



Incidence of Burnout among Distance Learning Practitioners in Nigeria: Evidence from a NOUN Study Centre

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Abstract

This study on the incidence of burnout among National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) staff, Jos study Centre, was conducted in Jos between June and July 2015. Thirty-six questionnaires were distributed to 36 staff. Respondents indicated the strongest period of burnout as during conduct of examinations and least during alumni counseling. The respondents agreed that burnout was more during early rain (May, June, July) and least during late dry (February, March, April) seasons. The respondents agreed strongly that the most conspicuous sign of burnout was exhaustion and strongly disagreed that it was using food, drugs or alcohol to feel better or to simply not feel. The respondents indicated making the zonal/regional offices more functional as very effective in solving the problem of burnout and the not effective method was planning examinations for early and late rains only. It can be concluded that burnout is prevalent in NOUN especially during conduct of examination and early rainy seasons as observed. The management of NOUN should as a matter of urgency make the zonal/regional offices functional and organize training for staff on signs, prevention and recovery from burnout to alleviate, reduce or enable recovery from burnout among staff of NOUN.

Keywords: Distance Education, Institution, Staff, Burnout.

Introduction

The term burnout in psychology was coined by Herbert Freudenberger in his 1974 staff burnout, presumably based on the 1960 novel “A Burnout case by Graham Greene”, which described a protagonist suffering from burnout (Freudenberger, 1974). The Maslach Burnout Inventory operationalizes burnout as a three – dimensional syndrome made up of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach, Jackson, Leiter and MBI, 1996).

Smith, Segal and Segal (2015), described burnout as a state of emotional, mental and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when one feels overwhelmed and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, one begins to lose the interest or motivation that led one to take on a certain role in the first place. Burnout reduces one’s productivity and saps one’s energy, leaving one feeling increasingly helpless, cynical, and resentful. Eventually one may feel like one has nothing more to give as observed by Smith, Segal and Segal (2015).

Burnout is one of those road hazards in life that high – achievers really should be watching out for but sadly-more often than not, because of their “I can do everything” personality and penchant for work they rarely see it coming (Carter, 2013). High achievers are often so passionate about what they do, they tend to ignore the fact that they are working on exceedingly heavy workloads, and putting enormous pressure on themselves to excel hence unknowingly– preparing themselves for burnout.

Observably, in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode of education, and as it is in the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), staff work “round the clock”. A Centre Director, as well as other staff, officially work from the hour of 8am in the morning till 4pm in the evening when they close, but due to exigencies of work, staff resume work earlier than 8am and close after 4pm. Aside this, some staff continue to attend to students by receiving and responding to phone calls from students and prospective students, way into the night, especially during examinations period, for the purpose of

ensuring that operations, the environment is conducive while every required facility is seen to be working and functional. As remarked in the study by Butswat and Istifanus (2014), staff contacted by learners before admission and during ODL schooling proper includes the Director, Students counselor, the senior Assistant Registrar, the Assistant Librarian, the Confidential Secretary II and some junior staff. Consequently, there is tendency for a burnout among some of these key NOUN staff considering their involvement in these operational activities.

Statement of the Problem

The most common complaints seen in doctors' offices today include fatigue, depression, anxiety, allergies, candida and hypoglycemia (ARL, 2012). These and many others are symptoms traceable to burnout. A stressful lifestyle can put people under extreme pressure, to the point that they feel exhausted, empty, burnout, and unable to cope. Stress at work can also cause physical and mental symptoms. Possible causes include feeling permanently overworked or under – challenged, being time-pressured, or having conflicts with colleagues. Extreme commitment that leads employees to neglect their own needs may also be at the root of it (IQWIG, 2013). Problems caused by stress at work are a common cause for being signed off sick. But sometimes changes in the working environment and more concrete support in everyday life can help with problems at the workplace or stress from home care (IQWIG, 2013). No known investigation has been done on the rate of burnout among employees in NOUN, Nigeria, hence motivation for this.

Significance of the Study

The study has the NOUN staff particularly in mind. The ultimate aim is to help the NOUN employee to manage stress positively, to avoid burnout and reduce to the barest minimum the need to see the doctors, while at the same time maintaining high productivity and cordial relationship at work and in the home front.

