

Sexist Comments & Responses: Objectification

Although sexist comments and remarks are prevalent and normalized in everyday conversation, public discourse, and virtually every other social setting throughout the world, researchers at the Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) wanted to understand how women experience these comments in Utah. This is the third of five briefs focused on the results of an extensive study on this topic (see “[Study Introduction and Overview](#)”¹ and “[Sexist Comments & Responses: Inequity and Bias](#)”² for the first two briefs in the series). The study was designed with the intent of collecting and analyzing a wide variety of sexist comments experienced by women across the state, in addition to the responses women made—or wish they had made—to such comments. The goal of this series is to educate men and women on the many forms that conscious and unconscious sexist comments can take, from egregious to more subtle statements. Additionally, we aim to equip women with the tools to confront more successfully the sexism they experience.

Study Background

During May–June of 2020, an online survey instrument was administered to a nonprobability sample of Utah women representing various settings, backgrounds, and situations (age, marital status, education, race/ethnicity, parenthood status, employment status, faith tradition, and county/region; see specific demographic details in the [first brief](#) in this series).³ A call for participants was announced through the UWLP monthly newsletter, social media platforms, and website. UWLP partners, collaborators, and followers also distributed to their circles of influence. Overall, 1,115 respondents started the survey, and 839 Utah women participated to a degree that provided usable data. As each participant was allowed to submit as many as four comments, 1,750 unique scenarios were reported. From the original study analysis, four major themes emerged: Inequity and Bias, Objectification, Stereotypes, and Undervaluing Women. This research and policy brief focuses on the second: Objectification.

Findings – Comments and Remarks

In this study, the “Objectification” theme included comments in which women were viewed or treated more as objects than as human beings. Notably, many of the comments coded in this theme were much more explicit and vulgar than those included in this brief. Additionally, not all responses were limited strictly to sexist comments; some respondents also reported sexist situations and behaviors such as unwelcome touching, grabbing, or groping. The analysis of the responses within the Objectification theme produced seven specific categories:

1. *Focus on physical appearance/bodies*: Comments focused on women’s bodies as part of an interaction, whether positive or negative, sexual, or otherwise.
2. *Sexual harassment*: Remarks or behaviors toward women in workplace or similar settings that were sexual in nature.
3. *Sexualizing women*: Comments that focused on women as sexual objects, rather than as whole individuals.
4. *Unwanted sexual advances*: Solicitations or advances toward women that were unwelcome.
5. *Intersectional discrimination*: Comments directed at more than one dimension of an individual; for example, sexist comments that also included references to race, age, weight, religion, or other elements.
6. *Exclusion from work activities*: Statements specifically related to women being excluded at work because of their gender, with the implication that women are viewed as sex objects rather than as colleagues.
7. *Accusations of using sex to get ahead*: Comments centered on the idea that women use sexuality to gain an unfair advantage.

Table 1 shows the total number of mentions for each category, as well as the percentage representation of the total number of comments (N=1,750). Overall, 35.7% of all comments reported related to one of the categories under the Objectification theme. Importantly, many comments were included in several categories, as individual statements were often related to a variety of sexist themes and topics, and there is some overlap between categories within this theme.

Table 1: Objectification Categories

Categories	#	%
Focus on physical appearance/bodies	251	14.3
Sexual harassment	122	7.0
Sexualizing women	86	4.9
Unwanted sexual advances	79	4.5
Intersectional discrimination	43	2.5
Excluded from work activities	31	1.8
Accusations of using sex to get ahead	13	0.7
<i>Total Mentions</i>	625	35.7

Participants who shared comments related to this theme were most often white (90%), married (67.8%) women with children (66.7%) who worked full time (77.9%), were 30–39 years old (27.1%), had a bachelor’s degree (35.2%), and were a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (56.0%). The vast majority of these women (89.7%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they felt people can behave in sexist ways without realizing it, and most of them (84.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that

they had personally experienced bias because of their gender. A similar percentage (85.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that women need to be prepared to be leaders.

In addition to reporting sexist comments, participants were asked to answer four questions about the context of each comment, including the gender of the person making the comment, the relative authority of the commenter, the commenter’s approximate age, and the setting in which the comment was made. The context questions were not answered for every comment. The results of comment context questions specific to the categories under the Objectification theme are found in Table 2.

