

Navigating Leadership Challenges and Conflict in the Digital Era: Pathways Towards Sustainable Development

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Abstract

In the digital age, organizations are experiencing rapid technological change, leading to intensified internal conflicts. These conflicts challenge traditional leadership approaches and pose significant risks to organizational performance and sustainability. This study aims to develop an integrated theoretical framework that connects digital leadership, conflict management, and organizational sustainability, addressing the complexity of managing conflict in digital environments. A systematic literature review was conducted to examine existing research and theories on conflict dynamics, leadership strategies, and sustainability practices in digital businesses. The study also identifies key research gaps, particularly the lack of integrated models that address all three dimensions. The study proposes a novel conceptual framework that shows how dynamic digital leadership can transform conflict management into a strategic tool for promoting sustainability. The framework emphasizes flexibility, adaptability, and proactive conflict resolution. This framework offers practical guidance for digital leaders to enhance conflict management and build sustainable organizational cultures. It also provides a foundation for future empirical research, encouraging mixed-methods approaches and exploration across diverse digital contexts. Additionally, the study suggests policy recommendations to support sustainable digital transformation in both public and private sectors.

Keywords: Digital leadership, conflict management, organizational sustainability, digital transformation

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Introduction

As technological advancements rapidly reshape industries in the digital age, organizational conflicts have become more prevalent, affecting both work performance and business stability (Choi & Kim, 2023; Garcia & Thomas, 2020). Adaptive leadership is recognized as a crucial factor in reducing conflict and promoting team collaboration (Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2021; Dinh & Lord, 2020). However, existing literature often treats leadership and conflict management as separate domains, lacking integrated models that reflect the complexity of digital organizations. Effective conflict management has been identified as essential for building sustainable and resilient organizations (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2020; Nguyen & Hall, 2021). However, few studies have critically examined the limitations of traditional conflict frameworks in volatile, technology-driven contexts. Research by Patel and Robinson (2024) reveals that creative conflict strategies enhance decision-making and innovation. At the same time, the ability to manage conflict is closely tied to adaptability in both leaders and organizations (Zhang & Deng, 2021; Kane et al., 2021). Despite these findings, prior work rarely discusses how adaptability and sustainability co-evolve through leadership in conflict situations. Sustainable leadership, which fosters organizational cultures that respond effectively to change, aligns with conflict management models supporting long-term growth (Serafeim, 2023; Jamali & Karam, 2021). Thus, there is a pressing theoretical need to integrate conflict management, adaptability, and sustainability into a cohesive leadership framework. This study addresses this gap by analyzing conflict patterns in digital businesses, exploring leadership's role in managing conflict, and proposing a dynamic leadership approach that aligns conflict resolution with sustainability goals.

Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the patterns and factors contributing to conflict in digital business environments and to analyze leadership's role in addressing these challenges. The specific objectives are as follows:

To investigate the nature and underlying causes of conflict within digital business environments.

To examine how leadership can effectively manage organizational conflict in alignment with long-term sustainability goals.

To develop strategic leadership concepts that support adaptability and decision-making in complex and rapidly changing digital contexts.

Research Gap

Although some studies address leadership or conflict management in specific dimensions, there is a lack of integration to systematically analyze the impact on sustainability goals. Additionally, there is insufficient focus on the role of digital technology in transforming organizational structures or leadership behaviors. Furthermore, there is a gap in research offering practical frameworks or tools for digital-age leaders facing rapidly changing environments. There is also a lack of a systemic connection between leadership, conflict management, and sustainability in an integrated manner. Moreover, no studies delve

deeply into the context of digital businesses or organizations undergoing technological transitions. Additionally, there is a lack of statistical models that can clearly explain the interrelationship of these factors, which limits their strategic application. This research aims to fill these gaps and create new knowledge aligned with the digital era's context.

Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual synthesis approach, aiming to integrate existing theoretical and empirical studies on leadership dynamics in the digital age. Although this is not an empirical study, a structured review process was applied to ensure academic rigor.

Research Design: The study is positioned as a conceptual/theoretical paper. Secondary data were drawn from peer-reviewed journals, books, and policy report, focusing on leadership, digital transformation, and sustainable change.

