

What does it take to co-create place brands? Learnings from an academic-practitioner exchange

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to report on the insights from an international workshop entitled Co-creating place brands: sharing research insights and practical experiences towards more inclusive cities and regions hosted by the Erasmus University Rotterdam. The authors outline their collective reflection and the learnings for place branding theory and practice. Additionally, this paper discusses the need to build practitioner-scholar relationships in a co-creative style, to co-develop more inclusive models for co-creating place brands.

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Design/methodology/approach – The report details key learnings of a whole-day interactive workshop featuring academic and practitioner presentations and discussions around inclusive approaches to co-creating place brands. The report is structured around key emerging themes and their associated learnings.

Findings – The workshop yielded six important learnings: 1) a key obstacle to co-creating place brands is that co-creation is often misunderstood among decision-makers; 2) all place stakeholders need to be taken seriously if co-creation is to shape a place's identity and foster cohesion; 3) broad stakeholder inclusion in place branding can be problematic, but it is a necessary condition to the practice of place brand co-creation; 4) co-creating place brands requires going beyond marketing tools and deep into the levels of community life and place's social and cultural construction; 5) co-creation at all stages of the branding process from conceptual development to performance measurement and sometimes unconsciously; 6) politics of place must be observed (this is crucial yet easily overlooked in co-creating place brands).

Originality/value – The micro-format of the workshop facilitated valuable interactions between academics and practitioners, effectively blending practical, “on the ground”-knowledge with academic ideas, concepts and models. This approach not only generated key learnings with the possibility to advance the field but also highlighted important future research directions.

Keywords Participation, Learning, Place branding, Practitioners, Co-creation, Inclusion

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

On 23rd November 2023 a group of international academics and practitioners in place branding gathered to engage in a collective reflection on inclusion in place brand co-creation during a whole-day workshop entitled *Co-creating place brands: sharing research insights and practical experiences towards more inclusive cities and region*.

The workshop aimed to reflect on the concept and practice of co-creation in place branding processes, where:

Co-creation refers to all forms of formal and informal participation at any one or multiple components in the place branding process and conscious and unconscious contributions to the content of the place brand by place actors through their individual behaviors and mutual interactions (Eshuis and Ripoll González, 2024).

The workshop took place at the Cooperative “Het Gemaal op Zuid” in the south of Rotterdam (Netherlands). The location choice connected academics and practitioners with the city, in a location and a community invested in inclusive and co-creative practices. A mix of 36 academics and practitioners from diverse cities in the Netherlands and abroad (UK, Sweden, Poland) participated.

1.1 Workshop set up

The set-up of the workshop stimulated a dynamic and inclusive environment for everyone present. The composition of presentations, panels and generous networking time provided space for exchange between academics and practitioners. The set-up of the workshop itself appeared to resonate exceptionally well with the theme due to several reasons:

- The workshop format in itself resembled the microcosm of place brand co-creation by blending the academic and practitioners' perspectives as it not often happens;
- Thematic and in-depth focus replaced a broad range of themes characteristic for traditional conference formula;
- Smaller scale event of a full day allowed for more active participation, more interaction and more questions asked; and
- Despite the smaller scale, the audience was sufficiently diverse, representing a variety of career paths, experiences and cultural backgrounds.

2. Setting the scene: place branding and its underpinning logics

The workshop started with a thought-provoking academic keynote by Jasper Eshuis (EUR) who presented three approaches to place brands as:

- (1) symbolic constructs that identify and differentiate places from others;
- (2) images and associations in the minds of target groups; and
- (3) multisensory embodied experiences (for more details, see [Eshuis and Ripoll González, 2024](#)).

In particular, Eshuis emphasized the experiential and multi-faceted nature of place brands, as brands are experienced through all that people see, feel, hear, touch or narrate in a place. Thus, brands can be developed via diverse vehicles such as events, physical environment, stories, food and other touchpoints that target groups encounter in the place.

Eshuis stressed that *inclusive* place branding calls for the involvement of diverse stakeholders, including various subgroups of residents, companies from different sectors, politicians, civil servants, visitors and public institutions such as universities. These stakeholders usually work from different logics, which are informed by their organization or socio-cultural background. Inclusivity means that these different logics are acknowledged and included in the co-creation process ([Bekkers et al., 2017](#)). Therefore the design and development of inclusive brands is not only about rational decision-making, it must also acknowledge *institutional*, *political* and *symbolic* logics. The summary of logics with implications for co-creation is presented in [Table 1](#).

