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## THE PERCEPTION OF UNETHICAL ISSUES IN SELECTED THAILAND TOURIST AREAS: MEASURING THE ATTITUDES OF FOREIGN TOURISM STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** The principal aim of the paper was to examine what kind of experience international exchange students, as future professionals in tourism industry, gained during their study at the Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism in Phuket, Thailand. Thus, the paper deals with how often they encountered the unethical issues in the tourism industry, and how these issues affect their perception of the image of Thailand as a tourist destination. The paper also explores how formal education in Tourism ethics affects the perception of Thailand tourism unethical practices, and as such, it is one of the first studies in this field. In addition, the paper intends to show if there is a relationship between formal education in Ethics in tourism and the respondents' experience and perception of unethical issues. The results show that these unethical issues have the significant and very strong influence on tourism perception of Thailand with a special emphasis on exploitation of women and children in sex tourism. Also, the study indicates that respondents who have a formal education in Ethics were more aware and had a clearer picture of the negative effect of these unethical issues on the image of Thailand as a destination.

**Keywords:** formal ethical education, tourism, unethical issues, tourism students, Thailand

### Introduction

Tourism often has the strongest voice in the country's communication with the world, and may eventually overpower the economic, political, industrial, and even cultural messages (Anholt, 2009). A similar situation is in Thailand, where tourism represents the leading industry while the country has a strong image of a sex tourism destination (Persaud & Chin, 2016). Although the perception of destination image has very strong influence on future behavior, tourists' experiences at a destination affect the formation of that perception. In that aspect, tourism experience is a critical concept in tourism marketing and management literature (e.g. Cohen, 1979; Li, 2000; Beerli & Martin, 2004;

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Uriely, 2005; Alegre & Garau, 2010; Caton, 2012; Kim, Hallab, & Kim, 2012; Mkono, Markwell, & Wilson, 2013; Kim, 2014; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Decrop, 2017; Elliot & Markos, 2017; Rickly & McCabe, 2017). Kim (2014, p. 34) said that “tourists’ experiences at a destination are a more powerful driver of future behavior because these experiences determine customer satisfaction and memorable experiences”.

According to the Tourist Authority of Thailand, in 2016, Thailand was visited by 32,588,303 ([www.tourism.go.th](http://www.tourism.go.th)), which ranked it among the most visited countries in Southeast Asia. In spite of this fact, in tourism literature there are very few papers dealing with the brand and image of Thailand, as it is the case with competing destinations (Bali, Singapore etc.). Entering the term “destination image of Thailand” in the Internet search engine *Google*, the first results are usually the photographs of beautiful white beaches and blue sea, but also photos of the nightlife in Thailand related to sex tourism, while when searching for the term “national brand of Thailand”, as results, slogans of National Tourist Organization of Thailand are often found. It is also interesting to mention that the majority of tourism-related web sites such as, for instance, *Tripadvisor* mention Thailand as a leading sex tourism destination. Research done by Spasojević (2013) examined the general attitudes of tourists regarding Thailand as a tourist destination. When being asked to express their opinion on the assertion that Thailand “has the image of a sex tourism destination” the significant number of respondents (31%) thought it is completely accurate. So, apart from white beaches and blue sea, Thailand is reputed to be a destination with the strong image of sex tourism as well as a destination which is characterized by many unethical examples in the tourism industry, which specifically refers to the growing social problems such as exploitation of women and children in sex tourism, exploitation of children for work, as well as animal abuse for tourism purposes. It is believed that these issues have become a large threat to the future image of Thailand attracting even the global attention.

