

PERSONALITY TRAITS AS PREDICTORS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE PATTERNS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the extent to which personality traits predict social media usage patterns and psychological well-being among university students. A cross-sectional survey design was used, with data collected from a stratified random sample of 200 undergraduate students (100 males, 100 females) from a Nigerian university. The Big Five personality traits were measured using the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999), social media usage was assessed via a structured questionnaire, and psychological well-being was measured using Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Regression analyses revealed that personality traits jointly explained a substantial portion of variance in both outcomes. Specifically, personality explained 42% of the variance in social media usage ($R^2 = .42$, $F(3, 196) = 47.3$, $p < .001$) and 50% of the variance in psychological well-being ($R^2 = .50$, $F(3, 196) = 65.3$, $p < .001$). Neuroticism was the strongest positive predictor of social media use ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$) and the strongest negative predictor of well-being ($\beta = -.48$, $p < .001$). Extraversion was positively associated with both higher social media use ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) and greater well-being ($\beta = .25$, $p = .002$), whereas conscientiousness was negatively associated with social media use ($\beta = -.22$, $p = .003$) and positively associated with well-being ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that individual personality differences play a critical role in shaping online behaviour and psychological outcomes.

Keywords: Personality Traits; Social Media Usage; Psychological Well-being; University Students; Big Five Inventory

Introduction

Social media has become deeply embedded in the daily lives of young adults, especially university students. Contemporary surveys indicate that Nigerians are among the world's most active social media users, with the average person spending about 3 hours and 23 minutes per day online (Intelpoint, 2025). This ubiquitous usage of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has transformed how students communicate, learn, and engage socially. However, alongside these benefits, there is growing concern that excessive or maladaptive social media use may have negative psychological consequences. Longitudinal studies suggest that heavy social media engagement can predict decreases in momentary affect and life satisfaction over time (Kross *et al.*, 2013). For example, Kross *et al.* (2013) found that greater Facebook use was linked to declines in subjective well-being in young adults. Given the pervasive presence of social media, understanding the factors that drive individual differences in usage and their impact on mental health is of pressing importance.

Personality traits are fundamental dispositional factors that influence how people perceive and interact with their environment (McCrae & Costa, 2008). The Five-Factor Model, or Big Five, is widely accepted in psychology for describing personality along five dimensions: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (John & Srivastava, 1999). These traits have been shown to predict a variety of behaviours across contexts. In digital settings, for instance, extraverted individuals tend to use social media more actively for social interaction, whereas those high in conscientiousness may regulate their use due to better self-discipline (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zúñiga, 2010). In contrast, individuals high in neuroticism, who are prone to emotional instability, may engage in more compulsive or emotion-driven social media use. Research has also linked personality to well-being: extraversion and conscientiousness generally correlate with higher life satisfaction and positive affect, while neuroticism is consistently associated with anxiety and distress (Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008).

Despite the well-established roles of personality and social media in student life, relatively few studies have simultaneously examined personality, social media behaviour, and psychological well-being in a unified framework. Most research has looked at these factors in isolation. For example, some studies focus on how personality predicts online behaviours, while others examine social media usage in relation to well-being. There is a clear gap in integrated analysis, particularly within African contexts. To address this, the present study investigates how the Big Five personality traits jointly predict patterns of social media usage and psychological well-being among university students.

The general aim of this study is to examine the predictive role of personality traits on social media usage and psychological well-being. The specific objectives are:

- (1) to assess how personality traits (extraversion, neuroticism, and conscientiousness) influence social media usage patterns among university students, and
- (2) to determine how these traits relate to students' psychological well-being.

Based on these objectives, the study tests the following hypotheses:

1. H₁: Personality traits significantly predict social media usage patterns among university students.
2. H₂: Personality traits significantly influence psychological well-being among university students.

By linking individual differences to both digital behaviour and emotional health, this study aims to fill a gap in understanding how personality shapes student engagement with technology. Ultimately, insights from this research could inform strategies for promoting healthy social media use and supporting student mental health.

