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## Shaming and socially responsible online engagement

### Abstract

The implementation of social media environments has exacerbated the use and visibility of degrading language and imagery, and shaming in online spaces is often different from that in face-to-face environments. Those who shame can hide behind anonymity or create images that are not associated with any one person, but that target a specific person or group of people. This research investigates ways in which shaming is used in social media and develops an argument for why and how it must be addressed within the learning environment. Teachers and students, working collaboratively, can create learning environments, including face-to-face and online interactions that involve positive digital citizenship, quality learning, and increasingly advanced communication skills.

**Key words:** memes, digital citizenship, online communication, popular media

### Introduction

In 1976 Richard Dawkins<sup>1</sup> coined the term ‘meme’ to describe how certain ideas spread to become part of a common belief structure. He argued that whether the idea

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The selfish gene 30th Anniversary Edition*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press) (2006), p. 199.

is true or not, it often comes to be seen as valid. While the idea of the meme was not meant for the digital social networking age, it has been co-opted and used to combine short ideas with imagery. Dawkins<sup>2</sup> sees this as a valid use because “the meaning is not that far away from the original”. Social networking sites (SNS) are not only used for personal communications, but also for school activities in which individuals use language and imagery for communication. While the majority of posts are often innocuous, some can be hurtful and damaging, even visually depicting hateful and violent acts<sup>3</sup>. Such posts break down the core purpose of SNS, which is to spread engagement, connectedness, and social development.

When scanning social media feeds, readers will be hard-pressed not to find posts, memes, and videos degrading specific demographics and communities. From images of two women wearing t-shirts with “This is what a Feminist Looks like”, which has text below the image stating “Feminist: When no guy wants to touch you”, to imperatives like “The smell of cigarettes and shitty cologne, COME OUT PERSIANS WE KNOW YOU ARE HERE”, social media is used to shame ‘others’ from a wide swath of global culture. The constant flow of humiliating and potentially violent information presented on sites with quick reposts and little analysis, encouraging ‘likes’, ‘favourites’, or other positive reinforcements makes such posts appear innocuous. The simple act of posting and reposting declarations of inequity and dominance has reinvigorated the role of shaming in public environments.

While language has often been used to devalue and disempower others, the implementation of SNS environments has exacerbated the use and visibility of degrading language and imagery. Bitch, faggot, retard (including fucktard and other variations), and other defamatory monikers are used not only to shame the individuals to whom the language is aimed, but also to degrade the populations the words are meant to represent. By comparing someone to another group with a negative connotation, composers of information are implicitly stating that the groups to whom the individual is compared are worth less than the composer is and, as an extension, the general population<sup>4</sup>. The stigma of marginalization often leads to disengaging from the medium and decreasing the engagement, connectedness, and social development of those marginalized. Technologies, as dis-emancipatory engines, can often increase the scope

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<sup>2</sup> Olivia Solon, “Richard Dawkins on the internet's hijacking of the word ‘meme,’” <http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2013-06/20/richard-dawkins-memes>, date accessed 28 July, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Dean Hindman, “Rethinking intersectionality: Towards an understanding of discursive marginalization,” *New Political Science* 33:2 (2011); Brandy Johanson-Sebera, Julia Wilkins, “The Uses and Implications of the Term “Retarded” on YouTube,” *Review of Disability Studies: An International Journal* 6:4 (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. (New York: Simon and Schuster) (1963); Foucault Michel, *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason*. (New York: Vintage Books) (1988).

and effect of this marginalization and shackle the ‘others’ to the negative connotations for as long as the technologies retain data.

