29

Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity

From BMWs to Bud Light

Jackson Katz

Since the late 1990s, there has been growing attention paid in media and cultural studies to the power of cultural images of masculinity. Nonetheless, there has been little attention paid, in scholarship or antiviolence activism, to the relationship between the construction of violent masculinities[1] in what Sut Jhally (1990) refers to as the "commodity image-system" of advertising and the pandemic of violence committed by men, young men, and boys in the homes and streets of the United States.

This chapter is an attempt to sketch out some of the ways in which hegemonic constructions of masculinity in mainstream advertising normalize (White) male violence and to point to some new developments and continuities in the way this is achieved. Theorists and researchers in profeminist sociology and men's studies have developed the concept of *masculinities,* as opposed to *masculinity,* to more adequately describe the complexities of male social position, identity, and experience. At any given time, the class structure and gender order produce numerous masculinities stratified by socioeconomic class, racial and ethnic difference, and sexual orientation. The central delineation is between the hegemonic, or dominant, masculinity (generally, White, heterosexual, and middle class) and the subordinated masculinities (e.g., men of color, gays, poor, and working class).[2]

But although there are significant differences between the various masculinities, in patriarchal culture, violent behavior is typically gendered masculine. This doesn't mean that all men are violent but that violent behavior is considered masculine (as opposed to feminine) behavior. One need not look very closely to see how pervasive is the cultural imagery linking various masculinities to the potential for violence. One key source of constructions of dominant masculinity is the Hollywood movie industry, which has introduced into the culture a seemingly endless stream of violent male icons. For several decades, tens of millions of people, disproportionately male and young, have flocked to theaters and rented videocassettes and DVDs of the "action-adventure" (a Hollywood euphemism for *violent*) films of White male icons such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Jean-Claude Van

Damme, Bruce Willis, Christian Bale, Matt Damon, and so on.

The first wave of these cultural heroes rose to prominence in an era, the mid-to-late 1970s into the 1980s, in which working-class White males had to contend with increasing economic instability and dislocation, the perception of gains by people of color at the expense of the White working class, and a women's movement that overtly challenged male hegemony. In the face of these pressures, then, it is not surprising that White men (especially but not exclusively working class) would latch onto big, muscular, violent men as cinematic heroes. For many males who were experiencing unsettling changes, one area of masculine power remained attainable: physical size and strength and the ability to use violence successfully.

Harry Brod (1987) and other theorists have argued that macro changes in postindustrial capitalism have created deep tensions in the various masculinities. For example, according to Brod,

Persisting images of masculinity hold that "real men" are physically strong, aggressive, and in control of their work. Yet the structural dichotomy between manual and mental labor under capitalism means that no one's work fulfills all these conditions. Manual laborers work for others at the low end of the class spectrum, while management sits at a desk. Consequently, while the insecurities generated by these contradictions are personally dissatisfying to men, these insecurities also impel them to cling all the more tightly to sources of masculine identity validation offered by the system. (p. 14)

One way that the system allows working-class men (of various races) the opportunity for what Brod (1987) refers to as "masculine identity validation" is through the use of their body as an instrument of power, dominance, and control. For working-class males, who have less access to more abstract forms of masculinity-validating power (economic power, workplace authority), the physical body and its potential for violence provide a concrete means of achieving and asserting "manhood."

At any given time, individual as well as groups of men are engaged in an ongoing process of creating and maintaining their own masculine identities. Advertising, in a commodity-driven consumer culture, is an omnipresent and rich source of gender ideology. Historically, use of gender in advertising has stressed difference, implicitly and even explicitly reaffirming the "natural" dissimilarity of males and females. In early 21st-century U.S. culture, advertising that targets young White males (with the exception of fashion advertising, which often features more of an androgynous male look) has the difficult task of stressing gender difference in an era characterized by a loosening of rigid gender distinctions. This requires constantly reasserting what is masculine and what is feminine. One of the ways this is accomplished, in the image system, is to equate masculinity with violence, power, and control (and femininity with passivity).

