

Women's Leadership Communication in Project-Based Creative Organizations

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Abstract

Research on women's leadership has predominantly focused on gender stereotypes, structural barriers, and leadership challenges, while limited attention has been given to how women leaders use communication to manage organizational relationships in project-based work environments. This study examines how women leaders practice communication in managing organizational relationships within Event Organizer and Wedding Organizer organizations operating in the creative sector in Samarinda, Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach informed by a critical paradigm, data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with eleven women leaders and analyzed using Critical Thematic Analysis (CTA). The findings reveal four interconnected communication practices: building and maintaining relational connections, adapting communication across organizational relationships, managing emotional dynamics in project work, and maintaining coordination through flexible communication. These practices enable women leaders to develop trust, negotiate stakeholder expectations, sustain collaboration, and coordinate project activities across dynamic organizational environments. The study contributes to organizational communication scholarship by demonstrating

that leadership communication functions not only as a mechanism for coordination but also as a relational process for sustaining organizational relationships across temporary and continuously changing stakeholder configurations. The findings further contribute to women's leadership scholarship by highlighting how gendered expectations are communicatively negotiated through everyday organizational interactions within project-based creative organizations.

Keywords: *Creative Industries, Organizational Communication, Project-Based Organizations, Relational Leadership, Women Leaders*

1. Introduction

Project-based organizations have become an important and growing organizational form in the creative industry. Within Event Organizer (EO) and Wedding Organizer (WO) sectors, organizational activities are structured around temporary projects that require intensive collaboration among clients, vendors, creative teams, and external partners. Unlike organizations with stable structures and predictable routines, project-based organizations operate in dynamic environments where success depends on the ability to coordinate diverse actors, respond to changing conditions, and maintain productive working relationships throughout project implementation (Mallia, 2019). In such contexts, communication is not merely a supportive function but a critical organizational resource through which coordination is sustained, trust is developed, and collective efforts are organized.

The significance of communication is particularly pronounced within leadership processes. Leaders in project-based organizations are expected not only to direct work activities but also to facilitate collaboration, build trust, negotiate relationships, and maintain coordination among organizational actors with different roles, interests, and expectations. These demands are especially relevant in EO and WO organizations, where work is highly dependent on interpersonal interaction and continuous engagement with multiple stakeholders. Understanding how leaders manage organizational relationships through communication is therefore important for both scholarship and practice, particularly as the creative industry continues to expand in regional urban settings such as Samarinda, Indonesia.

Within organizational communication scholarship, leadership is increasingly understood as a communicative and relational process rather than an individual attribute (Tourish & Jackson, 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Fairhurst (2008) and Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien (2012) argue that leadership emerges through interaction, communication, and the negotiation of meaning among organizational members. In project-based organizations,

this relational view is especially relevant because flexible work arrangements require continuous adaptation to changing conditions and relationships (Yasih, 2022). Workplace relationships and interpersonal networks, therefore, become important resources for sustaining trust, coordination, and collaboration in fluid work environments (Pilatti et al., 2024).

Leadership communication, however, does not occur in a socially neutral space because gender is produced through everyday interaction and shaped by broader gender ideologies (Davis & Greenstein, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Acker (1990) argues that organizational structures, practices, and assumptions frequently reflect masculine norms, producing what she describes as gendered organizations. From a Feminist Organizational Communication perspective, gender is continuously produced and reproduced through everyday communication practices that shape how leadership is enacted, interpreted, and legitimized within organizations (Arendt & Buzzanell, 2018). Communication, therefore, cannot be understood solely as an interactional process because it is also shaped by organizational power relations and gendered expectations. These structural conditions are particularly relevant to women leaders, who must continuously navigate leadership demands while also responding to gendered expectations regarding appropriate behavior (Linabary et al., 2021). A critical perspective is therefore well-suited to examining how communication practices are embedded within broader organizational structures that influence leadership experiences.

Research on women and leadership consistently demonstrates that women leaders navigate competing organizational and gendered expectations. Eagly & Carli (2007) and Heilman (2012) show that leadership roles often require authority, competence, and decisiveness, while women are simultaneously expected to conform to norms associated with femininity, creating tensions in how leadership is enacted and evaluated. These expectations continue to influence the legitimacy and evaluation of women's leadership across organizational contexts (Kark & Buengeler, 2024). Although this body of literature provides important insights into gendered leadership experiences, it offers a limited understanding of how women actively use communication to manage organizational relationships in everyday leadership practice.

