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Research Article

'Gemoy' Campaign: A Strategic Electoral Communication of Prabowo Subianto

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ABSTRACT

Prabowo Subianto, an ambitious politician in Indonesia, ran for the presidency in the 2024 election after experiencing defeats in 2014 and 2019. This study examines the strategic political communication of Prabowo Subianto during the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, focusing on his rebranding efforts and digital media strategies. The objective of this research is to analyze how Prabowo's strategic communication shaped public perception and attracted a broader voter base. This study employs a case study approach by analyzing campaign materials, social media content, and public discourse to assess Prabowo's strategic communication transformation. Data sources include digital media analysis, interviews with political analysts, and public opinion surveys. The findings indicate that Prabowo successfully transformed his image from a rigid military figure to a more approachable and humorous persona through digital communication strategies. The "Gemoy" campaign, executed on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter, effectively engaged young voters and increased public interaction. His shift towards a more audience-oriented political marketing approach significantly contributed to his electoral success in 2024. This study highlights the importance of adapting political communication strategies to changing voter demographics and the role of digital media in modern political campaigns.

Keywords: *Strategic Communication, Political Branding, Electoral Campaigns, Digital Media, Public Engagement*

Introduction

Background and Family Influence

Prabowo Subianto Djojohadikusumo's political journey is significantly shaped by his familial background and elite connections

within Indonesian society. Born into a family with a rich legacy, his grandfather played a pivotal role in establishing Indonesia's first state bank, while his father was a prominent economist during the Suharto era. These familial ties

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not only provided Prabowo with considerable privilege but also positioned him within the elite circles of Indonesian politics, which have historically influenced the nation's governance and policies. His upbringing in such an environment instilled in him the ambition to pursue a career in politics, ultimately leading him to become a key figure in Indonesia's political landscape.

Furthermore, Prabowo's marriage to Titiek Suharto, the daughter of former President Suharto, further solidified his connections to one of Indonesia's most influential political families. Although their marriage ended after the fall of Suharto's regime in 1998, it reinforced his status within the political elite and allowed him to navigate the complexities of Indonesian politics more effectively. This background has been instrumental in shaping Prabowo's approach to political campaigns and his strategies for engaging with the electorate.

Resilience and Rebranding Effort

Despite facing significant challenges during his previous presidential bids in 2014 and 2019, Prabowo Subianto has demonstrated remarkable resilience in his political career. His determination to secure the presidency culminated in his successful campaign for the 2024 election, where he effectively rebranded himself as a more relatable candidate. This transformation involved leveraging social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram to present a lighter, more approachable image, contrasting sharply with his earlier portrayal as a strict military figure. By adopting this strategy, Prabowo aimed to connect emotionally with voters and counteract the controversies surrounding his past.

The success of Prabowo's "Gemoy" campaign illustrates the effectiveness of strategic communication in modern electoral politics. His ability to engage with younger voters through humor and relatable content not only humanized him but also fostered a sense of community among his supporters. This approach proved vital in attracting a broader voter base, ultimately leading to his victory as Indonesia's eighth president. The analysis of these rebranding efforts provides valuable insights into the evolving landscape of political

communication and its impact on electoral outcomes in Indonesia.

Literature Review

Strategic Communication Approach

Strategic communication is a central component during an election campaign. Mahoney (2023) argues that strategic communication has a pivotal role for politicians to inform their ideas, actions, and political achievements to attract the interest of voters so that they can win elections and survive in the political arena. Therefore, a strategic communication approach plan is needed as an effort to increase public trust for politicians. Meanwhile, according to Holtzhausen et al (2021), there are 2 types of communication strategy approaches that can be taken, namely inside-out and outside-in. In the inside-out approach, the communication carried out comes from the perspective of the organization or politician. On the other hand, outside-in places the needs and the perspectives of the audiences to be the main point of the process. Moreover, Holtzhausen et al (2021) claimed that there are three hierarchical levels of analysis in strategic communication, which are the macro level, the meso level, and the micro level. In the macro level, the communicator needs to understand the social, politic, and cultural environment for engaging with the stakeholders. By analyzing and interpreting the context in the macro level, it can help the communicator or the strategic communication professional to tailor effective plan in the meso level, where communicative strategies are designed to achieve the desired goals. Those strategies will be implemented at the micro level. Therefore, it is important to strongly understand the engagement of variables in the macro and the meso levels to make the implementation of strategic communication effective in the micro level.