## SNS Inquiry and Methods

This research began as a study in shaming targeted at children with disabilities in online spaces. However, as the study progressed, the inclusion of different demographics and self-shaming—because of its impact within the social media platforms for the original poster and the audiences who read the posts—became apparent. The method of data collection for this research was qualitative in nature, drawing from memes posted on SNS by reviewing feeds in various SNS. The 124 examples of visual shaming in memes were collected over the course of one year, from 2014-2015, from various social media and online organizations including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, the Secret app, the YikYak app, Whisper, BuzzFeed, and others. Samples were selected by reviewing memes that focused on marginalized demographics, such as memes that used women, people with disabilities, or sexual orientation as their object of ridicule. The examples were collected by two researchers, one in Arizona, the other in Maryland. For location specific apps, like Secret, YikYak, and Whisper, samples were collected while in various locations, especially near college and university campuses, including Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, New Mexico, Minnesota, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, to determine if location was a mitigating factor in shaming. The research revealed that location did not have an impact on the types of shaming or the amounts of shaming that occurred, but was focused more on demographic specificity. For instance, African Americans were often targeted in the Mid-Atlantic region of the US while they were not targeted elsewhere. The researchers then used content analysis of the text and images, through a social semiotic lens, to determine how the content focused on marginalized peoples and the ‘othering’ of those individuals. As the researchers approached the research with predefined ideas about the effects and creation of the communication, it was determined that the social semiotic approach would allow a better way of assessing how the images create marginalization and othering, rather than the subconscious biased approach of the researchers. The social semiotic approach is, as Jewitt and Oyama state, “a description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images, and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Carey Jewitt, Rumiko Oyama, “Visual meaning: A social semiotic approach,” in *Handbook of visual analysis*, ed. Theo Van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt, (New York: Sage) (2001), p. 134.

The researchers used content analysis to develop understandings of the visual data collected. Margolis and Pauwels suggest that in visual research content analysis is “a taxonomic and counting strategy for determining the relative frequency of certain representations within groups of images”<sup>6</sup>. Content analysis is “based on a number of rules and procedures that must be rigorously followed for the analysis of images or texts to be reliable”<sup>7</sup>. The resultant themes from the content analysis are then used to answer the questions below that the researchers posed to determine the validity of the research being conducted:

1. Are memes being used to shame?
2. How are memes being used to shame?
3. How do technologies compound shame?
4. How can we—as researchers and teachers—change the ways memes and other online communications are used to decrease shaming in online spaces?

In order to answer these questions, understanding social media, shaming, and memes had to be explored, as did determining a method for working with learners to combat shaming and develop SNS environments free from marginalization.

## Social Media and Homogeneity

Social media has revolutionized the ways we can communicate with one another. From simple text-oriented messages through long-form writing to visual communication, the advent of social media has changed the ways we share and interact. Not only has the shape of the communication changed, but also the speed of that communication has changed. For instance, in 2004, when Janet Jackson entertained during the half-time of Super Bowl XXXVIII, Facebook had yet to launch (it launched 3 days later), and very few SNS as we know them today existed (discussions, listservs, portals, forums, etc., did, but did not have the wide reach and immediate impact of today’s SNS). In the next few hours or days, the event permeated media on American television, radio, and newspapers, and most of the international public did not hear about it for at least a day or more. Today, however, events and conversation about events travel instantaneously. In 2012, for instance, US Presidential candidate Mitt Romney commented during a televised (and shared online) debate about “binders full of women”. While he was still discussing the topic, Twitter exploded with comments

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Margolis, Jeremy Rowe, “Methodological Approaches to Disclosing Historic Photographs,” in *The Sage handbook of visual research methods*, ed. Eric Margolis and Jeremy Rowe, (Los Angeles: Sage) (2011), p. 348.

