



Exploring the Motivations of Foreign Tourists Visiting Songkhla Province in Preparation for Hosting the 2025 SEA Games

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative study investigated the motivations of foreign tourists visiting Songkhla Province, Thailand, in the context of the province's preparations to host the 33rd Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in 2025. Three objectives guided the research: (1) to examine the push and pull motivations of foreign tourists visiting Songkhla Province; (2) to compare tourist motivations across personal characteristics; and (3) to provide strategic guidelines for public and private sectors to leverage tourism for the SEA Games. Data were collected from 400 foreign tourists using a structured questionnaire, with multi-stage sampling comprising purposive and convenience sampling. Descriptive statistics (percentage, mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (independent samples t-test and one-way ANOVA F-test) were employed at a significance level of .05 using SPSS. Results revealed that overall motivation was at a high level ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.68$), with pull factors ($M = 3.66$) marginally exceeding push factors ($M = 3.64$). The dominant push factors were escape from monotony, novelty-seeking, and social interaction. The leading pull factors were scenic beauty, historical significance, and tourism activities. Nationality was the only personal characteristic that significantly influenced pull factor motivations ($p < .05$). Findings suggest that destination managers should diversify experiential offerings, enhance cultural participation programs, and improve physical infrastructure to maximize the SEA Games tourism legacy.

Keywords: tourist motivation, push-pull theory, sports tourism, SEA Games, Songkhla Province, destination management

1. INTRODUCTION

Sports tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry, generating substantial economic returns and facilitating cross-cultural interaction (Hinch & Higham, 2011). Unlike conventional leisure tourism, sports tourism is multidimensional, encompassing travel for event spectatorship, active sport participation, and sport-themed heritage visits (Gibson, 1998). Globally, sports tourists are reported to spend three to four times more than general visitors, making them a high-value market segment (Weed & Bull, 2009). The International Olympic Committee and regional multi-sport events such as the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games have been shown to catalyse destination branding, infrastructure investment, and long-term visitor growth (Kim & Morrison, 2005).

The SEA Games, the region's foremost multi-sport event, is held biennially and rotates among the ten ASEAN member states. Since its inception in 1959, the event has served as a platform for regional solidarity and human capital development in sport (Brownell, 2012). The 33rd SEA Games is scheduled to be hosted by Thailand in 2025, with Bangkok, Chonburi, and Songkhla Province designated as co-host venues. This arrangement positions Songkhla — a historically and culturally rich destination in southern Thailand — for significant exposure to an international audience.

Songkhla Province, strategically situated on the Thai-Malaysian border, functions as the primary tourism gateway of southern Thailand. The province encompasses diverse natural attractions (Hat Samila beach, Ko Yo island, and Songkhla Lake) and tangible cultural heritage (Songkhla Old Town), which collectively attract both domestic and international visitors (Theeradamrongsak et al., 2022). The provincial government's initiative to brand Songkhla as a *Sports City* (Songkhla Sports City) underscores a strategic commitment to integrate sports with tourism development (Songkhla Public Relations Office, 2022). However, there exists a notable gap in empirical literature specifically addressing the motivational profile of *foreign* tourists visiting Songkhla, particularly in an event-tourism context.

Understanding tourist motivation is foundational to destination management, as it enables planners to align supply-side offerings with demand-side expectations (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977). The push–pull theoretical framework — the dominant paradigm in tourism motivation research — proposes that tourists are simultaneously driven by internal psychosocial forces (push factors) that generate travel desire and external destination attributes (pull factors) that channel destination choice (Uysal & Jurowski, 1994). Despite its conceptual simplicity, the framework has demonstrated robust explanatory power across diverse cultural and destination contexts (Bansal & Eiselt, 2004; Jang & Wu, 2006; Kim & Lee, 2002).

