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Original Research Article

# The framing of food in Canadian university classrooms: A preliminary analysis of undergraduate human nutrition sciences, dietetics, and food studies syllabi

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## Abstract

There are numerous "positivity" movements circulating such as sex positivity and body positivity that affect how sexuality and bodies are discussed, including in educational contexts. These movements have provided alternative discourses that challenge constructions of sexualities and bodies as "dangerous", aberrant, or "other". There is potential for "food positivity" to do the same given how food is frequently constructed as "risky", reflecting anxieties about industrial food production and the impacts of "bad" food on human health, appearance, and the environment. Food practices and discourses can act as moral signifiers and be exclusionary, exacerbating marginalization and inequities. Alternatively, food pedagogies can prioritize inclusion, diversity, and sustainable, resilient communities. How might the discourses that circulate in post-secondary food education construct and support positive relationships

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with food? Two major, and largely silo-ed, fields in Canadian higher education are Nutritional Sciences and Food Studies. Using publicly available syllabi (n=97) from undergraduate courses across Canada, this study investigated how food positivity is being enacted. In Nutritional Sciences, food positivity emphasizes nutritionism ideology whereby the composition and quantity of nutrients can add up to an (undefined) healthy diet. In Food Studies, food positivity is associated with local, equity-promoting, and culturally-sensitive approaches. In both fields, "food negativity" also appears in relation to "obesogenic" foods and systems, revealing an underlying fatphobia. Greater transdisciplinary collaboration with Fat Studies would benefit both fields in enacting a broader and more inclusive food positivity.

**Keywords**: Food positivity; education; post-secondary; food studies; nutrition education; Canada; critical discourse analysis

## Résumé

De nombreux mouvements de « positivité » qui circulent, tels que la positivité sexuelle et la positivité corporelle, influencent la manière dont la sexualité et les corps sont abordés, notamment dans les contextes éducatifs. Ces mouvements ont fourni des discours alternatifs qui remettent en question les constructions des sexualités et des corps comme étant « dangereux », aberrants ou « autres ». La « positivité alimentaire » a le potentiel de faire de même dans la mesure où des aliments sont souvent considérés comme « risqués », reflétant les inquiétudes suscitées par la production alimentaire industrielle et les effets de la « mauvaise » alimentation sur la santé humaine, l'apparence et l'environnement. Les pratiques alimentaires et les discours qui les soutiennent agissent comme des indicateurs moraux et peuvent être source d'exclusion, exacerbant la marginalisation et les inégalités. Par ailleurs, les pédagogies alimentaires peuvent donner la priorité à l'inclusion, à la diversité et aux communautés durables et résilientes. Comment les discours qui circulent dans l'éducation alimentaire postsecondaire peuvent-ils construire et soutenir des relations positives avec la nourriture? Les sciences de la nutrition et les études sur l'alimentation sont deux domaines majeurs et largement cloisonnés de l'enseignement supérieur canadien. En utilisant des plans de cours accessibles au public (n=97) de cours de premier cycle offerts à travers le Canada, cette étude a examiné la façon dont la positivité alimentaire est mise en œuvre. En sciences de la nutrition, la positivité alimentaire met l'accent sur l'idéologie du nutritionnisme, selon laquelle c'est la composition et la quantité des nutriments qui donnent lieu à un régime alimentaire sain (non défini). Dans les études sur l'alimentation, la positivité alimentaire est associée à des approches locales, favorisant l'équité et sensibles à la culture. Dans les deux domaines, la « négativité alimentaire » apparaît en relation avec les aliments et les systèmes « obésogènes », révélant une phobie du gras sous-jacente. Une plus grande collaboration transdisciplinaire avec les études sur les graisses serait bénéfique aux deux domaines pour mettre en œuvre une positivité alimentaire plus large et plus inclusive.

## Introduction

From the success of *Masterchef Canada* to the revamped Canada Food Guide (Health Canada, 2019), efforts to teach Canadians about food are intensifying in popular culture, public health, and formal education. As university students and educators teaching in different disciplines, we are struck by how food and its production and consumption are constructed in different fields. Food is frequently framed as risky, often reflecting anxieties about industrialized food production, "obesity,"[1] human health and appearance, and the environment (Elliot, 2020; Levenstein, 2012; Lupton, 1996; Parker, 2020). In response, we have started to consider the ways in which food is constructed in post-secondary education generally, especially when food is discussed approvingly and without shame, guilt, or anxiety. We have begun to play with the idea of "food positivity," echoing movements such as sex positivity and body positivity that have offered alternative discourses to challenge constructions of bodies and sexualities as dangerous or aberrant; these movements have impacted sexuality and body discourses. We see potential for food positivity to do the same. To this end, we chose to conduct a preliminary analysis of discourses circulating in Human Nutrition Sciences, Dietetics, and Food Studies by examining syllabi to better understand how post-secondary education constructs food generally; secondarily, we sought to explore how food anxieties may be shaping contemporary postsecondary education by examining in what ways and which foods were presented with approval and without connotations of risk or blame.

Traditionally, food education has emphasized nutrition and "functional" foods, an approach that has increasingly been critiqued as reductionist (Flowers & Swan, 2016; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Food also has frequently been constructed as a source of health risk or environmental crisis (Elliot, 2020; Levenstein, 2012; Lupton, 1996, Parker, 2020). Yet, food means much more than health or nourishment; it also reflects identity and familial, cultural, and environmental contexts (Beagan et al., 2014; Stapleton, 2015). How food is understood also represents competing worldviews, including between neoliberal discourses that make food intake individuals' responsibility (Alkon, 2014), social justice and feminist discourses that see food as part of the fight for equity and fulfillment (Parker et al., 2019), and Indigenous ways of knowing whereby food is understood as a gift (Kimmerer, 2020).

