

Photocards and Collections: The Appeal, Popularity, and Uses of K-pop Compact Disc Purchases in the United States

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Abstract

Although compact disc sales in the United States are significantly smaller than they were a quarter-century ago, several of the format's top-selling artists in recent years hail from the K-pop genre. These K-pop CDs differ from CDs of most other genres as they are often sold with creative packaging and have items inserted, such as photocards and stickers. This study aims to understand the purchase motivations and uses of the compact disc by K-pop consumers through a uses and gratifications lens. Utilizing an online questionnaire, participants noted that they purchase K-pop CDs to acquire, collect, and trade photocards; support their favorite artists; and decorate their rooms or scrapbooks. Not all play their CDs, but those who do use a variety of devices, including car stereos, home stereos, computers, and DVD players. The majority indicated that they are likely to purchase additional new K-pop CDs in the future. Musicians and record labels from other popular music genres seeking to release albums via compact disc may want to consider providing additional packaging incentives to further entice sales from their fanbases.

Keywords

K-pop, photocards, compact disc, CDs, recorded music, music industry

Introduction

While the cachet of a physical music format is not lost on vinyl record collectors and consumers—which has seen steadily growing interest by the general public after years of near-dormancy—the sale of compact discs has largely decreased over the past two decades, reduced to a mere fraction of what sold in the heyday of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 2024, shipments of compact discs in the United States amounted to 32.9 million units, slightly higher than the 32.4 million units a year prior, but nevertheless substantially slimmer than 2000's peak at 942 million (Bass 2025; Leu 2025). The reason for this continuous decline of compact disc sales is rather obvious. With the proliferation of the MP3 file format in the late 1990s (coupled with illegal file sharing servers and the rollout of high-speed internet access in households), and later, advancements in streaming technology (made possible via the establishment of high-speed cellular data connectivity), the overall demand for physical music media has notably declined. Simply put, the general music audience has found more convenient ways in which they can experience a vast

library of titles, without having to own or possess physical formats, but rather by paying a monthly fee to access a digital service provider (DSP) such as Spotify or Apple Music. However, as the sales metrics highlight, there is a particular subset of listening audiences that continue to not only use the compact disc format but purchase them new. While typical compact disc usage today stems from factors including ownership of existing discs and/or still possessing vehicles or computers that feature disc players, a recent trend in the United States has been the sales of new compact discs in the K-pop genre. K-pop artists have seen explosive growth in popularity and recognition over the past several years in the United States. This growth began as an offshoot of the exportation of Korean popular culture—better known as the “Korean Wave” (Shim and Gajzágó 2023)—via Korean TV dramas, which became known regionally in Asia in the 1990s; K-pop music followed, generating international recognition in the following decade, given the rise of popularity and usage of online social media networks by K-pop fanbases

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(Yoon 2019; Jin 2018). One of K-pop's earliest massive successes in the United States was Psy, whose 2012 viral music video for the hit song "Gangnam Style" became the first on YouTube to exceed one billion plays, all the while ushering in a second Korean Wave into North America (Suh 2022). As of October 2025, "Gangnam Style" is still in the list of top 10 most viewed YouTube music videos with 5.7 billion views (YouTube 2025). And while K-pop's fanbase was originally limited to specific audience segments, this has since expanded to more mainstream acceptance in the United States and other territories (Liu and Taneja 2025).

Artists like BTS have become household names, selling out large stadiums such as the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California (Brown 2019), performing on *Saturday Night Live*, and even collaborating with McDonald's for their own signature meal (Nuyen 2021). The prestigious Coachella Music and Arts Festival, an arbiter of music tastes, showcasing both successful and budding musicians since its inception in the Southern California desert in 1999, most recently hosted K-pop artists ENHYPEN (Dodson 2025) and solo performances from BLACKPINK's Jennie and Lisa in its 2025 iteration (Brown 2025; Broadway 2025). The 2026 Coachella Festival has BIGBANG, Taemin (of SHINee), and KATSEYE scheduled to perform (Pyo 2025).