Table 2: Objectification Commenters (Descriptors and Context)

Descriptor	Content
Gender of commenter (N=571)	Man (93.3%), Woman (6.5%), Other (0.2%)
Relative authority of commenter (N=571)	Someone who has/had authority/influence over me (50.3%), A peer [neither authority level] (42.2%), Someone over whom I have/had authority (7.5%)
Approximate age of commenter (N=571)	Child or youth (0.9%), 18–25 (7.9%), 26–35 (14.9%), 36–45 (26.1%), 46–59 (34.9%), 60–70 (14.4%), Over 70 (1.1%)
Setting in which comment was made (N=569)	Workplace (68.5%), School (6.3%), Home/family (6.3%), Community (6.0%), Church (5.4%), Other (4.2%), Political (3.2%)

Category 1: Focus on Physical Appearance/Bodies

The most common category within the Objectification theme was a focus on physical appearance and bodies, which included 251 distinct comments. Comments categorized as “Focus on Physical Appearance/Bodies” were most commonly made within the workplace by a man who was between 46 and 59 years old and was in a position of authority.

First, prevalent among comments in this category was the idea that women’s bodies were viewed as sex objects:

“The first time we met, he said, ‘What a surprise. I thought you’d look a lot older than you do. You’ve still got a good 10 years of sex kitten left in you!’”

“The bishop said, ‘You have no idea what you wearing those shoes does for me!’ The bishop said that!!!”

“In a presentation to all the young women about modesty, she said, ‘Sometimes, if you wear clothes that are too revealing, it can make boys turn to mush and they might assault you and lose control of themselves. Modesty is a protection.’”

“I was 7 and playing outside with my cousins. It was a very hot summer day, and we were playing with water balloons. My male cousin, who was 13 at the time, said ‘Wait, I don’t know if it is a good idea that you play with us. Your shirt is white and will get wet, then it will be see-through.’ . . . This

is the first memory I have of realizing someone may look at me differently as a woman.”

Second, other comments were likely intended to be compliments, but they made women uncomfortable because of the setting or context, or how the statements put the focus on a woman’s appearance rather than her abilities:

“A professor I worked with told me that although he knew the comment wasn’t appropriate, the shirt I was wearing that day was particularly flattering.”

“In an interview with a candidate I was representing he said, ‘I’m old and have forgotten a few things, but I still recognize a beautiful woman.’ And pointed at me.”

“A manager asked, ‘How do you keep that slim figure?’”

“I was the only female on a video sales call. We were talking to a CEO in his fifties, and he stopped the conversation to say, ‘You have a nice smile.’ It was the only thing he said to me the whole call. It isn’t wildly inappropriate, but I am a director at a company, and it seemed clear he looked at me as lesser than my male counter parts.”

Third, this category also included a number of negative, non-sexual comments about women’s bodies:

“In a setting with friends and family, this man commented that women shouldn’t serve as president because ‘once every month, the country would be in deep trouble’ (referring to a woman’s monthly period), insinuating that a period and any moodiness associated with a period makes a woman unfit to hold the presidency.”

“He said, ‘You’re getting a little fat here (grabbed the back of my arm in the triceps area). I bet you could . . . run on your lunch time.’”

“He wanted to know how they could let me, someone who is ‘homely and looks like a sad old man’ work the front desk when there was a real looker in the other office who could be in my place.”

“He said, ‘You are not to be seen by clients while you are visibly pregnant.’”

Fourth, another topic that emerged was the idea that women’s bodies were somehow the property of men, or that men had certain rights to women’s bodies:

“My bishop said (over the pulpit) that his pretty wife was a reward for him being a good missionary, so the young men in the ward needed to be good missionaries.”

He said, ‘Women shouldn’t be insulted by catcalling and constant requests for affection or physical contact because it is a compliment and women should accept the compliment.’”

“Upon meeting for the first time, a man said, ‘My wife is here somewhere. She used to model, but she was too weak to get back into shape for me after the kids were born.’”

“I was at a party chatting with a fellow about shaving off my hair. This fellow, whom I had previously considered a

friend, became visibly upset and began to yell at me, . . . using expletives and telling me that I couldn't cut my hair.”

