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# What Do Romanian Couples Talk About on a Daily Basis? A Mixed Method Approach

Octav-Sorin CANDEL<sup>1</sup>, Maria Nicoleta TURLIUC<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Communication plays an important role in the development and maintenance of close relationships. This article presents the results of examinations of daily conversation topics of 99 couples from a period of one week. The data was gathered using an electronic daily diary. The results are based on both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The findings reveal that couple's daily conversations can be categorized into 12 categories: instrumental, leisure, affection, catching up, planning, relationship, family, private concerns, conflict, and children. Further analyses indicated no gender differences in the frequency of the topics included into these categories. However, there were differences based on the length of the participants' relationships. In addition, some topics were more common on some days of the week. Finally, we examined daily relational satisfaction and how it was related to each category of the conversation. This study presents a novel view on Romanian couples' day-to-day life and offers new insights for the psychologists, sociologists and social workers that are interested in the research and intervention on romantic and family relationships.

*Keywords:* communication, relational satisfaction, daily diary, conflict, children, relationship.

## Introduction

Couple relationships have an important role in maintaining social order. They are related to other kinds of social institutions, such as communities and organizations (Linke, 2011), and are beneficial for the individual (Bliuc, Costea, Mihai, & Stratulat, 2018). However, romantic relationships need time to develop and interpersonal communication acts as an important process through which they develop (Dainton, 1998). Moreover, it has been suggested that good communication

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between the partners can lead to reduced reactivity to stress (Robles, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003), while conflict or other negative forms of communication determine lower levels of well-being for the partners (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005). Many previous studies concentrate on couple communication in instances of conflict (Brassard, Lussier, & Shaver, 2009; Feeney, & Karantzas, 2017) or on the broader effects and implications of good communication (Hiew, Halford, Van de Vijver, & Liu, 2016). Fewer studies have investigated the mundane, daily interactions between the partners. These events can also have an effect on how satisfied the partners feel (Burlinson, & Samter, 1994) as well as on the maintenance of their relationships (Alberts, Yoshimura, Rabby, & Loschiavo, 2005). For this study, we aimed at examining the daily topics of conversation performed by Romanian couples. We used a daily diary design through which we analyzed the qualitative responses of the partners. We also performed a series of quantitative analyses in order to find out whether the topic varies based on the day of the week and on the participants' demographic variables. Finally, we were also interested in determining whether different topics are associated with different levels of satisfaction for the participants.

### **Mundane communication and its implication in relationships' maintenance and satisfaction**

Recent studies have shown that, regardless of culture, the couples that use communication which is more negative are less satisfied, while those that use positive communication are more satisfied (Hiew et al., 2016). However, "everyday interaction is the force that sustains relationships, so one can only understand how relationships are maintained by understanding the interactions that take place within those relationships" (Dainton, 1998, p. 108). Thus, everyday talk (Goldsmith, & Baxter, 1996), which is comprised of ordinary interactions between the participants, becomes incessantly important in a couple's life. Yet, not many studies have shown interest in finding out what is important for couples and what their main topics are during their everyday interactions. Alberts and her colleagues (2005) consider that mundane communication acts as an important way to maintain good, satisfying couple relationships. Further more, some types of maintenance behaviors and conversations are intentional, while others are involuntary (Gilbertson, Dindia, & Allen, 1998). Dainton and Stafford (1993) have shown that routine behaviors play a crucial role in maintaining a romantic relationship, even though they are unplanned, almost automatic.

A number of studies have examined the specific behaviors and topics of conversation that appear in mundane couple interactions. Dainton (1998) was interested in the daily interactions of married couples. Her study investigated 55 couples for a period of one week. The results show that communication and the expressions of affection (mostly through verbal means) are the most commonly

described types of interactions for both husbands and wives. Nevertheless, spending time together, regardless of the activities that are involved, acts in a crucial way in favor of relational maintenance.

