DIGITAL RELIGION: ONLINE TRANSFORMATION OF RITUALS

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Abstract : *In the early 2000s, online confession websites began to appear on the Internet. These types of websites are now increasing in number and popularity. This article aims to explore some Christian confession websites and divide them according to the theory of "online rituals" and "rituals online" offered by Heidbrink (2007) and Miczek (2008). Although the origins of confession websites and their mechanisms for attracting Internet users have been widely studied, little is known about either they describe their service as "real" confession or they only help penitents to prepare for this practice. What are the reasons people feel the need to confess online, whether there are websites that offer such an opportunity for a certain amount of money? These questions will be followed by a content analysis of the 6 most powerful confession websites. It is concluded that some websites have created online confession services and claim that it can be considered as a real confession. In contrast, others offer to confess without pretending that this is a ritual and call on everyone, regardless of religion. A few of them commercialize this action and require a certain amount of money.*

Keywords: *cyberspace, online religion, online ritual, sacrament of penance.*

INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies give the opportunity to do many actions via the Internet, even religious practices. There is a wide range of digital materials that support or enrich liturgical life. As Campbell (2012) pointed out several websites and online forums facilitate Christian rituals and practices like online worship, "godcasting" (religious podcasting), e-ministry, e-evangelism etc[141]. Cheong et al (2008) explored Christian blogging and concluded it provide a new way to express religiosity in daily life[142]. Berger (2017) gave examples from an app to prepare for confession, a liturgical calendar in the palm of one's hand, and iStations of Lent, to the ability to pray Compline with a loved one far away via Skype, or to render a recently paralyzed young man present in the pews of his church via an iPad[143]. Of course, cyberspace offers to confess online. Sitting in front of a computer screen, Internet users can confess their sins. In this process, the cathedral or confessionals are replaced by a monitor, a camera, and various programs that allow virtual images to be displayed, to provide real-time interactive communication[144]. Even though

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[141] Campbell, "Cyber Behavior and religious practice", 437.

[142] Cheong, "Understanding blogging", 110.

[143] Berger, "@ Worship", 11.

[144] Gavrilov, "The digitized sacred", 178.

canonically, only the priest can administer the sacrament of confession[145] and Eastern Orthodoxy also demands to bring sincere penance for his/her sins before the priest[146], in the early 2000s, the first websites and mobile apps for online penitence were launched. As a result of their popularity among Internet users, there have been studies examining whether online rituals may be considered real (O'Leary 1996), whether religious rituals, especially confession, can be offered online (Duff 2013, Bellar 2017), and what motivates people to pray online (Dawson and Cowan 2004)[147].

Bellar (2017) explored Catholic mobile apps and found a number of apps like "Prayers before Confession" and "Prayers after Confession", and included them in daily prayer practices[148]. Duff (2013), Scott (2016), and Berger (2017) concluded about existing online confessions on the Internet and analyzed certain websites, such as DailyConfession.com and PostSecret.com related to this category[149]. Estes examined virtual churches and defined them as a synthetic world where the confessing people gather regularly[150].

Although the origins of confession websites and their mechanisms for attracting Internet users have been widely studied, little is known about either they describe their service as "real" confession, or they only help people to prepare for this practice. There is no research that divides confession websites according to the theory of "online rituals" and "rituals online" offered by Heidbrink (2007)[151] and Miczek (2008)[152]. For this research, 6 Christian confession websites are selected. This paper attempts to provide answers to the following questions through a content analysis of selected websites:

RQ$_1$: Do confession websites only help penitents prepare for confession before the priest or do they pretend this service to be considered is a real practice?

RQ$_2$. Which category do confession websites belong to "online ritual" or "ritual online"?

RQ$_3$. How online confession service is commercialized?

This article is organized as follows. Firstly, it is provided background information on online rituals and appearing confession websites. Secondly, it aims to divide selected websites into two groups by the theory of "online rituals" and "rituals online". In this way, it will be clear if these websites offer Internet users to confess online and claim that it can be considered a real confession; or if they only provide users with prescripts, texts, and other materials to prepare penitents for this practice. Then the reasons for people to feel the need to confess online are explored according to comments left by Internet users. Moreover, it will become known the benefits of penancing online. In the end, the article

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[145] "Code of Canon Law", c. 965.