Ads that link masculinity to violence are ubiquitous. Contemporary ads contain numerous images of men who are positioned as sexy because they possess a certain aggressive "attitude." Men's magazines and mainstream newsweeklies are rife with ads featuring violent male icons, such as football players, big-fisted boxers, military figures, and leather-clad bikers. Sports magazines aimed at men and televised sporting events carry tens of millions of dollars worth of military ads. In the past 20 years, there have been thousands of ads for products designed to help men develop muscular physiques, such as weight training machines and nutritional supplements.

By helping to differentiate masculinity from femininity, images of masculine aggression and violence—including violence against women—afford young males across class a

degree of self-respect and security (however illusory) within the more socially valued masculine role. In addition, as automation, globalization, and the demise of the domestic manufacturing industry and other macroeconomic shifts have contributed to a decline both in employment and real wages for working-class White men, images of violent masculinity in the symbolic realm of media and advertising function, in part, to bolster masculine identities that have increasingly less foundation in the material world.

Violent White Masculinity in Advertising

The appeal of violent behavior for men, including its rewards, is coded into mainstream advertising in numerous ways: from violent male icons (such as particularly aggressive athletes or superheroes) overtly threatening consumers to buy products to ads that exploit men's feelings of not being big, strong, or violent enough by promising to provide them with products that will enhance those qualities. These codes are present in all forms of advertising, but this chapter focuses primarily on mainstream American magazine ads (*ESPN* magazine, *Esquire, Men's Journal, Sports Illustrated, GQ, Maxim, Rolling Stone*, etc.), ads from special-interest men's magazines (e.g., *PC Gamer* and *UFC* magazine), and TV and web-based ads from the early 2000s through 2010.

Several recurring themes in advertising targeting men help support the equation of White masculinity and violence: the angry, aggressive, White working-class male as anti-authority rebel (21st-century version); violence as genetically programmed male behavior; the use of military and sports symbolism to enhance the masculine appeal and identification of products; and the association of muscularity with ideal masculinity.

THE ANGRY, AGGRESSIVE, WHITE WORKING-CLASS MALE AS ANTI-AUTHORITY REBEL (21ST-CENTURY VERSION)

The rock, heavy metal, and rap-metal cultures of recent decades have produced numerous male artists who perform a White, working-class "rebel" masculinity that embodies all sorts of violent angers and resentments and seeks validation in the defiance of middle-class manners and social conventions. Not surprisingly, advertisers have sought to use this young-White-man-with-an-attitude in their marketing of products to young males. In one characteristic example, a 2001 ad for JVC audio equipment features Nikki Sixx of the 1980s metal band Motley Crue with an angry expression on his face. Prominently placed in the foreground (visually "in your face") is a large speaker system and CD/cassette unit. The copy reads "Big, Mean, Loud." More recently, in a 2009 ad for WWE Shop, a clothing line owned by World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), the professional wrestler John Cena—whose character and clothing are meant to represent those of a thuggish White working-class rapper—is pictured in his trademark baseball cap, jean shorts, wrist bands, and T-shirt emblazoned with a cartoon drawing of a wrestler about to violently toss another man off his shoulders and to the ground, with the words "Attitude Adjustment."

The superstar White rap artist Eminem (nee Marshall Mathers) is arguably the most well known of the contemporary "angry White males" with attitude who, for the past decade, have been skillfully marketed to young people—especially White boys—as anti-authority "rebels." The rage-rock group Limp Bizkit and the metal band Slipknot are other notables in this genre. Compared to the aggressive rockers of the classic rock era of the 1960s and 1970s, these 21st-century artists affect a much more overtly violent, aggressive, and nihilistic demeanor.

Eminem, for example, in ads for his music CDs and other projects, is almost always portrayed with scowls on his face or with looks of grim seriousness. For the past decade, in magazine layouts that function as de facto unpaid ads, Eminem has been portrayed in cartoonishly violent guises. In one 2000 layout in the hip-hop magazine *The Source,* he appeared in an old hockey goalie's mask (a homage to the serial murderer Jason from the film *Friday the 13th*), holding a chainsaw. The article was entitled "American Psycho," the page smeared with a bloodied handprint. In a video ad for his 2009 album *Relapse,* a psychopathic-appearing Eminem is pictured naked in a pool of blood. Judging by the number of violent poses struck by Eminem in similar magazine articles, online videos, and other promotional materials, it is safe to say that violent posturing—especially toward women and gays—is central to Eminem's constructed identity as a rebellious White rapper who's "keepin' it real." But it is never exactly clear what a White rapper like Eminem is rebelling *against.* Powerful women who oppress weak and vulnerable men? Omnipotent gays and lesbians who make life a living hell for straight people? Eminem's misogyny and homophobia, far from being "rebellious," are actually extremely traditional and conservative. But the homicidal and rape fantasies in his lyrics continue to upset a lot of parents, so kids can "rebel" against their parents' wishes and middle-class norms by listening to him, buying his CDs, and so on. The irony is that buying into Eminem's "bad boy" act turns them into obedient consumers. ("If you want to express your rebellious side, we have just the right product for you! The Marshall Mathers LP! Come get your Slim Shady!) It's rebellion as a purchasable commodity.

