



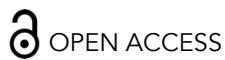
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unpacking the Emotional Experience of Athletes: An Assessment of Shame, Guilt and Anxiety

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OPEN ACCESS

PUBLISHED

30 April 2026

CITATION

Carbonneau, K.J., 2026. Unpacking the Emotional Experience of Athletes: An Assessment of Shame, Guilt and Anxiety. Medical Research Archives, [online] 14(4).

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ISSN

2375-1924

ABSTRACT

This study examines the interrelationships among sport-related shame, guilt, and anxiety and provides initial validity evidence for a newly developed Shame in Sport Scale. A sample of 144 undergraduate students with sport participation experience completed a 30-item survey assessing these three emotional constructs. Exploratory factor analysis supported a three-factor structure corresponding to shame, guilt, and anxiety, accounting for 52% of the variance. The constructs were significantly and positively correlated, yet demonstrated sufficient uniqueness, suggesting that athletes' emotional experiences are multifaceted rather than redundant. Sex differences emerged for shame, with females reporting higher levels than males, while no significant differences were observed for guilt or anxiety. These findings contribute to the literature by offering a unified measure of three commonly co-occurring negative sport emotions and highlight the importance of distinguishing among them in both research and applied sport settings. Implications for assessment and intervention are discussed.

Keywords: Shame, Guilt, Anxiety, Athletic Performance.

Introduction

Shame, guilt, and anxiety are just a few negative emotions that athletes may experience as a result of their athletic performance. Collegiate athletes, in particular, are highly likely to encounter these emotions due to the public nature of sport and the consequences of competitive outcomes¹. For athletes, these negative emotions are prone to be self-focused and have detrimental effects on their performances and general well-being². In the emotion literature, shame is characterized by feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy regarding the inability to meet societal expectations or even personal expectations, while also involving a significant amount of self-rejection³. Guilt, often conceptualized in the same emotional family as shame, extends shame by including both real and perceived failures of a specific event, defined as an "affective state characterized by negative self-evaluation, self-condemnation and remorse due to a real or imagined transgression"⁴(p541). While guilt and shame share some conceptual overlap, anxiety is a different emotion altogether, one that involves a distinct set of thoughts and behaviors. Specifically, anxiety is an excessive and apprehensive response to stress or a perceived threat which can impact mental health.

Experiencing shame, guilt, and anxiety often occurs in tandem and can be reciprocal in nature⁵, creating a cycle of detrimental effects on an athlete's mental health and performance. These emotions can lead to a downward spiral that can be difficult to overcome, creating situations where athletes experience negative thoughts and behaviors both during and outside their performances⁶. Shame can make athletes feel unworthy and unconfident, leading further to guilt and anxiety generation. Identity plays a significant role in the lives of athletes⁷, and shame specifically can deeply impact their sense of self². Athletes often invest a significant amount of time, effort, and emotion into their sport, and their identity becomes intertwined with their athletic performance and achievements⁸. When they experience shame, it may raise doubts about their worth and value as individuals beyond being athletes. In other words, shame can lead athletes to question if they are enough beyond their sporting abilities. Anxiety can prevent athletes from focusing and performing at their best due to

physical symptoms such as sweating and increased heart rate. While guilt can trigger athletes to become fixated on mistakes or poor performance, leading to negative self-talk, anxiety, and decreased confidence and thereby creating a negative cycle. The general well-being of athlete can be impacted by this cycle of shame, guilt, and anxiety, resulting in an essential need for coaches and other athletic professionals to be able to assess and understand how athletes experience these emotions.

Overall, assessing shame, anxiety, and guilt in athletes is essential for promoting environments that support athletes' well-being, optimize performance, foster healthy relationships, and facilitate personal growth. Assessing shame, guilt, and anxiety enables the development of targeted interventions that support athletes in overcoming emotional barriers and achieving their full potential. Therefore, in the current study, we describe the development of our Shame in Sport survey, provide evidence for the validity of the scores produced by the survey, and examine the sex-based differences in how athletes experience these emotions.

