

Predictors of Teacher Burnout Across Career Stages: Evidence from the Romanian Educational Context

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Abstract

The emergence of burnout among teachers represents a major international concern, being associated with reduced teacher well-being, lower levels of engagement, and poorer educational outcomes among students. Although extensive research has examined the phenomenon of burnout, relatively few studies have addressed the relationship between its predictors and teachers' stages of professional development. In this context, the present study investigates the extent to which burnout predictors vary across stages of the teaching career within the Romanian pre-university education system.

The study adopts a quantitative design based on a sociological survey using a questionnaire, administered to a sample of 194 teachers. The variables analyzed include organizational factors (role overload, learning opportunities, and development opportunities), transactional factors (satisfaction of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness), and individual factors (distress reactivity and stress mindset). These variables are examined in relation to the dimensions of burnout. Data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis, conducted separately for each career stage. The results indicate that burnout predictors vary depending on professional stage, with certain variables exerting stronger effects in the early stages of the career, while others become more relevant in later stages. These differences suggest the need for differentiated interventions tailored to the specific developmental needs of teachers at each stage of their professional trajectory.

This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the dynamic nature of burnout across the teaching career and offers relevant implications for educational policies and teacher support programs.

1. Introduction

Concerns regarding the psychological well-being of teachers have been present in international research for more than half a century. Consequently, a substantial body of empirical evidence has examined the influence of organizational, individual, and transactional factors on stress, work engagement, organizational commitment, motivation, and performance, as well as on negative outcomes such as burnout.

Burnout has received considerable attention from researchers, with numerous studies investigating its associations with a range of variables, including interpersonal and environmental factors (Carroll et al., 2022), high workload (Kokkinos, 2007), lack of social and administrative support (Rennert & Stoeber, 2008), personality traits such as high neuroticism and low extraversion (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010), as well as time pressure and work overload (Leiter & Maslach, 2009).

In recent years, an increase in the prevalence of teacher burnout has been observed. This trend can be explained by the high levels of responsibility teachers are required to assume, the emotionally demanding nature of their work, and additional contextual pressures such as time constraints, workload intensity, limited infrastructure, and insufficient social support from parents, colleagues, and school leadership. Research indicates that early-career teachers are particularly vulnerable to these stressful conditions (Gavish & Friedman, 2010).

Against this background, the present study investigates the predictors of burnout among teachers, with a specific focus on differences across stages of professional career development.

2. Literature Review

Burnout has been described as “an erosion of engagement; what started as important, meaningful, and challenging work becomes unpleasant, unfulfilling, and meaningless” (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001, p. 416). In this sense, positive attitudes toward work gradually shift into negative experiences. Conceptualized as a tripartite syndrome, burnout is characterized by emotional

exhaustion, which replaces feelings of energy; cynicism, which replaces hope and engagement; and reduced professional efficacy, which replaces a sense of accomplishment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

The literature on burnout is highly diverse; within this body of research, the Job Demands - Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) has become one of the most widely used theoretical frameworks. According to this model, burnout arises from an imbalance between excessive job demands and insufficient job resources. In this framework, job resources include aspects such as control over work, access to information, supervisory support, innovative school climate, and social climate (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). Job demands, in contrast, refer to factors such as student misbehavior, workload, and a psychologically unfavorable work environment (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). Job demands are defined as those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of work that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive or emotional) effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Job resources refer to those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of work that reduce job demands and their associated costs. Burnout occurs when job demands exceed the available resources available to counterbalance them. Organizational, individual, and transactional factors may function both as job demands and job resources. For instance, social support from principals and colleagues, documented in studies by Pyhältö, Pietarinen, and Salmela-Aro (2011), Barutcu (2013), Maslach et al. (2001), and Bakker et al. (2010), can operate as a protective resource in teachers' work. However, when such support is lacking, it may become a source of strain, contributing to the burnout process.

