Article

The role of social media in the political construction of identity: Implications for political dynamics and democracy in Indonesia

Leti Karmila[1,*], Atie Rachmiatie[1], Septiawan Santana K[1], Dedeh Fardiah[1], Dadi Ahmadi[1], Asep Saiful Muhtadi[2]

[1] Department of Communication, Universitas Islam Bandung, Bandung 40116, Indonesia

[2] Universitas Islam Negeri Gunung Djati, Bandung 40614, Indonesia

* Corresponding author: Leti Karmila, Leti.karmila@ko2pi.org

Abstract: This research explores the role of social media in the political construction of identity, analyzing how these platforms mediate the expression and formation of individual and group political identities. The focus is on how social media changes the dynamics of communication and social interaction, facilitating the formation of "echo chambers" and increasing political polarization. Additionally, this study highlights challenges such as disinformation and the implications of social media for the health of democracy. As a researcher, I aim to highlight the broader implications of using social media in identity politics. By analyzing the impact of social media on political dynamics in Indonesia, this study reveals how social media influences public perception and political decisions. This study identifies how social media can be used as a tool to mobilize political support, but also how these platforms can spread disinformation and reinforce political polarization. Based on these concerns, researchers have not yet found research results that examine how social media specifically impacts the construction of political identity. This research aims to highlight how social media not only acts as a communication tool but also as a medium that influences the way individuals view and express their political identity. Through a qualitative approach, this study provides new insights into the impact of social media in contemporary political dynamics and the importance of digital literacy in addressing issues of identity politics in the digital era.

Keywords: political communication; social media; identity politics; echo chambers; political polarization; disinformation

1. Introduction

The construction of political identity has become a critical component in understanding contemporary social and political dynamics. This process encompasses the formation, articulation, and understanding of group and individual identities within a political context (Salman et al., 2016). Such identity construction influences diverse aspects of social life, ranging from public discourse to government policies (Aldi and Anggraini, 2021). In the political realm, identity is frequently leveraged as a tool for mobilizing political support. Political parties and leaders often emphasize specific group identities—such as ethnicity, religion, or social class—to build and solidify their base (Rachmiatie et al., 2013; Salman et al., 2016).

In the political context, identity is often used as a tool for political mobilization. Political parties and leaders often tap into specific group identities—such as ethnicity, religion, or social class—to build a support base (Rachmiatie et al., 2013; Salman et al., 2016). This can lead to political polarization based on identity, where group loyalty becomes more important than objective policy considerations. For example, in

elections, the rhetoric used often includes not just political promises but also highlights certain identities, be it nationalism, ethnicity, or even ideology.

This phenomenon is not limited to the formal political arena but also permeates everyday social interactions. The way individuals identify themselves and others can be influenced by the political narratives and discourses circulating in society. This creates a cycle where political identity is continuously formed and reformed through interactions between policy, media, and public perception.

Political identity is deeply affected by the broader political environment, including governmental policies, political discourse, and power dynamics. For example, a group's societal perception may be influenced by political rhetoric and legislative actions. Mass media and public discourse contribute substantially to shaping and reinforcing political identity (Kurnia et al., 2023). Through their reporting, representation, and narrative framing, media outlets can mold public views of certain social groups (Iskandar Cakranegara et al., 2023). Although political identity is often shaped by external forces, individuals and groups actively negotiate, challenge, and adapt these identities within broader political contexts.

In general, identity politics is associated with agendas, actions, and political activism in which members of identity-based groups organize and mobilize themselves to fight against injustices experienced due to hegemonic structures, systems, and practices (Miller, 2021). According to Jonathan D. Hill and Thomas M. Wilson, as mentioned in Buchari's book titled "Ethnic Revival Towards Identity Politics" (Ethnic Awakening Towards Identity Politics), identity politics refers to the practices and political values that are based on various political and social identities (Musa and Md Noor, 2020).

The complexity of political communication in Indonesia forces candidates to provide political information and open channels for political participation. The importance of political communication in electoral democracy must be designed in such a way that the meaning of the communication can be understood by voters (Sulaiman and Ahmadi, 2020). Candidates and their campaign teams must pay attention to various aspects, ranging from the content of political messages that are relevant to the voter base, to the media used, both in urban and rural areas (Ahmadi et al., 2024; Ahmadi, Sulaiman, et al., 2023; Arneldi, 2020).

