



Conversion Fails in Indonesian Higher Education from Application to Enrolment Uncovering Why Applicant

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Abstract. This study investigates why applicants who have passed the initial admissions stage do not proceed to final enrolment in an Indonesian private higher education context. While student recruitment is often measured by the number of applications received, institutional sustainability depends on the ability to convert applicants into enrolled students. This study employed a descriptive survey design supported by thematic analysis of open-ended responses. Data were collected from 179 applicants who had participated in the admissions process but did not complete final re-registration. The data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, and thematic categorization. The findings show that conversion failure is influenced by several factors, including waiting for public university admission results, financial constraints, postponement of study plans, family considerations, uncertainty about the institution or study programmed, preference for other institutions, and campus accessibility. A key finding reveals that 58.1% of respondents would reconsider enrolment if scholarships, tuition discounts, or other financial assistance were available. These findings highlight the need for a conversion management strategy through targeted financial aid, transparent cost communication, family engagement, and proactive applicant follow-up.

Keywords: Applicant Conversion; Enrolment; Financial Aid; Higher Education; University Choice.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions in Indonesia are now facing increasingly fierce competition, in which student recruitment, stable enrolment, and institutional sustainability are closely interconnected. For private universities, success in student admissions cannot be measured solely by the number of applications received (Damayanti et al., 2024; Cahyono et al., 2026). Although a high number of applicants may reflect institutional visibility and public interest, it does not necessarily guarantee that applicants will proceed to the final registration stage (Sirait et al., 2024). Therefore, the gap between the number of applications received and the number of students who actually enroll needs to be understood as a strategically important issue in higher education admissions management. Recent studies have shown that students' decisions to enter higher education are shaped by a complex set of factors, including institutional reputation, financial affordability, brand trust, promotional communication, and perceived programs value. Juhaidi et al. (2025) found that enrolment intention in Indonesian higher education is influenced by brand awareness, brand trust, promotion, school type, and family socioeconomic background. This indicates that applicants' decisions are not formed only at the point of application, but continue to develop through comparison, information search, and evaluation of institutional credibility before final enrolment.

In the context of private higher education, competition with public universities remains an important challenge. Putri (2025) shows that prospective students in Indonesia tend to consider accreditation, tuition fees, campus image, scholarship information, application ease, and career relevance when choosing private higher education institutions. These findings are consistent with Juhaidi (2024), Wahyudi & Nur, (2013), who argues that university choice in Indonesia is shaped by perceived institutional quality, type of institution, and the suitability of the institution with students' needs. Therefore, applicants who have passed the initial admission stage may still delay or cancel final registration when they perceive stronger alternatives, especially public universities or institutions with better perceived value.

Students' decisions in choosing a university are influenced by various considerations, ranging from the reputation of the institution, the uniformity of study programs, to the perceived educational benefits. Furthermore, promotional communications, the level of awareness of the institution's brand, the family's socioeconomic status, and trust in the university also shape these decisions. In the Indonesian context, Juhaidi (2024) explained that prospective students tend to compare universities based on the type of institution, perceived quality, and various conditions relevant to their needs. Meanwhile, Juhaidi et al. (2025) found that promotional factors, brand awareness, trust in the brand, school type, and family socioeconomic background all influence students' intentions to enroll in universities in Indonesia. These findings emphasize that the registration process cannot be viewed as a final decision, but rather as part of a series of gradual and evolving decision-making processes.

Financial affordability remains a major obstacle hindering participation in higher education. Delaney & Marcotte, (2024) demonstrated that tuition fees significantly influence a person's decision to continue their education after high school. Conversely, Mulyaningsih et al. (2025), through research conducted in Central Java, Indonesia, found that even students who qualify for financial aid may still hesitate to enroll. This hesitation is influenced by low expectations, limited information, and various obstacles arising from family environments. These findings confirm that financial barriers are not solely related to the high cost of education, but also include uncertainty, perceptions of risk, and students' and families' understanding of available financial support.