[146] Orthodoxy and Modernity, E-library, 75.

[147] O'leary and Brasher, "The Unknown God of the Internet"; Duff, "Praising God Online"; Bellar, "iPray"; Dawson and Cowan, "Religion online".

[148] Bellar, "iPray", 116-117.

[149] Scott, "Algorithmic absolution", 11; Berger, "@Worship", 11.

[150] Estes, "SimChurch", 37.

[151] Heidbrink, "Exploring the religious frameworks of the digital realm", 175.

[152] Miczek, "Online Rituals in Virtual Worlds".

examines whether selected websites offer to confess online for a certain amount of money. The results and conclusions are given, and the scientific and practical significance of the research is justified.

2 The sacrament of penance and online confession

Christianity finds expression in rituals as well as in theology and ethics[153]. Riggs argues that rituals include the sacraments of the church and other simple and widespread actions, and leading rituals are described under the term "sacraments". As he stated, Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas referred to the church's sacraments as seven in total and one of them is penance (reconciliation). Confession of sins (repentance) is a precondition of baptism (Matt.3:6; Acts 2:38). Penance is "a conversion that passes from the heart to deeds and then to the Christian's whole life" and reconciliation will be achieved "only through the interior transformation or conversion, which bears fruit in a person's life through acts of penance"[154]. According to the Code of Canon Law, in the sacrament of penance, the faithful who are sorry for their sins confess to a legitimate minister and intend to reform themselves and obtain from God through the absolution imparted by the same minister forgiveness for the sins they have committed after baptism and, at the same, time is reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by sinning[155].

Despite the canonical rules, the Christian practice of confession has experienced a notable expansion in the digital space. Confessions appear in many popular media formats (e.g., reality shows), as well as in digital culture (blogs, social networks, digital storytelling)[156]. The first online confession websites launched in the early 2000s were www.theconfessor.co.uk, www.dailyconfession.com, www.notproud.com, and others[157]. In particular, the site www.theconfessor.co.uk was visited by more than a million people within the first 72 hours after its launch. This means that there was a great interest among Christian Internet users at that time to try out religious practices on the Internet. Duff (2013) described dailyconfession.com as a website that invited people who were not only Catholic or even religious, offering them complete anonymity[158]. However, according to Archbishop John Foley (the president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications), online confessions must take place in "the sacramental context of a personal encounter" and that confession must be based on a "personal vocal encounter between priest and penitent"[159]. However, the Vatican's position did not put a stop to online confession. Ogan (2003) revealed in the example of such websites as theconfessor.org, www.dailyconfession.com, www.notproud.com, and www.fess-up.com that online

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[153] Riggs, "Worldmark", 173.

[154] Pope & Paul II, "Reconciliation and penance", 4.

[155] "Code of Canon Law", c. 959.

[156] Zdanowicz-Cyganiak, "Trust in digital confessions", 1.

[157] Ogan, "Confessing in Cyberspace", 195.

[158] Duff, "Praising God Online", 25.

[159] Willan, "Vatican to Rule Out Online Confessions", 25.

confession seems to be thriving[160]. Connection with these processes, that is, the "thriving" of some religious practices online has led to the emergence of a new area within digital religion studies. As Campbell (2020) underlines, this field revolves around how technology or technological practices can themselves be considered to have religious qualities or behaviors associated with them[161].

3 "Online rituals" and "rituals online"

Online religious activities started in the mid-1980s[162]. It began with the use of local bulletin board systems (BBSs) for only writing about religious topics. Then appearing websites, a 3D environment which is called the "virtual world" caused the development of religious activities and rituals via the Internet. Several studies have used the heuristic framework of online religion and religion online offered by Helland[163]. He defined the distinction between religious websites, where people can act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity – online religion, and religious websites, which provide only religious information and not interaction – religion online.

