

MEASURING SATISFACTION AND KNOWLEDGE OF VISITORS' CULTURAL TOURISM SITES

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the visitor's knowledge and satisfaction in the area of cultural tourism in Thailand. The main area of the study is one of the most important heritage sites of Thailand, Phra Pathom Chedi in Nakhon Pathom province. The quantitative research with questionnaires was applied to collect the data and provide the research findings. The analyses included descriptive statistics and multiple regression. The research identified the wide gap among the visitors. Landscape, atmosphere and information about the sites had positive influence on the overall satisfaction of cultural tourism. Discussions and directions for further research were also provided.

Keywords: Phra Pathom Chedi, Thailand; interpretation, knowledge; satisfaction

Introduction

For cultural tourism, it is important for tourists to find a balance between knowledge and satisfaction. In this part, the authors introduced the importance of cultural and heritage knowledge of the tourism sites.

Knowledge of heritage in Thailand – specifically heritage knowledge in Thai context relatively to the cultural heritage they visit – is one of the two main topics of the paper. It aims to fill the gap in the academic literature relative to Thai heritage management and tourism, as scholars have mostly focused on its historical or anthropological aspect.¹

The question and the relative discussion are a continuation of a discourse started a decade ago in the pages of this journal: a thesis dealing with the problem of knowledge by Western visitors at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Ayutthaya Historical Park (Saipradist, 2005), appeared a couple of years later (Saipradist and Staiff, 2007).² The problem of cross-cultural translation of Thai architecture was raised in that paper, but such a statement in that paper had to be obviously generic, as there

were no studies to verify the level of knowledge of Thai visitors.

As a sort of continuation of such earlier research, the level of knowledge of Thai visitors relatively their own history, traditions and culture, using the temple of Phra Pathom Chedi in Nakhon Pathom – a city roughly 50 km from Bangkok – as study site is the focus of this paper. The choice of the site was dictated by the fact that the temple is famous, it is the biggest *chedi* (temple tower) in Thailand, but most of its history or artistic features are not part of the national educational curriculum. Following Timothy and Boyd (2003, p. 14), Phra Pathom Chedi can be considered as a national site, without reaching the level of importance of Wat Phra Kaeo/Grand Palace, nor being a UNESCO World Heritage site, such as Sukhothai and Ayutthaya.³ Moreover, Phra Pathom Chedi is not a temple exclusively employed by the royal family as it is the case for Wat Phra Kaeo, nor it is part of a national – and nationalistic – discourse as it happens for Sukhothai and Ayutthaya. Thus, Phra Pathom Chedi represents a good case study to measure the level of knowledge of Thai visitors relative to the cultural heritage they visit.

¹ Just summarizing by topics: Thai heritage its origins and actual status (Peleggi, 1996, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2011, 2013, 2015), stakeholders' participation (Herzfeld, 2013, 2014, 2016; Prakitnonthakan, 2013) or general issues about cultural tourism in Southeast Asia context (Hitchcock et al., 1993, 2010).

² In Thailand, most of these studies were originated as PhD theses at the International Programme of Heritage Management at Silpakorn University in Thailand, as the

thesis cited above. Cross cultural interpretation problems, this time referred to Sukhothai, have been more recently discussed in Staiff (2014, pp. 144-147).

³ While escaping the magniloquence of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, in favour of a more accentuated religious importance, Phra Pathom chedi was ventured to be another UNESCO World Heritage site in Thailand, if the local community would not have challenged such registration (Gozzoli, forthcoming).

However, apart from comparing the knowledge and attitudes of Thai visitors toward the academic disciplines of history of Buddhist art and history, the present paper also aims to measure the satisfaction level of visitors to the site. Heritages have to attract visitors to cover the economic costs of their resource creation and maintenance incurred and to reap economic benefits visitors bring to the heritages, the local community, and the society at large (Ashworth, 2014). Hence, the findings of the present study can give guidance to cultural tourism sites of similar nature in Thailand ways to satisfy visitor experiences.

