

Pattern avoidance and overlap in strings

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April 12, 2001

Abstract

Consider a finite alphabet Ω and patterns which consist of characters from Ω . For a given pattern w , let $\text{cor}(w)$ denote its autocorrelation, which can be seen as a measure of the amount of overlap in w . Letting $a_w(n)$ denote the number of strings over Ω of length n which do not contain w as a substring, the main result of this paper reads: If $\text{cor}(w) > \text{cor}(w')$ then $a_w(n) - a_{w'}(n) > (|\Omega| - 1)(a_w(n - 1) - a_{w'}(n - 1))$ for $n \geq N$, and the value of N is given. This result confirms a conjecture by Eriksson [2], which was previously proved to be true by Cakir, Chryssaphinou and Månsson [1], but then under the assumption that $|\Omega| \geq 3$.

1 Introduction and main result

Let Ω denote a finite alphabet of size $q \geq 2$, and call any finite sequence composed of characters from the alphabet Ω a string. For a given string $w = w_1 \cdots w_k$, $w_i \in \Omega$, which will be referred to as a pattern, let $a_w(n)$ denote the number of strings of length n , which do not contain w as a substring of consecutive characters. We say that these strings avoid w . In this paper we will consider how the structure of the pattern w affects $a_w(n)$.

Guibas and Odlyzko [3] introduced the notion of autocorrelation of a pattern w . If $|w| = k$, where $|w|$ denotes the length of w , it is defined to be the binary sequence $b_k b_{k-1} \cdots b_1$, where $b_i = 1$ if $w_j = w_{k-i+j}$, $j = 1, \dots, i$, i.e. if there is an overlap of size i . Sometimes it is convenient to view this sequence as a number in some base, and with some abuse of notation we let $\text{cor}(w)$ denote both the sequence and its numerical value in, say, base 2. For example, if $\Omega = \{H, T\}$, and $w = TTHHTHTTHT$, then $\text{cor}(w) = 100001001$, and if it is viewed as a binary number, then $\text{cor}(w) = 529$. Autocorrelation can be seen as a measure of the amount of overlap in w .

By means of generating functions, Guibas et al. [3] derived the following recurrence equation for $a_w(n)$, where the convention $a_w(0) = 1$ is used:

If $|w| = k$ and $\text{cor}(w) = b_k b_{k-1} \cdots b_1$, then, for $n \geq 0$,

$$a_w(n) = \sum_{i=1}^k b_i [q a_w(n + i - 1) - a_w(n + i)]. \quad (1.1)$$

Furthermore, Guibas et al. [3] showed that asymptotically $a_w(n) \sim c_w \theta_w^n$, where $c_w, \theta_w > 0$ depend on the autocorrelation of w . Eriksson [2], who gave another, combinatorial, proof of (1.1), proved also that there exists an N such that $a_w(n) > a_{w'}(n)$, $n \geq N$, if and only if $\text{cor}(w) > \text{cor}(w')$. Furthermore, Eriksson [2] states the following conjecture concerning the value of N :

If $\text{cor}(w) > \text{cor}(w')$, then $a_w(n) > a_{w'}(n)$ from the first n where equality no longer holds.

Cakir, Chryssaphinou and Månsson [1] proved that Eriksson's conjecture is true, by giving a lower bound on $a_w(n) - a_{w'}(n)$; however only under the annoying assumption that $q \geq 3$:

If w and w' are patterns of length k with $\text{cor}(w) > \text{cor}(w')$, where $\text{cor}(w) = b_k \dots b_1$ and $\text{cor}(w') = b'_k \dots b'_1$, and $r = \max\{i : b_i \neq b'_i\}$, then

$$a_w(n) - a_{w'}(n) = \begin{cases} 0, & \text{if } n < 2k - r, \\ 1, & \text{if } n = 2k - r, \end{cases} \quad (1.2)$$

and if $q \geq 3$, then for $n \geq 2k - r$,

$$a_w(n) - a_{w'}(n) > (q - 2) \sum_{i=1}^{n-1} [a_w(i) - a_{w'}(i)]. \quad (1.3)$$

If the patterns are of different lengths, $|w| = k$ and $|w'| = j$, $j < k$, then the formulae above hold with $2k - r$ replaced by j throughout.

