

Service Quality in Muslim-Friendly RSAs: Evidence from user voices on Google reviews

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Abstract

Rest and Service Areas (RSAs) play an important role in supporting Muslim-friendly travel experiences along Malaysia's North-South Expressway. Despite Malaysia's strong positioning as a Muslim-friendly tourism destination, limited attention has been given to the service quality of transit facilities such as prayer rooms, restaurants, and public washrooms. Using a qualitative case study approach, 120 Google Reviews from three selected RSAs were analysed through the SERVQUAL framework. The findings reveal that cleanliness, accessibility, comfort, and halal assurance strongly influence traveller satisfaction. Although the facilities were generally perceived positively, issues related to maintenance, accessibility, and operational quality remained recurring concerns.

Keywords: Muslim-friendly; Rest and service areas (RSA); Service quality; Customer satisfaction

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1.0 Introduction

Tourism remains one of the major contributors to global economic growth, contributing 7.6% of global GDP in 2022 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2023). Beyond generating income and employment, tourism also depends heavily on supporting infrastructure that shapes travellers' experiences. Transportation networks, transit facilities, accommodation services, and public amenities influence how travellers perceive the quality and convenience of a destination. In Malaysia, Rest and Service Areas (RSAs) along the North-South Expressway play an important role in supporting long-distance travel by providing facilities such as fuel stations, dining areas, washrooms, retail outlets, and rest spaces (Sa'ari & Ishak, 2020). These facilities are not merely functional stopovers but also form part of the overall tourism and travel experience, particularly for domestic travellers and interstate tourists.

As Malaysia continues to position itself as a leading Muslim-friendly tourism destination under the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI), the quality of Muslim-friendly facilities at RSAs has become increasingly important for both domestic and international Muslim travellers (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2021). Muslim-friendly tourism generally refers to tourism services and facilities that accommodate Islamic requirements and practices, including halal-certified food, prayer facilities, hygienic washrooms, and family-friendly environments

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(Battour et al., 2024). Within highway tourism settings, facilities such as surau, halal dining outlets, ablution areas, and clean public washrooms are particularly important as Muslim travellers often need to fulfil religious obligations during long-distance journeys. The availability and quality of these facilities may influence travel comfort, convenience, and overall satisfaction.

Despite continuous improvement efforts by PLUS Malaysia Berhad, the operator of the North–South Expressway and its associated Rest and Service Areas (RSAs), several operational issues continue to affect traveller satisfaction, including overcrowding, poor washroom cleanliness, insufficient seating, and maintenance problems (Roslan et al., 2022). For Muslim travellers, inadequate surau facilities, limited halal food options, and poor maintenance may negatively affect travel comfort and confidence in service delivery (Tarmazi et al., 2022). Previous studies have extensively examined service quality in tourism and hospitality settings using the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). The model evaluates service quality across five dimensions; tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy which continues to be widely applied in recent studies to assess customer satisfaction, loyalty, and service performance across various service sectors (Panday & Nursal, 2021). Studies on Muslim-friendly tourism have also emphasised the importance of maintaining operational quality and consistent service delivery to strengthen traveller trust and satisfaction (Battour et al., 2024). However, research focusing specifically on RSAs remains limited despite their strategic role in supporting tourism mobility in Malaysia.

At the same time, digital platforms such as Google Reviews provide valuable user-generated feedback that reflects travellers' actual experiences and expectations. Online reviews allow researchers to identify recurring service quality issues and operational weaknesses more naturally compared to structured surveys (Nilashi et al., 2021). User-generated content also offers more spontaneous and experience-based evaluations, particularly regarding cleanliness, accessibility, food quality, and facility maintenance. Therefore, this study aims to identify the key service quality issues associated with Muslim-friendly facilities at selected RSAs along the North–South Expressway through the analysis of Google Reviews. Specifically, the study seeks to examine travellers' evaluations of surau facilities, halal dining services, and public washrooms, and to determine how these evaluations influence overall customer satisfaction. The findings are expected to contribute practical insights for RSA operators and tourism authorities in strengthening Malaysia's Muslim-friendly tourism image and improving service quality within highway tourism settings.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality: The Role of Rest and Service Areas in Enhancing Travel Experiences

Malaysia has established itself as a leading Muslim-friendly tourism destination, attracting more than 5.3 million Muslim visitors in 2019 and generating RM16.72 billion for the national economy (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2021). This growth is closely linked to the provision of Muslim-friendly services such as halal-certified food, prayer facilities, and Shariah-compliant hospitality practices (Tarmazi et al., 2022). Previous studies also noted that the expansion of Muslim-friendly tourism has encouraged further investment in tourism infrastructure and services.



