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ACCOMMODATION NEEDS AND PREFERENCES AMONG INTERNATIONAL MUSLIM STUDENT TRAVELERS

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Abstract:

The Muslim tourist segment is regarded as one of the demanding segments in the tourism industry at the current state. It is understood that Muslim travelers prefer to select tourist destinations that bear Islamic elements thus allowing for activities to be done based on religious norms. This would include facilities for prayers, having Halal food and beverages, are liquor-free, and abide by Islamic dress codes; among others. These elements undoubtedly will provide an enriching experience during their travels. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate Muslim travelers' perception regarding accommodation experiences that Muslim travelers encounter during their stay to realign with Muslim traveller's needs and preferences. As this study is exploratory in nature, a qualitative research design is applied and 14 international Muslim informants who have travelled internationally were interviewed during the data collection process. The findings revealed that Muslim travelers seek accommodation that offers special necessities for Muslim travelers, located in a suitable location, and chooses the accommodation that offers a favourable service experience. This study has supported previous literature on enhancing Muslim customers' experience in terms of accommodation provision worldwide. Furthermore, the findings aid in enhancing the needs and preferences of Muslim travelers during traveling hence supporting the growth of Halal tourism. It is seen that tourist destinations and facilities that can provide the faith-based needs required by Muslim tourists will exceed in the creation of a memorable and meaningful tourist experience.

Keywords:

Accommodation Provision, Halal Tourism, Muslim Travelers, Travelers' Experience

Introduction

Halal tourism refers to products, accommodations, food and beverage, leisure, recreation and social purposes that comply with Islamic teaching. Ryan (2016) purported that Halal tourism involves tourism activities undertaken by Muslims for “recreational, leisure, and social purposes”. According to Oktadiana, Pearce & Chon (2016), Muslim travel trends nowadays is a fast-growing market and the challenge in working with this is to understand the important needs of tourists towards the Halal tourism experience during their travels.

Based on the study by Han, Al-Ansi, Olya and Kim (2019), the Muslim population is composed of about 30% of world population, and based on this, the share of Halal tourism takes up 12% (Han et al., 2019). Based on Crescent Rating (2020), the Muslim travel market is a lucrative growing market segment in the global travel industry. By 2026, the Halal sector’s contribution to the global economy is expected to increase by 35% which is an estimated US\$300 billion in comparison with US\$220 billion in 2020. By that time, Muslim travelers globally are forecasted to grow to 230 million visitors, to represent around 10% of tourist world-wide figures (Crescent Rating, 2020).

Based on its popularity among Muslim Travelers, Malaysia is one of the top preferred destinations by these travelers as there is an abundance of Muslim friendly facilities and services offered. Further, Malaysia offers rich Islamic traditions and values in its tourism products and services (Butler, Khoo-Lattimore, & Mura, 2014). Positioned as a prominent and attractive destination in Asia, Muslim tourists are looking for a destination that consists of the majority Muslim community (Henderson, 2010) that can offer them a Halal-friendly tourism environment. Wingett and Turnbull (2017) stated that a Halal holiday is considered as one that allows Muslim tourists to go on a holiday while remaining true to their religion.

Based on the above statements, it can be seen that Muslim travelers prefer to choose a tourism destination whereby Islamic attributes are highly available, which allow for tourism activities that fall within their religious norms and practices, which undoubtedly will provide an enriching experience during their travels. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate Muslim travelers’ perception regarding accommodation experience that Muslim travelers encounter during their stay to realign with Muslim traveller’s need and preferences.

Literature Review

Halal Accommodation

The hospitality industry comprises of accommodation, food and beverages, gaming and entertainment, event management and recreational activities. Due to the rising numbers of Muslim travelers worldwide, the demand for Islamic product and services are amounting as well. The tourism industry has been positively affected by the increasing number of Islamic travelers globally and positive tourism and hospitality trends. Malaysia, for instance, has been leading the way in Halal tourism and has been successful in trying to attract Muslim tourists from all over the world (Samori & Sabtu, 2014). The destinations that travelers choose to travel to also play an important role and has been the subject of much discussion in the literature. Thus, the potential growth in this emerging sector has been recognized in the industry, with airlines, hotels and other tourism and hospitality providers responding to the demand for a greater range of Halal tourism products (Mohsin, Ramli & Alkhulayfi, 2016).

