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Abstract

Overview: Have you ever heard a song on the radio with a terrible beat or a screechy singer but had eloquent lyrics? Like a diamond in the rough, the true beauty is buried underneath layers of dirt. This premise can be seen in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, a young adult novel surrounded by controversy. Due to its somewhat risqué themes, the book is undoubtedly ribald, thus causing quite a flurry by parents about its use in curricula. However, this novel should not be censored because it not only integrates modern young adult literature into classrooms, relating better with students, but also serves educational purposes by enlightening adolescents using real-life situations in a safe environment.

Keywords

Writing

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The ‘Perks’ of Controversial Texts in Curricula: The Benefit of Young Adult Literature on Adolescents in the Classroom

Have you ever heard a song on the radio with a terrible beat or a screechy singer but had eloquent lyrics? Like a diamond in the rough, the true beauty is buried underneath layers of dirt. This premise can be seen in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, a young adult novel surrounded by controversy. Due to its somewhat risqué themes, the book is undoubtedly ribald, thus causing quite a flurry by parents about its use in curricula. However, this novel should not be censored because it not only integrates modern young adult literature into classrooms, relating better with students, but also serves educational purposes by enlightening adolescents using real-life situations in a safe environment.

Published in 1999 by MTV Books, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, written by Stephan Chbosky, made its debut in the literary spectrum as a coming-of-age novel. From the very beginning, the launch of this novel was a success among adolescents due to its inimitability. Stereotypical young adult novels have brave, outgoing protagonists who heroically terminate their problems throughout the course of the plot. What sets this young adult book apart from its conventional parallels is the unique disposition of the protagonist. Similarly, in an article titled, “The Irony of Narration in the Young Adult Novel”, author Mike Cadden discusses the importance of the narration seen in young adult literature. Specifically referencing *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Cadden states, “Chbosky creates a narrator who is less sophisticated and confident than others... He shares his conscious doubts with us all along, unlike the [other] narrators” (150). Featuring a more vulnerable main character differentiates *Perks* from the copious amount of young adult works, which, in turn, produces a novel that is more applicable to its adolescent audience – allowing readers to relate on newer, deeper levels.

Chbosky designs a narrator who connects with every adolescent. The novel, written in first-person narration, tells the story of a fifteen-year-old boy transitioning into high school. Under an alias, “Charlie”, the protagonist, confides in an anonymous stranger whom he has heard to be trustworthy. Through writing letters, journaling some of his most personal secrets, Charlie recollects memories from his surprising past in order for

the unidentified receiver to wholly comprehend him. Charlie divulges the suicide of his best (and only) friend, Michael, several months prior to the first letter. Due to Michael's death, Charlie is hesitant to start high school with no close friends. Charlie is quite the wallflower, being reserved and rather unnoticed, hence the title. Feeling like he cannot communicate with his parents about his internal struggles, the only other person Charlie could confide in was his Aunt Helen, who, unfortunately, had also passed away.

However, once he enters high school, Charlie manages to befriend an upperclassman, Patrick, and through him, Patrick's stepsister, Sam. He then, via them, is introduced to upperclassmen and their social scene. Charlie begins branching out – participating more in life. He also develops a relationship with his high school English teacher, Bill, outside of class, who encourages Charlie's writing and subconsciously influences his transition into adulthood, acting as a mentor. Through all of his new experiences, Charlie is exposed to real, relevant young adult situations, developing a better understanding of life.

The strong message behind the text is specifically due to Chbosky's choice of recurring young adult matters. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* showcases multiple themes, some of which are coming-of-age, love, friendship, sex, bullying, abuse, homosexuality, and drug use. Charlie's adventures throughout the novel encompass each of these. The coming-of-age aspect of this novel is seen as Charlie grows into his identity, realizing his true potential through his tribulations. Due to his friendship with older peers – and simply the transition into adolescence – Charlie encounters the sex, homosexual, and drug use themes. He first encounters sex while witnessing a girl being raped during a party his older brother hosts at their house when he was younger. Ironically, Charlie's later experiences with sex are not ideal either. Parties also familiarize Charlie with drug use, including alcohol, prescription pharmaceuticals, and illegal narcotics. Regarding homosexuality, it is Patrick, Charlie's friend, who is a closeted homosexual, a secret known only by Patrick's close group of friends. Through Charlie's insight, he reveals Patrick's struggle of being gay during his adolescence. Bullying can be witnessed in this novel due to Charlie's unique disposition. He receives harassing statements from vicious classmates, along with "swirlies", over the course of the novel just because he is different. Several forms of abuse can also be seen, including sexual abuse, domestic abuse, and physical child abuse. Mentioned previously, there is sexual abuse seen when Charlie recollects the memory of witnessing a rape. He also experiences sexual abuse in