Literature Search and Selection: A systematic search strategy was used across Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar with keywords such as “digital leadership,” “adaptive leadership,” and “sustainable transformation.”

- Inclusion: Peer-reviewed studies related to leadership and digital change.
- Exclusion: Non-academic sources and studies before 2015 (except seminal works).

The initial search found 120 papers; 36 high-quality studies were selected after relevance screening and theoretical appraisal.

Synthesis Process: A thematic synthesis was performed, involving: (1) Mapping key concepts and leadership models. (2) Comparing perspectives on adaptive leadership in digital contexts. (3) Developing a conceptual framework that integrates leadership strategies, digital disruption, and sustainability.

Dynamic Leadership in the Digital Context

The ability of leaders to adapt flexibly to rapidly changing situations while leveraging digital technology to drive organizations in highly uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments (VUCA) is crucial. Uhl-Bien and Arena's (2020) research supports this concept through the "Adaptive Space" theory, which fosters organizational dynamics. Kane et al. (2021) highlight that digital leaders must possess both vision and the ability to manage big data. Zheng et al. (2023) and Sousa and Rocha (2022) emphasize the use of technology to foster a culture of learning and innovation. Similarly, Avolio et al. (2021) discuss the transformation of leadership in the digital era, which requires emotional intelligence and effective communication. Dinh and Lord (2020) confirm that dynamic leadership is central to managing complexity and change in digital organizational systems.

Dynamic leadership is a key concept that enables digital-age organizations to adapt and respond effectively to change. Leaders who are flexible and understand their context can devise strategies suited to complex

situations. Therefore, developing leadership skills is fundamental to the survival and growth of organizations. Modern leaders must drive innovation and create sustainable transformations.

Conflict Management Theory

Conflict management theories provide valuable frameworks for understanding and addressing conflicts within organizations, particularly in the digital age. These theories explore various strategies for resolving disagreements, including the role of leadership, technology, and communication in managing conflicts effectively. The table below summarizes key conflict management theories and strategies, highlighting their application in digital organizations and the importance of leadership in fostering collaboration and sustainability.

Table 1: Synthesize Conflict Management Theory

| Theory / Concept | Conflict Management Approach | Key Features / Application | Researchers |
|---|---|--|-------------------------|
| Integrative Conflict Management Theory | Focuses on finding mutual benefits through open communication | Promotes a highly collaborative organizational culture | Zhang & Deng (2021) |
| Emotion Regulation in Conflict Management | Uses emotion regulation to control reactions and reduce tension | Suitable for teams with cultural diversity | Liu et al. (2022) |
| Digital Conflict Mediation | Utilizes technology and online platforms to resolve conflicts | Supports remote work environments | Choi & Kim (2023) |
| Collaborative Leadership in Conflict Situations | Leaders use participation and open communication to manage conflict | Builds trust within the organization | Garcia & Thomas (2020) |
| Cultural Intelligence and Conflict Resolution | Uses cultural intelligence to reduce misunderstandings and conflict | Ideal for international and cross-cultural organizations | Nguyen & Hall (2021) |
| Restorative Conflict Resolution | Focuses on restoring relationships after conflict through listening and empathy | Emphasizes healing, not just problem-solving | Patel & Robinson (2024) |

Source: Adapted and illustrated by the author (Prayoonvong, 2025).

Driving Organizational Sustainability with the ESG and Triple Bottom Line Models

The adoption of the ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) model in organizational management has gained increasing global attention, focusing on business growth alongside social and environmental responsibility. Research by Friede et al. (2020) and Whelan & Fink (2021) confirms that ESG is positively correlated with long-term organizational performance. In contrast, Khan et al. (2022) highlight

that companies prioritizing ESG are better able to adapt to risks. Additionally, Krueger et al. (2021) and Serafeim (2023) suggest that ESG creates value for stakeholders and enhances the organization's sustainable image.

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) model, which encompasses economic, social, and environmental dimensions, has become a crucial approach for sustainable organizational development. Elkington (2020) proposed a "reboot" of the TBL concept to align with the challenges of the modern era, while Jamali and Karam (2021) emphasize the application of TBL in organizational strategies to achieve social sustainability. Malik et al. (2022) confirm that TBL impacts long-term competitive advantage, while Lim and Lee (2023) and García-Sánchez et al. (2020) show that TBL strengthens stakeholder responsibility and drives long-term business value.