In addition, the demand for Muslim friendly facilities and services has also been affected. While the term Halal is mostly associated with food and eateries, there is a growing trend for hotels to comply with the Islamic requirements and to become Muslim friendly (Kuan-Huei Lee & Amelia, 2019). According to Vargas-Sánchez and Moral-Moral (2018), food and accommodation are the two main important elements for Muslim travelers while travelling. Alternative accommodation is also gaining significance in the hospitality industry, and it is changing the way Muslim travelers select their accommodation today (Cusack, 2018).

Due to the increasing demand and supply of Muslim-friendly accommodation, more online booking platforms are catering to the Muslim market, such as HalalBooking.com which is one of the leading independent sites that focuses on Halal travel (Battour & Ismail, 2016). Moreover, the awareness to select Halal options during travelling among Muslim travelers have increased to suit their needs (Battour & Ismail, 2014). Thus, to cater to this need, some non-Muslim destinations such as Japan, Philippines, and Brazil offered Muslim friendly options to cater to Muslim travelers' needs and wants (TTG Asia, 2014).

According to Amadeus (2016), Muslim travelers who travel as a family expressed their preference for apartments or chain hotels that allowed them more freedom. Main-stream hotels currently fail to meet the basic prayer and dining needs of Muslim holidaymakers, forcing them to go out of their cultural comfort zone and is also challenging for female Muslim to identify a hotel that caters to their specific needs.

Muslim Tourist Experience

Halal tourism has gained momentum in addition to being part of the important segment of international hospitality and tourism. Moreover, it is witnessed that Muslim tourists are rising faster than the global tourist rate. Therefore, this can be taken as an opportunity to cater a tourism experience for Muslim travelers and allow them to perform religious duties while traveling. Muslim friendly tourism facilities and services include halal accommodation, halal transportation, halal eateries, halal tour packages and halal financing.

According to a research conducted by Amadeus (2016), 72% of Muslims seek comfort when travelling and visit known destinations without compromising "family-friendly" activities. Later, Battour et al. (2017), Yeo, Mohamad, and Muda (2016), and Han et al. (2019) are also in agreement with the motion made by Amadeus (2016). As stated by Vargas-Sánchez & Moral-Moral (2018), food and accommodation are the two most important elements that concern Muslim travelers during travelling, therefore accommodation and the provision of food and beverage facilities at their destination contributes significantly towards the satisfaction of Muslim travelers.

Halbrook (2006) stated that the value tourists' attach to their experience differs according to their expectations, the context, and the resources available to them. This is in line with this concept, whereby Muslim consumers are generally a distinctive group with special religious requirements and culture (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Battour, Ismail, Battor & Awais, 2014). Further, Muslim millennial travelers are also in the rise and they are distinct from the previous generations and other millennial travelers, with a unique set of values, needs, expectations and experiences in their travel consumptions and expenditure pattern ship (Halal Trip, 2017).

According to the Holy book of the Quran, Muslims are allowed to travel to learn and seek new knowledge, as well as to see God's creations and enjoy the beauty of the world (El-Gohary, 2016). Hence, the motives behind travel undertaken by Muslims may not necessarily be spiritual as a whole, nonetheless they are expected to behave in a decent manner in line with the Holy book of the Quran and the Sunnah as well as in accordance with actions and teachings of the Prophet Mohammad (Henderson, 2016). When Muslim travelers travel, they consider aspects such as the availability of halal foods, conservative entertainment, and provision of segregated facilities between men and women as prime factors (Mohsin et al., 2016).

Research Methodology

This study applies qualitative method to answer its research objectives. The target population of this study were international Muslim travelers. These international Muslim travelers were the international students of Universiti Utara Malaysia, and the informants were chosen to be interviewed based on their travel experience on traveling whether within or outside of their countries. Prior to the interview, the researcher has given the informants insight regarding this study and allowed the informants to explore their understanding of key issues relating to the Muslim travel experience.