Purpose of the Study

The study aimed at investigating the incidence of burnout among NOUN staff with a view to proffering solutions or alleviating the rate. The objectives are as follows;

1. To investigate the causes, times or periods of burnout in NOUN.
2. To investigate and determine the common signs and symptoms of burnout among NOUN staff.
3. To proffer practical ways in which burnout can be checkmated.

Research Questions

This research work sought to provide answers to the following questions:

1. Are there causes of burnout in NOUN?
2. Are there any particular seasons of burnout in NOUN?
3. Are there any signs of burnout among NOUN staff?
4. Are there effective ways of avoiding and solving the problem of burnout in NOUN?

Research Hypotheses

This study is guided by the following hypotheses:

1. There are no causes of burnout among NOUN staff.
2. There are no particular seasons of burnout in NOUN
3. There are no signs of burnout among NOUN staff
4. There are no effective ways of solving/checkmating the problems of burnout among NOUN staff.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study examined the incidence of burnout among NOUN staff in Jos Study Centre with a view to finding out the causes and possible solutions.

The study used the staff of NOUN in Jos Study Centre as sample population of NOUN staff. In Jos, it is 100% of the population of staff at the Centre, but nationwide, it is small and therefore possesses a limitation when talking of staff of NOUN. If not for resource limitation,

similar study should have taken place in all the 69 Study Centres of NOUN, and the degree of error would have been minimal. This then posed a limitation.

Research Methodology

Study Location

The investigation was undertaken in Jos. Jos is the capital of Plateau State. Plateau State is located in the middle belt zone of Nigeria, within latitude 8°22' N and 10°24' N and longitude 8°32' E and 10°38' E and has a total land area of 26,899 M. The 1991 census figures showed that about 2.56 million people live in Plateau State (Plateau State Dairy, 2006).

Jos Study Centre is one out of 108 study Centres scattered all over the Country as of August 2022, comprising of Model Study Centres, Community Study Centres and Special Study Centres, a part from Lagos Liaison Office and Centre for Human Resource Development (CHRD), Kaduna.

Study Population and Data Requirement

The Study population for this study were the 36 staff of NOUN, Jos Study Centre. They are currently 76 out of the 2,537 total staff of the university.

Sample Size

The total population of staff at the Centre during the study was 36, while total for all the Centres across the Country was 1,537. The case study therefore represented $36/1537 \times 100 = 2.34\%$ of the NOUN staff population, but 100% of the case Study Centre.

Data Collection Instruments

A combination of self-administered questionnaire backed-up by in-depth interviews were considered the most appropriate data collection instrument for the research and was therefore used. The questionnaires were close ended. The first part of the questionnaire comprised the biodata of the respondents, while the second part comprised issues on employee burnout.

Data Analysis

Data collected was analyzed in two stages, simple descriptive statistics and secondly, weighted mean score as used by Babawale (2007) was calculated as follows;

$$\text{Mean score} = \text{Mean score} = \frac{5n_5 + 4n_4 + 3n_3 + 2n_2 + 1n_1}{n_5 + n_4 + n_3 + n_2 + n_1}$$

Where n_5 = number of respondents who answered ‘strongly agree’.

n_4 = number of respondents who answered ‘agree’.

n_3 = number of respondents who answered ‘undecided’.

n_2 = number of respondents who answered ‘disagree’.

n_1 = number of respondents who answered ‘strongly disagree’.

Firstly, opinion of respondents was presented using simple descriptive statistics in frequency tables and percentage rating.

Data Analysis, Presentation and Discussion

Results And Findings

Section A: Biodata

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Respondents According to Age

S/N	Age Range	Frequency	%
1	20 – 29	6	16.67
2	30 – 39	19	52.78
3	40 – 49	10	27.78
4	50 – 59	1	2.78
5	60 – 69	0	0.00
Total		36	100.01

Source: Field Survey, 2015

From the above Table 1, majority (52.78%) of the staff at NOUN Jos fall within the age range of 30 – 39 years, followed by those between 40 – 49 years (27.78%). The next group (16.67%) comprise those between 20 – 29 years and the least (2.78%) are those between 50 – 59 years with none between 60 – 69.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Respondents According to Educational Status

S/N	Educational Status	Frequency	%
1	Primary School	1	2.78
2	'O' Level	9	25.00
3	Diploma/NCE	5	13.89
4	First Degree/HND/PGD	16	44.44
5	M.Sc.	4	11.11
6	Ph.D.	1	2.78
Total		36	99.99

Source: Field Survey, 2015

As can be seen from Table 2, majority (44.44%) of employees at NOUN, Jos are either First Degree/HND or PGD holders, followed by 'O' level (25.00%), Diploma/NCE (13.89%), then Ph.D. and Primary school (2.78%).