The integration of the ESG and Triple Bottom Line (TBL) models serves as a vital strategy for modern organizations to foster sustainability across business, social, and environmental dimensions. García-Sánchez et al. (2020) support that integrated reporting based on TBL influences organizational culture, while Elkington (2020) advocates for adapting TBL to address new challenges. Regarding ESG, Khan et al. (2022) and Friede et al. (2020) affirm the positive relationship between ESG practices and financial performance. Meanwhile, Jamali & Karam (2021) and Lim & Lee (2023) emphasize that stakeholder engagement and ESG disclosure are key drivers of sustainable development in contemporary organizations.



Figure 1: The Power of Balanced Organizational Sustainability

Source: Created by the author (Prayoonvong, 2025)

The integration of ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) and TBL (Triple Bottom Line) is an approach that helps organizations achieve a balance between profitability, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability. Access to data and stakeholder engagement are key elements for success. Organizations adopting this approach will be better equipped to adapt to challenges and enhance long-term external trust.

Conflict Management in Digital Organizations

Conflict management in digital organizations is essential for maintaining productivity and collaboration in a fast-evolving technological landscape, using technology and leadership strategies to resolve conflicts and ensure sustainability.

Conflict in Virtual and Cross-Cultural Work Environments

The increasing challenges in the digital age, particularly when organizations operate in a distributed manner and rely on remote communication technologies, have highlighted the significance of managing conflict effectively. Zakaria et al. (2021) emphasize that cultural differences can lead to misinterpretations in communication, while Shonk (2022) suggests conflict management approaches that involve understanding cultural contexts and fostering creative communication. Kim and McLean (2020) argue that relationships between leaders and team members in virtual environments rely on trust and role clarity. Furthermore, Wang et al. (2023) highlight that adaptive leadership can alleviate tension arising from cultural differences. Liu et al. (2022) support the idea that cross-cultural training enhances effective collaboration in culturally diverse teams.

Effective Conflict Management Strategies in the Technological Era

In the contemporary era, where technology plays a significant role in business operations and organizational communication, conflicts between individuals or departments often arise from differences in perspectives, the information received, or the variety of communication channels. Therefore, conflict management strategies need to be adapted to align with the context of the digital world, particularly by using technology as a tool to prevent, manage, and reduce the severity of conflicts. Effective strategies in this era include open communication through digital platforms, the use of AI systems to analyze emotions or opinions, virtual meetings with strict regulations, and real-time feedback systems to reduce misunderstandings. Lee et al. (2021) state that using internal communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Slack can reduce misunderstandings, which are a primary cause of conflicts, by up to 35%. Meanwhile, Chen and Zhang (2020) found that AI-based sentiment analysis can accurately predict potential conflicts in organizations. Additionally, Kumar (2022) highlights the importance of structured virtual meetings in reducing intense emotions during discussions. Therefore, conflict management in the technological age requires both human skills and effective digital tools, focusing on fostering mutual understanding, respecting differences, and engaging in creative communication based on accurate and transparent information.

Table 2: Conflict Management Strategies and Benefits in Digital Organizations

| Main Issue | Details | Researchers | Benefits |
|---|---|---|--|
| 1. Using Technology to Support Communication in Organizations | Utilizing digital platforms like Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Slack reduces information discrepancies and supports collaboration. | Lee, Kim, & Park (2021); Zakaria, Amelinckx, & Wilemon (2021) | Reduces misunderstandings and increases transparency in communication. |