<sup>7</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. (Los Angeles: Sage) (2012), p. 81.

and a hashtag (#bindersfullofwomen) and less than a day later a Tumblr page was sharing memes about the topic ridiculing and critiquing Romney for his comment. Because of SNS, the immediacy of critiques and shaming occurs much more quickly without much time for processing or assessing the validity of claims or critiques. Not only does it occur more quickly, but because of the homogeneity of most users' feeds, many social media users make an assumption that their audience is just like them and will consequently, laugh, joke, or ridicule just as they would. As Kane et al. writes

If people are limited to establishing similar formal connections with diverse sets of others including trusted confidants, casual acquaintances, and family members in their social networks, the platform homogenizes all these relational connections as being equivalent (e.g., friends, contacts).<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, technologies such as SNS environments often encourage homogenized thinking and have been created to increase levels of connectedness and belonging, the sort of space Eli Pariser<sup>9</sup> called a 'filter bubble'. He argues, "news-filtering algorithms narrow what we know, surrounding us in information that tends to support what we already believe"<sup>10</sup>. However, this goes beyond algorithms and works within all social structures and—because of that—the most salient theory to address this concept of mediated society is *habitus*. Habitus addresses the level at which the ways we classify the world in social capital are generated by structural features of that same social world. While Pierre Bourdieu was not speaking to the interactions within media, nor social media at all, his explanations of the ways we interact because of the environmental structural features is an important way to discuss our communicative processes in social media, and to define the reasons shaming occurs so frequently in social media communications. As Bourdieu writes

...the point of view is a perspective, a partial subjective vision (subjectivist moment); but it is at the same time a view, a perspective, taken from a point, from a determinate position in an objective social space (objectivist moment).<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in social media, dis-emancipatory communication is subjected to the perspective that is already defined by the system and which, once disseminated, defines the space in which the communication takes place and how that communication is defined, and

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<sup>8</sup> Gerald C. Kane, Maryam Alavi, Giuseppe Joe Labianca, Steve Borgatti, "What's different about social media networks? A framework and research agenda," *MIS Quarterly*, (2012), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Eli Pariser, *The filter bubble: How the new personalized web is changing what we read and how we think*. (New York: Penguin) (2011).

<sup>10</sup> Eli Pariser, <https://backchannel.com/facebook-published-a-big-new-study-on-the-filter-bubble-here-s-what-it-says-ef31a292da95#.w42q9k6dg>, date accessed 4 July 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu Pierre, "What makes a social class? On the theoretical and practical existence of Groups", *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32 (1987), p. 13.

speaks to the ways that social media platforms naturally create space for the designation of ‘other’. Being part of an ‘out-group’—those who are different from the perceived norms—requires a sense of otherness, being other than ordinary. Foucault explains the term ‘othering’ as how social groups tend to define themselves through the cultural boundaries of inclusion and exclusion<sup>12</sup>. This does not mean that we have no free will over what we post, but that SNS platforms create space for the designation of ‘other’ because of the ways they encourage engagement. The ways people communicate in social media and how some of these communication practices lead to the marginalization of individuals and groups is because of the ways SNS encourage users to share and create for automatic feedback.

Marginalization, which comes from ‘othering’ and stigmas, which Goffman explains as an individual who does not measure up to the normative expectations and righteously presented demands set by society, is usually discussed with a political stance on inequalities<sup>13</sup>. It attempts to fractionalize the different groups to which an individual may belong and then deconstruct them. The process of fracturing and deconstructing focuses on descriptive traits of individuals and this focus can “obscure the deep-seated power relations that help to produce marginalized subjects”<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, when someone is ‘othered’ and described as wrong or outside what is allowed, power is shifted and the individual is then marginalized. Hindman continues to explain that these individuals within marginalized groups can also be silenced or have their identity overlooked<sup>15</sup>.

Goffman also describes how a shameful gap forms between virtual and actual social identity (not to be confused with a gap between online and offline identity, but as a constructed versus actual social identity) for those individuals whose stigma is fully visible because the norms that define the ordinary are very obviously not met<sup>16</sup>. The continual interaction of virtual and actual social identities are like a play whose main character is always in flux, always changing, and not always fitting into the norm or the stigmatized. However, the recognition that we each have this ability to play the other side is not typical knowledge or awareness for the majority of individuals. If there is awareness, there also exists the unwillingness to accept that my identity could just as easily be shaped by or fit into other. Stigma management is a process that occurs wherever societal norms are set. This type of management of what is construed as ordinary and what is ‘other’ happens in SNS. The concepts of power that are held by the group that is presenting and shaping the ordinary have far-reaching markets.

