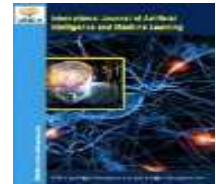




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Research Paper

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Is Delinquency a Choice or a Condition? Physical and Digital Manipulation in 'No Guns at My Son's Funeral' and 'Little Brother'

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Abstract

This study argues that juvenile delinquency is not the result of individual choice but an outcome shaped by coercion, constraint and systemic erosion. The analysis extends Agnew's General Strain Theory by introducing manipulation as a structurally organised mechanism of strain enacted through both physical coercion and digital surveillance and control. Through comparative narrative and socio-legal analysis, this research examines how manipulation operates across two novels: Paro Anand's *No Guns at My Son's Funeral* (2005) and Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* (2008). The former depicts manipulation through physical coercion within a conflict-affected environment, while the latter depicts manipulation through digital surveillance and algorithmic control within a securitised urban environment. Despite these differing modalities, the analysis reveals that manipulation simultaneously activates all three of Agnew's strain sources in both settings.

The study situates these findings within global and Indian legal frameworks, including each of which reorients juvenile justice from a punitive response toward preventative, child-centred reform. The study proposes the 3R Model: **Recognition, Rehabilitation and Reintegration**, conceptualising juvenile delinquency as a structured psychological process produced by systemic manipulation, whether physical or digital, rather than individual moral failure.

Keywords: Juvenile Delinquency, General Strain Theory, Manipulation, Digital Surveillance, Child Rights, Law and Literature

Introduction

Juvenile delinquency, defined as criminal or antisocial behaviour by individuals below eighteen, spans a spectrum from status violations to serious offences (Muncie, 2009). Such behaviour is not individual moral failure but a conditioned response to structural inequalities, environmental deprivation and systemic neglect (Agnew, 1992; Farrington, 2003). While existing frameworks - strain theory, differential association, and labelling theory (Merton, 1938; Sutherland, 1947; Becker, 1963), have advanced understanding of its causes, they remain insufficient in accounting for organised manipulation, whether physical or digital, as a structurally embedded mechanism of strain that erodes agency and forecloses legitimate pathways (Agnew, 1992; Zuboff, 2019).

Paro Anand's *No Guns at My Son's Funeral* (2005) illustrates how a young man's recruitment into a terrorist organisation results not from individual volition but from cumulative familial, social, and state neglect. Similarly, Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* (2008) demonstrates how algorithmic systems criminalise adolescent dissent within a digitally securitised environment.

Prevailing explanations of juvenile delinquency have predominantly focused on macro-level socioeconomic determinants, including poverty, educational deprivation, family instability, and proximity to criminal environments (Farrington, 2003; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). While necessary, these variables insufficiently account for the psychological mechanisms through which deprivation translates into deviance. Agnew (1992) fills this explanatory space by proposing that strain can originate from three interrelated conditions: an inability to reach goals that society treats as desirable, the loss of relationships or resources an individual already values, and continued exposure to circumstances experienced as harmful or threatening. Crucially, Agnew argues that it is not deprivation itself but the psychological experience of strain, characterised by anger, frustration, and helplessness, that generates the motivational conditions for delinquency. This study extends this framework by arguing that manipulation, whether exercised through physical coercion or digital surveillance, functions as a structurally organised activator of all three strain sources simultaneously, producing delinquency not as a chosen response but as a conditioned outcome.

Another aspect relates to the spaces within which delinquency takes place. While spaces characterised by violence and coercion continue to be essential, digital spaces bring about more pervasive but hidden ways of exercising control. In the novel *Little Brother*, it is shown how surveillance systems, along with the algorithms of curating and monitoring, influence actions and interactions while maintaining invisibility and often a lack of consent from the individual involved.

Existing legal frameworks governing juvenile justice reflect a normative shift from punitive retribution toward rehabilitative approaches. Internationally, the UNCRC (1989), Articles 37 and 40, establishes the child's right to dignity and reintegration, reinforced by the UN Beijing Rules (1985), which prioritise child well-being over formal adjudication. Domestically, India's JJ Act 2015 established Child Welfare Committees and Juvenile Justice Boards for children in conflict with the law. In *Pratap Singh v. State of Jharkhand* (2005), the Supreme Court of India further affirmed that juvenile status is determined by the offender's age at the time of the offence, strengthening legislative protections. However, these frameworks address the consequences of delinquency rather than its structural and psychological causes, offering no mechanism to identify or redress the socio-psychological conditions -coercion, surveillance, and systemic manipulation that produce delinquent behaviour. It is this lacuna that the present study seeks to address.

This study employs comparative narrative analysis and socio-legal analysis as its methodological framework, situated within the Law and Literature tradition (Posner, 1988; Aristodemou, 2000). The two primary texts, Anand's *No Guns at My Son's Funeral* (2005) and Doctorow's *Little Brother* (2008), are treated as sites of social knowledge, wherein fictional narratives illuminate structural and psychological conditions that empirical data alone cannot fully capture. Legal instruments are analysed alongside literary evidence to demonstrate how existing frameworks fail to identify or redress the manipulative mechanisms that produce juvenile delinquency. Despite extensive scholarship on juvenile delinquency, socio-psychological strain, and digital surveillance, existing literature has not produced a cohesive framework that integrates these dimensions. This study asks: how does systemic manipulation, whether enacted through physical coercion or digital surveillance, function as a structurally organised mechanism of strain that produces juvenile delinquency?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foundations of Juvenile Delinquency: Social and Psychological Perspectives

Research consistently identifies poverty, family dysfunction and peer influence as primary social drivers of youth offending. Sutradhar (2023) roots delinquency in structural deprivation, though Salmi and Kivivuori (2006) found self-control outperformed social capital as a predictor and Liu (2011) confirmed that blocked educational opportunity produces comparable outcomes across culturally distinct settings. Social conditions thus create the context for delinquency while individual traits shape differential responses to it.

Family dynamics remain contested. McCord (1991) demonstrated that maternal relational quality shapes delinquency over extended periods, while Schroeder et al. (2010) showed that family formation, not merely dissolution can increase offending through disrupted parental attachment. The dominant policy response, the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm, has drawn sustained criticism: O'Mahony (2009) argues it reduces complex causation to checklists, while France (2008) contends it frames youth as a future problem rather than engaging structural realities.

