

THE USE OF VISUAL HUMOR ON TRAVEL COMPANIES INSTAGRAM : SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Travel companies are struggling using social media for the right implementation, particularly in formulating engagement-based visual messaging strategies. However, making interesting posts can generate strong engagement and lead to a more positive public view of the brand. Humor is one of the weapons used by social media users, given its ability to develop social interactions. However, how humor works in social media is not well understood, especially visually because different life experiences create different perceptions to make meaning of it. This study wants to make humor a symbolic source and adopts a combined semiotic content-analysis to identify the visual content and its symbolic meaning in tourism posts of various travel companies. 20 posts from 2 travel company brands with tourism content were collected. The results show that there are 5 types of humorous content and 4 types of symbolic meaning generated by the content. Research content is product related but not hard selling. This research advances tourism literacy, humor theory, and provides a conceptual map to travel companies in developing social media through visual humor content to increase engagement with consumers.

Key words : *Humor Content, Social Media Marketing, Travel , Visual Message Strategic*

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media marketing has a primary form of visualization with the practice of using digitally mediated images (e.g. videos or images) to attract attention and reach existing and unreached customers more effectively [1]. Diversity of brands that use social media urges all companies to develop tourism-themed visual content that is entertaining and relevant to life or current events . To promote tourism we need to know the basics of tourism itself. Tourism is a product wrapped in a visual and hedonic experience [2] Visual messages that are close to life or events that have been passed by consumers are very important because they can build good relationships between companies - consumers and show the advantages that a brand has over competing brands [3]. Even though tourism marketing has recognized its need for social media-based visual content and dive deeper to develop themselves in the crowded social media realm, they are still designing visual strategies for optimal results that can maximize consumer engagement and continued marketing.

In social media, visual humor is an

Important element in encouraging consumers to participate in the digital space [4] and is very suitable for visual marketing strategies on social media. In marketing strategy, it consistently shows that content which carries the concept of humor can generate more engagement than content with other concepts [5]. Although few, in tourism marketing, humorous content generates more interaction by consumers than content with humorous words [6]. In previous studies, the use of marketing with humorous content focused on traditional media such as postcards, brochures and TV [7 & 8] and visual humor on social media has not been explored optimally.

Focusing on social media Instagram, this study wants to systematically examine the use of marketing strategies based on visual humor on the social media of travel companies that promote tourism. In particular, the approach used is semiotic [9] to identify visual content and its symbolic meaning embedded in tourism-themed humor content published by various travel companies.

Instagram is a platform that is often used to produce humorous content to market products or not. The ability of social media to produce expressive and visual content encourages the use of humor as a creative way of self-expression, meaning-making, and reflection of socio-cultural realities [4]. In this context, humor is recognized as a symbol of emotional nutrition [10] and makes it possible to build a lasting and authentic relationship between companies and consumers. Based on this, this study argues that the use of humor-themed visual content is not only used to make consumers laugh, but also depicts events or events that resonate with them.

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. First, expanding the literature on humor, tourism, travel companies, and marketing by adding a social media context that focuses on humor-themed visual content by examining the humor content from a semiotic perspective. Second, this study contributes to the social media marketing literature in a visual form for tourism promotion on travel company content by introducing the use of humor as the most effective way to generate engagement between companies and consumers. third, this study helps travel organizations improve their marketing efforts and helps social media platforms to optimize content creation interfaces that can help facilitate content creation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Visual Social Media Marketing

Companies need to recognize the consumer-dominated online communication culture and develop attractive visual messaging strategies to sell and advertise products that are not felt directly (hard selling) to benefit from visual social media marketing. This context is gaining relevance as marketers in tourism are increasingly using social media-based visual messages in an effort to initiate, sustain and develop conversations between companies and consumers [3]. Message strategy is a marketing approach to promote and introduce products from a brand with a focus on the content to be said and the style of communication which is ultimately needed to generate engagement with consumers. As Aristotle's scholars argued, a persuader must adopt an unconventional and playful style of language to stimulate a supportive response from the audience [11].