Although studies of communicative leadership, project-based organizations, and women's leadership offer valuable insights, these areas are often examined separately. Communicative leadership research tends to focus on interaction and leadership emergence, while studies of project-based organizations emphasize collaboration, innovation, and performance. Meanwhile, women's leadership scholarship has largely examined structural barriers and gender stereotypes rather than everyday

communication practices. This separation leaves an important gap in understanding how women leaders build trust, negotiate relationships, sustain collaboration, and maintain coordination within project-based creative organizations where stakeholder relationships are temporary and continuously changing.

This study aims to examine how women leaders practice communication in managing organizational relationships within project-based creative organizations. Drawing on a critical paradigm and Critical Thematic Analysis, the study explores how communication functions as a leadership practice through which organizational relationships are developed, negotiated, and maintained within gendered organizational contexts. The study contributes to organizational communication scholarship by extending discussions of communicative leadership and women's leadership toward the everyday communication practices through which organizational relationships are sustained in project-based creative work environments.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach informed by a critical paradigm to explore how women leaders practice communication in managing organizational relationships within project-based creative organizations. A critical perspective was adopted because it enables the examination of communication practices in relation to organizational structures, relational dynamics, leadership expectations, and social assumptions that shape leadership experiences (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2014). The critical paradigm informed both data collection and analysis by directing attention to how communication practices were shaped by organizational relationships, leadership responsibilities, and broader social expectations operating within project-based work environments.

The study was conducted within the Event Organizer (EO) and Wedding Organizer (WO) sectors in Samarinda, Indonesia. These sectors were selected because they represent project-based work environments characterized by flexible organizational structures, dynamic team configurations, intensive interpersonal coordination, and ongoing interactions with clients, vendors, and other stakeholders. Such characteristics provide a relevant context for examining leadership communication practices within organizational settings.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015). The criteria required participants to hold leadership positions, such as owner, founder, director, project manager, or team leader, within EO or WO organizations, actively lead teams and projects, have at least two years of leadership experience, and be willing to participate in an in-depth interview. Leadership status was verified through participants'

organizational positions and their descriptions of project management responsibilities during recruitment and interviews. Only participants who actively managed teams and project implementation were included in the study.

Based on these criteria, eleven women leaders participated in the study. Interviews were conducted until thematic saturation was achieved. Saturation was determined when no substantially new communication practices, relational patterns, or interpretive insights emerged from the interview data (Patton, 2015). During the analysis, recurring themes related to trust building, relationship management, coordination, communication adaptation, and stakeholder interaction consistently reappeared across participant accounts. Saturation was initially observed after the ninth interview, and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and consistency of the emerging themes, resulting in a final sample of eleven participants.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method enabled participants to reflect on their leadership experiences and describe their communication practices in detail. The interview protocol included open-ended questions concerning communication with team members, clients, vendors, and other organizational actors, as well as strategies used to build trust, sustain collaboration, manage emotions, and coordinate project activities. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and lasted between 35 and 70 minutes, with an average duration of approximately 49 minutes. All interviews were conducted individually, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Because the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and the article is presented in English, selected quotations were translated into English by the researcher and subsequently reviewed against the original transcripts to ensure semantic consistency and preserve participants' intended meanings.

Data were analyzed using Critical Thematic Analysis (CTA) developed by Lawless & Chen (2019). CTA was selected because the study sought not only to identify recurring communication practices but also to examine how those practices contributed to the development and maintenance of organizational relationships within project-based work environments. The analysis was conducted through two stages. The first stage involved open coding guided by the criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness proposed by Owen (1984). This stage facilitated the identification of recurring communication practices, shared experiences, and relational patterns across participant accounts.

The second stage involved critical coding to examine how communication practices were enacted within everyday organizational

interactions. Particular attention was directed toward how participants navigated authority relations, managed stakeholder expectations, adapted to organizational norms, and responded to gendered assumptions encountered in everyday leadership interactions. Data segments were systematically examined to identify how participants described decision-making processes, expectations regarding leadership behavior, and experiences associated with women's leadership. Codes were compared across participants to identify recurring relational dynamics and communication practices. The critical orientation of the analysis distinguished this stage from conventional thematic coding by directing interpretive attention toward structural conditions, including power dynamics, organizational norms, and gendered assumptions, that shaped how communication was enacted and experienced. The resulting codes were subsequently refined and organized into broader themes following the thematic analysis procedures outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). Figure 1 presents the complete research workflow, from initial problem identification and literature review through participant recruitment, data collection, Critical Thematic Analysis procedures, member checking, interpretation of findings, and conclusion development.

