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The 'chemical lives' of young Filipinos

by Gideon Lasco, MD, PhD

INTRODUCTION

MANY YOUNG Filipinos are using a wide array of 'chemicals' that structure, and are structured by, their everyday lives. These chemicals - cosmetics, supplements, narcotics, beverages - range from local to foreign, cheap to expensive, licit to illicit; orally ingested to topically applied, and are used for different reasons in a variety of contexts.

Constituting these 'chemicals' as a single category of focus is analytically useful for two reasons. First, they allow scholars to move away from the connotations and 'conceptual baggage' that each category carries. For instance, 'drugs' may immediately connote addiction and crime, but substances currently labelled as 'narcotics' were medicines once, and, as in the case of marijuana, may again be considered as such in the future (see Whyte et al. 2001). Drawing in part from fieldwork in the Philippines, Hardon and the Chemical Youth Collective (2017) explain:

In studying the way young people use chemicals, we move beyond dichotomies of licit and illicit drugs, as well as concerns about addiction and harm, focusing rather on the kinds of subjectivities and socialities that diverse chemicals enable and the techniques that young people use to render them efficacious.

Second, looking at various substances as chemicals allows scholars to borrow insights from the study of a particular 'chemical' to enrich the broader field. The literature in the Philippines on alcohol and drug use among young people, for instance, can serve as a starting point in thinking about chemicals at large, and relevantly for this volume, in situating 'chemicals' in the youth studies literature. The notion that marginalised young men use *shabu* as a form of *diskarte* reveal chemicals as tactics (Lasco 2014). Similarly, studies on alcohol use among young Filipinos hint at how chemicals are embedded in social relations (Choe and Raymundo 2001; Batan 2010) and are underpinned by a willingness to experiment and take risks (Lanuza 2004; Puyat 2005). Moreover, the idea that chemicals can be the object of 'moral panics' (Tan 1995) continue to resonate in the contemporary period where *shabu* is seen as a societal evil. Some of the scholarship also underscore the scale of chemical use among young people. The 2013 Young Adults Fertility Survey, for instance, indicate that more than 1/3 of youth aged 15-24 drink alcohol, while almost 1/5 are currently smoking (Demographic Research and Development Foundation 2014).

Why look at the Filipino youth in particular? One rationale is the fact that the use of chemicals has become more pervasive than ever before, and it is the youth that have had the most exposure to them. Even if the same chemicals are used in various parts of the world (for instance, skin whiten-

ing products are also widely used in many parts of Asia), *how* they are used, and *for what reasons*, is highly dependent on local, socio-economic contexts - as the ensuing discussion will hopefully make clear.

Chemicals, of course, have been around for a long time (Pigafetta noted that the Visayans were ‘great drinkers’; Jose Rizal experimented with marijuana, Donya Victorina applied powder on her face), but the emergence of new products, enabled by global flows of people, information, technologies, products, and ideologies, is unprecedented in both its diversity and magnitude (see Appadurai 1996). The economics is illustrative: Skin whitening products alone are projected to be a \$31.2 billion global industry by 2024 (Global Industry Analysts, and pharmaceutical industry in the Philippines is projected to reach over \$4 billion by 2020; Filipino teenagers and young adults are recognised as “high-value segments” by market researchers (Osorio 2012). This “pharmaceuticalization” of their daily lives (Abraham 2010) call for a focus on young people which are affected by them the most - notwithstanding their very diverse experiences (see Cornelio 2016).

This chapter aims to provide an overview of how chemicals figure in the lives of young Filipinos, by furnishing a survey of the chemicals themselves and offering some analytic points. By “young Filipinos”, I refer to various groups and demographics surveyed in my my own ethnographic studies (see Lasco 2014, Lasco 2017, Lasco 2018, Hardon and Lasco, forthcoming) as well as in a broad range of sources - including works from the Chemical Youth Project (see Hardon and Tan 2017; Hardon et al. 2018) and other literature in a variety of disciplines. These groups included high school and college students, tricycle drivers, tour guides, security guards, call centre agents, beauty pageant contestants, basketball players, out-of-school youths, and many others in various fieldsites ranging from Batanes to Batangas. Most of these studies made use of semi-structured interviews, which were followed up by ‘focused ethnographies’ that looked into specific chemical use practices primarily through in-depth interviews and participant-observation.