About five to ten years ago we could rarely hear the words ethics and tourism together, while ten years ago researchers didn’t study the role of ethics in any form of business practice (Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013). However, nowadays, many authors mention “ethical deficit” in tourism industry (Moufakkir & Burns, 2012). Lovelock & Lovelock (2013) argued that the reason for this can be the extensive development of tourism industry which brought about negative social, economic and environmental impacts. The implementation of ethical principles could reduce these negative impacts and make tourism more beneficial. This is why formal ethical education in tourism is of paramount importance. However, as it was mentioned, development of tourism industries is often followed by

unethical practice. According to Fleckenstein & Huebsch (1999), tourism has not been perceived as a real industry for a long time and it has gained a reputation of having lax ethical standard. To improve its situation in the future, it is important to raise awareness of the importance of Ethics in tourism as well as to increase responsibility of all subjects providing tourism services, but also their education on this important issue. Pattullo (2006, p. 1) claimed that real ethical tourism means “happy hosts as well as happy tourists”. It seemed that a standardized code of ethics for the tourism industry could be a solution. In 1999 such a code has been implemented by the UN, the “Global Code of Ethics for Tourism”. However, this ethical code is often neglected, and unethical issues are still a common practice in developed tourism destinations. These unethical issues are sometimes real society problems, as in case of Thailand (Bishop & Robinson, 1998; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Cohen, 2013; Bone & Bone, 2015), referring to the various forms of human and ethical exploitation such as exploitation of women and children in sex tourism, exploitation of children for work as well as animal abuse. Facts about Thailand indicate that around 30,000 sex workers are active in Bangkok, of whom 7000/10,000 are females who work specifically in the tourism sector Phuket, Pattaya, Koh Samui, and Chiang Mai are also well-frequented by sex tourists. Overall, a large, diverse, inexpensive, and accessible commercial sex market exists in Thailand (Van Kerkwijk, 1992; Leheny, 1995; Pettman, 1997; Zhiqiang, 2012). Moreover, child labor issues were explicitly addressed two decades ago in a World Bank report on Thailand. The report noted the rapid decline in child labor in Thailand (World Bank, 1996). In terms of unethical issues in Thailand’s tourism industry, animal abuse is another problem (Tipprasert, 2002; Cohen, 2013). The leading problems are animal shows displaying wild animals in unnatural settings such as zoos, circuses and theme parks which became very popular among tourists worldwide. Some of these tourists’ shows are under suspicion for animals’ mistreatment and abuse: elephants used for shows (circus), trekking, elephant nursery, elephant painting, pulling carts or tigers that are mistreated in Tiger temple in Bangkok. One of the solutions for this kind of problem could be an adequate Ethical education of future tourism professionals. Tourism ethics can point out what is good/bad or right/wrong in tourism (Fennell, 2006), while education in tourism ethics should provide tourism students with ability to distinguish between the two. Many authors (Macbeth, 2005; Fennell, 2006; Caton, 2012; Fennell, 2014; Cotterell, Arcodia, & Ferreira, 2015) consider that ethics is important in practice, but also in tourism education. Cotterell et al. (2015) claimed that in preparing future tourism professional, universities need to design curriculum that develop students' skills in critical thinking including ethics and sustainability in tourism industry. Their results unfortunately indicate that students often graduate without these skills. Thus, in the light of current study, the authors expect that tourism

students with formal ethical education will be more able to perceive the unethical issues in tourism industry, realize how negatively it can influence the country's image and recognize the importance of education in ethics in dealing with unethical issues in tourism industry.

Using quantitative research methodology, the authors examined what kind of experience international exchange students, as future professionals in tourism industry, gained during their study at the Faculty of hospitality and tourism in Phuket, Thailand. Foreign tourism students were also selected to participate in this study because we wanted to gain insight into relatively unbiased perception of unethical issues in Thailand tourism. Local tourism students were brought up in this culture, and unethical practices are part of their everyday life, their perception could be subjective and completely different compared to foreign visitors. Thus, the paper deals with how often foreign tourism students encountered the unethical issues in the tourism industry and how these issues affect their perception of the image of Thailand as a tourist destination. The paper also explores the impact of the formal education in ethics on the perception of unethical tourism practices in Thailand. In addition, the paper intends to show if there is an impact of former education in ethics in tourism on the opinion of these students. As fast-growing tourism industries often develop neglecting the basic code of ethics, the paper intends to highlight the importance of the ethical principles in tourism developed countries, as well as formal ethical education of tourism employees. Findings of this study could raise awareness of Thailand tourism stakeholders about the fact that their common tourism practices also encompass certain behaviors that are perceived as unethical by the members of different cultures. This could be beneficial in their future creation of tourism offer.

