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Understanding Citizen Journalism from the Perspective of Young Journalists in Malaysia

Comprender el periodismo ciudadano desde la perspectiva de los periodistas jóvenes en Malasia

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ABSTRACT

Citizen journalism is increasingly practiced worldwide due to the expansion of the Internet, new media technologies, and social media platforms. This study investigated Malaysia's citizen journalism through young journalist's perspective by understanding the concepts and roles of citizen journalists. The analysis demonstrated that young citizen journalists view opportunities and empowerment from a new angle. The results illustrated that citizen journalism in Malaysia provides a potential prospect for citizen journalists as well as a role in inspiring young people. Based on the present paper, it is suggested that future research should explore the guidelines to distinguish Malaysian citizen journalists from the conventional keyboard warriors and cyber troopers.

Keywords: Citizen journalism, Malaysia, youth citizen journalist.

RESUMEN

El periodismo ciudadano se practica cada vez más en todo el mundo debido a la expansión del Internet, las nuevas tecnologías de medios y las plataformas de redes sociales. Este estudio investigó el periodismo ciudadano de Malasia a través de la perspectiva de los periodistas ciudadanos jóvenes mediante la comprensión de los conceptos y roles de los mismos. El análisis demostró que los periodistas ciudadanos jóvenes ven las oportunidades y el empoderamiento desde un nuevo ángulo. El resultado ilustró que el periodismo ciudadano en Malasia ofrece una perspectiva potencial para los periodistas ciudadanos y también un papel para inspirar a los jóvenes. Con base al presente artículo, se sugiere que la investigación futura debería explorar las pautas para distinguir a los periodistas ciudadanos malasios de los guerreros del teclado y los ciberdelincuentes convencionales.

Palabras clave: Periodismo ciudadano, Malasia, periodista ciudadana joven.

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INTRODUCTION

In early studies on citizen journalism, Miller (Miller: 2019) stated that scholars were mostly concerned with the extent to which citizen journalists produced journalistic content that adhered to journalistic standards and whether their content met journalistic standards of news quality. Traditional journalists were more likely to include a greater variety of sources and perspectives, more open in communicating the identities of their sources, and relied exclusively on official sources for their stories (Miller: 2019). However, according to Chinasammy et al. (Chinasammy et al.: 2017, pp. 8001-8004), the emergence of citizen journalism has affected the trust and credibility of the news and information disseminated by the country's professionally trained journalists through the mainstream print and broadcast media channels. Consequently, audiences have increasingly subscribed and believed in the information obtained from citizen journalists. Additionally, non-professional citizen journalists often share their experiences online, highlighting issues to the news agenda that were not or could not be covered in real-time by the mainstream media channels at an international level. Thus, the question of news reliability highly depends on the citizen journalist.

Furthermore, social networking sites, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, provide innovative methods for stimulating citizen engagement in public life. As a result of this technological advancement of social networking sites and easy Internet access, the development of the public acting as journalists has become a phenomenon where anyone with digital gadgets such as Internet-connected smartphones can upload content freely and call themselves citizen journalists (Balaraman et al.: 2016, pp. 277-293). The user-generated Internet content and its increasing accessibility to many people both in urban and rural areas have made citizen journalism more prominent, and more people are interested in playing a role in citizen journalism (Riaz & Pasha: 2011, pp. 88-103; Chung & Nah: 2013, pp. 271-288).

In Western countries, the growth of online citizen journalism from online journalism has been more evident than in other parts of the world. Some online journalism platforms accept citizen-generated content as part of their operations however some news portal editors are sceptical about citizen journalists' news content (Kaba & Touré: 2014, pp. 1662-1674; Okorie, Oyedepo & Usai: 2014, pp. 16-19). Meanwhile, in Eastern countries, online citizen journalism may vary in development and exposure due to Internet penetration in the regions. Furthermore, significant differences may also be contributed by the countries' media landscape as some countries have more autocratic media outlets than other countries.

Similarly, in many developing countries such as Malaysia, digital differences do occur. For instance, Malaysia consists of both urban and rural backgrounds with digital differences. However, a growing number of Malaysians use online platforms to build and distribute news material. Social media apps such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are used to disseminate content to friends and families, among others. Additionally, alternative news outlets in Malaysia use material posted by citizen journalists to promote newsgathering (Jalli: 2020, pp. 67-88).

