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Writing differently with film: An animated video on gender, leadership, and language

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Abstract

The animated video “Leadership and Discourse” (original title: “Führung und Sprache”) (4:05 min) is produced by us (a filmmaker and a scholar) and stands as an artistic research contribution that is published on the GWO website (<https://bcove.video/3yBUL04>). It links to and develops forms of “writing differently” in organization studies with moving images, colors, and sound. Drawing on feminist research, it visualizes how language creates a view on leadership as white, heterosexual, and masculine that excludes women and non-binary individuals, queer people, and people of color. The male leader stereotype “stands” his ground and dominates all others. The video also shows how marginalized positions may find their form when they act in solidarity, reject misogynist vocabulary and hate-speech, redefine words, and create new terms. In a way that a text cannot, the film allows viewers to experience gender and leadership as a product and artifact of discursive practices. It invites viewers to affectively relate to the content and encourages them to re-imagine ourselves and others in organizations and leadership relationships beyond binary gender stereotypes. This written article serves as an academic framing, a common standard for artistic research, offering an interpretation of the video and situating the theoretical contribution. We theorize how artistic research as “writing differently” can challenge dominant forms of knowledge production

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and may support learning and leadership development with alternative, reflective, and experiential approaches and materials.

KEYWORDS

artistic research, feminine writing, film, gender, leadership, leadership development

1 | INTRODUCTION

The animated video on gender and leadership is a piece of artistic research. It deals with language and how it not only describes the world, but brings social and gendered relations into being. How we speak about something determines how we think and what we can imagine. Language creates a discourse about organizations (Billing & Alvesson, 2014; Mabey, 2013) that promotes masculinity and marginalizes female and non-binary gender identities (e.g., Burel, 2020; Fotaki & Harding, 2018, p. 15; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2020; Linstead & Maréchal, 2015). Specifically with regard to leadership, a view of leaders as white, heterosexual, cis male, and able-bodied is disseminated, marginalizing and “othering” everybody else (e.g., Gündemir et al., 2014; Rabelo et al., 2021). To illustrate and challenge these understandings, we have produced a video in collaboration with a filmmaker and a management scholar as a form of artistic research (Bell, 2019). We present an English version of an originally German film, explicitly made as an international research contribution. The format links to feminist activism and expression (Bell et al., 2019; Just et al., 2018), exploring forms of “writing” that are different from typical academic writing in organizational and management studies.

Using film to develop forms of “writing differently” responds to criticisms of mainstream forms of writing in organization studies. Scholars advocate less abstract communication for political, moral, and aesthetic reasons (Grey & Sinclair, 2006), and others explicitly challenge what they see as “masculine writing” with many parallels to masculine language in leadership. Perpetuating gendered stereotypes of rationality, rigorous method, and explicit knowledge production (Phillips et al., 2014), these approaches have been found to marginalize women's experiences and to disable men's femininity (Pullen & Rhodes, 2015, p. 87). In response, various forms of “writing differently” (Gilmore et al., 2019; Pullen et al., 2020) emerged which use personal, subjective, and creative approaches (e.g., Amrouche et al., 2018; Helin, 2020; Kostera, 2022; Pullen, 2018). Some approaches use decidedly artistic forms in organizational research to counter dominant forms of writing (Biehl-Missal, 2015; Carreri, 2022). We draw on and develop these ideas, exploring film as a medium to “write differently”.

We approach our film project as “artistic research” that includes the making of an artifact with artistic/arts-based methods in pursuit of discoveries (Bell, 2019; Leavy, 2009). Our aim is to explore the potential of artistic forms to communicate research and to encourage viewers to reflect upon and possibly re-imagine gender, leadership, and language. Film, as a distinct art form, does not only tell a “story”, but creates an “aesthetic experience” by addressing vision, hearing, and embodied perception, providing alternative opportunities to relate to, empathize with, and learn from what is presented (Biehl, 2023; Carreri, 2022). Its aesthetic form partly escapes the dilemma that we are using the medium of language to talk about language (Learmonth & Morrell, 2019, p. 57). The video hopes to promote dialog and builds community across differences. This is possible when we bear in mind that “what the arts most offers and what traditional academic writing most fails to accomplish is *resonance*” (Leavy, 2009, p. ix, original emphasis). The video is conceptualized to enable you to understand and experience the topic in an intellectual but also embodied way. We aim to facilitate a different “feeling” for or “aesthetic knowing” (Taylor & Hansen, 2005, p. 1214) about leadership, gender, and language in organizations. The film extends an invitation to not only intellectually but affectively relate to the topic (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021). We discuss how the artistic form provides an experience that may encourage us to feel with and relate to others and to imagine possibilities to speak and write differently about ourselves.

Our recommendation is that you, the reader, watch the video at this point (insert URL to mp4 file to be published on GWO website), simply “opening up” to the experience and “tuning in” emotionally. This is a common first step when engaging with artistic forms, specifically when learning with film. This is then followed by processing the experience and reflecting on it in more detail. Ideally, some of the experience is mobilized toward personal and professional insight and growth (Biehl, 2023), as a form of self-directed learning or leadership development (Vogel et al., 2021) that in this case may be critical of organizational discourses (Mabey, 2013, p. 366). In the remainder of the paper, we offer an interpretation and more context to help you move through this process. You might want to go back to the video and watch scenes again.

In the next step, you are invited to read the following section in which we summarize research on “writing differently” to situate our approach, also with regard to what is called artistic research. Then we offer some context of the production of the film, also linking to leadership and gender. Then, we describe the artistic research process and show material from preliminary stages of the video production. This is followed by the interpretation of the final film, which is an appraisal of the artistic research and the artifact (film) with regard to the theoretical contribution—a common standard of artistic research (Bell, 2019, p. 11; Rippin, 2015; Taylor, 2003). Our written text, in comparison to the film, offers less of an aesthetic impact as it did not try to create an evocative textual performance for example, (e.g., Amrouche et al., 2018), but aims to frame the research. We still write a bit “differently” in the spirit of this journal by not engaging in pseudo-technical mystification (Grey & Sinclair, 2006: 452) and not reproducing a positivist, masculinist discourse (Phillips et al., 2014). Rather, we return to possible ambiguities, allow your alternative interpretations of the film, and reflect on the difficulties, traps, and limitations that we encountered when producing this film.