Strategic communication in election campaigns is essential in shaping voter perceptions. In the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, Prabowo Subianto adopted a rebranding strategy that leveraged digital media to connect with younger voters. (Stromback and Kiousis 2014). Therefore, it is important for the political candidate to meet their ideas with the voters' potential needs to gain public support.

Political strategy involves considering market trends, demographic, and psychological factors. Thus, strategic decisions are important to be made considering the data (Less – Marshment 2001). In political communication, the strategic communication approach has more types than 'inside-out' and 'outside-in'. Lees – Marshment (2019) as cited in Bingarrayni & Kholisoh (2021), argues that political parties currently are using marketing techniques to

design their “product” (including their politicians and policies) to appeal most voters rather than being solely driven by ideology. He divided the political strategic communication approach, also known as Comprehensive Political Marketing (CPM), into three categories, which are: Product Oriented Party (POP), Sales Oriented Party (SOP), and Market Oriented Party (MOP).

Table 1. Comprehensive Political Marketing

Product Oriented Party	Sales Oriented Party	Market Oriented Party
Focusing on promoting its own ideology, with minimal adaptation to voters' demands	Using a mix of promotional activities and communication strategies to sell its “product” (politicians, policies, etc.) to voters' interests	Designing its policies, organization, politicians, and messaging to provide voters satisfaction

Source: Lees-Marshment, J. (2001). The marriage of politics and marketing.

During 2014, 2019 and 2024, Prabowo used various strategic communication approaches in his effort to gain votes. In 2014, Prabowo ran as the presidential candidate with Hatta Rajasa, a politician, as his vice-presidential candidate. According to Herpamudji's (2015) research about Prabowo's strategic communication in 2014 election, Prabowo built his personality as a nationalist. Through this positioning, Prabowo was trying to gain votes from the lower middle class, especially farmers. As part of the new order under President Soeharto's government, Prabowo offered the comfort and stability that the people experienced during Soeharto's reign. He often used some jargon such as “Save Indonesia” and

“Awakening Indonesia as the tiger of Asia” during the campaign. At this election, Prabowo used an ‘inside-out’ approach where he branded himself as patriotic figure. This branding related to his military background but distanced him from the public because people saw him as an elite politician. On his meso level, he rarely considered the macro level. He used ‘product-oriented party’ in his political communication, where he focused on pushing his own ideology with little flexibility with voters' expectation. By using a ‘product-oriented’ approach, the politicians assumed that voters will be agree with their ideologies and therefore vote for it (Lees – Marshment 2001).



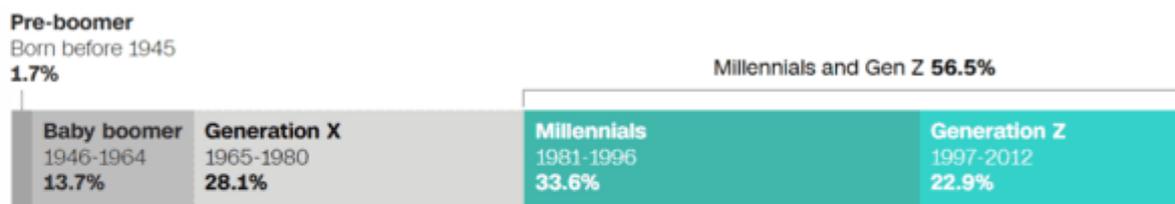
Figure 1. Prabowo
Source: Instagram.com

Meanwhile, his opponent, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), developed his political image as a presidential candidate who was close to people and modest. With the slogan 'Jokowi is us' and impromptu visit program to meet the people, Jokowi was portrayed as a politician who resembled the public and humble. 'Blusukan' or the impromptu visit was political characteristic of Jokowi (Damayanti & Hamzah 2017). Moreover, he often wore simple outfits like rolled up long-sleeved shirts during the campaign as the symbol that he was ready to work. In implementing his campaign communication strategy at the micro level, Jokowi adopted the 'outside-in' method where he was portrayed as part of the people whose majority is middle class and eager to collaborate with them to develop the country. He used 'market-oriented' method for the meso level based on the macro level condition. At that time, Jokowi was the first presidential candidate who portrayed himself as part of the public, not an elite politician (Damayanti & Hamzah 2017). By using this strategic communication, Jokowi got 53.15% votes and defeated Prabowo (Databoks 2019).

