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Research Insights

Interactional Variation Online

Arts and Humanities Research Council

IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

About

Virtual meeting room platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams are a ubiquitous component of modern workplace interaction.

The uptake of these platforms was accelerated by the necessity to work from home for many during the COVID pandemic leading to a widespread adoption of virtual and hybrid meetings as a primary means of communicating with colleagues.

Over the past three years, members of the Interactional Variation Online (IVO) project team have sought to examine both verbal and non-verbal communication (i.e. gestures, patterns of gaze direction etc.) in a collection of recorded virtual meetings (known to linguists as a '**corpus**'), to identify typical features of such meetings.

This 'research insights' report outlines some of the key findings from this project, drawing on real-life examples from our data to illustrate the points made. The report outlines, for example, how effective time keeping, chairing and conflict management can be managed in virtual meetings, as well as providing tips on how to ensure meetings are inclusive and accessible to all. These research insights can be used to inform best practice in virtual meeting facilitation and communication in your own professional context.

Questions

There are numerous questions and topics that can be explored when examining online meetings. Some of the topics we sought to explore in the IVO project include:

- How do meetings open and close now?
- What about role, power semantics, gender, ethnicity? Do these variable impact on who speaks and for how long?
- Are meetings more transactional (down to the business of the meeting) and less relational (who has COVID? How was your holiday? Love your top!

Survey insights

Between December 2021 and February 2022, we carried out a survey to gain a baseline understanding of people's general working behaviours, and their perceptions of working online during COVID. 371 responses were received from individuals working in a range of vocations including academic, pharmaceuticals, finance, real estate, IT, media, the creative arts, medicine and for charitable organisations.

What works well online?

I can chat to other attendees without disturbing the teacher

reaching the whole team regardless of their location

I can eat/drink/knit during the sessions, which helps me to stay focused

Reaching the whole team regardless of their location

What <u>doesn't</u> work so well online?

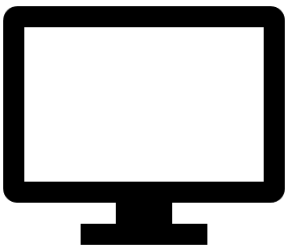
You can't pick up on the mood music of the room

Less opportunity to get acquainted with new colleagues

Difficult to build team spirit

Slow internet can lead to confusion if sound is continually cutting out

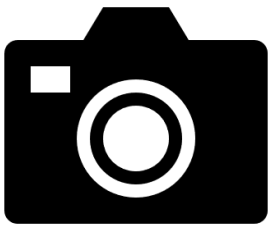
Technology usage: we found that our respondents have a high level of engagement with hardware as well as platform features (e.g. virtual backgrounds) and interactive features (e.g. hand up icon, chat box). This shows that there is a high level of communication in virtual meetings outside of just what is spoken.



86% use virtual backgrounds

82% use the chat box

84% use reactions



76% turn on their cameras

79% turn their mic on

Face-to-face or online? Only 24% of respondents were in favour of social events online, but more are happy with other meetings to be held online (e.g. 35% for whole organisation meetings). Respondents also like the efficiency of online meetings, but there is a strong sense of the loss of social interaction that is a feature of face-to-face meetings.

Meeting attendance: When asked how many people normally attend different meeting types, results show that attendance is high at whole organisation meetings and seminars, but drops considerably for cross-department meetings, training sessions and socials with team meetings having the lowest attendance, showing that teams are often comprised of around 10 people.

Data: the IVO corpus

The IVO project team used insights from the survey to design our dataset (corpus) for the project, the analysis of which has provided evidence for the insights presented in this report. The IVO corpus is an English-language dataset which includes meetings of 4-21 people that occur fully online or in hybrid mode, across the following professional sectors:

Organisation Type	Type of Meeting
Public Sector	Routine City Council Meeting
Educational Institution	University Conference Planning Meeting
Non-Government Organisation	Arts NGO Project Team Meeting

All recordings were transcribed and specific forms of gestures (e.g. head nods, smiles) were annotated in the data (using the free online analysis tool, ELAN) to allow for the examination of relationships between patterns of language and forms of non-verbal behaviour, and how they collectively contribute to meaning, and effective communication, in virtual meetings. The corpus includes around 15 hours of recordings, amounting to over 150,000 words in total.

