

ELECTRONIC MARKETING – ITS IMPACT ON THE PERFORMANCE OF SMES IN THE TOURISM SECTOR IN MALDIVES

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ABSTRACT

SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives contribute a lot to the economy of the country. The businesses in the industry are rapidly growing leading to high competition among them (Ministry of Tourism, Republic of Maldives, 2020). Hence, all businesses try their best to be successful and competitive in the industry. Electronic marketing (e-marketing) is one way to improve the performance of the business. The purpose of this study is to determine how e-marketing impacts the performance of SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives. For this study, a quantitative survey was conducted by distributing online questionnaires to the guesthouses in the Maldives and 240 responses were collected. The deductive approach was used and the study was done based on the cross-sectional research as this study explains the impact of e-marketing on the performance of SMEs (guesthouses) in the Maldives at present. Thus, the specific objectives were to check the relationship between electronic word of mouth, website quality, email marketing, and social media marketing on the performance of SMEs (guesthouses) in the Maldives. Findings show that electronic word of mouth and social media marketing impacts the performance of the SMEs (guesthouses) in the Maldives. On the other hand, email marketing and website quality do not influence performance.

Keywords: *E-Marketing, Electronic Word of Mouth, Website Quality, Email Marketing, Social Media Marketing, SMEs, Performance.*

Introduction

The Maldives is a developing country and the economy of the Maldives is mostly based on tourism, fishing, and agriculture (Atolls of Maldives, 2020). Tourists visit the Maldives to spend their holiday on the beautiful beaches of the Maldives and learn about the Maldivian culture. According to Maldives.net.mv (2018), the number of tourists that visited the Maldives reached up to 1.4 million. In the Maldives, there are several Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in a different sector. Most of the SMEs are under wholesale and retail trade, construction, real estate activities, and the tourism sector. From SMEs in the Maldives, GDP is high in the tourism sector.

According to Maldives Times (2017), SMEs in the tourism sector contributed 22.6% to the national GDP while 14% from construction, 4.7% from real estate activities, and 3.5% from wholesale and trade. SMEs in the tourism sector are mostly fallen into accommodation facilities from which there are main four categories which are resorts, guesthouses, hotels, and safari vessels (Zahir, 2019). Most guesthouses are located in the inhabited islands, resorts in the private islands, and hotels in the city (Zahir, 2019). The statistics show that number of accommodation establishments are growing over the years (Ministry of Tourism, Republic of Maldives, 2020). There are 166 resorts, 13 hotels, 631 guesthouses, and 158 safari vessels registered in the Maldives by March 2020 (Ministry of Tourism, Republic of Maldives, 2020). According to the Maldives hotel industry survey 2019 conducted by Horwath (2019), guesthouses are rapidly growing over the past years, contributing to the growth and development of the tourism industry. According to the survey, guesthouses grew 14% in the year 2019 compared to 2018.

The first guesthouse was opened in Maafushi, an island near the Male' city in the year 2010 to develop local tourism, and ever since guesthouses have been increasing and contributing to the Maldives' economy (Hotelier Maldives, 2016). Resorts are more like luxury destinations, and their prices are too high compared to guesthouses, where services in the guesthouses are

at economical rates (Zahir, 2019). However, guesthouses are at economical rates, and they also offer many tourist activities such as water sports, sightseeing, restaurants, leisure, shopping, and many more to entertain them (Hotelier Maldives, 2016; Zahir, 2019).

Many businesses are using electronic marketing to do their business activities. Electronic Marketing (E-Marketing) can be defined as using the internet to carry out marketing strategies and activities (Parminder Kaur, 2015). The internet has become an essential component in our daily life, whether it is to purchase a product or gather information. Likewise, SMEs in the Maldives also use e-marketing to promote their businesses. As they mostly target tourists from different countries, the best way to reach them is through the internet. SMEs like guesthouses in the Maldives use electronic word of mouth, social media, website, email, etc. to advertise their business.

