

The Social Impact of Advertising: How Commercial Weight Loss Program Advertising Promotes Thinness Ideology

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Abstract

Raised body mass index (BMI) is one of the significant risk factors for non-communicable diseases. Regardless of their BMI, more than half of Americans strongly desire to lose weight. As a result, commercial weight loss programs (WLP) have emerged and proliferated in the United States. This study examines WLP advertising as a vehicle for promoting the thinness ideology and how these advertisements impact women's beliefs and attitudes about self-perceived ideal body image. This study defines thinness ideology as emphasizing being thin and self-perceived ideal body image as individuals' desired body shapes formed by internalization through advertising messages. By employing four significant theories, this study focuses on how women form their self-perceived ideal body image and, as a result, change their beliefs and attitudes as measured by their changing levels of self-esteem and body (dis)satisfaction. The model is theoretically based on the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) and has been incorporated with social learning theory, social comparison theory, and satisfaction theory. The model also explains the linear transmission of weight loss program advertisements and changes in individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about ideal body image. According to the model, beliefs and attitudes change depending on individuals' self-esteem and body dissatisfaction levels, often influenced by WLP advertisements promoting the thinness ideology.

Keywords: Weight loss program advertising, Theoretical Mapping, Thinness Ideology, Elaboration likelihood model, Social learning theory, Social comparison theory, Satisfaction theory

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1. Introduction

Obesity and overweight have become major public health problems. According to an IBISWorld Industry Report (2022), approximately one-third of American adults (aged 18 and older) are considered obese. The obesity rate in the United States is expected to increase from 33% to 35.4% in 2027. Moreover, the rate for people with various educational and socioeconomic backgrounds has recently been rising at an unprecedented rate due to the modern work environment and the COVID-19 pandemic (Dyer, 2021; OECD, 2017).

A recent survey by Gallup (2022) found that 41% of American adults considered themselves overweight, regardless of their actual body mass index (BMI). The study also showed that, on average, more than half of Americans (49% of men and 61% of women) expressed a desire to lose weight, and 26% of the survey respondents (23% of men and 29% of women) were actively trying to lose weight. However, a significant number of people have used risky methods to promote weight loss, such as dehydration, diet pills, vomiting, fasting, and laxatives or diuretics (Kuehn, 2006), which can produce equally or more dangerous situations, such as eating disorders, impaired growth, and depression. Thus, there is a need to develop safe and effective weight loss strategies for individuals who want to lose weight.

Weight loss diet businesses like Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and NutriSystem have emerged and proliferated (Research and Markets, 2022). According to the Research and Markets' study (2022), even though the industry struggled during the pandemic due to closures of weight loss programs, it recovered quickly back to \$72.6 billion in 2021.

The concern about weight loss became prevalent in the post-COVID-19 era due to the 'in-home everything' lifestyle. As the growth rate of the weight loss industry increases every year, advertising for commercial weight loss programs is also rapidly increasing (Research and Markets, 2022). These advertisements try to attract consumers via visual and verbal messages, stating that their products provide healthy weight loss and offer a way to have nicer body shapes. In addition, they employ a spokesperson who has gone through the program and experienced its efficacy—the 'testimonial' advertising framework (i.e., Jessica Simpson backed Weight Watchers, while Valerie Bertinelli endorsed Jenny Craig). With their testimonials—often by celebrities—these programs

promote their products as new, different, and successful ways to lose weight. These testimonials are generally considered proof of the program's efficacy (Martin, Wentzel, & Tomczak, 2008).

The advertisements for commercial weight loss programs often reflect the 'thinness ideology,' which emphasizes the importance of being thin or looking slimmer than the consumer currently looks (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). It is one of the measures women use for self-confidence, and many women still internalize the thin ideal and act accordingly (Wolf, 1991).

Data show that women are exposed to the thinness ideology more than men are (Andersen & Didomenico, 1992). As a result, they try to lose weight more than men (Davis & Turner, 2001). In addition, women choose ideal body images that are thinner than they actually are, and younger women are more likely to choose thinner body images (Lamb et al., 1993). Losing weight is now one of the preoccupations among young people (Hamilton & Greenway, 2004).