Consequently, the rise of citizen journalism has caused the journalism sphere and academics to reconsider what constitutes journalism and who is a reporter. According to Miller (Miller: 2019), citizen journalists have undermined the news media by questioning the validity and representativeness of reports from traditional newsrooms. However, further issues arise regarding the extent of the publics' participation in news gathering and production process (Miller: 2019). Mahamed et al. (Mahamed et al.: 2018) also stated that the point on citizen journalists' performance compared to their counterparts, professionally trained journalists should be considered. Thus, this study is crucial to understand Malaysia's citizen journalism through youth citizen journalist's perspective by understanding the concepts and roles of citizen journalists.

Citizen journalist and youth citizen journalist: How reliable is the news?

For several years, the journalism industry has been reserved for a select few with sufficient professional training, for example, a degree in journalism or equivalent preparation and adequate resources to provide readers and viewers with reliable news reports (Jalli: 2020, pp. 67-88). However, as a result of the advancement of communication technology, journalism has undergone a dramatic shift that enables people

without any formal journalistic training to produce news content themselves and become citizen journalists (Channel: 2010).

Contrarily with the existing concept of journalism, citizen journalism is a concept in media that refers to journalistic activities of ordinary people such as citizens themselves to report issues and raise their voice on matters that concern them (Noor: 2017, pp. 55-76). This group of people, according to Duffy, Thorson, and Jahng (Duffy et al., 2010), consist of individuals without professional training but delivers news concerning their communities or residential areas. Sharing the same view, Albarado (Albarado: 2018) also defined citizen journalism as a type of journalistic activity performed by people without professional training. Nevertheless, so-called journalists or citizen reporters produce news content and disseminate it online with their immediate friends or families, including broader audiences.

Additionally, the ability to locate varied content through search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing provide users with easier ways to obtain, generate and share content with broader audiences across geographical boundaries (Maria, 2020, PP. 9-18). Among the earliest examples of citizen journalism was during the September 11, 2001 attacks at the World Trade Center. Citizens were able to share the breaking news, including facts, images, and videos, while individuals outside of New York were able to view the event by watching it on television in real-time and then sharing the event on blogs and message boards through the Internet. However, issues of news credibility delivered by citizen journalists and failure to authenticate the content they produce due to the lack of professional training among citizen reporters were pointed out by critics.

Concerning youth in citizen journalism, youth are considered under the tech-savvy and digitally literate segment of the population, thus suggesting that youth may bring greater freedom and scope in the media environment by using the ICT system more efficiently and increasing global literacy (Banaji & Buckingham: 2013, p. 125; Mehboob & Othman, 2020, PP. 1-8). Nonetheless, prior studies have highly expressed skepticism about the use and significance of new media functions as an effective platform for information, discussion, and participation among youth (Livingstone & Lievrouw: 2002; Markham: 2011, pp. 150-164; Campbell: 2015, pp. 704-719). Mahamed (Mahamed et al.: 2018) stated that discussions on youth in citizen journalism often draws towards youth's involvement in the journalism sphere with regards to the digital media landscape and the mass media in improving their representations and concerns, their job performance and identification as citizen journalists were also discussed. Thus, there is a significant gap in youth citizen journalists' perspective on citizen journalism, as there are currently no concluded results.

Citizen journalism in Malaysia: The development of youth citizen journalist

In Malaysia, the development of citizen journalism began after MalaysiaKini.com, a news website, was established in 2007 and has accelerated citizen journalism in Malaysia since. In its early years, MalaysiaKini.com was driven by passionate Malaysians, particularly former journalists who felt the need to share alternative views about current issues and events in Malaysia. Correspondingly, citizen journalism content can be found on personal blogs or websites and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Alam and Shakir, 2019), along with the establishment of Citizen Journalist Malaysia (CJ.MY) in 2011 to improve citizen journalists presence and networking opportunities in Malaysia (Bhatti and Akram, 2020).