Table 3: Percentage Distribution of Respondents According to Job Designation in NOUN

S/N	Designation	Frequency	%
1	Director	1	2.78
2	Registry Staff	10	27.78
3	Counseling Staff	2	5.56
4	ICT Staff	2	5.56
5	Estate Management	1	2.78
6	Library Staff	3	8.33
7	Bursary Staff	4	11.11
8	Secretarial Staff	4	11.11
9	Cleaner(s)	2	5.56
10	Gardener(s)	4	11.11
11	Security	3	8.33
Total		36	100.01

Source: Field Survey, 2015

From Table 3, majority NOUN, Jos Study Centre staff are Registry (27.78%), followed by Bursary, Secretarial and Gardening staff (11.11%), then Security and Library staff (8.33%), ICT, Counseling and Cleaners (5.56%) and the Director (2.78%)

Table 4: Percentage Distribution of Respondents According to Marital Status

S/N	Marital Status	Frequency	%
1	Married	29	80.56
2	Single	7	19.44
3	Widow/Widower	0	0.00
Total		36	100

Source: Field Survey, 2015

From Table 4, most (80.56%) of the staff in NOUN, Jos were married while a few (19.44%) were still single and no widows/widowers.

Table 5: Percentage Distribution of Respondents According to Number of Children

S/N	Number of Children	Frequency	%
1	0	7	19.44
2	1 – 2	2	33.33
3	3 – 4	14	38.89
4	5 – 6	2	5.56
5	7 – 8	0	0.00
6	9 – 10	1	2.78
	More than 10	0	0.00
Total		36	100

Source: Field Survey, 2015

Most (38.89%) staff of NOUN, Jos, had 3 – 4 number of children (Table 5), followed by 1 – 2 (33.33%), 0 number of children (19.44%), 5 – 6 (5.56%) and the least (2.78%) with 7 – 8 children and none with 9 – 10 children.

Table 6: Description of the causes or times or periods of burnt-out in NOUN

The following statements are purported to describe the causes or times or periods of burnt-out in NOUN. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the statement:

A = Agreed **SA** = Strongly Agreed **D** = Disagree

SD = Strongly Disagree **NC** = No Comment

Statements as to Causes, times or periods of burn out	A	SA	D	SD	NC	MEAN	Ranking
During conduct of Examination	14	15	4	1	2	4.03	1
During registration of new entrants	12	15	7	0	2	3.72	2
During registration of returning students	10	15	9	0	2	3.72	3
During students' orientation	09	7	14	0	6	3.31	4
During students' pre-entry counseling	7	7	9	2	11	3.22	5
During school period counseling	4	8	10	0	14	3.17	6
During add/drop periods	6	6	12	1	11	3.11	7
During normal work hours	3	13	13	1	6	3.11	8
During Collation of scripts post exams	6	9	12	3	6	3.08	9
During signing for exams	4	9	10	2	11	3.08	10
During exams report writing	3	9	13	1	10	3.00	11
During Conduct of TMAs	4	5	12	1	14	2.97	12
During students' matriculation	5	6	20	0	5	2.89	13
During post school (Alumni) counseling	0	5	15	4	12	2.50	14

Source: Field Survey, 2015

From Table 6, most respondents indicated that the most prevalent period of burnout was during conduct of examination and the least

incidence of burnout was during post school (alumni) counseling. Others felt between these two extremes.

Table 7: Indication of the seasons of burn-out in NOUN

The following statements are purported to describe the seasons of burnt-out. Kindly indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the statement.

