

Moveable Types

Youth and the Emergence of Mobile Social Media in Australia

This paper discusses youth and mobile media, with a particular focus on the emergence of mobile social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Drawing on qualitative research conducted for an Australian national study, it finds that social media on mobiles is well on the way to being entrenched in the everyday lives of our respondents—intertwined with text messaging as important technologies of friendship, intimacy, family and other relationships. It is argued that this connection between mobiles and online social networks means that we can no longer look to the phone as a sealed, standalone and portable vessel of connection and engagement, but as a portal that opens into many other spaces.

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INTRODUCTION: YOUTH CULTURE, MOBILE MEDIA AND INNOVATION

Mobile communication continues to experience great growth, with subscriptions set to cross the five billion mark in 2010. At present, we see not only the sheer breadth of the continuing diffusion of devices and uptake of subscriptions—especially in overdeveloped as well as the less developed world, and in the so-called emerging markets. We are witnessing the metamorphosis of mobile communication itself. The term “mobile phone” is no longer adequate to indicate what is occurring here. Around the world, mobiles are increasingly recognised as media. Researchers are grappling with the concomitant question of what kind of media form mobiles represent. Also there is the closely related question of what implications mobile technology and user practices are having for media, its characteristics, communicative architectures and social functions. Questions of use and users are at the centre of these changes and their dynamics (Ball, 1968), and, as we now realise, such inquiries are deeply connected with the problem of innovation.

In our paper, we wish to approach this rubric of innovations in use from two standpoints. Firstly, we will focus upon recent innovations in youth culture and mobiles. This has been a prominent, if not defining, axis of innovation in mobile communication and technology, with many rich studies available documenting and theorising youth and mobiles especially in wealthy

countries. Our study of youth looks at a relatively late period of the category—18- to 30-year-olds. This is not simply because mobiles users of this age group have not been well-studied. They certainly have—not least—because researchers in universities have many members of this cohort handily placed as research subjects by dint of being enrolled students. Rather, our starting point is a critique of rhetorics of generations, which often pivots on discourses, myths and ideas on this broad group especially. Our empirical research discussed in this paper fit into a framework of study of how the contemporary constitution of youth culture as a phenomenon that is shaped by such overarching social and political logics of generations (Butcher and Thomas, 2003; Crawford, 2006; Wyn and Woodman, 2006)—and in which uses and representations of technology are vitally important.

Secondly, we are especially interested in innovations in use in relation to the shift towards mobile media. Mobile media is a comparatively recent development in the technology, though its origins can be clearly traced to the late 1980s and 1990s (and even earlier, if we include the many kinds of portable media technologies) (Goggin, 2011; Haddon and Green, 2009). There is much less research available on youth and mobile media (Donald, Anderson, and Spry, 2010; Donald and Spry, 2007; Goggin, 2010; Haddon and Vincent, 2009; Hjorth, 2009; Ito et al., 2009 and 2010; Ito and Okabe, 2006; Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda, 2005; Scifo, 2009; Westlund, 2007), so this focus has a certain novelty. However, as well as the empirical yield from such a research approach, we also wish to understand the thing we call mobile media. Presently, the greatest area of energy and action in mobile media is at the intersection of mobiles and Internet. Mobile Internet sits alongside, and is entwined with, the seemingly infinite recursive and reconfigurable technology of SMS (Donner, 2009), as shaping the very form of mobiles as media, and

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through this how we understand mobile communication.

Again, youth culture is an auspicious place to explore the innovations of use central to the second coming of mobile Internet (the first appearance, of course, being, respectively, Wireless Access Protocol and iMode, in the 1990s). As research is beginning to establish, mobile Internet is emerging in new and quite specific forms, across the world, with profound implications for how we understand both forms of mobiles and Internet (Fortunati and Contarello, 2002; Haddon, 2002; Kraut, Brynin, and Kiesler, 2006; Madell and Muncer, 2006). In our own research, we have observed a rapid development and salience of mobile Internet in youth culture, especially with the significant use now of social media—notably Facebook and Twitter—on mobile devices.

