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Alive and well: the manifestation of zombie leadership in the arts

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ABSTRACT

Leadership in the arts is a priority for governments, professional bodies and organisations. Cultural policies and strategies highlight its importance, training programmes build leadership capability, and institutions recruit leaders believed essential for organisational success. Yet the sector has a predilection for outdated leadership ideas. The arts remain wedded to narrow, elite models that sustain a leadership 'industry' while failing to address the sector's real needs. We examine this issue through a case study of 'zombie leadership' in the arts–notions about leadership that persist despite having been discredited (Haslam et al. 2024). Our study of field and organisational cases reveals disproved leadership ideas are evident in policies, programmes, and practice. We also found authentic and distinctive approaches to leadership. Shared and co-leadership, alongside growing recognition of the value of leaders with lived experience, may discount zombie notions of leadership. Our research offers insights that guard against ineffective ideas about leadership.

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Arts leadership; zombie leadership; dual leadership; lived experience

Introduction

The concept of zombies–the reanimation of the dead–comes from Haitian folklore. A fascination with the 'undead' has not only influenced popular culture (Christie and Lauro 2011) but also shaped academic literature. Quiggin (2012) introduced the concept of 'zombie economics' in reference to ideas about economic theory that refuse to die despite substantial evidence of their failings. Similarly, Haslam, Alvesson and Reicher introduce the concept of 'zombie leadership' in reference to ideas about leadership that prove particularly 'hard to kill' (2024, p. 1). This article examines zombie leadership in the arts; ideas about leadership that steadfastly refuse to die, despite an overwhelming body of evidence highlighting their inadequacies (Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher 2024). In doing so, we consider the research question: *How does zombie leadership manifest at the field and organisational level in the arts and cultural sectors?*

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Zombie leadership risks undermining the progress and impact of this practice. As Haslam et al. note, zombie leadership 'simplifies a knotty social process while at the same time legitimising the privileges of social elites and the leadership industrial complex that supports them' (2024, p. 1). Since its publication in 2024, Haslam, Alvesson and Reicher's work has been cited extensively by critical leadership scholars. It has been used to study the omission of power in leadership research (Biygautane and Clegg 2025); the use of lies and mistruths by leaders (Alvehus 2025); and a lack of confidence in the self-identity of leaders (Bachkirova and Jackson 2024). Zombie leadership has been examined in a range of industries and across both the public sector (for example Schneider et al. 2024; van der Woerd and van der Scheer 2025) and the commercial sector (for example Avby et al. 2025; Stephenson and Bolden 2025).

The investigation of zombie leadership is equally valuable in the arts. Evidence suggests the negative consequences of outdated ideas about leadership impact the sector. Indications of ineffective leadership constraining the sector and reinforcing structures of inequality include: labour market failures (Comunian and England 2020; Pennington and Eltham 2021; Shaughnessy et al. 2022); entrenched workforce inequalities (Banks 2017; Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2025); bullying, harassment and unsafe work cultures (Coate, Eltham, and Verhoeven 2023; Nisbett, Walmsley, and McDowell 2025; Support Act 2022); and resistance to change along with difficulty aligning with the sector's values and expectations (Johanson et al. 2025; Kershaw, Glow, and Goodwin 2022).

Despite indications that zombie leadership contributes to longstanding issues in the arts, there has been limited critical study of leadership and its impact (Enoch 2014; Goodwin 2022; Hadley 2024; Price 2016). This current research addresses this gap through a case study of zombie leadership in government and professional bodies (macro or field level case) and arts organisations (meso level case). Using critical discourse analysis we examine cultural policies, leadership programmes, strategic plans and job advertisements for leadership roles. We find that in the arts sector zombie leadership (Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher 2024) is thriving. The focus on individual leaders ignores followers and their motivations and disregards the achievements of collectives.

We also found evidence discounting zombie leadership. The prevalence of co-leadership and dual leadership arrangements in the arts sector (Reid and Fjellvær 2022; Reynolds, Tonks, and MacNeill 2017), predicated on collaboration and shared authority, challenges the discredited assumption that leadership lies with a single individual. There is also increasing emphasis on recruiting leaders with lived experience. However, this focus may inadvertently re-establish zombie leadership; background and culture become a new elite and essential leadership attribute while overlooking shared, relational, or follower-centred leadership practices (Crevani 2015).

This article opens with an overview of arts leadership research, then defines the concept of zombie leadership and its eight axioms. Next, we outline our methodology and case study research design. Third, we present and discuss our findings using our novel categorisation of zombie leadership axioms. Finally, we consider opportunities for future research.

Literature review

Leadership in the arts

Leadership research has a legacy spanning more than a century. During this time leadership theory has reflected the cultural and social values of the era (Goethals, Sorenson, and MacGregor Burns 2004). Leadership is currently understood to be a social process that involves motivating followers to contribute to the achievement of collective goals through processes that are relevant to the context of the activity (Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher 2024; Liden, Wang, and Wang 2025).

Academic interest in arts leadership has grown since the 1990s and coincided with the emergence of the arts management field (Evrard and Colbert 2000). Early research into arts leadership explored the intersection of creativity and leadership (Bilton 2007, 2010; Caust 2006) and the role of the entrepreneurial arts leader (Chang and Wyszomirski 2015; Rentschler and Geursen 2004). The COVID-19 pandemic brought renewed attention to leadership in the arts (Keeney and Jung 2023) and recent political and social crises have raised concerns about leadership in arts governance (Adler 2025; Eltham 2025; Goodwin 2026). Evidence suggests the arts and cultural sector prioritises individualised approaches to leadership. Normative leadership models–designed to guide leaders on how to behave in certain situations–have been the focus in the arts, with particular attention to charismatic and transformational approaches (Abdullah and Varatharajoo 2017; Cray, Inglis, and Freeman 2007; Nisbett, Walmsley, and McDowell 2025; Xu et al. 2022).

