

ANTECEDENTS OF CUSTOMER-PERCEIVED SERVICE INNOVATION IN GRADUATE STUDY ABROAD SERVICE ENTERPRISES

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Abstract: This research examines the antecedents of customer-perceived service innovation in graduate study abroad service enterprises in China. Amidst a competitive and rapidly digitizing market, understanding the drivers of customer-perceived innovation is crucial for success. This study explores the impact of organizational factors (organizational culture, leadership, human resources, training, process improvement) and digital marketing strategies (online channels, targeting, advertising, measurement, content) on customer-perceived service innovation, with customer satisfaction acting as a mediator. A mixed-methods approach was employed, beginning with qualitative in-depth interviews with experts to develop a structured questionnaire. Quantitative data were then collected from 500 respondents, including students, parents, and educational consultants, in major Chinese urban centers. The data was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The findings indicate that both organizational factors ($\beta=0.446$) and digital marketing strategies ($\beta=0.580$) have significant positive direct effects on customer satisfaction. In turn, these factors, along with customer satisfaction ($\beta=0.381$), directly and positively influence customer-perceived service innovation. Customer satisfaction was also found to be a critical mediator in these relationships. The final validated structural model demonstrated excellent goodness-of-fit ($\chi^2/df=1.28$, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.02) and explained 90.5% of the variance in customer-perceived service innovation. The study provides actionable insights for enterprises to enhance innovation by strengthening internal capabilities, implementing sophisticated digital marketing, and prioritizing customer satisfaction.

Keywords: Service Innovation, Customer-Perceived Service Innovation, Organizational Culture, Digital Marketing, Customer Satisfaction, Study Abroad Services.

INTRODUCTION

The global education landscape is increasingly shaped by the significant number of Chinese students pursuing education abroad, establishing China as a dominant force in global student mobility (Chen et al. 2022). This trend has fueled a substantial market for graduate study abroad service enterprises, which have evolved from simple application assistance to comprehensive support organizations. The global market was valued at approximately USD 30 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach USD 60 billion by 2032 (Malafeyev et al. 2024). In the post-pandemic era, a resurgence in demand, combined with evolving student preferences for diverse destinations beyond traditional countries, has created a complex and competitive environment.

However, these enterprises face significant challenges in achieving meaningful service innovation, which is critical for their sustainability. Many firms struggle with a limited understanding of the complex interplay between internal organizational factors, external digital marketing strategies, and customer perceptions in driving innovation. Historically, organizational cultures in many Chinese enterprises have relied on imitation rather than genuine innovation, posing a barrier to progress (Song and Zhao, 2022). Concurrently, digital transformation has fundamentally altered customer expectations, requiring enterprises to innovate their service delivery with virtual counseling and hybrid models (Tavoletti et al. 2022). Understanding the relationship between these factors, customer satisfaction, and perceived innovation is crucial, especially as Chinese families now prioritize affordability and post-study work opportunities. This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by addressing the following research questions:

What is the current state of organizational factors, digital marketing strategies, customer satisfaction, and customer-perceived service innovation in graduate study abroad service enterprises?

How do organizational factors, digital marketing strategies, and customer satisfaction influence customer-perceived service innovation, both directly and indirectly?

What is the structural model that best explains the factors influencing service innovation achievement in graduate study abroad service enterprises?

To answer these questions, the objectives of this research are:

1. To explore the current state of organizational factors, digital marketing strategies, customer satisfaction, and customer-perceived service innovation.
2. To analyze both the direct and indirect effects of organizational factors and digital marketing strategies on customer-perceived service innovation, with customer satisfaction as a mediator.
3. To develop and validate a model that explains the factors influencing service innovation achievement in graduate study abroad service enterprises.

