

An Innovative Technique to Define Marketing Research Objective

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Abstract – The article aims to describe an innovative technique for defining the marketing research objective. The proposed approach is based on a Structured Table Analysis of Business Environment, presented in tabular form (STABE technique). The technique enables obtaining the information needed to solve a certain management problem in a particular business environment. The development of the STABE technique is based on the following provisions: the role, importance, and functions of marketing research in making managerial decisions; managerial orientation, logical sequence of stages, maximum possible formalization.

Keywords – marketing technique, management problem, marketing research objective, marketing problem, marketing opportunity.

1. Introduction

In the current highly unpredictable and increasingly competitive business environment, the effectiveness of investment in marketing research and its economic return largely depends on the accuracy of defining the research objectives.

Marketing research has always been one of the most important tools for getting information for corporate executives to make important management decisions. The issues of methodology and methods of marketing research, especially in terms of defining its objective, are in the focus of marketing theory and practice. Defining the objective is the initial and most important stage of the marketing research since wrong objective results in the research failure and impossibility of making a sound managerial decision for operations in the domestic and international markets [9], [21].

Defining the research goal is the most challenging, lengthy, and valuable stage of the marketing research process. It requires multidimensional analytical efforts for the selection and expert evaluation of a variety of factors in the macro-and micro-marketing business environment. It allows to explore the company's place in the market, determine alternative ways for performing managerial tasks, define objectives of marketing research and gain information for sound decision-making. The modern business environment, with its ongoing global economic turbulence and geopolitical and health care crises, poses new super challenges to market research methodology. Financial globalization is creating new markets with their companies attractive to investors, although these markets are highly exposed to business risks, and only the continuous improvement of market research can provide reliable data to avoid irreversibly flawed management decisions. Accurate targeting of market research is the key to obtaining relevant information that ensures management efficiency and reduces risks for domestic and international businesses.

The current situation in that part of marketing studies that deals with defining the marketing research objective, is characterized by a certain disjunction between the theory and training of students, on the one hand, and practice, on the other. Academic science has detailed general approaches to the marketing research goal-setting like its stages, a list of experts in and outside the client's staff, the scope of questions to be asked. However, it is very

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difficult to use these recommendations in practice because there is no clear technique in the open sources on how exactly the provisions proposed by academic science should be put into practice. Each research company has its own branded technique and does not seek to make it publicly available.

Modern information and computer technologies have a significant impact on marketing research, mainly due to the possibility of processing large data sets and tracking customer behavior [10]. However, the new technical possibilities caused the heads of marketing departments of companies to downplay the stage of defining the goal of marketing research, as in a short time it became possible to consider almost limitless hypotheses about the behavior of online buyers. Moreover, artificial intelligence is becoming more and more active in this field, pushing people out of the research process.

The article aims to describe an innovative technique for defining the marketing research objective. The proposed approach is based on a structured analysis of business environment factors, presented in tabular form.

2. Literature Review

The current status of investigations into the matter of defining the objective of marketing research with a view on the internal logic of marketing evolution as an applied science is evident from the pertinent publications. In scientific publications, the issue of defining the marketing research objective is considered mainly in the form of a general method, without a specific technique that reveals in detail the instruments that could be immediately used in practice. Sometimes authors declare the forthcoming clarification of "a framework for problem definition" [26], but, as a rule, it all ends with a list of several well-known recommendations regarding the wording of the marketing research goal. The manual for managers dealing with marketing matters contains only two paragraphs in the section about marketing research that touches upon the stage of planning the research objective [13]. The ESOMAR Market Research Handbook provided five pages of brief general information on how to define a marketing research goal [29].

The academic community, committed to improving university curricula, is constantly analyzing the extent to which marketing competencies meet the needs of the graduates [22]. This monitoring reveals serious shortcomings in student training, including the lack of capacity to define a marketing research objective.

University textbooks on marketing research devote scant attention to the descriptive method of defining the marketing research objective [15], [25]. However,

even these authors do not discuss a particular method for identifying the marketing research objective.

