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Conceptualizing The Pull Factors Attracting Foreign Workers In Malaysia's Fisheries Sector

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ABSTRACT

The fisheries sector in Malaysia plays a crucial role in national food security and economic development but has become increasingly dependent on foreign workers due to declining local participation. This paper aims to conceptualize the pull factors that attract foreign workers to Malaysia's fisheries sector, addressing a gap in existing literature that has largely focused on push factors from migrants' home countries. Drawing on an extensive review of previous studies, reports, and policy documents, this conceptual paper identifies and classifies the main pull factors into four key dimensions: economic, employment and institutional, social and cultural, and the last is geographical and environmental factors. The findings suggest that higher relative wages, continuous demand for low-skilled labor, and the perception of income stability serve as strong economic incentives. These are reinforced by institutional elements such as recruitment mechanisms, work permits, and bilateral agreements, which create a structured and secure environment for foreign employment. Social and cultural networks, including family ties and shared cultural affinities, further facilitate migration and settlement, while geographical proximity and environmental similarities make Malaysia an accessible and attractive destination for fisheries work. The conceptual framework developed in this study highlights that migration decisions are not solely motivated by economic opportunities but are shaped by an interrelated system of social, institutional, and environmental factors that sustain labor flows into the industry. Understanding these pull factors provides valuable insights for policymakers and industry stakeholders in formulating comprehensive strategies to manage foreign labor dependency and promote sustainable development within Malaysia's fisheries sector.

1. Introduction

The fisheries sector has long been one of Malaysia's key economic contributors, providing an important source of food, income, and employment for coastal communities. It not only supports

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national food security but also plays a significant role in sustaining the livelihoods of thousands of people across the country. The fisheries industry includes marine capture, aquaculture, and fish processing activities that collectively contribute to the Malaysian economy [1]. However, over the last few decades, the industry has faced a growing dependence on foreign workers [2]. In Malaysia, the foreign labor particularly from neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. These workers have become essential in maintaining the daily operations of the fisheries sector, filling labor gaps left by the declining interest among local workers. Malaysia's fisheries sector has been identified as one of the most labour-intensive industries, where the nature of work requires physical endurance, long working hours, and exposure to harsh weather and dangerous sea conditions [1]. Many Malaysian workers, especially younger generations, view such work as unattractive due to low wages, unstable income, and limited opportunities for career advancement. As a result, the local workforce has been shifting toward more comfortable and secure employment in industrial, service, and government sectors. This situation has created a persistent labor shortage that compels employers to depend on foreign labor to sustain productivity. The heavy reliance on foreign workers has become an integral feature of Malaysia's fisheries labor market structure.

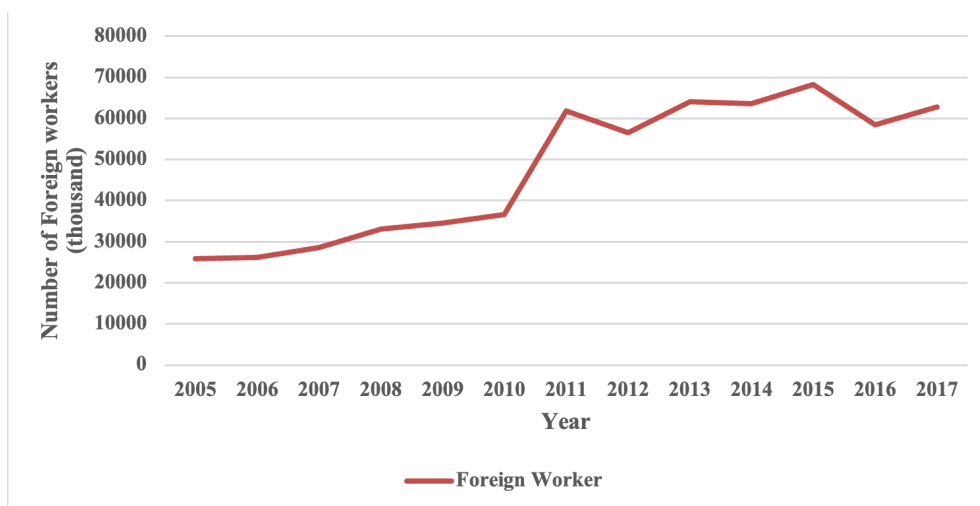


Fig. 1. Number of foreign workers in fisheries sector in Malaysia
Source: Department of Fisheries Malaysia

