



First-Generation Immigrant Mothers Report Less Spanking of 1-Year-Old Children Compared with Mothers of Other Immigrant Generations

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Abstract

Introduction The American Academy of Pediatrics discourages spanking, especially of infants and young toddlers. This study examines the association between maternal immigrant generation and reported spanking of 1-year-old children, and whether this association is impacted by domestic violence (DV). **Methods** We conducted a cross-sectional secondary data analysis using 1-year wave data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. We used descriptive statistics to explore demographic differences among first-generation, second-generation, and third-generation or higher (reference group) mothers. We conducted logistic regression to examine the association between immigrant generation and spanking, controlling for covariates. We used stratified logistic regression to evaluate how experiencing DV may impact the association between immigrant generation and spanking. **Results** The study included 370 first-generation mothers, 165 second-generation mothers, and 1754 reference group mothers. The prevalence of spanking differed across immigrant generations ($p=0.004$). First-generation mothers had statistically significant lower odds of spanking compared with the reference group (adjusted OR 0.26; CI 0.11–0.64). Second-generation mothers also had lower odds of spanking compared with the reference group, although this result did not reach statistical significance (adjusted OR 0.60; CI 0.22–1.63). Mothers' report of experiencing DV appeared to impact the relationship between immigrant generation and spanking. **Discussion** First-generation immigrant mothers had lower odds of reported spanking compared to reference group mothers, an association which is attenuated for both second-generation immigrant mothers and mothers who have experienced DV. Future work should explore the potential factors that drive variations in spanking between immigrant generations.

Keywords Spanking · Immigrant · Domestic violence · Secondary data analysis

Significance

What is already known on the subject? Spanking, especially of infants and young toddlers, has profound health and developmental effects on children. Few past studies have explored differences in maternal reports of spanking 1-year-old children across immigrant generations.

What this study adds? First-generation immigrant mothers (born abroad) have significantly lower adjusted odds of spanking compared with third-generation or higher mothers (mother and her parents born in the US). Second-generation mothers (parents born abroad, mother born in the US) also have lower, albeit insignificant, adjusted odds of spanking compared to third-generation or higher mothers. The results provide a framework to support the unique needs and lived experiences of immigrant children and parents.

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Introduction

Spanking, defined as striking a child with an open hand on the buttocks or extremities with the intention of modifying behaviors without causing physical injury, is a commonly used form of corporal punishment [American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) 1998]. However, the AAP does not consider spanking an effective disciplinary tool (AAP 1998). Additionally, a plethora of research has shown that spanking may negatively impact parent–child bonding and children’s mental and physical health (AAP 1998; Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016; Taylor et al. 2010). The extant literature documents associations between spanking and a child displaying aggressive behavior, experiencing depression or anxiety, and having mental health symptoms or using substances as adults (Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016; Taylor et al. 2010). Of particular importance is preventing spanking of infants and young toddlers, as past work demonstrates that spanking a 1-year-old child is associated with increased odds of physical injury and Child Protective Services involvement (AAP 1998; Crandall et al. 2006; Lee et al. 2014).

Although spanking has well-documented negative health effects on children, parents both in the US and internationally still commonly use spanking (AAP 1998; Runyan et al. 2010; Save the Children 2003). However, considerable variability globally exists regarding spanking acceptability and use. As of 2018, 53 countries have banned corporal punishment (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children 2018). However, in many countries, including the US, corporal punishment is still permitted and often accepted (Child Trends Databank Indicator 2015; Save the Children 2003).

The immigrant community in the US is rapidly expanding, now comprising 13.5% of the population (Migration Policy Institute 2018). Although research is needed to better understand the health, lived experiences, and culturally-specific practices of immigrant families, past literature on immigrant parents’ use of spanking is sparse and with mixed results (Mendoza 2009). On the one hand, some studies show spanking may be tied to cultural and family practices. For example, studies of both Latino and Asian immigrants have found that spanking may be perceived as important for child-rearing (Calzada et al. 2010; Zhai 2017). In contrast, a recent study reported that foreign-born Latino parents were *less* likely than their native-born counterparts to spank their 3-year-old children (Lee and Altschul 2014). Furthermore, few studies have examined the use of spanking by immigrants from different countries; while immigrants have unique lived experiences based on their country of origin, there may also be universal components to the immigrant experience. For example,

