

## THE BURNOUT PHENOMENON AMONG STUDENTS FROM THE WEST UNIVERSITY OF TIMISOARA

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### Abstract

Since the phenomenon of burnout affects more and more people, this research aims to explore the existing relationship between the health crisis facing humanity and the emergence of student burnout in the context of the digitalization of the teaching-learning process, by overloading them with academic tasks. 209 students from the West University of Timișoara, undergraduate cycle, of which 172 are female and 37 are male, participated in the research. Following the analysis of the data collected through the questionnaire, it was found that third-year students are more prone to burnout than first-year and second-year students, with an average of 3.25. At the same time, women are more prone to the occurrence of the phenomenon than men with an average of 3.26.

**Keywords:** burnout, students, COVID-19, symptoms, prevention.

### Résumé

Comme le phénomène du burnout touche de plus en plus de personnes, cette recherche vise à explorer la relation entre la crise sanitaire que traverse l'humanité et la survenue du burnout étudiant dans le contexte de la digitalisation du processus d'enseignement-apprentissage, en les surchargeant de tâches académiques. 209 étudiants de premier cycle de l'Université de Vest de Timișoara ont participé à la recherche, dont 172 femmes et 37 hommes. Après analyse des données recueillies par le biais du questionnaire, il a été constaté que les étudiants de troisième année sont plus sujets au burnout que les étudiants de première et deuxième année, avec une moyenne de 3,25. Dans le même temps, les femmes sont plus sujettes au phénomène que les hommes, avec une moyenne de 3,26.

**Mots clés:** épuisement professionnel, étudiants, COVID-19, symptômes, prévention.

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## Rezumat

Întrucât fenomenul burnout-ului afectează din ce în ce mai mulți oameni, această cercetare își propune să exploreze relația existentă între criza de sănătate cu care se confruntă umanitatea și apariția burnout-ului studenților în contextul digitalizării procesului de predare-învățare, prin supraîncărcarea acestora cu sarcini academice. La cercetare au participat 209 studenți de la Universitatea de Vest din Timișoara, ciclul de licență, dintre care 172 de femei și 37 de bărbați. În urma analizei datelor culese prin chestionar, s-a constatat că studenții din anul III sunt mai predispuși la burnout decât studenții din anul I și din anul II, cu o medie de 3,25. În același timp, femeile sunt mai predispuse la apariția fenomenului decât bărbații, cu o medie de 3,26.

**Cuvinte cheie:** burnout, studenți, COVID-19, simptome, prevenție.

## 1. Introduction

Knowledge is the main source of economic growth and social development. In this sense, higher education is one of the most vital areas of our society (Alarcon, 2011). Despite the importance of education, „university students today face the risk of not obtaining their bachelor's degree” (Alarcon, 2011, p. 211). There are growing concerns worldwide about the mental health of students as well as the high levels of stress and burnout linked to dropping out of school (Lin & Huang, 2014; Stallman & Hurst, 2016).

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in global interest in studying and encouraging student mental health. Due to high academic demands, attending classes, meeting deadlines, balancing study, work, and personal life, as well as financial difficulties, attending university could be a stressful experience for some students (Chambel & Curral, 2005; Stallman, 2010; Shin *et al.*, 2011).

Burnout is a process that begins with excessive and prolonged levels of stress. Generally, this process lasts about a year and is accompanied by a variety of mental and physical symptoms. It produces feelings of tension, irritability and fatigue, and the long-term perspective is also involved (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2017).

Burnout is an ineffective response to chronic stress, due to the discrepancy between demands and resources. Today, research has established that burnout can be seen regardless of profession (Maslach *et al.*, 2001).

When we talk about the causes of burnout syndrome, we consider multiple factors related to the occupational environment (job satisfaction, stress level, work experience), lifestyle and psychological characteristics of a person: temperament type and personal traits.

Burnout has the following symptoms: physical (migraines, muscle pain and nausea); psychosomatic disorders, such as ulcers, abdominal and cardiac disorders; physiological reactions to stress, such as increased breathing, increased pulse, high blood pressure, high cholesterol); emotional (feelings of depression, anger, frustration and cognitive disorders) and behavioral (postponement and delay in the execution of tasks, unmotivated absence from work, frequent delays, departures from work)” (Balode, 2019).

