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BEAUTY AND THE FLEECED: READING DOVE'S 'CHOOSE BEAUTIFUL' CAMPAIGN

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Abstrak: Standar kecantikan secara konstan diperbarui dan ditinjau kembali dari waktu ke waktu. Media, melalui media cetak maupun elektronik, memainkan peran penting dalam membangun dan mengkomunikasikan gagasan kecantikan kontemporer. Dalam upaya mereka untuk memberdayakan wanita di berbagai penjuru dunia, Dove memprakarsai eksperimen sosial yang disebut 'Choose Beautiful' di mana wanita di lima kota berbeda (San Francisco, London, New Delhi, Shanghai, dan Sao Paulo) diberi pilihan untuk berjalan melalui satu dari dua pintu yang dilabeli 'cantik' dan 'biasa'. Eksperimen ini menempatkan subyek penelitian dalam situasi dilematis untuk memilih di antara kedua label. Kampanye ini merupakan wacana akademik yang menarik karena tidak hanya mempromosikan standar kecantikan baru atau memperkuat standar yang ada seperti yang dilakukan iklan lainnya. Sebaliknya, kampanye ini memicu diskusi yang lebih mendasar tentang konsep kecantikan yang sulit didefinisikan dan implikasinya terhadap perempuan. Penelitian kualitatif deskriptif ini mengkaji kampanye Choose Beautiful dan dampaknya dalam kerangka *lookism* dan berbagai teori tentang kecantikan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa terlepas dari niat yang tampaknya baik, kampanye Choose Beautiful adalah sebuah upaya implisit untuk memasukkan seluruh wanita ke dalam kategori cantik.
Kata kunci: *Kecantikan, standar kecantikan, Dove, Choose Beautiful, strategi pemasaran*

Abstract: The standards of beauty are constantly challenged and revisited over time. The media, through advertisements and commercials, plays a vital role in constructing and communicating contemporary ideas of beauty. In their efforts to empower women across the globe, Dove initiated a social experiment called 'Choose Beautiful' in which women in five different cities (San Francisco, London, New Delhi, Shanghai, and Sao Paulo) were given the choice to walk through one of the two available doors labeled as 'beautiful' and 'average'. This experiment put many of the research subjects in a dilemmatic situation of choosing between the two labels. In hindsight, this campaign was an interesting academic discourse because it did not merely promote new standards of beauty or cement the existing standards as other advertisements did. Rather, it prompted a more fundamental discussion on the elusive concept of beauty and its implications on women. This descriptive qualitative research examines the campaign and its undertone within the frameworks of *lookism* and the existing concepts of beauty. This research concludes that despite the seemingly good intentions, the Choose Beautiful campaign is a somewhat patronizing attempt to compartmentalize women into the precarious pool of feeling beautiful.
Keywords: *Beauty*, *Beauty standards, Dove, Choose Beautifully, Marketing Strategy*

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INTRODUCTION

Feminist movements have opened Pandora box for women. They can now have it all: higher education, family, career, money, and beauty. Capitalism, hustle culture, and social media further propel this agenda, creating ridiculously demanding expectations for women. Women are no longer competing against men but against other women in a battle where physical appearance becomes one of the most sought-after arsenals. The beauty industry, which thrives from this phenomenon, is built around the idea that beauty does not have to be a gift of nature or genetics. Rather, it is something *attainable*, *workable*, and most certainly, *purchasable*. From beauty salons to plastic surgery, the beauty industry is there to make people *feel* beautiful.

The development of technology has allowed the beauty industry to create new needs for women. A person who was born with brown eyes can now have blue eyes with the help of contact lenses. The beauty industry in the United States alone generated over $55 billion in 2015 (Sena, 2020). The skin care segment was the second highest-grossing market with a market share revenue of 23.7% (Sena, 2020). Sena (2020) also reported that 82% of the female respondents blamed social media for this trend. Furthermore, the Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) predicted that the revenue in the Beauty and Personal Care market will grow by 4.8% annually between 2023 and 2027 with an estimated revenue of US$7.95 billion in 2023 alone (Statista, 2022).