For example, narrative strategy (NS) and and language (LA) are two of the sources of

2.2 Humor

Humor is used for communication that aims to entertain the audience and can influence them with a positive influence [12]. There are three complementary theories, namely relief, incongruity, and superiority of humor, to elaborate the philosophy of humor. In particular, the uplifting humor allows content creators to release nervous energy, and relieves consumers of tension. This can be seen in public speakers, politicians and businessmen who often use humor to overcome communication anxiety and disclose difficult information [13]. Incongruity humor refers to something unexpected and surprising as a result of violating what is agreed upon as normal. This allows people (e.g., advertisers, politicians) to clarify their views and make their message memorable. In contrast, superior humor is more likely to be a double-edged sword. This occurs when a person describes himself as superior to the weaknesses of others. On the one hand, it can be used as a social corrective by laughing at unacceptable behavior, and to strengthen unity among group members by teasing the wrong behavior of others. On the other hand, it may not be the kind of humor that entertains the people it targets, as it can cause unpleasant feelings [12]. Furthermore, the psychology of humor focuses on people's perceptions of whether and to what extent something is funny. It also sees their response to humor through smiles and laughter, and is therefore associated with positive psychology [14]. The psychology of humor emphasizes that humor is one of the strengths and features of personality, and it has been applied by scholars to research the use of humor in health, the workplace and education.

Humor linguistics refers to the study of the content of humor itself, how it is conveyed through techniques such as puns or metaphors, the form of language in texts, images, and their meanings [15]. Focusing on traditional forms of communication, [16] proposes the most complete typology consisting of 45 types of humor. Building on the semantic script theory of humor (SSTH), [15] developed a general theory of verbal humor (GTVH). It is more comprehensive than SSTH, as it consists of 6 sources of knowledge capable of analyzing long humorous texts, (eg, novels, short stories, TV shows).

knowledge: the former analyzes the genre of humor (eg, puzzles); the latter looks at lexical, syntactic, and

phonological choices.

Humor can be divided into two depending on the results obtained whether positive or negative morning social life. On the one hand, humor is considered to be able to relieve tension in intense relationships and maintain social order [17]. Humor is also ascribed to social control or social corrective, i.e. laughing at something that is actually outside the norm [18]. On the other hand, humor functions are transgressive, aggressive, and conflictive [17]. Humor is often based on the violation of social and cultural boundaries, which can lead to violations in certain types of targets (eg, groups, objects). In addition, experts note that people often use humor to express their negative emotions (commenting on people or things they don't like), thereby facilitating hostility. Ethnic and political jokes can support this claim. As [12] asserts: humor is concerned with the construction of 'we', which implies inclusion as well as exclusion. In summary, humor scientists have attempted to identify the causes of humor, why it exists, and why it is funny, and have paid little attention to the semiotic perspective of humor.

2.3 Humor use in Marketing

Judging from the explanation in point 2.2 regarding the positive benefits of humor, it shows that humor is suitable for social media marketing. Previous studies have focused more on scripts and verbal humor than on visual humor. This gap deserves scientific attention because the proportion of social media-based humor [19] is getting higher considering that people are already very dependent on the digital world, especially social media. With limited research on humor semiotics [19 & 20], this research focuses on the use of social media-based visual humor semiotics by treating it as a sign. Visual humor is a marker or object that can be observed and the meaning is marked [21]. For example, an image showing a car in motion (i.e. a marker) may indicate a fast-paced life situation (i.e. a marked meaning).

Semiotics in the use of humor in marketing and communication is not only to attract attention and make the audience laugh, but to create a shared symbolic meaning that allows to apply the nature of solidarity and create engagement with consumer. However, the marketing literature focuses on other consumers [22]. These activities are able to reach both old and new consumers. The practice of sharing content with other consumers through the

typologies of humor (eg, puns, ridicule, comparisons) in traditional advertising contexts such as TV and print media [23]. The author finds that the successful use of humor in advertising largely depends on the symbols and stereotypes in a particular context. Similarly, [24] points out that symbolic meaning is at the core of marketing messages that enable tourism marketers in travel companies, to create and satisfy consumer wants and expectations by considering their social and cultural experiences. Applied to the context of social media marketing, the use of semiotics of humor can provide marketers with an avenue for creating and growing consumer-driven companies.

