

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY RESIDENTS OF ENUGU NORTH LGA IN USING FACEBOOK FOR PUBLIC HEALTH MESSAGING DURING COVID-19

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Abstract

The study investigated the challenges encountered by residents of Enugu North LGA in using Facebook for public health messaging during Covid-19 Pandemic. The survey research design was used. The sample size of 273 was drawn from the population of 347,500. Multi-stage cluster sampling procedure was the technique used to carry out the study. The findings in the study shows that 77.9% of the respondents have been exposed to campaigns against Covid-19. Also, 91.5% are aware that Covid-19 can be transmitted from person to person. Also, 72.3% of the respondents believe that using Facebook for public health messaging is beneficial. However, Facebook was not the major source of information on Covid-19 for 54.6% of the respondents. This implies that respondents merely use information gotten here to augment the one from their major source of information on Covid-19. Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made; Enhance digital literacy programmes for the residents of Enugu-North: the outcome of this study shows that misinformation and unfiltered information from non-governmental or public health sources was a major threat to the adoption of Facebook for information on the Covid-19, the research recommends enlightenment of the target population on how to discern credible information from misinformation on Facebook. Hence, the local government authority LGA, should partner with local health organizations and educational institutions to conduct workshops and seminars on digital literacy and critical thinking. This will go to a great extent in increasing knowledge of residents to make informed decisions regarding COVID-19 and other health issues based on reliable information. Enhance Health Communication Strategies on Facebook: Create targeted health communication campaigns specifically tailored for residents of Enugu-North, focusing on local languages and cultural context to improve understanding and engagement. Use interactive and engaging content formats like live Questions and Answer (Q&A) sessions, info graphics, and short videos to convey critical information about COVID-19 prevention, symptoms, and treatment options on Facebook.

Keywords: Challenges, Facebook. Covid-19 Pandemic, Public Health, Residents

Introduction

It is evident that nobody in the present age is oblivious of the covid-19 pandemic which rocked the world terribly in the year 2020. This is particularly true as such a pandemic had not been witnessed within the last century (Ekwunife, Ukeje, Robinson & Kalu, 2020). Both in the developed liberal societies of the North and the developing nations of the South, the coronavirus experience was a bad hit on both the private and public sectors. The coronavirus disease otherwise known as (covid-19) is an infectious disease caused by a new discovered coronavirus. It was first reported by World Health Organization (WHO) on the 31st of December 2019 and the virus emerged from Wuhan China. The cause of the disease was soon confirmed as a novel coronavirus, and the infection has since spread to many countries worldwide and has become a pandemic disease (Araz & Hersh, 2020).

Several websites and mass media have disseminated information about covid-19 and have given different instructions to their audience about ways to prevent the spread of the virus, such as keeping a distance between themselves and others, using face mask, washing hands with running water and using alcohol-based sanitizer. However, Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC, 2020) affirms that coronavirus is a new strain of virus that has not been previously identified in human beings. They advanced that, SARS-Cov-2 is the virus that causes coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The disease was initially named the 2019-novel coronavirus 2019-nCov) on 12 January 2020 but was later officially named by World Health Organization (WHO) as Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19).

Medical experts noted that the virus is transmitted to another person when an individual comes in contact with an infected person, there are high chances of an individual becoming a victim and the end result in most cases is death as no vaccine has been discovered yet until recently when there are lots of emerging vaccines. As a result, governments adopted sensitization and awareness creation as tools to curb the spread of this notorious covid-19 (Araz & Harsh, 2020).

According to the National Center for Disease Control (2020) the Federal Ministry of Health confirmed the first case of covid-19 on the 27th February 2020 in Lagos adding that the victim was an Italian citizen, but worked in Nigeria. His case was confirmed by the Virology Laboratory of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital. It should be noted that corona virus case across the globe was high as 127,519,788 out of which 2,792,568 deaths were recorded while 102,778,857 recovered.

