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Exploring the use of Spotify and YouTube to enhance students' vocabulary mastery

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates students' experiences in using Spotify and YouTube to enhance their English vocabulary mastery. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, six students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings show that students actively used strategies such as reading lyrics, replaying songs, and using translation tools to understand new words. Both platforms provided authentic and engaging input that improved vocabulary recognition, pronunciation, and motivation. Learning through music also increased learners' confidence and autonomy by transforming entertainment into meaningful learning. Although students faced challenges such as slang and unfamiliar accents, they developed coping strategies to overcome them. The study concludes that Spotify and YouTube effectively support vocabulary development and can be integrated into EFL learning to promote independent and enjoyable language acquisition.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays a very important role in second language learning, as it forms the basis for students to understand, process, and produce meaningful communication in both spoken and written forms. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, learners often find it extremely difficult to comprehend various kinds of texts, follow conversations, or express their thoughts and feelings effectively in English. In other words, vocabulary serves as the foundation upon which all other language skills are built. Mastering vocabulary, therefore, becomes an essential component for every English language learner because it allows them to interpret messages accurately and respond appropriately in real-life communication. Students who possess a rich and wide range of English vocabulary will find it much easier to express their ideas clearly, construct sentences more fluently, and understand the messages conveyed by others through both verbal and written forms of communication. As noted by Sri, Ningsi, and Agustina (2021), students who do not master vocabulary well tend to face serious comprehension problems when attempting to understand English texts or when listening to speakers of English, resulting in imperfect and incomplete understanding. Vocabulary knowledge not only facilitates productive skills such as speaking and writing but also enhances receptive skills such as listening and reading comprehension. As Cahyono and Widianti (2008) emphasize, vocabulary instruction should begin as early as possible, as it plays a crucial and irreplaceable role in language acquisition for young learners. Early intervention in vocabulary instruction lays a strong linguistic foundation for future language development, enabling

learners to progress more smoothly in mastering complex structures and communication tasks as they advance.

In recent years, the rapid development of digital media and information technology has opened up new and exciting opportunities in the field of language learning, especially through the use of platforms that are easily accessible, interactive, and familiar to students. Among these numerous digital platforms, Spotify and YouTube have emerged as two of the most widely used applications not only for entertainment but also for educational purposes. These platforms are popular among young people and can be effectively utilized to support vocabulary learning in engaging and motivating ways.

Spotify offers a diverse and ever-expanding collection of audio content such as songs, podcasts, and spoken materials that expose learners to authentic language use. Through repeated and sustained listening, learners encounter new vocabulary items in meaningful contexts, which promotes incidental vocabulary acquisition—a natural process of learning new words through exposure rather than direct instruction. The versatility of Spotify allows teachers and learners to tailor content according to individual interests, language levels, and learning goals, thereby increasing motivation and engagement (Ilyas & Kaniadewi, 2023). For instance, by incorporating popular songs or culturally relevant podcasts into lessons, teachers can create a familiar and enjoyable learning atmosphere that enhances comprehension and retention. This emphasizes the importance of utilizing technology that resonates with students' personal preferences to sustain their enthusiasm and facilitate deeper, long-term learning. Moreover, the use of Spotify in collaborative classroom settings has encouraged teamwork, where students discuss lyrics, analyze vocabulary, and share interpretations together. Such interaction not only improves vocabulary acquisition but also strengthens communicative competence, cooperation, and peer learning. These technology-driven and collaborative approaches align with educational research highlighting the crucial role of digital tools in modern language teaching, which not only engage students cognitively but also prepare them to use language effectively in today's digitally connected world (Burns, 2009; Santosa et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024).

