

DEFINING OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: Stress is the health epidemic of the 21st century. Stress results in negative outcomes as well as positive outcomes. Moreover, with the evolution of industries, work-related stress is a phenomenon that constantly increases in severity. Therefore, a professional's stress can negatively impact the quality of their work. Thus, the 'Occupational Stress' study requirement is a timely topic. However, the lack of a wholesome generic definition for occupational stress is a hurdle for further research on the study area. Hence, this study aimed at developing a definition for 'Occupational/ Job/ Work/Workplace Stress'. The research was wholly based on an in-depth literature review. One hundred one research publications were analysed to extract twenty-five definitions of 'stress' and 'occupational stress'. The definition was conceptualised by establishing three 'Themes' and 'Key Constructs' within the themes using the content analysis of the available definitions in the literature. As a result, a new theme was identified in addition to the 'occupational stress' compared to the 'stress'. Furthermore, it is evident that 'Occupational Stress' is also linked to occupation/ work/ job acting as a subset of 'Stress'. Therefore, the derived definition can be used as a basis for further research on occupational stress.

Keywords: *Definition; key constructs; occupational stress; themes.*

1. Introduction

According to Fink (2016), the World Health Organisation has identified stress as the "Health Epidemic of the 21st Century", which can devastate a person's emotional and physical health. The word "stress" is derived from the Latin word 'stringere', meaning "draw tight" (Oladinrin et al., 2014; Ross, 2020). Further, Ross (2020) mentions that, in the 14th century, the term "stress" was associated more with adversity, hardship, or some affliction. In the 17th century, stress was used for the associated meanings to describe hardship, strain, adversity or affliction (Oladinrin et al., 2014). Ross (2020) and Oladinrin et al. (2014) are of a similar view that, after the 18th century, with the advent of intense scientific and industrial development, the term stress denotes force, pressure, strain or strong effort strain, and resilience.

Fontana (1989), cited in (Chow, 2009), defines stress as those challenges that excite us and keep us on our toes, without which life for many people would become dull and ultimately not worth living. Jeffrey (2006) defined stress as a state of cognitive, emotional, and physical arousal (Oladinrin et al., 2014) that link up with the perspective of the human body. Similarly, Newbegin (2015) has defined stress as a state of mental or emotional strain due to adverse or demanding life circumstances. Oladinrin et al. (2014) have mentioned that stress can be a powerfully destructive force when it gets out of control. Further, Kalia (2002) and Spielberger et al. (2003) have identified stress as an epidemic (Ajayi et al., 2019).

Hans Selye, as cited by Landy & Conte (2016), often referred to as the "father of stress", was the first to distinguish between good stress (eustress) and bad stress (distress). Similarly, Oladinrin et al. (2014) mention that stress is a life-saver, a life-destroyer at the other end of the spectrum. Further, according to Seaward (2004), there are two kinds of distress: acute and chronic. Oladinrin et al. (2014) mention a Latin word, 'stringere', which means 'draw tight', emphasising; 'to close tightly' or 'to squeeze'. On the other hand, Lazarus & Folkman (1984) identified 'Stress' as a relationship like; "The relationship between the person and the environment, which takes into account characteristics of the person on the one hand, and the nature of the environmental event on the other". By looking at 'Stress' from a more biological viewpoint, Charmandari et al. (2005) stated that "Stress is defined as a state of threatened or perceived as threatened homeostasis" where the 'homeostasis' is a state of steady internal, physical, and chemical conditions maintained by living systems. McEwen (2007) noted, "Stress is a word used to describe experiences that are challenging emotionally and physiologically" in a more social view. Thus, the definition of 'stress' is more diversified with the author's focus.