According to NCDC (2020) coronavirus cases across Nigeria is 162,641, 150,466 recovered whereas 2049 died from covid-19 complications out of a total of 1,767,694 sampled. Lagos, FCT, Plateau, Kaduna, Rivers, Oyo, Edo, Ogun, Kano, Ondo and Kwara States were the States most affected (NCDC, 2021). Also, the first lockdown was on Monday, 30th March 2020 mainly for Lagos, FCT Abuja and Ogun State. It should be added that the lockdown was announced as part of the measures to curtail the spread of the virus. Later across the Country which led to the emergency closure of all schools, businesses (market), religious places, social gathering, work from homes, virtual meetings etc.

The mass media (radio, Tv, newspapers, billboard) etc and new media (website, blog, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram) were employed to create awareness in order for the public to be fully aware especially the preventive measures as there was no vaccine for the virus as of that time so the best was to avoid having it. Social media is an efficient source of information and an effective means for staying abreast of the vast amount of medical knowledge especially for keeping social distancing as one of the ways to avert the spread of the virus.

Social distancing, travel restrictions, quarantine, closing of business outlets have changed the fabric of society. People have been forced out of the safety and wellbeing of their routine. The social media have taken at the centre stage more than ever, and to global social networking and discussions. (Chan, Nickson, Rudolph, Lee, and Joynt, 2020; Thelwall and Thelwall, 2020). Social media information has a wide effect on the individuals and groups that connect to the online world to seek information for families, friends and the general public (Magnet, 2019).

Okunna and Omenugha (2012) observe that the mass media has a significant role to play in determining audience interpretation of social issues through media advocacy and framing. This is exemplified in the agenda-setting function of the media, whereby the media gives attention and prominence to the coverage of some social events while neglecting others. Aside from this prominence, the language of presentation is a factor that influences audience perception.

Like most social network sites, Facebook provided a formatted web page into which each user can enter personal information, including gender, hometown, political and religious views, activities, email and physical addresses, relationship status, interest and many other features.

Facebook helps you connect and share with people in our life, friends and relations, you can make new friends on Facebook from different areas of the world, and you can connect with people by using Facebook chat and messages.

Facebook is a source of information and news, it is one of the best sources to stay updated with the latest news, you will not miss the important updates, bloggers and internet marketers can subscribe to popular blog fan pages and keep themselves up with the latest updates, so it is a useful way to disseminate information. During the lockdown and aftermath, lots of users used Facebook to seek understanding information about covid-19 especially the symptoms, preventive measures and treatment etc. therefore, for the purpose of this study, the effort will dwell on facebook especially how it was employed to seek relevant information about covid-19.

Objectives of the Study

1. To ascertain the challenges encountered by residents of Enugu North LGA in using Facebook for public health messaging on Covid-19.
2. To examine the impact of Facebook on public awareness of Covid-19 in Enugu-North Local Government Area.
3. To investigate the extent of reliance on Facebook for preventive information on Covid-19 by residents of Enugu-North Local Government Area.

Literature Review

Facebook was established in 2004, from the college dorm room of Mark Zuckerberg, a Harvard student, the website is now worth billions of dollars and is one of the world's recognisable brands. It is a website which allows users, who sign up for free profiles to connect with friends, work colleagues or people they don't know online. It allows users to share pictures, music, videos and articles, as well as their own thoughts and opinions with however many people they like. Users send friend request to people who they know or may not know, once accepted, the two profiles are connected with both users able to see whatever the other person posts. Facebook can post almost anything to their timeline, a snapshot of what is happening in their social circle at any given time, and can also enter private chat with other friends who are online. Facebook would later expand to other networks, such as employees of companies. In September 2006, Facebook announced that anyone who was at least 13 years old and had a valid email address could join. By 2009, it had become the world's most used social networking service, according to a report by the analytics site Compete.com.

Facebook Coverage of Corona virus

Unarguably, Facebook was awash with covid-19 related messages all through the year 2020. From the month of March 2020 which could be called the first phase of the spread of the virus in Nigeria, the spread was low in Africa (Caitlinalder, 2020) including Nigeria but the news about the coronavirus flooded social media particularly Facebook to the extent that it resulted in information overloaded (Ekwunife et al, 2020). In the face of this low spread of the virus in Africa, Nigeria was predicted to have the highest number of infections in Africa. This was one of the commonest pieces of information disseminated by Facebook. The coverage of the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria is significant since Nigeria ranks among the very top users of Facebook in the world. The Facebook being massive used by Nigerians was instrumental in reporting covid-19 related deaths, preventive measures, spread among others (Nwakpu et al, 2020).