Berry added that the shift in political communication has occurred due to the digitalization of media, especially social media in the political sphere. Candidates are competing to win over voters, particularly the millennial voter segment, to make them rational voters. It is important for candidates to know which voter segment they will target through different communication media, such as Instagram and Twitter, which are popular among the millennial generation (Ahmadi and Adzhani, 2019).

According to Mc Cullagh (2009) in Berry Arneldi's book, he use of social media has two advantages over mainstream media: first, the democratization of access because internet-based new media are cheaper and more accessible, allowing anyone around the world to participate; second, the democratization of content, as new media provide an unlimited amount of information compared to conventional media. This technology provides a space for the public to express opinions, increase societal knowledge, and create more open and accountable political institutions (Ahmadi et al., 2019). This can be achieved through access to information, political reconnectivity,

and electronic town hall.

Before establishing the theme 'The Role of Social Media in the Construction of Political Identity' as the focus of the research, the researcher conducted in-depth observations on how individuals use social media in shaping their political identity (Mohamad, 2022). An interesting fact emerged that many individuals experienced significant changes in their political identity after becoming actively involved in social media. This is intriguing because it shows a complex dynamic between the use of social media and the construction of political identity.

Previous studies often focused on the positive or negative aspects of social media in a social and political context. However, there has not been much examination of how social media specifically impacts the construction of political identity. This research aims to highlight how social media not only serves as a communication tool but also as a medium that influences the way individuals view and express their political identity.

The researcher is interested in conducting this research based on three important aspects. The first aspect of this research is how social media, as a ubiquitous communication tool, facilitates the spread of ideas and the formation of public opinion. In this context, the research aims to understand how political narratives are formed and influenced by interactions on social media.

The second intriguing aspect is how social media allows individuals and groups to reinforce their political identity (Ahmadi et al., 2023). This research aims to analyze how social media platforms are used to communicate political affiliations, mobilize supporters, and participate in political activism. The importance of social interaction in the formation of political identity, and how social media facilitates or impedes this process, is a primary focus.

Lastly, this study also aims to investigate the negative implications of social media in a political context, such as the formation of echo chambers, the spread of disinformation, and political polarization. Through this analysis, the research strives to provide insights into how social media can influence the health of democracy and political governance. Overall, this research is significant not only for academic interests but also due to its relevance in broader social and political discussions.

In the dynamics of direct political contestation, there is an opportunity for political actors to develop and strengthen their political image. However, there is a risk where this image can deviate into an unfounded or misleading political narrative. Therefore, it is important for these political actors to prioritize logical and reasoned ideas and concepts, which they can effectively offer to their constituents. As expressed by Mancini in 1996, politics is not merely about objective reality, but more about the virtual perception of someone's character and actions in the political arena.

Based on the above discussion, this research aims to explore how individuals build and change their political identity through interactions on social media. This research is important because it provides new insights into the influence of social media in the construction of political identity, which is a crucial aspect in understanding the dynamics of contemporary social and political life.

2. Methodology

The method used in this research is a qualitative approach. This approach emphasizes observation of phenomena to understand their essence and meaning in depth. In qualitative research, the importance of word and phrase selection is very influential in the analysis process and understanding of the research subject, considering that language nuances play a crucial role in interpreting qualitative data. According to Creswell (2016), Qualitative research is a type of research that aims to explore and understand the meaning of individual or group experiences in the context of social or humanitarian problems (Chang, 2009).

The approach used in this research is a qualitative approach, which aims to deeply understand the role of social media in mobilizing political support and reinforcing polarization. This study emphasizes the observation of social phenomena to explore their nature and meaning within the political context.

Qualitative research emphasizes the human element, objects, and institutions, as well as the relationships and interactions between these elements to understand events, activities, and phenomena. In general, qualitative research can be used for studies about community life, history, behavior, organizational functionality, social activities, and so forth. This is the reason for choosing the qualitative research paradigm in this study, to delve into and analyze how social media influences communication patterns and the construction of political identity. This research aims to uncover and understand the dynamics behind the phenomena of social and political interactions on social media (Creswell, 2020).