3. Key learnings of the workshop

Below we present key themes that emerged during the workshop, we discuss them in relation to the place branding literature and reflect on key learnings around the different themes.

3.1 Key learning 1. *The misunderstanding of co-creation by decision-makers is one of the key obstacles to the advancement of place branding practice*

The core idea behind co-creating place brands is to liberate the place branding process from the hands of a few stakeholders and involve the wider community ([Eshuis et al., 2018](#); [González et al., 2023](#)), thus increasing legitimacy. However, co-creation in place branding seems to be an umbrella term for processes through which complex brand meanings emerge through stakeholders' participation in place activities, contributions, collaboration and exchange of ideas and resources (this is also acknowledged in academic literature, see [Stoica et al., 2021](#)). The discussion highlighted an absence of a clear understanding not only on what constitutes co-creation but also on what branding can do for places. Some stakeholders (sometimes important politicians or civil servants) may hold narrow views of branding as the communication of logos, slogans and narratives ([Mueller and Schade, 2012](#)). Naturally, despite the recognition among practitioners of the importance of engaging stakeholders in the co-creation of place brands, this narrow view often results in instrumental and short-term approaches to branding without co-creation efforts. Participants suggested that this can be partly explained by the lack of professionalization and recognition of those working in communications and marketing teams that can effectively act as boundary spanners and translators to realize not only inclusion but also the full potential of place branding ([Govers, 2013](#)).

Table 1. Place branding logics – implications for co-creation (by authors based on keynote by Jasper Eshuis and workshop discussions)

Place branding logics	Explanation	Examples of implications for co-creation of place brands
Rational logic	Based on knowledge and reason, concentrates on the effective realisation of rationally chosen marketing goals, such as attracting young professionals to the place	In the co-creation paradigm following a rational logic, the parties involved engage in joint fact finding and evidence-informed place branding practices. They collectively decide on a set of measurable marketing goals Example: The 100% Pure New Zealand brand based on extensive marketing research (Morgan et al., 2002)
Institutional logic	The brand strategy should fit with incumbent rules, regulations and routines, giving the strategy an appropriate basis in the existing norms and structures	The institutional logic of the municipality might require that a place brand logo and slogan are developed in the co-creation process, even though this is not useful from a rational perspective because logos and slogans are not very effective place marketing instruments Example: the Porto logo serving to simplify the Councils corporate communication and serve public managers aim to attract (Casais and Monteiro, 2019) Example: using the phoenix flower as symbol in public sector institutional logos in Tainan (Taiwan) to guide a unified city image (Hsun and Jie, 2022)
Political logic	Place branding involves struggles for power and weighting interests in different arenas. The selected brand strategy needs to accommodate different (political) interests to get sufficient support	The political logic may require, for instance, that the interests of well-organized locals, the tourism sector or the ruling political party are accommodated Example: the struggle over the Luton brand (Stoica et al., 2021) or the Stockholm brand (Lucarelli, 2015). Example: place branding as instrument that serves the ruling parties' interests (Zhang et al., 2024)
Cultural logic	Sees the branding strategy as an instrument to facilitate expression, meaning making and identity	The place brand identity is well aligned with existing identities in the city. The marketing materials and branding activities such as events help stakeholder groups to give meaning to the place and express their identity as residents or users of the place. Example: the brand of Katendrecht (Rotterdam) which was strongly based on the community's identity (Eshuis and Edwards, 2013)

3.2 Key learning 2. Co-creating place brands helps shape identity and foster cohesion only if all stakeholders are taken seriously

Interestingly, later on when exploring the motivations for engaging in co-creation, the academic expert panel highlighted how place branding can be a catalyst for developing a sense of belonging and identity, especially in diverse urban contexts such as the cities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam in the Netherlands (see, for instance, [Belabas et al., 2020](#)). Warda Belabas (EUR) emphasized the role of city brands in creating a shared sense of belonging and urban identity in super-diverse cities. As migrants and their children have a strong local

identity, branding could in theory bring about positive effects for identification and belongingness. This connected well to the cultural logic of place branding that was highlighted in Jasper Eshuis' keynote. Negar Noori (EUR) reflected on how the municipal team in collaboration with researchers addressed digital inclusion challenges and co-creation in the development of Helmond Digital Inclusion policy. She highlighted the participatory nature of their approach to transform the city of Helmond into an inclusive digital city and highlighted that the project embraced diversity by focusing on empowering all people equally.