Research by Javadi (2014) shows that teacher autonomy is significantly and negatively associated with burnout. The study highlights that many teachers lack control over how they teach, which may generate dissatisfaction, reduced motivation, and hindered professional development (Javadi, 2014). The negative impact of demotivation and reduced job satisfaction on teachers' professional development has also been documented by Fernet, Guay, Senécal, and Austin (2012). Perceived autonomy varies depending on both individual characteristics and contextual factors such as educational policies, institutional constraints, and teaching methodologies. Findings suggest that teachers who are more self-regulated and engaged in developing their instructional skills report

lower levels of helplessness, disillusionment, and emotional exhaustion (Javadi, 2014). Furthermore, emotional exhaustion has been identified as a key predictor of perceived autonomy. Reduced autonomy, in turn, is associated with lower professional accomplishment. Studies by Fernet et al. (2012) also link teacher autonomy to professional development, showing that autonomy-supportive contexts enable teachers to make meaningful decisions about their work and foster professional growth. Within the JD-R model, autonomy is conceptualized as a job resource that enhances intrinsic motivation by supporting learning and development. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991), social contexts that satisfy basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness promote well-being and increase engagement.

Previous research has primarily focused on early-career teachers. For instance, Gavish and Friedman (2010) examined how novice teachers perceive their work environment and how these perceptions influence burnout. Their study highlights the role of organizational conditions and work-related difficulties, particularly job demands, in shaping professional adjustment. Factors contributing to emotional exhaustion and dissatisfaction among novice teachers include lack of rewards, limited promotion opportunities, low salaries, role conflict, role ambiguity, and both qualitative and quantitative overload, as well as insufficient encouragement of initiative. Their findings indicate that novice teachers are often not fully satisfied with their organizational environment during their first year of teaching. They report difficulties in integration and adaptation, which hinder effective functioning and professional performance. In addition, they express limited satisfaction with professional and personal support, recognition from school leadership, parents, and colleagues, as well as with school culture and public status (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). Similarly, Høigaard et al. (2011) found that newly qualified teachers report excessive workload and job demands that are not directly related to instructional activities.

3. Methodology

The main objective of the study was to identify the significant predictors of the emergence of teacher burnout among pre-university education teachers in Romania and to analyse how these predictors vary according to career development stage. In direct relation to the theoretical framework, the following hypotheses guided the research: H1: *we assume that the presence of*

work overload, a low level of satisfaction of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), a dysfunctional coping style in relation to stress, a low level of learning opportunities, and a lack of development opportunities predict the occurrence of burnout among teachers. H2: we assume that there are differences between the five groups of teachers regarding the predictors that contribute to the emergence of burnout.

Sample characteristics

A total of 194 respondents participated in this study. Snowball sampling was used, and the research instrument was distributed online via the Google Forms platform. The questionnaire was disseminated in online teacher groups on social media platforms and through person-to-person sharing. The main inclusion criterion was being a teacher in the pre-university education system. The response rate could not be calculated, and the questionnaire was not subjected to a pre-testing process. The sample consisted of 194 teachers (90.2% female), with a mean age of $M = 35$ years, $SD = .998$. **Table 1** presents the detailed characteristics of the sample.

N	194	100%
Gender		
Female	175	90,2%
Male	19	9,8%
Age		
18-25	18	9,3%
26-35	65	33,5%
46-55	39	20,1%
56-65	7	3,6%
The environment in which they teach		
Rural	84	43.3%
Urban	110	56,7%
Marital Status		
Married	112	57,7%
Unmarried	66	34%
Level of education		
High School Education	2	1%
Short-term higher education	23	11,9%
Long-term higher education	165	85,1%
PhD studies	4	2,1%

Ciclul de predare		
Kindergarten	15	7,7%
Primary school	81	41,8%
Middle School	50	25,8%
High school	47	24,2%
Post secondary	1	0,5%
Professional degrees		
Novice	39	20,1%
Qualified teacher status	38	19,6%
Didactic level II	23	11,9%
Didactic level I	71	36,6%
Without qualifications corresponding to their position	23	11,9%
Sector of activity		
Public	180	92,8%
Private	14	7,2%

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample Participants

Research Method. Research Instruments

The research method employed in this study is a survey-based sociological inquiry using a questionnaire. The research instrument consists of a battery of internationally standardized and validated scales, integrated into a 78-item questionnaire.