By developing a comprehensive model, this research will provide theoretical contributions and actionable insights for managers to enhance their competitive capabilities and support China's broader goal of human capital development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review covers the key theories and concepts that form the foundation of the research framework, focusing on organizational culture, digital marketing strategies, customer satisfaction, and customer-perceived service innovation as the primary variables in this study.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is defined as a system of shared values, beliefs, and norms that distinguish one organization from another and guide the behavior of its members. Schein (2010) offers the perspective that organizational culture is the result of an organization's collective learning in problem-solving, adapting to the external environment, and integrating internally to achieve common objectives. Therefore, organizational culture is crucial for creating unity, motivating personnel, and helping an organization adapt to external changes. This study adopts Denison's model, a framework used to measure the impact of organizational culture on performance and innovation, by conceptualizing it through four key dimensions (Aboramadan et al., 2020):

Mission Culture: A culture that focuses on achieving the organization's clear goals and vision, where personnel understand and work in alignment with those objectives (Denison et al., 2015).

Adaptability Culture: A culture that emphasizes flexibility and responsiveness to the external environment by supporting creativity, risk-taking, and experimentation to meet changing customer needs (Denison et al., 2015).

Consistent Culture: A culture that focuses on internal strength and stability, with clear core values guiding practices, leading to effective coordination and integration across the organization (Denison et al., 2015).

Involvement Culture: A culture that prioritizes employee participation in decision-making, believing that responsibility and a sense of ownership lead to organizational success (Fey & Denison, 2003). Extensive research demonstrates that these dimensions are positively correlated with organizational performance and innovation.

Digital Marketing Strategies

Digital marketing is the use of digital channels and internet technologies to promote products, build relationships, and deliver value to customers (Stokes, 2011). It differs from traditional marketing in its capacity for two-way communication and real-time data collection to learn about customer behavior. The core components of a successful digital marketing strategy include:

Online Marketing Channels: Selecting appropriate platforms for the target audience, such as social media, websites, blogs, or email, to communicate and foster interaction (Kotler et al., 2021).

Target Group: Clearly defining and analyzing the target audience in terms of demographics, psychographics, and behavior to create precise messaging (Aaker, 2020).

Measurement: Evaluating campaign effectiveness using key performance indicators such as reach, engagement, and conversion rates to continuously refine strategies (Kaushik, 2021).

Advertising: Paid communication through digital channels. Godin (2020) introduced the concept of "Permission Marketing," which emphasizes building consent and relationships with customers before advertising.

Content Communication Strategy: Creating and distributing valuable and engaging content to attract the target audience and build a strong brand relationship (Kotler et al., 2021).

Market Competition Trends: Monitoring and analyzing competitors' strategies to develop a differentiated approach and gain a competitive advantage (Kotler & Keller, 2022).

The effective integration of these components helps organizations reach their target audiences and achieve long-term success.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is a foundational concept in marketing and service management, defined as the feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a service's perceived performance against pre-existing expectations (Kotler & Keller, 2022). This is known as the "Expectation-Disconfirmation Paradigm." Satisfaction is not merely a rational evaluation but also includes an emotional response to the service experience (Zeithaml et al., 2018). It is a critical indicator of service quality and directly influences loyalty, retention, and word-of-mouth promotion. Key components contributing to customer satisfaction include:

Service Quality: The customer's overall assessment of a service's excellence is often measured using the SERVQUAL model, which emphasizes reliability, responsiveness, and professionalism (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Perceived Value: An assessment of the benefits received from a service relative to the costs incurred, which can be monetary (price) or non-monetary (time, effort) (Zeithaml, 1988).

Commitment: The psychological attachment a customer feels toward a service provider, which encourages them to maintain the relationship and resist competitors (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Brand Image: The customer's overall perception of the organization's reputation, credibility, and market position (Keller, 1993).

Trust: The confidence a customer places in the service provider's ability to deliver on its promises and act in the customer's best interest (Moorman et al., 1993).

Customer Perceived Service Innovation

Customer-perceived service innovation is a customer's subjective evaluation of the novelty, utility, and value of new or improved services. According to Rogers (2003), an innovation is judged from the customer's perspective as to whether it is "new." Therefore, the value of innovation is determined by customer perception rather than its objective technical features. Perceived service innovation is a key driver of competitive differentiation and enhanced customer satisfaction, encompassing several dimensions:

Functional Innovation: Improvements to the core features and performance of a service that customers can directly benefit from, such as adding useful new functionalities (De Jong & Vermeulen, 2003).

