

The Evolution of Brand Activism Research: A Bibliometric Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Brand activism has emerged as a prominent phenomenon in contemporary marketing and management research, reflecting the growing expectation that brands act as social and political actors beyond their traditional economic roles. As scholarly interest in this topic has expanded rapidly, the literature has become increasingly diverse and fragmented across disciplines, themes, and methodological approaches. This study aims to systematically examine the evolution of brand activism research through a comprehensive bibliometric analysis. Using data retrieved from the Scopus database, the study analyzes publication trends, citation patterns, influential authors and institutions, country collaborations, and thematic developments using VOSviewer. The findings reveal that brand activism research has evolved from early normative and ideological debates toward a more consolidated and empirically grounded field, with growing emphasis on social media, consumer activism, authenticity, corporate and CEO activism, and branding outcomes such as loyalty and brand equity. The results also indicate a dominance of transatlantic research networks, alongside emerging contributions from developing economies. By mapping the intellectual structure and thematic trajectory of brand activism research, this study provides an integrative overview of the field, identifies key research clusters and gaps, and offers a foundation for future theoretical development and empirical investigation.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the role of brands in society has undergone a significant transformation. Traditionally, brands were primarily viewed as economic entities focused on delivering functional value and maximizing

shareholder profits [1], [2]. However, globalization, digital communication, and heightened public awareness of social and environmental issues have reshaped consumer expectations. Brands are now increasingly perceived as social actors with responsibilities

that extend beyond market transactions [3]. As a result, companies are expected not only to provide quality products and services but also to take clear stances on pressing societal issues such as climate change, social justice, gender equality, racial discrimination, and political polarization [4], [5]. This shift has given rise to the concept of brand activism, which refers to brand-led actions, communications, and strategies aimed at influencing social, environmental, economic, or political change [6].

Brand activism has gained prominence as consumers increasingly align their purchasing decisions with their personal values. Studies indicate that value-driven consumers are more likely to support brands that demonstrate authenticity, ethical commitment, and social responsibility, while simultaneously rejecting brands perceived as indifferent or opportunistic. Social media platforms have further amplified this phenomenon by enabling rapid dissemination of brand messages and facilitating public scrutiny [7], [8]. Consequently, brand activism has become a double-edged sword: while it offers opportunities to strengthen brand equity, trust, and loyalty, it also exposes firms to risks such as consumer backlash, boycotts, and accusations of “woke-washing.” These dynamics have made brand activism a strategically important yet complex area of inquiry within marketing and management research [9], [10].

The growing relevance of brand activism has been reflected in the expanding body of academic literature addressing this phenomenon. Early research often emerged from broader discussions on corporate social responsibility (CSR), cause-related marketing, and ethical branding [11]. Over time, scholars began to distinguish brand activism as a more explicit, value-driven, and often politically charged form of brand engagement. Unlike traditional CSR, which is frequently reactive and compliance-oriented, brand activism is characterized by proactive advocacy and public

positioning on controversial issues [12]. This conceptual evolution has led researchers from diverse disciplines (including marketing, communication studies, sociology, and political economy) to contribute theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and critical perspectives on brand activism [13], [14].

Despite the growing volume of publications, brand activism research remains fragmented across journals, disciplines, and methodological approaches. Some studies focus on consumer perceptions and behavioral outcomes, such as purchase intention, brand trust, and loyalty. Others examine organizational motives, leadership ideologies, and stakeholder management strategies. More critical streams of research explore the ethical implications of brand activism, questioning its sincerity, power dynamics, and potential to commodify social movements. The diversity of themes, theories, and methods highlights the richness of the field but also creates challenges for scholars seeking to gain a comprehensive understanding of its intellectual structure and developmental trajectory.

Furthermore, the rapid evolution of social, political, and technological contexts continues to shape brand activism research. Global crises such as climate emergencies, social justice movements, and political polarization have intensified expectations for corporate engagement. Simultaneously, advancements in digital analytics and bibliometric techniques have enabled researchers to systematically analyze large bodies of literature. Bibliometric analysis, which uses quantitative methods to evaluate publication patterns, citation networks, and thematic trends, has emerged as a powerful tool for mapping knowledge domains. Applying bibliometric methods to brand activism research offers an opportunity to identify influential studies, key authors, dominant themes, and emerging research fronts, thereby providing a structured overview of the field's evolution.

