

Gender Representation In X Posts by Unicef

By

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Abstract

This study examined gender representation in X posts by UNICEF, focusing on how boys and girls are portrayed across various themes and messaging categories. Utilising a content analysis approach, the research analysed the top posts from UNICEF's X page between December 1, 2023, and June 1, 2024, to identify and compare themes, messaging strategies, and audience engagement. The findings revealed a significant disparity in gender representation, with posts predominantly featuring girls and less attention given to boys. Themes such as health, education, and protection are explored, with girls often highlighted in advocacy and health-related posts, while boys receive minimal representation. The study also evaluated engagement metrics, noting higher average engagement for posts about boys despite their lower frequency. The research advocated more balanced gender representation in UNICEF's digital content, recommending increased focus on boys' issues, diversified thematic messaging, and enhanced visual storytelling to better align with UNICEF's gender equality goals. By problematising these issues, this study, aside contributing to an understanding of UNICEF's social media strategy, reflects on the organisation's broader gender equality objectives, and offers insights for improving gender representation in online advocacy.

Keywords: Gender representation, UNICEF, X, audience engagement, gender bias

Introduction

Over the past century, gender issues have evolved significantly, shaped by political discourse, philosophical exploration, and the realities of individuals whose identities do not conform to the binary definitions of sex. This evolution has led to a broader understanding of gender, encompassing a range of identities beyond the traditional male-female dichotomy. Consequently, conversations around gender representation have become even more relevant today. However, due to its historical origins in feminist movements, gender representation has primarily focused on women's issues, striving for equality and challenging patriarchal norms (NCBI, 2023). Over time, this focus has expanded to include men's experiences and the broader spectrum of gender identities, acknowledging the complexities and intersections inherent in gender discourse (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). This expansion ensures that diverse narratives of gendered expression are recognised and valued in public and media spaces.

The advent of social media in the early 2000s transformed how discussions around gender representation unfold. Platforms such as Twitter now X, Facebook, Tumblr, and later Instagram provided individuals with unprecedented opportunities to amplify their voices, critique media portrayals, and advocate for more inclusive representations (Livingstone & Third, 2017). X, in particular, has played a pivotal role in shaping public discourse, serving as a platform where ideas are cultivated and societal issues - gender representation included - are reflected. Notably, movements like #MeToo, which gained global attention on X, spotlighted issues of sexual harassment and assault, predominantly affecting women, but also acknowledging the experiences of men and

non-binary individuals (UN Women, 2023). Through the use of hashtags and viral posts, X has become a powerful tool for amplifying marginalised voices, mobilising communities, and driving societal change regarding gender equality and representation.

UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, is a globally recognised organisation committed to advocating for the rights and well-being of children (UNICEF, 2022). However, even in organisations as influential as UNICEF, gender biases can emerge, especially in how they address the development needs of boys and girls. Neglecting the issues faced by one gender at the expense of the other can have undesirable consequences for current and future societies (Luzzio, 2020). As a key player in shaping public opinion and political thought, UNICEF's communication strategies wield significant influence on how issues related to gender are perceived and addressed. By utilising its platform on X, UNICEF holds the power to mould societal attitudes toward gender equality, highlighting both the challenges and progress in achieving balanced representation for children—an essential step toward effective advocacy for their needs.

This study aims to analyse gender representation in UNICEF's posts on X, investigating how the organisation portrays gender issues. By examining the content and themes of these posts, the paper seeks to uncover patterns and biases, contributing to a broader understanding of how influential organisations like UNICEF can drive more inclusive and equitable narratives in digital spaces. This research not only highlights the prevailing state of gender representation in UNICEF's social media communications, but also offers insights into how these narratives can be improved to further promote gender equality.

Statement of the Problem

On May 16th, 2024, the International Day of the Boy Child - a UN-adopted observance dedicated to highlighting the challenges faced by boys globally; passed largely unacknowledged by major organisations on X (formerly Twitter). This lack of attention sparked widespread frustration, underscoring a perceived disparity compared to similar events that focus on females.

