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Is it just the music? Understanding the atmosphere in festivalgoers' experience at British rock music festivals

Alyssa Brown

Understanding the (festival) tourist experience

As such a major social and economic phenomenon, it is surprising that although festivals in general have long been considered in the academic literature (see, for example, Crompton & McKay, 1997; Falassi, 1987; Pieper, 1965; Vaughan, 1979), popular music festivals more specifically have enjoyed only limited academic scrutiny. Moreover, given that music festivals in Britain are not only numerous but also enormously diverse in scope, scale, type, and, hence, audience, it is particularly surprising that few if any attempts have been made to explore critically festivalgoers / tourists and the experiences they seek. Therefore, as research in the area of festival and event experiences is still 'scarce and fragmented' (de Geus, Richards & Toepoel, 2016: 276), it is necessary to draw on studies from other disciplines that contribute to the conceptualisation of experiences in relation to festivals and events.

Defining the tourist experience

Intangible, continuous, personal, and subjective in nature (O'Dell, 2007; Quinlan Cutler & Carmichael, 2010), and as a tacit concept (Jennings, 2010), the term 'experience' is complex to define (Getz & Page, 2016). In fact, 'experience' has often been discussed without the benefit of a clear explanation or definition of the term, leaving individuals to understand the concept through their own perceptions and assumptions (Morgan, 2008; Poulsson & Kale, 2004; Scott, 1991). Typically, dictionary definitions identify experiences as the process or instance of encountering, observing, or participating in an occurrence (OED, 2016) yet, although practical in nature, such definitions fail to address the different ways in which experiences may be perceived or understood. In contrast, empirical research across a variety of disciplines such as philosophy (Russon, 2010; Smith, 1970), psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Larsen, 2007), social

anthropology (Csordas, 1994; Selstad, 2007), marketing (Mossberg, 2008; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009), and economics (Andersson, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999) has attempted to conceptualise the phenomenon and more precise definitions have been proposed within specific real-world contexts.

Examining definitions of experience within the tourism literature typically refers to the interaction between tourists and destinations as the site of the experience (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). However, this focus does not allow for a consideration of the more complex and multifarious factors that contribute to the event tourists experience, especially given the enormous variety of types and scales of events and numerous stakeholder perspectives (Getz & Page, 2016; Jackson, 2014; Jennings, 2010). There is also consensus that the tourist experience is different to everyday experiences (Cohen, 1979; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Graburn, 2001; Vogt, 1976) – that is, the significance of an event or tourism experience lies in its ‘extraordinariness’ (see Urry & Larsen, 2011). According to Li’s (2000) review of tourist experience literature, definitions often refer to the pursuit of authenticity, the act of consumption, a response to ‘ordinary’ life and multifaceted leisure activities. However, across the varied and diverse definitions of the tourist experience, the only commonality found was the significance or meaning of the ‘occurrence’ to the individual.

More recently, in an attempt to define more specifically the event experience, de Geus et al. (2016: 276) have proposed a conceptual model that defines the event experience as: an interaction between an individual and the event environment (both physical and social), modified by the level of engagement or involvement, involving multiple experiential elements and outputs (such as satisfaction, emotions, behaviours, cognition, memories and learning) that can happen at any point in the event journey.

Whilst de Geus et al.’s (2016) definition and proposed model incorporates a wide range of features that have been highlighted in relevant literature, it does not however clarify the relationship between the experiential elements, no doubt reflecting the overall complexity of experiences. At the same time, nor does it consider the role of value or the importance of particular dimensions of experiences to individuals and stakeholder groups. Therefore, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the festival and event experience, the following section introduces more specifically how the event / festival experience may be conceptualized.

