

WhatsApp Business App and Customer Retention of Thrift Vendors in Uyo Metropolis, Nigeria: A Conceptual Review

Idiongo Mark ANTHONY
markanthysonglobal@gmail.com

Department of Marketing, Faculty of Management Science, Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication platforms increasingly shape how micro-enterprises manage customer relationships, yet evidence on their role within Nigeria's thrift retail sector remains fragmented. This article examines how WhatsApp Business can support customer retention among thrift vendors in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. It adopts a narrative review design and synthesises literature on WhatsApp Business, social commerce, customer relationship management, thrift retailing and customer retention. The analysis is guided by the Technology Acceptance Model and Relationship Marketing Theory. The review indicates that business profiles, catalogues, status updates, broadcast lists, quick replies, automated messages and customer labels can improve product visibility, responsiveness, convenience, personalised communication and continuity of interaction. These mechanisms may strengthen satisfaction, trust, loyalty and repeat patronage when they are supported by reliable service and order fulfilment. However, limited digital competence, poor internet connectivity, time and personnel constraints, privacy concerns and competition for customer attention can restrict the platform's value. The article argues that WhatsApp Business should be treated as a relationship-management tool rather than merely a channel for posting products. It recommends planned communication, prompt responses, customer segmentation, consent-based messaging, updated catalogues and practical digital training. The review contributes a context-specific framework linking strategic platform use with customer-retention outcomes among resource-constrained thrift vendors and identifies priorities for empirical testing in Uyo.

Keywords: *customer engagement, customer retention, social commerce, thrift vendors, WhatsApp Business.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Customer retention is central to the survival of small retail businesses because it supports repeat patronage, referrals and more predictable sales. Its importance is even greater for micro-enterprises that have limited budgets for continuous customer acquisition. Evidence from a small-business case study indicates that individualised communication, prompt service and regular follow-up improve satisfaction and loyalty, although limited resources can weaken customer relationship management practices (Kalu, 2025). Retention therefore depends not only on attracting buyers but also on sustaining satisfactory interactions before, during and after a sale.

Digital communication has changed the means through which these interactions occur. Mobile platforms allow small businesses to display products, answer questions, receive orders and maintain contact without the cost of a formal e-commerce system (Uford et al., 2022). WhatsApp Business is particularly relevant because it combines familiar messaging functions with business

profiles, catalogues, automated messages, quick replies, labels, status updates and broadcast communication. A Nigerian documentary study found that these features can support integrated marketing communication, customer engagement and relationship management among small and medium-sized enterprises (Igwe, 2026). The value of the platform, however, lies less in its availability than in how deliberately a vendor uses it.

Thrift vending is a visible part of Nigeria's informal clothing market. It provides access to relatively affordable clothing and creates livelihood opportunities, while customer choices are shaped by price, product condition, style, perceived value and confidence in the seller. Adeyemi (2023) examined purchase intentions towards second-hand clothing in Nigeria, while Fajobi (2023) showed that clothing businesses increasingly use social media to reach customers and improve sales performance. For thrift vendors, whose stock is often limited to one or a few pieces of each item, timely product display and direct customer communication are especially important.

In Uyo, many thrift vendors use WhatsApp to post new arrivals, confirm availability, negotiate purchases, arrange delivery and maintain relationships with customers. Yet the local discussion often treats WhatsApp mainly as a sales-posting channel. This narrow view overlooks its possible role in relationship management, including follow-up communication, complaint handling, customer segmentation and personalised service. It also risks assuming that the adoption of the platform automatically produces loyalty. This article addresses that problem by examining the mechanisms through which WhatsApp Business may support customer retention, the conditions required for those mechanisms to work and the constraints that may limit their usefulness among thrift vendors in Uyo.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing use of digital platforms, many small businesses still struggle to maintain long-term customer relationships. Some vendors communicate irregularly, delay responses, circulate repetitive promotional messages or fail to resolve complaints after a sale (Uford & Akpan, 2024). In such cases, the platform may increase visibility without improving the quality of the customer relationship. The presence of catalogues, automated replies or broadcast lists is therefore not sufficient evidence of effective customer retention.