Problem Statement

The tourism industry in the Maldives is expanding, creating healthy competition between the businesses in the industry. Every enterprise in the industry is trying their best to compete with each other. Therefore, this has created a will for every business to find better ways to succeed and lead the market. There are resort tourism and local tourism in the Maldives. Resorts are much expensive, and mostly local tourism is chosen by budget travellers, and guesthouses include in that category (Hotelier Maldives, 2016). However, guesthouses are low cost, and they offer services to their customers to enjoy their stay. Guesthouses are located in inhabited islands which means people who want to see the culture and lifestyle of the Maldivians can easily do so while also enjoying the sun, sand, and sea if they stayed in guesthouses (Hotelier Maldives, 2016). Moreover, guesthouses offer services/activities such as diving, water sports, restaurants, souvenir sales, and arts and crafts (Hotelier Maldives, 2016). However, it seems that many tourists are not aware of such guesthouses and their activities and services that they offer.

SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives also use e-marketing to push their businesses to top and achieve their objectives. However, they do not understand which critical factors of e-marketing are most useful to produce a positive impact on their business performance. A survey conducted by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of the Maldives in February 2018 shows that 74% of tourists visited the Maldives stayed in resorts only, 16% of visitors stayed in the guesthouses only, and 7% stayed in both resorts and guesthouses (Ministry of Tourism, Republic of Maldives, 2018). The findings from the survey indicated that guesthouses attracted very few percentages of visitors which means they need to carry out activities that will make their existence visible and attract more customers. This will help to increase their organisational performance. Hence, variables of e-marketing could be a help in the future.

Researches showed that e-marketing impacts the performance of the business in different ways (Ainin et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2015; Musa et al., 2016; Onyango, 2016; Abou-Shouk and Khalifa, 2017; Kaur, 2017; Xu, 2017; Abbaspour et al., 2018; Marmaya, Balakrishnan and Shuaib, 2018; Gupta, 2019). The researchers argued that e-marketing tools such as electronic word of mouth, social media marketing, email marketing, and website quality influence financial performance, non-financial performance, and marketing performance of the business. On the other hand, some researchers stated that there is no impact of e-marketing on some of the performance of the business (Omondi, 2017; Bernal et al., 2018). However, relevant researches have been carried out in other countries. There is no research done in the Maldives on the critical factors of e-marketing to determine how it will impact the performance of SMEs, particularly in the tourism sector. Therefore, it creates a need to do such research in the Maldives. Hence, this study is conducted in the Maldives to examine how electronic word of mouth, website quality, email marketing, and social media marketing impact the performance of SMEs (guesthouses) in the tourism sector.

Literature Review

Performance of the SMEs

Researchers and managers have developed a high level of interest in financial performance and marketing performance (Iddris and Ibrahim, 2015). According to Njoku and Chiana (2019), technology commercialisation is an essential driver of a firm's marketing success. The researcher also stated that e-marketing provides SMEs with the opportunity of developing successful economic businesses in ways that have never been available to them before. It helps these entrepreneurs to be in touch with previously unavailable global resources and opportunities. As a result, they can communicate as well as to conduct business activities with new and existing customers in an integrated and more accessible way.

The use of e-marketing by SMEs can improve marketing performance and increase marketing effectiveness through cost reduction by using technology and e-marketing tools to carry out marketing activities. This will lead to an improvement in the company's profitability. According to Sheikh, Shahzad, and Ishaq (2017), a study conducted by Mzee, Ogwen, and Irene (2015) revealed that organisations that use e-marketing in their businesses found that the implementation of e-marketing helps to communicate with the customers locally and globally. In line with that, Rahim et al. (2015) in Sheikh, Shahzad, and Ishaq (2017) highlighted that the use of e-marketing technology differs from business-to-business, despite the wide acceptance of the internet in business environments. Other than that, e-marketing is a recent technology that has established considerable attention in the industry.

