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Contextual Factors That Enable and Restrain Social Network Formation of Dutch Erasmus+ Students

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ABSTRACT

When studying abroad, international exchange students generally establish a new social network abroad. However, how international exchange students develop their social networks over time remains a blind spot in academic literature. In this article, we analyze the initial formation and development of such networks among six Dutch Erasmus+ students. Using homophily theory, we focus on the factors that enable and restrain initial social network formation and interaction patterns. We relied on a longitudinal qualitative approach, whereby we repeatedly interviewed these six students over time. Our findings reveal the importance of three main contexts in the initial social network formation of Erasmus+ students, namely the premobility phase, the living place, and the social space. These findings provide insights for practitioners on which contexts to focus on when developing strategies to foster the integration of international exchange students at host institutions.

Keywords: Erasmus+, interaction patterns, international student mobility, the Netherlands, social networks

INTRODUCTION

Since its introduction in 1987, more than 3 million European students went abroad on a temporary exchange within the framework of the Erasmus+ program. By studying abroad, these students generally encounter different culture(s), which generally leads to adaptation processes. Such processes have been extensively examined from a (cross-cultural) psychological perspective and using quantitative approaches (e.g., Lewthwaite, 1996; Pacheco, 2020; Pedersen et al., 2011; Pitts, 2009; Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Zhou et al., 2008). Social networks are thereby often an important focal point, as they can have a significant impact on international students' adaptation processes. For example, if students mainly interact with other international students, they might not get really involved in host society dynamics, in contrast to students who predominantly establish social relationships with the local student population. However, how social networks of international exchange students develop over time remains a blind spot in academic literature. In this article, we analyze the initial formation and development of such social networks among Dutch Erasmus+ students, with a focus on the factors that enable and restrain initial social network formation and interaction patterns, relying on a longitudinal qualitative approach. When referring to international students, we thus specifically refer to exchange students throughout the paper.

Our contribution to the academic literature is twofold. First, several scholars who analyzed the social networks of international students already indicated that international students tend to cluster with other international students or co-national students (students from their home country), rather than with local students (e.g., Beech, 2018; Brown, 2009; Dervin, 2009; Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Marangell et al., 2018; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Waters & Brooks, 2011), which can lead to the creation of student bubbles whereby they live an international life separately from the local students (Cairns et al., 2018). However, the majority of these studies focus on "degree mobility"—that is, international students who pursue a full degree abroad, as well as flows of non-Western students toward Western countries (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). In this article, in contrast, we focus on initial social network formation in the framework of the Erasmus+ program, whereby students go abroad for a limited time during their studies, usually a semester or full academic year. In contrast to other world regions, this is the most common form of student mobility in Europe (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Erasmus+ students form an interesting group to study, as empirical evidence suggests that the social networks and interaction patterns of exchange students might be different compared with degree-mobile students. A study of Van Mol and Michielsen (2014), for example, indicated that Austrian, Belgian, Italian, Norwegian, and Polish exchange students are most likely to interact with other international students in their destination countries, followed by local students and only lastly with co-national students. They explained these patterns through the absence of an international student community from interviewed students' home country in the destination country, as exchange students generally spent only an academic semester or year in the destination city,

which limits the possibilities for interaction with co-national students. This contrasts markedly with the experience of many degree-mobile students, who often can rely upon a sizeable network of co-nationals (Marangell et al., 2018). Furthermore, they indicated students generally felt little cultural distance with the local students, as most European exchange movements take place within Europe itself. Finally, they indicated exchange students generally do not compete with local students in terms of academic degrees, as they obtain their degree at their home institution, which leads to an easier establishment of contact as no competition is involved. Altogether, it thus seems that Erasmus+ students are less likely to rely upon co-national students in a foreign context compared with degree-mobile students. Our article contributes to a scientific understanding of the dynamics described above by providing empirical evidence on the contextual factors that enable and restrain the formation of social networks of Erasmus+ students with international, co-national, and local students.