The Figure 1 illustrates the trend in the number of foreign workers employed in Malaysia's fisheries sector from 2005 to 2017. Overall, the trend demonstrates a steady and significant increase in the number of foreign workers throughout the period, reflecting Malaysia's growing dependence on migrant labor in this vital industry. In 2005, the number of foreign workers was slightly above 25,000, and the figure remained relatively stable until around 2007. From 2008 onwards, a gradual upward trend became evident, indicating a continuous inflow of foreign workers responding to labor shortages in the sector. A particularly sharp rise occurred between 2010 and 2011, when the number of foreign workers jumped dramatically from approximately 37,000 to over 60,000. This spike suggests an intensified reliance on migrant labor during that period, likely driven by increased production demands, expansion of aquaculture and deep-sea fishing activities, and the ongoing reluctance of local workers to take up jobs in the industry. After 2011, the number of foreign workers remained high, fluctuating between 60,000 and 70,000 workers from 2012 to 2017. Although there was a minor decline around 2016, the overall level stayed far above the pre-2010 figures, signaling a structural dependence rather than a temporary adjustment. This upward trend highlights a persistent

problem for Malaysia's fisheries sector. The increasing reliance on foreign workers indicates that the industry has failed to attract and retain sufficient local labor, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of its human resource base. Such dependency exposes the sector to a number of vulnerabilities, including economic, social, and policy risks. Economically, heavy dependence on foreign labor can lead to capital outflows through remittances, reducing the domestic income circulation within local communities. Socially, it can create tensions between local and foreign populations, especially in coastal fishing areas where competition for limited community resources occurs.

Despite the government's ongoing initiatives to reduce foreign labor dependency through automation, modernization, and incentives for local employment, the fisheries sector continues to attract large numbers of migrant workers. These workers are often recruited through both formal and informal channels [3]. Their presence ensures that the sector remains operational, but it also raises policy concerns related to labor management, social welfare, and long-term sustainability. Understanding why foreign workers are drawn to Malaysia's fisheries industry is therefore an important issue for policymakers, researchers, and industry players alike. The main problem that motivates this study is the limited understanding of the specific factors that attract foreign workers to Malaysia's fisheries sector. While many studies have examined the push factors that drive workers to migrate from their home countries due to the reason such as unemployment, poverty, and limited opportunities. Hence, there is relatively little focus on the pull factors that make Malaysia an appealing destination. Without a clear conceptual understanding of these attraction elements, it becomes difficult to design effective labor policies that address the real needs of both employers and migrant workers. The fisheries sector's dependence on foreign labor cannot be effectively managed if the reasons behind this attraction remain unclear. Moreover, most existing studies on foreign workers in Malaysia focus on the construction, plantation, and manufacturing sectors [4]. These studies provide valuable insights into migration dynamics but do not fully capture the unique context of the fisheries industry, which operates under distinct physical, economic, and social conditions. Unlike factory-based jobs, fisheries work is characterized by high risk, mobility, and seasonal fluctuations[5]. It requires specialized skills and maritime experience, which many foreign workers possess due to the coastal and fishing traditions in their home countries. This makes the pull factors in fisheries potentially different from those in other industries. In light of these circumstances, this paper aims to conceptualize the pull factors that attract foreign workers to Malaysia's fisheries sector.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

The migration of foreign workers is often explained through classical and contemporary theories, including Ravenstein's Laws of Migration (1885), the Neoclassical Economic Theory, and the Push–Pull Theory.

