

Investigation of athletes' attitudes towards nationalism in sports

Şevval Dağgöl, Reşat Sadık*

Düzce University, Düzce, Türkiye.

* Correspondence: Reşat Sadık; resatsadik@duzce.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine the attitudes of athletes towards nationalism in sports. In this study, the survey model was utilized. The sample consisted of students from the Faculty of Sports Sciences at Düzce University (n=545; 364 male and 181 female), including national athletes, university students, and athletes engaged in individual and team sports. The Nationalism Attitude Scale in Sports was used for data collection. The scale consists of 18 items in total, 9 under negative nationalism, 7 enthusiastic nationalisms, and 2 under constructive nationalism, divided into a total of 3 sub dimensions. Since the obtained data showed a normal distribution, parametric tests were employed. According to the results, it was determined that the nationalist attitudes of the athletes were at a moderate level and that there was a significant difference in the negative nationalism dimension in terms of age variable, national status and the departments they studied in ($p<0.05$), and that there was no significant difference in other variables ($p>0.05$). Overall, athletes' attitudes toward nationalism in sports were at an adequate and desirable level, with differences observed only in the negative nationalism sub-dimension.

KEYWORDS

Nationalism; Sports; Nationalism in Sports; Attitude

1. INTRODUCTION

Sports continue to be a significant social phenomenon in modern society, serving as a key indicator of cultural values and levels of prosperity. The relationship between sports, nationalism, and national identity remains a central topic in sociological and political studies regarding sports (Whigham, 2024). Nationalism is defined as an ideology in which a community identifies itself by a variety of shared characteristics such as history, language, culture, geography, or economic interests,

and demonstrates devotion to such characteristics (Smith, 2001). It can also be seen as a structure that strengthens individuals' attachment to their national identity and promotes solidarity in the face of perceived threats to that identity (Anderson, 2020). This concept plays a central role in the formation and legitimation of the nation-state. Nationalism, as a cultural value and political instrument, can exert influence across a diverse array of subjects, from social movements to economic policies.

In the realm of sports, nationalism is particularly evident in international competitions. Drawing on Anderson's (2020) theory of "imagined communities," sporting events are seen as vehicles for representing the national identity. For example, a nation's sporting achievements can enhance feelings of pride and belonging among its citizens, while failures may lead to collective disappointment. In this context, sports offer a platform that nurtures nationalism in both positive (solidarity and unity) and negative (competition and exclusion) ways (Hobsbawm, 1992). Moreover, it is well established that sports play a multifaceted role in shaping national identity, not only reflecting the diverse social and cultural dynamics of different countries but also influencing how that identity is constructed (Chaeroni et al., 2024).

Sports are considered important instruments that go beyond individual performance and physical development, as they play a crucial role in the construction of societal identities and expression of collective emotions (Smith & Porter, 2004). International competitions in particular emerge as platforms on which a nation exhibits its identity, culture, and values on a global scale. Arnold (2021) emphasizes in his study that the most generous accolades directed toward a nation often arise in sporting events. The concept of nationalism is recognized as a complex social phenomenon in sports, a force capable of producing both positive and negative effects. From a positive standpoint, the relationship between sports and nationalism can contribute to an increase in national pride and strengthen social solidarity. However, excessive nationalist attitudes may also lead to harmful notions such as discrimination and intolerance (Billig, 2009). By its very nature, sports are conservative and facilitates the reinforcement of patriotism, nationalism, and racism (Coakley & Dunning, 2000).

Nationalism is experienced overwhelmingly in international sports competitions. According to Bairner (2001), sports and nationalism also construct a complex, interdependent process of identity formation. Indeed, it is well known that in the twentieth century, Western nations frequently employed sports as a tool for nation-building (Silk et al., 2005). The organizational structures of these events are designed to serve as platforms in which participating countries can demonstrate their self-worth. For example, the national parades conducted during the opening and closing ceremonies