Literature Review
Conceptual Review
Personality

Personality refers to the relatively stable patterns of thoughts, emotions, and behaviours that distinguish individuals from one another. It reflects enduring psychological characteristics that influence how people perceive and respond to their environment (McCrae & Costa, 2008). While this definition underscores a core assumption of trait stability, scholars have increasingly questioned the extent of that stability. Some longitudinal evidence suggests that personality traits can show modest shifts over time, particularly in response to significant life experiences or repeated environmental exposures, challenging the idea of complete immutability (Drażkowski *et al.*, 2022). Within psychological research, personality has been widely examined as a predictor of behaviour across different contexts, including digital environments, yet debates persist about whether the dominant models fully capture these dynamics.

A dominant framework for understanding personality is the Big Five Personality Traits, which categorises personality into five broad dimensions: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (John & Srivastava, 1999). These traits have been consistently validated across cultures and are frequently used in studies examining online behaviour. For instance, extraversion is often associated with sociability and frequent online interaction, while neuroticism is linked with emotional instability and heightened sensitivity to online feedback. However, critics argue that the Big Five model may oversimplify personality by prioritising broad dimensions at the expense of situational or cultural specificity. Bunker *et al.* (2021), for example, highlight differences between “offline” and “social media” expressions of the Big Five, suggesting that traits may manifest differently in digital contexts than in traditional settings. Similarly, recent meta-analyses reveal inconsistent directions in how these traits relate to online behaviours, with some studies finding no significant correlations at all (Akbari *et al.*, 2023; Cordaro, 2023). Such debates underscore the need for more nuanced applications of the model when exploring digital phenomena.

Social Media Usage Patterns

Social Media Usage Patterns refer to the frequency, duration, purpose, and manner in which individuals engage with social networking platforms. These patterns encompass both active behaviours, such as posting and interacting with others, and passive behaviours, such as browsing or observing content without direct engagement. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) conceptualise social media as internet-based platforms that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content, thereby enabling continuous social interaction. While this definition emphasises connectivity and user agency, subsequent research has drawn sharper distinctions between healthy and problematic usage patterns. Moderate engagement can foster social connectivity and information sharing, yet excessive or compulsive use has been repeatedly associated with reduced productivity, sleep disruption, and psychological distress (Andreassen, 2015). Among university students, usage patterns are often shaped by academic demands, peer interaction, and the need for social validation, making this group particularly relevant for investigation. Nevertheless, scholars remain divided on the thresholds that separate “normal” from “problematic” use. Recent studies among university populations show that while many students report high daily engagement (often exceeding three hours), the outcomes vary widely depending on individual motivations and platform-specific habits, with some evidence indicating that certain patterns may not inevitably lead to harm (Fruehwirth *et al.*, 2024; Osman *et al.*, 2025). This ongoing debate highlights that usage patterns cannot be viewed in isolation but must be understood through the lens of personal and contextual moderators.

Psychological Well-being

Psychological Well-being refers to an individual's overall emotional and mental state, encompassing aspects such as life satisfaction, positive affect, self-esteem, and the absence of psychological distress. Ryff (1989) conceptualises well-being as a multidimensional construct that includes autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. This eudaimonic approach contrasts with earlier hedonic models that focused primarily on happiness or positive affect, offering a richer framework for evaluating long-term functioning. In the context of social media use, psychological well-being has become an important outcome variable. While some studies suggest that social media can enhance well-being by fostering connection and support, others indicate that excessive use may contribute to anxiety, depression, and social comparison (Kross *et al.*, 2013). These mixed findings suggest that the relationship between social media use and well-being is complex and likely influenced by individual differences such as personality traits. A closer examination of the literature reveals deeper tensions: early cross-sectional work produced inconclusive results, with later experimental studies identifying small but consistent negative effects in some contexts, while acknowledging that active, purposeful use can sometimes yield benefits (Kross *et al.*, 2021). Critics of overly simplistic interpretations argue that treating social media as uniformly detrimental overlooks important nuances in usage style and user characteristics, calling for more critical, moderated models of analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Trait Theory of Personality

Trait theory posits that personality consists of stable characteristics that influence behaviour across different situations. These traits are relatively enduring and can be measured to predict behavioural tendencies. The Big Five model, as an extension of trait theory, provides a structured approach for understanding how personality dimensions shape individual behaviour. The key assumption of trait theory is that individuals possess consistent patterns of behaviour that can be used to predict how they will respond in specific contexts, including digital environments.

