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Investigating Local Students' Support for Inbound Tourism and its Relationship with Place Attachment in Huế City/Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This study, situated in the touristy city of Huế in Central Vietnam, takes the case of the young Vietnamese, particularly University students, in order to investigate the locals' support for inbound tourism. It also measured a multidimensional construct of place attachment and determined the influence of this concept on their support levels. Findings have shown that the overall level of support is relatively high, wherein indicators related to pride and identity have generally scored higher than the ones related to economic factors. Female respondents have been indicated to show higher support for tourism inbound to Vietnam and students majoring in tourism have been found to be more supportive of inbound tourism than their counterparts from other faculties. In addition, place attachment was specified to have a significant impact on the respondents' levels of support for inbound tourism.

Key words: support for tourism, residents, students, place attachment, Vietnam

1. Introduction

After decades of tourism being used for governmental and political purposes only, in 1991 the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has entered a new stage of related development (Truong, 2013). Ever since, foreign investments in the sector are encouraged (Brennan & Nguyen, 2000) and the government has started to recognize the economic benefits of the tourism industry (Agrusa & Prideaux, 2002; Cooper, 2000).

As a consequence, Vietnam has emerged as a key tourist destination of South East Asia, attracting mostly backpackers, culture and nature lovers, sand and sun tourists, as well as long-stay tourism from veterans of the Vietnam War (Nguyen, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2014). In 2015, the government reports a total of 337.38 billion VND earning from the tourism industry with a total of 7,943,651 international arrivals (Vietnam Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, 2016). The tourism industry is estimated to have totally contributed approximately to 8% of the country's overall GDP (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2016).

However, although tourism has brought employment opportunities to the country, a recent study by Suntikul, Pratt, Kuan, Whong, Chan, Choi and Chong (2016) has shown that most

locals, even in touristic places, still work in low-paying jobs with generally poor working conditions. Truong (2013) also highlights that growth of the tourism sector alone has failed to alleviate poverty in the country, mainly due to shortcomings in related policy and planning. As a consequence, it is not entirely clear in how far locals support tourism to Vietnam or if they simply depend on it (Suntikul *et al.*, 2016).

In addition, a local sense of community and pride has been a double-edged sword in the Vietnamese tourism development. On one hand, tourism has been shown to enhance Vietnamese locals' sense of community and pride (Suntikul *et al.*, 2016). On the other hand, patriotism has also negatively influenced the Vietnamese reaction to certain tourist groups, such as refusal to serve Chinese visitors during the height of the political disputes between China and Vietnam over the South China Sea (Thanh Nien News, 2014). As a consequence, the local Vietnamese' support levels for inbound tourism are still poorly understood.

This study, situated in the touristy city of Huế in Central Vietnam, takes the case of the young Vietnamese, particularly University students, in order to investigate the locals support for inbound tourism. Students are the future labor force and the decision makers of the country. Understanding this group of locals would contribute for the future planning and development of tourism industry. Furthermore, a multidimensional construct of place attachment is measured in order to determine the influence of the aforementioned concepts of identity and pride on their support levels.

In order to reach these research objectives in this study, a survey with 255 University students is held, measuring their support level for inbound tourism and levels of place attachment. Following, the influence of different place attachment dimensions on the University students' support levels for inbound tourism is investigated using multiple regression analysis.

The contributions of this study are multifold. First, the findings aim at an enhanced understanding of the influence of place attachment on community support for tourism, particularly in the context of developing countries in general, and Vietnam in particular. Next, the case of Huế City is taken, where the government has put considerable efforts in raising the awareness and support levels for inbound tourism among local residents (Thừa Thiên Huế Portal, 2016). Through investigating the support levels of Huế's University students and considering their important role in the Vietnamese tourism industry, it is hoped that the findings of this study may not only contribute to theoretical, but also practical implications for developing effective tourism policies in Vietnam.