of the Olympic Games, along with the final medal rankings, function as mechanisms that promote a display of power among the competing nations. Despite their universal traits, Olympic broadcasts, the national anthems played for the victors, and the flags waved exist primarily to reinforce the cultural differences and political leaning of sovereign nations. International sports competitions assert national identity and sovereignty; in this respect, sport is one of the few public domains where nations engage in competition without inflicting harm upon each other (İnal, 2008). Moreover, sports may enable nations, nation-states, as well as regions and other localities to resist cultural homogenization (Bairner, 2008). According to O’Callaghan (2021), sport is ritualistic, and therefore it easily becomes embedded in national traditions. In this context, athletes’ attitudes toward nationalism are shaped not only by their individual experiences but also by their socio-cultural environments and interactions within the field of sports. Studies that examine the historical context of nationalism in sports have indicated that national identities are reinforced through sport—and that sport has even been used as an instrument of political propaganda (Hobsbawm, 1992). This underscores the importance of understanding how athletes’ nationalist attitudes are moulded by shifts in societal values and changes in sports culture.

This study aims to understand athletes' attitudes towards nationalism in sports and to reveal the effects of such attitudes in individual, cultural and social contexts. It is anticipated that the research will contribute to the literature on the perception of nationalism in sports and raise awareness to create a more inclusive and tolerant sports culture.

2. METHODS

2.1. Design and Participants

In this study, the survey model was utilized. The survey model is a research approach that aims to describe a past or current situation as it was or is. This model is used in the research process to analyse the current situation at a certain time and to reveal the characteristics of this situation. Survey models aim to determine the opinions, interests, abilities, attitudes, or behaviours of individuals through surveys and similar data collection methods conducted on a sample representing a large population or the whole target population. The data obtained are analysed by quantitative methods, as this method aims to obtain more general results instead of examining a phenomenon in depth (Karasar, 2018). The sample consisted of students from the Faculty of Sports Sciences at Düzce University (n=545). The sample is comprised of national athletes, university students, and athletes engaged in individual and team sports. This method was chosen to ensure that the sample represented the general population (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018).

2.2. Instruments and Procedures

The “Attitude Scale towards Nationalism in Sports”, developed by Dağgül (2021), was used for data collection. The five-point Likert-type scale consists of 18 items including negative nationalism (9 items), enthusiastic nationalism (7 items) and constructive nationalism (2 items). The score ranges are graded between 1.00 and 5.00. The minimum score is 18 and the maximum score is 90. Factor reliability coefficients were calculated as .92, .71, .93, and overall scale reliability was calculated as .94 (Cronbach Alpha).

The data was obtained from athletes studying at Düzce University Faculty of Sports Sciences in the 2020-2021 academic year. In this process, the researcher surveyed the volunteer athletes and 545 surveys were returned.

2.3. Statistical Analysis

The analyses were performed using SPSS. Parametric tests were utilized since the data obtained from the scale showed normal distribution. In addition to frequency analysis, independent groups t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used. Tukey test, one of the post-Hoc tests, was used to determine the difference in the ANOVA test. The significance level was accepted as 0.05.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the study participants. The results show that the majority of participants were male (66.8%), not national athletes (80.6%), affiliated mainly with Physical Education (45.9%), and were 23 years or older (68.8%).

Table 1. Demographic characteristic of study participants

Variable		N	%
Gender	Man	364	66.8
	Woman	181	33.2
National Athlete	Yes	106	19.4
	No	439	80.6
Department	Physical Education	250	45.9
	Sport Management	165	30.3
	Coaching	130	23.9
	Education		
Age	17-22	170	31.2
	23+	375	68.8
Total		545	100

Below, the findings obtained according to the sub-problems are given. The sub-problem of the research is the question: “At what level are the athletes’ attitudes towards nationalism in sports”. The arithmetic means and standard deviations of the athletes' evaluations on the sub-dimensions of the 'Nationalism in Sports' scale are given in the table below (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of nationalism sub-dimensions by gender

Sub-dimensions	Gender	N	\bar{X}	S	t	p
Negative Nationalism	Man	364	3,80	.416	1.576	.116
	Woman	181	3,86	.369		
Enthusiastic Nationalism	Man	364	3,46	.467	.944	.346
	Woman	181	3,42	.441		
Constructive Nationalism	Man	364	2,95	.545	1.265	.206
	Woman	181	2,90	.416		
Total		545				

In the sub-dimensions of negative nationalism, enthusiastic nationalism and constructive nationalism of the nationalism attitude scale in sports, no significant difference was found between male and female athletes in terms of the gender variable ($p>0.05$). Table 3 shows the comparison of nationalism sub-dimensions between national athletes and non-national athletes using independent samples t-tests.

