

## **WRITING APPREHENSION AND NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATES' INTEREST IN DISSERTATION'S WRITING: THE MODERATOR EFFECTS OF SELF-EFFICACY, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND ACADEMIC OPTIMISM**

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### Abstract

*This study investigated the relationship between writing apprehension and undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing and the moderator effects of self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and academic optimism. 2400 Undergraduates were randomly selected from four universities (2 public and 2 private universities) in Ogun State, Nigeria. They were made up of 1001 males (41.71%) and 1399 females (58.29%). Five instruments were used for collection of data: General self-efficacy Scale; Writing Apprehension Test (WAT); Almost Perfect Scale - Revised (APSR); Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS); and Students' Interest in Research (SIR). Collected data were analyzed using hierarchical multiple regression. Results showed that writing apprehension divergently correlated with undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing. Self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and academic optimism correlated significantly with undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing and moderated writing apprehension – interest in dissertation writing nexus. The results suggest the need for enhanced academic environment that will foster students' self-efficacy level, emotional intelligence and improved service quality.*

*KEYWORDS: Writing apprehension, undergraduates, interest in dissertation writing, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and academic optimism.*

### **Introduction**

One of the main goals of university education is to develop scholars with good academic writing skills. Therefore, university education requires students to engage actively in academic writing practices. Students are expected not only to satisfy the degree completion requirements by writing course assignments and a dissertation, but they are also expected to practice in their contribution to their discipline by writing professional and publishable products (Kamler & Thomson, 2006).

Zamel (1983) cited by Ibrahim & Noor (2011) describes the process of writing as nonlinear, exploratory, and generative whereby writers discover and generate ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning. The process of writing involves sub-processes of planning, collecting data, drafting, revising, rewriting and editing. These sub-processes of writing are dynamic, non-sequential and interactive processes not as sequential stages.

However, studies have shown that the ability to present scientific findings in an accurate, informative, coherent and logical manner is a core skill needed by researchers because it dictates success in publishing journal articles, preparing reports, obtaining grant funding and communicating research findings (Lee, Woods, & Tonissen, 2011; Adenuga & Ayodele, 2009). As noted by Quitadamo & Kurtz, (2007), instruction in scientific writing at

the undergraduate level can both prepare students for future careers and significantly improve their critical thinking skills. Furthermore, the practice of writing regularly, from the beginning of a research project, is advocated as a way to develop, clarify and test ideas while experimental work proceeds (Lee, Woods, & Tonissen, 2011; Martin, 2009). The practice of regular writing also fosters creativity and research paper productivity (Adenuga & Ayodele, 2009, 2012; Boice, 1989).

### **Writing Apprehension and Dissertation Writing**

Daly and Miller (1975) cited by Ibrahim & Noor, (2011) defined writing apprehension as "A subjective complex of attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral interaction which reinforces each other". Researchers have used many terms to refer to writing apprehension such as anxiety and blocking (Gungle and Taylor, 1989; and Al-Ahmad, 2003). Daly and Miller (1975) regard writing apprehension as a complex term because of the complexity of writing. Writing tasks tend to increase students' anxiety levels because anxiety can lead students to be demotivated in writing, which in turn may cause them to have negative attitudes towards writing.

Researches have shown that writing apprehension is a serious problem that can hinder the performance of both native and nonnative learners (Ibrahim & Noor, 2011; Hanna, 2010; Al-Ahmad, 2003). Daly and Miller (1975) suggest three levels of writing apprehension, ranging from high, moderate, and low level.

A study conducted by Hanna (2010) found that writing apprehension might influence students at all levels even after they had graduated from the universities. In addition, students with high level of writing apprehension produced a paper of less quality than low apprehensive writers, avoided writing tasks whenever possible and procrastinated in their work (Hanna, 2010). Researchers have considered writing apprehension as synonymous with writing anxiety or blocks while others have categorized it into two main levels i.e. high apprehensive writers and low apprehensive writers.