A key theme in arts leadership research is the prevalence of dual, co- or shared leadership. This distinctive feature of the arts has led to investigation of leadership from a structural perspective (Caust and Goodwin 2022; Järvinen, Ansio, and Houni 2015; MacNeill and Tonks 2009, 2013; Reynolds, Tonks, and MacNeill 2017). Co-leadership research has examined the artistic–managerial divide and the use of co-leadership to balance creative and administrative logics. Dual leadership is common with structures formally separating artistic vision from operational or financial management, often pairing an artistic director with an executive or managing director (MacNeill and Tonks 2013; Reid and Fjellvær 2022).

Research into dual leadership has also examined authority and power. Rather than operating as a simple division of labour (co-operative leadership), effective co-leadership relies on ongoing negotiation, mutual trust, and clarity around decision-making (Denis, Langley, and Sergi 2012). Authority in artistic co-leadership arrangements is often fluid rather than fixed, shifting according to context, expertise, and organisational needs (Uhl-Bien 2006). Dual leadership in the arts requires relational and communicative leadership. It relies on strong interpersonal relationships, frequent communication, and alignment of values between leaders (Caust and Goodwin 2022; MacNeill and Tonks 2009).

Zombie leadership

Zombie ideas are those that remain influential despite having been disproved or discredited. The notion of zombie leadership was introduced by Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher (2024) to account for ideas about leadership that remain popular and in use despite having been discredited by research. These leadership myths proliferate and

Table 1. Zombie leadership axioms.

Axiom #	Description
1. Leadership is all about leaders	The focus is on individual leaders (their traits, behaviours, and decisions) rather than on relationships, followers, groups, or context.
2. There are specific qualities that all great leaders 'have'	Certain inherent traits (charisma, intelligence, vision, etc.) set leaders apart from others.
3. There are specific things that all great leaders do	There are universal 'right actions' or behaviours that all effective leaders perform.
4. We all know a great leader when we see one	Leadership excellence is obvious, intuitive, or instantly recognizable.
5. All leadership is the same	There is a single, general phenomenon of leadership with the same principles applying across all settings.
6. Leadership is a special skill reserved for special people	Leaders are elite and exclusive, and these roles are only those who are 'cut out"' for it.
7. Leadership is always good and good for everyone	Leadership is inherently beneficial and good leaders always produce good outcomes.
8. People can't cope without leaders	Groups always require leaders to function; without them, chaos would ensue.

remain, not due to empirical support but because they appeal to the leadership 'industry' and maintain institutional and cultural status quo. Zombie ideas oversimplify the concept of leadership, focusing on individual leaders and neglecting the role of followers. In doing so, zombie leadership ideas privilege those in positions of power and marginalise collaborative action. The eight axioms on which zombie leadership rests (Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher 2024) are summarised in Table 1.

The zombie axioms are significant because of their potential to undermine progress and weaken the practice of leadership. Discredited notions of leadership carry four costs (Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher 2024): (1) failure to recognize and reward ordinary people; (2) alienation and demotivation of group members; (3) damage to leaders by inducing narcissism and complacency; and (4) reduction in productivity and the health of groups and society.

Previous scholarship suggests the arts bear the costs of discredited ideas about leadership. Failure to recognise and reward the efforts of ordinary people is suggested by recurring patterns of disadvantage impacting arts workers who are not white, able-bodied, middle- to upper-class, and male (Banks 2017; Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2025). Despite numerous policy efforts to address this issue, the number of cultural workers from working class backgrounds has in fact fallen (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2025). Alienation and de-motivation of artworkers is indicated by labour market failures and the inability of arts workers to achieve sustainable livelihoods (Comunian and England 2020; Pennington and Eltham 2021; Shaughnessy et al. 2022). The combination of precarity and inequality has created fertile ground for unsafe work environments (Coate, Eltham, and Verhoeven 2023; Nisbett, Walmsley, and McDowell 2025; Support Act 2022). Leaders themselves can be the source of damage and reduced productivity.

Perhaps the strongest indication that the arts are impacted by outdated leadership ideas is the level of innovation and vibrancy in the sector. Evidence suggests the sector is resistant to change, and unable to align practice with cultural policy priorities or the values of workers. Ideas about leadership that are not context-specific or authentic to the arts suggest the influence of New Public Management (henceforth NPM) which assumes the value of private sector management practices when applied to the public sector (Hood 1991; Kann-Rasmussen 2024). NPM draws on management tools and theories

prevalent in the private manufacturing sector to argue for improvements in the management of public organisations (Osborne et al. 2014). More recently, NPM has been replaced by New Public Governance (henceforth NPG), which instead recognises the distinctive nature of public administration and the need for solutions to its 'wicked' problems (Kann-Rasmussen 2024; Osborne, Radnor, and Nasi 2013). A feature of NPG is its focus on collaboration as a mechanism for innovation. NPG seeks out diverse perspectives in decision-making, due to the belief that a diversity of voices is key to innovation (Kann-Rasmussen 2024). However, evidence suggests the arts struggle to undertake the sort of collaborative practice required by NPG (Glow, Kershaw, and Reason 2021; Kershaw, Bridson, and Parris 2018; Lynch and Alberti 2010)

Methodology

This research presents a case study of leadership in the Australian arts sector. We undertook a multiple-case study that examines leadership in the arts at the macro (field) level and the meso (organisational) level using critical discourse analysis (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002; Kim 2024). Our case study design and data sources are outlined in Table 2.