Post-secondary students encounter food pedagogies in Human Nutrition Sciences, Dietetics, and Food Studies programs and courses, which have remained remarkably siloed from one another (Stephens & Hinton, 2021). Nutrition or Food Science has tended to emphasize its role as a biological science, such as with the chemical isolation of vitamins in 1926 (Mozaffarian et al., 2018), while current Human Nutrition Science and Dietetics programs incorporate social and environmental components, with Beauman et al. (2005) offering the definition: "the study of food systems, foods and drinks, and their nutrients and other constituents; and of their interactions within and between all relevant biological, social and environmental systems" (p. 697). Food education, especially in Dietetics, a historically

[1] "Fat" is used throughout this manuscript non-pejoratively as a neutral descriptor in line with fat activism, whereas "obese" and "obesity" are placed in quotation marks to emphasize the pathologisation of fatness as contested (Meadows & Daníelsdóttir, 2016).

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femininized profession emerging from Home Economics, has had profound gendered effects. It attracts mostly white, heterosexual, middle-class women, with subsequent praxis and expertise that are also gendered, racialized, and classed (Brady, 2018), leading to recent calls to diversify the field and employ anti-oppressive pedagogy (Brady, 2020; Wellington et al., 2021). Food Studies is an interdisciplinary field that focuses more on food systems and food practices, making connections between food, health, the environment, and well-being as well as intersecting structural inequities (Parker et al., 2019; Stephens & Hinton, 2021). Despite the intensification of interest in food, how these food-centric fields construct food, eaters, and producers in post-secondary education is under-explored.

We take an explicitly interdisciplinary approach to bridge disciplinary silos in food pedagogy (Stephens & Hinton, 2021) rather than analyzing each discipline separately, which may reinforce divisions. Food is a central connecting societal experience; silos compromise attempts to solve food crises (Elliot, 2020; Levenstein, 2012; Lupton, 1996, Parker, 2020), whose "real-world" messiness transcends disciplinary divisions and requires synthesizing knowledge from multiple content areas (Palmer, 2001; Stember, 1991; Styron, 2013). As part of our interdisciplinary approach, we bring into contact food pedagogies from Human Nutrition Sciences, Dietetics, and Food Studies in a comparative analysis (Kivits et al., 2019). For successful interdisciplinary work, a greater understanding of other disciplines with a specific aim should be developed (Priaulx & Weinel, 2018). In line with our focus, the positive contributions various disciplines make to an issue should be highlighted (Stember, 1991). Therefore, in taking this interdisciplinary, comparative view, we are seeking to discover what can be gained from each discipline, and, in working together (Stember, 1991), from "food positivity".

In our study, we take a critical, emancipatory approach, inspired by work conducted in spheres like sex positivity and body positivity that has reframed socially- and politically-contested phenomena (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Fahs, 2014). Sex-positive feminism challenged constructions of women as disempowered victims or vessels of others' sexuality and fought against the oppression of sexual minorities (Glick, 2000). Body positivity also relies on principles of inclusion and affirmation and has gained traction recently (Lupton, 2018; Senyonga & Luna, 2021). The "social movement spill-over" effect works when there is overlap in movement membership, alignment of ideological frames, and mutually beneficial establishment of political structures and communication networks (Meyer & Whittier, 1994). The spill-over effect has helped advance other progressive movements (Saguy & Ward, 2011), and we anticipate the same could be the case for food positivity. Education has been an important arm of both the sex- and body-positive movements. Sex-positive pedagogy portrays sex non-judgmentally as neither "good" nor "bad" but as a subjective experience that may be a pleasurable, healthy personal choice, while emphasizing consent, knowledge, and diversity (Brickman & Willoughby, 2017; Pound et al., 2017). The field of fat pedagogy takes a critical pedagogical approach to addressing weight-based oppression and seeks to create conditions for all bodies to flourish (Cameron & Russell, 2016, 2021; Russell, 2020), with an expanding repertoire of curricula and programs for elementary, secondary, post-secondary, and public educational contexts (see Russell, 2020).

In contrast to sex and body positivity, the idea of food positivity has been rarely evoked. If food is presented positively, it is often in calls for moderate consumption of the "right" (natural, local, healthy)

foods (Guthman, 2011), in market-driven "food porn" (McBride, 2010), or in still somewhat prescriptive intuitive eating models (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011). Buying and consuming food can thus be an emotionally fraught experience (Bombak, 2015; Parker 2020), especially for those with marginalized bodies, since consideration is rarely given to matters of class, ethnicity, or gender when pronouncements about food are made (Beagan et al., 2014; Probyn, 2000). Further, as concerns over "obesogenic" environments have arisen, new forms of moralism have become part of food discourses (Guthman, 2011). These discourses typically ignore sociopolitical contexts, present paternalistic, stereotypical, and homogenizing constructions of how "others" live, and suggest that consumer ignorance is at the core of food-related problems (Farrell et al., 2016), with education often touted as a solution.

We recognize the limitations of and debates surrounding "positivity" movements. Body positivity has been critiqued for becoming a depoliticized, neoliberal, corporatized, whitewashed, and even weight-loss-promoting imitation of a more radical fat acceptance movement (Bombak et al., 2019; Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Griffin et al., 2022; Johansson, 2021; Sastre, 2014) that converged historically with queer, Black, and mobilization discourses (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015; Darwin & Miller, 2021; Griffin et al., 2022). These are issues with which we concur (Bombak et al., 2019). Critics have also alleged that body positivity persists in over-emphasizing appearance and women's individualistic need to adopt positive bodily attitudes (Cohen et al., 2021; Johansson, 2021). Sex positivity may become depoliticized, meaningless, or ableist, or may not adequately account for non-consensual sex, compulsory or pressurized sexuality, consumerism, intersectionality, or objectification (Fahs, 2014; Glick, 2000; Ivanski & Kohut, 2017; Milks, 2014). Regardless of their initial intent, like many other social movements, these movements can be misused, misappropriated, diluted, or captured by hostile actors (Lewin, 2021; Sobande, 2020). As such, we do not adopt a prescriptive approach by *advocating for* sex, body, or food positivity, beyond arguing they are preferable to shame and rejection.