SHAME, GUILT AND ANXIETY

Over the past few decades, shame, guilt, and anxiety have been studied in disciplines such as education^{9,10} and clinical psychology^{11,12}, but there have been very few attempts to explore these emotions in athletes without the central focus of body-image^{6,13}. This is unfortunate, as feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety could be exacerbated in sports by coaching styles, team and individual competitions, and public acknowledgement of sporting outcomes. The literature across these different domains has identified an association between shame and guilt, as well as shame and anxiety; however, understanding the interrelatedness of all three negative emotions as well as the unique nuances of each of these negative emotions is still needed in sport literature.

Shame, guilt, and anxiety are stress emotions and have been conceptualized as belonging to the same pedigree^{14,15}. Specifically, all three of these emotions are known to be related to a person's perception of what others think about them, making sports where performances are judged and coaches' opinions are valued a prime arena for

experiencing these emotions. Focusing on shame and anxiety, Tangney and Dearing¹⁶ explored the psychodynamics of shame. They posited that shame has a link with negative outcomes such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression. Particularly, not only is the emotion of shame accompanied by higher levels of anxiety, but shame also leads to a negative self-image, which contributes to an increase in anxiety. They suggested that the reason for this could be due to the overwhelming nature of shame and the fear of experiencing it again in the future; therefore, they purport that addressing shame is crucial in treating anxiety.

Experiencing shame in sports has also been found to be linked with lower levels of self-determined motivation and higher use of avoidance coping strategies, while also contributing to the likelihood of burnout and/or a dropout from sports¹⁷. Burnout is especially concerning, as it is defined as a singular response to chronic stress that gradually develops over time and can eventually lead to lifelong health difficulties¹⁸. Despite the seriousness of shame and guilt, most research on the detrimental consequences of negative emotions in sports focuses solely on anxiety, and there seems to be a scarcity in the supply of research on athlete-specific shame, guilt, and anxiety together. To understand the onset of these stress emotions, it could be advantageous to assess and highlight the interrelationship between sport-shame, sport-guilt, and sport-anxiety, a major goal of this study.

DIFFERENTIAL EXPERIENCES IN SHAME, GUILT, AND ANXIETY

In general, research has shown that women tend to report more feelings of anxiety, shame, worry, and guilt than their male counterparts¹⁹⁻²². The causes of this sex difference may be attributed to various factors such as hormonal differences, socialization practices, and even gender role expectations. Specific to sports, similar findings emerge. For example, research suggests that boys as a group tend to be more aggressive, dominant, and competitive, whether through constitutional factors, social learning, or both, whereas girls are more relationship oriented, nurturant, feelings-oriented, and cooperative, and they tend to have lower self-efficacy in the physical domain^{23,24}. Research has also suggested that male athletes often use objective indices of winning and peer

comparison as a basis for judging success, whereas female athletes have a greater tendency to use self-comparison standards, such as skill improvement and reference to internalized performance standards²⁵. Differences in how success is judged may result in sex differences related to shame, guilt, and anxiety.

SPORT- SHAME, - GUILT, AND -ANXIETY QUESTIONNAIRES

Numerous psychological instruments have been developed to assess the psychological characteristics, traits, or strategies of athletes. However, few focus on feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety in tandem and in relation to athletic performances. For example, the recently developed Athletic Perceptions of Performance Scale was designed to measure athletic shame-and guilt-proneness⁶. The instrument is a self-report 12-items survey consisting of three domains (athletic guilt-proneness, shame-proneness, and no-concerns). Items focus on behaviors that are associated with athletic performance preparation (eg, "I felt a need to train harder for future matches/contests" or "I had no performance issues to worry about") rather than in-the-moment emotions related to athletic performance. Additional instruments, such as the Multidimensional Inventory of Sport Excellence (MUSI)²⁶ and the Sport Anxiety Scale-2²⁷ have some assessment of sport anxiety but fail to gather information about shame and guilt. Specifically, the MUSI assesses athletes' mental energy, cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, attention focusing, awareness about attention, attention, awareness about attention during performance, internal speech, and narrow external focus both during competition and practice. The Sport Anxiety Scale-2 gauges the level of anxiety experienced by athletes prior to and after a sporting event and is a self-reported questionnaire that comprises 21 items to assess cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, worry, and disruption of concentration.