Organisational case

Arts leadership at an organisational level is examined through job descriptions for executive and senior management positions. These job advertisements were collected from the predominant Australian online newsletter for the arts and creative industries. Our data comprise a comprehensive sample of senior management roles advertised in a 12-month period from May 2023 to May 2024. This sample of 59 job advertisements includes all roles posted under the categories of 'CEO & general management' and 'Senior management' during the 12-month period (Table 3).

Table 2. Case study design and associated data sources.

Overall case study Multiple case design	Leadership in the Australian arts and cultural sector	
	Case 1: Field/macro perspective	Case 2: Organisational/meso perspective
Data sources	Data sources—Policy, strategy and programmes: • National and state cultural policies = 5 • National leadership programme guidelines = 1 • National professional body strategies = 5	Case 2: Job advertisements ($n = 59$) Embedded case data sources: (a) Venues = 20 job advertisements (b) Performing arts = 17 (c) Visual arts = 6 (d) Literature = 5 (e) Museum/ gallery = 5 (f) Festival = 3 (g) Community arts = 3

Table 3. Profile of job advertisements ($n = 59$).

Job role	Target audience/ participants
• CEO/Manager = 43 • Specialist function (e.g. marketing manager) = 11 • Artistic director/ creative producer = 4 • CEO/ artistic director = 1	• General public/audience not specified = 37 • Focus on a specific community (CACD organisation) e.g. First Nations or regional community = 22

These job advertisements were posted by organisations that target the general public as well as organisations with a remit to specific audiences and participants. Organisations with a target audience are generally committed to cultural development and authentic, diverse cultural expression (Lemasson 2015). In Australia, a focus on specific target groups is often aligned with socially engaged art practice and termed Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) (Creative Australia 2025). Of the 59 job advertisements examined in the organisation case, 37% were for CACD or First Nations arts organisations. The profile of arts organisations and leadership roles included in this sample of job advertisements is outlined in Table 3.

Our analysis of job advertisements recognises that recruitment is more than just the processes involved in attracting and selecting candidates for existing job openings (Breaugh and Starke 2000). Recruitment in an arts context is often distinct from practice in larger organisations in other sectors. Hiring often involves social contacts and recruitment is built on relationships rather than on a model of sourcing, screening, and selection using knowledge and educational credentials (Alacovska and Gill 2019; Grugulis and Stoyanova 2011). Advertising arts jobs can be a compliance measure masking the fact sourcing and selection draw on existing knowledge of potential candidates (Ashton 2015; Banks 2017; Eikhof 2017). Often described as the hidden job market, this relationship-based recruitment practice is hard to quantify but often recognisable (Careers Success Australia 2024).

Although recruitment may involve flawed practices, job advertisements remain a valuable tool for the study of leadership. Advertisements illustrate expectations about competence and leadership behaviours and identify how employers determine who is a legitimate leadership candidate. They affect potential applicants' willingness to apply, as they reflect organisational attitudes and provide an indication of the organisation's values and approaches, including unconscious bias or discriminatory practice (Mahjoub and Kruyen 2021). Job advertisements explicitly and tacitly communicate attitudes and preferences for particular styles, models, or approaches (Gaurav 2022). While there is limited arts-specific research into job advertisements and recruitment, De Cooman and Pepermans (2012) found nonprofit workers place importance on the values and intrinsic work motivators presented in job advertisements.

Field case

By 'field level', we refer to the notion of an organisational field as used in institutional theory–the collective that constitutes a recognised area of institutional life and is comprised of government, regulatory agencies, suppliers, consumers, and like organisations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The structures within an organisational field provide an arena through which organisations interact and collectively present themselves to themselves (Greenwood, Hinings, and Suddaby 2002) while also influencing or constraining organisations within their sector (DiMaggio 1991).

The field case is examined through the analysis of national and state government cultural policies, professional body strategies and government-run leadership programmes. These policies, strategies, and leadership programmes were sourced through desk research. The study involves a comprehensive analysis of policies, strategies, and programmes at the time of publication.

Cultural policy impacts on arts leadership because, as Hadley (2024) acknowledges, policies shape the context in which leadership occurs. Similarly, Price considers the reciprocal relationship between 'cultural policy' and 'cultural leadership' highlighting that cultural leaders within organisations are under 'pressure to demonstrate a connection with the 'positive' tradition of cultural policy discourse and by doing so to reinforce the values associated with it' (Price 2017, p. 53).

Leadership development programmes involve building an individual's skills to lead and manage others in order to achieve strategic objectives (Carroll 2015). This work has largely focused on *leader* development, aiming to enhance the personal competencies, skills, and attributes of individual leaders (Collins 2002; Iles and Preece 2006). Leadership development programmes are usually functionalist and instrumental, focusing on a 'toolkit approach' designed to build capability and achieve organisational goals (Nicholson and Carroll 2013). However, critics argue that this traditional model is limiting because it tends to decontextualise leadership and is frequently rooted in Western, white, and male-centric frameworks (Iles and Preece 2006).

Professional bodies are organisations led by experts in a specific sector with the aim of advancing the interests of their members and the standards of their field. While these organisations have potential for both reform and conservatism (Greenwood, Hinings, and Suddaby 2002) they are largely recognised for maintaining professional practice rather than encouraging innovation (DiMaggio 1991).