However, despite the extensive establishment of citizen journalism in Malaysia, the Malaysian media landscape is still poorly understood, and there has been little depth of study on citizen journalists in Malaysia. The issue of youth playing a significant role as citizen journalists in Malaysia remains unclear, as past studies generally relied on issues and impacts rather than focusing on the youth citizen journalists position within the processes and practices of the Malaysian media landscape (Othman & Nayan, 2013, pp. 113-131). Interestingly, despite the overall positive outlook for the role of youth as citizen journalists, it remains unclear how successful the youth citizen journalists' efforts have been. Studies by Berger (Berger: 2011, pp. 708-726) and Bentley et al. (Bentley et al.: 2007, pp. 239-260) indicated a successful role and function for youth citizen journalists in citizen journalism. Similarly, in the present condition in Malaysia, as youths are active Internet

users, the role of youth as citizen journalists and their experiences remain uncertain; thus, further exploration is needed.

Hence, guided with Prodosage Theory as the underpinning theory for the study, this study aims to explore youth citizen journalists understanding and perception of citizen journalism. This study aims to create a better understanding of shaping media industries in Malaysia. Additionally, the study outcomes will help in determining the reliability and validity of existing content shared by the youth citizen journalists on their understanding of citizen journalism.

Produsage Theory (Picone's extended model)

In the Produsage Theory, the word produsage refers to a shortened form of production and use of vocabulary, invented by Axel Bruns, illustrating user-driven content development that takes place in a variety of online environments, open-source software, and the blogosphere (Bruns, 2007, pp. 99-106). Bruns (Bruns, 2007, pp. 99-106) stated that produsage has four characteristics, namely transparent participation and group evaluation, dynamic heterarchy by ad hoc meritocracy, palimpsestic unfinished objects in a continuous process, and shared property and individual rewards.

According to Bruns (Bruns 2007, pp. 99-106), citizen journalism is a case in point where it depends on its users to act as participants in analyzing, publicizing, and reacting to news stories. Bruns (Bruns 2007, pp. 99-106) argued that citizen journalism draws on the voluntary efforts of its participants who use technology and the Internet to organize the process of citizen journalism.

Yet, since the main aim of the study would to examine this self-production background in greater detail by looking at how it works among young citizen journalists in order to enable them to explore the potential roles they play as citizen journalists and how they can contribute to Malaysian society, Picone's extended model of Produsage theory seem much significant to the study context.

Moving on, Picone (Picone: 2011, pp. 99–120) explores this field by examining the motivation of people to create casual content in a techno-social setting that empowers the self-production of news through the Internet. Picone used the concepts of Bruns' Produsage Theory to illustrate the incentive of self-produced people using the online public domain in terms of open participation, evaluation, dynamic hierarchy, common properties that allow others to share, modification, and exploitation while adhering to ethical principles (Bruns, 2007, pp. 99-106). Using similar elements, Picone (Picone: 2011, pp. 99–120) conducted a study to illustrate the inspiration for self-producing news.

The Picone (Picone: 2011, pp. 99–120) model defines each dimension using content elements related to the actual story and how people react to it. The personal aspect involves clusters linked to the personal interests (skills, mood, context, etc.) of writers, in this case, youth citizen journalists, who decide whether or not to publish their posts. Meanwhile, the social aspect involves the social reflux clusters that reflected the engagement and responses of the respondents to their potential audience, in this context, the social outcome of the interactions for the youth citizen journalists. There are several other theories similar to Picone's model; however, Picone's extended model of Brun's Produsage Theory is most suitable for this study.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted qualitative inquiry using the phenomenological approach. Creswell (Creswell: 2013) recommended using phenomenology to help consciously evaluate the experiences of the informants through a structure that allows for a clear assessment of those experiences. Additionally, the phenomenological approach has been applied in many disciplines, including nursing, health science, psychology, and education. Thus, for this study, the transcendental phenomenology was used to obtain the best possible outcome for the phenomenon explored. The informants in the study were youth citizen journalists from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, with the main focus on providing a useful and realistic interpretation of their understanding of citizen journalists. Furthermore, an audit trail was implemented to assess the accuracy of

the data in ensuring data reliability. The audit trail consisted of the researchers' detailed explanation of each of the research process, from the initial stages through the collection, analysis, presentation, and discussion of the data as stated by Flood (Flood: 2010, pp. 7-16).

