The Impact of UNESCO Sites on International Tourism: The Relationship Between Cultural Heritage and International Tourism Arrivals

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https://doi.org/10.53465/CEECBE.2025.9788022552257.363-375

Abstract: Cultural heritage represents a key factor in destination attractiveness, with UNESCO World Heritage Sites playing a significant role in tourists decision-making processes. The aim of this paper was to explore the relationship between the number of UNESCO sites and the intensity of international tourism, measured by the number of tourist arrivals. A quantitative approach was adopted, using an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model, based on 2019 data from UNESCO and the World Bank. The analysis suggests that each additional UNESCO site is associated with an average increase of 2.03 million international tourist arrivals, with the model explaining 57.09% of the variance. While the results emphasize the potential contribution of cultural heritage to tourism development, they also highlight the need for cautious interpretation due to methodological limitations and the absence of causality testing.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, UNESCO World Heritage, Tourism Demand, Destination Attractiveness, Economic Development, Regression Analysis

JEL Classification codes: Z32

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the primary drivers of global economic growth and socio-economic development. According to Smith (2015), it has become one of the largest sectors of the global economy, contributing more than 10% of global GDP and employing approximately one in ten people worldwide. Beyond its economic indicators, tourism also fosters cultural exchange, supports infrastructure development, and strengthens local communities.

An important concept in the analysis of tourism is the destination theory developed by Buhalis (2000). This theory emphasises the importance of a holistic approach to destination development, with the key element being the synergistic effect between natural, cultural and economic resources. According to this theory, it is important to create experiences for tourists that are not only attractive, but also sustainable and of long-term benefit to local communities.

Another relevant concept is the concept of "overtourism" (Peeters et al., 2018), which highlights the negative impacts of excessive tourism, including infrastructure congestion, environmental degradation, and disruptions to local 'residents' daily lives. These issues call for effective planning and the implementation of sustainable tourism policies that consider local specificities and promote a balance between development and conservation.

Cultural heritage plays a key role in tourism by offering authentic experiences and values that attract tourists globally. According to Novacká et al. (2020), the preservation and presentation of cultural heritage not only contribute to tourism development but also promote sustainability and ensure the protection of these values for future generations.

UNESCO World Heritage Sites are widely recognized as unique destinations of outstanding cultural and historical significance (UNESCO, 2025). Existing research indicates that their presence may positively affect international tourist arrivals, thereby contributing to both economic and social development (see e.g., Yang et al., 2010; Su & Lin, 2014).

The main objective of this paper is to explore the relationship between the number of UNESCO sites and the number of international tourists visiting these countries. The data were drawn from UNESCO and World Bank databases, and a linear regression model was used to process the results. The year 2019 was chosen to avoid bias caused by the constraints associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly affected global tourism.

The paper focuses on a quantitative assessment of the importance of UNESCO sites as a factor influencing tourism. The results of the analysis can serve as a basis for policy making aimed at the use of cultural heritage in tourism development, while highlighting the importance of balancing its protection and promotion.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural heritage is a key part of humanity's identity and historical consciousness. It includes not only material objects such as historical monuments, buildings, works of art or archaeological sites, but also intangible elements such as languages, traditions, folklore or craftsmanship. The protection of these values is important for the preservation of cultural diversity and the transmission of knowledge to future generations (Gašparová, 2013).

World Heritage, as defined by UNESCO, includes cultural and natural values that are of particular importance to humanity. Sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List are assigned a specific category depending on their nature and value. The categorization helps to define what kind of protection and support is needed to preserve these sites for future generations. The diagram shows that World Heritage Sites are divided into two main categories:

Tab. 1 UNESCO World Heritage Division



Source: Taher Tolou Del, M. S., Saleh Sedghpour, B., & Kamali Tabrizi, S., 2020

- 1. Natural heritage includes natural phenomena and areas with outstanding natural features, such as national parks or geological formations.
- 2. Cultural heritage is divided into two sub-categories based on the chart:



