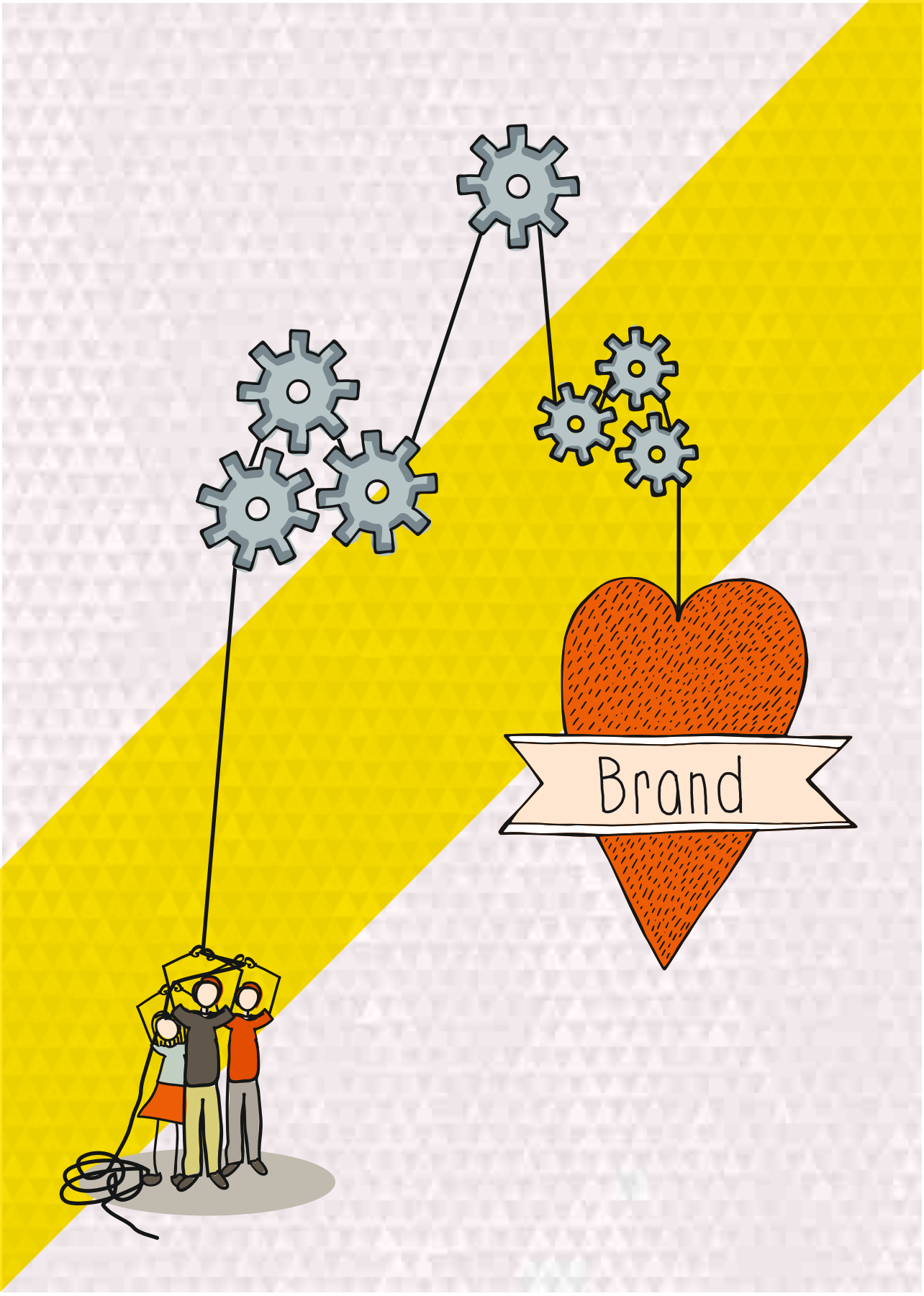

Brand

Social Brand Engagement: A New Idea

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The quandary of engagement /// Although it has become a popular buzzword, there is still considerable confusion about engagement or, as a number of academics tend to refer to it, "consumer-brand engagement". From the mid-2000s on, influential brand consultants and writers like Kevin Roberts and Marc Gobé began telling marketers that brand awareness and loyalty were not enough, that managers now needed to seek emotional commitment and brand love. Social media marketing writers like Brian Solis, Francois Gossieaux, and Joseph Jaffe began to translate the love orientation of emotional branding and plug it into the engagement concepts of social media marketing analytics.