Literature review

Arts, history, heritage and Thai visitors

Saipradist and Staiff (2007) started over a quite significant assumption: that interest toward the past by Thai visitors at their own temples was at similar levels to those found in Europe. Differences however exist: within Western cultural horizon, ancient Rome and Greece created the cultural background through which the European Renaissance rose in

the fifteenth century CE. Then during the Enlightenment Period, archaeological ruins and cultural heritage were rediscovered once more: Goethe, Nietzsche, Wagner in German culture, Byron and Shelley in England, the French *Encyclopedie* cannot be understood without getting into the Classical background they still lived in (Schnapp, 1996, pp. 258-266).

In Thailand, the episodes of Buddha's life are limited into learning some of the episodes, and the Thai educational curriculum does not really work over the concept of religious art for instance, but simply over a relationship between styles and history (Appendix 1).⁴ Outside compulsory education, history of art is a discipline strictly confined to very specific universities like Silpakorn University, by definition – *sillapa* means Arts in Thai language – the University of Arts in Thailand.⁵

Phra Pathom Chedi and national heritage

Phra Pathom Chedi temple in the Nakhon Pathom Province is famous for having the highest stupa/*chedi* of Thailand.⁶

⁴ The Thai curriculum does not have any Religious History of Art element in its curriculum, but simply Fine Arts in general (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2008, pp. 236-237). A classification of Buddha's gestures exists, from the pen of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, cf. Rajanubhab (1973). See also Peleggi (2015) for the classification of Thai arts and its national implications.

⁵ As noted by (Peleggi, 2015, p. 81): “Art History” as a scholarly concept was imported from Europe and localized in the

Thai intellectual landscape in the early twentieth century, but it did not achieve the status of academic discipline until 1960s'. This delay in being embraced art history as academic discipline may explain its virtual absence from Thai compulsory education curriculum.

⁶ Stupa or *chedi* are names for the central tower of a Thai temple, usually containing Buddha's or king's relics. For the importance of the stupa as cultural emblem, see Byrne (1995, pp. 268-274).

Nakhon Pathom is situated near the west bank of the Ta Chin River in the central part of Thailand. Archaeological remains found at Nakhon Pathom define the site as one of the major centres of the Dvaravati civilisation (Indrawooth, 2004). One of the most important discoveries were two silver coins engraved with the Sanskrit words *Sridvaravati Svarapunya* that mean “meritorious deeds of the King of Dvaravati” (Indrawooth, 2004, p. 129; Indrawooth, 2008, p. 36). Within Thai academic scholarship, it is identified with the semi-mythical Suvannabhūmi kingdom (Assavarirulakarn, 2010, p. 63; Revire, 2011).

After becoming king, Rama IV started to build the actual temple at Phra Pathom Chedi in 1853 following the Ayutthaya style of the period.⁷ More interventions and restorations were later done by his successors King Rama IV, Rama V and Rama VI (Fine Arts Department, 2005, pp. 68-73), each of them contributing to set statues, paintings or votive objects within the temple compound.

Heritage as a place for consumption

Heritage unfolds the spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional uniqueness of a place that helps distinguish people of various races and societies at large (Danesi, 2017). However, heritage is a contemporary commodity that is created to satisfy contemporary consumption (Ashworth, 1994). On these bases, visits

to heritages are a process, an outcome, and a consumable experience (Ashworth 1997) and are a demand-driven collection of contemporary users (Ashworth, 2014).

The sustainable development of heritages has, for long, been the main concern of their managers and administrators. The Type Museum in London closed in May 2006 because of an unsustainable deficit (Heywood, 2006). Facing a decrease in subsidies, these managers and administrators realize the necessity to compete with other tourist activities to attract several visitors to generate income (Kolb, 2013). Hitherto, heritages could impact the economic development of societies. John Kenneth Galbraith, one of the most celebrated economists of the 20th century, claimed that the main reason for the rapid recovery of post-war Italy is that Italy has incorporated into its products an essential component of cultures and that cities, such as Milan, Parma, Florence, Siena, Venice, Rome, Naples, and Palermo, display in their standard of living a huge amount of beauty (in Danesi, 2017, p. 50). These cities with relative cultural heritage, to support the constant flow of tourists, have to set up relevant commercial activities and facilities, infrastructures such as hotels and restaurants, and public events (Danesi, 2017). The visiting rate of a heritage is a tool to measure its success. The 2017 annual report of the Metropolitan Museum of Art illustrated the record-high attendance of seven million visitors in the fiscal year of 2017, a testament to the “strength, relevance, and endurance of MET’s mission: to

⁷ King Rama IV’s deeds in relation with Phra Pathom Chedi are narrated in Flood (1965, pp. 496-518). See Byrne (2014, pp. 83-84)

for a cultural history of the Phra Pathom Chedi reconstruction, as enhancing the magical value of the *chedi* itself.

connect people to creativity, knowledge, and ideas through the collection and presentation of five thousand years of visual expression (MET, 2017, p.6.).”