The primary data collection process involved 14 informants ranging from the management of citizen journalist platforms such as CJ.MY, The Vocket, and The Patriots, and as well as their personal contacts based on the characteristics of the sample given (snowball sampling). Prior to selecting these portals, the researcher took the initiative to meet the founders of these sites to understand how they obtained access to citizen contributors' content. Once the operations of a portal meet the required study characteristics, the portal will be selected as the study's participants. The first participant of the study was selected from the list of citizen journalists that was provided by the project manager and founders of the selected platforms. The data collection started in March 2017 and ended in May 2017 with the interviews held in various locations in Malaysia according to the convenience and preference of the informants.

The study reached data saturation with no new codes emerged after the 14th informant, which is consistent with Bowen (Bowen: 2008, pp. 137-152) and Merriam (Merriam: 2009, p. 147) indications of data saturation. According to Bowen (Bowen: 2008, pp. 137-152) and Merriam (Merriam: 2009, p. 147), the number of informants involved in a study is influenced by the process of comparing codes and categories in the refinement of each case (informant) with data saturation occurring when the code is found to repeat itself. The initial immersion into the data and coding was done manually, a further examination and transfer of codes to ATLAS.ti were performed, and the data analysis was continued using the same software. Member checking was also performed to ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of transcriptions.

RESULTS

The findings revealed each informants' role as a citizen journalist to some extent, including their age between 25 and 40 from various educational backgrounds. The table below shows the profile, affiliations, and experiences of the 14 informants.

Table 1. Demographic profile of informants

No	Name	Age	Education	Career	Affiliation as Citizen Journalist	Experience as a Citizen Journalist	Topics	Remarks
1	Darsh	26	Bachelor in Marketing Communication	Marketing Communication Executive	Personal CJ.MY	Two years (2013–2014)	Trends, Urban festivals	CJ.MY website, Facebook
2	Hud	34	Bachelor in Human Development	Social Research Officer	Personal The Vocket	14 years (2003–)	Malay culture and philosophy	A blog to Facebook, The Vocket
3	Nur	26	Master in Halal Products	Student Tuition Tutor	Personal The Vocket	Two Years (2016–)	Student experiences in leaning math, Microbiology	Facebook, The Vocket
4	Dan	33	Master in Finance and Risk Management	Banker	Personal The Patriots	14 years (2003–)	Defense and military	Blog, The Patriots, Facebook
5	Jay	33	Bachelor in	Businessman	Founder	Five years	Malay	The

			Quantity Surveying		of <i>The Patriots</i>	(2012–)	culture, Nation-building	<i>Patriots</i> , Facebook
6	Mus	25	Medical degree (M.D.) (Egypt)	Houseman	Personal <i>The Vocket</i>	Ten years (2007–)	Travel, Gadgets, Business, and finance	A blog to Facebook, <i>The Vocket</i>
7	Faiz	31	Medical degree (M.D.) (Russia)	Financial Planner (<i>takaful</i>)	Personal <i>The Vocket</i>	Ten years (2007–)	Travel, Financial planning	A blog to Facebook, <i>The Vocket</i>
8	Kamchan	40	Diploma in Civil Engineering (Japan)	Civil Engineer	Personal <i>The Vocket</i>	Two years (2006–2008) (OF)	Hobbies, Japanese culture, and practices	An online forum to Facebook blog, <i>The Vocket</i>
9	A. D.	33	Bachelor (field not disclosed)	Freelance Writer	Co-founder of <i>The Vocket</i> / Citizen journalist	Two years (2014–)	Business, Parenting, Health, General info	<i>The Vocket</i> , Personal Facebook
10	Cikgu	39	Bachelor in Human Development	Teacher	Personal <i>The Vocket</i>	Two years (2016–)	Education, Student experiences, Syllabus development	Facebook, <i>The Vocket</i>
11	Ira	31	Master in Education Policy and Globalization (Finland)	Government Officer	Personal <i>The Vocket</i>	Three years (2015–)	Education, Travel, Finland	Facebook, <i>The Vocket</i>
12	Naem	31	Medical degree (M.D.)	Doctoral Candidate	Personal <i>The Vocket</i>	Four years (2014–)	Travel health	Facebook, <i>The Vocket</i>
13	Ash	35	Master in TVET	Government Officer	Personal <i>The Patriots</i>	Can't remember the exact year; always loved writing since young	<i>Adatperpatih</i> , TVET	Facebook, <i>The Patriots</i>
14	Gana	33	Degree in Mechanical Engineering	Video Documentary Production	Project Manager <i>CJ.MY</i>	Five years (2013–)	Community Stories, Positivity	<i>CJ.MY</i> website, Facebook

