Causes Of Employee Discrimination In The Workplace: A Study Of Selected Federal Universities In South-East Nigeria

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ABSTRACT:
This study is a survey on the causes of workplace discrimination in selected Federal Universities in South-east Nigeria. Structured questionnaires were administered to a total of 1756 staff of the University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN), Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUAU)and Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo (AEFUNAI). The data collected was analysed with a generalized linear regression model. The study found that employees of the selected universities perceived that they experienced discrimination because of their ethnic group/state of origin, gender, marital status, educational qualifications and union affiliation diversities. The major areas of discrimination indicated were promotion, training/study leave, and appointment to headship positions. Religious diversity was not perceived as a significant cause of discrimination in the institutions studied. The universities should endeavour to generate the confidence of their employees by making their promotion, training and appointment to hold positions of responsibility more transparent.They should also accommodate all diversities in their workplace to reap the advantages.

KEYWORDS: *Workplace Discrimination, Causes of Discrimination, Diversities in the Workplace and Discrimination*

INTRODUCTION

Employment discrimination manifests when the worker is treated less favourably or unequally due to what is peculiar to their characteristics. Some predisposing reasons could be sex, race, ethnic consideration, age, disability, religion, nationality and sexual orientation (Odeku&Animashaun, 2012). The common discriminatory practices found in the workplace, amongst others, are refusal to hire, prejudiced promotions, harassment, bullying, unjust termination, and unfair workplace treatment. The consequences of employee discrimination are multiple. Those affected usually feel frustrated and, at times, helpless. It could pollute the workplace environment by giving rise to lowered production, poor staff engagement, and a breakdown of trust inside the company concerned. It is also apparent that good working relationships will be rare in an organization affected by discrimination. Yao and Jiale (2022) believe that various types of open or hidden job discrimination create room for "multiple losses of efficiency", which may be indicated nationally, organizationally, and personally. On the other hand, the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2007) equates discrimination at the workplace to a sort of human rights violation, which might give rise to the

waste of human talent, affecting both productivity and economic growth. It also generates socio-economic inequalities and undermines social cohesion and solidarity.

The policy thrust of the federal universities in South-east Nigeria towards handling cases of discrimination is hardly seen in their handbooks. Only the constitutional prescriptions and a few clauses in the university laws have something to say against discrimination. The Acts establishing University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike and Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo, respectively, encourage each of them to extend the advancement of learning and to hold out to all persons the opportunity of acquiring a higher education without distinction of race, creed, sex or political conviction, (Federal Universities of Agriculture Act 48, 1992; Federal University of Ndufu-Alike Ikwo (Establishment)) Act, 2015). The laws excluded discrimination based on racial reasons, ethnicity, gender, where one was born or family origin, and religion or political commitment as a determining factor for holding any appointment in any of these federal universities or being a member of any agency constituted by their law. Besides, the laws state that no individual should be made to suffer any deprivation or accorded any advantage in any of these universities.In addition, ILO and other relevant national labour standards provide adequate guidelines regarding non-discrimination law and practice. ILO prescribes that organizations should instead make qualifications, skill, and experiences the basic determining factors for employee recruitment, placement, training and advancement of their staff at every stratum.

This research is focused on surveying the possible areas where employees of federal universities in South-East Nigeria experience discrimination in the workplace. Identifying patterns of discrimination employees of federal universities in South-East Nigeria experience due to their diversity (ethnicity, state of origin, religion, gender, marital status, educational qualification and union affiliation) were studied and discussed. The increasing diversity of the university workforce is believed to escalate the discrimination rate. Most often, management scientists diagnose organizational problems without proper reference to the issue of discrimination (Watts & Carter, 2007; Abbah, 2014). Discrimination is described as cancer that management either consciously or unconsciously fails to diagnose, which they consequently pay a higher price for. Thus, universities or organizations that manage diversity effectively are bound to enjoy many advantages, including increased productivity, a higher rate of employee retention, and greater leverage to recruit employees with high potential (Morrison*et al*., 2007). Most organizations face challenges in managing diversity properly by implementing fair policies reinforcing the right behaviours and paying attention to feelings of discrimination by their employees.