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With the evolution of industries with different kinds of jobs, several authors have mentioned 'job stress', 'workplace stress', and 'occupational stress'. Work-related stress is a phenomenon that constantly increases in severity (Vlăduț & Kállay, 2010). According to Salam (2016), a professional's stress can negatively impact the quality of their work. Organisations are concerned mainly with the ability of their employees to execute work competently, effectively, and efficiently (Salam, 2016). Further, Fagbenro et al. (2023) identified that the construction industry loses its active workers to mental health challenges and suicide, reducing productivity, contribution to economic growth, and overall workers' living standards in their study related to prefabricated construction and the health of the workers. Several studies on stress management concerning professionals working in different fields, such as education and healthcare, have been conducted (Bradshaw, 1991; Odigie, 2016; Quirke, 2001). For example, Richardsen & Matthiesen (2014) studied pressure and stress among Norwegian managers. Newman & Beehr (1979) associated 'job stress' with 'a job-related factor; similarly, Schuler (1980) linked 'job stress' with the 'job environment'. Moreover, some authors refer to 'work situation' (Sharit & Salvendy, 1982), 'workplace' (Colligan & Higgins, 2006; Ganster & Rosen, 2013) and also to 'job performance' (Jeon et al., 2022). Therefore, 'Occupational Stress' is connected to a person's job/ work or occupation, which can classify as a sub-set of 'Stress'.

Geare (1989) identified the failure to use a reasonable and adequate definition of job stress as a deficiency in his literature on 'job stress'. Further, the definitions for job stress are described by several according to their focus. For example, Newman & Beehr (1979) defined job stress as his or her psychological and/or physiological condition such that the person (i.e., mind-body). In contrast, Sharit & Salvendy (1982) preferred to define work stress in a more operational-related manner. Alternatively, Jeon et al. (2022) linked job stress with environmental factors such as work overload, role conflict/ambiguity, and poor working conditions. These diversified focuses have made the definitions in the literature focus on different paths challenging to focus on a wholesome, generic definition. However, a generic definition of job stress is essential for laying a basis for enabling studies on stressors, symptoms, and stress management. However, despite its importance, less attention has been paid to research on developing a generic definition covering all the occupations for occupational stress by identifying themes and key constructs of it. Henceforth, this study aimed to develop a definition for 'Occupational/ Job/ Work/Workplace Stress'. The paper is structured as an introduction, methodology, findings and analysis, conclusions, and the way forward.

2. Methodology

A critical literature review inspires valuable insights into the research topic, allowing the researchers to work expertly, make informed decisions, and benefit from existing knowledge in many ways (Boogie & Saharan, 2019). Further in this research, a definition of occupational stress will be an excellent foundation for researchers to move forward in research related to stressors, symptoms and strategies to overcome occupational stress. Thus, the essential first step is reviewing existing literature on stress and job-related stress definitions. Hence this research aims to find a definition for 'Occupational stress', reviewing previous literature and analysing the existing definitions.

As represented by Figure 1, primarily, the researchers used the keywords and phrases relevant to the subject area to filter the relevant articles from search engines of; Google Scholar, Emerald Insight, and Web of Science. For example, the researcher identified, 'Stress'; 'Occupational Stress'; 'Work Stress'; 'Job Stress'; 'Workplace Stress'; 'Definition of Stress'; 'Stressor'; 'Stress Management'; 'Stress Symptoms' and 'Work-Life Balance' as keywords and phrases for the search of relevant literature. The extended search was carried out using the combinations of; 'Work' OR 'Works' OR 'Working' OR 'Occupation' OR 'Occupational' OR 'Occupations' OR 'Job' OR 'Jobs' OR 'Management' AND 'Stress' OR 'Stressor' OR 'Stressors' OR 'Symptom' OR 'Symptoms'.

