

OPERATIONAL STRATEGIES OF ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL CRIMES COMMISSION (EFCC) UNDER PRESIDENT MUHAMMADU BUHARI'S ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA (2015–2023): AN EMPIRICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This study examines the operational strategies employed by Nigeria's anti-graft agency, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), to fight corruption under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration from 2015 to 2023. The study is theoretically anchored on Social Disorganisation Theory. Drawing on a mixed-method survey design, structured questionnaires were distributed to 384 respondents drawn from the Commission, with 376 valid responses retrieved, representing a 97.7% response rate. In-depth semi-structured interviews were also conducted with key institutional stakeholders including agency officers, Federal High Court judges, civil society representatives, and Federal civil servants. Quantitative data were analysed using frequency distribution tables, percentages, while thematic analysis method was used for qualitative data. The findings reveal that investigation and surveillance emerged as the most effective operational strategies employed by the EFCC, followed closely by inter-agency collaboration and international cooperation. In contrast, prosecution, legal frameworks, and plea bargaining were rated as the least effective strategies, primarily due to political interference, judicial delays, and legislative gaps. The study concludes that while the EFCC made notable use of intelligence-led investigative strategies, its overall operational impact was constrained by political interference, weak legal frameworks, and poor institutional coordination. The study recommends for legislative reforms to guarantee agency autonomy, judicial reforms to accelerate corruption case resolution, and investment in digital anti-corruption technologies.

Keywords: Anti-graft agencies, Buhari's administration, Corruption, EFCC, Operational strategies

Introduction

Corruption remains a pervasive and detrimental issue affecting nations worldwide by impeding socioeconomic development, eroding public trust in governance, and undermining the rule of law (Eze, 2023). In response to this enduring challenge, governments often establish anti-graft agencies tasked with the responsibility of investigating, prosecuting, and preventing corrupt practices. Various Nigerian governments have confronted endemic corruption, leading to the establishment of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) to address the phenomenon (Akinola, 2023). The history of corruption in Nigeria dates back to the first and second republics when Major Kaduna Nzeogwu led the Nigerian first military coup on January 15th, 1966, which ended the first Republic on account of corrupt behaviours exhibited by the government officials.

Since then, subsequent administrations, including those of General Yakubu Dan-Yumma Gowon (rtd.) and Alhaji Shehu Shagari have been terminated through military coups while that of Goodluck Jonathan changed by democratic means for engaging in corruption (Adebayo, 2023). For example, Gen Gowon's administration which began with a promise of national unity was later marred by allegations of financial mismanagement and favouritism (Okeke, 2023). Similarly, Alhaji Shehu Shagari's government, despite being the first democratically elected administration after military rule, faced widespread accusations of electoral fraud and embezzlement, leading to its eventual downfall through a military coup in 1983. In the same vein, President Jonathan was defeated in the 2015 general election partly as a result of perceived corrupt incidence in his administration (Mbanefo, 2023; Obi, 2022).

In 2015, the fight against corruption stood as one of the major campaign promises of General Muhammadu Buhari (Stephen, 2019). Hence, his administration employed various anti-graft agencies to fight corruption (Nwabughio, 2019). This includes the use of established anti-graft agencies especially the EFCC. For example, through EFCC, the government made several arrests of government officials accused of engaging in corrupt practices while serving as public officials (Aluko, 2015). Prominent among them were Olisa Metuh, former PDP National Publicity Secretary who was charged with receiving N400 million allegedly meant for arms procurement; Col. Sambo Dasuki (rtd), former National Security Adviser, accused of embezzling \$2.1 billion intended for arms procurement against Boko Haram insurgency; Orji Uzor Kalu, former Governor of Abia State and a serving Senator, initially sentenced to 12 years for embezzling N7.65 billion; Joshua Dariye and Jolly Nyame, former governors of Plateau and Taraba states, who both received 14-year prison sentences for embezzling ecological funds; and Ayo Fayose, former Ekiti State Governor, accused of money laundering charges involving N2.2 billion (British Broadcasting Commission, 2018; Ameh, 2018).

