ANXIETY, LIFE EVALUATION AND WELL-BEING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC AMONG COMMUNITY IN SABAH, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic has brought not only a high mortality rate from viral infection, but also has been drastic changes at the individual life and cause various mental health problems. A study conducted in China at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that various mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression and panic disorder was triggered by the pandemic. This study aimed to examine the perceived anxiety, and life evaluation among community in Sabah, Malaysia before and during pandemic Covid-19 and predictive factors of their well-being during pandemic. The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory and was used to measure anxiety. Satisfaction with Life Scale and the Cantril’s Self-Anchoring Ladder of Life Scale were used to measure life evaluation in term of quality of life, and the Flourishing Scale measured well-being. The questionnaire was disseminated through the snowball sampling technique. The study found the community of Sabah (N=406) perceived significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and better life evaluation before pandemic compared to during pandemic. In term of anxiety and well-being, the participants perceived moderate level of state and quite high level of trait anxiety. Surprisingly, the community reported a quite high level of well-being during pandemic Covid-19. Multiple regression results revealed trait anxiety affected participants' well-being negatively, but not state anxiety. Besides, the result also indicated that satisfaction with life predicted the community's well-being significantly and positively.

Keywords: State and trait anxiety, life evaluation, well-being, Covid-19 pandemic, community of Sabah.
INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 poses a threat since its outbreak in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019 and its later spread to the rest of the world. In view of its high contribution to mortality rates, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it as public health emergency internationally (Spina et al., 2020). Globally, repeated closure of businesses, schools, government and private sectors has been imposed in order to contain transmission of the pandemic. It put the livelihood of people at stake. The outbreak of COVID-19 has catastrophic effects, where domestic violence, suicidal behaviour, social stigma, crime, depression, anxiety, stress and other mental health problems are on the rise (Manzoor Ahmad Malla & Hilal Ahmad War, 2020). To date, the world is still fighting with this “invisible enemy” and not knowing when it is going to end, especially when the virus mutates and becomes more difficult to deal with. Fighting with the “invisible enemy” has certainly burdened society and people including youths, as most of the youths are either working or studying.

In the US, a study conducted by McGuine et al. (2021) reported that youngsters demonstrate moderate to severe anxiety symptoms, and their quality of life was at the lowest level when schools closed down and sports were cancelled. They further postulated that youngsters show the tendency of developing depression and anxiety. In the UK, COVID-19 disproportionately affects young people both short-and long-term. In the long-term mechanism, it was predicted that there will be decreased of young people mental health as social isolation, changes to the delivery of therapeutic services and almost complete loss of all structured occupations (school, work and training) within this population group (Power, et al., 2020).

Not only in the west, in China, research showed that symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and panic disorders had increased compared to levels prior to the COVID-19 outbreak even at the beginning of the outbreak (Qiu et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2020). In Israel, Lipskaya-Velikovsky (2021) found high level of psychological distress, reduction in quality of life in terms of physical, psychological, and social contexts during lockdown. Youngsters were among the high-risk groups as their quality-of-life index was lower compared to the rest of population.

In Malaysia, the first lockdown (Movement Control Order, MCO) was imposed on 18th March 2020; Since then, each state in Malaysia switch between Movement Control Order (MCO), Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO), Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO), Emergency Movement Control Order (EMCO), and semi-EMCO depending on the COVID-19 condition in each state. Recently, the government of Malaysia makes another announcement of a total lockdown started 1 June 2021 till 28 June 2021. The some of the businesses were not allowed to operate during MCO as the pandemic is not over yet. The restriction of movement affected markets and employment rates. Malaysia suffered RM63 bn loss since the first MCO (Povera et al., 2020). Even though the Malaysia government announced three PRIHATIN Rakyat Economic Stimulus packages up to RM280 bn in the first MCO to strike a balance between containing COVID-19 and revitalising the economy, the impacts of these packages have yet to be known (Sia & Adamu, 2020). What could be seen directly is more and more business closures. Loheswar (2020) claimed that 50% of Malaysians underwent negative mental health during the MCO.
In Sabah, the first positive Covid-19 case reported on 12 March 2020 involving a male resident from Tawau District who had participated in the Muslim religious gathering at Sri Petaling in Kuala Lumpur. Two days later the Sabah State Health Department reported another 11 new cases were confirmed in the state, bringing the total cases to 26. A further spike to 82 positive cases was then reported making Sabah the third most affected in Malaysia by the virus after Selangor and Kuala Lumpur on that time. On 11 September 2020, Sabah recorded the highest infections rate from a new cluster in Lahad Datu with newer cases passing 300 and becoming the highest case jump of COVID-19 in Malaysia in more than 3 months (Wikipedia, retrieve on 14 June 2021). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak situation in Sabah, the state government has banned tourists from certain countries from visiting Sabah, being an open economy where international trade and tourism sector is one of the important contributors to Sabah economy, the pandemic undoubtedly gives huge impacts to Sabah tourism industry. The outbreak has led to the resort of lay-off of workforce, retrenchment of staff, and downsizing of business. Research done by Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Sabah shows at least 34 per cent are on unpaid leave while another 32 percent of tourism-related jobs have had to take a pay cut.

