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CULTURAL ATMOSPHERE, HAPPINESS, AND TOURIST LOYALTY: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF RURAL HOMESTAYS IN CHINA

Nannan Liu¹, Mazlina Mahdzar^{2*}, Norhaya Hanum Mohamad³, Yang Zhou⁴, Xiaodong Ding⁵

¹ Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.
Email: 2022546745@student.uitm.edu.my

² Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.
Email: nina@uitm.edu.my

³ Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Terengganu Kampus Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia.
Email: norhayahanum@uitm.edu.my

⁴ School of Economics and Management, Jining University, Jining, Shandong, China.
Email: 202110074@jnxu.edu.cn

⁵ Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.
Email: 2024746313@student.uitm.edu.my

* Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

Against the backdrop of China's rural revitalization strategy, the development of rural homestays has emerged as a key driver for upgrading the rural tourism economy. Examining how the cultural atmosphere of rural homestays influences tourist happiness and loyalty can contribute to exploring sustainable development models for homestay tourism, while offering practical insights into the integration of rural culture and tourism. This study takes Hongcun Village as an example and constructs a theoretical model based on self-regulatory attitude theory, incorporating variables such as rural homestay cultural atmosphere, tourist happiness, and loyalty. Empirical analysis was conducted using SPSS 27.0 and SmartPLS 4.1. The results indicate: (1) The cultural atmosphere of rural homestays has a significant positive impact on tourist happiness; (2) Tourist happiness positively influences loyalty; (3) The cultural atmosphere significantly and positively affects loyalty. Based on these findings, it is recommended that rural homestays deepen their local cultural characteristics, improve service quality, enhance tourist emotional experiences, and strengthen brand appeal through targeted marketing, thereby increasing tourist loyalty and promoting the high-quality development of rural homestays.

Keywords:

Rural Homestay, Cultural Atmosphere, Happiness, Loyalty

Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of rural tourism in China has driven the transformation of rural homestays from mere accommodation facilities into carriers of cultural experiences. By tapping into regional cultural resources, such as traditional architecture, folk crafts, and local lifestyles, homestays create a distinctive cultural atmosphere, serving as a bridge connecting tourists with local culture. Unlike standardized hotels, homestays, as non-standardized lodging products, are often personally operated by hosts who provide unique local cultural experiences. Through personalized environments and warm, hospitable services, they foster a homely ambiance (X. Zhang, Zhang, & Han, 2022). This experience transcends traditional lodging services, encompassing multiple dimensions including natural surroundings, cultural immersion, emotional engagement, and personalized hospitality (W. Wu & Liu, 2025).

Culture serves as both the starting point and ultimate destination of tourist activities—the essence of a destination's appeal and the soul of tourism development and operation (J. Chen, Ma, & Li, 2023). Rural homestays possess distinctive cultural and tourism resources, reflected in architectural styles, natural environments, lifestyle experiences, and humanistic charm. For instance, the white walls and black tiles of Hongcun Village in Anhui Province carry historical memories, serving as key media for visitors to engage with rural culture. The surrounding landscapes—lush mountains, clear waters, and pastoral scenery—offer opportunities to reconnect with nature. Homestays further enrich the experience by organizing farming activities, folk culture workshops, local culinary tastings, and traditional craft demonstrations, deepening cultural understanding. The warm hospitality of homestay hosts adds a human touch, enhancing the overall travel experience and solidifying the unique position of rural homestays in the cultural tourism market. As shown in Figure 1, there are two sample pictures of the cultural atmosphere of rural homestays.



Figure 1: Example Pictures of the Cultural Atmosphere of Rural Homestays

Existing research indicates that a destination's cultural atmosphere influences tourists' emotions and, ultimately, their behavior (J. Chen et al., 2023). However, the intermediary factors in this process remain unclear and warrant further exploration. Therefore, this study selects Hongcun Village, a renowned rural homestay destination in China, as a case study to examine tourists' perceptions of rural homestay cultural ambiance. Grounded in self-regulatory attitude theory, it constructs a theoretical model incorporating variables such as rural homestay cultural atmosphere, happiness, and tourist loyalty. The study investigates the mechanism through which cultural atmosphere affects loyalty and proposes managerial recommendations to promote the high-quality development of rural homestay tourism.

