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Chapter 11

The bolthole of self-employment: migrant workers avoiding prejudice and discrimination

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Introduction

Self-employment amongst migrants has been an area of investigation for many years, with the characteristics of individuals often the basis of explanatory factors of ethnic entrepreneurship and self-employment (Lindmark et al, 2014). Those participating in migration have been thought of as rational individuals who are prepared to take risks to improve their livelihoods and can sometimes take advantages of being outsiders (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013). Whilst some have argued that culture plays an important role in the self-employment of migrants (Fairlie and Meyer, 1996), others suggest it is a response to blocked mobility through labour market disadvantage and discrimination and is therefore a matter of strategic survival (Boyd, 2000).

Whilst much is understood about migrant workers employed formally, or informally, within tourism and hospitality services (Ladkin, 2011; Janta et al, 2011, Ndiuini and Baum, 2020), the self-employment of immigrants has received scant attention. This is surprising, given the general tendency in the labour market more broadly towards self-employment rather than paid employment (Yuen et al., 2018). Evidence from other studies has shown self-employment in tourism, particularly within the hotel and restaurant sector amongst the foreign-born populations is growing rapidly (Joppe, 2012). In Europe in 2016 self-employment constituted 9 per cent of the workforce in accommodation and food services, compared with 5 per cent in the wider economy

(Williams and Horodnic, 2020). This lack of research can be partly explained by a limited amount of data regarding self-employment and ethnicity more broadly, compounded by the challenges of the distinction between registered self-employment, and that which occurs in the informal sector.

The emergence of internet platforms has become an important factor in the choice for and the conditions of self-employment. Pervading important parts of the informal economy, they have lowered the barriers to entry but at the same time, they have eroded the legal protection of workers. Those with limited access to the regular labour market may therefore resort to platform work, with the risk of greater exposure to abusive practices.

This chapter offers an insight into the self-employment of the migrant population primarily in the restaurant sector, drawing from examples in the Netherlands and the UK. The approach looks at self-employment historically, as well as the current situation, before moving on to the platform era and the implications of this new way of working. In doing so, the chapter questions whether self-employment offers a bolthole for migrant workers as refuge from some of the hospitality employment challenges.

Self-employment in ethnic minority communities

The emergence of entrepreneurial activity segmented along ethnic groups is a phenomenon that can be commonly observed in migration destination countries: from the 'Indian' —mostly Bangladeshi— restaurants in the UK, Russian supermarkets in Germany, Ethiopian taxi drivers in the US or Senegalese 'blanket' salesmen in Spain. In addition, migrant self-employment has been profusely studied since the 1970s; see for example, the literature reviews in Nestorowicz (2012), Brzozowski & Lasek (2019) and De Quieroz Falcão et al. (2020). OECD countries show a slight overrepresentation of immigrants among the self-employed, with 12.7 per cent of the working population compared to 12.0 per cent for host population; in Australia, this difference was 18.8 per cent as against 16 per cent of the domestic population (Alaslani and Collins, 2017). Other studies, however, report lower self-employment in immigrant populations than among the host community (Van Tubergen, 2005, OECD/European Union, 2019). What these numerical differences fail to show, however, are enormous contrasts between ethnical groups (Clark and Drinkwater, 2000, Li, 2001, Bradley, 2004, Van Tubergen, 2005, Clark, 2015), business type and the perceived prestige of these business types between migrants (Chaudhary, 2015) and host communities (Nestorowicz, 2012).

Several theories contribute to understanding a propensity of migrants for entrepreneurial sectors. One suggests that immigrants represent a self-selection of less risk-averse individuals, who are therefore more open to business ventures (Laganà, 2011, Nestorowicz, 2012, Lundmark et al., 2014, Clark, 2015). Ethnic minorities are also exposed to push and pull factors that help explain their choice for self-entrepreneurship. The 'blocked mobility' hypothesis (Laganà, 2011, Nestorowicz, 2012, Chaudhary, 2015, Alaslani and Collins, 2017, de Queiroz Falcão et al., 2020) assumes that limited access to the regular labour market pushes immigrants towards self-employment. Discrimination, financial urgency, lack of recognition of educational or professional achievements in the country of origin, language barriers, lack of networks and insufficient knowledge of the labour market create an 'accent ceiling' (Collins and Low, 2010) in traditional career paths that makes entrepreneurship, especially in low-access sectors, an alternative to paid employment (Tofig, 2017).