A = Agreed

SA = Strongly Agreed

D = Disagree

SD = Strongly Disagree

NC = No Comment

Statements on levels of agreement	A	SA	D	SD	NC	MEAN	Ranking
Early rain (May, June, July)	6	17	9	0	4	3.56	1
Late rain (August, September, October)	10	10	11	1	4	3.47	2
No specific season	6	5	5	2	18	3.22	3
Late dry (February, March, April)	9	7	10	4	6	3.19	4
Late dry (February, March, April)	6	7	11	5	7	2.94	5

Source: Field Survey, 2015

From Table 7, most respondents believed that the season of the year with highest burnout was early rain (May, June, July), followed by late rain (August, September, October), then no specific season, late dry (February, March, April) and least late dry (February, March, April).

Table 8: Description of the signs of burn-out in NOUN

The following statements are purported to describe the signs of burnt-out. Kindly indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the statement.

A = Agreed **SA** = Strongly Agreed **D** = Disagree **SD** = Strongly Disagree **NC** = No Comment

Statements of agreement as to the signs of burn-out	A	SA	D	SD	NC	MEAN	Ranking
Exhaustion	19	17	0	0	0	4.53	1
Lack of motivation	13	16	4	0	3	4.06	2
Health problems (headach backaches etc.)	8	18	6	1	3	3.72	3
Generally decreased satisfaction	11	13	9	1	2	3.67	4
Dragging yourself to work and having trouble getting started.	10	15	5	3	3	3.67	5
Frustration, cynicism and other negative emotions	10	13	4	3	6	3.64	6
Being pre-occupied with work	7	18	4	3	4	3.61	7
Having sleep habit or appetite changed	9	12	7	2	6	3.53	8
Slipping job performance	13	6	10	2	5	3.50	9
Interpersonal problems at home and at work	5	17	6	3	5	3.42	10
Cognitive problems (lack of concentration)	9	12	11	3	1	3.36	11
Not taking care of yourself	8	11	9	4	4	3.28	12
Using food, drugs or alcohol to feel better or to simply not feel	9	9	10	5	3	3.19	13

Source: Field Survey, 2015

As in Table 8, respondents asserted that the most prominent sign of burnout was exhaustion and the least conspicuous sign was using food, drugs or alcohol to feel better or to simply not feel. Other fell in between these two extremes.

Table 9: Descriptions of how effective the problem of burn-out can be solved in NOUN

How effective will this be in solving problem of burnt-out in NOUN?

VE = Very effective **E** = Effective **LE** = Less effective

NE = Not effective

NC = No comment

Statements of agreement on how effectively the problem of burn-out can be solved	A	SA	D	SD	NC	MEAN	Ranking
Making the regional/zonal offices more functional	31	5	0	0	0	4.86	1
The ODL allowance should be increased to	32	2	1	0	1	4.81	2
compensate staff burnt-out							
Adequate facilities for normal use and during exams should be provided	30	5	0	0	1	4.81	3
Provide refreshment to Invigilators/supervisors/Attendants during exams	30	2	1	1	2	4.53	4
Having some balance in the work-life	26	6	2	1	1	4.50	5
More staff and at least a counselor per 500 students should be employed	24	8	2	0	2	4.50	6
Having more social support	21	12	2	0	1	4.44	7
Having a more functional workplace dynamic	22	10	1	1	2	4.42	8
Better job fit	20	11	2	0	3	4.36	9
Rotating of Senate meetings within Zones should be adopted	25	5	2	2	2	4.36	10
Having clearer job expectations	10	12	1	2	1	4.28	11
Having more match in values	17	13	4	0	2	4.19	12

There should be a maximum student population of 5000 per study centre to reduce over stretching of facilities	24	4	4	3	1	4.17	13
Having less extremes of activity	18	11	5	1	1	4.11	14
Decentralization of activities like collection of course materials only at Kaduna etc.	20	8	5	2	1	4.08	15
Having some more control over one's job	15	12	5	1	3	3.97	16
Exams should be planned for early and late dry seasons only	16	6	8	2	4	3.72	17
Exams should be planned for early and late rains only	12	7	9	3	5	3.44	18

Source: Field Survey, 2015

Table 9 shows the response of respondents as to how effective the problem of burnout can be solved in NOUN. The very effective way to solve the problem was indicated to be making the Regional/Zonal offices more functional. The not effective solution was 'Examinations should be planned for early and late rains only. Other responses fell in between these two extremes.

