

## Co-creation of Destination Image in Bali: Insights from Social Media Narratives

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Article History	Abstract
Received: 24 April 2026 Accepted: 08 June 2026 Published: 27 June 2026	<p><i>The rapid growth of social media has transformed destination image formation from a marketing-driven process into a dynamic and participatory phenomenon shaped by user-generated content (UGC). This study examines how Bali's destination image is co-created through digital interactions across social media platforms. Adopting a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, the research integrates social media content analysis and netnography to explore the narratives, meanings, and representations associated with Bali as a tourism destination. Data were collected from publicly available content on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X), focusing on tourism-related posts, captions, comments, and hashtags. The analysis employed inductive thematic coding to identify recurring themes, followed by netnographic interpretation to uncover the socio-cultural meanings embedded in online interactions. The findings reveal that Bali's destination image is predominantly constructed through four interconnected themes: natural beauty, cultural authenticity, wellness and lifestyle experiences, and emotional engagement. These themes are continuously reinforced through tourists' storytelling practices, social interactions, and participatory digital engagement. The study demonstrates that destination image is not merely communicated by destination marketing organizations but is actively negotiated and co-created by tourists and online communities. Theoretically, the study extends destination image literature by conceptualizing destination image as a socially negotiated and platform-mediated construct, while also highlighting the dynamic interaction among cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions within digital tourism environments. Practically, the findings suggest that destination management organizations should engage tourists as active co-creators of destination image and support authentic digital storytelling strategies to strengthen destination competitiveness in increasingly networked tourism ecosystems..</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> destination image co-creation; social media; user-generated content; netnography; Bali tourism; digital tourism.</p>



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### INTRODUCTION

As one of the world's leading tourism destinations, Bali has undergone a significant transformation in the way its destination image is constructed and communicated to global audiences. In the contemporary digital landscape, social media has evolved beyond a mere promotional tool into an interactive arena where tourists actively participate in shaping

meanings and perceptions of destinations (Xiang et al., 2017; Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2015). The concept of the *co-creation of destination image* reflects this paradigm shift, emphasising that destination image is no longer solely controlled by destination management organisations (DMOs), but is collectively constructed through user-generated content (UGC) across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015; Stylidis et al., 2020). In the context of Bali, the proliferation of visually driven content, experiential narratives, and viral digital trends has contributed to the formation of a dynamic, symbolic, and at times idealised representation of the destination.

However, this process of co-creation also raises critical concerns that remain insufficiently addressed in the existing literature. One key issue lies in the discrepancy between the digitally constructed image of a destination and its on-the-ground realities, which may lead to inflated tourist expectations, environmental pressures, and socio-cultural tensions (Gössling et al., 2018; Seraphin et al., 2018). Furthermore, the dominance of aestheticised visual narratives often marginalises local cultural authenticity, resulting in homogenised and commodified representations of place (Mkono & Tribe, 2017). In Bali, the rise of “Instagrammable tourism” and digitally influenced tourist behaviour reflects a shift in the meaning of the destination from a culturally embedded space to a globally consumed visual commodity. Nevertheless, the mechanisms through which co-creation unfolds discursively within social media, and how tourists’ narratives collectively shape Bali’s destination image, remain underexplored and warrant further scholarly attention.

In response to these issues, this study aims to examine how the destination image of Bali is co-created through social media narratives, with particular emphasis on the role of tourists as active co-creators within the digital tourism ecosystem. Specifically, the study seeks to identify dominant themes within UGC, analyse sentiment and symbolic representations embedded in social media content, and explore the dynamics of interaction between tourists and the destination in shaping public perceptions. By employing a social media analytics approach combined with digital discourse analysis, this research aspires to provide a more comprehensive understanding of destination image construction in the digital era.

