

Youth on Social Media: Unveiling Natural Disasters Information Seeking Factors

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Abstract

Information seeking on social media has now become a habitual desire of social media users including youth as the most active and interactive users. This study was conducted to unveil potential factors of natural disasters information seeking among youth on social media. A self-administered survey was conducted to collect data for instrument testing. Questionnaires were distributed to 500 youth from five zones in Malaysia. This study contributes to the field of environmental and behavioral research by focusing on the potential factors of natural disasters information seeking among youth on social media; namely social tie variety, heuristic, information quality, social motivation and cognitive homogeneity. This study also line out practical implications on youth and social media users especially when focused research is conducted in the behavioral study of social media use by youth. The results show that youth have social tie variety, heuristic, information quality, social motivation and cognitive homogeneity as natural disasters information seeking factors in using social media. All factors show a high correlation among youth except for correlation of cognitive homogeneity that is moderate, yet still significant. A systematic natural disasters information seeking system in social media is in great demand along progressive modern era. Therefore, the role of natural disasters information seeking factors need to be unveil for better understanding through longitudinal studies and experiments which is behavior related.

Keywords: Natural Disasters, Information Seeking Factors, Information Seeking, Youth, Social Media

Introduction

Advance technology has always been growing compatibly with social media, in terms of updating and connectivity with other interfaces. According to the Chief Statistician of Malaysia through the results of the ICT Use and Access Survey by Individuals and Households

2023, 97.7% of Malaysians use the internet in their daily lives (Yahya, 2024), it hinting us that every internet user has a social media account. Youth living all their life engulfing with social media for various reasons including when they seek about something they want to know. The information seeking by Generation Z (Gen Z: youth) is at its peak when it is about health and well-being issues related (Dentsu Aegis Network, 2020), or an emergency occurs (Laato et al., 2020; Mertens et al., 2020) such as natural disasters. According to Maier et al. (2015), and Turner (2015), Gen Z has become the biggest piece of pie in using social media which called as digital native generation, that is, growing up with social media has become accustomed in experiencing a higher-than-average level of information overload (Liu et al., 2021).

A spark of curiosity can trigger and encourage youth to start information seeking at their fingertips. In 2023, the percentage of Malaysians getting information online indicate continuity in receiving responses such as e-health, e-Commerce and internet banking activities (Yahya, 2024), and these “basic need” activities are generally found on hot and trendy social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. According to Moreno, Fuentes-Lara & Navarro (2020), based on their research, people will instantly search and process information when they find out about news related to public health or environmental outbreaks such as natural disasters through various different sources from print media, mass media to social media (Masip et al., 2020). As a result of Stockdale & Coyne (2020) study, X (formerly Twitter) is the most used social media platform for natural disasters information seeking while Instagram is used more for socializing. The intention of this study is to examine natural disasters information seeking factors such as social tie variety, heuristic, information quality, social motivation and cognitive homogeneity that may influence youth in information seeking on social media.

Literature Review

Natural disasters are a major adverse event resulting from natural processes of the earth; which countries across the globe are facing the natural threats. In Malaysia, the community is facing formidable challenges caused by natural disasters such as floods, tsunamis, storms, and landslides. Natural disasters pose a significant threat to human lives and their property. In the recent flood that hit Malaysia, more than 125,000 people were affected, and 54 deaths were recorded (Malay Mail, 2022). As the current global climate situation is unpredictable and expected to worsen in the future, it is important for youth to unveil themselves to natural disasters information on social media which they play critical roles, especially in disseminating rapid and reliable information to the public. Social media as a highly effective tool offers fast and effective dissemination routes for important natural disasters information if it is responsibly and appropriately used by user (Chan et al., 2020). Thus, the factors that youth need to behold in order to seek natural disasters information on social media are social tie variety, heuristic, information quality, social motivation and cognitive homogeneity.