Fig. 1: Example of Surau Facilities at a Rest and Service Area (RSA)
(Source: Berita Harian (2020))

Despite this progress, discussions on Muslim-friendly tourism often focus on hotels, airlines, and destinations while giving limited attention to transit facilities such as Rest and Service Areas (RSAs). Along Malaysia's North-South Expressway, RSAs serve as important travel touchpoints through facilities such as surau, halal dining outlets, and family-friendly amenities. Although operators such as PLUS Malaysia Berhad continue to emphasise comfort, safety, and cleanliness (PLUS Malaysia, 2023), recurring complaints regarding maintenance and service quality raise concerns about whether RSAs consistently meet the expectations associated with Malaysia's Muslim-friendly tourism image.

2.2 Key Attributes of Muslim-Friendly Services in Rest and Service Areas

Rest and Service Areas (RSAs) play an important role in supporting Muslim-friendly travel by providing facilities such as surau, halal food outlets, ablution areas, and hygienic restrooms (Mohamed Ismail & James Noh, 2022; MS 2610:2015; Global Muslim Travel Index, 2023). These facilities help Muslim travellers fulfil religious obligations while also improving comfort and cleanliness for all highway users. Previous studies suggested that Muslim-friendly facilities often reflect higher overall service quality standards (Purnomo & Purwandari, 2024).

Despite growing attention towards Muslim-friendly tourism, studies examining the actual performance of RSAs remain limited. Existing reports often highlight upgrades and initiatives but rarely assess issues related to maintenance, accessibility, overcrowding, and cleanliness. Although Muslim-friendly features are linked to traveller satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth promotion (Poernomo et al., 2022), operational weaknesses such as limited prayer space and inconsistent facility maintenance continue to affect user experiences. Current research also relies heavily on survey-based approaches, while user-generated content such as Google Reviews remains underexplored despite offering more direct and spontaneous feedback on RSA service quality.

2.3 Towards a Critical Understanding of RSAs in Muslim-Friendly Tourism

Although Malaysia is widely recognised as a leading Muslim-friendly tourism destination, limited research has critically examined the role of Rest and Service Areas (RSAs) in shaping travel experiences. Existing studies largely focus on destinations, hotels, and airlines, while RSAs remain underexplored despite functioning as important transit facilities for domestic and international travellers. This gap is significant because RSAs often contribute to travellers' overall impressions during highway journeys. To address this issue, the present study adopts a user-generated content approach by analysing Google Reviews to examine the service quality of RSAs from the perspective of Muslim-friendly tourism.

2.4 Service Quality

Service quality is widely recognised as an important factor influencing customer satisfaction and travel experiences (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Kamri et al., 2024). The SERVQUAL framework identifies five key dimensions commonly applied in tourism and hospitality studies:

- i) Tangibility refers to the physical condition and appearance of facilities such as surau, washrooms, dining spaces, and signage. Clean and well-maintained facilities strongly influence travellers' perceptions, especially among Muslim travellers who require proper prayer and ablution facilities (Johnson & Karlay, 2018).
- ii) Reliability relates to the consistency and dependability of services, including the availability of halal food, accessible surau, and properly functioning facilities. Inconsistent services may weaken trust in Muslim-friendly tourism services (Magasi et al., 2022).
- iii) Responsiveness reflects how quickly and effectively staff respond to travellers' needs, complaints, and operational issues, particularly during peak travel periods.
- iv) Assurance refers to travellers' confidence in halal certification, Shariah-compliant practices, and the credibility of service providers (QuestionPro, 2023).
- v) Empathy focuses on understanding travellers' cultural and religious needs through family-friendly spaces, gender-sensitive facilities, and accessible surau (Johnson & Karlay, 2018).

