Meaning Making: Examining Malay Adolescents' Media Text Decoding Process in Constructing Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates how meanings from television are negotiated and used in adolescents' construction of meaning, focussing on cultural identity. This article is not an attempt to generalize Malaysian audiences but aims to explore the process of making meanings and understand the process of negotiations young Malaysians go through from watching television in relations to the construction of their cultural identity. Four focus group interviews were held with groups, which are made up of two different socio-economic background, which consist of urban and adolescents living in a big city, and adolescents living in a rural, small town. It was discovered that the activities, which revolves around their engagement with television, plays a part in their construction of meaning. Although studies in activities in the process of meaning making has been quantitative and used to measure effects of watching television, the qualitative approach has provided an additional insight, in which, the activities can be used to explain the inputs or element which assisted these adolescents in their process of engagement with television text. Several activities have been identified which are prominent in the process of engagement with television texts. These include intentionality, selectivity, utilitarianism and orality and these activities are considered as influencing the process of making meanings of television texts.

Keywords: *Encoding/decoding, audience reception, cultural identity, television text, construction of meaning.*

INTRODUCTION

Arguments about active audience never ceased to end. According to Levy (1983, p.109), the term active audience "emphasizes the voluntary and selective nature of interaction between audience and mass media".

Hall (1980, p.171) maintained that audiences are active in decoding messages but he was concerned with the class struggle faced by audiences in decoding messages. He argued that audiences are able to decode messages and make sense of the messages in three ways: within the dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated or oppositional code.

Hall (1980, p.171) further elaborated that in the dominant-hegemonic position, people who accepted the encoded massage would believe within the taken-for-granted hegemonic ideology. They are said to accept contents which are encoded as natural and are not aware of the alternative views and see it as being invisible. However, Morley (1980) in his *Nationwide Audience* study found that people are fully aware of alternative opinions, even when they agree with the encoded ideas presented, which are said to be within the hegemonic ideology. Although Morley started out the study by initially agreeing with Hall's idea - in which viewers who agree with the encoded messages are sealed off in their own cultural space and are unaware with values and definitions offered by others - he found that

the audiences are indeed very aware of the alternative views, which television has excluded from its broadcast. Morley pointed out that there is a preferring mechanism within the viewers in which they make decisions based on what they feel and how they prefer it to be as opposed to the taken-for-granted hegemonic position which sees the ideas as being naturally right.

Fiske (1987, p.16) also believed that preferred meaning is inherent in every message. Meanwhile Philo (2008, p.540) opined that when new information is available, people are exposed to new ideas. With this, the legitimacy of certain positions can be dramatically affected by the context in which they are understood and the information given. So, what happens to the people that Hall said are living within the hegemonic ideology? The consequences to when these people get alternative information was not clearly elaborated by Hall.

The negotiated position meanwhile, is a mixture of the dominant-hegemonic position and the oppositional elements. Viewers may accept the hegemonic viewpoint but seek particular exceptions in terms of their own belief and behaviour. Hence, the decision that they make are partly based on their own beliefs, culture and behaviour.

Culture is said to be an important element in determining the way one decodes a message (Zaid, 2014). For instance, an oppositional reading is said to be caused by people who are exposed to messages which are different from what is considered natural to them and they reject the idea because it is contrary to their belief and values. However, Philo (2008, p.537) criticized this as he found that even people of the same culture can produce different readings of the same message. Hence, he suggested that audiences, regardless of their similar or different cultural background, are actually able to understand and be aware of the encoded meaning, but merely decoded it in a different way based on their own preference.

Therefore, if culture cannot be regarded as fundamental in determining how messages from the media are negotiated, it would be beneficial to explore on the process of meaning making. Philo (2008, p.541) noted that the encoding/decoding model misses important dimensions of audience activity and underestimates the power of media in shaping is taking for granted beliefs.

Murphy (2005, p.169), meanwhile, noted that most work following the encoding/decoding model investigates audience reception of connotative meanings as part of the broader project of studying the ritual or symbolic functions of cultural communication, despite Hall's (1980, p.133) remark that an audience study on both the denotative and connotative level would represent "the different levels at which ideologies and discourses intersect". Murphy (2005) suggested that in order to find out how audiences make sense of what they watch and look at, viewers should be analyzed in the context that is relevant to one's research questions. But first, it is important to understand the concept of activity in relations to the moments of reception.