The K-pop audience has fueled the genre's compact disc sales, landing several of its artists in the top 10 for CD sales in the United States. This is an interesting circumstance, as the K-pop audience is typically younger (Tamar 2020) and technologically connected (Yusifzai 2021). These K-pop audiences congregate online, organize, and communicate via social media; they also use connected technologies like light sticks at K-pop concerts across the world. However, K-pop audiences have found compact discs—a music format introduced to the consumer marketplace in the early 1980s—to be an enticing purchase, even if some are not actually playing the discs.

In an era when fewer record labels and artists are pressing and releasing music on compact disc, brand new albums by K-pop artists are continually issued on the format. The sales volume in the United States for some of these releases exceeds 100,000 units per year. While that may not be a significant number if compared historically—when popular artists routinely sold millions of CD units per album release—it is meaningful in 2025. That is because these U.S. CD sales figures rub shoulders with some of contemporary music's most popular American artists, including Taylor Swift.

And this is not an occasional occurrence. Luminate Data's 2023 Mid-Year Report noted that of the top ten CD album sales in the U.S., nine artists were K-pop (Taylor Swift was number 6). The Luminate Data 2023 Year-End Report indicated that seven of its top ten selling artists' albums on CD were K-pop (Taylor Swift held the other three rankings). The Luminate Data 2024 Year-End Report notes that seven of the top ten

album sales on compact disc in the U.S. were from K-pop artists (Swift and Billie Eilish held the other three rankings).

An interesting note was that the number of compact disc sales in this Top 10 list is akin to the number of vinyl album sales units in the Top 10 list of the same report. The Top 10 U.S. CD album units sold ranged from 165,000 to 1,512,000 per title, whereas the Top 10 U.S. vinyl album units ranged from 175,000 to 1,489,000 per title (Luminate Data 2024). However, zero K-pop artists were listed in the U.S.'s Top 10 vinyl records album sales list, which was almost entirely dominated by American-based female pop musicians (the sole exception being Fleetwood Mac). The most recent Luminate Data report as of this writing, the 2025 Mid-Year Report, shows K-pop artists listed as five of the top ten albums sold on CD in the United States. These chart positions further affirm the CD's importance as a format for certain K-pop consumers to purchase.

Literature Review

Articles in the press have discussed the rebirth of the compact disc in the marketplace, to varying degrees, in recent years. With a headline asking, "Is the CD Revival an Actual Thing?," Hogan (2022) notes that K-pop is the best-selling genre on CD at music chain Newbury Comics. The Bull Moose record store chain, with locations in Maine and New Hampshire, also reported a rise in CD sales, partially attributed to K-pop and its emphasis on packaging (Valigra 2022). It was reported that music distribution company Alliance Entertainment's K-pop sales increased 55% over twelve months to the end of July 2023 and that "...the genre 'is driving enormous consumer demand and sales growth in physical music media, particularly in the Compact Disc market'" (Dalugdug 2023, para. 3). Alliance would continue to report a 3.2% increase in general CD sales in the first half of 2024, also citing K-pop as a factor for rising figures (Tencer 2024). According to a record label executive, "the fan bases of some genres seem particularly drawn to CDs—country and K-pop being among the strongest..." (Glasser 2023, para. 7). This is perhaps not surprising, considering that the K-pop genre has been known to find fans connecting on a strong emotional level with their favorite artists (An et al. 2025).

As to why K-pop fans engage with compact discs despite not playing them, Herman (2020) states that many different collectible cards can be produced for an album release (some have fifty variants), and that buyers will aim to complete their collections or discover rare cards by purchasing several copies. And such collecting habits persist, as the ownership of rare items is considered valuable (Anderton 2016). These photocards have been "a large driver for the contemporary success of physical albums sales in the K-pop industry" (James 2025, 8). The packaging of K-pop albums—which

oftentimes includes such collectible cards—is also highlighted in the press. Kinsher's (2023) blog post, titled "What You Can Learn From K-pop Album Packaging," discusses the genre's innovative design concepts, plus its collectible and limited-edition packaging. *The Korea Times* coverage focuses on the eco-friendly packaging of some K-pop CD releases (Park 2021), noting that some record labels designed albums to minimize plastic use and are instead using paper envelopes for packaging.