The proof of (1.2) in Cakir et al. [1] is a simple use of (1.1), while the proof of (1.3) is more involved. The case where $q = 2$ was left open except for some special cases. In the present paper, we show that the conjecture by Eriksson is, as expected, true also when $q = 2$.

Theorem 1.1 *If w and w' are patterns of length k with $\text{cor}(w) > \text{cor}(w')$, and $r = \max\{i : b_i \neq b'_i\}$, then for $n \geq 2k - r$*

$$a_w(n) - a_{w'}(n) > (q - 1)[a_w(n - 1) - a_{w'}(n - 1)]. \quad (1.4)$$

If the patterns are of different lengths, $|w| = k$ and $|w'| = j$, $j < k$, then (1.4) holds for $n \geq j$.

Before proving this theorem, we need some results and observations on the avoidance of a pattern. An extensive list of references on results on the occurrence of patterns can be found in Régnier and Szpankowski [4].

2 Results on the avoidance of a pattern

Strings which are shorter than the pattern w can, of course, not include w as a substring. Also all strings of the same length as w , except the pattern itself, avoid w . Hence, if $|w| = k$ then

$$a_w(n) = q^n, n = 1, \dots, k - 1, \quad \text{and} \quad a_w(k) = q^k - 1. \quad (2.1)$$

The number of strings of length n for which w does not occur in the first $n - 1$ positions is equal to $q a_w(n - 1)$. These strings can be divided into two groups; those that end with w and those that do not end with w . The number of strings in the latter of these groups is $a_w(n)$. Thus $q a_w(n - 1) - a_w(n)$ is the number of strings of length n ending with w , that is in positions $n - k + 1$ to n , and avoiding w in its first $n - 1$ positions. It is hence true that

$$q a_w(n - 1) - a_w(n) \begin{cases} = 0, & \text{if } n \leq k - 1, \\ = 1, & \text{if } n = k, \\ > 0, & \text{if } n \geq k. \end{cases} \quad (2.2)$$

Now, let us introduce the notation $h_w(n) = q a_w(n - 1) - a_w(n)$. Then, by (2.2), $q h_w(n - 1) - h_w(n) = 0$ for $n < k$, and $q h_w(k - 1) - h_w(k) = -1$. Above we considered what happened when adding a character in the end of the strings which avoid w . We now repeat this arguing for the strings in which w occurs for the first

time at the very end, by considering what happens when a character is added in the beginning. For $n > k$, $h_w(n-1) > 0$ and then $qh_w(n-1)$ can be interpreted as the number of strings of length n ending with w and avoiding w in positions $2, \dots, n-1$. As above, these strings can be divided in two groups; those which start with w and those which do not start with w . The number of strings in the latter group is $h_w(n)$. Hence $qh_w(n-1) - h_w(n)$, $n > k$, is the number of strings of length n which both begin and end with w , but avoid w in all other places, which certainly is a non-negative number.

Using the convention that $b_0 = 1$, let

$$s = \max_{0 \leq j \leq k-1} \{j : b_j = 1\}. \quad (2.3)$$

The shortest possible string of length $> k$, which both begins and ends with w is of length $2k - s$, and there obviously only exists one such string. To summarize,

$$qh_w(n-1) - h_w(n) \begin{cases} = 0, & \text{if } n < k, \\ = -1, & \text{if } n = k, \\ = 0, & \text{if } k < n < 2k - s, \\ = 1, & \text{if } n = 2k - s, \\ \geq 0, & \text{if } n > 2k - s. \end{cases} \quad (2.4)$$

Note that (2.4) can be verified formally by using (1.1).

In Cakir et al. [1], the proof of (1.3) was divided into the cases where $b_{k-1} = 0$ and $b_{k-1} = 1$. In the case where $b_{k-1} = 1$, the proof relied on that if $b_{k-1} = 1$ then $b_1 = \dots = b_k = 1$; the implication follows since by the definition of b_{k-1} , $w_1 = w_2, w_2 = w_3, \dots, w_{k-1} = w_k$, and hence $w_1 = w_2 = \dots = w_k$. In the present paper the autocorrelation structure plays a larger role. What we use is the following observation, where $\lfloor \cdot \rfloor$ denotes the integer part:

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{if } b_j = 1 \text{ for some } j \in \{0, 1, \dots, k-1\}, \\ & \text{then } b_{k-(k-j)t} = 1 \text{ for all } t \in \{1, \dots, \lfloor \frac{k}{k-j} \rfloor\}, \end{aligned} \quad (2.5)$$

which follows by the definition of autocorrelation, as in the case where $b_{k-1} = 1$.

