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Digital Nudging and Healthy Food Choices: How Social Media Platform Design Shapes Generation Z's Purchasing Behaviour in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Digital platforms increasingly shape consumption through algorithmic exposure, influencer ecosystems, and social comparison processes. This study explains healthy food purchasing among Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers in Saudi Arabia by extending the Theory of Planned Behavior with platform-relevant mechanisms: influencer trust, susceptibility to influencers, emotional influence, and social comparison. Survey data from 401 Saudi Gen Z consumers were analyzed using composite Likert indices and multiple regression. Purchase intention was predicted primarily by self-efficacy, emotional influence, social comparison, attitude, and subjective norms ($R^2 = .527$). Actual purchase behavior was predicted most strongly by intention and further reinforced by susceptibility to influencers, social comparison, influencer trust, and subjective norms ($R^2 = .650$). Despite high health awareness and positive attitudes, behavior was comparatively lower, indicating a marked intention-behavior gap. Findings advance digital strategy and consumer behavior theory by identifying a platform-based reinforcement layer that shapes conversion in platform economies.

Keywords: platform economy; digital strategy; influencer marketing; social comparison; Generation Z; healthy food; purchase intention; Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of platform economies has transformed consumption into a continuously mediated process in which attention, preference formation, and purchase decisions are increasingly shaped by algorithmic curation and socially reinforced visibility. Unlike traditional media environments, where marketing exposures are episodic and relatively separable from social interaction, social media platforms integrate commercial influence into everyday routines of identity construction, peer communication, and entertainment. This structural integration alters the nature of consumer decision-making. Consumers are no longer merely informed by digital channels; instead, they operate within a persistent influence architecture where norms, emotions, social comparisons, and influencer narratives continuously shape behavioral choices.

From a business administration and strategic management perspective, this transformation redefines the concept of consumer conversion. Traditional marketing models explain conversion primarily through persuasion effectiveness, product accessibility, and price sensitivity. In contrast, platform-based markets rely heavily on socio-technical reinforcement mechanisms. Algorithmic recommendation systems repeatedly expose consumers to similar content until it becomes cognitively salient, engagement metrics signal popularity and legitimacy, influencer endorsements foster parasocial familiarity, and social comparison processes generate pressure to conform to visible lifestyles. Consequently, firms increasingly compete not only through product features and promotional communication but also through their ability to align with platform reinforcement dynamics that convert consumer intentions into actual behavior.

Healthy food purchasing provides a particularly informative context for examining these dynamics. This consumption category is characterized by a well-documented paradox: consumers frequently report positive attitudes and high awareness regarding healthy eating while failing to translate these intentions into consistent purchasing behavior. Behavioral research conceptualizes this phenomenon as the intention behavior gap, in which favorable evaluations and stated intentions do not necessarily lead to behavioral enactment (Ajzen, 1991). In digital environments, this gap may either widen or narrow depending on whether platform influences facilitate behavioral capability or intensify conflicting cues and comparison-based pressures that undermine self-regulation.

Generation Z represents a critical population for studying this phenomenon. As digital natives, Gen Z consumers rely heavily on social media platforms for product discovery, social validation, and lifestyle learning. Prior research demonstrates that influencer content, visual storytelling, and peer validation

significantly shape Gen Z purchase decisions in digital environments (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Within health-related domains, social media platforms function not only as communication channels but also as informal health information ecosystems, where entertainment, persuasion, and commercial incentives coexist. This environment raises important questions regarding credibility, trust, and consumer protection in influencer-driven marketing systems.

Saudi Arabia provides a particularly relevant empirical setting for investigating these dynamics. The country has experienced rapid digital transformation and exhibits exceptionally high levels of social media engagement among young consumers. At the same time, public health strategies increasingly emphasize lifestyle and dietary improvements. Digital platforms therefore play an important role in shaping health-related consumption patterns, including food purchasing behavior. Understanding how social media influence interacts with consumer decision-making processes in this context is important for both marketing strategy and public health policy.