Although SERVQUAL has been widely applied in tourism and hospitality studies, limited research has examined how these dimensions operate within highway tourism and Muslim-friendly transit facilities such as RSAs (Battour et al., 2024).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the service quality of Muslim-friendly facilities at Rest and Service Areas (RSAs) along Malaysia's North-South Expressway (NSE). The approach enabled deeper exploration of travellers' experiences and perceptions through user-generated feedback.

3.2 Study Area and Sample Selection

The study focused on three selected RSAs: Tapah Southbound, Tapah Northbound, and Seremban Northbound. These RSAs were selected due to their popularity, strong public reputation, and high number of Google Reviews. These RSAs are selected due to their high number of customer reviews above 5000 reviews, surpassing other renown service area such R&R Seremban Southbound and R&R Rawang, which are all below 5000 reviews on Google Maps (Google Maps, 2026; Afiz Redzuan, 2019).

3.3 Population and Sample Size

The population consisted of 29 RSAs managed by PLUS Malaysia Berhad along the North-South Expressway. To determine an adequate sample size, GPower 3.1 software was employed. The study specified a Goodness-of-Fit test: Contingency Table under the χ^2 test family. Input parameters included a medium effect size of 0.30, a significance level (α) of 0.05, a statistical power of 0.80, and one degree of freedom, as the analysis compared two categories, namely service attributes and customer ratings (Davey, 2015). The

calculation indicated a minimum sample size requirement of 88 reviews. However, following the recommendation of Lakens et al. (2022), the final dataset was expanded to 120 reviews to improve data reliability, enhance analytical accuracy, and reduce the influence of irrelevant or overly brief reviews. The larger sample size also addressed the challenge of obtaining reviews containing substantive comments on Muslim-friendly service attributes, including surau facilities, halal dining services, and public washrooms. Therefore, a total of 120 Google Reviews were selected and analysed in this study.

3.4 Sampling Technique and Data Collection

The study employed stratified purposive sampling to ensure balanced representation across the selected RSAs. A total of 120 Google Reviews were collected, comprising 40 reviews from each RSA. Reviews published between 2020 and 2023 were analysed to capture recent traveller experiences. Priority was given to reviews posted by Google Local Guides due to their higher credibility and active contribution history. Only reviews written in English or Malay that contained substantive comments related to service quality and Muslim-friendly facilities were included. Reviews consisting solely of ratings, emojis, or irrelevant comments were excluded. The review selection process was guided by keywords such as “surau”, “halal food”, “washroom”, and “cleanliness”, based on the criteria outlined in MS 2610:2015 and the Global Muslim Travel Index 2023.

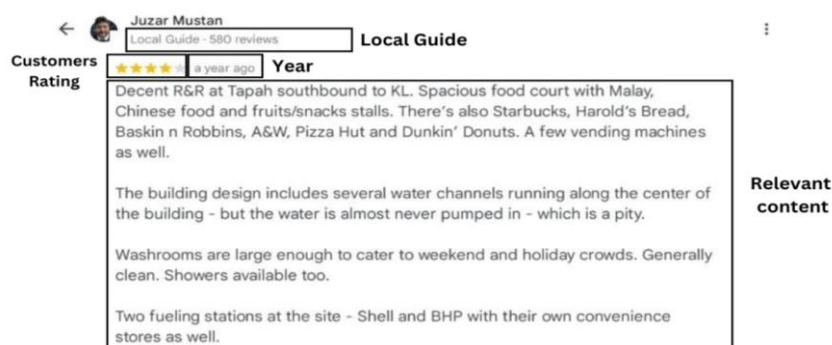


Fig. 2: Feedback from Google Review
(Source: Google Review)

3.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in two stages: descriptive analysis and thematic content analysis.