Although brand activism has attracted increasing scholarly attention, the existing

literature lacks a comprehensive and systematic synthesis that captures its intellectual development, thematic structure, and research dynamics over time. Most prior reviews rely on traditional narrative or systematic approaches, which, while valuable, are often limited in scope and subject to reviewer bias. The absence of a bibliometric analysis means that key patterns (such as collaboration networks, influential journals, foundational works, and emerging topics) remain underexplored. This gap hinders the ability of scholars to fully understand how brand activism research has evolved, where it currently stands, and how it may develop in the future. Consequently, there is a need for a rigorous bibliometric study that maps the evolution of brand activism research and provides an integrative overview of the field. The objective of this study is to examine the evolution of brand activism research through a comprehensive bibliometric analysis.

2. Method

This study employed a bibliometric research design to systematically analyze the evolution of brand activism scholarship. The Scopus database was selected as the primary data source due to its comprehensive coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed journals across

disciplines relevant to marketing, management, and social sciences. A structured search was conducted using relevant keywords related to brand activism (e.g., “brand activism,” “corporate activism,” and related terms) within titles, abstracts, and keywords, with no initial restriction on publication year to capture the full development of the field. Only English-language journal articles were included to ensure consistency and academic rigor, while non-article document types such as conference proceedings, book chapters, and editorials were excluded. The retrieved bibliographic data, including authors, affiliations, citations, keywords, and references, were exported in compatible formats and analyzed using VOSviewer software. VOSviewer was utilized to perform citation analysis, co-authorship analysis, and keyword co-occurrence mapping, enabling visualization of the intellectual structure, collaboration patterns, and thematic evolution of brand activism research. Through these analyses, the study identified influential publications, key research clusters, and emerging themes, providing a systematic overview of the field’s development over time.

3. Result and Discussion

Citation Analysis

Table 1. Top Cited Literature

| Citations | Authors and year | Title |
|-----------|------------------|---|
| 546 | [15] | Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing? |
| 515 | [16] | Private global business regulation |
| 466 | [17] | The Relationship Between Sustainable Supply Chain Management, Stakeholder Pressure and Corporate Sustainability Performance |
| 318 | [18] | Corporate Sociopolitical Activism and Firm Value |
| 317 | [19] | Beyond the boycott: Labor rights, human rights, and transnational activism |
| 237 | [20] | Woke-washing: “intersectional” femvertising and branding “woke” bravery |
| 233 | [21] | Brand activism: Does courting controversy help or hurt a brand? |
| 224 | [22] | Commentary: Brand Activism in a Political World |

| Citations | Authors and year | Title |
|-----------|------------------|---|
| 194 | [23] | The revenge of the consumer How brand moral violations lead to consumer anti-brand activism |
| 190 | [24] | 'Long live zackie, long live': AIDS activism, science and citizenship after apartheid |

