

Service Quality and Students Retention Among Private Universities in Uganda: A Case of Islamic University in Uganda

Turyatunga Modern¹; Nabukeera Madinah²; Matovu Musa³;
Ssali Muhammadi Bisaso⁴

¹Post Graduate Student, ^{2,3}Assistant Professor Dr., ⁴Senior Lecturer.

^{1,4}Department of Education Management and Administration, Faculty of Education, Islamic University in Uganda.

²Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Studies, Islamic University in Uganda.

³Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, Islamic University in Uganda.

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Abstract: The study was carried out to investigate the relationship between service quality and students' retention in Islamic University in Uganda, Females Campus Kabojja (IUIU-FC). It was guided by the following specific objectives; (i) to examine the relationship between Service Reliability and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC, (ii) to examine the relationship between Service Responsiveness and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC, and (iii) to examine the relationship between Service Tangibility and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC. The study was based on primary data which was collected using closed ended questionnaires. Data was provided by IUIU-FC third year undergraduate students in programs which were highly affected by students drop outs. Data collected was edited, coded and entered into computer program known as Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). The SPSS program was used to analyze the data collected by carrying out descriptive and Pearson correlation analyses. The results indicated that; (i) there is a statistically significant and strong positive relationship between Service Reliability and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC ($r = 0.709$; Sig. value = $0.000 < 0.01$), (ii) there is a statistically significant and strong positive relationship between Service Responsiveness and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC ($r = 0.624$; Sig. value = $0.000 < 0.01$) and (iii) there is a statistically significant and strong positive relationship between Service Tangibility and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC ($r = 0.723$; Sig. value = $0.000 < 0.01$). It was concluded that elements of service quality play a critical role in students' retention at a university. Based on the study findings and conclusions, it was recommended that IUIU-FC staff members should at all times show sincere interest in solving students' problems. They should for instance give students full attention when they present issues and at the same time quickly respond to students' emails, calls or messages. The university should dedicate part of its budget to facility improvement each semester. It should also formulate a policy that makes it mandatory for its staff members to be well-dressed and neat in appearance at all times.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Retaining students has been and is still one of the critical objectives of private universities across the globe (Albornoz-Toyohama et al., 2025). This is mainly because, higher retention rate will attract more students, which is essential for the university's success since those students will pay tuition and fees and provide excellent academic outcomes (Burke, 2019). On the contrary, universities that fail to retain students will encounter financial problems, affect teaching quality and therefore have an impact on

student satisfaction (Xuerong & Kanjanapathy, 2024). Additionally, universities that fail to ensure student retention jeopardize their reputation, financial gain, and survival (Eresia-Eke et al., 2020). This notwithstanding however, student retention has been a major challenge to many universities and indeed, incidents that involve students leaving without completing their courses continue to threaten the continued survival of Universities across the world (Eresia-Eke et al., 2020). In Uganda for instance, despite achieving a significant increase in students' enrollments from 264,908 students in 2019/20 to 268,908

students in 2020/21 (National Council for Higher Education, 2022), students' retention rates in most of these universities remain low (Kajoina, 2022). The situation is even more disheartening among private universities where student retention remains a source of concern for different stakeholders. A study conducted by Kajoina (2022) indicated that, even when private universities account for more than 51% of the total student enrollments in university education, most of them are grappling with a challenge of retaining the students they admit. Kajoina (2022) further reported that almost 30% of all students in Uganda who join university education for various degree programs, never finish their courses on time, or simply drop out.

To avoid the adverse effects of low students' retention, a number of strategies have been suggested. According to the findings of many studies, service quality attributes are crucial at private educational institutions for building positive interactions with students and enhancing the proportion of student retention (Kamissa, 2020). Leonnard (2018) also established that similar to ensuring high quality of service is a fundamental strategy to maintaining students' retention in a university. Besides, several previous researchers have provided the link between service quality and students retention in Universities on global, continental, regional and national levels. For instance, Albayda (2025) revealed that overall service quality has a significant impact on student retention among students in the Philippines. On a similar note, Kitana (2016) studied service quality and student retention in the United Arab Emirates and established a positive relationship between the two variables. This concurs with Borishade et al., (2021) whose study in Nigeria revealed that when students' service expectations are met or exceeded, they are more likely to stay, emphasizing a more direct relationship between service quality and students retention. In Sudan, Omar and Mustafa (2020) reported that service quality directly affects students' decisions to stay in Universities. Likewise in Uganda, Kajoina (2022) observed that student services play an essential role in Universities, not only by reducing student dropout rates but also by increasing student retention. The study was guided by the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985), which conceptualizes service quality across five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy. Its reliability and credibility makes it an effective tool in evaluating consumer expectations and perceptions (Nojavan et al., 2021). Unlike most of the previous researchers that used this model to assess the quality of teaching at tertiary institutions (Arthur et al., 2022), the current study used it to assess student retention at university level.