However, these are highly visible social movements that have influenced cultural discourse (Bombak et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2021; Mosher, 2017) and may be beneficial for mood, body image, recognition of bodily and sexual diversity, and health interventions/education (Cohen et al., 2019; Dhadly et al., 2023; Fahs, 2014; Fava & Fortenberry, 2021; Kroes, 2021; Murphy et al. 2022; Stein et al., 2023). They are multivocal, divided, and self-reflexive concerning critiques of exclusivity and neoliberalism (Darwin & Miller, 2021; Fahs, 2014; Ivanski & Kohut, 2017; Sikka, 2021). It also behooves us to note some oppose body positivity because it may inspire *too much acceptance* of fat bodies (Cohen et al., 2021; Johansson, 2021). Therefore, these movements are, in some iterations, opposite to fatphobia/weight-loss promotion and rampant anti-queer and feminist backlash (Cohen et al., 2021; Lewin, 2021). They may, cautiously, be part of emancipatory efforts to limit shame, anxiety, and the erasure of certain bodies (Hargons et al., 2021; Leath et al., 2020; Leboeuf, 2019; Johansson, 2021).

We do not wish to draw direct parallels to these other movements in our preliminary search for food positivity. They merely inspired us as we considered a discursive environment heavily mired in food-related anxiety and shame. Nor do we believe more affirming food discourses will address structural issues around food inequities. We recognize these issues require political, collective action beyond individualistic attitudes on food. However, food has relevant attitudinal and affective dimensions. With disordered eating on the rise globally (López-Gil et al., 2023), thin-ideal social media content negatively affecting mood and body satisfaction

(Cohen et al., 2019; Dhadly et al., 2023), and widely promoted appetite suppressors such as semaglutide potentially inducing pancreatitis and stomach paralysis (Bombak, 2023; Sodhi et al., 2023), we believe there is value in considering how food is invoked favourably, pleasurably, and without shame or apprehension in curricula.

In this study, we draw upon critical food pedagogies and feminist intersectional food pedagogies, emerging fields informed by both critical pedagogy and critical food studies (Flowers & Swan, 2016; Parker, 2023). Critical food pedagogies are purposely pluralistic to denote the myriad foci and teaching and learning approaches used in both formal and informal settings, as well as in public food pedagogies. They also reflect the diversification of food education and a shift in who is considered to have knowledge about food. Highlighting issues of power, authority, and expertise, critical food pedagogies draw attention to the moral economies in food philosophies and practices that are reproduced by "healthy living" and wellness discourses. Such economies, often driven by neoliberal agendas and classist, sexist, racist, sizeist, colonial, and speciesist ideologies, focus on lack of knowledge as the driver for individual "bad" choices, effectively ignoring other social, political, and cultural complexities driving people's food choices (Lloro-Bidart, 2017; Ma Rhea, 2018; Nxumalo et al., 2011; Stapleton, 2015). Critical food and intersectional feminist food pedagogies critique reductionist discourses that perpetuate harmful assumptions about what constitutes "good" food to fuel "good" bodies (Burrows, 2009; Flowers & Swan, 2016; Parker, 2023). Critical food pedagogies can play a role in building more inclusive approaches to food education; however, it is a nascent field, and more research is needed (Flowers and Swan, 2016). As one starting place for this preliminary analysis, we suggest it is important to better understand how food is currently constructed in contemporary food education in Human Nutrition Sciences, Dietetics, and Food Studies.

## Methods

We conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of undergraduate syllabi from Human Nutrition Sciences, Dietetics, and Food Studies courses from Canadian post-secondary institutions (colleges and universities). We searched for and collected the syllabi in 2020, with two additional syllabi sent to us in 2021. CDA considers how people construct their social realities using language and signification, as well as how such constructions maintain power relations in society by supporting common-sense understandings of the world (Fairclough, 1989, 1992; Locke, 2004)

### Definitions of fields and search strategy

We defined Food Studies as the interdisciplinary study of food systems, which includes food consumption, production, policy, and distribution (Canadian Association for Food Studies, n.d.). Food Studies in Canada is rarely formally recognized by institutions. Rather, scholars work in their traditional home disciplines and teach food-related content. As such, we took a broad, high in sensitivity but necessarily low in specificity, approach in our search for syllabi. We also did not pre-specify a date range for included syllabi, and

some syllabi did not include dates. Syllabi ranged from the years 2000-2020. Three outliers (including those directly sent by instructors) preceded 2010, but the single years most represented were 2018, 2019, and 2020. Given the diversity of Canadian post-secondary institutions' organizational structuring, course offerings, and faculty complement, we included any undergraduate social sciences, humanities, and arts courses focused on food or food systems in contemporary society. We note that Food Studies often takes an explicitly critical approach that interrogates structural inequalities in contemporary food systems and their contributions to health, economic, and environmental problems (Koç et al., 2021). However, as we did not know whether individual instructors would consider themselves a Food Studies scholar, in ensuring we did not miss any relevant syllabi, our sample may include courses neither traditionally associated with Food Studies nor adopting an explicitly critical orientation.

For the purposes of this study, we defined Human Nutrition Sciences as the scientific study of how food impacts human health and wellbeing (Dietitians of Canada, 2020). Unlike Food Studies, many Canadian universities have stand-alone Human Nutrition Science and Dietetics departments and degree programs. As such, we limited course syllabi to those offered from Human Nutrition Science and Dietetics departments.

We deployed a multi-step systematic search strategy to identify publicly-available syllabi. Our initial strategy involved using Google to search for the following keywords: food studies, food courses, food syllabus, and Canada. We then searched the websites of Canadian universities with known Food Studies courses, identified the most recent undergraduate academic calendar on each university website, and searched these calendars for the words "food," "nutrition," or "eating." We then entered the course number, course name, and university name into Google to identify any publicly-available syllabi or, when available, the university website's syllabus archive or wiki. Following these broad approaches, we then consulted the websites of the three largest English-speaking universities in each province and territory, based on enrollment, and went through their course catalogues. Any syllabi not yet captured were added. For Human Nutrition Sciences syllabi specifically, we also searched programs accredited by the Partnership for Dietetic Education and Practice (PDEP) and added any additional available syllabi. We recognize that Human Nutrition Sciences undergraduate courses and programs are required for Dietetics programs; however, we did not consider program requirements for Dietetics in our sampling. At the time of data collection, PDEP was the accrediting body for Dietetics in Canada. PDEP required accredited programs to include courses in "sciences such as chemistry, biochemistry, physiology, microbiology; social sciences and communication; nutrition through the lifecycle, chronic disease and food service; [and] nutrition in the community and population health" (Dietitians of Canada, 2020).

