



Far Away from Home: A Qualitative Study on Challenges Encountered by Geographically Distant University Students

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the challenges faced by university students residing geographically distant from their homes. Through a focus group discussion with eight participants enrolled in a literature class, the research investigated the specific difficulties encountered by these students and the coping mechanisms they utilized. The findings revealed a multitude of challenges related to living arrangements, financial management, social integration, and emotional adjustment. Participants grappled with limited privacy, budgeting difficulties, and feelings of homesickness. However, communication technology and various coping strategies, including focusing on activities and maintaining social connections, emerged as valuable tools for navigating these challenges. The study highlights the need for targeted support structures within universities to foster a sense of community, equip students with financial management skills, and promote resources for mental well-being.

Keywords: Geographically distant students, University experience, Challenges, Coping mechanisms, Acculturation

1. INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of higher education often necessitates a significant life change for students. Driven by academic aspirations, career goals, or limited options in their local area, many choose universities located far from their families and familiar surroundings. This geographical separation can be a result of various factors. Financial constraints may limit choices to higher education institutions or scholarship opportunities located geographically distant (Shaw & Braga, 2016). For students seeking specific academic programs not offered locally, or those who aspire to broaden their horizons, universities in different cultural or geographic environments hold immense appeal (Harper & Quaye, 2017). Moreover, some students may perceive a lack of social opportunities or academic rigor in their local universities, motivating them to seek a more challenging and diverse learning environment further afield (Museus & Rickinson, 2017).

While the benefits of attending a university far from home are well-documented, fostering self-reliance, personal growth, and exposure to new perspectives (Allen & Phillipson, 2009), the challenges faced by geographically distant students may have received less attention in research. This qualitative study aimed to delve into the lived experiences of these students. By exploring the specific challenges they encounter and the impact on their academic and social lives, this research sought to shed light on the realities of geographically distant students and inform support structures that can help them thrive in their academic journeys.

Specifically, this study aimed to:

1. explore the challenges faced by university students who are living geographically distant from home, and;
2. examine the coping mechanisms utilized by geographically distant university students to overcome the challenges of living away from home.

Significance of the Study

This study addressed a significant gap in the understanding of the university experience – the challenges faced by students who attend academic institutions geographically distant from their homes. While the positive aspects of attending a geographically distant university, such as fostering independence and exposure to diverse perspectives, are well-documented, the challenges encountered by these students have received less research attention. This qualitative study aimed to bridge this knowledge gap by exploring the lived experiences of geographically distant students. By examining the specific challenges they face, the research could inform the development of targeted support structures within universities. Understanding these challenges will allow universities to move beyond simply acknowledging the benefits of geographically distant education and instead, create resources and programs that equip these students with the tools and support they need to flourish academically and socially.

Scope and Limitation

While this qualitative study explored the challenges faced by geographically distant university students through a focus group discussion with eight participants enrolled in a literature class, the findings have limitations. The focus on a single university's literature class restricts the generalizability of the results. Students in a literature course might have specific academic challenges or motivations compared to the broader student population. Additionally, the classroom setting and the activity being part of a course could limit the openness of participants. Despite these limitations, the study offered valuable insights into the experiences of geographically distant students within this specific context.

These findings can serve as a springboard for future research with a larger and more diverse sample, ultimately informing the development of targeted support structures to help geographically distant students thrive at universities.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was anchored on the Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997), which posits that individuals navigating new cultural environments experience psychological stress and cultural confusion. Applied to the context of students living away from home, this theory suggests that these students may grapple with adapting to a new social and cultural environment within the university setting.

Acculturation Theory: A Framework for Understanding Student Adjustment

The Acculturation Theory, developed by John Berry (1997), provides a valuable framework for understanding the process of cultural adaptation experienced by individuals encountering a new cultural environment. This theory is particularly relevant when examining the challenges faced by students living away from home and attending university, as it sheds light on the emotional, social, and psychological adjustments they undergo.

Central Concepts

Cultural Contact

At the heart of Acculturation Theory lies the concept of cultural contact, which refers to the interaction between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In the context of university life, this contact occurs when students from diverse backgrounds come together to live and learn in a new environment.