In industry, engagement has been defined operationally, as a type of multidimensional and multistep process guided by management. Many researchers have looked at brand engagement as an individual's psychological state of mind regarding their physical, emotional, and active experiences with a brand.

Some recent scholars, however, have noticed the deficiency and expanded the engagement concept to include the active and social aspects of brand engagement, when a consumer begins to simultaneously interact with the brand and with other people. Particularly noteworthy here is the work of Rosella Gambetti and her colleagues, in which they suggest including consumer-to-consumer "interaction, participation, dialogue, co-creation, and sharing of brand-related values

and contents'' as a necessary part of the brand engagement concept. However, now the concept has become overly large and inclusive. And, as a result, confused.

We need to begin to talk about a special type of engagement. If ''consumer-brand engagement'' is what happens in isolation, in a consumer's own individual mind and thoughts, based on personal – even physical – experience between a product and person, then social brand engagement is the diametric opposite of this. Social brand engagement is a social act full of culture, meaning, language, and values.

The social side of brand engagement /// Social brand engagement is meaningful connection, creation and communication between one consumer and one or more other consumers, using brand or brand-related language, images and meanings. You cannot have social brand engagement in isolation. Engagement need not be strictly about economic transaction, either. Social brand engagement can happen when the brand is a celebrity, an idea, a cause, a destination, a country of origin, a nationality or even an activity or hobby. With social brand engagement, the relationship widens from person-brand to person-person-brand.

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Social brand-engagement principles are based upon two notions. The brand-based consumer-consumer connection can vary by the type and level of endorsement of the brand: from little endorsement, which can also be negative critique, to lots of endorsement, as with appreciation and recommendation. The connections among consumers can also vary by the amount of creative work consumers are doing, from merely ticking a ''like'' box to creating detailed videos or organizing campaigns. These two dimensions give rise to some important types of social brand engagement for us to consider. (Figure 1)

First, if consumers are not endorsing the brand and not creating communications or connections around it, then no one cares. This is probably the worst engagement situation to face, but also the one all new brands face: ***apathy***. Making consumers care enough to share is difficult and expensive, but can certainly be done. Increasingly, it must be approached through social branding principles such as the ones described and detailed in this issue.

Second, if consumers are willing to endorse the brand, but show little interest in or ability to create new material, they are engaging in ***evangelism***. As we will see in the articles by Edward McQuarrie et al and Robert Kozinets et al, this type of behavior is often sought by marketing managers who want their message to spread or their new video to go viral. However, this type of engagement is minimal and may not be seen to be as genuine or authentic as more creative types.

Next are the various social and ***creative activities*** in which consumers engage that do not necessarily endorse the brand. People have their own uses for things, including brands. They may choose to play with brands – as our article by John Deighton and Leora Kornfeld illustrates. They may choose to play against brands or decide to become activists, seriously opposing the brand as the child-labor activists did in our article by Henry Jenkins. Or, unsatisfied with current offerings, they may choose to create their own new brands, as in our article by Johann Füller.

The optimal and desired state for marketers is to move the other states toward ***believable, authentic, motivational endorsement*** that is marked by creative expression and use of the brand. Here, people play positively and socially with the brand. They view it as a valued and valuable cultural resource. Social brand engagement has meaningful and significant social, creative and productive outcomes.