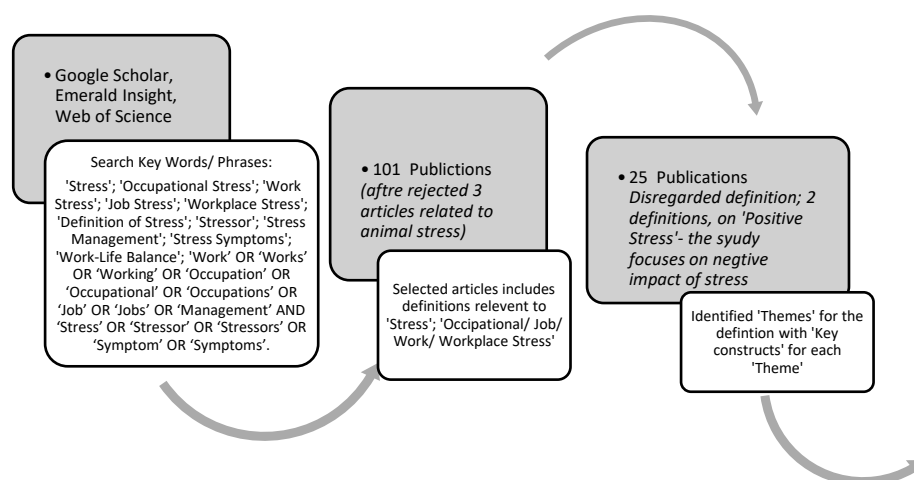


Figure 1: Process of developing a definition for 'Occupational Stress'

After reviewing the abstracts of one hundred and four (104) research publications which include articles, journals and books, the researchers rejected three (3) publications since they were related to animal stress totalling one hundred and one (101) publications. The researcher's next step was to read the filtered one hundred and one (101) publications to sieve to find definitions related to 'Stress' and 'Occupational/ Job/ Work/ Workplace Stress'. The process ended after reducing to twenty-five (25) research publications summarised in Table 1.

Then the extracted definitions were qualitatively analysed using content analysis. Essentially, the 'Key Constructs' and the 'Themes' were identified by going through contents where the meaning of words and phrases comprised in the definitions.

3. Findings and Analysis

Out of these carefully chosen twenty-five (25) publications, eight (8) extracted definitions represent 'Occupational/ Job/ Work/ Workplace Stress', and 24 represent 'Stress' in general. Table 1 denotes the twenty-five (25) definitions of 'Occupational/ Job/ Work/ Workplace Stress' and 'Stress'. In addition, 'Key Constructs' for sorted-out definitions for 'Stress' and 'Occupational Stress' is derived after further analysis of the contents of the definitions. Finally, out of these concluded publications, one definition is related to the literal meaning of 'Stress' in Latin, which denotes the early stage of the evolution of the definition of stress.

Table 1: Definitions of 'Occupational/ Job/ Work/ Workplace Stress' and 'Stress'

Item	Definition	Reference	Key Construct
1.	"The word "stress" is derived from the Latin word stringere, which means to "draw tight."	Oladinrin et al. (2014) "Page 22"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw tight, meaning- to close tightly or to squeeze
2.	"Stress is "the non-specific response of the body to any demand" .	Selye (1956) "Page 12"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • non-specific response • of the body • to any <u>demand</u>
3.	"The relationship between the person and the environment, which takes into account characteristics of the person on the one hand, and the nature of the environmental event on the other"	Lazarus & Folkman (1984) "Page 21"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relationship • between the person and the environment • takes into account • characteristics of the person, nature of the environmental <u>event</u>
4.	"This article, however, argues that stress must be recognised as a physical or psychological demand on a person which can result in either, or both, stimulation and strain."	Geare (1989) "Page 25, 26"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • physical or psychological demand • on a person • result in either or both • <u>stimulation and strain</u>
5.	"Stress is defined as a state of threatened or perceived as threatened homeostasis."	Charmandari et al. (2005) "Page 259"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • state • threatened or perceived as <u>threatened homeostasis</u> (Homeostasis- state of steady internal, physical, and chemical conditions maintained by living systems)
6.	"Stress is a word used to describe experiences that are challenging emotionally and physiologically. "	McEwen, (2007) "Page 874"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experiences • that are challenging emotionally and physiologically
7.	"Fontana (1989) as cited in Chow (2009), defines stress as those challenges which excite us and keep us on our toes, and without which life for many people would become dull and ultimately not worth living."	Chow (2009) "Page 10"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>stress- good</i> • <i>challenges which excite us</i>