What emerges as a particular gap, as this brief literature review indicates, is research on this new kind of “mobile social media”. Accordingly, it is youth and mobile social media that are at the core of this paper. In what follows, the first section of the paper gives an overview of our research project on youth culture and mobile media in Australia, and outlines our approach and methods. Secondly, we summarise general findings and especially focus upon Facebook, Twitter and mobile social media. In the third part, we discuss the implications of the findings, and offer an argument about the changing nature of mobile phones, youth cultures and friendship, which we sum up as “phones as portals”.

MOBILE MEDIA AND YOUTH CULTURE: APPROACH AND METHODS

As part of a three-year Australian study on youth and mobile media, we conducted qualitative research about use, consumption, perceptions, and affect, which underpins our discussion of mobile social media in this paper.

During 2009, we conducted one-to-one interviews and focus groups with a total of 339 respondents aged 18–30 years. The group consisted of 172 women and 147 men drawn from one of four locations around Australia. There were approximately 30 one-to-one interviews and 26 focus groups. Participants were distributed by advertisements, leaflets, and information circulated through youth agencies seeking participants. The snowballing sampling technique was also used to identify other suitable participants. Of the total participants, there were 97 participants from Marrickville, an inner-city area of Sydney; 204 participants from Richmond-Tweed region in Northern NSW (a rural location), stretching to the Gold Coast, an urban location in the south-east corner of Queensland; 14 participants from Port Augusta, a rural town, approximately three hours’ drive from Adelaide in South Australia; and 24 participants from inner city Melbourne, Victoria. The reason for conducting the research in four sites, and with a mix of metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations, was to gain a broader national perspective across particular regions and states.

Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes, and while all participants were asked the same set of questions,

some areas of discussion were pursued in greater detail as determined by the interests and experiences of the subjects. As far as was possible, we maintained a rough balance between genders, urban and rural residents, and ends at the age spectrum (below 18; greater than 30 years) throughout the process.

In many respects, the findings from this qualitative part of our study are broadly consistent with predecessor studies elsewhere in confirming the importance for young Australian users of mobile phones (Walsh, White, and Young, 2007; Donald and Spry, 2007). We had many conversations concerning the ubiquity of mobiles in the lives of informants, with quite a few informants always having the phone near them, even while sleeping, and never turning it off. Indeed one of the most striking instances was of someone reporting the high anxiety experienced when they were obliged to turn their phone off when travelling on a plane:

I never [turn my phone off]. So I was just like, I have to do what? Like turn it off? I couldn’t fathom that they wanted my phone off. I was like, can I just put it on silent, and they’re like, that doesn’t help, we need you to turn it off, Miss. I was like oh, okay (Female, 20, Marrickville).

Others spoke of the highly significant role that the mobile played in the formation of relationships, especially their friendships:

- Male 1: It is like your friend. The mobile phone is like your friend.
 Female: It is a love hate relationship ...
 Male 2: It’s a network of friends in one ...
 Female 2: Dozens of friends are there [in the phone] (excerpt from focus group conversation, Gold Coast).

One might see such statements bearing a strong resemblance to many findings of previous studies about the role that mobiles specifically play in youth and friendship. However, our observations have led us to believe that granular, variform notions of friendship are developing in youth cultures in relation to mobile social media, and we will return to this later in the paper, after we set out the findings.

MESSAGING, MOBILES AND FACEBOOK

A focus of research on mobiles has been the place of text messaging in youth cultures, with Kasesniemi’s classic Finnish study putting this phenomenon at the heart of second-generation GSM mobiles (Kasesniemi, 2003). More recently, Rich Ling has offered a thought-provoking account of “texting as a life phase medium”, drawing upon Norwegian data (Ling, 2010). In our Australian study, text messaging loomed large in the social life of technology for youth, as our respondents’ spoke of it. Many reported sending tens, or even hundreds, of text messages per day, with a semi-continuous stream of such communication being the norm among our cohort. We heard many stories about the under-studied yet prevalent

practice of “drunk texting”, and participants revealed both the strong temptation to send pictures or messages while drunk, and the techniques they deploy to avoid doing so.