We offer an analysis of the film that discusses how its elements work together to create an aesthetic experience. This should provide you with theoretical links that enable you to process the film experience in a more reflective way. This is where we encourage you to bring in your own critical assessment of visual motives, start a dialog with your own experiences, relate to, or reject what you see. Being guided by the text, you should be ready to draw your own intellectual and emotional conclusions from the film experience, and possibly take some of it forward into your own work life or academic work. We conclude with thoughts on how artistic research as a critical approach to knowledge production and a form of “writing differently” encourages and facilitates imagination, learning, and (self-) development also in the area of leadership.

2 | WRITING DIFFERENTLY AND ARTISTIC RESEARCH

The motivation to produce a film on gender, leadership, and language arose from the aim to explore ways of “writing differently” in organizational research, accessing, and investigating a topic in new ways, and finding a form to reach beyond academia to other stakeholders and the public. Artistic (or synonymously: arts-based) methods respond to critiques of mainstream academic writing as being restricted to a small circle, being aesthetically reduced, tendentious and jargon-ridden, and holding up established power relations (Grey & Sinclair, 2006, p. 445). These issues are continued by feminist scholars challenging conventional academic writing along with its masculine discourse of rationality, rigorous method, and explicit knowledge production (Fotaki & Harding, 2018). Critiques of dominant forms and styles of writing and academic knowledge production reject the normalcy of masculine vocabularies of rigor and pungent conclusiveness (Phillips et al., 2014), of “masterful, rational and penetrating masculine forms” (Pullen & Rhodes, 2015, p. 87).

Writing differently however does not seek to escape academic standards, rather its aim is “to deepen and broaden our understanding of ‘the world’ through research and theorizing in which the writing itself contributes to research and theory” (Gilmore et al., 2019, p. 5). Artistic research (Bell, 2019; Leavy, 2009) has a particular potential in this context as it is a legitimate form of inquiry. Artistic methods affect individuals as they address the senses and provide aesthetic experiences. They are suitable to convey an experience and generate a more *embodied* understanding—whilst discursive forms of writing in journal articles and books aim to represent and transfer explicit and *intellectual*

knowledge (Taylor & Hansen, 2005, p. 1214). In this way, arts-based methods go beyond mainstream texts as they can convey a more holistic understanding of and feeling for organizational life, including gender issues, and may allow us to reflect on and to “re-imagine” our embodied existence in organizations (Biehl-Missal, 2015, p. 193).

Artistic forms are congruent with critical perspectives on knowledge construction (Leavy, 2009, p. ix): They challenge dominant ideologies such as gendered organization study writings that limit what organizational researchers are allowed to produce, and restrict what readers are encouraged to understand, and delimit what students are able to learn. Commonly, these *presentational*, artistic forms—in contrast to *discursive* forms that express explicit knowledge (Taylor & Hansen, 2005, p. 1214)—give voice to subjugated perspectives and marginalized positions and human experiences, producing situated and contextual truths and moving “from rigor to vigor” (Leavy, 2009, p. 63). Following Höpfl (2000, p. 99) who has argued that “the text and, indeed, the organization, are not a place for women with physical bodies”, artistic forms can provide an opportunity to “write” differently, also with regard to gender in organizations.

The time is ripe for research to establish alternative practices of knowledge production that challenge patriarchal social formations in academic work (Bell et al., 2019). Feminist perspectives have pointed out that we need to open up language in order to imagine alternative ways to write and tell about ourselves. Finding new ways of speaking about ourselves is “a vital step toward the unfinished feminist revolution” (Fotaki & Harding, 2018, p. 32). Feminists render gendered writing open for discussion and explore different forms of expression that have the power “to affect” us to stimulate change (Pullen & Rhodes, 2015, p. 92). Artistic research seems useful to embrace plural sensual experiences of individuals in organizations as a complement to scientific rationality that has been increasingly advocated, for example, by Pullen and Vachhani (2021).

Arts-based methods, which are able to counter masculine stereotypes of rationality, rigorous method, and explicit knowledge production, have already been considered as possible extensions of “writing differently”, for example, with regard to “feminine writing” (Biehl-Missal, 2015). Included here are poetic and auto-ethnographic forms of writing and creative research notes (e.g., Amrouche et al., 2018; Boncori & Smith, 2019; Helin, 2020; O’Shea, 2019, 2022a; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008; Pullen, 2018; Sayers & Jones, 2015; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019), visual narratives and imagery, fabrics and materials (Rippin, 2015), and various kinds of performances (Biehl-Missal, 2015). For example, Carreri’s (2022) artistic installation and video on gender inequalities disseminate research findings differently, enabling empathetic sharing and conveying the affective dimension of individuals’ real life experiences. Our artistic research links to these approaches and adopts artistic inquiry as a critical perspective in a context that is described next.

3 | THE CONTEXT OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH ON GENDER AND LEADERSHIP

This project uses film as artistic research to advance our critical understanding of gender and leadership and our own identity in organizations. It is a pars-pro-toto of a broader inquiry of a university guest professorship (Brigitte Biehl) for “Gender and Queer studies in Leadership”. The overall aim was to introduce international gender research to students, in the context of German language business and leadership studies that tend to ignore gender in organizations because of a prevailing positivist, empiricist tradition (Weibler, 2022, 2023, pp. 535–551). While few gender-critical contributions can be found here, German policymakers in accordance with EU legislation reinforce efforts to advance gender equality at work (BMFSFJ, 2021) and the media are increasingly aware of discrimination (#metoo). This political nature of the research also calls for the exploration of ways to disseminate research to the public (Carreri, 2022) and to create new learning materials.