Draw a line between "rituals online" and "online rituals" based on the initial differentiation between online religion and religion online. The term "rituals online" describes ritual prescripts, ritual descriptions, information, etc. that are provided on webpages, and mobile apps or are discussed in forums or chats. "Online rituals" however refer to those ritual settings that are being performed in virtual spaces online[164]. That is why Heidbrink (2007) stated that the second is hardly ever to be found. Also, the scholar emphasized that ritual performances in the category of online rituals can be easily explained by the concept of "Transfer of ritual" (it was originally developed at the University of Heidelberg to be a part of the application for a large research program on "Ritual Dynamics").

"Transfer of ritual" is the movement of a ritual from one context into another, or more generally a change of the context surrounding the ritual[165]. As it was found, transfer processes can happen over time or space. In addition, this concept covers (re)invention, reception, compensation, and disappearance of rites and rituals. When one or more aspects of a ritual are changed, it can be referred to as the transfer of ritual. The concept of "Transfer of ritual" also applies when a ritual is moved from an offline setting into the virtual space of the Internet. Langer et al. (2006) argue that in the media (including the Internet) "the script and the performance of the ritual are materialized"[166]. The Internet offers not only interaction and communication but also much information about rituals; instructions on how to perform particular rituals both within and outside the Internet. In

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[160] Ogan, "Confessing in Cyberspace", 195.
[161] Campbell, "Contextualizing current digital religion research", 13.
[162] Lochhead, "Shifting realities", 33.
[163] Helland, "Online-religion/religion-online and virtual communitas".
[164] Heidbrink, "Exploring the religious frameworks of the digital realm", 175.
[165] Langer et al., "Transfer of Ritual", 1.
[166] Ibid., 2.

summary, the presence of these features indicates that it belongs to the "ritual online" category. If the elements of the performance change during the ritual transformation, and it is possible to make a confession via the Internet, it is reasonable to believe that it belongs to the online ritual category.

4 Commercialization of religious rituals

Commercialization is the process of making things available for purchase[167]. Some religious and cultural features such as rituals can also become trivialized for economic profit, while not originally intended for sale. Susumu (1998) argues that people may become "consumers" of religious resources, and the religious group is a "provider of information services"[168]. The author calls this process the "commercialization of the sacred". A form of commodity exchange between "producers" and "consumers" penetrates the sphere of prayer and worship, and subsequently may be accepted as a natural form of religious action[169]. That is why commercialization is censured for degrading the sacred by some scholars[170]. However, there are some approaches that appreciate commercialization for catering to the needs of different Internet users. Commercialization of rituals in cyberspace, therefore, is a difficult and delicate issue. During the framework we try to identify how online confession is commercialized, and for which services confession websites require visitors to pay by a content analysis of selected websites.

5 Exploring confession websites

5.1. Who are the users of online confession?

The findings presented here are based on data collected during October-December 2022. The data shows how websites are attracting people and give them the opportunity to confess in digital space. The research aims to fulfill three main goals. The first one is to understand whether these websites prepare visitors for confession before the priest, or they pretend this service to be considered a real practice. Next is to explore which category these sites might belong to: "online ritual" or "ritual online". The third main goal is to identify whether the service of confession is available for a certain amount of money or for free. To achieve these goals, first, the most powerful confession websites are selected using SimilarWeb, a tool that tracks the digital ranking of websites. In total, the research analyzes 6 confession sites. The keywords for searching them are confession, online confession, and penance sacrament. Among all obtained results, the most visited sites: confessionstories.org, confessionpost.com, confessionpoint.com, and penance-and-sin-101.weebly.com are chosen. They are all in English. In addition, two sites, ebatyushka.com, and онлайн-церковь.рф[*] are chosen selectively among eastern orthodoxy sites, and they are in Russian. It is possible to find out the percentage of users by country only of three sites using SimilarWeb:

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[167] Shi, & Pande, "Commercialization at religious sites", 2.

[168] Shimazono, "The commercialization of the sacred", 181.

[169] Ibid., 187.

[170] Andriotis, "Sacred site experience", 66. Shi, "Commoditised religious souvenirs".