Psychological Adaptation

The Acculturation Theory emphasizes the psychological dimension of cultural adaptation. Students experience varying degrees of stress, anxiety, and emotional turmoil as they navigate the unfamiliar norms, values, and social dynamics of university life. The theory explores the coping mechanisms individuals develop to manage these challenges and adapt to the new cultural context.

Strategies of Acculturation

A core concept of the theory is the identification of different strategies individuals employ to navigate cultural contact. Berry's model proposes four primary strategies:

Integration: This strategy represents a bicultural approach, where individuals strive to maintain elements of their original culture while simultaneously adopting aspects of the new culture. Students who integrate might actively participate in cultural events of their home background while also embracing opportunities to connect with peers from diverse backgrounds within the university environment.

Assimilation: This strategy emphasizes the dominance of the new culture. Students who assimilate might prioritize adopting the values, behaviors, and social norms of the university environment, potentially experiencing a greater disconnect from their original culture.

Separation: This strategy reflects a desire to maintain one's original culture and minimize contact with the new culture. Students who separate might primarily connect with individuals from similar backgrounds within the university, potentially forming cultural enclaves that limit their exposure to the broader university culture.

Marginalization: This strategy reflects minimal identification with either the original or the new culture. Students who experience marginalization might feel isolated and struggle to find a sense of belonging within either cultural context.

3. METHODOLOGY

Setting of the Study

The study, conducted in November 2022, leveraged a real-life context within a private university's literature class in Iloilo City, Philippines. This familiar classroom environment provided a comfortable space for student participants to engage in open and trusting discussions. By situating the research within the context of a literature class focused on a female protagonist navigating the challenges of living away from home for university, the setting itself likely resonated with the student participants, potentially prompting deeper reflection and more meaningful dialogue during the focus group.

Sample and Sampling Scheme

Recognizing the need for targeted participants with firsthand experiences, the researcher employed purposive sampling, a non-probabilistic technique. This strategy involved deliberately selecting eight students from the literature class who were currently living away from home or had experienced living away from home during their college stint. This specific criterion ensured the focus group participants possessed a direct connection to the study's theme – the challenges faced by university students residing away from their families. The shared experience of living away from home likely fostered a sense of camaraderie within the focus group, potentially reducing inhibitions and encouraging open and honest dialogue amongst participants.

Informants

The chosen informants were eight undergraduate students enrolled in the literature class. A unifying characteristic amongst them was the experience of living away from home while pursuing their academic goals at the university. Going through the similar experience may have brought the focus group closer, making them feel more comfortable sharing their honest thoughts and opinions. Their firsthand knowledge of the topic – the challenges of living away from home for university studies – was central to the success of the focus group discussion.

Research Instrumentation

To guide the focus group discussion and ensure a productive exchange of ideas, a semi-structured questionnaire served as the primary research instrument. The faculty member leading the study meticulously crafted this tool. Uniquely, the questionnaire originated from student-generated questions related to the challenges of living away from home for university studies. By incorporating student-generated questions, the instrument tapped into real concerns and experiences, ensuring the discussion remained relevant and engaging for the participants. The final questionnaire, consisting of 10 open-ended questions, aimed to stimulate in-depth exploration of the chosen theme, prompting participants to delve into specific challenges and fostering rich dialogue.

Data Gathering Procedure

A focus group discussion served as the chosen method for data collection. The faculty member, taking on the dual role of moderator and facilitator, played a pivotal role in guiding the conversation and ensuring a productive exchange of ideas. Prior to the focus group session, students actively participated by submitting questions relevant to the theme of living away from home. Utilizing these student inputs, the faculty member selected 10 from these questions to form the foundation for a focused and insightful discussion.

During the focus group, the moderator ensured adherence to established research protocols. This included obtaining oral informed consent from participants, a crucial step in ensuring their rights and privacy were protected. Additionally, the moderator emphasized the importance of confidentiality throughout the discussion to put participants at ease and encourage open expression. These ethical considerations were paramount in building trust and fostering a safe space for participants to share their experiences.

