

**The Curious Tale of the Polish Plumber:
Rebranding Nations for New Social and Political Situations**

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Introduction

In recent years, representatives of numerous countries have turned to advertising in an attempt to market the desirable qualities of their respective lands. Generally, these adverts are an attempt at "nation branding" in order to increase tourism. The practice has become quite commonplace and it is not unusual to see a country featured prominently in an advertisement. Although these nation-branding campaigns usually focus on attracting more tourists, a few countries have begun to use advertising for political and social purposes. In 2005, the Eastern European country of Bulgaria began using internal and external advertising in order to prepare for its entrance into the European Union (EU). Bulgaria attempted to redefine its image both at home and abroad in an effort to make the EU transition smoother.¹ The Central European country of Poland also faced a geopolitical image problem when it joined the EU in 2004. Poland turned not only to traditional diplomatic avenues, but also to advertising and marketing to present its argument. This novel approach may seem esoteric and unimportant, but in reality it is worthy of notice because in the coming century, advertising and marketing could very well become important tools not only for the business community, but for statesmen as well. The possible new direction of international advertising and marketing gives one pause and requires one to ask what the role of the disciplines are, and how each could and should be used in the coming years.

The Polish Question

In May 2004, the European Union, a political and economic coalition of European nations, formally expanded its ranks to include ten new countries primarily from Central and Eastern Europe. As one might expect, adding ten nations to an already-existing alliance was a complicated and difficult process that was only exacerbated by the historical, economic, and cultural differences between the various parties. Many of the new member nations were former Warsaw Pact states that were economically weaker than their EU allies. This, combined with long memories of past conflicts and nationalistic sentiment, often made for unstable relations between some "old" and "new" states. A prime example of this relationship between different EU members is the connection between founding member France and 2004 inductee Poland. As students of history may be aware, Poland's recent past is an often-harrowing tale that comes partly from being sandwiched between two powerful neighbors, Germany and Russia. It was the Nazi German invasion of Poland that marked the start of World War II, and while the war's end signified independence and freedom for many western countries, it only marked the start of a quasi-Soviet government for Poland. The period between the fall of the Berlin Wall and Poland's induction into the EU gave rise to both new governmental and economic systems. Unfortunately, Poland's economic growth ranked low among both new and old EU member nations, which caused

considerable consternation among more established members like Germany and France. In May 2004, as Poland was joining the EU, its unemployment rate was a staggering 18.9%, by far the worst unemployment rate of any EU member. This was more than double the French unemployment rate of 9.4% and the EU average of 9%.² (By comparison, the U.S. unemployment rate for April 2004 was a much lower 5.5%.³) Despite the fact that France had a much lower jobless rate than Poland, the French economy was struggling, and many French citizens and politicians were worried about what Polish EU membership would mean to France's economy. Many Frenchmen appeared to believe that cheap Polish labor would harm France's economy and cost numerous French citizens their jobs. Radio France journalist Brice Couturier stated that Frenchmen believed their economy was not working well and the French social and economic systems were so fragile that Polish labor could destroy them. He noted, "We know very well that the whole of this society is living on [its] dependence on the next generations. In the civil service in some big countries, people work 32 hours a week.... So the labour force from outside western Europe, the cheapest labour, is considered as a threat."⁴ Many French citizens worried that Polish workers would cause the French economy to implode and thus wished to restrict Polish labor from coming to France. In theory, the agreement between EU nations allowed for the free exchange of labor across national boundaries, but according to European Union guidelines, established member states were allowed to restrict the foreign labor of new members for the first seven years of the new membership. France thus chose to exercise this option.⁵ In other words, the French government could legally ban Polish workers from France for up to seven years. To most outside observers, France appeared to have little to fear from Poland with these rules in place, but many in the French population felt less than secure.

The Constitution that Wasn't

Even though the European Union's expansion proceeded relatively smoothly, the Poles and the French continued to eye one another suspiciously. Many Poles viewed their Gallic neighbors as arrogant xenophobes who feared change and were unprepared to compete in the global market. Numerous French citizens characterized the Poles as a horde of Slavic barbarians willing to work as cheap labor for impossibly low wages that would result in the wreck of the already-ailing French economy.⁶ The economic circumstances, mixed with historical stereotypical prejudices (the lazy conceited Frenchman and the drunken uneducated Pole), and world affairs (mainly role of the United States in Europe and the Polish support of the Iraq War) created tension and paranoia.