| Main Issue | Details | Researchers | Benefits |
|--|---|--|--|
| 2. AI Data Analysis for Conflict Prevention | Using AI to analyze messages and emotions in organizations to identify potential conflict risks in advance. | Chen & Zhang (2020); Wang, Chen, & Huang (2023) | Enables quick problem prediction and prevention before escalation. |
| 3. Digital Leadership | Leaders must have the skills to use technology to manage teams in fast-changing digital environments. | Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge (2021); Uhl-Bien & Arena (2020) | Enhances conflict management capabilities under uncertainty. |
| 4. Building an Open and Flexible Organizational Culture | Promotes a culture that accepts diverse ideas and involvement through technology. | Nguyen, T. M., & Hall (2021); Jamali & Karam (2021) | Reduces bias and increases understanding of employee differences. |
| 5. Real-time Feedback and Evaluation Systems | Using technology to support real-time feedback to adjust behavior and reduce misunderstandings. | Kumar (2022); Zhang, H., & Deng (2021) | Resolves issues quickly and prevents the accumulation of conflict. |
| 6. Training in Soft Skills and Online Conflict Management | Developing emotional, negotiation, and conflict management skills through online courses. | Kim & McLean (2020); Malik, Qureshi, & Mahmood (2022) | Improves effective communication skills. |
| 7. Knowledge and Data Sharing Systems (Knowledge Management) | Using centralized databases that are accessible to everyone, reducing information discrepancies. | Sousa & Rocha (2022); Garcia & Thomas (2020) | Reduces confusion and stress from inconsistent information. |

Source: Adapted and illustrated by the author (Prayoonvong, 2025)

Conflict management in the technological era must emphasize the use of digital tools alongside the development of human skills. Transparent communication and data analysis effectively reduce misunderstandings. Moreover, leaders who are adaptable in the digital world play a crucial role in fostering collaboration within diverse teams.

The Role of Leaders as Mediators to Foster Collaboration

Leaders in the contemporary era play a crucial role as “mediators” who bridge diverse perspectives, attitudes, and interests within an organization to promote sustainable collaboration. Choi and Kim (2023) highlight that emotionally intelligent leaders can effectively reduce resistance within teams. Avolio, Kahai, and Dodge (2021) emphasize that digital leaders can leverage technology as a tool to build trust within their teams. Furthermore, Dinh and Lord (2020) suggest that adaptive leadership helps achieve

a more balanced approach to conflict management. Patel and Robinson (2024) focus on the leader's involvement in designing an organizational culture that fosters collaboration. Nguyen and Hall (2021) assert that leaders should continuously encourage two-way communication to prevent conflicts. Overall, leaders who can serve as coordinators with vision and contextual understanding are key to creating collaborative and efficient organizations.

The Relationship Between Leadership in Digital Businesses and Conflict Management for Sustainability

The relationship between leadership in digital businesses and conflict management is essential for fostering sustainability in rapidly evolving environments. Effective leadership strategies play a crucial role in resolving conflicts and promoting long-term organizational growth and adaptability.

Analyzing Conflict Management Strategies to Promote Organizational Sustainability.

Conflict management within organizations is a crucial strategy for fostering sustainability. Research by Choi and Kim (2023) found that leaders with strong conflict management skills help mitigate the impact of tension and create an environment that encourages collaboration (Nguyen & Hall, 2021). The use of technology in conflict management in digital organizations also enhances communication transparency (Kane et al., 2021). Furthermore, strategies focusing on negotiation and compromise contribute to building strong relationships and long-term sustainability (Sousa & Rocha, 2022). Creating an organizational culture that prioritizes sustainability through conflict management requires leadership support to foster cooperation among teams (Avolio et al., 2021). Additionally, the study by Khan et al. (2022) highlights the importance of viewing conflict as an opportunity for growth and innovation within organizations (Liu et al., 2022). Effectively managing conflicts can also contribute to sustainability across economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Serafeim, 2023). Leadership-supported conflict management helps build resilience and adaptability in a rapidly changing world (Zheng et al., 2023). Sustainable conflict management strategies must also promote diversity and embrace differences (Malik et al., 2022). Moreover, building respectful relationships and connecting team members can reduce conflicts and improve work efficiency (Garcia & Thomas, 2020).

Conflict management in organizations is essential for fostering sustainability with leadership support. Leaders can use technology and strategies focusing on negotiation and compromise to reduce tension and promote collaboration. Building a sustainable organizational culture that embraces differences allows organizations to grow sustainably in the long term. Leaders with conflict management skills play a vital role in developing organizations that can adapt and compete in a rapidly changing world.