Despite the growing body of literature on destination image and social media, several notable research gaps persist. First, many studies continue to adopt a static perspective on tourist perceptions, without adequately capturing the dynamic and interactive processes of co-creation that occur within digital environments (Stylidis et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2022; Guerreiro et al., 2024). Second, research utilising social media data often prioritises quantitative techniques such as sentiment analysis or frequency-based metrics, while overlooking the deeper narrative and symbolic meanings embedded in user-generated content (Marine-Roig, 2019; Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé, 2016; Stopp & Kraus, 2021). Third, empirical studies focusing specifically on Bali as a global tourism destination through the lens of social media-driven co-creation remain limited, despite its rich socio-cultural context and global prominence (Mahadewi, 2019; Sutawa, 2019; Patera et al., 2023). Previous studies on destination branding and social media have largely concentrated on broader destination marketing issues rather than examining how tourists, local communities, and digital platforms collaboratively construct destination images through ongoing interactions (Antonios, 2020; Mandagi et al., 2024). These

gaps highlight the need for a more integrative and context-sensitive approach to understanding how destination images are collaboratively constructed.

This study contributes to the literature by offering a novel perspective that integrates social media analytics with narrative analysis to capture the multidimensional nature of destination image co-creation. Rather than relying solely on quantitative metrics, this research foregrounds the interpretive dimension of tourists' digital narratives, thereby uncovering the complex processes through which meanings and representations of destinations are produced and circulated. Theoretically, this study advances the destination image discourse by shifting from a traditional top-down perspective to a participatory, experience-based framework grounded in digital interactions. Practically, the findings are expected to provide valuable insights for destination managers and policymakers in designing more adaptive, authentic, and sustainable tourism communication strategies in an increasingly digitalised environment.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research design that integrates social media content analysis and netnographic inquiry to examine the co-creation of destination image in Bali. The rationale for combining these approaches lies in the need to capture both broad patterns emerging from user-generated content (UGC) and the deeper socio-cultural meanings embedded within tourists' narratives and online interactions. Social media platforms have become important arenas where destination images are continuously produced, shared, negotiated, and transformed through digital communication. Consequently, they provide valuable empirical sources for understanding how destination image is collaboratively constructed in contemporary tourism environments (Kozinets, 2020; Xiang et al., 2017).

The study combines two complementary analytical approaches. First, social media content analysis is employed to identify recurring themes, dominant narratives, and general sentiment tendencies reflected in online discussions about Bali. Second, netnography is used to interpret the meanings, values, and symbolic representations underlying these narratives. This integrated design enables the study to move beyond descriptive representations of destination image and explore the social processes through which destination meanings are co-created in digital spaces.

### **Data Collection and Sampling Strategy**

Data were collected from publicly available content on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X), which are among the most influential platforms in shaping tourism discourse and destination representation. The data collection process focused on posts containing tourism-related keywords and hashtags such as #Bali, #VisitBali, #BaliLife, #BaliExperience, and other contextually relevant terms associated with travel experiences in Bali.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select content that was directly relevant to the research objectives. The dataset included textual captions, comments, hashtags, and engagement indicators that reflected tourists' experiences, perceptions, evaluations, and interactions related to Bali as a tourism destination. To ensure contemporary relevance, only

posts published within the post-pandemic tourism recovery period were included in the analysis.

Data screening procedures were undertaken to remove duplicate content, commercial advertisements, irrelevant posts, and automated or spam-generated content. This process ensured that the dataset primarily reflected authentic user-generated narratives and experiential accounts shared by tourists and other tourism stakeholders.

Although social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are highly visual environments, the present study focuses primarily on textual content, including captions, comments, hashtags, and user narratives. Visual materials were used as contextual references to support interpretation but were not subjected to a formal visual content analysis. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting the narrative and discursive dimensions of destination image co-creation rather than the full spectrum of visual representations available on social media platforms.

### **Social Media Content Analysis**

The first stage of analysis involved systematic social media content analysis. All collected posts were reviewed, organized, and coded using an inductive thematic approach. The coding process consisted of three stages: open coding, category development, and theme generation. During open coding, recurring words, phrases, and ideas related to destination image were identified. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories and refined into overarching themes representing key dimensions of Bali's destination image.