The growing popularity of postmodernist views on the marketing function also influences approaches to defining the objective of marketing research [2]. Based on them, marketers try to explore the changing trends of modern markets and customer behavior. Proponents of the postmodern trend, therefore, suggest a flexible approach to research similar to jazz improvisation: "if you habitually approach the research process in a 'scientific' fashion, think and see 'jazz' and 'art' instead" [18]. Guided by the postmodern thesis that in conditions of constant changes in consumers' tastes and values, traditional approaches to their research lose their meaning, it is proposed to develop marketing solutions based on "creativity", attempts to impress the consumer with an unusual, often absurd solution, rather than on the results of consumer surveys. The main area where post-modernism in marketing is most clearly manifested is advertising research, many of which are conducted in the style of the hype creative promotion of ideas of advertising appeal [24].

3. Methodology and Research Methods

The development of methods for defining the marketing research objective is based on some basic assumptions.

Firstly, it is important to distinguish the method of defining the marketing research objective, as a theoretically sound approach, from the technique, which is a certain logical set of steps and tools for implementing the method to achieve a predetermined result [20].

The range of tasks to be accomplished in defining the marketing research objective (i.e., the method itself) includes "discussions with decision-makers, interviews with industry experts and other knowledgeable individuals, analysis of secondary data, and sometimes qualitative research. These tasks help the researcher to understand the background of the problem by analyzing the environmental context... Then the management decision problem is translated into a marketing research problem" [14]. Regrettably, there is no explanation as to how a marketer can complete these tasks.

As a phenomenon of the theory, the technique for defining the marketing research objective can be considered in terms of the scientific paradigm on which the marketer relies on the study of socio-economic processes. Thus, detailed, pre-designed hypotheses on the behavior of economic agents can be the basis for defining the objective. These data are obtained within a particular theoretical model with the so-called hypothetic-deductive method [7].

Secondly, the technique for defining objectives of the marketing research should take into account some general principles: feasibility, repeatability, compliance with the objectives and tasks of the planned activities, validity, efficiency [23], and principles for management decision-making: theoretical justification, management orientation, logical sequence of stages and the methodology adaptability for various levels of training specialists, maximum formalization, use of tools for analyzing economic processes [4], [11]. The technique for defining the objective of the marketing research is based on the role, value, and functions of the principles used in making managerial decisions [30].

In the technique for defining the marketing research objective, marketing is considered as the theory and practice of decision-making regarding the business entities' market strategy, worked out on a study of factors of the external macro- and micro-marketing environment with the internal environment factors taken into account to meet economic interests of producers and consumers. Marketing research is regarded as a systematized process of setting goals, identifying the scope of objective market information, its collection, and analysis, developing recommendations for any elements of the market product strategy to achieve the highest results of the company in a specific marketing environment. Such factors are taken into account as the management orientation of marketing studies, the state, and dynamics of the external business environment factors, economic interests of the company and its stakeholders [28].

Consequently, information is one of the most valuable resources at the disposal of managers. The quality of information determines the effectiveness of management decisions and the attainment of the company's competitive advantages. Marketing research performs the important task of providing information to managers, which is the most sophisticated and costly part of marketing activity.

The value of information directly depends on its credibility. The latter, in turn, is determined by a correct and systematic process of marketing research. To the greatest extent, the quality and reliability of information depend on the correct setting of marketing research objectives, which, in turn, correlates with the management problem.

There are advanced methods and techniques for conducting many stages of research. The objective of marketing research reflects the options for solving the management problem. If the goal is set incorrectly, then the information obtained is useless for solving the management problem.

The special technique of the analysis of business environment factors is considered in its application for defining the objective of the marketing research undertaken to accomplish a specific management task.

4. Results. STABE Technique: General scheme

A special technique, called the Structured Table Analysis of Business Environment (STABE), is suggested for use in specifying the marketing research objective. Defining the marketing research objective is a complex process that requires considerable time, cost, and involvement of qualified marketing researchers. The marketers accomplishing the research must be competent in assessing the main factors of the external and internal operating environments of business entities. The stages of defining the objective of marketing research are shown in Table 1.

The STABE technique appears in use at the stage of analysis of external macro- and micro-environment factors, which is the most laborious task in terms of the required volume of work, but the analysis enables to identify the market environment factors that affect the efficiency of solving the management problem. It may seem that with this approach, the analyzed factors have the same effect on the activity of any similar company in a particular market, and this is axiomatic. However, firstly, not all companies conduct this analysis, therefore competitive advantage will be available to those of them that care to analyze the marketing problems and opportunities. In practice, when formulating the marketing research objective, managers of the companies are guided by their understanding of the marketing research and this standpoint is also based on personal experience and informal analysis of the market situation.