Social Tie Variety

The diversity of social ties can be understood as “the diversity of offline groups and contexts represented in one's online social network” (Gerhart & Sidorova, 2017). Steffes & Burgee (2009) and Ali (2019) highlight the strength of ties is the nature of the strength or intensity of relationships among people in an online network. Users hope to follow information from social ties that exist between people who have intimate and emotional relationships (family members and close friends) and acquaintances (Gilbert, 2012). Sustainable and healthy

relationships built with social partners begin with people being interactive in a social networks (Putnam, 2000), including being actively interactive in the context of natural disasters information seeking and information sharing. Activities that lead to collective action to achieve group goals (e.g. information sharing) in social networks can move the level of resource perception that can determine the effectiveness of the activity (Van Zomeren & Spears, 2009; You & Hon (2019).

Information obtained from a strong social tie variety is found to be influential and credible (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015) which then catalyzes a person to make a decision (Brown & Reingen, 1987) such as natural disasters information seeking. Social network users often feel confident to share about their personal lives or their beliefs among “selective socialization”, groups they feel connected to in social media (Wok et al., 2012; Mital et al., 2010). The diversity of social bonds comes from “selective socialization”. Lim et al. (2022) supports it with his study results which are that youth usually get information and views on interests or issues that they can relate to such as natural disasters through specific groups or communities (selective socialization) that they participate in on certain social media platforms (e.g. Facebook) which are used as among the main reference sources on social media.

Heuristic

Cognitive shortcuts and simple cues in reaching judgments explain heuristics (Chaiken, 1980; Metzger & Flanagin, 2015; Trumbo, 1999; Alvi & Saraswat, 2020). Heuristics often occur when a person considers a piece of information unimportant or difficult and takes a lot of time in its search. Neuroticism found to be significant with heuristics affects decision making by influencing the way information is perceived (Cho et al, 2016; Alvi & Saraswat, 2020). The reliance of faith in intuition on heuristics to form quick judgments and decisions (Garrett & Weeks, 2017; Nan et al., 2022) is directed to information processing based on existing or previous knowledge, views or beliefs (De Neys, 2006; Ku et al. al. (2019), even biased (Wu et al., 2022) and it has been proven through the study of Klaczynski & Lavallee (2000) and West et al.

Therefore, the possibility of receiving and spreading misinformation (Nan et al., 2022; Tang, Luo & Su, 2024) about natural disasters is high because people focus on certain characteristics of information while ignoring others (Chaiken & Maheswaran (1994), Ali (2019) and Ali et al. (2022). Important natural disasters information or news that is posted sporadically on social media tends to make users unwilling to devote a lot of time to the information received and evaluate the content in depth. This is known as “news snacking” which is often practiced by social media users. The acquisition of information (e.g. natural disasters) is only from the headlines, keywords, pictures or other news highlights (Meijer & Kormelink, 2015) to form a general picture (Ku et al., 2019). It is supported by Ali et al. (2022) on heuristic which is informational features in message attributes, content or context allowing users to conserve their cognitive resources while reaching “good enough” decisions quickly.

Information Quality

Information quality according to Wang et al. (1995) measured in terms of accessibility, usefulness, comprehensibility, and credibility (Jiang et al., 2021) while Bates et al. (2006) measure the information quality in terms of reliability, truthfulness, readability and completeness (Sun et al., 2019). Zhao, Zhao & Song (2022) support it through their research

results that there are three sources of information quality sources that are most often mentioned which are credibility, usefulness and ease of use. The main measure of information quality in the online opinion acceptance model by Cheung et al. (2009) are the dimensions of relativity, timeliness, accuracy and compactness. Users are motivated to share natural disasters information in a group or community forum based on the main determinants of information quality, which are relevance and comprehensiveness (Penari et al., 2014). The focus on natural disasters information quality and the seeking for reliable reference data is carried out by individuals with a high risk perception to reduce or avoid possible losses. Information quality can affect people's trust in networks, which the more frequent the quality of information they receive; the more trust youths will have in the networks they settle in. Thus, the information quality depends on how usable and how much youth receive from the content (Koohikomali & Sidorova, 2017).