Burnout was measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory - General Survey (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Demerouti, 1996), which assesses three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy. For our sample ($N = 194$), the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was $\alpha = .86$ for emotional exhaustion, $\alpha = .76$ for cynicism, and $\alpha = .84$ for reduced professional efficacy.

Work overload was measured using the role overload subscale from the Occupational Stress Index. For our sample ($N = 194$), the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was $\alpha = .83$.

Learning opportunities were assessed using the Learning Opportunities subscale from the Questionnaire on the Experience and Assessment of Work (QEAW) (Veldhoven & Meijman, 1994). For our sample ($N = 194$), the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was $\alpha = .83$.

Development opportunities were measured using the Development Opportunities subscale from the Job Demands–Resources Questionnaire (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014). For our sample ($N = 194$), the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was $\alpha = .81$.

The three basic psychological needs from Self-Determination Theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000) were assessed using the Need Satisfaction at Work (NSW) Questionnaire, developed by Van den Broeck et al. (2010) and culturally adapted for Romania by Țânculescu and Iliescu (2014). For our sample ($N = 194$), Cronbach's alpha values were $\alpha = .80$ for relatedness, $\alpha = .85$ for competence, and $\alpha = .80$ for autonomy.

Distress reactivity was measured using the Responsive Distress scale, part of the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP), in the culturally adapted Romanian version by Iliescu, Popa, and Dimache (2015). For our sample ($N = 194$), the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was $\alpha = .80$.

Stress coping orientation was assessed using the Stress Mindset Measure. For our sample ($N = 194$), the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was $\alpha = .78$.

Career development stage was operationalised by grouping teachers into the following categories: unqualified teachers (those occupying substitute positions without relevant formal qualifications for the role), novice teachers, teachers with the teaching certification (definitivat), second-degree teaching certification, and first-degree teaching certification.

4. Research Results

In order to test the hypotheses proposed in this study, multiple regression analysis was employed to identify the models that best predict burnout among teachers. Based on the correlation matrix, predictors that did not correlate with burnout were excluded from the analysis. The remaining variables were entered simultaneously into a linear regression procedure using the stepwise method, with burnout as the dependent variable. To identify differences according to career development stage, the groups were first separated using the “Compare Groups” procedure, after which the regression analyses were repeated. Independent variables were entered simultaneously. Regarding the models generated with burnout as the dependent variable, the first model identified the need for autonomy (within the framework of Self-Determination Theory) as the first variable contributing significantly to the regression model, $F_{\text{change}}(1,192) = 84.22$, $p < .001$, accounting

for 31% of burnout variance. The second model introduced learning opportunities, which explained an additional 10% of burnout variance, $F_{\text{change}}(1,191) = 32.85$, $p < .001$, significantly increasing the value of R^2 . The inclusion of the need for competence in the third model, $F_{\text{change}}(1,190) = 14.71$, $p < .001$, explained an additional 4% of the variance in burnout. The fourth model introduced overload, accounting for an additional 3% of burnout variance, $F_{\text{change}}(1,189) = 10.76$, $p < .001$. The fifth model added stress mindset, explaining an additional 3% of burnout variance, $F_{\text{change}}(1,188) = 9.37$, $p < .001$. Relatedness need satisfaction was introduced in the sixth model, increasing R^2 by 1%, $F_{\text{change}}(1,187) = 4.05$, $p < .05$. In the seventh model, the need for autonomy was removed, while the remaining variables were retained, resulting in only a 1% decrease in R^2 . Overall, burnout among teachers was explained in proportion of 51% by perceiving learning opportunities as excessively demanding ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$), dissatisfaction of the need for competence ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .001$), perceived overload ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$), a debilitating stress mindset ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$), and dissatisfaction of the need for relatedness ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .01$).