As a publicly accessible audio-visual learning material for students and for individuals who work, this video is one of eight short videos from a series of “xplain clips” on gender and leadership (<https://video.fernuni-hagen.de/Browse/Category/95>; realization: Carina Kötter and the ZLI media department of FernUniversität in Hagen; script: Brigitte Biehl), which cover the following topics: gender, language, and leadership (this video); gender stereotypes in

leadership; LGBTQIA+ and leadership; intersectionality; appearance and bodies in leadership; neoliberal feminism; female misogyny; and benevolent sexism. The choice of these topics is based on the obvious relevance to speak about gender and some videos specifically address hidden barriers for women and non-binary individuals in leadership that form a second-generation gender bias (Carli & Eagly, 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013), including neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2018), intra-gender violence (Mavin et al., 2014), and the case of women and their bodies as a spectacle (Bell & Sinclair, 2016; Mavin & Grandy, 2019).

This video was approached as a piece of artistic research with Katerina Schönfeld as a freelance animation filmmaker. Katerina was asked by Brigitte to create a film with a budget and decided to work beyond this framework and turned the project into an exploration and political contribution that meets her own feminist interest in language. The filmmaker intuitively used her medium of film to work through the topic as an artistic inquiry (Bell, 2019, p. 15), while the scholar acknowledged the potential of working with film as an aesthetic medium to challenge how we write, speak, and think about gendered organizations.

The general approach to use the medium of film draws on and links to studies that have acknowledged its potential for academic theorizing and learning. Popular culture often is ideological, but also helps to expose gendered ideology and may inspire new ideas for management theory and practice (Bell & Sinclair, 2016; Biehl, 2023; Höpfl, 2003; Pullen & Rhodes, 2013). In this spirit, film was used as a leadership learning and developmental activity for individuals with a conference on International Women's Day with the title "Beyond Wonder Woman and Superman—New Forms of Leadership in Film and TV Series" organized by Brigitte Biehl, Jürgen Weibler, the Office for Equal Opportunities and Equal Opportunities Officer of FernUniversität in Hagen. Film quotes and references were also included in written learning materials on "gender and leadership" for management students on distance-learning programs (38,000 words, Biehl, 2022) and in a public presentation.

The focus of the video on "leadership" rather than "management" or "work" resulted from the denomination of the project (gender in leadership) but works well with film and popular culture. Leadership seems to be "everywhere" and its ubiquitous use has received critique, for example, as it flatters and glamourizes people in power, promotes neoliberal ideologies, and eschews distinctions between privileged bosses and exploited workers as mere "followers" (Learmonth & Morrell, 2019). The language on leadership is seen as a discourse that brings social and gendered relations into being (Fotaki & Harding, 2018, p. 15) and guides individuals to accept unquestioningly norms that restrict their thinking and behavior (Mabey, 2013, p. 368). Rather than promoting celebratory leadership labels and lingo, for example, from a neoliberal feminist perspective in which (white) women want their piece of the capitalist cake (Rottenberg, 2018), the artistic approach is able to expose and challenge this discourse with its ideological portrayals of leadership. The film makes leadership recognizable as an embodied, gendered, emotional, and not purely rational, nor objective, nor gender-neutral practice. Opposing typical forms of academic knowledge production, its aesthetic form shows leadership as a political project to help challenge dominant discourses and practices. This video not only aims to "explain" feminist theory but to stimulate an enhanced embodied understanding of gender and language in leadership. This may inspire us to re-imagine this topic and how we see ourselves in organizations. The next section illustrates this process and the efforts we made to create such a video.

4 | THE PROCESS

We present a film and an article as an "artistic research" output, with an emphasis on creative work as a vehicle for enquiry. This is also referred to as "practice-based" research as an "original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice" (Candy, 2006, p. 1). The creative outcome in the form of a video demonstrates the academic contribution and is necessary for a full understanding, whilst the "significance and context of the claims are described in words" (Candy, 2006, p. 1). This is different from, for example, "practice-led" research which often falls within action research and conducts research *into/for* art and design, as opposed to research *through* creative arts practice (Bell, 2019). Artistic research is also different from arts and creative practice as it is not directed toward the individual's particular (artistic) goals at one point in time but seeks to add to our shared store

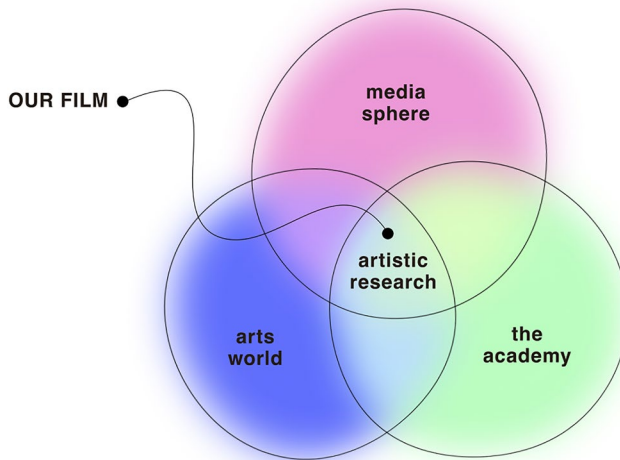


FIGURE 1 Interlocking spheres with artistic research added, following Nelson (2013, p. 24). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

of knowledge in a more general sense, including reflection and writing about it. It enhances academic practice which for long could not comprehend that arts practices can be knowledge-producing and that the practices themselves constitute a research inquiry (Nelson, 2013, p. 24). This understanding is shown by the illustration of interlocking spheres (Figure 1).

In our case, the research process is executed through the making of animated digital artwork (animated film). This artistic approach is different from much research in the dominant scientific tradition, as it enables discoveries rather than the confirmation of hypotheses (Bell, 2019, p. 15). We proceeded as follows: Having identified the *topic* as relevant with regard to the literature (here: leadership, gender, and language), we agreed on the *method* (animated film) and set ourselves some *guiding research questions* (Bell, 2019, p. 18). These can be summarized as follows: How can the film convey an understanding of gender and leadership as a product and artifact of discursive practices? Which artistic methods can the film use to invite viewers to relate to and empathize with the content? How can the film extend an invitation to re-imagine how we speak about ourselves?

Driving forward, these questions require *project planning* and subsequent *fieldwork* (Bell, 2019). With regard to film, this includes pre-production, production, and post-production, which we will discuss next.