Eight additional students served as documenters and transcribers, acting as a supportive arm to the research process. These classmates were likely chosen for their attentiveness, strong written communication skills, and ability to capture the nuances of a conversation. Their role involved capturing the details of the discussion through detailed notes or recordings, with the understanding that these notes would later be transcribed for comprehensive analysis. Their contribution ensured a thorough record of the focus group, providing rich data for further analysis.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns and insights from the data collected through the focus group discussion.

1. Data Familiarization:

The semi-transcribed conversation from the focus group discussion underwent an examination. The researcher read and re-read the transcript, taking detailed notes and assigning initial codes to capture key ideas, concepts, or experiences related to the research theme – the challenges faced by students living away from home for university studies.

2. Identifying Themes:

Following the initial coding, recurring patterns and connections within the codes were identified. These patterns were then grouped together to form potential themes. The researcher then reviewed and refined these themes to ensure they accurately represented the data and captured the essence of the participants' experiences.

3. Refining the Thematic Framework:

A critical evaluation of the identified themes was conducted. The researcher examined each theme to ensure it was clearly defined and adequately supported by evidence from the focus group transcript. This involved revisiting specific sections of the transcript, refining the coding where necessary, and even merging or splitting themes to achieve a robust and well-supported thematic framework.

4. Findings and Integration:

The thematic analysis findings were then incorporated into the research report. This involved describing the thematic framework in detail, providing rich examples from the data through direct quotes from the student participants, and explaining how these themes relate to the research question and existing literature on the challenges faced by students living away from home.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were demonstrably addressed throughout the study. Obtaining oral informed consent from participants ensured they understood the research purpose, their right to participate voluntarily, and their ability to withdraw at any point. Furthermore, maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process was paramount. This likely involved anonymizing the data collected during the focus group discussion to protect the privacy of the participants. Likewise, coding was used to present the responses of the respondents. By adhering to these ethical principles, the researchers ensured the rights and well-being of the participants were protected.

4. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Profile of the Respondents

Examining Table 1, pertaining to the profile of the respondents, reveals details about the participants in the focus group discussion. The group comprised eight students, achieving a balanced gender representation with four females and four males. All participants were evidently living away from home as they resided in various temporary housing arrangements. These dwellings included boarding houses with both two-person and three-person room configurations, a single student apartment, and dormitory rooms. While the table does not provide details about the students' year of study or hometown distance from the university, it offers a glimpse into the living situations of the participants who presumably shared their experiences of navigating university life away from home.

Respondent	Sex	Type of Temporary Dwelling
1	Female	Boarding House (two-person room)
2	Female	Boarding House (three-person room)
3	Female	Apartment
4	Female	Dormitory
5	Male	Dormitory
6	Female	Dormitory
7	Male	Dormitory
8	Male	Dormitory

As shown in Figure 1, the student responses revealed three primary themes namely, difficulties with living arrangements, financial management and financial security, and social integration and emotional challenges.

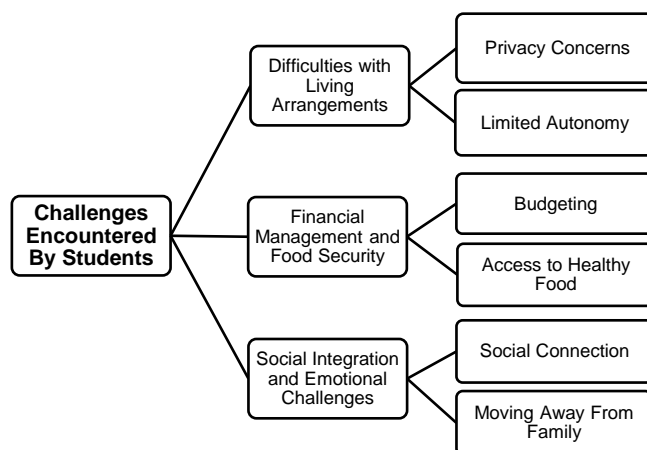


Figure 1. Challenges encountered by university students geographically distant from home

Theme 1: Difficulties with Living Arrangements

This theme centers around the challenges students face in their temporary housing situations.

Sub-theme 1.1: Privacy Concerns: Students residing in shared rooms (boarding houses or dorms) expressed discomfort with a lack of privacy, hindering relaxation and potentially impacting sleep quality (Respondent 2). This highlights a potential clash between expectations of personal space at home and the realities of shared living arrangements. Negotiating privacy with new people can be a challenging concern, especially when one would be establishing boundaries for the first time (Respondent 6).

