

The Role of Sensory Elements in Enhancing Airbnb Guest Experience in Bangkok.

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Abstract

In the evolving landscape of tourism and the sharing economy, Airbnb has emerged as a leading accommodation platform, particularly in Bangkok, Thailand. While previous studies have explored various factors influencing guest satisfaction, limited research has examined the role of sensory elements in shaping the Airbnb guest experience. This study investigates how visual, auditory, and olfactory stimuli drive guests' decision-making and overall satisfaction. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 Airbnb foreign guests who had stayed in Bangkok within the past year. Data obtained from the participants were coded using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that visual, including cleanliness, interior design, and lighting, are the primary aspects influencing booking decisions. Additionally, scent and noise levels in a bustling city play decisive roles in enhancing or detracting from guests' overall satisfaction. A positive sensory experience fosters emotional engagement and guest retention, while negative sensory stimuli, such as unpleasant odors or disruptive noise, lead to dissatisfaction. This study underscores the importance of sensory marketing in enhancing the Airbnb guest experience and provides practical insights for Airbnb hosts to improve their offerings by optimizing sensory elements.

Keywords: Airbnb, Guest, Host, Sensory Elements, Sensory Experience, Sensory Marketing

1. Introduction

Sensory marketing plays an important driving force in the global marketing environment. As consumers today are more individualistic, individuals' lifestyles, values, and personal characteristics are diverse. Customer needs and satisfaction become more complex because people's attitudes, behaviors, and values are constantly changing along with the shift of cultural values through generations. Today, customer satisfaction does not rely solely on an individual's physical needs, but it must also satisfy emotional and experience-based needs. Therefore, it is a crucial question for companies and marketers on how to meet individual desires, wants, and needs. "The three main personal factors behind individualization as lifestyle have been identified as self-fulfillment, identity creation and multisensory brand experiences" (Hultén, 2020). Sensory marketing engages the five human senses—visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory—creating immersive brand experiences that influence purchasing decisions and brand perceptions (Hultén, 2020). This approach has become especially relevant in the tourism industry, where service experiences play a key role in consumer satisfaction.

One of the most transformative forces in tourism and hospitality has been Airbnb, an online marketplace and hospitality service, aiding users to rent or lease accommodation not limited to bed and breakfasts, hostels, homestays, apartments, rooms or hotels (Introduction to Airbnb, 2017). This has revolutionized the lodging industry by offering a business model worldwide. Airbnb offered led to over 1.5 billion guests and 5 million guests across the globe (Airbnb, 2024a). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated changes in travel behavior, leading to increased demand for flexible, long-term stays and a shift toward distributed tourism. Instead of concentrating travel in traditional urban hubs, Airbnb has enabled travelers to explore smaller cities and local neighborhoods, fostering economic benefits for local communities.

As Airbnb has been playing as an important role in the tourism industry worldwide, it has become an important pillar of Thailand's tourism industry and contributed to the country's GDP. The platform's activities contributed over THB 31 billion to Gross Domestic Product and supported almost 56,500 Thai jobs in 2022 alone, accounting for approximately 1.7 percent of the tourism industry's contribution to GDP (Airbnb, 2023b). The platform has reshaped travel

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trends, with long-term stays (i.e., those staying for 28+ nights) accounting for 35.6% of total guest nights in Thailand in 2022*, up from 13.9% in 2019. (Airbnb, 2023b). Additionally, Airbnb's influence extends to local businesses, as guests spend on restaurants, transportation, and accommodations. In 2022, Airbnb guests spent a total of almost THB 41 billion in Thailand, including in restaurants, retail stores, transportation, as well as accommodation (Airbnb, 2023b). The Thai government has also collaborated with Airbnb to rebuild and expand the nation's tourism economy.

This research examines the role of sensory marketing in the tourism sector, focusing on its role in consumer decision-making within the Airbnb model. By understanding how multi-sensory experiences shape travelers' choices, Bangkok hospitality businesses can optimize their marketing strategies to enhance guest satisfaction and drive economic growth in the post-pandemic tourism landscape.