Financial affordability is also a central factor in the transition from application to enrolment. Mulyaningsih et al. (2025), in a study of low-income eligible students in Central Java, found that limited information, family background, and low expectations may reduce students' willingness to apply for financial aid even when they are eligible. At a broader policy level, Czarnecki & Korpi, (2025) show that student funding policies are closely related to

tertiary education participation in high-participation countries. These studies suggest that financial barriers are not only related to tuition costs, but also to uncertainty, limited knowledge of available support, and family perceptions of educational investment.

Family influence also plays a significant role in determining the decision to pursue higher education. In many situations, the decision to enroll in college is not solely determined by the student, but rather results from discussions and collective deliberations within the family. Parents and other family members often influence educational choices through financial support, expectations, approval, and even their views on the credibility of an educational institution. Bórquez & Soriano, (2024) explain that parental support and expectations also influence students' educational transition process, especially for first-generation students. Therefore, the conversion process for prospective students cannot be viewed solely as a personal decision, but also as part of a decision-making process involving the family (Eldegwy et al., 2024; Bórquez & Soriano, 2024; Koçak et al., 2021).

Institutional communication is also a crucial aspect. Prospective students generally require transparent and easy-to-understand information regarding tuition fees, scholarship programs, payment systems, campus facilities, graduate career opportunities, and the institution's values and identity. Pawar (2024) explains that the use of social media and digital communication in higher education marketing plays a crucial role in increasing student engagement, building the institution's image, influencing enrolment decisions, maintaining relationships with students, and supporting the overall marketing strategy. On the other hand, Amado Mateus et al. (2024) and Villafaina & Mosquera, (2024) revealed that student perceptions of a university are influenced by the relationship between perceived value, educational experiences, satisfaction levels, and the institution's reputation.

Similarly, Mateus et al. (2024) emphasize that students' perceived value and educational experience influence university reputation, which is important for institutional competitiveness and sustainability. Thus, the post-application stage should not be treated merely as an administrative process, but as a critical conversion phase in which institutions need to provide transparent cost information, persuasive communication, family-oriented engagement, and targeted financial support.

Although research on university selection and enrolment intention continues to grow, attention to the post-application phase remains limited. Previous studies have mainly examined students' reasons for choosing a particular university, including institutional reputation, affordability, programme suitability, and perceived institutional quality (Juhaidi 2024; Putri, 2025). Other studies have focused on factors influencing enrolment intention, such as brand

awareness, brand trust, promotion, school type, and family socioeconomic background (Juhaidi et al., 2025). In addition, recent research has also discussed the role of university reputation, perceived value, educational experience, satisfaction, and loyalty after students have formally entered higher (Mateus et al., 2024; Villafaina & Mosquera, 2024). However, these studies have not sufficiently addressed the post-application stage, in which prospective students have already shown initial interest and entered the admissions process but ultimately do not proceed to final enrolment. Therefore, the issue of failed conversion from applicants to active students remains underexplored, especially in the context of private higher education in Indonesia.

This study addresses the research gap by focusing on applicants who have completed the initial admissions process but do not proceed to final re-registration. Its novelty lies in viewing student admissions not merely as a recruitment activity, but as part of a broader conversion management strategy. Accordingly, this study seeks to identify why applicants fail to become enrolled students and to examine whether financial interventions, such as scholarships or tuition waivers, could encourage them to reconsider their enrolment decisions.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive quantitative survey design. This design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to systematically describe and summarise the key factors that caused applicants who had passed the initial admissions stage to discontinue the final registration process. Quantitative survey research enables researchers to collect numerical data from a defined group of respondents and describe patterns, frequencies, and tendencies related to a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Bihu, 2021; Taherdoost, 2022). Therefore, this approach was suitable for mapping applicant conversion barriers in the post-application stage. The research flow is shown in Figure 1.

Respondents in this study were prospective students who had been accepted to a university but had not yet completed the re-registration process. The study sample consisted of 179 applicants who met certain criteria: those who had passed the initial admissions stage but did not proceed to the final registration stage. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, selecting respondents based on their suitability for the research objectives.