### **Academic Optimism and Dissertation Writing**

The term academic optimism was chosen to represent the many positive decisions school make to overcome negative consequences of low socio-economic status (Hoy, Tarter & Woolfolk, 2006). A school with high academic optimism is a collectivity in which the faculty believes that it can make a difference, that students can learn, and academic performance can be achieved.

Hoy (2005) characterized the three dimension of academic optimism as representing the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects of a school. Collective efficacy was the cognitive element, representing the thoughts and beliefs of teachers; trust was the affective element, representing feelings of teachers and academic emphasis was the behavioural element, embodying the specific actions that arose from collective efficacy and trust. These three aspects were mutually dependent and reinforced each other. These three dimension represents beliefs of the faculty that the conditions for students achievement exist, and give rise to a general optimism that student will achieve academically. The dimensions of optimism are factors that shape the normative environment of the school.

Al-anzi (2005) in his study on academic achievement and its relationship with optimism and self-esteem found out that significant positive correlation existed between academic achievement and both optimism and self-esteem. Noris & Wright (2003) found that achievement-striving and situational optimism may be as important as ability variables when used as predictors of academic performance. In the same vein, Yats (2002) found a relation between grade level and optimism or pessimism in students' achievement in Mathematics. Also, Akinlana (2011) established that academic optimism is a potent factor in students' academic achievement.

McGuigan and Hoy (2006) later utilized correlation, regression and factor analysis to study academic optimism, enabling school structure bureaucracy, SES and school achievement. The results of their study confirmed that the higher the schools that enabling structure is significantly correlated with academic optimism, controlling for SES; and that the greater the academic optimism of the school, the higher the academic achievement levels of schools.

It is therefore opinionated by the researchers that if academic optimism could positively influence students' academic achievement, it is also very possible to influence students' attitude toward project or dissertation writing.

### **General Self- efficacy and Dissertation Writing**

Self-efficacy has been linked to academic success (Mabekoje, 2010; Adenuga & Ayodele, 2009; Salami, 2004, Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as an individual's confidence in their ability to organize and execute an action to solve a problem or accomplish a task. A strong sense of self-efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being. Students with high self-efficacy are likely to have higher academic achievement compared with those with low self-efficacy who might doubt their capabilities and withdraw from difficult tasks (Multon et al., 1991).

Self-efficacy can make a difference to people's ways of thinking feeling and action. With respect to feelings, a low sense of self-efficacy is associated with depression, anxiety and helplessness. People with low self-efficacy also harbor pessimistic thoughts about their performance and personal development (Mabekoje, 2010; Adenuga & Ayodele, 2009). In constant, a strong sense of belief in one-self facilitates cognitive and execute processes in multiple contexts, influencing, for example, decision making and academic achievement (Bandura, 1995; Shewarzer, 1999).

Bandura's (1995, 1997) concept of self-efficacy as applied to research can be defined as confidence in carrying out research activities from organizing a research plan to carrying out the research process from library research and reading to writing and publication (Holden et al., 1999; Lei, 2008; Uranu & Beck, 2004, in Baltes, Hoffman-kipp & Lynn, 2010 ). Self-efficacy is a good predictor of behavior and research self-efficacy is particularly useful in identifying the forces at work in career choices for graduate students regarding whether or not they will engage in research formally in their work (Mullikin, Bakken, & Betz, 2007).

Research has shown that low research self-efficacy can interfere with students' research training and practitioners' willingness to conduct research and add scholarly contributions to their field of study (Adenuga & Ayodele, 2009; Love, Bahner, Jones, & Nilson, 2007). Research has also shown that high research self-efficacy is an important factor

related to students successfully conducting research and pursuing research beyond graduate study (Adenuga & Ayodele, 2009; Forester, Kahn, & Hesson-McInnis, 2004).