FIGURE 1:
Forms of social brand engagement



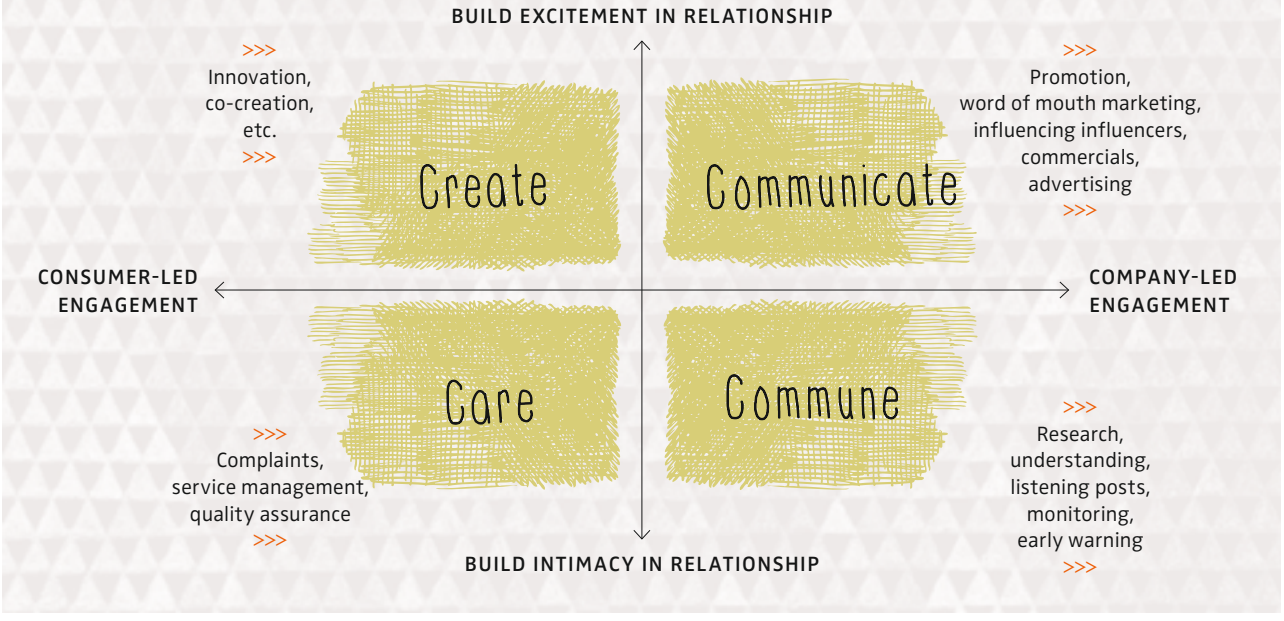
Four strategies for successful social brand engagement /// The research work presented in this issue illustrates four general strategies for successful and positive social brand engagement. (Figure 2, page 12) These strategies are based upon two underlying premises. The initial premise is that social brand engagement is like a dance: Although there are two parties moving together, for it to happen gracefully, one party must take the lead. In this case, engagement practices, with their creativity and endorsement functions, can be largely initiated and maintained by either consumers or companies. And just as in an elegant waltz, it should be clear to both parties who is leading the strategy. Companies have historically had major problems letting consumers take the lead, but for successful authentication to happen, putting consumers in the driver's seat is sometimes – but certainly not always – necessary.

The following premise holds that, because social brand engagement is built on connection and relationships, it is also useful to think about the two polarities of successful relationships. Successful relationships must balance the security and comfort of intimacy with the stimulation and novelty of excitement. Successful social brand engagement is no different.

> ***Customer Care*** /// The first strategy to consider is one that many if not most major companies have adopted regarding social media: using them for customer care. Customer care strategies often now involve the use of social media monitoring to find customer complaints and to channel them to appropriate customer-service personnel. Often, customer care conducted over social media serves a "quelling" function, seeking to prevent customer service "forest fires" before they happen. However, this seems overly reactive and negative. On the other hand, customer care initiatives can, indeed, be deeply meaningful and reassuring to consumers, providing a basis for comfort and intimacy in the relationship.

FIGURE 2:

Strategies to leverage social brand engagement



> ***Co-Creation*** /// The second strategy is to use social brand engagement to gather ideas from consumers and to co-create or collaborate in their creative endeavors. This can be a powerful tool for big brands, as recent successful efforts at crowdsourcing new products by Budweiser beer and the clothing brand Patagonia demonstrate. Finding and using consumer-generated ideas can generate excitement and authenticity, as well as lead to new insights into consumers' experiences and world.

> ***Communing and Listening*** /// The third strategy is about understanding. Communing is the use of social brand engagement strategies to listen broadly, widely, deeply and wisely to the ongoing conversations consumers have with one another as they communicate about the various matters related to brands. This should be done with big data, medium-sized data, smart data and small data. In this case, companies would silently initiate the process of listening or sagely employ their existing social media listening posts. They would then use the information to introduce greater levels of intimacy into their brand-consumer relationships.

> ***Communication and Sharing*** /// The final, and perhaps most familiar, social media-based strategy is the use of social branding techniques to share information, messages and images that, when spread by consumers, can promote and influence other consumers to purchase and use more of the brand's products or services. Out of necessity, these company-initiated messages should be stimulating and exciting and should give consumers a good reason to both spread them and to act upon them in the marketplace.