However, despite these efforts, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) consistently reported high levels of corruption in Nigeria during President Buhari's administration, particularly in its 2020 report, where Nigeria was ranked 149th out of 180 countries with a score of 25 out of 100, highlighting persistent corruption index despite government efforts (Transparency International, 2020). This was attributed to governance deficiencies, such as weak

institutional frameworks, which created conditions conducive to corruption, while political interference undermined the impartial enforcement of anti-corruption laws, enabling influential individuals to escape accountability (Ejalonibu, 2021).

Against this backdrop, this study focuses specifically on the operational strategies employed by the EFCC to fight corruption under President Buhari's administration. The study is thus guided by the primary research question: What are the operational strategies employed by the EFCC to fight corruption under President Muhammadu Buhari's Administration? The primary objective of the study is to find out the operational strategies employed by the EFCC to fight corruption under President Muhammadu Buhari's Administration. This article presents the empirical findings, theoretical discussion, and policy implications derived exclusively from this first research objective.

Conceptual Clarifications

The Concept of Corruption

Corruption is defined as acts where public authority is harnessed for personal gain in contravention of established rules (Jain, 2001). The term 'corruption' also encompasses the misuse of resources or entrusted authority for personal benefit. Corruption encompasses various forms of wrongdoing, including bribery, misappropriation, deception, collusion, money laundering, extortion, favouritism, and nepotism (Transparency International, 2019). Corruption can manifest at different levels. Petty (or administrative) corruption pertains to everyday transactions at the lower echelons of the hierarchy, where civil servants engage with citizens. Although often involving smaller sums of money, it can significantly impact citizens' access to essential services such as healthcare, education, employment, or housing (Menocal, 2015).

On the other hand, Rose-Ackerman (2009) contested that corruption can also be said to be stemming from systemic failures, institutional weaknesses, and societal norms rather than solely individual moral failings. This perspective emphasizes the role of institutional design, political culture, and economic structures in shaping corruption patterns (Thompson et al., 2020). Grand corruption involves high-ranking officials and business figures (Yunusa, 2024). Bribes and financial gains are substantial, and the ramifications of corrupt acts are more pronounced (Yunusa, 2024). Systemic corruption is the state wherein petty and grand corruption is pervasive and deeply ingrained in the political, social, and economic system, consistently affecting the lives of citizens (Suleiman, 2023).

From the diverse perspectives and conceptualizations offered by various scholars and institutions, a consolidated and workable definition of corruption has been formulated for the research. Thus, corruption encompasses acts where individuals, whether in public or private roles, abuse their entrusted authority or resources for personal gain, thereby deviating from established rules or ethical standards. This includes but is not limited to bribery, fraud, misappropriation, favoritism, and other forms of illicit enrichment (Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act, 2000).

Operational Strategies of Anti-Graft Agencies (EFCC)

A robust legal framework serves as a cornerstone in the global fight against corruption, providing a structured mechanism for enforcement and accountability (Søreide, 2017). However, while legal provisions exist in most countries, their effectiveness varies significantly based on the strength of institutions, political will, and judicial independence. Inter-agency collaboration has been widely documented as a critical strategy in the fight against corruption globally (Inyang, 2017; Ibrahim, 2017). International cooperation, particularly through bodies like Interpol and the FBI, has enhanced cross-border investigations and the recovery of stolen assets. Advocates argue that such collaborations enhance capacity through resource and intelligence sharing, enabling anti-corruption agencies to tackle complex, cross-border financial crimes effectively (Chinonso & Olusegun, 2020).

Surveillance has been identified across comparative studies as an effective anti-corruption strategy. Croft and Reynolds (2019) found that surveillance and investigation are central to corporate bribery detection and prosecution in the United Kingdom. Ezeani (2021) similarly noted that political interference challenges the implementation of surveillance in Nigeria. Investigation strategies have consistently been identified as the backbone of effective anti-corruption systems. Quah (2011) and Caiden (2019) argued that efficient investigation mechanisms form the backbone of strong anti-corruption systems. Hope (2017) and Gabriel (2017) asserted that effective monitoring discourages embezzlement and promotes transparency in public resource management.