### **Emotional Intelligence and Dissertation Writing**

Emotional intelligence (EQ) has been defined as one's ability to recognize process and utilize emotional laden information (Petride & Furnham, 2003). EQ encompasses various dispositions from the personality domain, such as empathy, impulsivity and assertiveness as well as elements of social intelligence. Mayer and Salovey (1997) also collaborated this by describing emotional intelligence as a form of social, intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and other feelings and emotions, to dominate among them to use this information to guide one's thinking and action; and to reflectively regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth.

Emotional intelligence describes the ability, capacity, or skill to perceive, assess, and manage the emotions of oneself, those of others and of groups (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). The construct has also been described as the ability to recognize the meanings of emotions, relationships, to reason and solve problems (Mabekoje, 2010, Adenuga & Ayodele, 2009; Ogunyemi, 2008; Mayer, Slovey & Caruso, 2002). EQ have been found to be associated with outcomes such as life satisfaction and social network size and quality (Fernandez-Berrocal & Ruiz, 2008; Palmer, Saklofske, Austin, & Minski, 2003; Donaldson, & Stough, 2002).

Researches have shown that emotional intelligence predict academic performance and other cognitive outcomes (Adenuga & Ayodele, 2009; Deniz Tras & Aydogan, 2009; Berenson, Boyles & Weaver, 2008; Harrod & Scheer, 2005). Emotional intelligence in research for graduate students appears to begin with positive experiences in the early research design courses. Thus, emotional intelligence can be used to facilitate certain kinds of cognitive processes. Positive moods can facilitate creativity, integrative thinking and inductive reasoning and negative moods can facilitate attention to detail, detection of errors and problems and careful information processing (Deniz Tras & Aydogan, 2009; Berenson, Boyles & Weaver, 2008; Mayer, Slovey & Caruso, 2002).

From the foregoing, one can surmise that writing apprehension can negatively affect dissertation writing by interfering with their self-efficacy level, emotional intelligence and academic optimism. Perhaps, a reasonable way of getting over the effect of writing apprehension on students' attitude toward dissertation writing is to enhance their self-efficacy and emotional intelligence level, and academic optimism in addition is to alleviate their underlying fear or anxiety of writing research project.

The purposes of this study are: (1) to investigate the relationship between writing apprehension and dissertation writing among undergraduates. (2) To examine the moderating roles of self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and academic optimism in the relationship between apprehension and dissertation writing.

### **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses were tested at the .05 level of significance in this study:

1. Students who report higher level of apprehension will exhibit lower ability for dissertation writing.

2. High academic optimism will influence students' academic success in dissertation writing.
3. Students with high self-efficacy will exhibit higher ability for dissertation writing.
4. Students who are high emotional intelligence will exhibit higher ability for dissertation writing.
5. Emotional intelligence will moderate apprehension - writing of dissertation relationship in a positive direction.
6. Self-efficacy will moderate apprehension - writing of dissertation relationship in a positive direction.
7. Academic optimism will moderate apprehension - writing of dissertation relationship in a positive direction.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants for the study were 2400 Undergraduates randomly selected from four universities (2 public and 2 private universities) in Ogun State, Nigeria. They were made up of 1001 males (41.71%) and 1399 females (58.29%). The age range of the students at the time of data collection was 19 to 31 years with a mean age of 26.3 years and standard deviation of 5.07. Of the 2400 questionnaires distributed 2388 were completely filled while 12 were incomplete. This gave a return rate of 99.5%.

### ***Instruments***

#### **➤ General Self-efficacy Scale (GSE)**

Self-efficacy was assessed using the General Self-efficacy scale developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995). The scale was created to assess a general sense of perceived self-efficacy with the aim of predicting how individuals can cope with s daily hassles and adapt to all kinds of stressful life events. The construct of perceived self-efficacy reflects an optimistic self-belief. It is a 10 – item scale measured on a 4 – point likert scaling model with options ranging from 1 = not at all true, to 4 – exactly true. Typical items include ‘Thanks for my resourcefulness, I know I how to handle unforeseen situations’ and ‘When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions’. The scale has internal consistency between 0.75 and 0.90 (Schwarzer and Jerusalem, 1995). The scale is parsimonious, reliable, culture fair, and widely used in Nigeria with various evidence of validity provided (Adenuga & Ayodele, 2009; Adediyi and Owolabi-Gabriel, 2010; Ogunyemi & Mabekoje 2007; & Okubanjo 2007).