A key tool in both Cakir et al. [1] and in the present paper is the recurrence equation for $a_w(n)$ given in (1.1), where $a_w(n)$ is expressed in terms of ‘‘future’’ values of $a_w(i)$, i.e. $i > n$. Here it is however more convenient to express $a_w(n)$ in terms of $a_w(i)$, $i < n$, as in the following equation, which follows directly from (1.1). For $n \geq k$,

$$a_w(n) = qa_w(n-1) - a_w(n-k) + \sum_{i=1}^{k-1} b_i [qa_w(n-k+i-1) - a_w(n-k+i)]. \quad (2.6)$$

Note that it follows immediately from this recurrence equation and (2.1) that $a_w(n) = a_{w'}(n)$ for all n if $\text{cor}(w) = \text{cor}(w')$.

In the sequel we use the convention that $h_w(n) = 0$, $n = 0, -1, -2, \dots$, and to simplify the notation we drop the subscript in h_w , when there is no risk of confusion.

Lemma 2.1 *Assume that w is a pattern of length k with autocorrelation $\text{cor}(w) = b_k b_{k-1} \dots b_1$, and let s be defined by (2.3). Then, for $n \geq 1$,*

$$qa_w(n-1) - a_w(n) \geq \begin{cases} (q-1) \sum_{i=1}^{k-s} [qa_w(n-1-i) - a_w(n-i)], & \text{if } 0 < s < k, \\ (q-1) \sum_{i=1}^{k-1} [qa_w(n-1-i) - a_w(n-i)], & \text{if } s = 0. \end{cases} \quad (2.8)$$

Proof. The proof is divided into six parts: (i) $n \leq k$, (ii) $k < n < 2k - s$, (iii) $n = 2k - s$, (iv) $2k - s < n < 2k$, $1 \leq s \leq k - 1$, (v) $n \geq 2k$, $1 \leq s \leq k - 1$, (vi) $n > 2k$, $s = 0$.

(i) By (2.2), $h(k) = 1$ and $h(n) = 0$ for $1 \leq n \leq k - 1$, so the lemma is obviously true for $n \leq k$.

(ii) Now we consider n such that $k < n < 2k - s$, and hence we can assume that $0 \leq s \leq k - 2$. For these n it follows by (2.4) that

$$h(n) = qh(n-1) = (q-1)h(n-1) + h(n-1).$$

Furthermore, if $k < n - 1$, then $h(n-1) = (q-1)h(n-2) + h(n-2)$, so that

$$h(n) = (q-1)(h(n-1) + h(n-2)) + h(n-2).$$

Repeating this arguing, and using that $h(k) = 1$, we get

$$h(n) = 1 + (q-1) \sum_{i=1}^{n-k} h(n-i). \quad (2.9)$$

Since $h(j) = 0$ for $j < k$, the lemma is true for $n < 2k - s$.

(iii) By (2.4) and (2.9)

$$\begin{aligned} h(2k-s) &= qh(2k-s-1) - 1 \\ &= (q-1)h(2k-s-1) + h(2k-s-1) - 1 \\ &= (q-1) \sum_{i=1}^{k-s} h(2k-s-i), \end{aligned}$$

so the lemma holds also for $n = 2k - s$.