2. Statement of Problem

In the rapidly evolving tourism industry, travelers now have more options for accommodations, challenging traditional hotels and emerging alternatives. Airbnb has successfully adapted to market shifts, becoming a key player in Thailand's tourism sector, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. In competitive markets, Southeast Asia cities like Bangkok, fostering emotional connections between travelers and destinations is crucial for sustainable tourism, making sensory marketing a vital tool in enhancing guest experiences. While sensory marketing has been widely studied in hotels and restaurants, insufficient research has explored its role in Airbnb rental services. Despite growing interest in sensory-driven experiences, there remains a gap in understanding how sensory stimuli—vision, hearing, smell, touch, and taste—drive Airbnb guests' emotional and behavioral responses. Existing studies have linked Airbnb's environmental stimuli to perceived enjoyment, yet sensory elements remain underexplored. This research seeks to bridge this gap by investigating the influence of sensory marketing on Airbnb guest experiences in Bangkok, providing valuable insights for Airbnb hosts to enhance their service offerings.

3. Research Questions

RQ1- How do sensory elements influence the decision-making processes of potential guests when

choosing to book Airbnb accommodations in Bangkok?

RQ2 – What is the role of sensory elements that influence the guest experience in Airbnb accommodations in Bangkok?

4. Research Objectives

RO1 - To examine how various sensory elements influence potential guests' decision-making processes when choosing to book Airbnb accommodations in Bangkok.

RO2 – To identify the role of sensory elements on guest experience in Airbnb accommodation in Bangkok

5. Literature Review

Airbnb operates within the sharing economy, revolutionizing the tourism industry by enabling peer-to-peer (P2P) interactions where consumers actively engage with service providers. Unlike traditional business models, Airbnb fosters a co-creation process between hosts and guests, where both physical elements, such as interior design and local culture, and social dimensions, including online and offline interactions, contribute to a unique and memorable experience (Li *et al.*, 2022). Sensory marketing has emerged as a crucial strategy in tourism, leveraging the five human senses—sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch—to shape consumer experiences (Hultén, 2020). By stimulating these senses, businesses can enhance customer perceptions and emotional engagement, ultimately influencing satisfaction and brand experience. Multisensory experiences in hospitality are key to service differentiation, affecting cognitive and emotional responses and leading to either positive or negative consumer perceptions (Lee *et al.*, 2019).

Sensory marketing is an integrative marketing approach, especially in the tourism industry, where consumers perceive and shape their experiences through human senses. Sensory marketing is a new theoretical and practical contribution giving an understanding of the significant role of the human senses (Hultén, 2020). This marketing strategy offers marketers and companies a new approach to delivering consumer value and experience through multisensory experiences. The reason why this is important is that consumer experiences are shaped and created from

their senses during the process of consuming brands, products, and services. It is evident that all consumption of brands, products, and services involves our senses and responds to our desires, wants, and needs, leading to satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the choices we have made (Hultén, 2020). Sensory information is transmitted to the individual body and mind through the five senses, which consist of sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch, that transform into perception and sensory experience. Hultén (2020) defined sensory marketing as ‘a firm’s service process that focuses on sensory strategy by using sensory stimuli to create a sensory brand experience. Companies can differentiate themselves from others by focusing on the service process to create a memorable experience built upon the interaction of how individuals perceive through the five sensory cues/stimuli and not through product attributes like price and quality.

Empirical studies highlight the impact of sensory marketing on consumer behavior and satisfaction across hospitality settings. Recent research emphasizes the growing importance of multisensory design in enhancing the guest experience within the hospitality industry. Visual elements such as lighting and culturally resonant decor significantly influence guest satisfaction, while auditory, olfactory, and tactile cues contribute to emotional comfort and brand perception. An integrated sensory approach can differentiate properties in a competitive market by creating memorable and emotionally engaging environments (Sulaiman & Sulaiman, 2023). Supporting this, Lee *et al.* (2019) demonstrated that a well-designed multisensory experience enhances customer satisfaction, while So *et al.* (2020) found that Airbnb guests' perceived enjoyment is significantly influenced by environmental stimuli such as authenticity and home benefits. Additionally, Pelet *et al.* (2021) identified the role of the Internet of Things (IoT) in stimulating guest senses and shaping affective experiences. Further reinforcing the significance of non-physical design factors, recent findings suggest that certain amenity categories—such as office setup, entertainment options, ambiance, safety features, and accessibility—are more strongly associated with the guest experience than traditional spatial amenities like kitchens, bedrooms, or bathrooms (Tafesse, & Tariq, 2025). Despite growing recognition of sensory marketing, there remains limited research on its application within Airbnb. This gap underscores the need for further exploration of how sensory stimuli contribute to enhancing the Airbnb guest experience, particularly in a dynamic tourism market like Bangkok.