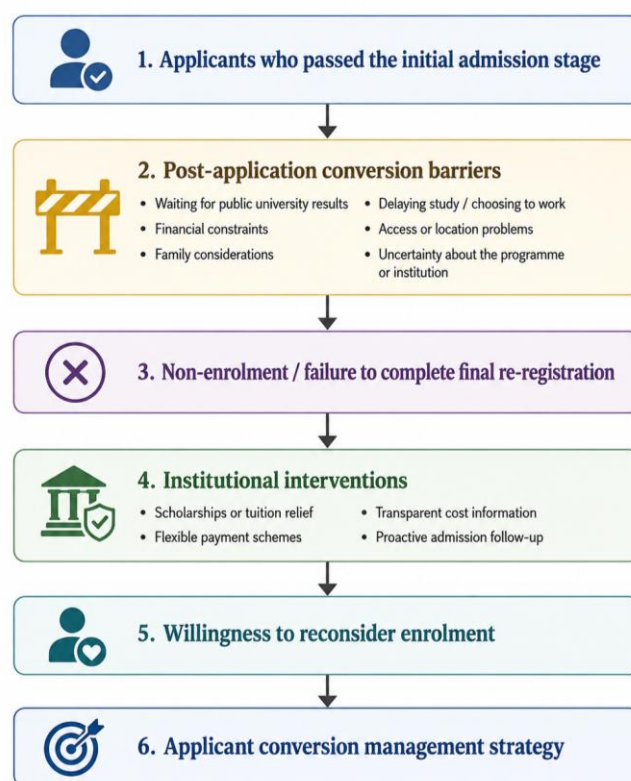


Figure 1. The flowchart of the study.

Data were collected through a Google Forms-based admissions survey conducted from January to April 2026. The questionnaire was distributed through the institution's official admissions communication channels to applicants who had passed the initial selection stage but did not complete final re-registration. The instrument consisted of closed-ended questions on intended study programme, reasons for non-enrolment, and willingness to reconsider enrolment if financial assistance was offered, as well as an open-ended question for admissions improvement suggestions.

Before distribution, the questionnaire was reviewed by the admissions team and academic management representatives to ensure relevance and clarity. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained through questionnaire completion, and no personally identifiable information was collected. Quantitative data were analyzed using frequencies and percentages, while open-ended responses were grouped using thematic analysis to identify key conversion barriers (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The distribution of study programs of interest among applicants who did not proceed to final registration shows a strong bias towards the healthcare sector. According to Table 1, the Bachelor of Physiotherapy was the most popular choice, with 49 respondents (27.4%), followed by the Bachelor of Nursing with 47 respondents (26.3%). Combined, these two programs accounted for 96 respondents, or 53.7% of the total sample, indicating that more than half of applicants who did not complete the initial registration process were interested in the healthcare sector.

Meanwhile, programs outside the healthcare sector showed lower interest. The Bachelor of Entrepreneurship program was registered with 22 respondents (12.3%), while the Diploma in Nursing was represented by 19 respondents (10.6%). Other programs, such as the Bachelor of Digital Business ($n = 16$; 8.9%) and the Bachelor of Pharmacy ($n = 15$; 8.4%), had moderate representation. The Bachelor of Midwifery program had the lowest number of respondents, with 11 respondents (6.1%).

Table 1. Distribution of intended study programmes among non-enrolled applicants.

Study programme	Frequency (n)	%
Bachelor of Physiotherapy	49	27.4
Bachelor of Nursing	47	26.3
Bachelor of Entrepreneurship	22	12.3
Diploma in Nursing	19	10.6
Bachelor of Digital Business	16	8.9
Bachelor of Pharmacy	15	8.4
Bachelor of Midwifery	11	6.1
Total	179	100.0

Main Reasons for Not Proceeding to Final Enrolment

An analysis of respondents' reasons for not proceeding to the final application stage reveals several key trends, primarily related to uncertainty and financial factors. Table 2 shows that the most dominant reason was waiting for admission results at state universities, chosen by 40 respondents (22.3%). This finding indicates that many applicants still consider these institutions as alternatives while awaiting a decision from their state universities.

The second most common reason was limited educational costs, cited by 36 respondents (20.1%). This suggests that economic conditions play a significant role in determining final application decisions. Combined, these two main reasons accounted for 42.4% of the total responses, confirming that financial factors and external competition are the main barriers to application conversion.