Lastly, some instructors sent additional syllabi to our team directly after learning about our project. We excluded syllabi that were from non-accredited nutrition programs, graduate classes, those focused on culinary or hospitality techniques, and those syllabi with very little food content—such as those more on general marketing, agrology, finance, plant identification, or politics. We constructed a database of our final syllabi, then de-identified them, assigning each a number to not single out courses or instructors in analysis and reporting.

## Food studies summary

We found thirty-seven Canadian Food Studies syllabi available online that met our criteria (see **Table 1**). Syllabi were from the following institutions, in descending order by count: University of British Columbia, University of Alberta, McMaster University, Queens University, Memorial University, Simon Fraser University, University of Manitoba, University of Victoria, Western University (Brescia College), Yukon College/University, McGill University, Lakehead University, and University of Calgary. The syllabi reviewed covered a range of topics including food security, agricultural production, the environmental dimensions of food, and sustainability. As well, but less prominently, there was some discussion about nutrition and its effects on health and physical activity. Sociology and anthropology syllabi focused on historical, social, and cultural food practices, social structures (particularly gender), and the ecological and social relationships related to food provisioning. Other syllabi examined hunger/malnutrition and "overweight/obesity" on a global scale and attended to power, capitalism, and globalization within food systems. Finally, some syllabi focused on the economic and business sides of the food industry, with discussions of marketing, pricing, and the effect of tourism on local food systems.

Table 1: Distribution of food studies courses by discipline

| **Disciplines** | **Tally** |
|---|---|
| Sociology/Women's Studies | 1 |
| Agriculture and Environmental Sciences | 1 |
| Anthropology; Health, Aging, and Society | 5 |
| Folklore; Geography | 2 |
| History; Kinesiology/Health Studies; Sociology; Environmental Studies | 4 |
| Latin American Studies; Sociology/Anthropology | 2 |
| Anthropology; Agricultural and Resource Economics | 5 |
| Land and Food Systems; Food and Resource Economics; Sustainability | 8 |
| Anthropology/Archaeology | 1 |
| Agribusiness | 2 |
| Agricultural Economics; Sociology | 2 |
| Sociology; History | 2 |
| Environmental Science; Early Learning and Childhood | 2 |

## Human nutrition sciences and dietetics syllabi summary

Because Human Nutrition Sciences courses are usually offered as part of entire programs and are required for Dietetics programs, these syllabi were more common than standalone Food Studies courses. For this reason, we chose to narrow our focus to courses at the introductory level (which have the highest enrollment at most institutions), upper-level courses such as counselling and nutritional assessment, and courses on policy, public health, and community nutrition. This broad range of courses ensured we captured the diverse topics included in human nutrition programs and dietetics courses with an applied focus. We limited the number of food science/basic nutritional syllabi (such as those on vitamins and minerals) as their technical focus did not suit comparative analysis with Food Studies syllabi, and the inclusion of multiple syllabi in this area would have been redundant.

Our final sample consisted of sixty syllabi from nine Canadian institutions with English-language undergraduate Human Nutrition Science and Dietetics programs. We were unable to find publicly available syllabi online from Mount Saint Vincent, University of Prince Edward Island, or Toronto Metropolitan University.[2] The University of British Columbia was disproportionately represented in our sample, accounting for nearly half (twenty-seven) of the total syllabi, with the rest (in descending order by count) from Western University (Brescia College), University of Guelph, Acadia University, University of Alberta, University of Saskatchewan, University of Manitoba, St. Francis Xavier University, and McGill University. Approximately two thirds of our final sample consisted of third- and fourth-year courses. Most courses were focused on diet, including addressing the role of nutrition in disease prevention and management, nutrition through the lifecycle, chronic conditions, and the nutritional needs of specific populations (such as athletes). The next largest portion of syllabi focused on food systems: addressing food production, markets, preparation, and safety. Other course topics included public health, nutrition education, food and culture, food security, and nutrition in the global context.

## Analysis

Syllabi were examined using CDA (Fairclough, 1989). Syllabi were uploaded into NVivo 12 and analyzed line-by-line by three of the authors. Analysts maintained an audit trail throughout analysis by recording notes on their processes. Analysts reviewed one another's analyses to enhance trustworthiness of analysis. After each round of coding, the authors doing the analysis would meet to debrief and discuss how the analysis was progressing and any discrepancies in interpretation (Creswell, 2007; Kaczynski et al., 2014). Any discrepancies were resolved by the first author. Within the syllabi, vocabulary, grammar and style choices (e.g., pronouns, active vs passive voice, negative vs positive sentences), and textual structures were analyzed, and this language use was then interpreted with respect to constructions of "common knowledge," schemata (representations and interpretations of standard activity types), frames (representations and interpretations of content), and scripts (representations and interpretations of subjects, their relations, and their behaviours). Ultimately, explanations were arrived at pertaining to how social power was signified and enacted in the syllabi (Fairclough, 1989). Analysts then

[2] Previously known as Ryerson University.

compared and contrasted emergent themes between Food Studies, Human Nutrition Sciences, and Dietetics syllabi, which we describe in the Discussion.

## Findings

We begin this section by sharing findings from the analysis of the Food Studies syllabi before turning to the Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi. Implications regarding our interest in food positivity are addressed in the Discussion section. The sample was not representative, and there is no standard instrument for comparison purposes. The analysis was interpretive, exploratory, and designed to develop a novel understanding of the state of pedagogy and food positivity in Canadian post-secondary curricula. It was focused on social meanings and power as exhibited, represented, and practiced within syllabi.

### Food studies syllabi thematic analysis

The analysis of Food Studies syllabi revealed five broad themes: inter- and trans-disciplinarity; agriculture as a business; capitalism; power and intersectionality; and health, body, and nutrition. Each theme is described below.

#### *Inter-and trans-disciplinarity*

One notable aspect about Food Studies syllabi is their interdisciplinarity. Specifically, within each syllabus, concepts from different disciplines were used, as well as the various disciplines that have Foods Studies courses (anthropology, archaeology, business, economics, education, geography, history, nutrition, politics/political sciences, sociology, and women and gender studies). This proved challenging in developing coherent themes, as these various disciplinary homes meant courses had diverse emphases. For example, some courses in this group offer students critical perspectives on capitalism in relation to food and food systems, while others are teaching business or agriculture using market-oriented practices and knowledge.