This situation was exacerbated when the nations of the European Union attempted to take the next step toward a united Europe by drafting an EU constitution. The proposed constitution would bring the member states into deeper political and economic cooperation, and would allow a greater level of free trade.⁷ A unanimous vote of approval was required among the twenty-five member nations in order for the constitution to be ratified. Not surprisingly, French voters rejected the document in May 2005, and one of the major reasons was the public/political fear that masses of Slavic workers would take French jobs and in turn damage the economy. The symbol of this French trepidation came from a speech given by conservative politician Philippe de Villiers, in which he introduced the nation (and the world) to the dreaded "Polish Plumber." In his speech, de Villiers bemoans that if the constitution is approved, it "...will permit a Polish plumber to come to work in France with a salary and social protection of his country of origin."⁸ To many French citizens worried about the proposed constitution, the Polish Plumber became a rallying cry against cheap immigrant labor. Many social critics believe that this xenophobic campaign was one of the primary reasons that the French populace voted down the

proposed EU constitution. In the wake of this historic vote, the Polish government and people were faced with a difficult decision. What were they to do about being portrayed as the villains of the new EU? This new campaign stirred many recent and distant memories of historical slights suffered by the Polish people. Would normal political and social pressures from the Polish society succeed in areas where they had often failed in the past, or should a new method be considered? What other manner of expressing its side of the issue was available to the Polish nation?

Poland's Political Reaction

The strong negative reactions by many Poles to what they perceived as anti-Polonism (anti-Polish statements and sentiments) were understandable given the historical context. Because of Poland's background as a seemingly unlucky and downtrodden state, many such ideas have surfaced. These include, but are not limited to, the once-popular "stupid Polish" jokes; the idea among many Europeans that Poles are dishonest and untrustworthy; and the stereotype that Poland is a nation of drunkards.⁹ These have traditionally caused both anger and sadness among Poles. Within that context, it appeared to many Poles that a substantial number of French citizens viewed themselves as not only economically superior to Poland, but also culturally superior as well. In order to combat these negative statements and ideas, Polish politicians spoke out against the French accusations and defended the character and viability of the Polish state. Numerous well-known Poles, including Nobel Peace Prize winner and former Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa and Poland's president Aleksander Kwaśniewski, derided the French government for arrogant nationalistic behavior and for violating its own principles of freedom and fairness.¹⁰ This seemingly minor row between the two nations magnified the challenges of European cooperation and caused many to question the viability of a "united" Europe. The political sniping between the EU members continued for a short time and then appeared to die down after the Netherlands also voted against the EU constitution, apparently condemning the prospects of the EU constitution. In the end, many citizens were forced to believe that the episode was just another example of old prejudices and modern nationalism weakening European alliances. Some pundits reflected that the politicians only fanned the flames of distrust for nationalistic purposes and arrived at no reasonable solutions.¹¹ In other words, many experts believed that politics had failed to find a solution to unite people and had instead worked to push them apart. Although the classic political and diplomatic methods of change appeared to have failed, not all the news was bad. Seemingly going unnoticed was an advertising campaign that accomplished many of the things that the more traditional efforts had been unable to do.