In addition to thematic identification, the analysis examined the general emotional orientation of the narratives. Posts were interpreted as reflecting positive, neutral, or negative evaluations based on the meanings expressed within the textual content. Rather than relying solely on automated classification, sentiment interpretation was conducted contextually to preserve the nuances of tourism experiences and destination perceptions. The content analysis generated an overview of dominant themes and perceptions associated with Bali, providing a foundation for subsequent netnographic interpretation.

### **Netnographic Analysis**

To complement the content analysis, this study employed netnography as an interpretive qualitative approach. Following Kozinets (2020), netnography enables researchers to examine how meanings are constructed, negotiated, and shared within online communities. A purposive subset of posts and discussion threads demonstrating high thematic relevance and engagement was selected for deeper analysis.

The netnographic analysis focused on exploring how tourists narrate their experiences, how authenticity and cultural encounters are represented, and how digital interactions contribute to the formation of destination image. Particular attention was given to symbolic expressions, storytelling practices, emotional narratives, and social interactions among users.

Throughout the analytical process, reflexivity and contextual sensitivity were maintained to ensure that interpretations accurately reflected the socio-cultural meanings embedded in the data. This approach enabled a richer understanding of destination image co-creation beyond the descriptive patterns identified through content analysis.

### **Data Integration and Analytical Framework**

The study adopted a sequential interpretive approach in which findings from social media content analysis informed and guided the netnographic interpretation. The integration process involved comparing and triangulating patterns emerging from both analytical stages to identify areas of convergence, divergence, and complementarity.

The analytical framework was grounded in the concept of destination image co-creation, which conceptualizes destination image as a dynamic and socially constructed phenomenon emerging from interactions among tourists, local communities, tourism businesses, and digital platforms. The interpretation considered three interconnected dimensions of destination image: cognitive dimensions (beliefs and knowledge), affective dimensions (feelings and emotions), and conative dimensions (behavioral intentions and destination advocacy). By integrating thematic content analysis with netnographic interpretation, the study captures both the structural patterns and experiential meanings underlying Bali's destination image in digital environments.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. The study relied exclusively on publicly accessible online content and did not involve direct interaction with social media users. To protect privacy, all identifying information, including usernames, profile details, and personal identifiers, was removed during data processing and reporting.

The research adhered to the ethical principles of digital research and followed platform-specific terms of service. Furthermore, the interpretation of user-generated content was conducted with sensitivity to cultural context and representational fairness. Efforts were made to preserve the original meanings of participants' narratives while avoiding selective interpretation or misrepresentation. These procedures ensured that the study maintained transparency, ethical integrity, and compliance with international research standards.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Overview of Social Media Narratives on Bali**

The analysis of user-generated content (UGC) collected from Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X) reveals that Bali's destination image is not constructed as a singular, static representation, but rather emerges as a multi-layered and co-created narrative shaped by diverse tourist experiences. Based on NLP-driven topic modelling, five dominant thematic clusters were identified: (1) *aesthetic landscapes and "Instagrammable" locations*, (2) *spiritual and wellness experiences*, (3) *luxury and lifestyle consumption*, (4) *cultural authenticity and local interactions*, and (5) *overtourism and behavioural issues*.



Figure 1: Tourism Destination in Bali  
Sources: blog.thetripguru.com, hospitalityinsights, 2025.

The social media narratives examined in this study consistently portray Bali as an aesthetically appealing destination characterized by natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and experiential tourism activities. References to scenic environments, iconic landmarks, and visually memorable experiences frequently appeared across user-generated content, suggesting that aesthetic appeal remains an important component of destination image formation. These findings indicate that tourists often associate Bali with visually attractive and experience-rich environments, reinforcing the role of digital storytelling in shaping destination perceptions and travel expectations. However, the present study focuses primarily on textual narratives and user interpretations rather than conducting a systematic analysis of visual content itself.

## 2. NLP Results: Topic Modelling and Thematic Structure

The Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) analysis identified the relative distribution of themes across 25,000 sampled posts. The findings indicate that visual-driven narratives dominate the discourse, particularly those related to scenic beauty and curated photography.