The researcher's positionality was considered throughout the study. As a female researcher with prior experience in the Event Organizer and Wedding Organizer industry, the researcher possessed contextual familiarity and access to participants. To minimize potential interpretive bias, reflexive practices were employed throughout the research process, including repeated transcript review, analytic memo development, and regular supervisory discussions regarding coding decisions, theme development, and interpretation of findings. These procedures supported critical reflection on the researcher's assumptions and their potential influence on the analysis.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed source triangulation and member checking (Patton, 2015). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing experiences across participants occupying different leadership roles and organizational backgrounds. Member checking was performed by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to verify that the analysis accurately represented their experiences and intended meanings.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process. This study did not require formal institutional ethical review under the regulations governing non-clinical social science research at the time of data collection. Informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and participants' right to withdraw were maintained throughout the study. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews were conducted. Participant identities were

anonymized through coded identifiers, and all research materials were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

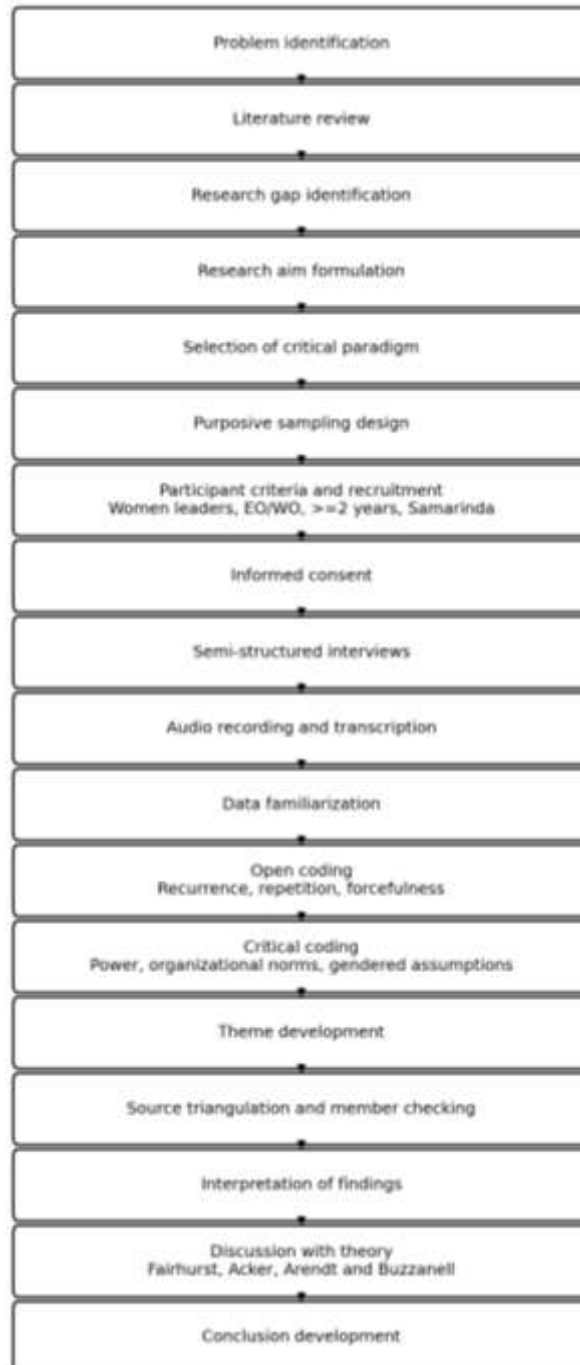


Figure 1. Detailed Research Procedure and Critical Thematic Analysis Workflow.

3. Results

Analysis of the interview data identified four interconnected communication practices through which women leaders managed organizational relationships within project-based creative organizations. These practices were evident in participants' interactions with team members, clients, vendors, and other organizational actors throughout project implementation. Collectively, the findings indicate that communication functioned not only as a mechanism for coordinating work activities but also as a relational process through which trust, collaboration, and organizational cohesion were continuously developed and maintained.

Table 1 presents a comparative overview of the four communication practices identified in the study, including their defining communication strategies, gendered and power dynamics, and organizational implications.

Table 1. Women's Communication Practices in Managing Organizational Relationships

No.	Theme	Communication Practice	Gendered / Power Dynamics	Organizational Implications
1	Building and Maintaining Relational Connections	Trust building, active listening, personal engagement, kinship-based interaction, and post-project communication	Relational closeness strengthens trust but may blur professional boundaries and create expectations of emotional availability	Facilitates collaboration, commitment, and stakeholder engagement
2	Adapting Communication Across Organizational Relationships	Audience-oriented and situational communication, style modification based on role, age, and context	Requires continuous negotiation of authority, legitimacy, and stakeholder expectations. Younger leaders face additional	Enables cooperation across diverse actors and project settings

No	Theme	Communication Practice	Gendered / Power Dynamics	Organizational Implications
3	Managing Emotional Dynamics in Project Work	Emotional regulation, reassurance, conflict mediation, indirect criticism, humor as a relational tool	legitimacy challenges Reflects gendered expectations that women remain calm, supportive, and emotionally available. Includes contradictory evaluations of assertiveness	Sustains collaboration and relational stability under organizational pressure
4	Maintaining Coordination Through Flexible Communication	Adaptive coordination, briefing and expectation alignment, situational responsiveness, and direct intervention during crises	Concentrates relational and communicative burdens on leaders to offset scarce organizational buffers	Supports project continuity and organizational effectiveness across shifting stakeholder configurations

Source: Compiled by the authors (2026)

Figure 2 illustrates how relational connections, adaptive communication, emotional management, and flexible coordination work together to support organizational relationship management in project-based creative organizations.

