

Utilizing Cultural Inclusivity as an Attraction to Increase Commercial Games' Locals and Foreign Players

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the role of cultural representation in the attractiveness of video games to both domestic and foreign audiences. This study also wants to fills a gap by examining how cultural representation in video games influences player engagement and market appeal, an area often overlooked in game design research. The scope of this analysis includes Genshin Impact and Coral Island, which are representative of Chinese and Indonesian culture, respectively. This research uses a mixed method with a quantitative approach through a survey of 46 respondents and a qualitative approach through interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with 12 participants from Indonesia, Taiwan and Paraguay. Incorporating different cultural perspectives, the scope of this study aims to analyze how inclusivity and cultural representation in games can increase game appeal and player loyalty and expand market reach. The findings of this study are expected to assist game producers in building the appropriate strategies in integrating cultural elements to increase competitiveness in the global market.

Keywords: visual design, game design, Chinese culture, Southeast Asia, inclusivity, diversity, representation

INTRODUCTION

Cultural representation issues in the digital gaming industry have recently risen, especially among the younger generation (Generation Z), who grew up in the era of globalization and social media for the most part of their lives. This generation is

more open to cultural diversity and demands inclusiveness in numerous aspects of life, including how one engages with culture through gaming. Different from the older generations, members of Generation Z live in a digital world where they can interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, which leads them to have a deeper understanding of social and cultural issues (Dünne et al., 2020). Therefore, inclusivity in the gaming industry is no longer just a value-add but rather a core essential factor that affects the appeal and sustainability of a game in the global market.

In the context of digital games, inclusivity can be reflected in various aspects, such as character representation, environmental design, narrative, and visual elements that depict diverse cultural backgrounds. Authentic cultural representations not only provide a richer gaming experience for players but can also be a means to introduce and promote a nation's culture to a global audience. Study showed that Chinese players felt proud when their culture was well adapted in the game Genshin Impact (Fan, 2024). Recognition of local culture in digital media such as games can increase a sense of nationalism, as well as attract players from different countries to learn more about the culture. Respondents in the study stated that seeing their culture recognized in the game increased their sense of pride and encouraged foreign players' interest in Chinese culture. This phenomenon suggests that authentic cultural representation in games can effectively introduce and promote national culture globally.

Inclusivity in digital games can be observed in character, setting, and story as well as in visuals from different cultures. Authentic cultural representations not only enhance the experience of players but can also serve to market and showcase different cultures from all around the world (Ardilla et al., 2024). Chinese players expressed a sense of pride when their culture was accurately incorporated in the game Genshin Impact. Local culture recognition on digital platforms like games increases feelings of nationalism, creating a sense of curiosity to know more about the place and its culture (Chang et al., 2023). In the study, the participants stated that their feelings of pride and interest in Chinese culture were piqued by the recognition of their culture in the game. This is one of the examples of how

authentic cultural representation in games is potentially able to promote national cultures overseas.

However, cultural representation in global games is still uneven. Representation of Southeast Asian cultures, including Indonesia, is still minimal compared to the more dominant East Asian cultures in the global entertainment industry. Many individuals from other countries have difficulty recognizing Southeast Asians due to lack of exposure in global media (Li & Hao, 2024). Representations, often, still refer to East Asian stereotypes, which leads to Southeast Asian identities often being marginalized. This phenomenon poses a challenge for game developers from Southeast Asia who want to bring their culture to a global scale.

From a business perspective, cultural representation in games can be an effective strategy to appeal to a wider market. Newzoo's Global Games Market Report 2023 reveals that of the 3.3 billion gamers worldwide, 53% are from the Asia-Pacific region, with around 270 million players from Southeast Asia. Despite the region's huge market, there is still limited representation of Southeast Asian culture in games (Newzoo, 2023). This lack of representation contrasts with the success of Genshin Impact, which successfully integrated Chinese culture deeply and attracted global players.

In comparison, Coral Island, a game developed by Indonesian studio Stairway Games, seeks to present Indonesian culture through design elements such as traditional house architecture, culinary specialties, and traditional festivals. Coral Island also features characters that represent the diversity of Indonesian society, making it an early attempt at introducing Indonesian culture to the global market (Amelia et al., 2024). However, compared to Genshin Impact, Coral Island still faces challenges in building an equivalent global appeal. Therefore, further analysis of the factors that determine the success of cultural representation in games is needed to make them more effective in attracting the interest of the international market.