Second, most of the existing qualitative studies focusing on interaction patterns of exchange students are based on retrospective qualitative interviews. Although Van Mol and Michielsen (2014) suggested exchange students' social networks are dynamic, their cross-sectional qualitative data provide no real insights into how social networks develop over time during students' international exchange. In this article, we aim to provide a more in-depth insight into this dynamism, as we conducted repeatedly interviews with six Dutch exchange students during their initial stages abroad. Initially, the aim of the research project was to interview each of these six students 12 times over the whole exchange period. Unfortunately, COVID-19 interrupted our qualitative fieldwork stage, as students had to return home. Nevertheless, the qualitative data gathered during the initial phases of their exchange period already indicate the dynamic nature of these networks and their role in the adaptation processes of exchange students. After all, social networks are generally quickly formed after arrival (Ballatore, 2010; Gill & Bialski, 2011), as international students are then in need for support and orientation upon arrival (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014).

Theoretical Background

When international exchange students enter a new environment, they generally encounter individuals who are different from themselves, and establish new social networks and interaction patterns. Scholars commonly distinguish between three student groups when investigating the social networks of international exchange students: international, co-national, and local (Dervin, 2009; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). To analyze the initial social network formation of Dutch Erasmus+ students, our theoretical starting point was the theory of homophily, a sociological approach to social networks that aims to explain why social networks often tend to be homogeneous. According to this theory, "birds of a feather flock together": individuals are inclined to establish relationships with people they consider to be similar in attributes or values (e.g., Brooks, 2005; de Federico de la Rúa, 2003; Ferris & Stein, 2018; Kalmijn, 1998; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; McPherson et al., 2001;

Murphy-Lejeune, 2002), as they perceive less relational uncertainty during such interactions (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984). This is especially relevant during the first phases of an international student exchange, as students might be disoriented and experience significant challenges, such as not commanding the language of the host country well and orienting themselves in a new society. As such, the need to connect with individuals with whom relational uncertainty is low, might be salient in the initial stages of the exchange period. In the context of our research project, we expected that Dutch students would initially rely on other Dutch students to get oriented in the destination society. We also expected that exchange students would connect relatively quickly to other (newly arrived) international exchange students, as they also seek to build up a new social network from scratch. Their "newness" to the host country might hence induce international students to mainly connect to each other, as they might share similar concerns. The study of Van Mol and Michielsen (2014) among Austrian, Belgian, British, Italian, Norwegian and Polish exchange students confirms this idea, as their respondents indicated relying mainly on co-national and international students during the initial phases of their international exchange experience.

However, it is not only the preference for seeking relationships with similar others that defines individuals' social network formation and interaction patterns. According to the theory of homophily, the composition of individuals' social networks heavily depends upon the opportunities they have to meet other individuals (de Federico de la Rúa, 2003; Ferris & Stein, 2018; Kalmijn, 1998; Martinovic et al., 2011). In the context of international student exchanges, we expected this also to hold true: The possibilities to establish social connections with different groups of students may be significantly enabled or restrained by the specific social spaces exchange students move in.

Two studies of Fincher and Shaw (2009, 2011) among international students in Melbourne illustrated the importance of the housing environment in this respect. They argued that the location and sort of building (e.g., apartment, house, student residence, etc.) significantly impacted the segregation of international students from local students. This is partly the result of the process described above, whereby students have the tendency to seek support from co-national and international students in the initial stages of their exchange experience, but it is also related to institutional practices whereby students are directed toward specific housing where only other international or co-national students live (Beech, 2018; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). The importance of housing in terms of connecting the social worlds of international students with those of local students has also been underlined in other studies (e.g., Nesdale & Todd, 2000; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). When there are possibilities to interact in the living place, for example, through a shared kitchen or dining hall, social contact between different groups is facilitated.