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault.

<sup>13</sup> Erving Goffman.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Dean Hindman, “Rethinking intersectionality: Towards an understanding of discursive marginalization,” *New Political Science* 33:2 (2011), p. 191.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Dean Hindman, p. 191.

<sup>16</sup> Erving Goffman.

YouTubers have followers that allow them power to dictate and perpetuate what they choose to present as part of the ordinary ‘in’ group. Through this presentation of ordinary, a sense of belonging is created for the in-group that segregates the ‘other’. ‘Other’ becomes the out-group, the target, the bullied, or the shamed. The hand-in-hand character of ‘other’ and ordinary can be observed through their symbiotic existence.

## Shaming in Popular Media

Shaming in media tends to occur in ways or places that make another—often the protagonist—character seem more likeable, sympathetic, or understandable. For instance, in “Of Mice and Men”, in both the literature and film versions, George is seen as the character who must endure the actions of Lennie, his companion, even as he looks out for him and advocates for him. He does this all while shaming him, calling him a “crazy bastard,” “poor bastard,” or “crazy fool”. Indeed, Steinbeck exacerbates this view of Lennie by labelling Lennie as wild at the same time he addresses Lennie as an innocent who has a whimpering cry<sup>17</sup>.

Shaming occurs in all types of media, especially pop culture media. In a popular song from 2004, the word ‘retarded’ is used to indicate a simplistic view of the singer’s emotions:

Oh, therapy, can you please fill the void?  
Am I **retarded** or am I just overjoyed?<sup>18</sup>

This use of language is indicative of the ways that shaming occurs not only of others, but of the self, indicated in the title of the album from which this song originates, *American Idiot*, inflating the concept of self-shaming and/or ridiculing within this piece. In fact, popular music is often used to ridicule, shame, marginalize, or stigmatize others, but to also call out that shaming. In 2012, Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, in their song “Same Love”, sing

Call each other faggots behind the keys of a message board,  
A word routed in hate, yet our genre still ignores it<sup>19</sup>

As the duo contend, language is often used in musical genres to promote hate and shaming without any regard to the actual influences of the concepts behind the words

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<sup>17</sup> John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, (New York: Penguin) (1994).

<sup>18</sup> Billie Joe Armstrong, “American Idiot,” *american idiot*. (Oakland, CA) (2004).

<sup>19</sup> Ben Haggerty, Ryan Lewis, Mary Lambert, Same Love, *The Heist*. (Seattle, WA: Macklemore, LLC) (2012).

or of the words themselves.

The influence of words and conceptualization of the words is also explored in the film “Tropic Thunder”. Communicating the idea of when it is ok for an actor to “go full retard” is a segment performed by Robert Downey Jr.’s character (while his character is also in blackface, which is a double commentary on concepts of shaming in popular media). Downey’s character discusses the different performances of retarded, and what is or is not acceptable. Throughout this discussion the ‘other’ is defined at varying levels: full retard (Sean Penn’s portrayal in “I Am Sam”), slow and maybe retarded (Tom Hank’s in “Forrest Gump”), and appearing retarded, but not (Dustin Hoffman in “Rain Man”). Dumb, moronic, and imbecilic are terms set up as boundaries between these levels within this movie. The resulting commentary is that one can “never go full retard” or will go home empty-handed (from the Oscars), resulting in being less than the norm. This language is so fleshed out and defined that it attempts to encompass an entire population of individuals.

While these may seem rather banal and help to create an ethos about the characters and/or artists, when combined with the onslaught of this type of communication and the proliferation of media such as ‘shock jocks’ and political pundits who use shaming as a means of communication, much of society begins to see shaming as something that is the norm. Increasingly, we not only see or hear about shaming in popular media, but also see it in the places we congregate online.