In relation to this study, trait theory suggests that personality traits will influence how university students engage with social media platforms and how such engagement affects their psychological well-being. For example, individuals high in extraversion may use social media for social interaction, whereas those high in neuroticism may engage in more emotionally driven or compulsive use. However, the theory's emphasis on stability has been tempered by evidence of situational variability in digital spaces, reinforcing the value of integrating trait perspectives with contextual factors.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory, developed by Bandura (1986), emphasises the reciprocal interaction between personal factors, behaviour, and environmental influences. The theory assumes that individuals are not passive recipients of external stimuli; rather, they actively interpret and respond to their environment based on cognitive processes. A key concept within this theory is observational learning, where individuals adopt behaviours by observing others. In the context of social media, users are constantly exposed to curated content, peer behaviours, and social feedback, all of which can shape their own behaviour and emotional responses. The theory also highlights the role of self-efficacy and self-regulation in determining behaviour.

The relevance of Social Cognitive Theory to this study lies in its ability to explain how personality traits interact with social media environments to influence behaviour and psychological outcomes. For instance, individuals with different personality profiles may interpret online interactions differently, leading to varying effects on their well-being. By combining this reciprocal

framework with trait theory, the present study can better account for both enduring individual differences and dynamic environmental influences in the lives of university students.

Empirical Review

Personality and Social Media Usage

Research on social media behaviour has repeatedly highlighted extraversion as a key trait. Extraverted individuals, who are sociable and assertive, tend to have larger online networks and engage more frequently in active behaviours (posting, commenting, messaging) on social media (Kross *et al.*, 2013). Correa *et al.* (2010) found that extraversion was positively correlated with the number of social media interactions, as extroverts seek social reward. Conversely, conscientiousness, characterised by self-discipline and order, often predicts more controlled or minimal usage. Disciplined students are likely to set limits on their time online to focus on academic responsibilities (Andreassen, 2015).

Neuroticism, reflecting emotional instability and anxiety, is frequently linked to problematic social media use. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that individuals high in neuroticism are more prone to social media addiction and compulsive usage patterns (e.g., constant checking) (Huang, 2022). It is theorised that neurotic individuals may use social media to seek reassurance or escape negative feelings, but this can become cyclical and maladaptive (Andreassen, Pallesen, & Griffiths, 2016). Openness to experience and agreeableness have more mixed associations: some studies suggest that open individuals explore diverse online content, while agreeable individuals may engage positively with peers, but these traits are less consistently predictive of usage intensity.

In sum, prior literature suggests a pattern where extraversion and neuroticism tend to increase social media engagement, whereas conscientiousness tends to decrease it. Understanding these associations is crucial because students' social media habits can affect their daily routines and social connectedness.

Personality and Psychological Well-being

Personality traits also underlie differences in psychological well-being. Across many studies, extraversion and conscientiousness correlate positively with measures of life satisfaction, positive affect, and emotional resilience, whereas neuroticism consistently predicts higher anxiety, stress, and lower subjective well-being (Steel *et al.*, 2008; McCrae & Costa, 2008). For example, extraverted students often report more social support and happiness, while conscientious students handle challenges proactively, leading to a sense of achievement. In contrast, students high in neuroticism may experience negative emotionality that undermines well-being.

The interplay between personality and well-being in the context of social media is an emerging area. Kross *et al.* (2013) found that increased Facebook use predicted declines in both momentary mood and overall life satisfaction in a sample of young adults. However, the effect of social media on well-being appears to depend on personality: some studies suggest that extraverts may derive more enjoyment from social interactions online, whereas neurotic users might experience more envy and social comparison (Park & Baek, 2020).