2.3.1 Social media - based humor

Humor that is carried out on social media is humor that is presented through digital platforms (eg Instagram or Facebook) which has changed techniques, forms, ways of communicating, and topics as a response to social, cultural and technological trends [25]. The shift in the way to produce humor poses new challenges for marketers. In addition to dimming the existing humor, the platforms provided by social media have created new techniques such as funny presentation files or interactive humor such as actions to achieve humorous effects such as glossing or entering text. In addition, digital technology has created new and adaptable visual humor, such as photos manipulated through digital technology and animated GIFs or photo compositions made with Photoshop [18]. Importantly, this form of visual humor is found to be more common than scripted/verbal humor in the digital space. This visual humor has been at the core of enjoyable and ongoing interactions across various social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook [19 & 26]. Equally important, online communication without geographical boundaries has had an impact on the creation and popularity of the topic of humor. For example, sex, animals and gender are topics of humor that are globally oriented, while ethnicity, politics and customs are local topics [4]. In short, social media-based humor goes beyond and is far more complex and innovative than humor in traditional media.

Social media-based visual humor is important because it allows companies to be more visible than competitors in crowded online areas, and encourages the practice of sharing content with use of humor creates and strengthens group identity and solidarity, and demonstrates one's ability to identify and use humor [4]. Obviously, humor as a

form of sharing provides travel companies with the opportunity to promote tourism to enhance their social media marketing efforts. How to use social media-based visual humor to stimulate sharing remains largely overlooked in the marketing and tourism literature.

2.3.2 Semiotics

The theory and methods of semiotics are interpretations of meaning embedded in signs [9] and have an important role in understanding social media-based visual humor in tourism marketing in travel companies. Semiotics in tourism visuals basically always represent other things that are more than just describing people, places, and things related to travel; instead, they signify a range of experiences and potential practices that attract and guide tourism [24 & 27]. For example, people closing their eyes with a relaxed facial expression with their hair blowing in the wind can indicate that the destination is mountains. There are also symbolic values that have personal, social or cultural connotations such as sunglasses that can be interpreted as a beach. In addition, the use of visual humor to create meaning, such as signifying one's daily life, and social and political conflicts, is a common practice of users on social media [6]. From a theoretical perspective, semiotics identifies the content and meaning of denotative (literal) and connotative sign elements (interpretations subject to socio-cultural or personal associations) in images [28] and interprets them in terms of their iconic, indexical, or symbolic significance [9]. In particular, the iconic signs are incredibly easy to spot and have a literal resemblance to the original like a subway map. Moreover, indexical signs are an indicator of the presence of something, such as a sign with the letter 'S' crossed out which indicates that stopping is prohibited. Finally, symbolic signs represent something with social conventions, cultural norms or institutions, such as a flag for a country and a mascot for a team [29].

Semiotics has been and continues to be an important subject matter and related methodology applicable to many aspects of tourism [30]. However, semiotic studies remain scarce in relation to social media-based visuals in tourism, let alone promotion by travel companies. Several studies examine the adoption of photos created by companies and/or consumers to build and perpetuate

3. VISUAL METHODOLOGY

Visual methodologies aim to examine,

the image of a particular destination [31 & 32]. For example, using the Peirce sign system to develop a typology of visual semiotic-based authenticity that includes iconic, indexical, and symbolic authenticity and some that adopts a combination of [31].

For example, content analysis is used to identify and categorize visual content depicted in photographs (e.g., landscapes/nature, local food), visual semiotics is adopted to analyze the iconic/symbolic dimensions of those visuals (e.g., way of life, adventure). A common characteristic of all identified tourism-related visual semiotics studies is that they largely ignore the visual uniqueness of certain online platforms and the visual practices in which they are embedded. Thus, the existing tourism literature focusing on visual semiotics in the context of online tourism provides little guidance for studying emerging social media-based visual humor.

In summary, visual social media marketing is beneficial but challenges tourism content marketers in travel companies to develop entertaining and relevant visual content to reach and resonate with consumers who play a dominant role in the online space. Visual humor has been identified as a powerful tool for social media marketing communications, given its ability to foster the practice of sharing or inadvertently promoting content from viewing consumers to non-viewing consumers. However, the existing tourism literature mainly focuses on the use of humor in traditional media. In addition, it is well recognized that the communicative, expressive, and semiotic abilities of social media platforms encourage the use of humor as a new way to express, make meaning, and reflect on the reality or events that occur in our lives. However, the current literature on humor for marketing focuses on techniques and modalities of humor which ignores its semiotic significance. In response to the literature gap, this study aims to examine and answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What type of content does social media-based visual humor convey?