By jointly participating in the branding process, community members can better understand the core values and cultural characteristics of the places they inhabit, thereby helping to increase active support for local brand building (not just passive acceptance of the brand, but also active efforts to strengthen and contribute to the brand, see [Ripoll Gonzalez et al., 2023](#)). In the discussions, practitioners highlighted that co-creating place brands is not just about developing an image marketing strategy but also about shaping the city's identity on a social and cultural level. Besides, panellists highlighted the transformative potential of participatory approaches in promoting stakeholder inclusion and empowerment. This resonates with a political logic (which is about power), namely, to rebalance an unequal distribution of power and assist marginalized groups to gain more power. It also resonates with the institutional logic in the sense that promoting inclusion and empowerment fits with existing policies and institutional preferences of the municipality.

An inclusive way of working can bring people together and foster cohesion. The new insights that previously less involved groups bring, may be transformative not only for place branding but also "spill over" to wider spatial planning and place-making processes. This way, co-creative place branding can be a key strategy for future place brand development. However, as highlighted by Lisa Källström, Kristianstad University (Sweden), it is important for researchers to show genuine curiosity to understand the place stakeholders and their perceptions of place branding, as they often have paradoxical perceptions of its meaning and scope which influence their participation in place branding ([Källström and Siljeklint, 2024](#)).

3.3 Key learning 3. Broad stakeholder inclusion into place branding can be problematic, but it is necessary to practice co-creation

Participants agreed that co-creation means that branding should not only be decided unilaterally by the municipality or commercial institutions but also include extensive participation of various stakeholders such as residents, cultural institutions, NGOs and academia (as seen in the literature, see [Kavaratzis, 2012](#); [Klijn et al., 2012](#)).

Generally, broad participation can not only inject more diverse elements into a place's brand but also reduce the bias and imbalance caused by the dominance of a single interest group. As [Stoica et al. \(2021\)](#) suggest, the mode of multi-stakeholder participation can improve both the representativeness and sustainability of branding building. Meanwhile, through consultation and cooperation with various stakeholders, the place's potential and resources can be better explored and a better match between place identities and images can be stimulated ([Braun et al., 2018](#)). Nina Wols-Boons, a strategic advisor in city branding at the City of Rotterdam (Netherlands), expanded on this in her practitioner keynote focused on a major event hosted in the city in 2022: the King's Day. Wols-Boons reflected on the challenge for city branders in Rotterdam to make a national holiday inclusive in a multicultural city, and how her team worked with local stakeholders in the co-creation of the event. She explained that the city marketing team used a value-driven approach mixing the brand values of the city of Rotterdam with those of King's Day. In the lead up to the event, the municipality accommodated dialogue with a diversity of residents and local organizations through creative sessions which led to incorporating the controversial theme of Dutch colonial slavery in the

city of Rotterdam, and even put it on the agenda in the conversation with the king and queen during the event. Despite the criticism received due to the perceived challenge of bringing a political-sensitive topic to the agenda that does not fit the nature of the event, the team considered that being authentic and including the issues brought up by the community was important. In this way, the efforts were not only focused on the success of the event but also on building a community around the Rotterdam brand. This demonstrates that, although addressing this sensitive topic went against the institutional logic (informal rules) of this festive event, actors prioritized a cultural logic to use the brand for engaging in joint meaning making and developing a common identity.

However, inclusion issues and even conflicts may be involved in the process of engaging a wide range of stakeholders of place brand co-creation. The discussions highlighted that involving citizens in place branding does not directly link to inclusive branding. This is because certain highly educated and well-to-do residents often dominate in public participation processes, while other groups such as the disabled, the elderly, low-income people and ethnic minorities are historically prone to be excluded from co-creating place brands. In addition, Vidar Stevens, University of Utrecht (Netherlands), shared a critical reflection on the inherent selectiveness in co-branding processes where the messages not aligned with the main place narrative are considered “out of place”. Stevens used examples in the context of sports to highlight how branding might reflect certain norms and myths around “sameness” that are far from the realities of local communities and that can lead to marginalization, particularly to dissonant voices.