Previously, heritages tended to attract cultural tourists who had a high per diem expenditure relatively (du Cros & McKercher, 2015). However, currently, visits to heritages are a mainstream tourist activity (du Cros & McKercher, 2015).

Thailand attracts more than 32 million foreign tourists who spent more than USD49,000 million in 2016 (UNWTO, 2017). Furthermore, 95% of its population comprises Buddhists (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.). Ayutthaya attracted approximately 5.3 million local visitors and 1.9 million foreign tourists in 2016. The Phra Pathom Chedi, as far as its history, significance, and geographical location are concerned, has a good potential to attract local and foreign visitors by providing them with a consumable experience (moved from the last paragraph of this section).

Satisfaction of tourists

Several scholars and researchers corroborate that the success of tourism businesses depends on providing tourists with and engaging tourists in rich and rewarding experiences (Wall and Mathieson, 2006).

Tourist experience as suggested by Pearce (2011) is an integrated conceptualization that resembles “an ensemble of orchestrated sensory inputs; affective reactions; cognitive mechanisms used to think about and understand the setting; actions undertaken and the relevant relationships which define the participants’ world (p. vii).” These components, from the

tourist perspective, as stated by Pearce and Wu (2016) are interacting and fused influenced. Hence, they posited that we should approach tourist satisfaction and experiences from the perspectives of expressive and instrumental attributes. The former refers to the intangible and holistic features, such as the atmosphere and scenic beauty of a heritage, whereas the latter refers to tangible dimensions, such as clear orientations and good paths.

Bryman (2004) affirmed that strong themes are an essential element to give visitors a sense of place. This sense of place, using the words of UNESCO to elaborate, is, in a broad sense, “a unique combination of spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional aspects that distinguish a society or a social group. This sense of should also embrace not only art and literature but also human lifestyle, fundamental human rights, systems of values, traditions, and beliefs (in Danesi, 2017).” However, Bryman (2004) validated that merchandising provides a good link to the themes developed for attraction.

Also, Jensen, Li and Uysal (2017) illustrated two types of antecedents of visitor experiences: subject-oriented and object-oriented. The former is the psychological feeling of visitors and the latter focuses on on-site attraction properties such as displays, interpretations, and artifacts. They stated that those who consider the attraction site an essential part of their travel itinerary tend to pay more attention to the presentation platforms of the site than those who go to the site as an additional activity of their itinerary.

The Survey

A questionnaire survey was distributed at the temple in 2016.⁸ The original questionnaire was written in Thai language by one of the authors and distributed to the temple visitors. Visitor's motivations to visit the temple, as well as satisfaction of temple services were mixed with questions about knowledge of the temple and its historical or artistic features. Some questions were relative to general knowledge about the temple and its assets, as well as the temple most famous artistic elements. Other questions instead were more specific about history or religion, and they required knowledge of Buddhist art or historical events related to the temple, and some questions were supplemented by a photo or image. The answers to the knowledge questions were double checked with academic books and references to the temple itself.

On-site knowledge was not expected: the temple has only one small booklet on sale (20 Thai Baht) about the temple in general, and a more expensive one (500 Thai Baht) relative to the temple paintings in the southern *vihara*, but no other information material is present on site. While some digital format interpretation tool was planned at the temple site, none of them was present at the time of the survey.

The questionnaires were distributed within the temple compound through convenience sampling, in proximity of the major standing Buddha, as well as the southern *vihara*, which is close to the

Dvaravati seated statue, one of the most visited places within the temple complex. While 589 Thai visitors filled the questionnaire, but only 438 could be employed for the research, as quite a few were incomplete.