a first-hand encounter, after being molested at a young age by his Aunt Helen – a memory Charlie tried so hard to suppress. Domestic abuse is addressed when Charlie accidentally observes his sister being hit by her boyfriend, and when Charlie recalls the memory of his father hitting him. Lastly, in regards to abuse, Patrick’s boyfriend, Brad, is beaten by his father when he witnesses Brad and Patrick having homosexual relations. Together, all the themes enclosed in this novel combine to create a perfect young adult novel to expose adolescents to real-life situations.

Though this novel can serve as an educational instrument for adolescents, there is a great deal of controversy surrounding Perks. Educators stray from using it in curricula; they feel as though the themes in Perks are too graphic for teens to be subjected to. In a news report for CBS, Magee Hickey covered a story on parents’ reaction to *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* being used in their daughter’s English class. The article, titled “Crusade On To Ban Controversial ‘Wallflower’ At Rockland School”, voiced parents’ concerns regarding the language and content seen in Perks. As devout Christians, the family opposed the swearing and crude sexual themes, saying they went against their religion. These parents felt the content is too provocative for their sixteen-year-old daughter to handle. Therefore, they requested a separate assignment for their daughter (Hickey). However, this is not the only case where students have been removed from classes due to the use of this book. Multiple accounts of censorship have been reported due to parents’ apprehension.

It is examples like this of parent disapproval that discourages teachers from using *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* in the classroom, thus causing self-censorship. Self-censoring in curricula, in actuality, does more harm than benefit. An article titled, “The Effects of Censorship on Experienced High School English Teachers”, discusses the negative implications that come with the censorship of curriculum materials. Author Jane Agee proclaims:

One disturbing aspect of censorship is its power to deny students in one class or an entire school system the right to read particular texts... many schools, in spite of good intentions, actually deny students the opportunity to develop intellectually... Even the threat of censorship works to exacerbate the fears of teachers and to undermine their attempts to introduce a broad range of texts that will help diverse groups of students... (Para. 3)

When teachers self-censor potential texts, it can deprive their students of the

opportunity to learn – the primary purpose they attend school. However, in order satisfy parents, educators deviate from using this young adult novel due to the controversy surrounding the content. Yet, this can have a detrimental effect on young adults. In a piece that similarly examines the self-censorship of teachers, the authors, Lauren Freedman and Holly Johnson, discuss the detriments that can come with self-censorship. An example of this can be seen when Freedman and Johnson address the downfalls of teachers' self-censorship:

Stories involving [controversial] issues...provide young adults with a window to the world and a mirror to the self... Through the window of literature, students have immediate access to the experiences of others beyond their own families, friends, neighbors, classmates, and teachers. By gazing into the mirror literature provides, students are able to reflect more deeply on their own lives and the forces that affect them. When teachers abandon their right and responsibility to select literature, they sacrifice their students to protect themselves. Self-censorship silences both teachers and students. This is particularly problematic at the middle level as early adolescents expend tremendous energy defining and redefining themselves and trying on various identities and roles. It is also at the middle level that students find controversial issues immediately compelling and, given the opportunity, “think and wonder about ideas and their consequences” willingly and eagerly. (356-57)

Teachers who self-censor young adult literature choices from their curricula based solely on the disapproval of parents are depriving their adolescent students of development needed for this confusing period of their lives. Incorporating *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* into classrooms allows for teachers to discuss topics that might otherwise be awkward. Still, some parents feel it is their duty to educate their children on such issues, while others believe the text is simply not appropriate for the school setting.

