

Research Article

Examining the role of stress in the dynamics of professional commitment and academic freedom among secondary school teachers

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The study aims to examine the influence of role stress on the relationship of professional commitment and academic freedom among secondary school teachers. The data has been collected from 400 secondary school teachers using the academic freedom scale, professional commitment scale, and role stress scale. The correlational technique is used to analyse the data. The research results show that academic freedom has a positive and significant relationship with professional commitment; whereas, it has a negative but significant correlation with role ambiguity and role conflict components of role stress. The partial correlation results revealed that three role stressors, namely role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload, significantly influence the relationship of professional commitment with academic freedom among school teachers. The present study has implications for both academicians and policymakers to understand the need for academic freedom to strengthen the professional dedication of teachers by lowering their stress levels. To improve the professional commitment of school teachers, policy makers and school administration need to take professional developmental initiatives such as stress reduction programmes, clearly defining responsibilities of teachers, and providing necessary academic freedom through institutional structures and cultural shifts as stated by NEP 2020.

Keywords: Academic freedom, Professional commitment, Role ambiguity, Role conflict, Role overload

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1. Introduction

The complexity of professional environment for secondary school teachers has increased substantially in the recent years because of the rise in expectations, administrative pressure and curriculum demands. This satisfy these demands higher degree of professional commitment of teacher characterized by loyalty, dedication and obligations towards roles and responsibilities is required (Firestone & Pennell, 1993; Mowday et al., 1997). Academic freedom gives freedom to the teachers to make instructional decisions independently, put forward their views on pedagogical concerns freely (Altbach, 2001; Hofstadter & Metzger, 1995). In their academic atmosphere, teachers often experience negative effects of occupational stress, particularly, role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload. This significantly impacts their work motivation and autonomy (Kahn et al., 1964; Kyriacou, 2001). Teachers with higher stress levels feels restricted to implement innovative pedagogical even though they are committed towards their profession (Travers & Cooper, 1996).

In the Indian context, freedom becomes more imperative as there are disparities in infrastructure, policy enforcement, and administrative support. The secondary school teachers in Punjab are overburdened with work, ambiguous job roles, and conflicting demands (Ali et al., 2013; Singh & Thakur, 2025). Their ability to practice gets effected, even when they are committed towards their professional (Kaur, 2017).

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2. Background

2.1. Professional Commitment

Commitment is the psychological involvement of oneself in the profession as well as belongingness towards the organization (Buchanan, 1974). In an educational context, it refers to the complete involvement of teachers in school and work (Firestone & Rosenblum, 1988). Professional commitment is an individual belief in and acceptance of the values of the profession as well as their willingness to be in that profession (Vanderberg & Scaepello, 1994). It needs one's commitment along with aspiration to carry on the assigned work and to gain essential information to complete the tasks (Noesgaard & Jørgensen, 2024). Professional commitment is the dedication of a teacher towards his/her school and learners for the attainment of educational objectives (Crosswell, 2006). Teachers' commitment in the school system is linked with his dedication and role played by him in the achievement of educational goals and objectives (Akinwale & Okotoni, 2019). The professional commitment of a teacher is reflected by his/her devotion towards learner's education, awareness about duties and responsibilities related to school and teaching profession. It is associated with teachers' work performance, attitude towards school, and readiness to perform all academic and non-academic activities in school.

2.2. Academic Freedom

Academic freedom encompasses faculty members' right to exercise considerable independence in their teaching and research (Tierney, 1993). Academic freedom is the liberty to participate in academic work, including the freedom of teachers to teach the subject matter, in academic roles and contexts, pursue and publish research work without any interference from administrators or controlling authorities. The idea of academic freedom is deep rooted in the history of European Higher Education. The notion of academic freedom first originated in Germany in the 19th century, and it expanded over time (Altbach, 2001).

According to the statement given by the American Association of University Professors [AAUP], academic freedom is defined as, "Teachers are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results subject to the adequate performance of their other academic duties" (AAUP, 1940). The phenomenon of academic freedom denotes the rights of the teachers in their subject matter, in research, to present their views on public matters, and to do work for others without involvement from administrators. It permits the faculty members to discover and distribute knowledge without interference from the authorities and governing boards (Smith, 2005).