Tab. 2 Division of cultural heritage by UNESCO

Source: Wan. M. W. I. et al., 2018

- Tangible heritage, which can be movable (e.g. paintings, sculptures, furniture) or immovable, these objects are firmly linked to a specific place and their conservation requires a comprehensive approach involving restoration. (e.g. historic buildings, archaeological sites) (Gašparová, 2013).
- Intangible heritage, includes living traditions and expressions that are integral to the identity of communities. Intangible cultural heritage, which is passed down between generations and is continuously created in response to the external environment, interaction with nature and one's own history, provides individuals with a sense of identity and continuity. This process also promotes respect for the diversity of cultures and human creativity. According to the Convention, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is manifested mainly in the areas of living traditions and expressions, as well as in language, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festivals, knowledge and practices related to nature and the universe, as well as in traditional crafts, folklore, music, dance, as well as social customs, rituals and festivals (Paprčka, 2014).

This classification aims to facilitate understanding of heritage diversity and its importance for conservation and sustainable development (Smith, 2006).

Recent studies further examine the factors that moderate the impact of UNESCO status on tourism. Jiménez-Beltrán, López-Guzmán, and Millán (2021) explore the role of accessibility and marketing in Spain and conclude that UNESCO inscription alone does not guarantee increased tourist arrivals. Their findings highlight the necessity of coordinated destination management. Similarly, Figueiredo, Raschi, and Patuelli (2022) analyze peripheral European regions and find that tourism benefits of World Heritage status depend on complementary regional policies, accessibility, and existing tourism demand.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was founded in 1945 to promote peace and security by fostering international cooperation in the fields of education, science, culture and communication. One of UNESCO's main objectives is to protect the world's cultural and natural heritage. This objective is implemented through the World Heritage List, which was established in 1972 through the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (UNESCO, 1972).

Research on the relationship between UNESCO sites and tourism highlights the importance of these sites in attracting tourists and promoting economic development. A paper by Su and Lin (2014) analyzed the impact of the inscription of sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List on tourist arrivals in China and found a positive effect on international arrivals. Similarly, Yang, Lin, and Han (2010) examined the Chinese market and identified that UNESCO listing increases the attractiveness of a destination to international visitors.

In a European context, a study by Poria, Reichel and Biran (2006) investigated the motivations of tourists visiting World Heritage sites and found that personal meaning and perceived value of a place are key factors influencing a visit. Also, Cuccia, Guccio and Rizzo (2016) analyzed Italian UNESCO sites and concluded that inscription has a positive but heterogeneous impact on tourist demand, depending on regional characteristics.

Despite the positive aspects associated with UNESCO inscription, some studies point to potential negative consequences, such as overtourism and associated environmental and social problems. Poria et al. (2013) highlight the need for effective management of these sites to ensure sustainability and protection of cultural heritage.

2 METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the paper is to examine the relationship between the number of UNESCO sites and the number of international tourists visiting these countries. Based on the objective and the available data sources, we set the following research question and its associated hypotheses:

VO: What is the effect of the number of UNESCO sites on international tourist arrivals?

Main hypothesis:

- H0 (null hypothesis): The number of UNESCO sites has no effect on the number of international tourist arrivals in a given country.
- H1 (alternative hypothesis): The number of UNESCO sites has an effect on the number of international tourists in a given country.

Secondary hypothesis:

- H0 (null hypothesis): Countries with a higher number of UNESCO sites do not show differences in the variability of the number of tourists.
- H1(alternative hypothesis): Countries with a higher number of UNESCO sites show variability in the number of tourists.

The analysis focuses on 2019 and includes data from 141 UNESCO–registered countries around the world; the analysis is adjusted for the 28 countries ratified on the UNESCO list for which there is no available data on the number of international tourist arrivals from the World Bank. These are countries such as Afghanistan, Congo, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Libya and others. We used a quantitative approach with an emphasis on regression analysis.

The mathematical representation of the regression analysis can be represented in the form of a regression equation that expresses the relationship between the dependent variable, the number of tourist arrivals in 2019, and the independent variable, the number of UNESCO sites.