Further, this work is specifically guided by the stimuli–organism–response (S-O-R) theory, which holds that an organism's internal evaluation process can cause a response, or resulting behavior, in response to a stimulus, which is defined as external input from the exposed environment as perceived by an individual (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Since it offers an integrative theoretical approach that takes into account environmental (external), internal, and behavioral variables, S-O-R theory has been widely used as a framework for examining consumers' experiences in a variety of research settings, including education (Goi *et al.*, 2018), retailing (Vieira, 2013), and hospitality and tourism (Lam *et al.*, 2011). For this reason, it was chosen for this investigation.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative approach to explore the role of sensory elements in enhancing the Airbnb guest experience in Bangkok. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with Airbnb foreign guests who had stayed in Bangkok within the past year. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Open-ended questions were used in the interviews to allow participants to share their insights and experiences related to booking and staying at Airbnb accommodations in Bangkok. The checklist questions were designed to align with the research objectives. The example of sample questions includes “Which sensory elements (sights, smells, hearing, touch, and taste) make the property more appealing to you when choosing an Airbnb property, and why?”, “Would you please share your positive and negative sensory experiences during your stay at an Airbnb?” and “Do you think sensory elements influence the guest experience in Airbnb accommodations in Bangkok?”. Each interview ranged from 20 to 30 minutes and was recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

6.2 Sampling Procedure

Data gathering was done by leveraging social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to recruit the interview participants. The post outlined the research objective, type of interview, expected duration for an interview, and the criteria for participation to invite individuals who met these criteria to volunteer. The criteria for participants are that they are foreigners and have recently stayed in the Airbnb Bangkok in the past year. The posts were shared with the help of friends and family on their

online platforms. Potential participants were screened considering the outlined criteria before being invited to an interview. In addition, the author provided a digital consent form for participants to sign, outlining the purpose of the interview and that their identity would remain confidential. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their rights, including voluntary participation and the option to withdraw. All identifiable information was anonymized. The interviews were conducted from June 7, 2024, to June 14, 2024. The authors conducted face-to-face and online interviews using Google Meet and Zoom meetings. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, while the authors noted down as evidence (Table 1).

6.3 Data Analysis

To determine the implicit and explicit elements influencing Airbnb guests' decision-making, a thematic analysis was applied as part of the manual data analysis process. This study followed Clark *et al.* (2015)'s recommendations for thematic analysis phases. To find the broad trends that emerge, researchers first read the data. The first codes were then created by collapsing the data into labels (codes) based on the meanings and utterances of the participants. To create preliminary categories, a line-by-line analysis of the participant data was conducted. The connections between the categories were then determined. To create the axial codes, similarities were found in the open codes. The second-order codes shifted their focus from participant voices to theory development. Lastly, the codes were integrated into broad themes that were proposed as possible determinants of Airbnb guests' decisions to stay (Figure 1).

Table 1: Summary of Informants' Profile

Method	# of interviews and function	Location	Sampling frame	Key Respondent Characteristics	Type	Quantity
Online semi-structured interview	Foreigner	Zoom Call	Instagram	British, Male, has used Airbnb in Bangkok	Interview transcript, video recording,	24 minutes
Online semi-structured	Foreigner	Google Meet	Instagram	Malaysian, Male, has used Airbnb in	Interview transcript, video recor	20 minutes