It's important to compare these two games because each presents culture with a different approach. Genshin Impact successfully globalizes Chinese culture with a very immersive approach, using cultural elements directly in the design of the environment, narrative, and immersive game mechanics. This success proves that strong cultural representation can boost national pride and attract global attention. Meanwhile, Coral Island has attempted to integrate Indonesian culture into its game, but it still has challenges in gaining global exposure and building equal appeal. Further studies are needed to explore the factors that contribute to successful cultural representation in games, as well as how local game developers can improve their strategies to make Indonesian culture more widely recognized in the global digital game industry.

Based on the above background, this research focuses on several main questions:

1. How cultural representations in digital games can affect player attraction and loyalty
2. How do the approaches used in Genshin Impact and Coral Island differ in representing their local cultures?
3. What factors contribute to a game's success in adapting local culture into a play experience that appeals to a global audience?

RESEARCH METHOD

This research utilized mixed methods (Dawadi et al., 2021), mixed-methods approach by combining quantitative surveys to analyze numerical data on visual perceptions of cultural representation in games and qualitative interviews to explore respondents' deeper insights, emotions, and experiences related to cultural elements in Genshin Impact and Coral Island. Quantitative data was collected through the collection of numerical survey results from respondents regarding the visualization of the two games (Fischer et al., 2023). Meanwhile, qualitative data is obtained through analyzing respondents' views on cultural elements represented in the games, analyzing their feelings when viewing *gameplay videos* or playing the games. To gather richer qualitative data, we will conduct a Focus Group

Discussion with 4 respondents from Indonesia, 4 respondents from Taiwan and 4 respondents from Paraguay. The core aspects examined include architectural and landscape imagery, character portrayal, narrative and other aspects that aid the depiction of culture. It is crucial to use a mixed-methods approach in this study to receive a better analysis of cultural depiction shown in the games. The quantitative portion of the study through surveys provides the respondents with a structured questionnaire that acts as measurable data. This data gives an overall insight into the respondents' visual impression, identifying patterns throughout the answers given.

This research seeks to evaluate how the inclusivity and representation of culture in games can elevate brand loyalty, appeal, and market scope. By integrating parts from several cultural backgrounds, the result of this study aims to inspire game developers in how to use culture competitively in the global market. In addition, this research aims to determine how game developers from Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, can improve their cultural visibility and are accepted in the international digital game industry. By understanding the factors that influence the success of cultural representation in games, it is hoped that ways can be developed for Southeast Asian cultures to expand their recognition in the global entertainment industry.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Impact of Cultural Representation in Digital Games on Player Attraction and Loyalty

An accurate representation is crucial to shape the players' perceptions and attachment to a country's culture. Culture is not solely built through words, but also through various forms of media, even digital games. The correct visualization can aid in establishing cultural identity and promoting understanding across cultures (Shliakhovchuk & García, 2020). Considering the growth of the gaming industry and escalated awareness of diversity, it is important to understand how cultural elements are integrated in games and how players from different backgrounds respond to these representations. This study focuses on analyzing

how cultural representations in Genshin Impact and Coral Island influence the play experience and the participants' perspective towards the cultural elements featured in the games.



Figure 1. Genshin Impact
Source: Epic Games

The initial case study concentrating on the game Genshin Impact shows that strong and authentic cultural representations can increase the game's acceptance among players. The survey results show that 71.9% of the total Indonesian respondents (with 31.3% strongly agreeing and 40.6% agreeing) rated the representation of Chinese culture in Genshin Impact as accurate and interesting.



Figure 2. Google Form Comparative Study Data: Cultural Inclusivity as Game Attraction
source: author's documentation

The incorporation of indigenous culture when designing games increases the level of immersion and active participation of players with the content provided. In addition, 97.5% of respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the statement declaring that the cultural elements in Genshin Impact have contributed to the appeal of the game. The two most appreciated cultural elements by respondents were architecture (50%) and character design (34.4%). The architecture in the game is perceived to represent traditional Chinese styles of building, with heavy details, as to the design of the roof designs and other ornaments, so that they can create symbolic spaces to strengthen cultural identity in digital media (Moreno García, 2024). These results confirm that authentic cultural representations enrich the gaming experience and have a sustainable and enduring impact on introducing and protecting features of culture worldwide (Rahmi et al., 2024).