The following aspects were analysed, through statistical means and frequencies:

1. Educational level, motivation and satisfaction of visitors to visit the temple;
2. How much it was known about the temple, also looking whether different levels of education were an influential element for the given answers and
3. The differences in the satisfaction level of various elements that contributed to visitor experiences to the temple.

Findings and discussion

Education, motivation and satisfaction

Among the people interviewed, 64% of the respondents had a BA degree or higher, divided in BA degree (53.7%) and Master or Higher (11.0%), while the second group as educational level was made of Secondary/Technical School degree holders, with 29.2% of the respondents. Many of them had already visited the temple in previous occasions – only 19.4% of the visitors were first time visitors, while 41.4% of the visitors

⁸ The questionnaire ran between May and July 2016, and later in October-November 2016.

had visited the temple in the last 5 years, and another 13.5 between 5 to 10 years, and 25.8% more than 10 years.

As for the frequency on visiting temple and historical site, 30.1% of the respondents visited temples and historical sites with a certain frequency (2-5 times the year), while 39.8% of the respondents declared they were going to temples at least one time a month. Such rarity on visiting temple might be looking odd from the perspective of the other major world religions, as Muslim, Christian and Jewish believers have a sacred day of the week. From the Buddhist point of view however, such a weekly prescription is absent, and Buddhist followers crowd the temple in occasion of the various festivals spread during the year.

As for the reasons to come to Phra Pathom Chedi, making merit was the most important factor (4.39 in 1-5 scale), immediately followed by visiting the temple (4.32); while in the way to my destination was the least important (3.16).

Visitors' knowledge

As noted above, the most relevant part of survey was about measuring the knowledge of the visitors through both general and specific questions. In this case, the analysis through frequencies works over the division in questions between general and specific. Within each sets of questions, the right answer is written in *italics*.

a) General questions: The two questions that required knowing the name of the king who discovered the temple and the king erecting the major cultic statue. Nearly 50% respondents gave the right answer to the former. The connection between Phra Pathom Chedi and Rama IV is known since the primary school, as well as King Rama IV has various portraits in the western *vihara* in proximity of the reclining Buddha, which act as reminder of the king's importance.

As for the question about the standing Buddha, Rama VI was known – with a smaller percentage of around 32, it is fair to say – as the king setting it.⁹ As for the wrong answers, a pattern is also visible for both questions: 25.8% of respondents responded Rama V (the second most chosen king), who is certainly is the most respected royal figure among the Thai society, especially for the middle class (Stengs, 2009). Thus, in the case the Thai visitors did not really know the answer, Rama V (King Chulalongkorn) was their guess. As the two answers were considered among the general questions, as they referred to two major architectural and cultic elements of the temple, the number of respondents giving 'I do not know' (7% for the former and nearly 11% for the latter) as answer certainly demonstrates that more information should be provided to the visitor.

In relation to the educational level, the first question has the BA and higher degree having the highest percentage among those giving the right answers, with 53.2% respectively. The same kind

⁹ At the time part of the questionnaire was run (2016), the centenary of the statue erection was just celebrated (November 2015). Thus,

the royal connection was even more remarked.

of results was also present for the second question, as BA and Master degree holders had 37.0% and 32.6% respectively.

As for the question of fame, the fact that the temple is the highest *chedi* in Thailand was well known. Yet, the second most chosen answer with a response rate of 20.5% (it contains the ashes of previous kings) remains questionable whether it was simply given out of respect, or based in some knowledge that King Rama VI's ashes are really contained in the standing Buddha's base. As for education, BA and Master degree holders had the highest percentage with 70.2% and 83.6% respectively.

As discussed above, the statue itself is one of the most visited parts of the temple, especially for merit making. The statue does not have any sort of information around the statue; thus, the style of the statue itself is recognized, without any difference about the level of education. 58% of respondents responded Dvaravati and 18.9% responded Srivijaya. The responses to Ayutthaya, Sukhothai and Rattanakosin received a response rate of 8.4%, 9.6% and 3.7% respectively.

b) Specific questions: As noted above, the second sets of questions were dealing more with specific knowledge of the temple itself. The first question was the reasons the temple was famous for. As a multiple choice question, Nakhon Pathom was considered as the capital of the legendary reign of Suvarnabhumi, as well as it was the place where the

missionaries sent by King Asoka came to the modern Thai territory (Subhadradis, n.d., pp. 7-9). However, 67.4% and 75.1% of respondents chose the answer wrongly. In this case, most people simply ignored the importance of the city in antiquity, both from the historical or religious point of view. For the education level, there was no significant difference among the various educational levels.