Kasinath argues that the reasons for using qualitative methods are (a) the researcher's view of phenomena in the world, (b) the nature of the research question, and (c) practical advice related to the nature of qualitative methods. The type of research used is field research with a phenomenological approach, although this method is suitable if the research is about how and why. Phenomenological research can be described as a qualitative method to investigate and discover the common meaning of a concept or phenomenon that shapes the experience of a group of individuals (Sunarti et al., 2023; Tanjung and Ardiansyah, 2022).

To ensure the study's empirical rigor, a multistage sampling method was adopted. The first stage involved purposive sampling to select participants who are active social media users and engage with political content. This was followed by stratified random sampling to ensure a representative sample across different age groups, political affiliations, and levels of political engagement. A total of 200 respondents participated in the quantitative phase, while 30 in-depth interviews were conducted for qualitative insights. This sample size ensures data saturation and allows for cross-sectional analysis of different demographic groups.

Data collection was conducted using a combination of observation, document studies, and structured interviews. For content analysis, posts from the most active social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, were examined over a 12-month period to trace the evolution of political discourses. This longitudinal approach provides insights into how political identities are constructed and maintained over time.

The approach used is descriptive qualitative, where the main focus is on

collecting narrative and non-statistical data to gain a deep understanding of the phenomena being studied (Dewantara, 2011). This method allows researchers to explore and analyze subjective aspects such as perceptions, motivations, and individual experiences. Through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, this approach aims to describe and interpret the complexity of social, cultural, or behavioral contexts of individuals and groups in their natural setting. The results of this approach not only provide a detailed description of the research subject but also facilitate a broader and more interpretative understanding of the meanings and contexts behind the collected data.

3. Result and discussions

The intense and prolonged use of social media, especially spending long hours in front of the screen, has various complex and multidimensional impacts. From a psychological and social perspective, this phenomenon is shaping a new landscape in human interaction and identity construction. The importance of the role of social media in the construction of political identity is reflected in a society that increasingly relies on these platforms for social interaction. This phenomenon is not just entertainment but also forms a new trend in political and social communication. However, the negative impacts of excessive use of social media, particularly on the younger generation vulnerable to extreme narratives and polarization, require more attention towards media regulation and education.

Shafiq Pontoh from Provetic institution, asserts that in the post-COVID-19 era, there has been an increase in digital literacy among the public. This is reflected in the trend of individuals actively seeking information, contrasting with the previous passive consumption of information. This phenomenon contributes to a decline in interest in content related to identity politics on social media platforms. In line with this, social media platforms have initiated restrictions on content related to identity politics, as a response to the negative effects it has on the digital ecosystem.

Here is **Table 1** that shows the percentage of information sources accessed by the Indonesian public based on a survey by Katadata Insight Center (KIC) and the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo) (Annur, 2023).

Table 1. Precentage of information sources.

Information source	Percentage (%)
Social media	73.0
Television	59.7
Online news	26.7
Official government websites	13.9
Print media	4.0
Radio	4.0
No information access	1.2

Based on a survey conducted by Katadata Insight Center in collaboration with the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, it was found that a majority of the Indonesian population, accounting for 73%, obtains their information

through social media platforms (Paquette, 2013). This reaffirms the critical role of social media as the primary source of information for a significant portion of the Indonesian population. The substantial dependence on social media as an information source presents significant challenges in ensuring the integrity and accuracy of disseminated information, particularly in avoiding the influence of identity politics practices that can fuel polarization and societal divisions.