the immigrant paradox, defined as immigrants experiencing worse health the longer they have stayed in the US (over time and generations), has been shown to exist for Latino and Asian communities (Marks et al. 2014). Additionally, a study of children of immigrants from multiple cultural backgrounds showed similar thoughts about dating and marriage regardless of parent’s country of origin (Nesteruk and Gramescu 2012). Therefore, it may be helpful to explore maternal reports of spanking for all immigrants rather than focusing on a single group.

In addition, few studies to date have examined spanking use by parents who are second-generation immigrants. Second-generation immigrants (born in the US, parents born abroad) may *acculturate* differently than their first-generation (born abroad) counterparts (Pew Research Center 2013; Schwartz et al. 2010). Acculturation is a multidimensional and dynamic process of potential changes in cultural practices, values, and identities experienced by immigrants and their families (Schwartz et al. 2010). Second-generation immigrants more often identify with US culture compared to their first-generation counterparts, but also are more likely than third-generation or higher immigrants to identify with their parents’ heritage (Pew Research Center 2013; Schwartz et al. 2010). Therefore, they may have different and unique spanking attitudes and practices compared with parents of other immigrant generations.

The relationship between immigrant generation and spanking may be further complicated by other factors, including maternal experience of domestic violence (DV). DV, defined as any behavior within an adult intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm, has been associated with maternal use of spanking (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2016; Taylor et al. 2010). Additionally, although experiencing DV can be harmful to all women, DV survivors who are immigrants may face unique challenges including language barriers, lack of financial resources, isolation, and barriers related to their immigration status (Erez et al. 2009). Therefore, to more clearly understand the relationship between immigrant generation and spanking, it may be useful to consider the role of DV.

The aims of this study were to: (1) examine the association between maternal immigrant generation and spanking of 1-year-old children; (2) explore potential differences in spanking among first-generation, second-generation, and third-generation or higher mothers; and (3) determine whether experiencing DV impacts the relationship between immigrant generation and spanking. We chose to focus the current study on mothers’ report of spanking, as women tend to be the primary caregivers and therefore spend more time with children.

Methods

Study Design and Data Source

We conducted a secondary data analysis of the data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS; Reichman et al. 2001). This cohort includes children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 US cities. The first interview was conducted at birth (baseline wave) with follow-up interviews when the child was 1, 3, 5, 9, and 15 years of age. Mothers and fathers were interviewed at each wave, in English or Spanish. FFCWS uses a complex sampling design, providing national weights so data from 16 of the 20 cities are representative of the 77 cities around the US with populations over 200,000 in 1994; see Reichman et al. (2001) for a detailed methodological description. As four cities (ones not selected via random sampling; see Reichman et al.) are dropped when national weights are applied, the total number of participants in the weighted sample is 3120 (as opposed to ~5000 in the unweighted sample). The current study examined data from mothers' interviews at the baseline and 1-year waves. Boston University Medical Campus's Institutional Review Board determined this study to be exempt.

Study Sample

The study sample included mothers who were interviewed at the baseline and 1-year waves, if they reported living with their child at least some of the time, if they had data available to assess immigrant generation (place of birth of the mother and her parents), and if their surveys included questions about experiencing DV.

Predictor Variable: Immigrant Generation

Our main predictor variable was the immigration generation of the mother, which we defined as first-generation immigrant, second-generation immigrant, or third-generation immigrant or higher (hereafter referred to as the reference group). Questions about the mother's place of birth were asked in the baseline wave and those about the mother's parents' place of birth were asked in the 1-year wave. A mother was considered a first-generation immigrant if she answered no to the question: "Were you born in the United States?" A mother was considered a second-generation immigrant if she was born in the US but one of her parents was born abroad based on her response to the question: "In what country or territory was your father/mother born?" Finally, a mother was considered part of the reference group if both she and her parents were born in the US.