Women's Leadership Communication in Project-Based Creative Organizations



Figure 2. Women's Leadership Communication in Project-Based Organizations. Source: Developed by authors based on research findings (2026)

3.1. Theme 1: Building and Maintaining Relational Connections

Building and maintaining relational connections emerged as a central communication practice through which women leaders managed organizational relationships in project-based creative organizations. Across participant accounts, organizational relationships were not primarily sustained through formal authority or hierarchical control. Instead, participants emphasized interpersonal closeness, trust, familiarity, and ongoing communication as important foundations for collaboration. Relationships were developed not only with team members but also with clients, vendors, family members, and other actors involved in project implementation.

Several participants described that organizational relationships were initially built through pre-existing personal networks, including family and friendship ties. These relationships frequently became the foundation for team formation and facilitated cooperation during project implementation.

"Kami kerja berdasarkan kedekatan. Jadi isinya adalah keluarga dan teman-teman."

"Kami kerja berdasarkan kedekatan. Jadi isinya adalah keluarga dan teman-teman."

We work based on closeness. The team consists of family members and friends. (INF01)

Kinship language was also frequently used in everyday organizational interactions, reflecting the integration of personal and professional relationships within project-based work.

"Aku nyebutnya adik-adik karena memang kebetulan di WO ini kebanyakannya sepupu-sepupu juga yang jadi tim kita."

I call them younger siblings because most of the team members in this organization are actually my cousins. (INF03)

These findings indicate that organizational relationships were often grounded in interpersonal familiarity and kinship-based connections. Such relationships enabled participants to establish trust more quickly and to foster a sense of collective responsibility within project teams. Beyond kinship ties, participants described trust as something that was continuously maintained through communication, including active listening, openness, and personal engagement.

"Aku lebih banyak mendengar." I listen more. (INF04)

Organizational relationships also extended beyond formal interactions with clients. Participants frequently described maintaining communication with clients' family members, bridesmaids, groomsmen, and vendors whose cooperation shaped project outcomes.

"Kita membiasakan tuh tidak hanya klien yang kita service. Sampai ke tante dan yang lain-lain. Ke bridesmaids sama groomsmennya."

We not only serve the clients. We also communicate with their relatives, bridesmaids, and groomsmen. (INF05)

However, relational communication also produced tensions. While interpersonal closeness strengthened trust and collaboration, it could blur professional boundaries and generate additional relational demands. One participant reflected on the risks associated with highly familial organizational cultures.

"Jangan dicampur sama masalah pribadi. Dua jamnya masalah pribadi, lupa kerjanya apa."

[Do not mix personal problems with work. People can spend hours discussing personal issues and forget what work needs to be done.] (INF11)

From a critical perspective, relational communication operated as both an enabling and constraining leadership resource. While it strengthened trust and collaboration, it also created emotional obligations and expectations of personal availability beyond formal leadership responsibilities. This reflects a pattern identified in feminist organizational communication scholarship, in which women leaders' relational labor is often treated as natural rather than recognized as skilled communicative work (Arendt & Buzzanell, 2018; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Thus, managing organizational relationships required women leaders not only to cultivate trust but also to negotiate relational boundaries that sustained professional accountability.

2. Theme 2: Adapting Communication Across Organizational Relationships

Adapting communication across organizational relationships emerged as a central practice through which participants managed interactions with team members, clients, vendors, and other organizational actors. Participants consistently described the need to modify communication styles according to the characteristics, expectations, and roles of different stakeholders. Rather than applying a single leadership approach, communication was adjusted to accommodate diverse interpersonal dynamics and organizational demands encountered throughout project implementation.

Several participants explained that communication with clients required flexibility and sensitivity to individual preferences.

“Kalau klien sendiri kita fleksibel aja. Saya lebih ke kasih rekomendasi, membuka opsi.” With clients, we try to remain flexible. I usually provide recommendations and offer different options. (INF09)

“Beda treatment. Kalau klien perempuan lebih banyak mendengarkan. Kalau klien laki-laki, lebih lembut memperlakukannya.” The approach is different. With female clients, I spend more time listening. With male clients, I use a softer approach. (INF10)

Participants also reported adapting communication when interacting with team members, adjusting strategies based on individual personalities, experience levels, and working styles.