Audience activity, opined Levy (1983, p.114) is best conceptualized as a range of possible orientations to the communication process. Biocca (1988) in an article has reviewed the different meanings and concepts of audience activity. He concluded that there are five different versions, which are selectivity, utilitarianism, intentionality, resistance to influence, and involvement.

This paper is an attempt to explore audience's process of meaning making and how audiences engage with television representations, focusing on adolescents. In particular, we tried to address how the concept of audience activity as proposed by Biocca (1988) may be used to explain the process of decoding media texts.

AUDIENCE ACTIVITY

The process of negotiating meanings in audience reception is an important aspect in cultural studies. Since all audience are not equally or absolutely active (Rubin, 1993, p.98), the concept of activity can help elaborate the processes in negotiating meanings. Rubin in his article, *Audience activity and media use* (1993) opined that there are several aspects which affect activity: (a) Media orientation; (b) Media attitudes; and (c) Social and psychological factor. These aspects should be considered when probing the concept of activities in media reception because it could help a researcher to think about activities in media reception holistically and from different angles. For example, when trying to look at the activities that go on in the process of meaning making such as selectivity, involvement or utilitarianism, the concepts, which affect activity, could help to determine the degree of activeness in the activity.

The concept of media orientation can be understood as media use and is divided into ritualised media orientation and instrumental media orientation. In a ritualised media orientation, audiences are said to use the media because they are used to having it around them. A good example is a housewife who switches on the television while doing her house chores. She may not necessarily watch it, but the sound of television acts as a diversion to occupy her loneliness and time. Simply said, a ritualised media orientation means greater exposure to the medium, instead of a specific content.

An instrumental media orientation, meanwhile, pictures audiences as more active because they are assumed to seek media content or messages for informational reasons. Hence, audience is more selective and choosy with the media they interact with and are fussier with content selection. Rubin (1993, p.102) remarked that they have greater affinity with and perceived realism of that content. This, naturally, leads to a stronger outcome because it means a greater involvement, from the audiences' perspective, with the encoded messages. In *Moments of television*, Fiske (1988) had talked about determination in producing meanings, which could be related to instrumental media orientation. Determination refers to how people have the power to exercise some power over their meanings, pleasures and subjectivities, which constitutes of cultural processes and social experience. Somewhat connected to intentionality and selectivity, determination is able to encourage or discourage audiences from choosing to be involved with the media and how he or she intend to make meanings of what had been watched.

The concept of media attitudes refers to audience's attitude towards the medium and its content. The more the audience believes in what he or she is exposed to as reality, the more they are affected by the encoded messages (Rubin, 1993, p.102). Perceiving the content as reality would also encourage viewers to use the information in their social interaction such as talking about it to others and practicing the information they have gathered onto their everyday life.

Social and psychological factors also affect activity. A good example is when one is highly dependent on the media. This usually happens when one does not have anyone to communicate with, hence he or she will communicate with the television, albeit it being a

one-way communication. When this happen, audiences are comforted by the idea of being able to 'talk' to the television characters or news announcer and has a superficial relationship with the content. This indirectly affects the motivation to watch, audiences' intention and also selection process, which consequently affects activity and negotiation processes.

METHODOLOGY

The concept of active audience and their decoding of polysemic television messages has somewhat directed this study to explore their negotiation process through focus group discussion. Four focus group interviews were held with groups, which are made up of two different socio-economic background, which consist of urban adolescents living in a big city, and adolescents living in a rural, small town. The main purpose of segmentation of the different groups is to allow developing a comparative dimension into the entire research project and at the same time to help facilitate discussions by making participants more similar to each other, as suggested by Morgan (1996, p.143). The breakdowns of the groups are as follows:

a. Urban adolescents living in big city with moderate and high family income
b. Rural adolescents living in small town with low family income

The urban adolescents were recruited by word of mouth and groups were formed among those who know each other and who went to the same school. They are based in Petaling Jaya, one of Malaysia's biggest cities. The rural adolescents, meanwhile, were recruited from a school in Kuala Kubu Bharu, a small town in Selangor, Malaysia. It was important that the adolescents are familiar with each other in order for the group dynamic to be easily fostered. This will hopefully encourage them to speak freely and to question each other's opinions and perceptions (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996, p.6).