Duck, Rutt, Hurst, and Strejc (1991) showed that mundane communication is important for couples, and that the day of the week is associated with how people feel about their relationship. The authors found that on Wednesday people have the most conflictual conversations. Other studies have shown that the partners offer different evaluations for their satisfaction based on the day of the week. Alberts and her colleagues (2005) found that the conflict was at its peak during weekends, and that the lowest level of satisfaction was achieved on Wednesday, followed by Saturday and Sunday. Their results suggest that the couple's daily conversations are dominated by maintenance communication (more than half of the coded conversation) and that routine and unremarkable conversations take place very often. Laliker and Lannutti (2014) showed that daily communication is important for relationship maintenance even when the partners use technology-mediated communication, in the form of daily electronic messages.

Most of these previous studies were made on the North-American population. However, we found no study that assessed how Romanian couples communicate. Thus, for the first aim of our study, we were interested in examining the topics that arise in the Romanian couples' daily conversations. Based on previous research (Alberts et al., 2005; Duck et al., 1991), our second aim was to investigate whether the topics differ based on the day of the week.

Nevertheless, people do not perceive their communication in exactly the same way. Past research already addressed this issue and has shown that some demographic variables play an important role in shaping the partners' communication behavior. For example, gender acts as a moderator in both the expression of daily maintenance behaviors and in the perception of the importance of communication for the couple (Dainton, & Stafford, 1993; Duck et al., 1991). Also, relationship status and relationship length might be important in determining the ways in which the topics of conversation arise for each couple (Alberts et al., 2005). Thus, we also took into consideration that couples with different relationship lengths might communicate in different ways. As such, our third aim was to investigate how these demographic variables (i.e. gender and relationship length) lead to different topics of conversation for the participants.

Finally, as previously stated, couple communication is very important for maintaining the satisfaction of one's relationship (Brassard et al., 2009; Feeney, & Karantzas, 2017). This association has been significant in both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs (Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2016), and some aspects of couple communication, such as its frequency and conflict are associated with higher, respectively lower satisfaction (Collins, & Horn, 2019; Johnson, Horne, Hardy, & Anderson, 2018). Nevertheless, love talk (i.e. expressing affection, love) and friendship talk (i.e. gossip, chit-chat) are associated with greater satisfaction,

while problem talk (problem-focused communication) is linked to lower satisfaction (Carter et al., 2018). Thus, the last aim of this study was to verify whether different topics of conversation have an effect on the level of daily relational satisfaction.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

Students at a large Romanian university were offered credits for completing a daily diary for seven consecutive days. Each student must have been involved in a romantic relationship at the time of the research and must have had a partner that was willing to also participate. If the student was not in a relationship or the partner refused to participate, the student could have recommended another couple. This study was part of a larger research endeavor. A total of 106 couples were recruited. Seven couples were eliminated from the study because one or both partners did not complete the daily diary for more than four days. Accordingly, 99 couples (N = 198) participated in the final sample. However, not every participant completed the diary every day. In the end, our analysis is based on the 1336 answers (each participant answered the questions on a mean of 6.74 days). For men, the mean age was 25.74 years (SD = 5.63). For women, the mean age was 23.13 years (SD = 4.92). For the complete sample, the mean length of the relationship was 42.78 months (SD = 44.02). 15 couples were married while the rest were not.

### *Procedure*

Each participant received an online form containing the informed consent and some demographic questions. In addition, they were asked to offer their email addresses and phone numbers. After sending back this information, each participant received another unique online form, specially designed for him/her. They were asked to complete it daily (in the evening) for seven days, from Monday to Sunday. Each day, one of the researchers sent personalized emails and phone messages to the participants in order to emphasize the importance of their adherence to the research. The daily form contained multiple questions, but for this study we were interested only in the open-ended question regarding the topic of conversation, the demographic variables and the indicator of satisfaction.

### *Measures*

The topic of conversation was assessed with an open-ended question: "Please consider the most important topic discussed with your partner during the day. Please describe this topic with a maximum of 10 lines." Although the participants could have offered more extended answers, the majority chose to offer shorter answers, containing one or two sentences. When more than one topic was presented,

we chose to use only the first one for the analysis, considering it was the most important for that day.

Relational satisfaction was measured with a single item (“Today I am satisfied with my relationship”) rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (total disagreement) to 6 (total agreement).

The participants also offered some demographic characteristics, such as their gender, age, marital status and length of their relationship. This information was offered during the first and the last fill in.