Hence, there are inherent challenges to co-creation. Members of the audience from different municipalities provided practical examples of instances in which stakeholders’ desires are at odds with current policies and branding campaigns (Maiello and Pasquinelli, 2015). Successful place branding campaigns, built on sustained efforts by branding teams deeply engaged with the community they serve, can quickly be politicized (i.e. for bringing over-tourism) trumping the long-standing efforts of communications, marketing or branding departments. In this context, it was suggested to widen the focus from specific campaigns that may or may not be well received at different times, to strengthening the local community around the brand. This is what the municipality of Gent (Belgium) is doing by promoting the *Gentse character*. City of Gent Communications Manager Eveline Vincke explained that they no longer invest communication campaigns, but rather co-create the city identity through events, collaborations with different local communities and generally amplifying the authentic values of the city that makes it quirky but at the same time different from others.

Co-creation hence brings about both benefits and costs. On the one hand investments are required for maintaining good rapport between stakeholders engaged in place branding whilst ensuring opportunities for engagement for those who are disengaged from the process. However, time and budgetary constraints can often lead to selective inclusion of certain stakeholders. Although participants concurred that engaging all stakeholders to increase democratic legitimacy is indeed important, practitioners highlighted that often it is not actually about selectively activating or deactivating certain stakeholders but going “where the energy and resources are”. Here Prof. Erik Hans Klijn remarked that it then became clear that managing stakeholders must indeed become part and parcel of deliberate strategizing and planning around place branding processes.

3.4 Key learning 4. Co-creating place brands requires going beyond marketing tools and deep into the levels of community life and place’s social and cultural construction

Traditional place branding approaches often refer to marketing tools such as logos, slogans or advertising (Greenberg, 2008; Kavaratzis, 2004). Stimulated by Eshuis’ keynote, there

was a lively discussion about co-creating place brands as inclusive “multisensory embodied experiences”. One key insight was that it requires placescapes where people with different bodies, corporeal styles and clothing styles feel included, for example, people with disabilities, varying genders or certain clothing styles linked to their religion or culture. In recent years, a growing number of scholars believe that place branding is not only marketing and promoting but also a public governance strategy (Eshuis and Klijn, 2017). This means that place branding can be achieved by supporting community projects, hosting cultural events, improving infrastructure, etc. Co-creating place brands also require going beyond superficial marketing tools and truly going deep into the levels of community life and social and cultural construction (i.e. as brands are seen and perceived differently by different stakeholders and often highlight cultural elements of place), as was evidenced by Eveline Vincke’s presentation of the city of Ghent brand strategy, that has no logo and no slogan and is rather co-created through community activities (*the Gentse character*).

The discussion addressed how co-creation of place brands can be done in practice. Lisa Källström from Kristianstad University in Sweden shared a relevant example based on a collaborative research project with the Östra Göinge municipality in Sweden. Källström illustrated how design thinking can facilitate an inclusive place branding process and introduced the inclusive place branding diamond (Källström and Siljeklint, 2021). The framework consists of four iterative phases with different activities and tools with the possibility to enrich the dialogue and simulate and empower the participants to contribute with meaningful input to the process. From a practical perspective, the framework offers a distinct and structured model – or *roadmap* – to relate to for place practitioners who want to develop a place brand by involving place stakeholders. However, co-creation requires brand managers to engage in different ways of working. Nina Wols-Boons highlighted that city branding is often merely seen as a “communication” or “marketing” and that institutional forces want it to stay at that. This general perception leads to difficulties in partnering with others on deeper values such as inclusion. It makes it difficult for the city branding team to prove their worth and to be taken seriously in their inclusion efforts. Additionally, there is the challenge of maintaining efforts, and moving from one campaign or event to a more structural approach to engaging with place stakeholders in which co-creation and inclusion are highly valued. The institutional logic of public organizations favours a project based and campaign-based set-up. Finding ways to keep momentum and have an impact in the long term, especially in a political context, like Rotterdam, which is not known for its pro-diversity attitude was one of the main challenges shared by many other practitioners present. Thus, a dominant political logic may contrast with rational marketing logics about effectively reaching marketing goals. The examples showed how working inclusively in the sense of acknowledging and doing justice to the logics and needs of various stakeholders is a serious challenge.