In preproduction (script, art direction, and storyboard), the first step was to agree on a style based on the film maker's portfolio and then work on a script. The video is based on a script that was written by the academic struggling to condense a text with 3700 words (Biehl, 2022, pp. 79–88) into 750 words, which was then, in further iterations between both artistic researchers, reduced to approximately 600 words in the German version. Storyboard writing deconstructs academic writing, trying to condense thoughts and findings into brief words, but not deleting them or losing all of their nuances, rather trying to transform the main overarching ideas so that they can re-appear as moving images in the form of visuals, colors, editing, sound, or in other film techniques. Some of the central ideas in extant research revolve around non-binary ideas, expressed in the film via fluid colors, changes of forms, and continuous forms of editing. The first draft of the storyboard (Figure 2) included ideas on visual motifs (e.g., yellow: masculine discourse and blue: feminine writing) and matching image examples Brigitte took from Katerina's previous works. Both women discussed ideas in meetings and worked on drafts, with Katerina eliminating or adding text from her viewpoint as a filmmaker and concretizing visual ideas in various storyboard versions that were again edited and amended with suggestions (Figure 3). Katerina made final creative choices.

The production process included further discussions of draft versions of the films to find an agreement at points of no return in animation filmmaking, when style choices are set that then need to be continued. Exploring the topic further and further, we were able to reach a visual language that fits and that we both agreed on—and that was very



Thema: Maskuline Sprache und neuer Diskurs von „Führung“			
Szene	Bild (-ideen)	Text	Anmerkungen
1		Führung (oder Leadership) geschieht nicht nur <i>durch</i> Sprache, sondern auch <i>in</i> der Sprache. Wie wir über Führung sprechen, bestimmt auch, wie wir denken und was wir uns vorstellen können.	
2		Der Management- und Führungs-Diskurs ist ein maskuliner Diskurs oder patriarchale Sprache . Er definiert Führung als männlich und schließt Frauen, nicht-binäre und queere Personen aus, bringt sie zum Schweigen.	Das Hauptmotiv des Arguments ist dieser „ maskuline Diskurs “, der alle nicht-maskulinen Menschen ausschließt. Die Gegenströmung „ feminines Schreiben “ kommt unten. Vielleicht wäre es etwas, wenn Du diese beiden Diskurse als Strömungen visualisierst. Feminines Schreiben will aber nicht Frau gegen Mann, sondern nicht-binär sein und dieses Männliche auflösen. Wenn sich diese beiden Strömungen am Schluss vermischen (ohne 2 Geschlechter).
3		Management-Sprache <i>scheint</i> neutral, ist es aber nicht. Dazu gehört nicht-geschlechtergerechte Sprache und die hauptsächlich männliche Form wie „der Manager“ , die Frauen und nicht-binäre Personen in unserer Vorstellung von Führung verschwinden lässt.	  Das sieht schon aus wie so ein Diskurs, der in dem Fall um die Person rumgeht und sie verschwinden lässt, an den Rand drückt

FIGURE 2 First draft of the storyboard. The left column displays an early draft of the spoken text, which later is substantially shortened and revised starting at 00:01 (German: “Wie wir über Führung sprechen”—English: “How we speak about something...”). The right column shows comments that explain the theory and use colors to visualize the “masculine discourse” (yellow) and “feminine writing” (blue) which may eventually merge (green), adding screenshots from Katerina’s previous works that show fluidity. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Dieser Diskurs ist solidarisch, gemeinsam stark – etwa gegen Cyber-Bullying auf sozialen Medien, wenn viele ~~((Menschen)) einzelne weniger-Privilegierte~~ Einzelne marginalisieren. - auch in der Wissenschaft.

Ein Rahmen bildet sich um die Blumen und das Ganze erscheint als Bild/ Kunstwerk auf einer digitalen Timeline. Nasty Kommentare erscheinen an den Seiten.

FIGURE 3 Storyboard in the late stage of the process with edits and suggestions. It shows a draft of the spoken text (bold) from the video at 02:34 (“It includes solidarity, being strong together...”). The text below explains the image (“A frame surrounds the flowers, it appears on a digital timeline. Nasty comments on the sides.”). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

different from the first storyboard (Figure 2). Reaching common ground is important in joint action and Katerina acted as “a medium in a non-egoistic but subjective and personal way”. In the very early stages, she came to name this inquiry “artistic research” and then figured out that this approach already existed (Bell, 2019; Leavy, 2009)—again a beautiful moment which made sense to her. This form of inquiry—sadly—was not included in her institutional training and further professional development.

Toward the end of the production, Katerina contacted the German speaker, Maximiliane Häcke, who agreed to read the text and finalized the German version. In postproduction, the sound was added with sound effects and voice-over. This was followed by the researcher translating the German version back into an English version with approximately 470 words. The challenge that emerged was to identify and fall back onto the specific English wording that was originally used in the academic writings: for example, Höpfl referred to the “masculine order” and “symbolic order” that found a different equivalent in the German text (e.g., “männliche Vorherrschaft”), which would translate back into something else (“male dominance”). Kathleen Bomani was then approached to read the English text and she was invited to make changes from her perspective, but she decided on only minor changes. Kathleen worked with time codes and submitted several takes of the readings (under challenging circumstances while cat-sitting!). The takes eventually roughly fitted the German version so that the duration of the film images did not have to be altered drastically, so the flow remained intact.

Producing an animated film is more than writing a storyboard and handing it over to a filmmaker. It is a process which requires many artistic choices and creative decisions that are made in-between the film maker and the academic. Embracing this choice means providing a space in which things can find their form. Katerina says that a mode of collaboration was found that respected her own tempo and methods—which is different from her usual work experience in advertising where she is embedded within structures that emphasize control and directional leadership. Brigitte did not want to exercise control in line with creative leadership approaches (Mainemelis et al., 2015) that emphasize “integrating” and “facilitating” next to “directing”, along with relational forms of leadership (Biehl, 2020, pp. 87–101). In this framework, “directing” would require a clear artistic vision that professional film directors and orchestra directors have for “directing” and controlling others. “Directing” is not an approach for academics doing films, who at best can try to “integrate” into a central idea the different creative contributions (images, sound, and text) that are produced by specialized individuals. With a realistic and humble attitude, “facilitating” would fit best here, that is, providing a basis, resources, and structure for highly skilled creatives to perform and conduct the artistic inquiry together. Overall, relational approaches to leadership outlined here seem appropriate for a feminist (artistic research) project. From a social constructionist perspective, it emphasizes processes of intersubjectively creating social realities through ongoing interpretation and interaction, relating and communicating via sensual perception, and influence emerging at the interpersonal interaction level (Endres & Weibler, 2017). These relational processes involve many forms of trust in what is happening. McNiff (1998, p. 124) says that “we rarely know in advance what will emerge from artistic activity”, so the recommendation is: “Trust the process”.