Psychologically, Kerig (2012) identifies trauma as the core developmental mechanism linking adversity to offending; Miao et al. (2025) locate cognitive bias, shaped by self-esteem and relational neglect, as foundational to delinquent behaviour; and Baglivio et al. (2014) demonstrate that adverse childhood experiences are cumulatively associated with more serious and persistent offending.

2.2 Strain, Structure and the Production of Juvenile Delinquency

Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding juvenile delinquency, yet its application across populations reveals both explanatory power and significant limitations. Agnew and White (1992) demonstrated that strain arising from blocked goals, loss of positive stimuli and negative experiences significantly predicts delinquency and substance use, while Agnew et al. (2002) showed that negative emotionality and low self-control moderate strain responses toward offending. Cross-cultural applications further expose GST's predominantly Western assumptions. Moon et al. (2008) found that chronic parental punishment was negatively associated with offending among Korean youth, complicating standard GST predictions, while Agnew (2015) argues that collectivist cultural values shape both the experience of strain and delinquent responses. Crucially, neither cultural nor structural refinements address the psychological mechanisms through which strain is internalised, leaving the internal processes translating external pressure into offending theoretically underspecified.

These limitations are sharpened by empirical critique. Mazerolle and Piquero (1998) demonstrated that the strain-to-offending link weakens considerably without anger as a mediating emotion, and Broidy (2001) found that strain consistently produces negative emotion but not consistently offending, exposing GST's tendency to treat strain as uniform when its psychological impact varies substantially by relational context. Kerig and Becker (2012), Amatya and Barzman (2012), and Horan and Widom (2021) collectively demonstrate that trauma compromises the internal resources, emotional regulation, attachment security and cognitive appraisal, that buffer against strain-driven offending, exposing GST's recurring blind spot: precise cataloguing of external pressures without sufficient exploration of the psychological mechanisms mediating strain and behaviour. This reinforces the need for an integrated framework across the relational and digital contexts through which strain now increasingly operates.

2.3 Digital Delinquency, Surveillance and Legal Responses

The rise of digital environments raises a critical question: whether cyber and offline offending represent the same behaviour in a new setting or introduce genuinely distinct dynamics. Nam (2021) provides longitudinal evidence that both are bidirectionally related across adolescence, while Lee (2018) complicates this by showing that low self-control and deviant peer association predicted cyber deviance but device access did not, suggesting digital delinquency is driven by individual and social risk factors rather than technological opportunity alone.

Peer influence operates with particular intensity online. McCuddy (2021) found that online peer delinquency predicts offending independently of offline associations, while Udris (2016) demonstrated that distinct variables differentially predict online and offline deviance, confirming the two are interconnected but not governed by identical mechanisms. Psychological vulnerability adds a further independent pathway: Li et al. (2025) found dark triad traits and moral disengagement predict sustained online deviance, while Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) linked aggression, social difficulties and low caregiver bonding to online harassment, a dimension underexplored in purely structural accounts.

Interventions consistently fall short by treating online and offline contexts as interchangeable. Lee et al. (2024) confirmed offline protective factors do not automatically translate online and Reyns et al. (2011) demonstrated that online exposure and proximity to motivated offenders significantly predict cyber victimisation, exposing the inadequacy of interventions that ignore digital structural properties.

What remains absent is a theoretically coherent account of digital environments as strain-producing contexts in their own right. GST was formulated before the digital transformation of adolescent social life and has not been systematically extended to account for manipulation, social comparison and reputational harm as distinct sources of strain — underscoring the need for an integrated framework connecting structural conditions, psychological processes and digital environments.

3. Theoretical Framework: General Strain Theory

3.1 General Strain Theory: Conceptual Foundations and Theoretical Scope

This paper adopts Robert Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory (GST) as its primary analytical framework for understanding juvenile delinquency as a response to difficult social and environmental circumstances. Rather than treating delinquency simply as an expression of individual moral failure, GST directs attention towards the social conditions that create strain and influence how young people respond to adversity. Agnew's theory builds on Merton's (1938) foundational anomie paradigm, which explained deviant behaviour through the gap between culturally valued goals and the legitimate means available for achieving them. Agnew extends this argument by proposing that strain can arise from a much broader range of social, psychological, and environmental experiences, particularly those perceived by individuals as harmful, unfair, or difficult to manage. This broader conception makes GST useful for examining the different pressures that shape young people's experiences across family, educational, social, and institutional contexts.

For Agnew (1992), strain is not a single phenomenon but takes three interconnected forms: it can emerge when a person cannot secure outcomes that society treats as desirable, when something they already value is taken away from them, or when they are repeatedly confronted with conditions they experience as unwanted or damaging. Such experiences can generate negative emotions, including anger, frustration, and resentment, which may influence the ways individuals cope with strain. Delinquent behaviour represents one possible form of coping when constructive responses are unavailable or difficult to access. A central contribution of GST is therefore its attention to the subjective experience of strain and to the emotional processes that connect adverse circumstances with behavioural responses. In this respect, the theory

provides a broader explanation of delinquency than approaches that focus only on structural conditions or individual characteristics.

The relevance of GST is particularly significant when examining adolescents, who may have limited coping resources and remain dependent on institutions such as family, school, and the state. Experiences of loss, conflict, exclusion, deprivation, or institutional pressure may therefore have a considerable influence on how young people understand and respond to their circumstances. From a GST perspective, behaviours commonly associated with juvenile delinquency, including rule violation, resistance, and disengagement, can be examined in relation to the strains surrounding young people rather than being understood solely as evidence of individual pathology. This perspective allows the analysis to move from asking why a young person behaves delinquently to examining the social and institutional conditions that produce strain and shape the responses available to them.