Additionally, other reasons included postponing college or choosing to work first (n = 20; 11.2%), as well as location or access constraints to campus (n = 19; 10.6%). These findings suggest that practical considerations and geographic location also influence prospective applicants' decisions. On the other hand, uncertainty about study programs or institutions (n = 12; 6.7%) and acceptance to other private universities (n = 11; 6.1%) reflect information gaps and competition among private higher education institutions.

Most of the remaining responses fell into the "other individual reasons" category (n = 41; 22.9%), reflecting a variety of personal circumstances that do not fit neatly into the established categories. This suggests that the enrolment decision-making process is complex and influenced by many varying factors, necessitating a more in-depth study in future research.

Table 2. Main reasons for not proceeding to final enrolment.

Main reason	Frequency (n)	%
Waiting for public university admission results	40	22.3
Financial constraints/tuition cost	36	20.1
Delaying study / choosing to work first	20	11.2
Campus location too far / access problem	19	10.6
Uncertainty about the programme or institution	12	6.7
Accepted by another private institution	11	6.1
Other individual responses	41	22.9
Total	179	100.0

Thematic Grouping of Non-Enrolment Reasons

Table 3. Thematic grouping of non-enrolment reasons.

Thematic category	Frequency (n)	%
Waiting for / accepted by a public university	47	26.3
Financial barriers	41	22.9
Family-related reasons	21	11.7
Delaying study / choosing to work	21	11.7
Access/location constraints	19	10.6
Preference for another institution	13	7.3
Uncertainty about the programme/institution	12	6.7
Other/unclear	5	2.8
Total	179	100.0

Willingness to Reconsider Enrolment

Tables 4 and 5 show respondents' willingness to reconsider their enrolment decision if tuition assistance were available, while also identifying applicant groups that still have a chance of being re-hired. The main results indicate that 41 respondents (22.9%) stated they would be willing to reconsider their enrolment if a scholarship or other form of tuition waiver were available. Furthermore, 63 respondents (35.2%) answered "maybe." Overall, 104 respondents (58.1%) still have the potential to re-enroll through financial support.

The findings regarding the potential re-hired applicant segment (Table 5) indicate that the majority of applicants who previously discontinued their enrolment (58.1%) have not completely disappeared from the institution's reach. This data confirms that financial support, such as scholarships or tuition waivers, plays a significant role in increasing the likelihood of conversion. Although 41.9% of respondents still steadfastly decided not to continue, the "maybe" and "yes" groups remain strategic opportunities that can be leveraged in student admissions management and financial aid planning.

Table 4. Willingness to reconsider enrolment if tuition relief is offered.

Response	Frequency (n)	%
Yes	41	22.9
Maybe	63	35.2
No	75	41.9
Total	179	100.0

Table 5. Potentially recoverable applicant segment.

Category	Frequency (n)	%
Potentially recoverable (“Yes” + “Maybe”)	104	58.1
Not recoverable (“No”)	75	41.9
Total	179	100.0

Open-Ended Suggestions

Open-ended responses revealed a number of recurring patterns, such as the availability of scholarships or tuition assistance, clarity of cost information, enhanced communication during the admissions process, promotion of campus facilities, and more detailed explanations of graduate job prospects (Table 6). These findings indicate that applicants consider not only affordability but also a need for more transparent information about the institution's values and strengths.

Table 6. Dominant themes in open-ended suggestions.

Theme	Illustrative meaning
Scholarships/tuition relief	Requests for tuition reduction, discounts, instalments, or financial assistance
Fee transparency	Clearer information about total cost, payment schemes, and available support
Stronger admission communication	Faster, more responsive, and more persuasive follow-up
Promotion of facilities	Better communication of campus resources and the learning environment
Graduate prospects	More visible information about career outcomes and programme value

Discussion

This study demonstrates that the failure to convert applicants into students generally does not stem from a single, isolated cause. Rather, it is a combination of interrelated factors, such as competition between universities, economic constraints, family pressure, access and mobility constraints, and perceptions of the institution's value proposition. By focusing on the post-application phase, when interest is already aroused but a final decision has not yet been made, this study enhances our understanding of the university selection process. The decline in applicants at this crucial stage cannot be attributed solely to administrative issues, but rather reflects unresolved doubts regarding cost, trustworthiness, and perceived value in the final decision-making process.