I begin by presenting the chemicals that make people ‘look good’, that is, chemicals that young people take in pursuit of certain body ideals and aspirations. I then move to chemicals that make people ‘feel good’, and those that help them ‘work better’ (that is, chemicals that are used as means for a particular, work-related end). While these categories are heuristic and not all-encompassing (young people, after all, also take medicines that make them ‘get better’), these categories capture a range of practices sufficiently broad to advance the goal of documenting the state of today’s youth.

The ensuing discussion reflects on some common themes - and concerns - across the categories. I note, for instance, the sense of pragmatism and improvisation in the way young people use chemicals, drawing from old notions like *hiyang* but also tapping into novel circulations of knowledge, in various offline and online media. I also discuss how chemical use is socially mediated, with *barkadas* and social networks playing a significant role in the circulation of the products themselves - and the knowledge that surround them.

I end by raising two concerns. First, while young people today are “extremely creative in finding strategies to avoid or lessen drug-related harm” (Hardon and Hymans 2014:753), they are not free from the chemicals’ adverse effects and negative consequences. Among certain chemicals, these risks can include arrest, imprisonment, even death (see Lasco 2018). Second, while the lived experiences of young people show their agency, the very existence, circulation, and marketing of those chemicals - as well as the perceived needs and desires that surround them - are also revelatory of the socio-economic inequalities that underpin their lives. Amid the diversity of young people’s experiences, then, a critical look at the diverse uses - and misuses - of chemicals in their everyday lives is called for.

“TO LOOK GOOD”: CHEMICALS AS BODY ENHANCERS

One common use of chemicals is to enhance certain bodily features, or the body in general. The range of these products is very diverse not just in terms of aspirations that inform them but the route of administration: while most are orally ingested, some are administered intravenously - like glutathione. All of these can be said to be driven by aspirations for the body, which are indicated in words prefixed by ‘pampa-’: *Pampaganda*, *pampapogi*, *pampa-sexy*.

A survey of this set of chemicals can begin with products that seek to temporarily beautify the face and the body. In her ethnography of chemicals in Cagayan de Oro City, Taqueban (2018) found that ‘make up’ like lipstick figures greatly in young women’s lives, particularly those among call center agents and those belonging to the service economy. While the focus of ‘beauty products’ has traditionally been mostly women, there has been a recent proliferation of products catering to males, from various hair products (i.e. gels, pomades, waxes, gums, clays) to a ‘masculine wash’ that is marketed to clean the genital area (tellingly, the male beauty industry in Asia has grown over 300% over the past decade in terms of market volume). Meanwhile, the pervasive use of fragrances, colognes, deodorants, reveal young people’s notions of attractiveness as not just a visual (i.e. white) or tactile (i.e. smooth) quality, but also an olfactory one (e.g. Davatos 2017; see Dalisay 2015 for a discussion of the sensorial dimensions of chemicals)

While most cosmetics offer temporary enhancement, there are those that seek to produce a more lasting effect on the body. In my own fieldwork, I saw how teenagers buy growth supplements (i.e. Cherifer, Growee) in the hope that they will still grow tall(er). Height may be final for adults but it is still a developing attribute for young people, and their hopes that they will still grow by a few more inches are buoyed by products which offer such a possibility. I also saw how young people use a variety of chemicals to make their skins whiter - *or less dark*; other examples include the use of diet pills (some of which are medically sanctioned, like Xenical, generic name Orlistat), body-building anabolic steroids (Lopez 2013), among others. Very few of these chemicals have been discussed in ethnographic detail.

Both the chemicals and the body aspirations attached to them are gendered. To add to the above examples, female hormones are used by transgender women to acquire more feminine characteristics - for example, larger breasts and nipples, while transgender men make use of male-associated chemicals for the same ends (see Rengel-Josol 2017).

Body aspirations are also culture-specific, structured by societal norms and values. Desires for taller bodies and whiter skin antedate colonial times (Eugenio [2007] writes that some Filipino epic heroes are portrayed as tall and fair-skinned) although these desires may have intensified in recent years, owing in part to the globalisation of beauty standards (Goon and Craven 2003). Acne is a long-standing problem for many generations although few young people today will be satisfied with the old prescription of washing one's face (*hilamos*) with soap and water thrice a day. With or without their mothers' prodding, my interlocutors studying in a state university in Metro Manila would opt for a dermatologist's prescription.