Experience Innovation: Enhancements to the overall customer journey to create more engaging and memorable interactions (Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

Technological Innovation: The integration of new technologies to improve service delivery, making it more efficient and accessible, such as through the use of AI or mobile applications (Barras, 1986).

Process Innovation: Improvements in service delivery processes to increase efficiency, reduce complexity, and ensure consistency (Davenport, 1993).

Business Model Innovation: The development of new approaches to creating and delivering value, which might involve changes to the service structure or pricing models (Teece, 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies to comprehensively investigate the factors influencing service innovation achievement in graduate study abroad service enterprises. This chapter details the research design, population and sampling, instrumentation, and data analysis procedures.

Design of a Questionnaire and Survey Method

The research was conducted in two distinct phases to ensure a robust and well-grounded investigation. The phase 1 was qualitative instrument development which was initial phase, involving in-depth interviews with a purposively selected sample of 10 key experts from government, academia, and the private sector. These experts provided critical insights into the dynamics of organizational factors, digital marketing, and customer perspectives within the study abroad industry. The rich data from these interviews formed the foundation for developing the structure and specific items of the quantitative questionnaire, ensuring its relevance and contextual validity. While in Phase 2, quantitative survey was conducted. The second phase was quantitative, utilizing a structured questionnaire for data collection.

Population and Sample

The target population comprised administrative staff, marketing executives, and customer service professionals from approximately 1,200–1,500 graduate study abroad service enterprises located in China's primary educational hubs: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Chengdu. The sample size was determined to be 500 respondents, based on the guideline of requiring at least 20 cases per parameter for multivariate analysis (Lindeman et al., 1980), which is a standard requirement for robust Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure the sample was representative of the different regions and enterprise sizes.

Data Analysis

Instrumentation and Scoring: The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932) to measure respondents' opinions on the key constructs, ranging from 1 (least agreement) to 5 (highest agreement). Interpretation of the mean scores was based on predefined intervals (e.g., 4.50–5.00 for the highest level), following the methodology of Best and Kahn (2006).

Validity and Reliability: The questionnaire's quality was rigorously established. Content validity was assessed by three subject-matter experts who evaluated the congruence of each item with the research objectives using the Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) index. Items were retained only if their IOC value exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.6 (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1977). Reliability was confirmed through a pilot test with 30 individuals from the target population. The analysis yielded a very high overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.986, indicating excellent internal consistency and suitability for data collection (Cronbach, 1990).

RESULTS

This section presents the analysis of the data collected from 500 respondents. It begins with a descriptive analysis of the sample's demographic characteristics and the main research variables. This is followed by the results of the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) used to test research hypotheses.

Descriptive Analysis

The demographic characteristics of the 500 survey participants are summarized in Table 1. The sample was predominantly male (81.6%). The largest age group was 41–50 years (41.6%), followed by those over 50 (18.4%), suggesting that many respondents were middle-aged adults, likely parents or experienced decision-makers. The sample was highly educated, with 56.0% holding a degree higher than a bachelor's, which is appropriate for a study concerning graduate-level education services. In terms of status, over half of the respondents were students (51.6%), while parents or guardians constituted a significant portion (37.8%). This distribution provides a diverse set of perspectives from both direct service users and key stakeholders involved in the study abroad process.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=500)

Variable		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	408	81.6
	Female	92	18.4
Age	18 – 20 years	39	7.8
	21 – 30 years	73	14.6
	31 – 40 years	88	17.6
	41 – 50 years	208	41.6
	Over 50 years	92	18.4
Education Level	Upper secondary school or vocational certificate	5	1.0
	Bachelor's degree	215	43.0
	Higher than bachelor's degree	280	56.0
Monthly Income (in Chinese Yuan – CNY)	Less than ¥5,000	47	9.4
	¥5,001 – ¥8,000	103	20.6
	¥8,001 – ¥12,000	86	17.2
	¥12,001 – ¥20,000	206	41.2
	More than ¥20,000	58	11.6
Experience with graduate study abroad services	Never used	120	24.0
	Used 1–2 times	125	25.0
	Used 3–5 times	190	38.0
	More than 5 times	65	13.0
current status	Student	258	51.6
	Parent/Guardian	189	37.8
	Educational Consultant	39	7.8
	Other: _____	14	2.8

Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

As shown in Table 2, the descriptive analysis revealed that respondents perceived all four main constructions at a high level. The Organizational Factors are with an overall mean of 3.956, this construction was rated highly. The sub-dimension of leadership received the highest score ($\bar{x} = 4.030\$$), indicating that strong and clear leadership is a well-recognized strength. The digital marketing strategies had an overall mean was 3.912. The measurement component ($\bar{x} = 4.012\$$) scored highest, suggesting that enterprises are perceived as effective in tracking and evaluating their digital marketing efforts. In addition, customer satisfaction had the highest means among the 5-point scale variables ($\bar{x} = 3.971\$$). The sub-dimension of trust ($\bar{x} = 4.023\$$) was the strongest contributor, highlighting its critical role in building customer relationships. The customer perceived service innovation received high ratings. Process Innovation ($\bar{x} = 3.965\$$) and

Experience Innovation (\$ = 3.961\$) were the most recognized aspects, indicating customers value efficiency and the quality of their journey.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the Main Constructs

Variable	\bar{X}	S.D.	MIN	MAX	SK	KU	levels
Organizations	3.956	.436	2.31	4.84	-.493	.034	High Level
Digital Marketing Strategies	3.912	.394	2.46	4.67	-.679	.368	High Level
Customer Satisfaction	3.971	.478	2.26	4.90	-.607	.284	High Level
Customer Perceived Service Innovation	6.468	.859	3.15	8.20	-.612	.231	High Level
Total	3.956	.436	2.31	4.84	-.493	.034	High Level

Structural Model Analysis

To test the research hypotheses, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was performed. The correlations among all variables were positive and highly significant ($p < 0.01$), confirming the suitability of the data for path analysis. The final validated structural model is illustrated in Figure 1, and the detailed results of the analysis are presented in

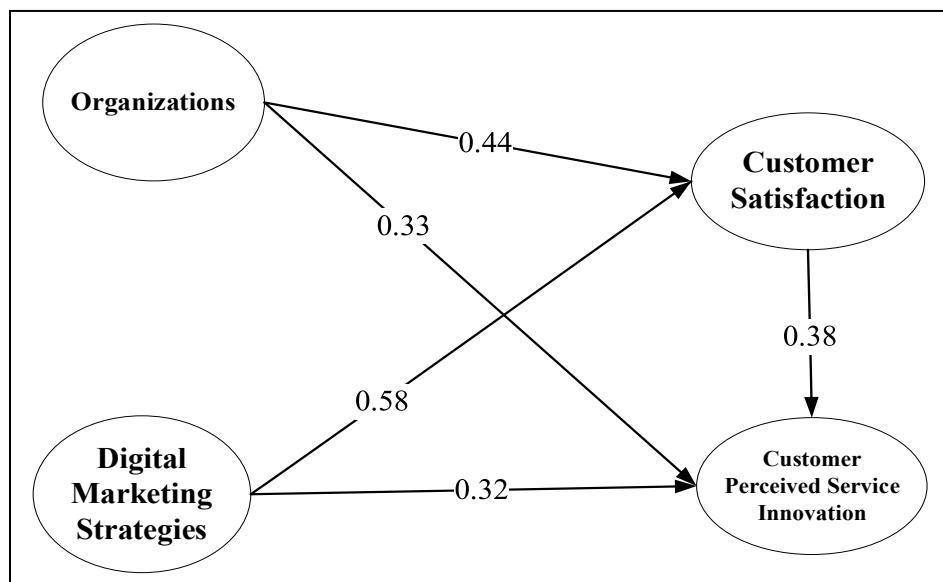


Figure 1: Structural Model of the Causal Influence Analysis between Factors

Table 3: Results of the Structural Model Analysis

Dependent Variable	Customer Satisfaction			Customer Innovation	Perceived Service	
Independent Variable	TE	IE	DE	TE	IE	DE
Organizations	0.446	-	0.446**	0.498	0.166	0.332**
Digital Marketing Strategies	0.580	-	0.580**	0.535	0.215	0.320**
Customer Satisfaction				0.381**		0.381**
R ²	0.551			0.905		
Chi-Square = 95.96, df = 75, P = 0.07, CFI = 0.99 TLI = 0.99 SRMR = 0.07 RMSEA = 0.02						