The finding that waiting for admission results from public universities represents the most dominant reason for conversion failure demonstrates that applicant decision-making is dynamic rather than final at the application stage. From a strategic management perspective,

submitting an application to a private university should not be interpreted as a firm commitment but rather as an exploratory behavior in which applicants simultaneously evaluate multiple educational alternatives. This behavior reflects a competitive higher education market where applicants continuously compare institutional reputation, tuition affordability, perceived graduate employability, and long-term career prospects before making their final decision. Consequently, applicant conversion should be managed as a relationship-building process instead of a purely administrative admission procedure. Universities therefore need to implement continuous engagement strategies, including personalized communication, timely follow-up, and value-based messaging throughout the admission journey to strengthen applicants' confidence before public university admission announcements are released (Juhaidi, 2024; Juhaidi et al., 2025).

Beyond the direct effect of tuition costs, the findings indicate that applicants evaluate higher education through the broader concept of perceived educational investment. Prospective students and their families consider not only the affordability of tuition fees but also the expected return on investment, including employment opportunities, graduate competitiveness, and long-term career development. Therefore, financial support should not merely consist of tuition discounts but should be integrated with transparent information regarding graduate outcomes, scholarship continuity, internship opportunities, and employability indicators. Such an integrated value proposition may reduce applicants' uncertainty and increase confidence in completing the enrolment process.

Financial constraints emerged as the second most dominant barrier, reinforcing the view that affordability is a fundamental factor determining access to higher education. However, this issue extends beyond tuition fees to encompass a broader range of issues, including often-invisible additional costs, the availability of scholarships, and increased financial support over the course of several years of study. This complexity aligns with the findings of Mulyaningsih et al. (2025), who showed that students from low-placed groups in Central Java who actually met the requirements still tended to hesitate to apply for financial assistance due to limited information and family pressures.

More importantly, this study provides strong managerial support: approximately 58.1% of prospective students who discontinued their enrolment could have been saved through financial support such as scholarships or tuition reductions. These findings underscore the need for an admissions approach that transcends administrative boundaries and is viewed as a continuous conversion process. Universities need to go beyond simply collecting application documents by actively identifying those potentially "lost" in the process and then providing

targeted interventions, such as tailored scholarship offers, more flexible installment payment schemes, and transparency regarding cost details from the outset.

These findings further reinforce the idea that the enrolment process is rarely an individual decision. Instead, it typically stems from collective family considerations. In this regard, family members play a crucial role in assessing students' trustworthiness and financial capabilities. Consistent with Bórquez & Soriano, (2024) emphasis, parental expectations play a crucial role in the student transition process. Therefore, higher education institutions' communication approaches need to be more "family-friendly," for example, by providing dedicated information sessions for parents and providing more targeted explanations of the long-term benefits of the study program (Eldegwy et al., 2024).

Furthermore, technical aspects such as campus location and transportation availability, while often viewed as secondary factors, significantly influence perceptions of enrolment eligibility. For prospective students already burdened by financial constraints, geographic distance can be a significant indirect cost. To address this challenge, institutions need to emphasize practical forms of support, such as flexible class schedules and various student support services, in addition to emphasizing the academic benefits offered.

Open-ended responses from applicants indicate that low conversion rates are often related to ineffective communication. Many prospective students require more detailed and clear information regarding available facilities, graduate prospects, and financial aid schemes. As (Pawar, 2024) notes, digital engagement and effective relationship management are crucial elements in the image-building and decision-making process in the modern era. Therefore, admissions departments should move beyond general promotional messages to a more open, informative, and value-focused approach that addresses the specific needs and concerns of prospective students (Villafaina & Mosquera, 2024).

These findings indicate that applicant conversion is closely related to institutional communication, perceived value, and career relevance. Kwartawaty et al. (2026) found that Generation Z's educational decisions are influenced by digital transformation, perceived value, career orientation, and institutional strategic capability. This supports the need for universities to provide clearer information about programmed benefits, tuition schemes, graduate prospects, and institutional credibility. Moreover, Kwartawaty et al. (2024) emphasized that Generation Z has specific expectations that require more responsive and engaging communication approaches. Therefore, digital-oriented communication and institutional branding are important in strengthening applicant trust and encouraging prospective students to reconsider enrolment decisions (Rumalessin et al., 2025).