3.2 Strain Typology: Goals, Loss and Negative Stimuli

Building on this foundation, Agnew's (1992) typology can be understood as spanning three distinct, though related, categories of strain that together shape delinquent behaviour. The first, failure to achieve positively valued goals, refers to the inability to attain socially desired outcomes through legitimate means, generating frustration and dissatisfaction that increase the likelihood of deviant responses. The second involves the removal of positively valued stimuli, the loss of supportive relationships, stability, or security, which disrupts emotional balance and weakens conventional attachments, particularly among adolescents dependent on social and familial structures. The third and most significant for this study, is exposure to negative stimuli, including violence, coercion, control and surveillance. Unlike the preceding categories, this form of strain is characterised by the continuous presence of harmful conditions rather than isolated events, functioning as a sustained source of pressure that shapes behaviour over time. In both physical and digital environments, negative stimuli manifest through systems of manipulation that restrict autonomy and impose external control, generating persistent behavioural responses.

3.3 Manipulation as a Structural Mechanism of Strain

Building upon General Strain Theory, this study introduces manipulation as a central mechanism through which strain is produced and sustained. Defined as structured processes of control operating through coercion, surveillance and systemic regulation, manipulation functions as a continuous and organised force that limits individual autonomy and intensifies strain across contexts. While Agnew's framework identifies negative stimuli as a strain source, it does not account for manipulation as a deliberately organised and sustained system of control, a distinction that requires theoretical extension.

Manipulation operates across both physical and digital forms. Physical manipulation is characterised by violence, coercion and direct control, while digital manipulation emerges through surveillance systems, data monitoring and algorithmic regulation. In digitally mediated environments, control extends into psychological experience: continuous surveillance leads to the internalisation of control, where individuals regulate their own behaviour in anticipation of observation, generating anxiety, hyper-awareness and cognitive pressure. Manipulation thus functions as a necessary theoretical extension of GST, the structural mechanism through which strain is deliberately produced and intensified across both physical and digital contexts, reframing delinquency as a systemic outcome rather than individual deviance.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design, consistent with constructivist epistemology, which holds that meaning is produced through the interaction between text, context and reader (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rather than producing generalisable empirical findings, it offers a theoretically grounded interpretation of how two literary narratives represent the structural and psychological conditions shaping juvenile behaviour.

The primary method is comparative literary analysis of two purposively selected novels: one set in a conflict-driven physical environment characterised by violence and coercion, the other in a digitally mediated environment defined by surveillance and technological control. Their differing mechanisms of control allow examination of whether distinct environmental conditions produce convergent outcomes in strain generation and juvenile behavioural response. Close reading serves as the primary analytical tool, enabling sustained attention to narrative technique, characterisation and thematic structure to trace how external structural pressures are internalised and expressed by juvenile protagonists (Eagleton, 2009).

The analytical framework is grounded in Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory (GST), which identifies three strain sources: failure to achieve positively valued goals, removal of positive stimuli, and introduction

of negative stimuli. This study extends GST by introducing manipulation as a distinct analytical category, defined as the structured process through which coercion, surveillance and institutional control actively produce and intensify strain. This extension addresses a gap in GST's account of how organised systems of power deliberately generate adverse conditions, consistent with calls for greater theoretical attention to power structures in delinquency causation (Broidy, 2001; Rebellon et al., 2012). Analysis was guided by three operationalised markers: instances of coercion or surveillance directed at the juvenile protagonist; narrative representations of strain responses including anger, helplessness and blocked agency; and structural patterns through which institutional control forecloses legitimate pathways.

The study integrates literary studies, criminology and legal analysis, disciplines whose combined perspectives are necessary to address an inherently cross-disciplinary phenomenon. Findings prioritise analytical depth over empirical breadth (Flyvbjerg, 2006), and conclusions drawn from two literary texts are not directly transferable to real-world populations. Future research might extend the framework to empirical case studies or a wider literary corpus.

5. Legal Frameworks in Juvenile Justice: Scope, Contradictions and Limitations.

5.1 Normative Foundations: International Frameworks for Juvenile Justice.

International legal standards provide the normative foundation for juvenile justice systems globally. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises children as rights-bearing individuals entitled to protection, dignity and development, establishing that the best interests of the child must guide all legal proceedings and prioritising rehabilitation and reintegration over punitive responses. The Convention further stipulates that deprivation of liberty should be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period, reflecting a welfare-oriented philosophy that places developmental needs at the centre of judicial intervention.

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (Beijing Rules) complement this framework by providing operational guidance on diversion, proportionality and sensitivity to the age and circumstances of the child. Emphasising the relevance of family environment, economic conditions and developmental context, the Beijing Rules reinforce a restorative rather than retributive approach to juvenile offending.

Despite their progressive orientation, both frameworks remain largely normative in character. They acknowledge the relevance of social and psychological factors without ensuring their systematic integration into legal practice, and implementation varies significantly across jurisdictions, shaped more by institutional capacity and state priorities than by the holistic needs of the child. This gap between principle and practice is consequential: where legal systems fail to operationalise the welfare commitments encoded in international standards, juveniles whose behaviour is conditioned by structural adversity remain vulnerable to responses that prioritise punishment over understanding. It is within this normative gap that the present study situates its inquiry, examining how manipulation, strain and delinquency operate in conditions that existing legal frameworks inadequately address.

5.2 National Legal Framework: Juvenile Justice and Digital Regulation

In India, juvenile justice is primarily governed by the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, which prioritises rehabilitation, reintegration and child-friendly procedures through dedicated bodies including Juvenile Justice Boards and Child Welfare Committees. Rooted in restorative philosophy, the Act situates the child's welfare at the centre of judicial intervention. However, provisions permitting children aged 16–18 to be tried as adults in cases involving heinous offences introduce a significant internal contradiction, one that privileges offence severity over contextual understanding and risks reproducing the punitive structures the legislation was designed to transcend. The Act's reliance on judicial discretion in determining adult trial eligibility further compounds this problem, producing inconsistent outcomes shaped by individual interpretation rather than standardised child-centred criteria. The absence of mandatory psychological assessment prior to such determinations strips the process of the developmental sensitivity the Act otherwise promotes, exposing a gap between its rehabilitative principles and its operational practice.

The Information Technology Act, 2000 reveals a parallel and equally consequential limitation. It contains no child-specific provisions accounting for psychological development, vulnerability or the structural conditions shaping digitally mediated behaviour — a deficiency that grows more significant as digital environments increasingly define how young individuals negotiate identity, authority and resistance. The Act applies the same punitive framework to juvenile and adult offenders alike, failing to distinguish between deliberate criminal intent and structurally induced resistance behaviours such as circumventing institutional surveillance or subverting digital monitoring systems.