Chairing meetings

In any well-managed meeting, participation is typically channelled via a chair whose job it is to orchestrate the meeting, set the tone, follow established workplace cultures or institutional protocols, and be attentive to overall participation.

This role of the chair becomes even The role of the chair becomes more important in virtual meetings where many of the subtle non-verbal signals we subconsciously rely on when face-to-face (e.g. gaze direction, bodily movement) may be absent, missed or difficult to read, because of the physical limitations of the context or difficulties with technology.

In the virtual context, you can do this by using the following strategies:

- provide **clear and explicit signalling** of meeting stages
- provide clear reference to agenda items
- **nominate** participants to speak
- **monitor** for / read requests to speak (from the chat etc.)
- **manage** interruptions
- **open the floor** for participants to speak
- **remind** participants of the meeting protocols

- respectfully **acknowledge** participation of attendees
- **give feedback** relating participants' use of cameras and/or microphones

Chairs can use these strategies in many types of meetings, big and small, formal and informal.

For example, while participants are joining the virtual meeting room, and before getting down to the business transactions of the meeting, the chair **might set the tone** with informal chat or refer to the technology: '*okay I'm just waiting for people to join'*, '*so we'll start once we start recording'*. The chair will typically mark the start of the meeting with a '*Right, we'll get started if everyone's ok with that'* and an indication of what's to come '*Right, this meeting won't take too long …'*, followed by explicit reference to an agenda '*I've 2 items under chairperson's business', we're going to move item 10 up'*.

The chair might mark swift and efficient progress through an agenda with an explicit reference to what is coming up, while pointing out pressures of time to **ensure everyone is heard**. It is the chair's job to respectfully acknowledge contributions. The constraints of the virtual context means that participants' names are frequently used as a means of nominating the next speaker, in the absence of body language and gaze.

Openings & closings

Virtual meetings are often set up by a meeting convenor. Depending on how the meeting has been set up, participants follow a link and either enter a virtual meeting room directly or wait in a virtual waiting room until they are admitted. Once in the (virtual) 'room', there's often a settling-in phase prior to the meeting start as participants are still joining. What happens in this phase depends on the institutional culture (ways of working), the number of attendees and their roles and relationships. This pre-meeting phase might include, for example, work-related talk, relational small talk, or technology-related talk, to do with the meeting set-up, functionality of cameras, microphones, etc. or silence.

Silence before the meeting begins is much more common in virtual contexts than in face-to-face: it is more difficult to have informal spontaneous chat in virtual contexts. As with face-to-face meetings there is typically an identifiable transition from the settling-in phase which marks the official start of the meeting, usually indicated by the chair, for example by saying:

Right, okay

Good morning everyone

Can everyone hear me?

Okay, shall we start

At this point, depending on the type and culture of the meeting, cameras might be on, and participants' attention and gaze turned towards the screen to show they are attending to what is being said. The chair (typically) signals that the meeting is coming to a close. This phase is identifiable through a series of pre-closing remarks, a type of winding down, for example:

Okay, great, that's been really productive

Does anyone have anything else before we finish up?

The chair might continue in 'wrapping-up mode', looking ahead, summarising actions and plans, ending with thanks and good wishes, interweaving of the relational with the transactional. This is followed by a series of goodbyes from other participants to the whole group (*bye guys, bye everybody*) with accompanying waves and smiles. The actual ending of the meeting takes place after this, typically when the meeting convener stops the recording or leaves the meeting. Unlike in face-to face-contexts where participants can gradually withdraw from a meeting space, chatting as they go, the actual closing of the meeting can be quite abrupt.

Time keeping

A fundamental role of the meeting chair is to ensure a meeting goes according to the plan, in this case that it follows the agenda. Most meetings, be they face-to-face or online, are agenda driven and an integral part of this is that time is managed and allotted effectively. The chair frequently has the task of ensuring that the meeting stays on schedule, starts, progresses, and finishes within the allotted time. Meeting participants often have comments to make, information to give, and updates on progress to provide. The chair **plans, monitors and regulates** the time spent on turns, agenda items and progress updates. If an item has been scheduled to last five minutes (for example) the chair holds sole responsibility for guaranteeing that the speaker does not exceed this. In the virtual meeting this is done through examples such as:

Everyone has five minutes

We have three minutes for motions

You have thirty seconds left

Participants take a turn when nominated by the chair or by an item on the agenda. The agenda is typically distributed before the meeting and participants typically have access to this throughout the meeting. This is evident in statements such as:

Is that item three?