On the other hand, YouTube provides a rich variety of visual and audiovisual learning materials, including educational channels, story-based videos, vlogs, and language learning tutorials. The YouTube website offers a vast array of content suitable for English teaching, and as Dowse (2009) notes, it should be effectively utilized by teachers in language classrooms. He also emphasized that the use of successful techniques and appealing tools, especially songs and music videos, can make vocabulary learning more memorable and motivating for students. When learners are engaged in enjoyable lessons, they tend to feel more relaxed, which reduces their anxiety and inhibition in acquiring a second language. The combination of sound, images, and translated text available on YouTube helps students understand meaning more easily, thereby making vocabulary learning more interactive and effective. YouTube thus serves as a very useful medium for teachers to support students' comprehension and to enrich their vocabulary in authentic ways. According to Putri (2019), there is an abundance of video content that can be watched daily to learn English, providing learners with continuous exposure to the target language. Olasiana (2017) also highlights that YouTube can increase student participation and overcome their lack of interest in learning. Through YouTube, students gain access to diverse English-language materials while enjoying the learning process, which transforms traditional instruction into a more engaging experience. From these explanations, it can be concluded that YouTube functions as an effective instructional tool for teachers to deliver materials and foster vocabulary growth among students.

Although many studies have examined the use of digital platforms such as YouTube and Spotify for vocabulary learning, several gaps in the literature remain unaddressed. Previous research often focuses on a single platform—either YouTube or Spotify—without considering how learners may combine and integrate both tools simultaneously to reinforce vocabulary development. Moreover, much of the existing literature emphasizes measurable learning outcomes or learners' general attitudes rather than investigating their actual experiences, learning strategies, and challenges when independently using these platforms. Studies focusing on self-directed vocabulary learning through YouTube and Spotify are still limited, even though today's learners increasingly rely on these platforms outside the classroom. Additionally, few studies have explored how specific features such as subtitles, lyric displays, and translation tools contribute to vocabulary comprehension. In the Indonesian EFL context, research on this topic—particularly involving digital-native students, remains scarce, emphasizing the need for updated and contextually relevant investigations.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill these gaps by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do students utilize Spotify or YouTube as learning tools in developing their English proficiency?
2. What types of songs most effectively support students' vocabulary acquisition when learning English through digital music platforms?
3. To what extent do the lyric display or translation features provided in these applications facilitate students' understanding of new vocabulary?
4. What challenges do students encounter when learning English through digital music platforms such as Spotify or YouTube?

The objectives of this study are fourfold: (1) to investigate how students use Spotify and YouTube as learning tools to enhance their English proficiency, (2) to identify the types of songs that best facilitate vocabulary learning through digital music, (3) to examine the extent to which lyric display and translation features assist vocabulary understanding, and (4) to explore the challenges students face when learning English through these platforms.

A growing body of research continues to emphasize the significant role of digital platforms, especially YouTube and Spotify in promoting vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners. These platforms offer authentic, multimodal, and engaging input that helps students internalize new vocabulary in meaningful, real-world contexts. Several previous studies have already explored the effectiveness of music- and video-based learning tools in improving students' vocabulary mastery, providing valuable insights that inform this research.

Furthermore, technological tools like Spotify are increasingly recognized for their educational potential. Although Spotify is best known as a music streaming service, it has evolved into a valuable platform for language learning. Researchers such as Demont- Heinrich (2021) have identified Spotify's usefulness in improving a wide range of English skills, including listening, pronunciation (Lubis, 2022), speaking (Purba et al., 2023), and vocabulary development. Similarly, Shafwati et al. (2023) describe Spotify as a comprehensive digital platform offering access to countless songs and podcasts that can effectively support learning activities focusing on vocabulary, listening, and speaking practice.

In addition, the use of YouTube songs has been found to make vocabulary learning easier, more enjoyable, and more memorable for students. Songs are considered one of the most effective and creative ways to improve English vocabulary. By listening to and watching YouTube song videos, learners are exposed to repeated vocabulary in meaningful contexts. Nisa et al. (2020) explain that YouTube videos and song lyrics attract students' attention and help them remember new words more easily. Similarly, Putri and Rustipa (2023) report that videos featuring song lyrics were effective for teaching English vocabulary because they foster motivation and engagement, enabling students to retain words more efficiently. This demonstrates that using YouTube music videos is an alternative and powerful teaching medium that can substantially support vocabulary improvement.