Conceptualising the festival tourist experience

The exploration of experience by academics in the field of event tourism has primarily developed from a management perspective. Following the works of Pine and Gilmore (1999), conceptualising events within the ‘experience economy’ has encouraged practitioners to explore the concept of experiences within the context of enhancing competitive advantage and organisational success. Generally, research suggests that organizations can add value to their offer by providing memorable and transformational experiences. It has become increasingly clear, however, that not all elements of the consumer experience can be controlled by providers (Verhoef et al., 2009). In fact, the influence from other research disciplines has introduced a wider variety of perspectives and conceptualisations of the phenomenon, which, in turn, has emphasised the interpersonal and emotional nature of experiences. Investigating the festival experience can, therefore, be examined from a variety of perspectives that are divided into six key conceptual approaches:

- i. Process (the event journey, the duration of the experience, how the experience is consumed)
- ii. Content (context-specific attributes of the event experience, nature of the activity and intensity, what one experiences)
- iii. Personal response (cognitive, affective, conative, sensory, and emotional responses)
- iv. Meaning and value (how the experience is interpreted)
- v. Influencers (motivations and expectations)
- vi. Outcomes (satisfaction and consumer behaviour).

(Adapted from de Geus et al., 2016; Jackson, 2014; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009)

For the purpose of this chapter, examining what is important in the festival tourist’s experience at British rock music festivals focuses primarily on ‘content’. The content of an event / festival experience relates to what someone may experience during that event or festival. From an objective and practical perspective, the festival experience consists of a combination of elements that occur within the event’s environment, including physical organisation, event design and programming of activities, place, entertainment, products, services, and comfort amenities (O’Dell, 2007). However, there are also many external and intangible elements that can be consumed, such as online and technological aspects (Hudson & Hudson, 2013; Sundbo &

Darmer, 2008); interpersonal interaction, relationships, *communitas* and other social aspects (O'Dell, 2007; Rihova, Buhalis, Moital & Gouthro, 2013); culture (Andrews & Leopold, 2013; Picard & Robinson, 2006); identity (Connell & Gibson, 2003); the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990); the liminoid and 'out of the ordinary' (de Geus et al., 2016; Turner, 1979); ritual and rites of passage (Turner, 1982); intensity and immersion (Dowd et al., 2004); and learning and transformation (Karlsen, 2007).

Such is the diversity and complexity of the contexts, dimensions, and variety of both tangible and intangible content that to consider them in this chapter all would be difficult, if not an impossible task. This is especially so given that the event or festival experience journey involves a number of phases or stages, from first encountering the event through word of mouth or promotional materials, through the booking process and preparing for the event, travelling to and arriving at the event, to the event itself and then post-event interactions through digital media communication, reliving or extending the experience. Furthermore, the multiple and subjective perspectives of what is experienced at an event adds further complications to understanding the concept. Therefore, owing to this complexity, the research discussed in this chapter is limited to and focuses on only what is most important to festival tourists in their experience of a British rock music festival. That is, it does not consider any pre- or post- festival experiences but, rather, on the experience of the festival itself to elicit a deeper analysis of the core event experience.

Investigating the festival atmosphere

As explained above, the aim of the research discussed in this chapter is to explore what is important to festival tourists in their experience at British rock music festivals. Hence, a qualitative approach was adopted to 'tease out some of the more subterranean beliefs and motivations' (Stewart, Smith & Nicholson, 2003: 214). As part of a larger and more comprehensive study (for example, Brown & Sharpley, 2019), a total of 43 semi-structured interviews were conducted on-site with 124 festival attendees at three British rock festivals. These festivals were selected through convenience sampling as access and permission were granted to conduct the research on site. Interview participants were also selected on a convenience basis and were primarily approached away from any main stages so that dialogue could be heard and recorded. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded using qualitative data analysis software 'NVIVO'.

The respondents were generally asked to discuss various aspects of their entire music festival experience and, specifically, the most important aspects of the festival experience. Whilst areas from their entire festival experience were discussed, this chapter only incorporates the peri-festival experience; that is, what was most important to the festival tourists whilst they are physically at the festival.

From the interviews, the most popular identified feature of the festival experience was the festival atmosphere. It was most commonly referred to as a motivating attribute for attendance, and the most important aspect of the overall experience. To understand more fully the notion of festival atmosphere, respondents were also asked to define what they considered the atmosphere to be, and why it was most important. Not surprisingly, perhaps, they referred to the atmosphere by identifying a number of features that encompassed a combination of experiential elements. In other words, the festival atmosphere was perceived to be the over-arching term that was used to explain multiple and inter-related festival experience attributes: as one festivalgoer said, 'It's just everything about the festival'. Nevertheless, three primary themes were identified in defining the festival atmosphere; music, social aspects, and enjoyment. These core elements were also identified as individually important attributes of the festival experience. Within each area, more specific features were revealed during the interviews, which are now considered in more detail.

