to industrial development or the improvement of consumption level, its cultural connotation and social value will be ignored. For young people, the significance of participating in outdoor activities is not only physical exercise or equipment purchase, but also the value of exploring nature, pursuing the spirit of adventure, enhancing social interaction and promoting self-development. More often, outdoor activities are closely linked to young people's needs for freedom exploration, healthy lifestyle, mood relaxation, personal experience of nature and seeking a sense of community belonging. The so-called check-in is not just a photo record; it is a way for young people to complete practice, make choices and reflect their life attitude with their bodies, thus forming a perceptible identity. For many young people, their first exposure to outdoor activities does not start with professional training courses, but is triggered by an attractive hiking photo, an anticipated camping experience, a challenging cycling route or a carefully selected adventure activity on a platform.

Research in the field of lifestyle sports has found that it does not fully operate in accordance with the rules and victory-seeking ideology prescribed by traditional competitive sports, but pays more attention to the deepening of individual feelings, personalized presentation and the formation of community belonging [4]. According to in-depth research on Chinese youth lifestyle and sports consumption, participating in trendy sports such as frisbee, flag football and land surfing is no longer a simple consumption behavior, but has become a way for young people to break free from daily social norms, reflect their individual personality differences and establish social relationships [5]. Therefore, this paper mainly studies how young groups turn the short-term experience of outdoor activities into a long-term sense of lifestyle identity through personal participation, equipment investment, location exploration and making friends.

2. Theoretical foundation: lifestyle sports, social practice and identity

2.1. Lifestyle sports: from competitive participation to style expression

The rapid growth of youth outdoor sports consumption should first be analyzed under the theoretical framework of lifestyle sports. Lifestyle sports are significantly different from traditional competitive sports. The latter mainly includes factors such as competition results, personal performance and

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systematic training arrangements, while the former pays more attention to health improvement, leisure pleasure and personal growth, and does not take competitive performance or professional training as its main features. Although it is based on physical activity, it pays more attention to the personal physical experience of participants, the process of free exploration, unique aesthetic expression and the formation of community identity. Relevant studies emphasize that such sports do not fully obey the performance logic of traditional competitive sports, but are closely related to consumption, identity, style and difference expression [4].

From this perspective, different outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, cycling, paddle boarding, frisbee and trail running have their own characteristics, but they all have obvious features of lifestyle sports. Its charm lies not only in competitive confrontation, but also in immersive experience of the natural environment, direct feeling of physical activity, establishment of social relationships and presentation of personal style. The significance of young people's participation in hiking is far more than just walking; it is more a reflection of discovering nature, challenging oneself and enhancing team spirit. Camping is not just staying overnight in the wild; it contains the value of being close to nature, learning survival skills and enjoying quiet time. As for cycling, although it pursues the improvement of speed and mileage, it carries a healthy lifestyle, the spirit of adventure and appreciation of beautiful scenery. More importantly, these activities can bring young people a special feeling: temporarily breaking away from the fast pace of daily life and doing physical activities in the natural environment, thus obtaining a physical feeling and experience different from urban commuting, academic work and digital life.

Lifestyle sports are not inherently separated from commerce, institutions and media; there is a complex relationship of mutual influence and mutual penetration. When lifestyle sports penetrate into the commercial field, media communication channels and policy frameworks, their original free exploration nature, subcultural characteristics and physical symbolic meaning will be re-encoded [6]. At present, the development of youth outdoor sports is in a process of constant change, and its connotation and extension are constantly being reshaped with the development of social culture and technological progress. On the one hand, it is still regarded as a way to get close to nature, get rid of daily life pressure, and seek spiritual relaxation and physical pleasure. On the other hand, it is increasingly affected by equipment manufacturers, commercial camp operators, cultural tourism project developers and online platform traffic promoters, and shows obvious tendencies of commercialization and entertainment.

2.2. Social practice theory: the combination of materials, competence and meaning

If the theory of lifestyle sports explains the cultural attribute of youth outdoor sports, then the theory of social practice helps to explain how this consumption activity specifically occurs. The value of social practice theory lies in that it puts consumption back into specific actions for understanding. Practice is not a single behavior, but a combination of physical activity, object use, knowledge ability and emotional meaning [7]; consumption is not an isolated purchase, but occurs when participating in specific practices [8]. Therefore, purchasing items such as jackets, hiking shoes, camping equipment, cycling jerseys and sports watches is ostensibly a consumption behavior, but in fact it is the material condition required to participate in outdoor sports practice.