Taken together, these frameworks reveal a legal architecture that addresses juvenile delinquency partially rather than comprehensively. Both in physical and digital contexts, Indian law engages with the behavioural outcome without adequately accounting for the structural and psychological conditions producing it. This gap directly informs the present study's argument that existing legal responses are ill-equipped to address delinquency as a structured response to manipulation and strain, reinforcing the need for interdisciplinary engagement and child-centred legislative reform.

5.3 Structural, Theoretical and Digital Gaps in Juvenile Justice

The central limitation of juvenile justice frameworks lies not in their procedural design but in their conceptual orientation. Legal systems categorise offences, determine culpability and prescribe responses, focusing on what the child has done rather than why. This produces frameworks that are operationally functional but analytically shallow, treating delinquency as individual moral failure rather than as a structurally produced outcome shaped by adverse social conditions.

A critical gap lies in the insufficient integration of psychological and sociological knowledge into legal practice. Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory identifies three strain-producing conditions: the presence of negative stimuli, the removal of positive stimuli and the blocking of legitimate goal-seeking pathways, each directly shaping the conditions under which juvenile delinquency emerges. Legal frameworks engage only with the behavioural outcome without addressing the structural pressures producing it. Agnew (2001) further contends that strain generates delinquency most powerfully when experienced as unjust, intense and unaccompanied by legitimate coping mechanisms, precisely the configuration characterising the lived environments of many juveniles in conflict with the law. By remaining inattentive to these dynamics, legal systems respond to symptoms while leaving underlying causes unaddressed.

This limitation becomes especially pronounced in digitally mediated delinquency. As noted in section 5.2, the Information Technology Act, 2000, contains no child-specific provisions distinguishing juvenile offenders in terms of psychological development or structural vulnerability. Juveniles engaging in digital resistance, circumventing surveillance, subverting institutional monitoring or exploiting digital systems do not necessarily act from criminal intent but in response to strain produced by digital control and the erosion of autonomy. Applying adult punitive frameworks to such behaviour reproduces the same conceptual failures characterising legal responses to physical juvenile offending, compounding rather than addressing the structural conditions driving delinquency.

Taken together, sections 5.1 to 5.3 establish that existing frameworks, whether international or national, physical or digital in orientation, share a common failure: they address juvenile delinquency as a legal problem rather than a structural one. This directly supports the study's central argument that delinquency must be understood as a response to systemic manipulation and strain, and that meaningful progress, in both scholarship and legal reform, requires the interdisciplinary framework this study advances.

6. Physical Manipulation: Aftab's Internalised Strain

6.1 Socio-political Violence and the Internalisation of Strain

Within the novel, socio-political violence is not merely imposed as an external condition but becomes internalised through the lived experiences of the characters themselves. Anand constructs it as a force operating across emotional, psychological and social dimensions, shaping how adolescents perceive fear, loss and belonging. This section examines how exposure to conflict manifests in Aftab's psychological and behavioural responses, using Angad's eyewitness account of a bomb blast as the precipitating event.

A moment of acute socio-political violence emerges when Aftab's childhood friend Angad recounts witnessing a bomb blast that dismembered Sonu Mama, the uncle of their mutual friend Laxman. His account is not a structured narrative but a fragmented, emotionally charged speech reflecting a consciousness overwhelmed by what it has witnessed:

'It was horrible, Afti — I — I saw it happen, right in front of my eyes. When the bomb went off, I saw a man fly, but his legs went the other way. Oh Aftab — it was right near my house. It could have been us, any one of us. Afti, it was horrible, I'm — I'm scared (Anand, 2006, p. 81-82)

What stands out is not merely the graphic violence but how Angad's account transforms an external event into a shared condition of psychological vulnerability. The broken syntax — "I — I saw it happen" — enacts at the level of language itself a consciousness struggling to process an experience that exceeds its emotional capacity. The phrase "it was horrible" functions less as description than as compulsive return, the verbal equivalent of a mind unable to move past what it has witnessed. Most significantly, "it could have been us" performs a crucial displacement: violence witnessed at a distance is reframed as a personally survivable threat, collapsing the boundary between observer and victim. It is this collapse that matters for

understanding Aftab. Hearing the account does not leave him as a passive recipient; the fear transmitted through Angad's words settles into Aftab's own sense of the world as unstable and unsafe, contributing to a heightened vigilance and a diminished capacity to trust the ordinary rhythms of his environment.

This response, fear absorbed through another's testimony and generated through conditions of structural manipulation, is precisely what General Strain Theory, as developed by Robert Agnew, illuminates. Agnew (2001) argues that strain intensifies when harm feels personal rather than abstract and this is precisely the mechanism at work: Angad's account does not describe a distant event but one that occurred near his home, involving people within their shared social world. For Aftab, the strain is compounded by his structural position as an adolescent already navigating communal tension and economic precarity, for whom the confirmation that violence can reach anyone in his community forecloses the psychological refuge of believing oneself exempt. This disruption can be understood through Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus*: not merely because a frightening event has occurred, but because the implicit, taken-for-granted assumptions organising everyday life—that the familiar is safe and that proximity offers protection—are exposed as unreliable. Once that foundation is destabilised, Aftab's subsequent responses cannot be read as individual failures of character but as adaptations to a world that has been revealed as genuinely threatening.

The significance of this destabilisation extends beyond Aftab's individual psychology, exposing a critical gap within international juvenile justice frameworks. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) establishes children as rights-bearing individuals entitled to protection and development, yet the damage visible in this exchange, transmitted fear, cognitive overwhelm, collapsed sense of safety, represents precisely what its protective principles are designed to prevent but are structurally unable to capture. The Convention's rehabilitative emphasis presupposes a child who has already entered the justice system, offering no mechanism for addressing the cumulative strain that shapes behaviour long before that threshold is reached. The Beijing Rules, while broader in their welfare orientation, present a distinct but equally significant limitation: their attention to family breakdown, economic disadvantage and developmental disruption addresses recognised precursors to juvenile offending but does not extend to vicarious, conflict-driven psychological harm of the kind Aftab absorbs here. What neither framework accounts for, therefore, is a child like Aftab, one who has not yet offended, has not yet entered any justice process, but whose psychological foundations have already been quietly eroded by the violence circulating through his social world.