Advertisers for the music and movie industries are constantly developing marketing strategies to appeal to the lucrative markets of young consumers of all socioeconomic classes. In recent years, one of the most successful of these strategies involves praising young consumers for their media smarts, especially in contrast with their parents and other older people. Then, as the young consumers absorb props for their sophistication, they are sold CDs, movies, and myriad other products whose purchase purportedly proves how hip these consumers are. This process would be laughable were it not for the fact that some of the products (e.g., Eminem) often simply reinforce or legitimate violent masculinity—and other cultural pathologies—as rebellious, humorous, or "cool."

Over the past decade, the skateboarding, snowboarding, motocross racing, and extreme sports cultures have contributed to the creation of another type of White working-class rebel masculinity that is then packaged and sold to consumers. In the advertising universe, this masculinity is characterized by the willingness to take dangerous risks; the potential for violent injury and even death is omnipresent. A Children Now study found that 27% of the commercials during televised extreme sports events placed actors in dangerous situations (Brown, Lamb, & Tappan, 2009). One ad for Boost Mobile phone company depicts a close-up of Rick Thorne, a heavily tattooed professional BMX rider. The text reads "Broke my arm, my leg and teeth. But not my bank." Monster Energy drinks employs several high-profile skaters and bikers as product pitchmen, and their ads are particularly aggressive. One ad reads, "The MONSTER packs a vicious punch but has a smooth kick ass flavor you can really pound down. So when it's time to unleash the beast within, grab a MONSTER and GO BIG!"

VIOLENCE AS GENETICALLY PROGRAMMED MALE BEHAVIOR

One way that advertisers demonstrate the "masculinity" of a product or service is through the use of violent male icons or types from popular history. This helps to associate the product with manly needs and

pursuits that we are led to believe have existed from time immemorial. It also furthers the ideological premise, disguised as common sense, that men have always been aggressive and brutal and that their dominance over women is biologically based. "Historical" proof for this is shown in a multitude of ways.

A 2010 ad for a protein supplement by Nutrabolics depicts the mixed martial arts champion Frank Mir shirtless, with his arms folded, and a scowl on his face. Behind him is a drawing of the Roman Coliseum. The text reads "Fuel Your Next Conquest." It further states that "A true warrior does not relinquish to fatigue, rather he supplies his body with the arsenal needed to win a multitude of battles." An ad for the Toyota 4Runner depicts a photograph of two men eating an outdoor meal while camping, with a cartoon skunk looking over them. The text promises "reclining fold-flat second-row seat and improved driver comfort." But lest potential customers think that desiring such comforts is not masculine, it continues with a tongue-in-cheek reference to a celebrated frontiersman from the 19th century: "Not that you need to be pampered, you element-hardened, modern-day Davy Crockett."

An ad for Trojan condoms features a giant-sized Roman centurion, in full uniform, muscles rippling, holding a package of condoms as he towers over the buildings of a modern city. Condom manufacturers know that the purchase and use of condoms by men can be stressful, partially because penis size, in popular Western folklore, is supposedly linked to virility. One way to assuage the anxieties of male consumers is to link the product with a recognizably violent (read: masculine) male archetype. It is no coincidence that the leading brand of condoms in the United States is named for an ancient warrior (Trojan). Ancient warriors have also proven to be big box-office draws in the 21st century, and action-packed trailers for movies such as *300* (2007), about the Battle of Thermopylae, and print ads for

the Starz television series *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010)—replete with a sword-wielding warrior—appear all over mainstream television and magazines.