Social Motivation

Based on previous research, information seeking (e.g. natural disasters) is one of the main motivations of adult users including youth in using social media (Bulut & Doğan, 2017; Khan, 2017; Rauch & Schanz, 2013; Stockdale & Coyne, 2020). As for teenagers (younger youth), they are motivated to use social media for their communication needs with their peers (Barker, 2009) while for women's motivation, social media is used for information seeking (Noguti, Singh, & Waller, 2018) and romantic relationships seeking (Sumter, Vandenbosch & Ligtenberg, 2017). There has been a lot of research associating the motivation to use social media with information seeking (Khan, 2017; Rauch & Schanz, 2013; Stockdale & Coyne, 2020). Youth at various levels and backgrounds have various motivations as the main factors to follow social influence including information seeking, information sharing, friendship, entertainment, personal utility, convenience and considering it as something 'cool' (Croes & Bartel, 2021) with social interactive satisfaction (Al-Menayes, 2015) and has been found in the empirical study of Throuvala (2019). Based on the results of the study by Plaisime et al. (2020) on the other hand, social motivation is associated with the use of social media for role models and the benefit of others through information sharing. Information seeking due to news outbreak such as natural disasters through various sources is a social motivation (Zhang, 2012; Soroya et al., 2021). Social unity can be fostered through sharing or spreading verified news on social media in maintaining social relationships, that is social motivation according to Waruwu et al. (2021).

Cognitive Homogeneity

The findings of Dhir et al. (2019) have received support from the Limited Capacity Model (LCM; Lang, 2000), which is that cognitive processing ability can be influenced by privacy, self-disclosure and social comparison (Kaur et al., 2021), including the same thoughts about natural disasters shared with others. Homogeneity in the group includes cognitive homogeneity according to the definition of Leach et al. (2008) are individuals who consider the sharing of information or views within their group to reflect a homogeneous composition, which establishes group members as "coherent social entities" (Velasquez, Montgomery & Hall, 2019). Koohikamali & Sidorova (2017) support that cognitive homogeneity has the same mindset as online networks, thus, users who have a large relationship on social media usually have similar interests and are expected to evaluate and share information that is considered relevant to each other in their networks, especially youth as active users.

Social media users process the information received cognitively by receiving stimuli through exposure to content on social media and storing information for future use (Bright et al., 2015), which then leads them to natural disasters information seeking. Based on the results of the adolescent scale test (adult youth) in Vraga et al.'s (2016) study, youth who are very news literate believe that they can control the influence of the media (cognitively) by having a high level of basic knowledge about media content, the industry and its effects (Ku et al., 2019) including natural disasters. Based on a study by Reynard & Shirgaokar (2019) that focuses on the opinions of X users during natural disasters, users share their location by "checking in", their thoughts and opinions on the application during natural disasters (Cho et al., 2011), indicates cognitive homogeneity between users. Thus, cognitive homogeneity is "the extent to which a person perceives his network members to share his beliefs and eliminate opposing views or beliefs" (Gerhart & Sidorva, 2017; Coastes et al., 2021). Park et al. (2012) and Apuke & Omar (2021) have the same views about it.

Methodology

A quantitative approach through a self-administered survey was implemented in this study to collect research data. Youth in the age range of 15 to 30 years from five zones (east coast, central, northern, southern and Sabah/Sarawak) in Malaysia were selected as the study sample considering 70% of Instagram's active users are youths under the age of 34 and the majority of Tiktok users are between 18 and 24 years old, showing the large percentage of social media use consumed by youth (GilPress, 2023). A multi-stage random sampling was employed where at the first stage, two states cluster random sampling. Then, all states were grouped according to five zones. Cluster sampling is a multi-stage sampling according to Babbie (2012) and Chan (2016) in which initially natural groups (clusters) are sampled, following which members of each selected group are subsampled.

For each zone, a state was selected to represent that zone; next, a district was randomly selected from each of the selected states. Subsequently, at the last stage of the sampling, 100 students of each district was chosen as the respondents, making the overall total of the respondents are 500 (5 zones x 1 state x 1 district x 100 respondents). To ensure youth from diverse backgrounds represent the study, stratified random sampling will also be performed as the respondents will be selected on strata (races). Then, a non-probability (purposive) sampling method was used to collect data. This technique was chosen because the researcher has identified youth with certain criteria. The response rate received was 100% with the return of 500 questionnaires. Table 1 below shows the breakdown of the variables involved and the source of adaptation of the research instrument.