Ultimately, this study recommends a shift in approach from a solely recruitment-focused model to a conversion management model. While recruitment emphasizes the number of applicants, conversion management emphasizes institutional sustainability by ensuring applicants actually proceed to the final registration stage. More structured monitoring of the entire registration process is needed, particularly with special attention paid to applicants who have completed the initial stage but have not yet proceeded to the re-registration process.

Furthermore, One of the most important empirical contributions of this study is the identification of a substantial recoverable applicant segment, representing 58.1% of respondents who expressed willingness or potential willingness to reconsider enrolment if financial assistance became available. This finding shifts the institutional perspective from viewing unsuccessful applicants as permanently lost to recognizing them as strategic assets requiring differentiated conversion management. Instead of investing resources exclusively in acquiring new applicants, universities may achieve higher recruitment efficiency by implementing targeted recovery programs for applicants who have already demonstrated initial interest. Such programs may include personalized scholarship offers, segmented communication campaigns, early-payment incentives, and continuous relationship management through digital admission platforms.

Finally, communication strategies need to be strengthened by shifting the focus of messaging from simply promoting facilities to emphasizing outcomes related to job readiness and professional career development.

The present findings support a paradigm shift from recruitment-oriented admission management towards applicant conversion management. Recruitment success should no longer be evaluated solely through the volume of applications received but through the institution's capability to transform applicants into enrolled students. Consequently, higher education institutions should develop applicant relationship management systems supported by data analytics that identify applicants with high conversion potential and automatically trigger personalized interventions based on their specific barriers. Such an approach aligns admissions management with contemporary customer relationship management principles increasingly adopted within higher education marketing.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examines the factors that prevent prospective students from continuing from the initial admission stage to the final registration process at Indonesian universities. Findings indicate that this conversion failure is complex and influenced by many factors, such as the

preference for public universities, financial constraints, postponement of study plans, family influence, and concerns about the quality and affordability of the institution. A key contribution of this study is the identification of a group of prospective students who still have the opportunity to “re-enter,” with 58.1% of individuals who did not enroll still willing to consider the option if financial support was available. This indicates that the decision not to enroll is often driven by specific circumstances, rather than an outright rejection of the institution. Therefore, prompt and targeted interventions have the potential to bridge the gap between initial interest and final decision. Ultimately, the process from prospective student to university should be understood as a series of multi-step and complex decision-making processes. For private institutions, the strategic focus needs to be expanded beyond the recruitment process to more systematic conversion management. By prioritizing cost transparency, engaging with families, and proactive financial support, institutions can strengthen enrolment rates and support long-term sustainability. However, this study does have several limitations. The descriptive nature of the data and the sample size of 179 applicants from a single research context mean that the results may not be representative of the broader conditions in the Indonesian higher education sector. Furthermore, because this study did not employ a causal approach or inferential statistical analysis, further studies are recommended using more comprehensive methods such as PLS-SEM or logistic regression to test predictive models of enrolment behavior. Comparing enrollees and non-enrollees would also provide a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of various interventions, both financial and communication-related. As competition in the higher education sector increases, the ability to translate interest into concrete decisions is a key factor in institutional success. By viewing the admissions process not simply as an administrative procedure but as a process of building relationships and trust, institutions can transform prospective students who "didn't continue" into successful enrollees, eliminating financial and logistical barriers to educational access.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends previous university choice literature by demonstrating that applicant decision-making remains fluid even after the application stage. While previous studies primarily explain factors influencing university selection before application, the present findings highlight that conversion failure represents a distinct decision phase influenced by financial, institutional, familial, and competitive factors. Accordingly, applicant conversion should be conceptualized as a continuation of the university choice process rather than merely the final administrative step of admissions.

Practically, the findings provide several strategic recommendations for higher education institutions. Universities should implement applicant segmentation based on conversion risk, strengthen financial aid communication, involve parents during the admission process, provide transparent information regarding programmed outcomes and graduate employability, and establish systematic follow-up mechanisms for applicants who discontinue registration. These interventions are expected to improve applicant conversion rates while enhancing institutional sustainability in an increasingly competitive higher education environment.

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