Studying for a university degree can be very demanding, generating considerable stress. Many of the students have come to face the burnout phenomenon during college because of the academic demands, which are high, and the students must deal with a variety of academic, social and personal problems. Many hours of work must be devoted to searching for information, solving homework, and preparing for exams.

In addition to academic obligations, the new student also faces other issues, change of address, living away from home, the search for interpersonal relationships, change of environment, stress of finding a post-graduation job in line with what they are studying, etc. These demands, if they persist over time in the absence of sufficient resources to solve them, can generate the burnout syndrome (Aguayo *et al.*, 2019).

## 2. Previous research

The abrupt shift from physical to online teaching has had numerous effects that have implications for burnout. While some experienced high levels of stress and other subjective manifestations associated with it, for others it was a challenge in terms of stimulating learning, as well as developing a coping mechanism, a method of adapting to stress, what we call eustress (Ortiz, 2020).

Another important aspect that differentiates the level of perceived stress from the burnout phenomenon is given by the cognitive re-evaluation which involves the reinterpretation of situations in the academic sphere in beneficial or negative terms, through the prism of primary and secondary evaluations from which the coping mechanisms due to stress result (Daumiller & Dresel, 2020; Folkman *et al.*, 1986). As a continuum of felt stress, burnout is manifested by avoiding putting effort into the learning process, which can later be associated with excessive concern expressed through the state of cognitive overload, copying and limited learning resources (Maslach & Leiter, 2008).

Pisarik's (2009) study examined students' motivational orientation on self-determination theory (when the needs for competence, connectedness, and autonomy are met). The results indicated intrinsic motivation connected to lower levels of burnout while extrinsic motivation aligned with higher levels of burnout. The author proposed that when students can better connect to career goals and aspirations, actions will be more achievable and effective; thus, faculty and advising can play a role in helping students make these connections. Other studies, (Greene *et al.*, 2014; Zimmerman, 2000) supported individual study as a premise of online learning success. A disruption of individual student study, patterns or lack of persistence can lead to burnout, as formulated in Tinto's (1987) theory of student departure caused by a lack of mutual involvement or reduced academic commitment to the higher education institution and programs.

David (2010) examined academic motivation and burnout but added the personal variable. Findings showed direct effects from academic motivation to burnout, but indirect effects resulting from the relationship between academic motivation and personal factors.

Cazan (2015) examined the connection between engagement, burnout, and academic performance. The results showed a significant correlation between burnout and commitment, arguing that the phenomenon of burnout and lack of commitment are the main factors that lead students to a state of monotony towards academic activities. The relationship between effort and rewards and potential negative student outcomes, such as withdrawal from school, has also been studied. Results showed that more than one-third of students (37.5 percent) reported negative effort-reward relationships, positively correlating with burnout and withdrawal intentions (Williams *et al.*, 2018).

### **3. The purpose of the research**

The purpose of the research is to find out if the multitude of projects, course assignments, seminars and daily stress are the reasons why students from the West University of Timisoara end up under the effect of the burnout phenomenon through the digitization of didactic activities.

#### *Research objectives*

1. Comparison of the occurrence of the burnout phenomenon depending on the year of study.
2. Comparison of the occurrence of the burnout phenomenon according to gender.
3. Identifying the difficulties that influence the occurrence of the burnout phenomenon.
4. Identifying the effects that the burnout phenomenon has on private life.

#### *Research hypotheses*

1. Third year students are more prone to burnout than first- and second-year students.
2. Women are more prone to burnout than men.
3. With the appearance of the burnout phenomenon, the quality of the performance of academic tasks decreases.
- 4.. The higher the burnout, the more the student's personal life is affected.
5. The occurrence of burnout affects the level of motivation.

#### *Participants*

The research was carried out at the West University of Timișoara, the respondents being the first, second- and third-year students from six faculties (Faculty of Law, Faculty of Arts and Design, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Faculty of Mathematics and Computers, Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, Faculty of Letters, History and Theology). 209 students participated in the research, of which 172 were female and 37 were male, of which 88 were students from the First year, 61 from the second year and 60 from the third year.

