

# Perceived Conspicuous Consumption and Brand Evaluation: Mediation Effect of Power Distance Belief

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## Abstract

Little empirical consumer research has focused on perceived conspicuous consumption in the respect of negative emotion. This research aims to prove the perceived conspicuous consumption's negative effect on consumers' attitude toward brand. In this research, two experiments were designed to test hypothesis. The results of analysis confirm that perceived conspicuous consumption affects the attitude towards brand, Consumer's temporal power distance belief mediates the relation between perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation, in line with our assumption. The level of perceived group norm towards conspicuous consumption (high vs. low) moderates the relation between perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation. In further research, the group norm scale should be improved and additional experiment adopting variety priming or manipulation method should be conducted for robustness of causality.

*Keywords: Perceived Conspicuous Consumption, Power Distance Belief, Perceived Group Norms, Brand Evaluation, Mediation Effect*

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## 1. Introduction

Conspicuous consumption refers to the phenomenon where individuals purchase goods for signaling social status, rather than for its inherent functional value (Wu, Eisenegger, Sivanathan, Crockett and Clark, 2017). Conspicuous consumption has become a widely practiced aspect of daily life (Currid-Halkett, 2014, Liang, Chang and Wang, 2017).

A considerable amount of research has been conducted on various topics relating to conspicuous consumption. Consumers involve in conspicuous consumption not only for conspicuous goods' functional utility but also for signaling their social status and wealth (Veblen 1899; Scott, Mende, and Bolton 2013). There are a huge number of research has confirmed the form of conspicuous consumption. Little literature or work has contributed to the decoding of conspicuous symbolism (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982; Hunt, Kernan, and Mitchell 1996, Scott, Mende and Bolton 2013) and the other consumers' conspicuous consumption effect on consumers' making decision in purchasing, evaluation brand, and recommendation behavior. Liang, Chang and Wang(2017) point out power state moderate the effect of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption. Lee and Shrum (2012) demonstrated that when individuals were in social exclusion (i.e., an interpersonal relationship is rejected), they drew attention to themselves by other means, such as conspicuous consumption. Lee and Shrum also indicated that a number of moderating variables may exist between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption. From the perspective of consumer

behavior, when evaluating products or brand consumers can be influenced by their reference group or the norm of group. Moreover, the influence of peers on individuals' product and brand decision concerning conspicuousness was investigated adopting American and Thailand samples.

Base on the conspicuous consumption phenomenon and previous research, the question of "Does other consumers' conspicuous consuming behavior affect consumers' brand evaluation?" remain pending. We therefore propose that consumer inference about a conspicuous peer, friend or unrelated consumer might affect the attitude towards the luxury brand. Specifically, we attempt to investigate following three questions? (1) Does other consumers' conspicuous consuming behavior affect consumers' brand evaluation? (2) Does the perceived group norm moderate the association perceived conspicuous consumption with consumers' attitude toward brand? (3) Does the perceived conspicuous consumption triggers high power distance belief, consequently influence brand evaluation?

In answering to aforementioned questions, our research makes several contributions to the literature and marketing practice. First, we try to confirm the relationship between perceived conspicuous consumption and consumers' attitude toward brand. Second, perceived group norms moderate consumers' brand evaluation. Finally, at the core of our research, investigating other consumers' conspicuous behavior triggers consumers' high power distance temporally and affects consumers' brand evaluation decision.

The remaining of the research is organized as

follows. In the following section, related theoretical background and logic of hypothesis development are provided. Subsequent section presents the research model. In section of experiment, the goal of experiment, experimental design, and procedure are described in detail. Then, the result and discussion will be provided. In the last section, we point out our search limitation and further research direction of this study.

## **2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses**

### **2.1 Conspicuous Consumption and Brand Evaluation**

#### Conspicuous consumption

Conspicuous consumption was defined by Mson as” to be exceptional behavior and apparently considers the conventional account of consumer behavior to be the more general case.” Moreover, researchers like Bearden and Etzel (1982); Braun and Wicklund (1989); Richins (1994) centered on conspicuous signaling, when they defined the concept of conspicuous consumption.