Finally, this study contributes to the existing body of literature in several unique ways. First, it explores the combined use of YouTube and Spotify as complementary digital tools for vocabulary learning an approach that has received minimal scholarly attention. Second, it focuses on the influence of specific in-app features, such as subtitles and lyric displays, offering a deeper understanding of how multimodal elements support language acquisition. Third, unlike many previous studies that rely primarily on quantitative testing, this research employs a qualitative, experience-based approach to capture learners' authentic strategies, habits, and challenges. This perspective provides richer insights into how students naturally integrate entertainment-oriented platforms into their language learning routines. Lastly, the study offers new perspectives from Indonesian digital-native learners, presenting updated and context-specific evidence that reflects the realities of contemporary technology use in English learning.

2. METHOD

This This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design, as it aims to provide a detailed, systematic, and comprehensive description of students' experiences and perceptions regarding the use of Spotify and YouTube in improving their English vocabulary mastery. The descriptive qualitative

approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to explore participants' natural responses, authentic learning behaviors, and personal interpretations in depth, without manipulating any variables or relying on statistical or numerical analysis. Such an approach is particularly suitable for language learning studies, as it allows the collection of rich, narrative data that reflects real learning processes and students' subjective viewpoints, rather than merely measuring learning outcomes quantitatively. Through this method, the study seeks to capture the genuine experiences of learners in their natural learning environments, offering insights into how they interact with digital platforms to support vocabulary development.

The participants involved in this study consisted of six students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, all of whom were carefully selected through purposive sampling based on specific and relevant criteria. The criteria focused on identifying students who actively utilized digital music platforms for language learning purposes. Out of the six participants, three students reported frequently using Spotify equipped with lyric and translation features, while the remaining three students preferred YouTube lyric videos that provided subtitles for comprehension support. This deliberate sampling strategy was designed to ensure that the participants represented diverse patterns of digital media use, thereby allowing the researcher to explore a range of experiences and perspectives related to vocabulary learning through both platforms. Such variation among participants was expected to enrich the data and provide a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, a technique that enables the researcher to obtain in-depth and flexible information about students' learning experiences, difficulties, motivations, and strategies when using Spotify and YouTube. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to follow a predetermined set of questions while still providing opportunities to probe deeper into emerging themes and unexpected insights shared by the participants. All interview sessions were conducted based on a customized interview guide, which had been carefully prepared to align with the research objectives. Each interview was audio- recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy, and the recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed analysis and to maintain the authenticity of the participants' voices and expressions throughout the research process.

The collected data were then analyzed using a descriptive qualitative analysis procedure, which consisted of several systematic stages. The first stage, data reduction, involved selecting, categorizing, and simplifying the raw interview transcripts to focus only on information directly relevant to the research questions. This step ensured that only meaningful and representative data were retained for further interpretation. The second stage was thematic coding, in which the researcher identified recurring ideas, patterns, and key concepts that emerged across participants' responses. Afterward, the process moved to data presentation, where the coded information was organized into clear thematic categories and elaborated through descriptive narratives supported by direct quotations from the participants, ensuring transparency and authenticity of the findings. Finally, the stage of conclusion drawing and verification was conducted, during which the researcher interpreted the emerging themes and sought to confirm the validity of the results through member checking or participant validation. In this process, participants were asked to review and verify the researcher's interpretations to ensure that the findings accurately represented their actual experiences and perspectives. This systematic procedure helped maintain the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the research results, in line with qualitative research standards.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

The thematic analysis of the interview data produced seven major themes that represent how students utilized digital music platforms, particularly YouTube and Spotify to learn English vocabulary. These findings highlight the learners' strategies, challenges, and perceptions in an informal language learning context.

The first theme identifies **YouTube and Spotify as flexible and accessible learning media**. All participants mentioned that they frequently used these platforms to listen to English songs, citing their user-friendly features, availability of lyrics, subtitles, and playback controls. YouTube was described as a "complete package" offering both audio and visual learning input, while Spotify was favored for its

portability and ad-free playlists. One participant explained, *"I prefer YouTube because it's complete—music videos, lyrics, and sometimes explanations of meaning"* (S1). Such features allowed learners to control their exposure and focus on understanding the lyrics and vocabulary.