Previous empirical research reported that many people witnessed discrimination in the workplace due to their mother tongue or place of origin. It was also found that some employees experienced unfavourable treatment due to their religious beliefs (Charles &Ikenna, 2009).Akua and Cecilia (2015) researched factors affecting the participation of women in Higher Education management in Ghana. They found. They found that women are underrepresented due to gender discrimination. Odogwu and Nnonyelu (2021) examined how religion-related discrimination and interpersonal conflict hinder employees' performance in four selected universities in South-South Nigeria and found that religion-related discrimination and interpersonal conflict can potentially hinder employees' performance. There appears to be a gap in the literature on other variables like education, union affiliation and marital status diversities, which this present research intends to bridge.

Workplace Employment Discrimination

According to Noe *et al*. (2008), discrimination in the workplace is a multifaceted issue. It is described as a stubbornly persistent social problem. This is so because one could hardly measure the degree of prejudiced treatment the decision of an employer conveys when discrimination is involved. Mishra and Mishra (2015) gave a broad conception of discrimination "as a biased decision based on a prejudice against an individual group characterized by race, class, sexual orientation, age, disabilities, etc." Krinitcyna and Menshikova (2014) classified discrimination into two: social and psychological. The first relates to discrimination affecting gender and age variations, while the latter pertains to nationality, religious beliefs, sexual orientation and disability. According to them, workplace discrimination caused by psychological factors is witnessed in the recruitment and selection of workers, remuneration and other packages of service thereof, dispensation of benefits, training programmes, and promotion. Noe*et al*. (2008) additionally state that it is common to see employees having powerful faith-based beliefs who discover that some observations and practices of their religion could directly interfere with their jobs, such as working on the Sabbath or Sundays. Thus, where there are reasons to raise issues on faith-based discrimination, the onus lies on the employee to prove that there is a genuine religious belief and that they equally gave proper information to their employer,

expressing the need to give the religious observance a chance in the workplace. Explaining the negative consequences if the employer does not allow its practice is equally necessary.

Ghumman*et al.* (2013) and Drydakis (2010) discussed how workers acknowledge religious discrimination. One such way is when they face different treatment from their peers, as it affects pay, elevations, and other perquisites of employment. It was agreed that individuals who belong to religious minorities are more predisposed to be hired in jobs lowly regarded and attract lower pay than non-minority employees. In the second place, they gave the opinion that there could becases of religious harassment, implying that individuals were not necessarily allowed to practice their faith and exercise their religion in the workplace as a part of their conditions of hire. They adduce the view that religious harassment could adversely influence the victim's self-esteem. Thirdly, they opine that the organizational setting might not incorporate the principles of religious tolerance in the working environment due to social and political issues. Fourthly, they believe that employees belonging to religious minorities might face reprisals if they demand to exercise or express their religion in the workplace. Sexual harassment is another type of problem replete in a diverse workforce. This refers tosexual overtures that are not welcome to employees (Noe*et al.*, 2008). Dessler (2011) opines that sexual harassment pertains to one's sex, which could influence in a significant way the way work is done or make the place of work unfriendly or repulsive, thereby affecting job outcomes. Qualification is made that where this situation operates, it can change the conditions governing work. In the case of litigations, the courts usually consider many issues, not minding whether the discrimination reported is serious, regular, threatening behaviour or not, bringing shame or mere verbal expression. It does not depend on the degree of interference with an employee's work performance (Zugelder*et al.,* 2006).

It was shown that equitable employment rules act as a protection to prospective employees as well as regular workers already hired. The Equal Pay Act in the US made it mandatory for employers to pay equal wages for substantially similar work performed by men and women. To this end, judges handling litigations often rule against unfair remuneration, promotions, disengagement, disciplinary proceedings, or welfare schemes given disparately to employee categories. This is because such practices might negatively affect persons covered in their groups. Dastane and Eshegbe (2015) believe that employment prejudice has become rampant in work environments and portends danger to organizations. They advocate that contemporary firms must see to the abolition of different types of prejudice against workers. The person in charge of human resources should take an invaluable responsibility to assuage their organizations from discrimination (Dessler, 2011).