Understanding citizen journalism from youth citizen journalists perspective

Based on the data analysis, two main themes emerged, namely opportunities for citizen journalism in Malaysia and citizen journalism as empowerment for youth.

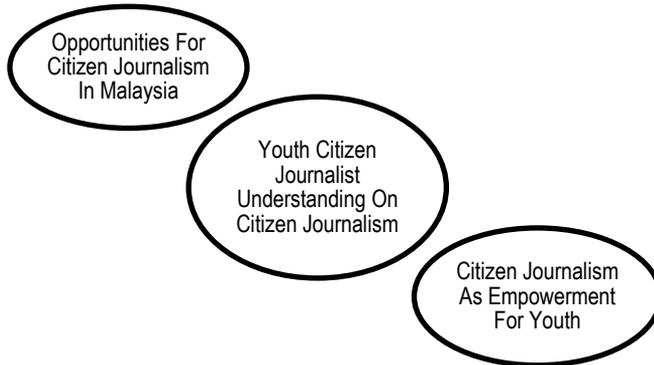


Figure 1. Emerging themes from data analysis.

DISCUSSION

The analysis indicated that the informants associated their position as citizen journalists with opportunities. The informants expressed the view that a citizen journalist position is closely related to the opportunity for young citizens to write and share content. Additionally, the informants viewed citizen journalism as a positive phenomenon, albeit with caution. Among the quotations as follows:

I see a new trend in social media, whereby social media allow citizens to write, share and have a say in everything. I see this as something good but something that, if allowed without control, there will be too much confusion and uncertainty. (Jay)

Ya, generally, it is good for youth to embark on citizen journalism, to write and share. I like when they are more involved as citizen journalists. I hope youth and young adults ... they must focus on positivity through when writing, maybe some of them wanna write about the dark side [negativity] Yet for me we have to avoid negativity. (Kamchan)

Once these youth citizen journalists shared on social media, they got featured in our portal [The Vocket]. Then it became the opportunity for them ..., as the mainstream media will highlight these youth and their stories or topics they share. Mainstream media also find us on the radar as our stories go viral so, this will later develop into a real opportunity for them and their stories to the mainstream media. So, for me, I often see social media and our platform, for example, as a medium to transfer the youth citizen journalists and their stories to a much bigger platform—in this case, into the mainstream media. (A. D.)

The findings also supported previous studies that elaborated on the idea that citizen journalists have the opportunity to fill the gaps in the mainstream media. For instance, the opportunity arises when an issue garners enormous attention online, and the mainstream media highlights the issue from the citizens' platform that is worth discussing on mainstream platforms. These studies also identified the notion of filling the gap as an

essential element in initiating a conversation among citizens on issues that matter to them (Forde: 2011; Whitten-Woodring & Van Belle: 2015, pp. 179–188).

Besides that, youth citizen journalists also view citizen journalism as possessing the ability to contribute to society, influence their peers to do greater things, and encourage others to become citizen journalists as well. The informants associated these outcomes with their growing ability to access, evaluate, analyze, assess, comprehend, review, critique, and produce information from a variety of media. Correspondingly, these associations are in line with Mihailidis's (Mihailidis: 2009) statement that discussed the processes and effectiveness of media literacy to empower youth. The findings also echoed several past studies that supported the possibility of citizen journalism as an empowerment tool that contributes to the public good (Antony & Thomas: 2010, pp. 1280–1296). Among the interview extract as follows:

Maybe a lot of people out there say youth should contribute more toward society building. Therefore, the empowerment of your youth comes from their ability to use this citizen journalist platform to contribute to society. I think this is the way youth contribute to society. (Nur)

