

The Relationship Between Emotion Regulation, Social Support and Mental Health Among University Students

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Abstrak: Kajian ini meneliti hubungan antara strategi pengawalan emosi, sokongan sosial, dan kesihatan mental dalam kalangan pelajar universiti di Malaysia. Seramai 150 pelajar berumur 18 hingga 25 tahun terlibat, terdiri daripada 62% pelajar universiti awam dan 38% universiti swasta. Data dikumpul melalui soal selidik atas talian menggunakan tiga instrumen: *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (ERQ) untuk menilai strategi pengawalan emosi (*cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression*), *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* (MSPSS) untuk mengukur sokongan sosial, dan *Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21* (DASS-21) untuk menilai tekanan psikologi. Analisis korelasi Spearman menunjukkan tiada hubungan signifikan antara penilaian semula kognitif (*cognitive reappraisal*) dan tekanan psikologi, manakala penekanan ekspresi (*expressive suppression*) mempunyai hubungan positif yang lemah tetapi signifikan. Sokongan sosial juga tidak menunjukkan hubungan signifikan dengan tekanan psikologi. Dapatan ini menekankan kepentingan fleksibiliti dalam penggunaan strategi pengawalan emosi serta keperluan intervensi yang disesuaikan bagi meningkatkan kesejahteraan mental pelajar universiti.

Kata kunci: Pengawalan emosi, sokongan sosial, kesihatan mental.

Abstract: This study examines the relationship between emotion regulation strategies, social support, and mental health among university students in Malaysia. A total of 150 students aged 18 to 25 years participated, comprising 62% from public universities and 38% from private universities. Data were collected through an online questionnaire using three standardized instruments: the *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (ERQ) to assess emotion regulation strategies (*cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression*), the *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* (MSPSS) to measure social support, and the *Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21* (DASS-21) to evaluate psychological distress. Spearman's correlation analysis revealed no significant relationship between cognitive reappraisal and psychological distress while expressive suppression showed a weak but significant positive correlation. Perceived social support was not significantly associated with psychological distress. These findings highlight the importance of flexibility in applying emotion regulation strategies and suggest the need for tailored interventions to enhance mental well-being among university students.

Keywords: Emotion regulation, social support, mental health.

Mental health and physical health are priorities in human life. They are interconnected and essential for maintaining a functional lifestyle. Over time, mental health has become a global issue that affects everyone. One of the principles of global health—the burden principle—helps explain why mental health is a significant global concern. At least 5% of any population (approximately 300 to 400 million people) struggle with severe mental disorders, which can lead directly to death through suicide (Patel, 2014). Therefore, addressing the importance of mental health to the public is crucial. This study focuses on Malaysian university students to provide insight into mental health problems among young adults.

The National Strategic Plan of Mental Health 2020–2025, published by the Ministry of Health Malaysia, states that the prevalence of mental health problems among Malaysians aged 16 and above is 29.2%. The age range for young adulthood is approximately 18 to 26 years (Sawyer et al., 2018), and the transition from adolescence to young adulthood may require greater attention for mental development. Furthermore, identifying mental health problems among university students is likely to enable more effective early intervention. The key

factors influencing mental health problems in Malaysian university students include individual conditions. Most university students face life transitions and new challenges, as well as structural conditions related to university life, such as time flexibility, decision-making flexibility, academic demands, and social support (Wörfel et al., 2015). Social support may be one of the factors that influence the mental health status of university students. Durkheim's theory explains that individuals' health is at risk when they lack social support and experience poor social integration.

Emotional regulation is a key factor in mental health issues. Several aspects warrant future research on emotion regulation within the mental health field. Beyond patients' risk factors, deficits in emotion regulation skills are a maintaining factor in mental health problems (Berking & Wupperman, 2012). Uncontrollable negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, fear, and shame can lead to more negative affective responses. Therefore, it is essential to understand the types of emotions experienced by the target population so that effective, targeted treatments can be developed based on the circumstances of Malaysian university students. Ignored potential mental health

issues induced by emotional problems during university years may further deteriorate, impacting personal, family, and interpersonal relationships. Each emotion has various adaptive functions that enhance self-achievement in life (Cole, 2014). Emotion regulation helps individuals make decisions and respond appropriately. To promote a healthy and functional life for university students, understanding their emotion regulation patterns enables more effective interventions.