“At first, I set my boundaries since it was the first time I met my dorm mate, but when we got to know each other, we started sharing things like rice cooker and everything since we’re kind of comfortable with the presence of each other,” said Respondent 6

Sub-theme 1.2: Limited Autonomy: Curfews, restrictions on cooking facilities, and limitations on cellphone usage in dorms were identified as challenges by some students (Respondent 5, Respondent 6, Respondent 8). These restrictions can be particularly frustrating for students accustomed to greater independence at home and may contribute to feelings of homesickness or a lack of control over their daily routines.

Theme 2: Financial Management and Food Security

This theme focuses on the financial pressures and challenges associated with food security.

Sub-theme 2.1: Budgeting: Managing finances for groceries, essential needs, and potentially additional school expenses was a concern for several students (Respondent 1, Respondent 3). This highlights the responsibility of budgeting on a limited income, a skill many students may be developing for the first time (Respondent 8).

“I would grocery back home because it is usually much cheaper, or my mom would pay for my groceries. If I am here in the city, I make it a habit to try not to spend more,” Respondent 8 said.

Sub-theme 2.2: Access to Healthy Food: Limited options for healthy meals due to dorm regulations or a lack of cooking facilities were mentioned (Respondent 3, Respondent 6). Restricted cooking options may force students to rely on less healthy takeout or processed foods, potentially impacting their overall well-being and academic performance.

Theme 3: Social Integration and Emotional Challenges

This theme explores the emotional challenges of adjustment and the potential difficulties of building social connections in a new environment.

Sub-theme 3.1: Social Connection: While one student mentioned initiating conversations (Respondent 4), navigating new social circles and potentially feeling isolated is implied by the lack of further comments on this topic.

“I made an effort to engage them in conversation,” Respondent 4 said.

The absence of strong social connections can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and homesickness. University life can offer numerous opportunities for social engagement, but some students may find it challenging to take the initiative or feel out of place in established social groups.

Sub-theme 3.2: Moving Away from Family: The emotional challenge of separation from family was directly mentioned by one student (Respondent 7). This is a significant adjustment for many students, requiring them to develop coping mechanisms to deal with feelings of missing loved ones and the support systems they provided back home.

Thematic Analysis on Coping Mechanisms Used by Students

Building on Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997), this analysis examines how students navigate the challenges of university life away from home and the coping mechanisms they develop. Research highlights the importance of social support networks and positive reappraisal (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984) for students facing stress and adjustment difficulties. Social support networks provide emotional comfort, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging, while positive reappraisal focuses on finding personal growth opportunities and reframing challenges as positive experiences.

As shown in Figure 2, the student responses revealed three primary themes related to coping mechanisms, offering valuable insights into how students manage the emotional and social challenges of living away from home.

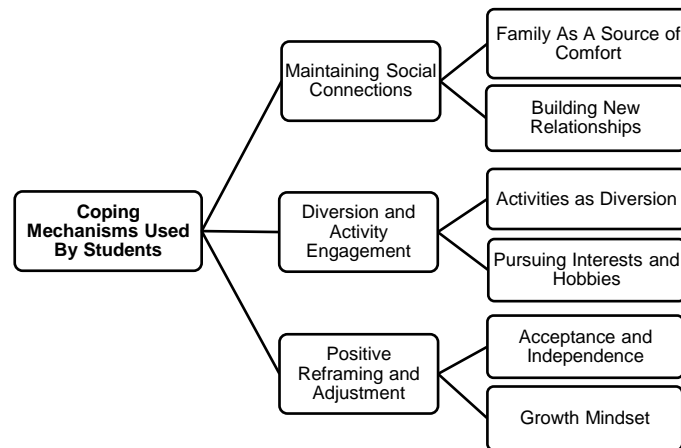


Figure 2. Coping mechanisms utilized by university students geographically distant from home.

Theme 1: Maintaining Social Connections - A Lifeline of Support

This theme highlights the crucial role of social connections in mitigating the emotional challenges associated with living away from home. Students leverage various forms of social connection to build a support network and combat feelings of isolation.