Data analysis

Our analytic strategy involved critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA); a process of investigating linguistic features that reflect the social relationships and structures that determine social beliefs and norms (Kim 2024). CDA rests on a foundation of 'understanding of the nature and sources of social wrongs' (Fairclough 2023, p. 15) which aligns with underlying principles of zombie leadership and their detrimental impact on the arts and cultural sector. By examining policies, strategies, and job advertisements, we interrogate the genres that communicate how leadership is constructed, authorised, and circulated. This approach was relevant because policymakers and organisations influence (whether positively or negatively) the propagation of zombie leadership by shaping who are imagined as *fit to lead* arts institutions. Additionally, job advertisements shape expectations for candidates around behaviours and ways of belonging within organisations (Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher 2024). Policies, strategies, programmes, and job advertisement are all genres that reflect and help construct and normalise institutional and managerial priorities and ideal worker leadership identities, similar to other human resource practices such as leadership development (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Jorgensen and Phillips 2002).

Two phases of data analysis were undertaken. Data was first analysed thematically using the axioms of zombie leadership identified by Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher (2024). This involved coding lexical choices according to a theoretical framework to identify (a) confirming and (b) discounting evidence of zombie leadership. Data were then reanalysed to identify presupposition and implicature, the information that was perceived to already be true, what is taken for granted and what the reader is required to understand when reviewing these genre materials (Sbisà 2021). This emergent analysis of data was designed

Table 4. Codenames of data sources and embedded case studies.

Case 1: Field	*Codenames*
Government cultural policies (state and federal)	CP1-CP5
National creative industries leadership programme	LP1
Professional body strategies	PBS1-PBS5
Case 2: Organisation	*Codenames*
Embedded cases (subsectors in the arts)	
Venues	V1-V20
Performing arts	PA1-PA17
Visual arts	VA1-VA6
Literature	L1-L5
Museum/ gallery	MG1-MG5
Festivals	F1-F3
Community arts	CA1-CA3

to 'break open' the theoretically coded data and explore alternative meanings or constructs (Bazeley 2013). Theoretical and emergent coding of the data was jointly undertaken by the research team through a process of negotiation (Bazeley 2013).

The individual data sources for each of the case studies were given codenames to ensure anonymity (Table 4). These codenames were designed to identify the relevant case (organisational or field) and the nature of the data source. For the job descriptions, the codenames also note the arts subsector of the recruiting organisation.

Limitations

While case study research can be criticised for its lack of generalisability, this current study instead aims for qualitative research that enables depth of investigation through detailed descriptions (Fitzgerald and Dopson 2009; Flyvbjerg 2006). The use of two cases with multiple data sources enables the triangulation of findings (Bazeley 2013) while also minimising bias in the data through the collection of 'counter-bias' or neutral positions (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2010). The risk of ideological bias and focus on negative aspects of discourse was mitigated by collaboration of the researchers (Bazeley 2013).

We acknowledge discourse analysis is not sufficient in itself for analysis of the wider social practice in relation to zombie leadership, since the latter encompasses both discursive and nondiscursive elements (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002). However, at a field level, leadership discourses affect recruitment, funding decisions, professional development, and sector culture. While job advertisements, inherently focused on individuals, provide a 'vocabulary of leadership' to potential candidates and the sector (Den Hartog, Caley, and Dewe 2007). By focusing on the field and organisational levels, we demonstrate how zombie leadership ideas help shape the arts ecosystem and impact individual behaviours and beliefs.

Findings and discussion

Evidence confirming or discounting zombie leadership axioms in the arts

In introducing zombie leadership, Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher (2024) acknowledge that they portray its axioms in their strongest form. Our data provides nuance to the ways

these ideas manifest in practice. Our analysis resulted in a high level of duplicate coding to one or more of the eight axioms, leading us to propose the axioms can be grouped into three categories: a) the focus on individuals and their attributes; b) the elite and ubiquitous nature of leaders; c) the essential value of leaders. The following presentation and discussion of our findings is structured according to this categorisation of the zombie leadership axioms.

We found the arts sector is influenced by zombie notions of leadership. There was evidence of the zombie leadership axioms in both the organisational and field cases. Table 5 summarises our findings including the categorisation of zombie leadership axioms and evidence confirming or discounting zombie leadership in the organisational and field cases.

A focus on individuals and their attributes (axioms 1–3).

Zombie leadership axioms 1 to 3 focus on outdated ideas about the individual leader, their central role in discourse, who they are and what they do. By grouping these three axioms, we consider how the cases focus on leaders rather than the relational concept of leadership and the qualities, traits, and behaviours leaders are expected to exhibit.

In the organisational case, we found evidence confirming zombie axioms 1 to 3 across all arts subsectors (embedded cases). The job advertisements sought the agency of individuals, but with little attention to relationships, followers, groups, or context (axiom 1). For example, a venue looked to hire an 'experienced … leader who can set and fulfil a dynamic and expansive agenda for [arts organisation] while comfortably pursuing strategic, creative and financial opportunities' (V12). The solo nature of leadership was also suggested by a venue that sought someone with 'Demonstrated capability to formulate, articulate and implement a curatorial vision and translate it into reality through leadership, authority, judgement, and flexibility' (V1). Neither of these quotes acknowledges the role of followers.

A largely homogenous set of leadership qualities (axiom 2) were identified in the organisational case. The five traits most frequently associated with arts leaders were visionary (found in 27 job advertisements), dynamic (21), passionate (17), entrepreneurial (15), and socially networked (14). When looking at combinations of these terms, 81% of job advertisements sought 'dynamic,' 'visionary,' or 'passionate' individuals regardless of organisational context, reinforcing the belief that leadership traits are universal.

The organisational case similarly reveals patterns in the behaviours expected of arts leaders (axiom 3). The top five behaviours required of arts leaders were strategic thinking (found in 53 job advertisements), relational skills (53), communication skills (47), flexibility/adaptability (42) and collaboration (36). In many cases, the behaviours required of leaders were conflated into a single criterion, such as 'Strong communication and relationship management skills with experience working collaboratively with boards, artists, funding bodies and external partners' (V1).