The second theme highlights the use of **active learning strategies**. Students engaged in self-directed learning behaviors such as reading lyrics while listening, pausing to check meanings, writing down new words, and replaying songs to practice pronunciation. As one participant shared, *"I read the lyrics while listening; if I don't understand a word, I pause and look it up"* (S1). These findings demonstrate that participants took an active role in their learning rather than passively consuming the content.

The third theme concerns the **linguistic and cognitive gains** students perceived. They reported significant improvements in vocabulary recognition, pronunciation, and contextual understanding. Several students also noted that they could use new words in everyday communication, such as in social media captions. For instance, one said, *"I learned 'darling' from Ed Sheeran's Perfect and used it in my social media caption"* (S4). This reflects a transfer of knowledge from passive exposure to active language use.

The fourth theme relates to **affective and motivational benefits**. All participants emphasized that learning through music was enjoyable and motivating. Songs made English learning less intimidating and more emotionally engaging. One participant remarked, *"Learning through songs is fun and keeps me motivated"* (S1), while another noted, *"I feel more confident speaking English because I'm used to hearing it in songs"* (S5). The emotional connection to music encouraged consistency and confidence in language practice.

The fifth theme addresses **challenges and coping strategies**. Learners faced obstacles such as fast accents, slang, and distracting advertisements. Nevertheless, they developed coping mechanisms such as replaying songs, finding lyric versions, consulting dictionaries, or asking friends for clarification. One student commented, *"Sometimes the accent is too heavy, so it's hard to catch the words. I replay or find a slower version of the song"* (S1). These strategies demonstrate the students' adaptability and problem-solving skills.

The sixth theme explores the **integration of learning and entertainment**. Many participants mentioned that their initial motivation for listening to English songs was purely enjoyment, but it later evolved into purposeful learning. Some created two separate playlists: one for fun and another for learning. *"I have two playlists: one for enjoyment and one for learning"* (S4). This demonstrates the transformation of entertainment habits into self-initiated learning activities.

The final theme, **expansion beyond YouTube**, reveals that several participants also used platforms like TikTok, Spotify, and podcasts to complement their learning. TikTok provided quick and visually engaging clips that introduced new vocabulary, while podcasts offered extended listening practice. One participant stated, *"Sometimes I learn new words from TikTok song clips"* (S1). This shows learners' digital literacy and their ability to diversify language input across multiple media.

Overall, the findings indicate that students actively transformed everyday digital entertainment into meaningful language learning. Through digital platforms, they managed to build vocabulary, improve pronunciation, sustain motivation, and develop autonomy in their learning processes.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal in considerable depth how digital music platforms function as informal yet powerful tools for English vocabulary learning among university students. The results highlight the significance of technology-driven, self-initiated exposure to authentic language input in promoting both cognitive and affective learning outcomes. More specifically, these findings demonstrate that digital platforms such as YouTube and Spotify can serve as meaningful learning environments that extend beyond entertainment purposes, providing opportunities for incidental vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation practice in an enjoyable and motivating way. The outcomes of this study are therefore consistent with theoretical perspectives on autonomous learning, motivation, and technology-assisted language learning (TALL), while also showing strong convergence with recent empirical research published in the same field. Altogether, the evidence illustrates that informal digital learning environments, when approached purposefully, can foster linguistic growth comparable to that achieved in structured classroom settings.

The finding that students relied heavily on YouTube and Spotify as their primary learning resources underscores the central role of multimodal and authentic input in facilitating language acquisition. These platforms expose learners to natural English usage embedded in songs, videos, and lyrics that combine sound, text, and visuals, elements regarded as essential in Nation's (2013) theory of contextual vocabulary learning. By engaging with this multimodal input, learners are able to process vocabulary items in a meaningful and memorable way, linking words to melody, rhythm, and context. The current finding supports Haque, Ariansyah, and Al-Munir (2023), who reported that digital platforms enhance vocabulary comprehension and learner motivation through interactive and learner- controlled features. Likewise, Fitria (2023) concluded that YouTube and Spotify promote autonomous listening and incidental vocabulary development in EFL contexts, emphasizing that such media afford learners continuous access to authentic input beyond the classroom environment. These studies collectively suggest that technology-driven platforms can help bridge the gap between formal and informal learning while maintaining student engagement and self- direction.