2. Literature review

2.1 University students' support for inbound tourism

Understanding residents' support for inbound tourism is believed to aid tourism policy development (Ap & Zhou, 2009; Presenza & Sheehan, 2013), as well as contribute to a more pleasant and satisfying experience for tourists visiting a destination (Carmichael, 2006; Tasci & Kozak, 2006). On the other hand, lack of residents' support for tourism has had widely negative consequences in practice, such as counter-branding campaigns, (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2010), as well as public indignation (Zenker & Petersen, 2010). As such, the issue of properly understanding the level of locals' support for tourism

has received much attention in theory and practice (Brida, Disegna, & Osti, 2011; Williams & Lawson, 2001).

However, residents are considered a largely heterogeneous stakeholder (Gnoth, 2002; Hankinson, 2001), and several approaches to their understanding have been proposed by scholars. Generally, a distinction between "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" factors influencing tourism support is made (Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997). Intrinsic factors are based on the heterogeneity of the host community and can be age, gender, geographical proximity to tourist activities, and involvement in tourism (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000; Wassler, 2014). Extrinsic factors, on the other hand, can be the general stage of development of a destination (Sheldon & Abenoja, 2001), seasonality (Belisle & Hoy, 1980), crowding (Wassler, 2014), cultural differences (Butler, 1975) and impacts of the tourism industry (Perdue, Long, & Allen, 1990).

In light of the conceptual intricacy, several frameworks have been used to investigate residents' support for tourism (Siu, Lee, & Leung, 2013). Arguably the most popular is the Social Exchange Theory (SET) adapted to a tourism context by Ap (1990; 1992). The theory advocates that residents' support for tourism depends on an internal cost-benefit analysis, whereas subjects who perceive benefits to outweigh the cost are more likely to have positive perceptions (Gibson, 2006). However, SET has been criticized for assuming a merely systematic perspective on thought processes, neglecting the influence of social norms, as well as social and historical contexts (Pearce, Moscardo, & Ross, 1996).

As a results, Pearce *et al.* (1996) propose the use of Social Representation Theory (SRT), which assumes that residents rely on shared pre-given images, values, and cultural preconceptions in forming their opinions (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000; Moscovici, 1988). SRT has the advantage of allowing non-rational reactions based on social and cultural values (Gibson, 2006), as well as the consideration of philosophical and moral values in addition to economic ones (Boley, McGehee, Perdue, & Long, 2014). Considering the case of rising nationalism in Vietnam, as well as a spillover of politically motivated aversions on residents' attitude towards tourists (Vietnam News, 2016), this study will follow this line of thought. However, to understand the values of a community, its characteristics should first be determined.

Moreover, the increasing discrimination that particularly Chinese tourists have been facing in Vietnam is believed to be linked to political tensions among the countries and an increasing feeling of Vietnamese patriotism (Thanh Nien News, 2014). Specifically in the case of Huế City, Suntikul *et al.* (2016) have found in a recent study that residents' relate local tourism to their community pride. In addition, the emotional bindings and feelings for a location, which are parts of place attachment, have been shown to have great impacts on residents' behaviors towards tourist destination brand building (Chen & Segota, 2015). This study will thus treat place attachment as a possible antecedent of Vietnamese students' support for inbound tourism to the country.

2.2 Place Attachment

Scannell and Gifford (2001, p.1) define place attachment as "the bonding that occurs between individuals and their meaningful environments". Although generally used to explore tourists' behavior and emotions (Chen, Wu, & Huang, 2012), place attachment has also been hypothesized to be a key concept in forming residents' support for tourism (Chen

& Dwyer, 2010). However, there is a wide array of theoretical and conceptual approaches which complicate a coherent investigation of the concept (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001). Most scholars agree that place attachment is a multifaceted construct and that there is a distinction among attachment to a "physical place" and attachment to a "social place" (Brocato, 2006).

Physical place attachment usually refers to attachment to a certain spatial area, which can range from a house to a whole nation (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001). This dimension is usually measured through "place identity" (a link between personal and spatial identity) and "place dependence" (evaluative outcome of comparing one place to another) (Raymond, Brown, & Weber, 2010).