“Tergantung kepribadian mereka masing-masing. Disesuaikan.” It depends on each person's personality. I adjust accordingly. (INF11)

Likewise, WR described communication adaptation as an ongoing leadership responsibility.

“Gaya komunikasi itu menyesuaikan dengan siapa yang aku hadapi.” *Communication style needs to be adjusted according to whom I am dealing with. (INF10)*

Communication adaptation functioned as a relational strategy that enabled leaders to maintain cooperation, reduce misunderstanding, and facilitate coordination among organizational actors with diverse expectations. Communication flexibility was particularly important in project-based environments where team compositions, client demands, and stakeholder relationships frequently changed from one project to another.

From a critical perspective, communication adaptation was not a neutral interpersonal competence. Participants had to negotiate authority, stakeholder expectations, and organizational pressures while maintaining productive relationships. Their communication choices were shaped by differences in role, age, experience, and social position. Younger leaders, in particular, adapted their communication when interacting with older clients or institutional stakeholders who questioned their competence or legitimacy. However, these pressures were not experienced equally, as leaders with stronger professional reputations reported fewer legitimacy challenges. Adaptive communication, therefore, functioned not merely as an interpersonal skill but as a strategy for navigating organizational power dynamics and sustaining leadership legitimacy across diverse stakeholder configurations.

3.3. Theme 3: Managing Emotional Dynamics in Project Work

Managing emotional dynamics emerged as another important communication practice through which participants sustained organizational relationships within project-based work environments. Participants described emotional management as an ongoing aspect of leadership communication that involved calming tensions, maintaining interpersonal harmony, addressing conflict, and supporting collaboration among organizational actors. Given the time-sensitive and highly interactive nature of event projects, leaders frequently encounter emotionally charged situations involving clients, team members, vendors, and family representatives.

Several participants emphasized the importance of maintaining emotional stability during periods of organizational pressure.

"Kalau itu setenang mungkin sih. Cari opsi solusinya." I try to remain as calm as possible. My focus is on finding solutions. (INF09)

"Ngebuat kritikan itu tidak seperti kritik. Seperti memberikan saran." I present criticism in a way that does not feel like criticism. More like offering suggestions. (INF06)

Participants frequently used humor, reassurance, and emotional support to reduce tension and maintain collaboration during demanding project situations.

"Sering diselingi humor biar tidak terlalu tegang." Humor is frequently used so that situations do not become overly tense. (INF07)

Participants also described absorbing emotional pressures from multiple stakeholders, effectively positioning themselves as organizational buffers during high-stress situations.

"WO ini bisa disebut sebagai tameng." The wedding organizer often becomes a shield. (INF09)

From a critical perspective, emotional management was not solely a project requirement but was also shaped by gendered expectations surrounding women's leadership. Several participants described experiencing expectations to remain calm, patient, approachable, and emotionally supportive even under organizational pressure. These expectations produced contradictory evaluations of their communicative behavior.

"Kalau kita terlalu lembut, dikira menggoda orang. Kalau kita agak tegas, dikira marah."

If we are too gentle, people assume we are flirting. If we become firmer, people assume we are angry. (INF08)

"Mau vokal salah. Agak merendah, salah juga."

If I am outspoken, it is considered wrong. If I become more modest, it is also considered wrong. (INF11)

These contradictory evaluations illustrate a double bind in which women leaders cannot achieve a communicatively neutral position. Their emotional expression is always evaluated against gendered norms that define both excessive softness and assertiveness as problematic. While

emotional management is documented in general leadership scholarship as a component of emotional intelligence, the present findings suggest that for women leaders in project-based organizations, emotional management carries an additional regulatory burden shaped by gendered organizational expectations. Women leaders were expected to manage not only the emotions of others but also the interpretation of their own communicative behavior, a form of invisible relational labor that extended well beyond the formal requirements of project coordination.

3.4. Theme 4: Maintaining Coordination Through Flexible Communication

Maintaining coordination through flexible communication emerged as a crucial practice through which participants managed organizational relationships across project activities. Participants described coordination not merely as the transmission of information but as an ongoing communicative process that enabled diverse organizational actors to align expectations, responsibilities, and actions. Given the temporary and dynamic nature of project-based work, leaders frequently coordinated teams, clients, vendors, and external stakeholders whose involvement varied across different project stages.

Several participants emphasized the importance of clear communication in coordinating team activities and preventing misunderstandings during project implementation.