The second major finding concerning active learning strategies further confirms the critical role of learner autonomy in informal learning contexts. Students' frequent use of strategies such as note-taking, pausing, and replaying songs exemplifies self-regulated engagement and conscious attention to form and meaning. Such behavior is highly consistent with Holec's (1981) concept of learner independence, which posits that autonomous learners actively plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning processes, as well as Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of cognitive and metacognitive strategies that facilitate vocabulary retention and comprehension. Similarly, Dilago, Liando, and Kukus (2022) found comparable results, noting that learners who interact with song lyrics not only display greater control over their learning but also demonstrate improved recall and confidence in using new vocabulary. These findings highlight the transformation of entertainment- based listening into an intentional act of learning, illustrating how motivation and strategy use merge in informal digital learning spaces.

The reported linguistic and cognitive benefits, particularly those related to pronunciation accuracy, vocabulary recognition, and contextual understanding also provide compelling evidence of the educational potential of music-based learning. The participants' reflections revealed that repeated exposure to English songs facilitated long-term memory retention and spontaneous vocabulary use, supporting Iswari's (2024) conclusion that song-based instruction significantly enhances vocabulary mastery and pronunciation accuracy. Likewise, Fadli et al. (2023) demonstrated that consistent listening practice reinforces vocabulary recall and promotes durable retention over time. Taken together, these results affirm that the rhythmic and repetitive structure of songs supports dual coding of language input both auditory and semantic, thus allowing students to internalize and reproduce vocabulary naturally without conscious memorization. Such learning mechanisms are especially valuable in EFL environments, where authentic communicative input is often limited.

Another important aspect of this study lies in the motivational and emotional factors influencing students' engagement. Participants consistently expressed positive attitudes toward learning through music, describing it as enjoyable, stress-free, and personally meaningful. Their responses reflect Dörnye's (2020) L2 Motivational Self System, which posits that enjoyment and emotional connection are central to sustaining persistence in language learning. When students feel personally connected to the content they engage with such as favorite songs or familiar artists, they are more likely to maintain motivation and achieve deeper learning outcomes. The relaxed atmosphere created by music also helps reduce anxiety, allowing learners to process input more efficiently. This finding echoes Fadli et al.'s (2023) study, which emphasized that emotional engagement in song-based learning enhances both confidence and self-efficacy, leading to greater willingness to communicate in English. Consequently, music serves not only as linguistic input but also as a powerful affective medium that nurtures positive learner identity and long-term motivation.

Despite the numerous benefits, the study also identified several challenges that students encountered, such as unfamiliar slang expressions, varying accents, and interruptions caused by online advertisements. Nevertheless, the learners' coping strategies reflected a strong level of self- regulated learning, as conceptualized by Zimmerman (2002). The use of techniques such as replaying difficult segments, consulting online dictionaries, and discussing unclear words with peers shows reflective problem- solving and adaptability. These behaviors indicate that students are capable of monitoring their own comprehension and modifying their approaches when encountering difficulties. Such autonomy reinforces Haque et al.'s (2023) observation that digital learning environments promote adaptive

behaviors and learner resilience. Thus, even in the absence of direct teacher guidance, students develop cognitive and metacognitive control that strengthens their overall learning capacity.

The integration of learning and entertainment, commonly referred to as edutainment, emerged as another defining characteristic of students' learning experiences. Participants described how their initial purpose for listening to English songs, pure enjoyment, gradually evolved into deliberate vocabulary practice. This process demonstrates that motivation arising from leisure can easily transform into intentional learning behavior. The phenomenon supports Benson's (2011) notion of informal learning as a bridge between structured and self-directed learning. By voluntarily engaging with English songs, learners create continuous exposure that complements formal instruction. The same perspective is reinforced by Iswari (2024) and Fadli et al. (2023), who argue that incorporating music-based materials sustains motivation and facilitates language learning outside classroom contexts. In this way, edutainment not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also promotes the habit of lifelong learning.