Advertising a New World

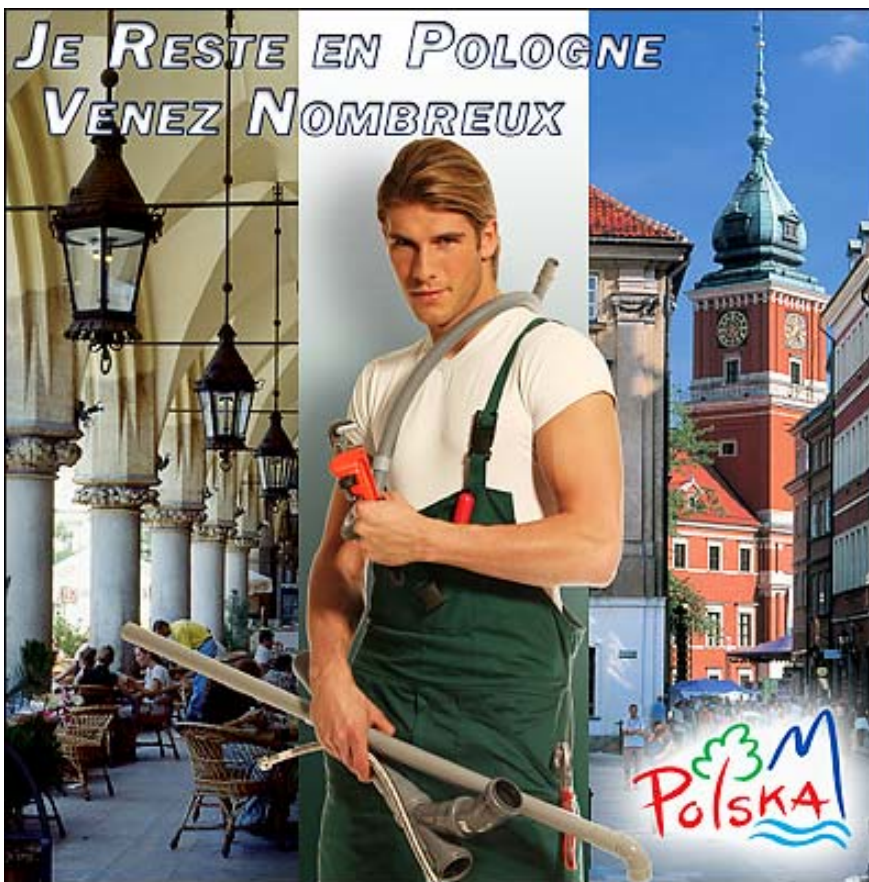
While French and Polish politicians were publicly arguing about issues concerning the nature of the EU and Polish workers' viability, a tourism advertising campaign was created with the purpose of enticing visitors to travel to Poland. International tourism is a multibillion dollar a year industry that Poland had hoped to take advantage of by creating a new better-funded marketing approach in 2001. In this campaign, Poland hoped to market itself as travel destination where people would want to vacation and spend money. The slogan "Poland: Adventures with Happy Endings" was an attempt to mark Poland as fun, safe, and exotic and to turn the nation into a well-recognized and trusted brand.¹²

Unto itself, this was a rather common and unremarkable fact. Branding nations for tourism is by no means unique, and many nations have campaigns, slogans, and other information designed to entice travelers to choose their country as a vacation destination.¹³ Israel's

Ministry of Tourism tells potential customers that "No one belongs here more than you," Canada invites travelers to "Discover our true nature," and Croatia claims visitors can experience "the Mediterranean as it once was."¹⁴ What is unusual about the Polish effort is that in 2005, an ad appeared that mixed tourism and politics in a way that is rarely seen. The Polish Tourism Bureau created a print advertisement that featured the divisive and controversial Polish Plumber. Although those opposed to Polish labor and immigration had created the character, it was reassessed and reimagined as a pro-Polish idea. It is not unknown for a culture to embrace a formerly negative stereotype and transform it into a positive image. "Yankee Doodle" was written as a British lambaste of American crassness; more recently, many current African-American comedians and entertainers have attempted to renovate destructive words and ideas into constructive cultural concepts. These are examples of cultures challenging stereotypes and changing for them themselves, though interestingly, the Polish reformation of the plumber was not meant for Poles but rather for the French, the culture that created it.

Snaking Out the Polish Plumber

The Polish Tourism Bureau's ad featuring the Polish Plumber character was created as a touristic message geared toward French citizens. It was designed using current events and political ideas, and had a much different tone and purpose than most tourism advertising.



Polish Plumber ad courtesy of the Polish Tourism Bureau.
Figure 1.

Polish Plumber ad
courtesy of the Polish Tourism Bureau.

