

Ecosystem Approach in Digital Tourism and Hospitality

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ABSTRACT

Tourism and hospitality are increasingly shaped by complex economic, organizational, and technological interactions that extend beyond the boundaries of individual enterprises. In this context, more integrative analytical and management frameworks are required to explain how value is created and sustained at the destination level. The ecosystem approach has gained relevance as it allows tourism to be understood as a system of interconnected actors, resources, and processes engaged in joint value creation. This paper examines the ecosystem approach as a conceptual foundation for sustainable tourism development, with particular attention to the role of hospitality under conditions of digital transformation. Tourism is analysed as a multifaceted ecosystem involving accommodation providers, tourism businesses, digital platforms, local communities, and public authorities. Special emphasis is placed on the coordinating role of digital technologies and platform-based solutions in facilitating cooperation, improving resource efficiency, and enhancing destination competitiveness. The analysis highlights hospitality as a core integrative component of the tourism ecosystem, linking digital platforms with destination-level actors and shaping the overall tourist experience. The paper argues that adopting an ecosystem perspective supports more effective strategic management, improves coordination among stakeholders, and contributes to the long-term sustainability and resilience of tourism and hospitality development in a highly digitalized environment.

Keywords: *Tourism ecosystem, Hospitality sector, Digital tourism, Ecosystem approach, Sustainable tourism*

JEL Codes: L83, O33, M21



INTRODUCTION

Contemporary tourism development is characterized by growing interdependence among economic, social, and technological processes that extend beyond the boundaries of individual tourism enterprises. Tourism services are increasingly rarely produced and consumed in an isolated form; instead, they emerge as the result of coordinated interaction among multiple actors—tourism companies, hotels, transport operators, digital platforms, local communities, and public institutions. In this context, the ecosystem approach has become an appropriate analytical and managerial framework for examining tourism as a complex economic system.

Ecosystem logic makes it possible to view tourism not merely as an economic sector but as a network of interconnected activities and resources that jointly shape the tourism experience. This network structure becomes particularly visible under conditions of digitalization, in which platform-based organizational models substantially facilitate the exchange of information, resources, and services (Gretzel et al., 2015).

Building on this perspective, the present paper contributes to the existing tourism and hospitality literature by conceptually positioning hospitality as a central integrative node within the digital tourism ecosystem. While prior research has widely examined tourism ecosystems and platform-based coordination, less attention has been paid to the specific structural role of hospitality in linking digital platforms, destination-level actors, and sustainability objectives. By combining ecosystem logic with the context of digital transformation, the paper offers a synthesized conceptual framework that highlights hospitality's coordinating function in value creation, ecosystem governance, and long-term sustainable destination development.

In this way, the study advances the discussion on tourism digitalization by linking ecosystem theory more directly to hospitality management and destination sustainability.

Purpose and research approach

The purpose of this conference paper is to substantiate the ecosystem approach as a conceptual foundation for the sustainable development of tourism and, more specifically, hospitality, by analyzing the role of cooperation, network interactions, and digital technologies in the creation of tourism value.

The study is grounded in a systemic and interdisciplinary approach, employing methods of analysis and synthesis of academic literature, comparative analysis of traditional and digital tourism models, and logical generalization of practices from the tourism and hospitality industries.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

The study is based on a qualitative, conceptual research design aimed at analysing the ecosystem approach in tourism and hospitality in the context of digital transformation and sustainable development. Given the theoretical nature of the research objectives, the paper does not rely on empirical data collection or statistical analysis. Instead, it applies analytical and interpretative methods commonly used in conceptual and review-based tourism research.

The research approach is grounded in a structured review and synthesis of academic literature related to tourism ecosystems, hospitality management, digital platforms, and sustainable destination development. Key sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and policy documents published by international organizations in the field of tourism. The literature was selected based on its relevance to ecosystem theory, digitalization processes, and destination-level governance.



Methods of analysis and synthesis were used to identify common concepts, relationships, and patterns across the reviewed literature. Comparative analysis was applied in order to contrast traditional tourism organization models with ecosystem-based and digitally mediated models. This approach made it possible to examine how digital technologies reshape coordination mechanisms, stakeholder roles, and value creation processes within tourism systems.