Outcome Variable: Spanking a Child at 1-Year of Age

The main outcome was mother-reported spanking at the 1-year wave. Mothers were asked: "Sometimes children behave pretty well and sometimes they don't. In the past month, have you spanked your child because he/she was misbehaving or acting up?" This variable was dichotomous (yes/no).

Domestic Violence (DV)

We used seven DV-focused questions in the FFCWS dataset. DV questions were asked in 18 of the 20 cities sampled and limited to women in three groups: (1) currently in a relationship with the father of their child; (2) in a past relationship with the father of their child; or (3) in a current relationship with a partner other than the father of their child. Two questions focused on physical DV (hitting or slapping/kicking); one question on sexual DV (forcing sex or sexual activities); and four questions on emotional DV (insulting/criticizing, keeping the participant from friends or family, preventing the participant from going to work or school, taking/controlling money). We consolidated and dichotomized the DV questions. Participants were labelled as experiencing DV if they reported often or sometimes experiencing any of the types of DV by the father of their child or a current partner.

Demographic Variables

We included additional covariates for respondent demographics including race, ethnicity, educational attainment (less than high school, graduated high school, some college, and graduated college), poverty (based on the federal poverty level; FPL), mother's age at the time of the interview, child's age at the time of the interview, and whether the mother had any other children. We included the child's age at the time of the interview because although the 1-year wave aimed to interview mothers when their child was close to 12 months, there was some variability in the child's age due to when mothers were available for the interview.

Statistical Analysis

Analyses were conducted using SAS version 9.4. We applied national weights, which adjust the sample so it is representative of the 77 cities in the US with populations over 200,000 in 1994 (Reichman et al. 2001). Less than 3% of responses had missing values, thus we conducted a complete case analysis. Our analysis proceeded in four steps. First, we conducted descriptive analyses (Chi square and *t* tests for categorical and continuous variables respectively) to explore potential differences among first-generation, second-generation, and reference group mothers. Second, we ran

unadjusted logistic regressions to explore the association between immigrant generation and spanking. We then created multivariable logistic regression models controlling for maternal race, education, poverty, ethnicity, mother's age, child's age, and the presence of other children in the home. These variables were chosen because they have been shown to potentially influence mother-reported spanking (Combs-Orme and Caine 2008; MacKenzie et al. 2011). Lastly, we conducted stratified unadjusted and adjusted logistic regression analyses to test our hypotheses that experiencing DV may influence the relationship between immigrant generation and mothers' use of spanking. We conducted these analyses based on past literature describing that spanking use may be fundamentally different in situations where a mother is experiencing DV (Taylor et al. 2010).

Results

The study included 2289 mothers; 370 first-generation mothers, 165 second-generation mothers, and 1754 reference group mothers. The average child's age was 12.8 months. The majority of both first and second-generation mothers traced their heritage to Mexico/Central America/South America (called Latin America in the FFCWS coding book) or Asia. Seven percent of first-generation mothers, 13% of second-generation mothers, and 17% of reference group mothers reported spanking their 1-year-old child in the past month ($p=0.004$). Throughout the "Results" section, we report unweighted frequencies and weighted percentages.

Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristics of the three groups are presented in Table 1. Significant differences between the three groups emerged for mother's age, race, ethnicity, primary language of the interview, poverty, education, and child's age. First-generation mothers were slightly older, less likely to be White or Black, more likely to be Hispanic, more likely to have less than a high school education, and more likely to have a household income less than the FPL. We found no significant differences between the three groups when comparing presence of other children in the household, family structure, or child's gender.

Domestic Violence (DV)

Fifty percent of first-generation mothers, 41% of second-generation mothers, and 44% of reference group mothers reported a history of DV (Table 1). DV prevalence between the three groups did not reach statistical significance ($p=0.54$). Experiencing DV was independently and significantly associated with spanking ($p=0.02$).

Logistic Regression Analysis

In the unadjusted model, first-generation mothers had significantly lower odds of spanking than mothers in the reference group (OR 0.37; CI 0.17–0.82). Although second-generation mothers also had lower odds of spanking compared to reference group mothers (OR 0.79; 0.37–1.70), this result did not reach statistical significance. After adjusting for potential confounders, the relationship persisted with adjusted odds ratios (aOR) that were even lower for both first-generation (aOR 0.26; CI 0.11–0.64) and second-generation mothers (aOR 0.60; CI 0.22–1.63) compared to the reference group, and remained statistically significant for first-generation mothers. See Table 2 for the logistic regression results for the full sample.