Table 1

Description of Research Instrument

Section	Variables	Items	Sources
A	Demographic Profile of the Respondent		
B	Social Media Use		
C	Social Motivation	7	Based on Soroya et al., (2021), Apuke & Omar (2021) and Chisty et al. (2021)
D	Heuristic	3	Based on Chisty et al. (2021), Pundir, Devi & Nath (2021), Ali (2019) and Ali et al. (2022)
E	Social Tie Variety	3	Based on Gerhart & Sidorova (2017), Apuke & Omar (2021) and Ali (2019)
F	Cognitive Homogeneity	12	Based on Gerhart & Sidorova (2017), Apuke & Omar (2021), Ali et al. (2022) and Ali (2019)
G	Information Quality	4	Based on Koohikamali & Sidorova (2017) and Ali et al. (2022)
Total		29	

Table 2 shows the Cronbach's alpha values for the pilot study. Based on analysis through SPSS, all variables, namely, social motivation, heuristic, social tie variety, cognitive homogeneity and information quality, were exceptionally reliable. Therefore, this suggested that the items given in the instruments were having precise consistency.

Table 2

Cronbach's Alpha Values for Pilot Test (N=100)

Factors	Cronbach's Alpha Values (α) > 0.708
Social Motivation	0.945
Cognitive Homogeneity	0.930
Information Quality	0.857
Social Tie Variety	0.831
Heuristic	0.611

Findings and Discussion*Reading Natural Disasters Information on Social Media among Youth*

In the context of this study, female youth use social media more than male youth. They are 15-20 years old (Gen Z). These youth which also Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) holder, working in the private sector and have a monthly income of RM 1,500 to RM 4,400 on average. Most of these youth do not have youth association membership. They have been using social media for 5 to 10 years or so, considering that they are the digital generation, that is, the generation that grew up with social media. The average number of hours spent on social media each day is only 1 to 3 hours as most of them working on a job. Their number of friends on social media is less than 200 people while their posting per week on social media is between 1 to 3 postings. It is to maintain the exclusivity of the social networks for personal updates and information sharing. The most used social media platforms to connect and share information are WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok. The majority of youth have read natural disasters

related information on social media. Most main reasons youth use social media to get natural disasters related information are to get updated of the natural disasters status (75.4%), weather forecast (55.0%) and road and facilities conditions (49.2%). The majority of youth are satisfied with the natural disasters related information that they received from the social media.

Table 3

Social Media Use for Natural Disasters Information Seeking (n=500)

Social Media Use	Percentage
Have you ever read natural disasters related information on social media?	87.4
Which of the following reasons did you use social media for (natural disasters information seeking)?	
Natural disasters status	75.4
Weather forecast	55.0
Road or facilities conditions	49.2
Service status	49.0
Damages	33.8
Supermarket closures	20.2
I am satisfied with the natural disasters related information received from the social media	81.8

Natural Disasters Information Seeking Factors

Based on the study analysis, youth exhibit a high level of social tie variety ($M=3.96$, $SD=0.93$) in their pursuit of natural disasters related information on social media. They recognize that their online friends come from diverse backgrounds and cultures, indicating that the shared natural disasters related information is not limited to a homogenous group. This high social tie variety reflects youth's eagerness to engage with a broader audience, ultimately amplifying the reach of natural disasters related information through social media engagement and algorithms. Maintaining connections with individuals from different backgrounds is a primary motivation for social media use among youth (Xie, 2014), driving them to share information they find relevant or entertaining (Koohikamali & Sidorova, 2017). These findings highlight that youth engage deeply with natural disasters related information because their diverse social ties enable them to access a wide range of insights and emotional support during crises. For instance, during the 2015 Nepal earthquakes, Nepali communities abroad relied heavily on social media to stay connected with loved ones, demonstrating how varied relationships influence natural disasters related information seeking behaviors. Additionally, youth volunteer groups utilize their extensive networks to foster collaboration and innovative responses in disaster relief efforts. Ultimately, the interplay of both weak and strong ties is crucial for effective risk communication, empowering youth to navigate the complexities of disaster situations more adeptly (Spialek & Houston, 2018; Global Voices, 2015; Asia Internet Stats by Country & 2019 Population Statistics, 2018; Subba & Bui, 2017; Ranjit et al., 2020; McLennan et al., 2016; Friedman 2001; Peek 2008; Fothergill 2017; Strandh 2019; Simsa et al. 2019; Carlton, 2022; King & Jones, 2015; FEMA, 2019; Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe, 2007; Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman, 2014; Granovetter, 1983; Jonathan, Hausmann & Currie, 2017; Liu, Zhang & Zhang, 2020).