Figure 3. Google Form Comparative Study Data: Cultural Inclusivity as Game Attraction
source: author's documentation

Based on the survey results, the two elements of Chinese culture in Genshin Impact that attracted respondents' attention the most were the architecture and landscape of the environment (50%) and character design (34.4%). This suggests that the visual aspects of the game, especially those related to cultural aesthetics, play a big role in attracting players' interest. This finding is in line with research suggesting that strong cultural representation in digital media can increase players' emotional attachment to a game. Elements such as detailed Chinese building designs, landscapes inspired by real-life locations, and characters in traditional clothing are key factors that enrich the gaming experience.

Most of Genshin Impact's active player respondents also stated that the gaming experience motivated them to learn more about Chinese culture. Some of them expressed a desire to try Chinese cuisine, visit locations that inspired the environments in the game, and play traditional musical instruments such as the Guzheng. Some respondents have even started to study Chinese architecture and learn Mandarin through in-game interactions. This phenomenon corroborates the cultural proximity theory, which states that exposure to familiar or interesting cultural elements in media can encourage audience interest in learning more about the culture.



Figure 4. Visualization of the village in Genshin Impact's gameplay video
Source: Scenery and Sentiment: Liyue Edition, YouTube

Respondents from Taiwan showed a more critical perspective in assessing the representation of Chinese culture in Genshin Impact, which can be attributed to their historical proximity and cultural roots with China. Since the 17th century, Taiwan has received large amounts of immigration from China, particularly from Fujian and Guangdong provinces, which has led to a strong and continuous cultural influence (Shi et al., 2024). As a result, many aspects of the culture in games are familiar and easily identifiable to them, whether in terms of symbols, architecture or other elements. The survey data shows that 71.5% of Taiwanese

respondents (42.9% agreed and 28.6% strongly agreed) could recognize various cultural elements in the game that have similarities with the culture in Taiwan.

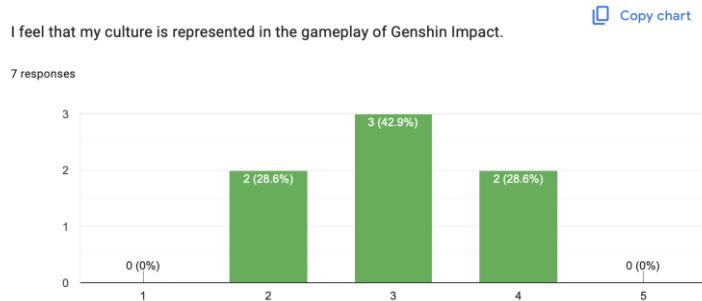


Figure 5. Google Form Comparative Study Data: Cultural Inclusivity as Game Attraction
source: author's documentation

Of the various cultural elements presented in Genshin Impact, architecture is the aspect most easily identified by Taiwanese respondents. Buildings with Chinese designs, such as pagodas, traditional siheyuan-style houses, and the use of distinctive ornaments and colors, are considered to reflect the architectural aesthetics that are also found in Taiwan. Respondents considered these elements to be very authentic and accurate in representing Chinese culture, given that similar buildings are still found in many cities in Taiwan, especially in historical areas such as Jiufen and Tainan. This is in line with the concept of cultural resonance which states that individuals tend to connect more with cultural representations in media if the culture has relevance to their own experiences or backgrounds (Soublière & Lockwood, 2022). Therefore, for Taiwanese respondents, Genshin Impact is not only a game, but also a medium that reinforces their cultural identity through accurate and detailed visual depictions.

To support the previous survey on the representation of Chinese culture in Genshin Impact, this study also conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with foreign student respondents who had spent a year in Taiwan. The purpose of this FGD was to gain a more in-depth perspective on how Chinese culture in the game is interpreted by individuals who have first-hand experience with Asian culture. In this discussion, the foreign student respondents revealed that many elements in

the game reminded them of famous tourist attractions in Taiwan, one of which is Jiufen (九份). Jiufen itself is known as a mountain town with distinctive traditional architecture, narrow alleys lined with red lanterns, and a classic atmosphere often associated with East Asian culture (Lin et al., 2024). One respondent in the interview stated that the lanterns that appear in the gameplay are very synonymous with Asian culture, particularly Taiwan, which has a tradition of releasing lanterns as part of a ritual to convey wishes and prayers.