One user, @jayy_ayofe, commented, "... Men are complaining because of the sheer silence of organisations, companies, groups, and individuals, who, at the mention of any day concerning females, will run up campaigns, nice initiatives, and even packages to commemorate such days. There's an obvious neglect of the male child and it's glaring." Another user echoed this sentiment, stating, "Yesterday was the International Day of the Boy Child. No WHO announcement, no trend sponsored by major brands. It's an uncomfortable truth, but the world doesn't care about the boy child, and what you experience is the outcome. When you neglect something, it's bound to wither" (@Devttorney, 2024).

Despite these vocal concerns, influential bodies such as UNESCO, the World Health Organisation (WHO), and notably the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) did not address the International Day of the Boy Child on X. This omission raises important questions about their commitment to gender representation. UNICEF, renowned for its global leadership in child protection and inclusion, notably overlooked this significant day. The absence of recognition for the International Day of the Boy Child by major organisations, especially UNICEF, underscores concerns about potential disparities in gender representation. This silence suggests that issues affecting boys may not receive the same level of advocacy and attention as those affecting girls. Addressing these patterns is crucial to ensuring that efforts to prioritise the needs of all children, regardless of gender, are inclusive, balanced, and representative in both global advocacy and digital media.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. compare the frequency of UNICEF's representation of boys and girls in its X posts;
- ii. identify the themes and messaging surrounding boys and girls in UNICEF's X posts;
- iii. evaluate audience engagement with UNICEF's X posts about boys and girls.

Literature Review

Gender Representation

Gender representation refers to the ways in which individuals, especially boys, girls, men, women, and non-binary people, are portrayed in various social, political, and cultural contexts, including media, literature, and institutions. For decades, feminist scholars have analysed the unequal and often stereotypical portrayals of women in media and public discourse, arguing that such portrayals reinforce patriarchal norms and perpetuate

gender inequalities (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). Historically, women were underrepresented in leadership roles and often depicted in domestic or sexualized roles in media, while men were associated with authority, power, and rationality (Luzzio, 2020).

However, as discussions around gender expanded, scholars such as Boeri, Mount, Ferguson, Desai & Kelly (2026) have advocated the importance of examining not just women's representation but also that of men and other gender identities. Men, for instance, have increasingly been the subject of critical analysis regarding their representation in media, particularly in relation to issues of toxic masculinity, vulnerability, and emotional suppression (Luzzio, 2020). Furthermore, non-binary and transgender identities have become more visible in media, prompting deeper analysis into how these identities are framed and understood in public discourse (Halberstam, 2018). The recognition of non-binary and transgender persons has been critical in dismantling the binary notion of gender and fostering inclusivity (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021).

In recent years, scholars have emphasised the intersectionality of gender representation, considering factors such as race, class, and sexuality in the portrayal of individuals (Crenshaw, 2021). Gender representation is thus understood not only as an issue of visibility but also in terms of how gender identities intersect with other social categories to either amplify or diminish marginalisation. Media representations of women of colour, for example, often reflect both racial and gendered stereotypes that limit their roles and agency (Hooks, 2015).

In the digital age, gender representation in social media has received significant scholarly attention. Online platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram offer new ways for individuals to express their gender identities and challenge traditional narratives. However, social media has also been critiqued for perpetuating harmful stereotypes through viral content and the commodification of gendered identities (Garimella, De Francisci Morales, Gionis, & Mathioudakis, 2018). The literature highlights that while social media can democratise voice and representation, it can also reinforce existing gender inequalities, especially when marginalised groups face online harassment or algorithmic biases that limit their visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018). For organisations like UNICEF, gender representation in their social media communications is critical in shaping public perceptions of gender equality and child advocacy. UNICEF's portrayal of gender roles can either reinforce traditional norms or challenge them by promoting more inclusive and balanced narratives that reflect the diverse realities of children globally. Understanding how organisations represent boys, girls, and non-binary children in digital spaces can provide insights into their commitment to gender equality (Gelles, 2023).

Social Media

Social media refers to digital platforms that allow users to create, share, and engage with content, including text, images, videos, and links, in real-time or asynchronously. Since the early 2000s, social media has revolutionised communication by offering unprecedented opportunities for individuals, organisations, and governments to engage with the public (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X have been instrumental in fostering global discussions on topics such as politics, social justice, and gender representation (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2018).