Prosecution and legal frameworks, while essential, have faced significant challenges in sub-Saharan Africa. Ojeih and Okanyi (2016) argued that plea bargaining helps accelerate justice and reduce court congestion; however, Makinde (2016) contended that lenient plea deals undermine deterrence and perpetuate inequality before the law. Lambsdorff (2017) further noted that behavioural audits can cultivate integrity among public officials.

Brief Background of the Study Area (EFCC)

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) was formally established by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (Establishment) Act, 2004, which repealed the earlier 2002 Act and provided a stronger legal and institutional framework for combating economic and financial crimes in Nigeria. The Act was enacted in response to increasing concerns about corruption, fraud, and financial misconduct, which had negatively affected Nigeria's economic development and global reputation (Abubakar, 2021). The legislation also aligned Nigeria with international anti-corruption standards, particularly those promoted by global institutions concerned with financial integrity and transparency (Okogbule, 2020).

Under the EFCC Act (2004), the Commission is empowered as the central agency responsible for the prevention, investigation, and prosecution of financial crimes. Section 6 of the Act outlines its core functions, which include the enforcement of all laws relating to economic and financial crimes such as advance fee fraud, money laundering, counterfeiting, and cybercrime (Onyeka &

Nwankwo, 2019). In simple terms, this means the EFCC is tasked with identifying illegal financial activities, gathering evidence, and ensuring that offenders are brought before the courts.

In addition to enforcement, the EFCC also plays a preventive role. The Act mandates the Commission to monitor financial transactions, investigate suspicious activities, and collaborate with both local and international agencies to reduce the occurrence of financial crimes (Eze, 2022). This function is particularly important in today's globalised economy, where financial crimes often involve cross-border transactions and sophisticated digital methods.

Another key role of the EFCC under the Act is public enlightenment and education. The Commission is expected to sensitise the public about the dangers and consequences of economic and financial crimes, thereby promoting ethical financial behaviour among citizens (Ogbodo, 2021). This educational role helps to address corruption not only through punishment but also through awareness and prevention.

Furthermore, the EFCC Act empowers the Commission to trace, freeze, confiscate, and recover proceeds derived from illegal activities. This asset recovery function ensures that individuals do not benefit from criminal conduct and that stolen public funds can be returned to the government or rightful owners (Adebayo, 2020). This aspect of the EFCC's mandate is critical in strengthening accountability and restoring public trust in governance. In summary, the EFCC Act (2004) provides the legal backbone for Nigeria's fight against financial crimes. Its primary roles enforcement, prevention, public education, inter-agency collaboration, and asset recovery collectively position the EFCC as a key institution in promoting transparency, accountability, and economic stability in the country.

Theoretical Framework

The study employed social disorganisation theory which was advanced by Shaw and McKay (1942) and later expanded by Sampson and Groves (1989) as its theoretical framework. The theory argues that crime and deviance stem from weak institutions, poor cohesion, and ineffective social control (Porter, Capellan & Chintakrindi, 2015). In the context of this study, social disorganisation theory is used to explain the challenges faced by the EFCC as a result of disorganisation from political interference and other operational difficulties which eventually affect the efficacy of its strategies and in the long-run weakens its ability to fight corruption.

Corruption is often learned through informal networks like family ties, friendship circles, neighbourhood groups, workplace cliques, and religious or social associations, where bribery is accepted as normal. This makes fighting corruption difficult, because anti-corruption efforts can seem like they are breaking these social bonds. The theory is considered appropriate for linking the social attitude of Nigerians towards corruption, showing why corruption continues, as people's attitudes and daily habits are shaped by informal networks, making corrupt behaviour a normal part of everyday life.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey design using a mixed method. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaire and interview guide distributed to respondents from the EFCC. Krejcie and Morgan’s table was used to determine the sample size. Secondary data were sourced from academic literature, government reports, policy documents, and media sources to provide contextual background and triangulate findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The population for this study consisted of the EFCC, which served as the main focus of the research. The EFCC had about 4,500 staff distributed across its zonal and head offices nationwide. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the required sample size was 384 respondents. A disproportionate stratified sampling technique was adopted to select participants, categorising respondents into four strata: EFCC staff (Stratum A), Federal High Court judges (Stratum D), CISLAC management staff (Stratum E), and federal civil servants in Abuja (Stratum F).