Variabila	B	T	p	R	R ²	ΔR^2
Model 1				.55	.31	.31
Autonomy	-.55	-9.18	.001			
Model 2				.64	.41	.10
Autonomy	-.36	-6.13	.001			
Learning opportunities	.36	5.85	.001			
Model 3				.67	.45	.04
Autonomy	-.30	-4.54	.001			
Oportunități de învățare	.36	6.01	.001			
Competence	-.23	-3.84	.001			
Model 4				.69	.48	.03
Autonomy	-.18	-2.57	.011			
Learning opportunities	.36	6.01	.001			
Competence	-.25	-4.37	.001			
Overall	.20	3.28	.001			
Model 5				.71	.50	.03
Autonomy	-.15	-2.14	.033			
Learning opportunities	.33	5.60	.001			
Nevoia de competență	-.26	-4.60	.001			
Competence	.20	3.38	.001			
Modul de raportare asupra stresului	-.16	-3.06	.003			
Model 6				.72	.51	.01

Autonomy	-.11	-1.55	.123			
Learning opportunities	.30	5.14	.001			
Competence	-.24	-4.04	.001			
Overall	.21	3.50	.001			
Stress mindset	-.15	-2.81	.005			
Relatedness	-.13	-2.01	.046			
Model 7				.71	.51	.01
Learning opportunities	.33	5.76	.001			
Competence	-.26	-4.71	.001			
Overall	.25	4.73	.001			
Stress mindset	-.16	-2.99	.003			
Relatedness	-.15	-2.50	.013			

For novice teachers, the multiple regression analysis generated two models. The first model identified learning opportunities as the first significant predictor of burnout, $F_{\text{change}}(1,37) = 23.66$, $p < .001$, accounting for 39% of burnout variance among novice teachers. The second model introduced overload, $F_{\text{change}}(1,36) = 8.57$, $p < .01$, explaining an additional 12% of variance. Model 2 explained 51% of burnout variance among novice teachers, with the strongest predictor being the perception of excessive learning opportunities ($\beta = .62$, $p < .001$), followed by perceived overload ($\beta = .34$, $p < .01$).

Variabila	B	T	p	R	R ²	ΔR^2
Model 1				.63	.39	.39
Learning opportunities	.63	4.86	.001			
Model 2				.71	.51	.12
learning opportunities	.62	5.26	.001			
Overload	.34	2.93	.006			

For teachers with qualified teacher status the regression analysis generated four models. According to the first model, the need for relatedness was the first variable contributing significantly to the regression model, $F_{\text{change}}(1,33) = 14.74$, $p < .001$, accounting for 29% of burnout variance. The second model included relatedness and competence needs, explaining 43% of burnout variance. In the third model, overload was added, explaining an additional 8% of variance, $F_{\text{change}}(1,34) = 5.58$, $p < .05$. The fourth model introduced stress mindset, $F_{\text{change}}(1,33) = 5.32$, $p < .05$.

explaining an additional 7% of burnout variance. This final model included four statistically significant predictors, the most important being dissatisfaction of the need for competence ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$), followed by a debilitating stress mindset ($\beta = -.30$, $p < .05$), dissatisfaction of the need for relatedness ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .05$), and perceived overload ($\beta = .27$, $p < .05$).