The branding literature suggests that using inclusive images does little to encourage identification among the local population or mitigate other negative reputational effects (see (Belabas and George, 2023)). Hence, while traditional marketing tools remain important in place brand co-creation, there are growing calls for a more inclusive and holistic approach to co-creating place brands through the local community.

3.5 Key learning 5. Co-creation in place branding occurs (sometimes unconsciously) at all stages: from conceptual development to performance measurement

Place branding is not a one-time activity but a continuously evolving process (Boisen et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2024). The concept of co-creation should be present throughout the place branding, not just in the initial planning stages. Marta Hereźniak, University of Lodz

(Poland), emphasized the need for co-creation to be a guiding principle in all stages of the place branding process. Reflecting on a project aimed at developing a city business brand, “Invest in Lodz” (Poland), Hereźniak highlighted how co-creation can help reduce tensions among stakeholders and stimulate Brand Citizenship Behaviour (otherwise known as support for the brand).

On the one hand, only by continuously interacting and cooperating with stakeholders throughout the entire brand building process can brand strategies be adjusted in a timely manner and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of brand building (Hereźniak and Florek, 2018). This was also reflected in the practitioner keynote, where the main challenge for the inclusive King’s Day was to build on the momentum and follow up with the success of the event.

We also addressed place branding as a conscious or rather unconscious process, as a wide range of stakeholders often participates in the co-creation of place brands with or without a formal invitation. While brand managers, ambassadors and officials consciously shape brand narratives, unconscious trends driven by residents, celebrities, taxi drivers and more also have a subtle yet profound impact on brand perception. There was consensus among the gathered experts that some part of the place brand is consciously influenced by brand managers, ambassadors and official branded communication. However, branding also happens unconsciously, by taxi drivers, residents, journalists, celebrities, the mayor and so forth. Hence, there are many stakeholders involved – consciously and unconsciously, with varying autonomy and self-organizing capacity. Hereźniak also stressed that each place stakeholder group is unique, and they may assume diverse roles across the place branding process, therefore may need to be involved at different stages (see e.g. Hereźniak and Anders-Morawska, 2021; Hereźniak and Florek, 2018), which is echoed in recent advancements in the literature (Källström and Ripoll González, 2024).

This gives food for thought on how governing place brands needs to be done: should we focus on the conscious support or rather on the unconscious activities, and is the latter ethically correct? This led to the reflection that conscious efforts provide strategic direction and intent, while acknowledging unconscious contributions emphasizes the organic, grassroots nature of brand formation. The need for co-creation therefore becomes a guiding principle at all stages of the place branding process.

3.6 Key learning 6. Politics is crucial yet easily overlooked in co-creating place brands

Dr Giannina Warren, Middlesex University (UK), shed light on the diversity of both people and processes involved in place branding. For instance, marketers (or practitioners) often deal with power struggles and feel the need to “play politics” (see e.g. Warren *et al.*, 2021). Hence it is important to observe everything surrounding the branding project, from politics, policies and diplomacy to news media, digital engagement, as well as cultural and lifestyle discourses. This resonated with the point made earlier that it is important to acknowledge multiple logics including a political and cultural logic.

Political forces can have a huge impact on place branding because they can influence resource allocation, decision-making processes and power structures (Belabas *et al.*, 2020; Ginesta and de San Eugenio, 2021). This is an important “logic” to be considered in place brand co-creation. In co-creating place brands, political forces may have a significant impact on the direction and results of brand building and may even lead to certain interest groups being excluded from the co-creation process.