interview				Bangkok	ding.	
Online semi-structured interview	Foreigner	Google Meet	Instagram	Taiwanese, Male, has used Airbnb in Bangkok	Interview transcript, video recording	25 minutes
Online semi-structured interview	Foreigner	Google Meet	Instagram	Japanese, Male, has used Airbnb in Bangkok	Interview transcript, video recording,	20 minutes
Online semi-structured interview	Foreigner	Google Meet	Instagram	Chinese, Male, has used Airbnb in Bangkok	Interview transcript, video recording.	25 minutes
Online semi-structured interview	Foreigner	Zoom Call	Instagram	Taiwanese, Male, has used Airbnb in Bangkok	Interview transcript, video recording.	25 minutes
Online semi-structured interview	Foreigner	Google Meet	Instagram	Japanese, Male, has used Airbnb in Bangkok	Interview transcript, video recording.	23 minutes
Face-to-face interview	Foreigner	Assumption University.	Instagram	Cambodian, Male, has used Airbnb in Bangkok	Interview transcript, audio recording.	24 minutes

Source: Primary Data

7. Results and Discussions

7.1 Influence of Sensory Elements on Potential Guests' Decision-Making in Choosing Airbnb Accommodations in Bangkok

The analysis of informants' responses reveals that visual appearance is the dominant factor influencing Airbnb guests' decision-making in choosing

accommodations in Bangkok. Key elements of visual appeal, such as cleanliness, interior design, and overall aesthetics, were repeatedly emphasized by informants. Cleanliness and a well-organized space were fundamental considerations, as guests associated these

attributes with comfort and a positive stay experience. Additionally, the appeal of unique and charming aesthetics, whether traditional or modern, plays a significant role in attracting guests.

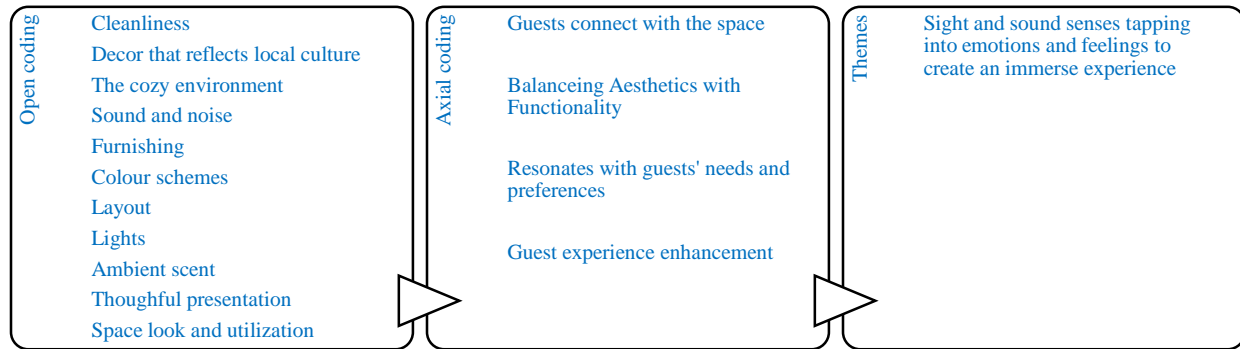


Figure 1. Data structure for defining the Sensory Elements on potential Airbnb Guests' Decision-Making
Source: Compiled by authors

Informants also highlighted the importance of interior design, particularly styles that reflect cultural authenticity, such as Southeast Asian interiors. Furthermore, the ambiance created by elements like low-level lighting contributed to the overall visual appeal and comfort of the stay, making lighting another key factor in decision-making. Overall, it is evident that guests prioritize the visual and sensory appeal of an Airbnb property, with some placing these

factors above other considerations such as price and accessibility. This underscores the importance for hosts to maintain high standards of cleanliness and invest in appealing interior designs to attract more bookings.