From a theoretical perspective, this study intends to introduce self-regulatory attitude theory into the context of rural homestay research. By constructing and validating the theoretical pathway of "cultural atmosphere - well-being -loyalty," it aims to deepen the explanatory dimensions of this theory in experiential tourism products. This research not only seeks to reveal the mediating mechanism of emotional responses between cultural perception and behavioral intentions but also strives to provide a new theoretical perspective on the psychological processes in cultural consumption behavior. Although existing literature extensively addresses the relationship between cultural atmosphere and behavioral intentions, few studies clearly elucidate the underlying affective transmission pathways. By introducing well-being as a mediating variable, this study aims to systematically explain the internal mechanism through which cultural atmosphere influences tourist loyalty, thereby addressing the current research gap in the exploration of emotional mechanisms.

On a practical level, this study is expected to provide actionable operational strategies for rural homestay operators. It emphasizes the need to shift from a traditional hardware-focused approach to a development model that prioritizes cultural experiences and emotional connections. By deepening cultural expression and interactive experiences, homestays can build differentiated competitiveness and achieve sustainable development. Furthermore, as an important vehicle for promoting cultural and tourism integration as well as rural revitalization, the construction of a cultural atmosphere in rural homestays not only enhances tourist satisfaction and loyalty but also contributes to local employment, the preservation of traditional handicrafts, and community cultural identity. The conclusions of this study are intended to provide a theoretical basis for destination marketing, recommending promotional strategies that highlight emotional value and cultural identity. Integrating digital technology and community participation can enhance the effectiveness of cultural dissemination, thereby comprehensively elevating the brand influence of rural homestays and regional tourism.

Literature Review

Self-Regulatory Attitude Theory

Proposed by Bagozzi, the self-regulatory attitude theory posits that evaluations trigger emotional responses, which subsequently influence an individual's behavior or behavioral intentions. This process follows an "evaluation → emotion → behavior" sequence (Bagozzi,

1992) and has been widely adopted to explain individual behavioral mechanisms (A. Zhang & Zhao, 2020). Grounded in this theory, the present study conceptualizes rural homestay cultural atmosphere as tourists' cognitive evaluation, happiness as their affective response, and loyalty as a behavioral outcome. A relational model integrating these three constructs is developed, with corresponding research hypotheses formulated based on prior literature.

Cultural Atmosphere

The concept of atmosphere describes the dynamic and complex interplay between environmental stimuli and human behavior, demonstrating positive effects on emotions (Zhao & Jing, 2016). Definitions of cultural atmosphere vary across contexts. In tourism settings, it refers to the distinctive environment shaped by a destination's tangible and intangible cultural elements that tourists perceptually experience. Zeng, Zhang, and Xu (2024) operationalize it as the holistic perception of a locale's cultural identity. Cultural atmosphere holds critical importance for visitors as it fundamentally shapes their experiences and behaviors (Pallasmaa, 2014). Investigating tourists' perception, cognition, and reactions to cultural atmosphere can substantiate theoretical frameworks for interpreting cultural tourism experiences (Q. Chen, Wu, & Ruan, 2021; X. Li & Wang, 2023). Table 1 lists the past findings on cultural atmosphere.

Table 1: Past Findings on Cultural Atmosphere

Aspect	Key Findings	Relevant Literature
Measurement	Scales have been developed to measure perceived cultural atmosphere, e.g., in historic districts, encompassing dimensions such as architectural setting, interior decoration, traditional activities, and shared affects.	(Xu & Zhu, 2016; Zeng et al., 2024)
Impact on Perceived Value	A stronger cultural atmosphere positively influences tourists' perceived value, including brand, emotional, and educational value.	(Prebensen, 2007; Wang, Chen, & Li, 2024)
Impact on Behavioral Intention	Cultural atmosphere influences behavioral intentions (e.g., revisit, recommend) primarily through the full mediation of perceived value, rather than through direct effects.	(Filieri, Lin, Pino, Alguezaui, & Inversini, 2021; Wang et al., 2024)
Role in Experience & Memory	A rich cultural atmosphere contributes significantly to forming memorable tourism experiences (MTEs), particularly through tangible elements like architecture and activities.	(Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012; Zeng et al., 2024)
Different Contexts	The concept has been applied in various settings: red tourism, historic districts, scenic spots, libraries, and	(L. Li & Kang, 2023; H. Liu, Ma, & Park, 2025; Vasilievna &