Social place attachment acknowledges that individuals become attached not only to their physical surroundings, but also to other individuals and social ties within this setting (Brocato, 2006; Kyle & Chick, 2007). Commonly, this concept is measured through "place social bonding" (communal bonding with other people in a place) and "place affect" (affective connection between an individual and a place) (Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013). All of these dimensions, including place identity, place dependence, place social bonding and place affect, have also been considered in the chosen measurements of place attachment, which are presented in the next section.

3. Methodology

3.1 Survey instrument

This study employed a survey instrument with two major constructs, namely (1) support for inbound tourism and (2) place attachment. The instrument for measuring the level of support for inbound tourism was adapted from a study on local community support for tourism development by Hanafiah, Jamaluddin and Zulkifly (2013). Taking consideration of the differences between the two studied contexts, measurement scales were adapted. Hence, 8 items were included to measure the level of support for inbound tourism in Vietnam. Referring to place attachment, the most common way to measure this construct is through a second order of its dimensions, as presented in the previous section. This study, therefore, adopted measurement scales by Lee, Kyle and Scott (2012) and Ramkissoon, Smith and Weiler (2013). Accordingly, 14 measurement items were utilized for this study.

A total of 22 measurement items were included to measure the level of support for inbound tourism and place attachment. All items were measured by 7-point Likert scales, indicating the level of agreement on the relevant statements. In addition to the above constructs, the third section of the instrument was designed to ascertain the respondents' basic demographic profile. The questionnaire was primarily designed in English and subsequently translated into Vietnamese. It was then reviewed and revised by bilingual tourism scholars of Huế University in Vietnam.

3.2 Sample and data collection

The aims of this study are to examine the level of support for inbound tourism from a Vietnamese students' perspective and to test its relationship with place attachment. Taking the case of Huế City in Vietnam, University students at local institutes were chosen as respondents. Ten students were recruited and trained as interviewers for the survey.

The survey was carried out in two months, namely November and December of 2015. A total of 225 valid questionnaires were collected. The respondents were mostly less than 25 years old and 51% of the respondents were studying tourism related majors.

3.3 Data analysis

In order to achieve the study's objective, different statistical analyses were performed. All the analyses were facilitated by IBM SPSS 23.0. A descriptive and frequency analysis was used to define the level of support for inbound tourism of Huế's University students. A series of independent t-test analyses were executed to compare the levels of support for inbound tourism among sub-groups of the population. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was moreover conducted to determine the underlying dimensions among the constructs of support for inbound tourism and place attachment (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2010).

A multiple regression analysis was then performed to identify the influence of place attachment on the support for inbound tourism. The regression factors scores of two constructs of support for inbound tourism and place attachment which were computed in the factor analyses were used as inputs for multiple regression analysis. As defined in previous section, place attachment was supposed to be comprised of four dimensions, including place dependence, place identity, place affect and place social bonding (Ramkissoon *et al.*, 2013). The relationship between the level of support for inbound tourism and place attachment is formulated as follows:

$$Support_i = \beta 0 + \beta_1 PD_i + \beta_2 PI_i + \beta_3 PA_i + \beta_4 PS_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where $Support_i$ is the level of support for inbound tourism by individual i; PD is place dependence; PI is place identity; PA is place affect, PS is place social bonding and ε is the error term.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1 Huế University students' level of support for inbound tourism

The table below indicates the level of support for inbound tourism from a University student perspective. Generally, the support levels for tourism are found to be relatively high, indicated by a grand mean of 6.16 and the mean scores ranged from 5.75 to 6.56 (out of 7-point Likert scale). This coincides with the fact that particularly in Huế City, tourism has been bringing new job opportunities for the residents (Suntikul *et al.*, 2016), as well as its contribution to an average of 50% of the city's GDP (Thừa Thiên Huế Portal, 2016). However, somewhat surprisingly, the item "Vietnam can economically develop through tourism" scored lowest (mean=5.75) within the construct, while "The tourism industry in Vietnam should be actively developed" scored highest (mean=6.56).