Stratified DV Analysis

For mothers who had not experienced DV, the adjusted odds of spanking were lower for first-generation mothers (aOR 0.09, CI 0.02–0.49) and second-generation mothers (aOR 0.23; CI 0.04–1.48) compared with those in the reference group; however, only the aOR for first-generation mothers was statistically significant. Notably, for mothers who had not experienced DV, the odds of spanking dramatically decreased for both first and second-generation mothers compared with the total sample.

For mothers who had experienced DV, the adjusted odds of spanking were lower for first-generation (aOR 0.53; CI 0.17–1.62) and higher for second-generation mothers (aOR 1.41; CI 0.43–4.68) compared with the reference group. Both aORs were larger than the aORs of the total sample and neither reached statistical significance. See Table 3 for the logistic regression results for the stratified samples.

Discussion

In this secondary data analysis, we found that first-generation mothers were significantly less likely to report spanking their 1-year-old child compared to mothers in the reference group. Second-generation mothers had lower, albeit statistically insignificant odds of reported spanking compared with the reference group, but higher odds than first-generation mothers. Domestic violence (DV) appeared to impact the relationship between immigrant generation and spanking.

To our knowledge, this study is one of the first to show that foreign-born mothers are less likely to report spanking their 1-year-old child. Several possible explanations for this epidemiological pattern can be conceptualized within the social-ecological framework, which considers the interweaving of individual, relationship, community, and societal influences (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the study sample

Demographic (n% missing)	First-genera- tion (n = 370)	Second-genera- tion (n = 165)	Refer- ence group ^a (n = 1754)	Chi square/ <i>t</i> test P-value
Spanking				
Yes	41 (7%)	38 (13%)	490 (17%)	11 (0.004)*
No	329 (93%)	127 (87%)	1264 (83%)	
Mother's age (mean years/SD)	30 (0.37)	29 (0.86)	28 (0.26)	- 4.1 (<0.001)*
Child's age (mean months/SD)	13.3 (0.31)	13.4 (0.38)	12.6 (0.08)	- 2.4 (0.02)*
Mother's race				
White	72 (15%)	73 (58%)	695 (60%)	348 (<0.001)*
Black, African American	57 (8%)	28 (6%)	862 (28%)	
Asian or Pacific Islander	60 (26%)	6 (5%)	4 (0.05%)	
American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut	10 (1%)	5 (1%)	34 (2%)	
Other	150 (50%)	52 (29%)	139 (9%)	
Missing	21	1	20	
Mother's ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic	136 (33%)	71 (43%)	1426 (83%)	105 (<0.001)*
Hispanic	232 (67%)	90 (57%)	323 (17%)	
Missing	2	4	5	
Language of interview				
English	202 (48%)	156 (91%)	1740 (98%)	94 (<0.001)*
Spanish	168 (52%)	9 (9%)	14 (2%)	
Poverty				
< 100% FPL ^b	110 (37%)	46 (15%)	553 (21%)	21
100–299% FPL	156 (35%)	67 (33%)	718 (34%)	(<0.001)*
300% FPL or greater	104 (28%)	52 (52%)	483 (45%)	
Education				
Less than high school	162 (50%)	51 (26%)	607 (26%)	27 (<0.001)*
High school	56 (18%)	34 (25%)	479 (25%)	
Some college	82 (10%)	49 (20%)	456 (23%)	
College or graduate school	69 (22%)	31 (28%)	210 (26%)	
Missing	1	0	3	
Gender of focal child				
Male	201 (50%)	82 (64%)	918 (54%)	1.4 (0.49)
Female	169 (50%)	83 (36%)	836 (46%)	
Other children in the home				
Yes	211 (64%)	89 (60%)	1078 (62%)	0.24 (0.89)
No	159 (36%)	76 (40%)	673 (38%)	
	Missing: 0	Missing: 0	Missing: 3	
Family structure				
Lives alone	24 (6%)	16 (4%)	281 (7%)	4.1 (0.39)
Lives with partner	311 (89%)	128 (90%)	1221 (84%)	
Lives with family	35 (6%)	21 (6%)	252 (9%)	
Domestic violence				
Yes	180 (50%)	78 (41%)	815 (44%)	1.2 (0.54)
No	190 (50%)	87 (59%)	939 (56%)	