I don't see that on the agenda

Where is this item on the agenda?

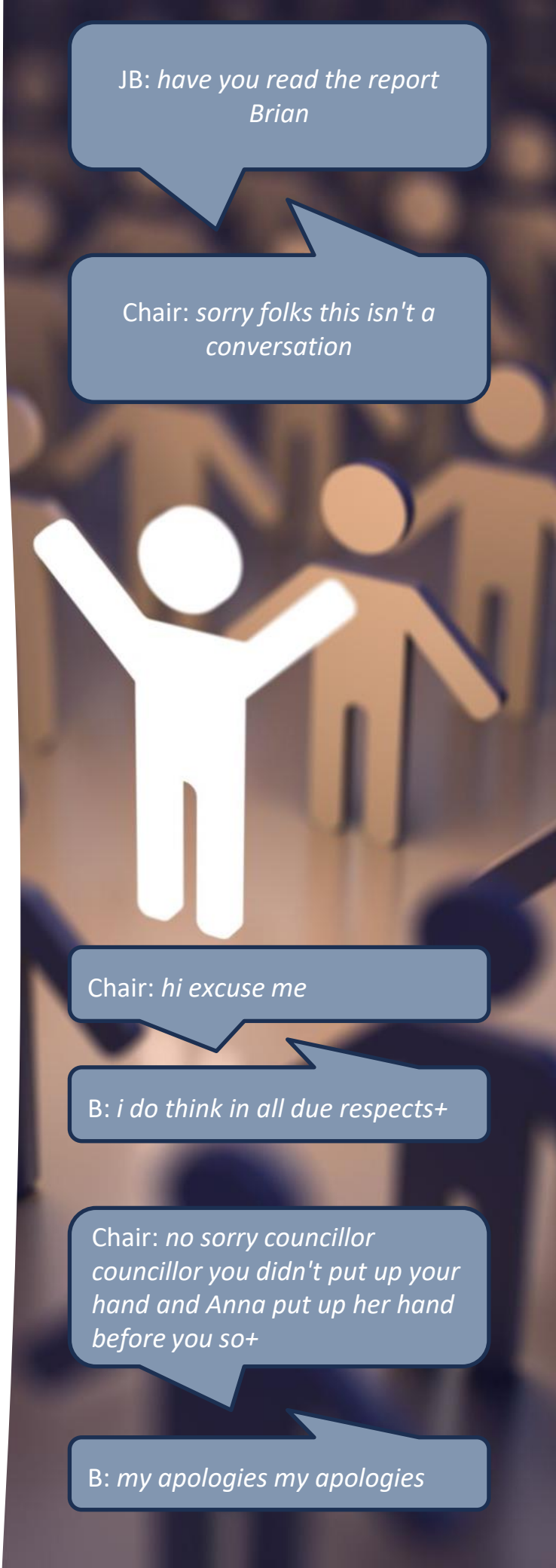
The role of the chair in all meetings is to explicitly maintain the order of the meeting. The chair controls the order of turns ensuring that time constraints are adhered to and reminds speakers of how much time they have for a turn. Effective time keeping is seen by many participants as a mark of efficiency in that their time is respected by the chair and even the success of a meeting guaranteeing that all objectives are met.

Conflict

It's not unusual for meeting attendees to have conflicting opinions, but it's the chair's responsibility **to value the contributions** of all participants and encourage them to behave respectfully towards each other, while adhering to the meeting's agenda and protocols. The chair may need to recognise and contain potential conflict before it escalates while also allowing participants to have their say.

In virtual meeting contexts, the full range of non-verbal clues are not available to participants allocating turns requires management from the chair. The use of raised hands (either through the raised hand icon or by actually raising a hand) becomes particularly important as overlapping talk, interruptions and speaking 'out of turn', is generally not welcome.