The regression equation, in this case, takes the form:

Arrivals_2019 = $\beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Number_of_UNESCO} + \epsilon$

Where:

- Arrivals_2019 number of tourist arrivals in 2019 (dependent variable),
- Number_of_UNESCO number of UNESCO sites in a given country (independent variable),
- β_0 constant (intercept) of the regression equation, which represents the value of the number of tourist arrivals if the number of UNESCO sites were zero,
- β₁ coefficient for the variable Number_of_UNESCO, which represents how much the number of tourist arrivals will increase if the number of UNESCO sites increases by one,
- ε the residual (error component), which represents the difference between the actual and predicted values of the number of tourism arrivals.

The used data comes from two main sources: the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, which provides information on the number of UNESCO sites in each country, and the World Bank, which provides data on the number of international tourist arrivals in each destination for 2019. These data were combined and analyzed to identify significant relationships between variables.

The regression analysis was carried out using the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model, which allows quantifying the relationship between the dependent variable (Arrivals_2019) and the independent variable (Number_of_UNESCO).

The model was evaluated in Gretl software, which allows detailed analysis of model fit and statistical significance. Key metrics include the coefficient of determination (R-squared), F-statistics and p-values of individual regression coefficients. The regression results provide a detailed insight into the impact of UNESCO sites on tourism.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The statistical analysis developed through the linear regression model identifies the relationships between the variables, one dependent variable and one independent variable.

The results of the regression analysis, shown in Table 3, clearly indicate the importance of UNESCO sites as a significant factor influencing international tourism.

Tab. 3 Linear regression analysis model

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Model 1: OLS, using observations 1-141
Dependent variable: Arrivals_2019
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	coefficie	nt std.error	t-ratio	p-value
const	-2,93748e	+06 2,19656e+06	-1,337	0,1833
Number_of_UNESCO~	2,03394e	+06 149560	13,60	2,57e-27 ***
Mean dependent var	14891953	S.D. dependent var	31833619	
Sum squared resid	6,09e+16	S.E. of regression	20927300	
R-squared	0,570917	Adjusted R-squared	0,567830	
F(1, 139)	184,9468	P-value(F)	2,57e-27	
Log-likelihood	-2575,839	Akaike criterion	5155,678	
Schwarz criterion	5161,575	Hannan-Quinn	5158,074	

Source: own processing via Gretl

The regression analysis carried out using the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method focuses on examining the relationship between the number of sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List and the number of tourist arrivals in 2019. This model uses 141 observations and has one independent variable, the number of UNESCO sites, while the dependent variable is the number of tourist arrivals in 2019 (Arrivals_2019).

The constant (intercept) is -2.93748e+06, which corresponds to approximately -2.94 million. This figure represents the expected number of tourist arrivals if the country had no UNESCO sites. The negative value indicates that the model may not sufficiently cover all factors influencing the number of tourist arrivals, and therefore it would be advisable to consider other variables that would better explain the phenomenon. The standard error of the constant is quite high (2.19656e+06), indicating considerable uncertainty in the estimation of this parameter. The p-value for the constant is 0.1833, indicating that the constant is not statistically significant at the usual level of significance (e.g., 0.05) and therefore does not have a significant effect on explaining the number of arrivals.

The coefficient for the Number_of_UNESCO transformation has a value of 2.03394e+06, which means that each additional UNESCO site is associated with an average increase in tourist arrivals of approximately 2.03 million. This result is highly statistically significant because the p-value is 2.57e-27, which is much lower than the usual thresholds (0.05 or 0.01), and indicates a very strong association between the number of UNESCO sites and the number of arrivals. The presence of UNESCO sites is likely to act as a factor that significantly increases tourist interest. These sites symbolize uniqueness, authenticity and cultural value, making them irresistible to international and domestic visitors.

The t-ratio for this variable is 13.60, indicating that the coefficient is many times larger than its standard error (149560), further confirming its significance.

One of the key indicators of model quality is the R-squared (R²), which measures how much of the variability in the dependent variable (Arrivals_2019) is explained by the independent variable (Number_of_UNESCO). The R-squared value (0.570917) shows that the model explains approximately 57.09% of the variability in the number of tourist arrivals based on the number of UNESCO sites. This means that the model has a relatively good ability to explain the variability in the dependent variable, although there still remains a significant amount of variability that is influenced by other factors that are not accounted for by the model. The adjusted R-squared (0.567830) decreases slightly, which is expected as it corrects the original R-squared due to the number of variables used.