Source: Scopus Database

Co-Authorship Network

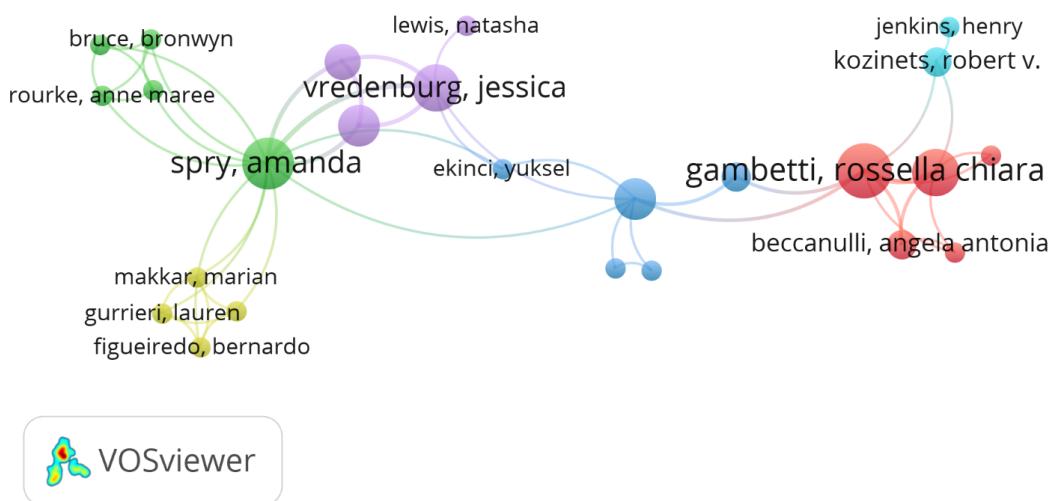


Figure 1. Author Visualization

Source: Data Analysis

Figure 1 illustrates a relatively concentrated yet fragmented intellectual structure in brand activism research, where a few influential scholars act as key connectors across thematic clusters. Amanda Spry emerges as a central bridging author, strongly connected to multiple clusters and linking foundational work on brand activism and consumer responses with adjacent streams involving authenticity, ethics, and persuasion. Jessica Vredenburg represents another prominent hub, closely associated with conceptual development and empirical grounding of brand

activism, while serving as a conduit between early conceptual debates and more recent applied studies. The cluster led by Rossella Chiara Gambetti and Angela Antonia Beccanulli reflects a European-oriented stream focusing on corporate communication, stakeholder engagement, and socio-political discourse, whereas the smaller cluster around Henry Jenkins and Robert V. Kozinets highlights a cultural and participatory perspective rooted in media studies and consumer culture theory.

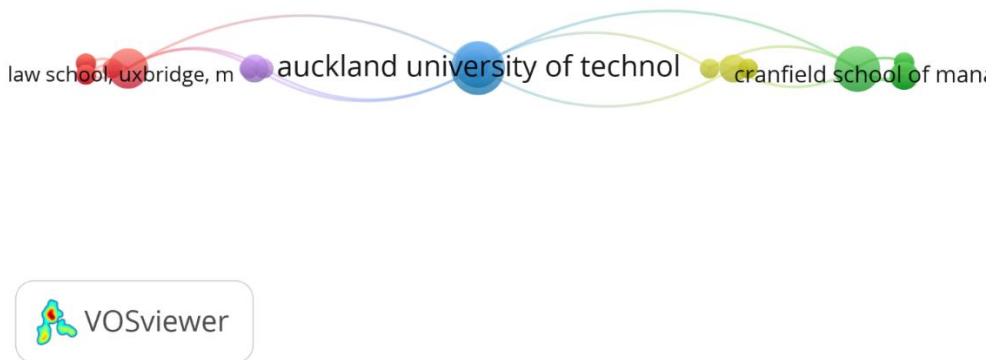


Figure 2. Affiliation Visualization

Source: Data Analysis

Figure 2 indicates that brand activism research is anchored around a small number of internationally connected universities, with Auckland University of Technology functioning as a central hub that bridges multiple academic communities. Its strong links with Cranfield School of Management highlight a management- and strategy-oriented research stream, while connections to Oxford Law

School suggest an interdisciplinary extension toward legal, ethical, and governance perspectives of brand activism. The presence of distinct clusters with relatively limited interconnections implies that institutional collaboration in this field remains selective and project-based rather than broadly networked.