Aspect	Key Findings	Relevant Literature
	Ethnic Minority Online Entrepreneurship.	Vladimirovna, 2022; Wang et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2024)

Cultural Atmosphere and Tourist Loyalty

Extant research has predominantly demonstrated that corporate cultural atmosphere exerts a significant positive influence on organizational loyalty. The cultivation and enhancement of employee loyalty contribute to corporate culture development, while corporate culture conversely reinforces employee loyalty (L. Chen, Dang, Zhang, & Ma, 2017). In the tourism domain, scholars widely conceptualize tourist loyalty as comprising revisit intention and positive word-of-mouth recommendation willingness (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). K. Liu, Jin, and Quan (2022) posit that a destination's rich cultural atmosphere creates harmonious surroundings through psychological effects, emotionally engages tourists, and evokes resonance, thereby generating happiness and enhancing consumption willingness. Similarly, J. Chen et al. (2023) confirm that stronger tourist perceptions of destination cultural atmosphere significantly increase the likelihood of loyalty behaviors like revisiting and recommendation. Consequently, we propose:

H1: Cultural atmosphere positively influences tourist loyalty.

Cultural Atmosphere and Happiness

Tourism destination cultural atmosphere triggers immediate pleasure through sensory stimuli (e.g., traditional architecture, festival activities) while fulfilling cultural identity and belonging needs via symbolic meaning transmission (e.g., farming experiences, handicraft workshops), directly enhancing hedonic happiness (Y. Zhang, Li, & Zhu, 2025). Grounded in self-regulatory attitude theory, cultural atmosphere functions as a cognitive evaluation, with happiness representing tourists' affective response to rural homestays. Thus, we hypothesize:

H2: Cultural atmosphere positively influences tourist happiness.

Happiness and Tourist Loyalty

As a holistic affective evaluation of past experiences (Karavdic & Baumann, 2014), happiness reflects humans' inherent pursuit of positive emotions and avoidance of negative feelings (Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998). Empirical studies confirm tourism activities effectively elevate happiness levels (De Bloom et al., 2010), establishing this construct as a crucial indicator for assessing tourism behavior value (Nawijn, 2010). Haji, Surachman, Ratnawati, and MintartiRahayu (2021) verified that happiness significantly promotes revisit intention and recommendation behaviors. Analogously, Baloglu, Busser, and Cain (2019) also found that tourists' emotional happiness was significantly positively correlated with their loyalty. Therefore, we propose:

H3: Happiness positively influences tourist loyalty.

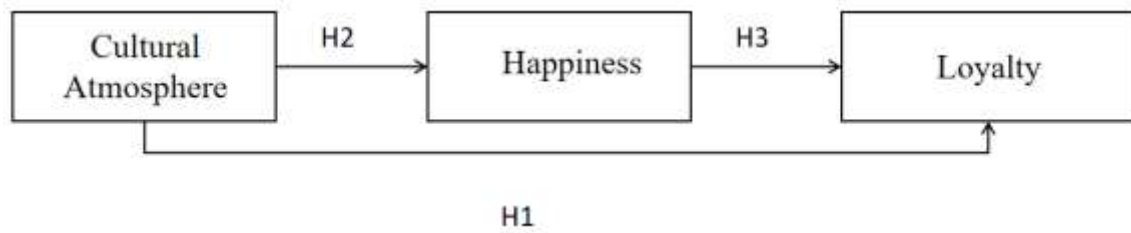


Figure 2: Research Framework

Method

Sample and Data Collection

This study selects Hongcun Village in Anhui Province, China, as the case study location. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Hongcun has emerged as a model for rural homestay development due to its exceptionally preserved Ming-Qing dynasty architectural complex and profound cultural heritage (boasting 215 operational homestays as of September 2024). The research employed an online questionnaire survey targeting adult tourists who visited Hongcun and stayed in local homestays within the past year, ultimately collecting 325 valid responses.