Existing studies provide useful evidence on WhatsApp use among small businesses, social commerce in Africa and social media use by Nigerian clothing businesses. However, most examine SMEs as a broad category, business performance rather than retention, or settings outside Akwa Ibom State. Recent work has examined Nigerian SMEs (Igwe, 2026), Ugandan enterprises (Richard *et al.*, 2023), South African micro-retailers (Azionya & Mashigo, 2025) and MSMEs in Indonesia (Adi *et al.*, 2025), but there remains little direct evidence on thrift vendors in Uyo. The problem is therefore both contextual and conceptual: evidence is limited in the local setting, and the pathway from WhatsApp Business use to retention is often left unexplained.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this article is to examine how WhatsApp Business can support customer retention among thrift vendors in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. The specific objectives are to:

- i. Examine the WhatsApp Business features that can support customer retention among thrift vendors;
- ii. Assess how the platform can be used for customer communication and engagement;
- iii. Explain how WhatsApp-based interactions may promote loyalty and repeat patronage; and
- iv. Identify the constraints that can reduce its effectiveness as a customer-retention tool.

Significance of the Study

The article offers thrift vendors a practical explanation of how WhatsApp Business can be used beyond advertising. It identifies the communication routines that are more likely to strengthen satisfaction, trust and repeat patronage, while drawing attention to practices that may irritate customers or weaken confidence. It also contributes to literature on mobile social commerce by applying established ideas about technology adoption and relationship marketing to a specific group of informal retailers in Uyo. For trade associations, business-support organisations and future researchers, the article provides a framework for training, measurement and local empirical investigation.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

The discussion focuses on WhatsApp Business and customer retention among vendors of second-hand clothing, footwear and fashion accessories in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. It considers communication, engagement, satisfaction, loyalty and repeat patronage. Other social media platforms and wider performance measures such as profit, market share and employment growth are outside the main scope. As a conceptual review, the article does not present primary survey or interview data from vendors or customers in Uyo.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Thrift Vending and Informal Digital Retail

Thrift vending involves the commercial sale of pre-owned clothing, footwear and fashion accessories. The trade responds to demand for variety and affordability and forms part of the wider informal retail economy. Adeyemi's (2023) study of purchase intentions towards second-hand clothing in Nigeria confirms the relevance of this market to consumer and sustainability research. Unlike conventional retailers with standardised inventory, thrift vendors frequently sell unique or limited-stock items. The seller must therefore communicate product condition, size, price and availability clearly and quickly.

Digital platforms help vendors bridge the distance between physical stock and dispersed

customers. Fajobi (2023) found that Nigerian clothing businesses use social media because of its reach and cost advantages, although effective results require an understanding of the platforms and sustainable use strategies. In Uyo, WhatsApp can function as a portable storefront, ordering channel and customer-service space. This combination is useful to micro-vendors who may not have websites, dedicated sales staff or formal customer databases.

WhatsApp Business: Features and Relationship Functions

WhatsApp Business is a version of the messaging platform designed to support business-customer interaction. Its business profile provides basic information such as address, opening hours and contact details. The catalogue displays product photographs, descriptions and prices, while status updates allow time-sensitive product and promotional content. Broadcast lists permit one message to reach several contacts without exposing recipients to one another. Quick replies and automated messages reduce repetition and provide acknowledgement when the vendor cannot respond immediately. Labels help organise customers and orders into categories.

These features are communication affordances rather than retention outcomes. Their contribution depends on whether they solve a customer problem. A catalogue may reduce the effort required to inspect available items, a quick reply may shorten perceived waiting time, and a label may help a vendor remember pending orders or repeat buyers. Igwe (2026) found that catalogues, broadcast lists and automated messaging can improve brand communication and customer relationship management among Nigerian SMEs. Azionya and Mashigo (2025) likewise identified clear objectives, consistent communication, personalised interaction, strategic feature use and regular evaluation as factors that shape successful WhatsApp engagement among South African micro-retailers.