Secondly, although the factors of influence are the same for a given business, the selection of response options to them and the choice of options to solve a specific management problem depend on the specifics of the company and its internal environment, i.e., the development strategy, financial and human resources, technological level of production and the like.

Defining the marketing research objective involves the identification of a company's marketing problems or opportunities by analyzing external marketing environment factors.

Marketing problems are the results of an adverse effect exerted on the company's performance by some of the external marketing environment factors that manifest themselves in foreseeable ways, and at times more discrete (low sales volumes as compared with the planned ones, a decline in profits or market share, *etc.*).

Table 1. Stages of defining the marketing research objective

Stage	Research stage / Environment	Sources of information
1	Specifying a management problem / Internal environment	Secondary internal information of the business entity, surveys of the company managers and experts
2	Assessment of the business environment factors to identify marketing problems and opportunities, testing hypotheses about the impact through marketing activities on the factors' effect. The use of STABE technique. / External macro- and micro-marketing environments	Secondary information from external sources, interviews with experts
3	Formulating hypotheses about the strategies: market coverage, relationships with competitors, suppliers, and contact audiences / External micromarketing	Information obtained by STABE technique, secondary inside information, interviews with the company's managers and experts
4	Developing and selecting solutions for a management problem / Company internal environment	Information obtained by the STABE technique, secondary inside information, analysis of the third stage hypotheses, surveys of the company managers and experts
5	Formulating the objective of the marketing research and setting its boundaries to test a solution to the management problem / Company internal environment	Secondary inside information, surveys of the company's managers and experts

Sources: developed by the authors

Sometimes imbalances between performance and company's plans do not relate to real changes in the marketing environment factors but this happens because the plans themselves were utopian, voluntary, and overstated or understated. In such cases, the task is not related to marketing problems but simply requires adjusting plans instead of heavy management and decision-making based on market strategy. Marketing opportunities are the result of a positive influence on the company's performance by factors of the external marketing environment, which appear (or, possibly, appear) as a gap between results and potential opportunities (factors are not taken into account or appear as new).

The STABE technique for identifying marketing problems and opportunities implies a selection and expert evaluation of the macromarketing

environment factors affecting the company's efficiency in the researchable market.

The analysis of the macromarketing environment factors can be formalized by the following algorithm. It is reasonable to compile several tables. Two tables are made up for each group of factors: political and legal, economic, demographic, scientific and technical, natural environment, cultural, two summary tables of market threats and opportunities, and a table of alternative solutions for a management problem.

To analyze the effects of every group it is necessary to select those factors for each of the groups which may impact the company's performance. Thereafter the selected factors are categorized by the following criteria (Table 2.): threat (-) or opportunity (+) and impact on demand and supply.

Table 2. Preliminary table of political and legal macromarketing environment factors (STABE Table 1.)

Factors	Threats (-)	Opportunities (+)	Demand/Supply

Sources: developed by the authors

Upon selection of potential factors, it is necessary to provide their detailed rationale. Each factor should be analyzed from the following perspective:

1. selection of facts, digital data, analytic inference supporting the effect of each factor on company performance as a threat or an opportunity (it should be kept in mind that the same factor may

produce the effect of both a threat and an opportunity, however, the significance of influence may vary),

2. the factor influencing demand or supply,
3. formulation of the hypothesis about the company's possible response to the factor and its effect,

4. expert evaluation of the factor weight in company performance using a rating scale (1-10, 1-20, etc.)

Upon detailed arrangement of potential arguments, factors, and suggestions, the following table allows

reviewing the political and legal factors (Table 3.). For convenience, the table is split into two parts showing the factors of marketing opportunities and threats.

Table 3. Summary table of political and legal macromarketing environment factors (STABE Table 2.)

Factors	Factor weight score (1– min., 10– max.)	Alternatives to threat countermeasure or opportunity feasibility	Demand/supply factor
Opportunities			
Threats			

Sources: developed by the authors

Analytic tables and arguments are drawn up for all six groups of factors (Factor STABE Tables 1.–12.). It is worth mentioning that certain groups of factors may produce no effect in terms of the performance of a company. In such cases, this group is not analyzed, and explanations will be provided.