Measurement

The scale used in this study is shown in Table 2 and involves variables such as cultural atmosphere, sense of happiness, and loyalty. A convenience sampling method was employed to collect the data. Except for the demographic questions, all other items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree).

Table 2: Constructs and Items

Construct	Item	source
Culture Atmosphere	C1. The facilities and decorations of the homestay have unique regional characteristics.	(H. Chen, Fu, & Lyu, 2024; Lai, Zhang, Zhang, Tseng, & Shiau, 2021; Salehi, 2024; Xing, Li, & Xie, 2022)
	C2. The homestay allows me to experience local customs and traditions.	
	C3. The homestay offers cultural activities that showcase local features.	
	C4. The homestay provides opportunities to participate in special folk activities such as rural festivals or temple fairs.	
Happiness	HP1. I feel happy when I participate in the leisure activities provided by the homestay.	(Haji et al., 2021; Han, 2020; Yu, Huang, & Bao, 2022)
	HP2. I find life more relaxing when I stay at this homestay.	

Construct	Item	source
Loyalty	HP3. I feel physically and mentally healthy when I stay at this homestay.	
	HP4. Despite the ups and downs in life, I feel that life is wonderful when I stay at this homestay.	
	HP5. I have good experiences and memories of the leisure activities provided by the homestay.	
	LY1. If my relatives, friends, or colleagues plan to travel, I would recommend this homestay to them.	(Assiouras, Skourtis, Giannopoulos, Buhalis, & Koniordos, 2019;
	LY2. I would praise this homestay online or on social media.	H. Chen et al., 2024; Groth, 2005; Hasan,
	LY3. I would give this homestay a positive review to other people.	Abdullah, Lew, & Islam, 2019;
	LY4. If I visit the area again, this homestay will be my first choice.	H. Zhang, Cheng, & Chen, 2022)
	LY5. I would like to stay at this homestay again.	
	LY6. Even if the homestay raises its prices, I would still choose it.	

Data Analyses

This study employs a mixed-methods approach for data analysis and processing. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the reliability and validity of the measurement model. Subsequently, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was adopted as the primary analytical technique, with model fitting and hypothesis testing implemented using SmartPLS 4.1.1.1 software. Additionally, SPSS 27.0 was utilized to perform fundamental statistical analyses.

Results

This study conducted a sample structure analysis on 325 valid questionnaires using SPSS 27 to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants. See Table 3.

Table 3: Descriptive statistical analysis of the sample.

Items	Categories	N	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	141	43.38
	Female	184	56.62
Age	18-25	54	16.62
	26-35	126	38.77

Items	Categories	N	Percent (%)
Educational background	36-45	102	31.38
	46-55	25	7.69
	56 and above	18	5.54
	Junior high school and below	32	9.85
	Senior high school	43	13.23
	Junior college	68	20.92
	Undergraduate	133	40.92
	Postgraduate and above	49	15.08

This study confirmed the good quality of the measurement model through reliability and validity tests (see Table 4 for specific data). In terms of reliability, the Cronbach's α coefficients and composite reliability (CR) of key constructs all exceeded 0.7, meeting the criteria proposed by Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Chatelin, and Lauro (2005). For convergent validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) for each latent variable surpassed 0.5, effectively representing the corresponding observed variables (Haji et al., 2021). Discriminant validity analysis revealed that the square roots of the AVE for all constructs were significantly higher than their correlation coefficients with other constructs, satisfying the Fornell-Larcker criterion (see Table 5). In conclusion, the measurement instruments used in this study are reliable and valid (Khashan et al., 2024).