3.5.1 Thematic Content Analysis

Google Reviews were analysed using thematic coding based on the SERVQUAL framework by Parasuraman et al. (1988). The analysis focused on five service quality dimensions:

- i) Tangibility – physical facilities and cleanliness.
- ii) Reliability – consistency of services and facility maintenance.
- iii) Responsiveness – staff response towards travellers' needs and complaints.
- iv) Assurance – confidence in halal certification and Muslim-friendly practices.
- v) Empathy – sensitivity towards cultural and religious needs.

Inductive coding was also applied to identify themes related to Muslim-friendly tourism, including prayer adequacy, halal assurance, and gender-sensitive facilities. The coding process was validated against MS 2610:2015 and the Global Muslim Travel Index 2023.

4.0 Analysis and Finding

4.1 Key Attributes of Muslim-Friendly Services

The findings examine the key attributes of Muslim-friendly services in RSAs based on travellers' reviews and service quality dimensions. Table 1 presents the distribution of reviews for each service attribute, providing insights into how RSA facilities meet the expectations and needs of Muslim travellers.

4.1.1 Prayer Room

Table 1 presents the analysis of prayer room facilities based on the SERVQUAL dimensions across the selected RSAs. The findings focus on accessibility, cleanliness, comfort, and the adequacy of facilities supporting Muslim travellers' religious needs.

Table 1. Analysis on Prayer Room Service Quality

Service Dimension	TN (+/-)	TS (+/-)	SN (+/-)	Sample Quotation
Tangibility	1/1	7/0	6/2	"Good spot for short rest or even for prayers for Muslim friends" (R1)
Reliability	1/1	0/0	0/1	"Have to walk far for the toilet, surau and baby room." (R69)

Service Dimension	TN (+/-)	TS (+/-)	SN (+/-)	Sample Quotation
Responsiveness	0/0	0/0	0/1	"Please bring your own prayer mats" (R107)
Assurance	1/1	0/1	0/1	"For Muslim to pray, there are also chair for OKU" (R20)
Empathy	10/0	6/0	8/0	"The prayer room is comfortable and spacious" (R107)

TN = Tapah Northbound, TS = Tapah Southbound, SN = Seremban Northbound

(Source: Researchers' Analysis)

Prayer rooms were among the most important Muslim-friendly facilities discussed by travellers, particularly in terms of accessibility, cleanliness, and comfort. Respondents generally appreciated the strategic placement of surau near other facilities such as restaurants and toilets, as this improved convenience during travel. These findings support Suci et al. (2021) and Lada et al. (2024), who identified prayer facilities as a key component of Muslim-friendly travel infrastructure. However, several reviews suggested that accessibility issues still exist, especially for elderly travellers and users rushing to perform prayers on time.

Positive perceptions were also strongly associated with the cleanliness and spaciousness of surau facilities. Consistent with Poernomo et al. (2022) and Zainol et al. (2024), the findings indicate that cleanliness and comfort contribute directly to traveller satisfaction and trust. At the same time, several reviews highlighted weaknesses related to facility support, including insufficient prayer equipment and maintenance issues. Overall, the findings suggest that travellers evaluate surau not only based on availability, but also on usability, maintenance, accessibility, and supporting amenities.

4.1.2 Restaurant

Table 2 presents the analysis of restaurant service quality based on the SERVQUAL dimensions across the selected RSAs. The findings highlight travellers' perceptions regarding food variety, halal assurance, service responsiveness, and overall dining experience within the Muslim-friendly tourism context.

Table 2. Analysis on Restaurant Service Quality

Service Dimension	TN (+/-)	TS (+/-)	SN (+/-)	Sample Quotation
Tangibility	1/2	1/0	6/4	"Facilities were good are well maintained" (R106)
Reliability	1/0	2/1	2/0	"A place to stop by for respite as even at odd hour like at 2 or 3 am, you still get food like nasi berlauk or mee" (R1)
Responsiveness	27/2	32/0	21/1	"There are several drink vending machines from the direction of entering to the right there is kind of food court" (R13)
Empathy	34/6	27/0	29/7	"Variety of eateries are there. Pak Tam for malay cuisine, dunkin doughnuts for donuts and western food, and A&W for fast food" (R44)

TN = Tapah Northbound, TS = Tapah Southbound, SN = Seremban Northbound

(Source: Researchers' Analysis)

Restaurants were frequently highlighted by travellers, particularly regarding food variety, halal assurance, and service convenience. Respondents appreciated the availability of different food options, including traditional Malaysian cuisine and international fast-food outlets. These findings support earlier studies showing that halal-certified dining services contribute positively to Muslim-friendly travel experiences and traveller satisfaction (Mohamed Ismail & James Noh, 2022; Poernomo et al., 2022). Travellers also valued the reliability of restaurant services, especially the availability of food during late-night travel hours.