RQ2: What kinds of symbolic meaning are embedded in social media-based visual humor.

capture and derive meaning from social reality

through various visual forms such as photos, videos and paintings [33]. Armed with this methodology, this research is to systematically examine social media-based visual humor. This methodology describes traditional and online media as sign systems that convey denotative and connotative meanings [31]. In tourism studies, the meaning of signs can be examined using interpretive approaches, for example discourse, content or semiotic analysis individually or in combination to understand visual representations identified in various media [31].

This study adopted two methodologies, namely content analysis and semiotic analysis. This method has been used by previous tourism research on photographs published in print (for example, travel brochures and guide books) [34] and on the Internet [31]. In particular, content analysis was adopted to identify the type of visual representation in photos related to the destination and semiotic analysis was used to identify the symbolic meaning of the visual representation of the content in question [31]. Online based research also focuses on verbal qualitative data using 'phenomenography' [35]. In previous tourism research, it has not realized its full potential when using research using visual methods [31]. This paper is intended to contribute to the body of marketing literature in particular visual content in tourism promotion research.

3.1 Online visual data and sampling

The data used is visual humor content issued by travel companies regarding tourism. The post is not a hard selling, but a visual game as outlined in humorous content that makes engagement with consumers increase because the meaning produced can be different depending on life experiences from a social and cultural perspective. Humor content is obtained from two major travel companies, namely Agoda and PegiPegi. Agoda and PegiPegi are online travel companies from Singapore that are expanding their wings to Indonesia. These two companies are the largest companies in the field of travel. In its humorous content, Agoda uses a mascot, which is a round character like its logo. For PegiPegi, the humorous content is content that has gone viral in the digital

world but the words in it have been changed according to its purpose to promote tourism. The total analyzed was twenty images with ten content each from each company.

3.2 Content & Semiotic analysis

By using two analyses, namely semiotics and content analysis, this research has two stages, namely; The first stage is to examine the elements in the image as denotative types (meaning that shows the relationship between the concept and the world of reality). This stage is carried out to identify the type of visual humor content. The second stage is to analyze connotative elements (referring to words that contain figurative meanings or are not actual words). This stage is carried out to identify the symbolic meaning encoded in the humor content. The denotative elements in the photographs are understood as elements that resemble reality, are form-specific and relatively independent of social context; connotative elements are understood as complementary to reality and dependent on social and cultural contexts [31].

4. RESULT

The data taken is data from content produced by 2 travel companies, namely Agoda and PegiPegi. The form of the content studied is an image. Image on 1 content does not have to be 1 only, there are some humorous content that is issued more than 1 image per content. The results of this study will explain the meaning of the humor content and the symbolic meaning produced by the two travel companies. The results will be supported by screenshots from Instagram Agoda and PegiPegi.

Agoda's 10 humorous on Instagram:



Image Agoda 1

Image Agoda



Image Agoda 3



Image Agoda 4



Image PegiPegi 3

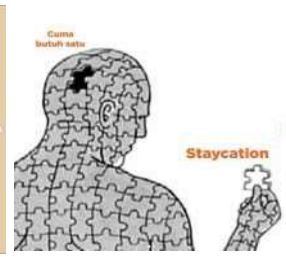


Image Agoda 5



Image Agoda 6



Image PegiPegi 5



Image PegiPegi 6



Image Agoda 7

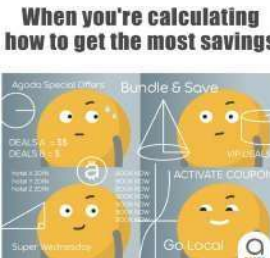


Image Agoda 8



Image Agoda 9

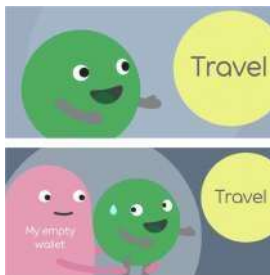


Image Agoda 10

PegiPegi's 10 humorous content on Instagram :