FINDINGS

Interaction between viewers and media is a complex relationship. As said by Straubhaar (2014, p.29), culture is constantly undergoing transformation and audiences' "senses of identification can increase as forms of media bring them new and compelling cultural forms to identify with". How is that so? Firstly, in order to understand how audiences can undergo 'transformation', it is important to know how they decode the meanings of media texts. In this case, the media text chosen to study is television. So, how do audiences, in particular, adolescents make sense of television, in relations to the construction of their cultural identity? How do they decode the meanings and fit it into their everyday life?

The adolescents who were involved in this discussion came from two distinct background; rural and lower income group and urban and higher income group. From the focus group discussion conducted, it was discovered that their access to media are poles apart. The group who lives in urban areas are more privileged and they are exposed to various kinds of media such as television with access to various channels and packages on the satellite television, internet which is available every day at home and mobile smartphone. Those in rural area, meanwhile, only have television and if they are lucky, the satellite television basic package. Their family's income does not allow them the luxury of owning their own mobile telephone, nor a computer at home, hence being inaccessible to

the world wide web. Does this affect the way they engage with television or how they interpret things which they encounter in the media?

Morley (1980) in his research found that readings of television differ according to different social location, background and status. He wrote that: "It is always a question of how social position, as it is articulated through particular discourses, produces specific kinds of readings or decodings" (Morley, 1983, p.113). In short, he maintained that people produce their own readings of media texts and make different sense of what is shown and said on television. The findings in this study seem to concur with Morley's thoughts. In this case, different social position does at times produce different readings of television.

Firstly, the adolescents living in urban areas are more selective in their choices of media usage. They insisted that they chose what to watch based on the director and actor.

> Everything counts.... the director... yea...the director. Some directors are really good... Rashid Sibir... I have never missed any of his dramas. I love the producer... Azizah Ahmad... I like shows produced by Metrowealth... funny... very funny. (Informant 1, Group 1)

Meanwhile, being heavily exposed to the media means audiences are more active and will result in a higher need to negotiate the media in the process of meaning making. In this case, from the way they select what to watch, they are more aware of the various media choices.

Admittedly, there are times when both the urban and rural adolescents had no choice but to watch what their parents or older sibling's choice of programmes, similar to what Levy (1983, p.112) describes as being a passive viewer. However, he explained that in some cases, individuals may be passive in the first stages of communication sequence (as in the case of not being able to choose what to watch on television), but will use the acquired information from their supposedly passive viewing at a much later stage. The fact that they are watching it, despite not being able to choose the channel, shows that they made a conscious choice. In other words, they are being selective and active in their choices.

> *Kalau dengan Mak, (saya selalu tengok cerita) Indonesia dia lah* (Informant 3, Group 2).

I also noticed that readings of the television text, pertaining to adolescents living in rural areas, differ according to age. When they are younger, they are more susceptible to believe what they watch on television as real and also empathise with the characters.

> *…suka tengok cerita tu sebab karakter (dalam cerita) tu sama macam saya* (Informant 2, Group 4).

Older adolescents were very critical of television programmes and insisted that it does not represent their daily lives and that the Malay cultural identity portrayed in the programmes greatly differs than reality.

I think it is absurd that most Malay dramas revolve around wealthy families, with fancy cars when not everyone can afford that lifestyle. Shouldn't they show something more realistic? (Informant 3, Group 2).

It is like this.... it (the portrayal of characters) is worst (than how it actually is). (Informant 1, Group 1)

The different readings between the different ages are caused by their selectivity and also exposure to media. When scrutinized at the matter in hand, it was found that the older adolescents acquired a taste of foreign television programmes as opposed to the younger ones who seemed to prefer locally produce Malay drama or Indonesian cinetron. The exposure to the 'outside world' through foreign programmes has probably opened their eyes to what is happening around them and helped them become more media savvy and in turn critical of the local media products. On the other hand, the younger adolescents who favour local programmes proved to be quite sheltered from the outside world and not aware of other options, hence falling gullible to media texts and are not so media literate. This has resulted in a different overview in how they view their own cultural identity as being portrayed.