The study was conducted in the context of private universities in Uganda and more specifically in the Islamic University in Uganda, Females Campus Kabojja (IUIU-FC). IUIU-FC is one of the three campuses of IUIU established in the year 2008 to increase access to Higher Education for the female students from Uganda and other English speaking African countries. Even when the campus has been in operation for more than 15 years, IUIU-FC continues to grapple with a challenge of low students' retention

(Nabukeera, 2018). In some science programs like Bachelors Information Technology (BIT), student's numbers were reported to have reduced by almost 50% from 103 in 2011/12 to 56 in 2015/16. Students in the faculty of management also reduced from 347 in 2013/14 to 237 in 2015/2016. The total number of students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences also reduced from 207 in 2014/15 academic year to 151 in 2015/16 (Nabukeera, 2018). While there could be many factors contributing to the low students' retention in IUIU-FC, service quality attributes may also be responsible since they have the capacity to influence students' retention in private universities (Kajoina, 2022). However, no study had been done to confirm or refute this in the context of IUIU-FC. This opened a gap for the current study to examine the relationship between service quality and students' retention in IUIU-FC. The study examined how service quality, or a lack thereof, relates with students' retention in IUIU-FC.

➤ *Statement of the Problem*

It is critical for universities to attract and retain students if they are to effectively execute their cardinal role of teaching, research and innovation (Eresia-Eke et al., 2020). Consequently, IUIU-FC implemented a number of strategies aimed at ensuring that she retains her students. Since the year 2008, the university has for instance invested considerable amount of resources in improving its service quality by putting in place several offices to respond to students' needs and laboring to provide prompt services and a number of physical facilities, including security services, parking space, modern equipments, toilet facilities among others. These strategies were, inter alia, geared towards improving service quality in a bid to increase students' retention at the university. However, the contribution of all these elements of service quality to students' retention in IUIU-FC remains doubtful since, even when they are in place, IUIU-FC continues to grapple with a challenge of low students' retention (Nabukeera, 2018). If this situation is not deal with, it will put sustainability of the campus in jeopardy since students are the major sources of funds that run its activities and programs. Therefore, as IUIU-FC continues to invest in service quality initiatives which, among other things, are intended enhance students' retention, there is need to examine why these initiatives seem not to be enhancing students' retention as expected. This situation prompted the researcher to undertake this study to examine whether dimensions of service quality have any statistically significant relationship with students' retention in IUIU-FC.

➤ *Purpose of the Study*

The study aims at assessing the relationship between service quality and students' retention in IUIU-FC.

• *Specific Objectives*

The study was guided by the following specific objectives

- ✓ To examine the relationship between Service Reliability and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC

- ✓ To examine the relationship between Service Responsiveness and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC
- ✓ To examine the relationship between Service Tangibility and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC

• *Hypotheses*

The study was guided by the following null hypotheses;

- ✓ There is no statistically significant relationship between Service Reliability and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC
- ✓ There is no statistically significant relationship between Service Responsiveness and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC
- ✓ There is no statistically significant relationship between Service Tangibility and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC

• *Scope of the Study*

The study focused on assessing the relationship between service quality and students' retention in IUIU-FC.

Service quality was defined in terms of service reliability, service responsiveness and service tangibility. An analysis was made to establish how each of these dimensions relates with students' retention in IUIU-FC. The study was carried out from IUIU-FC in Kabojja in Wakiso district. The study focused on the time between 2020 and 2024.

• *Significance of the Study*

The findings from this study will assist policy makers in IUIU-FC since it proposed the different ways through which students' retention can be improved. The study findings may also be significant to stakeholders in institutions of higher learning in comprehending the role of service quality in such institutions.

• *Conceptual Framework*

The study was based on the following conceptual framework.