The description, interpretations and findings are as done under each table. They are further referred to and discussed as below.

Discussion

The high percentage of staff within the age of 30 – 39 years as seen in table 1 shows that the prospects of quality staff in NOUN Jos is high as it's out of these that a director would arise and other principal officers of the Centre. The youths are the leaders of tomorrow.

Table 2 showed that majority of the staff were first degree, HND or PGD holders. This is as expected because being a university environment and workplace, it is expected that most of the people should indeed be degree holders as even if they picked up the appointment when they were not degree holders, they could easily enroll and obtain one in the institution. In Nigeria, many people aspire

to obtain at least a degree or its equivalence, it is therefore not surprising that majority of the staff at the NOUN, Jos Study Centre, were degree holders, while the minimum staff qualification was primary school, for security personnel, who might have gotten security experience early in life as a military or policeman.

Table 3 showed that majority of staff at the Centre were registry staff while those fewest in number were the Director and Estate Manager, where we had one personnel each. The high percentage registry staff confirms the fact that the heart of administration is its registry unit and therefore requires more staff especially in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) setting as ours. The Director is the representative of the Vice Chancellor at the Centre level, therefore he is alone, while the Estate Manager is alone because the Study Centre is not very big, therefore one estate Manager can manage it. Property advice rest on the assumption that valuations are good proxies for prices (Crosby, 2002). The bigger the organization, the higher the number of estate management personnel. Of course, other staff fall within the two extremes.

The percentage of staff that were married was the highest (80.56%) as shown in Table 4, while those singles were few (9.44%) and no widows/widowers. Marriage is generally seen and considered as a sign of responsibility. Most people therefore prefer to be married especially when they are of age. It is therefore as expected, that most staff of NOUN, Jos Study Centre were married.

As in Table 5, majority (38.89%) of respondents had children ranging from 2 – 4, while few (2.78%) had 9 – 10 and none with children above 10 in number, while others fell in between these extremes. In 1985 during the regime of Retired General Ibrahim Babangida as military president, there was a decree that one woman should give birth to a maximum of four children. This number was used as the maximum per woman, children to gain scholarship, tax rebate and some other government assistance. Majority of Nigerians are law abiding thus the highest percentage of staff have children within the 3 – 4 range. Those that have more or above that range are those that had born more than

the number before the decree. Others have less than 4 children either by choice or they were yet to be up to 4 children.

In description of the signs of burnout in NOUN, respondents agreed strongly that it was exhaustion. This is corroborated by the works of several authors (ARL, 2012; IQWIG, 2013; Smith et al; 2015). The strongly disagreed sign was 'using food, drugs or alcohol to feel or to simply not feel. This might have been so because people eat and drink regardless of burnout at specific times, so they don't necessarily eat or drink as a sign of burnout. ARL (2006) however, indicated change in food presence as an indication or sign of burnout that people may not recognize. This might have led to its lack of recognition as a sign of burnout, unlike exhaustion that is physically experienced and noticed. The other symptoms fall in between these two extremes.

Most respondents indicated that the highest incidence of burnout was during examinations and least during post school (alumni) counseling (Table 6). Other periods fell in between these two. The high incidence during examination is because during examinations both staff and students are tensed up expecting an ideal situation which in most cases was not there. The staff and students expect power to be steady, most of the time it is not there. The staff expect the computers and other electronic gadgets to work normally, but most times they failed. The source of power like generator could also breakdown during examinations. Students are supposed to obey and comply with examination rules and regulations, but some do not. There could also be a short fall in materials like answer booklets or breakdown in photocopier and similar gadgets. All these combine to constitute probable sources of burnout to staff during examinations. During post school (alumni) counseling, very few staff are involved therefore no cause for stress leading to burnout. Besides, Alumni being graduates are more matured and out to help the system in one way or the other, therefore they do not constitute any stress leading to burnout, as indicated. Examinations take about 6 – 7 weeks, and IQWIG (2013) and Smith et al; (2015) reported that prolonged stress leads to burnout. It's no wonder that staff experience more of burnout during the stressful examination period. It is also during the examination period that staff experience work overload because they come early (by 7:30

am) before normal time (8:00 am) and close late (sometimes by 11:00 pm, while normal closing time is 4:00 pm) therefore experiencing occupational stress which can lead to burnout (Bianchi et al; 2013). The anxiety of getting things to work like ensuring that the standby generator is work ready all the time plus the computers while expectant students wait, adds to the stress and burnout during examinations as indicated. The other periods fall between these two extremes and appear more manageable.