In the data analysis, frequency distribution, percentages distribution table with mean and standard deviation as well as pie charts were employed to describe the main characteristics of the respondents with the use of SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The qualitative data analysis adopted a content analysis process for organizing, analyzing, and finding insights in unstructured or qualitative data, such as interviews and open-ended survey responses (Barnes, as cited in Ogundola, 2013).

Out of the 384 surveys distributed, 376 were successfully retrieved, representing a high response rate of 97.7%. Only 8 questionnaires (2.3%) were not responded to. This suggests that the level of participation among respondents was excellent and that the data collected are likely to be reliable and representative of the target population.

Findings

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Gender | Male | 236 | 62.77 |
| | Female | 126 | 33.51 |
| Age | 18–30 years | 58 | 15.43 |
| | 31–40 years | 107 | 28.46 |
| | 41–50 years | 157 | 41.76 |
| | 51+ years | 44 | 11.70 |
| | Agency | EFCC | 136 |
| Education | B.Sc. | 211 | 56.12 |

| | | |
|-------|----|-------|
| M.Sc. | 51 | 13.56 |
| PhD | 14 | 3.72 |

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 1 above presents the socio-demographic profile of respondents. Males constituted the majority with 236 respondents (62.77%), while females accounted for 126 (33.51%). The majority of respondents, 157 (41.76%), are aged 41–50 years, followed by 107 (28.46%) aged 31–40 years. Out of 376 respondents, 136 (36.17%) were from the EFCC. Most respondents hold a B.Sc. degree (56.12%), followed by M.Sc. (13.56%). This shows that the majority are well-educated professionals with strong academic backgrounds, suggesting that the respondents possess adequate knowledge, analytical ability, and exposure to provide credible and informed opinions on anti-graft strategies and institutional performance.

Table 2: Operational Strategies Used by EFCC Under President Buhari’s Administration

(SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, UD=Undecided, SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree)

| Operational Strategy | SD (%) | D (%) | UD (%) | SA (%) | A (%) | % Effective |
|--------------------------------|--------|-------|--------|--------|-------|-------------|
| Investigation | 6.65 | 9.04 | 11.97 | 32.45 | 39.89 | 72.34 |
| Collaboration | 6.91 | 9.31 | 12.77 | 29.26 | 41.76 | 71.02 |
| UWO-like Actions | 8.24 | 10.11 | 13.56 | 31.65 | 36.44 | 68.09 |
| Sting Ops & Cash Recoveries | 8.78 | 12.05 | 12.23 | 28.45 | 38.03 | 66.48 |
| Prosecution | 7.71 | 11.70 | 16.49 | 28.72 | 35.38 | 64.10 |
| Whistle-blowing | 10.37 | 12.50 | 17.02 | 26.06 | 34.04 | 60.10 |
| Legal Framework | 18.35 | 23.67 | 11.44 | 19.94 | 26.69 | 46.63 |
| Special Anti-Corruption Courts | 22.61 | 23.67 | 19.94 | 14.36 | 19.95 | 34.31 |
| Plea Bargain | 9.04 | 10.90 | 14.63 | 15.69 | 18.09 | 33.78 |

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 2 above presents the effectiveness ratings of operational strategies used by the EFCC under President Buhari’s administration. From the responses presented, investigation was found to be the most effective operational strategy used by the EFCC during President Buhari’s administration. A total of 72.34% of respondents (32.45% strongly agreed and 39.89% agreed) confirmed that the Commission’s investigative activities were effective. Only 15.69% disagreed, while 11.97% were

undecided. This shows that EFCC's methods such as intelligence gathering, surveillance, and asset tracing were widely recognised as the main strength of its anti-corruption work, leading to many high-profile arrests and recoveries.