7.2 Role of Sensory Elements in Guest Satisfaction in Airbnb Accommodations in Bangkok

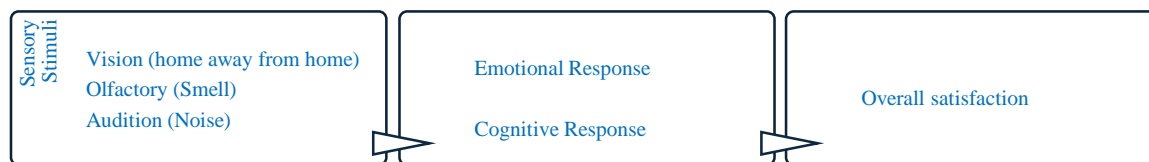


Figure 2. Integrated sensory stimuli framework influencing guest experience in Airbnb accommodations
Source: Compiled by authors

7.2.1 Visual Appearance

The analysis of informants' responses (Figure 2) indicates that a home-like atmosphere is the predominant factor in visual appearance influencing Airbnb guest satisfaction. Informants consistently emphasized the importance of a space being a livable and comfortable environment that feels like home. The elements that contribute to this atmosphere include

clean design and bright lighting, which enhance the overall comfort and livability of the space. Additionally, informants highlighted the significance of a minimalistic design incorporating subtle color palettes to create a calming atmosphere.

Regardless of how visually appealing a property may be, negative sensory experiences, such as intrusive noise, unpleasant odors, or poor cleanliness, can significantly diminish guest satisfaction. Such discomforts are frequently reflected in lower host ratings and negative reviews online, which deter

potential guests and impact retention. In a competitive market like Bangkok, where sensory overload is common, even minor disruptions can shape how they remember their experience of their stay and influence a guest's perception and willingness to return. This highlights the need for hosts not only to focus on aesthetic design but also to actively manage the full sensory environment to ensure a consistently positive experience.

7.2.2 Audition (Noise Level)

The analysis of informants' responses also demonstrates (Figure 2) that noise levels play a critical role in Airbnb guest satisfaction. Informants expressed a strong preference for a quiet environment, generally expecting their accommodations to provide a peaceful atmosphere. A quiet environment enhances sleep quality and contributes positively to overall satisfaction. Some informants reported that noise had a minimal impact on their stay; however, those who stayed in lower-floor rooms with high external noise experienced dissatisfaction.

While the majority of informants expressed a clear preference for a quiet environment, associating it with better sleep and greater overall satisfaction, not all guests viewed silence as ideal. A smaller group, particularly solo travelers in a new city, found the presence of environmental noise reassuring, especially in a busy city like Bangkok. For these guests, background noise such as distant traffic or urban activity provided a sense of human presence and life. In contrast, an environment that was too quiet evoked feelings of isolation or unease. These findings provide valuable insights for Airbnb hosts, emphasizing the importance of the location of Airbnb and bearable sound to enhance guest experience. Ensuring a peaceful environment aligns with guest expectations and promotes a memorable stay.

While the majority of informants expressed a clear preference for a quiet environment, associating it with better sleep and greater overall satisfaction, not all guests viewed silence as ideal. A smaller group, particularly solo travelers in a new city, found the presence of environmental noise reassuring, especially in a busy city like Bangkok. In the context of Bangkok, where the city's constant buzz is part of daily life, from the motorbike traffic, street vendors, and nightlife, such sensory input enhances a feeling of connectedness and authenticity. For these guests, background noise such as distant traffic or urban activity provided a sense of human presence and life. Bangkok's urban density reflects a broader cultural

value that embraces the community and energy, making complete silence feel unnatural or even isolating for some. In contrast, an environment that was too quiet could evoke feelings of isolation or unease. These findings provide valuable insights for Airbnb hosts, emphasizing the importance of their location and bearable sound to enhance guest experience. Ensuring a peaceful environment aligns with guest expectations and promotes a memorable stay.

7.2.3 Olfactory (Scent)

Regarding scent, the analysis of informants' responses reveals that scent undoubtedly shapes the Airbnb guest experience, with a strong emphasis on maintaining a neutral or pleasant smell. Guests generally expect a home-like atmosphere with a neutral scent, as this represents cleanliness and contributes to a sense of comfort and calm. While some guests preferred accommodations with no distinct scent to maintain a homely ambiance, others appreciated the presence of pleasant scents such as herbs or aromatic fragrances, which they associated with welcome service from hosts.