The youth heuristic is notably high ($M=3.78$, $SD=1.00$), reflecting their enthusiasm for sharing natural disasters related information on social media. They derive satisfaction from seeing their friends benefit from this sharing, as it brings joy and fosters a sense of contribution to society. This high level of heuristic engagement indicates that youth not only believe in the importance of disseminating natural disasters related information but also feel fulfilled by it. The positive feedback received on their posts, manifested through likes, shares, and saves, reinforces this behaviors, keeping such content trending on popular social media platforms. As Kankanamge, Yigitcanlar & Goonetilleke (2020) suggest, social media engagement becomes especially pronounced during natural disasters, as the demand for information surges. Youth engage deeply with natural disasters related information through heuristics; mental shortcuts that shape risk perception and decision-making.

According to Tversky and Kahneman (1974), these heuristics can lead to biases, such as overestimating risks associated with sensationalized events due to their memorability. Emotional responses also amplify perceptions of risk, driving heightened concern and engagement. While youth initially rely on these heuristics, those directly affected by natural disasters tend to seek more concrete information and critically evaluate governmental responses, moving beyond mental shortcuts. This shift indicates that personal experiences enhance their understanding of natural disasters management, contrasting with less impacted individuals who may continue to depend on heuristics. Therefore, comprehending the role of heuristics in risk perception can inform more effective natural disasters communication strategies, ultimately improving engagement and outcomes in natural disaster management (Lichtenstein et al. 1978; Fischhof et al. 1978; Slovic et al. 1982; Sjoberg 1999; Slovic 1999; Slovic & Peters 2006; Yong & Lemyre, 2019; Birkmann, 2013; Hansson et al., 2020; Cohen, 2003; Rudolph, 2006; Boin et al., 2009; Forgette et al., 2008; Gomez & Wilson, 2008; Arceneaux & Stein, 2006; Kindsmüller, 2022).

Information quality is notably high ($M=3.73$, $SD=0.93$) among youth using social media for natural disasters related information. They find this information highly useful and understandable, evaluating its quality based on specific characteristics before sharing it. The discovery of easily identifiable poor-quality information often disheartens youth, prompting them to seek accurate updates. This study confirms that youth prefer clear, credible, and easily understandable natural disasters related information. They value verified and reliable content, which aligns with findings by Koohikamali & Sidorova (2017), indicating that youth view the search for quality information as a valuable activity that fosters positive attitudes toward social media use.

High quality information is crucial during natural disasters, enabling communities to comprehend risks, respond effectively, and make informed decisions. Reliable information enhances preparedness and reduces confusion, while poor-quality data can provoke panic and distrust, undermining natural disasters management efforts. Just as misleading information disrupts investor engagement in crowdfunding, inadequate updates can jeopardize public safety during crises. Therefore, enhancing information quality in natural disasters communication is vital for improving public awareness and resilience, especially given the varying levels of education and digital skills among citizens. By providing clear and accessible information, governments can address digital inequalities and empower youth to engage responsibly and effectively in disaster situations (Chakraborty & Swinney, 2019;

Morse, 2015; Wessel et al., 2016; Jung, Schneider & Valacich, 2010; Koivisto & Hamari, 2019; Behl & Dutta, 2020; Jackson & Farzaneh, 2012; Ackoff, 1968; Simpson & Prusak, 1995; Chen et al., 2020; Janssen & van der Voort, 2020; Mei, 2020; Beaunoyer et al., 2020; Alamsyah & Zhu, 2022).

Table 4

Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents Response to Information Seeking Factors (n=500)

Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation
Social Tie Variety	3.96	0.93
Heuristic	3.78	1.00
Information Quality	3.73	0.93

In addition, youth have a high level ($M=3.58$, $SD=1.03$) of social motivation in natural disasters information seeking. They share natural disasters information or content on social media because they want others to get the same information as they did, besides, it is easy for them to retrieve information from their archive or save section when needed. Youth who have high social motivation in natural disasters information seeking in social media have a high sense of belonging with their social networks. Sense of belonging is very important in our lives and it actually impacts the way we think and interact with others. It is connected with humanity (Allen, 2019). One of the types of behavior of using Social Network Sites (SNS) or social media is information re-sharing. Youth who have high social motivation tend to re-share information found on social media such as natural disasters for their own use and that of others. This statement is supported by Ajzen (2011) through the Theory of Planned Behavior (Koohikamali & Sidorova, 2017).