Sub-theme 1.1: Family as a Source of Comfort: Video calls and communication with family emerge as a prominent coping mechanism (Respondent 1, Respondent 4, Respondent 6, Respondent 8). Maintaining strong connections with loved ones back home provides a sense of security, emotional support, and a familiar anchor during a period of significant change.

“I always communicate with my parents, but there are times that I get sad, but they will just call or I will call them asking how they are,” Respondent 6 said.

Sub-theme 1.2: Building New Relationships: University can also be a source of social connection. Students may find comfort in building friendships with compatible roommates (Respondent 4) or engaging with classmates with shared interests (Respondent 6). These new connections can help students feel less isolated and create a sense of belonging within their new university environment.

Theme 2: Diversions and Activity Engagement - Channeling Emotions

This theme centers around strategies that help students take their minds off worries and engage in activities that provide a sense of accomplishment or enjoyment.

Sub-theme 2.1: Activities as Diversions: Engaging in activities like studying (Respondent 6, Respondent 8), watching movies with roommates (Respondent 4), or simply keeping busy (Respondent 1) were mentioned as helpful coping mechanisms. Focusing on activities provides a temporary reprieve from negative emotions and fosters a sense of accomplishment or structure in their daily lives.

“The first one is I study hard, the second one is I communicate with my friends or with my family, and third I really enjoy music,” Respondent 8 said.

Sub-theme 2.2: Pursuing Interests and Hobbies: Focusing on hobbies or interests can be a particularly effective way to manage stress and create a sense of control. Universities can promote involvement in student clubs and organizations that cater to diverse interests, fostering a sense of community and belonging. Additionally, universities can explore initiatives like makerspaces or art studios that provide creative outlets for students.

Theme 3: Positive Reframing and Adjustment - Finding the Silver Lining

This theme explores students' perspectives on the challenges and their attempts to view them in a positive light.

Sub-theme 3.1: Acceptance and Independence: Students with prior experiences living away from home (Respondent 3, Respondent 7) displayed a higher level of acceptance and a focus on developing independence (Respondent 2, Respondent 4).

“I also chose to be independent to be able to grow as a person. There is no shortcut and we all have to go through it and experience it,” Respondent 2 said.

This highlights the potential for personal growth and self-reliance as a positive outcome of the adjustment process. These students may have already developed coping mechanisms and a sense of self-efficacy that facilitates a smoother transition.

Sub-theme 3.2: Growth Mindset: Reframing the challenges of being geographically distant as opportunities for personal growth fosters resilience and a more positive outlook. Universities can incorporate workshops or programs that promote a growth mindset, encouraging students to view challenges as opportunities for learning and development. Integrating these workshops into first-year seminars or general education courses can provide students with the tools they need to navigate the challenges of university life with a growth-oriented perspective.

Discussion

The transition to university life presents a multitude of challenges, and for geographically distant students, these hurdles can be even more pronounced. The physical distance from loved ones, coupled with navigating a new environment and establishing independence, creates a unique set of obstacles that require effective coping mechanisms.

Challenges Encountered By Students

Living Arrangements and Autonomy

Students accustomed to the comfort and privacy of their own rooms may find shared living in dorms or boarding houses jarring. The lack of personal space and potential clashes over shared facilities or dorm regulations regarding curfews, noise levels, or guest policies can disrupt relaxation, sleep quality, and overall well-being. This can be particularly challenging for students who value independence and may struggle to adjust to limitations placed on their autonomy.

Financial Strain and Food Security

Managing finances independently for the first time can be a significant hurdle. Budgeting for rent, groceries, textbooks, and other essential expenses can be overwhelming, especially for students on a limited budget. Additionally, access to affordable and healthy food choices can be a concern, particularly for students living off-campus in unfamiliar neighborhoods. Difficulties with meal planning and grocery shopping can lead to unhealthy eating habits, impacting students' physical and mental health.

Social Integration and Emotional Wellbeing

Feelings of isolation and loneliness are common among geographically distant students. Missing loved ones back home, coupled with the challenges of building new social connections in a new environment, can exacerbate these feelings and contribute to emotional distress. Students may struggle to find a sense of belonging within the university community, leading to feelings of homesickness, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating on academics.