#### *Agriculture as a business*

Syllabi in disciplines such as agricultural economics and agribusiness centred their focus on the business dimensions of food. In these, food was framed as a commodity that influences change, globalization, migration, movements, and technology. These syllabi included discussions of economics, policies, entrepreneurship, food marketing, consumer culture, and capitalism, notably with capitalism presented more positively or neutrally than in syllabi from other disciplines.

Within the subset of agribusiness syllabi, food policies such as agricultural policy, farm policy, trade policy, and food labeling policy were mentioned. In some syllabi, food policy was the explicit theme for one week. The syllabi differed in terms of perspectives on policies, with some syllabi more critical of food policy and control over the food system, including discussions of power with respect to food policy and how policies can contribute to food insecurity, whereas others were more neutral.

### *Capitalism*

Anthropology, sociology, and some agricultural courses tended to be more critical of capitalism, incriminating capitalism and corporations for inequalities and hunger and expressing a need to ensure equality and equity in food distribution, particularly in areas in the Global South (described in the syllabi using various terms). Food sovereignty and food security were common topics in these syllabi, as well as the need to reform existing systems. In two syllabi, "obesity" was presented as a consequence of unjust capitalist systems. Some syllabi discuss sustainability, environmental considerations, and climate change in relation to the current capitalist society, with the current food system presented as unsustainable and threatening to the planet and to food security. Common terms used here were "greenhouse gas emissions", "ecological footprints", and "deforestation". Alternative food models included in the syllabi included local food initiatives, organic food, slow food, and Indigenous food systems, and the need for fair-trade, hormone-free, steroid-free, and Canadian-made foods was also mentioned. Biotechnology, the Green Revolution, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), which are all connected in practice to corporate interests, tended to be presented as an area of debate or in neutral terms, with a few syllabi being more explicitly negative.

### *Power and intersectionality*

The Food Studies syllabi tended to be critical of power imbalances in the food system. The syllabi demonstrated that time would be invested in questioning who has power over food systems and how inequalities are embedded in food systems. These queries were tied to critical discussions of food security, capitalism, food sovereignty [the right for peoples to define their own sustainable food systems and to access healthy food (La Via Campesina, 2021)], food governance, global power imbalances, Eurocentrism, colonization, and neoliberalism. Inequalities such as malnutrition and food insecurity were discussed in many of the syllabi. Sustainability, climate change, biotechnology, GMOs, and environmental considerations were also discussed in relation to critiques of the current food system. An intersectional perspective on power and inequalities was also in evidence, and these were often discussed in relation to race, gender, social class, and other aspects of social positionality. Some syllabi focused explicitly on the intersections of identity and food, drawing links to social justice using feminist analyses, while others centred on the cultural aspects of food such as food sharing, religious rituals, cultural heritage, and traditions.

### *Health, body, and nutrition*

An important theme running through the Food Studies syllabi was health, body, and nutrition. Syllabi varied between adopting critical/constructionist, alternative, or orthodox analyses of health, with topics focused on health promotion, population health, and community health. Aligning with the other themes above, health and nutrition were frequently discussed alongside gender, class, culture, and identity, and they tied health to larger power structures, the environment, or food justice. Some, but not all, syllabi appeared to interrogate this content critically. Syllabi occasionally seemed to reproduce colonial ideas, such as presenting First Nations community education plans for managing health rather than holding polluting companies accountable for contaminating food sources, or pitting "modern" foods against "traditional" foods in discussions of health.

The syllabi varied in their discussions of the body in relation to food and health—including content regarding malnutrition, overnutrition, "underweight," "overweight," and "obesity." In some syllabi, "overweight" and "obesity" are presented as the flipside of "malnutrition" and a product of similar social forces. One syllabus mentioned that during the course students would be asked to estimate peers' body mass indices (BMIs). However, this syllabus also included an assignment that prompted students to engage critically with more orthodox views on "obesity," encouraged them to consider the contributions of neoliberal policy to "obesity," and suggested alternative views on fat, including "fatism." Students were occasionally presented with debates regarding "obesity," health, and capitalism. However, as we will expand upon in the Discussion, there was limited explicit inclusion of critical weight content, body positivity, or weight-neutral models of health in the Food Studies syllabi, with rare exceptions and occasional critical readings.

## Human nutrition science and dietetics syllabi thematic analysis

The thematic analysis of the Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi identified five themes: biological and chemical components; food's role in health and disease; role of the dietitian; business and food production; and policy.

### *Biological and chemical components*

The word "science" is emphasized in relation to food in numerous Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi and is presented positively as important to health and wellbeing. With rare exceptions, eating, foods, and sociocultural issues tended to be overshadowed by biological processes and references to, for example, ingestion, digestion, and nutrients. Nutrients tended to be mentioned in isolation from the foods from which they are derived, while the quantity of nutrients consumed, and health status were also linked together in a causal relationship. While some syllabi directly addressed ethnicity, culture, religion, food insecurity or socioeconomic circumstances, other syllabi rarely mentioned connections to personal or social identity (apart from life cycle/stage).

### *Food's role in health and disease*

What constituted "health" was rarely defined in the Human Nutritional Sciences and Dietetics syllabi, although some mention was made of the social determinants of health, religion, culture, acculturation, and traditional beliefs and practices as contributors to health and food choices, occasionally invoking a Eurocentric worldview. A lifespan approach to human nutrition was frequently included. Many Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi dichotomized health and disease, and food was constructed as a treatment, remedy, and prophylaxis for disease and disorders.

A number of syllabi indicated measurement (of nutrients and/or bodies) as a key practice for nutritional assessment, suggesting a positivist and quantitative approach to health. While often referred to solely as "anthropometrics," specific measurements named included height, weight, skinfolds, and body fat percentage. Some syllabi also included biochemical assessments. These syllabi may reinforce the desirability of seeking certain (sometimes very precise) "ideal" nutritional or weight goals, although rare references to "monitoring" or "changing" may suggest less of an idealized view and more of a focus on tracking individual alterations in physiology. Some syllabi also included assignments requiring students to recount detailed dietary assessments, positioning students in

reference to these ideals. In addition to nutrients being constructed as the basis of health in nutrition, they were also framed as the basis of "performance" or injury in certain Human Nutrition Sciences syllabi, with content referencing eating disorder risk and rapid weight loss in sport "culture" and strategies for weight change.

In Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi mentioning "obesity," it was framed as a chronic issue or condition, which has impacts on pregnancy and is considered within an energy imbalance context. Social and psychological aspects of "obesity" were covered in some syllabi, typically framed as a matter of lifestyle and behaviour change treatable through motivational interviewing and coaching to address energy imbalances and nutritional recommendations.

### *Role of the dietitian*

We obtained our Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi from Canadian undergraduate Nutrition and Dietetics programs accredited by PDEP (2020), as mentioned. Thus, these syllabi seek to shape future dietitians, and the associated discourse describes the desired roles of dietitians in Canada. A common theme in Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi was the capacity of dietitians to influence social change through behaviour change, education, awareness, eliminating barriers, and working with communities and public health systems. The expertise of dietitians was emphasized in terms of epidemiology, etiology, pathophysiology, nutrition, and treatment. Emphasis was placed on cultural competency, communication skills, and critical appraisal of evidence, along with the requirement for dietitians to consider environmental, psychosocial, ethnic, demographic, and socioeconomic factors in their professional roles. Cultural competency occasionally exhibited an "othering" approach in which references were made to ethnic groups who may not eat a "typical" North American diet. Indigenous nutrition was covered in multiple Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi, drawing links between ethnicity, culture, foodways, and health. Syllabi often referenced the need for cultural competency and self-reflexivity. Other topics mentioned in relation to Indigenous nutrition include community-wide interventions, the social determinants of health, food insecurity, policy, and funding.

Dietitians were also constructed as instrumental in human nutrition research, and it was emphasized that it was important to their practice and pedagogy to keep abreast of research. Most Human Nutrition Sciences syllabi included critiques of nutrition claims made in the media or through marketing or emphasized the importance of critically assessing human nutrition literature. The word "evidence" was used frequently in syllabi in relation to such claims, with a focus on using evidence to elucidate nutritional facts and strategies, especially in practice. Students were cautioned to be vigilant against possible mistruths that they may read or hear, with language such as "claims," "counter-claims," "miraculous," and "vested interests" used in relation to nutrition in the media. It was also recommended that eating be a planned and thoughtful process, with critical reflection on nutritional concepts and media controversies about food. Learning objectives and assignments emphasized this critical appraisal, and scientific, scholarly, and peer-reviewed sources were promoted.

### *Business and food production*

Several Human Nutrition Sciences syllabi discussed business aspects of food as well as food production. Topics included marketing, business strategies and sustaining a business, labelling, quality assurance, financing, accounting, human resources, and supply

chain issues. Here, food was framed as a commodity or product, and people were framed as clients or consumers, or, in some cases, systems or social groups. Some of these syllabi constructed food choices made by consumers as intertwined with identity (e.g., ethnicity, class, gender) and social roles. In some rare cases income or access was highlighted. More frequently, perceptions regarding "healthy" and safe eating, or environmental or ethical concerns of food production, were constructed as rational choices with which consumers engaged.

Food safety and the need to ensure it with respect to microorganisms, naturally-occurring toxicants, allergies, food additives, and environmental contamination were discussed. Biotechnology, GMOs, local, organic foods, and questions of sustainability were posed in syllabi in neutral terms or in ways that highlighted potential advantages and disadvantages of food production systems, while some syllabi incorporated philosophical, ethical, and justice-related concerns into those discussions. In contrast, other syllabi were more positive when it came to the food industry or biotechnology and more overt in their engagement. For instance, one syllabus mentioned collaborative learning opportunities with industry sponsors and promoted addressing problems relevant to the food industry. One syllabus on nutraceuticals and functional foods constructed foods as a marketable commodity with nutritional and health-promoting or disease-preventing abilities, alongside standards regarding efficacy and safety regulations and marketing. Food fraud and marketing misinformation and regulation were recurrent themes in these syllabi.

### *Policy*

Discussion of policy, at various levels, was present in multiple syllabi. In these, it was advocated that nutrition policymakers, educators, developers, and community members should work to improve the nutritional choices available as well as to improve food insecurity and food sovereignty, including for Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Canada's Food Guide was presented as a reliable source of information in this regard. Some syllabi focused on a bottom-up approach to policy change, with the community involved in the process and community-level initiatives emphasized, while other syllabi contextualized Canada within broader international systems and/or adopted a comparative approach.

Topics covered in discussions of policy included nutrition advocacy, policy intervention, community nutrition education, and community nutrition practices, all of which were said to influence how various demographic groups of people make "healthy" food choices. Educating people to achieve an (often undefined) ideal in nutrition was a common theme in Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi, although some emphasized building understandings of larger issues and policies rather than an individualized or micro analysis of nutrition. Other topics discussed included school and childcare provider policies, nutrition labelling, maternal nutrition policies, controversies pertaining to public health interventions, dietetic codes of ethics, the Canadian healthcare system, collaborations with the private sector, and jurisdictional regulations. Some syllabi were more explicitly critical of existing food-security policies, while other syllabi focused less on policy change and more on the impact of policy on nutrition. At least one syllabus referenced the importance of dietitians being accepting of diversity with respect to professional competencies and adopting a broader societal advocacy role.

Some syllabi included content on human nutrition in international contexts. These included references to interventions in "low-resource countries" or comparisons between "industrialized" and "non-

industrialized" countries. The use of food science, food aid, and biotechnology was included as a potential means of addressing nutritional issues, including acute malnutrition, nutrient deficiencies, "hidden" hunger, food insecurity, and world food waste. Food safety was also presented as dependent on policies at multiple jurisdictions. Controversies regarding global food aid policies were incorporated, such as funding allocations for prevention or treatment of malnutrition, obligations to feed the hungry (with an implication that high-resource countries carry the onus for managing malnutrition globally), whether corrupt governments should be recipients of food aid, and policies concerning GMOs. Non-technological solutions to international food problems mentioned in syllabi included education, diet, land reform, and improved water, sanitation, and hygiene. Culture, religion, gender, global differences, and population size were also included as contextual factors to consider in food policies, and social, political, agricultural, and economic influences on food policy were referenced in one syllabus. Mention was also made of different organizations and groups that attempt to alleviate hunger such as UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and women's home gardens.