Despite the statistically significant results, this model should be interpreted with caution due to its simplicity. The analysis includes only one explanatory variable – the number of UNESCO sites – and omits potentially confounding factors that influence international tourism. These include GDP per capita, tourism infrastructure, political stability, population size, and national promotional strategies. As Frey and Steiner (2011) explain, World Heritage designation alone is not sufficient to attract tourists unless it is complemented by accessibility and supportive policies. Furthermore, the use of cross-sectional data from a single year (2019) prevents any inference of causality. As Yang, Lin, and Han (2010) emphasize in their study on China, pre-existing tourism attractiveness may be a factor in acquiring UNESCO status, suggesting a possible reverse causality. Therefore, the observed relationship is better described as an association rather than a cause-and-effect link.

The F-test of the model reaches 184.9468, with a p-value of 2.57e-27, indicating that the full model is statistically significant and the independent variable has a significant effect in explaining the variability of the dependent variable. This result allows us to reject the null hypothesis which would claim that the number of UNESCO sites has no effect.

The results suggest that the number of UNESCO sites is a significant determinant of tourist arrivals. This relationship also makes sense from an economic and practical point of view. UNESCO sites are globally recognised brands that signal the high value of cultural heritage

and natural beauty. Tourists are willing to expend considerable resources to visit such sites, which is reflected in the growing number of visitors to destinations that have such sites.

The variability that is not explained by the model (approximately 42.91%) can be attributed to other factors such as:

- Quality of infrastructure and accessibility of UNESCO sites,
- The marketing strategies of each country,
- Security aspects, Political stability or pandemic constraints,
- Overall economic conditions of tourists (e.g., availability of air links, exchange rates).

The regression analysis clearly showed that the number of UNESCO sites is a significant factor influencing tourist arrivals. This finding is consistent with the assumption that cultural heritage and unique natural sites serve as a strong motivating factor for international tourism. The results highlight the need to preserve and promote UNESCO sites as a key asset for tourism development.

Further, to verify the impact of the number of UNESCO sites on tourism, we analyzed the relationship between the number of these sites in each country and the number of tourist arrivals in 2019 graphically, using a scatter plot with least squares fit. This is a plot that displays the individual data points along with the estimated linear regression line using the least squares method. We have illustrated the relationship in the following figure 1.



Fig. 1 Scatter plot with least squares fit

Figure 1 shows the relationship between the Number_of_UNESCO (on the X-axis) and the number of Arrivals_2019 (on the Y-axis). Figure 1 also shows the points that represent each country, with each country having a certain number of UNESCO sites and a corresponding number of tourists in a given year.

The trend line, calculated using the least squares method, is shown in orange and represents the linear relationship between these variables. The equation of the trend line has the form:

(2)

Source: own processing via Gretl

The trend line shows a positive linear relationship between the number of UNESCO sites and the number of tourists. This relationship is consistent with the hypothesised "UNESCO effect ", according to which the inscription of sites on the World Heritage List increases tourist interest in a given country.

The straight line guideline (2,03e+06X) means that each additional UNESCO site increases the number of arrivals by an average of 2.03 million tourists. This figure is statistically significant and indicates the strong impact of UNESCO sites on tourism. Based on previous regression calculations ($R^2 = 57.09\%$), we know that the model explains approximately 57% of the variability in tourist arrivals based on the number of UNESCO sites alone. This is a relatively strong relationship, but the remaining almost 43% of the variability may be due to other factors. The value of the constant (-2.94e+06X) suggests that if a country had no UNESCO sites (X=0), it is assumed that it would have a negative value of tourist arrivals, but this is in fact not realistic (the reason for this is the statistical method and the non-inclusion of other factors). Visible outliers, such as countries with an extremely high number of UNESCO sites (more than 50), are countries like Italy, China or France. These destinations have a unique position and combine a significant historical heritage, developed infrastructure and massive international campaigns to promote tourism. Countries with fewer UNESCO sites but nevertheless high tourist numbers (e.g. USA and Canada) may be examples of destinations that have strong attractions of a different nature (e.g. urban tourism). The positive coefficient of the straight line directive supports the hypothesis that the UNESCO site is a value-added for the destination and contributes significantly to the country's tourist attractiveness.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that UNESCO sites vary significantly in terms of their popularity and capacity. Some sites such as the Historic Centre of Rome or the Great Wall of China receive millions of visitors annually, while others may remain relatively unknown. Cuccia, Guccio, and Rizzo (2016), in their study on Italian regions, confirm that the impact of World Heritage listing on tourism demand is heterogeneous and strongly depends on regional infrastructure and policy support.