Many studies have dealt with thinness ideology; these studies often look at the media as the most decisive influence on thin female body ideals because the media tend to portray excessively thin female body standards (Garner et al., 1980; Stice et al., 1994). However, none of the studies examining commercial weight loss programs as the vehicle for delivering the thinness ideology have used the social comparison approach or explored the programs' impact on consumers. In addition, since young women tend to subject themselves to the thinness ideology and tend to have the highest desire to be thin, this study tries to answer the following research question:

RQ: Does commercial weight loss programs advertising influence young women's beliefs and attitudes about their self-perceived ideal body image?

Self-perceived ideal body image, in this study, is defined as individuals' own desired body shapes, which are often influenced by internalization through advertising messages. Until now, no studies have directly addressed this question. This study will deploy a conceptual framework of how commercial weight loss programs' advertisements shape individuals' perceptions of their perceived body image and cause changes to their beliefs or attitudes regarding their ideal body image.

2. Theoretical Foundations

To investigate the research question above, this study incorporates literature relevant to the social comparison of thinness ideology and individuals' beliefs and attitude changes that are related to self-perceived ideal body image. These beliefs and attitudes may be influenced by disparities between individuals' perceived ideal body image and standard body images portrayed in weight loss program advertisements. This study also uses literature pertaining to the social comparison theory, social learning theory, the elaboration likelihood model, and satisfaction theory, which emphasize four significant processes. The purpose of the literature review is to delineate the overall shape of this study based on previous research and to build new knowledge upon them.

2.1 Social Comparison Theory

Festinger (1954) proposes that people tend to evaluate and compare their abilities and opinions for accurate self-evaluation. Festinger also argues that humans acquire objective information by comparing themselves to others when such information is limited. People evaluate themselves using nonsocial and objective criteria if the information is sufficient. Social comparison theory (SCT) believes that comparing with similar others provides more information than comparing with dissimilar others. Mumford (1983) states that "individuals who are similar to the person making the comparison will be preferred as standards for evaluation since they provide a somewhat more precise and germane source of comparative information" (p. 874). For instance, when we play tennis, we prefer opponents who are similar in skill, age, or experience to evaluate ourselves more accurately.

Over the years, many researchers have found supporting evidence of social comparison theory in emotional responses (Schachter, 1959) and preferences to comply with similar others (Darley & Aronson, 1966). Festinger's (1954) original work has been expanded upon by Gulas and McKeage (2000). In addition to self-evaluation, the expanded version of social comparison theory argues that comparison behavior motivates humans to improve and enhance themselves (Wood, 1989). A group of researchers has investigated social comparison processes influenced by the personal motivation to evaluate themselves (Jellison & Davis, 1973; Wheeler et al., 1969). The foregoing research has found that individuals try to find information about cooperators' or competitors' opinions and abilities for reward acquisition and punishment avoidance.

This study utilizes social comparison theory, which suggests that individuals compare themselves to others. In this study, individuals compare themselves to spokespeople delivering advertising messages—such as thinness ideology. They then perceive and compare their body shapes—either satisfactorily or unsatisfactorily—based on this thinness ideology, which has been internalized through advertising messages as the standard of body shape.

2.2 Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory (SLT) can be defined as "an approach that synthesizes principles of learning with those of

cognitive psychology” (Maisto, Carey, & Bradizza, 1999, p. 107). Social learning theory, as presented by Bandura (1986, 1994), proposes that an individual develops his or her behaviors by observing other individuals’ behaviors and watching the consequences of these behaviors. Because of these observations, individuals tend to behave in ways attuned to socially desirable expectations and compatible with their self-approval (Bandura, 1994). According to Bandura (1994), “a great deal of information about human values, thinking patterns, and behavior is gained from models portrayed symbolically through verbal or pictorial means” (p. 66). The theory also stresses that self-reaction to observations motivates and guides our behavioral outcomes.