COVID-19 has not directly impacted the orang kampung (villagers) or the island communities in Sabah. However, the enforcement of The Control Movement Order has had a significant effect to the island communities that need to go out to fish daily for their livelihood. Rural farmers face difficulties transporting produce to the main markets in town, depleting their savings and ability to purchase other essential provisions. The Malaysian government has responded by providing cash aid to vulnerable populations through the National Prihatin Aid package. However, the cost of retrieving cash assistance from the nearest banks dilutes the benefit to the villagers. Villagers living in remote areas need to undertake a full day of travel on poor road conditions for a round-trip to the nearest town. In the small town normally only one ATM machine is available for the villagers to withdraw money. Furthermore, the limited bank branches in rural areas frequently run out of cash. The youths who were still studying were not spared either. While people living in Peninsular Malaysia could enjoy high-speed Internet, most students in Sabah are struggling with slow speed Internet and encounter connectivity problems during online classes, especially marginal students who are staying in remote areas. This discrepancy has a severe impact on youth in Sabah in terms of unequal Internet infrastructure (Sia & Adamu, 2020).

These socio-psychological impacts very much affect us, and especially hit hard to vulnerable groups in developing countries (Manzoor Ahmad Malla & Hilal Ahmad War, 2020), such as Malaysia. Although several research studies mentioned psychological distress during COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia, very few studies specifically evaluate Borneo youths, especially in terms of anxiety, life evaluation and well-being. There is a need to understand the pandemic impacts on this group of people from the psychological perspective, as this group contribute most to economic development in Borneo.

The present study explores the the perceived anxiety, and life evaluation among the community of Sabah, Malaysia before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the predictive factors of the Bornean youth’s well-being during the pandemic. The results could provide necessary information for policy makers and planners in relation to responding to this crisis, particularly to the Sabahan.
METHOD

Participants

There were 406 Sabahan (138 male, 268 of female) were selected randomly using a snowball sampling method to participate in the present study. A self-administered online survey method (Google Form) was used to collect the data. The questionnaire was distributed through social media (e.g., Facebook, Email, WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.) to the target sample who living in Sabah, located on the northern portion of Borneo. The respondent age ranged from 18 to 58 years old with an average of 26.82 (s.d = 7.53). Majority of the respondents was the indigenous group from Sabah (65%), there were 16.0% Chinese, 13.8% Malay, and the rest were other ethnic groups such Indian and indigenous group from Sarawak. In term of religion, there were 188 (46.3%) Muslim, 174 (42.9%) Christian, 31 (7.6%) Buddhist and 3.2% others. Seventy or 56.5% of the respondents reported they were working during the MCO due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the rest 54 respondents were not working during MCO. Most of the respondent (43.3%) had a monthly income between RM1001 to RM3000, 20.2% of the respondents reported their monthly income was below RM1000, 18.5% of the respondents had a monthly income between RM3001 to RM5000, and only 3.2% of the respondents with the monthly income above RM11,000.

Measures

The measurement used was a set of questionnaires that contained four sections. Section 1, the demographic data consisted of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and monthly income. Section 2, The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) designed by Spielberger et al. (1983). The STAI contains separate scales for measuring state and trait anxiety. In this study we only focus on State-Anxiety scale (S-Anxiety scale) to measure the current anxiety state of the respondents during pandemic Covid-19. The S-Anxiety scale contained 20 items (STAI Form Y-1) to measure the respondent’s feeling in that moment. The items of state anxiety assessed intensity of current feeling and were rated on a 4-point scale: 1 = not at all, 2 = somewhat, 3 = moderately so, and 4 = very much so). A high score indicated the presence of high levels of anxiety. The scale consisted of two sub scale (the state anxiety present and state anxiety absent) and each sub scale consists of 10 items. The scoring weights for the anxiety-absent items were reversed (e.g., items 1, 2, 5, 8, 10, 11, 15, 16, 19, and 20) (Chua et al. 2018). The internal consistency for State-Anxiety scale in the current study was Alpha Cronbach = .88, for state-anxiety present scale the Alpha Cronbach = .89, while the Alpha Cronbach for state-anxiety absent scale was .91.