Against this backdrop, the present study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it generates a context-specific motivational profile of foreign tourists in Songkhla prior to a mega-event. Second, it tests whether demographic heterogeneity particularly nationality moderates motivational responses to destination attributes. Third, it translates empirical findings into actionable recommendations for stakeholders preparing for the SEA Games tourism legacy. These contributions are timely given that event-hosting research increasingly foregrounds *legacy planning* — the deliberate use of mega-events to achieve long-term tourism, economic, and social outcomes (Preuss, 2007; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Push–Pull Theory of Tourist Motivation

The conceptual foundation of this study rests on Dann's (1977) and Crompton's (1979) seminal formulations of tourist motivation, subsequently operationalised as the push–pull framework by Uysal and Jurowski (1994). Push factors are internally generated motivational forces — rooted in an individual's needs, desires, and emotional states — that create the impetus to travel. They are broadly consistent with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and Iso-Ahola's (1982) escape–seek paradigm, which posits that tourism behaviour is simultaneously motivated by a desire to escape everyday environments and to seek rewarding personal and interpersonal experiences.

Pull factors, by contrast, are destination-specific attributes perceived by tourists as capable of satisfying their motivationally generated travel needs (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996). These include natural scenery, historical and cultural resources, recreational facilities, entertainment, and accessibility (Kim & Lee, 2002). The interaction between push and pull factors is non-linear: while push factors explain *why* people travel, pull factors explain *where* they choose to travel (Jang & Wu, 2006). Empirically, Bansal and Eiselt (2004) demonstrated that the interplay of push and pull motivations significantly predicts destination satisfaction and revisit intentions, particularly in cultural heritage contexts.

Subsequent refinements have highlighted that push–pull motivations are not static but are moderated by individual characteristics including age, gender, education, income, nationality, and prior travel experience (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Mohammad & Som, 2010; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Cross-cultural research has consistently shown that nationality shapes how tourists interpret and respond to destination pull factors (Chen & Funk, 2010; Kozak, 2002), a finding particularly relevant to multi-national event tourism contexts.

2.2 Sports Tourism and Mega-Event Legacy

Sports tourism is defined by Gibson (1998, p. 49) as travel outside one's home community to participate in sport or to watch sport competitions, or to venerate attractions associated with sport. The domain has expanded to encompass event sports tourism (spectatorship at competitions), active sports tourism (participation), and nostalgia sports tourism (heritage visits). Mega-sporting events — defined by Roche (2000) as large-scale cultural events of dramatic character with a global media reach — occupy a distinctive niche within this taxonomy, generating concentrated visitor flows, extraordinary media exposure, and durable infrastructure investment.

Research on the SEA Games specifically is limited relative to studies of Olympic or FIFA World Cup tourism, yet available evidence indicates that the event generates measurable economic multiplier effects for host destinations in Southeast Asia (Brownell, 2012). Chalip and Leyns (2002) established that event tourism leverage — the deliberate use of a sporting event to maximise tourism outcomes — requires proactive destination marketing, experiential product development, and stakeholder coordination. Without such strategies, the tourism potential of mega-events is often sub-optimally realised, resulting in a *tourism event bubble* that generates temporary visitor peaks without generating a sustainable tourism legacy (Preuss, 2007).

In the ASEAN context, tourism authorities increasingly recognise the SEA Games as a vehicle for regional destination branding. Smith (2012) and Liu (2014) both argue that event-related destination images are formed during the event period and, if strategically managed, can reshape long-term destination perceptions and generate repeat visitation. For Songkhla, the 2025 SEA Games therefore represents a strategic window to reposition the province in international tourism markets beyond its traditional Malaysian visitor base.

2.3 Foreign Tourist Motivation in Southeast Asian Destinations

Research on tourist motivation in Southeast Asian destinations has expanded substantially since 2000, reflecting the region's growing global tourism significance. In the Thai context, Mohammad and Som (2010) found that Malaysian tourists visiting

Thailand were primarily motivated by pull factors related to cultural diversity and value-for-money, while push motivations centred on novelty-seeking and social bonding. Similarly, Chen and Funk (2010) documented that cultural distance between origin and destination modulates the relative salience of push versus pull motivations, with tourists from culturally proximate countries (such as Malaysia relative to Thailand) responding more strongly to heritage-specific pull factors.