It is important to select as many factors as possible even if they do not inform well during this phase. As the factorial assessment progresses, some of these factors with minimal scores can be removed from further analysis. However, it is important to remember that the market environment is rapidly evolving and the influence of factors is also changing, so you should have as many factors in the databank as possible when monitoring the marketing environment and relative factors.

The practice of using the STABE technique shows that difficulties arise in the selection of business environment factors. Thus, when considering the legislative basis for business activities, the analytical work shrinks to selecting not all acting regulations that affect the company’s business, but only those that have not yet been taken into account in the development of the company’s marketing strategy and those laws that are planned to be adopted and put into effect for proactively responding to them.

The second problem is the formulation of factors to be included in the tables. The definition of a factor should be as specific as possible to show how the factor affects the company's operations and what the factor’s changing trends are. For example, the economic factors of consumers' solvency in a specific target market cannot be formulated for inclusion in the table as “GDP per capita growth in a country” or “growth in average wages in the country as a whole”. The marketer should write "wage growth in the studied consumer segment" with further analysis of the sources of this growth.

Another problem and discussion point may be the selection of experts to assess factors and the extent of their impact on the company's performance and the

option of scales to assess the impact of factors. This group may come from managers and specialists of the company who have different views on the problem under study. The participation of external consultants should be mandatory, whose experience and multifaceted knowledge make it possible to analyze the situation more quickly and skillfully in the conditions of rapid change of business environment factors.

After choosing the rationale and assessing all the factors of the macromarketing environment, this analysis should be summarized by compiling two pivot tables: one table of market threats (Table 4.) and the other table of market opportunities (Table 5.). It is necessary to establish the weight of each of the six groups of factors, the importance of the impact of which is not the same. Thus, by analyzing, for example, political and legal, demographic, and other factors on a scale of one to ten, marketers can get equal points within the group. Expert assessments should be brought in tables by the meaningful index of the group of factors as a whole. This allows compiling a hierarchy of factors regardless of their belonging to a particular group, but according to the level of their impact on the results of the company's activity.

To measure the weight of groups of factors, it is convenient to use a numerical scale (the number can be 1, 10, or 100). Weighted factors are distributed among groups of factors on the following criteria:

1. the number of factors in the group,
2. significance of factors in the group,
3. the ratio of market threat factors to opportunities,
4. the ratio of supply and demand factors,
5. actual impact on the company's performance.

The information in these tables allows for an in-depth analysis of the market and the impact of its factors on the company's performance and, more importantly, to develop hypotheses for solving management tasks.

Table 4. Summary table of market threat factors (STABE Table 13.)

Item No.	Factors	The expert score of the factor weight adjusted for a meaningful index	Hypothetical alternatives for threat removal	The demand/supply factor

Sources: developed by the authors.

Table 5. Summary table of market opportunity factors (STABE Table 14.)

Item No.	Factors	The expert score of the factor weight adjusted for a meaningful index	Hypothetical alternatives for implementation of opportunities	The demand/supply factor

Sources: developed by the authors.

Analysis of micromarketing environment provides for the development of the hypothesis of possible market strategy, segmentation criteria (in case of choosing diversified marketing), and hypothesis of competitive behavior strategies that can be tested in the course of marketing research.

The elaboration of hypothetical variants ('hypotheses' in short) of the company's reaction to the impact of a factor is the most difficult task, the solution of which largely determines defining the objective of marketing research and making effective management decisions. The hypotheses should concern only the company's reaction to the influence of a factor. For example, if a new regulatory legal may negatively affect the company's business, then the hypothesis may be about lobbying the company's interests in government bodies (of course, if this is not an oligarchic business). The reaction should relate to the elements of the company's market

strategy or internal marketing, namely, changes in positioning, elements of the marketing mix, recruiting, etc.).

The development of alternative solutions to a management problem and their generalization in the Solutions STABE Table 15. is the second step in defining the marketing research objective. For this purpose, the data in columns 4 of the STABE Factor Table 1.–12., i.e., hypothetical alternative solutions to the problem and implementation of opportunities, should be grouped and analyzed from the summary tables of marketing tasks and opportunities.