Section 3, the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) designed by Diener et al. (1985). SWLS was used to assess how an individual perceived the quality of life based on their own criteria. This scale comprised of five items and scored on a 7-point Likert scale, where ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A high score indicated high satisfaction with
life. In the current study SWLS showed a good reliability with Alpha Cronbach = .85 (the data before pandemic) and Alpha Cronbach = .83 (the data during pandemic).

Section 4, The Cantril’s Self-Anchor Ladder of Life Scale (Cantril 1965). The scale was used to measure life satisfaction of the respondent by first asking the respondent to imagine their life in the best possible light and the worst possible light. The respondent was then asked to rate their current life situation as presented as a ladder with the top of the ladder represents the best possible life (10 score) and the bottom of the ladder the worst possible life (0 score).

Section 5, The Flourishing Scale (FS) developed by Diener et al. (2009). The scale was designed to gauge an individual’s social-psychological functioning that contributed to the well-being of others, which included purpose and meaning, positive relationships, optimism, self-acceptance, competence, and being respected. FS comprises of eight items to measure an overall well-being. The items were rated on seven-point scales ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A high score indicated that the individual perceived he/she in a positive term of functioning. The scale showed a high level of reliability for the Italian version (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.88) and for the Malaysian version with Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.93 (Chua, et al., 2020).

Data Analysis
The data was analysed using Program IBM SPSS Statistic version 22.0. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean, median, standard deviation and the range score were used to analyse demographic information of participants, the level of anxiety and well-being of the participant. Pair Samples t-test was used to analyse the difference in satisfaction with life and life quality before and during pandemic Covid-19 among community in Sabah. While multiple regression analysis was used to analyse the effect of satisfaction with life, life evaluation and anxiety on participants’ well-being during the pandemic.

RESULTS
Satisfaction with Life and Life Evaluation of Before and During Pandemic Covid-19 among Community of Sabah
Paired samples t-test was used to analyse life satisfaction and life evaluation of the community of Sabah before and during pandemic Covid-19. The result revealed that satisfaction with life (t = 19.43, p < .05) and life evaluation (t = 22.97, p < .05) by the community different significantly before and during pandemic. We found the participants perceived a significantly higher satisfaction with life before (M = 23.97, s.d. = 5.88) pandemic as compared to during pandemic (M = 16.62, s.d. = 6.44). The same finding in life evaluation, mean score before (M = 6.69, s.d. = 2.17) was significantly higher than during (M = 4.07, s.d. = 2.19) pandemic Covid-19 (refer to Table 1).
Table 1. The Pair Samples $t$-test of the Satisfaction with Life and Life Evaluation among among Community of Sabah Before and During COVID-19 Pandemic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with Life Before Pandemic Covid-19</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>23.97</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>19.43</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Evaluation Before Pandemic Covid-19</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>6.69</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>22.97</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Evaluation During Pandemic Covid-19</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

State-Trait Anxiety and Well-being of the Community of Sabah During Pandemic Covid-19

The anxiety level of participants was measured in state and trait anxiety using State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI, Spielberger et al., 1983). The state anxiety refers to anxiety about an event, and trait anxiety was an anxiety level as a personal characteristic. Higher scores in STAI reflected higher levels of anxiety.

The state anxiety summed score [$n = 406; M = 47.94; s.d = 8.65; \text{Range} = 23 - 76$]. With a median in the range of scores being a score of 46.0, the mean of 47.94 suggested that the overall state anxiety of the community was at the moderate level. The sum scores of trait anxiety scale [$n = 405; M = 45.80; s.d = 8.41; \text{Range} = 20 - 76$] indicates that the overall trait anxiety of the respondents was quit high during pandemic Covid-19 outbreak situation. Surprisingly, the respondents reported a quite high level of well-being during pandemic with the well-being summed score [$n = 406; M = 42.27; s.d = 7.67; \text{Range} = 8 - 56$], median in the range of scores being a score of 44.0 and the mean of 42.27 (refer to Table 2).