The 'ethnic enclave' theory, on the other hand, provides an explanation of how immigrants are pulled towards entrepreneurship within their own community. After several years from arrival — a time lag necessary for building local networks (Li, 2001)—, opportunities arise for immigrants to create businesses that target the demand of their co-ethnic group. This development is facilitated by specific market knowledge, working longer hours, the availability of inexpensive labour of relatives and in-group sources of financing. Enclave businesses create a local labour market in which co-ethnic immigrants avoid the disadvantages they would encounter in the general labour market (Nestorowicz, 2012, Knight, 2015).

Whilst self-entrepreneurship provides an alternative for the restricted access of immigrants to traditional labour market, enclave businesses are often faced with increasing competition from peers with a similar offer, in neighbourhoods with low purchasing power (Andersson and Hammarstedt, 2015). This makes their survival often contingent on 'breaking out' of their cultural niche (Chaudhry and Crick, 2004, Crick et al., 2016). The appeal of self-employment therefore may tend to erode once subsequent generations reduce their disadvantage in education and language skills (Clark, 2015, Chaudhary, 2015). In summary, the 'blocked mobility' and 'ethnic enclaves' are not mutually exclusive explanations. The diversity of immigrant groups and their discrimination or acceptance in host communities, empirical evidence for either theory, as well as for next generation effects in different contexts suggest that different migrant communities differ and there is no 'one size fits all' explanation. (Van Tubergen, 2005, Ohlsson et al., 2010, Abada et al., 2014, Andersson and Hammarstedt, 2015, Clark, 2015, Chaudhary, 2015).

Assessing the current situation

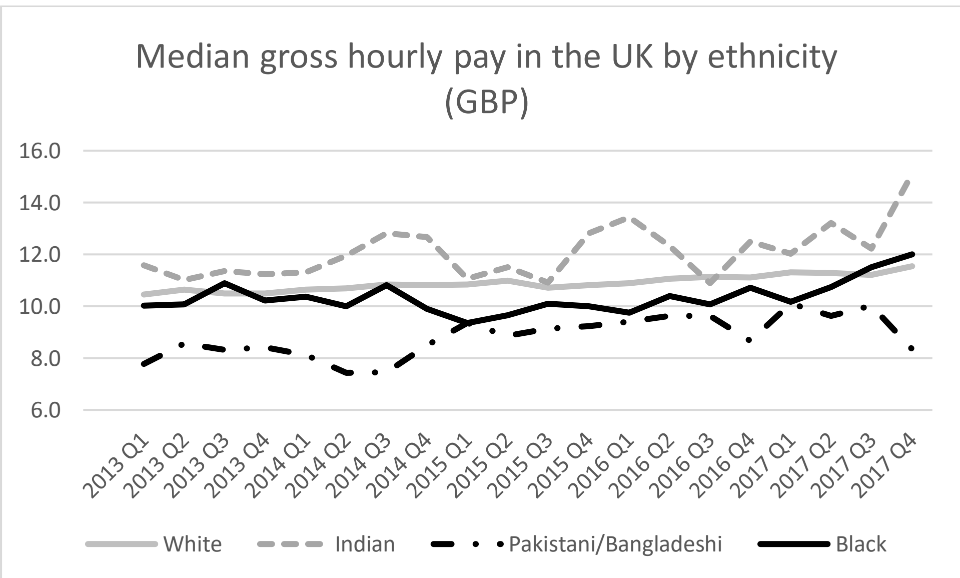
Analysing census data for London (ONS, 2015), confirms there is no evidence of a propensity for minority groups towards self-employment in general. Except for residents of Indian or Chinese origin, other minority groups of ages 16 and older are significantly overrepresented in part-time employment and unemployment. Chinese and Pakistani adults are overrepresented in part-time self-employment. Indians, by contrast, are overrepresented in employment, both full-time and part-time, and as students.