Though the content in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* may seem offensive to parents, the novel is interpreted as quite the opposite to its intended audience. To young adults, *Perks* is a beneficial learning tool in which they can be exposed to mature situations that teenagers are inevitably going to face throughout their adolescence. Although raw, the themes seen in *Perks* allow young adults to envision themselves in the shoes of Charlie – learning from the issues faced throughout the course of the book while simultaneously growing and developing a better sense of self-identity. With the tools needed to address these real-life situations in reality, teens can use the knowledge they have acquired from

this novel to effectively maneuver through adolescence's complicated moments. It is Charlie, however, who acts as the most constructive example in this novel; his meticulous narratives are what allow the readers to wholly visualize themselves in the situations he handles. In the article written by Mike Cadden, he particularly discusses *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* as being a different approach to young adult literature by featuring a protagonist, Charlie, who serves as an unusual role model for readers. Charlie's artlessness, combined with his providing the reader with the tools to doubt his perspective, invites the reader to think through the dilemmas Charlie faces with him rather than wonder at his cleverness or wonder which persona is "really" Charlie. As more conflicting perspectives are presented in the novel, the reader is free to do the work of the ethical act. The young reader will read like "a filter, not a sponge", as Charlie is warned to do by his teacher. (151)

Cadden explains the constant morphing seen in Charlie over the course of the plot. While sifting through the content of *Perks*, its readers will subconsciously adopt Charlie's view of thinking as it transforms from one of an immature teenager to one of an experienced young adult. This aspect of Charlie is what challenges readers to think deeper into the meaning and explanation behind his motives and ways of reasoning. Regarding this notion, Cadden continues on to say, "Together these factors enable readers to contemplate the competing ideologies and choices in Charlie's life with the knowledge that the speaker has integrity" (150). By examining his text, Cadden illuminates Charlie's narrative, which forces the readers of *Perks* to consider what their reactions would be to similar tribulations – the precise purpose, main criteria, and primary goal of what a young adult novel should embody. Charlie embodies all the problems an adolescent is likely to face, allowing readers to live vicariously through him while formulating proper problem solving techniques and learning from his choices and mistakes without ever being in the compromising position.

Chbosky's audacious approach toward writing *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, particularly mentioning the controversial themes, is what makes *Perks* the startling young adult novel it is. His innovative design ignited a movement in young adult literature, creating a completely renovated genre. In her essay, "The Relevance of Young Adult Literature", B. Joyce Stallworth considers this reformation within young adult literature. She reveals:

Today's young adult literature is sophisticated, complex, and powerful. It deserves to be

part of the literary tradition in middle and high schools. Quality young adult fiction can help tweens and teens handle the plethora of emotional, social, developmental, and physical changes they experience. Integrating such works into the curriculum increases “life literacy” by helping adolescents develop the reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills they need to succeed in school and by increasing their capacity to manage life problems... Young adult literature enables students to tackle tough questions and provides them with a forum for contemplating and deciphering authentic answers. Such books offer tweens the opportunity to learn vicariously, in safe classroom communities, about situations they may face as they make the transition into high school. (59-60)

The “quality” Stallworth refers to is embodied in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. The situations adolescents face on a daily basis are intertwined throughout every page of the novel. The instances Charlie faces over the course of the novel help readers envision their responses to his turmoil. However, considered controversial, the specific themes in question stitched under the surface of the text are homosexuality, drug use, and bullying. Some parents feel that these topics are too inappropriate to expose to young adults in curricula, and therefore push for the censorship of *Perks*. However, what parents may consider controversial themes are better defined as real-life themes. In this generation, all of these themes are seen in the actual lives of most young adults. Therefore, *Perks* can be perceived as a preparation tool, priming young adults to handle these real-life situations in a safe setting.