Musixscape

Unsurprisingly, music was referred to frequently as one of the most important aspects of the overall festival experience and a key attribute of the festival atmosphere. Music-related features of the festival experience and atmosphere include: the type (artists, genre, and line-up) music; the quality of the performance; physical and sensory responses to music; variety, discovery, and exploration of music; and sharing and engaging in music experiences. To capture all of these music-related aspects of the festival atmosphere, this research refers to them collectively as the musixscape.

The respondents often identified strong associations between the 'type' of music and the festival atmosphere:

It's just everyone getting along and having fun and the same interests music wise.

I will buy the ticket on the strength of one band just because I know the atmosphere will be good.

The performance was also identified as a key element in building the festival atmosphere, with references to sound quality, stage presence, 'feeling' the music, and engagement and involvement with the artists:

What you don't get anywhere else is that the music really comes through the ground and up through you, it's so exhilarating.

Some of the bands really get everyone involved and that really makes a difference, its important - the show that they put on.

I was never a big fan of Slipknot, it was always a bit too much for me but after seeing them and their stage presence... when you put the album on it's just you and them, but when they are alive you've got the atmosphere, everything and everyone there doing the show and it just makes it so much better!

The findings revealed that the type and quality of music at rock festivals had a strong influence on the perceived atmosphere and enjoyment in the festival tourists' experience. However, this was not limited to the bands and artists that they were familiar with, as the variety and discovery of new music was also identified as an important attribute of the experience:

The variety and having the different stages is obviously important.

I like to discover new music, that makes me excited and happy.

Unsurprisingly, as the core activity at the festival, the importance of music in the festival tourist experience is supported in the literature (for example, Childress & Crompton, 1997; Lee, Lee & Choi, 2011). Music has a positive impact on festival attendees' senses and also their involvement with the festival. However, whilst variety and exploration of new music is important to the festival tourist experience, it was not identified directly as a part of the festival atmosphere. Rather, the enjoyment, excitement, and fun that was generated from exploring and discovering new music was attributed to creating the festival atmosphere.

Another important music-related attribute of the festival atmosphere was sharing the music experience with others:

It's great to see other people enjoying it. That's as much entertainment, seeing other people enjoy the bands.

Co-creation and sharing experiences with others has been found in both tourism and event literature to have a critical impact on engagement and future consumer behaviour (Crompton, 2003; Morgan, 2008; Rihova et al., 2013; Son & Lee, 2011). However, this research also found that this influences the festival atmosphere, and is of critical importance to festival tourists' experiences within the context of British rock music festivals.

Generally, festivalgoers acknowledged that music was an important aspect of the festival experience: 'Obviously the music is key because you wouldn't go if you didn't like the music'. At the same time, however, the respondents all indicated that music was only a part of the experience.

I go to a lot of gigs ...but a festival, it's totally different. You are going for the experience. People go for the music because the music is the main part because that's what makes the festival, but I don't believe it's as important.

Because you say, 'oh look they are playing - let's go and see them; are you coming?' And it starts like that, but once you get here, the bands aren't as important.

It's the whole experience really, the music only plays a small part.

This concurs with research conducted by Anderton (2011), Morgan (2008), and Pegg and Patterson (2010) in that festival tourists have multiple and varied motivations to attend that influence their overall experience. Thus, the following section examines another important and contributing attribute of the festival atmosphere; the social dimension.

Socialscape

In defining the festival atmosphere, the respondents often mentioned a variety of social features of the festival experience, including spending time with friends and family; meeting new people; sharing interests with other festival attendees; friendliness and camaraderie; and feeling a sense of community and belonging. These aspects of the experience were also identified as individually important attributes of the festival experience and are defined in this research as the socialscape of the festival.

Spending quality time with friends or family was identified by all festivalgoers as an important attribute of the festival experience and contributed to building the festival atmosphere.

I think the actual core of it is definitely your mates.

In fact, many respondents revealed that they believed this to be more important than the music.

A lot of it is to do with who you go with, the bands are second priority. I think who you are with is the first priority because everyone likes the same kind of music, that's why you're at this particular festival.