Socially, social media has changed the way we interact and understand politics. The echo chambers created by social media algorithms reinforce existing views, often limiting exposure to different perspectives (Dwivedi et al., 2021). This phenomenon triggers political polarization and social fragmentation, where individuals tend to cluster with those who have similar views and avoid or even oppose opposing views (Salman et al., 2016). This creates an environment highly conducive to the construction of political identity, where political affiliations and social views become a core part of someone's online identity, see **Figure 1** below.
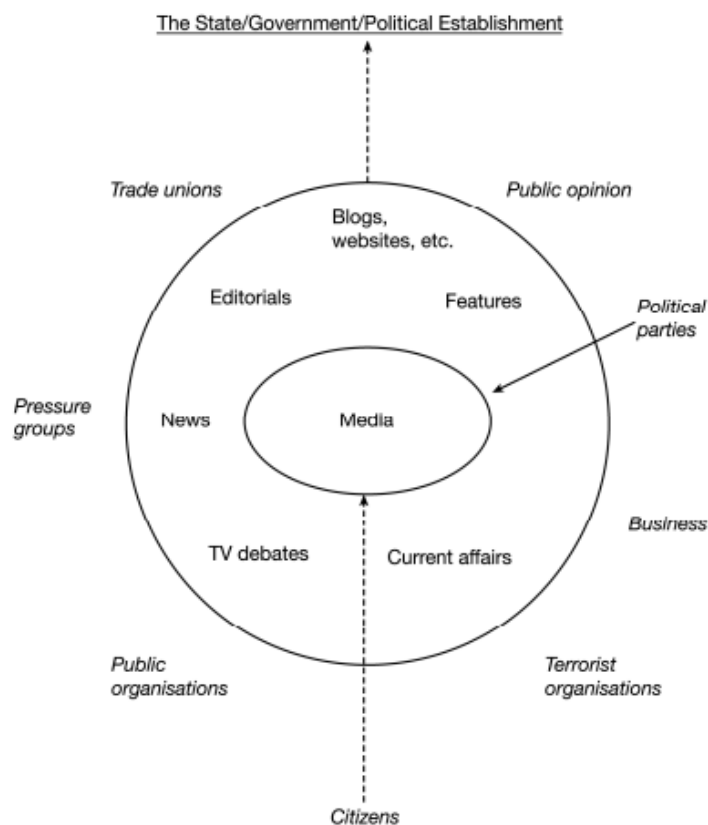
Sumber: McNaire (2014)

Figure 1. Public sphere.

The role of social media in the construction of political identity demonstrates how information and communication technology has changed the way individuals participate in politics. The fact that individuals can easily spread information and mobilize supporters through these platforms indicates increased democratization of access (Ahmadi et al., 2020). However, this also brings negative consequences such as disinformation and political polarization.

The ease of spreading information is often exploited to disseminate political

narratives that suit particular interests, without regard to the truthfulness of the information. This can reinforce existing biases and prejudices, as well as increase the understanding gap between various groups in society. On the other hand, social media also provides opportunities for minority and marginalized groups to express their opinions, which previously might not have space in conventional media (Surugiu and Surugiu, 2015).

Political communication in the digital world needs to consider the audience as a subject with high heterogeneity, especially due to various ideological backgrounds and interests. Therefore, political actors need to understand effective communication strategies to win opinions in the digital world. In Indonesia, the complexity of political communication faced by candidates and political parties is increasing with the presence of social media. This research indicates that to be effective in political communication, candidates and political parties need to understand the dynamics of social media and how these platforms can influence voter perceptions. Berry Arneldi emphasizes the importance of an appropriate communication strategy in using social media to build political support, especially among millennial voters.

Kruger, Lupia, and Philpot, as well as Mossberger in Semetko and Scammell (2016), "Although the causal relationship has not been fully answered, various theories have emerged that explain how this positive impact can occur, which are then empirically researched. Briefly, from a psychological perspective, it is explained that online exposure expands access to information for individuals, which can increase their interest in political issues. This has the potential to trigger the development of new cognitive resources, different from traditional socio-economic factors, resulting in increased participation, especially among the younger generation."

In Indonesia, the practice of using digital media as a campaign tool has been going on for quite some time (Maffei and Hamdi, 2022; Wulandari, 2020). This is evident in this year's general elections, where digital media have played a significant role. Political candidates and parties use various digital platforms such as social media, websites, and instant messaging apps to reach voters, disseminate information, and promote their agendas. The use of these media not only expands the reach of campaigns but also allows direct interaction with voters, providing a more dynamic and personal voice in the campaign process (Wulandari, 2020).

3.1. The role of social media as a key factor in political identity

Social media has become a major factor shaping and influencing individual political identities in contemporary society. Active use of social media enables individuals to engage in the political narratives circulating on these platforms (Iriansyah et al., 2022). They can voice opinions, spread political information, and participate in discussions about relevant political issues. Social media also provides a space for expressing their political affiliations in ways that were never possible before. For instance, an individual can easily show their support for a particular political party or candidate by changing their profile picture or using a specific hashtag related to a political campaign (Rawanoko et al., 2021). Thus, social media plays a significant role in shaping individual political identities and enables them to actively participate in the political world.