Evident in the organisational case is the lack of context and work specificity in the qualities and behaviours sought in arts leaders. Who the leader is (axiom 2) and what they do (axiom 3) is not contextualised in job advertisements. It is assumed that leaders in all locations, working in all-sized organisations and all art forms, need to be the same and behave in the same way.

Despite some confirmation of axiom 1, there was significant evidence disputing the notion of leaders working independently and alone. The prevalence of shared and co-

Table 5. Summary of zombie leadership findings in the organisational and field cases.

		Confirmation of zombie leadership		Discounting of zombie leadership		
Category	Axiom #	Organisational case	field case	Organisational case	Field case	Notes
A focus on individuals and their attributes	1. Leadership is all about leaders	Some evidence	Not evident	Evident	Some evidence	Discounted by co-leadership structures
	2. There are specific qualities that all great leaders have	Evident	Not evident	Not evident	Some evidence	
	3. There are specific things that all great leaders do	Evident	Not evident	Some evidence	Some evidence	Discounted by behaviours needed for co-leadership roles
The elite and ubiquitous nature of leaders	4. We all know a great leader when we see one	Evident	Not evident	Some evidence	Some evidence	Discounted in CACD sectors
	5. All leadership is the same	Evident	Not evident	Some evidence	Some evidence	Discounted in CACD sectors
	6. Leadership is a special skill reserved for special people	Evident	Some evidence	Some evidence	Evident	Discounted in CACD sectors
The essential value of leaders	7. Leadership is always good and good for everyone	Evident	Evident	Not evident	Not evident	
	8. People can't cope without leaders	Evident	Evident	Not evident	Not evident	

leadership arrangements in the arts, as well as the influence of boards and management committees, challenges leadership as an individual activity. Co-leadership was often built into organisational structure, as evidenced in the job advertisement requiring 'experience in co-leading an organisation with an Executive Director or similar' (V1). Governance arrangements also lead to shared leadership as evidenced in 'reporting to the Board, the CEO will work closely with the Artistic Director to execute the Board's vision and strategy (L3)'. Joint leadership was acknowledged in the field case in the description of arts leadership as, 'when you practice leadership, you behave in line with your values. . . . Sometimes you do this on your own and sometimes with others' (LP1). We expand on the impact of co- and dual roles on arts leadership below.

The discounting of axiom 1 also impacted on the behaviours expected of leaders (axiom 3). The emphasis placed on collaborative behaviour was linked to governance structures and co-leadership arrangements. For example, a literature organisation noted, 'you will work collaboratively with the Artistic Director under the Board's supervision' (L3). The behaviours required of leaders in dual roles was detailed in the job advertisement for a venue as follows:

> In 2021, the role of Director was rebirthed as a two-person Co-Directorship model. The Co-Directors have both individual and shared operational responsibilities, requiring close collaboration … The model strives to provide longevity, with specialist knowledge and skills collectivised, enriched, and held accountable across two positions. (V9)

The elite and ubiquitous nature of leaders (axiom 4–6).

Zombie leadership axioms 4–6 focus on leadership as an elite activity reserved for exceptional individuals. In this way, leadership is instantly recognisable and takes a common form in all settings. By grouping these axioms, we highlight the universal qualities of zombie leadership. Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher (2024) describe this as a sense of 'leadershipness' that can be discerned across all contexts.

The organisational case provided evidence confirming zombie leadership axioms 4 to 6 across all arts subsectors (embedded cases). The elite and ubiquitous nature of leaders manifested as intangible attributes that conferred leadership status on individuals (axiom 4) and consistency in the language used to describe leadership (axiom 5). There was evidence in both cases of excellence in leadership being immediately recognisable (axiom 4), such as Performing Arts organisation seeking an 'outstanding artistic director to lead the organisation's artistic vision' (V1) or a regional arts organisation seeking an 'exceptional CEO' (PA7). The qualities sought in leaders were often vague and nonspecific, suggesting that these are inherently understood (axiom 4) and the same across contexts (axiom 5). For example, a literature organisation required: 'Demonstrated strategic thinking, *personal leadership qualities* and political acumen required to navigate and negotiate complex partnerships and collaborations' (L1, emphasis added) suggesting that these leadership qualities are instantly recognisable. The language used to describe leaders was consistent across the 59 job advertisements, with the most commonly cited leadership qualities appearing frequently.

If leadership is consistent across all contexts (axiom 5) and reserved for special people (axiom 6), then there is an expectation that those who have been in leadership positions are the ones 'cut out for it.' Arts workers who had already joined the 'exclusive, extraordinary and expensive' leadership club (Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher 2024, p. 2) were

often the preferred candidates, 36 (62%) job advertisements explicitly requesting 'experienced leaders,' who possess 'proven track records,' or the specification of a minimum number of years of senior/executive experience.

The field case illustrated little confirming evidence of zombie axioms 4–6; however, there was some support for the elite status of leaders. For example, CP1 notes the policy 'builds on the proud legacy of Prime Ministers Gough Whitlam and Paul Keating, both champions of culture who recognised the vital role of the arts in developing national identity, social unity and economic success', suggesting these politicians were singular forces leading in the arts context.