Ultimately, this section demonstrates how socio-political violence shapes adolescent experience not through direct confrontation alone but through the vicarious transmission of trauma across intimate bonds. The failure to recognise the conditions generating those responses is not incidental to existing frameworks but inscribed within their design, exposing a fundamental gap between the violence children absorb and the justice systems ostensibly constructed to safeguard them.

6.2 Coercion, Control and the Destruction of Agency in Aftab's Narrative

While socio-political violence establishes an environment of fear and instability, the narrative intensifies this condition through direct forms of coercion that operate upon the body itself. Anand constructs coercion through the strategic deployment of fear, physical violence, and intimidation, transforming the body into a site of control rather than merely punishment. This section examines how these coercive practices manifest in Aftab's experience through a scene of violent interrogation.

Aftab is subjected to brutal interrogation, his captors repeatedly demanding the identity of Akram through sustained physical assault. This moment becomes evident when Anand writes:

A lash, stinging, across his already raw face. 'Who is Akram?' Silence — crack — another jarring blow. 'Who is Akram?' He tried to see, but it was blinding — had he become blind? Whose voice was this? What was the source of this pain? (Anand, 2006, p. 123-124)

What stands out is not merely the physical brutality but the systematic dismantling of Aftab's cognitive and sensory capacity. The repeated question "Who is Akram?" functions not as genuine interrogation but as a psychological instrument designed to overwhelm resistance through mental exhaustion. The fragmented syntax, "had he become blind?" and "whose voice was this?" enacts the progressive dissolution of rational agency under sustained assault, while the pauses between blows "Silence — crack" transform anticipation itself into an extension of the violence. What is destroyed here is not merely Aftab's body but his cognitive coherence his capacity to locate himself, identify his surroundings and retain any autonomous selfhood. From the perspective of General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992), this instantiates a direct negative stimulus of the most acute kind. As Agnew (2001) argues, strain is most damaging when experienced as both unjust and inescapable conditions unmistakably present here, where Aftab has no avenue of escape and no

recourse against the authority inflicting harm. This further disrupts what Bourdieu (1977) terms social habitus, as the body becomes the site through which submission is permanently inscribed.

The harm produced here exposes a fundamental inadequacy within international juvenile justice frameworks. The UNCRC [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child] explicitly prohibits torture and all forms of violence against children, yet operates as a normative instrument dependent on state compliance, rendering its protections meaningless where militant structures are themselves the perpetrating authority. The Convention's rehabilitative framework presupposes a child who has already entered the justice system, offering no mechanism for recognising the coercive conditions that precede and produce delinquent behaviour. Similarly, the Beijing Rules' welfare provisions confine their conception of context to family and economic conditions categories that fail entirely to account for institutionalised, violence-based coercion. Existing legal frameworks address what the child did rather than why, leaving juveniles like Aftab without any legal recognition of the coercive conditions that rendered autonomous choice structurally impossible.

Ultimately, coercion functions here not simply as physical violence but as a mechanism of total psychological control, making obedience not a choice but a condition of survival, exposing the inadequacy of frameworks designed for victims, not for those coercion has made complicit.

6.3 Vicarious Trauma and Cumulative Strain: Violence as a Structural Condition

Extending the dynamics of coercion and control, the narrative reveals how trauma accumulates beyond direct experience to produce sustained psychological strain. Rather than remaining an isolated event, trauma becomes a cumulative force generating enduring fear, anxiety, and cognitive instability. This is evident in Akram's account of Feroze, a twelve-year-old operative captured by the army following a bombing mission and subjected to extreme retaliatory violence:

They caught him. They brought him back to the camp and they — they — they brutalised him.' 'What did they do?' Akram sank down on the rocky bank of the Jhelum. His head hung so low that his chin rested on his chest. He pulled his knees up. It was almost as though he was trying to protect himself from memories too painful to bear. 'What did they do to him?' 'Ah — I — I can't even begin to tell you. It was too awful. They nearly killed him. They broke his bones. They almost bled him to death.' (Anand, 2006, p. 28)

The account fractures under the weight of what it attempts to express. The repetition—"they — they — they"—enacts psychological overwhelm, while the progression from "brutalised" to "broke his bones" and "almost bled him to death" demonstrates how trauma resists coherent narration. Although Aftab is not the direct victim, Akram's testimony functions as vicarious trauma, compelling him to internalise violence that he cannot psychologically escape.

Through General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992, 2001), this cumulative trauma emerges as an unavoidable and unjust source of strain that lacks legitimate coping mechanisms. The sustained psychological impact transforms violence into a persistent condition rather than an isolated incident. This disruption can also be understood through Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus*, as Aftab's assumptions about safety and normality are displaced by the expectation that extreme violence is an ordinary feature of everyday life.

This exposes a critical gap within juvenile justice frameworks. The UNCRC primarily responds after harm has been formally recognised, offering limited scope for addressing cumulative psychological damage that precedes delinquent behaviour. Likewise, the Beijing Rules emphasise family and socio-economic circumstances but do not adequately account for conflict-driven vicarious trauma. Existing frameworks continue to prioritise offending behaviour over the traumatic conditions that shape it, leaving juveniles like Aftab without meaningful recognition of the structural forces influencing their actions.

Ultimately, Feroze's brutalisation becomes a source of vicarious strain for Aftab, demonstrating that juvenile delinquency emerges not simply from individual choice but from the cumulative internalisation of structural violence. Existing juvenile justice frameworks remain insufficiently equipped to recognise or address these forms of psychological harm before they culminate in delinquent behaviour.