### *Qualitative analysis and coding*

We used the methods of inductive and deductive thematic analysis. According to Boyatzis (1998), the coding procedure is based on seeing an important moment and encoding it prior to a process of interpretation. However, in our study, we also used an already existing coding schema, a codebook that existed before the start of the in-depth analysis (Crabtree, & Miller, 1999). Using both the inductive and the deductive forms of thematic analysis is recommended as a rigorous approach in conducting qualitative analyses (Fereday, & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The coding was made by two independent researchers who individually coded the data based on previous research on similar topics (Dainton, 1998). After this initial phase, the inter-coder reliability was verified. When the coding was different, the researchers discussed their coding and agreed on the best solution. Some answers could not be coded based on the previous codebook. In this case, the authors created new categories for the data.

Danton (1998) created her analysis based on the everyday interactions reported by couples. However, her categories described behavioral interaction while this research aimed at verifying the everyday conversations. Therefore, on the one hand, we could not retain all the previous themes described by Danton (1998) and on the other hand, we had to create some new superordinate categories that better fit our data.

The first category, *instrumental conversation*, references topics such as house cleaning, money, shopping or home improvements. Generally, the topics included in this category are important to both partners and involve efforts from both of them.

The second category, *leisure*, included topics such as going to the restaurant, going abroad or choosing a movie to watch. Although the category generally included a conversation on fun or relaxing topics, going to church, a topic that appeared only on Sundays, was also included here.

The third category, *affection*, included discussions about feelings and emotions. Some of the participants answered that they spoke about moments when they were sad or happy as well as about events that made them feel one way or the other.

*Catching up*, the fourth category, referenced discussions about the events that transpired while the partners were not together. Usually, these topics were based on what happened at work or at school to one of the partners.

*Planning*, the fifth category, included conversations about scheduling activities such as vacations or visits. The planning should have involved at least one of the partners.

The sixth category was *relationship*. The participants reported general topics, such as conversations on the state of their relationship, on its past or on its future. Some of them discussed marriage or moving in together. Others said that they reconciled after a conflict. Conversations on sexual relationships were also included in this category.

*Family* was the seventh category. It included a conversation on the participants' extended families. Some of them reported that they discussed potential visits from their parents or siblings; others discussed specific problems from their extended family.

The eighth category, *private concerns*, included topics that were specific to only one partner. They discussed one partner's situation at university or at work, about one's plans to buy something or about one's health.

The ninth category was *conflict*. The participants described the verbal conflicts that appeared during that day.

The tenth category was *children*. It involved both conversations about the couple's child as well as conversations and future plans for having children.

The eleventh category was *other*. The partners discussed friends, daily news or philosophical topics, such as life and death. The last category was *none*. A response was coded in this category when the participants said he/she did not have a conversation with the partner or when he/she did not report a topic of conversation.

## Results

*Table 1* presents the frequencies and percentages of the reported topics, delineated by the women and men's reports. The men reported 662 topics, whereas women reported 674 topics. For the total sample, the most common topic of conversation was *relationship*, followed by *instrumental conversation* and *planning*. Also, the category of *other* was well represented in our sample. In order to determine whether there were any significant differences between men and women's responses, we conducted a Chi-Square test for Association. The results show a  $\chi^2(11) = 11.09$ ,  $p = 0.43$ . Thus, the gender differences for the reported topic were not significant.

Table 1. Frequency of men, women and couple's daily conversation topics

Topic	Male's Frequency	%	Female's Frequency	%	Total Frequency	%
1. Instrumental conversation	113	17.1%	110	16.3%	223	16.7%
2. Leisure	44	6.6%	38	5.6%	82	6.1%
3. Affection	21	3.2%	29	4.3%	50	3.7%
4. Catching up	13	2.0%	29	4.3%	42	3.1%
5. Planning	72	10.9%	87	12.9%	159	11.9%
6. Relationship	147	22.2%	144	21.4%	291	21.8%
7. Family	30	4.5%	32	4.7%	62	4.6%
8. Private concerns	53	8.0%	48	7.1%	101	7.6%
9. Conflict	34	5.1%	31	4.6%	65	4.9%
10. Children	31	4.7%	26	3.9%	57	4.3%
11. Other	89	13.4%	90	13.4%	179	13.4%
12. None	15	2.3%	10	1.5%	25	1.9%
Total	662		674		1336	