Trusting the process goes hand in hand with simultaneous *reflective practice* as part of the artistic research process (Bell, 2019, p. 27). As artistic researchers, we acknowledge our subject positions and the partiality of our knowledge within ideologies and social relations. We engage with our experience to understand how this affected the development of the film product. We reflect on difficulties, challenges, and conflicts in trying to question taken-for-granted, hidden, or alternative meanings. Most of this critical interrogation takes place in the next section (interpretation). In the conclusion, we outline implications of our artistic inquiry for research and leadership development.

5 | INTERPRETATION

To discuss the film, we proceed chronologically and link film moments to theory, explaining cinematographic choices that have been made and interrogating them critically. Starting from the overall style of the film, you will notice a **color scheme** that is inspired by a metallic foil that reflects colors that appear fluid, ranging from pink to blue, including orange, yellow tones, and greens. The gendered colors of blue and pink—which once referred to boys (pink) and girls (blue) while it is the other way around today (Paoletti, 2012)—mix and change. This is intended to convey an overall feeling of elements that are not opposed or binary, but evolve when you turn them and look at them differently. The choice of pink and blue may at first sight be read as a continuation of traditional gendered colors. In the process, we discussed that this may reproduce gender binaries—something we wanted to avoid. With its colors alternating and



FIGURE 4 Film still 00:11 (“How we speak about something determines how we think and what we can imagine.”). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

changing, however, this is intended as an artistic expression of the idea of gender performativity (Butler, 1990) that does not propose natural binaries but assumes that gender is performative and socially created with people who are “doing” gender and also are “un-doing” gender. This artistic choice also opposes what Katerina reads as the “mechanics of the patriarchy” that tries to control, dominate, and separate things (e.g., genders) via strict categories—this is a visual motif that the film reiterates by continuously constructing and deconstructing lines and squares.

Overall, the style of the video gives form to a view on management and leadership studies as a “discourse” in the sense of Foucault (Billing & Alvesson, 2014; Fotaki & Harding, 2018; Mabey, 2013), not being a universal truth but a contested image of the field that is produced by power relations and reproduces them, and that is challenged and resisted. Scholars exploring “feminine writing” commonly criticize that the management discourse in books and theory tends to appear gender-neutral, objective, and disembodied—but in reality is not (Phillips et al., 2014; Pullen, 2018). It erects a masculine norm that pushes to the margins women as “the abject” (Höpfel, 2000) as well as—increasingly emphasized in recent research—non-binary people (O’Shea, 2022a), people of color (Gündemir et al., 2014), women of color (Rabelo et al., 2021), and also individuals affected by intersectional discriminations, and also white cisgender men who reject the status quo and see themselves as allies.

The **sound** of the film is created to further support the idea of fluidity and change, illustrating some of the visuals and motives such as fluid elements (water and waves), transitory elements (bubbles), and visuals (balloons and tanks).

In this context, another source of meaning is the **voice-over**. The original version is in German, read by Maximiliane Häcke (feminist podcaster and speaker; <http://www.maximilianehaecke.com>, available here <https://video.fernuni-hagen.de/Play/4077>), and this English version is performed by Kathleen Bomani (multi-disciplinary artist, curator, and agitator, and researcher on colonialism; <https://www.kathleenbomani.com>). She says, “I am an unapologetically Black woman”, and explores this topic also with regard to film (Bomani, 2022). Her voice is confident and on the paralinguistic level it contrasts with the dominant management discourse that is dominantly embodied by male and white speakers, and in international academia also often performed with Received Pronunciation (e.g., “Oxford English” as a class-based variant). Academia is white-dominated and carries further intersectional discriminations (Sahin, 2019), so other agents should have “a voice”, literally.

The **visual** elements tell a story which starts with a speech bubble that becomes a word—in this case “Führung” (leadership) which appears hard, square, and solid (Figure 4), resonating with masculine gender stereotypes and leadership as masculine. These hard and metallic elements are on one end of the spectrum of the design, with fluid elements on the other side, balancing back and forth during the film.

These strict lines are continued with a recurring visual motif of squares and lines. Katerina refers to squared paper that she struggled with at school, crossing out and over the straight and orthogonal lines during the classes already in her early educational years. The lines—that restrict how we receive and engage with knowledge—develop into architecture as a symbolic tool in organizations that commonly suggests power and stability. In this film, it

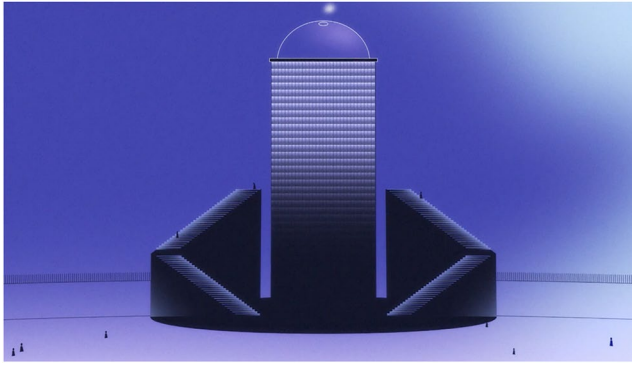


FIGURE 5 Film still 00:27 (“The management discourse defines leadership as male or white-heterosexual-male, and excludes women, non-binary and queer people, and PoC.”). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



FIGURE 6 Film still 00:51 (“Our brain only imagines a man”). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

eventually appears as a giant penis, an erection. A common symbol of the male order (Höpfl, 2014, p. 99) and the patriarchy. The “phallus” that is implicit in management and leadership theory (Fotaki & Harding, 2018) also is a recurring theme that is deconstructed and transformed visually in the film.