Closely following investigation in effectiveness was collaboration, with 71.02% of respondents (29.26% strongly agreed and 41.76% agreed) supporting its success. Only 16.22% disagreed, while 12.77% were undecided. This indicates that working together with other national and international agencies such as the Interpol, the Nigerian Police, and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission greatly helped the EFCC to carry out its duties more effectively. Unexplained Wealth Order (UWO)-like actions were also seen as very effective, with 68.09% agreement (31.65% strongly agreed and 36.44% agreed). Sting operations and cash recoveries were rated highly by 66.48% of respondents (28.45% strongly agreed and 38.03% agreed). Prosecution was confirmed effective by 64.10% (28.72% strongly agreed and 35.38% agreed). Whistle-blowing was rated effective by 60.10% (26.06% strongly agreed and 34.04% agreed).

On the other hand, the legal framework received mixed views. Only 46.63% (19.94% strongly agreed and 26.69% agreed) believed it was effective, while 42.02% disagreed and 11.44% were undecided. Special anti-corruption courts were rated low, with only 34.31% (14.36% strongly agreed and 19.95% agreed) seeing them as effective. In contrast, 46.28% disagreed, and 19.94% were undecided. Finally, plea bargaining was considered the least effective strategy, with only 33.78% (15.69% strongly agreed and 18.09% agreed) believing it worked well.

In an interview, a staff of EFCC, Male, 42years old, from the legal department explained that:

The EFCC's investigation strategy follows international best practices and focuses on improving its internal capacity through modern forensic tools, regular staff training, high ethical standards, and working with international partners. This approach has helped the Commission to strengthen its prosecution efforts, recover more assets, and enforce anti-corruption laws more effectively despite some challenges. For instance, in 2024, the EFCC achieved a large number of convictions and recovered over ₦364 billion, \$214 million, and more than 750 properties, showing the strength of its investigation and asset recovery efforts (EFCC Legal Officer/Male/42/May, 2025).

Similarly, another EFCC staff (Legal officer), Male, 42years old explained that:

In terms of collaboration, the EFCC continues to build strong partnerships with both local and international agencies. It works closely with foreign governments, such as France, on asset tracing, cybercrime investigation, and security training. Through this teamwork, the EFCC improves information sharing and quick response to criminal activities. This cooperation helps the Commission strengthen its enforcement ability and contribute to the global fight against corruption (EFCC Legal Officer/Male/42/May, 2025).

On the issue of legal framework, a Federal High Court Judge, Male, 58years old submitted that:

The administration of Buhari introduced measures to support the fight against corruption. Money Laundering Act was amended, executive orders were introduced and the whistle blowing policy was introduced. Delay in passing the Proceeds of Crime Bill and the Administration of Criminal Justice Act contributed to the slow pace of fighting corruption cases and their prosecution (Federal High Court Judge/Male/58/May, 2025).

As for the whistle blowing strategy, a Senior Investigator with EFCC, Male, 48years old revealed that:

The EFCC's Eagle Eye app, launched in July 2021, facilitates anonymous reporting of financial crimes through a user-friendly mobile platform. It eliminates direct person-to-person contact, encouraging whistleblowing and increasing public participation. Developed internally, the app exemplifies EFCC's tech-driven approach to transparency and crime reporting, improving efficiency and trust (EFCC Investigator/Male/46/May, 2025).

Discussion of findings

The findings of the study revealed that investigation and surveillance strategies were the most effective mechanisms employed. The EFCC's intelligence-led investigations, forensic analysis, and asset recovery frameworks improved case detection and conviction rates, confirming Quah (2011) and Caiden (2019) who argued that efficient investigation mechanisms form the backbone of strong anti-corruption systems. However, the study also found that while these investigative structures enhanced institutional credibility, their effectiveness was undermined by political interference and limited autonomy a challenge echoed by Amoako-Tuffour, Ndiaye, and Søreide (2019), who observed that even the most well-structured institutions fail where political control persists.

Linked to this, inter-agency collaboration and international cooperation played a key role in strengthening enforcement. Through cooperation with bodies such as Interpol, the FBI, and the Financial Action Task Force, the EFCC enhanced cross-border investigations and recovered stolen assets. This finding resonates with Inyang (2017) and Ibrahim (2017), who emphasised that collaboration fosters capacity building and intelligence sharing. Yet, Gbenga (2021) and Ibrahim (2020) cautioned that excessive dependence on foreign support could weaken domestic institutional independence and divert focus from internal reforms.