*Procedure*

The proposed research method is quantitative research. Its purpose is to generate numerical data, it represents a scientific approach to study information in a precise and objective manner.

The instrument for the research is the questionnaire, designed using the Google Forms platform. The questionnaire consists of 24 items, of which 21 have a Likert scale rated from 1 to 5, to measure burnout, the emotional state and daily life. The first three questions are socio-demographic questions (the year of study, gender, and faculty).

The data was collected in May 2022, with the help of the questionnaire, which was sent exclusively online, on different social networks, such as: Facebook, WhatsApp, and eMail. After collecting the data, we created a database using Microsoft Excel to start processing the information.

To carry out the research, the students gave their consent in terms of completing the questionnaire, they were not constrained to obtain the desired information, and at the same time they were informed from the beginning about all the aspects related to the research, the objectives of the research, the purpose, the anonymity of the questionnaire, etc.

Among the possible limits that could exist within the research, we can list: the discrepancy between the number of female and male respondents, the fact that we cannot generalize the results to the whole student population.

**4. Results**

Hypothesis 1: Third year students are more prone to burnout than first- and second-year students.

*Table 1. Distribution of burnout per year of study*

First year	Second year	Third year	Total
3.14	3.24	3.25	3.21

The data presented in the previous table confirm a slight (but statistically insignificant) increase in the predisposition towards the burnout phenomenon in relation to the year of study. We can explain this feeling by the natural approach of the study plan, with the approach, preparation, respectively taking the exams and finalization of studies, students feeling the highest point (associated with an average level) in terms of the phenomenon. (M = 3.25, SD = 0.80). Moreover, exceptions were identified regarding both the maximum level and the minimum level in the case of two students enrolled in the first year of two different specializations. A very high level of burnout was identified for a male respondent (M = 5, SD = 0) and the lowest level for a female respondent (M = 1.3 SD = 0.46).

Hypothesis 2: Women are more prone to burnout than men.

*Table 2. Distribution of burnout according to gender*

Men	Women
3.23	3.26

To determine this, we used a scale from 1 to 5, dividing it into equal levels: from 1 to 2.3 we have low level burnout, from 2.31 to 3.6 we have medium level and at 3.61 to 5 we have a high level. Women have an average of 3.26, while men have an average of 3.23. The data presented in the previous table confirm a slight (but statistically insignificant) difference in the predisposition towards the phenomenon of burnout in relation to the gender of the respondents. This feeling can be explained by the fact that women get involved more than men in carrying out academic tasks. The questionnaire was applied to a sample of 209 students from the West University of Timișoara, regardless of the faculty they belong to, 172 female respondents ( $M=3.26$   $SD=0.80$ ) and 37 male respondents ( $M=3.23$   $SD=0.80$ ).

*Table 3. Exhausting academic tasks from the students' point of view*

Year of study	presentation	project	reports	study	Grand total
First year	17%	21.6%	12.5%	48.9%	100%
Second year	24.6%	29.5%	13.1%	32.8%	100%
Third year	33.3%	26.7%	15%	25%	100%
Grand total	23.9%	25.4%	13.4%	37.3%	100%

This table was created to show which academic activities overwhelm students the most. It is noticeable that overall, the study activity ranks first. 37.3 percent of the total number of respondents claim that the study overloads them more than the rest of the academic activities. Several third-year students are exhausted by the number of presentations they must make. 33.3 percent of third year students claim presentations as the most tiring academic activity. Papers represent the least tiring academic activity for all three years of study, the average of the answers being 13.4 percent.

*Table 4. The time dedicated to studying by the students*

Row labels	about an hour and a half	between 2h and 4h	between 6h and 8h	Grand total
First year	6.8%	51.1%	42.1%	100%
Second year	14.8%	29.5%	55.7%	100%
Third year	11.7%	33.3%	55%	100%
Grand total	10.5%	39.7%	49.8%	100%

Regarding the time allocated for studying, a diversity of answers can be observed depending on the years of study. A total of 49.8 percent of the total number of respondents claim that they study between 6 and 8 hours. 51.1 percent of the first-year students' study between 2 and 4 hours, this being the predominant

period of study for the First year. The second and third years have as the predominant period of study between 6 and 8 hours, the difference is made by the 0.7 percent from which it follows that second-year students spend more time studying than third year students. Every year there are several people who study up to an hour and a half, compared between the three years, the first years are the year with the lowest percentage of people who study for an hour and a half, the next is the third year with almost double the percentage of the first year, and the second-year students exceeding the first and third years. From the previous table it appears that almost 50 percent of all respondents spend almost half the day studying.