In its early stages, social media primarily served as a networking tool, allowing users to connect with friends and family. However, its scope quickly expanded to include activism, business marketing, and political engagement (Luzzio, 2020). Social media's role in political movements such as the Arab Spring and the #MeToo movement demonstrates its capacity to mobilise individuals and amplify voices that were previously marginalised by traditional media (Tufekci, 2017). X, for instance, has been central in promoting social movements, offering a platform for real-time discourse and the rapid spread of information.

One of the key features of social media is its ability to democratise information, giving users the power to challenge traditional gatekeepers of media such as news corporations and government agencies (Castells, 2015). This democratisation has, however, come with challenges. Misinformation, disinformation, deepfakes, hate speech, and algorithmic biases have raised concerns about the role of social media in shaping public opinion. Studies show that algorithms used by social media platforms can reinforce echo chambers, where users are exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs, further polarising societies (Pariser, 2011).

For organizations like UNICEF, social media provides an essential tool for engaging with the public on issues related to children's rights, health, and education. Through its X account, UNICEF communicates its advocacy efforts, shares updates on campaigns, and promotes awareness of global issues such as child poverty, gender equality, and access to education (UNICEF, 2023). The immediacy and reach of social media allow UNICEF to engage directly with diverse audiences, including policymakers, donors, and activists, while also providing a platform for marginalised voices.

However, the use of social media by influential organisations comes with the responsibility to ensure that their

messaging is inclusive and representative. As platforms that reach millions, these organisations must be mindful of how they frame issues, especially regarding gender, race, and class. Studies indicate that digital platforms often reflect societal biases, and without conscious effort, organisations can inadvertently perpetuate these biases in their communication strategies (Noble, 2018). Therefore, analysing how UNICEF uses social media to address gender representation is vital in assessing its role in advocating for more inclusive and equitable narratives in the digital space (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

UNICEF and Gender Equality

UNICEF is a global United Nations agency with influence in well over 190 countries, particularly on matters regarding the protection of children's rights, health, education and safety. In the discharge of these responsibilities since its establishment in 1946, UNICEF has through its advocacies prided itself as a home for children of all races and gender. The UNICEF Gender Equality 2023 Report, for instance, provides an overview of the organisation's efforts to achieve gender equality under its 2022–2025 Gender Action Plan.

The report highlights progress and challenges in promoting gender-responsive policies, with a focus on empowering adolescent girls and engaging boys and men as allies. Key strengths of the report include its life-course approach, which addresses gender inequality across developmental stages—from maternal health to social protection. This framework is essential for tackling the persistent and systemic nature of gender inequality. The report emphasises investments in adolescent girls, including programs like Skills4Girls, which offer education, vocational skills, and mentorship. It also highlights UNICEF's strategy of involving boys and men in gender equality efforts, recognising that lasting change requires transforming harmful gender norms.

A notable strength is UNICEF's shift from gender-sensitive to gender-transformative approaches, addressing structural barriers and entrenched norms. Examples include advocacy for gender parity and gender-responsive education, and grassroots mobilisation in countries like Ethiopia. The report also identifies challenges such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crises, and conflicts, which have stalled progress in some regions. Funding gaps for gender transformative programs, especially in gender-based violence prevention, are also noted. UNICEF's use of data-driven programming and its partnerships with various stakeholders, including governments and tech companies, underscore its commitment to addressing gender inequalities effectively. Overall, the report offers valuable insights into UNICEF's gender equality strategies, relevant for analysing its social media content. It provides a framework for assessing how UNICEF's X posts reflect its gender equality goals, particularly in promoting adolescent girls' empowerment and engaging boys as allies.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on two theories, namely: the Framing, and Representation theories.

Framing Theory

The Framing Theory, introduced by Erving Goffman (1974) and later expanded by Robert Entman (1993), explains how media frames information to influence how audiences interpret and understand that information. Frames are the lenses through which certain aspects of reality are highlighted, while others are downplayed or omitted, thereby shaping how an issue is perceived by the public. The strengths of the theory include its high adaptability, versatility, contextual nuance, and holistic approach. The weaknesses, however, include, conceptual ambiguity, difficulty in differentiating effects, and overemphasis on mass media.