However, recent news reports state that environmental groups have voiced concerns about the creation and sale of plastic discs, which are not always used by the consumers who purchase them (8% of South Koreans use physical music media, according to the Korea Creative Content Agency), and instead are purchasing multiple copies of the same albums primarily for the purpose of collecting photocards (Park and Kim 2024). Still, these collections may ultimately be to express one's identity, tie relations between audience and artist closer, and provide an opportunity to connect with a unique culture (Ellis 2017; Giles et al. 2007)—in this case, the culture of K-pop fandom. After all, identifying as a K-pop fan or a fan of a specific K-pop artist can direct audience members into in-groups and further establish one's own social identity (Gahler and Choi 2024).

The purpose of this study is to examine K-pop consumers' purchase and usage experiences of compact discs. The study aims to understand why these K-pop consumers—many of whom are of the Generation Z cohort and considered "digital natives"—are seemingly unique in an era when the CD has been relegated to near-obsolescence by most music listeners. This study employs a uses and gratifications model (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1974)—while also being inspired by Lonsdale and North's (2011) qualitative analysis of music listeners—to uncover the motivations behind K-pop audiences' active interest in seeking the compact disc format. Two research questions drive the study's focus:

RQ1: Why do U.S.-based K-pop audiences purchase new music from K-pop artists on compact disc?

RQ2: What do U.S.-based K-pop audiences do with the compact discs they have purchased of K-pop artists?

Methods

After receiving institutional review board approval, an online questionnaire was administered via Qualtrics from February 2024 to October 2025. Question types included both multiple-choice and open-ended responses. Participants were asked a variety of questions about their purchases and uses of K-pop compact discs.

Participants were recruited via mass emails to students attending a large university in the Western U.S. and via social media posts in online K-pop communities and forums. The participants were required to be eighteen years of age or older, be United States residents, and have purchased a new K-pop compact disc within the last three years. After completing an informed consent form, a total of 116 participants engaged with the questionnaire; however, 26 (22%) did not complete all of the questions (the portions that were completed are included in the results). This was deemed a sufficient sample population, given the small subset of new compact disc purchases by K-pop fans; as an example, the Stray Kids *ATE* album sold 442,000 CDs according to Luminate Data's 2024 Year-End Report, while the same album currently has over 750 million collective song streams solely on Spotify as of October 2025. The average age of the participant population was 24.6 years. The majority resided in the western United States (primarily California), with some from other states, including North Carolina, Georgia, Utah, Minnesota, New York, Texas, and Michigan.

Results

Most of the respondents (n=108; 93.1%) had reported purchasing a new compact disc in either 2025, 2024, or 2023. Some respondents did not follow the questionnaire's instructions of typing in the year and month of their most recent new K-pop CD purchase, but rather wrote "last week," "June," or a date without a year; these were ignored due to their imprecision. Participants were asked to estimate the number of K-pop CDs currently in their collections. The range of responses were zero CDs to approximately 300 CDs. The average collection calculated to 43.6 CDs. Some responded with phrases such as "too many to count"; these responses were not numerical and dismissed from the overall calculation. For those who provided a range ("around 80-90") or a minimum number ("30+"), the lower number in the range or that minimum number was used for the overall average calculation.

The reasons for purchasing a new K-pop album on compact disc were considerably varied. The most prominent reason listed was photocards, which was abbreviated to "pc" in a couple participants' responses. These photocards—while varying in size and type—are generally analogous to baseball cards (Groh 2025). They feature photos of K-pop artists, are inserted in the packaging of the K-pop compact disc, and the rarity (and, therefore, collectability) of these cards provides added value and interest to their fanbase. A few participants emphasized the chance of receiving a particular artist's card. Said one, "I also buy CDs because they come with a random collectible photocard (similar to trading cards) and I collect the cards of certain members from certain groups."

Another participant agreed: "A huge reason why I buy kpop albums is also because of the random photocard. Similar to the concept of collecting baseball cards, it is fun (and almost addicting) to collect photocards. While it is like a lottery, the thrill of potentially receiving your favorite member is a good enough incentive to purchase the album."