Lacking the gate-keeping process that makes journalism a distinct profession, the covid-19 related information in the social media intentionally or unintentionally were framed and designed to determine how Nigerians responded to media advocacy on the pandemic. For example, while the mainstream media could maintain that the virus was real, several social media contents negated this view. The important question is this, 'between the social media like Facebook messages and those of the mainstream media, which do Nigerians find credible?'. This question becomes pertinent as social media seems to have significantly influenced people's behaviour during the pandemic, particularly as people sat back in their homes during the lockdown and married their social media (Facebook) platform.

Social media particularly Facebook disseminated videos of the citizens in hunger and deprivations amidst the news of numerous palliatives distributed by the Federal Government. Facebook was disposed to reporting other sides of responses to the pandemic which the government neglected or did not do well. On many occasions, the masses formed their opinions based on these social media presentations because they were convincing and appeared credible. The announcement of the first victim of coronavirus was made through various social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and others. Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) also utilized social media as a platform to disseminate vital information. (Obi-Ani et al, 2020). Covid-19 related information was not only disseminated on social media by ordinary people (citizen journalists). Formal organizations such as NCDC, Mobile Television Network, World Health Organization, and Presidential Task Force on covid-19, among others also used social media to spread useful pieces of information for the safety of the citizens. Updates on the rate of spread, mortality rate, precautionary measures and other information were given through

social media (Facebook). Aside from the advantage of combining the mainstream and social media for effective delivery of covid-19 related information, social media was utilized because of its reach, accessibility, speed of information, dissemination and potent influence on the younger generation.

Empirical Review

Onuegbu (2022), studied the impact of social media in the fight against the spread of coronavirus (Covid-19) Pandemic in Anambra State, Nigeria. The study was designed as a survey with close-ended questionnaire distributed to 400 respondents. The findings of the study revealed that usage and accessibility of social media increased in Anambra State because of Coronavirus pandemic. It also revealed that the social media is being utilised to gather and disseminate information, study, transact businesses. The finding also showed that the social media has positive impact in the fight against the spread of Coronavirus in Anambra State. The study concluded that social media has much benefits than negative impact, and should be used to control the spread of coronavirus.

Uwakwe (2020), studied Social media and bridging of covid-19 information gap among students of Federal Polytechnic, Oko. The study was a survey study which the researcher uses a sample of 112 students to x-ray the impact of new media in dissemination of information on covid-19 pandemic. The study submits that WhatsApp, Facebook and Opera news are rendering front line media services. Based on this, therefore, the study reveals that new media have been potent at the awareness level. The study also notes some differentials (gap) among the students in terms of level of awareness of covid-19 pandemic terminology. The study reinforces the role of the media in national development. The study recommends that governments and change agents should take advantage of the possibilities inherent in the new media in the fight against covid-19 pandemic.

Abubakar, et al., (2022) studied Social media efficacy on prevention and control of covid-19 pandemic in Ilorin South Local Government Area, Kwara State, Nigeria. The study examined the effectiveness of awareness created by Facebook, NCDC messages, and Twitter on prevention and control of covid-19 pandemic in Ilorin South LGA, Kwara State. The study adopted a descriptive research design of survey type. A multi-stage sampling technique of stratified and purposive techniques was employed to select 150 respondents for the study. The findings revealed that awareness created through facebook, NCDC, and twitter has many impacts on the prevention and control of covid-19 pandemic. Based on this findings, the study recommends that health officers should encourage people on the need to use social media tools like facebook, NCDC messages, twitter and so on to gain insight on prevention and control of covid-19 pandemic.

Aghadiuno, et al.,(2021) studied Influence of social media platform on dissemination of information about covid-19 by Librarians in universities in Nasarawa State, Nigeria. Descriptive survey research design was used, the population of the study consist 25 library personnel spread across the three university libraries in Nasarawa State. The results of the study revealed that Facebook is the most used social media platforms to obtain information about covid-19 among librarians in universities in Nasarawa State. Findings of the study also show that information of death toll from social media platforms about covid-19 has caused fear and panic in Nasarawa State. The study recommends that World Health Organisation (WHO) and other organisations involved in covid-19 should make use of social media platform in disseminating information related to covid-19. Also information on death toll should be communicated only by WHO, and NCDC.