Finally, the study highlights the expansion to multiple digital platforms, underscoring the learners' digital and multimodal literacy. Students demonstrated strategic use of platforms such as TikTok, Spotify, and podcasts to maximize language input according to their needs and preferences. Short-form content on TikTok provided quick exposure to vocabulary and pronunciation, while podcasts offered extended listening opportunities for advanced learners. This diversified media engagement aligns with Reinders and White (2023), who assert that varied online tools empower learners to create personalized and adaptive learning ecosystems. By selectively navigating multiple platforms, students optimize their exposure to authentic English, maintain consistent engagement, and develop digital competencies that support independent language learning.

In summary, the present study confirms that digital music-based learning contributes meaningfully to both the cognitive and affective dimensions of language acquisition. Through a combination of autonomous learning, emotional engagement, and strategic platform use, students achieve measurable improvements in vocabulary, pronunciation, and motivation. The results reaffirm the growing importance of informal, technology-assisted learning as an effective complement to formal instruction. Consequently, educators are encouraged to integrate song-based and platform-supported activities into their teaching practices, thereby bridging classroom learning with students' everyday digital experiences and promoting a more holistic approach to English language education.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital music platforms, particularly YouTube and Spotify, serve as significant informal learning environments that facilitate English vocabulary acquisition among university students. By engaging with these platforms, learners access authentic, context-rich, and enjoyable language exposure that promotes both cognitive and affective development. The results demonstrate that these platforms effectively extend learning opportunities beyond the classroom, offering continuous input through accessible and engaging digital media. Learners are exposed to real-world vocabulary, pronunciation models, and contextual meanings, allowing them to acquire new words naturally while enjoying the learning process. The findings thus highlight the educational potential of informal, technology-mediated learning spaces in promoting sustainable and independent language growth.

The study further reveals that students employ a range of active learning strategies to optimize their engagement with digital content. Instead of passively consuming songs, learners demonstrated autonomy and self-regulation through actions such as reading lyrics, pausing to clarify meanings, replaying songs, and using online tools to expand understanding. These behaviors reflect deliberate and reflective learning, where students plan, monitor, and evaluate their progress in line with autonomous learning theory. Such strategic engagement transforms entertainment into intentional learning activity, showing that technology-assisted environments can cultivate responsibility, discipline, and awareness of one's linguistic development. Consequently, learners not only enhance vocabulary retention and pronunciation accuracy but also develop digital literacy and strategic competence—skills essential for contemporary language learners navigating globalized, media-rich contexts.

Affective and motivational dimensions also emerged as critical factors in the success of digital music-based learning. Music creates a relaxed, emotionally engaging atmosphere that reduces anxiety and promotes sustained motivation. The participants' enjoyment of songs fostered a sense of personal

connection to the language, making learning more meaningful and less intimidating. This emotional engagement aligns with the view that positive affective experiences strengthen persistence and willingness to communicate. Although students encountered challenges such as rapid speech, slang, and accent variation, they responded with adaptability and resilience. By developing coping strategies—replaying songs, using dictionaries, and collaborating with peers—they demonstrated metacognitive awareness and problem-solving ability. These findings confirm that even in informal settings, learners can cultivate the self-regulatory and reflective capacities necessary for effective lifelong learning.

Overall, this study affirms that digital music-based learning complements formal education by providing continuous, learner-centered exposure to authentic English. Platforms like YouTube and Spotify offer flexible opportunities for language practice that integrate enjoyment, autonomy, and authentic input, thereby enhancing both motivation and learning outcomes. The findings underscore the pedagogical importance of acknowledging students' informal digital practices within formal curricula. Teachers and curriculum designers are encouraged to incorporate music-based and platform-supported activities to bridge classroom learning with students' digital experiences. Future research should further examine how the integration of digital music platforms into formal EFL instruction can influence vocabulary retention and communicative competence over time, using longitudinal or mixed-method designs to capture their long-term educational impact.

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