Electronic Word of Mouth

According to Kanwel et al. (2019), organisations have found that eWOM is also an active mode of promotion of goods and services. The study explained that people use eWOM to gather information about the stuff they find interesting. Information such as quality of the services, product's brands, travelling experiences, and food are some of the things they search for on the internet. The findings from past researches have shown that SMEs benefit from electronic word of mouth in different ways (Ahmad, Ahmad, and Bakar, 2018; Konstantopoulou et al., 2019). According to Konstantopoulou et al. (2019), with the help of electronic word of mouth, businesses can benefit from competing with other businesses in the industry. The researcher pointed out that the information found through electronic word of mouth leads to increased awareness and purchase intention. Another researcher stated that electronic word of mouth has the power to influence consumer behaviour. Hence, it is an essential marketing tool (Ahmad, Ahmad, and Bakar, 2018). Pasternak, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas (2017) highlighted that electronic word of mouth involves a comprehensive series of brand-related information and that can be spread out through posts, comments, and shares. The arguments of the researcher support the research done by Konstantopoulou et al. (2019) as it helps to increase awareness. According to Pasternak, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas (2017), electronic word of mouth opens a platform for business to communicate with the consumer as well as consumer to consumer interactions to exchange information. As a business can communicate with the consumers, this can be used purposefully to increase customer satisfaction by attending their concerns as well as appreciating their compliments. Hence, this not only supports to increase awareness but also change consumer's behaviour and increase their satisfaction and perception towards the brand. Therefore, it hypothesised that:

H1: There is a relationship between e-word of mouth and performance of SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives.

Website Quality

Xu (2017) defined that website quality is "the extent to which a website's features meet customer's needs and reflect overall superiority of the website". The researcher agreed that website quality is an essential factor to be a presence in online operations and for the success of the business as the quality of the websites helps to attract more customers. Abou-Shouk

and Khalifa (2017) also agreed with this as tourists who search and purchase online services are increasing. The researcher stated that nowadays, more people are demanding e-services thus, many of the tourism enterprises are using websites to promote their services to gain more online market share. Bernal et al. (2018) argued that even though whether the quality of the website is high, it does not necessarily help to get better organisational performance in terms of economic efficiency at all the time. Research conducted by Di Fatta, Patton, and Viglia (2018) pointed out that the internet is vital, especially for SMEs who have limited geographical reach. Hence, the researcher highlighted that website, and its quality is an essential factor to improve business performance. The researcher found out that website quality is a strategy to increase the purchases. Galati et al. (2016) noted that even if website quality positively influences or not on the financial or economic performance of the business, website quality significantly affects the success of e-business. Website is essential to access the global market and creates more online visibility through the website, and it is quality SMEs can increase their online market share (Ramayah et al., 2016). However, Ramayah et al. (2016) highlighted that website quality is useful and provides positive impacts if the marketers or business officers are more innovative and act more positively to IT adoption. Therefore, the researcher revealed that the quality of the website would bring advantages such as enhancing the business image, evolving new business opportunities, building stronger business linkages, increasing sales and market share, and reducing operating costs. Hence, the hypothesis developed is:

H2: Website quality does influence the performance of SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives.

Email Marketing

Omondi (2017) defined email marketing as a digital marketing technique which is used to deliver the personalised or targeted message to specific target groups at the right time to meet their requirements. According to Nuseir (2018), fast, appropriate, relevant, and effective communication with the customers is the pillar of the business and marketing. The researcher stated that it builds assurance and acceptance of the service quality if customers can exchange the information and queries with the respective company. Thus, email is an effective and efficient marketing tool to communicate with customers. The researcher also highlighted that email marketing helps to carry out the post-sales and after-sales business activities to impress customers. Gupta (2019) also supported that email marketing is the best way to increase the company's ROI. Batinić (2015) believed that email marketing could improve the marketing activities of the business as well as attract more customers and helps the business in retaining its existing customers. By supporting this Kaur (2017) stated that email could influence the consumer's behaviour towards purchasing as well as their perception towards the business. Hence, through email marketing, a healthy long-term relationship with the customers can be built as it helps to boost customer's trust in the business (Nuseir, 2018). Thus, the developed hypothesis is:

H3: Email marketing does influence the performance of SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives.