Unsurprisingly, variations of the term "collect" (including for the collection, or as collectibles) were the second most common reason stated for purchasing CDs. These K-pop fans aspire to build and maintain a collection of compact discs and these "inclusions" (a term used by several participants in their responses that encompasses additional packaging items, outside of the disc itself) are often a motivator for them to seek such recordings. Specific responses included, "I'm a really big fan of the groups I follow and enjoy collecting their merch. I also find excitement in buying K-pop CDs for the random photocards included," and another said, "because it has been my new hyper focused activity. And I love collecting things so creating a photocard collection has been a part of my reasoning as well." Many coupled their collection reasons with support for the artist. As one noted, "I like to collect the albums because they sell the CDs with additional content such as picture books, posters, photocards, etc. I also like to support the group I'm a fan of, so I tend to buy albums when they release new music." Another respondent succinctly put it, "I think buying the albums is a great way to show support for the group/idol!!" A third participant offered more detail behind their purchase intentions, connecting their actions on a neurological level, stating: "I love kpop. I started to listen to kpop last year and it has helped me with my depression and anxiety. Kpop has brought joy to my life that nothing else has. Buying [a] CD and merchandise from my beloved kpop groups gives my brain a boost of dopamine that nothing else can. Similarly to a high." And this participant noted that purchasing compact discs for their collection could increase the artist's chart positioning: "I also like knowing that by buying an album, I can help my favorite artists have success on various music charts." Other recurring reasons mentioned were being a fan of the artist and purchasing CDs as gifts for friends or relatives.

Participants used a variety of methods to purchase new K-pop compact discs, including from online retailers, directly from the record label (major K-pop record labels SM, JYP, and HYBE were all mentioned), at big-box stores, K-pop specialty retailers, and via "group orders," in which several fans would place a single order together, to reduce shipping and import costs especially if the purchase originates from South Korea. Popular online outlets included Amazon and Weverse (an online K-pop fan community created by HYBE), whereas major physical retail chain Target was frequently reported (35% of responses). Several indicated purchasing compact discs from K-pop stores in physical locations, including K Place, Choice Music LA, and Kloud K-Pop, and a few noted

bookseller Barnes & Noble as a source for K-pop discs. An interesting note is that of the one hundred participants who responded to this question about where album purchases were made, only two responded with purchasing albums at a physical record store that did not specialize in K-pop music. Approximately 45.5% (n=45 of 99 responding participants) stated that they do not play their K-pop CDs. The remaining majority (n=54; 54.5%) played their CDs at home (n=52; 52.5%) and/or in the car (n=30; 30.3%), while traveling on a bus, plane, or train (n=8; 8.1%) or while exercising (n=7; 7.1%). The most popular devices used for playback included a computer (n=38; 38.4%), car stereo (n=30; 30.3%), DVD player (n=18; 18.2%), portable "boombox-style" stereo (n=15; 15.2%), portable "Discman-style" CD player (n=14; 14.1%), or component stereo (n=13; 13.1%). A fair portion of participants selected multiple devices for playback (n=30, 30.3%); a couple others stated they use disc-based game consoles such as the Sony PlayStation 1 and PlayStation 2 Slim to play their compact discs.

The reasons for playing and owning CDs were similar to the reasons for purchase. Photocards, collecting, inclusions, support ("buying the physical album directly contributes to chart rankings...many fans see it as a way to 'give back' to the artist," said one participant), packaging, and displaying all echoed earlier responses for purchasing. However, additional insight was garnered from this open-ended question. One participant said that by owning and playing K-pop compact discs, "I get to listen to the music the way it was intended (like the right order)." Others touted the tangibility, including this participant, who noted the CD as an alternative to streaming, in which certain albums may not be accessible: "I own kpop cds because I like to have my music in a more tangible form just in case it is unavailable online." Other alternatives to streaming were mentioned by a variety of participants, some of which included, "to not waste data and skip ads," "it's also nice to get off my devices," "sometimes the Bluetooth takes forever to connect to the car," "when I want to have music playing in the background without using the battery of my other devices," and, "just in case [the albums] ever get removed from online apps."

The sonic fidelity of compact disc playback was also cited as a reason for its use. "My grandma left her stereo in my room and I play my CDs on it and the sound quality is much better on it as opposed to any speaker I own," said one participant. "I like lossless," said another participant. And this response stated, "we used to have a really nice home stereo system and the sound quality I could get out of my CDs was really good."