The whistleblowing policy introduced under Buhari's administration also improved citizen engagement through platforms such as the Eagle Eye App. It enhanced public participation and

increased case reporting, aligning with Lambsdorff (2017) and Johnston (2014) who viewed civic inclusion as critical to accountability. However, weak protection for whistleblowers and inconsistent reward mechanisms discouraged sustained participation. This aligns with Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell (2013), who argued that civic cooperation in anti-corruption drives can only succeed when institutional trust and security are guaranteed.

Despite operational progress, prosecution and legal frameworks remained weak. Although the EFCC achieved convictions, judicial delays and selective prosecutions eroded public confidence. Ojeih and Okanyi (2016) supported the view that plea bargaining helps accelerate justice and reduce court congestion; however, Makinde (2016) contended that lenient plea deals undermine deterrence and perpetuate inequality before the law. Caiden (2019) similarly argued that laws that fail to evolve with governance realities reduce institutional capacity for deterrence.

Furthermore, technological and institutional weaknesses affected operational coordination. Manual data management and the absence of centralised digital systems restricted inter-agency communication and efficiency, consistent with Smith (2007) who identified weak technological infrastructure as a barrier to effective governance reform. Likewise, Mungiu-Pippidi (2013) highlighted that digital integration is vital for transparency and accountability in modern anti-corruption systems a gap still evident in Nigeria's enforcement network.

The findings collectively suggest that while operational strategies were conceptually sound and occasionally yielded tangible outcomes, their practical impact was hindered by overlapping mandates, inconsistent application, and insufficient independence. From a theoretical standpoint, the Structural Functionalist Theory explains this imbalance: the EFCC performed its designated role but lacked the structural synergy needed to function as part of an integrated system. The Commission fulfilled its core mandate of investigation and prosecution, but systemic coordination was too weak to sustain an effective anti-corruption regime. Conversely, the Social Disorganisation Theory provides a contrasting explanation for its limited effectiveness, suggesting that the institutional division, political manipulation, and moral disengagement observed reflect a broader societal dysfunction that normalises corruption as a socio-political practice. This theoretical view is consistent with Johnston (2005) and Jain (2020), who both posited that corruption endures when formal institutions fail to align societal values with legal norms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to appraise the operational strategies employed by Nigeria's anti-graft agency, the EFCC, under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration from 2015 to 2023. The study therefore advances both theoretical and empirical debates by showing that the EFCC's anti-graft operational strategies were not inherently flawed but rather trapped within a politically charged environment that hindered uniform enforcement. The Commission's performance demonstrated how legal strength without political neutrality leads to selective justice, and how civic participation without institutional protection weakens trust.

In summary, the findings show that investigation, collaboration, and UWO-like actions were seen as the most effective strategies, showing that the EFCC performed best in intelligence-led operations and cooperation. In contrast, legal framework, special anti-corruption courts, and plea bargaining were rated as the least effective, suggesting that weaknesses in law and the justice system limited the EFCC's overall performance during President Buhari's administration.

Based on the foregoing, the study makes the following recommendations.

First, there is need for proper legislative reforms that gives way for autonomy for the EFCC, shielding it from political or executive interference in its investigations and prosecutions.

Second, the drive for judicial reforms to accelerate the resolution of corruption cases is essential, involving streamlining legal procedures, increasing the number of specialised anti-corruption courts, and ensuring the appointment of competent and independent judges.

Third, there is need for the adoption of predictive anti-corruption technologies through ethical smart contracts to enhance transparency and operational efficiency.

Fourth, the introduction of digital integrity passports for public officials and contractors is recommended as an innovative mechanism for monitoring public sector conduct.

Finally, allocating adequate resources to the EFCC is critical for its operational effectiveness, as sufficient funding for personnel, training, investigative tools, and technology will enable the Commission to carry out its duties more efficiently.

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