Suntikul *et al.* (2016) highlight that especially residents of developing countries can benefit from the economic and social impacts of tourism. While generally respondents have shown to be supportive of the development of the inbound tourism sector in Vietnam, the belief that this will be a major economic contributor to the country's overall economy was rather moderate. Especially in the case of Huế, Suntikul *et al.* (2016) had also suggested that the pride taken in the city's UNESCO World Heritage Site can be a trigger for the support of inbound tourism – thus transcending merely economic motives in regard. This falls in line

with Fredline and Faulkner (2000), as well as Moscovici (1988) who had asserted the importance of social and cultural values in forming residents' support for tourism.

Table 1. Huế University students' level of support for inbound tourism

Items	Mean scores*	S.D.
The tourism industry in Vietnam should be actively developed	6.56	0.86
I support tourism in Vietnam and would like to see it become an important tool for Vietnam's economy	6.36	0.99
I believe that tourism in Vietnam should be actively encouraged	6.33	0.93
Vietnam residents should support the promotion of Vietnam tourism	6.44	0.86
Vietnam can economically develop through tourism	5.75	1.28
In a long term tourism in Vietnam will exaggerate general business	5.86	1.13
It is important to sustainably manage the growth of tourism in Vietnam	6.13	1.18
Tourism in Vietnam helps to increase the quality of life and standard of living for residents in Vietnam	5.88	1.21
Grand mean of all eight items	*6.16*	-

All items were measured using 7-point Likert scale

In order to explore further, a comparison of the level of support among different groups of respondents was executed. To facilitate this comparison, a factor analysis was performed to reduce the number of variables and to discover the underlying dimensions of the level of support for inbound tourism, if any (Hair *et al.*, 2010). The results of Principle Component Analysis suggested one component extracted from eight variables, explaining 52% of the total variance. The analysis resulted in a KMO of 0.832, and a significant Barlett's Test of Sphericity of $p = 0.000$. Factor loadings of eight variables were well above 0.5 thresholds, ranging from 0.55 to 0.72. The Cronbach's Alpha of 0.785 signifies a high internal consistency. These figures indicated a reliable and valid factor analysis on the level of support for inbound tourism (Field, 2009; Hair *et al.*, 2010; Kaiser, 1974). The regression factor scores, which were computed from this analysis were employed for further examination.

Two independent sample t-test analyses were performed to compare the level of support for inbound tourism between male and female students and between students majoring in tourism and not majoring in tourism. The results of the analyses, as shown in table 2, demonstrated the significant differences among the above groups, although slight differences were found. Females showed more support for inbound tourism then their male counterparts and students who were majoring in tourism were found to have higher support for inbound tourism in Vietnam as well.

Gender is an intrinsic factor of the resident community (Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997), which in past studies was found to only have a limited impact on tourism support (Belisle & Hoy, 1980; Fredline & Faulkner, 2000; Liu & Var, 1986; William & Lawson, 2001). Vietnam is a strong patriarchal society and traditionally job opportunities have been limited for and low paid for women. However, the tourism business has shown to be able to bridge

these gaps, with some poor regions employing up to 80% of female tour guides (Megson, 2014). It is thus likely that among female students, the tourism business in Vietnam could be perceived as an opportunity for enhancing gender equality.

Regarding the results that respondents majoring in tourism are more supportive of inbound tourism than the rest, the reasons can be multifold. First, Vietnamese graduating in a tourism major would most likely look for employment in this specific sector, thus basing their future livelihood on it. Williams and Lawson (2001, p. 274) had mentioned earlier that residents who derive financial benefit from tourism are more likely to be supportive of its development. The expectation for this might have inspired Vietnamese students majoring in tourism to show higher results than their counterparts.

Second, awareness of the local community has been shown to significantly influence their perception of tourism development, especially in regards of related positive outcomes (Saarinen, 2010). Respondents majoring in tourism are most likely more aware of the tourism developments in Vietnam, its national and regional importance, and ultimately, its possible benefits for the local community.

Table 2. Results of independent sample t-tests on the level of support for inbound tourism

		Mean[a]	**t-value[b]**	**Sig.[b]**
Gender	Male	6.00	-1.836	0.070
	Female	6.22		
Majoring in tourism	Yes	6.27	2.471	0.014
	No	6.05		

[a] Mean values are computed by the grand mean of all eight items of the level of support for inbound tourism

[b] t-value and sig. value are resulted from t-test using regression factor scores of the level of support for inbound tourism from previous factor analysis.