Another visual metaphor is the distance between the stairs and the building: Although the building looks accessible at first sight, a closer look reveals a proverbial “gap” that cannot be crossed (Figure 5). The film offers a visual continuation of metaphors for gendered discrimination at work (the glass ceiling, sticky floors, leaky pipeline, firewall, etc.) (Bendl & Schmidt, 2010) which are widespread to express barriers that are real but covert and invisible.

In an effort to access this bastion, the next argument in the video concerns the **language** about leadership that purports to appear gender-neutral, but is not. This issue may sound unfamiliar to English native speakers as they did not grow up with male, female, and neutral articles that label and gender agents. As we are based in and mainly are working from a German or DACH area (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland), the film links to the heated debate about gendered language in society and at work—that also is an issue in French and other languages. German feminists in particular advocate the use of gender-neutral forms like “Manager*in”, or alternatively “Manager:in”. This version includes female, male, and non-binary positions and also decidedly makes visible women in power positions (Burel, 2020). Linguists have found that speaking in the male-only form limits our capacity to envision other genders in these positions (Burel, 2020, p. 87) and evokes a masculine model that the filmmaker has drawn with a traditional tie, stereotypical square body, and a socially acquired habitus with a superficial coolness factor (sunglasses) (Figure 6). The topic of gender and speech was included in our conference, in the form of workshops by Simone Burel, and this topic has its own chapter in the learning materials for students (Biehl, 2022).

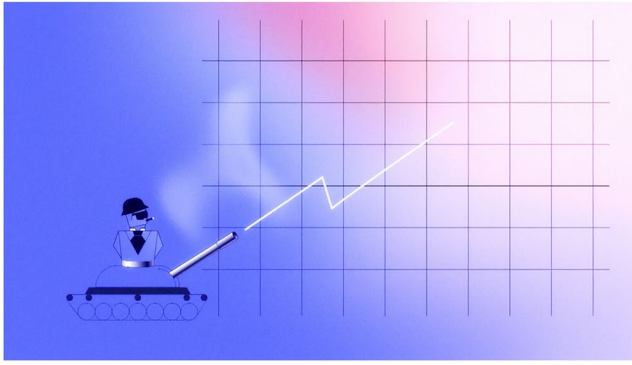


FIGURE 7 Film still 1:00 (“Almost in a military style...”). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

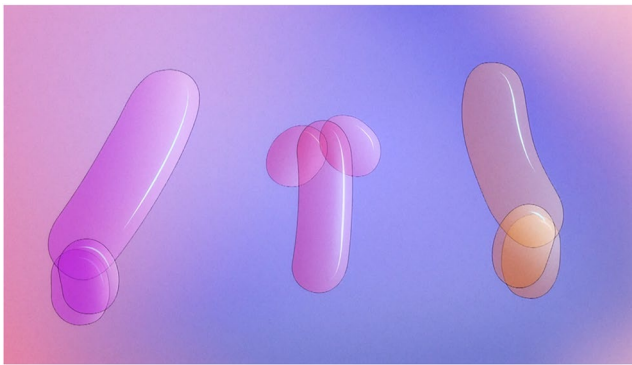


FIGURE 8 Film still 1:18 (“Being a leader means ‘having balls’...”). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

The video further illustrates how a male leader's ideal is created through **metaphors** that are common in the business jargon. Metaphors generally express and influence how we perceive the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and form part of the leadership discourse. In rhetorical analyses of top managers' public presentations (Biehl-Missal, 2011), aggressive military wording has been found along with related sports and mechanical imagery that cannot easily be used by women for the reasons of lacking social coherence (the so-called “outer aptum” in classical rhetoric). Katerina has visualized this again with a penis-reference by placing the pin-striped man in a tank, shooting up the share price (Figure 7).

Katerina has developed a particular interest in research on metaphors which are subtle (e.g., bringing people “on board”) and transitory, but powerful in shaping our imagination. She has read further literature particularly on water that is fluid, threatening stability (Svensson, 1980), and provoking a (male) desire to dominate and control. This is visualized here with the phallic ship that pinches through the surface (also a reference to Elon Musk's “space penis”). Specifically, Linstead and Maréchal (2015) have found that language in management revolves around the phallus and symbolically expresses male dominance through power and control, thus promoting a “penis-obsessed and power-hungry masculinity”. The filmmaker has visualized the phallus and the erection with balloons (Figure 8). She describes this moment as a circus-like atmosphere, exposing how ridiculous this behavior may be (before it can also become threatening). The visual metaphors provoked slight unease in one test viewer (cis male academic), who said something along the lines of the “penis” not being appropriate or necessary, and explicit amusement in another (non-binary academic). We assess the reaction of the cis male viewer as a feeling of being called-out and an embarrassment toward something that for him is not consciously present in seemingly gender-neutral organizations, preferring that it stays hidden as in other sanitized academic texts—while the film aims to expose it. Looking back



FIGURE 9 Film still 1:51 (“They are always ‘the other’, the ‘object’...”). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



FIGURE 10 Film still 1:57 (“How can I talk and write about myself...”). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

critically at the film, we see that some of these visual metaphors risk reproducing masculinity by giving them a lot of presence. However, exaggeration is an artistic choice and we liked the idea to point out a penis where we see or hear it, as Höpfl (2014, p. 99) did, as it is ubiquitous but normally implicit.

The phallogocentric discourse is further illustrated with the recurring squares and the tie as a symbol of traditional masculinity (Bolsø & Mühleisen, 2018). While these preconceptions (like the “glass slipper” as another clothing metaphor) “fit” some people, they do not fit others and the lines turn into literal chains that tie together a woman’s body. This visual moment is intended to express another critique of the dominant discourse that is “trimming”, “pulling”, and “correcting” women’s bodies and their writing like a metaphorical labiaplasty (Pullen, 2018). Other writings have described this as forcing women to “submit” themselves (Höpfl, 2000), as organizations are not a place for women and their bodies (Brewis & Linstead, 2004; Rippin, 2015, p. 121). A black frame is pressing against the non-male figure until it dissolves (Figure 9, Figure 10). This is done to raise the question of how to speak and write about ourselves that is then acoustically expressed by the speaker in the video.