In 2019, Prabowo stood for president with Sandiaga Uno, a young entrepreneur, as his vice-presidential candidate. Both had distinct personal brands. Prabowo was largely regarded as a firm and intelligent military leader. He was still using 'inside-out' by carrying an inwards perspective on his strategic plans, a nationalist who will bring prosperity for the country (Holtzhausen et al 2021). On the other hand, Sandiaga was portrayed as a smart young entrepreneur who enjoyed sports. In this scenario, Prabowo represented the older generations seeking security and stability, whilst Sandiaga represented Indonesia' dynamic and active youth. Their strategy centered on economic development including job availability and price stability (Bingarrayni & Kholisoh 2021). In this election, Prabowo- Sandiaga also tried to grab the attention of the young people as swing voters and started to use social media to engage this type of voters. He shifted his political marketing from a product-oriented party to a sale-oriented party by using mixed strategic communication to gain votes. On the meso level, the political campaign staff of Prabowo – Sandi tailored the programs based on the

market research. They realized the potential at the macro level should be considered in making programs to be accepted by voters, especially young people as potential constituents. Political marketing played a crucial role in the Indonesia's 2019 presidential election because it is the best method to achieve victory (Bingarrayni & Kholisoh 2021). However, even though Prabowo has changed his political marketing to the meso level, he still used the inside-out approach on his personal branding. Thus, this campaign was not successful because, in strategic communication, it is important to resonate the targets or voters' needs, values, and perspectives (Holtzhausen et al 2021). In this case, Prabowo was still portrayed himself as an elite politician, not a leader, and it did not match with the new perspective of Indonesians who wanted a humble leader, like Joko Widodo, after being under an authoritative president for 32 years (Ulfa et al 2020).

In his third presidential campaign in 2024, Prabowo underwent a marked transformation on his strategic political communication approach. Evidence a reflective stance, he began to recognize the ineffective campaign strategies of his two prior presidential candidacies. This was expressed by Prabowo during the public campaign event titled 'Young Indonesian Voices for Prabowo – Gibran' on 27 January 2024, in Jakarta. "As you know, I was lost twice by Joko Widodo because of the lack of involvement of the younger generation, like you, in my team" (Pemilukita 2024). Based on the data from the Indonesian general election commission, over 50% of the 2024 presidential election constituents belonging to the demographic spectrum delineated by birth years ranging from 1980 to 2012 (CNN 2024). Accordingly, Prabowo considered the potential of millennials and gen Z dominant at macro level to construct campaign communication strategies at the meso level so it can be effectively implemented at the micro level. Those younger generations prefer to have a humble and easy-going leader than a conservative one. Therefore, Prabowo's Tim Kampanye Nasional (national campaign team) devised a strategic communication approach termed as 'Gemoy' campaign to effectively engage the younger demographic of voters (Sihabudin et al 2023).



Note: The voting age in Indonesia is 17. Generation Z data includes people under 17 who are married and therefore eligible to vote under Indonesia's 2019 Marriage Law.

Figure 2. Breakdown of Indonesia's Electorate

Source: Indonesia's General Elections Commission (KPU); Pew Research (generations) (Rosa de Acosta and Rachel Wilson, CNN).