However, little research has focused on the decoding of conspicuous symbolism. Inferences consumers make about others’ conspicuousness has unfavorable effects on inferred warmth under communal norms, and moreover, the benefits of inferred competence under exchange norms disappear when a seller’s conspicuousness is perceived as a deliberate persuasion effort conspicuous consumption (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982; Hunt, Kernan, and Mitchell 1996, Scott, Mende

and Bolton 2013). Therefore, we presume that due to emerging unfavorable emotion, perceived conspicuous consumption will negatively affect consumer’s decision making like brand evaluation, brand royalty, and purchasing decision.

#### Brand Evaluation: Attitude toward the brand

Mitchell and Olson (1981, p. 318) define attitude toward the brand as an “individual’s internal evaluation of the brand.” According to Giner-Sorolla (1999), have remained fairly definitions: a) Attitude is positioned or directed at an object, in this case a brand, and b) attitude is evaluative in nature, i.e., there is “imputation of some degree of good or bad” to the attitudinal object (Eagly and Chaiken 1993, p. 3). The other dimension of Mitchell and Olson’s definition (internal evaluation) is noteworthy to attention. An attitude is an internal state as mentioned in the definition. However, in line with Eagly and Chaiken (1973) and Spears and Singh (2004), we recognize an attitude is an enduring state “that endures for at least a short period of time and presumably energizes and directs behavior.”

Thus, in our conceptualization, attitude toward the brand is a relatively enduring, unidimensional summary evaluation of the brand that presumably energizes behavior.

Based on above theory, when people facing other people’s conspicuous consumption behavior trigger unfavorable emotion, then affect the consumer’s attitude to brand. Therefore

$H_1$ : Perceived conspicuous consumption (other people’s conspicuous consumption) negatively affect consumer’s brand evaluation.

## 2.2 Conspicuous consumption and Group Norms

Group norms are defined as “shared standards and regular behavioral patterns expected by group members, which affect group members’ perceptions, interaction styles, decision-making and problem-solving” (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1991).

According to social identity theory, self-concept is formed based on the membership in social groups and categories. There are two processes of self-inclusive social category definition and evaluation. One is categorization, the other one is self-enhancement. Categorization means which perceptually accentuates difference between in-group and out-group, and similarities among in-group members (including self) on stereotypical dimensions. Self-enhancement means seeking behaviorally and perceptually to favor the in-group over the out-group, because the self-concept is defined in terms of group membership.

Norms within a team increase behavioral consistency among unit members and meanwhile drive them to exert collective effort to achieve common goals (O’Reilly, & Chatman, 1996). Group norms also function as an effective mechanism for controlling member behavior, such as anticipating, facilitating quickly, and responding appropriately (Hackman, 1992).

It is indicated by Leung & Bond(1984), Triandis(1972), Jettn et al.(2002), that collectivists dramatically distinguished from individuals in ingroup and outgroup. According to Chen et al(2006), consumers’ nationality, culture or the belief of idiocentrism and allocentrism would differentiate the

pattern of the perceived group norm. From previous research, it has been found in an individualist culture where those are more likely to identify their individualism with high identifiers than low identifiers. While a totally opposite indication can be traced in a collectivist culture. Besides, it is more obvious for group membership with high identifiers instead of low identifiers to cohere with group norms by the definition. In other words, high identifiers will act differently between collectivist and individualist, recognizing themselves more as collectivist in collectivist group, while more as individualist in individualist group norm. As to low identifiers, vice versa. Low identifiers tend to have a stronger self recognition which is considered to have a less connection with group norms. For some special occasions, contradictions to group norms might happen.

Therefore, consumer’s perceived group norms both in individual level and country level affect their brand evaluation and decision making.

$H_{2-1}$ : Perceived group norm towards conspicuous consumption in individual level moderates the relation between perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation.

$H_{2-2}$ : Perceived group norm towards conspicuous consumption in country level moderates the relation between perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation.