Variabila	B	T	p	R	R ²	ΔR^2
Model 1				.54	.29	.29
Relatedness	-.54	-3.84	.001			
Model 2				.65	.43	.14
Relatedness	-.47	-3.56	.001			
Competence	-.38	-2.90	.006			
Model 3				.71	.51	.08
Relatedness	-.40	-3.21	.003			
Competence	-.40	-3.24	.003			
Overload	.29	2.36	.024			
Model 4				.76	.58	.07
Relatedness	-.27	-2.00	.044			
Competence	-.41	-3.55	.001			
Overload	.27	2.36	.025			
Stress mindset	-.30	-2.31	.028			

For teachers holding the Second Didactic Degree, the regression analysis generated three models. According to the first model, relatedness need satisfaction was the first variable contributing significantly to burnout, $F_{\text{change}}(1,21) = 37.89$, $p < .001$, accounting for 64% of burnout variance. The second model added autonomy need satisfaction, explaining an additional 15% of variance, $F_{\text{change}}(1,20) = 13.94$, $p < .001$. The third and most comprehensive model explained 85% of burnout variance among teachers holding the Second Didactic Degree and added learning opportunities as a predictor, $F_{\text{change}}(1,19) = 7.13$, $p < .05$. According to this model, burnout among teachers holding the Second Didactic Degree results from dissatisfaction of autonomy ($\beta = -.47$, $p < .001$) and relatedness needs ($\beta = -.33$, $p < .05$), as well as perceiving learning opportunities as excessively demanding ($\beta = .33$, $p < .05$).

Variabila	B	T	p	R	R ²	ΔR^2
Model 1				.80	.64	.64
Relatedness	-.80	-6.16	.001			

Model 2				.89	.79	.15
Relatedness	-.57	-4.72	.001			
Autonomy	-.45	-3.73	.001			
Model 3				.92	.85	.06
Relatedness	-.33	-2.35	.030			
Autonomy	-.47	-4.44	.001			
Learning opportunities	.33	2.67	.015			

For teachers holding the First Didactic Degree, the first regression model identified learning opportunities as the first significant predictor of burnout, $F_{\text{change}}(1,69) = 46.73$, $p < .001$, accounting for 40% of burnout variance. The second model introduced autonomy need satisfaction, explaining an additional 7% of burnout variance, $F_{\text{change}}(1,68) = 9.07$, $p < .01$. Overall, the second model explained 47% of burnout variance among teachers holding the First Didactic Degree, with the strongest predictor being the perception of excessive learning opportunities ($\beta = .40$, $p < .001$), followed by dissatisfaction of the need for autonomy ($\beta = -.35$, $p < .01$).

Variabila	B	T	p	R	R ²	ΔR^2
Model 1				.64	.40	.40
Learning opportunities	.64	6.84	.001			
Model 2				.69	.47	.07
Learning opportunities	.40	3.45	.001			
Autonomy	-.35	-3.01	.004			

For teachers without qualifications corresponding to their teaching position, the regression analysis generated three models explaining burnout. The first model identified development opportunities as the first significant predictor, $F_{\text{change}}(1,21) = 9.11$, $p < .01$, accounting for 30% of burnout variance. The second model added relatedness need satisfaction, explaining an additional 19% of burnout variance, $F_{\text{change}}(1,20) = 7.47$, $p < .05$. The third model introduced learning opportunities, $F_{\text{change}}(1,19) = 5.41$, $p < .05$, explaining an additional 12% of variance. Thus, among unqualified substitute teachers, the strongest predictor of burnout was the lack of development opportunities ($\beta = -.77$, $p < .001$), followed by dissatisfaction of the need for relatedness ($\beta = -.48$, $p < .01$) and lack of learning opportunities ($\beta = -.46$, $p < .05$).