Besides the living place, however, international students have other places where they can meet other students, such as the higher education institutions they attend, nightlife, and student clubs. However, it seems that student clubs and communal spaces at higher education institutions are often characterized by segregation, whereby local and international students frequent different places

(Fincher & Shaw, 2011). Even when they share the same physical spaces at the higher education institution (e.g., the classrooms), interaction with the local population does not prove to be self-evident as both populations have different goals and opportunities, and local students' can perceive pressure from their peer group (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). Furthermore, "simply bringing home and international students together in class and on campus does not necessarily result in meaningful interaction between them" (Leask, 2009, p. 206). Indeed, it has been argued in the context of degree mobility that international and local students inhabit "semidistinct social spaces" (Harrison & Peacock, 2010): Although local and international students might regularly cross each other, they might not be present in each other's daily lives (Dervin, 2009). This seems to hold particularly true for more formal contexts, such as the higher education institution they attend; informal rather than formal contexts seem to be important for establishing contact with the local population (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014), and language proficiency naturally also plays a role (e.g., Ballatore, 2010; Dervin, 2009; Dunne, 2009; Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014).

METHOD

This study forms part of a wider study conducted by Oberon, on the experience of Dutch bachelor's and master's students, high school students, and teaching staff who participate in the Erasmus+ program. In the framework of this broader research project, we conducted a qualitative case study at the beginning of 2020 to investigate the adaptation processes of six Dutch higher education students abroad. Oberon approached Dutch higher education institutions with the question to recruit participants for their study by sending out an invitation email to their outgoing exchange students. The main author approached a subsample of the larger group of students who agreed to participate in the project. Additionally, we posted recruitment messages on Facebook, in groups that focused on international students. After identifying the participants, we organized online in-depth interviews three times over a period of seven weeks. Originally, we intended to interview participants 12 times throughout their whole exchange period of six months, but as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world in early 2020, fieldwork was interrupted as students had to return home. As such, our analysis provides an insight into the role of social relationships in the *initial* adaptation processes of international exchange students. Each interview lasted between 6 and 22 mins. The short duration of these interviews is the result of the initial planning, namely to conduct 12 interviews with each participant over a six-month period, which required not overburdening the respondents every two weeks with lengthy interviews in order to prevent attrition.

We organized the semistructured interviews around an interview guide, which was divided into different topics: (a) students' living arrangements and goals regarding the international exchange; (b) social and educational experiences since the last interview; (c) the development of social relationships; (d) contacts

with students' social environment in the home country; and (e) positive and negative experiences since the last interview.

We conducted all interviews on Skype in Dutch, which we audiorecorded and transcribed verbatim. We refer to respondents through pseudonyms to guarantee confidentiality. We interviewed five female students and one male student, and their age ranged from 20 to 26 years. We used a grounded theory approach to analyze the interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This means we aimed to conduct interviews on a cyclical basis, until a point of theoretical saturation, which refers to the point where no new insights are generated. Through the process of open and axial coding, we followed a coding paradigm that included context, conditions, actions, interactions, and consequences, based on the contact summary sheet of Miles and Huberman (1994). We identified three main contexts that explain the initial development of Erasmus+ students' social networks and interaction patterns: (a) the premobility phase; (b) the living place; and (c) the social space.

RESULTS

The Premobility Phase

Our results indicated the importance of not overlooking the premobility phase when analyzing initial social network formation of Erasmus+ students. Often, students start to organize their living arrangements before the exchange, and as such, the premobility phase can shape the opportunities they have to meet different groups of students. Some of the interviewed students, for example, indicated they had a clear preference for a certain type of living arrangement before leaving or upon arrival. For example, Sam, a 26-years-old data science student who went on exchange to South Korea, indicated he did not want to share a bathroom or bedroom with someone else, which restrained the housing opportunities and consequently also social interaction patterns. He said, "I opted for a bathroom just for myself, because I do not think I can handle sharing that with someone else. For example, [sharing] a bedroom, I am not into that."

Previous experiences with international students in the home country also seemed to play a role in the respondents' preferences for certain types of housing, indicating the role of students' personal biography. For example, Anna, a 20-years-old psychology student who went on exchange to Scotland, indicated that because of her previous experience with first-year international students at her university campus in the Netherlands, she was reluctant to live together with such students while being abroad:

> I am a bit over the first-year American students you see at campus. So I did not want a student accommodation but a normal private housing, and I knew a girl from [same institution] who was here during the first semester. She asked her landlord if I could have the room during the second semester. That is how I acquired this room.