In addition, logical generalization and conceptual integration were employed to develop a coherent analytical narrative linking tourism ecosystems, digitalization, hospitality, and sustainability. Rather than proposing a new formal model, the study aims to clarify existing concepts and highlight the structural role of hospitality within the tourism ecosystem. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of complex interdependencies while maintaining a clear focus on management and policy implications relevant to destinations and hospitality enterprises.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study emerge from the conceptual analysis and synthesis of the reviewed literature rather than from empirical measurement. They reflect the main analytical insights derived from applying the ecosystem approach to tourism and hospitality under conditions of digital transformation. The following discussion summarizes the key conceptual findings of the study and interprets their implications for tourism destinations, hospitality enterprises, and sustainable development.

Ecosystem coordination as a condition for competitiveness

One of the main conceptual results of this study is the recognition that competitiveness in tourism increasingly depends on ecosystem-level coordination rather than on the isolated performance of individual enterprises. Destinations that succeed in coordinating accommodation, transport, attractions, public services, and information flows are better positioned to deliver consistent and satisfying tourism experiences. In contrast, even destinations with strong individual actors may struggle when coordination among stakeholders is weak or fragmented.

From an ecosystem perspective, competitiveness is shaped by how well actors align their activities, schedules, and standards. Effective coordination reduces operational inefficiencies, improves accessibility, and enhances the overall coherence of the tourism product. This is particularly important in destinations with high visitor intensity, where uncoordinated growth may lead to overcrowding, service bottlenecks, and declining tourist satisfaction. The ecosystem approach therefore highlights coordination not as an optional managerial practice, but as a structural condition for long-term destination competitiveness.

Hospitality as an integrative actor in digital ecosystems

The analysis also confirms the central role of hospitality as an integrative actor within digital tourism ecosystems. Hotels often serve as the main interface between tourists and the destination, connecting visitors with transport services, cultural attractions, leisure activities, and local businesses. Through daily operational interactions and digital communication channels, hospitality enterprises help integrate different elements of the tourism ecosystem into a more coherent experience.

Previous studies in the field of smart and active tourism highlight that information and communication technologies play a key role in integrating services, improving coordination, and supporting more sustainable tourism development, particularly at the destination level (Lile, Kalluci, & Kaçurri, 2025).



Digital technologies further strengthen this integrative function. Reservation systems, online communication tools, and customer data platforms allow hotels to coordinate services, respond to guest needs in real time, and facilitate access to external providers. As a result, hospitality enterprises are not only service providers but also active coordinators within the digital ecosystem. This position enables them to influence service quality, information flows, and visitor behavior, reinforcing their importance for destination-level value creation and sustainability.

Digital platforms: opportunities vs. dependency risks

A further important result of the conceptual analysis concerns the dual role of digital platforms within tourism ecosystems. On the one hand, platforms offer significant opportunities by improving market access, increasing visibility, and reducing transaction costs for tourism enterprises. They enable small and medium-sized businesses to reach international markets and support efficiency through standardized booking and communication systems. At the same time, increased reliance on digital platforms introduces challenges related to digital inclusion, access equity, and structural dependency. Research has shown that digitalization does not affect all actors equally and that differences in digital capabilities and access can create uneven participation within digital ecosystems, which may compound the risks associated with platform dependence (Lendzhova, 2025).