Item	Definition	Reference	Key Construct
8.	"Stress is the reaction that people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them."	Kushwaha (2014) "Page 470"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reaction • people have to excessive pressure or other types of • <u>demand</u>
9.	"a state of cognitive, emotional, and physical arousal (Jeffrey, 2006) "	Oladinrin et al. (2014) "Page 23"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a state • cognitive, emotional, physical arousal
10.	"We will define stress as the circumstance in which transactions lead a person to perceive a discrepancy between the physical or psychological demands of a situation and the resources of his or her biological, psychological, or social systems."	Sarafino & Smith (2011) "Page 56-57"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • circumstances • perceive a discrepancy • between physical or psychological • <u>demands</u> of a situation and resources • his/her biological, physical or social systems
11.	"a state of mental or emotional strain due to adverse or demanding life circumstances"	Newbegin (2015) "Page 36"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a state • mental or emotional strain • due to adverse or demanding <u>life circumstances</u>
12.	"Any effect of change in surrounding environment on living being which results in disruption of homeostasis (internal balance) of that living being is called stress."	Shahsavarani et al. (2015) "Page 05"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • effect • <u>change in surrounding environment</u> on living being • results in disruption of homeostasis (internal balance)
13.	"Stress is the non-specific response of the body to any demand."	Fink (2016) "Page 12"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • non-specific response of the body • to any <u>demand</u>
14.	"One way of classifying it is as "good stress, tolerable stress or toxic stress."	McEwen (2017) "Page 02"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>good stress, tolerable stress or toxic stress</i>
15.	" "Stress" means feeling troubled or threatened by life."	(World Health Organization (2020) "Page 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling trouble led / • threatened by life
16.	"Stress is the body's reaction to any change that required an arrangement and adoption."	Kamarazaly et al. (2021) "Page 130"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • body's reaction • to any <u>change</u> • required an arrangement and adoption
17.	"Stress is the feeling of being overwhelmed or unable to cope with mental or emotional pressure."	Mental Health Foundation, (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling • being overwhelmed or unable to cope • with mental or emotional <u>pressure</u>
Work stress-related definitions			
18.	"job stress refers to a situation wherein job-related factors interact with the worker to change (i.e., disrupt or enhance) his or her psychological and/or physiological condition such that the person (i.e., mind-body) is forced to deviate from normal functioning."	Newman & Beehr (1979) "Page 01	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • situation • job- related factors interact with the worker to <u>change</u> • his or her psychological and/or physiological condition • that the person is forced to deviate from normal functioning

Item	Definition	Reference	Key Construct
19.	"demands of the environment exceed (or threaten to exceed) a person's capabilities and resources to meet them, or the needs of the person are not being supplied by the job environment."	Schuler (1980) "Page 188"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demand • of the environment • exceed (or threaten to exceed) a person's capabilities and resources • to meet them or the needs of the person • are not being supplied by the job environment
20.	"However, if some scheme is to be developed for assessing worker stress, an approach in which stress is operationally defined is preferable." "Such an approach would assume stress to be a multidimensional phenomenon that is reflected in the individual's physiological and psychological responses to a particular work situation."	Sharit & Salvendy (1982) "Page 130"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • multidimensional phenomenon • reflected in the individual's physiological and psychological responses • to a particular work <u>situation</u>
21.	"Workplace stress can be defined as the change in one's physical or mental state in response to workplaces that pose an appraised challenge or threat to that employee."	(Colligan & Higgins, 2006) "Page 89"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • change • in one's physical or mental state • in response to workplaces • that pose an <u>appraised challenge</u> or threat to that employee
22.	"By occupational stress is meant negative environmental factors or stressors (e.g. work overload, role conflict/ambiguity, poor working conditions) associated with a particular job. In addition to the environmental precursors, inherent characteristics of the individual and his behaviours may also contribute to occupational ill health."	(Cooper & Marshall, 2013) "Page 03"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>negative environmental factors or stressors</u> • <u>inherent characteristics of the individual and his behaviours</u> • associated with a particular job
23.	"define work stress as the process by which workplace psychological experiences and demands (stressors) produce both short-term (strains) and long-term changes in mental and physical health"	Ganster & Rosen (2013) "Page 1088"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the process • workplace psychological experiences and <u>demands</u> (stressors) • produce both short-term (strains) and long-term changes • in mental and physical health
24.	"The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as the 'adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed on them'. Occupational stress, or workplace stress in this context, refers to stress experienced as a direct result of a person's occupation."	(Campbell, 2006) "Page 03"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adverse reaction • people have to excessive pressure or other types of <u>demands</u> • placed on them
25.	"Job stress is defined the total amount of negative psychological responses that workers experience during job performance."	Jeon et al. (2022) "Page 05"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • total amount of negative psychological responses • workers <u>experience</u> during job performance