Yoon and Uysal (2005) demonstrated in a structural equation modelling study that both push and pull motivations positively influence tourist satisfaction, which in turn predicts loyalty behaviour — a finding consistent with Kozak's (2002) cross-national comparison across multiple European destinations. Huang and Hsu (2009) extended this line of inquiry to generational differences, showing that younger travellers exhibit stronger novelty-seeking push motivations and are more responsive to activity-oriented pull factors — a profile consistent with the predominantly young, educated tourist cohort documented in Songkhla's visitor statistics.

Specifically in the Songkhla context, Theeradamongsak et al. (2022) identified novelty-seeking and cultural exploration as primary push motivations among Thai tourists visiting Songkhla Old Town, while scenic beauty and historical significance dominated pull factor rankings. These findings provide a contextual benchmark against which the present study's findings among foreign tourists can be compared and interpreted.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative research design, consistent with the dominant paradigm in push–pull motivation research (Bansal & Eiselt, 2004; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). A structured self-administered questionnaire was selected as the data collection instrument, given its efficiency in capturing large-sample motivation data across multiple demographic subgroups (Creswell, 2014).

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised all foreign tourists who visited Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province, during the study period, estimated at 2,536,214 arrivals (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2024). Sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence level with a $\pm 5\%$ margin of error, yielding a minimum requirement of 400 respondents. Participants were recruited via multi-stage sampling: purposive sampling was applied to ensure respondents were foreign nationals aged 18 or above who had visited at least one tourism attraction in Songkhla; convenience sampling was subsequently applied within eligible tourist zones.

3.3 Instrument

The questionnaire comprised two sections. Section 1 captured socio-demographic characteristics: gender, age, education level, occupation, average monthly income, and nationality (adapted from Pimolsompong, 2005, as cited in Katasilat, 2021). Section 2 measured push and pull motivation constructs using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), adapted from validated instruments employed in prior Thai tourism motivation studies (Phetchprakong et al., 2018;

Theeradamrongsak et al., 2022; Khongtong et al., 2021; Phumbophlap, 2018). Push factor sub-dimensions included: physical/physiological needs, ego/status, novelty-seeking, knowledge acquisition, social interaction, and escape from routine. Pull factor sub-dimensions encompassed: scenic beauty, historical and cultural significance, tourism activities and infrastructure, accessibility, and value for money.

Content validity was established through an Item–Objective Congruence (IOC) review by three academic experts in tourism and applied linguistics. Instrument reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all sub-scales demonstrating acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha > .70$), consistent with the threshold recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994).

3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were computed for all variables. Independent samples *t*-tests were used to compare motivation scores between two-category demographic variables (gender). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed for variables with three or more categories (age, education, occupation, income, nationality), with post-hoc pairwise comparisons conducted using Tukey's HSD procedure where significant omnibus *F*-values were detected. The statistical significance threshold was set at $\alpha = .05$. All analyses were performed using SPSS Statistics Version 26 (IBM Corp., 2019).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Respondent Profile

Table 1 summarises the socio-demographic characteristics of the 400 respondents. The sample was predominantly female ($n = 205$; 51.2%), aged 18–22 years ($n = 138$; 34.5%), and held a bachelor's degree or higher ($n = 270$; 67.5%). The largest occupational category was student/university student ($n = 157$; 39.3%), consistent with the predominantly young and educated profile. Average monthly income was below THB 15,000 ($n = 141$; 35.3%). Malaysian nationals constituted the largest nationality group ($n = 183$; 45.8%), reflecting Songkhla's geographic proximity to Malaysia and its longstanding position as a cross-border shopping and leisure destination (Theeradamrongsak et al., 2022).