Evidence discounting zombie notions of leadership for axioms 4–6 was found in both the field and organisational cases. This discounting evidence was largely associated with CACD organisations. These organisations sought distinctive arts leaders who reflected the cultural background or lived experience of the communities they targeted. For example, one venue noted it: 'strongly encourages applications from First Nations people, people with disability (sic) and people of all ethnicities, genders and orientations' (V8). A visual arts organisation reported:

> As a community-focused organisation, we look to prioritise people who have a strong connection to Western Sydney, First Nations, and people of colour. Local knowledge, cultural competency and being multilingual will be valuable to your success. We welcome applications from people with disabilities and the LGBTIQA+ community. (VA5)

In the field case, a focus on lived experience includes a policy that noted 'through our consultation, we heard that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts, creativity and cultural leadership must be prioritised and extended'. The same commitments were made in a professional body strategy that notes:

> Equity and Inclusion: Growing focus on and need for diversity, equity, and inclusion, with more initiatives aimed at increasing representation of First Nations, culturally diverse, and d/Deaf and d/Disabled artists and arts leaders. (PBS5)

The field case acknowledges that leaders might not be immediately apparent and that leadership takes many forms. The government-delivered leadership programme, for example, provided a particularly detailed and nuanced critique of notions of leadership:

> When you practice leadership, you behave in line with your values. You draw on your resources, experience, knowledge and skills to act ethically and create change. Sometimes you do this on your own and sometimes with others. It might happen in different parts of your arts practice, with organisations you work in or with, or audiences and communities you are connected to. Your leadership practice might be quiet, not always visible from the outside, or you might be very vocal and public in your advocacy. . . . You may find the word 'leadership' challenging or uncomfortable. We acknowledge that for some people, this word has negative associations with control and feels lonely. (LP1)

We expand on the impact of lived experience on arts leadership below.

The essential value of leaders (axioms 7–8).

Zombie leadership axioms 7 to 8 focus on leadership as a universal good which is essential to achieve success. By grouping these two axioms, we consider the valuable nature of leadership and its positive associations.

These were the most strongly supported axioms across both cases. We found only confirming evidence of these notions of zombie leadership. There was no evidence discounting zombie notions of leadership as being universally good or essential for success in either the organisational or field case.

In the organisational case, evidence confirming the positive influence of arts leaders (axiom 7) was broad in scope, extending to staff, board, government, stakeholders, artists and audiences/communities. For example, the head of a venue was expected to 'lead the organisation and bring . . . artists, creatives, and audiences into its incredible spaces' (V5). A community arts organisation sought a 'versatile and highly organised leader to build strong relationships with artists, staff and the local community to help them achieve their goals' (CA1).

In the field case, confidence in the positive and universal good of leadership (axiom 7) was demonstrated through a leadership programme which announced, 'In this program we want to explore leadership as a practice dedicated to creating positive change' (LP1). Similarly, a state government cultural policy committed to investing in leadership to 'sustain a high level of creative achievement, growth and state-wide employment opportunities' (CP5).

No evidence contradicted the 'zombie' assumption (axiom 7) that leadership is universally beneficial in either the organisational or field cases. Job advertisements, cultural policies, policy documents, and leadership programmes consistently framed leadership in a positive manner. We note, however, that the use of job advertisement to examine our organisational case is impacted by the rhetoric used given their role as a branding tool. However, beyond their use for candidate attraction, job advertisements simultaneously describe and construct the nature of leadership in the arts.

The influence of leaders in the arts was also framed as essential for success (axiom 8). The organisation case presented leaders as essential to the impact and sustainability of organisations and the vitality of the arts sector more broadly. Leaders were needed to ensure the longevity of arts organisations, such as 'maintain the momentum while continuing to consolidate our long-term sustainability' (V3) or lead the organisation into an 'exciting new chapter, following a bold 38-year history' (L4). Leaders were essential for the growth of organisations, for example required to take an 'already strong organisation to new levels' (VA1) or 'promote excellence in the performing arts and enrich the cultural life of the community [during an] exciting new chapter of growth and development' (V7).

In the field case, the need for leaders to ensure the success of the creative sectors was evident in the state policy which argued, 'Now, more than ever, [state's] creative industries need *certainty and clear leadership* to overcome adversity and to be the driving force at the centre of [state's] future prosperity (CP5) (emphasis added). A strategic priority for a professional body was:

> Leadership development and support: Equip current and aspiring leaders with the skills, knowledge and resources needed to effectively lead teams, projects and organisations. For example, through training in management, people skills, strategic planning, organisational leadership, fair hiring practices, addressing unconscious bias, business acumen and fundraising; mentorship and peer learning opportunities for emerging leaders; leadership pathways for underrepresented groups; and flexible leadership models including job-sharing. (PBS2)

Some governments and professional bodies claimed their own leadership role in contributing to the success of the arts [PBS5, CP2, CP3, CP4, CP5] suggesting zombie leadership can manifest at the level of institution as well as individuals. There was no evidence discounting the zombie notion that leadership is essential for success (axiom 8) in either the organisation or field cases. The job descriptions, cultural policies, strategic plans, and leadership programmes leadership all presented leadership as being of essential value.

The impact of co-leadership on zombie notions of leadership

Our case study provides evidence discounting the notion of leadership as a singular activity (axiom 1) and that all great leaders behave the same (axiom 3). The prevalence of co- or dual leadership structures in many arts organisations means leadership does not reside in one individual. Additionally, arts leaders are influenced by the vision and needs of boards. Zombie leadership (axiom 3) is therefore partially discounted because the behaviours of arts leaders are context-specific, emphasising the need for collaboration and sharing authority. These shared leadership arrangements may arise structurally or through close working relationships, and are common in the arts (Caust and Goodwin 2022; MacNeill and Tonks 2013; Reid and Fjellvær 2022; Reynolds, Tonks, and MacNeill 2017).