In the inclusive co-creation of place brands, stakeholders take the diverse logics into account. They seek synergy between the logics, for example, using science and facts to develop brand strategies that strengthen stakeholders’ meaning making and identity. However, synergy is not

always possible, and experiences were exchanged of political logics hindering the realization of rational marketing goals. The emergence and withdrawal of some immigrant-friendly city brands is a typical example of political influence (Puybroeck *et al.*, 2014; Vallaster *et al.*, 2018; Zhao *et al.*, 2024). Political wrestling may lead to certain interest groups being excluded from the co-creation process (Yazici *et al.*, 2023). Our discussion also identified that the challenges of addressing political sensitivities and engaging in discussions created significant barriers for practitioners. Clearly power struggles and “playing politics” by marketers, that is, place branding practitioners, are crucial. Place marketers and city branding agencies can influence promotion decisions informally and non-systematically (Warren *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the workshop suggests that researchers and practitioners must recognize the presence and influence of political factors and use social capital with various politicians and stakeholders as a means to overcome these challenges and include a variety of actors.

4. Looking forward: reflections towards a research and action agenda

The micro-format (limited number of participants, division of the day in four different blocks with “shorter” and focused presentations allowing for plenty of interaction time and mini breaks for networking in between with extended pauses and lunch break) and the non-hierarchical nature of the workshop created an informal atmosphere where theories could be connected with practice and where academics and practitioners collectively could explore the challenges of involving all place actors in place branding processes. Academics openly discussed the challenges encountered in collaborations with place actors in place branding research projects, particularly when observing or facilitating co-creation processes. From practitioners’ perspective, the workshop helped to identify a significant gap, namely, that brand managers often lack the training to ensure that brand strategies are inclusive. Place branding practitioners feel they struggled with their role because their work was often seen by others as promotion, whereas they themselves see their role in co-creating place brands in inclusive ways. That is, while they see potential in their role, practitioners need knowledge and other tools to fully leverage branding for social purposes and create public value. In this regard, small scale workshops could be organized between academics and practitioners around specific themes (e.g. inclusivity in co-creating city brands) to help share knowledge and experiences, thus promoting meaningful communication and cooperation between research and practice. The novelty of the workshop’s approach is in the format of cooperation between place branding academics and practitioners through thematic micro-format workshops as opposed to broad-scale conferences. The small scale and full day length allow in-depth interaction. The thematic focus around co-creation and inclusion further allowed us to exchange practical knowledge as well as explore academic ideas in depth.

An important critical remark was that often practitioners are “doing the walk” and “less talk” and feel that academic research and insights are lagging. Here additional forms of interaction can help to co-create knowledge beyond just sharing insights, for example through action research. Practitioners found very useful the opportunity to share triumphs and tribulations with like-minded practitioners in the room and to learn from their experiences in working with academics to advance inclusion and co-creation in practice.

The discussions shed new light on key current matters in place branding and identified future research directions (of relevance for both practitioners and academics). Firstly, despite consensus regarding the need for inclusion and co-creation for successful and sustainable place branding (Ripoll González and Gale, 2023), the question *how to design an inclusive place branding process and what co-creation can look like in practice* needs further scrutiny. It is key to develop long-term inclusive initiatives, stretching beyond a single intervention or communications

campaign. Secondly, much of current place branding research on co-creation and inclusion focuses on the citizen as an important stakeholder group. Even though citizens hold an important role, other stakeholder groups are important too. Practitioners highlighted the significance of the role of decision-makers, such as politicians, and to approach, include and empower them. Thirdly, place brand practitioners sometimes struggle to see how their role could extend beyond marketing communication into many other overarching issues for both public and private interest, such as inclusion. Thus, the role of the place brand practitioners constitutes an intriguing area for future research. Thereby it is necessary to better understand the value conflicts and trade-offs that place brand managers must deal with in branding processes. In theory, place branding is more than a “communication” or “marketing” exercise and can be used as a strategy to stimulate positive societal outcomes (e.g. inclusion and sustainability). However, there is a need to observe the inherent tensions and *Eigendynamik* of competing branding frames (i.e. official branding efforts vis a vis civil society narratives about place, see [Rennstam et al., 2024](#)) and the limits of applying corporate concepts to the task of branding places. In practice, however, other municipal departments and other stakeholders regard branding practice as just marketing, which leads to difficulties in partnering with others on the delivery of deeper values such as inclusion. Finally, despite an encouraging account by both academics and practitioners of efforts to maintain place branding co-creation over time, there is a gap in the delivery of more structural approaches in which co-creation and inclusion are highly valued.

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