## **Methodology**

### *Sample*

The sample for this study consists of 170 respondents representing exchange students who attended the Faculty for tourism and hospitality at Prince of Songkla University in Phuket (Thailand) in the period from 2011 to 2013. It is important to mention that our sample size included a large part of population of exchange students at the mentioned faculty, during the mentioned period (170 out of 200 exchange students). Moreover, the essential criteria for choosing our sample was the thing that our respondents' field of education is tourism, thus we consider their attitude and opinion relevant for this study. We also consider that their opinion is competitive enough as they spent a whole semester in Phuket,

where they had an opportunity to familiarize themselves with unethical issues in tourism that they encountered during their stay. The international tourism students who attended the above-mentioned faculty in Phuket were chosen to participate in this research as our intention was to analyze attitudes of future tourism professionals and their perception of unethical issues in Thailand. Moreover, the authors intended to explore if there is a difference in experience and perception of these issues between those students who had formal ethical education in their country of origin (61.76% of the sample) and those who didn't. Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents' gender, age and country of residence. There was a higher number of female respondents, and the average age of the entire sample was 22.12 years (Std.=.789).

Table 1. Sample characteristics (N=170)

Gender	
Male	47.06%
Female	52.94%
Age	
18-21	20.59%
22-25	70.59%
26-28	8.82%
Country of residence	
Finland	34.11%
Sweden	6.47%
Estonia	4.71%
Netherlands	2.36%
Norway	1.18%
Denmark	1.18%
Germany	15.88%
Austria	19.14%
Serbia	1.18%
Indonesia	4.7%
China	2.94%
South Korea	4.7%
USA	2.35%

### *Instruments*

The questionnaire consists of three parts. The first part involves items related to the socio-demographic profile of the respondents (gender, age and residence) (Table 1), as well as general information whether this is their first visit to Thailand (yes/no question) and what destinations they have visited during their stay in Thailand (open question). The second part of the research was dedicated to unethical issues referring to child exploitation for work and child and women exploitation through sex tourism. Moreover, this part of the questionnaire also

includes questions related to animal abuse in tourism such as mistreatment of elephants, tigers and other animals (bad living conditions, lack of food and water, isolation) as well as the bad treatment of animals in animal shows, circuses, animals' performances, etc. The questions were generated based on the examples of unethical issues encountered in current literature on this topic, including the authors' personal experience during the study visit in Thailand. Firstly, respondents were asked to express their opinion on a 5-point Likert scale (1 — never, 2 — rarely, 3 — sometimes, 4 — usually, 5 — often) regarding how often they had an opportunity to see or hear about these unethical issues during their stay in Thailand. After that, respondents were asked to give their opinion about how much these unethical issues influence the negative image of Thailand. Again 5-point Likert scale was used to measure their answers (1 — there is no influence, 2 — small influence, 3 — I don't know, 4 — significant influence, 5 — very strong influence). Finally, the third part of the questionnaire included estimation of importance of Ethics in employees' education (1 — totally unimportant, 2 — unimportant, 3 — I am not familiar with it, 4 — quite important, 5 — very important). This part also includes questions related to respondents' opportunity to follow a course of Ethics at their home University, as well as at Prince of Songkla University in Phuket during their stay in Thailand. Both questions were in form of yes/no questions. Also, this part concerned respondents' estimation of the efficiency of TAT in prevention of unethical issues in tourism of Thailand on a 5-point Likert scale (1 — totally inefficient, 2 — inefficient, 3 — I am not familiar with it, 4 — quite efficient, 5 — efficient).

### *Procedure*

The research was carried out from February until April 2013. It was conducted by using the online survey (Google Docs) in order to include students who have finished the exchange program at the Faculty of hospitality and tourism in Phuket during the period of 2011 to 2013. From the total number of 200 students who have completed the exchange program at this faculty in this period, 170 of them responded to the survey. The sampling procedure was convenient, including those exchange students willing to participate (even though all exchange students were contacted). All questions were marked as obligatory so that respondents could not return an incomplete questionnaire. The respondents were informed of the general purpose of the study and that participation is voluntary and anonymous. In order to reach the target sample, the Facebook groups such as "Asia exchange", "Phuket study abroad" and "Iac Psu Phuket" were used to share the online survey.