It is undeniable that everyone experiences a range of emotions daily, and some emotions may be triggered by certain events. Emotion regulation involves managing actions toward emotions rather than allowing emotions to control other matters (Gross, 2009). It relates to how emotions are shaped, when they arise, and the individual's approach to experiencing and expressing emotions (Gross, 1998b; as cited in Gross, 2009). There are two common emotion regulation strategies: reappraisal and suppression. According to Yiğit et al. (2014), the reappraisal strategy has a positive impact, while the suppression strategy has a negative impact on individuals' happiness and life satisfaction. These strategies are closely related to the mental health status of individuals.

This study aims to explore the relationship between emotion regulation, social support, and mental health, particularly the regulation strategies that can be applied to promote mental well-being. To assess respondents' mental health status, an instrument focusing on psychological distress is used. The psychological distress symptoms of respondents will provide insights for early intervention in mental health problems (Pehlivan et al., 2020). The findings of this research will demonstrate the relationship between emotion regulation and mental health. Furthermore, the emotion regulation strategies commonly used by Malaysian university students will be analyzed and associated with their mental health status.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Understanding emotion regulation strategies among contemporary university students in Malaysia can help develop more comprehensive and effective future mental health promotion. Emotion regulation enhances individuals' ability to make decisions and solve problems, especially when dealing with emotions beyond their control. According to psychologist James J. Gross (1999), who is well-known for his research on emotion regulation, the two basic emotion regulation strategies are reappraisal and suppression. The reappraisal process involves changing one's perspective toward a situation that generates negative emotions, while the suppression process involves inhibiting the expression of certain emotions. Emotion regulation assists individuals in practicing intentional reflection and mindfulness, enabling more adaptive responses to negative emotions (Miller, 2017). These self-awareness processes play a role in cognitive reappraisal and allow individuals to make judgments with less emotional interference. Cognitive appraisal encourages individuals to reflect rather than act impulsively on negative emotions or suppress them.

The ability to regulate emotions plays an important role in mental health. Cognitive reappraisal is considered an effective strategy to avoid long-term negative emotions and increase life satisfaction, thereby preventing mental health issues (Hu et al., 2014). As emotional beings, we experience a wide range of feelings and gain a deeper understanding of ourselves. However, controlling our emotions—rather than being controlled by them—can enhance overall well-being. Emotion regulation strengthens individuals' resilience, increasing positive emotional experiences without necessarily changing the emotional experience itself (Tugade &

Fredrickson, 2006). Greater resilience makes us more capable of facing future challenges and overcoming adversity.

In recent years, several events have gradually caused international changes, such as the post-pandemic impact, trade wars, and interstate conflicts. These issues not only affect individual countries but also have global repercussions. In addition, the reciprocal tariffs imposed by the United States on other countries (The Star Online, 2025) may potentially increase the financial burden on university students in the future. Therefore, investigating the emotion regulation capabilities and mental health status of current university students could provide valuable insights into emerging mental health problems. The labor market has changed after the pandemic, with some positions being replaced by automation and artificial intelligence (AI) due to rapid technological development, creating a demand for individuals with digital skills (Lut, 2022). This indicates that job market requirements have shifted, which university students must consider before entering the workforce and choosing a career. Hence, it is essential to emphasize the importance of emotion regulation among university students in this generation.