## Discussion

The findings illustrate that food is constructed quite differently in publicly available undergraduate Human Nutrition Sciences, Dietetics, and Food Studies syllabi from Canadian post-secondary institutions, with occasional overlaps between the fields. We will begin the discussion by comparing similarities and differences between Human Nutrition Sciences, Dietetics, and Food Studies that emerged in our critical discourse analysis. Then we will consider how these thematic findings relate to the potential development of food positivity in these fields, which could be a transdisciplinary social movement.

### Comparison between fields

To start, we remind readers that we only analyzed publicly-available syllabi from a sample that is not representative of all or any particular Human Nutrition Sciences, Dietetics, or Food Studies programs in Canada. Instructors could have included additional content or raised critical challenges to topics presented more neutrally in the syllabus during class delivery. Furthermore, fields may have changed since data collection or since syllabi were produced. For example, a new dietetics accreditation body has been established and educational competencies have changed as programs prepare for their respective accreditation processes. As part of our overall study on food positivity we have also interviewed instructors and students, and the findings on class delivery are forthcoming. Further, in discussing the similarities and differences between fields, we make some generalities that do not capture all of the nuances and exceptions present in the syllabi.

When comparing the fields, it is important to note that the transdisciplinarity of Food Studies made it difficult to develop themes, which may suggest a greater degree of cohesion in the fields' core foci would be beneficial. In contrast, Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics are far less fragmented, likely due to being associated with an accredited and applied profession. One major difference between the fields is that foods

are less frequently mentioned in Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi. Rather, nutrients and quantification, or what Scrinis (2012) terms "nutritionism," are the focus, although social aspects of food and cross-cultural foodways were also considered. Within the Food Studies syllabi, foods were discussed in relation to identity (culture, social class, etc.), food security, and food sovereignty**.** Food and power were also discussed in relation to inequalities in the food system and through food practices.

Food was described as a commodity across the fields. The environment, sustainability, and alternative approaches to conventional agriculture were common concerns in Food Studies syllabi. The meaning of community overlapped to a certain extent within the fields. Community food insecurity and the health status of communities, including Indigenous communities, was a focus across the disciplines, with a greater emphasis on power imbalances and food sovereignty in Food Studies syllabi. Grassroots and community-led approaches to food systems and eating local food were presented as positive across the syllabi. Human Nutrition Science, Dietetics, and Food Studies focused on policy, with Human Nutrition Science syllabi also focusing on global nutritional interventions. Food Studies syllabi featured an emphasis on intersectional considerations of power struggles, including critical analyses of economic and social structures. Human Nutrition Science and Dietetics syllabi often took a more individualistic approach, focusing on individual choices and behaviours with some emphasis on pervasive food myths and misleading claims. Across disciplines, structural food access issues were considered.

Weight was presented as requiring health risk management in Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi, with "obesity" needing treatment through lifestyle changes. Further, a particular stress was placed on measuring bodies, and bodies and identities appeared as separate from one another. In Food Studies syllabi, "obesity" was presented as a product of capitalism, as was chronic hunger. "Obesity" was discussed as a product of inaccessibility or unaffordability of food across the syllabi. There was limited engagement with critical weight or fat studies content, although some Food Studies syllabi incorporated more critical readings on the topic.

## Whither positivity?

In Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics, framing food "positively" was connected with nutritional values rather than with what makes a person feel connected to others or invokes happiness. Positive foods were shaped around health (i.e., foods to eat for good health). What constituted "health" or "healthy foods" was often not defined in the syllabi, implying an assumption that "healthiness" and "healthy foods" have universal meanings that will be shared by instructors, students, and those implicated in the syllabi (i.e., dietetic clients, the public, policymakers, etc.). As internationally significant debates on formal definitions and policy parameters reveal, however, the meaning of "health" itself is contested, and this debate reflects social, scientific, and ethical dimensions (Bell, 2017; Dennis & Robin, 2020; Huber et al., 2011; Overend et al., 2020; Sartorius, 2006).

Similarly, what is commonly understood as "healthy" food and the dissemination of dietary advice are historically and culturally contingent; these discourses are morally loaded, gendered, classed, colonial, racialized, and reflect idiosyncratic priorities, not just unbiased science (Biltekoff, 2013; Dennis & Robin, 2020; Levenstein, 2012; Murphy et al., 2016; Overend et al., 2020). For instance, what might seem like relatively benign considerations regarding fat, sugar,

and Dietary Reference Intakes (DRI) have motivated years of spirited debate, challenges, and controversy internationally (Bragg & Nestle, 2017; Murphy et al., 2016; Teicholz, 2023). Among Canadian families, popular understandings of "healthy" eating can include attempting to adopt the widely disseminated Canadian Food Guide, eating a meat-heavy diet emphasizing homecooked meals, or prioritizing unprocessed food (Beagan et al., 2014). Taken-for-granted assumptions that students, educators, and dietetic clients will settle upon unequivocable definitions and priorities regarding "healthiness" in their food or dietary practices will likely miss the nuanced ways in which individuals enact and are constrained in their everyday lives. Understanding food more positively will remain unrealized until the diversity of human eating and the various structures that food serves are reconciled in Human Nutrition, Dietetics, and Health Sciences (Hayes Conroy & Hayes Conroy 2013; Hite & Carter, 2019; Murphy et al., 2016).

The Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi placed a major emphasis on the role of a culturally-competent dietitian in education and advocacy. However, a failure to consider food and not just nutrients, and to critically, self-reflexively question how hegemonic "healthy" dietary advice reinforces moralistic, colonial, sexist, classist, and racialized discourses (Brady, 2020; Gingras et al., 2017), may imperil an emancipatory approach to food. Encouragingly, more critical, weight-neutral approaches to health which incorporate social justice reforms are gaining traction (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Bombak et al., 2019; Gingras et al., 2017). However, this was minimally evident in the syllabi we analyzed. Further dismantling of silos between Human Nutrition Sciences, Dietetics, Food Studies, and also Fat Studies will expose students to fat acceptance and food and body positivity (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015; Cooper, 2016; Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Brady et al., 2019), and recruitment of educators invested in these aims is needed.