The quote above thus indicates how social networks already can influence a student exchange before departure. The interviews illustrated that friends who already studied abroad often offered advice about the different types of housing that are available in the destination. Furthermore, these social networks also provided exchange students with the contact information of living places directly. This way, the social network of Dutch Erasmus+ students prior to departure already has an impact on future social interaction patterns while being abroad, as students often opt for a specific kind of housing because of the information that circulates within their own social network. The organization of the Erasmus+ exchange program may also play a role here. Because exchanges within the program are organized through agreements between sending and host institutions, the likelihood increases that new exchange students already know someone from their educational program who went to the same destination in a previous academic year or semester. This allows students to get direct information about specific destinations, which can facilitate the insertion of new exchange students into existing social networks. This finding is also in line with the study of Van Mol and Michielsen (2014), which illustrated the importance of social relationships that precede the exchange period for understanding social network formation of Erasmus+ students.

Social Network Formation in the Initial Phases of the Exchange Period

In the initial stages of their exchange period, the interviewed students established a new social network relatively quickly, within the first days and weeks. The social networks they initially established largely determined how their social networks evolved during their stay. Upon arrival, our respondents mainly looked for support of other Dutch students and international students, as expected based on the literature review. On the one hand, interaction with co-nationals offered the comfort of speaking the same language, as indicated by several students. On the other hand, interaction with international students was logical, because—in line with the theory of homophily—they are often perceived to have similar characteristics and share the same situation. Sophie, a 20-year-old human resource studies exchange student in Iceland, for example, explained, "You come here as an international group and you all hang out with each other, you make contact easily because you are all in the same boat. You all want to make new friends and get to know people."

Our interviewees reported heterogeneity in terms of the development of their network. For some, the social network did not really change throughout the initial exchange period: They mainly stuck to the group they met during the introduction period. Others reported the development of a social network that unfolded over time, whereby new contacts arose out of activities students engaged in, such as parties or trips organized for international students. Interestingly, however, the results suggested that over time, local students became increasingly involved in social activities of the interviewed international students. This suggests that informal social activities in exchange students or local students' living places, such as dinners, were particularly relevant for establishing such bridging contacts.

The Living Place

During the first interview, the participants expressed feelings of excitement as well as fear about being in a new environment. They indicated that the living place was the place where their first—often international—contacts were established. This proved to be particularly relevant during the first days, as meeting their room or housemates helped them to get over their feelings of fear. As Sophie, the student who went on exchange to Iceland told,

> Of course nerves and excitement. It was a very hard day, I did not have any roommates yet or anyone over there. I felt so lonely, thinking "what did I get myself into." It was very dramatic, calling my mom and crying. It was hard, but the next day I met my roommate and I went out doing stuff with her.

Some students, however, reported having trouble adjusting to their new living arrangements, particularly with regard to living together with a roommate or living in a poor-quality building. However, their initial social network in their living place seemed to be helpful to overcome these challenges. As an example, Daisy, a 20-year-old humanities exchange student in the Czech Republic explained:

> I am not spoiled or anything that I find it hard to adapt but we are all in it, and everyone is nice to each other in the hallway which I find very nice. I had that feeling from the beginning, this will be fun because of the people.

Living places hence form a space where students establish their first social relationships that help them during the first stages of the adaptation process. In line with the theory of homophily, it is not only the contact opportunities that matter in the living place, but also the preferences students have to interact with people who are similar to them, or as McPherson et al. (2001) indicated, "similarity breeds connections" (p. 415). Iris, a 20-year-old human resource management student who went on exchange to Australia indicated that large student dormitories allowed her to "pick and choose" who to interact with based on perceived similarities:

> If I would have had my own room, I would not have found friends so quickly. There are a lot of different people here. So you can go to people you feel closest to, and if you have a room in town in a house which you share with two other people which you do not really like, you really do not have anyone.