As for adolescents in urban areas, their views on Malays in real life seem to be quite negative. They also do not agree with how Malays are portrayed on television, saying that it does not represent reality as it is always negatively portrayed. Ironically, although they insisted that the representation of Malays on television is false, their perception on Malay reflect what they are exposed to on television. Their decoding of television texts reiterates the values and beliefs on Malays which they watch on television. Hence, although these adolescents may have more choices in terms of which media to use and have access to more information through the various media channels, they do sometimes decode texts in a dominant hegemonic position. It seems quite bewildering to me, as one would have thought that exposure to media resources would make them more critical of what is being exposed. However, going back to the concept of audience activity in decoding texts, the study discovered that sometimes television serves as 'background noise' to other activities such as surfing the internet. So, although they said that they spend sizeable amount of time watching television, their level of involvement may be low. As aptly said by Rubin (1993, p.102), one shouldn't assume that an involved viewer is a heavy viewer. He maintained that the amount of time spend on television does not reflect activity.

If their level of involvement with television is low, how do they come up with ideas or opinions on the representations of diversified cultures on television? This is where the power of interaction comes to play. For instance, in the urban group, their opinion on characteristics of Chinese in real life and how they are represented on television differs. But, their opinion on Indians, reflected what they are exposed to on television. As for those in rural areas, they certainly lack understanding of the diverse cultures, especially when they assumed that Koreans and Chinese are the same.

(Group 2)

Moderator	: Lets say we want to learn about Chinese culture, do you think we can do that by watching television?
Informant 2	: Yes...yes you can find out more. I always watch Korean dramas!
Informant 1	: Koreans are not Chinese.
Informant 3	: There are little bits of Chinese like the fighting parts?
Informant 4	: Aren't Korean like Chinese anyways?

How can this phenomenon best be explained? What transpired during their process of making meaning? Socialization with friends and people of different cultures plays an important role.

> I am not really close to the Chinese in my school. They usually hang out with people of their own ethnicity. (Informant 3, Group 3)

The urban group goes to school with a lot of Chinese and have friends and classmates who are Chinese descendants but hardly knew any Indians. This explains why when commenting about Chinese characteristics and values and beliefs, they could tell the difference and identify the stereotypes, which Chinese are being accustomed to. As for Indians, because the group lacks interaction with people of that race, they conclusion that they can come up about Indians in real life reflects what they usually watch on television.

Furthermore, in the discussion they admitted to trusting friends more than family. Hence, it can be said that interaction or socialization with friends, especially about television programmes which they had watched, somewhat influence their process of making meanings and in turn, the construction of their cultural identity. Therefore, some information may not be correct and can be merely assumption because they are informed by people their age or their peers. This act, known as orality, simply means that by talking about the television show, they can activate certain meanings (Fiske, 1987). As said by Fiske (1987, p.106), audiences have dialogue and gossip about television and in the process, "they shift and shape its meanings and pleasures".

From these conversations and gossips, audiences are able to arrive to non-television associated meaning, in which they gain information from the conversation and not from what they watch. It promotes cultural diversity and enables them to resist centralization and the ideological hegemony (Fiske, 1987, p.78), which is exemplified when the urban groups resisted the stereotypical roles Chinese played in local television programmes.

The same goes to adolescents living in rural areas. The stereotypes shown on television about people of other cultures were reiterated and were pointed as portraying the diverse culture's characteristic in real life. In this sense, television is seen as their reference point to get to know people of other ethnicity because in real life, Chinese and Indians that they know mostly confine their socialization to people of their own race. As opined by Annete Hill (2005, p.57-78), television programmes construct "reality" and how viewers interpret these representations. What is seen is considered as real, even though it may be far from the truth. This is especially the case when adolescents have no other option to get information and do not know the 'real' culture, values and beliefs of people of other ethnicities. Also, their reliance on television for information could be seen from the way

they use it as a fashion guide and also style to converse. In the sense, the utilitarian and intentional aspect of activity is prominent among the rural viewers.

So far, this study has identified several activities, which are prominent in the process of engagement with television. These include intentionality, selectivity, utilitarianism and orality and these activities are considered as influencing the process of making meanings of television texts. How then, do these activities help them make sense of who they are; their identity?