In the context of this study, framing theory is relevant because it allows for an examination of how UNICEF's X posts frame gender. By analysing the themes and narratives that are emphasised in posts about boys and girls, the study can uncover the subtle ways in which gender roles are reinforced or challenged. If boys, for example, are consistently framed as leaders or problem-solvers, while girls are framed as beneficiaries or nurturers, this would reflect and potentially reinforce traditional gender norms. On the other hand, frames that depict boys and girls in non-stereotypical roles might suggest efforts to promote gender equality.

Representation Theory

Stuart Hall's (1997) Representation Theory focuses on how media constructs meaning and represents social identities, including gender. According to Hall, representation is not a passive reflection of reality, but an active process of meaning-making that can shape public perceptions and social norms. The strengths of the theory are in the fact that unlike older, passive transmission models of media consumption, Hall highlights how audiences are active interpreters. The theory also illustrates a clear correlation between representation and societal powers. On the other hand, critical theorists have berated the theory for its potential relativism, complexity of application,

overly critical perspective and underestimation of material realities.

This theory is particularly relevant to the study because UNICEF, as an influential global organisation, has the power to shape how boys and girls are perceived through its social media content. Representation theory allows the study to critically analyse how boys and girls are portrayed in these posts—whether traditional gender stereotypes are reinforced or if alternative, more equitable representations are offered. By understanding the way gender is constructed in these representations, the study can assess the broader implications of UNICEF's content in either perpetuating or challenging societal norms about gender.

Methodology

This study employs content analysis design to investigate gender representation in UNICEF's X (formerly Twitter) posts, integrating both the qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine and analyse the content UNICEF's X posts to interpret themes and patterns. Content analysis was also used to systematically review and glean insights into UNICEF's audience engagement related to gender representation. The approach combined qualitative thematic analysis with quantitative measurement of engagement metrics, including comments, reposts, likes, and views.

Data collection was conducted using X's advanced search tool on the web app, with personalisation and location features disabled to avoid bias. Initially, all posts categorised as "Top" between December 1, 2023, and June 1, 2024, were retrieved, yielding 30 posts. To refine the dataset for gender-specific analysis, the keyword "girl" was used, returning 24 posts. The search with the keyword "boy" yielded no posts. In total, 54 posts were identified, consisting of 29 posts about girls, 1 post about boys, and 24 posts with unspecified gender.

This method ensured that the study captured relevant content addressing gender-related themes, providing a detailed understanding of UNICEF's representation of boys and girls. The dataset included post content, engagement metrics (comments, reposts, likes, views), and posting time. This mixed-methods approach enabled a holistic analysis of both qualitative themes and quantitative engagement, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the representation of gender in UNICEF's X posts.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This study aimed to explore gender representation in UNICEF's X posts between December 1, 2023, and June 1, 2024, with a specific focus on frequency, thematic emphasis, messaging, and audience engagement. Data gleaned from the study are presented as follows:

Table I: Gender representation of girls and boys in UNICEF'S X posts.

Gender	Frequency
Boy	1
Girl	29
Unspecified Gender	24
Grand Total	54

Content Analysis 2025

Data on gender representation in UNICEF's X posts from December 1, 2023, to June 1, 2024, as seen in table one above, reveals a significant imbalance with girls the focus of 29 posts, while boys were featured in only one post.

Table II: Thematic representation of girls and boys in UNICEF'S X posts.

Themes	Boy	Girl	Unspecified Gender	Grand Total
Climate and Environment		1	1	2
Education and Technology		5		5
Equality and Gender		5		5
Health and Sanitation		13	3	16
Protection and Humanitarian Aid	1	5	20	26
Grand Total	1	29	24	54

Content Analysis 2025

The thematic analysis in table II reveals five key areas of focus: Protection and Humanitarian aid, Health and Sanitation, Education and Technology, Equality and Gender, and Climate and Environment, and showed a clear advantage to the female gender.

Table III: Message representation of girls and boys in UNICEF'S X posts.