Table 3. Comparison of nationalism sub-dimensions by national athlete status

Sub-dimensions	National Athlete	N	\bar{X}	S	t	p
Negative Nationalism	Yes	106	3,76	.374	1,644	.010*
	No	439	3,84	.407		
Enthusiastic Nationalism	Yes	106	3,52	.413	1,744	0.82
	No	439	3,43	.468		
Constructive Nationalism	Yes	106	2,94	.492	.196	.841
	No	439	2,93	.510		
Total		545				

Note. $p<0.05^*$

Looking at the nationalism dimension of the attitude toward nationalism scale in sports, there is a significant difference in the negative nationalism dimension in terms of the national athlete status variable of the athletes ($p=.010$). In the table, it is seen that the average of those who say yes to the national athlete status variable is $\bar{x}=3.76\pm.374$ and the average of those who say no is $\bar{x}=3.84\pm.407$. When we look at the enthusiastic nationalism sub-dimension, no significant difference is found in terms of the national athlete status ($p>0.05$). The average of those who said yes is $\bar{x}=3.52\pm.413$ and

the average of those who said no is $\bar{x}=3.43\pm.468$. No significant difference was found in the constructive nationalism sub-dimension either ($p>0.05$). The mean of the constructive nationalism sub-dimension is $\bar{x}=2.94\pm.492$ for those who said yes and $\bar{x}=2.93\pm.510$ for those who said no. Table 4 shows the comparison of nationalism sub-dimensions between two age groups (17–22 and 23+) using independent samples t-tests.

Table 4. Comparison of nationalism sub-dimensions by age group

Sub-dimensions	Age	N	\bar{X}	S	t	p
Negative Nationalism	17-22	170	3,72	.446	4.142	.000*
	23+	375	3,87	.370		
Enthusiastic Nationalism	17-22	170	3,46	.472	.449	.653
	23+	375	3,44	.453		
Constructive Nationalism	17-22	170	2,92	.496	.311	.756
	23+	375	2,94	.511		
Total		545				

Note. $p<0.05^*$

When examining the Nationalism Attitude Scale in Sports across its sub-dimensions of negative nationalism, enthusiastic nationalism, and constructive nationalism in terms of age, significant differences were found in the negative nationalism sub-dimension ($p=.000$). According to the table, the mean for the 17–22 age group in the negative nationalism sub-dimension is $\bar{x}=3.72\pm0.446$, while the mean for the 23+ age group is $\bar{x}=3.87\pm0.370$. Regarding the enthusiastic nationalism sub-dimension, the mean for athletes in the 17–22 age group is $\bar{x}=3.46\pm0.472$, and the mean for the 23+ age group is $\bar{x}=3.44\pm0.453$. For the constructive nationalism sub-dimension, the mean for the 17–22 age group is $\bar{x}=2.92\pm0.496$, and the mean for the 23+ age group is $\bar{x}=2.94\pm0.511$. Table 5 shows the results of a one-way ANOVA examining differences in negative nationalism across multiple groups.

Table 5. ANOVA results for negative nationalism

Department	Source of Variance	X^2	N	\bar{X}	SS	F	p
Physical Education			250	3,89	.333	7.483	.001*
Sport Management	Between Groups	2,358	165	3,78	.461		
Coaching Education	Within Groups	85,382	130	3,74	.419		
Total			545				

Note. $p<0.5^*$

When the negative nationalism sub-dimension of the Nationalism Attitude Scale in Sports was examined, a significant difference was found according to the departments the subjects studied in ($p < 0.05$). In the table, it is seen that the average of the athletes studying in the physical education teaching department is $\bar{x} = 3.89 \pm 0.333$ and the average of the students in sports management is $\bar{x} = 3.78 \pm 0.461$, and the average of the athletes studying in the coaching education department is $\bar{x} = 3.74 \pm 0.419$. The average of the physical education teaching department is higher than the other departments, according to the data. Table 6 shows the results of a one-way ANOVA examining differences in enthusiastic nationalism across multiple groups.

