

When morally good employees become bad: the role of unethical requests and wrong judgments at the workplace

Sana Mumtaz

*College of Business Administration, Umm Al Quwain University,
United Arab Emirates*

Abstract

Purpose – This research focuses on the distinct group of high-status employees commonly referred to as workplace vigilantes, and conceptually investigates how unethical requests by these individuals impact the behavior and attitude of other employees over time using the social identity theory.

Design/methodology/approach – For developing a conceptual model, literature from the domains of social identity, organizational behavior and general management was searched through Google Scholar. To search the literature, some key terms such as “unethical activities”, “Islamic work ethics” and “social identity” were searched and analyzed.

Findings – Using the social identity theory, a conceptual process model is developed which suggests that when high-status employees propose unethical requests to employees, individuals with high morality are likely to refuse those unethical requests to protect their self-categorizations. However, taking the unfair advantage of their illegitimate powers, high-status employees are likely to eventually make wrong judgments and give unnecessary punishments to moral employees. It is further argued that consistent victimization is likely to negatively impact the social identity of such employees and leads to irritability in moral employees, particularly when such individuals are unable to get the requisite social support from their leaders.

Originality/value – While a considerable body of literature has focused on the antecedents and consequences of intense unethical business practices and the crucial role of leaders in such activities, limited attention has been given to the role of other employees and how they engage in mild unethical misconduct regularly, which is the key focus of this research. The novel conceptual framework needs to be tested in diverse contexts for further development and validation.

Keywords Expressed rudeness, Leader identity, Moral identity, Perceived rudeness, Social identity theory, Unethical requests

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The identification of the biggest corporate scandals, particularly the ones related to the manipulation and fraud of financial statements such as the Enron scandal, quickly grabbed the attention of the public and researchers across the globe (Edwards *et al.*, 2019; Tang *et al.*, 2018). As a result, unethical business practices have emerged as one of the key research areas in the management, and have been studied in a considerable body of literature (e.g. De Cremer and Vandekerckhove, 2017; Jago and Pfeffer, 2019; Kuenzi *et al.*, 2020; Umphress and



Bingham, 2011). This literature has comprehensively investigated and recognized the role of several macro-level factors that lead to unethical practices in organizations, such as increased competitiveness and scarcity of resources (Kennedy, 2019; Khan *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, an adequate body of literature in organizational behavior has focused on individual behavior and developed an understanding of the cognitive processes that encourage individuals to engage in unethical activities in organizations (Holtbrugge *et al.*, 2015; Keem *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, the negative consequences of unethical activities have been thoroughly studied in the above literature.

Despite having sufficient understanding regarding the antecedents and consequences of engaging in unethical activities, most of the existing literature has remained confined to high-intensity unethical frauds, and limited attention has been paid to the mild unethical activities in organizations such as frequent unethical requests by managers for accomplishing their work goals (Gino, 2015; Knoll *et al.*, 2016; Javaid *et al.*, 2020). This literature has explored the concept of unethical requests, predominantly from the leaders' perspective, i.e. how morally corrupt leaders encourage employees to engage in morally wrong activities. However, limited literature has focused on how high-status employees, i.e. workplace vigilantes encourage low-status employees to engage in unethical acts. It is crucial to focus on the concept of unethical requests from the workplace vigilantes' perspective as these individuals hold informal authority and have strong social networks, thus having an illegitimate advantage over other employees (DeCelles and Aquino, 2020), which has been inadequately explored.

Moreover, mixed findings exist regarding the consequences of unethical requests at the workplace. For example, some literature guides that many employees do not understand the intensity of unethical requests and respond positively to them for protecting their positions (Johnson *et al.*, 2019; Shaw *et al.*, 2020), limited literature suggests that individuals who refuse to obey such requests are likely to quit those situations or experience negative changes in their work performance because of lack of support from their managers (Moutousi and May, 2018). Overall, there is a lack of clarity regarding how individuals with high moral values uniquely respond to such situations, and experience non-work changes over time.