Among the various answers relative to the styles of the temple as visible in the painting, Dvaravati was the most chosen. The reasons for the choice might be wondered, but the fact that one of the statues was in such a style might have influenced the choice as well. Lopburi and Ayutthaya however, there were not chosen. Nearly 93% and 72% of respondents responded to "no" to the two styles despite the fact they were the other two major architectural styles visible. The level of knowledge of the same for all the levels of education, on the question about Ayutthaya demonstrated that Secondary school and BA degree holders were those who knew most.

The last question had a redoubling of a similar question, with only the change of the title of the enemy from Burma, once as Prince and once as king. The redoubling of the entry was done as Naresuan, the King of Ayutthaya fighting against the Prince of Burma is the most famous and celebrated battle in Thai history, when Ayutthaya freed itself from the Burmese yoke.¹⁰ The painting instead narrated the battle between Phya Phan and Phya Kong, an event that is known from an early 19th century collection:

¹⁰ The importance of the King of Ayutthaya and the epic battle from the Burmese yoke has been celebrated in very recent movies, as

well as it is part of a classroom historical readings.

Phraya Kong, ruler of Kanchanaburi, a locality west of Nakhon Pathom, is predicted by astrologers that his son would kill him. Therefore, he sent his son away to live in a different province. As the son named Phya Phan grew up, he joined the army of the king of Ratchaburi, another locality around Nakhon Pathom, to fight against Phraya Khong, completely ignoring that Phraya Kong is his father. After having killed his own father in the mentioned battle, and having discovered his fault, Phraya Phan built the temple of Phra Pathom Chedi to purify his karma (Woodward, 2014, pp. 24-25). On a bigger picture, the trend implies that royal based history is still the most known and referred to set of events. Again, for the education level, Technical, BA and Master degrees have the highest level of knowledge.¹¹

Knowledge level: some conclusions

As a discussion of the answers above, the groups of general and specific questions have similar patterns: for the general questions, those relative to styles of the statue, the highest *chedi* are on one side, and the historical questions relative to the discoverer is on the other. The former are known, for the statue, the question of fame is the most possible answer. As for the highest *chedi*, it is common knowledge, surely derivative from compulsory schooling.

For the latter, the historical questions, fame or not fame, only the question about King Mongkut as the discoverer was quite generally known. The simplest statement is that history of the temple is not as known as much as some of the cultural assets. Even if we exclude the question about the highest *chedi*, cultic aspects are far more recognised than their historical counterparts. Cultic questions have the highest percentage of correct answers, as well as they also have a smaller percentage of “I do not know” answers.

For the specific questions, the questions relative to the history of the temple (King Asoke’s missionaries, Suvarnabhumi, the Phya Kong battle) were not known, despite the paintings and the references to the temple itself. As for the cultic or history of art questions, relatively to the styles of the temple or the Buddha style, again, the lack of general education about it is evident. Whatever is known about the temple comes from the compulsory education system, not any higher-level degree: there are substantially no differences about the level of education.

Satisfaction level

Table 1 and 2 illustrate the overall satisfaction results of visitors on the atmosphere, landscape, food, information and souvenir, and the model summary.

¹¹ Some readers out of curiosity might want to know whether any of the visitors was able to know the correct answers to the

knowledge questions. The answers to it is negative: no one of the interviewees gave the correct answers.

Table 1 Overall satisfaction of visitors on the atmosphere, landscape, food, information and souvenirs

Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation
Satisfaction of Cultural Attractions	4.36	.826
Satisfaction of Atmosphere	4.31	.891
Satisfaction of Landscape	4.31	.843
Satisfaction Food	3.35	1.079
Satisfaction of information tools (e.g. books and leaflets)	3.58	1.131
Satisfaction of souvenirs	3.39	1.182

According to the mean scores of the satisfaction factors, cultural attraction had the highest level of satisfaction (mean = 4.36), followed by satisfactions of atmosphere and landscape with the same mean score of 4.31. The tourists were not quite satisfied with food at the cultural tourism sites by indicating the lower mean score of 3.35.