Perhaps not common in previous generations, today’s society is flourishing, breaking down boundaries and prejudices once held in place. One of these confines is homosexuality. With slogans like “it’s okay to be gay” and the legalization of same-sex marriages in a growing number of states, our current world has begun to accept an act that was previously shunned. Therefore, it is no surprise that homosexuality has become the topic of a popular debate. Nevertheless, it is seen as controversial to certain parents and educators who protest homosexuality. Playing a large role in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is Charlie’s best friend, Patrick, who, aforementioned, struggles with his secret homosexuality, ironically, due to his fear of similar opposing individuals. Patrick’s struggle throughout *Perks* can educate young adults on the effects homophobia can have on a person. In an article titled “Fight for your right: Censorship, selection, and LGBTQ literature”, authors Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning discuss the importance of LGBTQ literature in curriculums. According to the authors, “One of the key ways that

schools condone homophobia is by failing to include LGBTQ literature in the curriculum” (38). By outcasting homosexual literature, teachers, parents, and school boards are sending the message to homosexual students that they are not accepted, while also showing students that surrendering to homophobic pressure is appropriate. Regarding teachers that are cautious to incorporate LGBTQ literature into classrooms, Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning discuss their hesitations and/or restraints:

[Teachers] may be limited by departmental, institutional, and/or district guidelines, or paralyzed by fear that a parent, community member, or administrator will descend with threats and anger. To some, including an LGBTQ book in the curriculum may seem like inviting a censor or outspoken critic to come calling. (40)

A simple explanation of this notion is that teachers fear parents, and this fear can have negative effects on students. Teachers that self-censor due to anxiety over parents’ disapproval are giving in to homophobia, whether they are aware or not. Teachers are role models to their students, therefore setting examples for these young adults to emulate.

Yet, if teachers avoid LGBTQ material by self-censoring or due to restrictions, this can further damage an already confused homosexual adolescent. However, to avoid this, ...one of the first steps every educator can take is to acknowledge that books with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning characters aren’t about “the other,” they’re about us—all of us. They’re about teens walking down the hallways of every high school, and about the people walking down the streets of every community. They’re about the world every teen, regardless of his or her sexuality, inhabits, and literature is one way to challenge readers to think critically about that world and their place in it. (Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning 39)

By using literature with homosexual content, teachers not only expose young adults to the topic but also address it in a way that promotes equality between everyone – defying differences. That notion is the benefit reading *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* would have on students. It would create a place in which readers could discuss any questions they might have in a tolerant, secure environment which would, in turn, produce more well-rounded, educated, unprejudiced adolescents.

On a separate note, a calamitous part of today’s society also seen throughout the text of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is drug use among young adults. Including alcohol, pharmaceuticals, and illegal narcotics, Charlie experiments with them all over the

course of the novel. Though countless parents hate thinking their adolescent children are taking part in any kind of drug use, the sad reality is that there will be situations in which young adults are exposed to these drugs. This uncomfortable anxiety in parents' heads is what causes an objection to *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* being used in curricula – due to the far from sugarcoated collection of Charlie's encounters with different drugs. Given the vulgarity of certain scenes containing drug use in *Perks*, some parents may feel it is inappropriate for young adults to read it in the classroom due to the possibility of encouragement. A study done for the Fall 2012 issue of *Contemporary Drug Problems* written by Gilbert Quintero titled, "Problematizing "Drugs": A Cultural Assessment of Recreational Pharmaceutical Use Among Young Adults in the United States", explores drug use among adolescents, acutely focusing on the use of prescription medications versus what may be considered "hard drugs". Quintero addresses the appeal pharmaceuticals have due to their advertisement and marketing, saying:

Currently, certain pharmaceuticals are being actively developed and aggressively marketed that focus less on treating disease and more on managing aspects of lifestyle and enhancing ordinary states and conditions, including sexual performance, body weight, sleepiness, and cognitive ability... The recreational use of prescription drugs is taking place within the context of these broader cultural developments which suggests that pharmaceuticals are increasingly being integrated into everyday life by a variety of social groups... As a result, a wide range of pharmaceuticals are now widely accessible to young people and they possess considerable knowledge and experience regarding medications, including dosages, indications, effects, and side effects. (496-97)