The development of generations and technologies brings both opportunities and challenges. According to Blumberg et al. (2016), social media serves as a medium for social interaction, where individuals with a negative mood use it to cope, while those with a positive mood use it to maintain their emotional state. Social media provides entertainment for relaxation and helps shift attention away from stressful events. However, this becomes only a temporary solution to emotional issues, and the ability to recognize and address underlying problems is crucial. Addiction and impulsiveness in social media use can lead to consequences such as worsening mental health symptoms, poor sleep, real-life social isolation, and unnecessary online spending. Sadagheyani and Tatari (2021) noted that one problematic behavior caused by social media is body dissatisfaction among young adults. For example, anxiety transmitted through the Internet can affect both physical and mental health. Sometimes, social media spreads feelings of anxiety when individuals receive excessive negative feedback. Thus, university students in Malaysia face not only real-world challenges but also information overload in the virtual world.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Over time, the mental health challenges faced by university students in Malaysia have evolved. In addition to academic stressors, numerous external factors contribute to emotional disturbances among students. Despite this, research in Malaysia focusing on early interventions for emotion regulation among university students remains limited. This study seeks to examine the most commonly employed emotion regulation strategies among Malaysian university students and their association with mental health outcomes. The findings aim to inform the development of targeted interventions aligned with prevalent emotion regulation strategies, which can be implemented to mitigate stress within this population. Previous research suggests that cognitive reappraisal exerts a more positive influence on emotion regulation compared to other strategies. By assessing the mental health status of university students and the impact of emotion regulation strategies, this study will provide insights into their coping mechanisms for managing stress and enable predictions of future mental health trajectories.

University students who are unable to effectively manage stress and other negative emotions during their academic years are likely to be more vulnerable to future occupational stress. Young adulthood, typically defined as ages 18 to 25, represents a critical developmental stage with long-term implications for

psychological well-being. Emotion regulation serves as a fundamental mechanism that enables individuals to adapt to diverse environmental demands and maintain mental stability (Reddy & Roy, 2020). Despite its significance, research examining the interrelationship among emotion regulation, social support, and mental health within the Malaysian context remains scarce. This study seeks to identify the emotion regulation strategies most frequently employed by Malaysian university students and to evaluate their association with mental health outcomes. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of evidence-based interventions aimed at enhancing emotional resilience and promoting mental health among this population.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

1. There is a significant relationship between cognitive reappraisal strategy and psychological distress among university students in Malaysia.
2. There is a significant relationship between expressive suppression strategy and psychological distress among university students in Malaysia.
3. There is a significant relationship between perceived social support and psychological distress among university students in Malaysia.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND MODELS USED

Based on Gross's (1998) model of Emotion Regulatory Processes, five emotion regulation strategies are categorized into antecedent-focused and response-focused regulation. The four antecedent-focused strategies—situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, and cognitive change—occur prior to the generation of emotion. In contrast, response-focused emotion regulation involves response modulation, which occurs after the emotion has been generated. Collectively, these five processes provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the emotion regulation system. Furthermore, reappraisal and suppression represent two major strategies within this model for regulating emotional responses (Gross, 1999).

PAST RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Emotion Regulation, Social Support and Mental Health

D'Agostino et al. (2017) investigated emotional dysregulation within DSM-5 clinical mental health disorders. Symptoms associated with emotional dysregulation include reduced emotional awareness and difficulty in cognitive reappraisal. These symptoms are present in disorders such as anxiety, depression, ADHD, and borderline personality disorder. The study primarily focused on the role of emotional dysregulation in acquired mental health disorders or potential mental health issues arising from a lack of social support. The findings support the current study's emphasis on emotion regulation and social support as contributing factors to acquired mental health disorders, rather than genetic or hereditary clinical conditions. In contrast, the present study targets Malaysian university students and examines emotion regulation strategies, rather than past experiences or genetic predispositions.

Social Support and Mental Health

Tajalli et al. (2010) demonstrated a negative relationship between social support and the mental health of university students. Their findings indicate that social support serves as a predictor of mental health and acts as a protective factor, reducing the negative impact of high levels of daily hassles on psychological well-being. Perceived social support not only contributes to personality and social development but also functions as a critical coping resource in stressful situations (Horowitz & Scheid, 1999).