As a manufacturer of skin-care products, *Dove* created a marketing strategy called ‘Movement for Self-Esteem’. Until 2010, this women-empowerment campaign was more commonly known as ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’. This idea was a response to the global report the company commissioned on the subject of beauty, in which out of the 3,200 women they studied, only 2 percent perceived themselves as beautiful (Millard, 2009, p. 147). It was reported that this campaign increased the company’s sales by approximately $1.5 billion, in which social media played a very significant role. In 2013, *Dove* released a video called ‘Real Beauty Sketches’ (YouTube, 2013).

The video that went on to become the most viral online advertisement ever made (over 70 million views, as of March 2023) contained a recording of FBI sketch artist, Gil Zamora, who was asked to draw two different sketches of the same people; the first one was based on the subject’s

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descriptions and the second on another person's. The three-minute video then showed the expressions of the women as they observed the sketches side-by-side. The underlying message of this video was perhaps best described by the artist's words, *"Do you think you're more beautiful than you say?"*

Following the success of the campaign, Dove kick started the 'Choose Beautiful' campaign in 2015. The three-and-a-half-minute video was filmed in five different cities across the globe: San Francisco, London, New Delhi, Shanghai, and Sao Paulo. In this video, female visitors were presented with the option of walking through one of the two entrance doors: one labeled as 'beautiful' and the other 'average'. Cameras were placed in hidden spots to record the behaviors and expressions of these women as they made their choices. Some of these women were then interviewed and asked to explain the reasons for their choices. Those who chose to walk through the 'average' door were described as "disappointed" and "full of regrets". The video ended with the words, *"Beautiful is a great word, so why not see what's on the other side of that?"*

The 'Choose Beautiful' video garnered over 100 million views and 125,000 social mentions in two weeks. Additionally, the 'Dove choose beautiful' keywords resulted in over a million entries on Google. Major media outlets, including Time, Fortune, and Huffington Post, were quick to report on the sensational impact of the ads. Yahoo! News was even quoted as saying, "*Proves beauty is a choice*" (Fitzharris, 2015). Some argued that the profit motivation tainted the legitimacy of the campaign with Millard (2009) suggesting that it was ironic to tell women that they were beautiful just the way they were while trying to sell them beauty products (p. 160). This paper will try to examine the thought-provoking issue behind Dove's Choose Beautiful campaign in conjunction with *lookism* and the perceptions of beauty, as well as the values behind the advertising strategies of beauty businesses. The purpose of this research is to conclude whether the Choose Beautiful campaign was indeed a genuine women-empowerment campaign or a subtle marketing ploy to, once again, 'fleece' women dry in their attempt to pursue beauty.

METHODS

This research employs a descriptive qualitative method. The research data were

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obtained from Dove's "Choose Beautiful" video, published on Dove Indonesia's YouTube channel (YouTube, 2015). The Choose Beautiful videos were shot in five different cities across the world, targeting only women. Other Dove promotional materials (e.g. Real Beauty Sketches, 2013) and press releases related to the Choose Beautiful campaign were also examined and included in the analysis. This research also employs the concept of lookism and other existing beauty concepts as analysis tools.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Beauty is a very important subject matter for many women. Although it arguably does not cure polio or feed the poor – at least not directly – women from different periods of time have yearned for beauty. Plato in Scruton (2009) identified *erōs* as *"the origin of both sexual desire and the love of beauty"* (p. 40). This statement suggests that physical appearance, as signified by beauty, is the object of attraction and sexual desire. With that mindset, people yearn for beauty, not for their satisfaction but for the satisfaction of others, which in turn, will bring good consequences to them.

Freud in Hagman (2005) confirmed this notion by suggesting, "*All that seems certain (about beauty) is its derivation from the field of sexual feeling.*" (p. 88). He further elaborated that secondary sexual features such as face and hair are the indicators of beauty. These secondary characteristics are the representations of beauty which, according to the beauty industry, can be modified to look better. Furthermore, Freud suggested that the appreciation for beauty is "*one of the primary characteristics of a civilized society*" (Hagman, 2005, p. 88).