Our study found that text messaging features prominently in youth culture. However, it is now entwined in other kinds of text, visual and other messaging communication that have grown up on the Internet. For our informants, these other kinds of communication included instant messaging, but especially now the communicative practices and meanings surrounding Facebook (and to a lesser extent MySpace and Twitter). It comes as no surprise to researchers studying digital media in mid-2010—ensconded in what one might call the “Facebook moment” (Goggin, 2011)—that these social networking systems and indeed social media carry primary importance for users. In terms of the Internet, in many countries of the world social networking systems are widely used, with Facebook since 2008–2009 enjoying a primacy unrivalled, not only among the Anglophone world and European countries but now among a wide range of countries elsewhere, including Asia, where other social networking systems have preceded it (Goggin and McLelland, 2009). Facebook has viewed the mobile media platforms as an area of strategic expansion, as too have the mobile carriers and equipment manufacturers.

Nearly all participants we interviewed used Facebook on a computer. As many remarked Facebook had very quickly become an essential—if not the essential—technology they used for networking and friendship. A majority of those who used Facebook on their computer also used Facebook on their mobile phone:

[Facebook on the mobile is] far easier than getting to the computer. It’s in your hands and it’s easier access than going home and uploading and like logging in and you know and things like that. With your phone, it like goes straight into Facebook, it’s easily updated. (Female, 18, Marrickville)

... Facebook’s pretty good in that way. You can get the whole contact and see what everyone’s doing and also people you haven’t seen for a while you know. (Male, Gold Coast)

For many of these respondents, Facebook was something that they avidly and regularly checked via their mobile phone:

I probably check it every day. (Male, 21, Port Augusta)

... the main one [time I switch my phone off] is probably when I’m at the airport ... Probably when I get on the plane and I’m like—it’s okay, it’s three and a half hours without Facebook. You can live without that. (Male, 22, Port Augusta)

You’re checking to see what other people have done with their day or writing about, that’s what you’re doing and it’s incredibly weird to me because ... half the people I’m friends with. They only log in just to see what people have written, what you can like and what you can comment on and half the

time you can’t like or comment anything because it’s all pointless, but it’s a completely new kind of addiction. I never had that problem with MySpace either (Male, 20, Marrickville).

Facebook checking was not something indulged in or appreciated by all respondents:

I think it’s worse if [friends] are on, with the iPhones, like Facebook. So they’re like updating and you’re having a conversation with them and they’re on there and checking if there’s any notifications. I’m just like, you know, I’m here; because then it’s like they’re kind of half heartedly in the conversation. (Male, Gold Coast)

Female 1: One thing I can’t understand is when you go to gigs and concerts or out like nightclubbing and stuff and you see the people in the corner on their like Hiptops or their iPhones and stuff on like FaceBook or MSN it’s just like you paid money to come in here, what are you doing?

Female 2: Or people go on holidays and while they’re on holidays upload FaceBook from their iPhone ... (respondents, Gold Coast)

However, the main factor that discouraged or inhibited respondents from using Facebook was the cost of data charges for mobile Internet:

Facilitator: How often would you use your phone for the Internet?

Interviewee: Very very rarely, as it costs too much. I usually just jump on to see what’s happening on Facebook and that’s it. I only use it for Facebook purposes at the moment as I have just moved into a house so I don’t have internet connected yet.

Facilitator: ... how many times a day do you go on Facebook?

Interviewee: Once or twice. (Female, 24, Port Augusta)

I think probably the worst thing now with my phone is that I can go on the Internet, so every now and then I might just Facebook up a little bit of a storm, but it costs me an arm and a leg (Female, 23, Port Augusta).

Others found Facebook a cost-effective alternative to other means of communication:

Facebook on the mobile is good because you can send group messages for free over Facebook, so I do that a lot. (Male, Marrickville)

For one respondent, not checking Facebook on their mobile served as a self-preservation strategy:

I spend so much time doing it at home, that if I did it outside of the house, I’d be a sick, sick person.