Table 2. The Mean, Median, Standard Deviation and the Range Score of State-Trait Anxiety, and Well-being among Community of Sabah During COVID-19 Pandemic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>State_Anxiety (n = 406)</th>
<th>Trait_Anxiety (n = 405)</th>
<th>Flourishing (n = 406)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>47.94</td>
<td>45.80</td>
<td>42.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>46.00</td>
<td>45.00</td>
<td>44.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>8.65</td>
<td>8.41</td>
<td>7.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>53.00</td>
<td>56.00</td>
<td>48.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>23.00</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>76.00</td>
<td>76.00</td>
<td>56.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Predictive Factors of the Community of Sabah Well-being During Pandemic Covid-19

The Multiple Regression analysis with model 'Enter' was used to analyze the effect of satisfaction with life, life evaluation, and state-trait anxiety on well-being among community of Sabah during pandemic Covid-19. The result revealed that the model contained four variables explained a total of 21.9% of the total variance in well-being among the participants. The results further indicated that satisfaction with life (Beta = .13) and trait anxiety (Beta = -.40) predicted significantly participants’ well-being during pandemic ($F_{(4, 400)} = 28.10$, p < .05). This finding explained that during pandemic, those who perceived high level of satisfaction with life and low in trait anxiety tended to have higher well-being, or the reverse (refer to Table 3).

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis on The Effect of Satisfaction with Life, Life Evaluation, and State-Trait Anxiety on Well-Being among Community of Sabah During Pandemic Covid-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig. t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with life</td>
<td>.134</td>
<td>2.482</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life evaluation</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>1.267</td>
<td>.206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Anxiety</td>
<td>-.014</td>
<td>-.229</td>
<td>.819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trait Anxiety</td>
<td>-.399</td>
<td>-6.588</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.219</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>28.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. $F$</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the general public worldwide in many ways including creating psychological problems. The first positive case in Sabah was detected on 12th March 2020 and the cases rose up to 82 cases in less than one week after the first case, making Sabah among the top three states affected by COVID-19 after Selangor and Kuala Lumpur (Lee, 2020; New Straits Times, 2020).

Many psychological related studies on those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the general population reported psychological distress such as stress, anxiety and depression (Kamaludin et al., 2020; Paulino et al., 2021; Savolainen et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2020). This study revealed that the satisfaction of life during the COVID-19 pandemic decreased as compared to before the pandemic. The first ever strict lockdown across the country was in March 2020 and drastic change in social and daily routine during the pandemic have somehow affected the mental health of the youths and therefore affected their life satisfaction. Social distancing, restricted gatherings, lifestyle changes, travel restrictions, new standard operating procedures for workplace and premises are some measures taken to
contain the virus outbreak. Apart from that, other problems faced during the early stage of the pandemic such as mask and sanitizer shortages and hike in price, panic buying during lockdown, losing jobs, pay cuts, online classes, and adapting to work from home situation in some way or another affected many. All these factors caused uncertainties, fear of the unknown and anxiety (Trzebiński et al., 2020) which affected the general public mental health and life satisfaction as a whole because previous research showed people undergoing ‘forced’ lockdown displayed more psychological distress associated with lower life satisfaction and this may continue after the lockdown (Lima, 2020). Lack of social interaction during the pandemic, feeling isolated and lonely, loss of job, financial burden, loss of loved ones and uncertainties over the future (Malla & War, 2020) really have a significant impact on the psychological well-being, quality of life and indirectly effecting one’s life satisfaction.

A comparison study on mental health status among seven middle income countries in Asia (China, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam) on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic revealed that Malaysia is among the top three countries with highest anxiety scores (measured using DASS-21) after Thailand and Pakistan (C. Wang et al., 2021). Similar trends were also reported in other countries (Paulino et al., 2021; Savolainen et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that participants in this current study reported moderate level of state anxiety and high level of trait anxiety. In adults this could be due to loss of job or pay cut, adapting to new norm by working from home while managing children’s online classes, sharing/providing new gadget for self and other family members (spouse and children), and dealing with problematic internet connection especially in the rural area in Sabah could be particularly stressful. Youths who are studying may also experience psychological distress such as internet access problem which has been a major issue in Sabah and was highlighted multiple times even before the pandemic. Social relationship is an important factor for mental health and social well-being of a student, but the pandemic has disrupted the social relationship which could lead to lack of emotional connectivity and support and therefore cause anxiety (Sundarasen et al., 2020).