Almotawa and Aljabri, (2020) studied, Role of Social Media in creating Awareness during Covid-19 Pandemic in Soudi Arabia. The study used a quantitative approach and distributed an online questionnaire via SM platforms during October 2020 and received 343 valid responses from University students, healthcare professionals, and the public. Findings showed that despite the wide use of SM applications, the MOH website was the main source of information relied upon during the pandemic.

Adam, (2022) studied Role of Social Media in Spreading Awareness of Covid-19 Comparative Study between Facebook, Twitter. The study was focused on the role of social media in spreading awareness about covid-19, and how media have been following every step of this journey with multiple stories, incessant headlines, and continuous updates across the past two years, the paper took a look at some of the challenges that have faced

journalists during the covid-19 outbreak and how the media played a role in containing and spreading awareness of covid-19 and potentially, saving lives. And also, the role played by social media in the fighting against pandemic covid-19 with the influx of news, information, and health guidance on social media to prevent coronavirus.

Islam (2022) studied Role of Facebook in Covid-19 Crisis Management and Awareness Raising Efforts in Bangladesh. Posts and comments from the Facebook page of the Directorate General of Health Service (DGHS) were extracted from January 1 to June 8, 2020. The findings suggest that the DGHS significantly draws public attention through the active use of its Facebook page. Through an official source, Facebook played a key role in facilitating emergency communication during the pandemic and delivering awareness campaigns on behalf of government.

Peary et al. (2012) observed that social media is sometimes the only functioning communication method in disasters. In an extensive online questionnaire survey, they found that during the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, social media was the most reliable source of information. Around 94% of respondents evaluated social media as a highly beneficial tool in an emergency. During emergencies, social media facilitates safety identification, identifying displaced people, providing damage information, providing support for disabled people, volunteer organization, fund-raising, and moral support systems (Peary et al., 2012). Social media data can also be a potential source of public health surveillance. Public health professionals may use social media data to track information, detect possible outbreaks, forecast infection trends, monitor emergencies, and assess disease awareness and responses to official health communications.

Therefore, social media platforms especially Facebook can be helpful in emergency management efforts by facilitating instantaneous communication with the general public. During crises, government agencies can employ social media networks to disseminate information from official sources. These tools can create new and innovative ways of connecting with citizens during emergencies and raise government responses in crisis management.

However, previous studies on crisis communication through social media in the public institutions was mostly focused on developed countries (Alexander, 2014; Peary et al., 2012; Y. Wang et al., 2021). Additionally, Facebook is the most widely exploited social media site worldwide (Statista, 2021). In contrast to other social media sites its worldwide reach, promptness, and dialogic potential make it ideal for emergency communication in events like Covid-19. Nonetheless, there is a significant literature gap in the use of Facebook as a crisis communication tool, particularly in developing countries. The present study intends to shed the light of existing literature and investigates the impact of Facebook on the awareness and management of Covid-19

Both studies are similar since all focuses on social media and crisis management like covid-19 pandemic, but all the previous studies differs from the present study in terms of location used as case study. In all, the coverage of the covid-19 pandemic via social media (Facebook) could be said to be a coverage that was both functional and dysfunctional. While social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp were used to disseminate covid-19 related information speedily and massively; it also seemed to create panic and tension in the audience. Both the government and private individuals used social media extensively and some information in the social media contradicted others in the mainstream media. By this literature, the use of social media for the coverage of crises, particularly by ordinary citizens who are not trained journalists is found both useful and problematic.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratification Theory

Uses and Gratification theory (Blumler & Katz; 1974) suggests that media users play an active role in choosing and using the media. Users take an active part in the communication process and are goal oriented in their media use. The theorist say that a media user seeks out a media source that best fulfils the needs of the user. Uses and Gratifications assume that the user has alternate choices to satisfy their need. People are actively

involved in media usage and interact highly with the communication media by building profile groupings of related uses and theoretically associated gratifications (Lou, 2002).