The extent of academic freedom allowed at school results not only in the number of ideas taught but also in the number of spokespersons and programs in schools, the quantity and quality of books and media explored (Barger, 2010). Thus, it is about the rights of the teachers to teach the subject matter, choose course content, present their viewpoint on any matter without being afraid of any sort of punishment, and offer them protection from external organizations.

2.3. Role Stress

Role stress is the tension and burden individuals face when they encounter conflicting, vague, or overwhelming expectations related to their roles within an organization (Kahn et al., 1964). Role stress has been defined as "anything about an organizational role that produces adverse consequences for the individual" (Kahn & Quinn, 1970). Teachers' role stress deals with the misfit between teachers' expectations of their role and actual work conditions (Petergrew & Wolf, 1982). Role stress was initially defined as having two components: role conflict and role ambiguity. Role overload was originally viewed as a subcomponent of role conflict (Kahn et al., 1964). However, empirical research and subsequent theories have shown that role overload is a distinct facet. Along with role conflict and role ambiguity, it forms the broader concept of role stress (Ortqvist & Wincent, 2006).

Role Ambiguity refers to the extent of clarity regarding job responsibility, organizational guidelines, authority, and work schedule. Role Conflict refers to "congruency-incongruency or compatibility-incompatibility in the requirements of the role, where congruency or compatibility is judged relative to a set of standards or conditions, which have an impact on role performance." Role Overload refers to an individual's perception of disparity between the resources, such as time, energy, and skills they have and those necessary to complete their assigned tasks in the given time frame.

3. Related Literature

Academic freedom refers to the participation of teachers in academic pursuits without hindrances (Karki, 2015); the selection of course content, and presenting their opinions on debatable matters (Berdahl, 1990; De George et al., 1997). It has been conceptualized as a tool to achieve excellence in both teaching and research (Agih & Egumu, 2007; Atkinson, 2004; Hoy & Miskel, 2008).

Academic freedom is dependent on stress-free academic life, freedom of speech and research, transparency (Badamchi, 2022; Dogan, 2016; Mihailova, 2014); rules of institution and administration (Karki, 2015). It is greatly affected by the political atmosphere (Seggie & Gokbel, 2015; Summak, 1998) and; discriminative attitude of administrators (Bozkurt & Balci, 2020). Thus, the academic freedom is required to make teachers stress free.

The concept of academic freedom in school attributes to numerous areas of school functioning such as teaching, classroom management, and student evaluation (Nayak & Padhi, 2022). Teachers' academic freedom is associated with democracy (Badley, 2009; Misco & Patterson, 2007), open learning environments for their professional development (Joshi, 2019; Mikulec, 2019), as well as commitment to the right course of action (Cronqvist, 2022).

The degree of academic freedom enjoyed by teachers is depicted by the freedom provided to them to develop their teaching methodology as per their creative ideas (Altun, 2013; Ledoux et al., 2010). All these areas need equal attention to fulfill the job requirements.

Considerable amount of academic freedom lowers the job stress and work overload (Duze, 2011) which in turn raises the level of professional commitment (Sheikh, 2015). School climate deeply impacts the teachers' professional dedication, and teachers ought to be provided with autonomy (Nazneen et al., 2014) as the closed environment at school forces makes them reluctant to express themselves (Amin et al., 2020). However, the positive environment and lower role ambiguity could elevate the commitment of employees (Duze, 2011; Ho et al., 2009; Kaur, 2023; Kaur & Rani, 2022; Pecino et al., 2019). Considering the previous research studies, the present study was undertaken to study the interplay of role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload components of role stress in the relationship of professional commitment with academic freedom among school teachers.