To analyze these mechanisms systematically, this study adopts the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as its primary theoretical framework. TPB explains behavior as a function of behavioral intention, which is determined by attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Although TPB has been widely applied in health and food consumption research, it was developed prior to the emergence of algorithmically mediated social environments. Contemporary digital platforms introduce additional influence mechanisms such as influencer credibility, emotional engagement, and continuous social comparison. These mechanisms may reinforce behavioral intentions or directly activate purchasing decisions within social media ecosystems.

Accordingly, this study develops and empirically tests a digitally embedded TPB model explaining healthy food purchasing among Saudi Generation Z consumers. While retaining TPB's core constructs, attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, the model incorporates platform-specific determinants including influencer trust, susceptibility to influencer influence, emotional influence, and social comparison. Rather than simply adding variables, this approach conceptualizes these constructs as a platform reinforcement layer that affects the translation of intention into actual purchasing behavior.

The study addresses two primary research questions:

1. Which determinants most strongly influence healthy food purchase intention among Saudi Gen Z consumers in social media environments?
2. Which determinants most strongly influence actual healthy food purchasing behavior?

By distinguishing intention from behavior, this research provides a conversion-focused perspective that aligns with both marketing strategy and digital consumer behavior research.

This study contributes to the literature in four ways. First, it provides empirical evidence from Saudi Arabia, a rapidly digitizing but underrepresented context in social media consumer behavior research. Second, it explicitly models the intention-behavior gap by estimating separate models for purchase intention and actual purchasing behavior. Third, it extends TPB theoretically by integrating social media mechanisms such as influencer influence, emotional engagement, and social comparison into the behavioral framework. Finally, the study generates practical insights for digital marketing strategy, particularly regarding influencer partnerships, credibility management, and consumer capability-building approaches that support healthier purchasing behaviors.

2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

2.1 Theory of Planned Behavior in Consumer Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is one of the most widely applied frameworks for explaining human decision-making in social and consumer behavior research. According to TPB, behavior is primarily determined by behavioral intention, which in turn is influenced by three key determinants: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). The model assumes that individuals evaluate the expected outcomes of a behavior, consider social expectations, and assess their ability to perform the behavior before forming intentions that lead to action. TPB has been extensively applied in studies examining food consumption, health-related behaviors, and sustainable purchasing decisions. Previous research demonstrates that attitudes toward healthy eating, perceived social pressure, and perceived behavioral control significantly influence consumers' intentions to adopt healthier dietary patterns (Chen, 2007; Yadav & Pathak, 2016). In addition, health consciousness and nutritional awareness often strengthen individuals' motivation to adopt healthier food consumption behaviors (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008).

However, TPB was originally developed in an environment where social influence was primarily interpersonal and not mediated by algorithm-driven digital platforms. In contemporary digital ecosystems, consumers are continuously exposed to curated content, influencer endorsements, and peer-generated information through social media platforms. These platforms can amplify social influence processes and shape consumer decision-making through mechanisms that extend beyond traditional interpersonal interactions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Hajli, 2015). Consequently, integrating digital influence factors into

the TPB framework can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how social media environments influence consumer purchasing behavior.

2.2 Social Media Influence on Consumer Behavior

Social media platforms have become central environments for consumer information search, product discovery, and peer interaction. These platforms allow consumers to access user-generated content, reviews, and recommendations that significantly influence purchasing decisions. Social commerce research indicates that social media interactions increase consumer trust and reduce uncertainty when evaluating products (Hajli, 2015). Furthermore, digital marketing strategies increasingly rely on social media platforms to reach younger consumers. Social media environments combine entertainment, social interaction, and marketing communication, making them powerful tools for shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In the context of food consumption, digital platforms frequently expose users to food-related advertising and influencer content. Research shows that exposure to social media food marketing can influence dietary preferences and consumption patterns, particularly among younger consumers (Kelly et al., 2015). Similarly, experimental evidence indicates that influencer marketing can directly influence food intake and product choice through identification with online personalities (Coates et al., 2019).