The video goes on to describe, as an alternative, a nonbinary discourse with examples. An abstract impulse in the form of a veil—also highly culturally symbolic (Katerina thought of Salome’s dance with the veils)—gains momentum and passes a reference to O’Shea’s (2019) “Cutting my dick off”. We found this an exemplary and touching piece, addressing a reader’s emotions and imagination in ways different from conventional management publications as the author shares their painful process of gender affirmation. They also draw on the medium of film to explore how minority genders can be reorganized in organizations (O’Shea, 2022b), and agreed to be named in this video.

Continuing the idea of solidarity that resonates in feminist writings, the video presents the case of sexist cyber-bullying that Mandalaki and Pérezts (2021) report and which members of the community witnessed and



FIGURE 11 Film still 2:38 (“sexist cyber-bullying on social media... also in academia”). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

engaged in, for example, through reporting bullies' comments and expressing solidarity and eventually having their comments deleted on the LinkedIn platform. Some of these comments were quoted (e.g., one from a male German academic that refers to both women's articles as an “April Fool's day” joke), another one is a schematic version of hasty emotional hate speech (Butler, 1997) (Figure 11). The filmmaker chose to use vagina imagery so as to counter earlier penis imagery and referencing efforts to bring in the body and nakedness—as described in the piece that was the reason for bullying (Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2020). This resonates with flower imagery that is often used to cover up female genitalia in spoken language (Pullen, 2018, p. 124), but here metaphorically visualizes them. Assessing this critically, we see the risk of essentialist binary thinking in these visuals, as gender identity does not hinge on body parts (O'Shea, 2019). On a less binary note, this imagery refers to agricultural metaphors for leadership that let things “grow”, rather than “controlling” and “cutting” them (Linstead & Maréchal, 2015).

With a figurative personification, the video intends to illustrate in a next step the subtle hate-speech and speech of misogyny as another invisible barrier for women and minority genders in organizations (Fotaki & Harding, 2018, p. 31). German language, again, is strong here, boasting terms such as the unique and ideological “Rabenmutter” (“raven mother”) to discriminate against a woman who is a mother and yet also works—crossing boundaries and violating the historically grown distinction between the “home” (woman) and “work” (man). The term originates in the historical epoch of Nazi Germany and is still used today without reflection to stigmatize “bad” mothers who “neglect” their kids in the (egoistic!) pursuit of their careers. We have cut this in the English voice-over but you can see it in the bird-form which transforms into an animal (“Zicke”, also unique German derogatively equating women with “she-goats”, while there is no male equivalent) which equates to “bitch” in English (Figure 12).

The subsequent topic of “re-appropriation” aims to illustrate emotions linked to newly created words in the public and feminist discourse that are political (Kim & Ringrose, 2018) by pointing out power imbalance: “mansplaining”, “slut-shaming”, and “victim blaming”. These efforts to speak up and find a voice lead to the end of the video that summarizes the aim of feminist endeavors (to find a language in which women and minority genders can speak about themselves) and feminist ethics in management (solidarity and relationality) with a visual metaphor.

In the end, the penis-building has been transformed into a form that does not express a “female” opposition, but rather includes angular and round forms and different kinds of symbolic forms. It goes beyond this binary thinking—also adding the color of green to the palette—and opens up space (literally) that is populated by people (in contrast to the first architectural form i.e., not inviting and inaccessible). The video suggests that this abstract organizational space is to be filled with new ways of doing leadership and management (Figure 13). It is a space that is open for doing things together and for new possibilities. The film leaves the viewer with this image, not providing a clear solution



FIGURE 12 Film still 2:58 (“A discourse for ‘every-body’ also rejects misogynist vocabulary...”). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

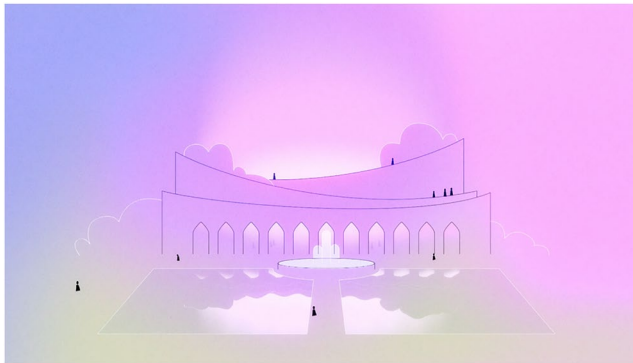


FIGURE 13 Film still 3:49 (“A form of leadership beyond binary gender stereotypes... accepts individuals on their own terms.”). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

like typical positivist research. Rather, the artistic piece of research has taken viewers on a journey through research findings, inviting viewers to relate to the topic not only intellectually, but affectively. It encourages them to continue suggestions made in the literature to go beyond binary thinking that perpetuates gender differences. The final frame of the video, with its airy composition and welcoming building, is a contrast to the first frame with the non-accessible building. It invites viewers to re-imagine what this space (or utopia) could look like and how they would need to speak and write and act to make it real.

6 | CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This article provides an academic framing of our artistic research project that is an animated video for research and leadership education and development purposes. There are implications for gender and leadership research and suggestions for future activity in the area of learning and development. With regard to research, we set out to explore “writing differently” with film from a feminist perspective in organization studies. We discussed that film can be a suitable approach as it conveys research to larger audiences and makes viewers experience insights in a way that a text cannot. Artistic research is “discovery-led” rather than hypothesis driven (Bell, 2019, p. 15) and it challenges dominant scientific traditions. It has the potential to combine intellectual insights with affective understanding, testifying that “things sensed cannot be immediately understood by us [and] that only things which are understood can be still more profoundly sensed” (JHCP collective, cited in Bell, 2019, p. 11). This is where the potential of artistic

approaches resides with regard to gender in organizations, for example, as gender can be described rationally with theory and concepts (e.g., “abjection”) but is an embodied and subjective practice that needs to be understood emotionally and affectively as well in order to engender change.