Bandura's social learning theory (1986, 1994) posits that expectancies and incentives are determinants of our behavior. *Expectancies* are defined as "beliefs concerning the extent to which one's behavior will produce favorable or unfavorable outcomes" (Frayne & Latham, 1987, p. 387). Expectancies also can be categorized into three types: expectancy about environmental cues, outcome expectation, and efficacy expectation (also known as self-efficacy) (Rosenstock, Strecher, & Becker, 1988, p. 176). Incentives refer to "the value of a particular object or outcome" (Rosenstock, Strecher, & Becker, 1988, p. 176). Bandura and Walter (1963) believe that individuals tend to find role models that perform socially effective behavior. Subsequently, they try to imitate their role models and believe that "modeled behaviour is appropriate and has been rewarded in the past" (Scherer & Adams, 1988, p. 19). Then, individuals' perceptions of the role models will be formulated so that imitating them will result in desired rewards (Scherer & Adams, 1988).

Regarding weight loss program advertisements, individuals who are not medically considered overweight or obese and who have an appropriate body mass index (BMI) may still perceive the thin body image portrayed in advertisements as a socially desired standard. As a result, they may internalize this image as the ideal body type.

2.3 Elaboration Likelihood Model

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) distinguishes two routes to evaluating information based on an individual’s motivation and ability to process information: central and peripheral routes (Perry et al., 1987). According to Perry et al., attitudes developed or changed through the central route “are postulated to be relatively persistent, predictive of behavior, and resistant to change until they are challenged by cogent contrary information along the dimension or dimensions perceived central to the merits of the object” (p. 234). Meanwhile, peripheral route attitudes “are postulated to be relatively less persistent, resistant, and predictive of behavior” (p. 234). To determine the route taken, the first deliberation is whether the individual is motivated to evaluate the presented information based on personal relevance, responsibility, or need for cognition. The central route is followed if the individual is motivated to process information, and the peripheral route is employed if the individual is not motivated to process information. If peripheral cues, such as attractive sources or positive or negative effects, are presented, relatively temporary attitudes may be changed. The preliminary attitudes would remain if neither central nor peripheral information were available at this consideration.

Individuals who are highly motivated to process information but cannot process it will follow the peripheral route as long as the peripheral cues are present. However, individuals with high motivation and the ability to process information will follow the central route for cognitive processing, which determines initial attitudes, such as negative, positive, or neutral. When individuals are not motivated or cannot process information fully, the peripheral route is used, meaning that attitudes are formed or changed by characteristics not directly related to the processed information.

Of these two routes, the message's argument is more significant when individuals take the central route rather than the peripheral route because attitudes formed by the central route are more persistent and evoke a high elaboration likelihood. Therefore, beliefs and attitudes change when information is processed through the central route since the central route can predict behaviors via its cognitive structure.

The elaboration likelihood model is relevant to the present study. The central route of information processing incorporates an individual’s cognitive structure, and the cognitive approach greatly influences an individual’s perceptions (Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001). As such, ELM serves as an important framework for understanding how individuals’ perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes are formed, stretched, and changed.

2.4 Satisfaction Theory

Satisfaction theory is generally associated with the issue of comparison processes. As *satisfaction* is defined as "an evaluation of some characteristic, person, experience, relationship or other object (in the same sense that an attitude has an object)" (Richins, 1991, p.72), it generally refers to the results of comparing—either consciously or unconsciously—the social standards for a particular performance with an individual's perceptions of his or her performance (Oliver, 1980). Therefore, a more considerable degree of dissatisfaction is likely to occur as the negative disparity between an individual's perceived performance and the standards for the performance grows; likewise, perceived performance satisfaction occurs when one's performance exceeds standards or expectations or at least equals them (Richins, 1991). Dissatisfaction generally occurs when there is a disparity in particular traits, especially ones that greatly matter to individuals (Higgins, 1987).

A study by Richins (1991) explored how attractive models in advertisements cause college-aged females to feel dissatisfaction with themselves. According to this study, when these women compared themselves to the attractive models in the advertisements, there were significant disparities between their self-perceived and standard attractiveness (as reflected by the models). Because physical appearance is considered a very “important dimension of the self” (Richins, 1991, p. 73) for these women, disparities between their self-perceived attractiveness and the standardized attractiveness of models lead to dissatisfaction.

In light of Richins’s (1991) study, satisfaction theory can help to explain how advertisements for weight loss programs influence individuals’ levels of self-esteem and body dissatisfaction, which are influenced by their self-perceived ideal body images.