In terms of identity, the urban group identifies themselves as being Malaysian but the rural group sees themselves as Malays from *kampong*. The urban group's self-identification mirrors the values which are constantly shown on television which include specific cultural ethnicity or concentrates on 1Malaysia values (Sabariah et al., 2013)

Their seemingly dominant hegemonic reading does not stem from merely television watching, but also through the act of orality, selectivity and utilitarianism. How is that so? Well, from the discussion, it was quite obvious that their process of formulating thoughts and ideas greatly depends on their interaction with friends. Hence, it made them more gullible to accept television's messages, however, pending friend's opinions. What about the rural group?

Identifying themselves as being Malays from a specific area in Malaysia also shows how the act of orality influences their process of meaning making. However, in their case, they tend to trust their family members like fathers and sisters as their source of information. So, it is not a wonder that their thoughts mimic their parents, hence identifying themselves as someone from their parent's original birth state as opposed to where they themselves were born. Despite admitting to now knowing local cuisines and delicacies, a strong family tie as well as not being heavily exposed to various media has kept them grounded and maintaining a sense of identification with being Malay.

Siapera (2010, p.176) aptly said it when she wrote: "[...] reception of cultural products does not only denote a position vis-a-vis a certain representation or regime of representation, it also *engages* and *articulates* an identity through bridging texts or representations with the contexts of their reception". In this matter, one's activity during, before and after engaging with the media which is directly related to one's background – regardless of social, political or cultural – can be seen as articulating how one 'read' or decode media representations.

DISCUSSION

Through this study, it was discovered that there are different ways in reading television texts within the two groups in rural areas. As noted, the amount of exposure between the two groups is similar, in which both have limited access to the satellite transmission and scarce usage of internet. Despite not having a lot of choices, they are still capable of being selective in what they want to watch. For instance, one group stated that they rather do other things than watching the news on television while the other group watches the news to gain more current information. Also, one group likes to watch local Malay dramas while the other group prefers to watch foreign programmes (if given a choice), which are quite similar to what the urban adolescents like. Their different preferences and selection has indeed produced a contrary reading on how they view Malays as being portrayed on television compared to what they think is reality. The group, which prefers to watch foreign programmes, opined that the portrayal of Malays on television does not depict reality while in the other group, some respondent admitted to identify and empathise with what the

characters are going through. However, what is intriguing is that despite the different ways in which they decoded television texts, they still acknowledged and identified themselves as being Malays.

This, in my opinion is largely attributed to their interaction with people around them. Parents and elders are very influential in the young people from rural areas' decision making and thought formation and the same goes when they try to decode television text. Input from parents can alter the way they make meanings and how they view themselves. In this case, they consider and take into account the information that comes from their parent and as elders. Thus, parents are able to pass down information on cultural traditions, values and beliefs, and also control what the adolescents watch and give their view – on what is considered right or wrong – on the programmes, which are easily accepted by these adolescents, as something trustworthy and true. Thus, having received inputs from elders who are aware of cultural traditions, it is easier for these adolescents living in the rural area to identify themselves as being Malay, despite the television programmes portraying a lot of 1 Malaysia values.

The consideration on what elders think was also detected when they were probed about their perception of how Chinese and Indians are portrayed on television and if it depicts reality. The respondents believed in the stereotypes showcased about other cultures on television, as they are not quite exposed to the other ethnicities in their daily lives. Their source of trusted information, elders, have limited interaction with the other races which would unable them to unravel the real truth about the stereotypes shown on television. Hence, the rural adolescents' main source of information about other culture would be from television or lessons in school, which made them assume that what was shown on television about other cultures as the truth and depicts reality.

