



Spa Classification – A Management Approach for the Spa Industry in Portugal

Classificação de Spa – Uma Estratégia de Gestão para a Indústria de Spa em Portugal

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Abstract

The fast-growing industry of health, wellness and well-being has increased the number of spas, in which the lack of standards and transparency in the spa supply has been noted especially in the touristic lodging units. This paper aims to provide an innovative classification for spas in touristic lodging units which may contribute to the standardization of spa supply by providing a clear idea to the client of what to expect in each spa category. The data was analysed with the Delphi Technique in two rounds, 25 spa managers/experts in the first round and 23 spa managers/experts in the second round. The results showed a clear differentiation between spa categories depending on the equipment type, equipment number, areas, treatments, brochure, price list, service procedures and spa management skills required. This innovative classification may contribute to the definition of spa standards, market segmentation, normalization in the spa supply, spa design, marketing strategy and spa management.

Keywords: spa classification; spa marketing; spa management; spa service; spa design.

Resumo

A rápida proliferação do turismo de saúde e bem-estar conduziu à difusão do número de spas, nos quais, é notória a inexistência de normas e de transparência na oferta deste tipo de produto e serviços, sobretudo ao nível dos empreendimentos turísticos. Este documento tem como principais objetivos contribuir para a criação de uma matriz inovadora de classificação de spas em empreendimentos turísticos e para a normalização da oferta de produtos e serviços de spa, com o intuito de proporcionar uma ideia clara ao turista sobre o que esperar em cada categoria de spa. Os dados foram analisados com a técnica de Delphi em duas rondas, com 25 gestores/especialistas de spa na primeira ronda e 23 gestores/especialistas de spa na segunda ronda. Os resultados mostraram uma clara diferenciação entre categorias de spa em função do tipo de equipamentos, número de equipamentos, áreas, tratamentos/serviços, brochura, lista de preços, procedimentos de serviço e competências de gestão de spa necessárias. Esta classificação inovadora pode contribuir para a definição de normas de spa, segmentação do mercado, normalização na oferta de spa, construção/edificação de spa, estratégia de marketing e gestão de spa.

Palavras-chave: classificação de spa; marketing spa; gestão de spa; serviço de spa; desenho de spa.

1. Introduction

The fast growth in wellness and spa trade through constant innovation and development of new services and products has been noted as one of the most profitable businesses in the leisure industry (Han, Kiatkawsin, Jung, & Kim, 2018). The proliferation of spas and the lack of requirements to organize the spa supply have been noted in the Portuguese touristic market (Figueiredo & Ladeiras, 2012). Currently, the spa industry in Portugal had no classification that promote spa standardization as in other areas of the tourism industry, for example. The customer/guest can choose a touristic lodging unit by the classification/rating in stars and know what to expect in terms of the facilities, but this is not possible when someone visits the spa in the touristic lodging unit. For example, a 4-star hotel can include in its facilities a restaurant with 1-star Michelin why cannot the same 4-star hotel have a luxury spa facility/5-star spa and be distinguished for it?

The non-existence in Portuguese legislation of a Classification for Spas with the minimum standards by category similar to the one existent for touristic lodging units is noted by the large diversity of spa infrastructures/facilities and services without specific requirements, that could regulate this type of supply in the touristic market. Frequently a 5-star hotels includes a mini spa and a small number of facilities like a Turkish

bath, Sauna and 2 or 3 treatment rooms with a reduced number of spa services offered. This fact clearly shows that the classification for touristic lodging units in stars is not extendable to its facilities like the spa, in fact, the spa is an optional facility for touristic lodging units. However, what is really a spa? Only a place to offer massages or a place to relax the spirit and pampering the body? What really can expect a customer from spa facilities and service in a hotel of 5-stars? Or in 4 stars? Or even in 3-stars?

This study aims to contribute for the standardization of spa facilities and services inside the touristic lodging units by providing a proposal of classification for spas in three categories (Midscale Spa *** = 3-stars, Upscale Spa **** = 4-stars and Luxury Spa ***** = 5-stars) enhancing the importance of the spa design, management and marketing. This spa classification proposal includes the required criteria relative to a) infrastructures/facilities, such as square metres of total spa area, square metres of thermal area, type of equipment (e.g.: Sauna, Turkish Bath, Hamman, etc.) and number of equipment; b) human resources requirements, such as staff qualification; c) number and type of services in the spa brochure; d) security procedures and e) customer service' requirements to classify for each category.