4.2 The influence of place attachment on the students' level of support for inbound tourism

A proposition of this paper is to that students' attachment to Vietnam would positively influence their support for inbound tourism of the country. A multiple regression analysis with the model presented above was executed in order to clarify this assumption.

Before conducting the multiple regression, another factor analysis was performed to identify the underlying dimensions of place attachment. The results are shown in table 3. these findings signified four dimensions of Place Attachment. A KMO of 0.826, a significant Barlett's Test of Sphericity of p = 0.000 and factor loadings larger than 0.5 indicate the validity of this analysis (Field, 2009; Hair *et al.*, 2010; Kaiser, 1974). Additionally, the Cronbach alpha values ranges - from 0.625 to 0.875 - were deemed as satisfying to ensure internal reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Accordingly, this factor analysis has confirmed the most common dimensions of place attachment for the obtained data, being (1) place dependence, (2) place affect, (3) place social bonding, and (4) place identity.

Place dependence was found to explain approximately 35% of the construct's variance, followed by place affect (16.9%), place social bonding (9.7%) and place identity (7.4%).

Table 3. The factor analysis results of Place Attachment

Items	Mean scores	Factor loading	Eigen-value	% variance explained	Cronbach alpha
Place Dependence			4.901	35.008	0.875
Many of my friends/family prefer Vietnam over other places	5.72	0.524			
For the activities that I enjoy, Vietnam is the best	5.59	0.796			
I prefer Vietnam over other places for activities that I enjoy	5.56	0.799			
For what I like to do for leisure, I could not imagine anything better than the setting in Vietnam	4.83	0.898			
Other places cannot compare to Vietnam	4.66	0.841			
When others suggest alternatives to Vietnam for the activities that I enjoy, I still choose Vietnam	5.33	0.754			
Place Affect			2.373	16.950	0.869
Vietnam means a lot to me	6.52	0.852			
I am very attached to Vietnam	6.43	0.905			
I feel a strong sense of belonging to Vietnam	6.42	0.752			
Place Social Bonding			1.362	9.731	0.625
If I was away from Vietnam, I would lose contact with a number of friends	6.50	0.677			
I have a lot of fond memories with friends/family in Vietnam	6.52	0.750			
I have a special connection to the people living in Vietnam	6.43	0.793			
Place Identity			1.044	7.458	0.696
I feel my personal values are reflected in Vietnam	5.53	0.889			
I identify strongly with Vietnam	5.55	0.792			

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) = 0.826

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: Chi-Square = 1436.921; df = 91; p = 0.000

Total variance explained = 69.147%

Following the previous findings, the regression factor scores of the above four dimensions were then used for the multiple regression in order to examine the relationship between place attachment and level of support for inbound tourism. The results of a stepwise multiple regression suggested that three out of four independent variables significantly predict the respondents' level of support for inbound tourism (as shown in table 4). Place dependence, despite being the most important dimension of place attachment (explaining

35% of the variance), was evidenced not to have a significant impact on the respondents' level of support for inbound tourism (t=-0.266, p=0.79). The three dimensions of place attachment were found to significantly and positively influence the level of support for inbound tourism, including place social bonding, place identity and place affect. According to the final model, place social bonding was found to have the highest weight (.254), indicating it to be the most important factor in predicting the level of support for inbound tourism. In other words, individuals who feel a stronger bond with the local community were found to be more supportive in regard.

Suntikul *et al.* (2016) had suggested earlier that in the case of Vietnam, inbound tourism is a source for enhancing local pride and establish identity. Furthermore, Vietnam is a country where community cohesion and communal identity are central to daily lives (The Hofstede Center, 2016). Especially in the case of Huế City, important historical and cultural relics of the country are preserved and showcased to the outside world (Nguyen & Cheung, 2014). This might be a reason for the significant impact of the place identity dimension on the overall support for inbound tourism.