2.3 Influencer Marketing and Consumer Trust

Influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most influential digital marketing strategies in recent years. Social media influencers act as opinion leaders who shape consumer perceptions through perceived authenticity, credibility, and relatability. Research suggests that influencer credibility significantly affects consumer trust and purchase intentions. When consumers perceive influencers as knowledgeable and trustworthy, they are more likely to accept product recommendations and incorporate them into their purchasing decisions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Similarly, studies indicate that parasocial interaction between influencers and followers strengthens emotional connections that may influence consumer behavior (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Generation Z consumers are particularly responsive to influencer marketing because they often rely on social media personalities for lifestyle inspiration and product recommendations (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). As a result, influencer marketing plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior in digital environments.

2.4 Social Comparison in Social Media Environments

Social comparison theory suggests that individuals evaluate their attitudes and behaviors by comparing themselves with others (Festinger, 1954). Social media platforms intensify these comparison processes because users are continuously exposed to curated representations of lifestyle, body image, and consumption patterns. Research indicates that social media exposure can influence health-related attitudes and behaviors through comparison with idealized lifestyle representations. For example, studies have found that Instagram usage is associated with increased awareness of dietary practices and body-related concerns (Turner & Lefevre, 2017). These comparison processes may motivate individuals to adopt healthier lifestyle behaviors in order to align with perceived social norms. In digital environments, social comparison may therefore influence both consumers' intentions to adopt healthier diets and their actual purchasing behaviors.

2.5 Healthy Food Purchasing Behavior

Healthy food consumption has become an increasingly important topic in consumer behavior research due to growing public awareness of nutrition and lifestyle-related diseases. Consumers who exhibit higher levels of health consciousness tend to show stronger preferences for nutritious and healthy food products (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008). However, research frequently highlights a discrepancy between positive attitudes toward healthy eating and actual purchasing behavior. Many consumers express intentions to adopt healthier diets but fail to translate these intentions into consistent behavior due to barriers such as price, convenience, and social influences (Chen, 2007). Understanding how digital environments influence this intention-behavior relationship is therefore important for both marketing strategy and public health initiatives.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design and sample

A quantitative cross-sectional survey was administered online to Gen Z consumers in Saudi Arabia. The final dataset contains 401 valid responses. The sample comprised 217 males (54.1%) and 184 females (45.9%). Age distribution was 15–19 (25.2%), 20–24 (52.4%), 25–29 (9.5%), and 30–34 (13.0%). Daily social media use was high, with 4–6 hours (46.1%) and more than 7 hours (30.2%) representing the majority. In terms of primary exposure to healthy food content, respondents most commonly selected TikTok (72.8%), followed by Instagram (52.6%), Snapchat (38.2%), and X (12.5%).

3.2 Measures and scoring

The entire constructs were measured using multi-item Likert-type indicators with five response categories: 1 = "Never," 2 = "Rarely," 3 = "Sometimes," 4 = "Often," and 5 = "Always." Composite indices were computed as the mean of item scores per construct. This approach yields interpretable scale means (range 1–5) and

is widely used in consumer behavior survey research. Such constructs were operationalized as follows: exposure to healthy food content (6 items), attitude toward healthy food (4 items), health awareness (4 items), influencer trust (4 items), susceptibility to influencers (4 items), subjective norms (4 items), self-efficacy (4 items), emotional influence (4 items), social comparison (4 items), purchase intention (4 items), and purchase behavior (4 items).

3.3 Reliability assessment

Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. All constructs met or exceeded common thresholds for acceptable reliability in applied marketing research. The alpha values ranged from .716 to .848, indicating satisfactory to strong internal consistency. The analysis proceeded in four steps. First, descriptive statistics were computed for the sample and all composite indices. Second, reliability estimates were calculated for each construct. Third, correlations were examined to establish associations among constructs and outcomes. Fourth, two multiple regression models were estimated: Table 2 predicted purchase intention; Table 3 predicted purchase behavior. Standardized beta coefficients (β), explained variance (R^2), and significance values (p) are reported to support interpretation and comparability across predictors.