On the other hand, the pursuit of six-pack abs is a recent development (Neither Richard Gomez nor Robin Padilla had 'abs' in their movies when they were at the height of stardom), and so is the proliferation of fitness centers. Shilling (2003) speaks of these practices as 'body projects'; young people themselves use a similar language when they refer to their bodies as "under construction". Chemicals (i.e. dietary supplements, weight loss pills) - especially those that seek to enhance the body - figure in these projects, as this account of 'bigorexia' in Davao City shows (De Mar et al. 2015):

Bigorexia, which is commonly referred to as a collection of attitudes and behaviors of individuals who have great desire to gain a perfect body. This may include actions that may lead to a strict adherence to gym regimen, consumption of muscle augmenting drugs (or steroids), and most commonly, strictly following diets.

The desire for a beautiful body can also acquire an economic impetus. As in Alex Edmonds' (2012) ethnography of beauty in Brazil where women saw plastic surgery as a way to get better jobs, many young Filipinos feel that having whiter skin, taller body can improve their chances. As one of my interlocutors said, whitening products are a '*puhunan*' (investment) that could lead to being more attractive in a service economy that privileges 'pleasing personality', which is, in other words, beauty.

“TO FEEL GOOD”: CHEMICALS AS MOOD ENHANCERS

Chemicals are also used not just to *look* good, but to *feel* good. *Shabu*, for instance, has been described by my interlocutors as '*pampatangal ng problema*' (remover of problems). The descriptions from my own informants are euphoric:

eh pakiramdam ko'y ano akong pinakamagandang lalake sa lahat (I feel as though I were the most handsome guy of all) [JR, 19 year-old]

drugi kung tawagin. bang, bangag. drugi kung lahat...bangag, mababaliw ka, para kang wala sa sarili (The feeling is called 'drugi', 'bangag', 'drugi' if everyone) [Tupe, 22 years old]

Tsongki (marijuana) is also described as a mood enhancer, but while *shabu* is spoken of in superlative terms, *tsongki* is more moderate: "tamang trip", "tamang tawa" (just the right laughter). Ethnographic accounts of other drugs in the Philippines are very limited, if not non-existent, but those elsewhere allow for some (limited) extrapolation. One of Hunt and Evans' informants, for example, describe the 'high' of ecstasy (MDMA) in these terms (2008:329):

All my friends say like, you know, I get very, very friendly. They say like they look at me and they think that I've got like sunshine flying out of my butt. Like I'm so happy It's like...I can't be any more happy.

Beyond illicit drugs, moreover, there are *legal* mood enhancers, most significant of which are alcoholic beverages like beer, brandy, and gin; youth studies show significant alcohol use among adolescents (see Choe and Raymundo, 2001; Cheng et al 2016). Smoking can also be seen as a mood enhancer; my informants speak of it as '*pampalipas-oras*' - that is, a cure for boredom.

Some of these above 'chemicals' are also used to enhance sexual mood or pleasure. For instance, young men who engage in informal sex work report that the use of *shabu* before sex can make them feel disinhibited and confident (Lasco 2017). An investigative report by Mendoza (2017) furnishes some illuminating detail about the chemical life of a sex party among young MSMs, and is worth quoting at length:

The drugs of choice are methamphetamine, also called by their slang names as meth, speed, shabu, tina, crystal or ice, along with Ecstasy or MDMA, also called "mean green" or "red demon" depending on their colors. Medical experts identify both meth and Ecstasy as stimulants and euphoriants.

Another must-bring is Viagra, a treatment for erectile dysfunction but is used for prolonged erection. The other drugs are GHB (gamma hydroxybutyrate), a liquid Ecstasy

that has the same effect as the pill, weed (marijuana) and amyl or alkyl nitrites called poppers. Although rare, partiers also use cocaine and heroin.

...the drugs are either swallowed, smoked or inhaled. Some partiers prefer to inject meth, called "slamming," to acquire a faster high. The meth is powdered in sterile water and injected from a syringe on a vein on the bend of the elbow. They also prefer to take in the drugs with energy drinks such as Cobra or Red Bull instead of alcohol, as wine or beer interferes with and does not enhance the effects of the drugs.