In order to further verify our second aim, we conducted another Chi-Square test for Association to compare whether the frequency of the reported topics is different based on the length of the relationship. Firstly, we created five different categories for the relationship's length. The first category was comprised of those participants who reported a relationship that was shorter than one year. The second category incorporated those respondents with relationships between 13 and 36 months, and the third category incorporated those with relationships between 37 and 72 months. The fourth category was comprised from the participants with relationships between 73 and 120 months and in the last category entered those who were in a relationship for more than 120 months. None of the participants reported a relationship between 37 and 72 months. The results were significant ( $p < .001$ ), with a  $\chi^2(33) = 108.80$  (see Table 3).



Table 2. Frequency of daily conversation topics by the participant's relationship length

Topic	0-12	%	13-36	%	73-120	%	120+	%
1. Instrumental Conversation	40	11.5%	68	15.2%	75	17.8%	40	33.6%
2. Leisure	18	5.2%	28	6.3%	33	7.8%	3	2.5%
3. Affection	20	5.7%	12	2.7%	18	4.3%	0	0.0%
4. Catching Up	9	2.6%	14	3.1%	12	2.8%	7	5.9%
5. Planning	40	11.5%	47	10.5%	58	13.7%	14	11.8%
6. Relationship	88	25.3%	100	22.4%	92	21.8%	11	9.2%
7. Family	16	4.6%	30	6.7%	13	3.1%	3	2.5%
8. Private Concerns	32	9.2%	44	9.8%	19	4.5%	6	5.0%
9. Conflict	22	6.3%	25	5.6%	15	3.6%	3	2.5%
10. Children	9	2.6%	17	3.8%	16	3.8%	15	12.6%
11. Other	43	12.4%	56	12.5%	65	15.4%	15	12.6%
12. None	11	3.2%	6	1.3%	6	1.4%	2	1.7%
Total	348		447		422		119	

It is interesting to note that the topics rooted in *instrumental conversation* were most common for the participants who reported relationships longer than 120 months, while for all the other categories, the topics related to their relationship were most common. The frequency of the topics about the *relationships* decreases with longer relationships, while the topics about *children* increase with length. Finally, the individuals in longer relationships talk less about *leisure* and have fewer *conflicts*, but also have almost no conversations in which they express their *affection*.

Table 3 presents the topics' distribution on each day of the week. The *instrumental conversation* has the highest frequencies during the workdays and the lowest during the weekend. *Leisure*, as expected, appears more often during the weekends. *Planning* has higher frequencies during the end of the week. The *relationship* is an important topic of conversation each day, but it has the highest frequencies on Mondays and Sundays.

Table 3. Participant's daily conversation topics by day

Topic	Mon	Thues	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
1. Instrumental conversation	37	52	38	30	15	24	27
2. Leisure	10	9	6	9	17	15	16
3. Affection	6	10	11	6	7	5	5
4. Catching up	0	11	4	7	6	10	4
5. Planning	15	18	20	28	32	22	23
6. Relationship	70	35	39	31	29	31	56
7. Family	10	5	8	6	15	9	9
8. Private concerns	12	9	14	19	19	16	12
9. Conflict	11	14	11	10	4	10	5
10. Children	10	10	13	7	6	6	5
11. Other	8	18	25	31	37	35	25
12. None	3	2	3	7	3	4	4
Total	192	193	192	191	190	187	191

The lowest level of satisfaction was reported on Wednesday ( $M = 5.28$ ), and the highest was reported on Sunday ( $M = 5.48$ ). Finally, we conducted a One-Way ANOVA Analysis to determine whether there are significant differences in the level of relational satisfaction based on the topic of daily conversation. The result ( $F(11) = 14.98, p < .001$ ) shows that the differences are significant. However, the post-hoc tests for multiple comparisons reveal that the *conflict* topic ( $M = 4.10$ ) is characterized by lower satisfaction in comparison to all other topics with the exception of *none* ( $M = 4.48$ ) ( $p = 1$ ). Also, the *none* category determines lower satisfaction compared to all other categories with the exception of *conflict*.