The most famous lantern festival in Taiwan is the Pingxi Lantern Festival, where each year thousands of lanterns are released into the sky as part of the Lunar New Year celebrations. Foreign student respondents who had witnessed the festival firsthand noticed striking similarities between the festival and the scenes in the game, which reinforced the impression that Genshin Impact managed to capture the essence of Chinese culture in an authentic and immersive way. The FGD results showed that visual aspects such as traditional architecture, lanterns, and festivals were the most prominent and memorable elements for them. The non-Asian respondents tended to associate these cultural visualizations with common images of Chinese culture that they often see in movies or other popular media, which suggests that games like Genshin Impact can play a role in introducing and strengthening a country's cultural image internationally.



Figure 6. Pingxi Lanterns Festival Taiwan
Source: newtaipei.travel

Representation may not be the main attraction of a game, but the accuracy of cultural application is very important. Because in a global gaming community with diverse cultural and racial backgrounds, inaccurate and far off representations will be criticized, which will discourage gamers from continuing the game. According to respondent 3 from the Indonesian interview, she only played up to the Liyue continent because the continents after that such as Semeru (a region that is supposed to represent the Middle East, South Asia, and tropical elements such as rainforests) had a low level of representation accuracy, such as generalization/stereotyping and whitewashing of various characters. Genshin Impact showcases Chinese culture in depth through classical-style building designs, distinctive ornaments, and character outfits inspired by traditional clothing.



Figure 7. Google Form Comparative Study Data: Cultural Inclusivity as Game Attraction
source: author's documentation

Differences in Cultural Representation Approaches in Genshin Impact and Coral Island

Unlike Genshin Impact, which systematically showcases Chinese culture through classic building designs, distinctive ornaments, and character outfits inspired by traditional clothing, Coral Island subtly integrates Indonesian culture. This life-sim farming game by Indonesian developer Stairway Games is set in a tropical archipelago with various game design elements that represent Indonesian culture and society. Elements such as names, physical features, character clothing, architecture, landscapes and soundtracks are subtly integrated into the game design, creating a distinctive atmosphere without dominating the overall narrative.

Indonesian players are likely to recognize these cultural elements more efficiently, while foreign players may require further interpretation to understand the context.



Figure 8. Poster Coral Island
Source: gstat.com, Google

The data shows that Coral Island's subtle approach in representing Indonesian culture remains effective in creating an authentic experience for local players. A total of 90.6% of Indonesian respondents (37.5% moderately agreed, 40.06% agreed, and 12.5% strongly agreed) stated that they could recognize elements of Indonesian culture in the gameplay. Architecture and landscape were the most interesting aspects for the majority of respondents (56.3%), followed by character design (21.9%) and in-game traditional celebrations (9.4%). This finding is in line with the interview results, where all participants could name various elements of Indonesian culture presented in the game, such as the sack racing game, the character of orangutan as an endemic animal, and temple architecture. In addition, 78.2% of respondents moderately agreed and strongly agreed that the world-building in Coral Island with representations of Balinese architecture and Raja Ampat's underwater scenery accurately captured the essence of Indonesia's natural beauty. Coral Island's success in integrating Indonesian cultural elements not only creates an authentic gaming experience but also fosters a sense of pride for local players. 57.2% of respondents felt their culture was truly represented, while 53.1% felt their physical characteristics were well portrayed. All respondents

(100%) also expressed pride in the game, with 34.4% moderately agreeing, 34.4% agreeing and 31.3% strongly agreeing.