Therefore, this paper uses material basis, skill application and value interpretation to analyze the phenomenon of youth participation in outdoor sports consumption [9]. It includes various contents such as equipment, camp layout, travel routes, transportation tools, digital platforms and video shooting equipment, as well as various qualities such as sports skills, safety awareness, route judgment ability, photography level and social etiquette. Health promotion, spiritual freedom, stress

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relief, being close to nature, embodiment of self-identity and integration into social circles all belong to deep-seated values. The emergence of youth outdoor sports consumption patterns is the result of the mutual influence and mutual promotion of these three factors. For outdoor sports to be carried out smoothly, there must be corresponding material conditions, that is, suitable equipment, good venues and convenient activity places. Moreover, sustained outdoor sports also rely on accurate route planning, scientific safety evaluation systems and participants with certain sports skills. More importantly, for outdoor sports to change from a single experience activity to a lifestyle and habit, there must be internal meaning support, such as free exploration, aesthetic pleasure and a sense of community belonging.

2.3. Identity and self-presentation: from taste distinction to platform display

The construction of individual identity in youth outdoor sports consumption mainly has two aspects: forming differentiated taste division from choosing different consumption behaviors and styles, and shaping and transmitting one's own personality and social status on social media. Bourdieu's theory of distinction reminds us that taste, aesthetics and lifestyle are not completely private choices, but are closely related to social position, cultural capital and taste structure [10]. The formation of individual identity in youth outdoor sports consumption is mainly realized in two aspects: the differences reflected in consumption behavior and consumption style, and the efforts to shape one's own image and social status on social media.

When Giddens studied the relationship between modernity and self-identity, he discovered why contemporary young people regard lifestyle as the main factor in constructing their own identity narratives. In modern society, self-identity is not immutable, but is constantly reflected and constructed in the process of daily life choices [11]. Young people participate in outdoor activities, carefully choose suitable equipment for themselves, post outdoor images online, and join relevant associations. All these are processes of exploring their own identity, constantly answering two basic questions: "Who am I?" and "What kind of person do I want to be?". Goffman's self-presentation theory deepens people's understanding of the check-in phenomenon. The reason why "check-in" has become an important part of young people's outdoor sports consumption is that people carefully shape their own image to cater to different audiences and environments when participating in these activities [12]. Therefore, young people posting their outdoor photography, travel routes and equipment information on social media is not just a record of daily life, but a conscious effort to create an appreciable lifestyle and reflect their own life attitude and values in the virtual world.

3. Identity construction mechanism in youth outdoor sports consumption

3.1. Physical experience: from sports participation to self-perception

When young individuals participate in outdoor activities, the first thing they feel is the physical experience. Compared with exercising in closed venues, outdoor sports can better reflect the interaction between people and the natural environment. During hiking, participants will feel the speed and route choices when walking and climbing to a certain place, which also tests a person's endurance. When camping, one must know how to set up a tent and spend time with friends, which is a way different from ordinary life. In paddle boarding, balance ability, adaptation to the state on the water, and mastering the rhythm of paddling are all necessary skills. In trail running, the test of physical limit, facing different terrains, and the psychological satisfaction obtained from immersing in nature are all the charms of this sport. These activities not only enrich young people's physical

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feelings, but also allow people to explore the connection between themselves and nature in non-daily situations, thus producing a unique life experience.

Due to the dual pressures brought by contemporary social learning, career development and urbanized lifestyle, young people's physical activities mainly occur in classrooms, offices, commuting roads and electronic device screens. This reflects the obvious characteristics and significance of physical experience for adapting to modern social challenges. Participating in outdoor sports provides young people with an opportunity to temporarily get rid of the constraints of daily life. In such an environment, people can re-recognize the feelings of their own bodies. Existing academic research has clearly indicated that Chinese young people's participation in lifestyle activities has far-reaching significance for breaking the traditional constraints of daily life [5]. This conclusion is highly consistent with the behavior patterns of young people participating in outdoor activities, such as "escaping from the hustle and bustle of the city", "exploring nature on weekends" and "seeking spiritual comfort on green grass". What young people gain from participating in outdoor sports is not only physical exercise results, but also a process of self-recognition after breaking away from the conventional life pattern.