Customer Retention and WhatsApp-Based Customer Relationship Management

Customer retention refers to a firm's ability to maintain active relationships with existing customers and encourage continued patronage. It is reflected in repeat purchases, willingness to remain with a seller, positive referrals and reduced switching. Retention is related to loyalty but is not identical to it. A customer may repurchase because of convenience without strong emotional attachment (Akpan & Uford, 2023), while a loyal customer may temporarily be unable to buy. For a thrift vendor, a practical understanding of retention should therefore include repeat enquiries, purchase continuity, referrals and sustained responsiveness to product updates.

Customer relationship management refers to the processes used to collect, organise and apply customer information in order to improve interactions. In a micro-business, CRM need not involve expensive software. WhatsApp labels, message history, saved replies and customer lists can perform a basic relationship-management function when they are used responsibly. Kalu (2025) reported that personalised communication, prompt service and regular follow-up contribute to customer satisfaction and loyalty. Similarly, Lubua and Pretorius (2019) found that

the quality of online product display, response to enquiries, shopping convenience and delivery-related factors shaped the perceived relevance of social commerce in an African setting. These findings suggest that communication quality and service performance must operate together.

Theoretical Review

Technology Acceptance Model

The Technology Acceptance Model, developed by Davis (1989), explains technology use through perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Perceived usefulness concerns whether a person believes a technology will improve performance, while perceived ease of use concerns the effort required to learn and operate it. The model is relevant because thrift vendors are more likely to adopt WhatsApp Business when they consider it convenient, affordable and useful for displaying products, responding to customers and completing sales.

The model also exposes a limitation in adoption-centred explanations. A vendor may find WhatsApp easy to use and still employ it poorly. Posting products without keeping catalogues current, responding promptly or managing customer consent represents adoption without strategic use. Technology Acceptance Model therefore explains entry into platform use more effectively than it explains customer retention. A relationship perspective is required to account for what happens after adoption.

Relationship Marketing Theory

Relationship Marketing Theory shifts attention from isolated transactions to the creation and maintenance of enduring exchanges. Morgan and Hunt (1994) identify trust and commitment as central to successful relational exchange. Applied to thrift vending, the theory suggests that customers are more likely to remain with vendors who communicate honestly, describe products accurately, respond reliably, handle complaints fairly and demonstrate consistent concern for the relationship.

WhatsApp Business can support these practices by enabling direct, continuous and personalised interaction. It can also weaken relationships when communication becomes intrusive, misleading or inconsistent. Relationship marketing therefore provides the main explanation for the pathway from platform use to retention: strategic communication can improve satisfaction and trust; satisfaction and trust can strengthen commitment, loyalty and repeat patronage. The platform facilitates the process, but the seller's conduct determines its quality.

Theoretical Synthesis

Together, the theories explain different stages of the proposed relationship. Technology Acceptance Model explains why thrift vendors adopt and continue using WhatsApp Business, while Relationship Marketing Theory explains how the quality of WhatsApp-enabled interactions can influence customer responses. Perceived usefulness and ease of use encourage adoption; purposeful feature use improves communication; responsive and personalised

communication supports satisfaction and trust; and these relational outcomes increase the likelihood of loyalty and repeat patronage.

Empirical Review

Research across emerging-market settings generally supports the business value of WhatsApp and related social-commerce practices, although the evidence varies in context and outcome. Richard *et al.* (2023) examined SMEs in Buloba, Uganda, and reported high adoption for customer engagement, product marketing and ordering. Their regression model attributed about 20.6% of the variance in SME performance to WhatsApp adoption, with customer engagement showing a marginally significant positive relationship. The study demonstrates business relevance but does not isolate customer retention.

Lubua and Pretorius (2019) surveyed social media users in Tanzania and found that order delivery, response to enquiries, product-display quality, shopping convenience and return-related factors influenced the perceived relevance of social commerce. Their combined model explained 57.7% of the outcome. The study is valuable because it shows that digital interaction cannot be separated from fulfilment and service processes. A responsive message may create interest, but unreliable delivery or inaccurate product information can undermine the relationship.

Within Nigeria's clothing sector, Fajobi (2023) used interviews with 18 participants to examine social media and the sales performance of small clothing businesses. The study concluded that social media has substantial potential but requires businesses to understand platform dynamics and adopt effective, sustainable strategies. Kalu's (2025) mixed-method case study similarly found that individualised communication, prompt service delivery and regular follow-up improve satisfaction and loyalty, while resource limitations and weak CRM technology adoption remain obstacles.