The theory describes why consumers use a particular medium and what functions the medium serves for them (Katerattanakul 2002). Relating this theory to the current study it has been known that uses of any given content is basically determined by the gratifications such contents can offer to the consumers. Moreover, gratifications control exposure, selection and recall of media contents. From this assertion, the position of gratifications in both news content consumption and recall cannot be better understood in the absence of uses and gratifications theory of mass communication which explores the position of the recipients of media message mostly as an active participant in an era of proliferated media Landscape. Therefore, the above theoretical framework was considered more apt for this study because of its ability to establish the required detailed explanation of the relationship among media content use, gratification and recall. Bahfiarti, (2022) studied the effect of Covid-19 message exposure through the use of conventional media and new media based on indicators of frequency, duration, and consistency. The study analysed the uses and gratifications theory through conventional and new media exposure of Covid-19 pandemic information exposure.

Methodology

This study adopts survey research method as the design. The reason for this is that survey research method permits a researcher to study large populations by selecting a sample from the entire population in order to generalize the result. Survey method is used to find out opinions, attitudes, preferences, knowledge levels, readership of people (Management Study Guide, 2019, as cited by Bamidele 2019). The residents of Enugu North local Government area constituted the study. The estimated population of Enugu-North is 347,500 residents (https://citypopulation.de/en/nigeria/admin/enugu/NGA014004-enugu_north/). The Riley Research Associates Online Sample Size Calculator was used to select a sample, with a confidence level of 95% and confidence interval of 4. Based on this, the sample size of 273 was been selected to represent the entire population. Multi-stage cluster sampling procedure was the technique used to carry out the study. The researchers used questionnaire as measuring instrument to collect data for the study. The generated quantitative data were collated, presented and analyzed using tables, charts and simple percentages.

Discussion of Results/Findings

Research Questions One: What impact did Facebook have on awareness of Covid-19 among residents of Enugu North?

This research question investigates the role of Facebook in disseminating information about Covid-19 to the residents of Enugu-North, an LGA in Enugu State. The primary focus is to understand how effective Facebook was in raising awareness about the pandemic among the local population. The information in Table 4.1.10 to 4.1.13 was used in analyzing this research question. Key components of the investigation include: examining how many residents accessed Covid-19 information via Facebook and how frequently they engaged with this content. The results show that while 82.7% of the respondents have been exposed to Covid-19 messages on Facebook, their extent of exposure varies greatly. Example, 37.6% received Covid-19 information on Facebook often, 21.4% received it occasionally, whereas, 26.6% can't say how often they received Covid-19 messages through Facebook. Nevertheless, that a significant majority of the respondents were exposed to Covid-19 messaging on Facebook on a regular basis shows that the social network contributed significantly in enhancing awareness of the pandemic (see Table 4.1.11). This is supported by the data in Table 4.1.13 which suggests that 58.9% of the respondents consider the stories on Facebook regarding Covid-19 helpful in knowing more about the disease. This supports findings by Islam (2022) that "Facebook played a key role in facilitating emergency communication during the pandemic and delivering awareness campaigns on behalf of the government".

Research Questions Two: To what extent did residents of Enugu North rely on Facebook for preventive information on Covid-19?

This research question explores the extent to which residents of Enugu North depended on Facebook as a source of preventive information during the Covid-19 pandemic. By investigating these aspects, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role Facebook played in informing and guiding the residents of Enugu-North about Covid-19 preventive measures, and how this reliance affected their health behaviors during the pandemic. To analyze the research question two, the data in Table 4.1.15 to Table 4.1.21 was utilized.

The study focuses on several key areas: determining the proportion of residents who used Facebook as their primary or significant source of preventive information and how often they used Facebook to obtain preventive information about Covid-19. Although the respondents indicated high exposure to Facebook (see Tables 4.10 and 4.11), and high knowledge of the preventive measures (see Tables 4.19) information in Table 4.1.18 reveals that Facebook was not the major source of preventive information on Covid-19 for 54.6% of the respondents. This shows that a significant majority of the respondents source their information on the pandemic from other sources. However, a significant majority, 43.2% of the respondents depended on Facebook for knowledge on how to prevent Covid-19 to a moderate extent (see, Table 4.1.21).