Mental Health Issues among University Students in Malaysia

Suhaili Arifin et al. (2023) investigated the prevalence of mental health issues among Malaysian university students. The study collected 810 responses from students at Universiti Putra Malaysia. Mental health was assessed using the Mental Health Inventory (MHI), which comprises two dimensions: psychological distress and psychological well-being. The findings align with previous research, indicating moderate to high levels of psychological distress among students, encompassing stress, depression, anxiety, and emotional difficulties. The study also highlighted several contributing factors to mental health problems, including financial dependency, individual stressors, high achievement expectations, and academic workload. While MHI was employed to measure both psychological distress and well-being, the present study utilizes the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (DASS-21) to assess psychological distress. Furthermore, the goodness-of-fit of DASS-21 has been validated as appropriate for evaluating mental health status among university students (Talwar et al., 2016). Although both studies share similar objectives, they differ in the instruments used to examine respondents' mental health status.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This study posits a significant relationship among emotion regulation, social support, and mental health. The emotion regulation strategies employed by individuals are expected to influence their mental health through mechanisms such as perception, resilience, and problem-solving. Understanding these strategies provides valuable insights into the psychological processes that shape mental health outcomes. Furthermore, perceived social support from various sources—such as family, friends, and significant others—plays a critical role in stress coping and may help mitigate mental health challenges.

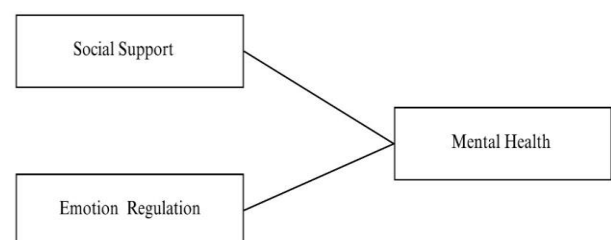


Figure 1: The relationship between emotion regulation, social support and mental health.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 152 respondents initially participated in this study; however, two were excluded because they were aged 28 and 29 years, which fell outside the required age range. The final

sample comprised 150 respondents who met the inclusion criteria: (a) aged between 18 and 25 years, (b) Malaysian nationality, (c) enrolled as university students in Malaysia, and (d) capable of understanding the English language. Of these respondents, 124 were female (82.7%) and 26 were male (17.3%). All participants were undergraduate students, ranging from Year 1 to Year 4, with 93 respondents (62%) studying in public universities and 57 respondents (38%) in private universities.

Regarding general health status, 21 respondents (14%) rated their health as excellent, 50 (33.3%) as very good, 67 (44.7%) as good, 11 (7.3%) as fair, and only one respondent (0.7%) as poor. Additionally, 126 respondents (84%) reported never seeking professional help for mental health issues, while 24 respondents (16%) had sought such assistance previously. Among the total sample, six respondents (4.0%) had been diagnosed with mental health conditions by medical specialists, including social anxiety, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and depression.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms and comprised four sections designed to capture demographic information and data from three standardized instruments. Completion of the questionnaire required approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and confidentiality of participants' information was strictly maintained.

Measures

Emotion Regulation

The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) is a self-report instrument designed to assess individual differences in two emotion regulation strategies: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression (Gross & John, 2003). This measure consists of 10 items, with items 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 10 representing the reappraisal subscale, while the remaining items correspond to the suppression subscale (Preece et al., 2019). Responses are rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In the present study, the mean score for Cognitive Reappraisal was $M = 31.98$ ($SD = 5.09$, $\alpha = .81$), whereas the mean score for Expressive Suppression was $M = 19.25$ ($SD = 4.56$, $\alpha = .70$).

Social Support

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) assesses three sources of social support: family, friends, and significant others (Zimet et al., 1988). This instrument uses a seven-point Likert scale to measure respondents' perceived social support during the past week. The total score for the 12 items was considered for further data analysis ($M = 64.67$, $SD = 11.12$, $\alpha = .90$), with higher scores indicating greater perceived social support.