The proverb 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' suggests that the perception of beauty is subjective; that people have different ideas about what is beautiful. It is unnatural for people to feel beautiful or ugly on their own accord. If we imagine a person who lives alone in this world, or a woman who has never seen another woman, it will be difficult to envision a situation in which they question their beauty. In most cases, beauty is only questioned when comparison exists. We do not feel that there is something wrong with our casual looks until we share a room with a dozen other women who are dressed to kill. Likewise, having a 'real size' body seems perfectly fine until we realize what people may think as we walk down the aisle in our tight wedding dress. Colebrook in Vartabedian (2016) called attention to feminist scholars who questioned those who

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seemingly had the authority to set beauty standards and why these standards only applied to women (p. 80). Beauty is indeed not so much in the eyes of the beheld than it is in the eyes of the beholder. But what standards are being used to lay a verdict on beauty?

As suggested by Freud in Hagman (2005), one way to see beauty is *figure* (p. 8). However, such indicator has produced different interpretations throughout the course of time. One of the most notable conceptualizations of this element is painting, as seen in Figures 1 and 2 below:

Figure 1. *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli

Figure 2. Eve in Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo

The figures of the women in both paintings are very much different from the representations of the 'ideal figure' in today's society. By Western and Asian standards, the ideal woman is tall, slim, and tanned with large breasts, clear skin, and long hair (Millard, 2009, p. 154). It is not hard to predict that only few women will meet these standards, by genetic fortune or surgical alteration alike. Hence, the women who become the standards for physical supremacy are the likes of supermodels and K-pop idols, as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3. *Victoria Secret* model, Candice Swanepoel

Figure 4. *Blackpink's* Jisoo

The fickle nature of figure can also be seen from the physical development phases of a woman. Chubby and overweight babies or toddlers are often perceived as adorable and treated as such. However, as the children enter school years, the adoration turns into bullying, which continues all the way to adolescent years. As they mature into young women, people with 'less ideal' figures are also advised to lose weight and work out to attract the opposite sex into a relationship. Even as adults, overweight women are perceived as lazy, gluttonous, and unhealthy.

Since there are many dimensions to the definitions and standards of beauty, does it mean that it is undefinable? Lorand (2002) argued that beauty is a paradox. On the one hand, an object is called beautiful when its elements "*complement each other and are rightly situated*". On the other hand, there are no clear-cut rules that govern beauty, which

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suggests the opposite of order (p. 1). She then concluded that beauty is a "*lawless order*", because it expressed a certain degree of order which is not necessarily consistent with "*discursive order*" (Lorand, 2002, p. 1). It means that although beauty does not possess a definite set of criteria, it does not mean that every person will come to a different conclusion in telling beauty apart. This is particularly evident when comparisons are made, as illustrated in Figures 5 and 6 below:

Figure 5. *Victoria Secret* model, Doutzen Kroes

Figure 6. Donatella Versace of Versace

Regardless of how they perceive beauty, most people would be inclined to agree that the woman in Figure 5 is more beautiful than the woman in Figure 6. Even without the means of visual aids, most people will mention similar words when asked to define physical beauty: tall, slim, beautiful eyes, flawless skin, healthy hair, and so forth. These conceptions do not come naturally. It is shaped by many factors; the media being one of the most "*pivotal force*" in the construction of beauty ideals (Picton, 2013, p. 86).

Stern, as quoted in Lind (2010), interviewed 63 kindergarten girls and classified them according to the amount of time they spent watching television. Girls who watched 0-14 hours of television each week were categorized as 'lighter viewers', and those who watched more than 14 hours of television each week were categorized as 'heavier viewers'. When asked if a fat person could be as pretty as a thin one, two of the 'heavier viewers' answered, *"A fat person can be pretty. My mom is fat. But she is going on a diet. She is going to look like a beach girl"* and *"Not as much as a thin person"* (p. 41).