[*] "Batyushka" is the Russian word for a priest. "Онлайн-церковь" means "online church".
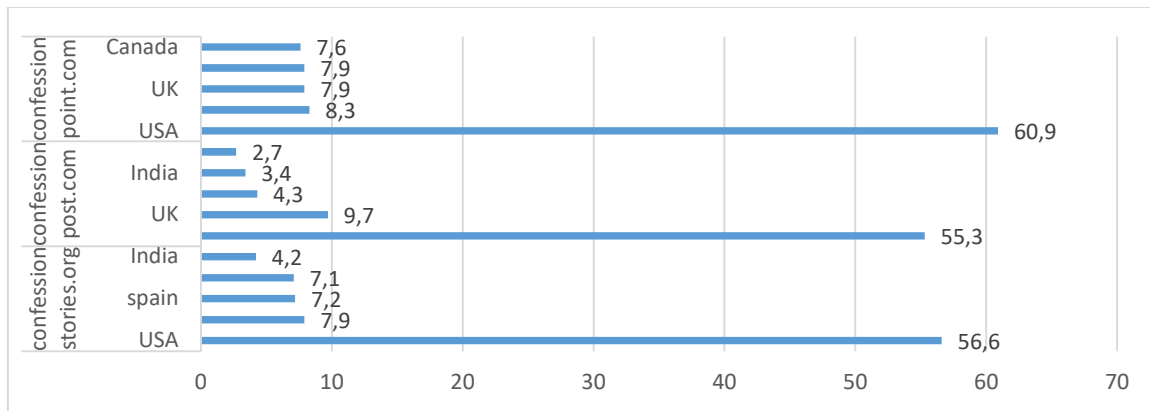
Table 1

Table 1 shows that majority of visitors of the three websites are from the US and English-speaking countries. It isn't unusual regarding the fact that these sites are in English and a great amount of the population of these countries are Christians. Besides, it can be assumed that the greater part of users of websites in Russian (ebatyushka.com and онлайн-церковь.рф) are from Russia and Russian-speaking countries.

Pew Research Center found that "Nearly two-thirds of online Americans use the Internet for faith-related reasons."[171]
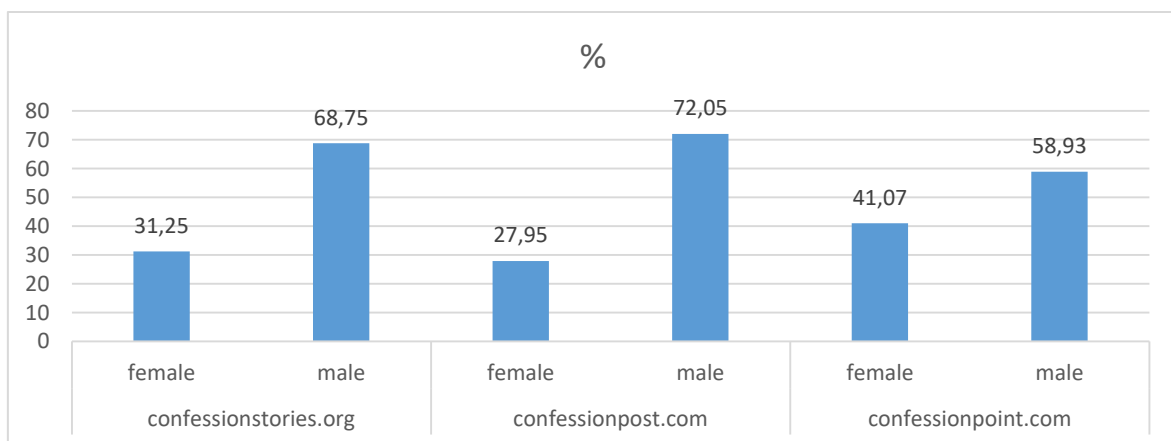
Table 2

Table 2 shows unexpected results. According to the percentage of users by gender, men who post their secrets and confessions are more than women. It might be considered that men need a special anonym place, where they can be honest, say their weaknesses and mistakes, and recognize their sins. SimilarWeb also shows the largest age group of visitors, and it is 25-34 in all three sites mentioned in Table 2.