Mental Health

The mental health of respondents was assessed using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (DASS-21) developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1993). The DASS was designed for use with both clinical and non-clinical populations (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). DASS-21 is the short version of the original scale and consists of 21 items that measure experiences across three dimensions—depression, anxiety, and stress—during the previous week (Lee, 2019). Each dimension comprises seven items, and scores are multiplied by two to obtain final values. All items are rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me most of the time). In the present study, mean scores were as follows: Depression ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 4.31$, $\alpha = .88$), Anxiety ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 4.14$, $\alpha = .85$), and Stress ($M = 6.84$, $SD = 4.23$, $\alpha = .87$). The total score (DASS-T), representing overall

psychological distress, had a mean of 17.85 ($SD = 11.86$, $\alpha = .95$) (Evans et al., 2020).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 30. Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed to examine the relationships among emotion regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression), perceived social support, and mental health, with a specific focus on psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress).

RESULTS

Spearman's rank-order correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between cognitive reappraisal and psychological distress (mental health). The analysis revealed no significant association between cognitive reappraisal and psychological distress ($r_s = -.01$, $p > .05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between cognitive reappraisal and psychological distress is accepted.

The analysis revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between expressive suppression and psychological distress ($r_s = .23$, $p < .05$). This finding suggests that university students who frequently employ expressive suppression as an emotion regulation strategy tend to report higher levels of psychological distress. Consequently, the null hypothesis stating that there is no relationship between expressive suppression and psychological distress is rejected.

The analysis indicated no significant relationship between perceived social support and psychological distress ($r_s = -.10$, $p > .05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant association between perceived social support and psychological distress is accepted.

DISCUSSION

This study aims to analyze the relationship between emotion regulation and the mental health of university students in Malaysia. Two emotion regulation strategies were examined: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.

The results indicate that the cognitive reappraisal strategy is not significantly correlated with psychological distress. According to the emotion regulation process model proposed by Gross and John (2003), cognitive reappraisal is an antecedent-focused strategy, whereas expressive suppression is a response-focused strategy. Cognitive reappraisal may be more complex and influenced by other antecedent-focused processes. Although individuals may frequently employ cognitive reappraisal, situational differences, misjudgments, personality traits, and other individual factors can affect the effectiveness of the emotion regulation process.

Andrews et al. (2023) reported that reappraisal capacity is unrelated to depressive and anxiety symptoms. The core explanation for this finding lies in the inflexible application of emotion regulation strategies, particularly cognitive reappraisal. Individuals must demonstrate flexibility when applying cognitive reappraisal across diverse situations. For instance, university students may frequently use this strategy by reframing academic stress as a necessary challenge before entering their career pathway. However, this approach becomes ineffective in contexts requiring collaboration, where the same strategy is applied rigidly. Greater flexibility in reappraisal capabilities can help students identify effective solutions while minimizing harm to others.

The ability to differentiate and integrate cognitive appraisals is an essential component of cognitive functioning. Effective differentiation and integration promote flexible stress appraisal and enhance coping flexibility, enabling individuals to adopt multiple perspectives on stressful events and match strategies to the specific demands of different situations (Cheng & Cheung, 2005). Therefore, the effectiveness of cognitive reappraisal is not dependent on its frequency of use. In a study by Cao et al. (2020), which investigated reappraisal success and failure groups using electroencephalogram (EEG) recordings, both groups initially applied the cognitive reappraisal strategy; however, the failure group was unable to maintain the strategy over time.

The second result indicates a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between the expressive suppression strategy and psychological distress. This finding suggests that increased use of expressive suppression in emotion regulation is associated with higher levels of psychological distress, including symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety. Gross and John (2003) noted that individuals who rely on suppression experience less positive emotion; the underlying reason for negative affect appears to stem from feelings of inauthenticity rather than suppression itself. The cost of expressive suppression lies in the need for individuals to act contrary to their true feelings, often receiving inauthentic feedback due to these incongruent actions. Such dynamics may exacerbate psychological distress and negatively impact overall well-being.