In this Table, we report unweighted frequencies and weighted percentages

^aReference group mothers are those who are third-generation immigrants or higher (both the mother and her parents were born in the United States)

^bFPL indicates federal poverty level

* $p < 0.05$

Table 2 Unadjusted and adjusted ORs for all mothers

	OR (95% CI)	p-value	Adjusted OR (95% CI)	p-value
First-generation mothers	0.37 (0.17–0.82)	0.03*	0.26 (0.11–0.64)	0.01*
Second-generation mothers	0.79 (0.37–1.70)	0.51	0.60 (0.22–1.63)	0.71
Reference group mothers ^a	Referent		Referent	

Adjusted ORs indicates adjusted odds ratios. Adjusted for race, ethnicity, education, poverty, child's age, mother's age, and other children in the home

^aReference group mothers are those who are third-generation immigrants or higher (both the mother and her parents were born in the United States)

* $p < 0.05$

Table 3 Unadjusted and adjusted ORs for mothers who have and haven't experienced domestic violence

	OR (95% CI)	p-value	Adjusted OR (95% CI)	p-value
Have experienced domestic violence				
First-generation mothers	0.38 (0.13–1.08)	0.05	0.53 (0.17–1.62)	0.19
Second-generation mothers	1.48 (0.50–4.39)	0.14	1.41 (0.43–4.68)	0.30
Reference group mothers ^a	Referent		Referent	
Have not experienced domestic violence				
First-generation mothers	0.30 (0.07–1.17)	0.33	0.09 (0.02–0.49)	0.03*
Second-generation mothers	0.41 (0.11–1.55)	0.72	0.23 (0.04–1.48)	0.78
Reference group mothers ^c	Referent		Referent	

Adjusted ORs indicates adjusted odds ratios. Adjusted for race, ethnicity, education, poverty, child's age, mother's age, and other children in the home

^aReference group mothers are those who are third-generation immigrants or higher (both the mother and her parents were born in the United States)

* $p < 0.05$

2015). From an individual perspective, a few past studies have shown that foreign-born children and parents report fewer adverse childhood experiences compared with their native-born counterparts (Caballero et al. 2017; Vaughn et al. 2017). Immigrant mothers may have been spanked less frequently as children and may subsequently have a lower likelihood of spanking their own children. Another possibility is that immigrant mothers have relationship and community-level buffers, such as social support, which may reduce their risk of reported spanking. Social support may be particularly important when considering spanking of 1-year-old children, which occurs more frequently in the setting of higher parenting stress (MacKenzie et al. 2011). However, the literature on social support for immigrant families is mixed, as some studies have shown improved family cohesion and community connections, while others describe that immigrants may experience isolation (Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al. 2014; Mendoza 2009). Societal differences in immigrant mothers' acceptance and tolerance toward spanking may also impact reported use of spanking especially as 53 countries around the world have banned spanking. Finally, it is possible that immigrant mothers may use spanking equally but may be less likely to report spanking on a survey compared with native-born mothers. Immigrants face unique

challenges related to language, fear of deportation and being separated from their children, confidentiality, and how they conceptualize health that may complicate their responses to survey questions (Brown 2015).