Many respondents also identified that meeting new people and making friends contributed to the festival atmosphere, and/or occurred as a result of the atmosphere:

You don't normally talk to random people, but you do here.

The festival atmosphere is a unique environment, it's a lot more open socially to talk to completely random strangers. We feel more comfortable to talk to anyone.

It's a positive atmosphere where you make some good friends.

The opportunities to meet new people and make friends was acknowledged to be a result of shared mindsets, interests, values, and hobbies that were typical amongst other festival tourists who had preferences for and interests in similar music genres:

Most people come in a group, so if you didn't you would want to feel that you have something in common so that you could make new friends. You always go back to your tent at like 1 a.m. smashed with a bunch of new friends, so it is important.

It's about meeting new people where everyone is so like-minded, they all like the same things so it's good to be surrounded by people like that.

I have seen about 50 Deadpool T-shirts and I like Deadpool, so I'm in good company because they like what I like. See you find people into the same music as you but there are also into the same other things as you.

This reflects and concurs with previous research by Anderton (2011), Brennan and Webster (2010), and Gelder and Robinson (2009), in which reference is made to the importance of 'similar mindsets' and the 'likeminded' nature of the collective festivalgoer community, particularly at rock and metal festivals. Sharing commonalities with other festival tourists was also identified as contributing to the sense of community and belonging at a rock music festival:

Rock festivals are always very friendly, there is always a community atmosphere.

There is quite a big community here, everybody is friendly, and anybody will talk to anybody.

I guess it's like a collective community to come together and enjoy something with other people and share an experience with a large community.

There is a collective mindset.

Thus, the sense of community at rock festivals develops from the shared interests and mindsets of those attending the festivals. In fact, some respondents felt as though they had shared similar previous experiences, such as being bullied or feeling marginalised, and that that they were somehow different to 'the norm' in society. Indeed, many expressed that they felt accepted within the festival community, and that they did not feel like the 'odd one out':

But I like rock festivals because I want to be surrounded by people like me.

There's an underdog type of element that goes on...we are all fucking misfits aren't we...I want to say persecution but not persecution... just like everyone knows where everyone else has come from so everyone has the same understanding, there is no real discrimination like everybody gets on regardless of what happens.

Fantastic people that are like us that don't look at us because we like metal and have tattoos and piercings. Everybody is friendly, and people will help you no matter what.

The atmosphere is when you don't feel like the odd one out.

This reflects the research conducted by Gorman-Murray (2009) and Stone (2009), who report on festivals bringing people together and promoting a sense of *communitas* (Finkel, 2010). This was aided by the caring and friendly nature of festival tourists. Various stories were told about how they help each other out, such as putting tents up, offering toilet rolls, finding lost wallets, and rescuing those in distress:

We are more tolerant and understanding of the world. We are passionate about lots of things, and people's well-being is one of them. We all want to go out, we want to have fun and enjoy ourselves and we want to help those who can't.

What you tend to find us festivalgoers are definitely more open-minded as people, we are not really racist or prejudiced in any way shape or form, and we are kind of a bit more civil.

Friendliness and camaraderie amongst festival attendees was also associated with establishing trust and feeling safe at the festival, contributing to the festival atmosphere:

You get along with everyone, there is no bother, you don't have to worry about anyone trying to pick a fight with you.

Everybody looks after everybody else.

Last year I seen some guy drop his wallet and another guy picked up and went running to give it back. That pretty much sums up the community here.

The friendliness and camaraderie at festivals is confirmed in the literature by Stone (2009) and Turner (1982), whilst Esu and Arrey's (2009) research demonstrate the importance of feeling safe and secure in the festival experience. Sharing things in common with other festival tourists, and the feeling of safety and security that was associated with the festival experience, was important to the overall experience and formed the festival atmosphere.

Another aspect of the socialscape was how important it was for festival tourists to share the experience with others, whether that be their friends, family, strangers, or the festival community as a whole:

It's about being in the same crowd, enjoying the same experience, watching the same bands together.