Gberevbie *et al.* (2014) studied discriminatory practices based on people's sex in recruitment and employee performance among academic staff in public universities in Lagos State. They found out that the universities tolerate diversity based on people's sex in the hiring of employees. The survey revealed that very few (30.5%) of those who responded agreed to suffer discrimination due to their gender in their universities. Nevertheless, the survey showed that 67.4% confirmed that male employees enjoy higher positions in the management hierarchy in the institutions. The researchers concluded that this development had affected job performance negatively. Mopa-Egbunu et al. (2021) found ethnic discrimination mainly in informal avenues amongst undergraduate students at Redeemer's University, Ede, while Igbafe (2021) established the presence of ethnic marginalization and indigenous people having squabbles with non-indigenes. Also, they discovered a strong cultural affinity and willingness to maintain pristine practices among lecturers in sampled universities. Kottis (n.d) carried out research where he studied workplace discrimination against Muslims in the United Kingdom (UK). They reported that they experienced discriminatory treatment concerning pay, recruitment, and position held. He discovered that Muslims with commensurate qualifications are remunerated lower than Christian workers and get lesser training. He summed up that the involvement of Muslim employees in decision-making was lesser. Kline*et al.* (2022) also found that individual companies in the USA discriminate against Black applicants. Specifically, they showed that selected large employers of Black names had a probability of reduced contacts by 2.1% relative to distinctively White names. Yao and Jiale (2022) studied employment discrimination related to PhD Students in the USA. They revealed the prevalence of many forms of employment biases and other practices allowed to reoccur (27.18%). Besides, differences were found regarding discrimination amongst different genders, ages, selection methods, types of training, academic disciplines, and regions. Regression analysis was used to show that the highest occurrences of discrimination arose from gender, age, and region where the employees affected came from.

Theoretical Framework
Noe *et al*. (2008) distinguished3 major theories of discrimination. These are disparate treatment, disparate impact and reasonable accommodation. According to them, the first form is found where persons in the

same circumstances are handled disparately and given unequal outcomes as a consequence of the individuals' racial configuration, colour, faith, gender, nationality, age, or disability status. This could be common when two persons with equivalent academic certificates subscribe for the same vacancy. The decision is taken to employ due to one's race, in which case the person not engaged has become a victim of different treatment. The onus of proof that there was a discriminatory motive lies on the victim of disparate treatment. He has to prove that the employer intended to discriminate against him. It was summed that whenever there was evidence that employees suffer such prejudice due to their racial, gender, or other issues, it would imply that there is disparate treatment. They gave an example of a situation where referees were confirmed to investigate past legal details of minority applicants, whereas it was not done for white applicants. Here, the applicants are being treated differently based on their group affiliation (race). In case of litigation, they state that the plaintiff's burden would be to show that what happened to them was due to their group affiliation and that they had the requisite qualifications for the position in question. Moreover, they must prove that they suffered rejection, not minding their qualifications but that the job was left unfilled and later given to another applicant with qualifications like his/hers (Noe*et al.*, 2008). In the opinion of Dessler (2011), this amounts to intentional discrimination.

The following framework of discrimination, disparate impact, happens when a neutral employment procedure is made to give rise to a disproportionate outcome excluding someone from being employed who is supposed to be under protection. Noe *et al.* (2008) defined a facially neutral employment practice as one that lacks obvious discriminatory content yet affects one group to a greater extent than other groups, such as an employment test. They drew avital distinction between disparate impact and disparate treatment discrimination. According to them, an intention to discriminate must be present for one to be discriminated against through disparate treatment. In contrast, imputation of intent does not matter in disparate impact. The necessary determining factor and dividing line should be the outcome of the employment practice which portends discrimination (Noe, *et al.*, 2008). An illustration was made with a hiring practice based on an individual's height, which may not have been intended to discriminate against anyone. However, since women or certain protected groups (certain ethnic groups) tend to be shorter (the hiring practice is based on height) or facially neutral, employment practices will impact certain protected groups. A characteristic like height is not distributed evenly across races and sex. In any case, involving disparate impact, the plaintiff must show that the employment practice in question disproportionately affects a protected group relative to a majority group.