Hypothesis 3: With the appearance of the burnout phenomenon, the quality of academic tasks of the Faculty of Letters, History and Theology of the performance of academic tasks decreases.

*Table 5. Quality vs quantity of academic tasks*

Year of study	1	2	3	4	5	Grand total
First year	9.5%	41.2%	27.1%	12.1%	10.1%	100%
Second year	7.3%	31.8%	31.8%	15.9%	13.2%	100%
Third year	6.3%	23.9%	34%	20.1%	15.7%	100%
Grand total	7.8%	33%	30.7%	15.7%	12.8%	100%

To determine whether students focus on the quality of academic tasks, a scale from 1 to 5 was used (1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Very often).

The most selected answer in this question is rarely, which disproves the hypothesis that students focus on just completing of academic tasks more than they're focused on quality. At the same time, 30.7 percent of respondents claim that they sometimes resort to the method of focusing on completing tasks more than on quality. According to the previous table, in the column very often (index 5) there are results from each year, third year being the year with the highest percentage (15.7 percent) compared to First year, which has 10.1 percent and second year which has 13.2 percent. First year students focus more on the quality of assignments compared to the rest of the years.

Hypothesis 4: The higher the burnout, the more affected the student's personal life.

*Table 6. The influence of burnout on private life among students*

	Female	Male	Grand total
I have a state of sadness and apathy	82.8%	17.2%	100%
I feel at the limit of my strength	82.3%	17.7%	100%
I feel emotionally drained	82.5%	17.5%	100%
Fatigue is prevalent in my life	84.1%	15.9%	100%
Total	82.9%	17.1%	100%

To synthesize the results regarding how much burnout affects the individual, a table was created in which the participants' answers are according to gender, to strengthen the hypothesis, such as that women are more prone to burnout than men, and to prove the hypothesis, burnout affects the private life of the individual. According to the results of the research, the data are at opposite poles, women having a total percentage of 82.9 percent, while men have 17.1 percent. What is worrying is that the female respondents have a percentage of over 80 percent, to each question in the table, being in the high extreme of emotional exhaustion, while the male respondents are at the other extreme, under 20 percent. To the question Fatigue is predominant in my life, the highest percentage is from women. 82.3 percent of female respondents feel at the limit of their powers, which makes evident the presence of burnout in their lives. 82.8 percent of the female students who answered the questionnaire experience a state of sadness and apathy. The hypothesis that burnout affects the individual's private life is confirmed.

*Table 7. The level of student involvement in relation to the former activities*

Faculty and year of study	I engage in fewer activities than before				Total respondents
	Male		Female		
	Yes	Not	Yes	Not	
<b>Faculty of Law</b>					
First year	57.5%	15.2%	15.2%	12.1%	100%
Second year	50%	30%	10%	10%	100%
Third year	37.5%	37.5%	25%	-	100%
<b>Faculty of Arts and Design</b>					
First year	11.1%	11.1%	33.3%	44.5%	100%
Second year	33.3%	-	55.6%	11.1%	100%
Third year	14.3%	-	57.1%	28.6%	100%
<b>Faculty of Economics and Business Administration</b>					
First year	-	50%	-	50%	100%
Second year	100%	-	-	-	100%
Third year	-	-	33.3%	66.7%	100%
<b>Faculty of Mathematics and Computers</b>					
First year	-	-	50%	50%	100%
Second year	25%	25%	12.5%	37.5%	100%
Third year	50%	-	50%	-	100%
<b>Faculty of Sociology and Psychology</b>					
First year	8.8%	8.8%	26.5%	55.9%	100%
Second year	3%	-	51.5%	45.5%	100%
Third year	8.8%	-	64.7%	26.5%	100%
<b>Faculty of Letters, History and Theology</b>					
First year	50%	-	-	50%	100%
Third year	-	-	100%	-	100%