4. Results

Table 1 as shown below reports composite means, standard deviations, and reliability. Respondents reported high levels of health awareness ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.87$, $\alpha = .793$) and positive attitudes toward healthy food ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.91$, $\alpha = .822$). Emotional influence was also relatively high ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.99$, $\alpha = .828$), indicating that health-related content is affectively engaging for many respondents. By contrast, purchase intention was moderate ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.92$, $\alpha = .807$) and purchase behavior was lower ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.95$, $\alpha = .834$). This pattern indicates a substantive intention-behavior gap: consumers in this sample endorse healthy food cognitively and emotionally, yet do not consistently translate that orientation into purchasing actions.

Table 1. Descriptives and reliability (composite indices; 1–5 scale; N = 401)

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	M	SD
Exposure to healthy food content	6	.730	2.81	0.75
Attitude toward healthy food	4	.822	3.70	0.91
Health awareness	4	.793	3.73	0.87
Influencer trust	4	.795	3.11	0.78
Susceptibility to influencers	4	.848	2.56	0.96
Subjective norms	4	.716	2.92	0.85
Self-efficacy	4	.777	3.02	0.88
Emotional influence	4	.828	3.41	0.99
Social comparison	4	.794	2.54	0.94
Purchase intention	4	.807	2.99	0.92
Purchase behavior	4	.834	2.50	0.95

Moreover, purchase intention correlated positively with self-efficacy ($r = .60$), emotional influence ($r = .57$), attitude ($r = .53$), subjective norms ($r = .51$), influencer trust ($r = .48$), susceptibility ($r = .48$), social comparison ($r = .45$), and health awareness ($r = .44$). Purchase behavior correlated most strongly with purchase intention ($r = .67$), susceptibility to influencers ($r = .66$), and social comparison ($r = .64$). These associations are consistent with a two-stage conversion logic: intention aligns more with capability and evaluative orientation, while behavior aligns more strongly with activation and reinforcement mechanisms.

Table 2 estimated the relative predictive strength of the theory-based determinants of intention. The table explained 52.7% of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = .527$). Self-efficacy emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .251$, $p < .001$), followed closely by emotional influence ($\beta = .225$, $p < .001$). Social comparison ($\beta = .164$, $p < .001$), attitude ($\beta = .183$, $p < .001$), and subjective norms ($\beta = .104$, $p = .033$) were also significant predictors. Health awareness and influencer trust were not significant predictors in the presence of the other variables, while susceptibility to influencers was marginal ($p \approx .059$). This indicates that intention is primarily capability and emotion-driven, with comparison and evaluative beliefs playing secondary roles.

Table 2. Multiple regression predicting purchase intention (standardized coefficients)

Predictor	β	p
Self-efficacy	.251	< .001
Emotional influence	.225	< .001
Attitude toward healthy food	.183	< .001
Social comparison	.164	< .001
Subjective norms	.104	.033
Susceptibility to influencers	.100	.059
Health awareness	-.074	.179
Influencer trust	.018	.712

Table fit: $R^2 = .527$.

Table 3 tested predictors of self-reported purchase behavior. The Table explained 65.0% of the variance ($R^2 = .650$). Consistent with TPB, purchase intention was the strongest predictor ($\beta = .436$, $p < .001$). Importantly, behavior was also substantially reinforced by social comparison ($\beta = .253$, $p < .001$) and susceptibility to influencers ($\beta = .248$, $p < .001$). Influencer trust ($\beta \approx .099$, $p = .042$) and subjective norms ($\beta = .098$, $p = .020$) remained significant. Health awareness showed a small but statistically significant negative association ($\beta = -.104$, $p = .029$), suggesting that greater awareness does not necessarily translate into higher purchase behavior and may be linked to increased scrutiny or higher perceived barriers.

Table 3. Multiple regression predicting purchase behavior (standardized coefficients)

Predictor	β	p
Purchase intention	.436	< .001
Social comparison	.253	< .001
Susceptibility to influencers	.248	< .001
Subjective norms	.098	.020
Influencer trust	.099	.042
Health awareness	-.104	.029
Attitude toward healthy food	ns	> .05
Self-efficacy	ns	> .05
Emotional influence	ns	> .05

Table fit: $R^2 = .650$.