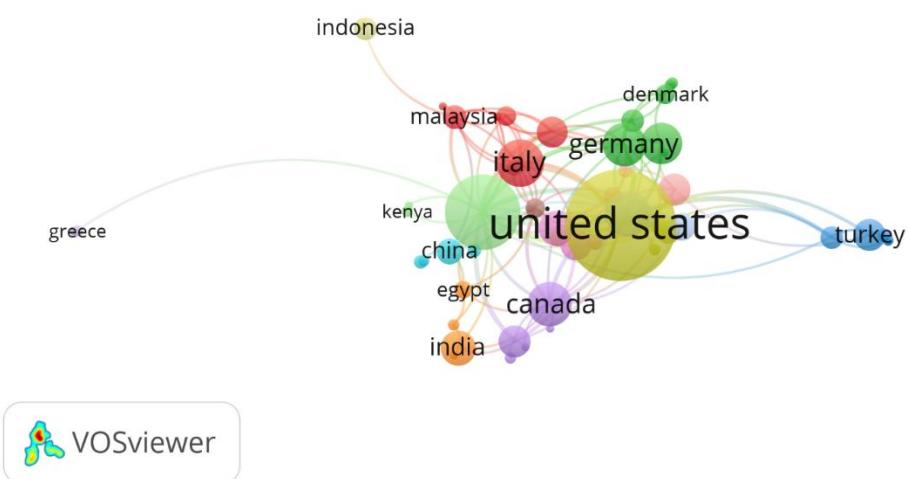


Figure 3. Country Visualization

Source: Data Analysis

Figure 3 shows that the United States occupies a dominant and highly central position in brand activism research, serving as the primary hub connecting most international scholarly collaborations. Strong ties with Germany, Italy, and Canada indicate that the field is largely shaped by transatlantic research networks grounded in marketing, communication, and corporate strategy traditions. Emerging connections involving Malaysia, Indonesia, India, China, and Egypt

suggest a gradual expansion of brand activism scholarship into developing and emerging economies, often linked through collaborations with established Western research centers. Meanwhile, more peripheral countries such as Turkey, Kenya, Greece, and Denmark appear as niche contributors, participating selectively in cross-national research efforts.

Keyword Co-Occurrence Network Visualization

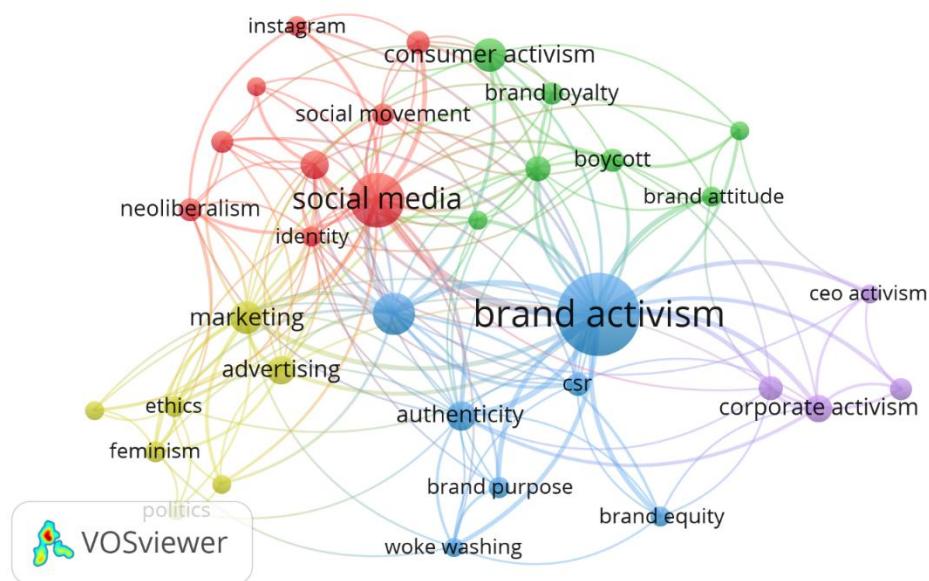


Figure 4. Network Visualization

Source: Data Analysis

Figure 4 reveals brand activism as the central and most dominant concept in the literature, functioning as the core integrative theme that connects multiple research streams. Its strong links with CSR, authenticity, brand purpose, and brand equity indicate that much of the scholarship frames brand activism as an extension of strategic branding and corporate responsibility, emphasizing value alignment, credibility, and long-term brand outcomes. This cluster reflects a managerial and marketing-oriented perspective in which brand activism is evaluated in terms of strategic fit, reputation, and performance implications. A second prominent cluster revolves around social media, closely connected to terms such as consumer activism, social movement, identity,

and Instagram. This stream highlights the role of digital platforms as catalysts for brand activism, enabling rapid dissemination of activist messages and facilitating consumer participation and collective action. Research in this area focuses on how online environments shape public discourse, amplify social causes, and intensify the visibility and scrutiny of brands' sociopolitical stances.