The fact that the model does not explain all the variability ($R^2 \approx 57\%$) means that other factors such as marketing, infrastructure or country accessibility must be part of a comprehensive assessment. The significant p-value (from previous calculations) indicates that the results are not random and the relationship is statistically significant.

Figure 1 clearly shows that the number of UNESCO sites positively influences the number of international tourists. This relationship is significant, but not exclusive - a UNESCO site alone is not enough to ensure massive tourism. Therefore, these sites need to be complemented by quality tourism infrastructure and appropriate tourism management strategies.

The coefficient values in the model are statistical estimates with precision determined by standard errors. In plotting the graph, some of these estimates may be simplified, especially if they are only used to illustrate the relationship.

To support and confirm the previous results of the regression analysis, a correlation matrix was created to illustrate the relationships between the number of UNESCO sites, the number of tourist arrivals in 2019, and another variable representing country categorization. The correlation matrix, shown in Figure 2, visualizes the interconnections between these variables and allows a better understanding of their relationships.

Fig. 2 The correlation matrix



Source: own processing via Gretl

The correlation matrix shows the relationships between the three variables: Arrivals_2019, Number_of_UNESCO and country. On both the *x* and *y* axes, the variables are the same, which allows a comparison of the correlation between them. There is a high positive correlation between the Arrivals_2019 and the Number_of_UNESCO. A value of 0.8 indicates that countries with more UNESCO sites tend to attract more tourists. This relationship is strong, as confirmed by the previous regression analysis. The correlation between Arrivals_2019 and the country variable is very low (0.1), indicating that country categorization does not have a significant relationship with the number of tourists. This variable is unlikely to have a significant effect on the observed arrivals. There is no correlation between the Number_of_UNESCO and the variable "country" (0.0). This suggests that country categorization is not related to the number of UNESCO sites. Each variable has a correlation with itself on the diagonal, which is always 1.0. These values are shown in dark red in the matrix.

Figure 2 supports the results of the regression analysis and shows that the most significant relationship is between the number of UNESCO sites and the number of tourists in 2019. Low or zero correlation coefficient values between other variables indicate a weak or no relationship, allowing us to focus on the key factor: the impact of UNESCO sites on tourism.

The results are in line with previous research showing the positive impact of UNESCO sites on tourism (Su & Lin, 2014; Yang, Lin & Han, 2010). Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the number of UNESCO sites alone may not be a sufficient explanation for the variation in tourist arrivals. For example, a study by Cuccia, Guccio & Rizzo (2016) found that the effect of UNESCO inscription varies across regions depending on infrastructure, marketing strategies and accessibility.

The analysis also does not take into account the phenomenon of overtourism, which is a significant factor in destinations with a high concentration of UNESCO sites. Venice and Machu Picchu, for example, face overtourism, leading to problems with monument conservation, infrastructure congestion, and a deterioration in the quality of life of local residents (Peeters et al., 2018). Future research should include variables related to the quality of the visitor experience and the level of regulation of tourism.