While dual or shared roles may reduce a focus on individuals (axiom 1), it is not sufficient to 'inoculate' against other zombie axioms. The benefits of co-leadership include a separation of artistic and operational responsibility and the potential to share the cognitive and emotional load that can contribute to leader burnout (Caust 2018). For organisational success, however, co-leadership requires individuals operating within it to *collaborate* rather than *coexist*. Collaboration emerges through interdependent stakeholders who work constructively through their differences, share ownership of decisions, and take collective responsibility for future directions (Chew 2013). There is a difference between individuals who collaborate, engaging in activity toward a shared vision, and those who cooperate, working in parallel with individual accountability (Reynolds, Tonks, and MacNeill 2017). A cooperative relationship may, in fact, provide space for two zombie leaders to co-exist and thrive, whereas a collaborative relationship addresses behaviours and space between individuals that may reduce the tendency toward zombie leadership. For co-leadership to succeed there must be an alignment between the structural requirements of the role and the leadership behaviours that support them.

Despite the prevalence of dual leadership and collaborative governance, our study suggests recruitment processes give inadequate attention to the leadership characteristics and behaviours needed to work in these contexts. Zombie leadership axioms 2 to 6 remain evident across the arts, despite the discounting of ideas about leadership being a singular activity (axiom 1). Success within a co-led organisation structure requires an alignment of individual qualities and behaviours with organisational structures, accountabilities, and collaborators, and it is these desired behaviours that are absent within current job advertisements. These findings may shed light on industry accounts of failed dual and co-leadership models (Antrobus 2023; Australian Leisure Management 2025; Bailey 2025).

Lived experience as a reconstruction of zombie leadership

Both the organisational and field cases provided evidence discounting the zombie leadership axioms we categorise as the 'elite and ubiquitous nature of leadership' (axioms 4 to 6). Rather than seeking a generic and universal type of leader, government and arts organisations emphasised the need for leaders with lived experience. In the field case, the need for diverse leadership was highlighted by the leadership programme (LP1), cultural policies (CP1, CP3 and CP5) and professional body strategies (PBS1, PBS2, PBS3, PBS5). In the job advertisements, many organisations (particularly CACD organisations) sought to recruit leaders who reflected the cultural background or lived experience of their target communities.

This attention to lived experience provides a critique of typical approaches to leadership in the arts. The historic lack of diversity within arts leadership leads to a focus on issues of access and inclusion. For example, one government policy noted the need for 'Development opportunities for young leaders that drive more inclusive and representative creative industries boards. Now is the time to prioritise First Peoples arts, cultural and creative leadership, driven by self-determination' (CP5). A professional body identified one of its strategic outcomes as 'Diverse participation and leadership in the sector increases' (PBS5).

This identification of unique and distinctive leaders, however, does not necessarily discount all zombie leadership axioms. It may be little more than an additional overlay of difference and act as a reduction of Haslam'Reicher, and Platow's argument that 'To lead us, leaders must represent "us"' (2025, p.124). Specifying the need for leaders from diverse backgrounds suggests community members intuitively bring inherent leadership knowledge – and neglects to recognise the broader context-specific skills and behaviours required of leaders. This approach also fails to acknowledge the culturally constructed notion of leadership and that leadership might be limited to inherited roles and have cultural rather than management significance (Mika and O'S Oullivan 2014).

While the desire for arts leaders with lived experience challenges some zombie notions, it can simultaneously reinforce zombie leadership ideas. The leaders with lived experience sought by organisations and the field manifest the same assumptions in our zombie leadership themes: a) a focus on individuals and their attributes; b) the elite and ubiquitous nature of leaders; c) the essential value of leaders. These findings suggest a focus on lived experience can serve to re-establish zombie notions of leadership.

The re-emergence of zombie leadership in the form of lived experience manifests as follows; leaders with lived experience are the focus of attention rather than followers (axiom 1); lived experience guarantees the qualities (axiom 2) and behaviours (axiom 3) sought in leaders; there is consensus (axiom 4) and homogeneity (axiom 5) in lived experience as a leadership characteristic; lived experience is the elite feature of leaders (axiom 6); and it is a universal good (axiom 7) that is essential for success (axiom 8). Our finding that lived experience enables the re-construction of zombie leadership is illustrated in Table 6.

Influence of public management paradigms on zombie leadership in the arts

Zombie notions of leadership in the arts are aligned with success and competitive advantage. The essential need for leaders, believing they offer universal benefits

Table 6. Zombie leadership reconstructed with a focus on lived experience.

Category	Axiom	Manifestation as lived experience
A focus on individuals and their attributes	1, All about Leaders	Leaders with lived experience are needed rather than followers with lived experience or new collaborations with different networks/ stakeholders.
	2. Specific qualities	Lived experience provides leaders with essential leadership qualities.
	3. Specific behaviours	Lived experience enables leaders with essential leadership behaviour.
The elite and ubiquitous nature of leaders	4. Consensus	All leaders with lived experience are the same. Lived experience is not approached from a perspective of 'diversity within diversity.'
	5. All the same	Lived experience guarantees leadership potential.
	6. Elite	Leaders with lived experience are natural leaders who will solve the 'wicked problems' that plague the sector.
The essential value of leaders	7. Universal good	Leaders with lived experience will increase access for all.
	8. Essential for success	Leaders with lived experience will realise the aims of NPG and delivery creative vibrancy.

(axiom 7) and are essential for success (axiom 8) was evident in both cases. The behaviours and qualities sought in arts leaders – including strategic thinking, finance, and stakeholder relations, undertaken by dynamic and entrepreneurial managers – indicate the influence of commercial business models on arts leadership.

These findings suggest the influence of New Public Management (NPM) on leadership in the arts; the adoption of 'proven' private sector management tools by the public sector which signals the influence of neoliberalism (Hood 1991; Kann-Rasmussen 2024;Osborne et al. 2015). Kann-Rasmussen (2024) argues that within NPM a key performance indicator for the arts is widening access, as the sector attempts to legitimise its receipt of public funding through evidence of increased use. Arts organisations that target specific communities, along with government and professional bodies, are likely to have performance indicators related to access in order to advocate for funding.