4. Current Study

Academic freedom and professional commitment are crucial for the quality and success of the educational process, especially at secondary level. Where teacher's role goes beyond teaching and they act as both transmitters of knowledge and role model for students. academic freedom, traditionally, was not of much concern in school education and it remained underexplored due to the ideological considerations (i.e. curriculum rigidity and discipline) (Altbach, 2001). However, the evolving educational landscape and National Education Policy puts emphasis on the need of academic freedom by highlighting the role of critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, learner autonomy and meta cognition among young learners (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The expected role of teachers is getting new dimensions and evolving because of the advancement of technology in the educational setup, changes in pedagogy, blended and hybrid modes of offline and online learning techniques. In this scenario, teachers face numerous obstacles such as a lack of readiness to handle innovation, the smart-classroom, and heightened level of role stress-manifested as role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload. These transformations adversely impact performance, morale, and professional commitment of teachers (Kyriacou, 2001; Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012). The ambiguous role, incompatible role demands, and overwhelming expectations diminishes the teachers' ability to exercise academic freedom and ultimately their professional commitment reduces (Rizzo et al., 1970).

As per NEP 2020, teachers are expected to facilitate higher-order thinking and socio-emotional skills among adolescents rather than merely achieving the educational objectives. Keeping in view the importance of academic freedom among school teachers, it is becoming more apparent to give them the necessary freedom, and ease their workload to enhance their commitment level. Although, there are many studies focusing on higher education, very few studies have been done to explore how role stress interferes or moderates the relationship of professional commitment with academic freedom especially in school-settings. This leaves a gap in understanding the challenges faced by school teachers especially in culturally and educationally diverse regions like Punjab.

Thus, the variables that affect the job performance of teachers require an investigation in terms of professional commitment and role stress (namely, role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload). This research sheds light on the interplay of role stress in the relationship between academic freedom and

professional commitment among secondary school teachers. The study provides valuable insights to the policy makers, and administrators for devising such policies and reforms which aims to enhance autonomy of teachers by lowering their stress and making them more empowered and committed. The aim of the study is to examine the moderating role of role stress in the relationship of professional commitment and academic freedom among school teachers of Punjab.

5. Method

5.1. Research Design

The quantitative, descriptive-correlational research design was followed in the conduct of the study to analyse the mediating role of role stress in terms of role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload in the relationship between professional commitment and academic freedom among school teachers of Punjab. Descriptive statistics has been employed to assess normality of the data, Pearson's product-moment correlation to examine associations among variables, and partial correlation to determine the moderating effect of role stress.

5.2. Participants

Government secondary school teachers of Punjab constituted the population of the study. Using a random sampling method, data was collected from 400 teachers. There were 103 i.e., 25.75% male teachers and 297 (i.e., 74.25%) female teachers. The participant teachers had teaching experience of 1 year to more than 31 years. Approximately, there were 42% of teachers hail from rural areas and 58% of teachers belong to urban areas. The sample characteristics for the present study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics of school teachers (N=400)

<i>Variable and Category</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
Male	103	25.75
Female	297	74.25
Teaching Experience (in years)		
≤10	207	51.75
11-20	114	28.50
21-30	66	16.50
≥31	13	3.25
Locale		
Rural	169	42.25
Urban	231	57.75

5.3. Instruments

5.3.1. Academic Freedom Scale

The academic freedom scale for school teachers by Kaur and Kaistha (2024) was used to study the academic freedom of school teachers. It is a self-report scale consisting of 24 items divided into four areas, namely, institutional climate, teacher-teacher relationship, teacher-student relationship, and teacher-principal relationship, with responses anchored on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (always) to 4 (rarely). The Cronbach's alpha value of the scale is 0.994 and the omega coefficient of reliability is 0.739.

5.3.2. Professional Commitment Scale

Teacher's professional commitment was measured using the Professional Commitment Scale by Kaur et al. (2013). It is 45-item scale measuring professional commitment on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (unfavorable) to 5 (favorable). The test-retest reliability of the scale is 0.76.

5.3.3. Role Stress Scale

The Role stress scale developed by Peterson et al. (1995) has been used to assess role stress among teachers. Role stress was measured in terms of role ambiguity, role overload, and role conflict components. The scale has a reliability (Cronbach alpha) of 0.61 for role ambiguity, 0.77 for role overload, and 0.54 for role conflict component.