(iv) In this step we assume that $s > 0$, and consider n such that $2k - s < n < 2k$. Fix n and make the induction hypothesis that (2.7) is true for all $m < n$. By (2.6), and since $b_i = 0$ for $s < i < k$, we get

$$\begin{aligned} h(n) &= qa(n-1) - a(n) \\ &= q \left(qa(n-2) - a(n-k-1) + \sum_{i=1}^{k-1} b_i [qa(n-k+i-2) - a(n-k+i-1)] \right) \\ &\quad - \left(qa(n-1) - a(n-k) + \sum_{i=1}^{k-1} b_i [qa(n-k+i-1) - a(n-k+i)] \right) \\ &= qh(n-1) - h(n-k) + \sum_{i=1}^s b_i [qh(n-k+i-1) - h(n-k+i)]. \quad (2.10) \end{aligned}$$

Recall from (2.4) that

$$qh(j-1) - h(j) \begin{cases} = 0, & \text{if } j < k, \\ = -1, & \text{if } j = k, \\ \geq 0, & \text{if } j > k, \end{cases}$$

and note that if $i = 2k - n$, then $n - k + i = k$ and $0 < i < s$, so that

$$\sum_{i=1}^s b_i [qh(n-k+i-1) - h(n-k+i)] \geq -b_{2k-n} \geq -1. \quad (2.11)$$

Moreover, $h(n-k) = 0$ if $n < 2k$, and it follows by (2.10), (2.11) and the induction hypothesis that

$$\begin{aligned} h(n) &\geq qh(n-1) - 1 \\ &= (q-1)h(n-1) + h(n-1) - 1 \\ &\geq (q-1)[h(n-1) + \cdots + h(n-(k-s)-1)] - 1 \\ &\geq (q-1)[h(n-1) + \cdots + h(n-(k-s))], \end{aligned}$$

where the last inequality follows since $n - (k-s) - 1 \geq k$ and $h(n - (k-s) - 1) \geq h(k) = 1$ by the induction hypothesis.

(v) In the final step in the case $s > 0$ we take $n \geq 2k$, and make the assumption that (2.7) is true for all $m < n$. In this case $qh(n-k+i-1) - h(n-k+i) \geq 0$, for all $i = 1, \dots, k-1$, and it follows from (2.10) that

$$\begin{aligned} h(n) &= qh(n-1) - h(n-k) + \sum_{i=1}^s b_i [qh(n-k+i-1) - h(n-k+i)] \\ &\geq qh(n-1) - h(n-k) \\ &\geq (q-1)h(n-1) - h(n-k) + (q-1) \sum_{i=1}^{k-s} h(n-1-i) \\ &\geq (q-1) \sum_{i=1}^{k-s} h(n-i), \end{aligned}$$

where the last two inequalities follow by the induction hypothesis.

(vi) What remains to prove is the case where $s = 0$, and $n > 2k$. Fix $n > 2k$ and assume that (2.8) holds for all $m < n$. Then, by (2.10),

$$\begin{aligned} h(n) &= qh(n-1) - h(n-k) \\ &\geq (q-1)h(n-1) - h(n-k) + (q-1) \sum_{i=1}^{k-1} h(n-1-i) \\ &\geq (q-1) \sum_{i=1}^{k-1} h(n-i). \end{aligned}$$

■

3 Proof of Theorem 1.1

To simplify the notation, we will in the sequel let

$$a(n) = a_w(n), \quad a'(n) = a_{w'}(n), \quad \Delta(n) = a_w(n) - a_{w'}(n),$$

$$h(n) = qa_w(n-1) - a_w(n) \quad \text{and} \quad h'(n) = qa_{w'}(n-1) - a_{w'}(n),$$

when this is more convenient.

Assume first that $|w| = |w'| = k$. By (1.2) we have $\Delta(n) = 0$, $n < 2k - r$, and $\Delta(2k - r) = 1$. Hence the statement of the theorem is true for $n = 2k - r$.

Fix $n > 2k - r$ and make the induction hypothesis that (1.4) is true for all m such that $2k - r \leq m < n$. First we assume that $1 < r < k - 1$. Using (2.6) and

that $b_i = b'_i$, $i = r + 1, \dots, k - 1$, $b'_r = 0$ yields

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta(n) &= q\Delta(n-1) - \Delta(n-k) + \sum_{i=r+1}^{k-1} b_i[q\Delta(n-k+i-1) - \Delta(n-k+i)] \\ &\quad + \sum_{i=1}^r b_i h(n-k+i) - \sum_{i=1}^{r-1} b'_i h'(n-k+i). \end{aligned} \quad (3.1)$$