With the same data, we can explore the effects of ethnic enclaves. Some groups concentrate in certain boroughs: Indians are 27.5 per cent of the adult population in Harrow, and in Tower Hamlets more than a quarter of adult residents are from Bangladeshi origin. Nevertheless, if we analyse the data for Tower Hamlets or the other boroughs with a strong Bangladeshi population —Camden, Newham, Barking and Dagenham and Redbridge— employment data are similar to the city in general, though they are significantly underrepresentation in full-time self-employment.

Available data for self-employment in accommodation and food services is much more limited; the Office for National Statistics (2020) cautions that the data for these professions are based on small sample sizes. The estimates show that out of more than a million self-employed in London, only an approximate 27 thousand are active in hospitality. In absolute numbers, most are active in the City, Westminster and Southwark (9000 in total); the boroughs with most hospitality self-employment —as far as the limited numbers allow to draw conclusions—, are Ealing (4.7% of all self-employed), Hounslow (5.3%) and Redbridge (5.5%). These three boroughs have concentrations of Asian population —respectively Chinese, Indian and South Asian in general— but a correlation must be speculative.

For employment and self-employment combined, Pakistani and Bangladeshi —2.5 and 2.3 per cent of London's adult population, respectively (ONS, 2015)— are overrepresented in restaurant and mobile food service professions, with 4.4 and 10.9 per cent (ONS, 2019). The Bangladeshi-born population also shows the lowest level of English language proficiency of migrant groups in the UK (Smith, 2014). General salary data —for all professional sectors— show that these groups receive lower hourly wages than other groups, with an increasing pay gap:

Figure 11.1*: Median gross hourly pay in the UK by ethnicity, January 2013 - December 2017. Source: ONS, 2018.*



In the Netherlands, statistics distinguish between migrants with a Western and non-Western background, a somewhat misleading denomination as the 'Western' group includes Japan and Indonesia whilst 'non-Western' immigrants include those originating from Surinam, the Dutch Caribbean, Morocco, and Turkey (CBS, 2020b). 'Non-Western' entrepreneurs and self-employed clearly overrepresent their 13.7 per cent of the population in most categories, whereas those with a 'Western' background slightly underrepresent their 10.5 per cent (CBS, 2020a, 2021):

Table 11.1: *Categories of self-employment of different ethnic groups in the Netherlands. Source: CBS (2020a), own elaboration.*

	Director / Major shareho	Entrepr eneur	Entrepr eneur without	Self-employ ed with	Self-employ ed	Relative working in	Other	Total
Dutch	76.2%	60.3%	68.4%	60.5%	69.0%	39.6%	88.6%	62.3%
Western immigration background	9.6%	9.3%	9.3%	9.3%	9.3%	9.3%	7.6%	9.3%
Non-Western immigration background	14.2%	30.4%	22.2%	30.2%	21.7%	51.0%	3.8%	28.4%

An indication of the difference in business types operated by the three groups are the aggregated median incomes and assets of entrepreneurs and self-employed:

Table 11.2: *Financial data of migrant entrepreneurs and self-employed, in percentage of Dutch counterparts. Source: CBS (2020a), own elaboration.*

	Income	Private assets	Business assets
Western migration background	80.4%	49.9%	45.4%
Non-western migration background	72.7%	34.4%	45.2%

An explorative study with a limited number of respondents identified entrepreneurial drive, autonomy, and push factors as reasons for self-employment; approximately one quarter of respondents mentioned discrimination as one of these push factors (Broekroelofs and Visser, 2019). A study of labour conditions finds that first-generation self-employed migrants often do difficult and diverse work, resulting in substantially lower labour satisfaction (-18%) and more burnout complaints (+12%) for this group, and to a more limited extent for second-generation migrants, compared to the Dutch self-employed (In der Maur et al., 2020).

The evolution of restaurant self-employment

With very limited data for migrant self-employment in hospitality, we turn to the history of migrant groups in the restaurant business, in particular Chinese and Indian restaurants, as an illustration of how the drivers of migrant self-selection, blocked mobility and ethnic enclaves played out at different stages of their development. Restaurants are, alongside taxis, construction, or grocery shops, sectors with low barriers to access that attract immigrants: 80 per cent of Chinese entrepreneurs in the UK were active in restaurants in 1991 (Clark, 2015); the same percentage of all self-employed immigrants in Sweden are reported to work in restaurants, hotels, or transportation (Lundmark et al., 2014). The experiences of Chinese and South Asian migrants suggest that restaurant self-employment has created a viable alternative to wage labour, although they do not readily offer an escape from low salaries and low prestige. Since the 1980s, the market for ethnic restaurants has increased and diversified; but even though they have outgrown the downside market, they have not become a vehicle for the integration of migrant groups into the regular labour market.