Social Media Marketing

There are significant researches done on the impact of social media marketing on the performance of SMEs and which proved decisive (Adegbuyi, Akinyele, and Akinyele, 2015; Ha et al., 2016; Tajvidi and Karami, 2017). According to Ha et al. (2016), social media increase the customers' engagement in the business by sharing, liking, or commenting and which leads to a growth in sales. Social media marketing is essential to increase online visibility. It helps to retain and sustain its customers (Adegbuyi, Akinyele and Akinyele 2015). According to Adegbuyi, Akinyele, and Akinyele (2015), SMEs should use social media marketing effectively to reach a broader target audience and build a relationship with

its customers. The researcher also mentioned that social media marketing provides the business with a better understanding of the customer's wants and needs. Thus, this will benefit the business to improve its operations as well as marketing performance to attract more customers. A research conducted by Tajvidi and Karami (2017) found out that social media marketing and performance of the business have a significant and positive relationship. The findings of the researcher concluded that it directs towards the success of the business and improves the financial performance of the business. Added to this, the researcher pointed out that by using social media marketing, the business can enhance their marketing capabilities. Thus, the researcher concluded that social media marketing positively affects the branding and innovation capabilities of the business leading business to increase its profitability. As explained by Karim (2018), the tourism industry in Bangladesh is strongly involves social media marketing to increase tourist arrivals. According to this study, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn are the most popular tools that consumers explore to find travel information. Therefore, the researcher believed that engaging in social media helps to attract more tourists and increase marketing performance as well as financial performance. Hence, the developed hypothesis is:

H4: Social media marketing does influence the performance of SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives.

After an extensive review of the literature, the conceptual framework was developed to demonstrate the impact of e-marketing activities on the performance of SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives.

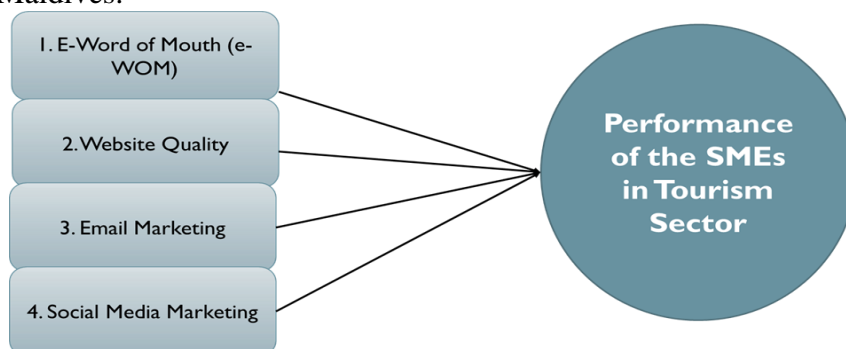


Figure 1: Research Framework

Research Methodology

This study aimed to generate more knowledge and to understand the subject of the study. The study was descriptive as the intention was to test whether e-marketing factors such as electronic word of mouth, website quality, email marketing, and social media marketing have any influence on the performance of the SMEs (guesthouses) in the Maldives. This study was based on positivism philosophy as the aim was to further understand the phenomena by observing the population. So, the deduction approach was used to develop the theory and hypothesis, which then were tested in the study. According to Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2016), the research approach used in the study is mostly based on the research philosophy. Usually, the deductive approach is used with the positivism research philosophy.

This study used a survey strategy to collect numerical data and was analysed as statistics and graphs. Hence, this study was quantitative research. Survey strategy can be used to answer questions like who, where, what, or how it was used to determine how e-marketing impacts the performance. Therefore, cross-sectional research was carried out by using a self-administered online questionnaire to examine the present status of e-marketing impacts on the performance of SMEs (guesthouses) in the Maldives.

The population of the study was SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives. There are four categories of SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives such as resorts, guesthouses, hotels, and safari vessels. Most of the SMEs are guesthouses in the Maldives, so guesthouses were

selected as respondents. There are 166 resorts, 13 hotels, 631 guesthouses, and 158 safari vessels registered in the Maldives by March 2020 (Ministry of Tourism, Republic of Maldives, 2020). The recommended sample size was 240.