Let s be the number defined in (2.3) pertaining to the word w , and set $\gamma = k - s$. Note that since $b_r = 1$, it is obvious that $s \geq r$, and that for some $t \in \{1, 2, \dots\}$ either $r = k - \gamma t$, or $k - \gamma t > r > k - \gamma(t + 1)$. In the first case $b_r = b_{r-\gamma} = b_{r-2\gamma} = \dots = 1$, by (2.5), and, letting $R = k - \gamma(t + 1)$, it follows in the latter case that $b_r = b_R = b_{R-\gamma} = b_{R-2\gamma} = \dots = 1$. Let Γ denote the set $\{k - \gamma, k - 2\gamma, \dots\} \cap \{1, 2, \dots, r\} \cup \{r\}$. Then Γ includes only i for which $b_i = 1$. (There can be $i \notin \Gamma$ for which $b_i = 1$.) Using that $b_j h(j) \geq 0$ for all j , it follows that

$$\sum_{i=1}^r b_i h(n-k+i) \geq \sum_{i \in \Gamma} h(n-k+i). \quad (3.2)$$

Furthermore $s \geq r > 1$, so by Lemma 2.1

$$h(n-k+i) \geq (q-1) \sum_{j=1}^{\gamma} h(n-k+i-j),$$

for all i . If the elements of Γ are ordered by size, the smallest element and the distance between two consecutive elements are at most γ , and we get

$$\sum_{i \in \Gamma} h(n-k+i) \geq (q-1) \sum_{i=1}^{r-1} h(n-k+i).$$

This inequality, together with (3.2) and $b'_j h'(j) \leq h'(j)$, yields

$$\begin{aligned} &\sum_{i=1}^r b_i h(n-k+i) - \sum_{i=1}^{r-1} b'_i h'(n-k+i) \\ &\geq \sum_{i=1}^{r-1} h(n-k+i) - \sum_{i=1}^{r-1} h'(n-k+i) \\ &= \sum_{i=1}^{r-1} [q\Delta(n-k+i-1) - \Delta(n-k+i)]. \end{aligned} \quad (3.3)$$

Now

$$\Delta(j) + b_i[q\Delta(j-1) - \Delta(j)] = \begin{cases} \Delta(j), & \text{if } b_i = 0, \\ q\Delta(j-1), & \text{if } b_i = 1, \end{cases}$$

and by the induction hypothesis $\Delta(j) \geq (q-1)\Delta(j-1)$, for $j < n$, so that

$$\Delta(j) + b_i[q\Delta(j-1) - \Delta(j)] \geq (q-1)\Delta(j-1), \quad (3.4)$$

with strict inequalities for $j \geq 2k - r$. Use (3.4) repeatedly for $j = n - 1$ down to $j = n - k + r + 1$ to get

$$\Delta(n-1) + \sum_{i=r+1}^{k-1} b_i[q\Delta(n-k+i-1) - \Delta(n-k+i)] > (q-1)\Delta(n-k+r), \quad (3.5)$$

which together with (3.3) inserted in (3.1) yields

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta(n) &> (q-1)\Delta(n-1) - \Delta(n-k) \\ &\quad + \Delta(n-k+r) + \sum_{i=1}^{r-1} [q\Delta(n-k+i-1) - \Delta(n-k+i)].\end{aligned}\quad (3.6)$$

Since $\Delta(n-k+r) \geq \Delta(n-k+r-1)$ by another use of the induction hypothesis, and by using (3.4) for $j = n-k+r-1$ down to $n-k+1$, we get from (3.6)

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta(n) &> (q-1)\Delta(n-1) - \Delta(n-k) + (q-1)\Delta(n-k) \\ &\geq (q-1)\Delta(n-1),\end{aligned}$$

and the theorem is proved when $1 < r < k-1$.

If $r = k-1$, then $b_1 = \cdots = b_k = 1$ by (2.5), so that

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta(n) &= q\Delta(n-1) - \Delta(n-k) + h(n-1) + \sum_{i=1}^{k-2} [h(n-k+i) - b'_i h'(n-k+i)] \\ &\geq q\Delta(n-1) - \Delta(n-k) + h(n-1) + \sum_{i=1}^{k-2} [q\Delta(n-k+i-1) - \Delta(n-k+i)].\end{aligned}$$

Since $h(n-1) > 0$, by (2.2), the inequality in (3.6) holds true also when $r = k-1$, and the result follows as before.