Consistent with previous studies by Larson (2009), Rihova et al. (2013) and Van Winkle and Bueddefeld (2016), these results demonstrate the importance of shared experiences and co-creation in the festival experience. However, the respondents often suggested that the atmosphere at rock festivals was different than at other music festivals:

There is no kind of snobbery around, it's not like you don't belong here or whatever everyone is just really welcoming and embracing and I don't know if you necessarily get that in other festivals.

Late this morning we saw someone going out for a run all kitted up and no one blinked an eye. If that person had gone to V Festival they would be getting looked at and stared down at, it's just here no one cares, everyone is here for the same reason.

I think you tend to find it is more 'family orientated' as in us rockers are a family.

I've been to Leeds Festival and I quite like it, it is good, but it didn't feel quite the same because there was a bigger mix of different people that weren't like me. I just didn't have anything in common with them, I guess. It was a bit more isolated, particularly in the arena watching the bands. It wasn't like I was enjoying it with everybody else, I just felt like I was on my own, I just didn't feel like I connected with other people.

From the results, it can be suggested that the atmosphere is experienced differently by rock music festival tourists. However, more research is required to determine whether the festival

atmosphere is constructed of the same experiential features at all music festivals, or if this is experienced differently at other festivals. What is clear in this research, however, is the importance of the socialscape to the festival experience and its role in creating the festival atmosphere. That is, the research revealed that it is important for festival tourists to spend time with their friends and family, to meet new people and make friends, to feel part of the festival community through shared interests and to bond with others at the festival. Much of this, however, cannot be managed or controlled by festival organisers; it is co-created between those attending festivals. Thus, festival organisers are able to only support and assist in facilitating these opportunities within the festival environment. Whilst the role of the socialscape and musixscape in the festival atmosphere has been explored, there is also a third dimension: enjoyment.

Enjoyment

Besides the music and social elements of the festival experience, respondents discussed the importance of enjoyment and fun at the festival. They referred to ‘good times’, the ‘buzz’, ‘being happy’, ‘relaxed’, and ‘chilled’ when describing the festival atmosphere and, again, these were also identified as critical components of the overall experience. The sense of happiness and enjoyment at the festival was associated by respondents with the sense of freedom that the festival provided:

It’s an element of freedom, where you are just enclosed but also surrounded by like-minded people. I think it’s the whole thing that the rules are a bit more relaxed at the festival as well isn’t it.

You can be yourself and be happy and chilled.

The atmosphere is relaxed, a bit more natural, I think even the people are more laid back. It’s not rules, rules, rules, you can have fun and enjoy yourself.

The freedom associated with the festival environment and atmosphere enabled festival tourists to feel as though they could invert their behaviour compared with the everyday. This confirms previous research regarding festive behaviour and the liminality of festival spaces (Anderton,

2011; Pielichaty, 2015). The respondents went on to explain how they behaved differently at festivals.

When you're camping at a festival it is a real let go of all the baggage. There is a real freedom about it that you can only get in that type of environment that is key to relaxing and having a good time.

I think there is a standard mentality when you look at music festivals where you wouldn't act the way you act at a festival if you are just down the pub with your mates. For me for instance, I get completely off the rails and I know I shouldn't act that way in normal society, where a festival seems to give you a bit more leeway than normal but you are aware of it, you are aware that you have a bit more of a social give than when you're at the pub.

Whilst respondents admitted that they behaved differently at the festival, they also associated this with being 'more themselves', as though everyday life limited their authentic self, whilst the festival enabled them to enjoy themselves more. Therefore, it is suggested, in line with Kim and Jamal (2007) and Szmigin et al.'s (2017) research, that music festivals provide a liminal space wherein festival-goers feel free and can express their identity in a safe place that reflects their interests.

Everyone here is relaxed and promotes a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere – you're comfortable to be yourselves and speak your mind.

The fun and enjoyment felt at the festival was also discussed with reference to stories about previous experiences that were compared with circuses, pantomimes, and surreal acts of the unexpected:

For some reason at the UK festivals, it is about how stupid you are. There is always some idiot a hundred yards away that's done something dumber, and then you go another hundred yards and [it's worse].

Mankini knees was my favourite last year! There was this guy in massive biker boots with massive great big hair wearing a Mankini.

We saw someone walking around yesterday with no shoes on, he was f***ing w***ered in the mud and the rain with all of his stuff off, and it was ten in the morning.