Another key thematic cluster centers on consumer responses, represented by keywords such as brand loyalty, brand attitude, and boycott. This body of research examines the behavioral and attitudinal consequences of brand activism, acknowledging its dual potential to strengthen emotional bonds with aligned consumers while simultaneously

provoking resistance or backlash among opposing groups. The presence of boycott alongside loyalty underscores the polarized nature of consumer reactions and the inherent risks associated with taking public stances on contested issues. The network also reveals a distinct corporate and leadership activism stream, reflected in terms like corporate activism and CEO activism. This cluster emphasizes the role of organizational leadership and governance in shaping activist positioning, suggesting that brand activism is not only a marketing tactic but also a reflection of executive values and corporate identity.

Studies in this area often explore authenticity, internal alignment, and the symbolic power of leaders as spokespersons for social change. A critical and normative perspective emerges through keywords such as ethics, politics, feminism, neoliberalism, and woke washing, indicating growing scholarly attention to the moral and ideological tensions surrounding brand activism. This stream interrogates whether activist branding represents genuine social engagement or strategic opportunism, questioning power dynamics and the commodification of social movements.

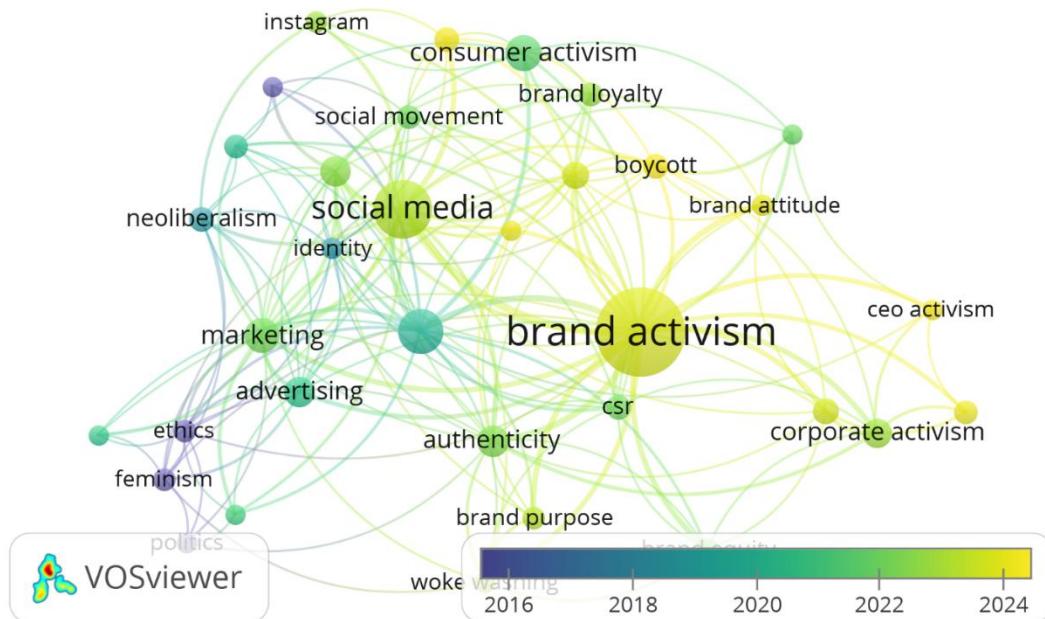


Figure 5. Overlay Visualization

Source: Data Analysis

Figure 5 illustrates the temporal evolution of brand activism research, showing how the field has shifted from early normative and ideological discussions toward more strategic and outcome-oriented perspectives. Earlier studies, indicated by cooler colors, focused on themes such as ethics, feminism, politics, neoliberalism, and advertising, reflecting initial debates around the moral legitimacy and ideological implications of brands engaging in sociopolitical issues. These foundational discussions established the critical lens through which brand activism was first

conceptualized. As the literature progressed into the mid-to-late 2010s, attention increasingly moved toward social media, identity, social movements, and consumer activism, highlighting the role of digital platforms in amplifying activist messaging and enabling consumer participation. This phase marks a transition in which brand activism became more empirically grounded, examining how online interactions shape public discourse and influence consumer-brand relationships. The prominence of social media during this period underscores its function as a key

mechanism connecting brands, activists, and audiences. More recent research, represented by warmer colors, centers on brand activism, corporate activism, CEO activism, brand loyalty, brand attitude, boycott, CSR, and

authenticity, signaling a maturation of the field. Contemporary studies increasingly investigate strategic implications, consumer responses, and reputational outcomes, while also scrutinizing risks such as woke washing.