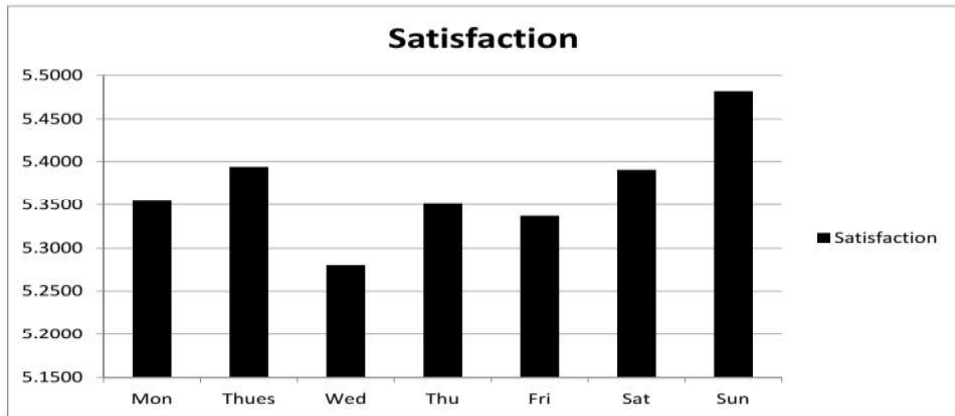


Figure 1. Participant's level of daily relational satisfaction by day

## Discussion

Most of the previous studies analyzing how couples communicate were carried out on the North-American population. However, we had no data about the ways Romanian couples communicate. This present study had the following aims: (1) to examine the main topics of conversation between Romanian couples; (2) to determine whether these topics are different based on the day they take place; (3) to verify how the participants' demographic characteristics (i.e. gender, relationship length) are associated with the topics of conversation; (4) to verify whether the level of daily satisfaction is dependent on the topic of conversation.

Regarding the first aim, our results show that the most common topics among Romanian couples are centered on the *relationship*. In general, when a couple discussed their relationship, they expressed their commitment towards each other. Previous literature shows that everyday expressions of commitment are important, because committed partners need and respect their relationship more (Weigel, & Ballard-Reisch, 2014). In addition, the expression of commitment from one partner might also increase the other's expressions. *Instrumental conversation* and *planning* were other common categories for the participants. These results are in line with previous findings (Dainton, 1998) and show that couples also prefer to discuss topics that are related to maintaining behaviors. *Instrumental conversation* included topics that were relevant to both partners and generally involved discussions about the day-to-day lives of the couple (shopping, house or car repairs, buying presents for friends, etc.). While the topics from the *instrumental conversation* category allowed them to spend time together during the present, the topics from the *planning* category revealed their plans to stay together in the future. Nevertheless, previous studies (Albers et al., 2004) showed that couples

spend the majority of their time together, being involved in maintenance behaviors and the conversations of the above-mentioned topics might allow them to find different opportunities to do this. Dainton's (1998) findings also suggested that couples spend time discussing their emotional state. However, our study shows that only a small fraction (3.7 %) of all the reported topics are centered on the expressions of positive affect. Even more, the frequency for *conflict* topics was slightly higher (4.9 %), while in Dainton's study (1998), conflict had lower occurrences. The results might be related to the differences among the topics included in the *affection* category. While Danton (1998) included both greetings and departure, as well as sexual behavior, we included only the conversations about feelings and emotional states (sexuality-related topics were included in the category of *relationship*). Levinger and Senn (1967) also found similar rates of responses for the expressions of negative affect, a category we consider similar to the *conflict* one from our study.

We also verified whether the topics are different based on the day of the week, which was our second aim. Previous studies showed that couples were least satisfied on weekdays (especially Wednesdays) and that they also reported the highest rates of conflict on Wednesday (Alberts et al., 2005; Duck et al., 1991). Our results suggest that couples have their lowest levels of satisfaction on Wednesday. *Conflict*-related topics are also more frequent during the start of the week. *Relationship*-related topics are more important at the beginning and at the end of the week (on Monday and Saturday). *Leisure*-related topics appear more often during the weekend and *planning* has the highest frequencies on Thursday and Friday, which means that the couples are preparing for the weekend. Parents were more prone to have discussions about their children during the weekdays and less during the weekend (when the children are with them at home). Finally, *instrumental conversation* appears in lower frequency during the weekend, when the partners are more preoccupied with leisure activities.