Finally, comments in this category revealed the idea that women's looks were the most important thing about them:

“She said, ‘It's our job as women to stay skinny; it's why I eat so little.’”

“I had travelled to work at our company booth at a trade show and a man came by and asked if there was someone he could talk to about the product. I said I would be happy to help him. He said, ‘No, someone who knows what they are talking about—not a booth babe.’”

“He looked at me and said, ‘You? But you're a cute, little blonde thing. You can't be a mayor!’”

“A male coworker said, ‘Of course the meeting went well, have you seen her?’ He was suggesting that his colleague's success was due to her looks alone.”

Category 2: Sexual Harassment

The second most common category that emerged under the Objectification theme was sexual harassment. There was a fair amount of overlap between this and other categories in this theme, but these were distinguished by a workplace or similar setting in which harassment is formally recognized. There were 122 comments in this category, which were most often made within the workplace by a man between the ages of 46–59 who had authority over the participant.

First, many of the comments in this category fall under the definition of a hostile work environment, whether the survey participant was the target of the comments or not:

“When I went with my father to work (take your daughter to work day), hanging all over his work area were pictures of naked women. I remember in my early twenties the day he was told he would have to remove the pictures. He was so mad and felt like he had a right to have them hang in his space. He yelled about it to my mother for days.”

“My male manager told me an old man was probably going to sexually harass me and to not report him.”

“A manager made a mildly crude comment before realizing I was in the room. Once he saw me, he said, ‘Oh crap, [my name's] in here,’ and walked off angrily.”

“A male colleague was interviewing candidates for a vacant position on his team. He told [other subordinates] that he could not consider one of the internal candidates (a female) because he would be distracted all day by her breasts.”

“I worked in a congressional office, and my boss would make sexist and inappropriate comments frequently. I finally called and reported him, but was told, ‘Unless he touches you, there's really nothing we can do. Congress wrote themselves out of the sexual harassment laws.’”

“A coworker began graphically describing his sexual relationship with his wife at a company lunch. This was a small company of less than 25 people where everyone could hear. I was also a minority as a female there, with only one other female coworker, who was not present at the time.”

Second, another common theme in this category was the idea of *quid pro quo*, wherein a professional boost was promised in return for sexual favors or women were penalized for rebuffing advances:

“My manager told me, ‘Part of your job is keeping me happy. Will you come away with me for the weekend?’ We were both married to other people.”

“I was invited to work ‘closely’ after hours to be a better employee and when I declined, I got very negative reviews. Previous to this offer, I got sterling reviews.”

“A male manager said, ‘I'll pat your back if you pat mine. We take care of each other.’”

Lastly, some comments in this category were clearly intended as jokes but were interpreted by the hearer as being sexist:

“When I held an executive director position in Utah state government, a male, married, elected official from a different branch of government asked me if I would go on a ride with him in his fancy sports car. He followed the invitation with the statement, ‘You know, anyone who rides in the passenger seat of my car goes topless.’”

“My male boss bent down and smelled the chair of my female coworker after she stood up and walked away while laughing with other men.”

“While at a speaking event where I was about to present, the host was having issues with the mic, and I went to help fix it and had to have my head down under the podium and he said, ‘While you're down there, . . .’”

“I had a young baby and was still taking breaks at work to pump. Somehow my pump got mixed in with the bags that the courier picked up daily. My manager said that I could go in the back with a lady coworker, and she could ‘milk me.’”

“A male superior suggested that I come to the office on Halloween in costume dressed as a sexy nurse.”

Category 3: Sexualizing Women

The third most common category that emerged from the analysis focused on sexualizing women, specifically framing women as sex objects. There were 86 individual comments in this category, and most were made within the workplace by a man—most often a peer—between the ages of 46 and 59. These comments took several different forms:

First, many comments focused on women's potential sexual behavior (often in a negative way):

“He said, ‘Women shouldn't work because that just creates more opportunities for extramarital affairs.’”

“My husband's coworker said, ‘You know your wife is going to have an affair,’ as a response to my being in MBA school.”

“He said, ‘If you dress in clothes that are tight, you are inhibiting the ability of our men to do their jobs. You are a distraction.’”