Qualitative feedback by Malaysian university students in Sundarasen et al. (2020) further revealed that attending six to eight hours of online classes daily during the day on top of doing assignments during the night, constantly on their handphone or laptop has affected their mental and physical health. Students living with family at home also reported that they have to help with house chores and taking care of younger siblings on top of their already packed online classes and assignments; this has affected their anxiety level, which can increase their exhausting experiences when working with digital devices (Leonardi, 2021). A study indicated that 30% out of 1,054 university youths in Malaysia experienced different levels of anxiety due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kamaludin, et al., 2020) while another study reported that 37.3% of university youths experienced depression and 23.7% experienced stress during the MCO (Farhah Hidayu, & Vasudevan, 2020). Some of them need to find jobs to support their family when their parents lost their jobs. The level of loneliness, depression, anxiety, and stress among them increased along with the arrival of lockdown implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic (Elmer et al., 2020).

Other studies associated increased anxiety with reduced subjective well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (Qiu et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020). However, the respondents in this
study showed high level of well-being during the pandemic. This study measured well-being using the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) which measures competence, engagement and optimism which is based on humanistic and eudaimonic well-being theories (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016). Diener (1984) in her top-down theory suggested that higher subjective well-being predicts positive emotional reflection and evaluation toward a certain life event in which some researchers explain that subjective well-being is important in coping with stressors in life and it makes people more resilient to negative life events (Wang et al., 2021). The respondents in this study may hold a more optimistic view about the pandemic and therefore this influences their well-being significantly. Another possible explanation of this in the context of Borneo is when facing any crisis, family or loved ones are the main support system as opposed to seeking help elsewhere. Therefore, facing the pandemic together as a family may create a sense of safety. Malaysians are more accepting instead of practicing avoidance in facing tragedies and thus are more resilient when experiencing negative emotions. The words ‘redha’ or ‘pasrah’ are often used when facing unfortunate events or difficult situation that is beyond the individual’s control as an act or belief of accepting an unfortunate situation with an open heart and to live through it. Apart from that, collectivism culture may play a role as one of the predictors resulting in high well-being during the pandemic. Maintaining a strong relationship and everyone feel responsible for other members of the society is an important value in a collectivist society (Boshner, 1994).

This study suggested that participants who have low trait anxiety score and are satisfied with their life tend to have better well-being. Other related studies (Bao et al., 2013; Tsitsas et al., 2019) also associated life satisfaction with psychological well-being. The negative correlation between anxiety level and well-being also means that participants with lower level of well-being experience higher anxiety. Marchesi et al. (2000) associated trait anxiety as one of the risk factors of mental health problems. Perceived satisfaction with life is a form of optimism which is a cognitive component, while trait anxiety is associated as an emotional component. Hence, the effect of anxiety on well-being may be associated with the different way of evaluating one’s emotional component and cognitive component (Kepka et al., 2013). The association between low trait anxiety and satisfaction with life predicted better well-being during COVID-19 could partially reflect one’s ability to adapt and manage psychological symptoms such as anxiety and still being able to maintain well-being. The ability to cope well is critical for a person’s well-being amid experiencing the unprecedented pandemic.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the impact of COVID-19 anxiety, life evaluation and well-being of youths in Borneo. The effect of COVID-19 on one’s mental health and well-being are expected to be profound and long lasting (O’Connor et al., 2021). Apart from vulnerable groups (children, elderly, people with disability and migrants’ workers), other groups such as the youths should not be neglected too. It is paramount to get as much empirical evidence on how the current pandemic affects the adolescents and young people so that policy makers, public health and mental health bodies can take the necessary measures to assist the general public in terms of crisis prevention and interventions to tackle the psychological impact. This group differs in socio demographic backgrounds, and it is recommended that data on social demographic background be considered in order to identify the effects on their mental health.
and well-being. Further research on cultural influence or factors especially unique to the Borneans may also be important to further understand how culture may influence their coping with mental health and well-being. Cultural information may give insights into how government policies can be implemented across different cohorts or segments of the general public, and this will help to better understand and manage the ongoing situation or similar situation in the future. A longitudinal study should also be considered to determine if post pandemic situation still has an effect on the general public psychological health and well-being.

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