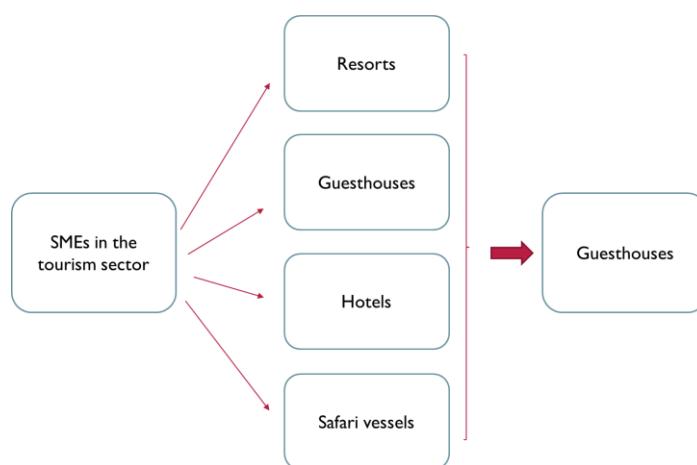


Figure 2: Sampling Breakdown

Findings

Reliability Test

Reliability is described as the consistency of a measure which is used to measure the consistency and stability of the measuring instruments (Price, Jhangiani and Chiang, 2015). Cronbach's alpha reliability test is conducted to test the reliability of the instruments. Cronbach's alpha is one of the most used measures for the internal consistency of reliability. It will show whether the used variables in the study are reliable or not (Deviant, 2011). According to Deviant (2011), it is the best method to measure the Likert scale type of questions. Table 1 is showing the Cronbach's alpha test result of the variables used in this study. Table 1 indicates that the Cronbach's alpha for this study is 0.914, which means reliability is excellent. Hence, the reliability of the study and the scale of the questions are highly reliable.

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardised Items	N of Items
.914	.918	21

Multiple Linear Regression

This section shows the multiple regression analysis for the study by using the independent variables of electronic word of mouth, website quality, email marketing, and social media marketing on the dependent variable. The dependent variable of the study is the performance of the SMEs (guesthouses) of the Maldives. The model summary represents how strong the relationship between the model and the dependent variable is. The larger the value, the better as it indicates that the relationship is strong.

In Table 2, the R-value indicates the correlations between the dependent variable and independent variables. The R Square value indicates the total variation of the dependent variable explained by the independent variables. (IBM Corporation 1989, 2016). The R-value is 0.567 (56.7%), which indicates a reasonable degree of correlation. R Square value is 0.321 (32.1%), which means 32.1% of the variation in the dependent variable, performance of

SMEs (guesthouses), is explained by the independent variables of electronic word of mouth, website quality, email marketing, and social media marketing.

Table 2: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.567 ^a	.321	.310	.58671

a. Predictors: (Constant), Mean social media marketing score, Mean email marketing score, Mean electronic word of mouth score, Mean website quality score

The ANOVA table represents the significance of the model, whether it is acceptable or not. The column 'Sig' in Table 3 shows the statistical significance of the model. If the value is less than or equal to 0.05, then the model is adequate, but if it is more significant than 0.05, then the model is not adequate (Lund Research Ltd, 2018). As shown in Table 3, the Sig (p-value) is 0.000. Therefore, the model is acceptable for this study.

Table 3: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	39.241	4	9.810	28.499	.000 ^a
Residual	82.960	241	.344		
Total	122.200	245			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Mean social media marketing score, Mean email marketing score, Mean electronic word of mouth score, Mean website quality score

b. Dependent Variable: Mean performance score

Table 4 shows the results for the significance of the effect of independent variables on the dependent variable of the study. It shows the significant effect of electronic word of mouth, website quality, email marketing, and social media marketing on the performance.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients

Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.691	.150		4.594	.000
	Mean electronic word of mouth score	.329	.065	.316	5.078	.000
	Mean website quality score	.065	.075	.062	.864	.388
	Mean email marketing score	-.032	.047	-.039	-.687	.493
	Mean social media marketing score	.310	.071	.307	4.349	.000