It is noteworthy that place affect, being an affective connection between people and place, had an impact on tourism support, while place dependence, being more of a cognitive construct, did not. While tourism has a significant impact on the economic development of Vietnam and Huế in particular (Thừa Thiên Huế Portal, 2016), residents showed that their affective connection to the place is more important in predicting tourism support. This is in line with Pearce *et al.* (1996) assertion that residents' form their opinion based on social representations and not merely on pragmatic thought.

Finally, it is important to notice that place attachment was found to only predict about 12.2% of the variance in Vietnamese Univeristy students' support for tourism inbound. This is not surprising as residents are an inherently heterogeneous stakeholder and a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors are believed to form their opinions (Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997; Fredline & Faulkner, 2000).

Table 4. Multiple regression of Level of Support for Inbound Tourism

Independence variables	Standardized Regression Coefficients	F	p	Cumulative R Square
Place Social Bonding	.254	15.168	.000	.064
Place Identity	.192	12.373	.000	.102
Place Affect	.143	10.087	.000	.122

5. Conclusion and Implications

The goal of this study was to measure a Vietnamese University students' levels of support for inbound tourism and the relationship between place attachment and their level of support. Findings have shown that the overall level of support is quite high (grand mean 6.16), wherein indicators related to pride and identity have generally scored higher than the ones related to economic factors.

T-tests have shown that female respondents show higher support for tourism inbound to Vietnam, alluding to the possibility of creating job opportunities for women in the sector.

Also, students majoring in tourism have been found to be more supportive of inbound tourism than their counterparts from other faculties, alluding to the importance of awareness and possible financial benefit for increasing support levels.

Place attachment was found to have a significant impact on the respondents' levels of support for inbound tourism. The identity and community oriented dimensions of place effect and social bonding were found to have a significant impact, whereas the more cognitive place dependence did not. This suggests the importance of pride and identity in enhancing young Vietnamese support for inbound tourism. These findings lead to several implications for tourism policy makers in general, and authorities responsible for Vietnam and Huế tourism in particular.

First of all, students' level of support for tourism was found to be fairly high, and the importance of items measuring pride and identity empirically confirms that the support is genuine and not based on economic dependence, as speculated by Suntikul *et al.* (2016). In particular, dimensions of place attachment related to identity and community were found to have a significant influence on the respondents' support. The importance of the young Vietnamese for the local tourism sector (Vietnam Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, 2011) asks for policy makers to maintain and possibly enhance these high levels of support.

As such, Vietnamese national and Huế local tourism promotion should focus on a brand identity which not only represents the community, but also enhances the locals' sense of pride and identity. Scholars have suggested that the identity of local people lies on the very core of a destination brand (e.g. Konečnik & Go, 2008; Weichhart, Weiske, & Werlen, 2006), and in practice destination brands focusing on local identity have shown to be very successful (Hospers, 2010). The values of a local community should be based on the locals' sense of pride and self-concept (van't Klooster, Go, & van Baalen, 2003; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2003; Wheeler, Frost, & Weiler, 2011; Zenker & Petersen, 2010), as well as on the feeling of local identity and self-esteem (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009). In the case of the Vietnamese University students, authorities should further investigate these concepts and take measures to incorporate them into the respective regional and national brand identities.

The moderate skepticism in terms of economic benefits of inbound tourism, as well as lower support among students from non-tourism related faculties, suggests that there might be a lack of related awareness among non-tourism majoring Vietnamese students. It is thus suggested for respective authorities to engage in internal branding campaigns emphasizing the economic benefits of inbound tourism, which for the younger generations is facilitated through the possibility of internet campaigns (Benckendorff *et al.*, 2010). The same possibility offers itself for promoting possible job for female students in the sector, which in the case of Vietnam has shown to be high (Megson, 2014). The subsequent development or revision of a brand identity specifically for Huế tourism and Vietnam in general can be a subject for further research and studies.

Finally, this study has to acknowledge several limitations. First, respondents were sample in the city of Huế only, which has a distinct imperial and cultural history. For a better understanding of the overall Vietnamese University students, future studies should repeat similar cases on other regional, or a national level. Second, respondents were randomly sampled among students from a local Huế university. Purposive or quota sampling in future studies might provide a more realistic overview of the respondent population.

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