2. Literature Review

The spa word is an acronym derived from Latin of *salus per aquam* which means health from water being also derived from *espa* which means water source (Jelínková, Tučková, & Jurigová, 2017; Yaman, Alias, & Ishak, 2012). The spa facilities should be dedicated to leisure,

relaxation and health promotion inspired by a philosophy with selected treatments and therapies that promotes the wellbeing and a healthy lifestyle (Keri, Ottenbacher, & Harrington, 2007; Yaman *et al.*, 2012). The differentiation of this product is clearly noticed

by its concept and design, not only by the variety of facilities (Chien, 2013; Keri *et al.*, 2007).

Different types of spas were based on the facilities and services supply such as club spa (i.e., members exclusive, offers spa and fitness services price), day spa (i.e., less facilities; offers beauty, wellness services to residents; lower prices), destination spa (i.e., core hotel/resort business; large and several facilities; prices), thermal spa (i.e., uses thermal mineral and sea water; offers health, wellbeing, and fitness services to guests and residents) and medical spa (i.e., supervised by a licensed health professional; offers medical and aesthetical services to residents and guests) (Wisnom & Capozio, 2012; Yaman *et al.*, 2012).

Nowadays, the spa is an everyday reality in the touristic lodging units and considered to be much more than an amenity (Schweder, 2011) with the focus of promoting relaxation and providing the sensation of escape from the daily routine by providing a set of spa services to its guests and residents and being an important contribution to the hotel revenue (Crebbin-Bailey, Harcup & Harrington, 2005). Due to the increased competition, the spa managers struggle to keep a regular number of visitors and to enhance the loyalty (Choi *et al.*, 2015), also the hotels managers objective is to increase revenue, upgrade the chance of sales

and raise the marketing opportunities (Koh, Yoo, & Boger, 2010; Rutherford & O'Fallon, 2006).

The spas classification and/or certification has been a worldwide growing concern. Some countries, specialised companies and/or governmental institutions emphasize its importance and try to ensure and guarantee the customer service and security quality of spa facilities through a spa certification or classification (Association Québécoise de Spas, 2018; ESA European Spas Association, 2017; Ferrère, 2014; MTCM - Ministry of Tourism and Culture of Malaysia, 2012; Spas_de_france, 2018; UAE, 2014). A destination with regulated and well-advertised spas has better probabilities of attracting tourists than a destination with no spas (Deswal, 2015). The same author also refers that is very important having the support of Government for the standards' establishment in the spa industry and to assure more credibility also in other sectors such as: hospitality, tourism, media, medical area and real state which must support the spa industry to generate a solid and independent industry.

Analogously to the touristic lodging units' classification the spa classification is an innovative and useful tool to contribute to the market differentiation, management strategies and to promote transparency according to the spa facilities and services (Pedro, 2016).

3.Methodology

The Delphi Technique was the most relevant method to identify the criteria for this spa classification due to the limited investigation in the spa field and the scarce number of spa experts in Portugal. This method combines the knowledge and opinions of a group of spa professionals – experts to obtain a consensus

(Hsu & Sandford, 2005; Renzi & Freitas, 2015; Szpilko, 2014) about technical issues by providing specific and valuable information (Etxeberria, Garayar, & Sánchez, 2015). In this methodology is not allowed discussion between the spa experts to avoid the change of opinion due to influence or persuasion (Szpilko,

2014). Most of the studies suggested the use of 15 to 35 experts (Renzi & Freitas, 2015).

3.1. Sample and Questionnaire

The study used a convenience sampling technique to select the experts group. A total of 25 spa managers and spa consultants have participated in the first round of the survey, from April 2019 to June 2019, and 23 spa experts in the second round of the survey, from December 2019 to March 2020. All of the spa expert's members have presented more than 8 years of job experience. According to Renzi & Freitas (2015), when the group of experts is small the opinions tend to be in the same proportion and the result's analyses have less complexity.