If $r = 1$, the last sum in (3.1) vanishes, and we get

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta(n) &= q\Delta(n-1) - \Delta(n-k) + \sum_{i=2}^{k-1} b_i [q\Delta(n-k+i-1) - \Delta(n-k+i)] \\ &\quad + h(n-k+1).\end{aligned}$$

Using (3.5), that $h(n-k+1) \geq 0$, and the induction hypothesis yields

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta(n) &> (q-1)\Delta(n-1) - \Delta(n-k) + (q-1)\Delta(n-k+1) \\ &\geq (q-1)\Delta(n-1),\end{aligned}$$

which completes the proof in the case where w and w' are of equal length.

What remains of the proof is to show the result corresponding to (1.4) in case of different lengths of the patterns; $|w| = k$ and $|w'| = j < k$. As usual the proof proceeds with induction, and the basic step follows by (2.1): $a(n) = a'(n)$ for $n < j$, and for $n = j$ we have $a(j) = q^j$, while $a'(j) = q^j - 1$. Hence

$$1 = \Delta(j) > (q-1)\Delta(j-1) = 0.$$

Fix $n > j$ and assume that (1.4) is true for all m such that $j \leq m < n$. First we consider the case where $|w| = k$, $|w'| = k-1$, $\text{cor}(w) = 1\underbrace{00\dots 00}_{k-1}$ and $\text{cor}(w') =$

$\underbrace{11\dots 11}_{k-1}$. Since $b'_1 = \cdots = b'_{k-1} = 1$,

$$a'(n) = (q-1) \sum_{i=0}^{k-2} a'(n-k+1+i),$$

by (2.6). Hence

$$a'(n) - a'(n-1) = (q-1)a'(n-1) - (q-1)a'(n-k),$$

and

$$a'(n) = q a'(n-1) - (q-1) a'(n-k). \quad (3.7)$$

Furthermore $b_1 = \dots = b_{k-1} = 0$, so that by (2.6)

$$a(n) = q a(n-1) - a(n-k). \quad (3.8)$$

Using (3.7), (3.8), the induction hypothesis and that $a'(n-k) \geq 0$ yields

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta(n) &= (q-1)\Delta(n-1) + \Delta(n-1) - \Delta(n-k) + (q-2)a'(n-k) \\ &> (q-1)\Delta(n-1). \end{aligned} \quad (3.9)$$

In the case where w and w' have arbitrary autocorrelations, and $|w| = k$ and $|w'| = j < k$, we choose patterns v_i and v'_i , $i = 1, \dots, k-j$ with autocorrelations $\text{cor}(v_i) = \underbrace{100\dots 00}_{k-i}$ and $\text{cor}(v'_i) = \underbrace{11\dots 11}_{k-i}$. Note that such patterns always exist.

Then $a(n) - a'(n)$ can be written as a telescoping sum as

$$\begin{aligned} a(n) - a'(n) &= a(n) - a_{v_1}(n) + \sum_{i=1}^{k-j} [a_{v_i}(n) - a_{v'_i}(n)] \\ &\quad + \sum_{i=1}^{k-j-1} [a_{v'_i}(n) - a_{v_{i+1}}(n)] + a_{v'_{k-j}}(n) - a'(n). \end{aligned}$$

By (3.9)

$$a_{v_i}(n) - a_{v'_i}(n) > (q-1)[a_{v_i}(n-1) - a_{v'_i}(n-1)],$$

$i = 1, \dots, k-j$. Furthermore w and v_1 are of the same lengths, which holds also for v'_i and v_{i+1} , $i = 1, \dots, k-j-1$, and for v'_{k-j} and w' , so the other summands are handled by the first part of this theorem, and we finally get

$$\begin{aligned} a(n) - a'(n) &> (q-1) \left\{ a(n-1) - a_{v_1}(n-1) + \sum_{i=1}^{k-j} [a_{v_i}(n-1) - a_{v'_i}(n-1)] \right. \\ &\quad \left. + \sum_{i=1}^{k-j-1} [a_{v'_i}(n-1) - a_{v_{i+1}}(n-1)] + a_{v'_{k-j}}(n-1) - a'(n-1) \right\} \\ &= (q-1)[a(n-1) - a'(n-1)]. \end{aligned}$$

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