The advertisement features a muscular, handsome and (figuratively) bohemian plumber standing in front of famous Polish landmarks while grasping the tools of his trade. The translation of the top caption from French reads, "I'm staying in Poland. You should come visit"¹⁵ The bottom right corner displays a multicolored crayon-like marking of the Polish word "Polska" (Poland) mixed with a tree, mountains, and water designs. The advert clearly is using the conflict over the EU constitution as its basis; it is very difficult to understand its significance if one does not know the background information. Presumably, there were few Frenchmen who did not know of the French/Polish problem and thus the advertisement should have had broad appeal. Although on the surface, the ad's message is that French tourists should come to Poland because it is a beautiful place to visit, there also is a secondary message about the French view of Polish laborers/immigrants. "I'm staying in Poland. You should come visit," as stated by a clean, attractive, and non-threatening workman, makes an argument against xenophobia, anti-Polonism, mistrust, and a myriad of other irrational ideas. The ad never directly addresses the Polish/French political problem, but the allusion it makes is a powerful and provocative one. It is in effect saying, "We are like you and you don't have to fear us because we aren't the stereotype." The advertisement was apparently a success. Newspapers across the world reported on its novel approach, and another ad featuring a sexy Polish nurse was created. French tourism to Poland reportedly rose significantly, and a dialogue was opened between the two nations that could help to create lasting change and have far-flung repercussions.¹⁶ Certainly one advertisement did not change the balance of power in Europe, right old wrongs, and end nationalist prejudices. It did, however, lead to increased cultural sharing (the thousands of additional French tourists who will visit Poland who may change their idea about the Polish people); positive images of Poles in the international media; a concrete representation of Polish plumbers and by extension all Polish migrant workers; and the opening of a dialogue between the two nations and cultures. An advertisement about a Polish plumber accomplished all these things where politicians on both sides failed. In this way, a simple tourism ad proved itself to be a powerful tool of international political policy, a tool that could be used very effectively in future geopolitical events.

Advertising as Political Tool

As noted before, conducting an advertising campaign for political purposes is not a novel idea. Politicians often turn to advertising to promote reelection, Communist leaders of the past in places like Poland attempted to make cultural change through social advertising, and during wartime, governments often use advertising propaganda to promote their aims. The Polish Plumber campaign was different though, because it was geared toward an international audience and promoted political and cultural change across national borders. The question that must be asked is whether this advertising and marketing campaign was an interesting anomaly or a viable means of future cultural and political exchange. No one can accurately predict the future, but interested parties can make educated guesses about possible trends. These predictions become even more difficult to make, though, when one considers the lack of texts written on the subject of international political advertising and marketing. Several authors have written on subjects that border nationalistic political advertising, but few appear to have commented on the subject directly. Simon Anholt claims nations must brand and market themselves in order to succeed in the new globalized society. He argues that nations are essentially "products" and must advertise themselves as such. Although this would seem to support the Polish Plumber campaign, Anholt also asserts that centralized government-supported advertising and marketing is

ineffective and thus wastes time and money. He claims personal "word of mouth" advertising is far superior and should be the pursued avenue of advancement.¹⁷ Anholt writes about international cultural exchanges that are geared toward commerce. His writing deals with advertising that promotes the buying and selling of a nation's wares. Although his theories encompass some elements of the political, his writings are not about political change in the traditional sense. William Gudykunst writes about intergroup communication and how societies better understand one another. His focus is more cultural than political though, and he provides no concrete examples on how nation states can use advertising.¹⁸ Other writers like Barbara Mueller, Katherine Toland Frith, and Marieke de Mooij write extensively about the cultural aspects of advertising but do not appear to consider the medium's possible political usefulness. In order to evaluate advertising's effectiveness as an international political tool, one must not rely on scarcely-existent past analysis of the idea but rather should consider how compatible the goals and objectives of advertising and politics are.