The first survey was based in the literature review and in technical criteria adapted from the Portuguese “Manual de boas práticas para Spa em Empreendimentos Turísticos” by Figueiredo and Ladeiras (2012). The first survey included 25 closed answer questions based on the literature review using 4 points Likert scale of importance with an obligatory response by Google Forms to classify each criterion by importance (from 1= not important

to 4 = very important). Five dimensions grouped these criteria, such as infrastructures, human resources, spa services, customer service and security procedures and corresponding to the lowest category – Midscale Spa ***. Also were included 11 open ended questions to optional addition of criteria by spa experts to the three categories of this classification (Midscale Spa ***, Upscale Spa **** and Luxury Spa *****).

The second round/survey included 96 criteria proposed by the experts in the first survey to measure the rate of importance using a 4 points Likert scale (from 1= not important to 4 = very important) with an obligatory response by Google Forms, divided by 3 categories of this spa classification.

3.2. Data Analysis

The statistical analysis was calculated by SPSS v.25 to achieve the average, median and mode. Finally, the calculation of points to each criterion in a specific dimension was obtained from an adapted formula (figure 1) used in a classification for golf greens in Portugal by Miguel (2012).

$$N^{\circ} \text{ of points} = \frac{(\text{criterion average importance}) \times (\% \text{ relative average of a specific dimension}) \times (1000)}{\text{sum of average points of all criteria in the specific dimension}}$$

Figure 1 – Formula used to the calculation points to each criterion

SOURCE: Adapted from Miguel (2012)

Because of the extensive number of criteria, the authors attributed 1000 points to the highest and demanding category – Luxury Spa *****. Therefore, the number of points for each

criterion-singular was calculated by the formula: criterion average points of importance, multiply by the percentage of the relative average of a specific dimension, multiply by

one thousand points, and divided by the sum of average points of all criteria in the specific dimension (Miguel, 2012).

Finally, the maximum score to each category was obtained through the Portuguese Legislation (Portaria_327/2008, 2008 - Annexes I), contains the score to classify by a number of stars hotel/resort units. By establishing the comparison between the hotel/resort units' categories with this spa categories proposal, the authors agreed that Midscale Spa *** is equivalent to 3-star, the Upscale Spa **** to 4-star and Luxury Spa ***** to 5-star, so the numerical proportion between the 3 categories in hotel/resort units was obtained to this spa classification. Therefore, according to the Portuguese legislation for the hotel/resort units to classify for 5-star it requires a minimum average of 198 optional points, to classify for 4-star it requires at least 188 optional points and for 3-star an average minimum of 164 optional points. After achieving the difference and proportion between the three categories, the same calculation was made to the proportion to score in points for each spa category. The authors decided to set 1000 points as the minimum score to the highest category – Luxury Spa ***** , according to the proportion achieved

from the Portuguese hotel/resort units' classification. Additionally, 949 points was the minimum to classify in Upscale Spa **** and a minimum of 828 points was required to classify in Midscale Spa ***. So, 121 points differentiate the Upscale Spa **** from the Midscale Spa *** and only 51 points differentiate the Luxury Spa ***** from the Upscale Spa **** (Pedro, 2016).

3.3. Measures

The data analyses were conducted using descriptive statistics, such as, frequencies, average, mode, median and the score/grade of importance. The consensus of the criteria acceptance and inclusion in the final spa classification followed at least three of the four the conditions: a) positive importance (3=important + 4 =very important) > 70% (Brandão & Guimarães, 2001; Etxeberria *et al.*, 2015), b) average \geq 3, c) median > 3.25 and d) mode = 3 or 4 points (Hsu & Sandford, 2005; Pedro, 2016).

Additionally, the percentage of relative importance for each dimension (infrastructures, human resources, spa services, customer service and security procedures) was required by the experts and calculated by considering 100% equal to the five dimensions.

4. Results and Discussion

The spa experts considered that it is important to have a classification for spas in the hotel/resort touristic units in Portugal. Most of the experts agreed with the spa classification in three categories and only one consider that it was also acceptable in five categories (Hsu & Sandford, 2005; Pedro, 2016). According to the guidelines analysed in this study the criteria to be included in this classification needed to respect at least three of the following conditions: a) positive importance > 70% (3 =

important + 4 = very important); b) average \geq 3; c) median > 3.25; and d) mode = 3 or 4 points (Pedro, 2016).