As a politician, Prabowo constantly adjusted to the changes at the macro level like demographic, social cultures, and communication technology based on voters' political attitudes and behaviors. Stromback and Kiousis (2014) claimed that the politicians transformed their campaign style because they believed that adaptation offers strategic advantages. Therefore, Prabowo revised his campaign strategy in 2024 to become a presidential candidate who is humorous, easy-going, and engaged to the young generations, the dominant potential voters (Sihabudin et al 2023). This was a contradiction with his previous candidacy, which used an 'inside-out' approach. Moreover, in his electoral campaign, Prabowo also often invited his participants to dance together called 'Gemoy' (cute) dance and mingled with the audiences. He shifted his strategy to 'market-oriented party' to satisfy the potential voters (Less-Marshment 2001). By shifting his communication strategy during the 2024 campaign, Prabowo succeeded in getting 58,59% voters defeated two other candidates, Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo (CNBC 2024).

Electoral Campaign in Digital Era

Habermas (1974) argues that the public sphere is an area of social life in which anything approaching public opinion can be established. In the public sphere, people can express and publish their views on subjects of popular concern in a major public space. This type of communication can transmit information and influence the receivers. Nowadays, the public sphere is also including media like television, newspapers, magazines, and social media. The

digital media arena framework can help communicators/politicians make strategic decisions about what, where, how, and with whom to communicate (Badham et al 2023).

According to Herpamudji's (2015) research, Prabowo strategically used diverse mass media channels to disseminate his electoral campaign. The media distribution utilized by Prabowo was television, as a predominant platform (91.1%), print media (5%), and radio (3.9%). This multifaceted approach was motivated by the demographic profile of Prabowo's targeted electoral, primarily comprising farmers who had limited internet accessibility yet substantial exposure to television, print media, and radio broadcasts. However, Prabowo's national campaign team also employs some social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to extend its potential voters. Furthermore, Prabowo's campaign benefited from the affiliations of certain political figures who had ownership stakes in prominent television networks, such as Hari Tanoe, a proprietor of RCTI, MNC TV, and Global Television, and Aburizal Bakrie, a proprietor of TV One. These strategic alliances not only facilitated broader media outreach but also conferred a nuanced advantage through tailored messaging across disparate media platforms. By conducting research of electability based on the data from the Indonesia Survey Institute, Hepamudji found out that using those media tools for electoral campaign boosted Prabowo's electability in a short period. In September 2013, there was a big gap between Joko Widodo and Prabowo's popularity, with Joko Widodo at 50.30% and Prabowo at 11.10%. By March 2014, this gap

had shrunk to 24%, with Joko Widodo at 35.42% and Prabowo at 22.75%. Furthermore, just before the presidential election, Prabowo's electability surged to 38.78. These findings indicate that Prabowo media-focused campaign significantly influenced his electability.

According to We Are Social (2023)'s digital studies, over 75% of Indonesians have internet accessibility and 167 million social media users at the start of 2023. Most of them are individuals aged between 16 - 64 who spend more than 3 hours daily to engage with various social media platforms. Furthermore, recent data reported by CNN (2024) indicates that a substantial majority, approximately 60%, of voters below the age 40 rely on social media channels for information dissemination and political discourse, such as TikTok and Instagram. Politicians in this modern era have the most powerful tools in tailoring their electoral campaign strategies to identify potential supporters and communicate with them by using information and communication technology (ICT) (Mohany

2024). Consequently, it becomes imperative for presidential candidates in Indonesia to formulate and execute comprehensive social media campaign strategies to effectively engage and mobilize the contemporary electorate.

In the 2024 presidential election, Prabowo's national campaign team totally changed the digital strategic campaign and prioritized social media campaign communication (Sihabudin 2023). Based on research by CNN (2024), Prabowo had the most followers on Instagram. Furthermore, Prabowo's team also hired many Indonesian influencers such as Raffi Ahmad, who has 14.9 million followers on TikTok and 75.6 million followers on Instagram and Atta Halilintar, who has 19.5 million followers on TikTok and 35.5 million followers on Instagram, to influence their followers for giving their vote to Prabowo. This strategy related to Hofjaan (2021)'s argument that strategic political communication was increasingly viewed as entertainment values over the political messages.