The above passage resonates with ethnographic accounts of how 'chemicals' are used not just independently, but in concert - or complementary to each other - to achieve a certain desired state. In my ethnography of illicit drug use, the young men used to term 'three-in-one' to describe a state of superlative 'high' when they use three inhaled substances (i.e. tobacco, marijuana, shabu) together with an ingested one (i.e. alcohol) (see Lasco 2014a).

One final example of a mood enhancer is one that is medically sanctioned: psychotropic drugs or drugs that treat depression, such as fluoxetine (Prozac) and sertraline (Zoloft). These drugs are used by young people with mental health issues, and given the increasing prevalence of depression and suicide among young Filipinos (citation needed), they raise the question of whether mental health issues also inform the use of illegal drugs. Moreover, they point to the tensions and contradictions inherent in the idea of 'mood enhancers': some are labelled as 'recreational drugs' are frowned upon by society, while others are accepted as treatment for those with mental health needs (see Parker et al 1998; Hunt et al 2007).

“TO WORK BETTER”: CHEMICALS AS PERFORMANCE ENHANCERS

In the realm of athletics, an entire drug control regime labels certain substances (i.e. Maria Sharapova's meldonium) as 'performance-enhancing drugs' and bans (or regulates) them so as not to give an unfair advantage to certain players (see Tamburrini 2000). But the idea of consuming certain chemicals to improve one's abilities goes beyond elite sporting competitions. Runners consume 'energy gels' (i.e. Gu, Clif Shot); mountaineers pack Gatorade powder or even oral rehydration salts. Delineating the parameters of what counts as 'performance enhancement' is a difficult experience, and in this vein it must be noted that methamphetamine itself was once used by athletes for the same reason.

Beyond sports and recreation, moreover, chemicals are also used to enhance "performance" or functionality in the conduct of economic and educational activities. There is a growing body of literature, for instance, that describes methamphetamine as a "functional drug" (Boys (et al 2001) or an "economic drug" (Sherman et al. 2008). In my own ethnographic work I documented how young people - *padyak* drivers, vendors, sex workers use shabu for its work related effects. For

drivers who need to work for 24 hours to make 'boundary', shabu is the crucial *pampagising* ('awakener') to keep them awake; for vendors of food and beverages, it is the *pampagilas* ('skill enhancer') that gives the confidence to sell their products; for sex workers it can be the *pampagana* ('appetite booster') that makes them perform better - or the remover of inhibitions, as one of my informants said (Lasco 2017):

You need to use shabu before the [sex work] encounter, so that you will be aroused and so that the client will be happy. It's easier to think of him as a female if you're on drugs.

Beyond *shabu*, another chemical that figures greatly are caffeinated beverages, from energy drinks to coffee. Diego (2017) shows how young security guards in Puerto Princesa see energy drinks like Cobra and Red Bull as '*pampa-alert*', relying on these caffeinated beverages to keep them awake during their night shifts: even as it costs them a significant proportion of their income. Students, meanwhile, consume coffee also to stay awake; The National Nutritional Surveys of the Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI) routinely confirm this observation, noting that even some young children drink caffeinated beverages (see FNRI 2014).

Chemicals as performance enhancers call to attention the fraught conditions that give rise to chemical use in the first place - and the fact that many young Filipinos engage in 'precarious work', particularly in the informal and service economies where day-to-day performance is the only guarantee of 'job security' (see Ofreneo 2013). While young elites turn to chemicals to perform well in triathlons, economically-marginalized young people turn to the same in order to survive.

DISCUSSION

Diskarte, 'Lay assessments', and circulations of knowledge

One common thread across various chemical practices is the fact there is a lot of resourcefulness and creativity both in making use of the products for their ends - and in how the products are used. Like young people in the rest of the world, Filipino youths engage in experimentation and improvisation in their everyday lives - and make use of chemicals for their specific needs. This is seen most starkly in the 'chemical physiology' of drug users, where marijuana and nicotine are used to counter the use of shabu. This is also seen when young people self-medicate, or when boys make use of whatever they could find in their mothers' closet (i.e. hairspray, papaya soap). This sense of *diskarte* suggests that many young Filipinos will be quick to try out novel products and make use of new knowledge - and that they are likely to be receptive to advertisements promising various desirable effects.