In these instances, the chair may step in to **keep the meeting on track**. The examples to the right show how a meeting's chair respectfully directs two participants to keep to the meeting's 'rules', by not speaking when not given the floor. The chair softens the request by using 'sorry' and 'folks' while reminding the participants they are in a meeting and can't speak to each other as if they are in a conversation. When the interaction continues the chair steps in again with a polite 'excuse me', then closes down the speaker with a reminder of requesting a turn through raising a hand.



Being inclusive

The challenge of creating a work environment that is inclusive is compounded by the restrictions imposed by working virtually. It can be difficult to read subtle cues that signify a person's willingness or intention to speak up in virtual meetings.

Research has found that **new and junior members** of organisations may find it even more difficult to speak up in virtual meetings and so their contribution remains absent. It is therefore important to try to ensure that all members have an opportunity to speak up.

This can be achieved in a number of ways:

1. Rather than opening the floor for anybody to contribute, it may be better to **directly address participants** to give them the opportunity to contribute. This can be achieved in an 'around the house' style address of each participant in a meeting. This may be time-consuming but will allow reluctant speakers to be heard.

2. **Silence** can create the space for people to speak, but we've found that long silences are most often broken by more senior members of a meetings. 4-6 second silences can be used to offer the floor for contributions, but more than 6 will make junior colleagues even more reluctant to speak up.

3. **Build in social time**. The opportunity to engage in small talk with colleagues enables people to express their personalities and can increase the likelihood of them making valuable contributions in more formal contexts. This can be achieved through allocating time in meetings to social talk or having meetings that have a social focus.

4. **Use technology**. While some participants may be reluctant to speak up, especially in larger groups, the features of virtual meeting platforms such as the chat box may be useful tools for contributions to be made. Chairs can remind participants to contribute through the chat box function and ensure they attend to chat box contributions throughout the meeting.

Active participation

Depending on the type of meeting, number of attendees and the chair, it may seem difficult to actively participate in a virtual meeting. Your attendance at a meeting is a form of **active participation**. However, the more you are seen to contribute to a meeting, the more active you are in the eyes of other participants.

Turning on your microphone and camera may display more active participation. Asking questions, contributing agenda items and reacting to others' contributions are all ways of actively participating in virtual meetings. In addition, the functions of virtual meeting platforms provide various ways of participating that are absent in face-to-face meetings.

While **speaking up** is the most obvious form of contribution to a meeting, active participation in virtual meetings comes in many forms. Sometimes, non-speaking forms of participation can be preferable as they avoid interrupting the speaker. You can be an active participant in virtual meetings in a number of ways without speaking.

Types of active participation:

- **<u>Gesture</u>:** gestures such as head nods are very common in virtual meetings as they show engagement without interrupting a speaker. Raising a hand to show that you wish to contribute to the meeting is also common.

- **<u>Use of the chat function</u>:** the chat tool in virtual meetings provides a written means of contribution that is both visible to everybody in the meeting and permanent for the duration of the meeting. This is especially useful for asking questions that can be answered when it suits the target of the question without interrupting the flow of the meeting. Just be careful that you don't message everyone if you only intend to message one person.

- **<u>Use of virtual gestures</u>:** temporary virtual gestures (e.g. the applause icon, the thumbs up icon) can be used to show engagement. Some of these stay visible until retracted (e.g. the hand up icon). These virtual gestures are useful for showing the chair and other participants that you wish to contribute and avoid undue interruption.