Table 4: The Results of Validity and Reliability

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Cultural atmosphere	0.884	0.920	0.741
Happiness	0.868	0.905	0.655
loyalty	0.862	0.896	0.590

Source: Output using SmartPLS 4.1 program

Table 5: The Results of Discriminant Validity

	Cultural atmosphere	Happiness	loyalty
Cultural atmosphere	0.861		
Happiness	0.516	0.809	
loyalty	0.409	0.544	0.768

Source: Output using SmartPLS 4.1 program

The goodness-of-fit (GOF) test results (Table 6) indicate that the R^2 and adjusted R^2 for happiness are 0.266 and 0.264, respectively, while those for loyalty are 0.318 and 0.314. Additionally, the model's Q^2 value reaches 0.501, demonstrating strong explanatory and predictive power (Haji et al., 2021).

Table 6: The Test Result of Goodness of Fit Model

	R-square (R^2)	R-square adjusted	Q^2
Happiness	0.266	0.264	$Q^2 = 1 - (1 - R^2_1) \times (1 - R^2_2)$ $= 1 - (1 - 0.266) \times (1 - 0.318)$ $= 0.501$
loyalty	0.318	0.314	

Source: Output using SmartPLS 4.1 program

This study employed structural equation modeling to test the direct effect hypotheses (see Table 7 and Figure 3). The empirical results demonstrated that: cultural atmosphere had a significant positive impact on tourist loyalty ($t=2.245$, $p<0.05$), supporting Hypothesis H1; cultural atmosphere significantly enhanced tourist happiness ($t=8.928$, $p<0.001$), confirming Hypothesis H²; and happiness also positively influenced tourist loyalty ($t=6.191$, $p<0.001$), validating Hypothesis H³.

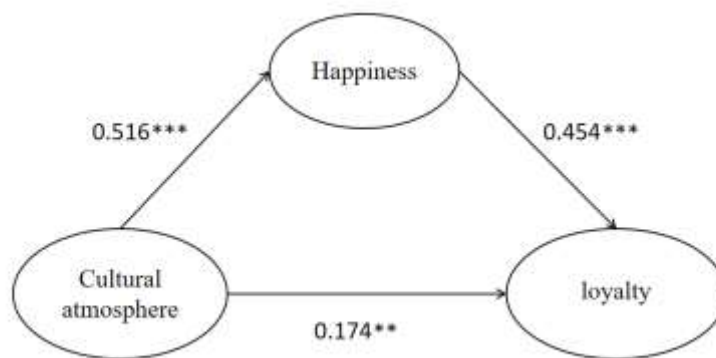


Figure 3: Direct Effect of Path Diagram

Table 7: Hypothesis Test Results of Direct Effect

Path	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Cultural atmosphere -> Happiness	0.516	0.516	0.058	8.928	0.000
Cultural atmosphere -> loyalty	0.174	0.177	0.078	2.245	0.025
Happiness -> loyalty	0.454	0.454	0.073	6.191	0.000

Source: Output using SmartPLS 4.1 program

Discussion and Conclusions

Discussion And Conclusions

The results confirm that Hypothesis H1 is supported, indicating that rural homestay cultural atmosphere positively influences tourist loyalty. This finding aligns with existing research (J. Chen et al., 2023; D. Liu & Zhang, 2023), verifying the cultural atmosphere's role as an external

environmental stimulus driving tourist loyalty behaviors. Within rural tourism contexts, the cultural atmosphere serves as a crucial factor in shaping tourists' emotional connections. When immersed in homestay environments rich with local characteristics, such as traditional architecture, folk culture displays, and authentic culinary experiences, these cultural elements not only enhance visitors' sense of immersion but also strengthen destination identification. Such profound cultural resonance motivates tourists to repeatedly choose the same homestay and actively recommend it to others, thereby establishing loyal behaviors.