One can infer from this evidence that it is not books like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* that might coax young adults into experimenting with different drugs. It is more so, however, the media – where it seems like every song, movie, and television show directed toward young adults broadcasts recreational drug use in an accepting light. Nevertheless, Quintero continues extrapolating on the topic of drug use among adolescents, also tackling the reason why young adults use these drugs. Similarly shown throughout *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie would take part in recreational drug use when socializing with his peers. Instead of using drugs for their intended purposes, the characters in *Perks* would use drugs for entertainment purposes at parties. Quintero's research supports this premise, stating:

Some young people do not describe their use in terms of intention to achieve a state of intoxication or pleasure, but instead emphasize the goal of facilitating social interchange and activities and personal experimentation through the consumption of pharmaceuticals. In contrast to the categorical discourse on getting high, these accounts center on utilizing pharmaceutical drugs to “party,” that is, to consume intoxicants while socializing with friends and peers in leisure settings. (517)

For adolescents, taking drugs is almost a requisite act that goes hand-in-hand with partying, just like good music and alcohol. The “high” feeling is not sought out, but instead young adults “engage in recreational pharmaceutical use to have a good time, to be more open and outgoing in social situations, to relax, to be happy, to relieve stress, to have fun,” (519) and so on.

Though *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* does contain daunting topics such as drug use, this does not mean that the book should not be used in the classroom. This topic creates an open discussion for students not only among peers but also among teachers, who, in turn, could extend the discussions beyond the classroom, between students and parents. Therefore, the parents who feel it is their responsibility to educate their children have an ideal entrance for opening the conversation. This notion can be seen in Freedman and Johnson’s self-censorship article:

If the goal of literature selection is to educate rather than indoctrinate our students, teachers must provide multiple opportunities for the students to think deeply and to respond honestly. In order to make the most of these experiences, teachers need confidence in their abilities to facilitate and guide their students’ reflection and discussion, so that the students are provided with knowledge and understandings of not only what is now, but also what could be and what should be in [this] world. (365)

Young adult literature, though sometimes controversial, allows students to experience real-life situations and learn from them. Reading *Perks* does not praise drug use, but rather educates adolescent readers on the issue – allowing them to formulate personal judgments and reactions to the situations Charlie faces. Adolescent readers would grow from discussing the content of the text, therefore developing better understanding of the world they live in.

Though an uncomfortable topic, another main theme, though contentious, seen throughout *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* that deserves attention is the matter of abuse. There are several forms of abuse in this novel, as aforementioned. Charlie

experiences domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and physical abuse throughout the course of the novel. Though some parents argue that the material is too explicit for readers, it is, unfortunately, an aspect of adolescents' lives that young adults should be educated on. Whether young adults are in relationships with domestic abuse or have "troubles at home", as Charlie would say, Chbosky purposely integrates this theme in *Perks* to let these individuals know they are not alone in their situation.

Featured in an article discussing domestic abuse in young adult novels, author Lisa Belkin references two books, examining the importance these novels have on its adolescent readers. Belkin states:

The lesson in [these] books – that dating violence is real and dangerous – is worth teaching...The central lesson of the conversation on dating violence, experts say, should be that abuse can happen to anyone, and that no one deserves when it happens to them. (Para. 4)

Reading *Perks* in the classroom will open a dialogue for young adults to fully understand the effects of abuse in any form. From a metaphorical standpoint, Charlie is an average teenage boy with a typical life, which is what makes his character so relatable. However, in his normal life, Charlie has multiple experiences with various forms of abuse, proving abuse can happen to anyone. Therefore, utilizing this book in the classroom allows educators the opportunity to incorporate segments, thereby, educating students on the proper measures to take when confronted with abuse – ultimately providing students who are suffering from these despairing situations to have an outlet and a means to an end.