You wouldn't be able to talk to me. Sometimes I come home and there's nothing been updated. That's how often I check it. It's sad. I've been gone for an hour and nothing's happened. I feel like the world's ended. Like there was a few weeks there where Twitter went down, for like two days. That was hilarious. I was getting so many texts, people going, oh my God, Twitter's down. I was like, there's still Facebook. Don't worry about it. (Female, 20, Marrickville)

For another, the perceived affordances of mobile social media were unappealing:

I just think there's probably an excessive amount of communicating exactly what you're doing at a particular time and being available all the time by mobile phone can sometimes be a bit of a chore anyway. (Female, 26, Marrickville)

The majority of respondents' transferred photos taken on their mobile phone to a computer before they uploaded them to Facebook (in particular):

... I usually upload [a photo taken on a mobile] onto my mate's computer and we just manipulate it and just do random stuff with it ... but then we usually just upload it online as well ... Probably on Facebook ... Like all our photos. (Male, 22, Port Augusta)

The predominant ways that mobile phone images reached Facebook (or to other sites such as Flickr), was via Bluetooth or cable connections:

I don't really look at them, they're just in my phone and they just automatically upload to my computer when the Bluetooth is switched on. So I just save them all to my computer and then look through them, I don't know, whenever but not often. They just usually go straight to my Facebook. (Male, 29, Marrickville)

During 2009 when we conducted our fieldwork, the other social media application increasing in popularity was Twitter:

... it's the first time I've ever done the Internet in bed and I felt like that was a really big shift for me because two weeks ago, I realised I could check Twitter in bed and I was like whoa, it's like the first time you watch TV from bed. (Female, Melbourne)

I have time to think of like funny, pithy things to say and I think I can be funnier in text. Probably why I like Twitter as well [as text messaging]. (Female, 20, Marrickville)

One respondent not yet using Twitter suggested they would be interested in purchasing a smartphone because of the particular nature of tweeting:

One of the things I've felt that's made me think about getting a smartphone or phone with smart capabilities has been to use Twitter actually ... I'm

kind of resistant to Internet capability and net mobility. Because I don't really want the expectation that people will be able to, or reasonably expect that I can answer an e-mail on the train, to meet someone for lunch ... But Twitter because I do see it as a kind of—it's like a spatial as well as temporal thing. So I often—I do find myself sitting there going, oh, could be such a good Twitter update. (Female, 30, Marrickville)

What we have presented here is only a brief selection from the interviews with over 300 users of mobile media. Less than half this sample had 3G phones, and many were resistant or sceptical of the blandishments and promises surrounding smartphones, especially the iPhone. We also noticed a strong current of cynicism among young people regarding the "self importance" of those who have iPhones. In a kind of reverse cultural capital, some respondents viewed others as self-obsessed and somehow spoilt if they had an iPhone. These findings flew directly in the face of the common representations of young people as mediaphilic early adopters.

Many under-20s interviewed lacked independent economic power and lived with parents, or if they lived out of home, were living on extremely low earnings. The class politics of phones for such users is very evident and often surfaced as a backlash against ostentatiously hip and newly released items such as the latest iPhone (cited in Goggin, 2009; Ling and Sundsoy, 2009). This recalls the early period of commercial introduction of mobile phones in the late 1980s and early 1990s, where mobiles were seen as "yuppie" devices (Goggin, 2006). Indeed, in our research, we found that older phones, particularly Nokia models from the late 90s and early 2000s, are already being accorded a kind of retro cool, and seen as a form of individual resistance to the blanket advertising and marketing of the ever-latest models of phone. In direct contradiction to the reification of young people as the leading edge users of technology, the young people we surveyed are often suspicious of the push for ever-shorter lifecycles of mobile phones and the purported need for 3G services at all times.

While the majority of our respondents were regular or heavy users of Facebook, and, to a lesser extent, Twitter, some respondents had chosen not to use social media, or indeed other mobile Internet services. As we have noted, some limited their use of social mobile media, especially Facebook, in particular for fear of the cost implications (cf. perceived cost of early mobile communication discussed in Funston and MacNeill, 1999). Nonetheless, as these quotations illustrate, social media on mobiles is well on the way to being entrenched in the everyday lives of our respondents. It is intertwined with text messaging as important technologies of friendship, intimacy, family and other relationships. Mobile social media partakes of the specific affordances of mobile phones, evident in camera phone culture—even if, as we have observed, users do not often upload photos or videos directly from their mobile to Facebook, Flickr, or other accounts, tending to do this via a computer. It is the imbrications of mobile

social media with its Internet varieties that is key to this emerging facet of youth culture, as least as revealed in our Australian study. While an emergent phenomenon, there are early signs of a new identity, function, and significance for mobiles here, at the crossroads of multiple media forms.