Hypothesis H2, proposing the cultural atmosphere's positive effect on tourist happiness, is likewise substantiated. Rural homestays' cultural atmosphere creates a distinctive "sense of place" through multisensory experiences (e.g., visual traditional decor, auditory folk music, gustatory local cuisine), enabling tourists to temporarily escape daily stressors and enter relaxed, pleasurable states. Particularly, participatory cultural activities (like farming experiences or handicraft workshops) can evoke feelings of accomplishment and belonging, significantly enhancing subjective well-being. Similar conclusions were reported by H. Wu, Cheng, and Ai (2017) in their analysis of tourism experience and happiness.

Hypothesis H3 concerning happiness's positive impact on loyalty is also empirically validated. As an internal affective state, happiness directly influences subsequent behavioral decisions. When tourists experience pleasure, relaxation, and satisfaction during rural homestay stays, these positive emotions transform into brand preference and dependence, manifested through higher revisit intention, more active word-of-mouth promotion, and reduced price sensitivity. These outcomes are consistent with findings by Baloglu et al. (2019) and H. Wu et al. (2017).

Theoretical Implications

This study, based on the self-regulation attitude theory, systematically constructs and verifies the dual-path mechanism through which the cultural atmosphere of rural homestays affects customer loyalty via happiness. It not only expands the application boundary of this theory in the context of tourism consumption but also, by revealing the "environmental stimulus–emotional regulation–behavioral response" chain of action, compensates for the existing research's insufficient attention to the psychological transformation process of cultural atmosphere. This study provides a new theoretical perspective for explaining the formation mechanism of tourists' emotional experiences and makes an important contribution to the perfection of the tourism consumer behavior theory system.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study hold significant practical guidance value. Research indicates that the cultural atmosphere of rural homestays can significantly enhance tourists' sense of happiness and strengthen their loyalty, further underscoring the necessity of deeply fostering an immersive and authentic local cultural environment. First, at the material level, it is essential to preserve and highlight traditional architectural elements, local material decorations, and rural landscape design to enhance the visual cultural impact. At the behavioral level, participatory folk activities such as farming experiences, handicraft making, and festival ceremonies should

be designed to allow tourists to perceive the culture through interaction. At the spiritual level, methods such as cultural explanations and storytelling by hosts can be employed to convey local history and humanistic spirit, fostering emotional resonance. Additionally, digital means can be utilized to enhance cultural expression and cater to the experiential preferences of younger tourists. Second, homestay operators should systematically design a comprehensive tourist experience management mechanism covering the "cognitive-affective-behavioral" cycle. In the pre-trip stage, the cultural characteristics and emotional value of the homestay should be communicated through social media and other channels to shape tourists' expectations. During the stay, attention should be paid to service details and emotional interactions, providing an environment that is relaxing, enjoyable, and fosters a strong sense of belonging. After departure, emotional connections can be sustained through memory triggers such as sending photos of activities or providing customized souvenirs, thereby increasing the likelihood of repeat visits and recommendations. Finally, tailored cultural experience programs should be designed based on the needs of different tourist segments. For instance, culture-seeking tourists could be offered in-depth cultural workshops, such as intangible cultural heritage craft experiences. For relaxation-oriented tourists, activities like nature therapy, tea ceremonies, and calligraphy could be provided to promote tranquility. For family and parent-child tourists, interactive and educational activities such as parent-child farming experiences and folk games could be designed. Through precise product stratification, tourist satisfaction and loyalty can be enhanced.

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

This study has the following three limitations: First, the sample mainly comes from rural homestays in a specific area, and the universality of the research conclusions in other countries and cultural contexts needs to be verified. Second, the cross-sectional design of data collection makes it difficult to fully capture the dynamic evolution process between the cultural atmosphere and customer loyalty. Third, the study mainly examines the single mediating path of happiness and does not fully consider the potential impact of other variables (such as place attachment and perceived value). Future research can be expanded in three dimensions: First, conduct cross-cultural comparative studies to examine the differences in the mechanism of action of the cultural atmosphere of rural homestays in different countries. Second, use a longitudinal tracking design to dynamically observe the complete process of tourists from their initial experience to the formation of loyalty. Third, construct a more complex theoretical model, incorporating more mediators and moderators.

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