Table 4: Regression Coefficients

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Mean website quality score	.065	.075	.062	.864	.388
Mean email marketing score	-.032	.047	-.039	-.687	.493
Mean social media marketing score	.310	.071	.307	4.349	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Mean performance score

Table 5 illustrates that some of the hypotheses were rejected while others were accepted. P-value (Sig) of website quality and email marketing is higher than 0.05. Hence, it can be concluded that these two independent variables do not affect the performance of SMEs (guesthouses) in the Maldives. However, the P-value of the other two independent variables, electronic word of mouths and social media marketing is less than 0.05. Therefore, it can be concluded that they affect the dependent variable.

Table 5: Hypotheses Test Results

Independent variables	Hypothesis		P-Value (Sig)	Result
Electronic Word of Mouth	H1	There is a relationship between e-word of mouth and performance of SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives	.000	H1 is accepted
Website Quality	H2	Website quality does influence the performance of SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives	.388	H2 is rejected
Email Marketing	H3	Email marketing does influence the performance of SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives	.493	H3 is rejected
Social Media Marketing	H4	Social media marketing does influence the performance of SMEs in the tourism sector in the Maldives	.000	H1 is accepted

Discussion

Electronic word of mouth showed that there is a significant relationship with the performance of SMEs (guesthouses) in the Maldives. Results concluded that electronic word of mouth

impacts the performance of SMEs (guesthouses). The findings from this study agrees with the previous studies conducted by different researchers. A study conducted by Hamdani, Abdul, and Maulani (2018) concluded that electronic word of mouth influences the performance of SMEs in general. In respect to this, Kanwel et al. (2019) also stated in the study that the researcher concluded that electronic word of mouth impacts the performance.

From the results, it is evident that there is no significant relationship between website quality and the performance of SMEs (guesthouses). Some of the past researches agreed that the website quality impacts the performance of the business (Wang et al., 2015; Abou-Shouk and Khalifa, 2017; Xu, 2017; Abbaspour et al., 2018). However, results from this study done in the Maldives did not agree with the past literature. The study showed that having a website quality does not impact the performance of the business. Even though the quality of the website resulted in having no impact, respondents agreed that having a quality website is essential for the success of the business and achieving brand equity.

This study hypothesised that email marketing has an impact on the performance of SMEs. The result showed that email marketing does not have an impact on the performance of SMEs (guesthouses). The questions asked in the survey, such as whether email marketing builds customer's trust and loyalty showed that it has no significant effect. Also, questions were asked whether email marketing helps to get more reservations or customers to the guesthouse and whether it helps to retain its existing customers. Also, this finding does not agree with some past researches conducted in other countries as those studies concluded that email marketing influences the performance (Batinić, 2015; Onyango, 2016; Kaur, 2017; Gupta, 2019).

According to the research findings, social media marketing impacts the performance of SMEs (guesthouses) in the Maldives. Social media can be helpful for businesses to conduct their marketing activities towards getting positive performance results. Hence, this study on social media agrees with the other researches done in other countries (Ainin et al., 2015; Karim, 2018;). However, it is also essential for the application of social media to be effective and efficient to produce a positive result from it (Musa et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The findings for the study concluded that electronic word of mouth and social media plays an essential role in impacting the performance of the SMEs (guesthouses) in the Maldives. On the other hand, website quality and email marketing do not seem to have a significant impact on the performance of SMEs (guesthouses). Findings revealed that social media helps to reach a broader target market at a cheaper cost. Also, electronic word of mouth opens a platform for marketers to strengthen their marketing strategies and build a sharp brand image. Thus, e-marketing has some impacts on the performance of SMEs (guesthouses) in the tourism sector in the Maldives.

Electronic word of mouth and social media marketing is proved to be the most effective tools for guesthouses in the Maldives to improve their performance of the business. Therefore, improving engagements with these two tools may help the managers to achieve their business success and improve performance. It could also help the SMEs (guesthouses) to achieve brand equity by contributing to building a sharp brand image.

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