The origins of Chinese restaurants in European cities are closely linked to the provision of services to Chinese sailors. In the London Limehouse district, former seamen opened 'meeting places' in which Chinese sailors could eat, drink, play games and smoke opium; these early restaurants were not open to non-Chinese public and difficult to find. In Dutch ports, Chinese restaurants were opened by owners of boarding houses for sailors. Until the early twentieth century, business was almost exclusively linked to the ethnic enclave; Chinese restaurants would only have menus in Chinese, they would not advertise in European languages or could not have telephone book listings. In the 1920s, city centre Chinese restaurants started to attract a small European clientele, described as 'bohemian' (Rijkschroeff, 1998, Amenda, 2009).

In the second half of the century, the market for Chinese restaurants started to grow, initially because of immigration from Southeast Asia. In the Netherlands, Chinese restaurants successfully tapped into demand from immigrants and repatriates from Indonesia, thus giving rise to the *Chinees-Indisch* restaurant (Indië being the colonial denomination for Indonesia), that in addition to Chinese dishes would offer nasi goreng and satay (Rijkschroeff, 1998). Further growth started in the 1960 when Chinese food 'broke out' to the general market, where its appeal expanded from adventurous consumers and a youth counterculture (Amenda, 2009) to an increasingly prosperous general population, for whom it was not usual nor affordable to go to traditional restaurants (Hest et al., 2019).

The business model of Chinese restaurants flourished because of cheap ingredients and cheap labour. In the Netherlands, they were staffed thanks to chain immigration in which business owners recruited and sponsored their workforce in their region of origin. Wages were low, especially in the case of illegal immigrants. The workforce could further be expanded with unpaid family labour: this is probably what happened when the market started declining and the average number of employed staff fell from 4.8 in 1982 to 2.7 in 1987. Revenues were in most cases substantially lower than in non-Chinese restaurants, and clearly insufficient to compensate for the owner's own working hours to average industry standards. Nevertheless, low consumption patterns allowed owners and employees to save money with which, combined with community support, they could start further restaurants (Rijkschroeff, 1998). Chinese restaurants had a similar evolution in the UK, where discrimination and blocked mobility are reported as reasons for the concentration of Chinese workers in the restaurant industry (Chaudhry and Crick, 2004). In this context, it is noteworthy that Indonesian immigrants and repatriates, in general of higher social status, played a limited role in the *Chinees-Indisch* restaurant.

Chinese restaurants used to compete with similar and unchanging menus, following competitors' prices (Chau and Yu, 2001, Chaudhry and Crick, 2004). Besides the specific hybridisation of Chinese and Indonesian food styles, dishes such as chop suey ('mixed pieces') were post-immigration inventions (Amenda, 2009). Market saturation and perceived inauthenticity, combined with the emergence of other ethnic restaurants, marked the decline of the popularity of Chinese restaurants from the 1980s. A limited number of second and third generation entrepreneurs have responded to this development with professionalisation —entering the upscale restaurant market— or diversification to Japanese, Thai, or other Asian restaurants, for example (Rijkschroeff, 1998, Van Spronsen & Partners, 2014).

The history of South-Asian restaurants in the UK follows very similar lines, with a limited supply catering to ethnic enclaves, former colonials and some adventurous consumers before World War II, and growing numbers driven by immigration after Indian independence. In the 1960s rising unemployment of factory workers drove Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants to take over fish-and-chips shops and to start 'Indian' restaurants. 'Break-out' from the ethnic enclave occurred through youth culture, before reaching the public as an affordable alternative to traditional restaurants (Buettner, 2008, Crick et al., 2016). Curries served in 'Indian' restaurants were, just like chop suey, a product of culinary hybridisation, with tikka masala allegedly invented by an angry chef who added 'Campbell's tomato soup, cream and some spices to a chicken tikka that an ignorant British customer claimed was too dry' (Palat, 2015: 172). Since the end of the twentieth century, the presence of affluent immigrants from India has accompanied a diversification in the market, with mainly

Indian entrepreneurs creating upscale restaurants that represent other than North-Indian cuisines (Palat, 2015).