Variabila	B	T	p	R	R ²	ΔR^2
Model 1				.55	.30	.30
Development opportunities	-.55	-3.02	.007			
Model 2				.70	.49	.19
Development opportunities	-.47	-2.92	.009			
Relatedness	-.44	-2.73	.013			
Model 3				.78	.61	.12
Development opportunities	-.77	-3.96	.001			
Relatedness	-.48	-3.27	.004			
Learning opportunities	-.46	-2.33	.031			

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The results obtained at the level of the entire sample explain the occurrence of teacher burnout through a combination of factors. The resulting model accounts for 51% of the variance in burnout, as a function of a high perception of learning opportunities ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$), low satisfaction of the need for competence ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .001$), perceived work overload ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$), a dysfunctional stress mindset ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$), and low satisfaction of the need for relatedness ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .05$). This model partially confirms the first hypothesis of the study. The partial confirmation is due to the fact that the need for autonomy and development opportunities do not enter the model structure, while, in the case of learning opportunities, the results contradict international findings, which indicate that a high number of learning opportunities contributes to increased performance (Borko, 2004). Moreover, within the Job Demands-Resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001), learning opportunities are conceptualised as job resources that reduce the impact of job demands. Our findings indicate the opposite pattern. This is particularly noteworthy, as it opens new research directions regarding the professional development process of teachers. Policy analyses conducted in previous research on continuous professional development of teachers in Romania have highlighted that training is often perceived as a bureaucratic requirement within the system. The institutionalisation of professional development as both a right and an

obligation in legislation, alongside the requirement to accumulate 90 transferable credits over a five-year period, has contributed to a “credit accumulation culture.” In this context, participation in training activities may be perceived as an additional administrative burden, particularly in a context characterised by high workload and an organisational culture oriented towards compliance and credit accumulation. The results support the relevance of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) in explaining the emergence of burnout through the inclusion of competence and relatedness needs in the model, with negative valences. It is observed that Romanian teachers perceive themselves as less competent and do not feel that they belong to the group of teachers to which they are assigned. Thus, they do not experience a sense of control over their environment nor a sense of developing new skills (Deci & Ryan, 2000), nor do they feel connected to others, belonging to a group, or experiencing close relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These results support the view that teachers’ psychological well-being depends not only on reducing job demands, but also on the existence of professional contexts that facilitate social support, professional recognition, and a sense of personal efficacy. Work overload is a significant predictor of burnout, confirming previous research findings (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006), which position overload within the category of job demands (Chang, 2009). Teachers who perceive stress predominantly as a debilitating factor report higher levels of burnout. This finding supports the conclusions of Crum, Salovey, and Achor (2013), according to which stress mindset influences how individuals respond to professional demands and their psychological consequences.

With regard to the second hypothesis of the study, the results reveal significant differences between stages of career development. Burnout predictors differ both in structure and intensity across the analysed groups, suggesting the dynamic nature of the phenomenon across the professional trajectory. Among novice teachers, burnout is mainly associated with the perception of learning opportunities as excessive and with work overload. These results may reflect the difficulty of professional integration in a context characterised by multiple demands and high responsibilities

from the very beginning of the career. For teachers with teachers with qualified teacher status and second-degree certification, basic psychological needs, particularly competence, autonomy, and relatedness, become central predictors of burnout. In the more advanced stages of the teaching career, dimensions related to professional recognition, autonomy, and belonging to the school community appear to become more relevant than the mere management of job demands. In the case of teachers without relevant formal qualifications for the position, lack of development opportunities represents the main predictor of burnout, suggesting increased vulnerability in this professional category.

The main limitations of the study relate to the research methodology adopted. First, this is a cross-sectional study, which does not allow causal conclusions to be drawn. Second, the snowball sampling technique leads to the underrepresentation of certain populations within the sample, and some sub-samples are considerably smaller than others. Another limitation stems from the operationalisation of career development stages, which was carried out in accordance with the Romanian teacher career management system. Although this approach provides more nuanced results in the national context, it reduces direct comparability with international studies. These limitations do not invalidate the findings; rather, they serve to contextualise the results within a specific framework. The findings highlight the need for differentiated educational policies and support programmes tailored to the professional stages of teachers in Romania.

AI Tools Usage Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT, OpenAI) were used exclusively as a support for text revision, clarification of wording, and improvement of academic coherence. These tools were not used for data generation, statistical analysis, or the formulation of research results. All scientific content, data interpretation, and conclusions are solely the responsibility of the author.

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