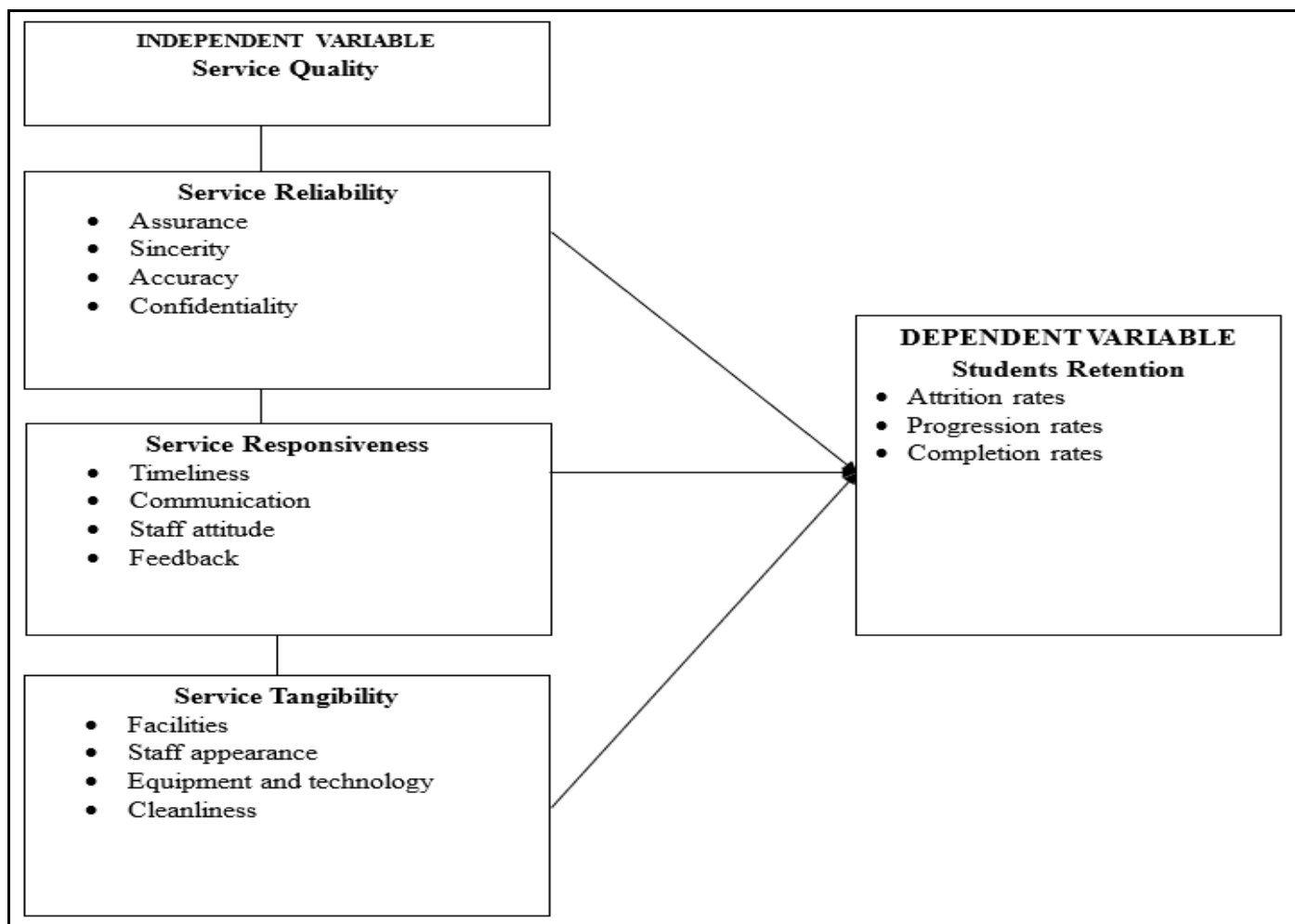


Fig 1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was adopted and adapted from Xuerong and Kanjanapathy (2024).

The conceptual framework was developed based on the assumption that dimensions of service quality have a

direct relationship with students' retention which was defined in terms of attrition rates, progression rates and completion rates.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, attempts have been made to review the literature on the study variables. Documents reviewed for the purpose of this study are broadly classified as research reports, thesis and dissertations as well as published journal articles.

➤ *Service Quality Model*

The study was guided by the SERVQUAL model which is widely recognized and commonly utilized by researchers to explore service quality in various service industries, including the higher education sector. In order to easily recall the five dimensions, the original developers of the SERVQUAL model propose using the letters of RATER, representing reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In the context of a university, the first dimension, Reliability, relates to the ability of the university to perform the promised services dependably and accurately. Additionally, assurance entails the knowledge and courtesy of the academic staff/faculty and their ability to convey trust and confidence. Thirdly, Tangibles pertains to the external characteristics of various elements such as physical infrastructures, apparatus, staff members, and communication resources. Fourthly, Empathy is the ability of the academic staff and faculty to provide a caring and individualized attention to students. Moreover, responsiveness refers to the speed and corrective feedback in the responses according to the changing needs and expectations of the students. Each time students experience a service, they evaluate the service quality by judging the experience based on the five dimensions.