Table 6. ANOVA results for enthusiastic nationalism

Department	Source of Variance	X^2	N	\bar{X}	SS	F	p
Physical Education			250	3,48	.452	1,572	.209
Sport Management	Between Groups	.611	165	3,43	.428		
Coaching Education	Within Groups	114.019	130	3,40	.504		
Total			545				

When the enthusiastic nationalism sub-dimension was examined, no significant difference was found between the departments the subjects studied in ($p > 0.05$). The average of the athletes studying in the physical education teaching department is $\bar{x} = 3.48 \pm 0.452$, the average of the students studying sports management is $\bar{x} = 3.43 \pm 0.428$, and the average of the athletes studying in the coaching education department is $\bar{x} = 3.40 \pm 0.504$. Table 7 presents the results of a one-way ANOVA examining differences in constructive nationalism across multiple groups.

Table 7. Constructive nationalism ANOVA results

Department	Source of Variance	X^2	N	\bar{X}	S	F	p
Physical Education			250	2.93	.493	.651	.522
Sport Management	Between Groups	.334	165	2.90	.481		
Coaching Education	Within Groups	139.168	130	2,96	.560		
Total			545				

No significant difference was found between the departments in the constructive nationalism sub dimension ($p = .522$). In the table, it is seen that the average of the athletes studying in the physical education teaching department is $\bar{x} = 2.93 \pm 0.493$, the average of the students studying sports

management is $\bar{x}=2.90\pm.481$, and the average of the athletes studying in the coaching education department is $\bar{x}=2.96\pm.560$.

4. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the attitudes of athletes towards nationalism in sports through different variables. No significant difference was found according to the gender variable ($p>0.05$). This finding seems to be in line with other studies on nationalism and gender in sports. For example, Ünür & Duman (2021), stated that the effect of gender on nationalism attitudes was not significant in their study examining discrimination in sports in the context of conflict of differences. Similarly, in Dever's (2020) study titled "Discrimination in Sport, Nationalism - Racism - Gender", it is emphasized that the relations between nationalism and gender in sports are complex and gender alone is not a determining factor. Yuval-Davis (2003) expresses that many nationalism theorists that emphasize the role of intellectuals in the reproduction of nationalist ideologies argue that not the intelligentsia, but women who reproduce nations biologically, culturally, and symbolically. Avcil (2020) summarized this situation as follows: The transformation of nationalism in the historical process and the participation of women in this transformation is essentially a created situation. The female body is constructed as the most important tool for the survival, success, and belonging of the nation, and the woman becomes the carrier of these imaginary roles.

Women's participation in nationalist projects and the vision of new types of femininity are some of the main themes that are underlined. Women's roles as good mothers and good wives in times of war and peace, as well as their association with the homeland and the nation, ensured the sustainability of nationalist projects. The differences in nationalism blurring between men and women in the context of sports suggests that sports may be a stronger variable than gender in shaping nationalist sentiments. In addition, individuals' socialization processes, the nature of sports and cultural factors may also affect these results (Anderson, 2020; Özkırmılı, 2010). The impact of gender on nationalist attitudes has been frequently discussed in the nationalism literature, and while some studies suggest that men have higher nationalist tendencies than women (Gellner, 2008; Nagel, 2019), others suggest that gender is not a determining factor (Yuval-Davis, 2003; Brubaker, 2004). These results contribute to the ongoing debate on whether gender is a determining factor in nationalism studies.

Another variable in the study is the national athlete variable. When examined through the national athlete variable, significant differences were found in the negative nationalism sub-

dimension ($p < 0.05$), while only nominal differences were observed in the other sub-dimensions. In the negative nationalism sub-dimension, the results favoured athletes taking part in the national team. Negative nationalism is generally defined as a form of nationalism that is exclusionary, ethnocentric, and competitive (Billig, 1995; Gellner, 2008). The lower levels of negative nationalism among athletes on the national team may be attributed to their interactions with other athletes from different cultures during international competitions. Athletes competing on the international stage, as they engage in cooperation during the rivalry within the global sports culture, might develop a more inclusive outlook. Conversely, athletes who are not part of the national team may exhibit higher levels of negative nationalism, suggesting that they construct their national identities in a more rigid and exclusionary framework. Individuals outside the national team might perceive national identity in sports in a solely competitive and exclusionary sense. Additionally, those not included in the national team might strive to develop a stronger sense of national belonging due to the psychological impact of not being part of the team. These findings indicate that athletes in national themes may possess a more moderate understanding when it comes to nationalism, and that nationalism in the context of sports can vary depending on personal experiences. In a study conducted by Tekin (2023), it was also emphasized that successful athletes use their national flags to underscore their connections with their country, and victories in sports are highlighted as a means of embodying and taking pride in national identity.