As previously highlighted, purposive sampling was applied as this study is exploratory in nature. Purposive sampling is vastly applied in qualitative research for the identification and assortment of information-rich cases to make the most use out of the limited resources. Cresswell and Plano Clark (2011) also stated purposive sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable or experienced with a phenomenon of interests. This is according to Galvin (2015) who purported those 14 informants would be sufficient for estimating the number of interviews needed to find any themes, assuming a random sample.

Informants were approached personally, and the researcher will explain in detail the purpose of the interview regarding their experience traveling and what is expected from the informants. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and categorized based on the research aims. The researcher will analyze the responses from the informants using thematic analysis.

The questions that will be interviewed consists of 3 main parts, which is Part A, Part B, and Part C. Part A asks about the demographic characteristic of the informants. Part B inquires the informants' comments towards their traveling experience and Part C asks about Muslim traveller's needs and preferences towards accommodation. This paper will specifically focus on the findings for Part A and C. The analysis will start with the discussion on the informants' demographic profiles.

Demographic Profile of Informants

The informants' profile is a list of the informants' code, gender, religion, education level, the country that they have visited, and their country of origin. Fourteen informants were selected and have agreed to be the interviewed. Most of the informants are Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) international students and most of the informants have an experience of traveling to a Muslim country, besides Malaysia and are familiar and aware of the existence of Halal tourism.

Table 1: Informant's Profile

Informants	Gender	Religion	Education Level	Country of Origin	The country that has been visited / travel
I1	F	Muslim	Degree	Singapore	Amsterdam
I2	F	Muslim	Degree	Jordan	Bangkok, Thailand, and Korea
I3	M	Muslim	Ph.D	Syria	Turkey, UEA, Syria, the United States, and Malaysia
I4	M	Muslim	Master	Indonesia	Malaysia and Vietnam
I5	M	Muslim	Ph.D	Jordan	Saudia Arabia and Malaysia
I6	M	Muslim	Master	Syria	Iraq and Malaysia
I7	M	Muslim	Ph.D	Jordan	Singapore, Turkey, and Malaysia
I8	M	Muslim	Degree	Indonesia	Hat Yai, Thailand, China and Malaysia
I9	F	Muslim	Degree	Indonesia	Singapore and Bali Indonesia
I10	M	Muslim	Master	Jordan	Turkey and Malaysia
I11	M	Muslim	Master	Jordan	Thailand, Italy, and Malaysia
I12	F	Muslim	Degree	Indonesia	Tokyo, Japan, and Singapore
I13	F	Muslim	Degree	Indonesia	Bali, Indonesia, and the United Kingdom
I14	M	Muslim	Degree	Yamen	The United States, UAE, and Malaysia

Based on Table 1, fourteen informants have been interviewed. All of the informants are international students from UUM. Most of the informants interviewed are male, whereby there were nine male informants, and the rest were female informants. Most of the informants are from the Middle East, with five informants from Jordan, two from Syria, and one from Yamen. Other international informants were from the Southeast Asian region, with five of the informants from Indonesia and one from Singapore. All informants are Muslims. Apart from that, all the informants have a different educational background ranging from Degree holders, Master's degrees, and Ph.D. holders.

Hence, most of the informants have experienced Halal tourism from their travel experience. Lastly, based on the table, it is observed that there are more male informants as compared to female informants and the male informants shared more regarding their traveling experience compared to female informants in this interview session. Seven out of the 14 informants were degree students, making the majority of the informant's degree students whilst four students are Master students and three are Ph.D. students.

Findings and Analysis

Accommodation Needs and Preferences of Muslim Travelers

This section will highlight the emerging themes relating to the needs and preferences of Muslim travelers whilst staying in Muslim friendly accommodations during their travels. The aspects encountered are divided into three themes which are the special necessity for Muslim travelers, suitable location and favorable service experience.

Special Necessity for Muslim Travelers

The most important aspect to consider when a Muslim traveler chooses their accommodation during traveling relates to the provision of the special necessity for Muslim travelers. Seven out of 14 informants have their own opinion regarding the special necessities provided for Muslim travelers at the accommodation they stayed during their travel. According to I3,

"Besides the usual standard accommodation criteria that everyone likes to have during traveling such as having a cozy and comfortable staying, I would prefer to have the basic necessities in the hotel I stay. Among the countries that I am familiar with {Turkey, UAE, Syria, Malaysia} I would say that all of them have this feature. When I traveled around Malaysia and UAE, I have noticed most places provides special treatment for Muslim guests such as providing prayer mat, Quran, and a visible sign for Qibla. Also, finding suitable accommodation for Muslim families is an essential part in the trip preparation. For instance, the location itself, how is it close to the mosque? Or Halal activity? And how is it far from a Non-Halal activity and most importantly the basic necessity provided from the accommodation?"