Silence

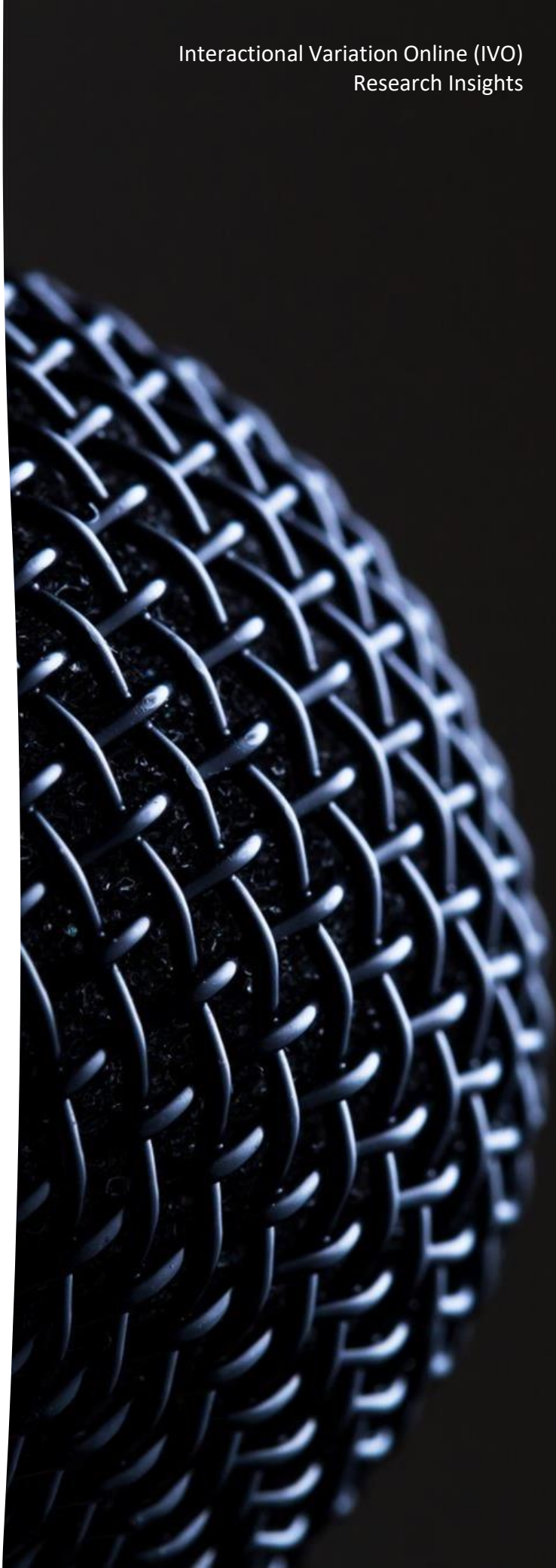
Silence is a **necessary and important part of communication** and has various functions in virtual meetings. Silence happens when:

- we need to form our thoughts
- there is a change of topic
- there is a transition to a different speaker
- we need to use technology such as sharing a screen
- when a microphone is accidentally on mute

Different organisations have different norms related to how to use and deal with silence. The length of silence can also be highly variable across meetings and organisations.

In one meeting we analysed, 14% of the meeting is made up of silence with one silence lasting 17 seconds. This might seem like a very long and potentially **awkward silence**, but it might be useful in giving participants the opportunity to speak.

There is a **balance to strike** between allowing enough time for participants to have ample opportunity to respond to and contribute items and not creating silences that are awkward or inefficient. If you work in a diverse workplace, it is worth noting that different cultures have different levels of **tolerance** towards silence. For example, while silence in conversation in English-speaking contexts tends to get awkward in about 4 seconds, it is twice that length in Japan.



Getting your point across

As it is more difficult to pick up on subtle cues from colleagues in virtual meetings than face-to-face ones, it can be challenging to efficiently and entirely convey a point. To successfully deliver your point in virtual meetings:

- **Use technology**: to help reinforce the point you are making, share your screen, share links in the chat function etc.
- **Be concise and prepared**: it can seem difficult to make a point fully without sufficient elaboration, but your colleagues may also appreciate a point delivered in a concise manner. Preparing your point in advance will help with this.
- **Direct speech towards one person**: with many people potentially visible on your screen, it can be challenging to decide where to look when making a point. We recommend directing your gaze and point towards one individual who you think will be receptive to your point.
- **Think about when to deliver your point**: if your point is not scheduled on an agenda, try to deliver your point at a relevant time in the meeting. Otherwise, participants may not be paying the right level of attention. If you add your point to an AOB, it may be more likely to appear in minutes and be more visible after the meeting. Avoid interrupting other speakers to make your point, this may lead to conflict and/or communication breakdown.

Find out more

For more details about the IVO project, associated project publications and project resources, visit the main website at www.ivohub.com

You can also follow us on X: @IVOhub

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