Image PegiPegi 1



Image PegiPegi 2



Image PegiPegi 7

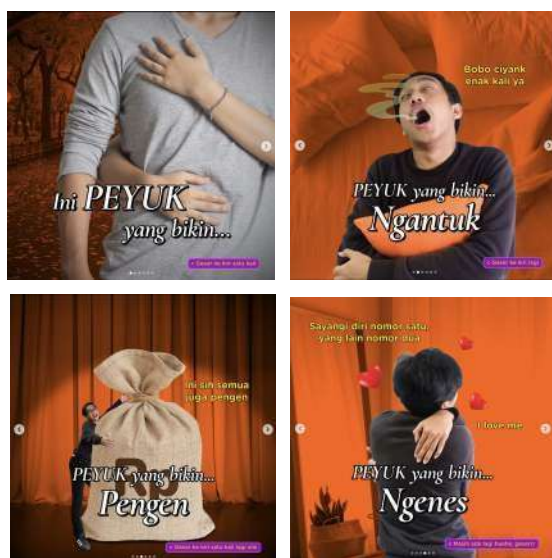


Image PegiPegi 8



Image PegiPegi 10



Image PegiPegi 9



4.1. Visual humor content

There are 5 types of visual humor [36] used by Agoda and PegiPegi on their Instagram. In the table below, the "object" category has the largest percentage compared to other categories. Inversely with the categories "animal, sculpture and animation & people" which both have the lowest percentage. For Agoda, "object" is the main choice for creating humorous content. Agoda uses its own character or what is often called a mascot. PegiPegi uses various visual categories, but "people" is the most used category. The images chosen by PegiPegi are images obtained from memes (images that are written in order to support the expression of the image) that have gone viral before but have been replaced with their own promotional purposes.

Category	Description	Count Image	Percentage
Object	Cartoon, material things, etc	Agoda 1-10 PegiPegi 1 PegiPegi 4	60%
People	Adult, children, man, women, etc	PegiPegi 2 PegiPegi 5-8	25%
Animal	Animal in general	PegiPegi 9	5%
Sculpture	Art objects	PegiPegi 10	5%
Object & People	Both object and animal	PegiPegi 3	5%
Total		20	100%

4.2. Symbolic meaning of visual humor

From the data that has been researched, there are 4 categories in the symbolic meaning of humor content [36] used by Agoda and PegiPegi's Instagram. In the table below it is explained that the percentage difference between "Personal Feelings", "Way of Life", "Life Value" is not too far away, but "Personal Feelings" is the category most frequently used by Agoda and PegiPegi. This category can be the most used in promoting tourism because traveling is a moment for us even though we do it together. In contrast to "Relationship", which is the lowest category because we travel for ourselves, not to establish relationships with other people, unless there are certain moments such as honeymoons. Example image PegiPegi 5, although it has to do with love, the need to go out with a partner is within us, if it is not done it will not be a problem. Then there's Agoda 7, describing work emails that come repeatedly, but described as relaxed. We are calm and keep looking for the most attractive offers from Agoda.

Category	Description	Count Image	Percentage
Personal Feelings	Emotional reaction towards certain things and social issues.	Agoda 2 Agoda 8 Agoda 7 Agoda 9 Agoda 10 PegiPegi 3 PegiPegi 5	60%
Way of Life	Typical behaviour of certain people or groups.	Agoda 4 Agoda 3 Agoda 5 PegiPegi 1 PegiPegi 4 PegiPegi 6	25%
Life Value	People's perspective of their life such as career, marriage, wealth, adversities.	Agoda 1 PegiPegi 7 PegiPegi 9 PegiPegi 10 PegiPegi 8	5%
Relationship	Behavior between each other such as friends, romantic partners and family members.	Agoda 6 PegiPegi 2	5%
Personal Feelings	Emotional reaction towards certain things and social issues.	Agoda 2 Agoda 8 Agoda 7 Agoda 9 Agoda 10 PegiPegi 3 PegiPegi 5	5%
Total		20	100%