Developing Conflict Management and Sustainability Approaches in Digital Businesses

Developing conflict management and sustainability approaches in digital businesses is crucial in an era of rapid technological change (Nguyen & Hall, 2021). Effective conflict management can foster long-term sustainability, particularly through the use of digital technology in communication and negotiation

(Kane et al., 2021). Researchers such as Avolio et al. (2021) have shown that leaders in digital businesses who can leverage digital tools to manage conflicts effectively help reduce tension and promote collaboration within the organization (Sousa & Rocha, 2022). Furthermore, Patel and Robinson (2024) confirm that strategies focusing on compromise and considering multiple perspectives from all parties help mitigate conflicts and create an environment conducive to sustainable business development. Using technology to manage conflict also enhances communication transparency among team members in digital organizations (Zhang & Deng, 2021), especially when developing systems for data management and performance tracking through technology (Liu et al., 2022). These systems enable leaders to make quick decisions with accurate data to manage conflicts effectively (Zheng et al., 2023). At the same time, sustainability in digital businesses relies on creating a culture that supports sustainable development (Malik et al., 2022), with leaders playing a vital role in fostering an atmosphere conducive to innovation and collaboration within the organization (Elkington, 2020).

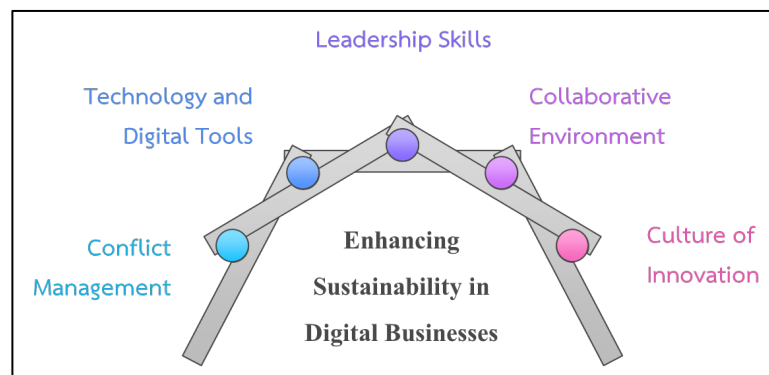


Figure 2: Enhancing Sustainability in Digital Businesses

Source: Created by the author (Prayoonvong, 2025)

Conflict management in digital businesses is a key factor in promoting sustainability. The use of technology and digital tools facilitates rapid and transparent communication and decision-making. Leaders with negotiation skills who create an environment that fosters collaboration can reduce conflicts and drive sustainable growth. Building a culture of sustainability and innovation is essential for businesses to continuously evolve and adapt in the digital era.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Organizational Leaders

1. Develop Digital Leadership. Leaders should learn and apply technology to support effective decision-making and communication within the organization.
2. Promote the Culture of Open Communication. Encourage the free exchange of ideas to reduce conflicts and enhance collaboration between teams.

3. Proactively Manage Conflicts with Data. Utilize data analytics systems and continuously gather employee feedback to predict and manage conflicts before they escalate.

4. Integrate Sustainability Goals at All Levels. Link the organization's operations to social and environmental goals to foster a sustainable growth trajectory.

Recommendations for Future Researchers

1. Study the Role of Digital Leadership in Specific Conflict Situations. Future research should explore in-depth the role of leadership in specific industries or contexts, such as digital transformation during crises.

2. Develop Leadership Models Linked to Sustainability Goals. A new conceptual framework should be created that integrates environmental, social, and governance (ESG) dimensions with digital leadership in the modern era.

3. Examine the Impact of Emerging Technologies on Organizational Collaboration.

4. Future studies should investigate the effects of technologies like AI, Blockchain, and Metaverse on team management and conflict resolution in the future.

Recommendations for Public Policy Development

1. Support the Development of Digital Leadership in the Public Sector. Policy should promote digital leadership training for public sector leaders to enhance the efficiency of governance.

2. Integrate Conflict Management Policies with Sustainability Concepts. Policies should consider creative conflict management alongside sustainable development at all levels.

3. Establish Open Data Systems for Transparency and Conflict Reduction. Promote the use of technology to disclose government policies and decision-making processes, fostering public trust.