"Ada briefing dulu. Kita make sure dulu mereka paham." We conduct briefings first. We make sure everyone understands their responsibilities. (INF09)

"Yang penting semua orang tahu apa yang harus dikerjakan."

The important thing is that everyone understands what needs to be done. (INF01)

Participants also described coordination as requiring ongoing communication with multiple stakeholders whose interests and expectations often differed.

"Kalau kita pasti cari titik tengahnya."

We always try to find a middle ground. (INF08)

Coordination also frequently involved responding to unexpected changes and situational demands, requiring leaders to adjust communication rapidly.

"Kalau udah hectic, datangin langsung."

When things become hectic, I approach people directly.
(INF07)

Across participant accounts, coordination emerged as a collective accomplishment produced through ongoing communication rather than through formal authority alone. Leaders frequently acted as connectors who facilitated information exchange, clarified expectations, resolved misunderstandings, and maintained collaboration among organizational actors.

From a critical perspective, maintaining coordination was not without structural consequences. Communication flexibility supported collaboration, but it also transferred significant relational responsibilities onto leaders. Participants were expected to remain accessible, responsive, and adaptable across multiple stakeholder relationships simultaneously. In practice, leaders often became the central point through which information, expectations, complaints, and project demands were managed and absorbed. This concentration of communicative responsibility is consistent with feminist organizational communication scholarship that identifies the disproportionate assignment of relational and coordinative labor to women as a gendered organizational pattern. (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). The findings, therefore, suggest that coordination in project-based organizations cannot be understood solely as a managerial function. It emerged as a relational communication practice through which participants continuously negotiated responsibilities, stakeholder expectations, and organizational demands that were unevenly distributed.

These findings indicate that coordination depended not only on procedural communication but also on leaders' ability to negotiate diverse expectations and maintain productive working relationships. Communication flexibility enabled participants to align multiple organizational actors whose priorities, responsibilities, and perspectives were often different.

3.5 Interrelationship Among Communication Practices

The findings indicate that the four communication practices identified in this study operated as an interconnected process rather than as separate leadership behaviors. As illustrated in Figure 2, building and maintaining relational connections provided the foundation for adapting communication across organizational relationships and managing emotional dynamics in project work. These practices then supported flexible coordination by enabling women leaders to align expectations, respond to stakeholder differences, manage tensions, and sustain cooperation across changing project conditions. Together, relational, adaptive, emotional, and coordinative communication functioned as an integrated mechanism through which women leaders managed organizational relationships,

strengthened trust, and maintained project continuity in project-based creative organizations.

4. Discussion

4.1 Managing Organizational Relationships Through Communication Practices

The findings indicate that women leaders managed organizational relationships through an integrated set of communication practices comprising relationship building, communication adaptation, emotional management, and flexible coordination. Rather than functioning as independent leadership behaviors, these practices operated as an interconnected communication process that enabled participants to establish trust, negotiate stakeholder expectations, maintain collaboration, and sustain project implementation across diverse organizational relationships.

These findings are broadly consistent with communicative leadership perspectives that view leadership as emerging through interaction rather than positional authority, particularly in the work of Fairhurst (2008) and Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien (2012). However, the present findings extend this framework by showing that leadership communication in project-based organizations involves not only meaning construction but also the maintenance of relational continuity. While previous frameworks emphasize discourse and interaction within relatively stable organizational settings, this study shows that women leaders in project-based creative organizations must continuously rebuild trust, sustain relationships, and coordinate stakeholders across temporary and changing project configurations.

This dimension of communicative leadership, which might be described as relational continuity work, receives comparatively limited attention within existing frameworks. Previous studies have examined how leaders communicate to direct, motivate, and align organizational members, but they have given less attention to how leaders communicate to repeatedly re-establish trust, rebuild relational foundations, and coordinate new organizational relationships across project cycles. The findings, therefore, suggest a need to extend communicative leadership scholarship toward project-based contexts where the relational conditions of leadership are structurally temporary rather than stable. Communication in these settings functions less as a mechanism for reinforcing established relationships and more as a mechanism for continuously constructing them.

The study also demonstrates that the four communication practices did not operate independently. This finding is consistent with relational and shared leadership perspectives, which emphasize leadership as a socially embedded and collectively enacted process (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011;

Fletcher & Käufer, 2003). Ruben & Gigliotti (2017) and Barge (2019) have shown that leadership communication involves practices such as relationship building and coordination, yet such practices are often treated as analytically discrete. The present findings suggest that in project-based organizations, these practices are functionally interdependent. Relational trust established through the first practice creates the conditions for effective communication adaptation in the second. Adaptive communication, in turn, supports the emotional management required in the third. Emotional management sustains the relational stability necessary for the flexible coordination described in the fourth. This interconnected structure suggests that leadership communication in project-based settings should be conceptualized as a systemic relational process rather than as a set of separable skills or behaviors.