The alternative solutions were summarized and categorized by management problems below (See Table 6.). Scenarios of the possible effect on the external marketing environment factors may refer only to the marketing strategy elements or the marketing mix, i.e., only the methods under the company's control.

Table 6. Alternative solutions to a management problem (STABE Table 15.)

Item No.	Solutions	Weaknesses	Strengths

Sources: developed by the authors.

Identification of strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions to a management problem is made by the following criteria:

1. alternative implementation costs,
2. alternative implementation time,
3. impact on the company's performance.

Having analyzed all management problems and alternative solutions, it is necessary to choose only one of them, which corresponds to the current business status of the company. Only one of the alternatives is verified in the marketing research. The chosen alternative is of paramount importance for determining the objective of marketing research.

The use of this technique is demonstrated by a case study defining the objective of marketing research for the dry wine market in Kyiv. The need to conduct this research was faced by a foreign supplier of dry wine who had to decide on the feasibility of increasing its market share. The marketing research was conducted from May to June 2015. SPSS15 software was used to analyze the data. All questionnaire findings were tested for false answers, sorted out accordingly, and then processed. The following techniques were used for the data analysis: frequency distribution of variables, cross-tabulation, factor analysis, cluster analysis, and nonparametric variables testing [27].

5. Discussion. STABE-technique: Application Problems

Several factors constitute certain problems for wide use of STABE-technique, the most important of which are the qualification of personnel, the latest technologies, practices of marketing activities, compliance with the procedure of using the technique.

Personnel. The research conducted by Boston Consulting Group through a survey of top managers around the world showed that one of the biggest drawbacks of line managers is that they are unable to understand the problems facing the business [6]. As a result, these managers are unable to determine what information they need to get as a result of their marketing research. It is indicative that business requirements for marketing research competencies are equally high for all marketing specialists from the lowest to the highest levels.

The pivotal point is to realize that defining a management goal differs from that of a marketing research objective. However, in practice, these concepts are commonly confused, mainly at the initial stage of marketing research. When the problem of management is posed as the goal of the marketing research, it distorts the entire research process and leads to erroneous results and, consequently, to the development of ineffective strategies. A management problem is an attainable or potential target for the company to adjust and modifications require decision-making based on reliable marketing information. It is the management problems (expansion into new markets, market share gains, product modification, a shift in the positioning strategy, *etc.*) that call for marketing research. The marketing research objective determines the scope of information essential for a particular management decision making.

The management of companies is increasingly inclined that marketing research staff should not only provide information to top managers but also become full participants in the business management process. Marketers need to be integrated into management decision-making and be able to assess the proposed solutions from a company-wide perspective. The importance of a systematic, well-formalized approach to marketing research, especially in small and medium-sized enterprises, is also emphasized [3].

Technology. Scientific and technological progress also has a direct impact on how marketing research goals are defined. Note only three of the most significant areas of impact, which are Internet technologies, big data processing technologies, and neuromarketing. The use of machine learning and artificial intelligence algorithms to track customer behavior during the search for goods and their

purchase via the Internet provides marketers with a large volume of information that has already been processed in a certain way. Buyers at the point of contact with the seller, move on the so-called customer journey map, leave data about themselves that can be stored and processed [8]. Companies are trying to gain a competitive advantage by processing effective data collected through big data technology, which comprises a set of approaches, tools, and methods for processing structured and unstructured data of huge volumes, significant diversity, which are quickly received and provide results that can be used to make effective management decisions. Big data technology makes it possible to arrange a detailed analysis of the Internet user's actions at all stages to determine conversion rates for each of them [17]. This technology also makes it possible to analyze the behavior of potential buyers and detect their expectations of products. As a result, a company can produce standardized recommendations for use at all points of its contact with potential customers. However, the reverse side of this kind of collecting and processing information technology is a reduction of attention to the important and theoretically justified stage of identifying the marketing research objective, as it becomes possible to quickly test dozens of hypotheses put forward, for example, regarding consumer behavior. Under such circumstances, the value of a correctly set marketing research goal decreases dramatically.