More recent WhatsApp Business studies provide direct insight into engagement and retention. Azionya and Mashigo (2025), using interviews with 12 small and micro-retail enterprises in Gauteng, identified eight success factors: clear communication objectives, integration with other platforms, a professional but conversational tone, consistent frequency, personalisation, strategic use of platform features, measurement and accessibility. Adi *et al.* (2025) surveyed 120 consumers of MSMEs in Papua Mountains and found that WhatsApp Business had a positive and significant effect on customer retention. High-quality digital interaction also had a significant role and moderated the relationship, while the model reported an R-squared value of 0.576.

Igwe's (2026) documentary study of Nigerian SMEs found that WhatsApp Business can support integrated communication, customer engagement, brand loyalty and relationship management. It also identified limited digital skills, poor connectivity and privacy concerns as constraints. Taken together, the studies support a plausible link between strategic WhatsApp use and retention-related outcomes. However, they do not provide direct evidence about thrift vendors in Uyo. The

present article therefore treats their findings as an analytical basis for local propositions rather than as proof of impact in the study area.

Conceptual Framework

The framework proposes that vendor adoption is encouraged by perceived usefulness and ease of use. Strategic use of business profiles, catalogues, status updates, broadcasts, quick replies, automated messages and labels can improve responsiveness, personalisation, convenience, product visibility and continuity of contact. These interaction qualities can support satisfaction and trust, which in turn increase the likelihood of loyalty, referrals and repeat patronage. Digital skills, internet reliability, available time, privacy practices, message overload and order fulfilment influence the strength of the process.

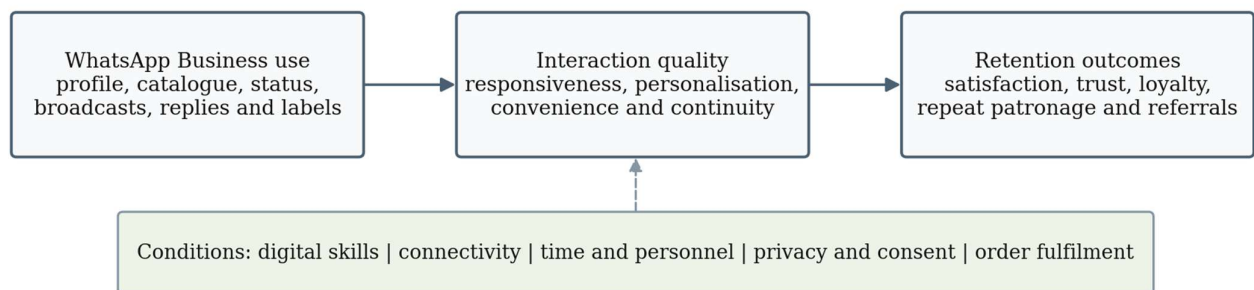


Figure 1: Conceptual model of WhatsApp Business and customer retention among thrift vendors.

Source: Author's Conceptual Model (2026).

3. METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a narrative review design. The approach is appropriate because the purpose is to integrate conceptual and empirical evidence, clarify the mechanisms linking WhatsApp Business with customer retention and apply those mechanisms to thrift vending in Uyo. The source materials comprise peer-reviewed journal articles, academic theses and traceable scholarly publications on WhatsApp Business, social commerce, customer relationship management, customer retention, SMEs and second-hand clothing.

Priority was given to studies published between 2019 and 2026 and to evidence from Nigeria and other emerging-market settings. Foundational works were retained where they were necessary to explain Technology Acceptance Model and Relationship Marketing Theory. Sources were included when they addressed at least one of four themes: platform features and adoption, customer communication and engagement, loyalty or retention outcomes, and barriers to effective digital use. The materials were organised and compared thematically in line with the research questions.