Direct physical feeling is the basis for the formation of identity. Only when participants truly experience physical release, freedom of movement and emotional expression in outdoor activities, can this form of sports change from leisure and entertainment to an important part of life, and then produce a change from short-term experience to long-term habit. On the contrary, young individuals do not join in because of the identity symbol of outdoor sports, but gradually form a self-awareness of "I am an outdoor sports enthusiast" and "I belong to this lifestyle" in continuous practice.

3.2. Equipment consumption: from functional use to taste distinction

In outdoor sports consumption, equipment consumption constitutes the second way of identity construction. These equipments were originally designed to ensure the safety, comfort and efficiency of sports. For example, hiking shoes help protect ankles and adapt to various complex terrain conditions, jackets can resist various wind and rain, and cycling jerseys can increase comfort during exercise. Sports watches are used to record sports trajectories and body data, and camping equipment can optimize the stay experience of outdoor activities. However, in young people's outdoor sports culture, equipment is not only a tool, but has gradually evolved into an identity symbol. Multiple choices such as lightweight equipment, retro-style camping, city-mountain matching and sports data recording jointly construct the social language of youth outdoor consumption.

It should be noted that equipment consumption cannot be simply understood as conspicuous consumption. Relevant studies have shown that the symbolic consumption of youth in lifestyle sports is not completely equivalent to showing off, but expresses style, consumption concepts, youth symbols and subcultural identity through clothing, images, joint sports and social sharing [5]. From the perspective of Bourdieu's distinction theory, equipment consumption makes outdoor sports a practice field of taste distinction. Whether certain equipment is "professional", whether a certain outfit is "relaxed", and whether a certain route is "niche" often need to be understood, evaluated and recognized in communities and platforms. For this reason, equipment consumption can not only improve the safety and experience of outdoor sports, but may also create new participation thresholds.

Therefore, the value of outdoor equipment is not only material value, but also a way for young people to shape and express their self-identity. It is both a sports tool and a reflection of personal taste; it can expand the scope of participation and also inadvertently form different social

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boundaries. In youth outdoor sports consumption, individual identity is constantly shaped and deepened through functional activity participation and symbolic symbol presentation.

3.3. Spatial check-in: from outdoor scenes to visible identity

If equipment consumption is regarded as a material symbol of identity expression, then spatial check-in is a scenario-based platform that reflects personal identity and status. When young people participate in outdoor activities, "check-in" is no longer simply taking photos as souvenirs, but has become a cultural phenomenon that integrates natural environment feelings, one's own physical condition, sports experience and life attitude concepts, and spreads widely on social networks. Various outdoor places such as mountains and fields, coastlines, camps, green trails and urban parks have acquired new meanings on social media, becoming lifestyle symbols that can be appreciated, shared and evaluated, changing people's understanding of leisure and nature interaction.

The outdoor check-in behavior of young people on social media is essentially a kind of self-expression and self-display behavior, which is their effort to shape an image that meets their expectations in the virtual community. Compared with face-to-face communication methods, online platforms bring young people richer and more personalized interactive forms, thus making them show strong selectivity and editability. Participants can choose appropriate shooting angles, write creative copy, sort out accurate route information, and add personalized tags to strengthen their image of life attitude and value orientation. Studies have shown that on *Instagram*, a visually dominant social network, athletes regard it as an important platform for self-image shaping and presentation [13].

Of course, "check-in" does not necessarily mean superficiality. For many young people, check-in is an important entry point into outdoor sports. Platform content provides route information, equipment experience, safety tips and community entrances, making it easier for beginners to access outdoor sports. But when outdoor sports are mainly driven by likes, collections and aesthetic standards, physical practice may also be replaced by landscape production. Therefore, spatial check-in is not only an important intermediary for the lifestyle-oriented development of youth outdoor sports, but also an important source of the risk of spectacularization of outdoor sports.

3.4. Community interaction: from individual consumption to circle belonging

Youth outdoor sports consumption is not an isolated personal behavior, but gains stable meaning in community interaction. Hiking groups, cycling teams, camping communities, frisbee clubs, paddle boarding activity groups, trail running training camps and platform interest communities constitute important organizational forms of youth outdoor sports lifestyle. Young people gradually form group belonging through shared routes, shared equipment language, shared activity memories and shared risk experiences.