The Political Fundamentals of Advertising

If one is to try to understand the compatibility of advertising and politics, then one must think outside of the standard conceptual definitions. The realms of business and political science are often thought to be incompatible, but in reality, the distance between the two fields is often merely a function of divergent viewpoints. John Calfee claims that one of central roles of advertising is to inform. Calfee assumes that consumers are rational and can be trusted to make responsible decisions. He asserts that advertising provides consumers with a wealth of information that not only better enlightens, but presses the receiver to investigate. In Calfee's view, advertising does not spoon-feed information that is consumed in a passive manner, but rather this information is used as a foundation that allows and encourages the consumer to research other sources and thus understand the subject better.¹⁹ If one replaces the word "consumer" with the word "citizen" in Calfee's definition of advertising, he/she arrives unexpectedly close to one of the tenets of the classical liberal style of thought and government. From the New England town hall meetings, to John Locke's Social Contract, to Whig idealistic ideology, to Jefferson's independent-yet-educated yeoman farmer, information is one of the key components in creating a liberal decent society. Informed citizens create a workable community and are the vanguard charged with keeping injustice and lawlessness at bay. Assuming that a society is democratic in nature, it has much to gain by having informed citizens and even more to lose if they are not. The Polish Plumber advertisement certainly follows Calfee's model. First, its purpose is to inform. It wants the French consumer to view Poland in a way that he/she may never have considered. Not as a stereotype, not as a setting for historical events, but rather as a modern nation with much to offer. It also wants this information to be used assertively as a substitute for passivity. Not only does the viewer of the ad have to have some sort of background information about the current events that have led to its composition he/she also is encouraged to learn more about the subject and do something. The viewer is pushed not to submissively listen to the politicians, but rather to research the subject either by reading about the matter or even personally visiting Poland. The ad's very nature as a tourist text is inviting French men and women to learn more about Poland by traveling there and then to spread the newly-learned information to their acquaintances. The ad wants to grow tourist travel to Poland and to increase revenues, but also to dispel French stereotypes and misunderstandings. It is asserting that information has more power than rhetoric, and that in the marketplace of ideas, consumers, given enough information, will choose the correct path.

The underlying link between advertising and political theory can be easily seen if one accepts John Calfee's view that consumers/citizens are rational and need more and better information to function properly. If advertising and politics do share common goals, and advertising can sometimes produce a desired political outcome (as with the Polish Plumber), is its use advantageous? Even if advertising can provide benefits to a political entity, are there not better, more traditional ways of accomplishing this? Although the Polish Plumber ad may have accomplished some noteworthy goals, could it not merely be one interesting yet overall unimportant ad? The answer to these questions is that advertising has unique strengths that provide opportunities to speak to people in ways that other techniques cannot. Throughout his/her lifetime, the average consumer views tens of thousands of ads of various styles and types. Generally, these ads attempt to inform a consumer about a product or a service. As Charles Sandage notes, consumers soon become savvier just by watching the advertising, and in this way, the advertising provides a type of education.²⁰ This education is not forced, as in school, but rather seems so natural that it almost becomes ubiquitous. The ads become a part of the consumer's life, and although the consumer does not totally trust them, he/she does understand them and is accustomed to their presence. It is this familiarity that makes international political advertising so appealing; it is an opportunity to use a comfortable, personal medium to press for social and political change. In this way, the Polish Plumber ad meets consumer expectations and positions itself well within the consumer's comfort zone, yet attempts to accomplish something more than a standard commercial venture. Notice that the advertisement, when first viewed, does not appear to be political in nature. It is a touristic ad featuring an attractive man, pictures of Polish sights, a slogan, and a brand name (Polska). This ad is similar in tone and style to ads that consumers see for a range of products everyday. In other words, the creators of the ad did not try to deviate from the norm, but rather followed the familiar pattern that consumers expected. It is an advertisement that works within accepted boundaries in order to make itself both more and less noticeable. The ad does not diverge from the expectations of the consumers; instead it provides an extraordinary message in a common way. Also note that the advert is used as a supplement to the political discourse. It provides information so that consumers can make decisions and then decide how they would like to create change. The ad operates in tandem with the EU political system and is in no way trying to change the state governmental structure. The Polish Plumber ad works because it is quasipolitical without overstepping its boundaries and does things that politicians and bureaucrats are rarely able to do. It takes the personal understanding that people have of ads and utilizes this relationship toward a new end, while being mindful of societal restraints and avoiding sensitive areas.