## 2.3 Conspicuous consumption and Power Distance Belief

Although inequalities in power exist within each society, the degree to which individuals accept

inequalities in power varies (Hofstede 2001; Oyserman 2006; Zhang, Winterich, and Mittal 2010). The extent to which individuals accept and endorse inequalities and hierarchies is called power distance belief and has traditionally been assessed at the country level (PDB; Hofstede 2001).

Recent research suggests that power distance belief also manifests at the individual level and that high (or low) power distance belief tendencies can also be temporarily heightened using priming procedures (Zhang et al. 2010; Winterich and Zhang 2014). Power distance belief is conceptually independent of the observed inequality in a given context and reflects an individual's beliefs about whether inequality is acceptable, not the extent to which it exists. It is important to note that power distance belief is conceptually distinct from the construct of psychological power. Power distance belief reflects the extent to which individuals accept inequalities in power in society, whereas power reflects perceived personal control over valued resources or on others (Gao, Winterich, and Zhang 2016; Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003; Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012).

Perceived conspicuous consumption as unfavorable emotion increase consumers' power distance belief temporally. In an environment of low power distance, consumers buy what they need without worrying about how others feel or think. Whereas in a high power distance setting, peers and superiors have a strong influence on the brands consumers buy. Because of this, consumers in a high power distance cultures constantly balance their purchases to match those in their reference groups. Consequently, these consumers are more prone to switching brands if their

reference group does so. This leads us to the last hypothesis. In other words, Individuals who score high in power distance will be less prone to brand loyalty than those who score low in power distance. Therefore, we can derive following hypothesis.

$H_3$ : Consumer's temporal power distance belief mediates the relation between perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation.

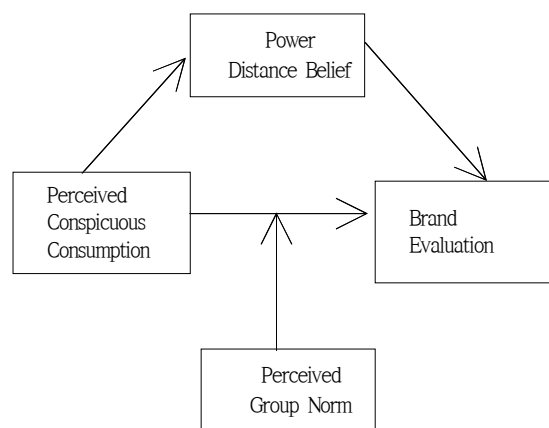


Fig. 2-1 Research Model

### 3. Study 1

#### 3.1 Method

Participants, Design and Procedure.

One hundred and eighteen panels ( $N=118$ ) recruited on www.sojump.com and received \$1 for compensation in this online based study. The study employed a 2 (conspicuous consumption condition vs. non-conspicuous consumption condition)  $\times$  2 (group norms: in-group vs. out group) between subject design. Additionally, the temporal power distance belief was measured as a continuous variable. Brand Evaluation Task was measured as

dependent variable. At the end of experiment, participations are requested to report their demographics including gender and age. Participants were randomly assigned to either the conspicuous or non-conspicuous condition.

#### Conspicuous Consumption Manipulation

To manipulation perceived conspicuous consumption situation, we adopted the Scott, Mende, and Bolton's (2013) method. Participants imaged the following situation.

You moved to a new town, and started working. You need to see a lawyer about a routine legal matter. You run across a local magazine that has a section titled "Getting to Know You," which includes brief interviews and profiles of a variety of local individuals and their work. You read the following about a lawyer.

Participants then read a magazine article (Russell and Fiske 2008), in which we manipulated consumption. We held all information constant except the manipulation of (non)conspicuous consumption: "Car: [Hyundai/Cadillac]. I always wear my: [Timex watch/Rolex watch]." This manipulation is arguably subtle, consisting of only 2 words in an article with more than 100 words. After reading the article, participants indicated their behavioral intentions toward the lawyer and rated his warmth and competence. Participants also responded to a manipulation check for conspicuousness, rating the lawyer's lifestyle as inexpensive/ expensive and modest/luxurious (on seven-point scales).