4.2 Communication, Gendered Expectations, and Women's Leadership

The findings further indicate that organizational relationship management was shaped not only by project demands but also by gendered expectations surrounding women's leadership. Participants frequently described situations in which they were expected to demonstrate authority and decisiveness while simultaneously remaining approachable, emotionally supportive, and relationally attentive. Such expectations influenced how participants communicated with clients, team members, vendors, and other organizational actors.

These findings are consistent with Feminist Organizational Communication scholarship. Ashcraft & Mumby (2004), Arendt & Buzzanell (2018), and Linabary et al. (2021) argue that women leaders often encounter competing expectations regarding leadership behavior and gender performance. Previous studies have examined these dynamics primarily in relation to leadership legitimacy, leadership evaluation, and career advancement in formal organizational settings. The present findings confirm that similar tensions exist within project-based creative organizations, where the informal and relational character of work creates additional spaces in which gendered expectations operate.

However, the present findings extend this literature in a specific way by demonstrating that gendered expectations are not confined to formal evaluations of leadership effectiveness. Instead, they are continuously negotiated through the routine, everyday communication practices associated with organizational relationship management. Trust building, emotional regulation, conflict management, stakeholder engagement, and coordination were each shaped by gendered expectations regarding appropriate behavior for women leaders. This indicates that the reach of gendered organizational structures extends into the smallest units of everyday communicative interaction, a finding that supports Acker's (1990) argument that gendered organizations reproduce inequality not through

isolated discriminatory acts but through accumulated and normalized practices.

Importantly, participants' experiences were not uniform. While several participants reported explicit experiences of gender-based assumptions and challenges to leadership legitimacy, others described relatively limited direct experiences of gender-related barriers. This variation suggests that the impact of gendered expectations is mediated by contextual factors, including organizational position, professional reputation, experience, age, and stakeholder composition. These findings complicate generalized assumptions regarding women's leadership by demonstrating that gendered organizational experiences are contextually variable rather than uniformly distributed. This finding is consistent with intersectional approaches to gendered organizing that highlight how multiple social positions shape the conditions of leadership (Linabary et al., 2021).

4.3 Extending Understanding of Project-Based Creative Organizations

The findings demonstrate that communication occupied a central role in enabling collaboration within project-based creative organizations. Participants consistently described project implementation as requiring continuous interaction among changing teams, clients, vendors, and external stakeholders. Communication, therefore, functioned as a mechanism through which trust was established, expectations were negotiated, emotional tensions were managed, and coordination was sustained throughout project implementation.

These findings are consistent with studies that describe project-based organizations as dynamic environments requiring collaboration, flexibility, and coordination (Mallia, 2019; Pilatti et al., 2024). However, previous studies have mainly focused on collaboration outcomes, project performance, and temporary organizational structures, with limited attention to communication as a relational leadership practice. This study extends that discussion by focusing on women leaders' communicative experiences and showing how relational dynamics are shaped by power and gendered expectations. Communication, therefore, emerges not merely as a supporting managerial activity but as a central organizing mechanism.

The temporary nature of project-based work creates relational uncertainty because teams, clients, vendors, and other stakeholders frequently change across projects. This condition requires leaders to repeatedly rebuild trust, communication patterns, and organizational relationships. It produces project-based relational precarity, in which organizational continuity depends on leaders' capacity to sustain relationships across shifting stakeholder configurations. Unlike economic precarity, this concept refers to the recurring communicative labor required to reconstruct relational foundations in each project cycle.

The study's qualitative critical approach enabled a closer examination of everyday relational negotiations that are less visible in research focused primarily on organizational structures or project outcomes. This perspective contributes to project-based organization scholarship by demonstrating that communication is not merely a tool for project execution but the primary mechanism through which organizational relationships are established, sustained, and renewed across temporary and continuously changing stakeholder networks.

4.4 Alternative Interpretations and Contextual Considerations

Although relational communication generated important organizational benefits, the findings also suggest potential challenges associated with relationship-centered leadership practices. Interpersonal closeness, family-like organizational cultures, and ongoing emotional support frequently strengthened trust and facilitated collaboration. Nevertheless, excessive relational closeness occasionally blurred professional boundaries, increased emotional obligations, and created additional relational expectations. These findings indicate that relational communication should not be interpreted as universally beneficial; its effectiveness appears to depend on leaders' ability to balance interpersonal connection with organizational accountability.