## **Dis-emancipatory Technologies**

In the early years of online activities, much emphasis was placed on the democratization of online communications. The online world was thought to be a space in which the oppressed and marginalized would have an equal voice because of the ability to post without preconceived notions of who anyone was. However, as more users become engaged in online communications, the opposite has shown to be true and online communications have often been much more marginalizing than face-to-face situations. The data collected for this research supports this reasoning. The use of SNS environments has not only allowed users to post memes that would shame others, but to do so without insight or analysis of what they are posting and how it affects others. SNS have created a space for speed and reach of shaming that was limited prior to the development of the technologies. Analysis of the posts shows that there is little oversight or questioning of posts as they occur and, more often, an acquiescence by audiences’ uses of ‘like’, ‘favourite’, or other ways of acceptance. For instance, in a posting of a meme with an image of the “Mad Men” character Don Draper laughing with a drink in his hand; the overlaying text is “TOLD GIRLFRIEND THAT MOM IS DEAF

SO SPEAK LOUD AND SLOW / TOLD MOM THAT GIRLFRIEND IS RETARDED”. No comments were made on the post, but six people, at the time of the capture, had ‘liked’ the post. The lack of critique or thoughtful engagement in the use of two disabilities (deafness and cognitive delay) is common throughout the use of shaming memes in SNS.

In addition, analysis of the data indicates that the status of the poster (anonymous or otherwise) does not have an impact on the dissemination of visual artefacts that use shaming language. For instance, SNS users on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, where names, whether official or nonofficial, are connected to accounts, materials using shaming language is posted to those sites just as often as those in anonymous apps like Secret, Whisper, and YikYak. The types of shaming did not change. For example, one Facebook user, known by one of the researchers, posted an image with the words “Apple goes full retard”, while on Whisper, one user posted an image with the words “Taco Bell, you are the most retarded restaurant even to exists [sic]”. The use of the word ‘retard’ in these two instances is used to shame the companies for their actions and/or presence, equating the companies to those with cognitive disabilities, a marginalized group.

Memes in online spaces, images with words that are shared widely in SNS, have contributed to the dis-emancipatory element of SNS technologies. Not only do they shame those they are directed at, but shame those they use to create an ‘other’ environment. Instead of having a more open and freeing environment, online spaces have become more restrictive in some ways because of the silencing of those who are marginalized and further silencing of those who are being equated with the already marginalized.

## **Digital Global Citizenship**

While we have determined that the act of being anonymous versus non-anonymous does not affect the outcomes of posts, the ways that social media users regard social media as private or public may have some influence on what is shared. For instance, one social media user was clearly thinking about her audience on Facebook when she posted “So, based on recent photos of myself, my best Halloween costume option is Jabba the Hutt”. Not only was there the expectation that her audience would sympathize, but that they would lend support to her plight, as she shamed herself and compared herself to a very large fantastical character from a movie. She did not post the same message on Twitter, where her tweets would be public (her Twitter account is public). What this means to the researchers is that she has a clear understanding of what is public and private, even as she engages in self-shaming practices.

However, ‘others’, who may not be familiar with understanding the differences between social media audiences and the thresholds of private and public discourse, may post information that would create barriers to discussion and/or disagreement. For instance, one user posted an image of the actor Sam Elliott with the following text: “Why the hell should I push one for English? When you’re just going to transfer me to someone that don’t know how to speak it... [sic]”. This user seems to have assumed that her audience would be amenable to this sentiment, that they would not notice the obvious grammatical issues in the text, and that they would naturally associate the dialectical shift with the characters, western cowboy-types, that Elliott often plays. In addition, the user has made a definitive statement about a marginalized demographic: those who do not speak English within the United States that would not have a voice in the post unless they were willing to out themselves as ‘others’. She may not even realize that her audience, especially in globally available venues like Facebook and Twitter, will have people from that marginalized group.