➤ *Service Quality*

Service quality is customer perception of the service in relation to their prior expectations (Kizito, 2023). In other words, it is the degree to which the service offered can satisfy the expectation of the user (Kizito, 2023). Parasuraman et al. (1988) also defined service quality as a form of attitude, related but not equivalent to satisfaction, and resulting from the comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance. The overall perception of service quality reflects the degree to which performance meets or exceeds customer expectations of quality as a yardstick. Thus, service quality is defined as the difference between customers' expectations of service quality and their perceived performance (Paraskevas, 2021). Kizito (2023) also stated that service quality in education is the difference between the students' and parents' expectations for service performance of educational institutions prior to the service encounter and their perceptions of the service perceived in the institutions. The concept of service quality among education institutions therefore means all the capabilities of an educational institution to fulfill all desires of its stakeholders like students and parents (Siregar & Bahrin, 2020).

➤ *Students Retention*

Students' retention is one of the basic requirements for growth and development of the education institution and

remains one of the core subjects of concern in schools in many parts of the world (Mayoma & Nabukenya, 2022). Students' retention implies that children, who are enrolled in school, keep in schools and complete their program (Hughes, West, Kim & Bauer, 2018). High retention rate is critical for universities as it attracts more students, which is essential for the university's success since those students will pay tuition and fees and provide excellent academic outcomes (Burke, 2019). On the contrary, universities that fail to retain students will encounter financial problems, affect teaching quality and therefore have an impact on student satisfaction (Xuerong & Kanjanapathy, 2024). Additionally, universities that fail to ensure student retention jeopardize their reputation, financial gain, and survival (Eresia-Eke et al., 2020).

➤ *Service Quality and Students' Retention*

Besides, several previous researchers have provided the link between service quality and students retention in Universities. For instance, Forid, Hafez and Khan (2022) investigated how service quality dimensions and digital transformation influence student satisfaction and student retention in private universities in Bangladesh. This study revealed that all the service quality dimensions positively and significantly impact student satisfaction and retention except the empathy dimension. Similarly, Zakirullah, Camlibel and Ying (2025) investigated how aspects of service quality, such as tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, impact students' contentment and views on the university's standing in society. The results show the importance of top-quality services across areas such as support and campus facilities in improving students' contentment and overall happiness and significantly boosting the institutions standing.

Relatedly, Albayda, (2025) assessed service quality as a determinant of student retention in private HEIs in Kabankalan city in the Philippines. A total of 361 first- and second-year students from three private HEIs were surveyed through convenience sampling. The findings revealed that overall service quality has a significant impact on student retention. This concurs with Borishade et al., (2021) whose revealed that when students' service expectations are met or exceeded, they are more likely to stay, emphasizing a more direct relationship between service quality and students retention. Furthermore, Omar and Mustafa (2020) reported that service quality directly affects students' decisions to stay in Universities. Likewise, Kajoina (2022) observed that student services play an essential role in Universities, not only by reducing student dropout rates but also by increasing student retention. It can be observed from the foregoing sections that several studies have been conducted on service quality. It is observed that generally, service quality dimensions indeed have a significant contribution in organizations. However, the researcher identifies content, contextual and methodological in the existing studies. For case of a content gap, the researcher observes that some of the previous studies focused on examining service quality with consumer satisfaction and ignored how service quality relates with student retention. For case of a contextual gap, the researcher observes that none of the previous studies was

conducted in the context of IUIU-FC. Besides, most of the previous studies were carried out using descriptive methodologies which left a methodological gap. Existence of content, contextual and methodological gaps in the existing studies acted as a justification for the current study.

III. METHODOLOGY

The researcher used a correlational research design. This design was taken to be fitting for the study since its major objective was to establish the relationship between service quality and students' retention in IUIU-FC. The study used a quantitative approach. The population was composed of 55 third year undergraduate students doing Bachelors Information Technology (BIT), Bachelors of Business Studies (BBS) and Bachelors of Social Works and Administration Studies (BSWAS) which were highly affected by students drop outs. Their number was obtained from the office of the assistant academic registrar IUIU-FC. Third year students were selected since they were believed to have stayed longer in the university and were therefore more placed to provide the required information. All the 55 students were considered for the study which was based on a census enquiry. The study use closed-ended questionnaires to collect the required data from the 55 respondents. However, the researcher was able to recover 45 questionnaires giving a response rate of 81.8%.