The progress made in the collection and processing of information using artificial intelligence and big data technology has led to the emergence of the so-called Surveillance capitalism theory, the core of which is the use of a large amount of data obtained from various social contacts of citizens to track their behavior and sell the results obtained on the market and the behavior of its participants to the business [5]. It is quite natural that the business, having the opportunity to receive such information from key players (Google, Yandex, *etc.*) is already different from the classic procedure of marketing research, which involves a very close and meticulous work on the development of the entire marketing research and, above all, to set its goal. It is now possible, without spending considerable intellectual efforts on defining a single goal, to search for information in a few hours based on several variants of the research objective.

Another breakthrough technology is the use of devices to study physiological and brain reactions of a person to certain marketing variables and tools (commercials, product taste, location of goods on shelves, *etc.*) which led to the appearance of neuromarketing in the technique of marketing research. Neuromarketing requires a highly professional mastery of complex techniques and the

ability to decode meter data. Compared to traditional qualitative and quantitative studies with a certain level of statistical processing of results obtained from a fairly large number of respondents, in neuromarketing, the focus is on processing the data of physiological reactions of a small number of people [12]. Due to the above circumstances, the issue of developing and analyzing a specific methodology for defining the marketing research objective has gone beyond the mainstream of marketing science and practice.

Marketing practice: secrecy and careless attitude.

The established practice of marketing consulting for large and medium-sized companies envisages that the client and the supplier of the marketing research carry out a preliminary exchange of formalized documents, in the course of which they come to a consensus about the research objective. The client prepares a research brief, which determines what management problem they will have to solve and what information they need for this. In response to this document, the research agency (or internal division of the company) develops a research proposal, which, among other things, accurately specifies the objective of the marketing research. The whole process of preparing and sharing documents is described in the literature quite comprehensively [1], [16]. Needless to say that neither the client nor the performer will disclose which technique was used to specify the purpose of the study. As a result, it is impossible to determine to what extent the technique used is scientifically grounded.

The careless attitude to the task of determining the purpose of marketing research is also related to the illusory possibility of quickly testing research hypotheses using the HADI method. It is believed that company managers (especially in small businesses) can identify dozens of different hypotheses regarding certain market variables and test them using information and communication technologies within a few days [19]. It is clear that in this case formulating objective of marketing research occurs without any special technique based on complex analytical work.

Compliance with the procedure of using the technique. When using the STABE technique, marketers should consider the following circumstances. First of all, there is a problem with the selection of experts to assess the degree of influence of factors in a variable marketing environment. Such experts should be highly qualified specialists in their field, yet a balance of internal and external experts should be maintained. Secondly, there is also a difficult transition from the selected variant of the hypothesis of solving the management problem to the formulation of the objective of specific marketing research. Thus, for example, there

are often questions about whether the study should always measure the level of demand for goods and consumer motivations, or it is possible to limit it to the latter.

6. Conclusion

The obtained results confirm the relevance of the hypothesis that using the STABE technique for analyzing factors of the business environment, it is possible to define the objective of the marketing research conducted to solve a particular management problem. The logic and specific stages of defining the marketing research objectives are exposed by the STABE technique, which allows getting exactly the information needed to address a specific management problem in a particular business environment. The STABE technique allows taking into account the specifics of a particular country where marketing research is conducted. The application of the STABE technique is shown in the wine market case study.

The proposed technique is consistent with the key areas of development of the theory and practice of marketing in general, and marketing research in particular. The basis of the STABE technique is the use of the preliminary and final groups of tables. The latter group is used to construct hypotheses of the company's response to factors. Characteristics of the company's reaction serve as an information basis for determining hypotheses of the solution for a management problem in a particular business environment. This technique also includes criteria for the assessment and selection of hypotheses and formulation of the research objective.

The STABE technique is an original author's development. The available methods of business environment diagnostics help to predetermine market environment factors for their use in the general assessment of the company's weaknesses and strengths, but these methods cannot be applied to formulate hypotheses for solving specific management problems. In contrast, the STABE technique contains structured sequential tabular forms for expert selection and analysis of business environment factors with certain classification features (problem, opportunity, demand, and supply).

Research in this field can be continued in several areas, e.g. it is advisable to create a periodically updated database to track the dynamics and changes in the business environment factors, which should become part of the marketing information system. One should also pay attention to the risks that may threaten the implementation of each stage of the STABE technique and define a technique for their management.

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