2.1.1 Ravenstein's Laws of Migration (1885)

Ravenstein's seminal work, derived from comprehensive census and registration data across England, Scotland, and Ireland, alongside subsequent analyses incorporating data from the USA and Canada, identified economic factors as the predominant impetus for migration [6]. His observations highlighted that individuals often move from areas of lower economic opportunity to those with greater prospects, frequently involving rural-to-urban shifts in pursuit of better wages and

employment [7,8]. This early recognition of economic disparity as a primary driver foreshadowed later theories that emphasize relative deprivation and the rational calculation of potential gains in destination regions [9]. Indeed, contemporary research continues to underscore the significance of economic motivations, categorizing them into "push" factors, which compel individuals to leave their homelands due to adverse conditions, and "pull" factors, which attract them to new destinations offering superior opportunities. Specifically, "push" factors encompass insufficient job opportunities, economic or political insecurity, or loss of wealth, while "pull" factors involve social, economic, and environmental incentives at the destination [11]. This framework, initially proposed by Lee, highlights how various socioeconomic and political conditions contribute to people's decisions to relocate [12]. However, a consistent theoretical veneer for understanding these "push-pull" dynamics, especially concerning the diverse experiences of various demographic groups, remains largely underdeveloped [13]. Despite this, Ravenstein's work laid the groundwork for understanding that socioeconomic disparities, such as those between urban and rural areas, significantly influence migration patterns [14]. These foundational insights are further elaborated by neoclassical economic theories, which posit that migration is largely driven by labor demand differentials between geographic locations, thereby leading individuals to move in search of higher wages [15].

2.1.2 Neoclassical Economic Theory

The neoclassical economic theory of migration, often criticized yet robust, posits that individuals migrate primarily due to perceived wage differentials between origin and destination countries, viewing migration as an investment in human capital [7,16]. This perspective, rooted in the functionalist paradigm, considers migration a positive development fostering greater global equality through optimal labor allocation [17]. This theoretical framework suggests that migration flows are a direct response to geographical differences in labor demand and supply, leading individuals to move from labor-surplus, low-wage regions to labor-scarce, high-wage regions in search of better earnings [15]. This individual choice is often motivated by the prospect of maximizing personal gains, including enhanced economic stability and improved living standards [18,19]. Consequently, the most significant precondition for an individual to make a migration decision is the anticipated potential income in the destination country, often alongside employment availability [20]. This rational choice model suggests that potential migrants meticulously weigh the costs and benefits associated with moving, aiming to maximize their economic welfare and that of their households [21, 22]. This implies a multi-stage decision-making process, where potential migrants first decide to migrate, and then select a specific destination based on expected income and other economic variables [23]. The net discounted value of migration over future periods must be positive for an individual to choose to migrate, with younger and more educated individuals often having higher present values of returns [24]. Therefore, factors like age and education are consistently identified as key determinants influencing migration decisions, with younger, more educated individuals being more prone to migration due to higher potential lifetime earnings and lower non-economic migration costs [25]. Furthermore, individuals are assumed to possess perfect information regarding wage rates and employment opportunities in various potential destination countries, allowing for an optimal choice that maximizes their economic utility [9]. However, critics argue that this idealized view often overlooks the significant uncertainties and imperfect information that characterize real-world migration decisions, alongside the non-economic factors that also influence these choices [13]. Despite this criticism, the neoclassical framework remains foundational for understanding how individual migrants weigh potential monetary costs and returns, including rural and urban incomes, education, and remittances, against non-monetary factors like risk and urban lifestyles [7].

2.1.3 The Push–Pull Theory

The ongoing phenomenon of human migration, a constant throughout history, compels individuals to seek improved living conditions or escape challenging circumstances in their homelands [10]. Everett Lee's seminal work on migration elaborates on this, proposing that these movements are fundamentally influenced by a dynamic interplay of "push" factors at the origin and "pull" factors at the intended destination [26]. These factors, which can be economic, social, or environmental, are further mediated by intervening obstacles and personal considerations, shaping the migration flow and migrant characteristics [27]. This framework posits that factors such as high unemployment rates, political instability, and limited access to resources in a migrant's home country act as significant "push" elements [28]. Conversely, destination countries offer "pull" factors such as robust job markets, political freedoms, and comprehensive welfare systems, which collectively make them attractive to potential migrants [29]. However, the theory extends beyond mere economic determinants, encompassing a broader spectrum of motivations including the desire for improved social services, better educational opportunities, and enhanced personal security [30]. For instance, push factors contributing to migration can include political tensions, violence, ethnic or religious cleansing, and a lack of economic opportunities [31]. Furthermore, a scarcity of essential resources and an elevated population growth rate in the country of origin can act as powerful push factors, compelling individuals to seek better circumstances elsewhere [32]. Conversely, pull factors attracting migrants to a specific locale often include improved economic prospects, access to quality healthcare, and enhanced religious freedoms [26]. However, quantitative analyses of migration frequently remain circumscribed by a functionalist interpretation of these push-pull dynamics, often failing to fully capture the macro-structural influences that shape diverse migration experiences across varying demographic groups [13].