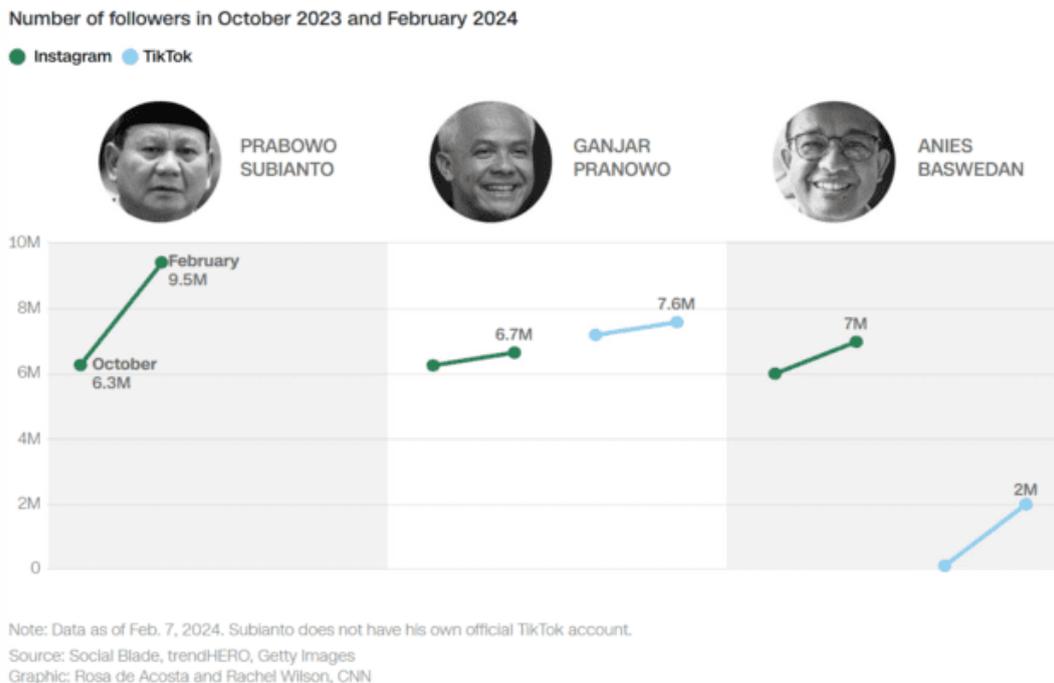


Figure 3. Number of Followers in October 2023 and February 2024

Source: Social Blade, trendiHERO, Gently Images (Rosa de Acosta and Rachel Wilson, CNN).

Based on the research conducted by Puspenpol (2024) research institute, which examine the comparative popularity of

Indonesian presidential candidates on TikTok platform, Prabowo – Gibran had higher level of popularity than their electoral rivals. However,

Prabowo surprisingly did not have a TikTok account, but he had the highest exposure on TikTok compared to other candidates. Puspennpol's analysis of digital content dissemination patterns revealed that articles featuring Prabowo attracted significantly greater viewership metrics compared to his rivals. This certainly

shows that digital media has an important role in political campaigns. Currently, the media is not only a communication tool but also plays a role as a strategic instrument in building a political image in Indonesia (Sihabudin et al 2023).



Figure 4. Most Viewers Presidential Candidate Content
Source: Instagram.com/puspenpol.



Figure 5. Most Popular Presidential Candidate
Source: Instagram.com/puspenpol.

Methods

Research Design

Data Collection

This study employs a qualitative case study approach by analyzing campaign materials, social media content, and public discourse. Data collection includes interviews with political analysts, an analysis of Prabowo's social media presence, and voter engagement metrics to assess the effectiveness of his digital strategy. The case study method is particularly suitable for this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of Prabowo's rebranding efforts and the strategic communication techniques utilized in his campaign. By focusing on a single candidate and his unique approach, the research aims to uncover the nuances of his communication strategy and its effectiveness in engaging voters.