Because some online users may not be aware of the subtle shifts in audience, private/public discussions, and the ramifications of the speed and reach of SNS (global audiences who can view a posting within seconds of being posted), educators have a responsibility to address social media and the marginalization that occurs within it with a focus on digital global citizenship. Instructors must educate more conscientious citizens who promote positive interactions and eschew the negative effects of ‘othering’ and shaming. SNS plays a large part in students’ lives and instructors must be acutely aware of the lives their students live outside of the learning environment. A social justice approach to education suggests that instructors bring in issues their students are facing and address them directly. Freire argues that for the greatest impact on learning, individuals must be prepared to “perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality”<sup>20</sup>. Teaching about digital global citizenship and learners’ roles within global communities will help them analyse situations in SNS more quickly and assess the appropriateness of posts and reposts. Rather than reposting, the lessons learned through a social justice or digital global citizenship lens will help students understand the ramifications of posts that are created to shame.

To address issues of othering, the learning environment must be created with a vision of citizenship that bolsters individual rights and makes apparent the responsibility of securing a common good<sup>21</sup> with a view to how students fit within a global community. The focus on social justice requires a renewed examination of the role technology plays in the learner’s life and her connection with others outside of her immediate locality. Because technology is not neutral, and is, in this case, more dis-

<sup>20</sup> Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing) (2000), p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Kathy Hytten, Silvia C. Bettez, “Understanding education for social justice,” *The Journal of Educational Foundations* 25:1/2 (2011).

emancipatory, it must be dissected to understand better why and how it is being used and who is affected by that use. Technology often fails to meet the standards of social justice due to lack of equity in participation, empowerment of individuals and groups, and the continuation of oppression and unequal treatment<sup>22</sup>.

The inclusion of SNS in the learning environment (and beyond) has implications that must be addressed in the curriculum. Educators must work with students to determine the best practices for communicating and collaborating with others, especially when one understands the global nature of digital communications. Ribble<sup>23</sup> outlines nine themes of digital citizenship that should be taught within three overarching topics: Respect, Educate and Protect. The nine themes include digital access, digital commerce, digital communication, digital literacy, digital etiquette, digital Law, digital rights & responsibilities, digital health & wellness, and digital security. However, it is important to consider how these themes can be expanded to include the notion of global digital citizenship as an important curriculum that supports individuals in becoming more globally aware, having understandings of cultural differences when engaging and collaborating with others via digital communication tools. The chasm created by online communications can limit understandings of connectedness and requires that individuals know how these interactions have the same consequences (if not greater) as those in their immediate circles.

## Conclusions

In order to create more emancipatory environments, there is a need to create spaces to understand how SNS users are taught to navigate complex social situations in social media platforms, how to engage with others, and how to promote positive reinforcement for others to interact in the global communities SNS provide. Working with learners, educators, developers, and thought leaders to work together to create more socially acceptable welcoming spaces will encourage connections with those outside of the composer's localized community.

While the infrastructure of social media is naturally conducive to creating communities of like-minded interactions, composers in online spaces should determine how to navigate successfully the systems in order to develop positive interactions that neither shame nor 'other' those who are not a part of their immediate online communities. Communicating something that shames or has adverse effects on others

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<sup>22</sup> Kathy Hytten, Silvia C. Bettez, (2011).

<sup>23</sup> Mike Ribble, "Nine Elements," [http://www.digitalcitizenship.net/Nine\\_Elements.html](http://www.digitalcitizenship.net/Nine_Elements.html), date accessed 15 February 2016.

is not restricted to an immediate audience in today's hyper-connected world, but can live on long after the original posting in a global context. In order to not only understand the inherent problems with negative compositions, individuals need to understand what it means to be a part of a community in which they may not know everyone their communications will reach, how to navigate that successfully, and how to create positive spaces for anyone. The world is no longer a huge space in which people 5,000 miles away cannot hear your voice or see your actions. We should learn to be conscientious citizens promoting positive interactions and eschew negative effects of 'othering' and shaming.

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