To our knowledge, a scale that measures sport-shame, -guilt, and -anxiety, all in one instrument does not exist. This creates a gap that our study hopes to bridge with regards to the assessment of these emotions in sports. An instrument that measures all these three together is important given these negative emotions are frequently experienced by athletes and can negatively impact

their performance and well-being. By assessing all three constructs together, researchers and practitioners can gain a more complete understanding of athletes' emotional experiences and their relationship to performance outcomes. This type of instrument is also more efficient and practical than using multiple instruments, as it simplifies data collection and analysis. Additionally, it can inform the development of targeted interventions to help athletes manage these negative emotions and improve their mental and even physical health.

PRESENT STUDY

To examine how shame, guilt, and anxiety manifests in sports participation, we created a 30-item Shame in Sports survey assessing the three constructs of sport-state shame, guilt, and anxiety. Questions were based on and developed from both the qualitative and quantitative extant literature discussing shame in sports. To ensure participants' response to our questions align with the purported constructs, we asked the following research questions.

1. What is the factor structure of the Shame in Sports survey?
2. What relationships exist between sport- shame, guilt, and anxiety?
3. Based on theoretical underpinnings of these constructs, are there sex differences that exists between self-identified males and females in how they report feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety?

We provide evidence for our questions by first conducting an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and then exploring scores with the use of correlations and mean group differences techniques.

Methods

The present study employed a cross-sectional survey design to develop and examine the psychometric properties of the Shame in Sport Scale.

PARTICIPANTS

Undergraduate students who self-identified as having actively participated in organized sports (N = 144) at a large Northwest university in the United States were recruited for this study. The sample was predominantly White (68%), with 11% identifying as Latinx, 10% as Asian, and the remaining 11% identifying as mixed race, non-

specific, or other. Participants had a mean age of 19.9 years (SD = 3.21). The majority reported high school sports as their primary form of participation, while 12 participants (8.3%) were current varsity student-athletes and 35 (24.3%) were actively involved in club or intramural sports.

PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited via email and through course-based research participation opportunities. Those who elected to participate completed an online survey that included demographic questions, items assessing sport participation, and the Shame in Sport Scale. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were anonymous. For participants receiving course credit, alternative options were provided. At the conclusion of the survey, participants were given the option to provide contact information separately if they were interested in follow-up qualitative work related to the survey development.

INSTRUMENT DEVELOPMENT

The Shame in Sport Scale was developed to assess athletes' experiences of shame, guilt, and anxiety within sport contexts. Item generation was grounded in the extant literature on moral emotions and sport psychology, drawing on established conceptualizations of shame as a global negative evaluation of the self, guilt as a behavior-focused evaluative response, and anxiety as an anticipatory affective state related to perceived threat or performance pressure. Existing instruments assessing related constructs were reviewed to inform item content while extending measurement to sport-specific, in-the-moment emotional experiences. An initial pool of 30 items was generated to reflect these three constructs, with 10 items representing each domain (shame, guilt, and anxiety). Items were written to capture athletes' emotional responses during sport participation and were designed to be applicable across a range of competitive contexts.

Prior to full survey administration, cognitive interviews were conducted to evaluate item clarity, interpretability, and alignment with the intended constructs. Twenty participants initially expressed interest in assisting with survey development, of whom four completed cognitive interviews. These participants were representative of the target population. Using a think-aloud protocol,

participants read each item and verbalized their thought processes while responding. Follow-up probes were used to clarify interpretations, identify ambiguities, and assess alignment between item intent and participant understanding.

Findings from the cognitive interviews indicated that participants found the items to be clear, relevant, and reflective of their sport experiences. Participants were able to distinguish among the intended constructs, although they occasionally used varied language to describe them (e.g., nervousness, frustration, embarrassment). They also reported that the instructions and matrix-style format were clear and easy to follow. Minor revisions were made to item wording to improve clarity and readability. This process provided preliminary evidence of face and content validity and informed the final version of the instrument used in the present study.