I4 also has the same opinion as I3 and stated that,

"I have traveled to Malaysia and overall, of the accommodation here practice the Halal Friendly accommodation. Each room is well marked with Qibla sign, provide prayer mat and Quran which are essential for Muslim travelers." (R4)

This is also supported by I6, who stated that,

"I have traveled to Iraq it gave me a positive experience during my stay at the accommodation chosen as it was comfortable, a room marked with the Qibla direction and most importantly the hotel doesn't allow non-Halal activities such as alcohol, discotheques, and gambling. Since I am a Muslim these aspect in choosing my accommodation during my travel is very important." (I6)

Based on the response from I6, staying in a hotel that strictly prohibits non-Halal activities inside the hotel premise is a bonus point for Muslim travelers that want to avoid any of uncomfortable situations. Not only that but choosing an accommodation that abides Syariah compliance is of utmost importance for Muslim travelers so that they can travel and rest without any worries regarding the accommodation they stay at and enjoy a stress-free vacation.

I8 that stated

"I have been to Hat Yai, Thailand and I experience the friendly Halal Tourism they provided there. It is easy to find a Muslim friendly hotel there and the owner itself is Muslim and that makes me feel secure because I know a Muslim friendly hotel at least provide their guest a prayer mat, the direction of Qibla and Quran in the room and I can perform my Solat peacefully".

Another opinion from I9 stated that *"I have been to Singapore and I experienced a positive vibe during my travel there and also the accommodation I stayed. I am not that particular about choosing the perfect Muslim friendly hotel but as long as the hotel room has a Qibla direction and a prayer mat it is enough for me."*

While I12 has experienced a similar situation during traveling to a Non-Muslim country. She stated that,

"I have been to Tokyo, Japan, and an experienced great amount of memories with its hospitality for Muslim travelers to the Country. The staff treats us with their Muslim guests with attentive care. To my surprise, they have trained their staff to understand the Muslim necessities by providing a Halal-friendly menu in their hotel restaurant and also use the praying mat in our room for rent." (I12)

Based on I12 responses, developed countries like Japan, have also began to acknowledge Muslim travelers by beginning to provide basic Muslim necessities and also Halal-friendly menus. There is acknowledgment shown towards Muslim travelers by accommodation owners in which they train their staff to understand Muslim travelers and basic Halal tourism concepts so that they can be apply their knowledge into their accommodation services.

Suitable Location

One of the faith-based necessity in choosing an accommodation for a Muslim traveler is the location. A Muslim traveler may choose an accommodation that is far from disturbing, Non-Halal activities such as bars and night clubs and closer to locations that provide Muslim friendly facilities and services. According to I5, *"When I was in Saudi Arabia to perform Umrah, it was an amazing experience. About the accommodation, it was very good because my apartment was very close to the Haram Ka'abah. The hotel was very comfortable, you can sleep deeply, and you can relax after performing Umrah."*

Meanwhile I10 stated that,

"Last year I have traveled to Turkey, I must make sure to choose the most strategic location of my accommodation especially traveling with my family. I will make sure the location of my accommodation place is easy to find a mosque for Solat if we are out, surrounded by Halal restaurant and far from the non-Halal activities such as a pub or bar." (I10)

Based on I10 responses, suitable accommodation and family-friendly accommodations are important especially if the travelers are traveling in groups or with families. The accommodation provided not only has to be Halal and Muslim friendly, but also suitable for a large group of people. Other than that, the location of the accommodation must also be located in a strategic, Muslim friendly area. I2 also stated that *"During my travel to Bangkok, Thailand,*

the lack of Muslim friendly services environment is quite hard and one of the example lack of prayer facilities. We thought that the location of our hotel was far from non-Halal activities. I guess that is our mistake that we did not investigate deeper when choosing a Muslim friendly accommodation. We have learned our lesson on what we needed to take note of choosing a Muslim friendly accommodation next time.". Traveling to a Non-Muslim country can be quite challenging especially in finding an accommodation that has Halal and Muslim friendly services and facilities available. For a Muslim traveler that is not used to the unavailability of Halal and Muslim friendly services and facilities, this can be an uncomfortable experience.