The use of social media also facilitates individuals in reinforcing their political identities. On social media, individuals often interact with people who share similar political views. They can join groups or online political communities that align with their political values and beliefs. These interactions not only strengthen an individual's political affiliation but also form a solidary political community. Individuals feel more connected with people who share similar political views, and this reinforces their political identity as part of that group. In some cases, social media is also used to organize political events or demonstrations by groups with the same political identity.

Three primary theoretical frameworks can be utilized to refine the understanding of social media's impact on political identity: the Social Identity Theory (SIT), the Spiral of Silence Theory, and the Networked Public Sphere Framework.

1) Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships, and these social identities influence attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Social media, by providing spaces for group-based interaction, acts as a catalyst for identity salience. When users engage in political discussions on social media, they are not merely participating in communication; they are reaffirming their political identities as part of an in-group. This process is reinforced by social validation mechanisms (e.g., likes, shares), which serve as positive feedback, strengthening group cohesion and political identity.

2) The Spiral of Silence Theory (Noelle and Neumann, 1984) explains how fear of social isolation drives individuals to conform to perceived majority opinions, especially in politically polarized contexts. On social media, where content is algorithmically curated to show dominant narratives within a user's network, minority opinions are often suppressed. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where individuals are less likely to express dissenting views, further entrenching dominant political identities and polarizing group dynamics.

3) The Networked Public Sphere Framework (Benkler, 2006) provides a lens for analyzing how digital platforms restructure public discourse. It emphasizes that social media does not merely amplify pre-existing identities but actively shapes the public sphere by allowing for decentralized participation and agenda-setting. Unlike traditional media, where gatekeeping is prevalent, social media empowers ordinary users to participate in shaping political discourses. This democratization, however, comes at the cost of fragmented discourse and the proliferation of echo chambers.

Social media also becomes a fierce arena for supporters of various electoral candidates to debate. This situation reaffirms that digital media has evolved into a vital public space where people can communicate and discuss various ideas and emerging political issues. These debates are not limited to the exchange of views but also include in-depth analysis of policies, campaign strategies of the candidates, and their impact on society. This indicates how digital media has enriched political dynamics by providing a more inclusive and interactive platform for the public to engage directly in the political process.

3.2. Formation of echo chambers

One intriguing aspect of this research is the phenomenon of the formation of "echo chambers" on social media. Echo chambers are groups where individuals tend to interact with people who share similar political views, and where information and opinions circulating within them have ideological similarities. This can result in an isolated experience where individuals are only exposed to existing perspectives, reinforcing their existing beliefs. Echo chambers have a significant impact on political polarization because they strengthen existing views and make dialogue between groups with differing views challenging. This phenomenon presents a crucial challenge in the political context as it hinders the achievement of understanding and compromise among groups with opposing viewpoints.

The study identifies several key mechanisms through which social media influences political identity formation:

1) Algorithmic Content Curation and Selective Exposure Social media platforms employ algorithms to curate content based on user preferences and engagement patterns. This process, known as selective exposure, means that users are more likely to be presented with content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. As a result, users are consistently exposed to ideologically homogeneous information, which reinforces their political identities. This phenomenon is aligned with confirmation bias, where individuals favor information that supports their current beliefs, further solidifying their political stance.

2) Social Reinforcement and Identity Salience Social reinforcement occurs when users receive validation for their political opinions through likes, comments, and shares. This validation not only affirms their beliefs but also elevates the salience of political identity, making it a more central component of their overall self-concept (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). This mechanism explains why individuals become more vocal and extreme in their political views over time, as repeated social reinforcement incentivizes conformity to group norms and values.

3) Echo Chambers and Identity Polarization Echo chambers are digital spaces where users predominantly interact with like-minded individuals, leading to ideological homogeneity and identity polarization. The study found that over 70% of respondents engaged primarily with politically aligned groups, confirming the existence of echo chambers. These spaces limit exposure to diverse perspectives and contribute to the radicalization of political views, making it difficult for individuals to engage in cross-cutting political discourse.