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the outcomes of unethical requests from employees' perspective, the social identity theory provides a useful lens as it combines psychological mechanisms with social factors for deepening an understanding of the non-work change experience of individuals (Turner *et al.*, 1979). Social identity theory suggests that interactions between distinct social groups lead to deeper connections and positive social identity change experiences. It also incorporates the role of moral identity of individuals and guides that the lack of alignment between the two groups leads to negative perceptions and discourages individuals from embracing change experiences (Aquino and Reed, 2002). Thus, it provides a useful lens for understanding the outcomes of unethical requests on employees.

Using the above guidance, a conceptual framework is developed to understand the linkage between unethical requests and their outcomes on the social psychology of moral employees. It is suggested that employees with high moral identity are likely to respond to unethical requests of high-status individuals through explicit moral objections in line with their values and inner conscience. However, explicit rejections are likely to deteriorate the relationship between the two groups and lead to wrong judgments by high-status employees. Thus, high-status employees are likely to become revengeful toward moral employees and give unnecessary punishments to those employees, particularly when leaders have low identity and control over their subordinates. Thus, lack of social support and continuous psychological distress in moral employees is likely to enhance the vulnerability of moral employees and leads to permanent rudeness in their behavior.

This conceptual article contributes to the literature in three distinct ways. First, while the majority of the existing literature highlights the negative consequences of major unethical

activities only, this research highlights that minor unethical acts are important as these acts eventually lead to the development of a morally corrupt culture in organizations and lead to major frauds, thus focuses on the concept of unethical requests and their consequences. Second, the concept of unethical behaviors and corporate scandals were predominantly studied in the context of the leaders, e.g. CEO and top management teams – individuals having the formal authority of decision making in organizations. However, this research focuses on the essential role of workplace vigilantes and how these individuals exercise their illegitimate power by pressuring low-status employees to accept their unethical requests. Third, it uses the social identity perspective to develop a comprehensive and step-wise understanding of the non-work change experiences of moral employees, and how supporting the right stance puts them in the wrong spot in everyone’s eyes and leads to permanent negative changes in their behavior. In this regard, it identifies and links various factors such as explicit moral rejection, wrong judgments, unnecessary punishments, irritability and expressed rudeness. Moreover, the conditional role of Islamic work ethics and the leader’s identity are also proposed. Overall, an understanding regarding the applicability of the proposed model may be deepened by empirically testing this framework in diverse contexts.

Literature review and theoretical framework

This section reviews the relevant literature from organizational behavior and psychology domains and merges it with the social identity theory for developing a holistic understanding of the outcomes of refusal to unethical requests on employees. The process model is summarized in Figure 1.

Unethical requests and explicit moral objection

Over the recent years, increased workplace competitiveness has blurred the boundaries between right and wrong moral standards (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2010; Knoll *et al.*, 2016; Mesdaghinia *et al.*, 2019). In view of the growing ethical challenges in organizations, a large body of literature has focused on workplace ethics, and has linked ethics with positive individual and organizational outcomes (Gino, 2015; Hauser, 2020; Mitonga-Monga *et al.*, 2016). However, based on individuals’ unique value system and their ability to draw unique