The perception of the K-pop compact disc packaging was reinforced by the participants in their responses to CD ownership and usage. Several simply found them visually attractive or appealing, using them for display or décor purposes. Descriptive language from a variety of participants

included, “the packaging and inclusions are exquisite,” “the album packaging is always super unique and pretty,” and “I also like the aesthetic of albums to display as decorations.” This participant added that, “another reason I own K-pop CDs is because the design and creativity that goes into physical releases in the K-pop industry really is above and beyond. It is very rare that a K-pop CD comes in the traditional plastic CD case and they all come in very unique designs, shapes, and sizes.” However, another participant stated that they intentionally purchased CDs for playback, not necessarily for decoration purposes: “I bought the albums and want to use/play them rather than just having them be unplayed and collecting dust on my bookshelves.”

Hidden or exclusive tracks were another reason why some participants played and owned K-pop compact discs. These hidden or bonus tracks are sometimes only available on the CD release and not on streaming platforms. And the opportunity to trade inclusions—such as photocards—was again mentioned by more than a few participants.

A question asked whether participants planned to purchase more newly released K-pop compact discs in the future. Approximately 81% of the respondents marked in the affirmative, with either “definitely yes” (51%) or “probably yes” (30%). About 7% were “not sure,” 7.5% marked “probably not,” and 4.3% indicated they “definitely [would] not” purchase additional new K-pop CDs. Reasons as to why those who indicated “definitely yes” or “probably yes” varied, yet also largely echoed earlier statements about their current purchase decisions, such as supporting the artist, collecting the photocards, attractive packaging, limited editions, and completing collections.

Several participants planned to purchase K-pop compact discs in the future because of an artist’s release of new recordings. For example, BTS made headlines in 2023 for its hiatus due to some of its members temporarily leaving the ensemble to complete their mandatory military enlistment in South Korea; all members have since completed their service (Park and Sherman 2025). Ten participants specifically used the term “comeback” in their responses, though this does not always mean the group is returning from disbandment or hiatus. This participant specifically noted that “each comeback represents a new era, and owning the album makes it easier to remember that period of time as a fan.” Other responses included: “I am a kpop stan so whenever my favorite artists have a comeback I would support and buy their album,” “I really like Le Sserafim, and I feel like they’re likely to have a comeback soon,” and, “a lot of my favorite groups are coming out with new albums/comebacks this year so I’m excited and ready!”

Differing responses answered why a subset would not purchase new K-pop CDs in the future. A few participants cited the costs of purchasing discs. One noted, “I think they are getting more expensive, I also have been listening to more music on Spotify. KPOP is getting too big and crazy now. The

groups I listened to back then have stopped producing albums,” and another stated, “they’ve increased in price and I barely play them.” Consumption habits were another reason, as one participant said, “they release too many versions for no reason which is bad for the planet,” with another similar statement by this participant: “over consumption and it’s collecting dust.” A third reason, mentioned by a pair of participants, was a waning interest in K-pop album collections. “I’ve grown into new hobbies and interests and would rather spend my money on things revolving around these new interests,” said one participant. “I think I’ve grown out of that phase and I only care about the photo cards,” said another. And this participant mentioned not only declining desire, but a lack of space: “It’s been over a year since I bought my last album and I am not as hyperfixated on K-pop at the present...I’m also pretty much completely out of room on my shelves to display my albums.”

As to what utility these compact discs have for the participants, many reported using the packaging or included content such as photocards, stickers, and posters for scrapbooking and journaling, trading photocards, decorating their rooms, collecting, and display purposes. Examples of such activity include this participant’s response: “There are different concepts and versions of albums, so sometimes it’s fun to collect them all. It’s also fun to see which photocards you get. Stores like [T]arget have exclusive extra photocards to incentivize you to buy from that place.” Other examples of supporting statements included: “I like to trade photocards with the community for different members. It’s a fun activity to do,” “I do not do this personally, but I have seen other people use the contents inside of the album and photobooks for more creative work. I’ve seen others rip out pages of the photobook for scrapbooking or other journaling activities as well,” “I frame them,” and “sometimes I use the CD as more of a visual, for example, putting it in a sleeve or case and using it to decorate my room.”