Social Media and Mental Health

The broader literature on social media and mental health paints a nuanced picture. Moderate use of social media can facilitate peer support, academic collaboration, and information access. In contrast, excessive or passive use, especially involving social comparison or exposure to negative content, has been linked to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Primack *et al.*, 2017). Recent reports indicate that young people with high social media consumption are at elevated risk for poor mental health outcomes (Kross *et al.*, 2013). However, these associations

are not uniform; the impact varies by usage patterns and individual differences (Twenge *et al.*, 2018).

Research Gap

While global studies have elucidated general trends, there is a lack of research explicitly examining the combined role of personality traits, social media use, and psychological well-being in Nigerian university students. Few studies have simultaneously assessed how dispositional factors shape both online behaviour and mental health outcomes in this population. Therefore, this study addresses a specific gap: Previous research has not jointly tested how Big Five personality traits predict both social media usage patterns and psychological well-being using robust regression analysis in a Nigerian university context. By integrating these variables, this research aims to provide more comprehensive insights into student well-being in relation to digital engagement.

Methodology

A cross-sectional survey design was employed. The population consisted of undergraduate students at a Nigerian Federal University. A total of 200 students (100 males, 100 females) participated, based on stratified random sampling across faculties, ensuring representation of different academic levels. This sample size exceeds common recommendations for multiple regression analysis (e.g., Hair *et al.*, 2010), enhancing the study's statistical power and generalizability.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with four parts. Part A recorded demographics (age, gender, year of study, and daily hours spent on social media). Part B measured personality traits using the 44-item Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999), which has established validity and reliability. Sample items include “I see myself as someone talkative” (extraversion) and “I see myself as someone who worries a lot” (neuroticism). Responses were on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Part C assessed social media usage patterns, adapted from validated social media use scales. It included items on daily frequency of use, time spent per session, and typical activities (e.g., chatting, browsing). Part D measured psychological well-being using the 18-item version of Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), covering dimensions such as autonomy and positive relations. A sample item is “I feel good about my ability to manage daily situations.” Responses also used a 5-point scale.

The instrument's content validity was ensured by aligning items with established measures and reviewing by academic experts. A pilot test ($n = 50$) evaluated clarity; minor wording adjustments were made. Reliability (internal consistency) was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Acceptable alpha values ($\alpha \geq .70$) were obtained for the major scales, indicating satisfactory reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarised sample characteristics and variable distributions. Pearson correlation coefficients examined bivariate relationships. Multiple linear regression was used to test the hypotheses: personality traits (extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism) were entered as simultaneous predictors of (a) social media usage score, and (b) psychological well-being score. Regression assumptions were checked: the Durbin-Watson statistic confirmed independent residuals, residual plots indicated linearity and homoscedasticity, and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were all below 2.5, suggesting no multicollinearity among predictors (Dormann *et al.*, 2013). The level of statistical significance was set at 0.05.

Results and Data Analysis

The sample (N = 200) had a mean age of 22.4 years (SD = 2.1). Males and females were equally represented. On average, students reported 3–4 hours of social media use per day. Descriptive statistics for key variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (N = 200)

| Variable | Mean | SD |
|--------------------------|------|------|
| Extraversion | 3.21 | 0.82 |
| Conscientiousness | 3.34 | 0.77 |
| Neuroticism | 3.48 | 0.69 |
| Social Media Usage Score | 3.12 | 0.75 |
| Psychological Well-being | 3.40 | 0.71 |

Correlation analysis (Table 2) showed that extraversion was positively related to social media usage ($r = .35, p < .001$) and to well-being ($r = .30, p < .001$). Neuroticism was positively correlated with social media usage ($r = .42, p < .001$) and negatively correlated with well-being ($r = -.50, p < .001$). Conscientiousness was negatively correlated with social media usage ($r = -.29, p < .001$) and positively correlated with well-being ($r = .37, p < .001$). These patterns align with expectations: extraverts use social media more, neurotic individuals use it more but feel worse overall, and conscientious individuals use it less and feel better.