Table 1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 400)

Characteristic	n	%	Dominant Category
Gender: Female	205	51.2	Female
Age: 18–22 years	138	34.5	18–22 years
Education: Bachelor's degree or above	270	67.5	Bachelor's+
Occupation: Student	157	39.3	Student
Monthly income: < THB 15,000	141	35.3	< THB 15,000
Nationality: Malaysian	183	45.8	Malaysian
Total	400	100.0	—

Note: Data collected via structured questionnaire. THB = Thai Baht.

4.2 Push Factor Motivations

Overall push factor motivation was rated at a high level ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.69$). Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for each push factor sub-dimension. The highest-ranked push dimension was *escape from monotony* ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.95$), followed by *novelty-seeking* ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.96$), and *social interaction and meeting new people* ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.93$). These three dimensions collectively reflect Iso-Ahola's (1982) escape–seek motivational duality, wherein tourists simultaneously disengage from proximal environments while actively seeking novel interpersonal and experiential rewards.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Push Factor Sub-Dimensions

Rank	Push Factor Dimension	M	SD	Level
1	Escape from monotony / routine	3.80	0.95	High
2	Novelty-seeking / new travel experiences	3.76	0.96	High
3	Social interaction / meeting new people	3.75	0.93	High
Overall Push Factors		3.64	0.69	High

Note: Scale: 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Level: ≥ 3.40 = High.

4.3 Pull Factor Motivations

Pull factor motivation was also high overall ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.72$), marginally exceeding push factor scores. The leading pull factor was *scenic beauty of the destination* ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.89$), followed by *historical and cultural significance* ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.78$), and *tourism activities and recreation* ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.80$).

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Pull Factor Sub-Dimensions

Rank	Pull Factor Dimension	M	SD	Level
1	Scenic beauty of the location	3.73	0.89	High
2	Historical and cultural significance	3.67	0.78	High
3	Tourism activities and recreation	3.58	0.80	High
Overall Pull Factors		3.66	0.72	High

Note: Scale: 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

4.4 Comparative Analysis by Personal Characteristics

Independent samples *t*-tests and one-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine whether motivation scores differed significantly by socio-demographic characteristics. At the aggregate (overall) motivation level, no significant differences were found across any demographic variable. However, meaningful differences emerged at the sub-dimensional level. Nationality exerted a statistically significant effect on overall pull factor scores ($F = \text{significant}$, $p < .05$), as well as on historical significance and tourism activity sub-dimensions. Gender significantly predicted scenic beauty pull ($p < .05$) and social interaction push ($p < .05$). Age and occupation significantly differentiated knowledge-seeking push and prestige push sub-dimensions. Monthly income influenced physical push and prestige push motivations. These patterns are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4 Significant Relationships Between Personal Characteristics and Motivation Sub-Dimensions

Motivation Sub-Dimension	Significant Personal Characteristic(s)	Statistical Test / α Level
Physical / physiological push	Monthly income	F-test, $p < .05$
Prestige / ego push	Age, Occupation, Monthly income*	F-test, $p < .05 / .01^*$
Knowledge-seeking push	Age, Occupation	F-test, $p < .05$
Social interaction push	Gender	t-test, $p < .05$
Overall pull factors	Nationality	F-test, $p < .05$
Scenic beauty pull	Gender	t-test, $p < .05$
Historical significance pull	Nationality	F-test, $p < .05$
Tourism activity pull	Occupation, Nationality	F-test, $p < .05$

Note: * $p < .01$ for monthly income on prestige push.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Push Factor Motivations: Escape, Novelty, and Sociality

The primacy of escape from monotony as a push motivation corroborates a well-established pattern in the tourism motivation literature. Crompton (1979) identified escape from the mundane environment as the foundational push motivation, arguing that the routinisation of work and study life creates a chronic psychological deficit that travel is uniquely positioned to redress. This mechanism is particularly salient among the study's dominant respondent cohort - young, educated students for whom academic stress and social comparison pressures intensify the escapist impulse (Huang & Hsu, 2009). The consistent replication of this finding across Thai destinations (Theeradarnongsak et al., 2022; Khongtong et al., 2021) suggests that it is a robust cross-contextual motivator, rather than a destination-specific artefact.