The review is interpretive rather than statistical. No meta-analysis was undertaken because the

available studies differ in design, samples, countries and outcome measures. Care was also taken not to present findings from general SMEs or other countries as direct evidence about vendors in Uyo. Instead, the evidence was used to develop a context-specific explanation and a set of propositions for later empirical testing.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

WhatsApp Business Features Supporting Customer Retention

The reviewed evidence indicates that the most relevant features are those that reduce customer effort and help the vendor maintain organised, timely communication. A complete business profile gives customers basic assurance about the seller. Catalogues and status updates make product discovery easier, which is important where thrift items are unique and sell quickly. Clear photographs, accurate descriptions, prices and availability information can reduce uncertainty and prevent disappointment. This supports Lubua and Pretorius's (2019) finding that product-display quality and shopping convenience matter to perceptions of social commerce.

Quick replies and automated greeting or away messages can improve acknowledgement and response consistency. They are particularly useful for a sole trader who cannot answer every enquiry immediately. Customer labels can distinguish new enquiries, confirmed orders, pending payments, deliveries and repeat customers. Broadcast lists can notify interested customers about new arrivals, but they must be used selectively. Frequent, irrelevant messages may produce irritation rather than loyalty. The analysis therefore answers the first research question by showing that no single feature creates retention. The value comes from combining features to provide accurate information, shorter response time, continuity and organised follow-up.

Customer Communication and Engagement

WhatsApp Business supports direct communication through text, photographs, videos, voice notes and calls. This allows thrift vendors to answer questions about size, fabric, condition and delivery in a conversational manner. The channel can also support post-purchase contact, including confirmation that an item was received, resolution of a complaint and notification of future stock that matches a customer's preferences. These uses turn messaging into a continuing relationship rather than a sequence of disconnected sales posts.

Effective engagement nevertheless requires purpose and restraint. Azionya and Mashigo (2025) found that clear communication objectives, consistent frequency, personalisation and a professional but conversational tone influence successful engagement. For thrift vendors, this means separating general promotional content from individual service communication. Status updates may serve broad visibility, while direct messages should be based on an existing enquiry, purchase history or customer consent. The second research question is therefore answered by treating engagement as planned two-way communication, not merely message volume.

Customer Loyalty and Repeat Patronage

The evidence suggests that WhatsApp Business contributes to loyalty indirectly through the quality of the experience it enables. Prompt responses signal reliability. Personalised recommendations make customers feel recognised. Accurate product descriptions reduce the risk of unmet expectations. Fair complaint resolution and dependable delivery reinforce trust. Kalu (2025) found that individualised communication, prompt service and regular follow-up support satisfaction and loyalty, while Adi *et al.* (2025) showed that high-quality digital interaction strengthens the relationship between WhatsApp Business and retention.

This finding is consistent with Relationship Marketing Theory. Trust and commitment develop through repeated satisfactory exchanges, not through the platform alone. A vendor who communicates effectively but supplies an item that differs from its description may lose the customer. Conversely, honest disclosure of minor defects, realistic delivery times and respectful after-sales communication can build credibility even when the business is small. The pathway to repeat patronage is therefore mediated by satisfaction and trust. WhatsApp Business provides the contact infrastructure, while service quality determines whether that contact develops into loyalty.

Challenges Affecting Effective Use

Several constraints can interrupt this pathway. Limited digital competence may prevent vendors from using catalogues, labels, automated responses and privacy settings effectively. Poor internet connectivity can delay responses or prevent timely product updates. Time and personnel constraints are also important because many thrift vendors source stock, create content, answer customers, process payments and arrange deliveries without assistance. Igwe (2026) identifies digital skills, connectivity and privacy as relevant constraints, while Fajobi (2023) stresses the need for clothing businesses to understand platform dynamics.

Competition for attention presents another problem. Customers may receive many similar status updates and promotional broadcasts, causing message fatigue. Overuse of direct messaging may be perceived as intrusive, especially where consent is unclear. Vendors also face risks arising from lost phones, poorly protected customer information, impersonation and dependence on a platform they do not control. Finally, WhatsApp communication cannot compensate for weak stock management, inaccurate descriptions, delayed delivery or poor complaint handling. These constraints answer the fourth research question by showing that technology, vendor capacity, customer boundaries and fulfilment quality jointly determine effectiveness.