“A [colleague's wife] caught me before I was traveling to a conference where this administrator would also be attend-

ing. She said, ‘My husband and I are very happily married, and he has no interest in you. Don’t get any ideas!’”

Second, some comments in this category insinuated that when women experienced sexual violence, they were partly responsible because of their behavior:

“On a date with a guy who was talking about a former girlfriend of his, he said, ‘She is going to get herself raped.’”

“He talked about sexual assault and said, ‘Well you can’t parade raw meat in front of a tiger and expect it not to pounce.’”

“When sharing that I was raped, she asked if I was drinking alcohol and if I said no.”

“A local woman was running at 3 a.m. and was physically and sexually assaulted on the trail. The woman said, ‘Well whose dumb idea was it to go running at 3 a.m.?’”

Finally, another subset of comments in this category revealed the idea that women’s primary role in life was as a sex object:

“A child of maybe about 9 years of age leaned out the window of his parents’ SUV and yelled this at me: ‘What up, Ya Skanky Ho.’”

“During my marriage ceremony, the officiator said, ‘What are women for?’ Everyone laughed and he said, ‘Well, we all know what women are for. But what *else* are they for?’”

“My boyfriend saw me speaking to a male coworker and accused me of bending over so my coworker could look down my shirt. He thought every action women did was for men.”

Category 4: Unwanted Sexual Advances

Related to the categories of sexual harassment and sexualizing women was the more specific category of “Unwanted Sexual Advances,” which included direct sexual/romantic invitations to women, ranging from subtle to aggressive. There were 79 comments in this category, which were most commonly made in the workplace by male peers and who were 46–59 years old.

“I was looking for a place to sit during a conference we were both attending. He and I were both members of a city council though for different cities. He patted his lap and told me I could sit there.”

“When I tried to extend my hand, he embraced me in a hug and said, ‘I’m a hugger.’ It was very unprofessional, especially since we didn’t know each other.”

“This guy tried to kiss me. Apparently, I wasn’t the first one, but since he was an employee of a third-party contractor, they basically did nothing.”

“A male colleague told me, ‘Those jeans look good. They’d look better draped over my dresser.’”

“My boss told me that he loved me. He was a married man and my direct supervisor. I stopped going to that job after

this. I never quit, I just stopped going. It was too uncomfortable to talk to him, even about quitting.”

Category 5: Intersectional Discrimination

Comments in the intersectional discrimination category showed overlapping biases that focused on individual aspects of a woman’s identity rather than seeing her as a whole individual. There were 43 comments in this category, and they were most frequently made in the workplace by men between 46 and 59 years of age who were in a position of authority over the study participant. Intersectional discrimination comments focused on gender as well as age, weight, race, religion, and sexual orientation:

“A man serving a lesbian couple said, ‘So since there is no man here, who is supposed to pay me? Who’s in charge?’”

“After removing a coffee mug from where it shouldn’t be, I heard one of the men say, ‘ornery old bag.’”

“One of our board members asked me where I was from. I told him Ogden. He then asked again, but this time asked the origins of my parents. When I replied that my father is American and my mother is Asian, he said to me that he thought Asian women were the most beautiful women in the world and then he touched my arm.”

“During a deposition, opposing counsel tried to intimidate me repeatedly. At one point I made an objection to a question (totally appropriate for attorneys to do), and he stopped, looked directly at my client and said, ‘Your attorney is too young and dumb to know that she’s not allowed to object that way, but let me tell you, your attorney is wrong.’”

Category 6: Exclusion from Work Activities

While on the surface, women’s exclusion from workplace activities may not appear to be an issue of objectification, comments in this category generally exposed attitudes of those who saw female co-workers as sex objects rather than colleagues. These 31 comments not only objectified women, but in many cases, participants said it hampered their careers as well. Women reported that these comments were most commonly made in the workplace by men in a position of authority who were 36–45 years of age.

“I was working towards becoming a partner in my company. One of my co-workers kept mentioning that the partner who was over both of us had been telling him what he needed to do to become a partner. I had never had this conversation. I asked to meet with this partner and said, ‘Is there a reason that you don’t tell me what I need to do to be a partner?’ and he said, ‘I only talk to him about that when we go to lunch, and it would be inappropriate for me to take you to lunch, so I can’t talk to you about it.’”