However, several reviews identified weaknesses related to cleanliness and responsiveness, particularly involving unclean dining areas and slow staff response. Although RSA restaurants generally reflected Malaysia's Muslim-friendly tourism image through halal food availability and diverse dining options, inconsistent cleanliness and operational quality affected overall traveller satisfaction. The findings suggest that halal certification alone is insufficient without consistent maintenance and service quality.

4.1.3 Public Washroom

Table 3 presents the analysis of public washroom facilities based on the SERVQUAL dimensions across the selected RSAs. The findings reflect travellers' perceptions regarding cleanliness, spaciousness, accessibility, and overall convenience of washroom facilities.

Table 3. Analysis on Public Washroom Service Quality

Service Dimension	TN (+/-)	TS (+/-)	SN (+/-)	Sample Quotation
Tangibility	15/1	17/3	12/0	"Toilet is clean" (R86)
Reliability	2/0	3/1	0/0	"The restrooms are well-maintained" (R42)
Empathy	18/1	14/6	5/2	"Spacious and big toilet" (R16)

TN = Tapah Northbound, TS = Tapah Southbound, SN = Seremban Northbound

(Source: Researchers' Analysis)

Public washrooms were frequently discussed by travellers, particularly regarding cleanliness, spaciousness, and accessibility. Many respondents perceived the washrooms as clean, spacious, and comfortable, indicating that the physical condition of facilities plays an important role in shaping service quality perceptions. This is especially important for Muslim travellers who require suitable facilities for

ablution before prayers. These findings support Arasli et al. (2023), who highlighted that hygiene and facility conditions strongly influence satisfaction within Muslim-friendly tourism settings.

Despite the positive feedback, several reviews raised concerns regarding accessibility and facility planning, particularly the distance between washrooms and other amenities. The findings suggest that although RSA washrooms have improved in terms of cleanliness and size, accessibility and user convenience continue to influence traveller experiences. This indicates that Muslim-friendly service quality depends not only on physical provision but also on inclusive and practical facility design.

5.0 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Muslim-friendly services at RSAs are evaluated not only based on the availability of facilities but also on their quality, cleanliness, accessibility, and overall usability. Facilities such as surau, halal restaurants, and public washrooms were generally viewed positively when they were clean, spacious, and conveniently located. This suggests that travellers seek practical and comfortable travel experiences alongside religious compliance. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of Muslim-friendly facilities depends not merely on their presence, but on how well they support travellers' needs throughout their journeys.

The findings also reflect several dimensions of the SERVQUAL framework, particularly tangibility, reliability, and empathy. Positive perceptions were strongly associated with clean facilities, comfortable prayer spaces, and accessible amenities, highlighting the importance of physical evidence in shaping travellers' evaluations. This observation supports Parasuraman et al. (1988), who argued that customers often rely on tangible cues when assessing service quality. Within the RSA environment, where travellers spend relatively short periods of time, physical conditions become a visible indicator of overall service standards. The findings also support Battour et al. (2024), who emphasised that Muslim-friendly tourism depends on consistent and quality service delivery rather than the symbolic provision of religious facilities alone.

At the same time, several operational weaknesses were identified across the reviews. Complaints regarding unclean dining tables, inaccessible washrooms, insufficient prayer equipment, and inconsistent maintenance practices indicate that the existence of facilities alone does not guarantee traveller satisfaction. Travellers increasingly expect facilities to function efficiently and meet practical travel needs. These findings suggest that reliability remains a critical component of service quality, as travellers expect facilities to be consistently available, functional, and well maintained regardless of the location or time of travel.