The interviewees were between the ages of five and six. Their remarks suggested that children who were exposed to a considerable amount of television received a stronger influence from the representations of beauty in the media. Kids channels and movies, such as *Disney*, instilled strong images of beauty in children by how the main heroines were portrayed. Although Disney princesses have become more inclusive as time went by, the respondents of this research were influenced by early Disney princesses, as shown in Figure 7.

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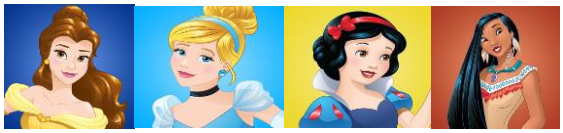

Figure 7. *Disney* princesses; (left to right) Belle, Cinderella, Snow White, and Pocahontas

The secondary characteristics of beauty shown by these characters shaped the perception of young girls on what it meant to be beautiful. Stern in Lind (2010) also mentioned that both types of viewers listed feminine accessories such as clothing, makeup, and jewelry as the indicators of beauty; that a girl must "*buy something pretty*" to look pretty (p.42). The consumer culture mindset instilled by the media starts at a very young age. Consequently, as these girls grow older, many of them become self-aware and insecure with their looks – an issue reflected in Dove's Choose Beautiful campaign.

The discrimination against people who are categorized as "*physically unattractive according to widespread psychobiological and/or social standards*" is the core of ***lookism*** (Minerva, 2013). Etcoff in Safire (2000) added that lookism is the "*most pervasive but denied prejudice*". This means that despite the progress mankind has made in terms of human rights and inclusion, lookism remains the demon lurking under the bed. Many studies have been conducted on the unfavorable effects of this prejudice, including employment discrimination (Warhurst et al., 2009); classroom treatment (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2011); public relation (Simorangkir, 2013); and epistemic injustice (Spiegel, 2022). This article will, therefore, consider the perspective of lookism in reading Dove's Choose Beautiful campaign.

Beauty and the Fleeced: Is There More than Meets the Eye in the Choose Beautiful Campaign?

In a press release, as quoted in Vagianos (2017), Dove made the following statement on their Choose Beautiful campaign:

> *"Women make thousands of choices each day – related to their careers, their families, and, let's not forget, themselves. Feeling beautiful is one of those choices that women should feel empowered to make for themselves."*

The second sentence, in particular, raises a few questions. The main proposition of the statement is 'I should choose to feel beautiful.' Note that the word *feel,* rather than *be* is used in this statement. The first question that springs to mind is, 'Can we control how we feel?' One has the ability to control response or action, but not feeling.

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For instance, a girl may feel sad after a breakup but chooses to be happy or move on with her life. However, she cannot choose to feel happy, as the feeling comes as a natural process beyond her control. When someone says something mean to us, we feel hurt. We can proceed to be at peace with ourselves or forgive the person, but a happy feeling will not come as a natural reaction.

Another problem with this proposition is that the word *feel* as a verb indicates something that occurs in the realm of mind. Note the difference between 'I am safe' and 'I feel safe'. For one, 'I am safe' is a reflection of reality, while 'I feel safe' is a reflection of the subject's feeling regardless of his/her actual safety. Illustratively, a person can live in a dangerous environment, perhaps among thieves and gangsters, and feel very safe. The person may have to endure danger on daily basis, yet s/he feels perfectly safe.

Secondly, the word *feel* indicates a certain degree of uncertainty. It describes a feeling of safety, and at the same time, uncertainty over the perpetuity of the condition. To a certain extent, it represents some sort of variability about the subject matter. When one says, 'I felt ignored', rather than 'I was ignored', the person subconsciously doubted if this was the case. Similarly, 'I am beautiful' and 'I feel beautiful' carry different meanings. The former represents certainty and does not depend on the opinion of others, whereas the latter signifies uncertainty and depends on the assessment of others. The problem is Dove promoted the latter.