#### Group Norms Measures

To evaluate perceived group norm, participants were assign to respond responded to two items (Terry & Hogg, 1996; White et al., 1994, Terry, Hogg and White 1999) measuring their perceptions

of the reference group norms for carrying out the goal behavior. e.g. 'How many of your friends and peers would engage in conspicuous consumption?' (1: none to 7 :all) and 'Most of my friends and peers think that me engaging in conspicuous consumption during the next fortnight would be (1: undesirable to 7: desirable). The measured items are averaged and employed the median split for analysis.

#### Power Distance Belief

The power-distance belief measure using following two items: "I think the social hierarchy is important" and "I feel social equality is important" (reverse coded) (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). These two items were based on recent research (Zhang et al., 2010). The two items were averaged.

#### Brand Evaluation

In the brand evaluation task, participants were requested to evaluate brand irrelated product. We adopted Speras and Singh method, which is developed in 2004. The 10 items and seven-point scale were used in this task (appealing/unappealing; good/bad; favorable/unfavorable; undesirable/desirable; high quality/low quality; expensive/inexpensive; important/unimportant; advisable to choose/ not advisable to choose; no value for money/value for money; satisfactory/unsatisfactory).

At the end of this experiment, respondents reported gender and age information.

## 3.2 Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check: Conspicuous consumption.

In line with Scott, Mende, and Bolton(2013),

participants rated the lawyer's lifestyle are more expensive and luxurious in the conspicuous condition ( $M_{\text{expensive}} = 6.17$ ,  $M_{\text{luxurious}} = 5.69$ ) than in the non-conspicuous condition ( $M_{\text{expensive}} = 4.87$ ,  $M_{\text{luxurious}} = 4.48$ ;  $F_{\text{expensive}} = 45.71$ ,  $F_{\text{luxurious}} = 17.52$ ). Thus, our manipulation succeeded as we intended.

**Brand Evaluation:** An analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the brand evaluation revealed a significant effect of perceived conspicuous consumption ( $F(1,117) = 37.79$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Participant who assigned in conspicuous condition rate less on brand evaluation than participants in non-conspicuous consumption ( $M_{\text{conspicuous}} = 2.50$ ,  $M_{\text{non-conspicuous}} = 3.44$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This pattern of results support  $H_1$ .

A two-way ANOVA of the brand evaluation failed to revealed a conspicuous consumption  $\times$  norm interaction ( $p = 0.159$ ). Therefore, we cannot confirm  $H_{2-1}$ .

**Mediation Analysis:** Using mediation analysis with PROCESS in SPSS, we examined whether power distance mediate the effect of perceived conspicuous consumption on brand evaluation. The independent variable was perceived conspicuous consumption, the moderator was perceived group norm, the mediator was power distance belief, and the dependent variable was brand evaluation. The bootstrapping analysis (5,000 resample) show that power distance belief mediated the effect of perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation. The indirect effects excluded zero (95% confidence interval [CI] =  $-0.1910$ ,  $-0.0078$ ). These results support mediation by power distance belief ( $H_3$ ).

In experiment 1, we manipulate the conspicuous condition (vs. non-conspicuous condition), measured the perceived group norms, and measured the power distance belief. The result of analysis of study 1 provides evidence that perceived conspicuous consumption affects the attitude towards brand ( $H_1$ ), Consumer's temporally PBD moderate the relation between perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation ( $H_3$ ), in line with our assumption. When consumer investigate other's conspicuous consumption, the unfavorable emotion will be appeared, then the negative emotion negatively affect consumers' brand evaluate behavior. Specifically, the perceived conspicuous consumption (vs. non-conspicuous consumption) trigger high power distance temporal, then sharpening consumers' brand related evaluation behavior. However, the hypothesis 2 does not confirmed. It may have several reasons. First, when they rate the perceived group norms, consumer dose not rate the group norm based on their actually situation. Second, consumer regard their intention of conspicuous consumption as unhealthy behaviors.