An even more sinister use of historical representations involves portraying violence that would not be acceptable if shown in contemporary settings. Norwegian Cruise Line, for example, in an ad that ran in the 1990s in major newsweekly magazines, depicted a colorful painting of a scene on a ship's deck, set sometime in the pirate era, where men, swords drawn, appear simultaneously to be fighting each other while a couple of them are carrying off women. The headline informs us that Norwegian is the "first cruise line whose entertainment doesn't revolve around the bar."

It is highly doubtful that the cruise line could have set what is clearly a rape or gang rape scenario on a modern ship. Controversy is avoided by depicting the scene as historical. A more recent—and much subtler—variation on this theme can be seen in the popular Captain Morgan spiced rum ads, which feature a cartoon pirate, "the Captain," inserted into contemporary party scenes, often with attractive young women and overt sexual suggestion. In one ad, the Captain is depicted aboard a sailboat with three young White women, one in a skimpy bikini. The text reads "Catch of the Day." The tagline in many *Captain Morgan* ads, "Got a little captain in you?" poses an implicit challenge to young men as it reinforces the idea that "real men" (pirates, swashbucklers) have always treated women as objects, or as less-than-fully human, a dehumanizing process that can lead to violence.

THE USE OF MILITARY AND SPORTS SYMBOLISM TO ENHANCE THE MASCULINE IDENTIFICATION AND APPEAL OF PRODUCTS

Well before the September 11, 2001, attacks prompted an upsurge in advertisers' use of martial displays of patriotic sentiment,

advertisers who wanted to demonstrate the unquestioned manliness of their products could do so by using one of the two key subsets in the symbolic image system of violent masculinity: the military and sports. Uniformed soldiers and players, as well as their weapons and gear, appear frequently in ads of all sorts. Advertisers can use these signifiers in numerous creative ways to make their products appear manly.

A 2010 ad for MTM watches depicts a man wearing a dark, military or police-style jacket. He is wearing the watch over the long sleeve of the jacket; the text reads: "Special Ops." One ad in the early 2000s for *The Economist* magazine manages to link the magazine with White heterosexual sexism, military masculinity, and imperialist aggression, presented in a spirit of ironic hyperbole, all in one page. In the top left corner is a photo of a classic (White) "pinup girl" from the 1940s at the beach in a bathing suit. The text reads "Sex Symbol." In the top right corner is a picture of a U.S. fighter jet in flight. The text reads "Power Symbol." Front and center is a picture of the magazine's cover, with a distorted map of North America portrayed as towering over Central and South America; Africa and Asia are small and off to the side. The map is headlined "America's world" and features one-word designations of various geographical areas: "Surfin'" in the Pacific; "Huntin'" in northwest Canada; "Exploitin'" in Central America; "Fishin'" in the Caribbean; "Fightin'" in Africa and Asia. The bold text underneath says simply: "Status Symbol." It might as well say "This magazine is for 'real' men, and ('wink, wink, nudge, nudge') real men are sexist and violent."

Ads for the military itself also show the linkage between masculinity and force. The U.S. military spends over $600 million annually on advertising (RAND Corporation, 2009). Not surprisingly, armed services advertisements appear disproportionately on televised sporting events and in sports and so-called men's magazines. Military ads are characterized by exciting outdoor action scenes with accompanying text replete with references to "leadership," "respect," and "pride." Although these ads sometimes promote the educational and financial benefits of military service, what they're really selling to young working-class White males is a vision of masculinity—adventurous, aggressive, and violent—that provides men of all classes with a standard of "real manhood" against which to judge themselves.

Boxers and football players appear in ads regularly, promoting products from underwear to deodorants. The text for a 2010 ad depicting the BMW M3 reads "Heavyweight power. Welterweight package." An ad for the energy drink 5-Hour Energy depicts an urban scene with three men in business suits on stone steps in what looks like a big city business district, with glass and steel office towers in the background. One of the men appears to have just kicked the other two into the air. The text reads: "Because life gets pretty hairy outside the ring, too."