In this way, our film can be read as an encouragement and invitation to viewers to act upon the gendered order. Our video ends with an organizational space that is still to be filled with a new culture. Drawing on feminist theories and artistic practice, organizational research can assume a transformative and emancipatory role in this endeavor. Artistic forms have a particular potential to further how we may imagine this utopia as a place for an accepting and nondiscriminatory society because of their “resonance” (Leavy, 2009, p. ix) and their *modus operandi* that disrupts typical forms of knowledge production that delimit how we think and what we can imagine.

Our own artistic research activity also prompts suggestions for learning about leadership or “leadership development”. Leadership development, in a broader sense, is understood to happen across the life span and may include seminars in higher education, structured organizational development initiatives for individuals or collectives, and informal or self-directed activities inside and outside work (Vogel et al., 2021). This distinct field of practice and research is closely linked to mainstream leadership studies (Vogel et al., 2021). As outlined in our video, gender issues are routinely marginalized in this masculine discourse, which is a shortcoming in the leadership development field as well, along with a bias toward cognitive theorizing at the expense of emotion and affect-related theory and processes (Vogel et al., 2021, p. 15). In this vein, it has been argued that a different style of leadership development is needed which adopts more open-ended discursive, reflective, and experiential approaches (Mabey, 2013), including activities of learning with film (Biehl, 2023).

Our artistic research inquiry that builds on reflective practice as part of the process and the film product itself can be situated in this context. The video is designed to encourage viewers to question leadership as a product and artifact of discursive practices and to re-imagine one's own identity in relation to others and in “leadership”—which can be conceived of not solely as a position, but as a relational and embodied process in-between people. Leadership development hence should not be exclusive or elitist for senior-level employees, but can be undertaken as a personal and self-directed endeavor that does not reproduce masculine leader models, but benefits from alternative materials and guidance. Carroll and Smolović Jones (2018, p. 192) have emphasized that leadership development which “asks participants to challenge core assumptions, break existing patterns and grapple with intense identity work has a necessarily affective and imagistic quality”. Our video and this accompanying text, as learning materials, support reflection with imagery and metaphor and probe ways to complement cognitive understanding with affective understanding.

In the process of artistic research, we experienced this potential ourselves. We developed our own understanding by opening up to the film experience, accessing and reevaluating our emotional and intellectual judgments, and trying to position ourselves (Biehl, 2023, p. 136) rather than only doing intellectual exercises on the basis of the literature. Academic writing so often turns into a purely cognitive and individualistic activity, and in the process of producing a film, both authors got engaged in an activity that—like writing “as love”—is embodied, sensuous, emotional, social, and identity-related (Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018). Like many other political writing interventions, where individuals write and rewrite their stories (Amrouche et al., 2018), working with film can be conceived of and used as a self-development activity or, in our case, as a self-directed leadership development activity. Katerina, for example, expanded her insight into what she calls a deep-seated sexism in everybody's work language—including our own, when we use gendered speech (e.g., masculine metaphors) without reflecting on it, reproducing the phallogocentric order (Höpfl, 2000). The process helped her to act in more empowered ways, when she conducted critical discussions on language at work. Sometimes this was fruitful, in other cases a cis male co-worker felt attacked and aggressively refused to exchange views. Engaging with this topic in a self-directed way helped to build up practice in, for example, identifying, addressing, and negotiating gendered and sexist speech patterns at work.

This “writing differently” approach was integrated as a developmental video making activity with simple animation software into a module Brigitte taught. Students created videos on self-chosen topics of gender discrimination at work (<https://www.srh-berlin.de/en/projects/berlin-school-of-popular-arts/2022/feminist-theory-queer-stud->

ies-management/). These videos will hopefully attract views as a political initiative and feminist practice of knowledge production within and beyond academia (Bell et al., 2019), and may serve as a resource for self-directed, critical, and feminist development in the leadership field beyond formal, top-down development initiatives in organizations. We need ways of “writing” and academic knowledge production and dissemination that offer different and affective opportunities for learning and development, through “empathetic sharing” provoking “awareness, questioning, criticism, and potential change” (Carreri, 2022, p. 207).

Artistic and aesthetic approaches can help us to better empathize, reflect, and re-imagine relationships in leadership and beyond. Feminist writings on ethics frame this as an affective relationality: it is about relating to the experience of “others” with emotions in combination with intellectual insight (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021). It is about working through things, listening, experiencing common ground, and solidarity (Amrouche et al., 2018, p. 898). This idea is a central motif in the film that entices us to experience the flow, the fluidity, not the oppositions but the continuum of square and soft forms, the non-binary, and the ever-changing nature of our interactions. On the basis of extant research, the film extends an invitation to viewers to re-imagine how we speak, write, and think about ourselves and others. We can thus recommend embarking on such an aesthetic journey, without “getting people on board” (a masculine metaphor), but with an attitude that “trusts the process” (McNiff, 1998), open to others and their experience cognitively and affectively, for “developing differently” leadership and organizations.

7 | VIDEO CREDITS

Direction and realisation: Katerina Schönfeld

Script: Brigitte Biehl

Voice: Kathleen Bomani

Music and sound effect source (Creative Commons Attribution-License):

Shady Dave—Abstract (ambient loop).

<https://freesound.org/people/ShadyDave/sounds/345838/>

Anechoix—Jazz Music Loop

<https://freesound.org/people/anechoix/sounds/456797/>

Kaybren Reckland—Typing sound effect

<https://freesound.org/people/imagery2/sounds/456906/>

Garuda1982—Tank sound effect

<https://freesound.org/people/Garuda1982/sounds/541240/>

Zangrutz—Bomb sound effect

<https://freesound.org/people/Zangrutz/sounds/155235/>

Audiolarx—water bubbles

<https://freesound.org/people/audiolarx/sounds/263946/>

dobroide - wave splash

<https://freesound.org/people/dobroide/sounds/167369/>

NoiseCollector—Balloon rubbing

<https://freesound.org/people/NoiseCollector/sounds/7767/>

Lukeo135—Balloon pop

<https://freesound.org/people/Lukeo135/sounds/563197/>

original_sound—confirmation upward & confirmation downward
https://freesound.org/people/original_sound/sounds/366102/

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in FernUniversität in Hagen, Videoportal at <https://video.fernuni-hagen.de/Browse/Category/95>.

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