P<0.05

Note: TE = Total Effect, IE = Indirect Effect, DE = Direct Effect.

Hypothesis Testing: The results from the SEM analysis supported all seven research hypotheses.

Direct Effects:

H1: Organizational factors had a direct positive effect on customer satisfaction ($\beta=0.446$, $p < 0.05$). (Accepted)

H2: Digital marketing strategies had a strong direct positive effect on customer satisfaction ($\beta=0.580$, $p < 0.05$). (Accepted)

H3: Organizational factors had a direct positive effect on customer-perceived service innovation ($\beta=0.332$, $p < 0.05$). (Accepted)

H4: Digital marketing strategies had a direct positive effect on customer-perceived service innovation ($\beta=0.320$, $p < 0.05$). (Accepted)

H5: Customer satisfaction had a direct positive effect on customer-perceived service innovation ($\beta=0.381$, $p < 0.05$). (Accepted)

Indirect Effects:

H6: Organizational factors had an indirect positive effect on innovation through customer satisfaction (Indirect Effect = 0.166). (Accepted)

H7: Digital marketing strategies had an indirect positive effect on innovation through customer satisfaction (Indirect Effect = 0.215). (Accepted)

Model Fit and Explanatory Power

The model demonstrated substantial explanatory power, accounting for 55.1% of the variance (R^2) in Customer Satisfaction and an impressive 90.5% of the variance in Customer Perceived Service Innovation. Furthermore, the goodness-of-fit indices confirmed the model's robustness and excellent alignment with the empirical data ($\chi^2/df = 1.28$; CFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.02), indicating that the proposed model is a valid representation of the relationships among the variables.

DISCUSSION

The findings illustrate a synergistic relationship where strong internal capabilities and strategic external marketing collectively drive customer-perceived service innovation, with customer satisfaction playing a crucial mediating role. The high ratings for Organizational Factors align with the Resource-Based View (RBV), which suggests that intangible, internal resources such as a positive organizational culture, skilled human capital, and agile leadership are central to creating a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). The adeptness of enterprises in Digital Marketing Strategies supports contemporary marketing theories that emphasize relevance, trust, and engagement through customer-centric digital approaches, such as Seth Godin's (2020) concept of "permission marketing". This is also consistent with research showing that digital strategies significantly contribute to higher satisfaction among service customers (Nuseir et al., 2023). On the customer side, the high levels of Customer Satisfaction was rooted in components like service quality and trust, which have long been emphasized by the SERVQUAL model (Zeithaml et al., 1988). The pivotal mediating role of satisfaction in the model supports Oliver's (1997) Expectation-Confirmation Theory, which posits that confirmed expectations lead to satisfaction, which in turn drives favorable post-purchase attitudes, such as a greater appreciation for innovation. When customers are satisfied with the core service, they are more likely to perceive and value the innovative efforts of the enterprise.

The powerful influence of digital engagement in these relationships is echoed in studies by Kim and Lee (2023) and Paul et al. (2024), who found that social media interaction and digital communication significantly boost engagement, satisfaction, and the perception of innovation. In essence, this study's validated model suggests that service innovation is not an isolated function, but an emergent phenomenon driven by the dynamic interplay between customer experience, organizational readiness, and digital fluency. This systemic perspective aligns with frameworks proposed by Chen et al. (2022), highlighting that modern enterprises must strategically integrate internal and external factors to achieve meaningful innovation.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to elucidate the complex interplay of factors that drive service innovation achievement within China's graduate study abroad service enterprises. Based on a comprehensive analysis of 500 respondents, the research provides an empirically validated framework and yields several key conclusions that directly address the research objectives.