2.2 Empirical Review

The influx of foreign workers into Malaysia is a multifaceted phenomenon driven by a confluence of economic, social, and policy-related factors, necessitating a comprehensive examination of the underlying mechanisms [33]. Specifically, this abundance can be attributed to persistent labor shortages in key sectors, local workers' disinterest in certain occupations, and governmental policies that, despite fluctuations, have often facilitated the entry of foreign labor to meet industrial demands [33,34]. These policies, however, have not always effectively aligned with labor market needs, frequently leading to an over-reliance on unskilled foreign workers, particularly within the manufacturing sector [35]. This reliance has generated complex socio-economic challenges, including potential wage suppression for unskilled domestic workers and increased wage inequality [36]. Furthermore, the substantial presence of foreign labor can exacerbate urban poverty issues, as migrant workers often face precarious employment conditions and low wages, contributing to financial hardship and competition for job opportunities among the urban poor [37]. This extensive dependency on foreign workers, particularly in the construction sector, stems from a shortage of local engagement and a high demand for labor, subsequently leading to a range of economic, socioeconomic, and political challenges for Malaysia [38]. The engagement of foreign labor, while filling critical gaps, has also been linked to societal concerns such as increased crime rates and elevated unemployment percentages among local populations, further complicating the socio-economic landscape. Despite these challenges, it is crucial to note that official police reports indicate that foreign workers are responsible for only a small percentage (10-15%) of total crimes committed in Malaysia, challenging the perception that they are the primary drivers of increased criminal activity

[39]. Indeed, the historical context reveals that Malaysia has consistently relied on foreign labor since the British colonial era to address workforce demands across various industries [40]. During the industrial transformations of the 1980s and early 1990s, Malaysia's shift toward export-oriented industrialization further solidified this reliance, leading to a significant influx of low-skilled foreign workers and establishing Malaysia as a leading Asian country in terms of foreign worker dependency [41]. This dependency is particularly pronounced in sectors like agriculture, where foreign workers constitute a substantial portion of the workforce, especially in palm oil plantations [39]. The demand for foreign labor in Malaysia is further exacerbated by the rapid economic development, which has led to increased demand and supply in the labor force market, particularly for roles that Malaysians are less inclined to fill [42]. This phenomenon is not unique to Malaysia, as other East Asian labor-importing countries also grapple with the socio-economic implications of substantial foreign labor inflows, including concerns over wage depression for domestic workers and potential disincentives for technological modernization [43,36]

3. Methodology

This study employs a conceptual research design based on an extensive review of previous journals, reports, and policy documents related to labor migration and fisheries employment.

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

This study relied on secondary data collected from academic databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Relevant literature on labor migration and fisheries employment in Malaysia was reviewed to identify key findings and theoretical perspectives. A thematic analysis was conducted to determine recurring patterns and major determinants related to migration pull factors. The analysis grouped these findings into four main dimensions, namely economic, social, institutional, and environmental factors. Based on these themes, a conceptual framework was developed to illustrate the interrelationships among the identified factors and to explain how they collectively influence the attraction of foreign workers to Malaysia's fisheries sector.

4. Findings

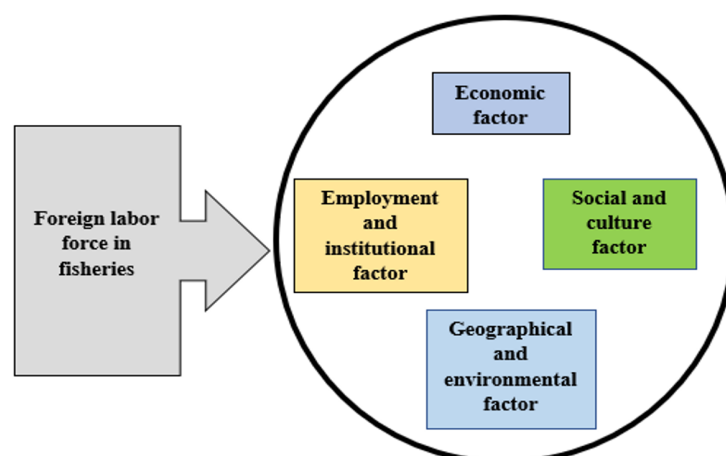


Fig. 2. Conceptual framework of pull factors influencing the labor workforce in Malaysia's fisheries sector