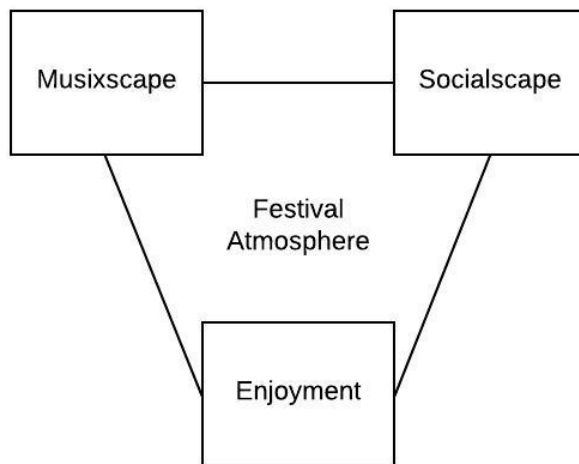
Witnessing unusual behaviour at the festival is, therefore, another form of entertainment that provides feelings of fun and enjoyment. When respondents discussed the importance of enjoyment and freedom at the festival, it was always associated with the music or social elements. In other words, it is the combination of music and people that creates enjoyment and fun at the festival.

Mine is the atmosphere of, like, you know that everybody is enjoying themselves and having a good time, you can be with your little bubble and you're enjoying it, and you know other people are in a little bubble of their own and enjoying it, then you do get the crossover of people talking to each other like they overheard someone say something and they just join in the conversation without anybody getting angry.

I like the atmosphere, it's more of a party environment rather than everyone just in a big field getting trashed, it's more of people getting together and enjoying music together, there is more of a community feel.

Therefore, this research suggests that co-creation involves immersing in and engaging with the festival atmosphere through the musixscape, socialscape, and enjoyment. What festival tourists value most during the festival experience can therefore be summarised as in Figure 22.1 below. This visual representation demonstrates the overlapping values and the relationship between the experiential attributes that occur or are felt during the festival. At the same time, the three main components that are valued by festival tourists are also what creates the festival atmosphere. Therefore, from this research, it is evident that most important to the festival tourist is the festival atmosphere, which comprises the musixscape (music-related experiential aspects of the festival), socialscape (social-related experiential aspects of the festival), and enjoyment.

Figure 22.1: The Festival Atmosphere



Conclusions

This chapter has explored what is most important to festival tourists in their experience of British rock festivals. The results revealed that of most value is the festival atmosphere, which comprises three main components: the musixscape, the socialscape, and enjoyment. More specifically, through qualitative interviews with festival tourists, the findings suggest that the relationship between music and social networks at the festival creates enjoyable experiences, which feeds into the festival atmosphere. Whilst the festival atmosphere has been recognised in previous festival literature, it has not been sufficiently explored to understand its value in the festival tourist experience, not least in the context of British rock music festivals. Therefore, this research in this chapter makes an important contribution to the extant literature.

Whilst some of the aspects of the festival atmosphere can be managed by festival organisers, this research demonstrates that there are also many experiential attributes that are not always under the control of festival organisers, such as who festival tourists share their experience with, and how they bond with others. Therefore, opportunities to market or promote such attributes may be limited, or more challenging to advertise. However, managers may consider how the atmosphere can be used to promote and stimulate preferred consumer behaviour.

Owing to the complex nature of the festival experience, the discussion and research in this chapter is limited to conceptualising the festival atmosphere as the most important experiential dimension at British rock music festivals, and only examines the core or peri- experience phase

of the festival tourist journey. In other words, it has not examined the other important attributes of the festival experience, nor the wider experience journey that occurs before or after the festival. Thus, it is suggested that further research is undertaken to explore other aspects of the festival tourist experience, such as pre- and post- experiences, especially acknowledging the growing influence of online digital media on festival tourist experiences.

The findings have also indicated that festival atmospheres may be perceived differently at different types of music festivals and, thus, it is suggested that future research should examine the atmosphere at other festivals of different sizes, locations, and music genres. Owing to the importance of the festival atmosphere to the festivalgoer experience at British rock music festivals, further analysis of the influence of this experiential dimension on motivation and consumer behaviour may also provide critical knowledge for festival organisers to strategically improve and manage the festival experience.

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