The results of this study also suggest that second-generation mothers have an intermediate likelihood of reported spanking, with lower odds than reference group mothers and higher odds than first-generation mothers. Past work has described similar patterns with a variety of other health outcomes (e.g. developmental delays, learning disabilities, asthma, substance and alcohol use) where first-generation immigrants are the healthiest, followed by second-generation, and then third and higher (Hamilton et al. 2011; Prado et al. 2009). One factor that may contribute to this epidemiological pattern is acculturation (Mendoza 2009). Past studies have described how higher levels of acculturation, especially less identification with one's country of origin, may be associated with some risky health behaviors among immigrant youth such as increased alcohol and substance use, and more depressive symptoms (Lorenzo-Blanco et al. 2012; Unger et al. 2009). To our knowledge, only two studies have examined the association between parents use of spanking and acculturation (defined by the studies as years living in the US, traditional gender norms, participation in

religious events, language, and cultural identity); neither found an association between acculturation and reported spanking (Altschul and Lee 2011; Tajima and Harachi 2010). However, these studies did not specifically examine the impact of immigrant generation. Immigrant generation itself may be an important proxy for acculturation as second-generation immigrants are generally more likely than first-generation immigrants to identify with their country of birth instead of their parents' country of origin (Schwartz et al. 2010). Future work should consider the way differential acculturation patterns based on immigrant generation impact perspectives about and use of spanking.

Experiencing DV seemed to attenuate the association between immigrant generation and reported use of spanking; in other words, first-generation mothers who have experienced DV had statistically similar odds of reporting spanking as mothers from other immigrant generations. One potential explanation for this finding is that the trauma of experiencing DV is associated with increased reported spanking regardless of immigrant generation, as past literature has shown that experiencing DV can be associated with both spanking and severe physical abuse (Taylor et al. 2010). Another possibility is that experiencing DV uniquely impacts immigrant women's likelihood of spanking compared with native-born women. Past studies have found that while DV is deeply harmful to the mental and physical health of all who experience it, immigrant women may face specific challenges including language barriers, isolation, financial disempowerment, and stressors related to their immigration status (Erez et al. 2009). Finally, participants who felt comfortable reporting DV on the survey may also have been more willing to disclose that they spank their children. While further research is needed to closely test potential hypotheses about why DV influences the association between immigrant generation and spanking, it is clear this relationship is complex and may be influenced by other factors.

We recognize that this study has several limitations. One limitation is that while we have information on the region of origin for immigrant mothers, we do not know the exact country of origin and are unable to determine whether an individual mother emigrated from a country that has prohibited spanking. We also recognize that there may be racial variations in maternal report of spanking, which we addressed by including race and ethnicity in the multivariate model. Additionally, the majority of first and second-generation immigrants in this study identified as Hispanic/Latino or Asian, which matches national immigration data (Migration Policy Institute 2018; Pew Research Center 2013). However, a minority of first-generation and second-generation immigrants do not identify as Hispanic/Latino or Asian; their perspectives merit further

study. We chose this dataset because it is one of the few that provides the information needed to distinguish first versus second-generation immigrants; however, we recognize that the sample size of second-generation immigrants in this study was small. Finally, spanking and DV are both sensitive topics and therefore may be subject to reporting bias. This bias may have been at least partially minimized as the FFCWS team conducted all maternal interviews confidentially (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2008).

Limitations notwithstanding, the results of this study provide a framework for further research. Future studies should explore the cultural, familial, and societal aspects of why first-generation mothers may be less likely to report spanking their 1-year-old child. This work should consider potential cross-cultural variations in how spanking and discipline are conceptualized, how perceptions of infant's behavior and development may differ between immigrant and native-born parents, and immigrants' perspectives about disclosing use of spanking. Researchers should also consider examining whether spanking rates are lower for mothers who immigrate from countries that have banned corporal punishment. We recommend conducting studies with second-generation immigrant parents to explore how their perspectives on spanking may differ from those of first-generation immigrants. Finally, further research examining disparities in health outcomes among children and parents from different immigrant generations should consider the potential impacts of other stressors in the home, such as DV.

The results of this study also have practice-level implications. During prenatal and newborn visits, healthcare teams should provide information about the harms of spanking 1-year-old children. Creating spanking prevention anticipatory guidance interventions based on feedback from immigrant parents may also be useful. These interventions should consider harnessing the strengths of immigrant families that may protect against spanking. Education for healthcare providers on cross-cultural differences may help facilitate culturally-sensitive discussions about positive parenting, the harms of spanking, and appropriate discipline choices. Supporting the specific needs of both first and second-generation immigrant children and parents is also important. Finally, interventions that address the relationship between DV and spanking are crucial to protecting and supporting the mother-child dyad.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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