The findings from the review of previous studies and theoretical discussions reveal through the conceptual framework displayed by Figure 2 that the attraction of foreign workers to Malaysia's

fisheries sector is shaped by a complex interaction of multiple factors that can be broadly categorized into four major dimensions: economic factors, employment and institutional factors, social and cultural factors, and geographical and environmental factors. These dimensions collectively form a “pull environment” that makes Malaysia an appealing destination for migrant labor, particularly from neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. Each of these components plays a distinctive yet interrelated role in motivating and sustaining foreign workers’ involvement in the fisheries industry.

Economic factors emerge as the most dominant pull element influencing foreign workers’ decisions to migrate and work in Malaysia’s fisheries sector. Wages offered in Malaysia, even though considered low by national standards, are relatively higher compared to what workers can earn in their home countries [4]. This wage differential acts as a strong financial incentive for foreign workers, especially those coming from rural or economically disadvantaged regions. Many foreign workers perceive employment in Malaysia’s fisheries as an opportunity to improve their family’s living conditions, build savings, and gain access to a more stable income flow. The continuous demand for low-skilled labor within the fisheries sector further enhances the attractiveness of these opportunities, as it provides consistent employment without the need for advanced qualifications or specialized education. Additionally, some studies highlight that foreign workers view fisheries employment as providing a more reliable source of income than agricultural or informal jobs available in their home regions, particularly during periods of economic downturn or climate-related instability. Therefore, economic factors serve as the initial and most powerful motivator drawing foreign workers toward Malaysia’s fisheries industry.

The second dimension, employment and institutional factors, also plays a significant role in attracting and retaining foreign workers. The Malaysian fisheries sector offers abundant employment opportunities due to the persistent shortage of local workers, leading to active recruitment both through formal and informal channels [38]. Employers often rely on intermediaries, labor contractors, and social networks to source workers from abroad. In some cases, recruitment is facilitated by bilateral labor agreements and institutional support that make the hiring process more organized and legally recognized. For example, the issuance of work permits and enforcement of basic labor protections create an institutional framework that provides a sense of legitimacy and security for foreign workers. Although challenges remain in ensuring fair treatment and legal compliance, these frameworks still serve as attractive features compared to unregulated migration systems in other countries. Moreover, the presence of established recruitment agencies and ongoing government-to-government cooperation between Malaysia and sending countries further strengthen the institutional dimension of the pull factors. Foreign workers are also drawn by the perception that Malaysia offers relatively better labor rights and enforcement compared to other destinations within the region. Together, these institutional mechanisms lower the perceived risk of migration and contribute to the stability of foreign employment within the fisheries sector.

The third dimension encompasses social and cultural factors, which strongly influence the decision-making process and long-term settlement of foreign workers in Malaysia. Many migrants choose Malaysia not only because of economic reasons but also due to existing social connections [13]. The presence of established migrant communities provides newcomers with crucial support in terms of information sharing, housing arrangements, and job placement. These social networks often act as informal recruitment mechanisms, reducing the costs and uncertainties associated with migration. Family members or friends who have previously worked in Malaysia may facilitate the migration process by providing guidance and even temporary accommodation. Furthermore, cultural and linguistic similarities between Malaysia and several neighbouring countries enhance the integration process for foreign workers. Shared religious practices, familiar food, and comparable

social norms create a more comfortable environment for migrants to live and work. Such social and cultural compatibility not only attracts workers initially but also encourages them to remain in the industry for extended periods. In many coastal fishing villages, foreign and local communities coexist and form hybrid social systems that contribute to the sustainability of labor supply in the fisheries sector.