## 4. Study 2

In the previous study, we tested individual level's perceived group norm towards conspicuous consumption in moderate the relation between perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation. In experiment 2, we focused on country level's perceived group norm towards conspicuous consumption.

## 4.1 Method

### Participants, Design and Procedure

One hundred and eighteen Chinese panels recruited on www.sojump.com and received \$1 for compensation in this online based platform and One hundred and fourteen American panels recruited on Amazon Mturk for \$0.50 compensation. The study employed a 2 (conspicuous consumption condition vs. non-conspicuous consumption condition)  $\times$  2 (group norms: in-group vs. out group) between subject design as well as experiment 1. However, the temporal power distance(PDB) were not measured in this party of experiment. Brand Evaluation Task was measured as dependent variable. At the end of experiment, participations are requested to report their demographics including gender and age. Participants were randomly assigned to either the conspicuous or non-conspicuous condition

### Conspicuous Consumption Manipulation

To manipulation perceived conspicuous consumption situation, we adopted the Scott, Mende, and Bolton' s(2013) method, which was employed in previous study.

### Group Norms Measures

To evaluate perceived group norm, participants were assign to respond responded to two items (Terry & Hogg, 1996; White et al., 1994, Terry, Hogg and White 1999) measuring their perceptions of the reference group norms for carrying out the goal behavior. e.g. 'How many of your friends and peers would engage in conspicuous consumption?' (1: none to 7 :all) and 'Most of my friends and peers think that me engaging in conspicuous consumption during the next fortnight would be (1:

undesirable to 7: desirable). The four items are averaged.

### Brand Evaluation

In the brand evaluation task, participants were request to evaluation brand unrelated product. We adopted Speras and Singh method, which is developed in 2004. The 10 items and seven-point scale were used in this task ( appealing/unappealing; good/bad; favorable/unfavorable; undesirable/desirable; high quality/low quality; expensive/inexpensive; important/unimportant; advisable to choose/ not advisable to choose; no value for money/value for money; satisfactory/unsatisfactory).

At the end of experiment, respondents reported gender and age information.

## 4.2 Results and Discussion

### Manipulation Check :Conspicuous consumption.

In line with Scott, Mende, and Bolton (2013), participants rated the lawyer' s lifestyle are more expensive and luxurious in the conspicuous condition ( $M_{expensive} = 6.01$ ,  $M_{luxurious} = 5.84$ ) than in the non-conspicuous condition ( $M_{expensive} = 4.57$ ,  $M_{luxurious} = 4.29$ ;  $F_{expensive} = 69.097$ ,  $F_{luxurious} = 56.96$ ). Thus, our manipulation succeeded as we intended.

Country and Group Norm: An analysis of variance(ANOVA) of the perceived group norm revealed a significant relationship with country (  $F(1, 231) = 6.58$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Chinese participants' level of perceived group norm higher than American participant' s group norms ( $M_{CN} = 4.31$ ,  $M_{US} = 3.89$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), which



means Chinese consumer more sensitive to reference group norm than American consumer.

**Brand Evaluation:** An analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the brand evaluation revealed a significant effect of perceived conspicuous consumption ( $F(1,231) = 15.781, p < 0.00$ ). Participant who assigned in conspicuous condition rate less on brand evaluation than participants in non-conspicuous consumption ( $M_{conspicuous} = 2.53, M_{non\_conspicuous} = 3.05, p < 0.00$ ). This pattern of results support also  $H_1$ .

Using moderation analysis with PROCESS in SPSS, Country level perceived towards conspicuous consumption moderate the relation between perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation. The independent variable was perceived conspicuous consumption, the moderator was perceived group norm, and the dependent variable was brand evaluation. The bootstrapping analysis (5,000 resample) show that the Country level group norm perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation. The moderation effects excluded zero (95% confidence interval [CI] = 0.3711, 1.3489). The results of analysis support the hypothesis: country level of perceived group norm towards conspicuous consumption moderate the relation between perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation

In study 2, our finding confirmed that the national culture as group norms moderates the effect of perceived conspicuous consumption on brand evaluation. Specifically, individuals with the high level group norm showed high brand evaluation score when they were facing perceived conspicuous consumption in line with our presume.