### *Data analysis*

The data were analyzed using statistical software SPSS 17. The following statistical analyses were used: frequency analysis, independent sample t-test, Pearson correlation test and MANOVA.

### **Results**

Regarding some general information about respondents' visit to Thailand, the research showed that 87.64% of the respondents visited Thailand for the first time. About 13.52% visited at least two destinations in Thailand, while 78.82% visited three or more destinations. From the total of 21 destinations in Thailand, visited by the respondents, the top five visited by most of them were Phuket (100%), Bangkok (93.52%), Krabi (60%), Phi-Phi Islands (50%) and Koh Samui (31.17%). Given the fact that more than 2/3 of respondents visited three or more destinations during their stay in Thailand, it can be concluded that the results of this research are not limited only to Phuket, but they include Thailand as a country, which makes this research more significant.

#### *Students' experience of unethical issues in Thailand*

In terms of frequency of encountering unethical issues in tourism of Thailand (Table 2), most of the respondents stated that they usually and often have encountered these unethical issues while very small percentage have never encountered them (below 9% for all four unethical issues). Respondents have most frequently experienced mistreatment of animals then exploitation of children for work and lastly exploitation of women and children in sex tourism.

Table 2. The frequency of encountering unethical issues in tourism in Thailand

Unethical issues	Average answers	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Usually (4)	Often (5)
Exploitation of children for work	3.37	5.88%	20.58%	19.43%	26.47%	27.64%
Exploitation of women and children in sex tourism	3.13	8.23%	22.94%	21.17%	25.29%	22.35%
Mistreatment of animals — unacceptable living conditions	3.53	8.82%	15.29%	19.41%	26.47%	30%
Mistreatment of animals through animal shows	3.73	3.52%	17.05%	15.88%	29.41%	34.11%

Furthermore, when analyzing respondents' opinion on how these unethical issues influence the negative image of Thailand (Table 3), the majority of respondents answered that they think that they have significant and very strong

influence, while again, very few respondents have answered that they think that there is no influence (below 5%). They believe that exploitation of women and children in sex tourism has the strongest impact on creation of negative image of Thailand, then exploitation of children for work and lastly mistreatment of animal.

Table 3. Respondents' opinion on how unethical issues influence the negative image of Thailand

Unethical issues	Average answers	No influence (1)	Small influence (2)	I don't know (3)	Significant influence (4)	Very strong influence (5)
Exploitation of children for work	3.91	1.76%	12.94%	14.7%	33.52%	37.05%
Exploitation of women and children in sex tourism	4.01	2.35%	7.05%	16.48%	31.76%	41.76%
Mistreatment of animals — unacceptable living conditions	3.78	4.7%	12.35%	15.88%	34.11%	32.94%
Mistreatment of animals through animal shows	3.74	2.94%	20%	14.17%	31.76%	31.11%

#### *T-test results*

Also, research intended to determine whether there are differences on these continuous scale scores with respect to gender. For this purpose, the independent sample t-test was conducted. The results showed that there was no statistically significant difference determined in the scores of males and females regarding any item ( $p > 0.05$ ). Moreover, the results of the second t-test showed a statistically significant difference in the answers on continuous scale scores (how much do these unethical examples in tourism influence the negative image of Thailand?) of those who had formal education in Ethics, and those who didn't. The analysis has been done for all four unethical issues separately.

The results show ( $t(172) = 3.474, p < 0.01$ ) that students who attended the course of Ethics think that the exploitation of children for work has a stronger influence on the negative image of Thailand ( $M = 4.18, SD = .903$ ) in comparison with those who didn't follow this course ( $M = 3.09, SD = .77$ ). Regarding the second dependent variable there is a statistically significant difference ( $t(172) = 2.260, p < 0.05$ ) between the first group ( $M = 4.1, SD = 1.082$ ) and the second group ( $M = 3.39, SD = 1.476$ ) meaning that students who followed the course of Ethics also consider that the exploitation of children and women through sex tourism has a stronger influence on the negative image of Thailand than those who didn't attend the course of Ethics. The t-test results also showed that respondents who followed the course of Ethics ( $M = 3.93, SD = 1.141$ ) and those who didn't ( $M = 3.16, SD = 1.344$ ) are different on dependent



variable — Bad treatment of animals (through animal shows, circuses, animal performance) ( $t(172) = 2.588, df = 69, p = 0.01$ ). Thus, respondents who have formal education in Ethics believe that unethical abuse of animals has strong influence on the negative image of Thailand as a tourist destination. It seems that respondents, who had an opportunity to have formal education in Ethics, have developed a stronger code of ethics than respondents who did not have that opportunity. Moreover, their perception of these issues as problems for tourism industry is stronger.