Coping Mechanisms Used By Students

Students develop various strategies to manage the unique challenges of being geographically distant. These strategies have allowed them to thrive in a new environment, fostering a strong sense of self despite physical separation.

Maintaining Social Connections

Technology plays a crucial role in maintaining social connections with family and friends back home. Video calls, phone calls, and messaging platforms provide a sense of comfort and emotional support. Building new relationships with classmates or roommates who share similar interests can also combat feelings of isolation and foster a sense of belonging within the university environment. Universities can play a role in facilitating social integration by offering clubs and activities that cater to diverse interests and hosting social events that encourage interaction among students.

Distraction and Activity Engagement

Engaging in activities like studying, hobbies, watching movies with roommates, or simply keeping busy can provide a temporary reprieve from negative emotions. Focusing on academic pursuits can offer a sense of accomplishment and structure, while hobbies and leisure activities can serve as a creative outlet for managing stress. Universities can support this by offering a variety of extracurricular activities and promoting involvement in student organizations.

Positive Reframing and Personal Growth

Students with prior experiences living away from home may exhibit a higher level of acceptance and a focus on developing independence. Reframing the challenges as opportunities for personal growth can foster resilience and a more positive outlook on the adjustment process. Universities can incorporate workshops or programs that promote a growth mindset, encouraging students to view challenges as opportunities for learning and development.

Understanding these challenges and coping mechanisms is crucial for universities in creating a more supportive environment for geographically distant students. By offering targeted resources and fostering a sense of community, universities can empower geographically distant students to thrive academically, build meaningful connections, and navigate the complexities of university life with greater resilience and a sense of belonging. This can involve everything from culturally sensitive communication workshops to financial literacy programs, all designed to address the specific needs of this unique student population.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusions

This exploration of geographically distant university students revealed a multitude of challenges related to living arrangements, financial management and food security, and social integration and emotional adjustment. Students grapple with a lack of privacy in shared living spaces, limited autonomy, and budgeting difficulties. The absence of familiar surroundings and family support can lead to feelings of homesickness and social isolation.

However, students are not without resources. Communication technology bridges the physical distance, allowing them to connect with loved ones back home. They engage in various coping mechanisms, including focusing on activities, maintaining social connections, and even reframing the challenges as opportunities for personal growth. These coping mechanisms resonate with Acculturation Theory, highlighting students' efforts to navigate the process of cultural adaptation within the university environment.

Understanding these challenges and coping mechanisms paves the way for further research and targeted support systems. Universities can play a crucial role by fostering a sense of community, offering workshops on budgeting and stress management, and promoting resources for mental well-being. Ultimately, this fosters a more inclusive and supportive university environment for all students, regardless of their physical distance from home.

Recommendations

Living away from home while attending university presents a unique set of challenges, but it also offers exciting opportunities for growth. Here are some recommendations to help students navigate this experience and flourish in their new environment:

1. Cultivating a Supportive Network

Staying connected with loved ones back home is crucial. Students can leverage technology to schedule regular video calls with family and friends, exploring communication platforms that resonate with their family dynamics. Additionally, seeking out a community on campus can be immensely beneficial. Joining clubs or organizations aligned with their interests allows students to connect with like-minded peers. Online forums and social media groups specifically for geographically distant students can also foster a sense of belonging and provide a platform for sharing experiences.

2. Developing Healthy Habits

Creating a daily routine provides structure and a sense of normalcy. This routine should allocate time for studies, social activities, relaxation, and communication with loved ones back home. Engaging in activities and hobbies, whether it is pursuing a creative outlet, or exploring the new community, can alleviate stress, offer a sense of accomplishment, and lead to connections with like-minded individuals. Prioritizing self-care is essential. Students should ensure they get enough sleep, eat healthy meals, and make time for relaxation.

3. Develop Sound Financial Management Skill

Budgeting is key. Creating a realistic budget that includes all expenses, from rent and groceries to textbooks and entertainment, allows students to track their income and spending effectively. Budgeting apps or spreadsheets can be helpful tools. Discussing financial plans and expectations with family can also be beneficial.

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