The third type of discrimination, reasonable accommodation, they regard as a nascent theory of discrimination. The origin is traced to religious discrimination, although it had expanded and popularised with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Unlike the others already discussed, this one expects an employer to refrain from specific actions but reasonably accommodate some groups as a social obligation. Employers are to be affirmative and ensure that accommodation is given to persons with disability or those belonging to religious minorities. The theory is breached if employers fail to make reasonable accommodations wherever required, especially to hire disabled individuals or those with religious observations and practices. It would appear that the Federal Character Principle in Nigeria requiring that all cadres of posts in the civil and public services of the Federation and states be distributed through an equitable formula among the States falls under the reasonable accommodation theory (Federal Character Commission Handbook, 2014). The three levels of theorization discussed above apply in the federal universities studied and, therefore, adopted in this study. Based on the above, the study hypothesized that:

HO$_1$: Employees of federal universities in South-east Nigeria do not experience any form of discrimination in promotion, assignment to higher responsibility, or training/development due to their ethnic, religious, gender, marital status, education, and union affiliation diversities.

METHODOLOGY
The research designed was survey approach which facilitated the use of close- and open-ended questionnaires design placed on a 5-point Likert-type scale to elicit responses from the respondents. The study also used data from secondary sources from the statistical digest and employment data from the three selected federal universities with a population of 14,594. A specific number of staff were sampled from each of the 3 selected universities based on the sample size determined for them based on the formula proposed by Watson (2001). The researcher randomly administered 1854 structured questionnaires out of which study participants returned a sample of 1756 made up of both Academic and Non-Teaching staff from the three (3) selected Federal Universities namely, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), Enugu State (1252),

Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUAU), Abia State (373), and Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu- Alike Ikwo (FUNAI), Ebonyi State (229).

Table 1: Sample Size for each Institution based on Proportional allocation.

S/No	University	Population	$n_i = \dfrac{N_i * n}{N}$
1	UNN	9,857	$n_i = \dfrac{9{,}857 * 1854}{14{,}594} = 1252.2 \approx 1252$
2	MOUAU	2,932	$n_i = \dfrac{2932 * 1854}{14{,}594} = 372.5 \approx 373$
3	AEFUNAI	1,805	$n_i = \dfrac{1805 * 1854}{14{,}594} = 229.3 \approx 229$
Total		14,594	1854

Source: Computed from NUC Statistical Digest, 2018.

The data collected were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The single hypothesis was analysed using a generalized linear regression model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
Preliminary Analysis
This section presented the distribution of the socio-economic data of study participants andthe results of respondents' perceptions on patterns of discrimination experienced due to their diversities in chosen federal government-owned universities in South-east Nigeria.

Table 2: Distribution of socio-economic characteristics of the study participants

Variables	Categories	Institutions			Total
		UNN	**MOUAU**	**AEFUNAI**	
Ethnic Group	Igbo	1062(89.9)	316(89.3)	182(82.4)	1560(88.8)
	Yoruba	37(3.1)	11(3.1)	17(7.7)	65(3.7)
	Others	82(6.9)	27(7.6)	22(10)	131(7.5)
Religion	Christian	1165(98.6)	350(98.9)	207(93.7)	1722(98.1)
	Muslim	16(1.4)	2(0.6)	11(5)	29(1.7)
	Others	0(0)	2(0.6)	3(1.4)	5(0.3)

Source: Computed by the Researcher from Field Survey Data, 2020

88.8% of respondents were of Igbo ethnic group, 3.7% were Yoruba, and 7.5% were other ethnic groups. On the other hand, 98.1% were Christian religion; 1.7% were Muslims, and 0.3% belonged to other religions. Nyemuta *et al*. (2011) report that the Igbo ethnic group is dominant in eastern Nigeria, and Christianity is the dominant religion.

Table 3 indicates the mean scores from the responses on the forms of discrimination employees experienced due to workplace diversities, namely, ethnic group/state of origin, religion, gender, marital status, educational qualification and union affiliation in the federal universities studied. The table showed that the respondents did not accept that they experienced discrimination in assignment to positions of responsibility, promotion, training/staff development due to their ethnic group/state of origin ($\bar{x}$= 2.1); religion ($\bar{x}$= 1.8); gender ($\bar{x}$= 1.6); marital status ($\bar{x}$= 1.8); and union affiliation ($\bar{x}$= 2.2).However, education ($\bar{x}$= 2.9) was the only variable with a significant mean score.