#### *The results of Pearson correlation test*

Most of the used variables correlate significantly (see Table 4). Research indicates that there is a strong positive correlation between frequency of encountering the mentioned unethical issues in tourism of Thailand and students' opinion on how they influence the negative image of Thailand as a destination (expressed by Pearson's coefficient of linear correlation). More precisely, this means that the more often they encountered these negative examples, the more they thought the stronger influence it has on the negative image of Thailand (see Table 4). Moderate negative correlation is determined between how often respondents have heard about or seen the mentioned unethical issues in the tourism of Thailand and their opinion about the efficiency of TAT (Tourism Authority of Thailand) in prevention of these unethical issues. The same is found for their perception of importance of Ethics in the education of employees in Thailand. The research showed that the more often they have encountered these negative issues of unethical practice the more they thought that TAT is inefficient in their prevention and the more importance they gave to formal Ethics education in Thailand.

Table 4. Correlation between all measured variables<sup>#</sup>

	Ethics	Child labor	Sex tourism	Animals - bad living conditions	Animal shows	Child labor - image	Sex tourism - image	Animals - image 1	Animals - image 2
1. Efficiency of TAT in prevention of unethical examples	-0.2*	-.399*	-.292*	-.271*	-.315**	-.472**	-.324**	-.241*	-.235*
2. Importance of ethics in employees'	1	.445**	.313**	0.16**	0.142**	.370**	.278*	.371**	.352**

education									
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Table 4. Correlation between all measured variables

3. Frequency of encountering exploitation of children for work		1	.490**	.346**	.420**	.563**	.402**	.468**	.533**
4. Frequency of encountering exploitation of children and women through sex tourism			1	.688**	.584**	.535**	.702**	.599**	.555**
5. Frequency of encountering mistreatment of animals in terms of bad living conditions				1	.812**	.500**	.561**	.659**	.666**
6. Frequency of encountering bad treatment of animals in various shows					1	.579**	.498**	.654**	.682**
7. Influence of exploitation of children for work on the negative image of Thailand						1	.742**	.625**	.650**
8. Influence of exploitation of children and women through sex tourism on the negative image of Thailand							1	.627**	.535**

Table 4. Correlation between all measured variables

9. Influence of mistreatment of animals (unacceptable living conditions) on the negative image of Thailand								1	.910**
10. Influence of mistreatment of animals (in various shows) on the negative image of Thailand									1

#Column names are shortened names of row names for better overview of the table.

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Finally, Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA test) was conducted in order to investigate if the three chosen independent variables (gender, former ethics education and previous experience with Thailand) interact to influence dependent variables (frequency of encountering unethical examples). The test showed no statistically significant difference between combinations of independent variables in terms of their influence on dependent variables. Due to the absence of statistically significant differences, the results of MANOVA test will not be presented in the paper.

### Discussion and conclusion

The principal aim of this research was to analyze the future tourism professionals' perception of unethical issues in tourism of Thailand related to child exploitation for work, child and women exploitation through sex tourism and animal abuse for tourism purposes. Moreover, the research intended to analyze their opinion on how these unethical issues influence the negative image of Thailand as a tourist destination and does formal Ethical education makes differences in their experience and perception of those issues.

The study shows that the majority of respondents have encountered these unethical issues during their stay in Thailand in comparison with a quite small number of those who have never seen or heard about this. This indicates that both exploitation of children for work, women and children through sex tourism as well as various forms of animal abuse in tourism, have become a real problem for the Thai society which can negatively influence its international image. This was also confirmed in the several previous papers on this topic (Van Kerkwijk, 1992; Leheny, 1995; Cohen, 2009; Zhiqiang, 2012; Cohen, 2013).