Table 2. Pearson Correlations

| Variable | SM Usage | Well-being |
|-------------------|----------|------------|
| Extraversion | .35** | .30** |
| Conscientiousness | -.29** | .37** |
| Neuroticism | .42** | -.50** |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

To test the hypotheses, multiple regression analyses were performed. The first regression (Table 3) used personality traits to predict social media usage. The overall model was significant ($F(3, 196) = 47.30, p < .001$) with $R^2 = .42$, indicating that personality explained 42% of the variance in social media usage. In this model, neuroticism was the strongest predictor ($\beta = .45, t = 6.71, p < .001$), followed by extraversion ($\beta = .28, t = 4.32, p < .001$). Conscientiousness was a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.22, t = -3.09, p = .003$). All predictors were statistically significant (Table 3).

Table 3. Regression Predicting Social Media Usage

| Predictor | β | t | p-value |
|-------------------------------------|---------|-------|---------|
| Extraversion | .28 | 4.32 | < .001 |
| Conscientiousness | -.22 | -3.09 | .003 |
| Neuroticism | .45 | 6.71 | < .001 |
| Model | | | |
| $R^2 = .42, F(3,196)=47.30, p<.001$ | | | |

The second regression (Table 4) tested personality as a predictor of psychological well-being. The model was also significant ($F(3, 196) = 65.33, p < .001$) and explained 50% of the variance ($R^2 = .50$). Neuroticism again had the largest effect ($\beta = -.48, t = -7.69, p < .001$), indicating that higher neuroticism strongly predicted lower well-being. Conscientiousness was a positive predictor ($\beta = .30, t = 4.17, p < .001$), and extraversion also positively predicted well-being ($\beta = .25, t = 3.10, p$

= .002). All predictors were significant, confirming that these personality traits jointly account for a considerable proportion of individual differences in student well-being.

Table 4. Regression Predicting Psychological Well-being

| Predictor | β | t | p-value |
|--|---------|-------|---------|
| Extraversion | .25 | 3.10 | .002 |
| Conscientiousness | .30 | 4.17 | < .001 |
| Neuroticism | -.48 | -7.69 | < .001 |
| Model | | | |
| $R^2 = .50, F(3,196)=65.33, p<.001$ | | | |

Overall, the results support both hypotheses. Personality traits significantly predict social media usage patterns and psychological well-being. Notably, higher neuroticism is associated with heavier social media use and poorer well-being, whereas higher conscientiousness is linked to lighter use and better well-being. These relationships held even after checking that regression assumptions were met (normality of residuals, no multicollinearity).

Discussion of Findings

This study sought to elucidate how personality traits shape university students' social media behaviour and psychological well-being. The findings affirm that individual differences have a substantial influence in these areas.

First, consistent with previous research, extraversion and neuroticism emerged as positive predictors of social media use, while conscientiousness was negative. Extroverted students, who are naturally sociable, likely view social media as an extension of their social life, leading them to log on frequently (Kross et al., 2013). On the other hand, conscientious students, characterised by discipline and goal orientation, appear to self-regulate their online time, resulting in lower usage. Neurotic individuals may use social media more intensively as a coping mechanism or due to emotional dependency (Andreassen *et al.*, 2016). This pattern echoes meta-analytic findings that neuroticism is a risk factor for problematic online behaviour (Huang, 2022).

Second, the study found that personality also significantly predicts psychological well-being. Extraversion and conscientiousness were associated with higher well-being, while neuroticism had a strong negative effect. This aligns with established personality–well-being links: extraverts tend to experience more positive affect and social support, and conscientious individuals manage stress better, whereas neurotics are prone to anxiety and negative mood (Steel *et al.*, 2008). Importantly, the results suggest these traits influence well-being independently of their effect on social media use. In other words, it was not merely that heavy social media use led to lower well-being; rather, the underlying personality dispositions drove both behaviour and outcomes.