5.2. The gateway to the sites – first attractive feature

To know what attracts visitors to move to them, we begin the content analyses of sites with home pages. The home page is the gateway to the whole Web site and, thus, worthy of focus[172]. Geissler et al. (2001) also argue that the home page can attract and displace potential visitors[173]. So, websites including confession sites pay great attention to all objects (texts, photos, videos, etc.) appearing on their home page. For instance,

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[171]

[172]   Ha, & James, "Interactivity reexamined", 467.

[173]   Geissler, et al., "Web home page complexity", 6.

confessionstories.org tries to attract the attention of visitors with such words: "I have to confess. Please forgive me for I have sinned", and the site promises: "It does not matter what your sins are. Do penance, confess your sins and you will be given forgiveness". But the site doesn't explain how one can reach forgiveness by only typing the words. Both churches (Orthodox and Roman Catholic) require the priest or bishop to be present to pronounce the forgiveness granted by God to the penitent[174]. However, there is no priest who is responsible for at least answering or writing comments on the posts of visitors.

Confessionpost.com on its home page asks just "Confess something". Anything, even if you aren't ready to do it. But a person should examine their conscience and think of any sins they may have committed. Only after this, one can be ready to confess.

The words on the home page of confessionpoint.com assure that you have chosen the most correct way if you have a confession. Site motivates you to confess right now: "What are you waiting for, get it off your chest now!" In contrast, penance-and-sin-101.weebly.com doesn't ask you to do penance. It announces the aim of the site as "to provide information about sin and the sacrament of Penance. It is intended as a guide for people who are new to the Catholic faith, or for people who want to know more about reconciliation and sin". So, on the home page of this site visitors can't see attracting claims to do penance right now, etc.

Ebatyushka.com says on its homepage that it all depends on what a person understands by the word "confession". If a person accepts this as a simple enumeration of wrong actions, feelings, and thoughts, then it will be possible to confess online. The home page differs in simplicity and the path is explicitly specified to the next window: "confess". Visitor is asked to write "The name of the sinner", "The essence of the sin committed" and the e-mail of the sinner if he/she wants to be revered (optional, but it turned out that it is just a hoax, and no letter would come in response. We ourselves experimented with this action and made sure of it.) Then "sinner" can press the button "Confess". After this, the site will please with such words: "Your sins will surely be forgiven!".

The home page of онлайн-церковь.рф welcomes visitors with an explanatory text of its mission. As it points out, because today many people, especially young people, do not attend church "the mission of the Online Church project becomes simple and obvious - spreading the Holy Word among young Internet users, raising the spiritual level and deepening Christian knowledge through the introduction of the "online generation" to Orthodox values". In fulfilling this mission, the site also included the provision of the service to confess online, and this service is paid. That is, the site considers visitors to confess from their site and demand money for this as part of "spreading the Holy Word among young Internet users". On the page "Confess online"[175] the user can choose from the proposed list the reason why he/she wants to confess (for example, abortion, treason, etc.), then select the type of confession: confess anonymously on the site, that is, print

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[174] Meyendorff, "Penance in the Orthodox Church Today", 110.

[175] Онлайн-церковь.рф/ispoved-online.html

his/her confession or confess to the priest and receive his blessing. If he/she chooses the second type, then he must write a confessional text and his own email in order to receive a letter of reverence from the priest. In this case, he/she will have to pay the amount indicated on the site.

5.3. Anonymity, comments, and "likes"

One of the advantages of these sites is anonymity. As Duff (2013) mentioned the issue of anonymity is especially important in analyzing online confession[176]. All sites studied during this framework (except penance-and-sin-101.weebly.com) promise about "100% anonymity". Even one of them introduces itself as "the most popular anonymous content site you probably never heard of" (confessionpost.com). A person can be sure that he/she can repent of any of his sins and at the same time remain anonymous. It is one of the motivates to be the user of such websites for whom confessing in the presence of the priest is very difficult.