5.4. Data Collection

Once the research tools were finalized, the researcher proceeded with the process of data collection. The investigator reached out to the headmaster or principal of government schools to collect the necessary data. After their permission, the researcher met the teachers and explained to them the purpose of the current research. They were assured about the confidentiality of their data and were handed the research tools. The filled tools were collected and checked by the investigator to make sure that all items were marked. Then, the filled scales were scored as per the guidelines, and the data was subjected to statistical treatment for analysis.

5.5. Data Analysis

The descriptive statistics were employed to compute the mean and standard deviation for both independent and dependent variables. The correlation analysis was employed to study the degree and strength of the relationship between the study variables. Further, zero-order and first-order correlation between predictor variables e.g. role stress and professional commitment, and academic freedom as dependent variable were computed using SPSS software.

6. Findings

The results of descriptive statistics revealed that the variables of academic freedom ($M = 66.18$, $SD = 8.89$), professional commitment ($M = 186.34$, $SD = 13.77$), role ambiguity ($M = 34.75$, $SD = 10.54$), role conflict ($M = 30.61$, $SD = 5.77$), and role overload ($M = 13.20$, $SD = 4.29$) were approximately normally distributed. The values of Skewness ranging from -0.421 to 0.429 (for academic freedom = -0.421 , professional commitment = -0.073 , role ambiguity = 0.308 , role conflict = -0.010 , and role overload = 0.429), and kurtosis which ranges from 0.041 to 0.159 (for academic freedom = 0.147 , professional commitment = 0.104 , role ambiguity = 0.088 , role conflict = 0.041 , and role overload = 0.159) all fell within acceptable threshold values (± 1 for skewness and ± 2 for kurtosis) (George & Mallery, 2019). This indicates that the data is normally distributed.

To study the relationship of dependent variable (i.e. academic freedom) with independent variables (i.e. professional commitment, role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload), the Pearson product moment correlation has been calculated and results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Correlation matrix: Academic Freedom, Professional Commitment, Role Ambiguity, Role Conflict, and Role Overload (N=400)

Role Stress	Correlations	Professional Commitment	(R_1) ₂₃	R^2	% Variance
Role Ambiguity					
Zero Order	$r_{13} = -.238^{**}$	$r_{12} = .210^{**}$	0.309^{**}	0.0955	9.55
First Order	$r_{13.2} = -.202^{**}$	$r_{12.3} = .167^{**}$			
Role Conflict					
Zero Order	$r_{13} = -.067$	$r_{12} = .210^{**}$	0.277^{**}	0.0729	7.29
First Order	$r_{13.2} = -.005$	$r_{12.3} = .199^{**}$			
Role Overload					
Zero Order	$r_{13} = -.118^{**}$	$r_{12} = .210^{**}$	0.277^{**}	0.0729	7.29
First Order	$r_{13.2} = -.086$	$r_{12.3} = .195^{**}$			

Note. $^{**}p < .01$

Academic freedom was found to have a positive and significant relationship with professional commitment ($r = .210$, $p < .01$); whereas, it has a negative and significant relationship with the role ambiguity component of role stress ($r = -.202$, $p < .01$). Professional commitment showed a positive relationship with academic freedom when role ambiguity is controlled ($r = .167$, $p < .01$), but the strength of the relationship decreases by 0.043. This depicts that role ambiguity moderates the relationship of academic freedom with professional commitment. When professional commitment is controlled, the relationship of academic freedom with role ambiguity comes out to be negative and significant ($r = -.202$, $p > .05$). Thus, professional commitment moderates the relationship of role ambiguity in explaining academic freedom among school teachers. Taken together, role ambiguity and professional commitment yielded the multiple correlation value of 0.309, which is significant at .01 level. It indicates that professional commitment enhances the academic freedom of school teachers when their role ambiguity is controlled, as the strength of the relationship increases from 0.210 to 0.309. It may be concluded that professional commitment emerged as a

significant correlate of academic freedom either independently or when taken together with the role ambiguity component of role stress. Further, it may be seen that role conflict and professional commitment conjointly contribute 9.5% variance to explain academic freedom among school teachers.