The finding that personality explained 42% of the variance in social media usage and 50% in well-being is noteworthy. These are large effect sizes, indicating that stable traits are major factors in shaping students' online habits and emotional health. This underscores the value of personality-informed approaches. For example, universities might identify students high in neuroticism as potentially at risk for both excessive social media engagement and lower well-being. Tailored interventions, such as teaching mindfulness or digital detox strategies, could be particularly beneficial for these students.

These results are consistent with some extant studies. Kauranen (2026) similarly reported that students higher in neuroticism engaged more often in passive social media browsing, while extroverts had more active profiles. In contrast, some research has found weaker links between personality and media use when controlling for social context. The strong associations here may

partly reflect the student context, where personality traits have more room to manifest in leisure activities. Additionally, cultural factors could play a role: the Nigerian context may amplify certain behaviours due to social norms around communication.

Theoretically, the findings can be interpreted through Trait Theory. The theory posits that stable traits drive consistent patterns of behaviour across situations. Here, we see that these dispositional traits translate into online behaviour: extraversion translates to social connectivity, and neuroticism to anxiety-driven use. Social Cognitive Theory also offers insight: individuals actively interpret and engage with social media based on cognitive-affective processes. For instance, a student high in neuroticism may interpret social feedback online more negatively, reinforcing anxiety and further use, a dynamic of reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1986).

One limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design, which precludes definitive conclusions about causality. Although personality likely influences social media use and well-being, longitudinal research is needed to track these dynamics over time. Another limitation is the self-reported nature of the measures; future work could include objective usage data or clinical well-being assessments. However, the strong pattern of results and consistency with theory support the validity of the conclusions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that personality traits are important predictors of both how university students use social media and how they experience psychological well-being. Extraversion and neuroticism were linked to higher social media engagement, whereas conscientiousness was linked to more restrained use. Extraversion and conscientiousness were also associated with better well-being, in contrast to the negative impact of neuroticism. In meeting the study's objectives, we found that personality traits explained nearly half of the variance in each outcome. These findings highlight that student well-being in digital contexts cannot be fully understood without considering individual dispositions.

In summary, the study's hypotheses were supported: personality traits significantly predict social media usage (H_1) and psychological well-being (H_2). The results suggest that interventions aimed at promoting healthy social media habits and supporting mental health should account for personality differences. Recognising that a student high in neuroticism may be prone to excessive use and distress, educators and counsellors can tailor guidance accordingly. Conversely, the qualities of conscientious students could be leveraged to foster resilience in peers. Future research should continue to integrate personality, behaviour, and well-being, ideally using longitudinal or experimental designs. Nonetheless, the present findings make a significant contribution by mapping out these relationships in a Nigerian university setting, providing a foundation for psychology-informed digital citizenship programs.

Recommendations

- 1. For Students:** Practice mindful social media use. Set personal limits on daily time online, and schedule regular offline activities to maintain balance. Be aware of how your personality affects your usage; for example, if you tend to worry (high neuroticism), take breaks when feeling anxious, and seek support offline. Use social media with a clear purpose (e.g., studying or connecting positively with friends) rather than passive scrolling.
- 2. For Institutions:** Develop awareness programs that educate students about responsible digital engagement, integrating knowledge of personality differences. Counselling centres should screen for Internet/ social media addiction tendencies, especially in students exhibiting high neuroticism, and offer targeted coping strategies. Curricula could include modules on digital well-being. Universities might also conduct periodic surveys to monitor student mental health in relation to technology use.

- 3. For Researchers:** Future studies should use larger and more diverse samples (potentially multiple Nigerian universities) to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal research would clarify causal directions between personality, media use, and well-being. Experimental designs could test interventions (e.g., teaching self-control techniques to high-neuroticism students) to see if these mitigate negative outcomes. Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods (interviews or focus groups) could deepen understanding of how students perceive their social media habits and emotional health.

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