Conclusion

Thai visitors at Phra Pathom Chedi have an insufficient level of historical or artistic knowledge. As the paper initially assumed that visitors needed to be informed, as they would understand better the place they visit, an empirical demonstration can be offered. At the time of the questionnaire survey, as each questionnaire was distributed inside the western *vihara* with the paintings relative to the history of the *chedi* itself, a few

visitors went back to see the scene of Phya Phan and Phya Kong once the questionnaire was filled. Other visitors questioned themselves about the level of knowledge, despite having visited the temple a few times.

Having ascertained that these visitors are willingly to be educated, it remains to see what should be supplied to them. In this respect, the major shortcoming of heritage management and interpretation in Thailand is the absence of any discussion about the message. In the last decade, most of the contributions about interpretation in Thailand target new technologies applied to interpretation: different universities and institutions cooperate with historical parks and Fine Arts Department to supply smartphone applications or audio visuals for Thai historical parks and museums, such as the National Museum in Bangkok and Ayutthaya Historical Park.¹² Those applications are only a tool, as new as it

¹² Up to now, computer applications targeting Ayutthaya are known; as well QR codes are

employed at the National Museum in Bangkok.

might be, to give information about a temple or historical building.¹³

But the issue about quality and quantity of information remains.¹⁴ Moreover, as the Fine Arts Department deals with the information and the external providers supply the tools, the information is essentially conservative.

Thus, a new approach to history as discipline is certainly needed: as experienced by the authors of this paper at different levels, history remains substantially static, and transferred as such generation after generation. It results on an unappealing list of names and deeds, both undoubtedly important, but inherently making the subject static and quite dull to any reader. It also goes together with the need of alternative/complementary information, as event based information can be supplemented with reconstructions of social/religious and alternative aspects of history.

However, although the present paper shows that visitors in general do not have a good prior knowledge of Phra Pathom Chedi, this lack of knowledge do not influence their general satisfaction level

of their visit to the site. The findings illustrate the interest in experiencing 'real' experience and verifying prior knowledge of a cultural site of visitors are not the only factor to satisfy the visiting experience of visitors. The findings show that the appealing to the psychological feeling of visitors is already sufficient to fulfil their visiting satisfaction. Tourist satisfaction, up to a point, is not necessarily an interaction of the sensory inputs, affective reactions and the cognitive mechanisms as suggested by Pearce (2011). Without the cognitive mechanisms, visitors of the present study tell us that they are still satisfactory with their visiting experience. This finding might stem from the fact as suggested by Jensen, Li and Uysal (2017) that those who visit a site as an additional activity as part of their itinerary do not emphasise on the presentation platforms. All in all, a consumable experience is a mixture of several elements. However, the content of the information tools of a heritage site, in the context of the present study, if strengthened, could help supplement this lack of knowledge but they are not an essential tool to fulfil the visiting experience of visitors.

¹³ Computer in a museum exhibition was the first experience by one of the authors in late 1980s, at the time of an exhibition about the Phoenicians at Palazzo Grassi, Venice, Italy. As still remembered, the attraction was the tool itself, more than the contents. Thirty years later, the tool is not a novelty any

longer, but it should provide different levels of information.

¹⁴ Reasons of space preclude a full discussion of the problem of the message in Thai Heritagescape, but the relevant research is now forthcoming by the authors.



Appendix 1

Strand 1: Visual Arts

Standard AR1.2: Understanding of the relationship between the visual arts, the history and the culture; appreciating visual art works that represent the cultural heritage, the local wisdom, and Thai and universal wisdom

Grade 7

1. Specify and describe the characteristics and the forms of the national and the local visual art works from the past to the present time.
2. Specify and compare the visual art works in various regions of Thailand.
3. Compare the differences of the objectives in creating visual art works of Thai and universal cultures.

Grade 8

1. Specify and describe various cultures reflecting the visual art works at present time.
2. Describe the changes in Thai visual art works in each period with the concepts and the contents of the works.
3. Compare the concepts in designing works of art of Thai and universal cultures.

Note: (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2008, p. 237)

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