The Internet plays an important role both in the circulation of knowledge and the products themselves. Blogs, websites, Facebook pages, YouTube videos all inform young people's discourses and decisions, and online marketplaces are increasingly venues for the acquisition of products. A quick online search for instance reveals advertisements for glutathione injections, poppers; blog posts endorsing multi-level-marketed cure-alls. Dating apps (i.e. Tinder, Grindr) are also venues where products are sold, and knowledge about them spread through social media (see Sy 2016). Information from these manifold sources are mobilised to make 'lay assessments' (Duff 2003) about the efficacy of chemicals.

Despite these novel information flows and the new ideas that emerge from them, old ideas persist, like the notion of 'hiyang', which conceives of efficacy not just based on the intrinsic potency of a substance, but based on its compatibility or fit-ness with the person taking it (see Hardon 1992).

Ultimately, however, one source of knowledge is their own experiences - including those shared with friends. In my fieldwork, male vendors insist that they can manage their own alcohol use, as this informant explains:

"di ako nagpapakalasing na lasing na lasing. Yung nagtitira naman na ako ng aking panlakad. nagtitira ako ng kahit ano, basta'y kung ako'y may tama na eh di tama na," (I don't really get drunk to that point that I'm really really drunk. I make allowances so I can still walk after...If I have a 'hit', then 'it's enough')

Sociality, relationality

Hardon and Hymans (2014:753) make the observation that "Drug taking among youth is almost invariably a social activity" and this is true for many of the chemicals surveyed in this chapter. Mood-enhancing chemicals are usually consumed with peers, they enact the eventhood of their activities and serve to function as "social lubricants" (Drobes 2002), whether they are engaged in an *inuman*, a sex party, or just hanging out while smoking a cigarette.

Chemicals mediate social relations, but social relations also mediate chemical use. In my ethnographies of drug use, the *barkada* figures prominently in ways in which young people learn about, procure, and use drugs (Lasco 2014, 2018). Today's digital age, moreover, calls for looking at the new forms of sociality engendered by the Internet and social media - and how they might structure the use of chemicals in the future.

Related to the theme of sociality is 'relationality': are defined in relational terms; The notion of 'bagay' (compatibility) inform people's desires, which in turn inform their chemical practices. The young men who want white(r) skin, for instance, say they don't want to be whiter than their girlfriends, while girls say that they don't want to be taller than their ideal partners. In Palawan, some

of the young people I met express the hope that will be *malinis tingnan* (clean looking) and *maputi* (white) so they will be *bagay* in their dreamed-of lives in Manila and the corporate world. Their narratives show how chemicals are used not just to fit in their immediate lifeworlds, but with their aspired-for futures; their identities-in-the-making.

'Side effects': Medical risks and beyond

In 2015, Maan Acedo, a 19-year old beauty queen from Dapitan City died before her coronation, reportedly of 'multi-organ failure after taking slimming pills four times a day' (Alconaba 2015). Her case is illustrative of the fact that despite FDA warnings (see, for example, citation needed), young people continue to embrace chemicals - either without an awareness of their risks, or with conscious knowledge of them.

Illicit drugs come to mind when it comes to harmful effects, but even commonly-consumed, readily-available products can have medical consequences. Goloso-Gubat et. al (2015) have warned that "with intake of other sources of caffeine (softdrinks and energy drinks) in addition to coffee and tea, it may be worthwhile to examine exposure levels and potential toxicological risks associated with high caffeine consumption." Cosmetics can also come with hazardous ingredients. Tan (2016) has warned that whitening products actually use exfoliants - which chemically *burn* the skin. Despite their perceived safety, herbal supplements are also well-documented to have a range of adverse effects (see Mahdi and Jager 2017).

Beyond these medical concerns, there are also the social concerns raised by the "pharmaceuticalisation of daily life' (Fox and Ward 2008; Abraham 2010), that is, how societies come to see chemicals as the answer to everyday concerns, and how the chemicals themselves gives rise to certain aspirations through their marketing and very existence (e.g. the "Height is might" slogan that is advertised alongside Cherifer). There are also legal and physical risks, and this is particularly true for illicit drugs - from the extrajudicial killings of suspected drug users (see Agoncillo and Ramos 2017) to the shaming of participants in an alleged 'drug-fueled orgy'(Serafica 2017).