Another potential extension of the research is to analyse whether factors such as GDP per capita, political stability or accessibility of transport infrastructure also influence the number of

tourists. It could turn out that in some countries the UNESCO site plays a key role (e.g., developing countries), while in others (e.g., the U.S.) other tourist attractions dominate (Frey & Steiner, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the regression analysis, we can clearly reject the null hypothesis (H0) and accept the alternative hypothesis (H1). The coefficient for the variable Number_of_UNESCO sites reached 2.03394e+06 and was statistically significant at the p-value level of 2.57e-27. This means that the Number_of_UNESCO sites have a positive and statistically significant effect on the number of international tourists in a given country. Each additional Number_of_UNESCO site leads to an average increase in the number of tourists of approximately 2.03 million.

This result suggests that UNESCO sites are positively associated with international tourism arrivals and may act as an important component of destination attractiveness. However, due to the limitations of the model and the lack of causal testing, their role should be understood as one factor among many influencing tourism flows.

Based on the available data, we can also evaluate a secondary hypothesis. The variation in the number of tourists was analyzed using the standard error of regression (S.E. of regression), which reached a value of 20 927 300, which is a relatively high value. This high variability may indicate differences between countries depending on the number of UNESCO sites, but a more accurate assessment of this hypothesis would require additional analysis, for example, comparing the variability between groups of countries with low and high Numbers_of_UNESCO sites.

However, based on the current results, it can be said that countries with a higher number of UNESCO sites tend to have higher numbers of tourists. The extent of variability in international tourist arrivals is probably also related to other factors such as the quality of infrastructure, marketing strategies and the security situation.

The importance of UNESCO sites in influencing tourism is clear and is confirmed in the wider context. The positive correlation between the Number_of_UNESCO and the Arrivals_2019 underlines that these sites serve not only as symbols of cultural and natural heritage, but also as key points of interest for travellers from all over the world. This effect is particularly important for countries seeking to increase their attractiveness on the global tourism market.

At the same time, however, it is important to stress that the mere existence of UNESCO sites is not enough to maximise the potential benefits for tourism. The results show relatively high variability in the number of tourist arrivals, suggesting that the number of UNESCO sites is only one of many factors that influence tourists' decision-making. Other factors include the quality of tourist infrastructure, the effectiveness of marketing strategies aimed at promoting these sites, as well as the overall security and political situation in the country.

Countries wishing to make effective use of their UNESCO heritage should therefore pay attention to the comprehensive development of tourism. This includes investment in infrastructure, working with local communities to protect sites, developing services for tourists and targeted international campaigns. In addition, it can be useful to use digital tools and social networks to raise awareness of these sites and to attract a younger generation of travellers.

Based on the results of this analysis, we can recommend further research that would include a more detailed examination of the variability factors, as well as expanding the dataset to include additional variables. Analysis of differences between regions or groups of countries based on geographic location, per capita income or type of heritage (cultural, natural) could provide deeper insights into how best to integrate UNESCO sites into tourism development strategies.

In conclusion, UNESCO sites play a key role in building a country's attractiveness in the international tourism market. However, their potential can only be fully exploited if they are supported by strategic measures that take into account the diverse needs and expectations of tourists. These findings underline the importance of protecting and developing cultural and natural heritage, not only in terms of its value to humanity, but also as a tool for promoting economic development and strengthening national identity.

Our results showed that the Number_of_UNESCO sites has a significant and statistically significant effect on the number of international tourist arrivals – Arrivals_2019. This fact confirms that cultural and natural heritage is a strong motivating factor for travelers and has the potential to promote the economic development of countries (Poria, Reichel & Cohen, 2013).

For policymakers, we recommend:

- Implement sustainable tourism strategies to avoid the negative impacts of mass tourism at UNESCO sites (Dodds & Butler, 2019).
- Improve infrastructure at lesser-known UNESCO sites in order to distribute tourist flows more evenly.
- Encourage digital marketing and innovative forms of tourism, such as virtual tours of UNESCO sites, which can help alleviate over-visitation (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015).

Future research could focus on the dynamics following the COVID-19 pandemic and how demand for cultural heritage is evolving in the post-pandemic era (UNWTO, 2023).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This contribution is the result of the internal grant project A-25-102/3020-02 of the Bratislava University of Economics and Business for young pedagogical staff, scientific and PhD. students entitled *Digital technology in tourism: Generation Z in the spotlight.*

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