Data for this study was collected through a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary data was obtained from interviews with political analysts, campaign strategists, and members of Prabowo's national campaign team. These interviews provided insights into the motivations behind the strategic decisions made during the campaign and the perceived effectiveness of various communication tactics. Secondary data included an analysis of media coverage, social media content, and public opinion polls related to Prabowo's campaign, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the electoral landscape.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved thematic coding to identify key themes and patterns related to Prabowo's strategic communication approaches. This included examining how he utilized digital media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter to rebrand himself as a relatable candidate. Additionally, comparative analysis was conducted between Prabowo's previous campaigns in 2014 and 2019, highlighting shifts in strategy and public perception over time.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all interview

participants, ensuring their willingness to share insights without coercion. Additionally, confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing responses where necessary to protect the identities of participants. The research also adhered to ethical guidelines regarding the use of secondary data, ensuring proper attribution and respect for intellectual property rights in all sourced materials.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the key findings from the analysis of Prabowo Subianto's electoral communication strategies during his presidential campaigns in 2014, 2019, and 2024. The discussion highlights the evolution of his approaches, the impact of digital media, and the implications for future political campaigns in Indonesia.

Strategic Communication Approaches

The analysis of Prabowo Subianto's electoral campaigns reveals a significant evolution in his strategic communication approaches over the three election periods from 2014 to 2024. Initially, during the 2014 campaign, Prabowo adopted an inside-out communication strategy, focusing on projecting a patriotic image aligned with his military background. This approach, however, distanced him from the electorate, as he was perceived as an elite politician rather than a relatable leader. His messaging centered around themes of nationalism and stability, appealing primarily to lower-middle-class voters but failing to resonate broadly with the electorate.

In contrast, the 2024 campaign marked a pivotal shift towards a market-oriented party strategy, characterized by a significant rebranding effort under the "Gemoy" campaign. Prabowo's team recognized the importance of engaging younger voters, who constituted a substantial portion of the electorate. By employing humor and relatability in his messaging—such as inviting audiences to participate in dances—Prabowo effectively transformed his public persona from a strict military figure to a more approachable candidate. This strategic pivot not only enhanced his appeal among younger demographics but also demonstrated an understanding of the macro-level social

changes influencing voter preferences. The findings indicate that Prabowo's strategic shift to a 'gemoy' (cute) persona and his emphasis on digital engagement significantly increased his reach among younger voters. Social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram played a pivotal role, with his campaign achieving higher interaction rates than his competitors. His rebranding strategy contributed to a 58.59% electoral victory, highlighting the effectiveness of a data-driven digital political campaign. Prabowo's ability to reposition himself as a relatable and humorous leader through digital platforms demonstrates the growing influence of social media in shaping political narratives. The increased engagement from younger voters highlights how digital branding and audience-oriented messaging can alter public perception and improve electoral outcomes.

Impact of Digital Media

The role of digital media in Prabowo's 2024 campaign cannot be overstated. As highlighted in the findings, Prabowo's campaign utilized various social media platforms—including TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter—to reach and engage with voters effectively. This approach was particularly crucial given that over 60% of voters under 40 rely on social media for political information and discourse. The campaign's ability to leverage these platforms allowed Prabowo to disseminate his message widely and interactively, fostering a sense of community among supporters.

Moreover, the strategic alliances with media figures who owned significant television networks further amplified Prabowo's reach across diverse demographics. By combining traditional media with modern digital strategies, Prabowo's campaign not only increased its visibility but also enhanced its credibility among voters. The results were evident in the surge of support he received leading up to the election, ultimately securing him victory with 58.59% of the votes. This case study illustrates how effective strategic communication and digital engagement can significantly influence electoral outcomes in contemporary political landscapes. The findings underscore that suc-

cessful campaigns must integrate both traditional and digital media strategies to maximize their impact on voter engagement and perception.

The discussion emphasizes that Prabowo's ability to adapt his communication strategy in response to changing voter demographics and preferences is critical for understanding modern electoral dynamics in Indonesia. As political landscapes continue to evolve with technological advancements and shifting societal values, candidates must remain agile in their approaches to effectively connect with their constituents.

Conclusion

This study highlights the growing influence of digital political branding in electoral success, emphasizing the need for candidates to adapt their public personas to shifting voter demographics. The findings suggest that modern political campaigns must integrate data-driven social media strategies to enhance voter engagement and mobilization. The "Gemoy" campaign effectively rebranded him as relatable and humorous, leveraging digital media to engage younger voters and secure 58.59% of the vote. This case study underscores the critical role of aligning political branding with audience expectations and adapting to technological advancements in modern elections.

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