INSTRUMENT

The Shame in Sport Scale is a 30-item self-report measure designed to assess athletes' experiences of shame, guilt, and anxiety during sport participation (see Table 1). The instrument includes three subscales—shame, guilt, and anxiety—with 10 items representing each construct.

Participants indicated how often they experienced each emotion in sport contexts using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from Never (0) to Always (4). Internal consistency estimates for the subscales were strong, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .92 for shame, .85 for guilt, and .87 for anxiety, indicating good reliability across constructs.

Table: 1. How often do you experience the following when engaging in sports

Shame	Factor Loading
I worry about what other people think of my performance.	.67
If I make a mistake during a competition, I wish I could disappear.	.71
I try to conceal my poor performance from other people.	.59
I avoid contact with people who watched a poor performance.	.66
I feel ashamed when I fail in a competition.	.69
I feel that I am less worthy of a future success when I make a mistake.	.62
When talking with my coach about my performance, I feel like I can never do anything right.	.64
I get frustrated with myself for not being good enough.	.62
If I do not perform well, I feel alone.	.71
I feel humiliated if others witness a poor performance.	.69
Guilt	Factor Loading
I feel angry for not trying my best.	.52
I feel like a failure if I did not do everything I could to win a competition.	.58
I feel like I do not deserve to compete if I do not try as hard as possible.	.54
I get angry with myself if I give up.	.74
I get frustrated with myself if I did not put forth all my effort during practice.	.53
I always feel like I could have tried harder during a competition.	.63
I worry that I have disappointed my coach or teammates with my performance.	.58
If I did not try my hardest during a competition I would want to disappear.	.74
If I did not work my hardest, it would be difficult to look my coach in the eye.	.56
I feel that if I make a mistake during a competition, it is because I did not work hard enough during practice.	.50
Anxiety	Factor Loading
I feel prepared for competition.	.54
I feel tense during competitions.	.59
I worry over possible misfortunes.	.68
I am at ease when competing.	.65
I feel frightened when competing.	.57
I am worried about my performance during competitions.	.59
I am relaxed during a competition.	.69
I am never satisfied with my performance.	.59
I feel inadequate during competitions.	.62
I get in a state of tension when I think about my performances.	.70

DATA ANALYSIS PLAN

Data analysis proceeded in several stages to address the study's research questions. Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine data quality, including screening for missing data, outliers, and assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and internal consistency estimates (Cronbach's alpha) were computed for each subscale.

To examine the factor structure of the instrument, and provide evidence for research question number one, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal axis factoring with oblique (Promax) rotation was conducted, given the theoretical expectation that shame, guilt, and anxiety would be correlated. Factor retention decisions were based on eigenvalues greater than 1, inspection of the scree plot, and interpretability of the factor solution. Items were retained if they demonstrated primary loadings of .40 or higher and minimal cross-loadings. Next, evidence for research questions number two was examined by calculating Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients to assess relationships among shame, guilt, and anxiety. Shared variance (r^2) was examined to evaluate the extent of overlap among constructs. Lastly, Independent samples t-tests were conducted to provide evidence for research question number three which sought to determine if sex differences in reported levels of shame, guilt, and anxiety were present in our current sample. Prior to analyses, assumptions of homogeneity of variance were evaluated using Levene's test, and effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to assess the magnitude of group differences. Statistical significance was evaluated at the $p < .05$ level for all analyses.

Results

FACTOR ANALYSIS

To begin, we examined the factorability of the 30-item Shame in Sports. First, it was observed that all items on the scale correlated above .3 ($r = .31$ -.77) with at least one other item, suggesting reasonable factorability. Secondly, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, $KMO = .90$ and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, $(435) = 2352.73, p < .001$. Based

on these indicators, the factor analysis was deemed suitable with all items on the Shame in Sports scale. Basic descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, are provided in Table 1.