The relative percentage of each dimension was determined by its average considering the five dimensions equal to 100%. Each dimension obtained the following relative percentage: infrastructures 21,74%, human resources 22,60%, customer services 22,83%, spa

services 18,13% and security procedures 14,70%.

The spa experts considered customer service the most important dimension with 22,83% followed by the human resources dimension with 22,60%. Due to the business nature and the importance of dealing with the spa customer, it is quite clear that customer service is the most important dimension and the human resources due to the service focus detail and customer's needs and expectations. A loyal staff member is more valued than a loyal customer because it is the staff member that in due course creates the customer loyalty. If the employees are satisfied they will stay and produce; this creates service value that drives to customer satisfaction, which enhances customer loyalty and consequently profitability and growth. The staff are the most valuable asset of the spa industry and it is noted there is a strong competition to recruit and retain qualified spa professionals due to the fast growth of the business. So, if the owners look after the managers, the managers will look after the employees and the employees will look after the guests (Cohen & Russell, 2011).

Due to the extensive number of criteria obtained in this spa classification, the authors only describe the most important criteria related to spa design and service. The results showed a clear differentiation in the spa facilities dimensions by category been observed a significant increase from the Midscale Spa *** to the superior categories in the total square metres of the spa; in the wet area square metres and its diversity of equipment like Turkish bath, sauna, ice fountain, etc.; in the number of treatment rooms with differentiation between simple and complete room – includes a wash-hand basin and shower. To all categories, the standard criteria were – the laundry requirements of having separated storage areas for dirty and clean laundry and separate circuit of clean and

dirty laundry inside the spa, not visible by costumers. This result reinforced the relevant importance of hygiene eligible in this type of ambiance, which is related with health security. In addition, the Upscale Spa **** and Luxury Spa ***** categories had some standard criteria, such as the existence of a couple treatments room and one relaxation room for Upscale Spa **** and two for the Luxury Spa *****; also the existence of dressing rooms separated by gender, gym attached to the spa, rest room for staff and a reception with a welcome and private area for customers advice. A waiting lounge located often near the reception should allow guests to be received and welcomed (Remedios, 2011). The reception area should facilitate to welcome guests and provide with the sensation of being taken care of from that point forward (Figueiredo & Ladeiras, 2012).

After the reception experience the costumers go to the dressing rooms which must have a locker with amenities (towels, robe, slippers, shower gel and shampoo, etc.), the number of lockers rooms must be considered by spa design because it depends on the location and flow. If the spa is only for day use or is located at an hotel the total lockers can be reduced as costumers may change in his or her room (Wisnom & Capozio, 2012). The guest privacy must be kept as much as possible, so the lockers must be located away from entrance doors and if possible clustered into more private areas. Some Luxury Spas offer a private restricted changing area with showers. There also needs to be a clear differentiation between wet, semi-wet and dry areas.

The materials choice is also a concern to be considered in the spa design, with natural, comforting and warm materials being more desirable (Fox, 2017). Especially in wet areas the porosity and slip resistance of materials should be considered (Remedios, 2011). The exit of the lockers rooms must be close to the

treatment rooms (Fox, 2015). In the treatment rooms design, must be taken into consideration the 360° access for the therapist work appropriately around the treatment table. Also, enough space is needed to store equipment, supplies and even a changing room and shower may be included in a treatment room.

Suites and couples' treatments rooms are quite popular in many luxury spas with added Jacuzzi, steam rooms and customised lounge areas for relaxation after treatments. These specific treatment rooms are equipped with sophisticated lighting and sound systems to create a relaxing atmosphere (Figueiredo & Ladeiras, 2012; Remedios, 2011; Wisnom & Capozio, 2012).

A relaxation room or lounge with chaise lounges must be close to the treatment rooms for an additional relaxation after treatments, with self-service drinks like tea and fruit juice or waters. The lightning system in this room should allow shade areas to create a calming and relaxing atmosphere (Figueiredo & Ladeiras, 2012; Remedios, 2011).

In this study, the Luxury Spa ***** also had more criteria and demanding facilities requirements, such as the existence of a retail area for cosmetic retail and merchandising, beauty nails bar, medical consultation office and a bar/restaurant to increase the opportunity of generating revenue. A retail area generally located close to the reception with a display of retail products to increase the spa sales products and spa business, being most of the time an impulse buy (Remedios, 2011). A spa cafe may be required to have a food and beverage component for waiting guests and can be added adjacent to the reception to allow sit-down dining and take-out (Chien, 2013).