The fourth dimension, geographical and environmental factors, also contributes significantly to the pull dynamics [4]. Malaysia's geographical proximity to key labor-sending countries makes migration more feasible, affordable, and less risky. For instance, migrants from Indonesia or the Philippines can reach Malaysia by sea within a short distance, reducing transportation costs and facilitating circular migration patterns. The shared maritime boundaries and similar climatic conditions between Malaysia and these countries further enhance adaptability, as foreign workers are already familiar with the working environment, weather patterns, and fishing methods. The environmental setting of Malaysia's coastal and marine zones, which are rich in fishery resources, also ensures the availability of steady work opportunities, thereby strengthening the pull attraction. Additionally, Malaysia's relative political stability and overall economic resilience contribute to a perception of safety and opportunity, especially when compared to some neighboring regions facing social or political uncertainty.

When considered collectively, these four dimensions form an integrated conceptual framework that explains the attraction of foreign workers to Malaysia's fisheries sector. The framework suggests that economic motivations often serve as the initial driving force behind migration, but they are reinforced and sustained by institutional structures, social connections, and favorable geographical conditions. Economic factors may initiate the decision to migrate, yet without institutional facilitation or social support networks, migration would be riskier and less sustainable. Similarly, geographical proximity lowers costs and enhances the flow of labor, while cultural familiarity eases adaptation and long-term retention. The interdependence among these dimensions highlights that migration is not merely a result of economic disparity but rather a multi-layered process influenced by structural, social, and spatial factors. From a conceptual standpoint, this framework provides a holistic understanding of the pull environment shaping foreign labor attraction in the fisheries sector. It also underscores that the fisheries industry's reliance on foreign workers is not accidental but rooted in a combination of structural economic needs and socio-cultural linkages that have developed over time. Recognizing these interconnected factors allows policymakers and researchers to move beyond simple economic explanations and instead approach labor migration as a complex, dynamic phenomenon. In essence, the conceptual model developed from the literature indicates that the attraction of foreign workers to Malaysia's fisheries sector is sustained through an interaction between opportunity and accessibility. The opportunity is driven by the country's economic and institutional context, while accessibility is enhanced through social networks and geographic closeness. Understanding these linkages can help in designing more comprehensive policies that not only regulate foreign labor but also address the underlying forces that make Malaysia a continuing magnet for migrant workers in the fisheries sector.

5. Conclusion

The fisheries sector remains a vital pillar of Malaysia's economy, ensuring food security and providing employment for thousands. Yet, its growing reliance on foreign labour has become a defining feature of the industry. This conceptual paper examines the pull factors that attract foreign workers to Malaysia's fisheries sector, arguing that migration is not driven solely by poverty in the sending countries but also by favourable conditions in the host country. A review of existing studies

identifies four main categories of pull factors: economic, employment and institutional, social and cultural, and geographical and environmental. Together, these form a dynamic “pull environment” that shapes migration flows and retention. Economic incentives such as higher wages and stable labour demand remain central, but they are strengthened by institutional structures like recruitment systems, labour policies, and bilateral agreements. Social networks, cultural familiarity, and Malaysia’s proximity to migrants’ home countries further ease adaptation and encourage migration.

The proposed conceptual framework highlights that migration to Malaysia’s fisheries sector is a multidimensional process, influenced by both opportunity and accessibility. It reflects the interaction of economic prospects, institutional arrangements, and social linkages rather than mere wage differences. Understanding these dimensions helps explain why Malaysia continues to attract foreign labour despite policy efforts to curb dependency. From a policy standpoint, addressing labour dependency requires more than wage controls or recruitment limits. Policymakers must also consider the social, cultural, and institutional contexts that sustain migration. An integrated approach that combining fair labour practices, social protection, and local workforce development that would create a more balanced and sustainable fisheries labour system. Finally, this conceptual framework offers a basis for future empirical research. Field studies involving migrant workers, employers, and communities could validate how these pull factors operate in practice. In conclusion, the attraction of foreign labour to Malaysia’s fisheries sector is a complex and interconnected process shaped by economic opportunities, institutional support, and social linkages. Recognizing these interrelationships is key to building inclusive and sustainable labor policies for the industry.

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