To provide evidence for our first research question, we conducted a principal axis factor analysis to identify the factors present on the developed instrument. A three-factor model emerged with eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and explained 52.0% of the variance. The scree plot was also consulted and supported a three-factor model with the inflexion occurring between three and four factor model. See Table 1 for factor loadings for each item.

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SPORT- SHAME, GUILT, AND ANXIETY

For our second research question we examined the Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficients to assess if, as predicted by the literature, there was a significant relationship between a shame, guilt, and anxiety. Results indicate a significant ($p < .05$) and positive relationship between shame and both guilt and anxiety ($r = .65$ and $.53$, respectively). Additionally, guilt and anxiety also shared a significant and positive relationship with a correlation of $.51$. While the correlations between each set of constructs is significant, it is important to note that the magnitude of these relationships, as assessed by r^2 , provides support for the theoretical notion that these constructs are interrelated, though each having a unique contribution to sport emotions. For example, the relationship between shame and anxiety shares approximately 28% of variance, shame and guilt share 42%, and guilt and anxiety share only 26%. The shared variance between these constructs still leaves the majority of variance as unique, providing evidence for three distinct constructs.

SEX DIFFERENCES IN SPORT- SHAME, GUILT AND ANXIETY

In our last research question, we systematically examined how biological sex influences the average shame, guilt and anxiety that are felt in sports. All assumptions (e.g., homogeneity of variance, normality) were tested and met prior to conducting any analysis. Our results suggest that shame in sports on average is felt more often by females than is felt by their male counterparts. Specifically, females reported an average of 1.89

($SD = .85$) whereas males reported an average score 1.41 ($SD = .91$), $t(141) = 3.2$, $p = .002$, $d = .52$. However, scores reported for females and males for both guilt and anxiety were similar across

these two sex groups ($t(141) = 1.03$, $p = .30$; $t(141) = 0.24$, $p = .80$, respectively). Means and standard deviations for shame, guilt, and anxiety by sex group are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations by Sex for Shame, Guilt, and Anxiety

Construct	Mean		Standard Deviation	
	Females	Male	Females	Male
Shame	1.89	1.41	0.85	0.91
Guilt	2.10	1.97	0.69	0.79
Anxiety	1.96	1.98	0.38	0.46

Discussion

The present study extends prior work on negative emotions in sport by demonstrating that shame, guilt, and anxiety are empirically distinguishable yet meaningfully interconnected constructs within athletic contexts. While previous research has often examined these emotions in isolation or emphasized anxiety as the primary affective barrier to performance, the current findings support a more nuanced understanding of athletes' emotional experiences. The identification of a three-factor structure aligns with theoretical distinctions in the broader emotion literature while also highlighting the unique ways these constructs manifest in sport-specific contexts.

Adding to the extant literature, the present study contributes a 30-item measure designed to assess sport-specific shame, guilt, and anxiety within a unified framework. Drawing on extant literature and supported by evidence from cognitive interviews and factor analysis, the instrument provides a concise and efficient means of capturing these related yet distinct emotional experiences. Together, these findings position athlete emotion as a multidimensional system that warrants more integrative theoretical and empirical attention.

SHAME IN SPORT SURVEY

In relation to our first research question, we found that our 30-item Shame in Sport survey had three constructs, as was predicted, with a clear relation and low cross loadings between items that assessed shame, guilt, and anxiety. Our main focus on feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety related to athletic performance is distinct from other instruments that focus more on outcomes or behaviors related to shame and guilt⁶ or other instruments that are more focused on sport anxiety.²⁷ Our survey could provide essential

information to optimize athletic performance, promote healthy relationships between coaches and athletes, and help to develop tailored interventions. Measuring shame, guilt, and anxiety in tandem allows for identification of which is the driving force behind an athlete's struggle. For example, is concentration being broken due to anxiety of a previous poor performance where the athlete was shamed by their coach or peers? Knowledge of which negative emotion each athlete experiences—shame, guilt, anxiety, or a combination of all three—could be leveraged to holistically support the athlete in overcoming these negative emotions. The ability to assess these emotions concurrently provides a foundation for future research and intervention efforts aimed at improving athlete well-being and performance.