Discussion and Future Directions

In an era of dematerialization, in which some media products—especially for younger generations—are not collected or kept, but rather streamed, rented, or otherwise acquired via non-tangible means, it is interesting that a subset of contemporary music fans, namely K-pop listeners, are engaged in creating and maintaining a collection of compact discs. What makes this more remarkable is that the K-pop fanbase tends to skew younger, as many of the survey respondents were in their late teens or early twenties. (Had the participants’ age minimum of eighteen years not been in place, the study’s average age could have trended even younger).

In framing and summarizing the findings via a uses and gratifications lens (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1974), some consistent patterns emerge from the data. These themes,

such as enjoyment, support, surprise, and appeal, are tied to the concept that the audience member actively seeks specific media selections to satisfy their wants. These fans appear to truly *enjoy* the collectible nature of their favorite K-pop artists' albums, they *support* their favorite artists with their purchases, they appreciate the *surprise* of the various inclusions (or, as some stated, a "lottery"), and they find the packaging highly *appealing*—enough to decorate their personal spaces with these releases. Plus, they also purchase them as gifts, participate in a trade/sell community, and revel in the exclusivity of owning limited-edition or special issue releases. Not all these themes are exclusive to K-pop compact disc consumers, though. Collectors of vinyl records hailing from a variety of genres may also engage in similar activity, as music fans have been inclined to support artists through such purchases and acquisitions (Brown and Knox 2016).

A pattern of the descriptors and adjectives used by the participants in their responses, particularly regarding questions of purchase intentions, was also apparent. Many positive terms were shared, such as "enjoy," "fun," "happy," "exciting," "cool," "cute," "joy," and "love." This affirmative emotional quality seems to only reinforce their decisions to seek, purchase, and use K-pop compact discs. The use of these terms also speaks to the gratifications these K-pop fans desire from such forms of music media.

The average age of the participant population at 24.6 years places their birth years around 2000-2001, nearly the time that compact disc sales began to decline (and perhaps correspondingly so with usage). Some of these participants on the younger end of the age group (12 participants were either 18 or 19 years of age, placing their birth years around 2006-2007) may not have even regularly interacted with compact discs until after their K-pop purchases; after all, they were born approximately the same year the Apple iPhone was released, a product many current music listeners use for streaming albums and songs. An argument can be made that the uses and gratifications of a K-pop compact disc purchase may not be a nostalgia-induced endeavor for fans of this genre (made especially clear, given that none of the participants even mentioned it), but rather an entirely new experience in using what some may deem an increasingly anachronistic format. As some of these K-pop fans use various types of CD players, it also allows such users to decouple themselves from streaming devices such as smartphones, lessen their reliance on online services and associated technologies, and therefore engage with a format that again may be viewed by these users more as novel than nostalgic. One participant summarized their experience, stating: "I also got a new CD storage rack, which made me more excited about collecting them and adding a unique look to my room. They're also super easy to use and [I] like the idea of moving away from digital albums and using 'old school' technology like stereos and CD players."

The discussion also included access to some of these albums, as they are not always regularly distributed and sold in the United States and therefore must be ordered directly from South Korea. Some participants mentioned that it has recently become easier to purchase K-pop albums on compact disc.

As one participant notes,

I was not able to purchase K-pop CDs when I was younger. Before I would have to order online via eBay to receive any K-pop CDs. Now I am able to purchase K-pop CDs at local K-pop shops. Not only does this make me feel more connected to my favorite groups, I can also hold a tangible piece of merch, of [sic] which is easier to obtain due to K-pop's growing popularity.

Another participant corroborates this statement, saying: "I have always enjoyed physical music formats (CD, cassettes, records) and kpop has recently become more accessible in the US." Accessibility may be improving, but there are some articles reporting that K-pop album sales appear lower both in the domestic South Korean market and in the United States (Hankookilbo 2025; Stassen 2025).

If popular music artists and record labels still desire to sell new music on compact disc to younger audiences, perhaps they can take a lesson from K-pop labels, by going beyond the traditional jewel case with a basic booklet, and instead focus on the complete presentation of the packaging. Inclusions such as stickers, photocards, and posters—coupled with rare and exclusive tracks only available on the CD format—can enhance consumer perception of the album, making it a more attractive proposition for purchase. However, the fandom must already be established and community-oriented—much like K-pop fandoms—to ensure robust sales for such limited-edition offerings and to foster such excitement and passion within the fanbase.

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