3. Proposed Model

This study explores the linear transmission model of weight loss program (WLP) advertisements and changes in individuals’ perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about ideal body image. This study posits a conceptual model specifying the processes in which WLP advertising may influence consumer self-perception formation and changes in their beliefs and attitudes. As Figure 1 illustrates, the proposed model includes four constructs.

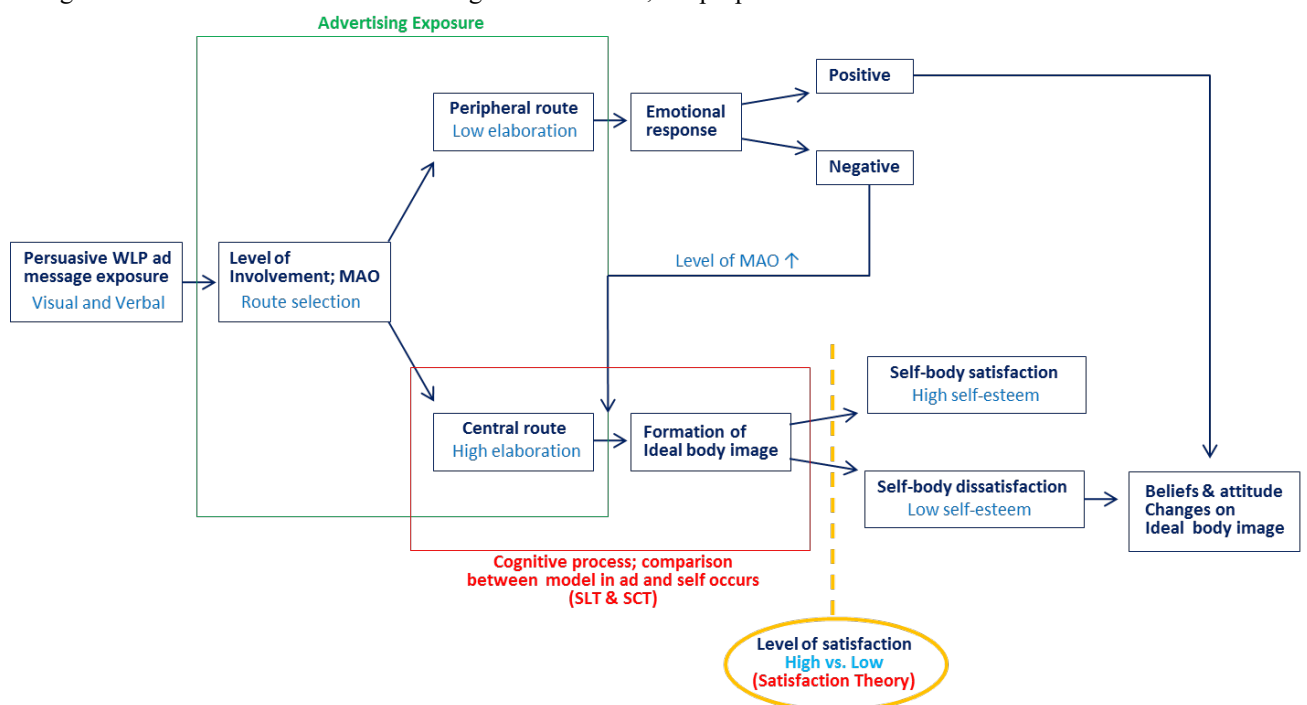


Figure 1. The impact of WLP ad message on an individual’s perception, beliefs, and attitudes changes on ideal body image

The first construct shows WLP advertisements as persuasive communication messages, including thinness ideology in testimonial format, which impacts individuals’ motivation and ability to process WLP advertising messages. The second construct explains how individuals judge themselves compared to others, as discussed in two major social theories, social learning theory and social comparison theory, and how they shape their self-perceived ideal body image. Based on satisfaction theory, the third construct discusses how self-perceptions of ideal body image impact individuals’ levels of self-esteem and body satisfaction—either satisfactorily or unsatisfactorily—. Finally, the fourth construct explains individuals’ changes in beliefs and attitudes regarding weight loss, particularly regarding their self-esteem and body satisfaction levels.