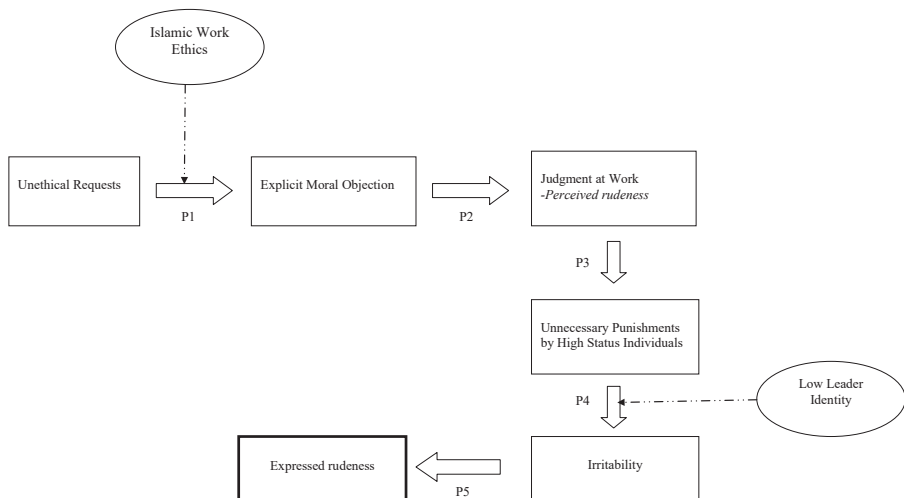


Figure 1.
Outcomes of refusal to unethical requests on moral employees

boundaries in setting their moral standards, ambiguous understanding exists regarding the differences between “request for help” and “unethical requests” at workplaces. Thus, many employees put forward minor unethical and immoral demands to their colleagues for the smooth and quick functioning of their operations (Johnson *et al.*, 2019; Klein and Shtudiner, 2021; Umphress and Bingham, 2011). In this regard, it is particularly challenging for employees to deal with unethical requests from high-status individuals in organizations, as these individuals have strong influence and hold in organizational processes (Prato and Ferraro, 2018). Although some literature has focused on the concept of ethical challenges from leaders’ perspective and suggests how leaders use their positional power and pressurize subordinates for ethical behaviors (e.g. Blair *et al.*, 2017; Sam, 2021; Knoll *et al.*, 2017). However, there is a limited understanding regarding how colleagues engage in such behaviors (e.g. Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Thus, this research focuses on a distinct group, i.e. high-status employees – who might not be formally working in leadership positions but have informal power of decision making (Prato and Ferraro, 2018), and how do other employees respond to such situations.

Social identity theory focuses on intergroup relationships and guides how group memberships impact the unique identity and psychology of individuals (Turner *et al.*, 1979). Moreover, it suggests that the moral identity of individuals plays an integral role in shaping their responses to the actions of diverse groups (Aquino and Reed, 2002). In this regard, positive social identity changes are likely to be experienced when there is an alignment between the values and actions of other people, while the lack of congruency might encourage people to protect their self-identity. Based on the guidance from the social identity theory, individuals’ responses to unethical requests may be adequately explored by understanding their internal strong or weak moral identity (Cohen *et al.*, 2014). In line with this, a large body of recent literature has found that Islamic work ethics plays a significant role in shaping the moral identity of individuals (Abuznaid, 2009). Islamic work ethics refers to a presence of strong moral philosophy and values which facilitate individuals in differentiating between right and wrong through direct guidance from Islamic teachings (Beekun, 1997). Alongside this, Islamic work ethics put a major focus on the essential role of commitment, hard work and teamwork for the creation of a conducive work environment in organizations (Khan Marri *et al.*, 2013; Yousef, 2001) and thus reflects the strong moral identity of individuals. Islamic work ethics are an integral part of most organizations in Islamic countries (Khan *et al.*, 2015). In particular, Islamic banking is one of the relatively new banking systems which has been integrated into a large number of Muslim countries for aligning the spirit and values of Islam following Islamic Shariah (Ahmad, 2011; Hassan and Aliyu, 2018). Other than the banking sector, several companies in the healthcare sector have integrated aspects of Islamic work ethics for improving human resource practices (Haroon *et al.*, 2012). Overall, employees in most Islamic countries are clear about these principles as well as encourage the implementation of Islamic work ethics in organizations (Rokhman, 2010; Usman *et al.*, 2015; Yousef, 2001).

Based on the above guidance, it is argued that employees respond to unethical requests from high-status individuals based on their moral identity. Although most of the existing literature on workplace ethics has guided that employees prefer to take indirect ways for rejecting an unethical request, however it is suggested that individuals with Islamic work ethics are likely to have a strong moral identity and a clear mindset, which will discourage them from fulfilling morally wrong demands of their colleagues and leading to explicit moral rejection by them. Explicit moral rejection refers to a direct and open refusal of the unethical act where individuals indicate the actual reason behind the rejection to leave no room for confusion (Irwin and Naylor, 2009). Further, employees are likely to engage in ethical voice and express explicit rejection toward unethical requests of high-status individuals with an

intention to discourage them and others from engaging in immoral behaviors in the future. Thus, [proposition 1](#) is developed:

Proposition 1. Islamic work ethics moderates the relationship between unethical requests and explicit moral objection, such that unethical requests at the workplace lead to explicit moral objection by individuals when they have Islamic work ethics.