This special issue on social brand engagement /// This special issue of the GfK Marketing Intelligence Review provides insights that relate to all four types of social brand engagement strategy. Social brand engagement extends and refocuses work on word of mouth. It is particularly useful as we work to understand the social media context and how it provides easy access between consumers for social brand engagement to occur.

The social power of "megaphone" holding consumers /// Peering into the worlds of both consumer creators and corporate needs to communicate, Edward McQuarrie and his coauthors detail the elaborate social and cultural process by which fashion bloggers take hold of the Internet "megaphone" to broadcast and influence taste (pp. 16). This work teaches us some general principles about the ways in which marketing is affected by these "citizen journalist" social media posters and the ways their behavior is affected by marketers. These megaphone-holding consumers have real power. Their consumer-to-consumer relationships depend on brands. In addition, brands are increasingly coming to depend on them as well. The social system involves and is based on the simultaneous use of both types of relationships: brand-consumer and consumer-consumer.

How social branding messages are translated /// The next reading, based on our research, continues to look at both creation and communication (pp. 22). Continuing to explore the dance between companies and empowered social media consumers, we netnographically researched how social branding efforts are received culturally. This expansion of the original article illustrates how the general principles we found in blogging communities may be applied to the entire world of social media. As messages become translated into meaningful communally shared material, under particular cultural restraints, possibilities open up, rules become less constraining and the principles and guidelines for successful social branding engagement become much more about human relationships than one-way communications.

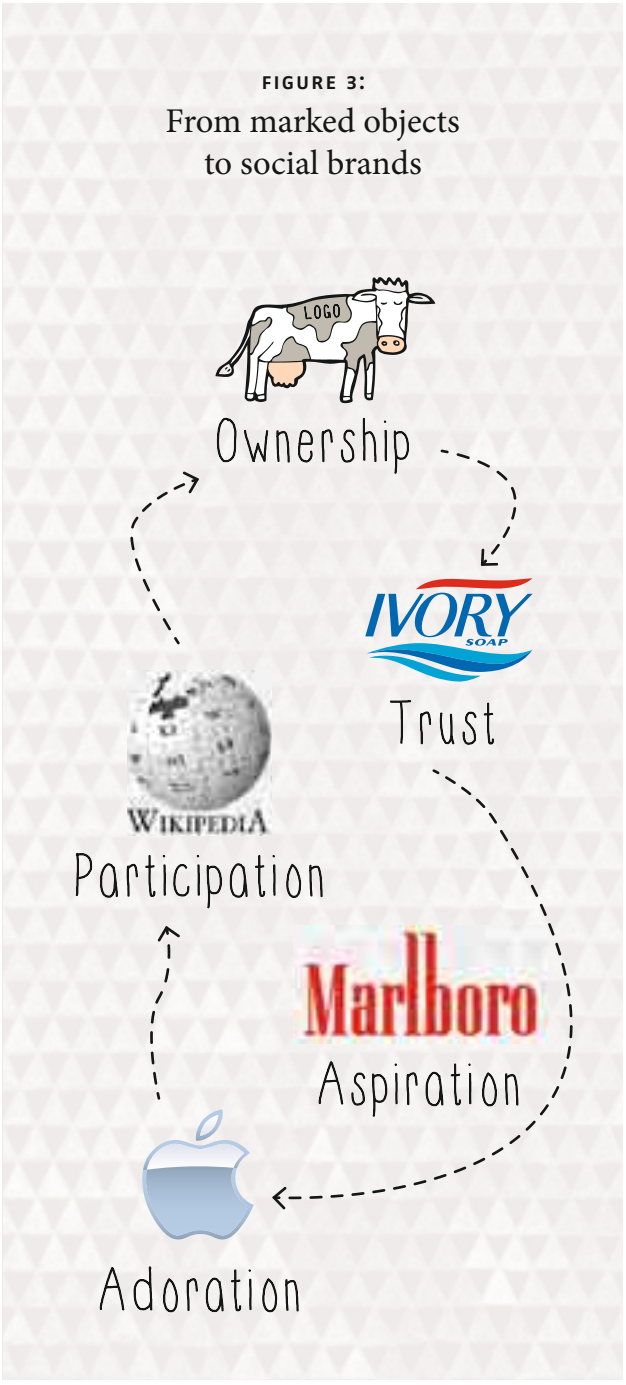
Playing against and playing with social brands /// Continuing our cultural journey of social brand engagement is John Deighton and Leora Kornfeld's exploration of the playful side of social media (pp. 28). According to them, social brand engagement is not merely about the turn-taking of communication and conversation, but about the turn-taking of competition and cooperation – playing against and playing with – that we typically see in game play. Touching on the responsiveness of care strategies as well as the power of communication strategies, the article shows how effective social brand engagement can result from marketers "getting in the game" by playing with consumers.