McEwen (2017) defines 'stress' using the terms "good stress, tolerable stress or toxic stress" (Item 14 as highlighted in Table 1). Comparably, some authors identified 'Stress' as a positive outcome (Fontana, 1989; as cited in Chow, 2009) (Item 7 as highlighted in Table 1), and some as negative (Campbell, 2006). Further, as stated by

Fagbenro et al. (2023), even though there are significant improvements in physical health, notably in safety, in developed countries, some industries still struggle with the problem of poor mental health among their workers. Moreover, according to Bremner et al. (2020), stress-related psychiatric disorders exist. Thus, it implies that stress causes poor mental health and negatively impacts job performance and productivity which is an important issue (Goswami, 2015). Further, poor health conditions cause physical and mental suffering to individuals and their families and considerable encumbrance on organisations and society (Ennis & Bunting, 2013; Herrman & Jané-Llopis, 2005; Kobau et al., 2011). Therefore, the study focused on negative occupational stress. Moreover, analysing the extracted definitions, it is evident that most authors have identified 'stress' as a negative outcome needed to overcome the adverse effects. Therefore, this research focused on occupational stress as a negative outcome.

3.1. IDENTIFICATION OF 'KEY CONSTRUCTS'

After qualitatively analysing the numerous definitions in-depth as per the contents, the researchers derived 'Key Constructs' as in Table 1. These 'Key Constructs' are identified according to three (3) 'Themes' by content analysis of these definitions. Among these, some specify the job/ work / occupational stress, while others define 'stress'. The three 'Themes' and 'Key Constructs' under those themes are in Table 2.

Table 2: Derived Themes and Key Constructs Using Definitions of Stress and Occupational Stress

Themes	Key Constructs
Viewpoint	biological, physical, social, mixed view
What happens (Output)	'response', 'physical or psychological demand', 'state', 'experience', 'circumstances', 'relationship', 'reaction', 'feeling', 'process', 'change', 'situation', 'stimulation and strain', 'disruption of homeostasis', 'exceed person's capabilities and resources.
Cause (Reason, Input)	'demand', 'life circumstance', 'event', 'result', 'change', 'pressure', 'threatened homeostasis', 'stimulation and strain', 'change in surrounding environment', 'phenomenon', 'appraised challenge', 'negative environmental factors or stressors', 'inherent characteristics of the individual and his behaviours', 'experience', 'situation'.

The 'Viewpoint' is in what angle are we looking at a definition? Emphasising further, this is whether we are looking at in 'biological view' as for using cell types, chemical reactions between neurones/ nerve cells as describing ideas in more biological terms. Or are we using the terminologies in a more 'physical' nature of resources, capabilities, and environment? Otherwise, we describe the phenomenon or situation from a more 'social viewpoint', involving reactions, pressures, demands, occupations, and environment. Accordingly, the analysed definition by Colligan & Higgins (2006) illustrates that 'physical and mental state' from the biological viewpoint and 'responses to workplace' is in the social view. Thus the viewpoint can be a mixed one also.

Since the content analysis of the wording shows that the definition of 'job stress', 'work stress' or 'occupational stress' includes phrases like; reactions, pressures, demands, and occupations, the 'View point' for the definition is identified more towards the theme of; 'Social viewpoint'.