#### **➤ Writing Apprehension Test (WAT)**

Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) was developed by Daly and Miller (1975). It is a 26 item inventory, measured along 5 Likert-type ranging from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. Examples of the items are like: “I am not good at writing”, “I look forward to writing down my ideas”, “Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time”, and “Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience”. WAT was recently used by Ibrahim & Noor, (2011). The WAT has demonstrated high internal consistency with Cronbach alpha between 0.68 and 0.77 and reliability coefficient of 0.81 (Ayodele & Akinlana, 2012).

#### **➤ Almost Perfect Scale-Revised**

Academic optimism was measured using the Almost Perfect Scale - Revised (APSR). It is an adopted instrument developed by Stanley, Rice, Manley, Tripp and Ashbb, 2001. This scale consists of 23 items. The APS-R contains three sub-scales for High standards (7 items), Order (4 items) and Discrepancy (2 items). Sample items include “I expect the best from myself” (High Standards), “I like to always be organized and disciplined” (Order) and “My achievement rarely measures up to my standards” (Discrepancy). The instrument has 7-point Likert-type scaling model ranging from Strongly Agree (1) to Strongly Disagree (7). Coefficient Alphas for the High Standards, Order and Discrepancy subscales were reported as 0.85, 0.86 and 0.92 respectively. Test-retest correlations were reported to be adequate over a period of three weeks: 0.72 for standards, 0.80 for order and 0.83 for Discrepancy (Akinlana, 2011).

➤ **Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS)**

The Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS) developed by Schutte *et al* (1998) which evaluates emotional intelligence based on self-report responses to 33 items tapping the appraisal and expression of emotions in self and other, regulation of emotions in self and other, and utilization of emotions in solving problems. Participants responded by indicating their agreement to each of items on a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Sample items include ‘When I am faced with obstacles, I remember time I face similar obstacles and overcame them’ and ‘I expect that I will do well on most thing I try’. The EIS has demonstrated high internal consistency with Cronbach alpha between 0.78 and 0.90 and reliability coefficient of 0.78 (Schutte, *et al*, 1998). Evidence and validity has been shown in studies conducted by Adenuga & Ayodele (2009); Mabekoje (2010), Okubanjo (2007).

➤ **Students’ Interest in Research (SIR)**

SIR was an adapted questionnaire from Adenuga & Ayodele (2009) to tap into the interest of the undergraduate students in writing final project or dissertation. It is 15-items scales ranging from strongly agree (4) to strongly disagree (1). Sample items include: ‘Generally speaking, research is of no interest to me’ and ‘my evaluation of self-worth in research depends on my interest and attitude towards it’. The reliability was ascertained through test-retest method within two weeks intervals. The validity co-efficient index of 0.79 and a test-retest reliability of 0.73 were obtained. Thus, the instrument was reliable and valid to use.

**Data Analysis**

The data collected were analyzed using hierarchical multiple regression analysis in order to establish the relationship between the dependent variable – dissertation writing and the independent variables (self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, academic optimism, and writing apprehension).

**Procedure**

The researchers with the help of other trained research assistants visited the universities’ faculties to administer the instruments directly on the subjects.