Another valuable finding is that, although a group in the rural area and in the urban area decode television texts pertaining to Malay cultural identity, similarly, both identified themselves in contrasting ways. The similarity in which they view Malay on television as not depicting reality and an exaggeration, have got to do with their programmes choices or selectivity. Both groups mentioned that they like watching Western television shows and compared the Malay programmes that they do watch to the Western or foreign programmes they watched. Thus, when they see Malays being portrayed as bitchy, driving big cars, attend expensive colleges, dress sexily and being affectionate to each other, they see it depicting the foreign programmes they watch, hence not reality. But, the way they define 'self' is contrary as the young people in urban areas see themselves as Malaysian while the ones in rural areas identify themselves as Malays. How can this be explained? Two things that are different in their process of meaning making is the activities, phases in exposure and orality. The urbanites are exposed to more sources of information and as mentioned above, this made them see foreigners as others and being Malaysian as self as opposed to the teens from rural areas. In orality, because of their interaction with parents and elders, teens in rural areas are more in touch with their Malay cultural identity as opposed to the ones in urban areas who do not seem to rely on their parents for information and have more faith in their friends. Trusting friends, who may have limited knowledge about Malay traditions, beliefs and values could lead the urbanites into losing touch with their Malay identity.

Their reliance on friends' opinions and influences of friends in making meaning of television text was obvious in their perception of Chinese and Indians being portrayed on television. The adolescents in urban areas insisted that the portrayals of Chinese on television does not depict reality, but those of Indians were. When dug further, the reason they didn't trust the portrayal of Chinese was because they have a lot of Chinese friends, and no Indian friends lead them to believe the stereotypes depicted reality. This simply shows that the process of interaction or orality within the different phases of exposure, and the construction of cultural category plays an important part in their engagement with television.

Having said that, in understanding how adolescents associate and identify themselves to what they watch on television, it was found that the activities which revolves around their meaning making plays a part. Although studies in activities in the process of meaning making has been quantitative and used to measure effects of watching television, my qualitative approach has provided an additional insight, in which, the activities can be used to explain the inputs or element which assisted these adolescents in their process of engagement with television text.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research does not aim to generalise the Malaysian population, but instead is an attempt explore the process of meaning making. Hence, the number of respondents involved in this study is quite small and is not representative of the Malaysian population. The activities conducted during the process of meaning making are found similar to the elements proposed by Biocca (1988). Therefore, a research that could represent the population should be conducted. In other words, an instrument can be created and more respondents could be included so that a conclusive study on Malaysian young people can be achieved. Aside from this, the research concentrates only on the Malays and does not take into account Indian and Chinese's engagement with television in their attempt to construct cultural identity. Hence, it would be good to include other races in a future research so that a comparison in the ways they decode messages and activities that surrounds their process of meaning making could be conducted.

Discovering the activities which are important in one's attempt to make meaning of television, especially in relations to the construction of cultural identity, can help to address the issue of fostering unity among society which are made up of diverse cultures. For instance, orality and phases in exposure was found to play a particular role in audiences' processes of making meaning of the television text. In particular, interaction with family members, for young people in rural area, and with friends, for those in urban areas, gave input to their formation of thoughts, ideas and beliefs. Thus, it is implied that the social agents – family and friends – are important in the process of engagement with television and meaning making. Knowing this, the government can address the issue of inculcating unity and understanding of the various races' cultures through television by making sure that the urbanites are more media literate and those in rural areas to be more exposed to other sources of information rather than only relying on parents in making sense of television. Only then, can perception on stereotypes be diminished and a better understanding of other cultures created.

Aside from that, using Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding decoding theory as the basis for theoretical framework, the decoding aspect was given emphasis, because of the aim of this research, which is to study audiences' engagement with television. In order to understand

the programmes that adolescents watch, a qualitative content analysis was conducted. Another option, which future researchers can do, is to interview programme producers and inquire what the programme's objective was and the message they were trying to convey. This way, one can identify what were the encoded messages, and compare it to the decoded messages. However, by doing as suggested, one can identify the ways audiences' decode television text, within the three stance which Hall has indicated; dominant hegemonic, opposition or negotiated, and wouldn't be able to successfully study the activities within the audiences' engagement, which was done in this study.

Another interesting way to approach this study is to use the symbolic interactionism theoretical framework as the basis of the research. As indicated from the findings, orality or interaction with others in particular, is an important activity one goes through in the process of making meanings of television text and this reflected what Blumer (1986) outlined about symbolic interactionism. Blumer (1986, p.12) maintains that the meaning of anything and everything has to be learned and transmitted through a social process and that "symbolic interaction is a vast process in which people are forming, sustaining and transforming the objects of their world as they come to give meanings to objects." Hence, a future researcher can look into this perspective, to thoroughly focus on how interaction is able to give meanings to television texts.

BIODATA

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