It may be observed from Table 3 that academic freedom has a negative but not significant relationship with the role conflict component of role stress ($r = -.067, p > .05$). When the effect of role conflict is controlled, professional commitment showed a positive relationship with academic freedom ($r = .199, p < .01$), but the value decreases by 0.011, which depicts that role conflict moderates the relation of professional commitment with academic freedom. When professional commitment is controlled, the relationship of academic freedom with role conflict comes out to be negative but not significant ($r = -.005, p > .05$). Thus, professional commitment moderates the relationship of role conflict in explaining academic freedom among school teachers. Taken together, role conflict and professional commitment yielded the multiple correlation value of 0.277, which is significant at .01 level. It reveals that professional commitment enhances the academic freedom of school teachers when their role ambiguity is controlled, as the strength of the relationship increases from 0.210 to 0.277. It may be concluded that professional commitment emerged as a significant correlate of academic freedom either independently or when taken together with the role conflict component of role stress. Further, it may be seen that role conflict and professional commitment conjointly contribute a 7.29% variance to explain academic freedom among school teachers.

Academic freedom has been found to have a negative and significant relationship with the role overload component of role stress ($r = -.118, p < .01$). When role overload is controlled, professional commitment showed a positive and significant relationship with academic freedom ($r = .195, p < .01$), which depicts that role overload moderates the relation of professional commitment with academic freedom as the correlation value decreases from 0.210 to 0.195. When professional commitment is controlled, the relationship of academic freedom with role overload comes out to be negative but not significant ($r = -.086, p > .05$). Thus, professional commitment moderates the relationship of role overload in explaining academic freedom among school teachers. Taken together, role overload and professional commitment yielded the multiple correlation value of 0.277, which is significant at .01 level. It reveals that professional commitment enhances the academic freedom of school teachers when their role overload is controlled as the strength of the relationship increases from 0.210 to 0.277. It may be concluded that professional commitment emerged as a significant correlate of academic freedom either independently or when taken together with role overload component of role stress. Further, it may be seen that role overload and professional commitment conjointly contribute a 7.29% variance to explain academic freedom among school teachers.

Overall, the role stress in terms of role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload contributes significantly to affect the relationship of professional commitment with academic freedom of school teachers. Role stress (in terms of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload) in combination with professional commitment was seen to be influencing its relationship with academic freedom as the correlation coefficient value of professional commitment came out to be $-.222, -.171$ and $-.339$ respectively for role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload (as mentioned in table 2). Also, this may be seen from Table 3 that role ambiguity plays a more dominant role in influencing the relationship of professional commitment with academic freedom, as the multiple R value came out to be 0.309, followed by role conflict and role overload (when the multiple R value is 0.277). This shows that role ambiguity plays a major role in explaining academic freedom among school teachers, followed by role conflict and role overload components of stress. Thus, it may be concluded that professional commitment emerged as a significant correlate of academic freedom either independently or when taken together with role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload components of role stress.

7. Discussion

The objective of the present research is to explain the mediation effect of role stress on the relationship of academic freedom with professional commitment among school teachers. The results of the correlation analysis revealed that academic freedom has a negative and significant relationship with the role ambiguity and role conflict components of role stress. This signifies that freedom in academic institutions would buffer the role stress among school teachers. Also, the professional commitment has a positive relationship with academic freedom. This highlights the importance of academic freedom in institutions to raise the level of professional commitment among employees. Further, the results revealed that role stress mediates the relationship of professional commitment with academic freedom.

The negative and significant relationship of professional commitment with role stress means that an increase in role stress leads to lesser professional commitment among school teachers. The lower stress level, clarity of assigned roles and responsibilities play an important role in elevating the commitment of teachers.

When a teacher experiences congruence of values, goals, and responsibilities with his profession, he will feel empowered and intrinsically motivated to perform his duties, which in turn raises his commitment level (Firestone & Pennell, 1993).

The individuals who are less likely to commit to their organizations have higher chances of experiencing role ambiguity. The confusion about the way to achieve goals or targets leads to lower satisfaction and lower commitment (Homayed et al., 2024). An individual feels threatened by role conflict and role ambiguity, which in turn create obstacles in finishing the job (Alam et al., 2015).