Within Food Studies, conceptions of positive foods were framed around equalities in the food systems, pro-local, culturally relevant, and (in some instances) non-genetically modified foods. Crucially, however, like nutritional or dietetic advice, alternative food movements are morally fraught and reflect racialized, classist, sizeist and colonial prejudices (Brady et al., 2019, Guthman, 2011). Depending on course delivery, a non-reflexive or unnuanced delivery of the alternative food movements' white, middle-class consumer preferences as a means of achieving systemic food justice may reinforce the idea of an unhealthy and/or unethical "other" (Biltekoff, 2013; Guthman, 2011; Parker, 2023). We noted that syllabi, particularly in terms of selection of readings, did suggest a self-reflexive awareness of these issues.

Food Studies syllabi appeared to reproduce, or at least not to challenge, the dominant negativity concerning larger bodies. Instructors and students may have reframed fat bodies more favourably in classrooms, but there was very little body positivity evident in the syllabi. Rather, foods, policies, and systems deemed "obesogenic" were constructed as negative, including conflating "obesity" with forms of malnutrition and positioning fat bodies as products of damaging, inequitable economic systems. The need to build bridges between food studies, fat acceptance, and fat studies and to move beyond using fat bodies as a justification for mobilizing food justice reforms has been recognized (Brady et al., 2019, 2023). Perpetuating fatphobia is at odds with the goal of many food studies scholars to critically interrogate power relations, and comfortable relationships with food cannot exist when

eating is as speciously charged with moral significance as it is in a fatphobic society.

## Transdisciplinary approaches to food positivity

We close by considering the possibilities of breaking down silos between Human Nutrition Sciences, Dietetics, and Food Studies to develop an inclusive and emancipatory food positivity pedagogy and movement. Central to a food positivity pedagogy would be learning how to rectify local and global food inequities and crises without reproducing individualistic, classist, racialized, and fatphobic discourses (Brady, 2020; Gingras et al., 2017; Hayes Conroy & Hayes Conroy 2013). In achieving food positivity, critiques concerning these fields that may inhibit positivity should be carefully considered. Our findings suggest Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi incorporate concepts such as the social determinants of health, but also continue to heavily emphasize discrete nutrients, individual knowledge, and behaviour change. This may produce practitioners who are unable to address structurally embedded food inequities while inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes of the marginalized "ignorant" "other" (Farrell et al., 2016; Gingras et al., 2017; Guthman, 2011; Warin, 2018), even when social determinants of health and cultural competency are discussed in the classroom.

The unequal systems in which food studies scholars are experts emerged over millennia, in part as a consequence of efforts to address life-threatening issues in food safety, preservation, and transportation, cope with conflict, feed growing populations, and deal with vector-borne diseases (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023; Knorr and Watzke, 2019; McLachlan, 1975; Silva et al., 2018; Tudi et al., 2021). While recognizing how capitalism has distorted the promise of human nutrition/food science innovations, we must remember that improvements in human nutrition substantially contributed to reduced mortality historically (Beltrán-Sánchez et al., 2012; Penn Wharton Budget Model, 2016). In part, these improvements reflect the synergist effects of malnutrition and infectious disease (Keusch, 2003; Schaible & Kaufmann, 2007; Schneider, 2023), which remain a threat to life for which therapeutic nutritional innovations are vital (Keusch, 2003; Schaible & Kaufmann, 2007). At the same time, there must be recognition that, historically, nutrition was weaponized against Indigenous Peoples (Daschuk, 2019; Dennis & Robin 2020), and this history of colonialism, ongoing settler-colonialism, and anti-Black, anti-Asian and anti-Indigenous racism must be reckoned with as we decolonize Human Nutritional Sciences, Dietetics, and Food Studies (Deawuo & Classens, 2023; White & Brown, 2021; Pictou et al, 2021). In a transdisciplinary model, students can learn how to disrupt and revolutionize power relations while incorporating essential nutritional innovations, all without losing sight of the social salience of food (Kimura 2013; Koç et al., 2017; Scrinis, 2012). Lastly, these fields must contend with how food pedagogies can reproduce classism, racism, settler-colonialism, and fatphobia (Brady et al., 2023; Flowers & Swan, 2016; Gingras et al., 2017; Guthman, 2011; Pictou et al., 2021).

## Conclusions

This preliminary study helps illuminate how food is being constructed in contemporary Human Nutrition Sciences, Dietetics, and Food Studies courses in Canadian post-secondary institutions. Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics syllabi focus on the nutrient constituents of foods and a taken-for-granted "healthy" diet. Food Studies syllabi emphasize social, cultural, and identity-relevant aspects of food, often critiquing status quo food systems and valorizing alternative approaches.

Food positivity is not yet prevalent in course syllabi across the fields we examined. Food Studies may benefit from more coherence and visibility in Canadian post-secondary institutions. Collaboration between Human Nutrition Sciences, Dietetics, and Food Studies would be beneficial for the development of an understanding of food that is not centred on "risk" or health, but perhaps instead, as we have described, centred on a "food positivity" pedagogy. For instance, Human Nutrition Sciences and Dietetics would benefit from the emphasis on intersectionality, anti-oppression, sociality, and equity, while Food Studies could benefit from a deeper engagement with the innovations of Human Nutrition Science in addressing local and global food inequalities. Both fields would benefit from an appreciation for the diversity of bodies and not relying on certain bodies to illustrate the "riskiness" of certain foods or the consequences of oppressive systems, along with a continued focus on anti-oppression pedagogies and curriculum. Recognizing that formal food education helps shape future policy development and Canadians' attitudes and behaviours toward food, we seek more inclusive and non--stigmatizing approaches that consider food and eating as multifaceted, unifying, and an affirmative phenomenon. This study is an initial starting point in exploring food positivity and is necessarily limited by only focusing on publicly-available syllabi. Future research should focus on instructors' and students' perspectives on food pedagogy in Canada and whether they would endorse a transdisciplinary food positivity movement.

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