In terms of natural seasons as described by Butswat (1994), the highest incidence of burnout was indicated to be early rain (May, June, July), while the least incidence was in late dry (February, March, April). The high incidence in early rain might have been due to the fact that the early rains are characterized by windy rainy storms that in most cases are destructive to both houses and trees thereby causing stress and over a long time, leading to burnout. The late dry seasons are dry, less windy and less destructive, thereby causing less burnout. The feeling of 'no control' leads to burnout (Tracy, 2000), therefore seasonal events beyond employee's control might have been the cause of the burnout experienced during the early rainy season.

In descriptions of how effective the problem of burnout can be solved in NOUN, the most effective was indicated to be 'making the regional/zonal offices more functional'. Delegation is one of the ways to reduce or alleviate burnout (ARL, 2012; Smith et al; 2015). Though the regional/zonal offices have been designated, as of present they are not functional. The view of staff is that activities are over-centralized at the headquarter which is quite some distance from most study centres. So, decentralization and delegation of responsibilities will alleviate burnout as corroborated by Smith et al; (2015). The least effective way was indicated as 'examinations should be planned for early and late rains only'. This is probably so because of the characteristics (stormy weather) of these seasons that are outside the control of the employee. Having a lack of control instils stress and eventual burnout (Tracy, 2000). Planning examinations for these periods will therefore not be effective in solving or alleviating the problem of burnout.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary

This investigation on the Incidence of Burnout among NOUN Staff. A case study of Jos Study Centre took place in Jos, the Plateau State capital between June and July, 2015. Thirty-six structural questionnaires were developed and distributed to all the staff of the study Centre and all 36 were returned back, representing 100% retrieval. The Biodata of the staff indicated that majority, 52.78% of them were aged 30 – 39 years, while few, 2.78% were 50 – 59 years. Majority, 44, 44% had first degree or equivalent and were mainly 27.78% registry staff and mostly 80.56% married with 38.89% being the majority having 3 – 4 children.

The respondents indicated the most burnout period as during conduct of examination and the least burnout was during post school (alumni) counseling. The season of burnout was indicated to be highest in early rain (May, June, July) while least burnout was indicated to be in late dry (February, March, April).

Exhaustion was the first and strongest indicator of burnout among the respondents, while using food, drugs or alcohol to feel better or to simply not feel was considered and indicated the least sign of burnout. Others fell in between these two. On the effective ways to solve the problem of burnout, respondents indicated the most effective as ‘making the zonal offices more functional while the least effective was planning examinations for early and late rains only. Other effective ways fell in between these.

Conclusion

From the results of this investigation on the Incidence of Burnout among NOUN Staff, a case study of Jos Study Centre, it is evident that burnout is experienced among NOUN staff. The most prevalent period of burnout was during conduct of examinations and the season when burnout is most experienced is early rainy season. The respondents indicated that the most effective way to reduce or eliminate burnout is to make the zonal centres more functional. The management of NOUN should assist the staff alleviate burnout by making the regional/zonal

offices functional as soon as possible and ensure supply of facilities and finances for conduct of examinations to reduce stress at the centres while counseling staff on how to alleviate burn out during certain seasons of the year.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this investigation, it can be recommended that;

1. NOUN should educate its staff on the issue of ‘burnout’, signs and symptoms and how to prevent or recover from burnout.
2. NOUN should meet the expectations of staff on the functionality of the zonal offices.
3. NOUN management should particularly pay attention to the needs of the Study Centres during the conduct of examinations.
4. Further future studies should be similarly conducted in every zone/region of the Country as NOUN has Study Centres in each of the zones/regions.

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