In the sub-dimensions of enthusiastic nationalism and constructive nationalism, no significant difference could be observed based on the status of being a national athlete ($p > 0.05$). The lack of statistically significant results indicates that both athletes who play on a national team and those who do not experience similar levels of national pride and commitment. This suggests that the nature of sports inherently promotes enthusiastic nationalism, and whether an individual is a national athlete or not does not make any noticeable difference in this regard. Indeed, according to Billig (1995), an athlete's sense of national identity is not limited to the national team alone but is a phenomenon generally reinforced within the sports culture. Constructive nationalism is a type of nationalism that defines national identity in a positive, unifying, and inclusive manner. The results here indicate that both athletes who play on the national team and those who do not adopt this inclusive understanding of nationalism in a similar manner.

According to the findings, while there was a significant difference in the negative nationalism sub-dimension in favour of athletes aged 23 years and above ($p < 0.05$), there was no difference in the other sub dimensions ($p > 0.05$). This situation indicates that individuals may develop more rigid or

exclusionary nationalist attitudes as they get older. It is frequently emphasized in the literature that the political, economic, and social events that individuals are exposed to can strengthen their perception of national identity, especially as they get older (Hobsbawm, 1992; Brubaker, 2004). Moreover, while younger individuals may have more moderate or inclusive forms of nationalism thanks to globalization and multicultural interactions (Özkırımlı, 2010), it is possible to observe that a more traditional and protectionist understanding of nationalism is adopted with age (Smith, 2001). In this context, it can be said that nationalism is remade with stronger emotional ties and even with a more exclusionary tone as athletes age. This tendency may also be related to the role of sports in reinforcing a national identity. Constructive nationalism can be considered a type of nationalism that supports social cohesion and inclusive national identity (Tamir, 1995). The fact that the attitudes of both young and adult athletes on this issue are similar can be explained by the role of sports in unifying and strengthening social solidarity. The fact that there was no significant difference between different age groups in terms of enthusiastic nationalism suggests that sports, by its nature, encourages enthusiastic nationalism at similar levels in individuals, regardless of age. It can be said that young people between the ages of 17 and 22 were born approximately after the year 2000. This generation is known as Generation Z or Gen-Z. Gen-Z is an expression used for people born around the year 2000 (Senbir, 2004). The most important feature that distinguishes Gen-Z from other generations is that they opened their eyes to life in a time when advanced digital technology was widely used (Taş et al., 2017). For example, it can be said that young people in Gen-Z are more understanding towards people different from themselves compared to previous generations. Marriages between different races and nationalities have become more common among today's youth. Although they are more accepting, they are also less aware of global issues. Gen-Z takes little part in discussions about society or ideologies, trusts other people less, and lives more isolated lives inside their own individual worlds (Gardner & Davis, 2013). Based on these and other similar examples, it can be suggested that there is a difference in the dimension of negative nationalism, while it is natural that there is no difference in the other dimensions. When the items of the 'negative nationalism' sub-dimension of the scale are examined, it is seen that some of the athletes are disturbed by the negative and extreme nationalist discourse in the sports media. Çoban in 'Nationalist Discourse of the Media: Media, "The Other" and Violence', says the following about the media:

The media plays an important role in making violence and hate speech (and maybe even acts) based on racism, nationalism and discrimination acceptable to society through various messages such as news, TV series, movies and advertisements. By using racism and nationalism, the media causes

hate speech to turn into violence, and as a result, it mediates an order in which “others” are defined through the “stereotypes” it starts to use in society. Stereotypes and stereotypical value judgments are embedded in the consciousness of the society, causing those who are not “one of us” to be accepted as a threat to “us” in every aspect. In this way, individuals can become even more dependent on the dominant discourses constructed in the media against the possibility of any danger that may reach their side (Çoban, 2007).