RELATIONS BETWEEN SPORT- SHAME, GUILT, AND ANXIETY

Our findings support the idea that sport-related shame, guilt, and anxiety are three distinct yet interrelated emotions. One way to conceptualize these findings is as a recursive emotional system, in which each emotion can function as both an antecedent and consequence of the others depending on the performance context. For example, performance-related anxiety may heighten sensitivity to failure, increasing the likelihood of shame, which in turn may trigger guilt-related self-evaluations and further anticipatory anxiety. These interconnected pathways suggest that athletes' emotional experiences are dynamic and mutually reinforcing rather than isolated.

Empirically, although the correlations among shame, guilt, and anxiety were moderate to strong, the shared variance did not exceed 42%, indicating that a substantial proportion of variance remains unique to each construct. This pattern supports

theoretical distinctions that characterize shame as a global negative evaluation of the self, guilt as a behavior-focused evaluative process, and anxiety as a future-oriented affective state. Together, these findings reinforce the importance of treating these emotions as related but distinct components of athletes' emotional experiences.

In sport settings, these distinctions have meaningful implications for intervention. For instance, strategies targeting anxiety (e.g., relaxation training) may be insufficient for addressing shame, which may require approaches focused on self-compassion or identity restructuring. Similarly, guilt-related experiences may be more effectively addressed through effort-based feedback and goal-setting strategies. Collapsing these constructs into a single "negative emotion" category risks obscuring these important differences in both experience and intervention.

From an applied perspective, the ability to assess these emotions concurrently provides coaches, sport psychologists, and athletic trainers with a more precise diagnostic tool. Rather than assuming that performance difficulties stem from generalized anxiety, practitioners can identify whether an athlete's struggles are rooted in shame (e.g., fear of judgment), guilt (e.g., perceived lack of effort), or anxiety (e.g., anticipatory worry), allowing for more targeted and effective support. Future research should further examine the directional and temporal dynamics among these emotions, particularly through longitudinal or experience-sampling designs that can capture how emotional experiences evolve across performance contexts.

SEX DIFFERENCES IN SPORT- SHAME, GUILT AND ANXIETY

Females have long been stereotyped as generally more emotional than their male counterparts.^{28,29} However, the literature pertaining to general emotional research is quite varied and dependent upon the emotion being assessed.³⁰ In our study, we add to this variation in our results, with findings indicating that females felt more shame than males on average, though not significantly different from males in both guilt and anxiety. This finding provides additional evidence that guilt and anxiety, while similar to shame, are quite distinct. The finding that females reported higher levels of

shame but not guilt or anxiety suggests that sex differences in sport-related emotions may be more construct-specific than previously assumed. This pattern aligns with broader literature indicating that shame is more closely tied to self-evaluative processes and social comparison, domains in which gendered socialization may play a stronger role. However, the absence of differences in guilt and anxiety highlights the importance of not overgeneralizing emotional differences across sexes. Further research should examine the contextual and social mechanisms that contribute to these patterns, particularly why differences emerge for shame but not for guilt and anxiety. These findings highlight the need for more nuanced, context-sensitive examinations of gendered emotional experiences in sport, rather than broad generalizations across emotional domains.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample consisted primarily of undergraduate students from a single university, which may limit generalizability to other athlete populations, such as elite or professional athletes. Second, the reliance on self-report measures introduces the possibility of response bias, including social desirability effects. Third, although exploratory factor analysis provided initial support for the structure of the instrument, confirmatory factor analysis is needed in future research to further validate the scale. Finally, the cross-sectional design limits conclusions regarding the directional or causal relationships among shame, guilt, and anxiety.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to the growing literature on athlete emotional experiences by introducing and providing initial validation for a measure that captures shame, guilt, and anxiety concurrently. The findings underscore the importance of distinguishing among these interrelated yet unique constructs and highlight their relevance for both athlete well-being and performance. Continued research in this area has the potential to inform more targeted, context-sensitive strategies for supporting athlete well-being and optimizing performance.

Conflict of Interest Statement:

None.

Acknowledgements:

None.

Funding Statement:

None.

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