However, other facilities are desirable to ensure the success of spa operation such as an office to the spa manager' private meetings and management tasks. In the highest category, the

spa design was considered with significant due to the sensorial stimulation that a spa must create to achieve a pleasant sensation and wellbeing through the five senses (Fox, 2017).

The infrastructures costs are usually very high representing a large amount of budget, so it is necessary to have a evident and realistic understanding of facilities and amenities. Usually, a spa consultant is required to identify and manage the quantity of variables that are intrinsic in spa design and allow all consultants to begin with the same guiding principle (Chien, 2013; Remedios, 2011; Wisnom & Capozio, 2012). When planning a spa, the type of services and the level of luxury is also a concern from the start. Must take the demographics of location and the demands of space into consideration to create a spa philosophy. A successful design captures the historical references and creates a total sensorial experience being important to consider the local culture, geographical location and operational intent to define the needs of that locality; even in the resorts the aim is to capture the native exotic qualities of that particular region (Remedios, 2011).

According to the spa services criteria obtained in this study, a clear differentiation between categories is observed, relative to the spa services offered in the brochure and price list, being highlighted that the higher the category the more demanding are the number and type of services in the spa supply. In all categories, it is required to use spa terms and nomenclature in the brochure and price list. The existence of spa programmes with compatibility between treatments and combining different services and activities in the lodging unit is required from the Upscale Spa **** category. A good combination of treatments will be for example a body scrub followed by a full body relaxing massage with aromas blended together for a relaxing,

calming effect (Fox, 2015; Howard & Vincent, 2011).

A spa sensorial stimulation can also be provided by aromatisation of social areas and treatment rooms being this only required in the Luxury Spa ***** category. The inhalation of aromas from cosmetics, vaporisers and burners have an important role in the relaxation and wellbeing experience (Howard & Vincent, 2011). Many companies recognize that aromas may have a very important role to create a “finger print” of brand recognition in the customer’s memory (Fox, 2015). The latest research shows that our ability to recognise a scent is greater than recognising a visual image, this is because the smell has an important relationship with memory and emotions making it easy for us to be transported to a time and place, without trying to remember it and also due to the limbic system in our brain that memorizes the smells and controls and/or modifies our emotions (Howard & Vincent, 2011; Wisnom & Capozio, 2012).

The services prices are required to be higher in the Luxury Spa ***** however, also in this category it is required to organize a customised treatment programme by preference of the client/guest. The service quality and products brand needs to reflect the quality and philosophy of the spa (Fox, 2015; Howard & Vincent, 2011).

The spa service has a fundamental relation with customer service quality, so was observed that all the three spa categories must keep available the brochure and price list in a visible place for costumers to take. To new clients/guests must be offered a spa tour to explain the best use and get the most benefit from the spa facilities. To evaluate customer service satisfaction, a questionnaire must be sent by email to the clients/guests, in the highest category. All categories must provide information about the equipment’ utilization without technical

supervision. In the Upscale Spa ***** and Luxury Spa ***** categories, all staff members must treat the client/guest by name whenever possible, the spa receptionists and therapists must recommend services and products according to the client’ needs and preferences. The customer service employees must be engaged in communication with spa clients to sell treatments and products; one of the major factors that drive customer satisfaction is great customer service; the most important factor of a pleasurable spa experience (Buchner, Snelling, & Cohen, 2011). To send an email with appreciation by the client visit and suggesting the subscription of the spa newsletter is a good way to keep in contact and updated information about spa to all customers.

In the Luxury Spa ***** category a guest book must be provided a guest book for registration of costumers’ comments, it must be available for costumers’ observation. During the costumers’ visit, the spa manager should meet them to understand their needs and expectations and promote and facilitate a loyalty relationship. The costumers must always be accompanied from the check-in at the reception to the dressing rooms and after treatments; the therapists must accompany client/guests to the relaxation room. All the spa events and information must be sent by email to the clients to promote, spa promotions, open days, etc., and remind them about the spa. Additionally, a useful tool to evaluate the customer service quality is the use of a “mystery client” – trainer of a spa cosmetic brand who is entitled to have a treatment as a normal client being anonymous to the therapists, to observe all details of treatment’ protocol and to determine if it is performed according to the protocol given. These criteria relative to the spa customer service can be use full as spa management tool for client’s attraction, loyalty and marketing strategy to increase the spa revenue.