Explicit moral objection and perceived rudeness

Focusing on the strong role of moral identity, [Proposition 1](#) focused on how individuals with Islamic work ethics are likely to respond negatively to unethical requests at the workplace. However, it is crucial to understand the consequences of explicit moral rejection on employees' future, who take such bold decisions. These outcomes are, however, inadequately explored in the existing literature. In this regard, the social identity theory suggests that when individuals of diverse social groups are unable to align their mindsets and expectations with each other, that weakens their social relationship with each other and leads to a negative impact on their perceptions as well ([Hogg et al., 1995](#)). In line with the above, some literature on organizational behavior also guides that when employees express unwillingness to perform certain duties at their workplace or disobey the order of their managers, that leads to deterioration of their relationship with managers ([Desai and Kouchaki, 2017](#); [Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021](#)) and leads to wrong judgments about them.

Integrating the social identity theory with the above literature, it is expected that explicit moral objection by employees and request refusal are likely to increase the social gaps between high-status individuals and those employees. Moreover, such refusals are likely to make high-status individuals think negatively about the behavior and attitude of those employees and lead to wrong judgments of them. Thus, instead of rethinking their unethical requests and rectifying their behavior, high-status individuals are likely to engage in wrong judgments and believe moral employees to be discourteous and rude toward them – commonly referred to as perceived rudeness. The perceptions regarding the rude behavior of employees are expected to deteriorate the relationship between the two groups and lead to an increased distance between them. Based on the above discussion, [Proposition 2](#) is developed:

Proposition 2. Explicit moral objection leads to wrong judgments by high-status individuals (regarding the perceived rudeness of employees) at the workplace.

Perceived rudeness and unnecessary punishments by high-status individuals

Based on the guidance offered by the reinforcement approach, which focuses on the importance of positive and negative sanctions in driving the desired behavior of individuals ([Villere and Hartman, 1991](#)), most organizations have developed a comprehensive reward policy that includes rewards as well as punishments. Although a large body of existing literature has focused on the positive role of the reinforcement approach, particularly the use of formal or informal punishments in reducing undesirable behaviors such as absenteeism in violators ([Lee and Raschke, 2016](#); [Luthans et al., 2011](#); [Stajkovic and Luthans, 2003](#)). However, the downside is this has also led to the initiation of unnecessary punishments by some employers for their motives. Overall, punishments also referred to as negative sanctions, are intentionally given to those employees who violate the prevailing rules of the organizations to direct their behavior in the right direction ([Putra and Damayanti, 2020](#)). The concept of employee reward and punishment was introduced in the 1970s as an essential determinant of employee attitudes, perceptions and behaviors ([Podsakoff et al., 2006](#)). Based on the same,

the concept of unnecessary punishments, though still underdeveloped, refers to the use of redundant techniques and penalties that are unreasonably given to employees (Mooijman and Graham, 2018)—for example, giving extra responsibilities to certain employees just to overburden them. Also, many employers insult their subordinates and especially highlight their mistakes in front of other employees for ridiculing them.

Although employers or leaders have the formal authority to give punishments to their subordinates; however, since high-status individuals have informal authority in the workplace, these individuals are likely to misuse their influential positions and become revengeful toward moral employees based on their wrong judgments and negative perceptions about them. Drawing the guidance from the social identity theory, which suggests that negative perceptions and stereotyping encourage individuals to behave less supportive toward other groups (Brown, 2000), it is argued that wrong judgment about employees and perceptions regarding the perceived rudeness is likely to encourage high-status individuals to encourage in revengeful behavior toward moral employees; thus they are expected to give unnecessary punishments to unfavorable employees within their capacities, e.g. request them to complete work before time or by identifying/highlighting their mistakes in front of others. Based on the above discussion, Proposition 3 is developed:

Proposition 3. Wrong judgments (regarding the perceived rudeness) encourage high-status individuals to give unnecessary punishments to employees.