The last of the controversial topics in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is the theme of bullying. Similar to television shows and movies that feature bullying, some parents feel the novel almost generalizes the act of bullying – condoning the action. The novel, however, does the opposite. Comparable to previously mentioned themes, the use of *Perks* in curricula permits for an open conversation, educating young adults on the appropriate actions to take if ever witnessing a bullying event. Carol Hillsberg and Helene Spak believed that the incorporation of young adult novels with bullying themes into curricula would help assist an anti-bullying campaign, thus stemmed their article titled, "Young Adult Literature As the Centerpiece of an Anti-Bullying Program in Middle School", which resulted from the research they conducted to reinforce this notion. Hillsberg and Spak begin by asserting, "If one defines literacy, in the broadest

sense, as the ability to use written and spoken language to help understand the human condition, then literature can be studied to both improve reading comprehension and peer relationships” (25). Therefore, by using young adult literature in the curriculum, it would increase students’ comprehension of not only educational concepts but also personal interactions – a skill that is indispensable for successful development into adulthood. Later in the article, Hillsberg and Spak also investigate the consequences of bullying from both the victim and the bully’s standpoints, along with the bystanders. The article continues on to say:

If the literature deals with the terrible consequences of bullying, it could help the victim and the bully. The victim may derive comfort or coping strategies from reading about another in a similar situation. In addition, the bully might begin to identify with a fictional victim, leading to empathy and the possibility for change... It reinforces the idea that anti-bullying programs are not just for the victims and the bullies, but also for the majority of students who are passive and who stand by and watch it occur. (25-26)

This excerpt exemplifies the motive behind the themes in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Though parts of the novel may describe graphic scenes of bullying, or drug use, or homosexuality, it was written to educate the reader. Instead of mollifying incidences to varnish the material, Chbosky conveys themes as bluntly as possible – because that is precisely how they play out in real life.

Using any literature with controversial themes (the list of possibilities is endless) in the classroom may cause uproar from parents, but teachers utilize this literature with superior intentions in mind. Though I have mostly focused on teachers who are skeptical of using such divisive literature in their curriculum, let us take a moment to discuss the teachers who are firm believers in young adult literature. In an article titled, “Young Adult Literature in the English Curriculum Today: Classroom Teachers Speak Out”, the authors, Louel C. Gibbons, Jennifer S. Dail, and B. Joyce Stallworth, are English educators. Their main objective in writing this piece was to persuade other English teachers who are, metaphorically speaking, “on the fence” about incorporating young adult literature into their curricula. One way in doing so was by using examples of English teachers who took the plunge, immersing their students in young adult literature. It is exemplified in their essay,

Many English teachers believe that YAL offers a sophisticated reading option for addressing standards, designing relevant curricula, and engaging twenty-first century

young adults in rich discussions of literature and life. For years, proponents have concluded that YAL should be integrated into the middle and high school English classroom because such literature can (a) help improve students' reading skills; (b) encourage young adults to read more books, thereby improving their abilities to read; (c) facilitate teachers' abilities to incorporate more books of interest to adolescents into the curriculum, thereby avoiding the non-reading curriculum or workbooks and lectures; and (d) support the development of an inclusive curriculum. (53)

Due to the content, young adult literature is easily relatable to its anticipated audience. Therefore, it is considerably more applicable compared to other options designated "classics" – and, to say the least, more desirable – making it an uncomplicated gateway through which students can learn. Teachers, who recognize the benefits young adult literature has to bestow in curricula, appreciate its use.

It is on this principle, however, that I present my argument. I decisively believe *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* should be used in curricula, not for the novel alone, but because the concepts it contains. Though some parents and educators feel the themes within it are overly explicit, the novel should be taught in order to prepare adolescents for confronting real life situations that they are likely to encounter. As I believe I have thoroughly substantiated a plethora of benefits that coincide within the novel, the main intention for the integration of this novel into English curricula is for the open discussion that accompanies it. This conversation among peers, including adults, would encourage young adults to contemplate the purposefulness of the text and how it applies to their personal lives. Corresponding to this notion, "As many readers know, it is not only the reading of the book that causes us to grow, it is also the social act of discussing the literature with peers and adults that makes for a greater understanding..."

(Freedman and Johnson 365). *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* would establish the ideal situation for a discussion that could cover a variety of extremely imperative, relevant, potential topics – in this case, homosexuality, drug use, and bullying. Incorporated into classrooms, this novel would not only equip adolescents with a better comprehension of literary skills but also include pertinent topics young adults can utilize during their development into adulthood.

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