Figure 6. Density Visualization

Source: Data Analysis

Figure 6 highlights brand activism as the most intensively researched and conceptually concentrated topic in the literature, indicated by the brightest and most central area on the map. High-density zones surrounding social media, consumer activism, and CSR suggest that these themes constitute the core knowledge base through which brand activism is examined. This concentration reflects a strong scholarly focus on how brands communicate sociopolitical stances through digital platforms and how such actions intersect with broader corporate responsibility frameworks. Moderate-density areas around authenticity, brand purpose, brand loyalty, boycott, and corporate or CEO activism indicate well-developed but still expanding research streams that explore outcomes, credibility, and leadership roles in brand activism. In contrast, lower-density regions related to ethics,

feminism, neoliberalism, and politics point to more niche or emerging critical perspectives that receive comparatively less empirical attention.

Discussion

Practical Implications

The findings of this bibliometric analysis offer several important implications for practitioners, particularly brand managers, corporate leaders, and communication strategists. The centrality of brand activism, closely linked with social media, consumer activism, CSR, and authenticity, indicates that activist positioning is no longer peripheral but embedded within mainstream branding strategy. Practically, this suggests that brands engaging in activism must prioritize strategic coherence and value alignment, as consumer responses are strongly shaped by perceptions of

authenticity. The prominence of social media-related themes highlights the role of digital platforms as critical arenas for activist expression and stakeholder dialogue, implying that brands should adopt transparent, responsive, and dialogic communication strategies rather than one-way promotional messaging. Furthermore, the growing visibility of CEO and corporate activism underscores the influence of leadership in shaping public trust, suggesting that activist stances should be supported by internal governance, organizational culture, and long-term commitments to avoid reputational risks such as accusations of woke washing.

Theoretical Contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by offering a systematic mapping of the intellectual structure and evolution of brand activism research. The results demonstrate that brand activism has evolved from early normative and ideological debates (centered on ethics, feminism, politics, and neoliberal critiques) toward a more integrated and empirically driven research domain focusing on consumer behavior, branding outcomes, and strategic management. By revealing the convergence of marketing, communication studies, consumer culture theory, and leadership research, this study positions brand activism as a multidisciplinary construct rather than a narrowly defined marketing tactic. The overlay and density visualizations further contribute by identifying emerging thematic priorities, such as authenticity, brand purpose, and executive activism, which signal theoretical maturation and opportunities for model development. In doing so, this bibliometric analysis provides a foundational reference for future conceptual frameworks, hypothesis development, and theory-building efforts in the study of brand activism.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be

acknowledged. First, the analysis is based solely on publications indexed in the Scopus database, which may exclude relevant studies published in non-indexed journals, regional outlets, or books, potentially limiting coverage, particularly of Global South perspectives. Second, bibliometric methods emphasize patterns of publication, citation, and keyword co-occurrence, which capture the structure of the literature but do not assess the substantive quality or depth of individual studies. Third, the interpretation of thematic clusters relies on author-assigned keywords, which may vary in consistency and terminology across disciplines. Finally, while this study maps the evolution of brand activism research, it does not empirically test causal relationships or theoretical propositions, suggesting the need for future research that integrates bibliometric insights with systematic literature reviews, qualitative analysis, or empirical modeling.

4. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive bibliometric overview of the evolution of brand activism research, revealing its transformation from a predominantly normative and ideological discourse into a consolidated, multidisciplinary field with strong strategic and managerial relevance. The findings demonstrate that brand activism has become a central construct in contemporary marketing and communication scholarship, closely intertwined with themes such as social media engagement, consumer activism, authenticity, CSR, and leadership-driven activism. The analysis also highlights the dominance of transatlantic research networks alongside emerging contributions from developing economies, indicating both intellectual concentration and growing global interest. By mapping influential authors, institutions, countries, and thematic trajectories, this study offers a structured understanding of the field's knowledge base, identifies underexplored critical and contextual dimensions, and provides a foundation for future research to

advance theory development, empirical investigation, and responsible managerial practice in brand activism.

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