Table 3: Analysis of mean score of the perception of employees on patterns of discrimination experienced due to their diversity

Perception of Respondents on:	TVLE(1)	TLE (2)	TSE (3)	TGE (4)	TVGE (5)	Mean	STD
I experience discrimination in assignments to positions of responsibility, promotion and training/development due to my state of origin/ethnicity.	791	363	296	167	139	2.1	1.3
One suffers discrimination in assignment to positions of responsibility, promotion and training /development in my university due to their religion.	1049	311	195	151	50	1.8	1.1
Staff suffer discrimination in assignment to positions of responsibility, promotion and training /development in my university due to their gender	1141	264	243	94	14	1.6	1.0
Discrimination is experienced in assignment to positions of responsibility, promotion and training /development in my university due to one's marital status	1074	257	265	63	97	1.8	1.2
Employees with higher educational qualifications discriminate against those with lower educational qualifications in my university.	325	434	373	334	290	2.9	1.4
I suffer discrimination in promotion, assignment to positions of responsibility, and training/development in my university due to my union affiliation.	873	261	229	222	171	2.2	1.4
Overall						2.1	0.5

Source: Computed by the Author from Survey Data, 2020

Note: STD = standard deviation, TVLE-to a very little extent, TLE- to a little extent, TSE-to some extent, TGE- to a great extent, TVGE- to a very great extent.

Testing of Hypothesis

Ho_1: Employees of federal universities in South-east Nigeria do not experience any form of discrimination (in promotion, assignment to a position of responsibility, or training/development) because of their diversities (ethnic groups/state of origin, religion, gender, marital status, education, and union affiliation).

Table 4: Generalized Linear Regression Model of Discrimination in Federal Universities based on workplace diversities of employees (State/ Ethnicity, Religion, Gender, Marital Status, Education and Union Affiliation)

Overall Effect			
Parameter	Wald Statistic	Df	p-value
(Intercept)	14194.627	1	<0.001
Gender	56.175	1	<0.001
MaritalStatus	7.577	1	0.006
Educational Qual.	224.048	5	<0.001
State	126.182	24	<0.001
Ethnicity	10.360	2	0.006
Religion	.825	2	0.662
Union	64.738	4	0.000
Likelihood Ratio (432.099, p-value <0.001)			

Source: Computed by the Author from Survey Data, 2020.

Note: p<0.05 indicates significance.

Table 4showed the results from the linear regression analysis on forms of discrimination employees in federal universities in South-east Nigeria experienced due to their diversities. The results showed that employees experience discrimination in assignment to positions of responsibility, promotion, and training/

development based on their state of origin/ethnicity, gender, marital status, education and union affiliation. The variables under consideration were significant ($p<0.05$) except religion. This implied that the respondents agreed on the presence of discrimination except on religious grounds. The regression coefficient with $p<0.05$ showed a significant coefficient. Since those with positive coefficients were significant, it implied that those employees experienced more discrimination. The estimated regression coefficient on the causes of employee discrimination in the workplace due to their ethnic/state of origin diversity, gender diversity, marital status diversity, education diversity, and union affiliation diversity, as shown in Table 4 was significant ($p<0.05$). Based on this result and at a 5% level of significance, we reject the null hypothesis(Ho_1) and alternatively state that employees of federal universities in South-east Nigeria do experience some forms of discrimination in promotion, assignment to higher responsibility or training/development as a result of their diversities (ethnic groups/states of origin, gender, marital status, education, and union affiliation).

Discussion

Educational qualifications are essential in appointments and promotions in the University System. It is common for educational qualification of employees to influence their chances of getting promoted or appointed to headship position. Nevertheless, employees would otherwise want to give interpretation as to why they perceive that they were not promoted, assigned to head important positions of responsibility or given the opportunity to be trained for capacity building was due to their state of origin/ethnic group, religion, gender, marital status, education or union affiliation. This is more so as people would want to find themselves favoured in the scheme of institutional dispensation of such benefits, thereby creating a "rat race" for such issues as promotion, appointment to head position of responsibility, and training/development for higher future performance. These usually are highly desired privileges by employees in the workplace. However, religion did not significantly influence the forms of discrimination employees experienced in the universities studied.