Lessons for Advertisers

If one accepts the notion that advertising's goal is to provide information of all types, not simply commercial, and that one of its strengths is that it is a familiar art form that can speak directly to a consumer/citizen in a simple personal manner about many types of needs, then one must ask, "When is international political advertising appropriate and when can and should it be used?" The answer to this question seems to be that advertising should stay true to its heritage and produce arguments in a way that other disciplines cannot. Advertising and marketing producers have learned how to package information in a clear and inviting manner that appeals to a large percentage of the mass populace. Stated another way, advertisers and marketers know how to persuade and how to sell, skills that can and should be used outside the realm of commerce. When a void in public life becomes apparent and the traditional avenues of modification are ineffective, then advertising should be considered. Once again, it should be declared that advertising

and marketing are not panaceas that will replace proven methods of social and political governance and change. Instead, both political methods and advertising and marketing techniques should be used order to serve the greater good. This criterion sounds particularly nebulous and preachy, but the open-ended debate on the role of advertising that could ensue would in turn allow governments, advertising creators, and citizens a chance to consider the process and the outcome in new and exciting ways. Advertising and marketing could become a powerful international tool of nations that would allow more citizens to become involved in world affairs. Examples of this can be found within the Polish Plumber ad. The advert literally put an appealing face on an emotional debate that was both frightening and confusing. The French were worried about losing jobs and national identity, while the Poles were nervous about oppression and discrimination. The ad revealed a simple truth, that the issue concerns real people who share more than they disagree on. This is not new information in the traditional sense because most people generally know this, but the ad bridged the gap between knowing and understanding. The advert helped people to better contextualize abstract information by turning a theoretical idea into a personal connection. Politicians attempt to do this regularly, by telling tales about people they have met in their travels or highlighting heroic actions or injustices in order to crystallize issues in the minds of their constituents. Good advertising can be an excellent storytelling device that can relay information in entertaining ways, making the message more palatable and less frightening. The Polish Plumber ad took a complex issue and marketed it in a simply way. The advert used the staples of adventure and sex to make the issue more approachable. It presented a narrow one-dimensional view of the issue, but it was a view that was not being expressed elsewhere, and when combined with the other points, it helped to transform the dialogue and conflict between the two nations. This is an interesting study of the power of international advertising and of how advertisers may have to adjust their thinking in order to encompass the larger scope of their profession.

International Advertising and Society

International advertising could become a far broader field than it currently is if non-commercial international advertising becomes more common. This article has explored many of the positive outcomes of this possible new direction. However, there may also be a dramatic downside to shifting advertising into the political arena. Michael Schudson would argue that using advertising in this manner would create a state art that is akin to socialist realism. He asserts that this would strip significant social, political, and public matters of their nuances and would leave society one-sided, flat, and gray.²¹ What Schudson is describing is a terrifying world of almost Orwellian dimensions in which governments package political discourse in bright and colorful sound bites in order to control public opinion. However, any message delivered by a government, politician, corporation, organization, or person of power or status should be reviewed, questioned, checked, and researched in order to determine its reliability. Advertising should not silence or replace any of the current voices of society, but it should instead supplement them. As noted before, politicians have historically employed advertising in political campaigns. Advertisers have also created public service announcements to combat social woes, and the United States government has long advertised for enlistment in the armed services. These domestic versions of social and political advertising have not ushered in a world of newspeak and dystopia, but have rather increased public awareness and debate. Consumers and citizens should always be vigilant in protecting their freedom and liberty, but the issue becomes how much so we trust our fellow citizens and ourselves? Are people intelligent and knowledgeable enough to be able to process more information or do we as a global society need to limit the amount of data that people receive? This question

has a different answer depending on how one sees the world, but if one agrees with theorists like Calfee and Carey, that advertising empowers consumers/citizens, then one must also agree that more information can only make for a better society.

Conclusion

The notion behind the Polish Plumber advertisement forces one to ask two simple yet profound questions; what is international advertising and what is its purpose? If international advertising is merely a way for businesses and corporations to sell items and services on a global level, then the Polish ad is of little consequence. It is simply an anomaly that may at best be an historical footnote in later years. If, however, international advertising is in fact a larger, more encompassing field whose function is to provide information for multiple purposes, then maybe this tourism ad is an expression of possible new directions for the field. No one can claim to know whether international advertising and marketing will become a tool of social change and politics, although the idea has been expressed by authors like Anholt. If international advertising does increase its scope, it could help improve numerous societies around the world by increasing awareness of social and political issues, and by spreading information in new and inventive ways. This advertising would certainly not be entirely without fault; nothing is, but it would be another source of valuable information for citizens across the world. Although many critics of advertising would contend that the medium will dull political discourse, it could enhance it for the betterment of the world as a whole. In an evershrinking faster-paced world, advertising could become a cultural, social, and political voice to the masses. One can only wait and see.

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Notes

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