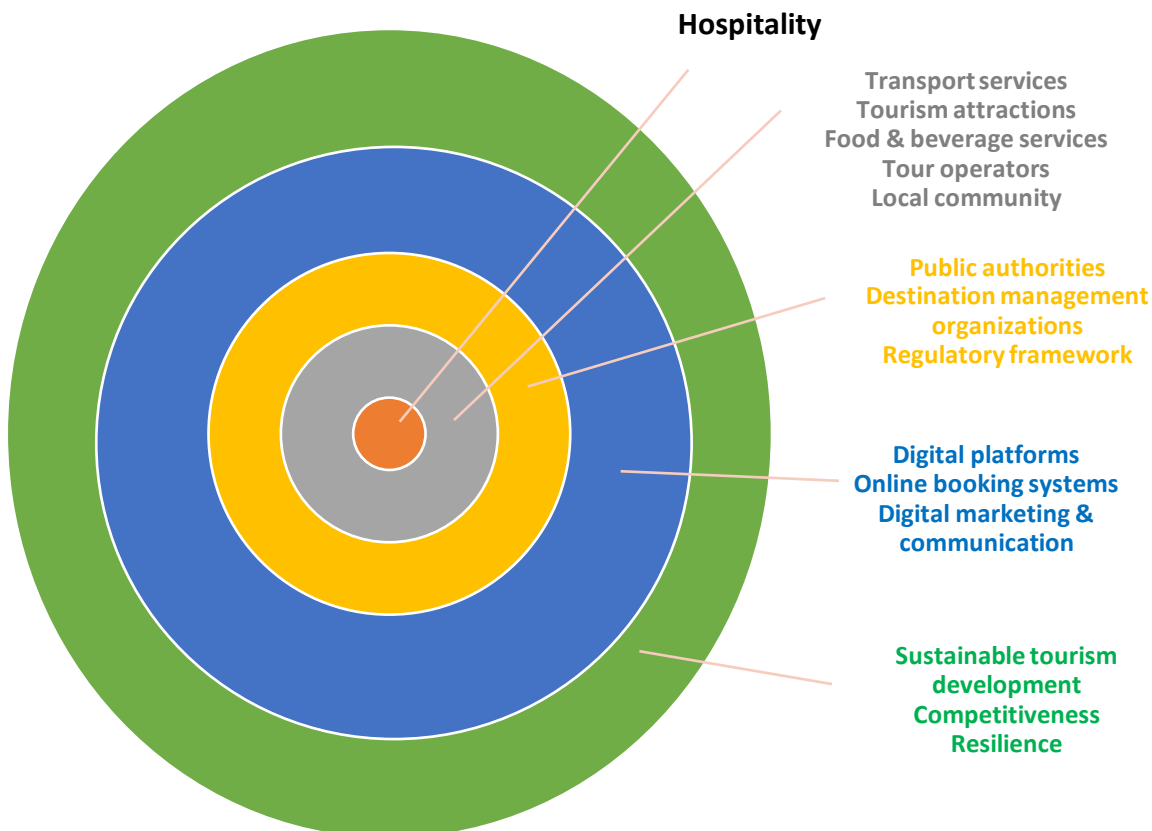


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of the tourism ecosystem highlighting the integrative role of hospitality under conditions of digitalization and sustainable development. Source: *The Author*

On the other hand, increased reliance on dominant digital platforms creates structural risks within the ecosystem. Platform dependence may reduce the autonomy of hospitality enterprises, increase commission costs, and weaken direct relationships with customers. This imbalance of power can limit

strategic flexibility, particularly for small and independent hotels. From an ecosystem perspective, these risks highlight the importance of diversification and balanced governance. While digital platforms are essential components of modern tourism ecosystems, long-term sustainability requires that hospitality enterprises maintain a degree of control over customer relationships and actively participate in destination-level cooperation beyond platform-based interactions.

The essence of the ecosystem approach in tourism

Tourism is a sector with a high level of complexity, as it brings together many different economic activities, social interactions, and spatial processes (Fig. 1). Unlike industries where value is created within a single organization, tourism value is produced through the interaction of many independent actors. Transport companies, hotels, restaurants, cultural institutions, entertainment providers, public authorities, and local communities all contribute to the overall tourism experience, which is usually perceived by visitors as a single, unified whole within a destination.

Because of this structure, tourism products cannot be understood as a simple collection of separate services. Tourists evaluate their experience in a comprehensive way, combining impressions from accommodation, mobility, attractions, public environment, and service quality. A weakness in any one of these elements may negatively affect the overall perception of the destination, even when other services perform well. For this reason, destination competitiveness depends not only on the quality of individual services but also on how well they are coordinated and connected (UNWTO, 2019).

The ecosystem approach provides a useful framework for analysing tourism in such conditions. Instead of examining tourism enterprises separately, this approach views tourism as a system of interconnected actors that jointly create value. Within the tourism ecosystem, core service providers such as hotels, transport operators, and food services interact with complementary services, institutional structures, regulatory bodies, and tourists themselves. These actors are linked through continuous flows of information, resources, and economic value, and their performance is closely interdependent (Baggio & Del Chiappa, 2014).