Youth comes with ideas. We express what we feel. The prospect of being and the sense of belonging with this focus group that these youth might have—for me The Patriots—we would feel more confident to present these ideas, we inform the public, enlighten them with ideas and things that many people may not know or be aware of, like adat pepatih, for example. So, I see this process as a citizen journalist as kinda my contribution to the public and society. (Ash)

Youth citizen journalists, from what I saw related to my experience at The Vocket, these contributors, citizen journalists, encourage others, especially youth, to do the same. What I mean is I really can see the encouragement trend going on, kind of inspiring others. Many of them are also keen on the type and number of responses they received from the articles they write and share with The Vocket, for example. You can really see this impact on social media. The impact is important to them, responses are important. However, their intention is not something I'm entirely sure of, as, at times, I realize that some people are leaning toward their personal agenda rather than for the public good—be it for glamour or likes and responses. Everyone has their own reason for sharing and writing with purpose. A citizen journalist should not as much of personal agenda, and then you are not a citizen journalist. (A. D.)

The results analysis illustrated the perspectives of the informants on their efforts as youth citizen journalists. The informants shared their perspectives and meanings about citizen journalism from their experience. In response to the understanding of youth citizen journalists on citizen journalism, the informants viewed Malaysia's citizen journalism as an opportunity in various ways, including opportunities for the citizen journalists themselves. They also viewed citizen journalism as an empowerment for youth. These results provided a different perspective from the literature review, in which the informants identified citizen journalists as a voluntary involvement, holds significant ethical awareness, and have adapted journalistic processes to their purposes, despite not being formally trained or exposed to those processes. The youth citizen journalists are aware of the importance of crediting sources, fact-checking, and writing only on well-versed topics. These considerations appeared because of the high value the informants placed on knowledge, the experience of oneself, and others.

CONCLUSION

This study presented the positions in Malaysia's citizen journalism through young citizen journalists' perspective by understanding the concepts and roles of citizen journalists. The research findings provided a foundation for media practitioners and researchers to gain a greater understanding of the local citizen journalism by considering the citizen journalists' positions, namely credible citizen journalists' role in disseminating information and sharing their experiences with others, and citizen journalists approach in their journalistic practices. Based on the analysis of the results, two themes emerged. Namely, citizen journalism in Malaysia is seen as an opportunity in various ways, including opportunities for citizen journalists themselves. The second theme was citizen journalism as empowerment for youth.

The findings demonstrated that citizen journalism is seen as a medium of opportunity for youth to share their perspectives and ideas on emerging issues surrounding them, including issues on existing media practices in journalism, which may potentially be featured in mainstream media. In other words, citizen journalism enables youth to have a voice that is crucial for the development of youth. Additionally, new perspectives on the mindset of youths' demands and needs were presented through youth citizen journalists. Correspondingly, youth citizen journalists understanding of citizen journalism indicates their abilities to act as a useful mechanism in disseminating more reliable content in media for audiences of all ages. Thus, the role of a citizen journalist transcends beyond news reporting.

Furthermore, youth citizen journalists' opinion on journalism has influenced their perception of their positions as citizen journalists and their viewpoints on ethical practices. Hence, issues on the reliability of the news produced by citizen journalists are no longer a problem in the Malaysian context as the citizen journalism viewpoint concerning ethical issues has been established in this study. Thus, despite the differences in experiences and journalistic exposures, citizen journalism contents should be considered. Despite the contributions of citizen journalists in enriching the local media landscape and increasing content variety, attention should also be given to citizen journalists in acknowledging their efforts in improving existing media reporting and inspiring other journalists. However, the extent of citizen journalists' contributions are still unknown; thus, further study on these aspects are highly encouraged in understanding the roles and impacts of citizen journalists in improving existing media reporting and inspiring other journalists.

Moreover, research on citizen journalism in Malaysia needs further exploration within the Malaysian context. Owing to the increase in the usage of social media, the influences of citizen journalists in journalism should not be neglected. It was essential to understand the general scenario and the trend of citizen journalism, both internationally and in Malaysia. Besides, it has become increasingly important to recognize the importance of technology as the platform that provides an opportunity for more citizens (especially young people) to contribute to this growing trend and how this group of young people can contribute to improving existing media landscapes.

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