6.4 Delinquency as Compelled Survival: Aftab's Psychological Collapse

Delinquent behaviour within the narrative emerges not as an inherent moral failing but as a compelled reaction, where survival takes precedence over ethical reasoning. This is most acutely manifested in Aftab's arrival at Lalaji's crowded sweet shop, sent on a suicide bombing mission by Akram with an explosive device concealed in his school bag. The psychological cost of this compulsion crystallises in a single scene that Anand renders not through exposition but through the fracturing of language itself:

'Stupid,' hissed Aftab, trying not to be drawn into the general warm friendliness that pervaded the space. It was too hot. Too close. He wanted to run away. There were too many people. He couldn't. He couldn't. (Anand, 2006, p. 163)

The fragmented syntax enacts a mind dissolving under unbearable pressure, while the repetition of "He couldn't" marks total psychological paralysis. Crucially, "trying not to be drawn into the general warm friendliness" reveals a devastating moral tension, Aftab's humanity surfacing involuntarily against the dehumanising logic of the militant system. He does not see targets; he sees people, and it is precisely this involuntary recognition that produces the collapse. This represents strain at its most extreme: inescapable, unjust and devoid of legitimate coping mechanisms as conceptualised by Robert Agnew (1992, 2001), collapsing what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) terms social habitus and dissolving the boundaries between moral agency and compulsion.

This moment exposes profound inadequacies within juvenile justice frameworks. The UNCRC's rehabilitative model presupposes a child who has already entered the justice system, offering no mechanism for one structurally positioned as an instrument of violence before any legal threshold is crossed. The Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 would classify Aftab's presence as deliberate criminal conduct, prioritising offence severity over the psychological conditions producing it. The Beijing Rules similarly reduce social context to family and economic conditions, categories structurally incapable of accounting for a child whose moral agency has been systematically dismantled. Aftab is simultaneously perpetrator and victim a configuration existing frameworks cannot hold. Ultimately, his presence in that sweet shop is not the act of a criminal but the compelled behaviour of a child broken by a system that dismantled his capacity for choice, exposing frameworks that speak of protection while remaining unable to reach those who need it most.

7. Digital Manipulation: Marcus

7.1 Surveillance as Total Control: The Psychological Expansion of State Power

The moment at which surveillance transcends institutional boundaries crystallises in a passage rendered not through action but through the weight of realisation, where Marcus recognises that "there were eyes out there, eyes and ears and they were watching me... the surveillance I faced at school had followed me home... the Department of Homeland Security had joined them" (Doctorow, 2008, p. 75).

The repetition of "eyes out there, eyes and ears" formally enacts paranoia, mirroring the psychological experience of being surrounded and trapped. The shift from "the Board of Education" to "the Department of Homeland Security" marks a critical escalation; surveillance is no longer a localised inconvenience but a state-level apparatus. "Looking over my shoulder" translates digital monitoring into immediate bodily pressure, demonstrating how technological surveillance is experienced as a physical threat rather than distant observation.

This condition of continuous surveillance, functioning as a form of digital manipulation, can be understood through the framework of General Strain Theory, as developed by Robert Agnew (1992, 2001). Agnew identifies this moment as instantiating strain through the removal of a positive stimulus, the loss of privacy, autonomy and freedom from scrutiny, generating fear and helplessness that destabilise the individual's sense of safety. Agnew (2001) further argues that strain intensifies when experienced as both unjust and inescapable, conditions unmistakably present here. This configuration is precisely the one most likely to generate delinquent behaviour, not as moral failure but as a structured response to intolerable conditions.

While such conditions of strain can be theoretically identified, they remain inadequately recognised within existing legal frameworks. The Information Technology Act, 2000, is structurally incapable of registering this distinction. Should Marcus's digital resistance be brought before a legal body, the Act would process it through the same punitive framework applied to adult offenders, rendering the structural origins of that resistance legally incoherent treating coercion as choice and strain as intent. Its silence on psychological development and structural vulnerability is not an incidental oversight but a symptomatic failure, revealing a legal architecture oriented entirely toward the act and entirely away from the conditions producing it.

7.2 Loss of Freedom and Agency

The loss of freedom and agency emerges not through overt restriction but through the technological restructuring of autonomy that renders movement traceable and predictable. Cory Doctorow presents this as a gradual erosion, where institutional power adapts to legal constraints by embedding control within seemingly neutral mechanisms. Agency is thus reconfigured rather than removed, operating under forms of surveillance that evade direct visibility. This section examines how this transformation manifests in Marcus's experience through RFID-based tracking, revealing digital manipulation as a strategic reconfiguration of freedom.

Doctorow locates the erosion of agency not in a moment of dramatic confrontation but in the mundane, almost invisible transfer of tracking from body to object:

It was another of those legal loopholes: the courts wouldn't let the schools track us with arphids, but they could track library books, and use the school records to tell them who was likely to be carrying which library book. I had a little Faraday pouch in my bag—these are little wallets lined with a mesh of copper wires that effectively block radio energy, silencing arphids. (Doctorow, 2008, p. 14).

What stands out is not merely the ingenuity of the surveillance mechanism but the displacement of agency it produces, where individuals are tracked not as autonomous subjects but as extensions of the objects they carry. The movement from tracking bodies to objects embeds surveillance within the material environment, while the Faraday pouch underscores that autonomy now requires active technological resistance. From the perspective of Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory, this reflects strain arising from the loss of privacy and freedom of movement alongside the imposition of covert monitoring. As Agnew (2001) argues, such strain intensifies when perceived as unjust and inescapable, a condition evident in Marcus's limited ability to evade surveillance. The Faraday pouch thus signals structurally compromised agency, where everyday mobility becomes subject to oversight. This dynamic aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, where surveillance regulates behaviour through systems that appear routine. The library book becomes a mechanism of control, redefining agency as conditional rather than absolute. Ultimately, digital manipulation reconfigures autonomy rather than removing it, leaving freedom constrained and negotiated rather than total.

7.3 Digital Resistance (Hacking)

Digital resistance in *Little Brother* emerges not as deviance but as a strategic reconfiguration of agency within technologically controlled environments. Doctorow frames resistance as an adaptive response in which individuals exploit the very systems designed to monitor them, revealing institutional control as continually negotiated rather than absolute.

This dynamic is crystallised when Marcus combines Firefox and TOR to evade school surveillance: "Firefox and TOR together made me into the invisible man, impervious to Board of Ed snooping", (Doctorow, 2008, p. 12). The metaphor of invisibility signals a shift from passive surveillance object to active resisting subject, with "impervious" suggesting not mere evasion but immunity from institutional power. Hacking thus functions as counter-surveillance, enabling Marcus to operate outside the structures designed to regulate him.

Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory illuminates the motivational logic here: surveillance removes autonomy and imposes control, generating strain that drives alternative action. Hacking is therefore not inherent deviance but a rational attempt to restore agency. Yet GST alone cannot account for the structural dimension of this resistance. Foucault's (1977) relational conception of power addresses this gap, Marcus's use of TOR exposes surveillance as neither total nor uncontested, transforming digital space into a site of ongoing struggle. Together, both frameworks reveal resistance as structurally produced, emerging from the tension between institutional domination and the agency it cannot fully suppress.

Hacking ultimately becomes a means of negotiating power: not an exception to systemic control, but its inevitable corollary.

7.4 Psychological Strain in Digital Context

Psychological strain within the narrative emerges as a consequence of sustained exposure to technologically mediated systems of control, where surveillance extends beyond external regulation to reshape perception and generate enduring fear and cognitive instability. Rather than arising from isolated events, strain becomes a continuous psychological condition. This section examines how Marcus's post-detention experience reveals the lasting emotional consequences of digital manipulation.

"It was a big crowd, and we weren't allowed to move freely through it. The state troopers who handled us were gentle enough, but they were still big, armoured and armed. I kept thinking I saw Darryl in the crowd, but it was always someone else with that same beaten, hunched look that he'd had in his cell. He wasn't the only broken one." (Doctorow, 2008, p. 345)

The repetition of "*I kept thinking I saw Darryl*" signals cognitive disturbance and an inability to stabilise perception under stress. The recurring image of the "*beaten, hunched look*" suggests that trauma has generalised beyond a single individual, while "*He wasn't the only broken one*" confirms that psychological harm is collectively produced through systemic control.

Agnew's (2001) General Strain Theory explains this internalisation as the emotional consequence of prolonged coercive control, where the loss of autonomy generates persistent negative emotional states that shape behaviour. Marcus's paranoia is therefore not irrational but a conditioned response to environments defined by uncertainty and surveillance. While GST explains the emotional consequences of strain, Foucault's concept of disciplinary power further illuminates how surveillance extends beyond confinement, becoming internalised as a continuous psychological presence. Marcus's post-detention paranoia reflects this process, as fear reshapes his perception of ordinary social spaces long after his release.

Ultimately, *Little Brother* presents psychological strain as a central consequence of digital manipulation rather than an incidental outcome of surveillance. Anxiety and paranoia become enduring conditions, demonstrating that technological control operates not only through external regulation but through the internal transformation of the individual, producing subjects constrained by continuous surveillance and compelled to resist.

8. Parallel Mechanisms of Control: A Comparative Analysis of Aftab and Marcus.

Having examined the psychological consequences of both physical coercion and digital surveillance, this section compares Aftab and Marcus to demonstrate how distinct systems of control produce similar patterns of psychological strain and juvenile delinquency. Despite their markedly different socio-political contexts, both narratives reveal a consistent pattern in which external systems of control function as central mechanisms shaping juvenile delinquency. Where Aftab is subjected to direct physical coercion within a conflict-driven environment, Marcus navigates technologically mediated surveillance that criminalises resistance itself. This comparative analysis suggests that, despite their divergent contexts, both narratives identify systemic coercion rather than individual pathology as a common mechanism underlying juvenile delinquency.

8.1 Surveillance vs Violence: Expansion of Control

Aftab's experience of violence is immediate and embodied; the bomb blast and its aftermath operate as an external force that invades both physical space and psychological stability simultaneously. As Anand renders it, destruction is not merely witnessed but *internalised*, producing fear as an unavoidable and visceral response that permanently alters Aftab's relationship with his environment. In contrast, Marcus's discovery that surveillance extends from school into the domestic sphere, as Doctorow illustrates through the DHS's infiltration of private digital spaces, represents the expansion of control within an entirely different framework. Here, power is not physically visible yet remains omnipresent, a condition in which the individual feels perpetually observed without ever encountering a definable threat.

What distinguishes these two modalities of control, yet ultimately aligns them, is their shared capacity to dissolve the boundary between safe and unsafe space. Foucault's concept of the panopticon helps explain this distinction by suggesting that power becomes most effective when individuals internalise the possibility of constant observation. Marcus's predicament enacts this logic precisely; the surveillance state requires no physical violence because the psychological weight of visibility is coercive in itself. Aftab, conversely, is subjected to a cruder but no less totalising form of control, one in which the body, rather than behaviour, becomes the site of regulation. In both cases, the environment is transformed into a space of continuous governance and the individual is systematically deprived of the conditions necessary for psychological safety. Despite their differing forms, both violence and surveillance operate as mechanisms of structural manipulation, producing comparable conditions of psychological strain that create the circumstances under which delinquent behaviour emerges.

8.2 Trauma, Paranoia and the Convergence of Structured Strain

Beyond their differing behavioural responses, both characters bear distinct but structurally comparable psychological consequences produced by sustained conditions of control, consequences that ultimately converge in the same outcome: the systematic erosion of agency. Aftab's psychological condition is shaped by trauma resulting from direct exposure to violence. The physical brutality he experiences produces not only immediate fear but a deeper internal destabilisation, manifesting as emotional breakdown, loss of security and long-term psychological damage. Trauma here is not a temporary reaction but a sustained condition, emerging from repeated encounters with violence that disrupt the individual's capacity to perceive the world as safe or predictable.

Marcus, by contrast, develops paranoia as a consequence of continuous surveillance and detention. His inability to distinguish individuals in a crowd, coupled with recurring projections of Darryl's presence, reflects a state of cognitive instability produced by prolonged psychological pressure. Unlike Aftab's trauma, which originates in visible and embodied violence, Marcus's paranoia emerges from invisible yet pervasive systems of control, where the constant possibility of being watched produces anxiety, suspicion and heightened vigilance.

Despite these differences in manifestation, both trauma and paranoia emerge as internalised forms of strain that reshape perception and behaviour in structurally analogous ways. In Aftab's case, trauma manifests as the memory of violence embedded within the body; in Marcus's case, paranoia manifests as the anticipation of surveillance embedded within the mind. In both instances, therefore, psychological disruption is not incidental but structurally produced — the direct consequence of sustained manipulation rather than individual fragility. Crucially, this internalised psychological damage does not remain at the level of emotion alone but extends outward to reshape the very conditions under which agency becomes possible, revealing that psychological harm and structural constraint are not separate phenomena but two interlocking dimensions of the same process.