Another feature of confession websites is that they offer users not only the possibility of anonymous confession but also allow visitors to write comments to and indeed "grade" the confessions of others. Three sites (confessionpost.com, confessionstories.org, and confessionpoint.com) out of the six selected for this article have these tools. Users can even show their attitude towards the sins of other people through "likes" and "hearts". The visitors can write their opinion and give advice. People are interested in the truth of other people, what they repent and confess. Some people feel less isolated by reading the confessions of others (realizing that they are not the only ones to fall into the mistake)

Also, websites try to divide confessions according to their subject matter. So, it will be easier for visitors to find exactly the confessions that they want to read. Some sites create the rank of the most posted and commented categories and thus attract visitors to read these confessions. According to the rank list of confessionstories.org, people confessed more of their sins concerning "Adultery", "Fetish", "Lust", "Embarrassment" etc. also this site counts the total number of posts, and it is 8343 confessions by 25th November 2022. Here visitors can see the number of views, votes, and comments on each post. But it is required to buy a premium account to read the new confessions and comments to them.

Confessionpost.com also offers to report - write visitors' opinions on why they think this post is inappropriate. On confessionpoint.com users can share/save posts on Facebook and Twitter. This site has a great archive of posts. One can find confession posts from 2005.

CONCLUSION

According to content analyses of selected confession websites, we conclude that:

One of the chosen websites (penance-and-sin-101.weebly.com) targets to help penitents prepare for confession before the priest by delivering information about the sacrament of penance. One of them (онлайн-церковь.рф) offers to confess online and pretends this service to be considered a real practice by providing a blessing letter from

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[176] Duff, "Praising God Online", 24.

the priest. The other 4 sites offer to confess just for relief and feel better. "If a person talks about his experiences and sins, then he relieves himself of this emotional stress", explains ebatyushka.com. On such sites, one can even post fabricated sins just for fun. In contrast, for some people, especially for teenagers such kind of sites are the only place where they can talk about depression, sexual orientation, their parents' pending divorce, or even thoughts of suicide, and get the help they need[177]. As Berger (2017) mentions digitally mediated confessions allow one to explore problematic edges of the self[178]. However, Turkle (2017) notices, most people who confess online are ready to confess, but not to apologize[179]. They recognize their sins and mistakes, and they ask for advice, but at most don't even ask for forgiveness from God.

Dividing selected sites into two categories by the theory of "online rituals" and "rituals online" shows that only one site (penance-and-sin-101.weebly.com) aims to provide information and therefore can be included into "rituals online" group. All other 5 sites are prime examples of "the movement of a ritual from one context into another" (in this case, to cyberspace) as determined in the "Transfer of ritual" concept[180]. The process of online confession, like typing posts instead of telling the priest; accepting the letter from the priest instead of a face-to-face blessing are telling about changing elements of ritual regarding the transfer of it. Scott (2016) states that a priest acts in persona Christi as a minister of the mercy of Christ and relies upon canonical law in the Sacrament of Penance and recites the Rites of Penance, thus transitioning the state of 'penitent' to 'absolved'. He argues that the replacement of a priest with the silent logic of algorithmic automation has profound implications for the authoritative power of confession as a transformative ritual[181]. Does this mean that cyberspace can be a place for doing confession in a transformed form? Some scholars draw attention to the fact that, at first, everyone was talking about the influence of the Internet on religious relations. However, we must not forget that the opposite effect also takes place. Gavrilov (2014) emphasizes that the "digestion" of the World Wide Web by religion turns it into an area for the implementation of religious practices, forming separate segments of the Web[182]. In this case, it all depends on the perception of the person, the Internet user. Scott (2016) makes a similar conclusion while studying confession in cyberspace. Confession - like any ritual - depends on the perception of authenticity, and if users report these practices as authentic, then this should be enough, he states. At the same time, we understand that this is not a substitution, but an adaptation and revision of authenticity and meaning.

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[177]   Duff, "Praising God Online", 23.
[178]   Berger, "@ Worship", 11.
[179]   Turkle, "Alone together", 233.
[180]   Langer, et al., "Transfer of Ritual", 1.
[181]   Scott, "Algorithmic absolution", 11.
[182]   Gavrilov, "The digitized sacred", 179.

sources, and traditions of religions. We thank all participants of this project for their precious input in this paper.

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