## Results

Table 1: Means, standard deviation and correlations for all variables in the study

S/N	Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1	Writing of Dissertation	1.00				
2	Self-efficacy	.41*	1.00			
3	Emotional Intelligence	.29*	.41*	1.00		
4	Academic Optimism	.37*	.35*	.22*	1.00	
5	Writing Apprehension	-.23*	-.30*	-.25*	-.23*	1.00
	Mean	28.3	21.8	59.7	68.1	80.5
	Standard Deviation	8.71	9.11	6.36	5.41	5.09

Note:  $N = 2388$ ,  $*P < .05$ ; All tests are 2-tailed

On the relationships of writing apprehension, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and academic optimism to Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing Table 1 depicts the correlation between the combined writing apprehension and the Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing which was divergently related ( $r = -.23$ ,  $P > .05$ ). This shows that there is no support for a direct relationship between writing apprehension and the Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing. The first hypothesis was not supported by the outcome of this finding. From the results on Table 1, Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing was found to be positively related to self-efficacy ( $r = .40$ ,  $P < .05$ ), academic optimism ( $r = .32$ ,  $P < .05$ ) and emotional intelligence ( $r = .26$ ,  $P < .05$ ). Therefore hypotheses 2, 3 and 4 are supported indicating that students who had higher self-efficacy, better academic optimism and higher emotional intelligence had higher propensity of doing well in dissertation writing.

Table 2: Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, academic optimism, and writing apprehension on dissertation writing

S/N	Variable	R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Adj	F	df	$\beta$	t-value
1	Writing Apprehension ( <b>WA</b> )	.29	.024	.017	1.133	1, 2386	.10	0.58
2	Self-efficacy ( <b>SE</b> )	.57	.401	.401	7.818	2, 2385	.33	5.17*
3	Emotional Intelligence ( <b>EQ</b> )	.43	.337	.309	4.419	3, 2384	.25	3.08*
4	Academic Optimism ( <b>AO</b> )	.45	.381	.348	5.222	4, 2383	.29	3.45*
5	Interactions	.66	.489	.397	6.110	7, 2380		
	WA X SE						.35	4.98*
	WA X EQ						.24	3.03*
	WA X AO						.27	3.11*

Note:  $N = 2388$ ,  $*P < .05$  (2-tailed)

The hierarchical regression procedure was used to test the significance and form of the main and interaction terms as indicated in Hypotheses 5, 6 and 7. To determine the joint contributions of the writing apprehension and the moderator variables to Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing, writing apprehension was entered first into the regression equation, followed by self-efficacy, emotional intelligence and academic optimism in steps 2, 3 and 4 respectively. In step 5, the interaction terms were entered. The results on Table 2 shows that writing apprehension was not a significant predictor of Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing (Adj.  $R^2 = .017$ ,  $\beta = .58$ ,  $F(1, 2386) = 1.133$ ). On the other hand, the results indicate that self-efficacy (Adj.  $R^2 = .401$  (40.1%),  $\beta = .33$ ,  $F(2, 2385) = 7.818$ ,  $P <$

.05), academic optimism (Adj.  $R^2 = .348$  (34.8%),  $\beta = .29$ ,  $F(4, 2383) = 5.222$ ,  $P < .05$ ) and emotional intelligence (Adj.  $R^2 = .309$  (30.9%),  $\beta = .25$ ,  $F(3, 2384) = 4.419$ ,  $P < .05$ ) separately contributed significantly to the prediction of Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing.

The results on Table 2 revealed further that self-efficacy interacted significantly with writing apprehension to predict Undergraduates' interest on dissertation writing. This means that the relationship between writing apprehension and Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing is affected by the level of self-efficacy ( $\beta = .35$ ,  $t = 4.98$ ,  $P < .05$ ) of the students. Students with low self-efficacy and high writing apprehension had lower interest in dissertation writing while those with high self-efficacy and low or high writing apprehension had higher interest in dissertation writing. Also emotional intelligence ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $t = 2.90$ ,  $P < .05$ ) and academic optimism ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $t = 2.40$ ,  $P < .05$ ) were found to interact separately and significantly with writing apprehension to predict Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing. This is an indication that the relationship between writing apprehension and Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing is significantly influenced by the students' emotional intelligence and academic optimism level. These results show that Hypotheses 5, 6 and 7 were supported and there is evidence that self-efficacy, emotional intelligence and academic optimism moderate the relationship between writing apprehension and Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing.