Messaging	Boy	Girl	Unspecified Gender	Grand Total
Advocacy and Rights		7	1	8
Health and Hygiene		12	1	13
Technology and Innovation		2		2
Advocacy and Awareness	1	1	16	18
Advocacy and Hope		1	2	3
Advocacy and Solidarity			1	1
Education and Support		4	1	5
Advocacy and Achievement			1	1
Advocacy and Condemnation		1		1
Support and Action			1	1
Climate and Environment		1		1
Grand Total	1	29	24	54

Content Analysis 2025

The messaging data above further reinforce the thematic focus, again showing an overwhelming advantage for the female gender.

Table IV: Audience Engagement with UNICEF's X Posts about Boys and Girls.

Gender	Average Comments	Average Reposts	Average Likes	Average Views	Total Average
Boy	457	439	728	46,000	11,906
Girl	58	133	244	27,345	6,945
Unspecified Gender	510	3,047	5,752	245,208	63,629

Content Analysis 2025

The engagement analysis above is quite instructive. For instance, while data Posts about boys, were significantly fewer in number, they received higher average engagement across comments, reposts, and likes compared to posts about girls.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis above are the basis for the following discussions based on the research questions posed in the study
Research Question 1: **What is the comparative frequency of UNICEF's representation of boys and girls in its X posts?**

The data on gender representation in UNICEF's X posts from December 1, 2023, to June 1, 2024, as seen in table one above, reveals a significant imbalance. Girls were the focus of 29 posts, while boys were featured in only one post. Additionally, 24 posts did not specify any gender. This trend aligns with global gender advocacy movements that often prioritise the challenges faced by girls, particularly in areas such as education and health. From a Representation Theory perspective (Hall, 1997), media representation reflects and shapes societal attitudes and norms. The overrepresentation of girls in these posts may reinforce the narrative that girls are the primary beneficiaries of social aid, while boys remain underrepresented in the discussion. This imbalance mirrors UNICEF's broader objectives, as articulated in its 2023 Gender Equality Report, which emphasises empowering girls, especially in marginalised and vulnerable communities. However, such a skewed focus may risk perpetuating a one-sided narrative about gender, where boys' issues are largely overlooked.

Comparative studies on gender representation, such as those by Baily and Ellis (2021), argue that boys' vulnerabilities in crises, education, and health also require attention. Although UNICEF's emphasis on girls might aim to address longstanding gender disparities, failing to adequately represent boys could undermine the organisation's goals of achieving comprehensive gender equality. This finding points to the need for more balanced content that addresses the challenges faced by both boys and girls to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes that position boys as less vulnerable or in need of support.

Research question 2: What are the themes and messaging surrounding boys and girls in UNICEF's X posts?

The thematic analysis of the posts revealed five key areas of focus: Protection and Humanitarian aid, Health and Sanitation, Education and Technology, Equality and Gender, and Climate and Environment. Across these themes, girls were predominantly linked to issues of education, health, and gender equality, while boys were almost entirely absent, as seen in Table II.

For instance, out of 16 posts focused on Health and Sanitation, 13 were about girls, while only 1 post addressed boys under Protection and Humanitarian Aid. Education and Technology and Equality and Gender were themes exclusively associated with girls, reinforcing UNICEF's advocacy for girls' education and empowerment. This thematic skew can be examined using Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974), which emphasises the role of media in highlighting certain aspects of a story while downplaying others. By consistently framing girls as the focus of these themes, UNICEF is reinforcing its goal of gender equality. However, the absence of boys in key areas like education and health suggests that their challenges are being marginalised in these discussions.

The predominance of girls in health and education themes aligns with the findings of Ridgeway and Correll (2004), who argue that gender-specific framing can create differential expectations for boys and girls. By focusing predominantly on girls' education and health, UNICEF may unintentionally suggest that boys do not face similar challenges, thereby perpetuating a limited understanding of gender issues.

The messaging data further reinforces this thematic focus. Posts about Advocacy and Rights (7 posts), Health and Hygiene (12 posts), and Education and Support (4 posts) overwhelmingly focused on girls. Boys, on the other hand, appeared in only one post connected to Advocacy and Awareness. The Framing Theory can again be applied here: UNICEF's messaging consistently frames girls as the primary recipients of advocacy, particularly in areas related to rights and health.