Community interaction plays a very important role in the formation of identity. It turns a person's outdoor activity experience from "solitary exploration" to "collective identity", and strengthens people's sense of identity with a certain lifestyle through shared experience, values and behavior patterns. The choices young people make in the community, such as learning approaches, followed safety regulations, mastered equipment knowledge, explored photography methods and communicating when integrating into a certain circle, will make their identity recognized and strengthened by peers. Research by Tsaur and Liang shows that in the category of serious leisure and recreation specialization, factors such as a person's lasting efforts in leisure activities, self-driven behavior and deep sense of identity with the activity will affect the formation of his identity as a

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leisure participant, and will prompt participants to gradually shape a more stable life focus and activity role [14]. This logic also applies to youth outdoor sports.

Whether outdoor sports can be changed from a single activity experience to a long-term lifestyle depends not on whether there is enough equipment or how much content is released, but on whether young people can form stable physical exercise habits, stable social circles and profound internal value identity in continuous participation. Only when outdoor sports are included in the scope of time management, integrated into interpersonal relationships, and also included in personal identity narratives, can it be transformed from a simple consumption behavior into a meaningful lifestyle.

4. Realistic tensions in the cultural practice of youth outdoor sports

4.1. The risk of spectacularization under the logic of check-in

Young people's interest in outdoor sports is closely related to the popularity of social media, and it also prompts people to rethink the risk of spectacularization. Through interactive means such as likes, collections, comments, reposts and recommendations, platforms turn users' outdoor sports experiences into measurable social echoes, which is not only a quantitative reflection of user participation, but also a process of changes in community identity and influence. Research on social media self-presentation by Hjetland et al. points out that feedback seeking, strategic self-presentation and upward social comparison may jointly constitute a kind of "self-presentation focus", and may bring risks to mental health [15]. Although this paper mainly focuses on teenagers' activities on social media, it makes a detailed analysis of the feedback mechanism and its connection with self-presentation pressure, which provides a new perspective for analyzing the motivation and psychological changes of young people's check-in behavior in outdoor activities.

The risk of spectacularization in outdoor activities refers to the process in which sports experience is reshaped and reconstructed by image logic. Under certain circumstances, young people choose to follow the trend, imitate popular shooting angles and recognizable scenes in order to achieve efficient communication effects and wide influence, resulting in the neglect of their own skill level, weather conditions, the complexity of travel routes and the pressure that the ecological environment can bear. At present, physical practice is easily reduced to visual materials that can be displayed and shared. This is not to say that the check-in mechanism itself is problematic, but to remind us to be alert to how the visibility effect of the platform will reshape the meaning and value of this activity.

4.2. Threshold formation and distinction in equipment consumption

Equipment consumption promotes the development of the outdoor sports industry, and also improves the sports experience and safety level. But when equipment is over-symbolized, outdoor sports may create new thresholds. Before entering outdoor sports, some young people first feel not the joy of sports itself, but consumption pressures such as "what should I buy", "what to wear to look like an outdoor person", and "will I be looked down upon without professional equipment".

As sports symbols, outdoor equipment may not only help young people express their identity and gain belonging, but may also become a boundary distinguishing "professionals" from "laymen"; sports symbol consumption itself has the dual functions of difference distinction and group identity [16]. Therefore, the analysis of equipment consumption cannot stop at praising industrial growth, nor can it simply criticize young people for "consumerism". The key is to judge whether equipment

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truly serves safety and experience, whether it lowers the participation threshold, or creates new exclusion.

4.3. Insufficient safety and public services in the upsurge of outdoor sports

Outdoor sports have leisure attributes as well as risk attributes. Projects such as hiking, camping, cycling, paddle boarding and trail running seem easy to access, but they all involve weather judgment, route planning, equipment use, physical fitness assessment, first aid knowledge and environmental protection. Attracted by social media content, some young people tend to understand outdoor sports as a "go-as-you-please" lifestyle, but ignore the risk management involved. For the upsurge of outdoor sports to develop and prosper for a long time, it is necessary to mobilize market enthusiasm and personal interest, and also rely on good facility supply, popular safety education and sound rescue systems. These aspects together form the main pillar supporting the long-term development of this activity. From the perspective of sports governance, when young people have high enthusiasm for outdoor sports, the importance of improving public service infrastructure and improving service supply becomes more prominent.