Figueroa (2013) contrasted *being* and *feeling* by highlighting that beauty is an outcome of "temporal and relational interaction" between the self and others. Plato in Zistakis (2019) also argued that *taste* is "the faculty for judging an object" or any form of representation by means of approval or disapproval (p. 282). In Kant's words, although others have their own perceptions of beauty, we consider their opinion as wrong and ours as right (Nuzzo, 2005).

Interestingly, the participants in this experiment seemed to voice the doubt, albeit unintentionally. One woman was quoted as saying, *"It's **quite** triumphant, really. It was **like** telling the world I **think** I'm beautiful."* Note the use of 'quite', 'like' and 'think' in the statement. Each of these words has a certain degree of uncertainty. Was the woman not sure? Was it because she was asked to solve a long-standing puzzle on the definition of beauty by choosing between

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two Dove-labeled doors? Did the fact that she was being interviewed influence the way she presented her opinion?

In her essay, Saraswati (2012) singled out "*fear of mockery*" as the biggest driving force in the purchase of skin-lightening products (p. 119). Similarly, one of her respondents, a woman in her forties, admitted to using skin-whitening cream to avoid unwanted attention saying, "… *(the cream) was intended to* ***avert*** *rather than, as commonly narrated in whitening ads, to* ***invite*** *the gaze of others.*" (p. 126).

The same can be said with Dove's experiment. It is safe to say that most women chose to walk through the 'average' door simply because it was the safest option. No one would accuse them of being narcissistic or shameless. Averting attention, and not inviting one, was the more basic survival need for most women. The concept of this experiment is, therefore, inherently flawed.

Another woman in the video said, *"Given another chance, I would choose beautiful."* This reminded me of a student who answered 'B' in a two-choice question, and upon being told that 'A' was the correct answer said, *"Given another chance, I would choose A."* There were not many choices left. Here lies the second problem with the Choose Beautiful campaign: the use of two doors, as seen in Figure 8.

Figure 8. The doors labeled 'Beautiful' and 'Average' in *Dove's* video

The doors labeled 'beautiful' and 'average' are presented as a polarity. In other words, they have the same binary-opposition implication as 'good' and 'bad' or 'light' and 'darkness', or in this particular case, 'beautiful' and 'ugly'. If the company had used the word 'ugly' instead of 'average', everyone would have walked through the 'beautiful' door, putting an end to the campaign. The guileful use of 'average' was, in fact, more damning to women as it subjugated the quality of 'average' to 'ugly', and that 'beautiful' was considered as the singular truth.

The two doors put visitors in an 'either/or' situation; you are either *beautiful* or *not*, regardless of the label used for the latter. The problem is that not everyone can be classified into either. Some people consider themselves *intelligent, funny,*

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strong, or *kind.* Unfortunately for them, there is no third door. *Beautiful* has to be the conclusive word, because the company markets beauty products. Moreover, assuming a person who is branded as 'ugly' by the society's standards arrives at the door, which door should she use? Perhaps there is a 99% certainty that the person will choose the 'average' door. But what does this do to her? Being considered or called 'ugly' is painful enough per se, but the person is now forced to physically walk through a door that says 'average' because the 'beautiful' door will earn her an extra title of being delusional.

Banister and Hogg (2004) argued that self-esteem is a huge motivator of consumer behavior. Starting a movement under the flagship of business is always a tricky move. The name of Dove's campaign series was 'Campaign for Real Beauty' before it was changed into 'Movement for Self-Esteem'. Neither of the two made much sense in correlation with the company's business. If real beauty is a form of self-appreciation and acceptance that may stem from other traits such as intelligence, perseverance, or kindness, and is completely detached from the opinion of others, where does that leave Dove's beauty products?

When the name of the campaign series was changed into 'Movement for Self-Esteem', Dove indirectly suggested that women ought to *be* or *feel* beautiful in order to have high self-esteem. This is not always the case. A woman can be or feel confident because she is smart, successful, or powerful, but the idea for Dove's movement is built around the concept of beauty. In other words, Dove is not telling women to realize that they are beautiful. Rather, they are suggesting that *this* is what it means to be beautiful – to walk through a door labeled 'beautiful' and admit in front of the camera how good it makes them feel. What it truly is is a patronizing, make-believe attempt aimed at individually-unique civilians who are simplified into either 'beautiful' or 'average'.