Managerial implications

This study's findings will help spa managers, spa experts, stakeholders to receive updated information and a new prototype instrument, regarding:

- spa classification criteria for each category, e.g., infrastructures, human resources, spa services and security procedures;
- spa design guidelines for architects, constructors and operators by a logical and functional spa conception and project;
- orientations to the spa market segmentation through the classification Midscale Spa ^{***}, Upscale Spa ^{****} and Luxury Spa ^{*****};
- increase credibility and confidence between spa operators, health insurance companies and health institutions;
- promote the combination between different health and wellbeing services allowing the person to get the most health benefit from different areas;
- contribution for spa industry standard and also to increase Portugal brand as a health and wellbeing destination.

5. Conclusions

This spa classification includes the criteria for each category without specifying which ones are obligatory or optional. In the Portuguese legislation of touristic lodging unit's classification (Portaria_327/2008, 2008) only the optional criteria counts for the score in stars, being these units evaluated according to the customer service and facilities quality. Therefore, the obligatory criteria needs to be complied. Also, it is desirable to analyse the criteria of square metres for treatment rooms, and square metres for relaxation room obligatory to classify – and only the additional square metres score with points – considering the score process used in balconies and terraces for resorts that classifies in stars the resort unit by the Portuguese legislation.

Taking into consideration the Portuguese “Manual de boas práticas para Spa em Empreendimentos Turísticos” by Figueiredo and Ladeiras (2012) the equipment square metres were: Turkish Bath – capacity of two

persons per square metre and must be placed visibly to users the maximum of capacity; hydro-massage rooms – minimum of 9 m²; jet water rooms – 4 m x 1,5 m; sauna – minimum of 9 m² and relaxation room – minimum of 15 m². In this specific criterion, the authors suggest for future investigation to analyse if these minimum measurements should be obligatory and only bigger facilities are entitled to additional score to classify.

In the Portuguese legislation about the touristic lodging unit's classification the spa could score 10 points in all categories, the only request is to have a minimum of 4 equipment, so, this is a fact that is not requested any differentiation between the spas and its facilities. This proposal for spas classification clearly showed that there was a distinction between categories with differentiation in the minimum equipment, facilities and services. The spa infrastructures/facilities criteria could contribute with guidelines to the spa design for

architects, constructors and operators by providing a logical and functional spa conception and project with orientations to the spa market segmentation.

This classification could also contribute to spa supply in the touristic market and promote a connexion between medical tourism and health and wellbeing tourism. The spa classification could enhance the credibility and confidence between spa operators, health insurance companies and health institutions, also could promote the combination of different health and wellbeing services allowing the person to get the most health benefit from different areas.

Lastly, the Portuguese Tourism Board could also adopt the same procedure as the France Government: France Government delegates to a private company an annual inspection to their spas that reports then to Tourism Board. If also applied also in Portugal this could be an important contribution for spa regulation and standard, also to contribute for the distinction and confidence in Portugal as a destination of health and wellbeing tourism.

Although the current study provides valuable insights into spa classification as a management tool for spa service and design,

should mention several limitations. First, the reduced numbers of spa experts in Portugal. Second, the use of online surveys highly reduces the response rate and increases the number of deceptive responses. Finally, the double round methodology decreases the number of experts' participation in the second round and rushed responses.

Future research needs to validate the methodology with more experts and at least one more survey round (e.g., three rounds). The use of face-to-face data collection seems to be more realistic once the use of online surveys promotes unreflective and rushed responses. Additionally, the authors also suggest future investigation to study the spa demand domain, to assess the significance of the spa classification to the spa-goers. Furthermore, for future research to analyse the inclusion of other criteria and/or completing the existing one, define which criteria must be obligatory and optional to final score classification. Finally, some criteria with subjective interpretation as the existence of spa design with sophisticated ambiance and sensorial appealing to the five senses must be defined in future investigations with guidelines to facilitate its evaluation.

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ANEXO

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