Four participants lived exclusively with other international students, or they reported not knowing any local students in their building. In line with literature on institutional housing practices (Beech, 2018; Fincher & Shaw, 2009; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014), some respondents indicated that international students are directed toward specific accommodations, leading to an overrepresentation of international students in such places. Consequently, the possibilities to interact

with local students were limited in such situations. In contrast, students who lived in more mixed accommodations indicated the important role this played in establishing social relationships with the local population. As Iris, the exchange student in Australia, indicated, "But it is really because you are in this college, that you also interact with Australian people. So it is very divided, I just have a group with Australian friends and a group of international friends."

Interestingly, Iris indicated that despite having Australian and international friends, both friendship groups did not automatically merge—or at least not during the initial phases of the exchange period, which was the focus of our study. Existing research on Erasmus students suggests such bridging processes between different student groups develops over time (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). Iris furthermore indicated that the presence of committees that organized activities for all students in the dormitory could be helpful in creating a sense of community and helping to establish new contacts. Interviewees also reported having meaningful contact both with international and local students more often when they lived together. Living together led to engaging in social activities outside of the living place as well, and consequently, living together with local students logically also led to more contact with local students outside of the living place. However, as explained by Daisy, the exchange student in the Czech Republic, it is hard to engage in social activities outside of the living place when the local population does not speak English well, or when the Dutch student does not manage the local language.

In sum, our findings suggest that the living place is a crucial space where the first social relationships are established. Depending on the specific housing situation exchange students opt for or are institutionally directed to, this can lead to different interaction patterns, prioritizing contact with local, international, or co-national students. This illustrates how the social network formation of Erasmus+ students is dynamic and unfolds over time. Whether a meaningful relationship is established with the other individuals in the living place seems to depend on the preferences individuals have in terms of social relationships—naturally next to other factors such as their command of foreign languages. Importantly, however, when these contacts are meaningful, they show to be crucial to help students to adapt to the new situation.

Social Contacts at the Receiving Higher Education Institution

When students were settled in their new living place, they naturally moved within diverse social spaces, at home, at their higher education institution, and also in other informal settings. In line with earlier research (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014), our study indicated that initially the interviewed students mainly engaged with other international students, as associations such as the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), which organized activities for international students, created a social space in which predominantly other international students participated. As such, these associations might— unintentionally—limit the contact opportunities of exchange students with local students in the initial exchange period. Or as Sophie, the exchange student in Iceland explained, "Of

course you engage mostly with other international students. You have associations here just like in the Netherlands, for example ESN, which does not include Icelandic people, so that makes it harder."

Our respondents indicated that they initially spent most of their time at home, in bars, or at the receiving higher education institution. Three of them indicated that local and international students did not have frequent interactions at the receiving higher education institution, which is a significant challenge that has been reported in a variety of other contexts as well (e.g., Arkoudis & Baik, 2014; Marangell et al., 2018; Wright & Schartner, 2013). Some students indicated that this was because there were hardly any local students at the campus, as international students received classes separately from the local students. This was the case for Sarah, a 22-year-old sociology student who went on exchange to Spain. She reported that she had only one Spanish classmate; all other students were international students. Such situations seriously limit the exchange of information with local students who could help international exchange students orient and adapt in the initial stages of their exchange semester. In other situations, teachers did their best to mix local and international students, as Daisy, the exchange student in Iceland indicated:

> Well there are many Icelandic people, but I do not really talk to them. We have one course where we were recently put in a group by the teacher. So I am with a Spaniard and an Icelander, and he is really sweet, willing to help, which is nice.

However, positive contact in the classroom did not necessarily lead to friendships outside the classroom among our respondents. This might be related to the fact that local students already have an established friendship network outside the higher education institution, as well as the temporary nature of exchange students, which makes local students less willing to invest in such friendships (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). In this line, some of our respondents indicated that they did not feel locals to be open to contact, or described their interactions as very formal. Nevertheless, this does not mean that higher education institutions only have a limiting role in the establishment of exchange students' new social networks. Our respondents reported, for example, that the introductions for exchange students, which are organized in the first days and weeks of their stay abroad, provided them with the first social contacts outside the living space.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we investigated the initial social network formation and development of six Dutch Erasmus+ students through a longitudinal qualitative approach. Our reported findings led to four main conclusions.