Figure 9. Google Form Comparative Study Data: Cultural Inclusivity as Game Attraction
source: author's documentation

In addition, interviews with participants showed that they were impressed with the quality of the game and Coral Island's visuals, proving that Indonesian developers can compete on a global level. This sense of representation had a positive impact on interest in playing, where the majority of respondents (40.6%) moderately agreed that they were interested in playing Coral Island because of the cultural elements presented, such as temple architecture, carvings, statues, and gates, as well as gamelan-style background music. Interesting character elements, such as costumes, unique Indonesian names, and distinctive NPC characters such as orangutans and Buto Ijo, further strengthen the cultural identity of the game. However, the main appeal of Coral Island lies not only in the cultural representation aspect, but also in the engaging gameplay and narrative, with 40.6% of respondents agreeing that this was the main reason they wanted to play the game.

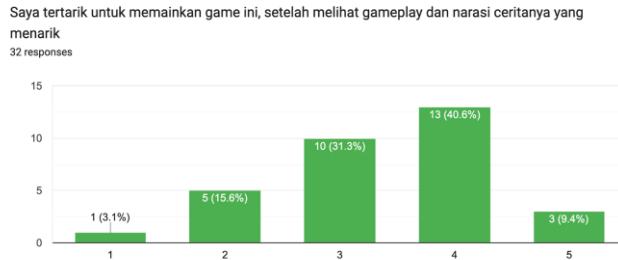


Figure 10. Google Form Comparative Study Data: Cultural Inclusivity as Game Attraction
source: author's documentation

A subtle approach to design is the strategy used by Coral Island in representing Indonesian culture without making it an overly dominant or explicit element. Coral Island concept designs do not directly assert any particular cultural identity in the main narrative but are present as an organic part of the game's world-building (Denisova et al., 2021). With this approach, local players can easily recognize and appreciate their own national representations, without making foreign players feel excluded or alienated through any heavily cultured visuals.

While Coral Island's strategic semi-universal design succeeds in creating an authentic representation for local players, it also has its drawbacks, especially for foreign players who are less familiar with Indonesian culture. Without additional context in the game, some cultural elements, such as distinctive ceremonies, traditional games, or local symbols, may not be fully understood by international players. As a result, the heritage value that it wants to convey can be missed in translation. In addition, without a narrative that explicitly explains its cultural context, the experience of foreign players is likely to be limited to the aesthetic aspects without understanding the deeper meaning. This has the potential to reduce the impact of southeast Asian representation that Coral Island aims to achieve.

The lack of explicit emphasis on cultural elements in Coral Island makes introducing Indonesian culture to foreign players more challenging. Without clear clues, players who have no background on Indonesia may have a hard time

recognizing the cultural elements presented in the game. FGD results with international students stated that they don't recognize the game element as part of Indonesia's culture because of its subtle universal design. This was also supported by the opinions of other questionnaire respondents who questioned whether foreign players who had not known Indonesia before could easily identify the cultural elements in the game as part of Indonesian culture. The interview results revealed that they did not have a clear picture about Indonesia other than general stereotypes of maritime life. When watching the gameplay video, participants stated that the Indonesian cultural elements in Coral Island are still not prominent enough, with the character designs and world-building feeling quite generic. This suggests that the subtle approach used in Coral Island is less effective in introducing Indonesian culture to international players who do not have the relevant cultural background.

The FGD results showed that although foreign players had difficulty recognizing Indonesian cultural elements in Coral Island, certain aspects of the game still held a certain appeal. Paraguayan FGD participants cited the game's tropical environment and depiction of the island as the most unique cultural aspects, while Taiwanese FGD participants highlighted marine life as an element that is rarely encountered in games, which attracted their attention. These findings suggest that even if cultural elements are not immediately recognizable as Indonesian, elements that are considered "foreign" or different from their own culture are attractive. In addition, the FGDs also revealed that foreign cultures in games are often considered more interesting than their own culture. From the FGDs, 7 out of 12 participants preferred games with unique cultural backgrounds that they had never encountered before compared to games that represented their own culture. However, compared to a general game without any cultural background, 6 out of 12 participants preferred a game featuring their own culture. These results suggest that while cultural representations may not be immediately recognizable, unique cultural elements still have the potential to attract players and make it a worthy aspect to follow up on in future game development.