The focus on leaders with lived experience also suggests the influence of New Public Governance (NPG). Unlike NPM, which draws on business approaches deemed successful in commercial sectors, NPG recognises the unique and distinctive nature of public administration. NPG aims to tackle seemingly 'wicked' or intractable challenges in the delivery of public services by harnessing the opportunities for innovation that come from collaboration with diverse stakeholders (Kann-Rasmussen 2024; S. Osborne 2006;Osborne, Radnor, and Nasi 2013). Kann-Rasmussen (2024) notes that NPG presents a new role for arts leaders, requiring facilitation skills to lead collaborative processes that gain input and advice from 'diverse voices'.

The re-construction of zombie leadership in the form of lived experience brings the 'experts' back into the organisation, rather than requiring leaders with facilitation and engagement skills. Arts leaders don't require collaborative skills to work with a diverse range of stakeholders; instead, they themselves are the stakeholders that NPG seeks to engage. Leaders with lived experience become proxies for the communities arts organisations hope to engage, Whereas NPG seeks a diverse range of stakeholders, the recruitment of leaders with lived experience narrows the range of voices that shape the services delivered by arts organisations. The expectation that leaders with lived experience will

bring innovative approaches to the sector's 'wicked problems' adds to the cultural burden of arts leaders from diverse backgrounds. These excessive demands and expectations may explain the high turnover in diverse leaders noted by industry (Childs 2023; Forsyth and Michaels 2024; Lee 2025).

Conclusion

Government, professional bodies and arts organisations prioritise leadership through commitments made in cultural policy, leadership development programmes, strategic plans, and recruitment practice. Yet the arts are largely committed to outdated ideas about leadership. As a result, the sector implements narrow and elite leadership models that act to sustain a leadership 'industry' rather than address the sector's actual needs. These discredited yet persistent ideas about leadership are termed 'zombie leadership' (Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher 2024).

This paper addresses the research question: *How does zombie leadership manifest at the field and organisational levels in the arts and cultural sectors?* through a case study of the Australian arts and cultural sectors. Our study involves two cases: field (through analysis of cultural policies, professional body strategies, and leadership programmes) and organisational (through analysis of job advertisements). We identified the use of discredited ideas about leadership in both our cases.

Building on Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher (2024) we propose the eight zombie leadership axioms can be grouped into three categories: a) a focus on individuals and their attributes; b) the elite and ubiquitous nature of leaders; and c) the essential value of leaders. We find evidence of all eight zombie leadership axioms in the organisational case. However, there was also substantial evidence discounting the notion that leadership is all about leaders (axiom 1). The prevalence of co- and dual leadership arrangements in the arts, as well as the influence of boards, challenges the zombie notion of leadership as an individual activity. These unusual structural arrangements also shaped the behaviours required of leaders, resulting in some repudiation of the zombie notion that there are specific things that all great leaders do (axiom 3). In the government case, evidence of zombie notions of leadership focused on the essential value of leaders (axiom 7 and axiom 8).

While co- and dual-leadership roles challenge the 'singular leader' myth of leadership, these unusual structural arrangements do not necessarily signal the avoidance of zombie notions of leadership. If these dual structures are merely 'cooperative' rather than 'collaborative' (Reynolds, Tonks, and MacNeill 2017), they may simply allow two zombie leaders to coexist. Issues of power and control must still be addressed in co- or dual-leadership arrangements if zombie leadership is to be avoided (Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher 2024; Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2025).

Zombie leadership was found to manifest similarly across all forms of arts practice. The key distinctions in our findings resulted from the type of audience being targeted. Discredited approaches to leadership were most evident in organisations that sought to engage the general public, whereas organisations targeting a specific community challenged notions of the elite and ubiquitous nature of leaders (axioms 4–6). Recognition of the unique nature of leadership needed to engage specific communities was evident in both the organisational and field cases. Lived experience was emphasised in the

leadership needed to target specific communities. We identify the risk, however, that lived experience becomes a basis for re-constructing zombie leadership. Lived experience may become a new personality trait, or inherent quality expected to solve the sectors 'wicked problems' without fundamentally changing the power dynamics between leaders and followers.

The influence of NPM in the arts is indicated by support for the essential value of leaders (axioms 7 and 8) (Hood 1991; Kann-Rasmussen 2024). Across both cases leaders were presented as the essential agents of success, sustainability, and 'creative vibrancy'. While we also found evidence of NPG and a desire for the innovation that results from greater diversity in arts leaders (Kann-Rasmussen 2024), there is a risk that lived experience acts instead to support zombie leadership. Rather than recruiting leaders with the skills needed for collaborative practice, leaders with lived experience are sought as a proxy for target communities. Instead of collaborating with a diverse range of stakeholders, the arts recruit professionals from diverse backgrounds and embed them into the sector.

This paper considers how zombie leadership manifests at the macro and meso levels. Future research could usefully examine the implications of zombie leadership on individuals (micro level cases), allowing for a deeper examination of not just how these discredited ideas prevail, but why they persist. In particular, there is opportunity to explore behaviours within co- and dual roles in the arts and experiences of those with lived experience in leadership roles. Industry reports suggest the value of case study investigations of failed dual leadership arrangements (Australian Leisure Management 2025; Bailey 2025) and the cultural load placed on leaders with lived experience (Childs 2023; Forsyth and Michaels 2024; Lee 2025). The impact of AI on recruitment practices and its consequences for zombie leadership are also a topic for future investigation (for example Hughes et al. 2026).

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