Students of tourism generally consider that these unethical issues have significant influence on the negative image of Thailand as a destination. It is important to note that animal abuse as well as exploitation of women and children for sex tourism is often done for tourist satisfaction and profit, which are short term benefits for tourist destinations, while in the long run they can negatively affect the perception of that destination in the world's tourism market. This should be a sign for TAT and the whole country to pay more attention to these issues which should be thwarted on time, before they seriously damage the perception of Thailand as an alluring and exotic tourist destination.

Furthermore, the research indicates that men and women equally encountered and paid attention to these unethical issues and that there was no statistically significant difference in their opinion about their influence on the negative image of Thailand. On the other hand, the results showed that there is a difference between perception of women of different age regarding exploitation of women and children in sex tourism, indicating that they don't have the same perception of this issue. Older women believe more that the exploitation of children and women in sex tourism has a stronger influence on the negative image of Thailand than younger women. This can be explained by the fact that women who are older have a more serious approach to this topic and are more aware of the fact that this is a very serious problem for modern society. These women are finishing their faculty and are of the age that they are thinking about planning family, thus they might be more sensitive to these issues.

The research results also show that respondents who have a formal education in Ethics were more aware and had a clearer picture of the negative effect of these unethical issues on the image of Thailand as a destination than those who didn't have any previous knowledge about that, emphasizing the importance of ethics in the tourism employees' education. The more respondents encountered these unethical examples the more they thought that the TAT is not efficient in their prevention and more importance they gave to ethics in the employees' education. The respondents may consider that education in ethics could change

the situation regarding unethical issues and analyzed types of exploitation in tourism, but some more strict and firm laws on a national level are needed but for its prevention. Also, the more they thought that TAT is not efficient in prevention of these issues, the more importance they give to formal Ethical education.

Unfortunately, it really seems that business ethics is not a priority in the education of tourism employees in Thailand. While ethics as a university course is obligatory on the most of the respondents' universities, this study discipline is not included in the curriculum of the university where those students were on the exchange programme. The research showed that students who had an opportunity to attend a course of ethics at their home universities have developed a stronger ethical value system. We believe that the lack of formal education about ethical principles among tourism employees has led to the growing presence of unethical business practice in Thailand's tourism.

The formal education in Ethics becomes more important than ever, especially today when tourism continues its rapid growth with many consequences for people and animals as well. There is no doubt that tourism is a lucrative industry and an important wheel of economic development, but unfortunately, tourism employees sometimes tend to neglect ethics and lose their empathy for people and animals. Unfortunately, tourists are also those who are willing to experience on vacation something unusual and something they wouldn't do at home as it is against the moral principles of society they live in. When on vacation, far away from their society criticism, they are often ready to participate in unethical tourism practice, such as sex tourism or watching abusive animal shows.

As research results show, one of the practical evidences of neglecting ethics in the employee's education in Thailand is the fact that students didn't have an opportunity to choose this subject during their exchange program. Future tourism employees should be aware of the importance of ethics in tourism as well as the protection of basic human but also animal rights and prevention of any form of human and animal exploitation in tourism purposes. This should be a basis for the balanced tourism development of any tourist destination which intends to build the positive image at the world's tourism market. However, we should note that not only formal education in ethics affects our attitude towards human and animal exploitation in tourism. Certainly, our cultural background, society we live in, religion, as well as our own principles and conscience shape our perception of unethical practice, which should be the subject of some future research. Moreover, the socio-demographic characteristics (age, income, place

of residence, marital status, etc.) and their impact on the perception of unethical issues should be further explored on the more diverse sample of respondents.

The authors of the paper consider that the further research in this field should also focus on tourism employees in Thailand, examining to which extent they embrace the ethical and moral principles in business practice. In addition, the level of formal education in the field of business ethics among employees should be further explored. Moreover, it would be interesting to conduct research on the tourists' perception of the image of Thailand regarding unethical practice in tourism before the visit and after their personal experience during their stay in this country. That way we could compare the general image Thailand has on the world's tourism market and how much it changes after the visit of this country.

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