The high salience of novelty-seeking is theoretically consistent with Iso-Ahola's (1982) escape-seek paradigm and with exploratory behaviour theory (Berlyne, 1960), which posits that moderate degrees of environmental novelty neither excessively familiar nor overwhelmingly unfamiliar are intrinsically rewarding. For foreign tourists visiting Songkhla, the destination's distinctive blend of Malay, Chinese, and Thai cultural influences, combined with its relatively undiscovered status compared to more internationally marketed Thai destinations, may produce precisely this optimal novelty stimulus. This interpretation aligns with Smith's (2012) argument that secondary destinations adjacent to mega-events benefit disproportionately from novelty-seeking tourist segments who use the event as a pretext for broader regional exploration.

5.2 Pull Factor Motivations: Heritage, Scenery, and Activity

The dominance of scenic beauty and historical significance as pull factors reflects Songkhla's comparative advantage in natural and cultural heritage assets. Ko Yo island, Hat Samila beach, and Songkhla Old Town collectively offer an aesthetically and historically rich landscape that aligns well with the pull factor profile of Malaysian tourists, who constitute the largest visitor nationality. Chen and Funk (2010)

demonstrated that cultural proximity between origin and destination amplifies the salience of heritage pull factors, as culturally informed tourists are better equipped to decode and appreciate destination symbolism. The significant effect of nationality on historical significance and tourism activity pull factors (Table 4) empirically supports this cultural proximity hypothesis.

The relatively lower ranking of tourism activities compared to scenic and historical factors suggests a potential gap in Songkhla's activity offering that destination managers should address particularly given the active sports tourism context of the SEA Games. Weed and Bull (2009) contend that sports tourists require a critical mass of participatory and spectator activity options to sustain motivation beyond the core event, and that destinations which fail to develop complementary activity portfolios risk losing event tourists after the competition period. The development of water sports, cultural workshops, and guided heritage trails as recommended in Section 6 directly addresses this gap.

5.3 Nationality as a Motivational Moderator

The finding that nationality was the only demographic variable to significantly influence overall pull factor motivation is consistent with cross-national motivation research (Kozak, 2002; Mohammad & Som, 2010) and has important managerial implications. Segmented destination marketing crafting distinct messaging and experience packages for Malaysian, Indonesian, Singaporean, and other nationality markets — is more likely to be effective than one-size-fits-all approaches. This aligns with Liu's (2014) recommendation that mega-event host destinations develop *nationality-sensitive tourism leverage strategies* that address the heterogeneous motivational profiles of multi-national visitor flows.

6. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SEA GAMES PREPARATION

Drawing on the empirical findings and grounded in event-tourism leverage theory (Chalip & Leyns, 2002; Preuss, 2007), the following recommendations are proposed for public and private sector stakeholders preparing Songkhla for the 2025 SEA Games.

6.1 Diversify and Innovate Experiential Tourism Products

To address the high novelty-seeking push motivation and moderate activity pull scores, destination managers should develop immersive cultural experience products. Specific initiatives could include: (a) hands-on workshops in Ko Yo traditional weaving (*Pha Kho Yo*) and local cuisine preparation (e.g., Khai Krob, Tao Khua, Hat Yai fried chicken); (b) guided evening cultural walking tours through Songkhla Old Town's multicultural architectural heritage; and (c) creative arts and crafts pop-up events co-located with SEA Games venues. These products respond directly to the escape–seek motivation profile documented in this study and are consistent with Ritchie and Crouch's (2003) framework of destination competitiveness through experiential differentiation.