The FGD results show that foreign players' interest in cultural elements that are considered unique and different from their own culture is in line with the novelty effect theory in psychology. According to this theory, individuals are naturally more attracted to things that are new and unfamiliar (Dubourg & Baumard, 2022), as humans tend to learn new things and be adventurous. This finding was seen in the responses of the Taiwanese FGD participants who, despite not recognizing the music in Coral Island as Indonesian, were still intrigued because they had never heard similar music before. This indicates that unfamiliar cultural elements can be attractive to a global audience. With more explicit delivery and visualization techniques, cultural elements in games can be more easily recognized and utilized as an effective cultural asset in introducing Indonesia to foreign countries (Korkut & Surer, 2023). Based on research data, inclusivity, diversity, and cultural representation are essential aspects in the creation of a game. Although often not the focus, the success of a game also depends on a solid and open community. Cultural representation integrated in world-building and inclusive character design can strengthen players' bond with the game, as well as create space for players to express their identity. In addition to providing a more immersive experience for players, game developers often adapt cultural elements to enrich the variety of storylines and game mechanics to avoid repetition and monotony.

However, the findings from the interviews and questionnaires suggest that cultural elements in games are not the main factor that determines their appeal to players. While culture and inclusivity are part of the gameplay experience, they are only one of the four key pillars in game development, along with storyline, game mechanics, visual graphics and music. The majority of respondents emphasized that they prioritize storyline, game mechanics, and visuals in assessing their interest in a game. Nevertheless, cultural elements still hold a unique appeal, especially for foreign players who rarely find representations of tropical environments and maritime culture in games. This is also reinforced by the sense of pride felt by Indonesian players, where cultural representation in local games can encourage their interest in supporting and playing domestic products. Thus, local game developers have a great opportunity to utilize cultural elements as a unique selling point that can attract players from within and outside the country. Developing

design concepts inspired by local cultures that have not been widely exposed to the gaming industry can not only generate a sense of pride among local players but also be an attractive differentiation factor for global players who are looking for new experiences in the world of digital games.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, inclusivity and cultural representation are some of the very important factors that should be considered when creating a game. Although they are often not the focus, the success of a game also depends on a solid and open community. Effective world-building and character design that captures the essence of the culture helps players connect with the game as well as allows them to showcase their identity. Besides making the game appealing, culture is one of the many factors that developers use to diversify the storylines and mechanisms to make the game less dull and repetitive.

This study highlights the significant role of cultural representation in enhancing player engagement and broadening market appeal. Through the cases of Genshin Impact and Coral Island, it is evident that authenticity and relatability in depicting culture can foster emotional connections with players. While well-known cultures, such as Chinese culture in Genshin Impact, are more easily recognized by global audiences, lesser-known cultures like Indonesian in Coral Island require clearer contextual cues to achieve similar impact. Nonetheless, both games demonstrate that inclusive cultural narratives—when presented with accuracy and accessibility—can increase curiosity, cultural appreciation, and player immersion. For game developers, this suggests the importance of balancing authenticity with readability to ensure cultural content resonates with diverse audiences and serves as a bridge for cross-cultural understanding.

For game developers it is recommended to explore how cultural representation in games can be optimized to be more effective in introducing culture to a global audience. Finding out the design strategies that work best in conveying local elements explicitly without compromising the immersive aspects

of gameplay. In addition, research can also examine the long-term impact of cultural exposure in games on players' understanding and perception of a particular culture. In the development of culture-based games, it is important for game developers to pay attention to the balance between authenticity and accessibility. The use of cultural elements should be supported with adequate context so that they can be understood by players from different backgrounds, without appearing exotic or stereotypical. In addition, the involvement of cultural experts and local communities in the design process can ensure that the cultural representations remain accurate and respectful of the original values of the culture. Further study is suggested to decide how cultural representation in games can be enhanced to effectively introduce culture to a global audience. More in-depth studies, such as detailed investigations can be conducted into the design approaches, conveying cultural elements without losing the essence of the game. Moreover, research can also examine the long-term impact of cultural exposure through games in the player's understanding and appreciation. When designing culture-based games, it is crucial for game makers to consider the authenticity and usability of the game interface. With the focus of the cultural features being appreciated and understood by players from diverse backgrounds, integration of such diverse elements is a must without being perceived as exotic or stereotypical. Furthermore, involving cultural experts and local communities in the design process will result in an accurate and respectful understanding of the origins of each country's cultural values. If well executed, these games can be designed for a more enhanced gaming experience purposefully aiming to educate and preserve culture globally.

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