To determine the level of activity of the respondents before reaching burnout, a table was created, according to gender, specialization, and year of study. The table above illustrates the fact that most respondents are from the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology. 64.7 percent of female students from the third year, followed by first year male students (from the Faculty of Law, 57.9 percent) claim that they get involved in fewer activities than before the onset of the burnout phenomenon. At the same time, a percentage of 15.2 percent of male respondents, from the first-year claims to be involved in the same number of activities as before. On the other hand, the fewest responses came from the Faculty of Letters, namely 4 responses, 3 of them are engaging in fewer activities, and only one person, from the first year, claiming that the number of activities is unchanged. There is data from every year, from the faculties, except for the Faculty of Letters, with no respondents from the second year.

At the Faculty of Arts and Design the results are divided. The first-year male respondents who claim to be involved in fewer activities have the same percentage as those who are involved in the same number of activities. Conversely, 44.5 percent of female respondents from the same field and year claim that they do not engage in the same number of activities. In the second and third year, there were no male respondents who contested this statement, instead 55.6 percent from second year, respectively 57.1 percent female respondents from third year who are no longer involved in the same number of activities as before.

At the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, some percentages are very low, as for example among male second-year respondents, only 3 percent confirm the statement alongside 51.5 percent of female respondents from the same year, while 45.5 percent of respondents of the same gender and age say they engage in an equal number of activities as before.

At the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, the results are poor due to the small number of respondents. Several people at this college claim to be involved in the same number of activities as before. In total, 58.9 percent of respondents, from all years, from all faculties claim that they are involved in fewer activities than before, while 41.1 percent claim that their involvement in activities is the same. A conclusion to the above is the fact that the occurrence of the burnout phenomenon affects the individual's involvement in the activities that once brought him happiness.

Hypothesis 5: The occurrence of burnout affects the level of motivation

Table 8. Loss of motivation in burnout situations

Faculty and year of study	The factors that motivated me before are no longer as strong				Total respondents
	Female		Male		
	Yes	Not	Yes	Not	
<b>Faculty of Law</b>					
First year	51.5%	12.1%	18.2%	18.2%	100%
Second year	50%	30%	20%	-	100%

Faculty and year of study	The factors that motivated me before are no longer as strong				Total respondents
	Female		Male		
	Yes	Not	Yes	Not	
Third year	25%	50%	25%	-	100%
<b>Faculty of Arts and Design</b>					
First year	33.3%	44.5%	11.1%	11.1%	100%
Second year	44.5%	22.2%	22.2%	11.1%	100%
Third year	57.1%	28.6%	14.3%	-	100%
<b>Faculty of Economics and Business Administration</b>					
First year	-	50%	-	50%	100%
Second year	-	-	100%	-	100%
Third year	66.7%	33.3%	-	-	100%
<b>Faculty of Mathematics and Computers</b>					
First year	62.5%	37.5%	-	-	100%
Second year	25%	25%	50%	-	100%
Third year	50%	-	-	50%	100%
<b>Faculty of sociology and Psychology</b>					
First year	44.1%	38.2%	14.7%	3%	100%
Second year	54.6%	42.4%	3%	-	100%
Third year	67.7%	23.5%	8.8%	-	100%
<b>Faculty of Letters, History and Theology</b>					
First year		50%	50%	-	100%
Third year	66.7%	33.3%	-	-	100%

This table was created to study whether the occurrence of the burnout phenomenon affects the motivation level of the individual. For the most thorough results, the respondents were divided according to gender, year of study and the faculty they belong to. A number of 209 respondents of which 172 are female and 37 male, the students being enrolled at six different faculties within the West University of Timișoara. Most female respondents in the six faculties claim that the factors that motivated them before are no longer as strong today. Even if the percentages are lower, there are female respondents who claim that the factors remained as motivating. Male respondents from the second and third years of the Faculty of Law agree with the statement, with no respondent refuting this hypothesis.

Respondents from the Faculty of Mathematics and Computer Science and those from the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration are in small numbers, with the highest percentages claiming that the factors are no longer as motivating as before. In the research there are two male persons who do not agree with the previous statement, a first-year respondent from the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration and another third-year student from the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics. In both faculties mentioned above, there are first-

year female respondents who do not support this statement, which means that for them the factors are as motivating as in the past.