The reason for not relying on Facebook for preventive knowledge to a large extent may not be farfetched. According to responses from 64.2% of the respondents is that “some stories came from unverified sources” and 41% believe that the stories are not from government (see, Table 4.1.15; Table 4.1.20). This supports the findings of other researchers that Facebook and other social media networks can be haven for misinformation. According to WHO (2021), “the spread of rumours and misconceptions through social media and other means can slow the fight against the pandemic”. Information gotten from social media must be subject to authentication. WHO (2021) suggests that the best approach is to “engage the community from where the rumour is coming from”.

Research Questions Three: What are the perceived benefits and limitations of using Facebook for public health messaging on Covid-19 among residents of Enugu North?

This research question aims to evaluate the perceptions of Enugu-North residents regarding the advantages and disadvantages of using Facebook for public health messaging during the Covid-19 pandemic. The idea was to provide a balanced understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Facebook as a tool for public health messaging during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the aim of offering insights into how such platforms can be optimized for better public health communication in the future. Key areas of investigation include: Assessing how Facebook's wide reach and accessibility allowed residents to receive timely Covid-19 information; understanding how the platform offers a variety of information from different sources, including health organizations, government agencies, and community groups; Investigating the prevalence and impact of misinformation and fake news on Facebook, which can confuse and mislead residents; Assessing the level of trust residents place in information found on Facebook, etc.

The opinion of 72.3% of the respondents is using Facebook for public health messaging is beneficial. However, the ways in which this benefits the audience varies. For instance, the information in Table 4.27 shows that 25.5% and 23.2% believe that using Facebook for public health messaging is beneficial ‘in reaching a large number of persons’ and gaining ‘access to varied opinions on public health concerns’ respectively. Also, 11.8% and 11.4% believe that Facebook provides opportunity “to clarify confusing information” and “to verify health information” Implicatively, the most unique attribute of Facebook as a medium for public health messaging is its ability to reach diverse audience on a large scale (see, Table 4.1.27)

Contrariwise, 83% also believe using Facebook for public health messaging has challenges. The responses from 31%, that is, majority of the respondents shows that Facebook promotes misinformation to a large extent.

However, while 22.5% said it's to a moderate extent, 23.6% believe it is to a little extent. This means that there is consensus that Facebook usage for public health messaging can promote misinformation, but, the extent varies significantly among the respondents. Similarly, the information in Table 4.1.31 above reveals that a slight majority (32.8%) of the respondents believe that using Facebook for public health messaging on Covid-19 could have contributed to the health panic witnessed during the lockdown to a large extent, whereas 30.3% believed this to a moderate extent. This supports the conclusion by Malik, Mahmood & Islam (2021), Facebook users "are less able to recognize their social and ethical responsibility to share authentic and credible information during crises".

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings and conclusions reached, the researcher recommends thus:

1. **Enhance digital literacy programmes for the residents of Enugu-North:** the outcome of this study shows that misinformation and unfiltered information from non-governmental or public health sources was a major threat to the adoption of Facebook for information on the Covid-19, the research recommends enlightenment of the target population on how to discern credible information from misinformation on Facebook. Hence, the local government authority LGA, should partner with local health organizations and educational institutions to conduct workshops and seminars on digital literacy and critical thinking. This will go to a great extent in increasing knowledge of residents to make informed decisions regarding COVID-19 and other health issues based on reliable information.
2. **Enhance Health Communication Strategies on Facebook:** Create targeted healthcommunication campaigns specifically tailored for residents of Enugu-North, focusing on local languages and cultural context to improve understanding and engagement. Use **interactive and** engaging content formats like live Questions and Answer (Q&A) sessions, info graphics, and short videos to convey critical information about COVID-19 prevention, symptoms, and treatment options on Facebook.
3. **Enhancement of collaboration with local media is also recommended.** Partner with local media outlets to amplify health messages shared on Facebook, ensuring a consistent and wide-reaching approach to public health communication. Integrate Facebook campaigns with other media platforms to reach a broader audience, reinforcing critical health messages across different channels. This is necessary since the results show that majority of the respondents got information on Covid-19 from other sources aside from Facebook.

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