Negative scents, particularly from areas such as the sink, were noted as significant detractors from overall satisfaction. One participant from the interview shared, *"There is one place where the sink is suffocating, the smell came to me and it is bad, and I almost had to change the place because I could not fall asleep. That is a real negative, I think it shouldn't happen anywhere I stay"* (Participant 5, personal communication, 2024). This quote underscores how strong, unpleasant odors can lead to serious discomfort and even the consideration of relocating, illustrating the emotional weight of negative sensory experiences. Cleanliness emerged as the top priority among informants; as long as cleanliness met guest expectations, a neutral or pleasant scent was considered acceptable. These findings highlight the importance for Airbnb hosts to maintain high hygiene standards and incorporate subtle aromatic enhancements to create a welcoming and comfortable environment for guests.

7.3 Key Findings

The key findings of this study reveal that sensory elements play a crucial role in shaping Airbnb guests' experiences in Bangkok. Visual elements emerged as the dominant aspect influencing guests' decision-making when selecting accommodations, highlighting the importance of appealing visuals in listings. Additionally, both visual and scent elements were

found to have equally contributed to guests' overall satisfaction. A positive sensory experience, encompassing aspects such as aesthetics and pleasant scents, greatly enhanced guests' perceptions and satisfaction levels. In contrast, negative sensory experiences detracted from the overall satisfaction of Airbnb guests.

7.4. Conclusion

The key finding from the analysis conducted aligns with the S-O-R framework, where sensory stimuli play a critical role in shaping guest experience and satisfaction. Particularly, the visual and olfactory elements have a higher influence on guests' internal responses, which lead to behavioral responses. This suggests that maintaining a sensory-pleasing environment with varied sensory elements is important in the Airbnb service settings. The literature supports the findings, highlighting how it is essential for Airbnb hosts to focus on creating a positive sensory experience to enhance their guests' satisfaction in staying at Airbnb in Bangkok.

7.5. Recommendations

Based on the analysis of this study, the researchers developed recommendations for Airbnb hosts to enhance the guest experience in Bangkok. The findings indicate that visual appearance plays a crucial role in a guest's decision to book a specific listing on Airbnb. The following recommendations emphasize how hosts can make their spaces visually appealing to potential guests. This includes providing photos that showcase the attractiveness of the space. A visually appealing environment can be achieved through thoughtful furniture arrangement, modern amenities, and, most importantly, by creating a livable space that offers comfort through careful attention to ambiance, like warm lighting to foster a cozy atmosphere. Cleanliness is another key factor; a clean visual presentation is essential to attract potential guests. While detailed descriptions can enhance the appeal of a listing, the actual visuals must meet the expectations set in the online description.

The second recommendation for Airbnb hosts is to enhance their guests' experience by focusing on sensory elements. The analysis shows that sight is the most crucial aspect of the guest experience. Visual appearance encompasses interior design, mood, and tone, which create a home-like atmosphere that is more appealing to potential guests.

Visual and olfactory are the two most important factors

that should be prioritized to enhance the Airbnb guest experience. In terms of visuals, it consisted of the cleanliness of the room, interior design, lighting, and maintenance. In the meantime, having a neutral scent will convey cleanliness, and a natural scent can enhance the scent if it is selected properly. These are the key main sensory elements that hosts should focus on however, a positive sensory experience involves all of the elements as well, so various elements of sensory must be considered to better enhance the guest experience for Airbnb guests.

7.6. Limitations

The authors acknowledge that this study has certain limitations of research. This study focused on the role of the sensory element in enhancing Airbnb guests' experience in Bangkok, examining the senses that were identified as most relevant to the context. While this provided a valuable insight, there are other senses, such as taste and touch, that were not covered in this research, which can be explored in future studies specifically to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Another important limitation of this research is the lack of diversity in the sample. All respondents in this study were male participants, which may have introduced a gender bias in the findings. As guest preferences and sensory perceptions can vary across genders, future research for gender differentiation would benefit from including a more diverse sample to ensure a broader understanding of Airbnb guest experiences and preferences. Additionally, this study did not focus on a specific type of accommodation provided by Airbnb, which may limit the applicability of findings across different property types. Lastly, the study relied solely on qualitative semi-structured interviews for data collection. While this approach provides insightful findings, incorporating mixed methods such as qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys, or analysis of Airbnb reviews, in future research could enhance the more specific findings that offer a deeper understanding of guest experiences.

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