“In discussing who should travel with a candidate I was representing, an off-hand comment was made, ‘Well, you can’t travel with him because that creates perception problems.’”

“A male colleague told me, ‘My wife has to meet every woman I travel with.’”

“When on a student selection panel, one of the faculty said *he* couldn’t work with a certain very highly qualified student because his wife would be jealous and suspicious of *her*.”

Category 7: Accusations of Using Sex to Get Ahead

Although the final category had only 13 comments, these were specific and egregious enough to warrant special mention. Women identified that these sexist comments were most frequently made within the workplace by a man who was 46–59 years old and was in a position of authority:

“A male superior said, ‘I don’t know what happens behind closed doors with you and him to have led you to receive more resources and support than other faculty receive.’”

“I got the highest grade on a test in a computer science class. When I shared the good news, one of my male peers said, ‘I wish I could sleep with the professor so that I could get an A.’”

“I had a co-worker tell me that the reason I got a promotion was because of my breast size.”

Findings – Responses

In addition to sharing sexist comments they had heard, study participants were also asked to share any response they made (or wish they had made) to the comments. In total, 529 responses were reported in the “Objectification” theme, which were then coded into the five broad categories in Table 3, as well as “other” responses (eight “other” designations are explained in the [first brief](#) in this series).⁴ As with the comments, many of the responses were coded into several response categories so the category count exceeds 529, and the percent total exceeds 100. Details about these responses are found in Table 3.

Table 3: Objectification – Response Major Themes

Themes & Categories	#	%
Direct Response	210	39.7
No Response	202	38.2
Internal Afterthoughts	110	20.1
Indirect Response	82	15.5
Emotional Response	43	8.1
Other Responses	193	36.5

Direct Responses

Nearly 40% (N=210) of the women’s replies incorporated a direct response to the sexist comment. Some retorted with a question back to the commenter, while others provided information or education, offered a rebuttal, or used humor to respond. Examples include the following:

“I said, ‘I wish he knew how hurtful his comments are. Someday I hope you will take the time to understand. For those of you who laughed and think he is so funny, the same goes for you.’”

“I removed myself from the situation at the moment. But a couple of days later I scheduled a meeting with him during which I told him that I found his behavior incredibly inappropriate and unprofessional and suggested that he wouldn’t have behaved that way if I wasn’t a woman and a subordi-

nate. I advised that I would not allow him to speak to me that way ever again, and that if anything like that were to occur in the future, I would not hesitate to escalate the situation.”

“I’m going to go to my office, and you are going to think about what you said and come and apologize when you are ready.”

“I responded by telling him that it was out of line for him to misconstrue my being civil with anything other than that, and that he was probably old enough to be my dad.”

“In front of everyone, I told him not to touch me again and then I kept speaking in the meeting.”

No Response

Women shared that many times they were so shocked or stunned that they did not say anything in response to the sexist comment. This accounted for 38.2% (N=202) of the responses. Participants made statements such as:

“I was shocked. I was only 20 and it was my boss. I didn’t know how to react and was scared that if I said anything, I would lose my job.”

“Almost without exception when some man says something sexist, or shocking to me, it does just that: shocks me and I can’t think of an appropriate response. . . . Later, I can think of things I should have said, but at the time, I just freeze.”

“I made no response. Several male coworkers approached me later to ask me if I was uncomfortable with the conversation, as though they wanted me to tell them how they should think or feel about the situation.”

“I was so stunned and red faced, I just turned my back and walked ahead of him. He caught me off guard.”

“Most everyone there laughed. I sat there frozen and didn’t say anything.”

Internal Afterthoughts

Many participants reported responses they wish they had made, once they had time to reflect. These afterthoughts ranged from clever comebacks, to providing information, to wishing they had reported the comment. There were 110 responses (20.1%) related to this theme. Examples included:

“I should have told her that her comment made me uncomfortable and was inappropriate.”

“I should have told him, ‘I appreciate your time during lunch. Your comment crosses my boundaries of what is an acceptable business interaction. I do not appreciate your sexual advances towards me. . . . In the future, please respect my personal boundaries.’”

“Words matter. They form thoughts and beliefs. Those become culture. Culture becomes the status quo. This is how sexism in the workplace easily becomes so pervasive.”