An important implication of the ecosystem approach is that system performance cannot be explained solely by the success of individual firms. Even highly competitive hotels or attractions may fail to deliver positive results if coordination within the destination is weak. Poor transport accessibility, overcrowding, lack of information, or inconsistent public policies can easily undermine otherwise good tourism services. From an ecosystem perspective, effective cooperation and coordination among stakeholders are therefore essential for maintaining destination quality and competitiveness.

This logic becomes especially visible in destinations with high tourism intensity, such as large cities or popular cultural centers. In such places, the tourism experience depends strongly on the synchronization of accommodation availability, transport services, access to attractions, event scheduling, and public infrastructure. When coordination works well, destinations benefit from higher visitor satisfaction, longer stays, and repeat visits. When it does not, tourists often experience fragmentation and dissatisfaction.

From a management and policy point of view, the ecosystem approach also helps identify critical weak points within the tourism system. Problems in governance, infrastructure, regulation, or stakeholder cooperation rarely affect only one actor; instead, they tend to spread through the system and reduce overall destination performance. By emphasizing interdependence and collective responsibility, the ecosystem approach supports more integrated management strategies aimed at improving coordination, reducing fragmentation, and supporting the long-term sustainable development of tourism destinations.



The role of digitalization in the development of tourism ecosystems

Digitalization has become one of the main drivers of change in tourism and hospitality over the last two decades. Digital technologies strongly influence how tourism services are created, promoted, coordinated, and consumed. From an ecosystem perspective, digitalization plays an important role because it reduces coordination costs between actors, improves access to information, and enables faster interaction among tourism businesses, destinations, and tourists.

Digital coordination within tourism ecosystems increasingly relies on integrated digital marketing, communication, and personalization strategies, which influence visibility, customer engagement, and conversion across digital platforms. Effective use of digital channels and targeted messaging has been shown to improve coordination between businesses and consumers, particularly during periods of intensified demand and competition (Karadzhov & Zlateva, 2024).

Online booking platforms, mobile applications, review websites, and social media channels have changed the traditional structure of tourism markets. These digital tools allow tourists to search for information, compare offers, make reservations, and share experiences in real time. At the same time, tourism enterprises gain access to broader markets and more direct communication with potential customers. As a result, information asymmetry is reduced, decision-making becomes faster, and market transparency increases (Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015).

Within this environment, tourism increasingly operates through digital ecosystems in which platforms occupy a central coordinating role. These platforms connect accommodation providers, transport companies, tour operators, cultural attractions, and end users within a single digital space. Their role goes beyond simple intermediation, as they integrate different tourism services into combined offers and standardized user environments. In this way, platforms act as key coordinators of interactions within the tourism ecosystem, shaping both market access and service visibility.

Digitalization shapes tourism ecosystems not only through technological tools but also through broader strategic and regulatory environments that influence coordination and sustainability. Analytical frameworks such as PESTEL analysis are increasingly used to assess these external influences and support strategic decision-making in digitally mediated tourism systems (Karadzhov & Patarchanova, 2025).

Digital ecosystems also significantly influence the position of small and medium-sized tourism enterprises. Traditionally, such businesses have faced limitations related to marketing budgets, geographic reach, and access to international demand. Digital platforms allow these enterprises to become part of global tourism networks with relatively low entry barriers. This integration increases competitiveness and opens new opportunities for local businesses, particularly in peripheral or less-known destinations (Sigala, 2018).

Another important effect of digitalization is related to data and personalization. Through online interactions, platforms and service providers collect large volumes of data on tourist preferences, behaviour, and consumption patterns. When used effectively, these data support personalized services, targeted marketing, and improved customer relationship management. This improves the match between tourism supply and individual tourist expectations, contributing to higher satisfaction and loyalty.

Digitalization also strengthens network effects within tourism ecosystems. The value of a digital platform generally increases as more service providers and users participate in it. This tendency leads to the concentration of interactions around a limited number of dominant platforms, which gradually gain significant influence over pricing, visibility, and customer access. While this concentration



improves efficiency and convenience, it also changes competitive relationships within the ecosystem and may increase dependence on digital intermediaries.