CONCLUSION

5.1. Research questions revisited

The results of the first research question, namely what visual humor-based social media content category is often used by travel companies, revealed that "Object" is a visual category that is often used and "Animal", "Sculpture", "Object & People" are the categories that fall under bottom order. The identified results expand product-focused humor content in the marketing and tourism literature; they also support the idea that successful marketing on social media requires tourism companies to focus on consumers and their interests [3]. For visual content categories that stand out such as "Object & People" are indeed the top results as a category that is often used by internet-based humor content [25]. These results also support Shifman's conclusion that the humor category on globally oriented social media such as "Object & People" is more popular than humor content on locally oriented social media such as "Ethnic". The results of this study also echo the research that has been done by [6]. Ge & Gritzel said that companies should focus on creating visual humor content that has a positive impact and stay away from using politics because it has the potential to have a negative impact. This is justified, because if a company uses its social media platform to create visual content involving political issues, consumers are able to strike back and can embarrass the company in public because social media is a two-way conversation space between companies and consumers.

The visual humor content studied can be explained by humor theory. The use of "Object" content (especially mascots) and "People" (especially adults and children) allows companies to release the tension created between companies and consumers on social media. Another element that can support the creation of this visual humor content is the shock effect created to attract the attention of consumers and then motivate them to process, interpret or memorize the messages formulated in the content. Interestingly, the object displayed is a representation of a meme (an image described in writing) which is converted into animation. This allows companies to embed images that represent the travel company in consumers' minds and can avoid aggressive memes because they have all been replaced with depictions of events through mascots.

The question in the second research, namely what kind of symbolic meaning is found in social media-based visual humor in two travel companies, results show that the proportions of all categories are not far apart except "Relationship".

Embedded in the humor content produced because it can create a symbolic appeal that resonates with consumers. With consumers being able to understand and bond with visual humor content, it can encourage them to not only passively consume content but actively communicate on social media posts. [37] suggests that marketing on social media requires a symbolic branding strategy and is in line with the findings of this study where symbolic branding strategy and is in line with the findings of this study where symbolic meaning is fully focused on consumers.

Referring to [12] research, this study shows that a good symbolic meaning can be explained by one of the rhetorical functions of humor, namely identification. With the above statement, it is possible for tourism marketers to identify consumer willingness with viral events, not forgetting to adapt to the existing community and ultimately get support from consumers because visual content must be identified so that the message can be received by consumers, although sometimes the message is conveyed. can be interpreted differently from the purpose for which the content was first created. Furthermore, according to Meyer, another social function of humor is differentiation which explains "Personal feelings" into the top category because content of this type is able to bring out various meanings from each person. With this, it is hoped that communication between companies and consumers can be more established on social media. The "Way of Life" and "Life Value" categories have almost the same number of uses because these categories are for building and maintaining friendship networks; one needs to do communal sharing to foster unity, community, collective identity and undifferentiated goodness. Given this, it can be argued that 'Relationship' may play a negative role because as previously stated, tourism is a private moment even if it is done simultaneously.

5.2. Practical implications

This study wants to provide an understanding to travel companies who are one of the drivers of tourism about using social media-based visual humor content to improve their marketing efforts to consumers. By inserting humor in product promotions, informing that the offer is indirect or nuanced in fun or graceful can increase

or nuanced in fun or graceful can increase engagement because engagement is the core of indirect or nuanced in fun or graceful can increase engagement because engagement is the core of social media marketing. In addition, visual content.

According to [38] the most important thing is the personal and social significance that has been researched with symbolic meaning, can be identified as offering a conceptual map of how to design and use entertaining and relevant social media posts as a way to provoke consumer engagement in the content that companies produce. By getting exclusive offers, consumers can connect with travel companies because the content created generates information needs and opportunities for emotional connection and in the end consumers openly show their relationship with the company to others [11]. In this context, categories of meaning that are very closely related to everyday life such as "Personal Feelings" and "Way of Life" suggest to tourism companies that humor can act as a trigger for emotional movements aimed at increasing engagement with consumers. Meanwhile, the categories of types and symbolic meanings of visual content offer tourism companies to develop communities (consumers) with whom they have ties. Closing remarks, tourism companies should be aware of the potential use of visual humor content, and ensure that its symbolic meaning is appropriate in the context of tourism marketing. For example, tourism marketers should avoid using Internet memes that convey political issues and negative news, because of the potential adverse effects on fostering a company's relationship with consumers.

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