When a WLP advertisement plays, consumers are exposed to its persuasive communication message; this is when the construct of the proposed model begins. According to ELM, the foundation of the first construct, individuals exposed to the WLP message evaluate the proposed message—in this case, thinness ideology—based on their motivation and ability to process the message. The first step in determining the route to take is deliberating whether individuals are motivated by the presented messages based on their relevance, responsibility, or need to process the ad messages. The central route is employed if individuals are motivated to process the ad message. If they are not motivated to process the ad message, then the peripheral route is followed, and the WLP ad message does not significantly affect these individuals. WLP ad messages do not play a significant role for individuals who are in the peripheral route is explained by the need for cognition (NFC), which influences an individual’s intrinsic motivation (Cacioppo et al., 1986). According to Haugtvedt et al. (1992), NFC, also conceptualized as a motivational factor, is an indicator of the motivation of information

processing, which determines the level of effort of cognitive work. More specifically, when individuals' NFC level is high, they devote more attention to advertising messages; when individuals' NFC level is low, they tend to avoid paying attention to advertising messages. Therefore, when individuals are not motivated to process ad messages, they tend to pay little attention to these messages; as a result, the information processing for the WLP ad message would stop for those individuals.

Regarding another route, young women's relevance or need to process the message would be the motivation to process WLP messages. This personal relevance can be an interest in losing weight in a healthy way rather than taking laxatives or diuretics, individuals' families, pressure from peers or self to be thin, or interest in WLP testimonials; these factors, in turn, encourage them to pay attention to WLP messages.

Regarding the second construct, individuals engaging in the central route compare themselves to spokespeople in WLP advertisements and judge their current body shapes and lifestyles based on social comparison with these spokespeople. According to Richins (1991), advertising messages influence individuals due to their explicit or implicit comparisons with idealized advertising messages and the lifestyles appearing in them. Therefore, individuals exposed to the thinness ideology through WLP advertisement messages—either visually by thin models or verbally through messages describing the importance of being thin—compare themselves to these models or the verbal message. In addition, as consumers not only compare themselves to the idealized ad messages but also to the lifestyles appearing in them (Richins, 1991), individuals exposed to these WLP ad messages may be inspired to attain these lifestyles that offer an 'ideally better life' through low-carb meal plans, counseling with experts, physical activity, and hypnotherapy. These lifestyles are often portrayed in a testimonial format to give more credibility to the programs. Concerning individuals' self-perceptions of ideal body image, although they may not be considered medically overweight or obese or have a body mass index that is considered unhealthy, they may perceive the thin body images portrayed in these ads to be a socially desired standard and form their own self-perceived ideal body images in accord with them, as proposed by social learning theory.

At the next stage, according to satisfaction theory, a more considerable degree of dissatisfaction and a lower degree of self-esteem are more likely to appear as the negative discrepancy between individuals' perceived ideal body image and the standards for the ideal body image grow. Similarly, individuals' perceived body satisfaction occurs when they perceive themselves as meeting or exceeding the standards or expectations of the ideal body image presented by WLP ad messages. Suppose individuals are satisfied with their current body shape. In that case, the WLP ad messages do not significantly affect them because their self-esteem and body satisfaction are high enough to be unaffected. However, those individuals who are not satisfied with their current physical body shape and who have a high degree of body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem would be more affected by the WLP ad messages.

Finally, those individuals who are highly affected by WLP ad messages because of their lower self-esteem and higher body dissatisfaction levels are driven by the perceived disparity between their ideal body image and perceived standards. The WLP ad messages would be more likely to change their beliefs and attitudes regarding their perceived ideal body image as they have gone through the cognitive message processing proposed by the elaboration likelihood model ELM.

4. Discussion

Weight loss programs are one of the fastest growing industries in America, and its market has become quite competitive. To survive in the highly competitive market, WLP companies have allocated large portions of their marketing budget to advertising, which is one of the leading marketing communication tools. Although advertising has been used as a common promotional tool, little is known about how advertising can facilitate the sales of WLPs and how their advertising messages influence individuals' reactions to the products, particularly their beliefs and attitudes about ideal body image.