Tempering the discussion of risks and harms, however, is Lanuza's warning that scholars "often fail to address the symbolic world of youth and how young people deal with [risks]" (Lanuza, 2004:364). As mentioned earlier, young people measure risk through their own 'lay assessments' - and risk itself is not necessarily undesirable. Hunt and Evans (2008) note: "By examining risk solely from a problem perspective, drug researchers have tended to ignore the possibility that for many young people taking risks may be an important source of pleasure and excitement."

Chemicals, the economy, and inequality

One final point, already implied in the preceding discussions, is to consider how chemicals figure in the context of young people's social and economic situations - and how they figure in their educational and occupational aspirations. In other words, how chemicals play a role in acquiring what Batan (2010:199) terms as 'legitimate status'. The case of *shabu*, for instance, shows how positions of marginality can drive young people to activities that are fraught with risk. Meanwhile, well-off students take to coffee shops like Starbucks, where they consume doses of caffeine in acceptable, even fashionable, ways. The case of skin whiteners and growth supplements, moreover, show how many young people who feel themselves to be economically vulnerable (Cornelio 2016) see their bodies as an 'asset': one that can boost the 'pleasing personality' they need for better jobs - or promotions. On the other hand, those with academic and economic capital can feel nonchalant about their skin.

Young people's socio-economic situations, then, do not just structure their use of chemicals, they also engender the need for them. Call centre agents, for instance, "say that they need coffee to stay awake during the 'graveyard' shift and then drink alcohol to drown out the shift's negative effects, such as irate calls from customers." (Amante, 2010:118; see also Melgar et al. 2009). As in Diego's account of security guards, market vendors have also been reported to use chemicals to keep themselves awake: an understandable concern for people who "start their day before the sun rises and work until late at night" (Timbancaya 2017:81).

In light of these inequalities, one important societal response is to address the structural conditions that lead to chemical use in the first place. Another is to have a broader conversation about the aspirations embedded in the use of certain chemicals (i.e. skin whiteners), as they raise another dimension of inequality: one not based on economics, but on aesthetics. While beauty standards can also offer a way of subverting social hierarchies (e.g. one can be tall and have *kutis mayaman*, even if poor), young people more often than not end up being (further) discriminated against by these standards.

A final response - one which must be seen in the backdrop of an ongoing 'war on drugs' - is empathy and understanding as to why young people use chemicals. Instead of looking at them as vanities or vices, a more productive way of looking at them is as 'tactics' of everyday life (de Certeau 1984), or, as Cohen (2014:782) described methamphetamine in Thailand: as "multi-purpose" drugs that can be consumed "for pleasure and performance". Thus, what Taqueban (2018) says of cosmetics can be said of all chemicals:

[They are] no strategy to change the system; they are tactics to survive in a system of domination. By putting on makeup, the young women mask their precarious situations.

CONCLUSION

Chemicals, as seen throughout this chapter, are used in a number of contexts, for number of non-exclusive reasons: to look good, to feel good, to work better. Some chemicals *conceal*, but all chemicals *reveal* something about young people: their (changing) values, desires, aspirations, risks, and lifeworlds. To reiterate an earlier point, this matrix of contexts do not just structure their use of chemicals, but gives rise to a demand for them. While Filipinos of all socio-economic classes use chemicals, those who are economically marginalised are particularly reliant on their effects - and vulnerable to their negative consequences. For many of them, chemicals offer help in precarious work environments - and hope for a better body that can in turn allow them to seek better income opportunities. In the process of consuming chemicals to boost their prospects, however, they also end spending on them and bringing their bodies to potential medical, physical, and legal harms.

Surveying young people's use of chemicals ought to be a continuous exercise, as new forms of products and practices emerge. Various chemicals also remain understudied, even as they have been used for a long time: from betel nut (*moma*) chewing in many parts of the country to solvent (i.e. *rugby, thinner*) use of urban poor children in Manila, Cebu, and Davao and the use of 'party drugs' by young urban elites. A more vigorous pursuit of this field and the participation of other stakeholders in what is necessarily an inter-disciplinary undertaking is needed to further understand of the lives of young Filipinos - and the place of chemicals in society.

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