Table 1. Distribution of Dominant Themes in Social Media Narratives

No	Theme Category	Keywords (Top Terms)	Proportion (%)
1	Aesthetic & Scenic Landscapes	beach, sunset, view, temple, photo	32%
2	Wellness & Spiritual Experience	yoga, retreat, healing, meditation	18%
3	Luxury & Lifestyle	villa, pool, resort, honeymoon	16%
4	Cultural Authenticity	local, ceremony, culture, tradition	14%
5	Overtourism & Behavioural Issues	crowded, traffic, disrespect, rules	20%

Source: Authors, 2025

These findings suggest that the **cognitive image** of Bali is largely dominated by visual and experiential attributes, while the affective image is reflected through emotional expressions such as “peaceful”, “paradise”, and “healing”. Interestingly, the presence of overtourism-related discourse (20%) indicates a growing counter-narrative that challenges the idealised image of Bali.

### 3. Sentiment Analysis: Emotional Construction of Destination Image

The sentiment analysis reveals that the majority of social media content expresses positive emotions, reinforcing Bali's global reputation as a desirable destination. However, a notable proportion of negative sentiment is associated with issues of overcrowding, environmental degradation, and inappropriate tourist behaviour.

Table 2. Sentiment Distribution of Social Media Content

Sentiment Category	Percentage (%)	Dominant Expressions
Positive	68%	"beautiful", "paradise", "amazing", "peaceful"
Neutral	17%	descriptive captions, informational content
Negative	15%	"crowded", "dirty", "overrated", "traffic"

Source: Authors, 2025

The coexistence of positive and negative sentiments demonstrates that Bali's destination image is co-created through both admiration and critique, reflecting a more complex and evolving perception among tourists.

### 4. Netnographic Insights: Narrative and Symbolic Meanings

To deepen the analysis, netnographic interpretation was conducted on selected high-engagement posts. The findings reveal that tourists do not merely share experiences but actively construct symbolic meanings associated with Bali. Three dominant narrative patterns emerge:

#### A. Bali as a "Paradise Escape"

Tourists frequently frame Bali as an idyllic escape from urban life, emphasising tranquillity, natural beauty, and emotional rejuvenation. This narrative reinforces the affective dimension of destination image.

#### B. Bali as a "Spiritual Sanctuary"

Many narratives highlight yoga retreats, meditation, and spiritual healing, particularly in areas such as Ubud. This positions Bali within the global wellness tourism market.



Figure 1: Wellness Tourism Bali  
Sources: indonesia-tourism-religion, thebalisun, onbali, 2025.

#### C. Bali as a "Commodified Visual Space"

A significant portion of content reveals staged photography, edited visuals, and performative behaviour (e.g., queuing for iconic shots). This suggests that tourists are not only consuming the destination but also reproducing its image for digital validation.

D. Counter-Narrative: “Bali Under Pressure”

Some users critique overtourism, environmental degradation, and cultural disrespect. These narratives often emerge in comment sections, indicating a dialogical co-creation process.

5. Integration of Findings: Co-creation Dynamics

By integrating NLP and netnographic findings, the study demonstrates that Bali’s destination image is co-created through a dynamic interplay between visual representation, emotional expression, and social interaction. Tourists act as both consumers and producers of meaning, shaping how Bali is perceived globally.

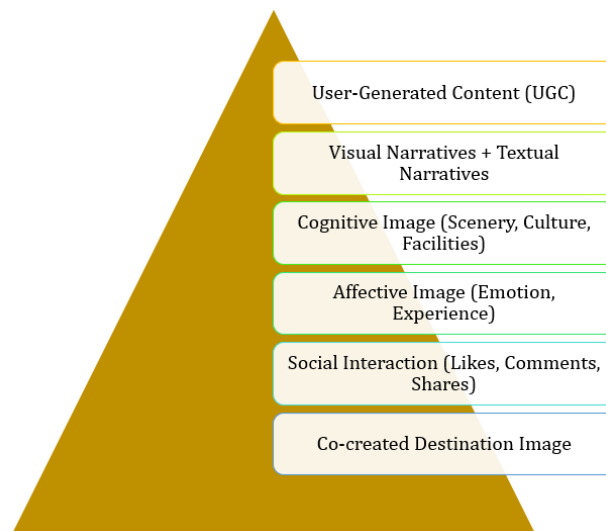


Figure 1. Conceptual Representation of Co-Creation of Destination Image  
Source: Authors, 2025

Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that the destination image of Bali is not a fixed construct, but rather a dynamic outcome of continuous interaction between tourists, digital platforms, and the destination itself. This aligns with the evolving theoretical perspective that destination image is co-created through participatory processes, rather than being unilaterally projected by destination management organisations (DMOs) (Stylidis et al., 2020). The dominance of visually driven narratives identified in the results reinforces prior assertions that social media, particularly image-centric platforms, has fundamentally transformed how destinations are represented and consumed (Xiang et al., 2017). In this context, Bali’s image as a “tropical paradise” is not merely marketed but repeatedly reproduced and amplified by tourists through curated digital performances.

From a theoretical standpoint, the results extend the cognitive–affective model of destination image by demonstrating how these dimensions are actively constructed through user-generated content (UGC). The prominence of themes such as scenic landscapes, wellness experiences, and luxury lifestyles reflects the cognitive dimension, where tangible attributes of the destination are highlighted. Simultaneously, the strong prevalence of positive sentiment expressed through terms such as “peaceful” and “paradise” illustrates the affective dimension,

which shapes emotional attachment and travel desire (Marine-Roig, 2019). Importantly, this study shows that these dimensions are not passively perceived but are continuously negotiated and reproduced through social media interactions, thereby supporting the notion of destination image as a socially constructed and iterative process.

However, the findings also challenge the predominantly positive framing of co-creation in tourism literature. While previous studies have emphasised the benefits of co-creation in enhancing engagement and authenticity (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015), this study reveals a more ambivalent reality. The emergence of overtourism-related narratives and negative sentiment indicates that co-creation can also generate counter-images that contest the dominant idealised representation of Bali. This supports the argument by Gössling et al. (2018) and Seraphin et al. (2018) that digital visibility can intensify tourism pressure, leading to environmental degradation and socio-cultural tensions. In this sense, co-creation should not be understood as inherently positive, but rather as a double-edged process that simultaneously enhances and destabilises destination image.

The netnographic findings further deepen this discussion by revealing the symbolic and performative nature of digital tourism practices. The identification of Bali as a “commodified visual space” aligns with Mkono and Tribe’s (2017) critique of social media tourism, where destinations are reduced to aesthetic backdrops for self-presentation. The prevalence of staged photography, curated experiences, and algorithm-driven visibility suggests that tourists are not only co-creating destination image but are also engaging in performative consumption, where the value of the experience is mediated by its digital shareability. This insight contributes to a growing body of literature that links tourism with visual culture and digital capitalism, highlighting how platform logics shape both tourist behaviour and destination representation.

At the same time, the presence of counter-narratives particularly those addressing overcrowding, cultural disrespect, and environmental concerns demonstrates that co-creation is inherently dialogical. Tourists do not merely reproduce dominant images but also critique and negotiate them through comments, reviews, and alternative narratives. This finding advances the concept of co-creation by emphasising its discursive and contested nature, where multiple voices interact to shape a more complex and sometimes contradictory destination image. In the case of Bali, this results in a hybrid image that oscillates between “paradise” and “pressure,” reflecting broader tensions between tourism growth and sustainability.

From a methodological perspective, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the value of integrating Natural Language Processing (NLP) with netnography. While previous research has often relied on either quantitative analytics or qualitative interpretation, this study shows that combining both approaches allows for a more comprehensive understanding of digital tourism phenomena. The NLP analysis provides a macro-level overview of dominant themes and sentiments, while netnography uncovers the deeper meanings and cultural contexts embedded in social media narratives. This methodological integration responds to recent calls for more interdisciplinary and mixed-method approaches in tourism research (Li et al., 2018), and offers a replicable framework for future studies.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this research advances the co-creation paradigm in

three key ways. First, it conceptualises destination image as a multi-layered digital construct shaped by visual, textual, and interactive elements. Second, it introduces the notion of “contested co-creation”, highlighting that destination image emerges not only from alignment but also from tension between competing narratives. Third, it situates co-creation within the broader context of platform-mediated interactions, emphasising the role of algorithms, visual culture, and digital performance in shaping tourism experiences.