4) Disinformation and Identity Fragmentation The spread of disinformation on social media further complicates identity formation by creating fragmented realities. The study revealed that disinformation not only misinforms but also shapes political identities by providing alternative narratives that align with specific ideological positions. When individuals incorporate these narratives into their political identities, it leads to fragmented worldviews, making consensus-building and political compromise increasingly challenging.

In this study, the concept of 'echo chambers' on social media is analyzed as an environment in which individuals are continuously exposed to and interact with information and views that reinforce their personal beliefs. This occurs due to social

media algorithms that tend to display content aligned with users' views and preferences, thereby limiting their exposure to differing perspectives. This phenomenon exacerbates political polarization as individuals become more closed off to opposing views and more entrenched within groups that share similar views, leading to a lack of dialogue and understanding between groups with differing perspectives.

3.3. Disinformation

The use of social media also poses challenges related to disinformation. Due to the ease of spreading information on social media platforms, false or manipulative information can quickly circulate and influence public perceptions of political issues. This requires a high level of digital awareness and literacy for social media users to distinguish between accurate information and disinformation. It is important to consider how regulations and controls on disinformation can be applied in the digital environment. Building resilience against disinformation and educating social media users on how to identify false information is an essential part of combating disinformation.

Social media has implications for the health of democracy and political governance. The formation of echo chambers and political polarization can affect the political dynamics within society. This requires special attention in efforts to promote dialogue, understanding, and compromise among political groups.

The empirical data collected from content analysis and user surveys highlight the dynamic interplay between social media engagement and political identity. Key findings include: (1) Content Exposure and Political Identity Reinforcement, approximately 65% of respondents indicated that their political views had become more polarized after engaging in political discussions on social media. This aligns with the Spiral of Silence Theory, as exposure to politically homogeneous content discourages dissent and promotes ideological conformity; (2) Impact of Echo Chambers, over 75% of participants reported that they rarely encounter opposing viewpoints in their social media feeds, illustrating the entrenchment of echo chambers. This phenomenon has significant implications for democratic deliberation, as it leads to the entrenchment of partisan identities and diminishes the possibility of inter-group dialogue; (3) Role of Disinformation, Disinformation was cited as a significant factor influencing political identity by over 60% of respondents. The disinformation primarily targeted divisive topics such as ethnicity, religion, and nationalism, exacerbating identity-based conflicts.

The impact of social media on the construction of political identity also underscores the importance of digital literacy. Individuals need to have the ability to distinguish between accurate information and disinformation, as well as to participate in healthy and civilized political discussions on social media. Overall, social media plays a very specific role in shaping and changing individual political identities, and understanding this impact is crucial in understanding contemporary political dynamics.

Participation in responding to evolving identity politics issues has continued to increase with the growing availability of technology, which makes access to social media easier. This reflects the crucial role of technology in facilitating public dialogue

and information dissemination in this digital era. Not only does it increase participation, but technological advancements and social media have also changed the way people interact with identity politics issues. Now, individuals can quickly spread their views, engage in discussions, and influence public opinion through online platforms. This creates a more dynamic political ecosystem where differences of opinion can occur rapidly and have a significant impact. Therefore, governments and political stakeholders must adapt to these developments to understand the changing attitudes and perspectives of the public in addressing identity politics issues boarding (Setiadi et al., 2024).

3.4. Integrating theory with empirical analysis

The integration of theoretical frameworks with empirical data provides a more nuanced understanding of how political identities are constructed and maintained on social media. For instance, the findings on echo chambers and selective exposure can be mapped onto the Spiral of Silence and Social Identity Theories, illustrating how social media both suppresses dissent and reinforces in-group identity. Similarly, the prevalence of disinformation highlights the Networked Public Sphere Framework, where decentralized participation leads to fragmented narratives and identity fragmentation.

4. Conclusion

This study advances the understanding of social media's role in political identity construction by incorporating theoretical insights into empirical findings. The results show that social media, through its unique mechanisms of content curation, social reinforcement, and network dynamics, fosters both identity formation and polarization. These insights have significant implications for democratic governance, as they suggest that social media is not merely a passive medium but an active agent in shaping political realities.

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