In the early 2000s, a black and white photo of a young White man in uncovered football shoulder pads adorned Abercrombie and Fitch advertising layouts. In Abercrombie and Fitch mall stores, a dramatically enlarged version of this photo greeted customers as they entered the store. Abercrombie and Fitch does not sell football equipment, of course. Rather, the clothing company—which has built brand recognition for the past two decades with its "racy" and sexually suggestive layouts of scantily clad teenagers—was presumably seeking to accentuate its appeal to adolescent males by creating brand identification with the archetypally masculine young man: the football player.

Football themes abound in advertising, including in ads for products with little or no discernible relationship to football. An ad for Nissan Altima shows the car driving on a rough stone surface, with water spraying all around. The caption reads "Necessary roughness." (Unnecessary roughness is a major penalty in football.) A newspaper ad for a Southern California John Elway Toyota dealership shows—amid the banner headlines

of cost-saving special deals—an action shot of the long-retired star quarterback Elway in full football uniform. The photo has no relation to the product or the ad except, perhaps, to appeal to men's (and women's?) yearning for a kind of reflected glory by reminding potential buyers of the masculine prowess of the dealership's namesake. Sometimes football players are positioned simply to sanction the masculinity of a suspect product line. For example, a 1999 ad for a cologne by Clinique depicts a clean-cut young White man in a football uniform, holding a football and running toward the camera. Standing beside him is a young White woman, in a white dress, holding a white frosted birthday cake with candles. The only copy says, in bold letters, "Clinique Happy. Now for Men." It seems reasonable to infer that the goal of this ad was to shore up the masculine image of a product whose name (Clinique) has feminine connotations. The uniformed football player, a signifier of violent masculinity, achieves this task by visually transmitting the message: Real men can wear Clinique. The birthday cake in the woman's arms, of course, sends a signal to women that this product is an acceptable present for their (masculine) boyfriends.

Advertisers know that using high-profile violent male athletes can help to sell products, such as yogurt and light beer, that have historically been gendered feminine. Because violence establishes masculinity, if these guys (athletes) use traditionally "female" products, they don't lose their masculinity. Rather, the masculinity of the product—and hence the size of the potential market—increases. Miller Brewing Company proved the efficacy of this approach in their long-running television ad campaign for Lite beer. The Miller Lite campaign, which first appeared in the early 1970s, helped bring Miller to the top of the burgeoning light beer market and is often referred to as one of the most successful TV ad campaigns in history. A recent example of this strategy is a Bud Light ad (2010) that depicts an Ultimate Fighting Championship bout, with the fighters hitting each other's bodies. The

text reads: "From the first round to last call. America's favorite beer is proud to sponsor America's hardest-hitting sport."

THE ASSOCIATION OF MUSCULARITY WITH IDEAL MASCULINITY

Men across socioeconomic class, race, and ethnicity might feel insecure, relatively powerless, or vulnerable in the economic sphere and uncertain about how to respond to the challenges of women in many areas of social relations. But, in general, males continue to have an advantage over females in the area of physical size and strength. Because one function of the image system is to legitimate and reinforce existing power relations, representations that equate masculinity with the qualities of size, strength, and violence thus become more prevalent.

The anthropologist Alan Klein (1993a)[3] has looked at how the rise in popularity of bodybuilding is linked to male insecurity. "Muscles," he argues, "are about more than just the functional ability of men to defend home and hearth or perform heavy labor. Muscles are markers that separate men from each other and, most important perhaps, from women. And while he may not realize it, every man—every accountant, science nerd, clergyman, or cop—is engaged in a dialogue with muscles" (p. 16).

Advertising is one area of the popular culture that helps feed this "dialogue." Sports and other magazines with a large male readership are filled with ads offering men products, supplements, and services to enhance their muscles—or their penis size. Often these ads explicitly equate muscles with violent power, as in an ad for a Marcy weight machine that tells men to "Arm Yourself" under a black and white photograph of a toned, muscular White man, biceps and forearms straining, in the middle of a weight-lifting workout. The military, too, offers to help men enhance their bodily prowess. An ad for the Army National Guard shows three slender young men, Black and White,

working out, over copy that reads "Get a Part-Time Job in Our Body Shop."