Similarly, communication adaptation emerged as both an organizational resource and a source of additional demands. While communication flexibility facilitated relationship management, it also concentrated communicative responsibilities on leaders who were expected to remain responsive and adaptable across multiple stakeholder relationships simultaneously. An alternative interpretation of the findings is that the communication practices described by participants reflect not only effective leadership strategies but also adaptive responses to organizational conditions that systematically place greater relational and communicative burdens on women leaders. What appears as an individual communicative skill may also be understood as a structural response to gendered organizational demands that would be experienced differently by leaders whose authority is less frequently questioned.

These alternative interpretations highlight that communication practices should be understood not only as sources of organizational advantage but also as forms of relational work requiring continuous effort and carrying unequal costs depending on the organizational position and social identity of the leader.

4.5 Practical Implications

The findings provide several practical implications for project-based creative organizations. Leadership development initiatives should recognize communication as a core organizational competency and not solely an interpersonal skill. Training programs may benefit from

strengthening leaders' capabilities in relationship building, adaptive stakeholder communication, emotional management under project pressure, and flexible coordination across changing team configurations. For EO and WO organizations specifically, this may include developing structured communication protocols for managing multi-stakeholder expectations during high-pressure event phases and creating peer support networks that reduce the concentration of relational labor on individual leaders.

Organizations should also acknowledge the relational and emotional demands associated with leadership positions in project-based work. Because leaders frequently serve as intermediaries between clients, teams, vendors, and external stakeholders, organizations may benefit from developing shared role clarity that distributes relational responsibilities more equitably rather than assuming that communication management falls entirely within the individual leader's domain.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of organizational awareness regarding gendered expectations that shape how leadership communication is evaluated. Organizations and supervisors may benefit from critically examining the assumptions that influence how assertiveness, emotional expression, and relational behavior are judged differently for women and men in leadership positions.

4.6 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focused exclusively on women leaders working within EO and WO organizations in Samarinda. The findings reflect experiences situated within a specific organizational and geographical context, and the extent to which they are transferable to other industries, cities, or cultural settings remains an open question. The relational and informal organizational culture characteristic of EO and WO work in Samarinda may amplify the salience of the communication practices identified, which could appear differently in more formally structured creative organizations or in different national contexts.

Second, the study relied primarily on interview data. Although interviews provided rich insights into participants' reflective accounts of their communication practices, future research may benefit from incorporating observational methods or organizational documents to examine communication practices as they occur within organizational settings, which may reveal dynamics that are not fully accessible through retrospective self-report.

Third, the study explored only the perspectives of women leaders. Future research could compare communication practices across women and men leaders to identify whether the practices identified are specific to women's leadership or more broadly characteristic of project-based organizational settings. Future studies could also investigate stakeholder

perceptions of leadership communication to examine whether participants' communicative strategies are received as intended.

Future studies may also explore how organizational size, project complexity, digital communication technologies, and cultural contexts influence organizational relationship management. Such research would contribute to a broader understanding of leadership communication across diverse project-based organizational environments.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that women leaders manage organizational relationships within project-based creative organizations through an interconnected set of communication practices involving relational connection, communication adaptation, emotional management, and flexible coordination. Rather than functioning as separate leadership behaviors, these practices operate as an integrated communication process through which trust is built, stakeholder expectations are negotiated, collaboration is sustained, and project activities are coordinated across dynamic organizational environments.

This study contributes to organizational communication scholarship by extending communicative leadership theory to project-based contexts, where leadership communication functions as a mechanism for sustaining relational continuity across temporary stakeholder configurations. The concept of relational continuity work offers a useful lens for examining organizational settings in which relational foundations must be repeatedly constructed. This study also contributes to women's leadership scholarship by showing that gendered expectations are negotiated not only through formal leadership evaluation but also through everyday communication practices in organizational relationship management.

The findings also have implications for research on project-based organizations by introducing the concept of project-based relational precarity, which refers to the ongoing communicative labor required of leaders who must repeatedly establish trust and rebuild relational foundations across project cycles. This concept extends existing scholarly discussions of project-based work beyond structural and performance dimensions toward the relational and communicative conditions that enable organizational continuity.

Practically, the findings suggest the importance of recognizing communication as a core leadership competency in project-based creative organizations, developing organizational support mechanisms that distribute relational labor more equitably, and critically examining the gendered assumptions that shape how leadership communication is evaluated. Future research should examine these dynamics across broader organizational and cultural contexts, compare women and men leaders,

and employ longitudinal or observational approaches to develop a more complete understanding of how organizational relationships are communicatively negotiated across different project-based work environments.

This study is limited to women leaders working within the EO and WO sectors in Samarinda, Indonesia, and relies primarily on interview data. These limitations affect the extent to which the findings may be generalized to other organizational settings, cultural contexts, or methods of inquiry, and they define an agenda for future comparative and longitudinal research.

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