## Discussion

This study examined the relationship between writing apprehension and Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing and the moderating roles played by self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and academic optimism in that relationship. That writing apprehension was divergently and non-significantly related to Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing. The result sharply contradicts the previous findings of Hanna (2010) that students with high level of writing apprehension produced a paper of less quality than low apprehensive writers, avoided writing tasks whenever possible and procrastinated in their work. Though, looking at the previous findings (Ibrahim & Noor, 2011; Hanna, 2010; Al-Ahmad, 2003), writing apprehension might influence students at all levels even after they had graduated from the universities. It could be deduced from this finding that there might be some underlying factors that might precipitate writing apprehension, in which self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and academic optimism were able to take care of in this study.

Hypothesis 2, 3, and 4 revealed that academic optimism, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence will significantly influence Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing. The result of academic optimism supported the previous findings that established that academic optimism is a potent factor in students' academic achievement (Akinlana, 2011; Al-anzi, 2005). This can be attributed to the fact school characteristics have a negligible effect on students' academic behaviour because service quality perceived and received by the students to a great extent determines their level of academic optimism. To this end, academic optimism a moderator of the relationship between writing apprehension and Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing confirmed Hypothesis 5. The finding also supports the work of Leonard et al. (2006) that the impact of the working context and support of research students which shows a need for tutors/supervisors to be more aware of the way in which their relationship with a student is developing. Also, Buttery et al., (2005), Harman (2002), Heath (2002) mentioned that the capability of the supervisor is a key factor in the success of candidates.



The finding that self-efficacy was positively related to Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing strongly supported hypothesis 3. These results agree with previous studies which found that self-efficacy was significant related to academic success (Mabekoje, 2010; Adenuga & Ayodele, 2009; Salami, 2004). This finding can be explained on the ground that students with high self-efficacy have confidence in their abilities to organize and execute actions to solve any academic challenges which impacted positively on their academic success. That self-efficacy moderated writing apprehension – Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing confirms Hypothesis 6 and supports the work of previous researchers who found that high research self-efficacy is an important factor related to students successfully conducting research and pursuing research beyond graduate study (Adenuga & Ayodele, 2009; Forester, Kahn, & Hesson-McInnis, 2004).

That emotional intelligence was positively related to Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing supports Hypothesis 4. Students' high in emotional intelligence also has high academic performance. This result confirms the work of previous researchers (Adenuga & Ayodele, 2009; Deniz Tras & Aydogan, 2009; Berenson, Boyles & Weaver, 2008) who have shown that emotional intelligence predicts academic performance and other cognitive outcomes. It could be deduced from their findings that positive moods can facilitate creativity, integrative thinking and inductive reasoning and negative moods can facilitate attention to detail, detection of errors and problems and careful information processing.

Also, that emotional intelligence is a moderator of writing apprehension – Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing relationship supports Hypothesis 7. This result is consistent with the work of previous researchers who found that emotional intelligence as a form of social, intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and other feelings and emotions, to dominate among them to use this information to guide one's thinking and action; and to reflectively regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Mabekoje, 2010; Mayer and Salovey, 1997).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings of this study show the predictive effect of academic optimism, self-efficacy and emotional intelligence on writing apprehension - Undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing. Academic optimism, self-efficacy and emotional intelligence were found to exert more influence on undergraduates' interest in dissertation writing. The results therefore suggest the need for enhanced academic environment that will foster students' self-efficacy level, emotional intelligence and improved service quality. In spite of the findings, a limitation of this study is worth noting. The data used in this study came from a cross-sectional self-report design. Therefore, one cannot draw causal conclusions. Future researchers could undertake this topic in an experimental mode or type.

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