This strategy aligns with the organisation's long-standing commitment to promoting gender equality, but it risks creating a narrative that overlooks the needs of boys. As Grabe and Mycek (2016) suggest, such one-sided advocacy may unintentionally reinforce a victimisation narrative for girls, while neglecting to frame boys as equally deserving of support. Moving forward, UNICEF could benefit from incorporating a more gender-inclusive messaging framing that highlights both boys' and girls' challenges, as supported by research on intersectionality and social justice (Crenshaw, 1991).

Research Question 3: What is the nature of Audience Engagement with UNICEF's X posts about boys and girls?

Post engagement is the ratio of interactions with a given post to the total number of followers a page, profile or handle has. Answers to research question 3 can be found in Table IV. The analysis of audience engagement revealed a surprising trend: posts about boys, though significantly fewer in number, received higher average engagement across comments, reposts, and likes compared to posts about girls. Posts about Unspecified Gender, which tended to focus on broad humanitarian issues, garnered the highest overall engagement, averaging 510 comments, 3,047 reposts, 5,752 likes, and 245,208 views. In comparison, posts about boys averaged 457 comments, 439 reposts, 728 likes, and 46,000 views, while posts about girls averaged significantly lower engagement with 58 comments, 133 reposts, 244 likes, and 27,345 views.

This data suggests that audience engagement was not necessarily driven by gender-specific content, but rather by the broader humanitarian themes that resonated with a wider audience. The high engagement with Unspecified Gender posts can be attributed to their focus on more universally relevant topics, such as protection and humanitarian aid, which likely appealed to a broader range of followers. The Framing Theory helps explain this phenomenon, as broader frames that include diverse groups tend to resonate more with audiences (Entman, 1993; Sheets, Rowling, Gilmore, & Melcher (2023)). The engagement data supports findings by McQuail (2010), who notes that media messages framed inclusively tend to generate higher audience interaction.

Interestingly, the single post about boys received more engagement compared to the average post about girls, despite the disparity in frequency. This could indicate that when boys are represented, there is an audience interested in their narratives, which may be underrepresented in UNICEF's broader messaging. Bessett and Geronimus (2020) argue that rare or novel topics can generate increased engagement due to their perceived uniqueness, which may explain why the post about boys performed better than those about girls.

The relatively low engagement with posts about girls, despite their higher frequency, suggests that focusing too narrowly on specific gender-related themes may not capture audience interest as effectively as more inclusive messages. This aligns with research by Khamis and Vaughn (2011), which suggests that digital content that appeals to a broader spectrum of followers tends to generate more interaction. For UNICEF, this finding underscores the importance of balancing gender-specific content with messages that resonate more universally to maintain high levels of audience engagement.

Conclusion

The findings across all three objectives of this paper reveal a clear gender disparity in UNICEF's X posts, with girls receiving far more attention than boys. This imbalance is reflected not only in the frequency of posts but also in the thematic focus and messaging, which overwhelmingly centered on girls. While this aligns with UNICEF's mission to promote gender equality, it risks creating a narrative that marginalises boys.

In terms of audience engagement, posts about Unspecified Gender received the highest interaction, while posts about boys, though limited in number, generated more engagement than posts about girls. This suggests that a more inclusive approach to gender representation could enhance audience engagement and better reflect UNICEF's commitment to equality for all children.

Recommendations

1. UNICEF should increase the representation of boys in its posts to create a more balanced portrayal of both genders. While girls are currently the focus, greater attention to boys' issues would promote inclusivity and help avoid reinforcing gender imbalances.

2. UNICEF should expand its thematic focus for both genders. This includes covering a wider range of topics such as health, education, and protection for boys, and involving girls in discussions on global issues like climate change. This approach would contribute to a more equitable representation of gender-related content.
3. UNICEF should leverage the higher engagement of posts with unspecified gender by integrating boys' and girls' perspectives in more inclusive content. UNICEF should also explore creative approaches, such as interactive polls or multimedia click-through elements, to boost engagement with gender-specific posts, particularly those about girls.

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