5. Discussion

This study set out to explain healthy food purchasing among Saudi Gen Z consumers in a platform-economy context by extending TPB with influencer and social-comparison mechanisms. The results support a conversion architecture that is strategically meaningful for digital markets: intention is driven primarily by capability and affect, while behavior is driven by intention and reinforced by platform-era activation mechanisms. First, the descriptive findings reveal a pronounced intention-behavior gap. Respondents report high health awareness and strongly favorable attitudes toward healthy food, yet their purchasing behavior remains comparatively lower. This pattern aligns with the broader observation that favorable health cognitions do not automatically translate into enacted consumption, especially in contexts where the behavior requires sustained effort, cost tradeoffs, or habit disruption. From a platform perspective, the gap is not simply a psychological failure; it is also a strategic friction problem: consumers may want to act but lack perceived capability, convenient routines, or reinforcement that stabilizes behavior.

The intention Table shows that self-efficacy is the strongest predictor of purchase intention, exceeding the influence of awareness and even influencer trust. This is a theoretically consistent but strategically underappreciated result. In platform markets, firms often compete by increasing exposure and aspiration. Yet the data indicate that consumers form intention when they believe healthy purchasing is realistically executable: they can choose healthy options with peers, interpret labels, and sustain decisions when alternatives are available. This suggests that the “capability layer” is foundational. Digital strategy in health-related markets may therefore benefit from shifting emphasis from inspiration alone toward operational support that reduces decision friction such as simplifying product information, offering ready-to-use healthy bundles, or embedding affordability cues.

Emotional influence significantly predicts intention. This underscores that platforms operate as affective ecosystems, not merely informational channels. In practice, Gen Z consumers are likely to encounter health

narratives through transformation content, motivational scripts, and visually compelling portrayals. Emotional influence does not replace capability, but it appears to amplify motivational readiness. Strategically, emotional content may function as a trigger that increases willingness to initiate change, especially when paired with capability-building resources that convert affect into consistent purchasing. In addition, social comparison predicts both intention and behavior, and its effect is particularly strong for behavior. This is critical for marketing theory and for digital strategy. Social comparison is not merely a side effect of social media; it functions as a structural conversion mechanism. Visibility creates benchmarks, benchmarks create pressure, and pressure increases the likelihood of trying what is trending or socially rewarded. The implication is that healthy food purchasing in platform economies is partly a socially negotiated behavior in which consumers align choices with peer-visible lifestyle scripts. This reinforces the argument that extending TPB in digital contexts requires explicitly modeling comparison-based reinforcement rather than treating norms as only offline interpersonal expectations.

The influencer mechanisms show a distinct pattern that refines the role of digital persuasion. Influencer trust does not significantly predict intention in the intention model, but it does predict purchase behavior in the behavior model. Meanwhile, susceptibility to influencers is one of the strongest predictors of behavior, even when intention is included. This distinction supports a “behavioral accelerator” interpretation: influencers may not primarily create intention for healthy purchasing, but they can catalyze action by lowering hesitation, increasing salience, and offering ready-made behavioral scripts. In platform markets, influencer content can operate like a conversion shortcut. This is consistent with the idea that platform persuasion often works through activation and reinforcement rather than through rational attitude change alone. It also aligns with governance concerns around disclosure and credibility, where the strategic question is not only whether consumers trust influencers but whether influencer exposure accelerates decisions regardless of careful evaluation (González-Díaz, 2024; Saternus et al., 2024).

The negative association between health awareness and purchase behavior is theoretically and managerially important. A simple assumption would predict that higher awareness leads to higher healthy purchasing. Instead, in this sample, awareness is high but behavior is lower, and when other predictors are controlled, awareness is slightly negatively related to behavior. One plausible explanation is that health-aware consumers are more critical of influencer-promoted products, more attentive to nutritional details, or more sensitive to price and availability barriers, reducing impulsive purchases triggered by platform content. Strategically, this suggests two segments: an “activation-driven” segment that purchases through social reinforcement and influencer cues, and a “critical-aware” segment that may require verified claims, transparent evidence, and value-based propositions to convert.