From the perspective of destination management, digital ecosystems offer new opportunities for planning and control. Data generated through digital platforms can be used to monitor tourism flows, forecast demand, and support infrastructure planning. Such information is especially valuable for managing overcrowding, reducing environmental pressure, and supporting sustainable tourism development. In this sense, digitalization contributes not only to economic efficiency but also to better governance of tourism ecosystems.

Overall, digital technologies have become an integral part of modern tourism ecosystems. They reshape interaction patterns, redefine the roles of market participants, and influence how value is created and distributed. While digitalization creates important opportunities for integration and growth, it also introduces new dependencies and governance challenges that require careful management within the tourism ecosystem.

The ecosystem model of the tourism destination

A tourism destination can be understood as a local ecosystem in which economic, social, and natural components interact in order to create a tourism product that is attractive, competitive, and sustainable over time. Unlike traditional approaches that focus mainly on geographic location or on individual attractions, the ecosystem model views the destination as a dynamic system of interconnected actors, resources, and processes. In this sense, destination development depends not only on the availability of tourism resources but also on the ability of stakeholders to coordinate their activities and manage shared assets responsibly.

Within the destination ecosystem, economic resources such as accommodation facilities, transport infrastructure, and tourism services are closely linked to social resources, including the local community, cultural traditions, and social capital. Natural resources, such as landscapes, climate, and biodiversity, often form the core attraction of the destination and at the same time represent its most vulnerable element. The long-term success of a destination therefore depends on maintaining a balance between these economic, social, and environmental components. When this balance is disturbed, destinations may face problems such as environmental degradation, resident dissatisfaction, or loss of attractiveness (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Local authorities, tourism businesses, and the local community play a central role in the functioning and governance of the destination ecosystem. Public institutions are responsible for regulatory frameworks, spatial planning, infrastructure investment, and coordination of tourism development strategies. Tourism enterprises contribute through job creation, service provision, and innovation, while the local community shapes the social atmosphere and cultural authenticity of the destination. The attitudes of residents toward tourism development can strongly influence visitor experience and the long-term sustainability of the destination.

The ecosystem model also highlights the importance of cooperation among different types of tourism actors. Effective destination development requires collaboration between accommodation providers, transport operators, cultural institutions, tour operators, and local authorities. A clear example of this interdependence can be observed in cultural tourism, where museums, heritage sites, hotels, restaurants, and public institutions must work together to offer visitors coherent and accessible experiences. Without such coordination, even destinations with rich cultural resources may struggle to attract and retain visitors.



At the same time, the ecosystem approach helps identify potential conflicts of interest within destinations. Economic objectives related to growth and increased tourist numbers may conflict with social and environmental considerations, such as quality of life for residents or protection of natural resources. These conflicts cannot be addressed effectively by individual actors acting alone. Instead, they require destination-level governance mechanisms that promote dialogue, cooperation, and shared responsibility among stakeholders.

From a strategic perspective, the ecosystem model provides a practical framework for destination management and planning. By recognizing interdependencies and shared resources, destination managers can develop more integrated policies that support sustainable tourism development. This includes coordinated investment in infrastructure, regulation of tourism flows, protection of local resources, and active involvement of the local community. In this way, the destination ecosystem model supports long-term development based on cooperation rather than isolated decision-making.

Hospitality as the core of the tourism ecosystem: sustainability, digital integration, and risks of platform dependence

Hospitality occupies a central position within the tourism ecosystem because accommodation services often represent the main point of contact between tourists and the destination. For many visitors, the hotel is not only a place to stay, but also the base from which they explore the destination, access services, and form impressions about safety, quality, and overall comfort. As a result, hospitality plays a key role in shaping the tourism experience and influencing tourists' satisfaction and intention to revisit (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2017).

From an ecosystem perspective, hotels do not operate as isolated business units. Instead, they function as active nodes within a wider network of economic, organizational, and digital relationships. These relationships include suppliers of food and beverages, cleaning and maintenance services, transport providers, tour operators, cultural institutions, and digital platforms. Through everyday coordination with these actors, hotels contribute to more efficient use of resources, smoother service delivery, and higher overall value for tourists. In this sense, hospitality can be considered a structural core of the tourism ecosystem, connecting multiple components of the destination.