First, our results illustrate the relevance of the theory of homophily for analyzing the initial social network formation and development of international exchange students. On the one hand, the interviewed students indicated they had a clear preference for interacting with students they considered similar to themselves. On the other hand, the findings also clearly indicated that

opportunities to interact are particularly important to establish relationships with students who are considered to be similar—co-national, international, or local. This finding leads to some practical implications, which we discuss below.

Second, our findings indicate the importance of investigating the premobility phase when analyzing social network formation of Erasmus+ students. Prior to going abroad, exchange students asked their social network for advice regarding housing. In this way, the existing social network in the premobility phase significantly influenced future contact opportunities abroad. Other studies also indicate the relevance of the establishment of social networks of international exchange students through social media before departure. Exchange students often already engage in online communities that can provide information on housing, administrative procedures, and social activities (e.g., Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014).

Third, the living situation of Erasmus+ students seems to be essential for the establishment and development of their initial social network, as it is a key space to establish the first new social contacts. Our findings suggest that exchange students who live in mixed housing situations have a more dynamic social network, whereby different groups of students (co-national, international, and local) are involved. In a similar vein, the results indicate the importance of bringing students together on campus: When international students are taught separately from local students, the possibilities to establish meaningful interaction reduce significantly. Together, these findings illustrate the importance of mixing different groups of students in physical and social spaces to prevent segregation.

Fourth, our analysis illustrates how the initial social networks of exchange students can be very dynamic and change over time. Although initially the interviewed students seemed to be inclined to establish social relationships with other co-national and international exchange students, over time an increasing number of local students seemed to enter the local network. Such change seemed to occur above all in informal spaces, such as during informal dinners in students' living places. Indeed, as indicated in classical sociology by Georg Simmel (1908 [1971]), adopting to a foreign environment takes time, and the local students also need time to reconfigure their social system, allowing foreign students to enter it.

Nevertheless, some limitations of our study should be flagged as well. First, due to the limited number of respondents, as well as the overrepresentation of female students, our findings are not generalizable to the general student population. Second, as the findings indicated, social network formation is a dynamic process that unfolds over time. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we could not interview the exchange students throughout their entire semester abroad. As such, this study only sheds light on the initial stages of social network formation. It would be highly relevant to have more studies that capture the whole process, whereby students are studied—both qualitatively and quantitatively—during their whole exchange period.

Finally, the findings of our study also have implications for practice. First, our findings indicate the importance of housing local and international students together to establish meaningful contact, as this provides the opportunity to interact. Whether meaningful interaction develops is, of course, also subject to

other factors, such as whether students feel a connection, but the results clearly indicate that unintended segregation—whereby international exchange students are housed together separately from the local student population—is a practice that is not uncommon, but seriously limits the possibilities of establishing contact with the local population. Higher education institutions can play an important role here by systematically mixing student accommodations. Furthermore, in cases where official accommodation is not available, higher education institutions could make an effort in, for example, raising awareness among the local student population of the enriching experience it can be to host an international exchange student. An application or website whereby local students can indicate they have a room available for an exchange student could be a logical step in this regard.

Second, unintended segregation also occurs when international exchange students receive lectures separately from the local student population. This is a finding that has also been reported elsewhere, but again seriously limits the opportunities exchange students have to establish meaningful social relationships with local students.

In conclusion, our article illustrates how the initial social network development of Erasmus+ students is a dynamic process that unfolds over time, constrained by contextual factors such as the predeparture social networks, the housing situation upon arrival, and institutional practices regarding housing, social activities, and campus life. Together, the findings indicate the relevance of longitudinal approaches to capture these dynamics.

Ethics

This paper is based on an analysis of data collected by Oberon, which is a nonacademic institution. As such, the study was not submitted to an institutional review board. However, ethical guidelines were strictly followed in terms of data storage and anonymization of the data. Furthermore, all respondents gave their informed consent to use their answers for scientific research and publications.

Data Statement

A data package with the anonymous interview transcripts is stored at Surfdrive. Both the authors of this article as well as the head of the department of Sociology of Tilburg University have access to this package. The data are available from the author upon reasonable request, conditional on permission by Oberon.

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