The study population showed that a predominant number of employees in the universities studied identify with the Christian faith (as shown by 98.1% of the respondents), thereby not allowing it to appear as a determinant of discrimination in the federal universities studied. Religion has remained one of the issues that give rise to a high level of suspicion among employees in public institutions in Nigeria, and this time, it was perceived differently by survey respondents. The findings are closer to Osah *et al.* (2017), who carried out a study in the Food and Beverage industry in Rivers State, Nigeria, where it was established that gender, religious and ethnic discrimination were present and were negatively correlated with quality of work and employee efficiency. They concluded that when gender, religious and ethnic discrimination escalate, the quality of output by employees will reduce and vice-versa. In a similar study, Odogwu and Nnonyelu (2021) examined how religion-related discrimination and interpersonal conflict hinder employees' performance in four selected universities in South-South Nigeria and found that religion-related discrimination and interpersonal conflict can potentially hinder employees' performance. The two variables also negatively correlated with employees' performance, and it was concluded that the expression of varying religious identities in the workplace could give rise to religion-related discrimination as well as interpersonal conflict, thereby limiting workers' performance. An aspect of the overall result about gender, however, agreed with Gberevbie *et al.* (2014), who found gender discrimination against women in managerial roles in Government Universities in Lagos State.

The result of the hypothesis is also supported by Njoku (2015), who observed that non-indigenous discrimination in job opportunities, education and political rights has been an issue of national concern in Nigeria. She stated that discrimination against non-indigenes on the basis of their state of origin or ethnic groups undercuts ambition and corrupts conventional moral values.Kline, Rose and Walters (2022) established that many large US firms exhibited widespread patterns of racial discrimination in the jobs posted by them and high gender contact gaps. It was specifically found that about 20% of the firms discriminated heavily against black names. Generally, suppose employees perceive that they suffer one form of discrimination or the other in their workplace; their morale might be dampened, and consequently, future performance might be jeopardized.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study examined whether employees of federal universities in South-east Nigeria experience discrimination due to their diversity (ethnic group/state of origin, religion, gender, marital status, education and union affiliation). The study found that employees of selected federal universities in South-east Nigeria experience discrimination in promotion, assignment to head position of responsibility, and

training/development because of their ethnic group/state of origin, gender, marital status, educational qualification and union affiliation. The more diversity is tolerated in federal universities, the less the likelihood of perceived discrimination against employees based on their diversity.This will also elicit greater commitment from employees in the workplace.

Theoretical implications

This study provides a trajectory that would help students understand the concept of discrimination in the university workplace. It also shows that every administrative action or decision affecting employees always generates a perceptual outcome, which decision-makers in organizational management should not overlook.

Practical implications

Since employees would prefer the diversification of dispensation of appointments and other privileges, there is a need to consciously involve a broader spectrum of individuals in training opportunities and appointments in federal universities. The universities should invest more in training to incorporate more people in the scheme of things. Federal universities in South-east Nigeria should endeavour to gain the confidence of their employees in their promotion exercise, appointment to head positions of responsibility, and training/development by making these activities much more transparent to allay the fear of discrimination on the part of employees. This will likely eliminate perceived discrimination in promotion, assignment to head position of responsibility and training/development, which employees acknowledge. Moreover, since federal universities in Nigeria always want their productivity to be improved and sustained at an appreciably higher level, they should consciously utilize the diversities of their workplace to enhance employees' motivation and performance positively.

Limitations and Future Directions

As much as the researcher endeavoured to adopt empirical techniques in this study, it must be acknowledged that some constraints were encountered. A notable limitation of the study is that it could not be possible to investigate all the federal universities in South-East Nigeria. Nevertheless, the results from the three selected universities could serve the purpose of generalizations. Another limitation was using 5-point Likert-type scales to validate subjective responses to the questionnaire into quantitative data. Therefore, further studies would better trap from testing models that overcome these limitations.

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