Brand engagement can mean brand activism /// But what happens when consumers mock, resist or entirely take over your brand? What Deighton and Kornfeld see as "tomfoolery", Henry Jenkins sees as brand activism (pp. 34). Jenkins' article relates how media fan culture and social brand engagement empower people to collectively seek social change. It deals with a combined care-and-create strategy that was mishandled by the Warner Bros. company. In this case, Harry Potter, a particular brand, is embraced. At the same time, the company who owns and licenses the brand is systematically scrutinized and criticized. The results are highly instructive to managers who increasingly face such challenges to their production and marketing methods. Social brand engagement, which draws consumers together to discuss brands, is a double-edged sword.

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Consumer-Created brands /// In our next article, Johann Füller explores both the ultimate usurpation as well as the ultimate ownership of a brand by groups of consumers (pp. 40). This occurs when engaged consumers create their own brand. "Community brands" are created by motivated groups of consumers engaged with a product or activity. As Prof. Füller explains, this phenomenon of engaged consumers producing their own brands places them in the same position as other producers and is both a challenge and an opportunity for companies.

FIGURE 3:
From marked objects to social brands



Harnessing social media /// The "communing" notions of businesses needing to deal with and understand the complex realities of social brand engagement are a core theme of the interview conducted with Adam Froman, the Canadian digital entrepreneur who runs Delvinia (pp. 46). The discussion with Adam covers such central themes as the evolution of social media marketing, how social brand engagement is coming to be viewed holistically, the role of mobile, and how business-academic partnerships develop in this exciting new space.

A view from the helicopter /// Our final article presents a research project sponsored by the GfK Verein (pp. 52). Focusing clearly on care and communing strategies, Axel Maireder shows how buzz on the Web can be tracked taking a macro perspective. The method he develops allows business users to quickly observe how potentially engaging – or threatening – consumer conversations spread online and to locate and identify activist groups as well as admirers.

The evolution of branding into social branding /// Engagement – as both social communication and individual emotional commitment – has been empowered by current conditions as never before. Media channels are multiplying. Microcultures are fragmenting into multicultures, with cultural hybridization reaching new heights of speed and extents of change. Mass media channels are multiplying exponentially and also evolving into transmedia. Everything media is both flying apart by diversifying and coming together by digitizing at the same time.

Marketing, meanwhile, has split into its component parts. The gravitational field of the "four Ps" Kotleresque thinking has gradually been broken by the call of other fields. Pricing is a financial matter. Distribution and supply-chain issues have migrated into operations management. Segmentation is being called a general management strategy. As the digitization of marketing continues, more and more data is being shifted to the operations side of business. If marketing is to be about more than the tactics of sales, advertising and communications, it must find a new strategic focus.

A key component of this new strategic marketing focus should be social branding based on social brand engagement.

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The basic proposition is that brands are evolving into social brands (Figure 3). Brands began as marks people introduced to signify that something was theirs: their cattle or their property. From there, brands began their journey to the social. They became a symbol of something you could identify and then perhaps trust. Something you could compare, discuss and report on. But brands also became something with which you could build a relationship. Brands became shared, something you could participate in. Brands also became legal entities, departments in corporations, consulting and tax-collection projects. Brands had boundaries, and sharing and participation have had historical limits that are now increasingly being tested. In addition, through their centrality in the culture-production industry, brands began to take on cultural and archetypal characteristics of their own, such as with the anthropomorphic qualities of the Jolly Green Giant or of Mr. Clean. As brands become social things that we can rely on and relate to, in ever more intimate ways (think of the Old Spice Guy), we move back in novel ways to participating, sharing, and owning our brands, to subjectively feeling that they, once again, are – both collectively and individually – ours.
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