As Agnew's General Strain Theory predicts, this convergence confirms that both characters experience conditions of strain that limit autonomy and shape behaviour in ways that exceed their individual capacity to resist. Whether through physical coercion or digital manipulation, both Aftab and Marcus are subjected to systems of control that remove positive stimuli, impose negative experiences and restrict legitimate opportunity — producing adaptive forms of delinquency as a direct and structurally inevitable consequence. Furthermore, the shift from physical to digital manipulation does not eliminate control but transforms its form, demonstrating that the mechanisms of strain are neither historically fixed nor environmentally limited. Ultimately, therefore, the merged analysis confirms that juvenile delinquency cannot be reduced to individual choice but emerges as a structured response to systemic conditions that engineer strain, constrain agency and compel individuals to act within coercive and imposed limits, conditions that existing legal and theoretical frameworks remain ill-equipped to recognise or adequately address.

9. Discussion

The comparative analysis establishes manipulation as the primary structural mechanism through which strain is generated and juvenile delinquency is produced. Adolescent subjects across both contexts are subjected to conditions of control that foreclose autonomous agency, accumulate psychological strain and compel behavioural adaptations that existing frameworks misidentify as individual deviance. Manipulation does not merely accompany social disadvantage but actively engineers it, simultaneously activating all three of Agnew's strain sources.

Agnew's General Strain Theory treats strain as emergent from social disadvantage rather than deliberately manufactured. This study extends that formulation by demonstrating that coercive systems actively produce strain-generating conditions, addressing the gaps identified by Broidy (2001) and Mazerolle and Piquero (1998): that strain produces negative emotion consistently but delinquency only when anger is present and legitimate coping is unavailable. Integrated with Foucault's (1977) disciplinary power and Bourdieu's (1977) habitus, this extension reveals that surveillance coerces through the mere possibility of observation while violence cumulatively restructures the assumptions organising everyday life. Physical coercion and digital surveillance differ in form but converge in function, with trauma and paranoia structurally analogous in origin, both foreclosing agency and compelling delinquent adaptation across radically different contexts.

All four legal frameworks examined share a common failure: addressing the act of offending rather than the conditions producing it. The UNCRC and Beijing Rules confine relevant context to family dysfunction and economic disadvantage. The Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 undermines its own restorative philosophy by permitting adolescents to be tried as adults without mandatory psychological assessment. The Information Technology Act, 2000 applies identical punitive frameworks to juvenile and adult offenders, rendering legally incoherent the distinction between criminal intent and structurally induced resistance. Collectively, these frameworks intervene at or after formal offending, leaving unaddressed the cumulative erosion of agency that precedes it.

The 3R Model, this study's central contribution, reconceptualises delinquency as a structured psychological process rather than moral failure. Recognition requires legal and clinical identification of manipulative conditions as cognisable preconditions of delinquent behaviour. Rehabilitation, informed by Kerig (2012) and Baglivio et al. (2014), targets the emotional regulation, attachment security and cognitive appraisal that manipulation erodes, functioning as a primary rather than post-sentencing response. Reintegration supports legitimate social participation while demanding structural reform of the conditions producing manipulation. Together, the three stages reorient intervention toward prevention rather than punishment.

As algorithmic monitoring, biometric tracking and predictive profiling normalise digital surveillance in adolescent life, the conditions identified here are no longer fictional but constitutive of lived experience,

making scholarly and policy engagement an immediate obligation. While this study establishes a theoretically grounded and interdisciplinarily coherent framework, its interpretive methodology, grounded in two literary texts, invites empirical extension. The 3R Model requires validation through longitudinal studies and practitioner collaboration, and future research should extend the framework to empirical case studies and a more culturally diverse corpus.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether juvenile delinquency is a matter of individual choice or a condition produced by structural systems of control. The answer the analysis yields is unambiguous: it is a condition. Across two markedly different environments, one defined by physical coercion and socio-political conflict, the other by digital surveillance and algorithmic regulation, the same structural logic operates, eroding adolescent agency, accumulating psychological strain and compelling behavioural adaptations that existing frameworks misread as moral failure.

Paro Anand's *No Guns at My Son's Funeral* and Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother*, though situated in distinct socio-political contexts, converge upon a single structural logic: manipulation, whether physical or digital, systematically forecloses legitimate agency and compels delinquent adaptation. This study extends Agnew's General Strain Theory by demonstrating that manipulation does not merely produce strain as an ambient social condition but actively engineers it, simultaneously activating all three of Agnew's strain sources. This extension, from strain as inherited disadvantage to strain as deliberately manufactured outcome, constitutes the study's primary theoretical contribution.

Existing legal frameworks, including the UNCRC, the Beijing Rules, the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 and the Information Technology Act, 2000, share a common and consequential inadequacy: they address offending behaviour rather than the structural conditions producing it. The 3R Model: Recognition, Rehabilitation and Reintegration, proposed here as an original interdisciplinary contribution combining criminology, literary analysis, legal studies and psychology, reorients juvenile justice thinking toward intervention before delinquency occurs rather than after it has been produced.

This study acknowledges that its qualitative and interpretive methodology, grounded in two Anglophone literary texts, limits empirical generalisability and that the 3R Model requires empirical validation before operational application. These limitations are acknowledged transparently, reflecting the methodological integrity that qualitative scholarship demands.

Three recommendations follow. Juvenile justice frameworks must recognise manipulation as a legally cognisable precondition of delinquent behaviour. Mandatory psychological assessment must be integrated at the earliest point of juvenile justice contact. Digital legislation must be revised to distinguish criminal intent from structurally induced resistance behaviour.

Ultimately, where systems of control engineer conditions that foreclose legitimate agency, survival and delinquency become structurally indistinguishable. The obligation of scholarship, law and policy is not to judge the behaviour that emerges from those conditions but to dismantle the conditions that make it inevitable. This study, in its interdisciplinary scope, original theoretical contribution and social relevance, offers a step toward that obligation.

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