The discourse around muscles as signifiers of masculine power involves not only working-class men but also middle- and upper-class men. This is apparent in the male sports subculture, where size and strength are valued by men across class and racial boundaries. But muscularity as masculinity is also a theme in advertisements aimed at upper-income males. Many advertisers use images of physically rugged or muscular male bodies to masculinize products and services geared to elite male consumers. An ad for the business insurance firm Brewer and Lord uses a powerful male body as a metaphor for the more abstract form of (financial) power. The ad shows the torso of a muscular man curling a barbell, accompanied by a headline that reads "the benefits of muscle defined." The text states that "the slow building of strength and definition is no small feat. In fact, that training has shaped the authority that others see in you, as well."

Saab, targeting an upscale, educated market in the early 1990s, billed itself as "the most intelligent car ever built." But in one ad, it called its APC Turbo "the muscle car with a social conscience"—which signaled to wealthy men that by driving a Saab they could appropriate the working-class tough guy image associated with the concept of a "muscle car" while making clear their more privileged class position. In a 2001 version of the same phenomenon, Chevy, in an ad for the expensive Avalanche SUV, showed a close-up photo of the big vehicle turning sharply on a dusty road. The text reads "Rarely do you get to see the words 'ingenious' and 'muscle-bound' in the same sentence."

Throughout the 2000s, Ford Motor Company employed classic blue-collar masculine iconography in its truck ads (Ford trucks, such as the F-150, hauling heavy loads, driving off-road on rugged terrain) to sell its trucks as symbols of masculine power, prowess, and control. If the television ads' storylines didn't adequately convey the message, the signature ending did: Built Ford Tough. One print ad for the Ford Escape (2006) used middle-class White men's fear of working-class White men to sell them on speed and engineering as important features of self-protection in a dangerous world. The ad depicts two White men in European-style bike gear getting into their Escape at a desert truck stop. Along with their clothing, their bicycles, strapped to the roof of their vehicle, signify their middle-class masculinity, which is, stereotypically, less than physically tough. Right next to them, looking menacing and confrontational, are three White men in black leather and tattoos; one has a black T-shirt with the inscription "Hellbound." They are positioned next to their motorcycles, possibly Harley Davidsons, signifying their working-class masculinity and establishing them, stereotypically, as physically tough and intimidating. The visuals of the ad play to the anxieties and fear of the middle-class men, but for good measure, the text clarifies the point: "V6 power for long, leisurely drives, or quick, exciting ones."

Conclusion

Media play an important role in constructing and normalizing violence, both at the interpersonal and the state levels. In light of the ongoing, worldwide crisis of men's violence against women, children, and other men, antiviolence educators and activists should advocate for a dramatic expansion of critical media literacy education at age-appropriate levels from Grades K–12, and in all manner of college and graduate programs, that helps to lay bare the gender norms that underpin and legitimate much of this violence. The kinds of critical media literacy analyses contained in this chapter need also to be incorporated into community-based violence prevention initiatives, as well as into prevention

education work funded by local, state, and federal government. To some extent, this is already happening. For example, many domestic and sexual violence organizations, batterer intervention programs, and gang violence prevention initiatives use my video, *Tough Guise* (Katz & Earp, 2000), or Byron Hurt's video *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (2007), to engage young men and women in lively debates about masculinities and media.

This chapter focuses attention on constructions of violent White masculinity in mainstream advertising. We need also to study more comprehensively a number of other cultural sites where violent masculinities are produced and legitimated: video games, comic books, toys, the sports culture, professional wrestling, comedy, popular music, and pornography. This will help us to understand more fully the links between the construction of gender, other macrosocial processes, and the prevalence of violence, which might then contribute to more sophisticated and effective antiviolence interventions.

Notes

1. *Violence* refers to immediate or chronic situations that result in injury to the psychological, social, or physical well-being of individuals or groups. For the purpose of this chapter, I will use the American Psychological Association's (APA's) more specific definition of interpersonal violence. Although acknowledging the multidimensional nature of violence, the APA Commission on Violence and Youth defines interpersonal violence as "behavior by persons against persons that threatens, attempts, or completes intentional infliction of physical or psychological harm" (APA, 1993, p. 1).

2. Although hegemonic constructions of masculinity affect men of all races, there are important variables due to racial/ethnic differences. I have chosen to focus on the constructions of various White masculinities, at least in part because while masculinity is often hidden in the national conversation about violence, so is whiteness.

3. The article cited here was excerpted from Klein's (1993b) book *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction.*

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