Chinese consumer perceived themselves as conspicuousness preference then the group norm is in favor of conspicuous consumption.

## 5. General Discussion, Limitation and Further Research

In the research, we attempt to answer the question of “Does other consumers’ conspicuous consuming behavior affects consumers’ brand evaluation?” In line with our hypothesizes, other consumers’ conspicuous consuming behavior affect consumers’ brand evaluation, perceived group norm (National level) moderate the association perceived conspicuous consumption with consumers’ attitude toward brand, and perceived conspicuous consumption triggers high power distance belief, consequently influence brand evaluation.

The result of analysis of study 1 provides evidence that perceived conspicuous consumption affects the attitude towards brand, Consumer’ s temporally PBD moderate the relation between perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation, in line with our assumption. When consumer investigate other’ s conspicuous consumption, the unfavorable emotion will appear, then the negative emotion negatively affect consumers’ brand evaluate behavior. Specifically, the perceived conspicuous consumption (vs. non-conspicuous consumption) trigger high power distance temporal, then sharpening consumers’ brand related evaluation behavior. However, the hypothesis 2-1 does not confirmed. For test hypothesis 2-2, we conducted the additional

experiment which measure group norms level across nations. National level group norm moderates the effect of perceived conspicuous consumption on brand evaluation were confirmed in the following experiment. Specifically, individuals with the high level group norm (Chinses vs. low level group norm in national level) showed high brand evaluation score when they were facing perceived conspicuous consumption in line with our presumption. Chinese consumer perceived themselves as conspicuousness preference then the group norm is in favor of conspicuous consumption.

Several limitations can be identified from the current research. First, the experimental data cannot support our hypothesis 2. We should carefully examine the perceived group norms scale and improve the measurement. Rimal and Real(2003) addressed the “injunctive norms” in the research of influence of perceived norms on behaviors. In this research, the injunctive norms measured in the dimension of social approval, benefits to oneself, benefits to others, similarity and aspiration. Based on the Rimal and Real’s research, the perceived group norms should be measured using a appropriate scales. Although we did not confirm the moderator effect of perceived group norms in individual level, the analytical result reveals the direction. Therefore, we can prove “perceived group norm towards conspicuous consumption moderate the relation between perceived conspicuous consumption and brand evaluation” by exact measurement scale. Second, the additional experiment for robustness of causality. For the robustness, we should employ variety method for measuring the power distance belief, conspicuous consumption manipulation and

brand evaluation. In therms of brand evaluation, Labroo and Lee(2006) directly ask the respondents whether they like the product or not and its effect on their mood. Third, self-brand connection (Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2013), self-control, should be examined as potential moderator and mediation.

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## 타인의 과시소비가 브랜드 평가에 미치는 영향 : 권력거리신념의 매개효과 중심으로

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### 요약

과시소비에 관한 연구는 많이 진행되어 왔지만, 소비자가 지각한 타인의 과시소비의 부정적인 감정에 대한 연구는 많지 않다. 본 연구에서는 타인의 과시 소비가 소비자의 브랜드 평가에 미치는 부정적인 영향을 검증하는 것을 목적으로 실험을 진행하였다. 본 연구에서는 두개의 실험을 통하여, 지각한 과시 소비는 소비자의 브랜드 평가에 부정적인 영향을 끼친다는 것을 밝혀냈다. 타인의 과시 소비는 임시적으로 소비자의 권력거리신념에 영향을 미치며 이러한 영향은 궁극적으로 소비자의 브랜드평가에 영향을 미친다. 즉 소비자의 권력거리신념은 타인의 과시소비와 브랜드평가의 관계를 매개한다. 개인 수준의 집단 규범은 타인의 과시 소비와 브랜드 평가에 대한 조절효과를 밝히지 못했지만, 국가차원의 집단규범은 타인의 과시소비와 브랜드평가의 관계를 조절하는 것을 검증하였다.

*표제어: 과시소비, 권력거리신념, 브랜드평가, 집단규범, 조절효과*

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