4.4. From traffic participation to sustainable lifestyle

The real value of youth outdoor sports should not stay on traffic, equipment and check-in, but should be reflected in sustained participation, skill accumulation, physical improvement, relationship connection and stabilization of life meaning. In other words, outdoor sports become a lifestyle not because young people take a photo, buy a set of equipment or go to a camp once, but because it is gradually embedded in the daily life structure of young people.

Lifestyle sports are accepted by people because of their strong inclusiveness, non-competitiveness and flexible rules, and they also open up a new world, bringing new and diverse participation methods for young people who are not interested in traditional competitive sports [17]. This finding shows that when formulating management strategies for youth outdoor sports, we should not only focus on short-term consumption control and temporary social media popularity, but should focus on cultivating and practicing a sustainable lifestyle with a long-term goal and emphasis on health. Only when young people can participate in outdoor activities conveniently and quickly and can persist for a long time, can this activity not become a flash in the pan.

5. Conclusions and implications

The growth trend of youth outdoor sports consumption is the result of the combined effect of multiple factors such as the upgrading of sports consumption, the accumulation of urban life pressure, the widespread influence of social media, and the self-expression of youth subculture. It is manifested in the popularization of outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, cycling, paddle boarding, frisbee and trail running, and its deep meaning is the process of young people shaping their own identity through cultural behaviors such as physical immersion, symbolic consumption, geographical marking and community interaction. Check-in is not just the shooting of a photo, but a social media communication method of self-display formed by young people after integrating the exploration of the natural environment, their own physical condition, the preference of selected equipment and the concept of life philosophy. When outdoor activities change from one-time entertainment consumption to long-term immersive experience, they are no longer just in the

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category of entertainment consumption, but become part of the life philosophy of the younger generation.

Studies have shown that the formation of identity in youth outdoor sports consumption includes the following four aspects: relying on physical experience to temporarily break away from the normal state of urban life, re-recognizing and deepening the connection between oneself and the natural environment; equipment consumption not only meets practical needs, but also contains professionalism, aesthetic value and the symbolic role of personal identity; relying on spatial check-in behavior to turn outdoor activity experience into social capital that can be spread and evaluated; the community interaction mechanism turns outdoor sports from the original individual consumption behavior into a process of seeking social belonging, thus strengthening the emotional connection and identity among participants. At the same time, the practical difficulties encountered by young people in the process of outdoor sports consumption cannot be underestimated. There are mainly three aspects of difficulties: check-in culture will turn sports experience into a visual symbol, resulting in the disappearance of deep-seated sense of participation; excessive emphasis on equipment investment may inadvertently set up new participation thresholds and prevent some people from entering; under the booming upsurge of outdoor activities, there are often problems of lack of safety education and unbalanced allocation of public facilities.

Based on this, to promote the transformation of youth outdoor sports from consumption trend to sustainable lifestyle in the future, we should explore and implement it from three aspects. The purpose is to improve public health and leisure experience. We will start by expanding the supply of low-threshold outdoor sports spaces, and create safer, more convenient and open outdoor activity places in urban parks, suburban green spaces, waterfront areas, greenway networks and surrounding mountains, so as to meet the sports needs of different groups of people and help strengthen the connection between communities. It is very important to strengthen outdoor safety education for teenagers, which includes popularizing route planning skills, correct use of equipment, basic first aid knowledge, weather condition judgment ability and cultivation of environmental protection awareness in schools, communities, clubs and various online platforms. A series of measures are aimed at comprehensively improving the safety awareness and sense of responsibility of teenagers when participating in outdoor activities. To standardize the development of outdoor sports communities, we should strive to promote the dissemination of correct, scientific and responsible outdoor sports information on platforms, and advocate clubs, associations and spontaneous youth organizations to provide a series of services such as entry-level guidance, equipment sharing, standardized activity procedures and risk control. The social value of youth outdoor sports consumption has gone beyond simple consumption growth, and does not only exist in the traffic indicators of a certain platform. Its connotation includes many aspects of social benefits and cultural significance. Only when outdoor sports are truly integrated into young people's daily lives and a set of safe and accessible participation mechanisms are formed, can it become a lifestyle with far-reaching social impact.

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