A saturated market in which restaurants compete with almost identical menus has caused many owners of curry restaurants to lead precarious lives in which they struggle to keep their business afloat. Both Chinese and Bangladeshi owners indicate that paid employment in a different sector would be preferable if available to them or their children (Chaudhry and Crick, 2004, Buettner, 2008). Both groups also report racist incidents in service encounters (Chau and Yu, 2001, Palat, 2015).

Besides these experiences rooted in colonial history, rising unemployment during the 1970s oil crisis caused Mediterranean contract workers in Northern Europe to resort to restaurant self-employment. This development had several similarities with that of Chinese and South Asian restaurants, such as an initial orientation towards co-ethnic markets and hybridisation such as the German-Turkish döner kebab (Möhring, 2008, Thoms, 2010); but they benefitted from an already changed consumer market that embraced ethnic food with less reluctance. However, the presence and even popularity of ethnic restaurants is not necessarily for all groups a symptom of vanishing discrimination: as incidents of restaurant patrons' offensive behaviour show, the acceptance of food products does not signal community membership, but rather a 'commodity relationship regulated by the private market' (Chau and Yu, 2001: 15, Buettner, 2008).

The platform era

After the economic recession of 2008, the digital world witnessed a rise in new types of business models, first discussed as the 'sharing economy' (e.g. Couchsurfing), later replaced by the concepts of platform capitalism (e.g. Airbnb) and 'gig economy' (e.g. Amazon Mechanical Turk). The new types of business models, furnished largely by global digital giants, bring work reconfigurations that have important implications for workers in many sectors, including accommodation and food services. The change in labour relations has been interpreted in radically different ways: either as an empowering trend that would emancipate workers by granting them access to the neoliberal dream of entrepreneurship (Sundararajan, 2016) or as a movement for deregulation and suppression of workers' rights (Morozov, 2013, Slee, 2015). The platform or 'gig economy' certainly has affected the situation of disadvantaged workers in multiple ways. In general, the phenomenon has blurred the distinctions between not only entrepreneurship and employment, but also between the formal and informal sectors. The platforms' business model is therefore contingent on penetrating precisely into those areas of economic life where migrants could formerly find refuge in self-employment.

With intransparency as an imperative for the platform business model (Slee, 2015, Edelman, 2017, Oskam, 2019), data about platform workers are hardly available. Nevertheless, there are abundant indications that low-entry jobs without capital requirements, such as food delivery, have a strong appeal for migrant workers. In the UK, a quarter of people on zero-hour contracts are black and minority workers (Haque, 2018); a report from Milan states that of bike food deliverers, forty percent are from Africa, fifteen percent from Asia, and five percent from South America (Free, 2020). Evidence from elsewhere suggests that many are undocumented workers, exposing them to exploitative practices such as subcontracting migrant workers at lower pay by contracted riders (Alderman, 2019, Tondo, 2020, Maciuca, 2021). Thus, the 'operations and strategies of gig platforms are contingent on the intersecting regimes of immigration policy and employment regulation in different national contexts' (Van Doorn et al., 2020: 7).

Workforce characteristics in accommodation and food services have traditionally been subjected to issues stemming from the seasonality and peak hour characteristic of these industries. In the UK zero-hours contracts or casual contracts have traditionally been the most common way for these industries to employ the workforce when needed instead of providing regular employment. Another common option is so-called agency work where agencies find staff for other businesses but pay the staff themselves. Lee and Green (2017) show that amongst all the sectors, the highest probability of low pay is in Accommodation and Food Services – an individual in this sector is 45 per cent more likely to be in low pay than in manufacturing. And even when controlling for their age, qualifications, migration status and disability, workers in Accommodation and Food are 17 per cent more likely to be in low pay than an observationally identical worker in manufacturing.