The ecosystem approach is particularly useful for analysing sustainability in hospitality. Sustainable practices in hotels—such as reducing energy and water consumption, managing waste, using local products, and employing local labour—are most effective when they are supported by cooperation with other actors in the destination. For example, sourcing food from local producers requires coordination between hotels, suppliers, and local authorities. When sustainability measures are implemented in isolation, their impact remains limited. When they are embedded in destination-level cooperation, they contribute more clearly to environmental protection and local economic development (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Digitalization further strengthens the role of hospitality within the tourism ecosystem. Hotel management systems, online reservation platforms, channel managers, and customer data tools allow hotels to communicate and coordinate with partners and guests in real time. Through these technologies, hotels become active participants in digital tourism ecosystems where information and data play an increasingly important role in decision-making and service personalization (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2015).

Different hotel models illustrate this ecosystem logic in practice. All-inclusive resorts, for example, operate as highly integrated systems in which accommodation, food services, entertainment, and additional activities are coordinated through a single management structure. This allows for strong



control over quality and resource use. At the same time, such hotels remain connected to the broader tourism ecosystem through supply chains, employment, and digital distribution channels (Buhalis & Crotts, 2013). Urban hotels, in contrast, are more open systems. They often rely on cooperation with external restaurants, cultural institutions, event organizers, and transport providers in order to offer more diverse and authentic experiences to their guests.

Despite the advantages of digital integration, the ecosystem approach also helps identify risks associated with hospitality's growing dependence on global digital platforms. Online intermediaries concentrate significant market power and often influence pricing, visibility, and access to customers. This dependence can reduce hotels' autonomy, increase commission costs, and weaken direct relationships with guests. Small and independent hotels are particularly vulnerable in this respect (Sigala, 2018).

From a strategic and sustainability perspective, this situation highlights the importance of balance within the tourism ecosystem. While participation in global platforms offers clear benefits in terms of market access and efficiency, hotels also need to invest in their own digital channels and destination-level partnerships. By strengthening direct communication with guests and cooperating actively with local actors, hospitality enterprises can reduce excessive platform dependence and contribute to more resilient and balanced tourism ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

The analysis confirms that hospitality occupies a central functional and structural position within the tourism ecosystem, as it brings together key elements that shape the overall tourism experience, including service quality, comfort, safety, accessibility, and connectivity with other destination components. Hotels act not only as accommodation providers but also as integrative nodes through which tourists interact with transport services, cultural and leisure activities, local gastronomy, and public infrastructure. From this perspective, the ecosystem approach offers a suitable framework for understanding tourism value creation as the result of coordinated interaction rather than isolated efforts by individual enterprises.

Under conditions of digital transformation, the relevance of ecosystem logic becomes even more pronounced. Digital platforms and online technologies significantly reduce coordination costs and facilitate information exchange among tourism actors, thereby reshaping competitive relationships within destinations. For hospitality enterprises, the integration of digital solutions such as reservation systems, revenue management tools, and customer relationship management platforms improves operational efficiency and service personalization. At the same time, participation in platform-based ecosystems creates new dependencies related to pricing policies, visibility, and access to customers. This highlights the importance of maintaining a strategic balance between the use of global digital platforms and the development of direct sales channels and local partnerships.

The ecosystem approach is also closely linked to the sustainable development of tourism destinations. Sustainable practices in hospitality—such as efficient resource use, waste reduction, cooperation with local suppliers, and social engagement—are most effective when embedded in destination-level coordination and cooperation. When hotels work together with public authorities, local businesses, and communities, sustainability initiatives generate broader environmental and socio-economic benefits and contribute more directly to long-term destination competitiveness.

In summary, the ecosystem approach provides both an analytical perspective for interpreting the complexity of tourism and hospitality systems and a practical foundation for management and policy



decisions focused on cooperation, integration, and sustainability. For destination managers, this implies the need to support coordinated governance and shared responsibility among stakeholders. For hospitality enterprises, it implies proactive positioning as integrative actors within digital and destination ecosystems. In this sense, ecosystem-based organization can be considered a strategic condition for the adaptation and long-term development of tourism and hospitality in an increasingly digitalized and competitive environment.

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