4. Create Mechanisms for Public Engagement Through Digital Platforms. Develop policies that encourage public participation in decision-making processes to reduce social gaps and conflict.

Theoretical Contribution

A New Model Linking Leadership, Conflict, and Sustainability in the Digital Context

In the rapidly changing digital organizational context, linking leadership, conflict, and sustainability has emerged as a new conceptual framework that requires further development. This model proposes that "digital leaders" serve as mediators of conflict using real-time data and promote a culture of sustainable collaboration, leveraging technology as a tool to support transparent decision-making and communication (Avolio et al., 2021; Zhang & Deng, 2021). Conflict management, therefore, is not only about reducing tension but also acts as a driving force for innovation and the achievement of sustainability goals (Nguyen & Hall, 2021; Serafeim, 2023). This model can be applied to develop management approaches that address both efficiency and social responsibility.

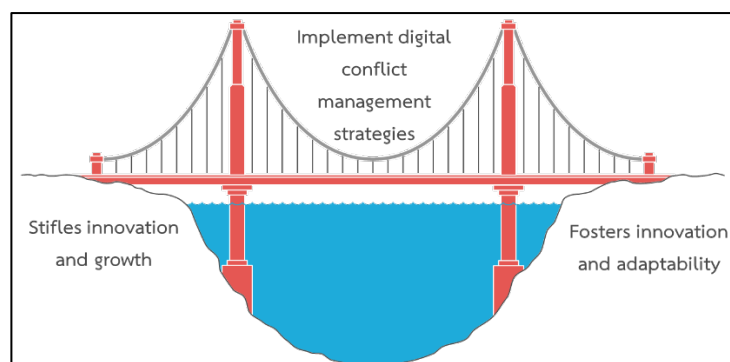


Figure 3: Digital leaders use conflict management to drive sustainability

Source: Created by the author (Prayoonvong, 2025)

The new model for leaders in the digital era emphasizes the role of leaders as conflict managers, utilizing data and technology to promote collaboration and sustainability. Conflict management is not merely about reducing tension; it serves as a mechanism to drive innovation and business growth. The use of technology enhances decision-making and communication, ensuring transparency and efficiency. Digital leaders must possess both visionary and technological skills to drive organizations towards sustainability in a rapidly changing world.

Empirical Findings

This study reveals that dynamic leadership and conflict management in digital businesses have a positive relationship with organizational sustainability. Leaders with vision and technological expertise can leverage the ESG and Triple Bottom Line models to balance profitability, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship (Elkington, 2020; Khan, Serafeim, & Yoon, 2022). Effective conflict management, particularly through the use of data and technology in decision-making, enhances transparency and reduces organizational tension (Liu, Zhang, & Wang, 2022; Rodriguez & Silva, 2024). Furthermore, analyzing conflict management strategies fosters teamwork, innovation, and adaptability in the digital era (Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2021; Sousa & Rocha, 2022). These findings suggest that conflict management not only minimizes workplace tension but also acts as a driver for sustainable organizational growth (Serafeim, 2023; Whelan & Fink, 2021).

Conclusion

Conflict management and leadership in digital businesses are essential for fostering organizational sustainability. Dynamic leadership, when aligned with ESG principles and the Triple Bottom Line framework, can drive organizations toward balanced and sustainable outcomes that integrate profit, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship. Managing conflict in digital organizations requires effective strategies where leaders act as mediators to foster collaboration and reduce tension. The strategic use of data and digital technologies in conflict management enhances transparency, enables efficient decision-making, and improves communication across all organizational levels. Analyzing conflict management

strategies helps enhance sustainability by creating an environment that supports teamwork and adaptation to changes in the digital era. Digital leaders must possess both vision and technological skills to drive organizations towards sustainable growth in a rapidly changing environment. Developing integrated conflict management strategies not only reduces tension but also serves as a catalyst for innovation and long-term business growth. Strengthening collaboration among team members and creating a sustainable organizational culture enables organizations to adapt effectively in an era of rapid technological change. By leveraging data and technology in conflict management, decision-making transparency is improved, further promoting long-term sustainable development.

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