DISCUSSION: PHONES AS PORTALS

If something significant is going on with this salience of social media on mobiles, what would this innovation in use be? For many of our informants, particularly for those with 3G phones, social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter are never far away. While such users would not necessarily be updating their accounts frequently, they would regularly be checking in on others, what Kate Crawford has proposed elsewhere as a “practice of listening” (Crawford, 2009). Users are tuning in, checking the frequencies to hear the latest, and then disengaging. This connection between mobiles and online social networks means that we can no longer look to the phone as a sealed, standalone and portable vessel of connection and engagement, but as a portal that opens into many other spaces. A person’s contacts list in their phone is no longer a representation of the communities they are connecting with via the mobile. Communities of contacts, friends, colleagues and strangers differ; from phone contacts, to Facebook friends, or the list of people followed on Twitter.

For some people, phone contacts and Facebook friends are “two completely different worlds”:

The majority of my mates that are on Facebook aren’t from here because I’m not from here originally, so they are all back down in my home town. So my mates that I have back down at home and my mates that I have here [in phonebook on phone] are two completely different worlds ... (Female, 24, Port Augusta; cf. Utz, 2007)

Facilitator: Do you ever use your phone to help connect up with social networking sites like Facebook?

Interviewee: Not ever ...

Facilitator: Would you say that either the friends or the contacts you have through LinkedIn—so the friends you have on Facebook or the work contacts you have on LinkedIn, are they replicated into your phone book, the phone book in your mobile phone?

Interviewee: Not all of them because there are some work contacts like on LinkedIn that are journalists and that sort of thing and they’re not really friends. I don’t really call them or anything like that. (Female, 25, Port Augusta)

For others, there are more subtle differences between classic phone book friends and the kinds of friends connected through online social networks:

It’s collective and you don’t feel as obligated to in-

clude them in your contact list because they can’t see when they have been blocked. So I have a very selective group of friends on my phone whereas the Internet, I’ll let anyone that I went to school with like 10 years ago go on. (Female, Gold Coast)

Facilitator: Are there any connections between that, you and the way you use Facebook and the way you use your phone?

Interviewee: I would say no just because there’s people, like there’s people I’m friends with on Facebook that we’re just friends on Facebook for the sake of being friends on Facebook and it would just always message each other or talk on the phone, that’s just how it is and somehow being Facebook friends ... it’s less of a friendship just because you’re friends with 100 other people you don’t speak to anymore. (Male, Marrickville)

For users of mobile social media, there are also key distinctions regarding friendship practices between Facebook and Twitter:

With my Facebook, that’s pretty much all my friends, and friends out of town, and all that. Twitter is more like celebrities and that, see what they’re doing ... a lot of my old school friends, in general, actually have all moved out of town, or out of state, most of them have. So I can catch up on them and talk to them, especially on Facebook, it’s like, I haven’t spoken to you for a while. So it’s good to yarn up with them, too. (Female, 27, Port Augusta)

I really enjoy the weird intimacy of Twitter because often these people, you like them and you really want to be their friend but you don’t ever have those sorts of interactions with them in real life. So you feel like they’re letting you into their world a little bit and that’s quite good. I feel like it’s really actually connected me to people in that way that I never would have had those interactions before, so that’s quite good. (Female, Melbourne)

Reflecting upon these respondents’ discussion of how they use and regard mobile social media, we would argue that the mobile phone is a strategic node in networks of friendship, and, for many, the critical cultural technology of friendships. The advent of social media on mobiles means that there is now a range of different ways that friendship is being constructed and experienced through these platforms. Our participants revealed highly considered and differentiated ideas of friendship that articulated with different spaces: “Facebook friends” were distinguished from “Twitter friends” and “people I see frequently face to face”. Friendship could take many forms, and shifted in character depending on how communication was made. What was clear was that the communities featuring in mobile social media are partial,

overlapping, and never static, and that the definitions of friendship were similarly varied and dynamic.