Unnecessary punishments by high-status individuals and irritability

When individuals are being given unnecessary punishments at the workplace it reflects an unfair treatment of those employees and illustrates a form of “workplace bullying”. Despite a large body of literature on workplace bullying and its negative consequences (e.g. Mubarak and Mumtaz, 2018; Sheehan *et al.*, 2020), limited literature has explored the consequences of high-status individuals’ bullying behavior on the social psychology of victims (Park *et al.*, 2020). In this regard, the social identity theory provides in-depth guidance and suggests that when individuals consistently become a part of an environment where they are unable to get along well with other groups, that leaves permanent negative marks on their psychology along with adversely affecting their social relationships (Branscombe *et al.*, 1999). In line with the above, some literature also guides that consistent exposure to negative behaviors and stressors leads to frustration and irritability in employees and makes them lose their patience (Ayoko *et al.*, 2003; Mumtaz, 2019). Using the above guidance, it is expected that consistent exposure to unnecessary punishments by high-status individuals is likely to lead to irritability in employees.

However, the role of leaders’ support is also crucial in understanding the above relationship as employees are generally expected to conform to guidelines provided by their leaders because of their formal authority and power in the workplace (Samnani and Singh, 2013). Thus, the conditional role of leaders’ identity – the extent to which an individual self-defines him/herself as a leader (Zheng and Muir, 2015) is also proposed in the above relationship. It is expected that high-identity leaders are likely to maintain control in organizations and discourage high-status individuals from exercising their informal powers. Conversely, when leaders have a low identity in organizations, i.e. when they do not play a central role in managing the behavior of their employees despite their formal authority, then high-status individuals are likely to exercise their informal authority more carelessly, which would increase the insecurity and hopelessness in employees and leads to irritability in them.

Proposition 4. Leader identity moderates the relationship between unnecessary punishments by high-status individuals and irritability of employees, such that punishments by high-status individuals lead to irritability in employees, when leaders have a low identity in the workplace.

Irritability and expressed rudeness

While a large body of existing organizational behavior literature has focused on the overall concept of rudeness and its negative consequences (Gallus *et al.*, 2014; Johnson and Indvik, 2001; Porath and Erez, 2009), a lack of understanding exists regarding the processes that lead to rudeness in individuals. It is important to understand that most employees like to engage in socially desirable behavior in organizations to maintain favorable relationships with their colleagues. However, rude behavior of employees is a behavioral outcome that generally occurs when employees are consistently exposed to unfavorable situations. This research develops a theoretical linkage between irritability and expressed rudeness. In this regard, the social identity theory forms a basis for understanding how individuals embrace positive or negative changes in their behavior after interacting with other social groups (Ashforth and Mael, 2004), thus providing a useful lens for developing the above linkage.

Using this guidance, it is suggested that continuous irritability of employees, which is a feeling or mood, is likely to lead to permanent negative changes in the behavior of employees over time. In this regard, some literature suggests that persistent irritability leads to violence and aggression in individuals and is reflected in individuals' behavior as well (Mumtaz, 2019). Expressed rudeness may be defined as one of the clear expressions that are reflected in individuals' behavior when they are unable to maintain positive relationships with other social groups (Porath and Erez, 2009). Thus, it is proposed that irritability is likely to lead to expressed rudeness in moral employees, i.e. individuals are likely to engage in a low intensity deviant and discourteous behavior with their colleagues as a result of consistently experiencing a negative internal state (Fida *et al.*, 2014). Expressed rudeness is likely to negatively impact the reputation of individuals as well as weaken their social relationships with high-status employees and other colleagues, thus reflecting negative social identity changes in employees. Based on the above guidance, Proposition 5 is developed:

Proposition 5. Irritability is positively related to expressed rudeness at the workplace.

Discussion

Based on the use of social identity theory, this article proposes a novel conceptual framework to understand the outcomes of refusal to unethical requests on the behavior and social psychology of moral employees. Theoretical implications along with future research avenues are proposed in this section.

First, unlike the focus of the majority of the existing on the negative consequences of major ethical scandals, this research focuses on the micro-level perspective and understands the essence of unethical requests, which are less noticeable and generally considered harmless. However, it is crucial to understand that these minor acts are likely to lead to a permanent negative impact on the behavior and attitude of individuals. In this regard, incidents such as the Enron scandal and Volkswagen emissions case indicate real examples of how minor unethical acts encourage employees to engage in major scandals. Future researchers are suggested to extend this research and develop a linkage between micro and macro-level factors as well as understand how minor misdeeds change the culture of organizations and lead to a major crisis in organizations. Further, while this conceptual article focuses exclusively on the outcomes of unethical requests, future researchers may focus on other less-intense ethical challenges such as sarcastic humor and how it leads to moral and ethical issues in organizations. In this regard, the use of longitudinal research designs would be helpful for future researchers in understanding the change experiences of employees with clarity.