For our third aim, we looked at the differences that arise based on the demographic characteristics of our sample. Firstly, there were no gender differences in the reported topics. Previous studies also revealed similar results (Dainton, 1998; Turner, 1990). This is in line with Burggraf and Sllars's (1987) perspective that during a relationship, the stereotypic sex-role behaviors are replaced with interpersonally negotiated role behaviors and that biological sex differences in communication behaviors are less important compared to those coming from more individual, personality-related differences. However, we found important differences based on the length of the relationship. Some categories, such as *leisure*, *affection*, *family*, *conflict*, and *relationship*, have lower frequencies for the couples that were together for more than 10 years compared to the couples with a shorter relationship length. On the contrary, these couples more have discussions on topics included in the *planning*, *instrumental conversation* and *children* categories. Higher frequencies for the *children* category are normal and highly expected (more experienced couples have more chances of being

parents). Our findings regarding the lower conflict in more experienced couples are supported by previous research (Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010). Dainton and Stafford (1993) also found that more experienced couples spend more time together sharing tasks (behaviors that are in line with both the *instrumental conversation* and *planning* categories). On the one hand, younger couples spend time together but they are more inclined to talk about their feelings and their relationships. Older couples, on the other hand, use communication that is routine and predictable (Duck et al., 1991) in order to maintain their relationships. Thus, in longer relationships, the communication topics might change from the intense and emotional ones (but also prone to higher conflict) to some that are more calm and mundane but equally important.

For our last aim, we were interested in how daily topics shape relational satisfaction. The only topics that determine lower levels of satisfaction were *conflict* and *none* (no conversation). While this is an expected result for the *conflict* category, the fact that no conversation is as damaging to one's satisfaction as conflict represents a more interesting result. This can be explained by the fact that even routine and seemingly uninteresting communication acts a relational maintenance behavior (Dainton, 1998), while a lack of communication may damage the relationship, even on a daily basis.

### *Limitations*

Some limitations should be noticed. Firstly, this was a study based on self-reported answers. The participants might have acted in a more socially desirable way and thus underestimated some more important topics, such as those related to conflict and other negative behaviors. Also, we used a convenience sample composed from different types of couples (dating, cohabiting, married). Thus, we cannot generalize our results for every Romanian couple. Most of the participants came from urban areas and rural couples were, most probably, under-represented in our sample. It would be important to expand this research and verify whether more diverse couples (in terms of education or living areas) offer similar or different responses. Thirdly, more diverse qualitative methods (such as interviews) could be used to better understand the links between daily conversations, satisfaction and other couple outcomes.

Despite these limitations, our study expands the empirical evidence regarding the daily interactions among dyadic partners. Firstly, this is the first study that took into account the daily reports of both men and women and used them in the mixed analysis. Although there were other studies that presented the daily conversations of Romanian families (Dohotariu, 2012; Tuliuc, & Marici, 2013), this would be the first study to show the topography of couple conversation and how they are linked with satisfaction. We have showed that couples discuss a variety of topics during a week and that these topics vary based on the length of the relationship. Our results are important for psychologists, sociologists, and social workers. Previous

studies showed that the topic of the discussion was associated with the partner's positivity and negativity and that some therapy interventions might use couples' topics of conversation in order to change their negative communication patterns (Williamson, Hanna, Lavner, Bradbury, & Karney, 2013). Family talk might also be important for the children's later understanding of emotions (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991). Thus, knowing how couples communicate might lead to the development of different psychotherapeutic techniques and social intervention programs. Nevertheless, this study presents a Romanian reality concerning the romantic life of various types of couples.

## Conclusion

These results highlight the importance of understanding the specificity of Romanian couples and how they communicate. The complex interrelations between communication that acts as maintenance behavior and routine communication should be considered when designing intervention programs for dyadic adjustment. Nevertheless, each individual also exists outside the relationship, and events from work or from the extended family might be as important in shaping one's satisfaction towards the relationship.

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