For the young people in our study, texting was commonly preferred to voice calls as the first way to get in touch. This is reminiscent of many studies of mobile text messaging. In his striking study on teen years as the acme of texting, Rich Ling suggests that:

In all likelihood, there will be a strong need for texting or at least mobile, asynchronous, point-to-point, text based mediation. SMS has filled this niche for teens. They are engaged in the establishment of a social sphere outside the homes of their parents and in their nascent romantic adventures. Those in their late teens/early 20s often are engaged in establishing themselves in their own homes for the first time. In this situation, the use of texting is a convenient way to mediate information. As they move into other phases of their lives this type of need is carried out using other forms of interaction, voice mobile, e-mail and the like (Ling, 2010: 289).

Our argument is that increasingly SMS are becoming almost identical to Twitter messages, or short Facebook posts. The mobile becomes just another place to tap into that constant stream of messages: some personally directed, some generally directed to a group, others widely broadcast, such as news updates and sports results. The edges of the mobile phone as a stand-alone technology (such as it ever was) are blurring. The mobile is now another container technology (Sofoulis, 2000) which is constantly receiving and transmitting into entirely different systems, practices and networks. Or, as one interviewee said:

I don't really mind if I lose my phone these days, because most of the people I want to reach are on Facebook, and people can still reach me there. It doesn't really matter if it is via the phone or not.

In sum, it is not that the mobile is not important, nor that it does not play a role in community formation and maintenance, but that we need to view them less as "things-in-themselves", and consider the embedded ideas and routines that cut across them (Sterne, 2006). The interpersonal aspect of SMS may remain, but it is embedded in a flow of mobile media information and practices.

CONCLUSION: THE CO-EVOLUTION OF MOBILE SOCIAL MEDIA AND FRIENDSHIP

The developments in mobile phone technology in the past decade have been impressive: the appearance and ubiquity of the camera phone; the rise of mobile data; the blossoming of mobile multimedia; mobile Internet redivivus; the iPhone's spur to the prospects of the smartphone; and, the cultural significance of mobile media platforms with the popularity of apps. Youth cultures have often been the sites where innovative mobile use is discerned, and indeed it is a preoccupation of mobile communication research.

Youth and its meanings are key to how mobiles have been perceived, debated, worried about, or celebrated across many societies.

In this paper, we have sought to offer a glimpse of the practices of social mobile media use in youth culture. We would argue that there are early indications here that the phone—as prized, essential technology of friendship and youth culture—is undergoing a metamorphosis. There are two bodies of literature that have delved into social networking systems and the cultures that have developed around these. A number of important studies have sought to understand cultures of friendship and the transformation of media represented by Facebook and the wide variety of kindred social networking systems centred thus far on the Internet (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Boyd 2008a and b; Lewis et al., 2008; Tong et al., 2008). The concept of "friendship" prevalent in social networking systems has led researchers to investigate the various meanings this takes, the practices of friendships, and the changing nature of social connection it represents (Papacharissi, 2009; Valenzuela et al., 2009; West et al., 2009). There is a smaller literature on mobile social networking, especially covering early examples such as the US-based Dodgeball, but latterly the slew of location-based applications such as Brightkite, Foursquare, and others (Humphreys, 2007; Humphreys and Barker, 2007; Thom-Santelli, 2007). A different take is evident in the work on mobile social software ("*mososo*"), where the question of social connection has been typically framed about larger notions of friendship and publics (cf. Boyd, 2008b). For instance, while noting that the "use of mobile social media is only among a relatively small group of elite early adopters", Lee Humphreys usefully suggests that:

Rather than mobile social networks helping people to find the love of their lives or their new best friend, a more plausible and realistic role for this technology may be just to make the public social life of the city more familiar (Humphreys, 2010: 775).

Our study underlines that what is now occurring has moved well beyond the early experiments in mobile social software in a number of respects—not least in the sheer reach and growing pervasiveness of current mobile social media. Such developments encourage us to bring together still disparate, if slowly merging, lines of inquiry into friendship, from their current bases respectively in studies into mobile communication and media (and mobile social software), or research on Internet-based social networking systems. As Wang and Wellman argue, the "nature of friendship networks will continue to evolve alongside the Internet, the transformation of social structure, and the cultural norms around these increasingly mediated communication practices ... people's social connectivity is quantitatively—and probably qualitatively—different than before" (Wang and Wellman, 2010: 1164). The swift evolution of mobile social media is intricately bound with developments in thinking about friendship, connection and intimacy.

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