In this study, the differences between the levels of negative nationalism according to the department the athletes studied in were examined and a statistically significant difference was found ($p<0.05$). It was determined that Physical Education Teacher students had the highest level of negative nationalism, followed by students studying in Sports Management and Coaching Education departments, respectively. Studies in educational sciences show that prospective teachers have a stronger sense of responsibility in the construction of social identity (Hobsbawm, 1992). In the context of Türkiye, physical education courses have historically been considered as a field that reinforces national unity, solidarity, and love for homeland (Yetim, 2000). The fact that students studying in Sports Management and Coaching Education departments have lower levels of negative nationalism can be explained by the fact that these departments focus more on managerial and technical skills. Sport Management students is able to develop a more inclusive perspective as they are more engaged with the place of sports in the global economy and international sports organizations. Coaching Education students may address nationalism in a more constructive framework as they are more likely to work with different athletes and be in multicultural environments. Özkırımlı (2010) states that nationalism is experienced in different ways in different fields of education. While Physical Education Teacher department may address nationalism within a more traditional and national framework, other sports departments may have a more pragmatic and global perspective in the matter. Nagel (1998) draws attention to the role of education in the construction of nationalism and social identity. In this context, pre-service teachers may show a stronger tendency towards nationalism as they are responsible for transferring national values. These results show that the relationship between education and nationalism is directly linked to the individual's professional identity and social role.

In this study, no significant difference was found between the enthusiastic nationalism levels of the athletes according to the department they studied in ($p>0.05$). In other words, there was no statistically significant difference between the students studying in the departments of Physical

Education Teacher, Sports Management and Coaching Education in terms of their enthusiastic nationalism attitudes.

Enthusiastic nationalism is a type of nationalism that involves the positive expression of national love through sports. This type of nationalism includes an attitude that does not harbour any hostility towards their rivals, sees national achievements as a source of pride, and considers sports a unifying force. Since the sports environment is seen as a space that promotes national identity, athletes may not differ greatly in their levels of enthusiastic nationalism, even if they study in different departments. The relationship between nationalism and sports is more linked to the role of the sports themselves in the cultural and social context than it is to the educational content. These results show that enthusiastic nationalism is seen as a common value among individuals who study sports and that differences in the fields of education do not have a significant effect on this attitude. In the study conducted by Şahin et al. (2010), it is asserted that one of the significant roles of sports is that it reinforces patriotism with sporting achievements.

Constructive nationalism emphasizes the pursuit of positive change and development for the future of nations. This type of nationalism supports active participation and responsibility for the development of societies (Kohn, 2004). In this context, it may be significant that athletes from different fields of education exhibit similar attitudes at this level as the different departments, although they educate athletes in different fields, may give similar values in terms of positively constructing a national identity in sports and carrying social responsibility. Constructive nationalism is associated with a sense of national responsibility and social virtue, regardless of education. Athletes may adopt a similar approach to acting in a socially responsible manner and contributing to national welfare, even if they have different educational backgrounds. The social context of sports and nationalism may enable athletes to develop similar attitudes on these issues. This reflects the structural role of sports in developing athletes as individuals with responsibility for national welfare and society. The fact that training departments do not shape this constructive attitude of nationalism in different ways shows the effect of an education system that internalizes sports and the sense of national responsibility.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As a result, it can be said that the attitudes of athletes towards nationalism in sports are at an adequate and desirable level. When different variables were examined, although there were differences in the negative nationalism sub-dimension, there were no significant differences in other

sub-dimensions. In future studies, researchers can adopt larger sample sizes and multidisciplinary approaches to examine how socio-cultural and educational aspects, and media factors in the formation of nationalism attitudes toward sports. Mixed research models that combine both quantitative and qualitative methods should be developed so that the identity construction processes of athletes, as well as the impact of nationalist discourses on social media and digital platforms can be analysed. In addition, comparative studies in different countries and cultural contexts will provide important data in revealing the universal and national dynamics of nationalism and gender relations. These recommendations will enrich the literature on nationalism in sports and provide policy makers and sports administrators with strategic information towards action.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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