American women have myriad opportunities to compare themselves to extremely thin advertising figures. The thin body image prevalent in the media may make women dissatisfied with their bodies (Richins, 1991). According to social comparison theory, the degree of body dissatisfaction varies across individuals. Once people are dissatisfied with their bodies, a feeling that may have been influenced by WLP advertising messages, they often try to change their beliefs and attitudes toward their perceived ideal body image to avoid punishment or obtain a reward.

The proposed model of evaluating WLP ad messages to individuals' beliefs and attitude changes suggests that effective WLP advertising causes individuals' perceptions of their ideal body image to change. From the point of view of marketers or advertisers, it is essential to generate an advertisement that includes a theme that can effect changes in the target audience's perceptions; this type of advertising serves as effective persuasive communication. Not only should the theme of the advertising be assessed, but also the target audience's likeability and familiarity with the advertising message. To be a compelling ad message, people must compare themselves to the advertising message and shape their perceptions according to it. Understanding how WLP ad

messages influence target audiences' beliefs and attitude changes through the proposed model will contribute to theoretical knowledge and a practical understanding of how to connect WLP advertising messages with their target audiences.

This study constructed a theoretical persuasion process regarding how WLP advertising culminates in changes in individuals' beliefs or attitudes. However, how attitudes or beliefs influence future intentions or behaviors is still unknown. Therefore, future researchers should identify and develop a framework for behavioral consequences of exposure to WLP advertisements. Regarding people's weight loss behaviors, when people are exposed to the media's portrayals of body image, they perceive these images as ideal bodies. As a result, they may try to imitate the body images portrayed in WLP advertisements. To imitate a perceived ideal body image, individuals have several behavioral options related to weight reduction, such as purchasing a commercial weight-loss program, weight-loss pills, cosmetic surgery, or exercise.

Two historical notions present different views of the effect of perception on behavior (Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001). For the first notion, behaviorists have argued that perception directly leads to behavior, or S-R bonds (Skinner, 1938; Watson, 1913). That is, perceptual inputs directly pertain to corresponding behavioral outputs (Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001). The second idea is Gibson's (1979) notion of affordances. In this view, "environmental stimuli directly suggest the appropriate behavioral response to them – the grilled lobster says 'eat me,' and the cold glass of beer says 'drink me'" (Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001, p. 2). The Gibsonians and the behaviorists argue that perceptual activity directs a behavioral tendency acquired from reward and punishment for one's behavioral response.

Moreover, Hommel et al. (2001) propose a theoretical framework for the relation between perception and action called the theory of event coding (TEC). The classical information processing view deals with perception and action separately, whereas TEC views perception and action as intimately related. Hommel et al. (2001) try to synthesize theories of perception and action based on the proposals that "perception, attention, intention, and action share, or operate on, a common representational domain" (p. 859) and "stimuli and responses share a common representational medium" (p. 884). Thus, Hommel et al.'s theory is considered the first attempt to synthesize perception and behavior. Their theory may be applicable for predicting behavioral outcomes of WLP ads, so the proposed research question is advisable for future research: *Does the advertising of commercial weight loss programs influence young women's behavioral changes or intention to lose weight?*

In addition to the theoretical development, collecting empirical evidence for the proposed models is also suggested. The empirical evidence can help scholars and practitioners gain more insight into the robustness of WLP-related models.

5. Limitation

As with any study, the present study has some limitations. First, the social comparison process in this study does not employ within-group or face-to-face comparisons. As Festinger (1954) initially proposed, the social comparison theory primarily deals with comparison among people. Although the theory can be modified for comparison between the target audience and advertising spokespeople, for mature analysis, this study should employ spokespeople and target audience members (within-group comparison by fact-to-face), comparing these two groups.

Another limitation is related to cultural relevance to the advertising message. Although this study tries to explain the impact of WLP advertising messages on young women's perceptions, beliefs, and attitude changes, few WLP advertisements have portrayed young women as spokespeople. Mumford (1983) notes that comparison with similar others provides more information than does comparison with dissimilar others. Therefore, if young women are a primary target audience for WLP ad messages because they are highly interested in losing weight and experience the highest pressure to be thin, more WLP advertising should employ these women as spokespeople. However, utilizing young adults in advertisements should be carefully addressed.

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