Moore et al. (2008) highlighted that the inflexibility of inhibited emotional expression represents a maladaptive strategy. Expressive suppression, like cognitive reappraisal, should be applied contextually to minimize its negative consequences. Excessive reliance on expressive suppression can reduce an individual's responsiveness in interpersonal relationships, which is a fundamental requirement for maintaining healthy social interactions (Butler et al., 2003). Nevertheless, in certain situations, suppression may be beneficial for creating a peaceful environment and avoiding conflict (Richards & Gross, 1999). The appropriateness of expressive suppression depends on the context; for example, inhibiting emotional expression with close friends may undermine trust and loyalty within the relationship. Indirectly, interpersonal difficulties arising from expressive suppression can trigger mental health issues or exacerbate psychological distress.

The expressive suppression strategy tends to increase individuals' experience of negative emotions and produce side effects such as impaired cognitive functioning and heightened physiological arousal (Szczygieł & Maruszewski, 2015). The cognitive consequences of this strategy can negatively affect decision-making ability and future emotion regulation. According to Richards and Gross (1999), expressive suppression consumes substantial cognitive resources regardless of the level of behavior being suppressed. This is further supported by the concept of ego depletion, as demonstrated in the research of Baumeister et al. (1998), where participants who applied expressive suppression to regulate their emotions exhibited reduced performance on subsequent tasks. Excessive use of expressive suppression can lead to continuous ego depletion, diminishing the ability to cope with psychological distress and increasing the likelihood of mental health problems.

Lastly, the results indicate no significant relationship between perceived social support and psychological distress. Karam et al. (2023) suggested several reasons for this finding, including the absence of high-quality support in reducing distress, lack of trust in others, and the influence of living

within close-knit groups, all of which may diminish the effectiveness of social support in alleviating psychological distress. These observations underscore the importance of considering individual circumstances and cultural factors to gain a deeper understanding of mental health status in relation to social support.

IMPLICATIONS

The effectiveness of emotion regulation strategies is not absolute and depends on situational factors and individual differences. This study provides insights into targeted interventions for individuals employing different strategies. Based on the findings, flexibility in the use of cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression among university students is crucial. Greater flexibility in emotion regulation can enhance the positive outcomes of these strategies and improve individuals' ability to manage diverse situations effectively. Furthermore, this study reveals that overreliance or frequent use of a single strategy tends to be less effective when applied without contextual appropriateness or consideration of alternative strategies.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that may reduce the generalizability of its findings. First, some individuals may exhibit self-perception bias in their daily lives, as they do not always accurately identify the causes of their emotional responses (Gillihan et al., 2007, as cited in Gill et al., 2019). Such bias can lead to inaccurate responses to emotion-related questions. Additionally, various internal factors may influence the choice of emotion regulation strategies. Individual differences in problem-solving skills and perspectives may also affect the results. Respondents come from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and life priorities, which can shape their emotional experiences and coping mechanisms. For instance, certain individuals may be more susceptible to mental health problems due to biological or personality factors. Consideration of cultural and family backgrounds is therefore essential, as these factors may reveal or influence the strategies employed.

STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research should explore topics related to individual differences and demographic characteristics. For example, investigations could examine the relationship between emotion regulation and mental health across variables such as gender, urban versus rural residency, educational level, and family background.

Based on the findings of this study, the effectiveness of cognitive reappraisal appears to be limited. From an educational perspective, workshops or campaigns on emotion regulation strategies should be implemented. Practical tasks and contextual examples can help university students learn to apply effective emotion regulation strategies in diverse situations. Additionally, expressive suppression can be taught as a strategy for use in necessary circumstances, along with alternative approaches for expressing negative emotions. Furthermore, follow-up programs for participating students could enhance understanding of the long-term impact of such educational interventions on emotion regulation.

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