According to MacBride & Smith (2021) the global financial crisis of 2007–2009 has had significant and long-lasting implications for work and employment with an increased rise in in-work poverty. They cite research by the TUC (2014) that only 1 in 40 jobs created since the crisis are full-time, and Clarke and Cominetti (2019) who report that two-thirds of new jobs in UK are zero-hours contracts, agency work or self-employment. Within self-employment, the practice of dependent or 'bogus' self-employment is seen as one of the most problematic forms that fosters the precarisation of workers. Born in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, the digitally fuelled 'platform economy' (Oskam and Boswijk 2016) seems to be a continuation of this trend, based primarily on the logic of 'just-in-time' business models.

With these business models we are witnessing the rise of the so called 'platform work' (Schmid-Drüner 2016): work managed by virtual platform operators. Regardless of whether the platform workers are employees or not, Turnšek and Ladkin (2017) argue that these workers are human resources managed in new ways via platforms. To a very large extent the platform economy lowered the barriers to entry for most workers. This is especially true for so called 'app work' like Uber and the numerous options of food delivery (e.g Wolt, Deliveroo). On the other hand, Duggan *et al.* (2020) positioned accommodation platforms such as Airbnb into 'capital platform work'. People providing services via 'capital' platforms are bringing in supplemental income while people in the 'labour' platforms typically work to offset shortfalls in their monthly earnings (JP Morgan Chase 2016). As a capital platform, the entry barrier is higher, requiring a property as a minimum.

In general, platforms operate on a business model that tries to minimise the barriers to entry to the most possible extent since the business model operates best with the highest number of service providers. Within this large pool of self-employed service providers, the platforms can then use various forms of automatic work monitoring (e.g. speed of delivery, speed of answering to client's questions) and customer review options to be included in algorithmic positioning within their search engines, resulting in indirect pay for performance measures (Lee *et al.* 2015; Cheng & Foley 2019). These mechanisms thus transfer the issue of discrimination of workers to the automatic surveillance processes and customer satisfaction – which, however, can be highly problematic, for example via racism of customers.

'Gig' workers have testified to the continuous state of anxiety that low ratings by customers can cause, with the corresponding financial consequences, even up to the loss of their job (Dzieza, 2015). In the case of Airbnb, several studies have provided evidence that the 'market freedom' of platforms has indeed allowed for consumer discrimination against minority entrepreneurs, resulting in lower prices for Airbnb listings offered by black or Asian hosts (Edelman and Luca, 2014, Gilheany et al., 2015, Kakar et al., 2017), or in a strong underrepresentation of minority hosts, even in predominantly black neighbourhoods (Cox, 2017).

In sum, the platforms themselves have become new forms of boltholes of self-employment. However, the discussion on work in the platform economy is fuelled largely by the debate on assuring decent work and means of safeguarding workers from the trend of precarisation. The case of Uber shows that the regulation is becoming stricter. London Employment Tribunal (2017, p. 21-22) ruled that Uber imposes numerous conditions on drivers, exercises control, and uses the rating system as a performance management/disciplinary procedure which effectively makes Uber drivers as dependent self-employed, and should be instead given the status of employees.

In addition, the debate extends further from the status of employment. Dehlendorf and Gerety (2021) argue that the current technological progress includes three problematic trends that encroach on workers' power and rights: (a) worker surveillance and automated management to increase the pace of work; (b) scaling up on-demand and just in time labour models to decrease wages and offset risk; (c) deskilling jobs to lower wages and decrease the cost of high turnover. Add in the murky world of fake reviews, algorithmic management, digital discrimination and elements of aesthetic labour and there are additional ethical concerns and questions around fairness and transparency. Employment status and workers' rights have implications for the workforce and associated legal developments, and there is no doubt these debates will continue.

Conclusion

Returning to the question of whether self-employment offers a bolthole for migrant workers as refuge from some of the hospitality employment challenges, clearly the answer is not straightforward. Historical data and evidence suggest that for some migrants, self-employment has been a productive means to making a living, offering all the benefits and challenges that being your own boss entails. The food service and restaurant sectors have benefited from entrepreneurial migrants who have shaped what is evident today in many towns and cities. Going forward, the business models of the platform economy present new challenges around the definitions of self-employment and the resulting concerns around workers' rights, protection, and increasing precarity. It is important to observe that one of the sectors most changed and challenged by the rise of digital platforms is food service and delivery, which is also where many migrant workers find (self?)-employment. While platforms have created opportunities for workers with limited access to the labour market, they have done so at the expense of regulations that would protect them against abuse or discrimination.

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