Accessibility emerged as another important consideration within the highway tourism setting. As RSAs function as temporary transit points during long-distance travel, convenience and efficiency become particularly significant. Facilities that are poorly located, difficult to access, or inadequately maintained may negatively affect travellers' experiences, especially among elderly travellers, families with children, and persons with disabilities (OKU). This finding highlights the importance of inclusive design and facility planning in supporting a wider range of traveller needs and expectations.

The findings further suggest that Muslim-friendly facilities benefit not only Muslim travellers but also the wider travelling public. Elements such as cleanliness, organised layouts, food safety, and comfortable facilities contribute to overall customer satisfaction regardless of religious background. This demonstrates that Muslim-friendly tourism standards have broader implications for service quality and may contribute to enhancing destination competitiveness and visitor experiences within the highway tourism sector.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that RSA operators should adopt a more integrated approach to service quality management. Improvements in maintenance, cleanliness monitoring, accessibility, and staff responsiveness are likely to generate positive effects across multiple service attributes simultaneously. Since travellers evaluate RSAs as a complete service environment rather than as separate facilities, shortcomings in a single area may influence perceptions of the overall travel experience. Continuous quality monitoring and timely corrective actions are therefore essential in maintaining positive traveller perceptions and strengthening Malaysia's Muslim-friendly tourism image.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of user-generated content in evaluating tourism service quality. Google Reviews provided direct and experience-based feedback that revealed both strengths and operational weaknesses within RSA facilities. The findings suggest that travellers assess RSAs holistically, where satisfaction is shaped by the combined performance of multiple facilities and services rather than by a single attribute alone. This demonstrates the value of online review platforms as a source of insight for both researchers and practitioners seeking to understand and improve traveller experiences within highway tourism settings.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings indicate that prayer rooms, restaurants, and public washrooms play an important role in shaping Muslim-friendly travel experiences at RSAs along Malaysia's North-South Expressway. Travellers generally perceived the facilities positively, particularly in terms of cleanliness, comfort, halal assurance, and food variety. However, several operational issues involving accessibility, maintenance, responsiveness, and supporting facilities continued to influence overall satisfaction. The study demonstrates that Muslim-friendly service quality depends not only on the availability of facilities, but also on their usability, convenience, and operational consistency.

The study also highlights the importance of user-generated content in evaluating tourism service quality, as Google Reviews provided practical insights into travellers' actual experiences. The findings suggest that travellers assess RSAs holistically, where satisfaction is shaped by the combined quality of multiple facilities rather than a single service attribute. This reflects the growing importance of maintaining consistent service standards within highway tourism settings.

Based on the findings, RSA operators and relevant authorities should strengthen maintenance practices, improve accessibility and inclusive design, and ensure the continuous availability of essential Muslim-friendly facilities. Greater attention should also be given to cleanliness management, prayer support facilities, and staff responsiveness to improve overall traveller experiences. However, this

study was limited to three selected RSAs and relied primarily on Google Reviews, which may not fully represent the experiences of all travellers. Continuous monitoring of online reviews may also help operators identify recurring operational issues and improve service quality more effectively. Future research may expand the scope by examining RSAs operated by different service providers or comparing service quality across other transportation facilities such as bus terminals, railway stations, and airports. Further studies may also incorporate quantitative surveys or interviews to provide deeper insights into travellers' perceptions and expectations regarding Muslim-friendly services.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the growing body of research on Muslim-friendly tourism and highway tourism by examining the service quality of Rest and Service Areas (RSAs) through user-generated content analysis. By integrating the SERVQUAL framework with Google Reviews, the study offers a practical understanding of how travellers evaluate Muslim-friendly facilities such as prayer rooms, restaurants, and public washrooms within transit-oriented tourism settings. The findings extend existing Muslim-friendly tourism literature beyond hotels and destinations by highlighting the importance of operational quality, accessibility, and maintenance in shaping travel experiences. The study also provides a transferable approach for evaluating Muslim-friendly service quality in highway tourism infrastructure across Southeast Asia, particularly within Muslim-majority travel corridors.

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