Implications for Thrift Vendors in Uyo

For thrift vendors in Uyo, the practical implication is to treat WhatsApp Business as a lightweight CRM system. Customer labels can be used to track enquiries and orders; quick replies can standardise answers to common questions; catalogues can hold current stock; and

status updates can announce new arrivals without flooding customers' private messages. Vendors can record simple indicators such as repeat enquiries, repeat purchases, referrals, response time, unresolved complaints and broadcast opt-outs. These measures are more useful for retention than counting views alone.

Technology Acceptance Model explains why vendors are likely to adopt the platform, but sustained benefit requires routines that convert ease of use into service value. Relationship Marketing Theory further indicates that the tone, accuracy and reliability of communication shape trust. Vendors should therefore combine feature use with honest product representation, prompt complaint resolution, reliable delivery arrangements and respect for customer consent. The platform should support the relationship, not substitute for the basic obligations of retail service.

Summary of Findings

The review produced four main findings:

- i. WhatsApp Business features provide useful communication and organisation tools, but their retention value depends on coordinated and purposeful use.
- ii. Responsiveness, personalisation, convenience, accurate product information and continuity of contact are the main mechanisms linking platform use with customer engagement.
- iii. Satisfaction and trust connect high-quality WhatsApp interaction with loyalty, referrals and repeat patronage; service and fulfilment quality remain essential.
- iv. Limited digital skills, poor connectivity, time and personnel constraints, privacy risks, message overload and weak order fulfilment can reduce or reverse the expected benefits.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Conclusion

This article concludes that WhatsApp Business can support customer retention among thrift vendors when it is used as a relationship-management tool rather than only as an advertising channel. Its features can make communication faster, more personal and easier to organise, but platform adoption does not automatically produce loyalty. Retention develops when WhatsApp-enabled interaction is combined with accurate information, respectful communication, reliable service, satisfactory fulfilment and consistent follow-up. The conclusion is therefore conditional: the platform creates opportunities for retention, while vendor practice determines whether those opportunities become sustained customer relationships.

Implications of the Review

Theoretically, the review links Technology Acceptance Model with Relationship Marketing Theory. The first explains adoption through usefulness and ease of use, while the second

explains how communication quality, trust and commitment shape retention after adoption. Practically, the analysis shows that thrift vendors require both digital capability and customer-service discipline. For trade associations and enterprise-support organisations, training should move beyond basic app navigation to include catalogue management, customer segmentation, communication planning, consent, data protection, complaint handling and simple retention measurement.

Recommendations

Based on the review, the following recommendations are made:

- i. thrift vendors should maintain accurate, current catalogues and provide clear photographs, prices, sizes and product-condition details;
- ii. status updates and broadcast lists should be planned, relevant and consent-based, while direct messages should remain personalised and respectful;
- iii. vendors should establish response and follow-up routines, use labels to track orders and customers, and resolve complaints promptly;
- iv. trade and market associations should provide practical training on WhatsApp Business features, privacy, digital customer service and retention measurement; and
- v. public and private digital-inclusion programmes should support affordable connectivity and applied digital skills for informal retailers.

Contribution to Knowledge

The article contributes a context-specific explanation of how WhatsApp Business may influence customer retention among thrift vendors. Rather than presenting platform use as a direct cause of loyalty, it identifies a sequence linking adoption, strategic feature use, interaction quality, satisfaction, trust and retention outcomes. It also places service fulfilment, digital capacity and customer privacy within the framework as conditions that can strengthen or weaken the relationship. This provides a more cautious basis for future empirical research in Uyo.

Limitations of the Study

The review is limited by the small and varied body of directly relevant literature. Several studies concern general SMEs, clothing businesses or retailers outside Nigeria, and their findings cannot be transferred automatically to thrift vendors in Uyo. The article also relies on a narrative rather than systematic review and contains no primary data from vendors or customers. In addition, WhatsApp Business features and policies may change, which can affect the continuing relevance of particular practices.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Future studies should test the framework with thrift vendors and customers in Uyo using surveys, interviews or a mixed-method design. Vendor reports should be compared with customer experiences to reduce self-report bias. Longitudinal research could examine whether response time, personalised communication, catalogue accuracy and complaint handling predict repeat

purchases over time. Comparative studies may also assess WhatsApp Business against Instagram, Facebook Marketplace and other channels used by informal retailers.

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