Moving to the other two 'Key Constructs', the 'What happens/ Output' are included in bold font, whereas the 'Cause/ Reason/ Input' is underlined under the 'Key Construct' column in Table 1. The summary of the said two 'key constructs' can be encapsulated as follows;

- What happens/ Output: 'situation', 'feeling', 'exceed person's capabilities and resources', 'response', 'change', 'process', 'reaction', 'state'.
- Cause/ Reason/ Input: 'change', 'pressure', 'demand', 'phenomenon', 'appraised challenge', 'negative environmental factors or stressors', 'inherent characteristics of the individual and his behaviours', 'experience', 'situation'.

Content analysis of the two constructs of 'output' and 'input', the definitions of 'Stress' and 'Occupational Stress' show no apparent difference between the two definitions (Table 3). However, other than the above three constructs, 'occupational stress' is linked with the 'job-related factors', 'job environment', 'work situation', 'workplace challenges', 'associated with a particular job', 'workplace demands' or 'occupation and job performance' (Table 3), identified as a new theme of 'Occupational component' (highlighted in Table 3). Therefore, the relationship to the 'occupation' is the major addition to the definition of 'Occupational/ Job/ Work/ Workplace Stress'. Therefore, the identification of 'Occupational Stress' as a subset of 'Stress' is more explicable.

Consequently, from the definitions found in the literature, the 'Key Constructs' of 'Occupational stress' need to contain, what happens, causes and mainly a linkage to one's occupation with the social viewpoint. Accordingly, 'Occupational Stress, Workplace Stress or Job Stress' is conceptualised as;

'reaction, to pressure or demands, as a result of a person's occupation.'

Table 3: Comparison of the 'Key Constructs: 'Stress' and 'Occupational Stress'

Definition		
Themes	Stress	Occupational Stress
Viewpoint	Biological/ Physical/ Social / Mix	Similar
What happens/ Output	Similar	Similar
Cause/ Reason/ Input	Similar	Similar
Occupational component:	-	'job-related factors', 'job environment', 'work situation', 'workplace challenges', 'associated with a particular job', 'workplace demands' or 'occupation and job performance

This definition also aligns with the definition of Campbell (2006) in the CIOB report on "The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as the 'adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed on them'. Occupational stress, or workplace stress in this context, refers to the stress experienced as a direct result of a person's occupation.", and the authors include 'adverse' reaction and 'excessive' pressure, which may be indicative of 'positive stress' with the positive reaction to pressure. Therefore, the researchers focused on the negative side of stress where stress management is in need.

4. Conclusions and the way forward

The concept of 'Stress' is identified by giving importance to why there is a need to identify stress. Further, the recognition of positive and negative stress and that sometimes we need some stress as a drive is also evident. With the evolution of industries, the focus moved from 'stress' to 'occupational stress', contemplating the negative impacts of stress.

It is evident that the various literature provided different ideas and definitions of 'stress' and 'occupational stress'. The vagueness of the situation is confusing and driven to search for precisely what the stress is. Thus, the study aimed to conceptualise a definition for 'Occupational stress'. 'Occupational stress', 'Job stress', 'Work stress' or 'Workplace stress' are identified in similar meanings that identify the same concept.

The researchers identified categorising into three (3) 'Themes' and 'Key Constructs' of individuals of the definition of 'Stress' and 'Occupational Stress'. The recognised 'Themes' are; 'Viewpoint', 'What happens/ Output' and 'Cause/ Reason/ Input'. Further, it is apparent that these three 'Themes' are similar for both the definitions of 'Stress' and 'Occupational Stress' with the addition of a new theme of 'Occupational component', which links occupation/ work/ job to the definition of 'Occupational Stress', enabling the 'Occupational Stress'; as a subset of 'Stress'. Subsequently, the definition for 'Occupational Stress' is conceptualised as a 'reaction, to pressure or demands, as a result of a person's occupation'. A proper definition of 'Occupational Stress' is essential for further research in this area. Therefore, this study will derive a wholesome generic definition covering all the occupations, which provides a future pathway to study occupational stress management in depth.

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6. References

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