The cognitive homogeneity among youth is observed at a moderate level ($M=3.39$, $SD=1.01$), indicating that they do not deeply contemplate the significance of natural disasters related information, both in terms of its importance to themselves and their families, as well as its connections to other knowledge they possess. This lack of cognitive homogeneity contributes to a lower likelihood of sharing natural disasters related information on social media. Such moderate cognitive homogeneity suggests that youth are not fully considering the perspectives of their peers regarding shared natural disasters related information. This behavior is concerning, as it may lead to a diminished sense of humanity (Allen, 2019), which can foster unhealthy relationships among youth both online and offline. Allen (2019) also highlights that peer groups should cultivate a sense of belonging, as this can facilitate the growth of personal and social identity in areas such as maturity, psychosocial development, coping skills, and resilience, ultimately forming stronger cognitive homogeneity.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that while many youth demonstrate resilience following natural disasters, a significant number continue to grapple with post-traumatic stress symptoms, which hinder their engagement with natural disasters related information. This disengagement is largely attributed to emotional and psychological barriers, resulting in cognitive overload. Additionally, the cognitive homogeneity within their social circles perpetuates a limited understanding of disaster risks, as shared experiences and perspectives influence their responses. Consequently, those in disaster-affected areas often possess a clearer comprehension of the severity of such events, whereas those in non-affected regions

frequently exhibit lower risk awareness. Therefore, these findings emphasize the urgent need for tailored interventions that address both individual and communal experiences, promoting greater awareness and engagement among youth in natural disasters preparedness initiatives (Brown et al., 2017; Liang, Zhou & Liu, 2021; Witt, Sachser & Fegert, 2024; Alaszewski 2005; Henwood et al. 2008; Osypuk & Galea 2007; Slovic 1999; United Nations 2015; Public Safety Canada 2016; Yong & Lemyre, 2019; Geng et al., 2021).

Table 4

Continued

Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation
Social Motivation	3.58	1.03
Cognitive Homogeneity	3.39	1.01

Conclusion

It is acknowledged that social motivation, heuristic, social tie variety, cognitive homogeneity and information quality are the natural disasters information seeking factors among youth on social media. The findings of the study show that all factors are at a high level, except for cognitive homogeneity which is at a moderate level. However, the natural disasters information seeking factors still need to be improved. The provision of quality information of natural disasters can make the youth be more prepared when encounter the real situation of natural disasters. Moreover, the development of natural disasters information dissemination is also more controlled. There is a need to improve the cognitive homogeneity in natural disasters information seeking. Emphasis on youth to be more sensitive and concerned about natural disasters information because when they experience it, they indirectly play the role of the information delivery agent to the people who experience the natural disasters in their residential areas. Upright and virtuous in community will contribute to societal benefit. Information quality in this age should be the standard of information seeking for every youth including natural disasters. Standard information quality according to Cuan-Baltazar et al. (2020) is that the information must be scientifically supported from relevant field sources.

Natural disasters information seeking and information sharing has now become a need for youth in line with technological advances including social media. Natural disasters information that is easily available at the fingertips can have various effects on users based on specific context. Natural disasters information seeking factors identified through this study can be used as variables or research instruments for researchers to study behavior related, environment related and other potential areas. In addition, the natural disasters information seeking system on social media should be upgraded accordingly to the needs and progress of user literacy, apart from the latest trends. An incompatible system will contribute to the spread of fake news and other problems. Lim et al. (2022) have supported the suggestion that interested parties such as National Disaster Management Agency and Ministry of Youth and Sports need to trust evidence-based researchers, based on studies and youth ambassadors who are influential in delivering important natural disasters information to youth and the community in general on social media. Therefore, by unveiling the natural disasters information seeking factors, the number of literate youth will be gradually improve on social media.

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