Overall, these findings advance a digital strategy contribution: conversion in platform economies appears to operate through two layers. The first is a cognitive-capability layer consistent with TPB, where self-efficacy, attitude, and norms shape intention. The second is a platform reinforcement layer, where social comparison and influencer susceptibility activate or intensify behavior and help determine whether intention becomes action. This layered interpretation fits the broader observation that social media can serve as a determinant of food consumer behavior and that platform effects need to be conceptualized as mechanisms, not just channels (Rini et al., 2024).

6. Implications

Theoretically, the study supports extending TPB in platform contexts by treating influencer and comparison variables as reinforcement mechanisms rather than as simple social inputs. In TPB, subjective norms represent perceived expectations, but platforms create a more persistent normative environment through visibility and metric-driven social proof. Social comparison emerges as a distinct mechanism that influences both motivational formation and behavioral enactment. Influencer susceptibility, meanwhile, appears to function as a conversion catalyst, shaping behavior even when intention is accounted for. This suggests that future marketing theory in platform economies should separate intention formation from behavioral activation, and should model the platform reinforcement layer explicitly.

From a digital strategy perspective, the results imply that healthy food brands compete along three strategic levers. The first is capability-building. If self-efficacy is the strongest driver of intention, then strategy should focus on enabling execution: reduce complexity, provide clear label interpretation, offer affordable entry options, and design convenience into products and bundles. The second lever is affective engagement. Emotional influence predicts intention, suggesting that emotionally resonant storytelling and transformation narratives can initiate motivation, but they should be paired with feasible action pathways to reduce drop-off. The third lever is reinforcement governance. Because behavior is reinforced by influencer susceptibility and social comparison, firms should treat influencer partnerships as conversion tools that can accelerate action, while recognizing reputational risk if credibility is compromised. Transparency and evidence-based endorsements become strategically important, not only ethically but because trust remains a meaningful predictor of behavior.

At the ecosystem level, the study reinforces the need for influencer governance in health-related categories. Disclosure strategy research indicates that how sponsorship is disclosed affects credibility and consumer

outcomes, and regulatory analyses emphasize the growing importance of legal and self-regulatory frameworks for influencer commercial communication (González-Díaz, 2024; Saternus et al., 2024). For Saudi Arabia, where social media influence is extensive and health priorities are policy-relevant, these governance insights are particularly salient.

7. Limitations and future research

The study is cross-sectional and based on self-reported behavior; causal inference is therefore limited. Longitudinal designs and experimental studies could clarify temporal ordering, especially whether influencer susceptibility and social comparison causally activate behavior or reflect post-purchase justification. Future research should also incorporate structural equation modeling to test mediation pathways, including whether intention mediates the effects of capability on behavior while reinforcement mechanisms partially bypass intention. Platform-level differences should be examined because TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and X vary in affordances, content formats, and recommendation dynamics, which may condition the strength of emotional influence and comparison effects. Additionally, future work could integrate objective purchase proxies (e.g., receipts, app-based purchase logs) or partner with retailers to validate behavior outcomes.

8. Conclusion

This research explains healthy food purchasing among Saudi Gen Z consumers as a platform-economy conversion process shaped by both cognitive capability and digitally mediated reinforcement. Despite high health awareness and favorable attitudes, purchase behavior remains lower, revealing a meaningful intention-behavior gap. Regression results show that intention is driven primarily by self-efficacy, emotional influence, social comparison, attitude, and subjective norms, while behavior is driven strongly by intention and reinforced by susceptibility to influencers, social comparison, influencer trust, and norms. These findings extend TPB by demonstrating that platform-era markets contain a reinforcement layer that shapes conversion beyond traditional cognitive determinants. For business administration and digital strategy, the implication is direct: effective growth in platform markets requires not only persuasive content but capability-building design and responsible reinforcement strategies that protect credibility while enabling sustainable consumer action.

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