To ensure validity of the questionnaires, the researcher relied on the opinions of experts in research who assisted in assessing the content validity of the proposed data collection tool. Thereafter, a content validity index (CVI) was

computed. The study obtained a CVI of 0.8 which means that the study instrument was valid. The research tool was also pilot tested on a sample of 10 respondents to test for its reliability. The study obtained a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.820 which means that the study instrument was reliable.

Data collected using the questionnaires was edited, coded and then entered into computer program known as Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). Using this computer program, both descriptive and inferential statistics (Pearson's correlation analysis) were generated. The study was conducted following some ethical considerations. First the researcher obtained permission to conduct the study from management of IUIU-FC. None of the respondents was included against their will. The researcher also ensured respondents confidentiality by not requiring them to indicate their names on the questionnaire. Furthermore, all the information provided by the respondents was used for academic purposes only.

➤ Findings

The findings obtained on each of the specific objectives of the study are presented as follows.

- *Objective 1: To Examine the Relationship Between Service Reliability and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC*

To achieve this objective, a Pearson's Correlation Analysis was conducted using the data obtained from the respondents. The results are indicated Table 1.

Table 1 Correlations Results

		Service Reliability	Students' Retention in IUIU-FC
Service Reliability	Pearson Correlation	1	.709**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	45	45
Students' Retention in IUIU-FC	Pearson Correlation	.709**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	45	45

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The results in Table 1 indicate that there is a statistically significant and strong positive relationship between Service Reliability and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC ($r = 0.709$; Sig. value = $0.000 < 0.01$). Consequently, the null hypothesis which stated that "there is no statistically significant relationship between Service Reliability and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC" was rejected and the alternative accepted.

- *Objective 2: To Examine the Relationship Between Service Responsiveness and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC*

To achieve this objective, a Pearson's Correlation Analysis was conducted using the data obtained from the respondents. The results are indicated Table 2.

Table 2 Correlations Results

		Service Responsiveness	Students' Retention in IUIU-FC
Service Responsiveness	Pearson Correlation	1	.624**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	45	45
Students' Retention in IUIU-FC	Pearson Correlation	.624**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	

	N	45	45
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The results in Table 2 indicate that there is a statistically significant and strong positive relationship between Service Responsiveness and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC ($r = 0.624$; Sig. value = $0.000 < 0.01$). Consequently, the null hypothesis which stated that "there is no statistically significant relationship between Service Responsiveness and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC" was rejected and the alternative accepted.

• *Objective 3: To Examine the Relationship Between Service Tangibility and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC*

To achieve this objective, a Pearson's Correlation Analysis was conducted using the data obtained from the respondents. The results are indicated Table 3.

Table 3 Correlations Results

		Service Tangibility	Students' Retention in IUIU-FC
Service Tangibility	Pearson Correlation	1	.723**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	45	45
Students' Retention in IUIU-FC	Pearson Correlation	.723**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	45	45
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The results in Table 3 indicate that there is a statistically significant and strong positive relationship between Service Tangibility and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC ($r = 0.723$; Sig. value = $0.000 < 0.01$). Consequently, the null hypothesis which stated that "there is no statistically significant relationship between Service Tangibility and Students' Retention in IUIU-FC" was rejected and the alternative accepted.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions were made on each of the specific objectives that guided the study.

- Service reliability plays a critical role in students' retention at a university. When the university services (teaching, examinations, administration, welfare) are consistently reliable, students trust the institution and are more likely to stay and complete their studies.
- Service responsiveness also plays a vital role in students' retention at a university. When the university is consistently responsive to students' needs and concerns, it increases satisfaction, trust, and loyalty, making students more likely to continue with their studies.
- Well-maintained and visually appealing facilities, equipment, staff appearance, technology, and learning resources creates a positive image that makes students proud to belong to a particular university which increases their commitment to stay.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are presented to management of IUIU-FC.

- IUIU-FC staff members should at all times show sincere interest in solving students' problems. They should for instance give students full attention when they present issues and at the same time quickly respond to students' emails, calls or messages.
- IUIU-FC should endeavor to keep accurate and errors free record. The university can for instance provide channels for students to quickly report and correct errors in their records.
- IUIU-FC staff members should endeavor to communicate to students on how long it would take to have their problems dealt with. The university can for instance develop a policy of informing students whom to contact if their problem is not solved within the communicated timeframe. This gives students confidence that their concerns will not be ignored.
- The university should invest and put in place more visually appealing facilities (e.g., buildings and furniture). The university can for instance dedicate part of its budget to facility improvement each semester.
- The university can also formulate a policy that makes its mandatory for its staff members to be well-dressed and neat in appearance at all times. The university can for instance create and communicate a professional dress code guideline for academic, administrative, and support staff.

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