The above-mentioned findings of the present study are per the studies of Pervez et al. (2022), Kaur & Rani (2022) and Kaur (2023). The commitment towards organization and teachers' performance is greatly impacted by role stress (Conley & Woosley, 2000), unequal distribution of work, long working hours, and lack of personal time (Wang et al., 2025). The study undertaken by Pan et al. (2023) asserted that autonomy acts as a source of self-empowerment as it helps the teachers to combat with exhaustion. Greater the autonomy, lesser is the stress experienced. Thus, they should be given sufficient freedom in teaching by lowering their stress. The teachers' performance at school is reduced when they experience role stress (Richards et al., 2019). The above findings of the study are also supported by the role stress theory (Kahn et al., 1964).

Nazneen et al. (2014) asserted that the professional dedication of teachers is highly influenced by the school climate. The democratic approach fosters a positive school environment, which consequently enhances teachers' commitment towards their job. A positive work environment would yield lower stress and ultimately lead to higher devotion towards their profession. The findings of the present study align with the study of Pecino et al. (2019), which confirms that a positive organizational climate could lead to the fulfillment of job demands. Kilinc et al. (2018) opined that autonomy in the teaching process will give teachers more freedom to make decisions about teaching, choose the most appropriate activities, and assess students, as they will be more willing to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of their profession. Amin et al. (2020) asserted in their study that teachers are hesitant to express themselves. This may be due to the closed environment.

Teachers should be given more freedom within their classrooms to choose the instructional strategies, curriculum, and assessment criteria (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). This autonomy will empower them to make decisions that are best suited for their students and to figure out the strategies to ensure learners' engagement in learning (Lamb & Reinders, 2008) as autonomy may decrease job stress (Ha et al., 2025) consequently heightening their professional commitment (Dilekci, 2022; Mulyana & Izzati, 2022). Autonomy in choosing teaching strategies, lesson planning and offering academic support enhances the performance of teachers (Johari et al., 2017). Also, the commitment of teachers increases when they are given curriculum autonomy (Fradkin-Hayslip, 2021); they show a willingness to be in the teaching profession and happily deal with students' problems (Erturk, 2023). Therefore, teachers ought to be provided with required freedom in school by making the school environment open to alleviate the stress level of teachers and to strengthen their dedication towards their profession.

8. Conclusions

The findings of the study highlighted that role ambiguity and role conflict have a negative relationship with academic freedom. Whereas, role overload has no relationship with it. The results further revealed that it had a positive relationship with professional commitment. The role ambiguity component of role stress significantly moderates the relationship of professional commitment with academic freedom. This shows that school teachers ought to be provided with the freedom to lower their stress levels so that their commitment can be enhanced.

9. Implications

The findings of the present study would help academicians and policymakers to understand how role stress and lack of academic freedom destroy the commitment of teachers. As per findings, teachers' connection with the institution is not automatic but an inner feeling that comes when they are given freedom to work according to their job requirements. The commitment of teachers towards their job will strengthen if they are given a positive and supportive attitude by their superiors, colleagues, and stakeholders, and not demanding work that is beyond their assigned duties. Steps should be taken to unearth the causes underlying role stress, and accordingly, steps should be taken to alleviate their stress to heighten their commitment level.

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understand how role stress and lack of academic freedom destroy the commitment of teachers. As per findings, teachers' connection with the institution is not automatic but an inner feeling that comes when they are given freedom to work according to their job requirements. The commitment of teachers towards their job will strengthen if they are given a positive and supportive attitude by their superiors, colleagues, and stakeholders, and not demanding work that is beyond their assigned duties. Steps should be taken to unearth the causes underlying role stress, and accordingly, steps should be taken to alleviate their stress to heighten their commitment level.

Data Availability: The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study were collected by the researcher herself. The data collected is kept confidential for the privacy of respondents.

Declaration of Interest: The author declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement: This research was conducted in compliance with ethical guidelines, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and the confidentiality and anonymity of all data.

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