Favorable Service Experience

A service is an essential part of an accommodation or hotel. The services provided will determine the guest's rating given to the accommodation or hotel based on the service experience they received from the accommodation staff. Services are also a part of the guest's experience, whether it was a positive experience or a negative experience. I13 stated that,

"I have traveled to Bali, Indonesia last time. I will choose a Muslim Friendly hotel. But from my previous experience, not all Muslim Friendly hotels have good service experience. This time the hotel I choose the staff is very welcoming, friendly, and respect their guests." (I13)

Based on I13 responses, a great and welcoming service creates a positive experience for the guests. When guests have experienced excellent service from the hotel, the guests tend to re-visit or become 'comeback guests' at the hotel. Nonetheless, I11 has a different perspective and stated that:

"During my travel to Kuala Lumpur Malaysia, I have stayed in a 4-star hotel which I expected the service to be excellent but turns out it was a disappointment. They miss looked my reservation then I have to wait for the next room available and lucky there was a room available, but it is a small room and there is not enough space to move around inside the room since I brought my wife and kids with me. And when I requested for extra amenities, I have to wait another 1 hour just for the amenities. Lucky there was a prayer room available since it is a bit hard to perform Solat with my kids running around inside my room". Even a Muslim friendly hotel needs to practice excellent service skills and apply them when entertaining the guests. Making the guests feel welcome and comfortable should be the main priorities of the accommodation.

I1 stated that *"I have traveled to Amsterdam before to visit my brother. The hotel we choose nearby the airport surprisingly they are one of the Halal hotels and provides Halal and Vegan for breakfast for their guests. The price per room also affordable so it is ideal for Muslim backpackers or for those who are tight on a budget like me. The room itself was comfortable and exceed my expectation"*. When accommodation that provides a Muslim friendly service and exceeds the Muslim traveler's expectation, it will automatically bring a positive experience from the guests. However 17 stated that,

"I have traveled to Singapore before and once I reach the hotel as if the staff does not welcome me inside their hotel and I have to wait for 2 hours before getting a check in to my room. No apologies because they kept me waiting and warm hospitality gestures and when I asked something the staff does not

answer it properly. Once I reach my room good things are there in the direction of the Qibla but not prayer mat provided. What frustrated me the most is the bill that I have to pay but the service I receive there is not worth paying at all.”
(I7)

Based on the I7 responses, even if a hotel is Muslim friendly, but the service of the hotel provided to the customer is poor and the price range per night is quite expensive, it will also affect the guest's perceptions towards the hotel and also leads to a negative experience for the guests.

A Halal or Muslim friendly hotel should also practice and train their staff to adapt excellent service skills that should be applied when entertaining their guests. This kind of situation will affect the guest's experience towards the accommodation, either it being a positive or a negative experience during their stay.

Figure 1 illustrates the three themes depicting the accommodation needs and wants for Muslim travelers during travels.