As reported by Vagianos (2017), Dove interviewed 6,400 women from 20 different countries as a part of their campaigns. A staggering 96% of these women claimed that they did not consider themselves beautiful, although 80% believed that there was something beautiful in every woman. Hence, the company aimed to 'empower' women and make them feel 'beautiful'. However, this kind of experiment is likely to produce the opposite effects on its subjects. As opposed to empowering women,

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it may actually trigger the *cacophobia* in some – the fear of being perceived as ugly.

In the opinion of Lee (2016), global feminism links oppression to having a negative self-perception and offers empowerment and self-esteem as individualized remedies (p. 7). This is what Dove, and many other brands, attemps to do. The trend of promoting self-love in media, business, and pop culture is inherently flawed, because despite the message, the models, idols, and products used represent the status quo and supports the existing standards of beauty.

Hagman (2005) argued that, *"the sense of beauty can function as a defense or a compensation for deficits"* (p. 100). How many women will say 'I'm very pretty' when asked to describe themselves? The number will be small because by making such claim, the person will be subjected to scorn. Similarly, a woman who calls herself smart risks getting the opposite reaction of what she expects. Therefore, in this case, 96% of the women interviewed might have made such statement out of defense, rather than honesty.

In her study of global feminism, plastic surgery, and self-esteem in South Korea, Lee (2016) mentioned lookism as "one of the central causes for plastic surgery consumption" (p. 12). In a country where the standards of beauty are K-pop idols and their perfect fair skin, body shape, and facial contour, it takes great self-confidence – or self-love – to be just as you are.

In a glance, Dove seemed to subvert the beauty narrative by promoting countercultural ideas and practices while enforcing the image of a "caring company" (Millard, 2009). However, lookism is essentially the fear of being seen as ugly. By subjecting women to the choices of 'beautiful' and 'average', Dove promoted 'beautiful' as the singular truth that every woman must strive for. The company refrained from using 'ugly', because if the choices were between 'beautiful' and 'ugly', most (if not all) women would walk through the 'beautiful' door without being self-aware. It would be like choosing between being a hero and a villain in a story. By substituting 'ugly' with 'average', the company intentionally – for the purpose of the campaign – created a new dichotomy that placed 'average' on the same level as 'ugly'.

The outcome would be considerably different if people were asked to choose between, for example, being a celebrity or an ordinary person. Some would be content with

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the latter, the same way the experiment subjects were content with being 'average' until they were asked to explain their decision in the interview that followed. Had there been a third door, for instance, with the label 'kind' or 'funny', many would have opted for it with those choosing the 'beautiful' door being subjected to a more negative response. Even if the 'average' door was replaced by 'other', I believe many would choose the 'other' door because smart, successful, kind, friendly, funny, and other positive traits are as important as being beautiful. Then again, Dove is selling beauty products.

CONCLUSIONS

The beauty industry is built around the idea that beauty does not have to be a gift of nature or genetics. Rather, it is something that can be obtained or worked on. As one of the major brands in the skin-care segment, *Dove* has managed to create a campaign that not only boosted their sales level but also sparked debate. The company marketed the campaign as a movement to empower women across the globe. However, the analysis in this paper concludes that the attempt was more of a marketing ploy, rather than a genuine empowerment strategy aimed at women. One of the indicators of this false empowerment was the use of two doors, particularly the label 'average'. In other words, the empowerment concept was merely a *fleece* for their business purpose. Admittedly, *Dove* was not the only beauty brand to utilize such façades for profit reasons. Many companies have been known to use various modes of indoctrination to instill images of beauty. As a result, women constantly purchase beauty products to 'remain beautiful'. The vanity and the desire to be the 'fairest of them all', as portrayed by the Evil Queen in *Snow White*, can be traced back to the beauty industry and their advertising strategies to *fleece* women penniless in their attempt to possess beauty – a destination as elusive and situational as happiness.

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