“I gave him a disapproving look and avoided him the rest of the day. I was in my young 20s then, and I now wish I had actually said something or stood up for myself. I also wish some of the senior male employees had helped and made it clear that behavior was inappropriate.”

“It felt like a compliment, but was it really?”

Indirect Response

In some cases, women responded to sexist comments indirectly, by changing the subject, laughing, or even agreeing with the commenter when they did not know how else to respond. Of all responses grouped into the theme of this brief, 15.5% (N=82) were indirect and were generally recognized to be ineffective. For example:

“I just said, ‘Mm-hmm.’ I should have shut it down on the spot and said, ‘Would you tell a man to smile more?’”

“I don’t think I really said anything—just nodded and everyone else pretended that they didn’t hear him.”

“I just stared at him and changed the subject. I’m still not sure what else I should have done.”

Emotional Response

Next, 8.1% (N=43) reported what were designated as emotional responses, where they shared that they felt ashamed, embarrassed, hurt, angry, or wished someone had stood up for them in the moment. Some responses include the following:

“Some laughed. Others were uncomfortable. I was shocked. I immediately felt violated and ashamed to be in the room. All I wanted to do was run away. I maintained my emotions and was consoled later that day by a trusted male colleague who was in the room. He was the one who apologized to me later on behalf of my boss. No one reported my boss.”

“I asked him to sign my transfer paper, which he did, and then I told him it was inappropriate for him to stare at my breasts. I felt so shamed.”

“I wished I had a woman in leadership mentor. Someone who could have confidentially walked me through how to handle the situation . . . My job felt threatened. My income felt threatened, and I felt trapped.”

“I was frozen and scared. The other men, who had to have heard everything, stood stiff and did nothing.”

“I just exited the conversation as soon as I could. I don’t really remember precisely because my adrenaline was so high. I felt trapped and at risk. I should have talked to an HR representative, but I was too scared that my reputation would suffer. I was also scared to damage his reputation.”

Other Responses

In addition to the five categories of responses above, eight other types of responses emerged: discussed with others, experienced backlash, proved them wrong, reported to a superior, successful response, third-person response, unsuccessful response, and walked away. In fact, 36.5% (N=193) of responses related to this overall theme included one of the other response areas. For example:

“I hired a lawyer. He handled the issue with one phone call to the company’s board chair.”

“I rolled my eyes and walked away.”

“A few times I have had men email or apologize later for the comments/behavior.”

“I moved so he couldn’t touch me any longer and changed the subject.”

“It was very uncomfortable. I had to ask him to kindly refrain from touching me, and he acted so offended. As if he were the victim.”

“I told him that what he had just asked me was very sexist. He apologized and said he didn’t mean it to be.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

This brief is the third in a series of five related to the UWLP sexist comments research study. The subsequent briefs will focus on the remaining major themes identified in the study: Stereotypes and Undervaluing Women, along with women’s responses to these comments.

In summary, the purpose of the series is twofold: First, we hope to educate readers on the various ways that language and related behaviors can demean and disempower women, especially for those who may not realize their words are problematic. And second, by examining the types of responses women make when confronted with sexist behavior, we aim to equip women with the tools they need to better combat the sexism they experience from day to day. Speaking up against sexism can be a powerful tool for reducing gender inequity. Further, being prepared in terms of how to respond to everyday sexism can help women feel more confident in their interactions with others. By raising awareness of the widespread occurrence and damaging effects of sexist language, comments, beliefs, and behaviors, we can all help reduce the frequency of sexism in our homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, congregations, communities, and the state as a whole.

¹ Scribner, R. T., Madsen, S. R., & Townsend, A. (2021, November 4). *Sexist comments & responses: Study introduction and overview*. Utah Women & Leadership Project.

<https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/38-sexist-comments-study-introduction-overview.pdf>

² Scribner, R. T., Townsend, A., Madsen, S. R. (2021, December 15). *Sexist comments & responses: Inequity and bias*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/39-sexist-comments-inequity-bias.pdf>

³ Scribner, R. T., Madsen, S. R., & Townsend, A. (2021, November 4).

⁴ Scribner, R. T., Madsen, S. R., & Townsend, A. (2021, November 4).

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