6.2 Upgrade Physical Infrastructure and Iconic Landmarks

The scenic beauty pull factor's top ranking underscores the importance of maintaining and enhancing Songkhla's visual landscape. Priority infrastructure improvements should include: (a) renovation of Ko Ngu–Ko Maew island facilities

(jetty, seating, sanitation); (b) restoration and repainting of the Naga serpent sculpture at Khao Kho Hong, a regionally significant landmark; (c) upgrading of the Khao Kho Hong cable car to international safety and service standards; and (d) development of waterfront promenades along Hat Samila to enhance scenic accessibility. Preuss (2007) notes that physical infrastructure improvements catalysed by mega-events constitute the most durable component of event legacy when aligned with destination brand values.

6.3 Develop Heritage Interpretation and Cultural Tourism

Given the significance of historical pull factors — particularly among Malaysian visitors — investment in heritage interpretation infrastructure is warranted. Targeted development should include: (a) multilingual interpretive signage and QR code audio guides at key heritage sites (Wat Khao Kao Saen, Ko Yo community, Songkhla Old Railway Station, Wat Chue Chang, Wat Khok Saman Khun); (b) trained cultural guides proficient in English, Malay, and Mandarin; and (c) storytelling-format digital content optimised for social media sharing to amplify organic destination awareness. These measures align with Smith's (2012) argument that heritage interpretation transforms passive heritage viewing into active meaning-making, deepening tourist engagement and loyalty.

6.4 Expand Water Sports and Marine Recreation

To capitalise on Songkhla's extensive coastal geography and raise the activity pull factor to a level commensurate with its scenic and historical assets, investment in marine recreation is recommended: (a) banana boat, windsurfing, and jet-ski operations at Hat Samila and adjacent beaches; (b) an annual water sports festival event timed to coincide with the SEA Games period to create synergistic promotion; and (c) certification partnerships with international water sports governing bodies to ensure safety standards and international recognition. Hinch and Higham (2011) demonstrate that active sport participation opportunities significantly increase per-visitor expenditure and length of stay.

6.5 Develop Nationality-Specific Marketing Strategies

Given the statistically significant effect of nationality on pull factor motivation, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) should develop segmented international marketing campaigns. For Malaysian visitors — the dominant foreign tourist segment campaigns emphasizing cultural heritage and gastronomy are likely to be most effective. For visitors from more distant source markets (e.g., Europe, East Asia), campaigns emphasizing natural scenery, adventure activities, and the SEA Games as a cultural spectacle may generate stronger motivation responses. Digital marketing platforms, influencer partnerships, and cross-border travel packages with Malaysian tourism authorities represent cost-effective channels for implementing this segmentation strategy (Liu, 2014; Mohammad & Som, 2010).

7. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the motivations of 400 foreign tourists visiting Songkhla Province in the context of the 2025 SEA Games. Applying push–pull motivation theory (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977; Uysal & Jurowski, 1994), the study found that both push and pull factors were rated at a high level, with escape from monotony, novelty-seeking, and social interaction leading push dimensions, and scenic

beauty, historical significance, and tourism activities leading pull dimensions. Nationality was identified as the primary demographic moderator of pull factor motivation, with significant effects on historical significance and tourism activity sub-dimensions.

These findings carry substantive implications for event tourism leverage planning. The 2025 SEA Games offers Songkhla Province a strategic window to reposition itself as a multidimensional international destination beyond its established cross-border shopping market. Realizing this potential requires proactive investment in experiential product diversification, heritage interpretation, marine recreation development, and nationality-sensitive marketing — initiatives that align the destination's current push–pull motivation profile with the activity and novelty demands of contemporary sports tourists (Hinch & Higham, 2011; Weed & Bull, 2009).

Future research should extend this study in several directions: (a) longitudinal designs tracking motivational changes before, during, and after the SEA Games; (b) structural equation modelling examining causal pathways from motivation through satisfaction to revisit intention; (c) qualitative enquiry capturing the lived experiences of event tourists; and (d) comparative studies examining how Songkhla's motivational profile differs from Bangkok and Chonburi, the other SEA Games co-host venues. Such research would enrich both the theoretical and practical dimensions of event tourism legacy scholarship in Southeast Asia.

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