Second, while the majority of the research has linked unethical requests with leaders, this research focuses on the neglected yet important group, i.e. workplace vigilantes and how these individuals take unfair advantage of their high-status positions for accomplishing their work

goals. It is essential to recognize that these individuals are highly concerned about protecting their positions; thus their propensity of engaging in their behaviors might be much higher as compared to actual leaders. However, the existing literature provides a limited understanding of this group. Thus, future researchers are suggested to thoroughly explore the exclusive characteristics of this group and how they acquire these positions. They may simultaneously focus on leaders and high-status individuals to develop a clear understanding of similarities and differences between the two groups and how these individuals overpower leaders, develop strong internal groups and engage in unethical activities. Based on the lack of understanding of this aspect, the use of social networking theory (Tichy *et al.*, 1979), especially through the use of exploratory research designs, might offer a comprehensive understanding of this unique group. Future researchers may conduct in-depth interviews with junior employees and identify their perceptions regarding the characteristics of high-status individuals.

Third, this research adopts a social identity perspective to develop a thorough understanding of the negative consequences of refusal to unethical requests on the behavior and future of moral employees. Whilst the majority of the literature has focused on work-based outcomes of unethical requests (e.g. Fehr *et al.*, 2019), the use of social identity theory in this research led to the understanding of long term non-work change experiences. Interestingly, the proposed model suggests how perceived rudeness translates to actual rudeness because of wrong moral judgments, which is in alignment with the self-fulfilling prophecy theory (Merton, 1948). However, the above linkage needs to be further explored and tested in the future, particularly through in-depth qualitative research methods, e.g. ethnography and observation approaches. Also, this research has exclusively focused on the role of negative social relationships and their consequences. However, future researchers are suggested to incorporate the social identity theory to focus on positive social identity changes and investigate how moral individuals engage in ethical voice and protect themselves from such situations. Finally, the essential role of moral identity is also reflected by focusing on Islamic work ethics in this research, which is one of the emerging areas of research in a large number of organizations, especially in the banking sector.

Practical implications

Using the findings of this research, this section offers practical implications to organizations for effectively managing the relationship between colleagues and the work environment, and for maintaining an ethical environment within a culture. First, based on the long-term negative prospects of unethical requests, organizations are suggested to understand the intensity of minor unethical activities and how such activities turns into norms over time. In view of the same, the HR department of organizations, in consensus with top management, should develop thorough guidelines regarding employees' code of conduct and explicitly mention all details regarding what constitutes against companies policies. Afterward, this information should be shared with employees through handbooks as well as awareness seminars. Furthermore, policymakers should develop and implement strict reinforcement strategies and punish those employees who engage in unethical or immoral behaviors. For example, organizations may define a sequence of punishments such as warnings, written notices, pay deductions or demotion for violators.

Second, workplace vigilantes are part of almost all kinds of organizations, and they use different tactics for developing their internal networks in organizations. However, top management teams are required to identify such individuals and monitor their activities to ensure that such individuals do not misuse their informal authority. In this regard, top management should try to develop a flexible culture where employees are willing to openly share their concerns and grievances with them regarding such issues. Moreover, HR departments should develop formal grievances committees for handling any reported issues.

Third, this research has highlighted the essential role of leadership and its support in developing a conducive and ethical culture in organizations. Therefore, organizations should develop a rigorous mechanism for hiring people for leadership positions. For this, knowledge-based as well as psychological tests should be conducted for ensuring the selection of the right candidates. Finally, the findings of this study indicated several negative outcomes for individuals who choose to go against workplace vigilantes. Based on these findings, it is crucial for leaders to carefully ensure that all the employees have been equally involved in various team-related activities, and no one should be socially isolated in work settings. In this regard, organizing informal team-based and a few individual gatherings might help leaders in timely resolving such issues. Also, the alignment of Islamic work ethics such as integrity, fairness, trust and helpfulness with organizational values would be especially fruitful for organizations in improving the relationship between employees.

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Corresponding author

Sana Mumtaz can be contacted at: sana_mumtaz91@hotmail.com

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