Confirmation of High Performance: The study first confirms that graduate study abroad service enterprises in China are perceived by their stakeholders as high-performing entities. They demonstrate strong internal capabilities through well-regarded organizational factors (e.g., culture and leadership), implement effective digital marketing strategies, achieve high levels of customer satisfaction—particularly in building trust—and are widely recognized by clients as being highly innovative in their service delivery. Second, the research identifies the primary levels of customer satisfaction. While both strong organizational factors and sophisticated digital marketing are significant predictors, digital marketing strategies emerged as the most powerful direct driver. This finding underscores the critical importance of a well-executed online presence

and targeted customer engagement in shaping positive service experiences in the contemporary market. Third, the study clarifies the multifaceted pathways to achieving customer-perceived innovation. It reveals that innovation is not only driven directly by strong internal organization and effective marketing but is also significantly influenced indirectly through the crucial mediation of customer satisfaction. This confirms a pivotal dynamic: a satisfied customer base is more receptive to, and appreciative of, an enterprise's innovative efforts, acting as a bridge between the firm's actions and the market's perception of its innovation. Finally, this research contributes a robust, validated structural model that successfully explains and predicts service innovation achievement. The model's excellent goodness-of-fit indices and substantial explanatory power, accounting for an impressive 90.5% of the variance in customer-perceived service innovation, validate its use as a reliable framework for both future academic inquiry and practical strategic planning for managers in the industry.

Recommendations

Based on the validated structural model and the significant relationships identified in this study, the following actionable recommendations are proposed for organizational leaders, marketing teams, and strategic planners within the graduate study abroad service industry. For organizational leaders to strengthen the internal foundation for Innovation, the findings confirmed that organizational factors are a significant antecedent to both customer satisfaction and perceived innovation. Therefore, to create an environment where innovation can thrive, leaders should:

Cultivate an Innovation-Driven Culture: Actively foster a workplace culture that emphasizes shared values, encourages creativity, supports open communication, and empowers employees to contribute to continuous improvement.

Invest in Human Capital: Prioritize ongoing training and professional development programs that are aligned with market demands, focusing on intercultural competence, digital literacy, and customer service excellence.

Optimize Internal Processes: Systematically streamline and refine internal workflows, from application processing to client communication, to enhance operational efficiency and ensure consistently high-quality customer experience.

The marketing teams should leverage digital marketing to drive satisfaction, given that digital marketing strategies were identified as the most powerful direct driver of customer satisfaction, which in turn mediates perceived innovation. For overall innovation strategy, the multi-dimensional approach should be adopted to meaningfully enhance how customers perceive service innovation, enterprises should innovate holistically rather than focus on singular improvements.

Limitations and Future Research

This study, while comprehensive, has several limitations that should be acknowledged. This is Cross-Sectional Design in which the data was collected at a single point in time. While this cross-sectional design allows for the examination of relationships between variables, it does not permit the inference of causality over time. Customer perceptions and the impact of organizational strategies may evolve, which cannot be captured by this methodology. The study was conducted in four major urban centers in China (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu). Although these are primary hubs for study abroad services, the findings may not be fully generalizable to enterprises operating in second-tier cities, rural areas, or other countries with different cultural and economic contexts. The demographic profile of the respondents indicates that most are males (81.6%) and a significant portion from the 41–50 age group (41.6%). This composition may not appear to directly reflect the primary end-users of study abroad services (i.e., young students). However, this can be interpreted as a reflection of the significant role that parents and key family decision-makers play in the process in China. Their inclusion provides a multi-stakeholder perspective but deviates from a purely student-centric sample.

Future Research

Longitudinal design to observe how organizational development, marketing innovation, and customer satisfaction evolve, especially in response to global events. Additionally, comparative studies across different countries or regions could offer broader insights into how cultural or regulatory contexts affect service innovation models. Future studies could also incorporate additional mediating or moderating variables, such as brand equity, perceived value, or customer loyalty, to further refine the understanding of what drives the perception of service innovation.

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