The responses from respondents within the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology are divided. Respondents of both sexes who agree and disagree with this hypothesis. 3 percent of first-year male students at the college claim that motivational factors are just as strong. Instead, all male respondents from older years support the stated hypothesis. The highest percentage at this faculty is among female respondents from the third year, a percentage of 67.7 percent, which shows that what was once a motivational factor for them, is no longer the case.

The Faculty of Letters, History and Theology has a percentage of 66.7 percent of female respondents and 50 percent of male respondents who claim that the factors are no longer as motivating as before.

More than half of the number of respondents are no longer motivated by the same factors that motivated them in the past, the hypothesis is confirmed, the appearance of the burnout phenomenon affects the level of motivation.

## 5. Conclusions

Burnout has become an increasingly present phenomenon in people's lives. To improve the symptoms that affect effective functioning, it is necessary to understand what burnout means, both by being aware of its severity, but also by identifying its causes and effects. As the last 3 years have been marked by various changes, people being forced out of their comfort zone, more and more stressors have appeared that put pressure on the emotional side of the individual.

The digitization of activities on all levels to comply with social distancing measures hastened the establishment of the burnout phenomenon. The transition from face-to-face education to online teaching caused students to go through a period that affected their engagement both academically and personally. Thus, this work aimed to explore whether the multitude of projects, assignments, courses, seminars, and daily stress are the reasons why students end up under the effect of the burnout phenomenon through the digitization of didactic activities.

The hypotheses listed in the methodological part were confirmed to the extent of 80 percent, i.e., 4 out of 5.

The distribution of burnout per year of study demonstrates that third year students are more prone to burnout than first- and second-year students. An explanation in this sense would be the stress created by working for the completion of undergraduate university studies.

At the same time, the current third year did not have time to fully adjust to student life due to the pandemic that started when they were in their first year. Moreover, they were already going through a transition period from pre-university to higher education.

Regarding the occurrence of burnout according to gender, women are more prone to burnout than men. However, although the hypothesis was confirmed, the results are not entirely conclusive, as the dominant responses are from women and the difference is very small between groups.

The hypothesis that highlights the relationship between the burnout phenomenon and the quality of performance of academic tasks was disproved. The predominant answer variant was „rarely”, highlighting the fact that students focus on the quality of academic tasks, especially those in the first year. At the same time, we have results from every year, the quality of academic tasks being damaged by the occurrence of burnout.

The results highlight the fact that the higher the degree of burnout, the more affected the student's personal life. This hypothesis supports hypothesis 2, emphasizing that women are more prone to burnout than men. The results between men and women are at opposite extremes, women having a total percentage of 82.9 percent, while men have 17.1 percent. What is worrying is that the female respondents to each question in the table have a percentage of over 80 percent, being in the high extreme of emotional exhaustion, while the male respondents are at the other extreme, under 20 percent.

The fifth and last hypothesis was confirmed, referring to the fact that the occurrence of the burnout phenomenon affects the level of motivation. To see the results as concretely as possible, we resorted to dividing the respondents according to gender, year of study and specialization. This hypothesis had mixed results, but in the end, it was proven that burnout affects the level of motivation. The highest percentage was registered among third-year female students of the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology and the lowest among second-year male respondents from the same faculty. Another aspect that we noticed after collecting the data, is the fact that women are more receptive than men, given the large difference in responses.

At the end of the study, some recommendations would be for the person to focus more on himself, to create a barrier between academic life and personal life, to create a realistic time management. A very important recommendation is for the individual to take breaks after a certain period and spend free time with loved ones. What must be remembered is the fact that there are specialists in the field that people turn to, the goal being to reduce the burnout phenomenon.

Discovering a new hobby is recommended, an activity that brings satisfaction and joy is welcome, the purpose of this activity being to reduce stress and combat the burnout phenomenon. Universities should promote counselling and organize workshops regarding time management and educational approach (self-learning, teamwork etc.). Students should be encouraged to ask for support if they are experiencing symptoms of burnout.

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