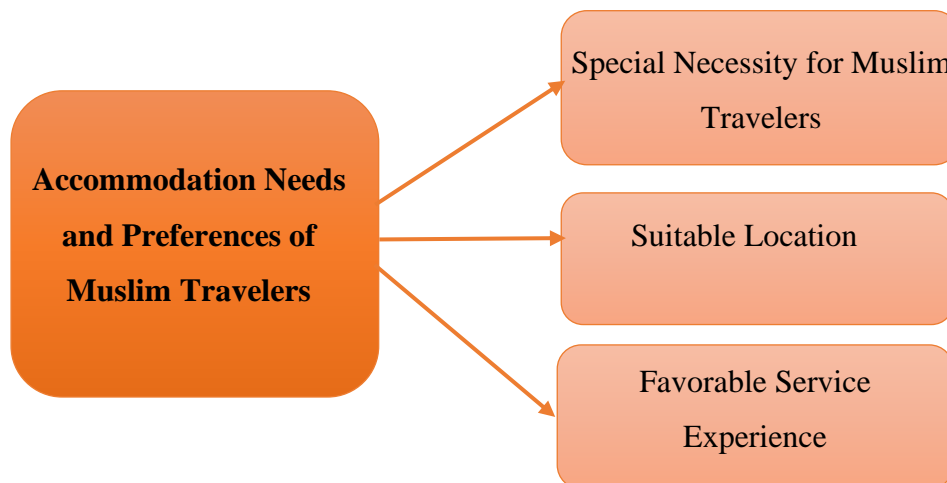


Figure 1: Accommodation Needs and Preferences of Muslim Student Travelers

Discussion and Conclusion

Three themes emerged based on the interviews done by the fourteen informants during traveling relating to accommodation provision which are identified as providing the special necessity for Muslim travelers, suitable location and favorable service experience.

The first theme is regarding the special necessity for Muslim travelers. Most of the informants have encountered a positive experience relating to their accommodation because their accommodation provided basic or special necessities for Muslim travelers such as the Qibla direction, prayer mat, and Quran. Battour (2018) has listed the criteria of Muslim friendly accommodation and services that is it must include a copy of the Qur'an, Qibla direction, prayer mat, prayer timetable, and others. This finding also supports the notions made by Kuan-Huei Lee & Amelia (2019) which specify the elements that Muslim travelers will look into when choosing any accommodation.

The second theme is regarding the suitable location of the accommodation chosen by the informants. One of the faith-based necessity in choosing an accommodation for a Muslim traveler is the location. A Muslim traveler may choose an accommodation that is far from any Non-Halal activities such as bars and night clubs and near to a location that provides Muslim friendly facilities and services. The accommodation chosen is not only to avoid non-Halal activities but also to accommodate the customer with a strategic area where they can visit and enjoy Muslim friendly features available in the location. As Zamani-Farahani and Henderson (2010) stated that Islamic hospitality services are referring to the characteristic of Islamic norms and values being practiced at the destination and some practices to Halal tourism have been observed and applied in some destinations to target Muslim tourists.

The final theme is about favorable service experience by the Muslim travelers. By taking into consideration the experiences that Muslim travelers encounter relating to the accommodation provision during their stay, it could fulfill most of the aspects that have been experienced by Muslim travelers such as providing an affordable price, establishing or building a Muslim traveler accommodation in a suitable location that provides Muslim friendly facilities and services, an accommodation that prepares special necessities for Muslim travelers such as 'Qibla' direction and prayer mat and lastly providing accessible hospitality services for Muslim travelers. This supports Battour and Ismail's (2014) notion which stated that awareness among Muslims have increased, and they have opted for Halal options to meet their needs in comparison to conventional options currently offered. This is also in line with Vargas-Sánchez and Moral-Moral (2018) in terms of accommodation experience at the destination contribute significantly to tourist satisfactions.

These few aspects play a huge impact in a Muslim traveler's experiences. It is important to maintain these aspects in sustaining accommodation which comply with Muslim friendly hotel policies as one of the most important factors influencing the success of the Halal tourism industry. This study can help future tourism and hospitality studies, especially towards the future of Halal tourism sustainability and also Muslim travelers. This study could help future researchers explore more regarding Halal tourism's most common provisions which are accommodation, food, and beverage and also the destination attraction provision for Muslim travelers.

The results of this study with the assistance of the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) to improve and provide better advancement towards Halal tourism that can meet the customer's demands especially Muslim travelers during their travel which could help to improve the chances of increasing more market share if they can fulfill the demands and preferences of the travelers.

As Halal travel trend continues to grow, the proliferation of new and existing Muslim-friendly accommodation offering is also increasing. Based on Cusack (2018), alternative accommodation is also gaining significance in the hospitality industry, and it is changing the way Muslim travelers select their accommodation today. Lastly, Shafaei and Mohamed (2015) stated that it is important to understand Muslim tourist needs and behavior in order to create a suitable product of the Halal tourism market. Hence, it is suggested that collecting more data from Muslim travelers relating to their thoughts and opinion on improving the Halal tourism system in the future by providing a clear comprehension of the Halal tourism sustainability concept towards the improvement of accommodation provision.

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