Practically, the findings have important implications for destination management in Bali and beyond. The dominance of aesthetic and idealised representations suggests that DMOs should move beyond traditional promotional strategies and engage more actively with user-generated content ecosystems. However, the presence of negative and critical narratives also indicates the need for more responsible and sustainable tourism management practices. Rather than attempting to control destination image, policymakers should focus on facilitating balanced and authentic representations, while addressing the underlying issues that generate negative perceptions. This includes managing visitor flows, preserving cultural integrity, and promoting ethical tourist behaviour.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the co-creation of destination image in Bali is a complex, dynamic, and often contested process shaped by digital interactions. By linking empirical findings with theoretical perspectives, the study not only confirms existing knowledge but also challenges and extends it, offering new insights into the role of social media in contemporary tourism.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that the destination image of Bali is not a fixed representation controlled solely by destination marketing organizations, but rather a dynamic and co-created phenomenon emerging from ongoing interactions within social media ecosystems. Through the integration of social media content analysis and netnographic inquiry, the findings reveal that Bali’s destination image is continuously shaped through tourists’ narratives, experiential storytelling, emotional expressions, and participatory digital engagement. The dominant representations identified in the study including natural beauty, cultural authenticity, wellness experiences, and lifestyle-oriented tourism collectively contribute to Bali’s contemporary digital image and influence how the destination is perceived by global audiences.

Beyond its empirical findings, the study offers an important theoretical contribution to the literature on destination image and digital tourism. The findings support the view that destination image should be understood as a co-created and socially negotiated construct rather than a unidirectional marketing outcome. By demonstrating how tourists actively participate in producing, sharing, and reinforcing destination meanings through social media interactions, the study extends existing destination image theory toward a more participatory and platform-mediated perspective. This contribution highlights the growing role of user-generated content and online communities in shaping tourism imaginaries and destination narratives.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the emerging discourse on destination image co-creation by proposing that cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of destination image

are increasingly intertwined within digital communication environments. Rather than functioning as separate dimensions, these elements interact dynamically through online storytelling, social engagement, and experiential sharing processes. This perspective provides a more integrated understanding of destination image formation in contemporary tourism contexts.

Practically, the findings suggest that destination management organizations should move beyond traditional promotional strategies and actively engage with tourists as co-creators of destination image. Encouraging authentic storytelling, fostering meaningful digital engagement, and supporting diverse visitor narratives may enhance destination competitiveness and strengthen the credibility of destination branding efforts in increasingly networked tourism environments.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research relies on publicly available social media data, which may not fully represent all segments of tourists, particularly those who are less active in digital platforms. This may result in a bias towards younger, more digitally engaged users.

Second, while the study integrates NLP and netnography, the analysis is limited to textual and partially visual data, without fully incorporating advanced image recognition or video analysis techniques. Given the highly visual nature of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, future research could benefit from incorporating computer vision and multimodal analysis to capture a more comprehensive representation of destination image.

Third, the study focuses on a single destination, Bali, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. Future studies could adopt a comparative approach across multiple destinations to examine how co-creation dynamics vary across cultural, geographical, and developmental settings.

Finally, this study adopts a cross-sectional design, analysing data within a specific time frame. Considering the rapidly evolving nature of social media and tourism trends, future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine how destination image co-creation evolves over time, particularly in response to crises, policy changes, or shifts in tourist behaviour. Overall, this study highlights that in the digital era, destination image is no longer owned by destinations but is continuously negotiated within a global network of connected tourists. Understanding this shift is essential for developing more adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable tourism strategies in an increasingly complex and mediated world.

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