

## Stereotypical Poles and Their Funny Beaver (Bober)

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The aim of the paper is to analyse the viral presence of the beaver in the contemporary Polish digital sphere to identify the features of a specific text that make it popular, recognised, and disseminated in certain cultural circles. Our focus is to specify the factors creating its humorous potential and highlight its role in creating and maintaining stereotypes. The material we use as an example is a short video that had apparently not been intended to be humorous but was received as such. Our hypothesis is that one of the reasons why it gained popularity was its maker's exaggerated emotional reaction to the encounter with the actual beaver, and the language he used to reflect it. In addition, the video invoked the recreation of traditional, pre-digital stereotypes of a primitive and emotional Pole, and became viral, disseminating the 'bober trope'. The video became popular across Slavdom, making the relation between a Pole and an animal iconic, recognisable and recontextualisable to produce further humour. The fluid transition from the video to other genres, especially memes and songs, was treated as a way of spreading the image of the stock Polish character and Polish language stereotype via an easily recognisable Polish profanity. The basic image played a vital role in constructing more elaborate narratives that reflect societal attitudes and beliefs across Slavdom. Following the early insights of iconology of movements and critical iconology, we explore the intricate relationship between the visual form of a stereotype and its corresponding symbolic meanings in order to embed images within a wider cultural context. We bring the approach up to date by drawing on the analysis of internet humour, looking at its mechanisms, such as variation, selection, emotional contagion or the need for social validation, and its increasingly transgressive character. This study points out the dynamic nature of dialogue which serves to interpret and reinterpret stereotypes across cultures and examines the qualities of the beaver video example, specifically the attitudes of the meme beaver to Poles and the reverse, the beaver impersonating a Pole, and the beaver being presented on the symbolic plane.

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## 1. The Aim and Material

The aim of the study is to analyse the viral presence of the beaver in the contemporary Polish digital sphere and its impact on the stereotypical perception of Poles in the Slavic memosphere. In order to meet this aim, we analyse a short Polish video that features an encounter with a live beaver and the spontaneous reactions of the video maker to it. What we are interested in is his attitude to the beaver, expressed in the verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal behaviour, as well as the reactions to that attitude by numerous commenters, especially from various Slavic countries. What we wish to establish are the reasons why the relation between a Pole and the animal was considered not only humorous but even iconic, stereotypical, and suitable for recontextualisation.

## 2. Method

The starting point for our analysis of the iconographic side of the presented material were the pioneering ideas proposed by Aby Warburg (1892), an author of innovative art historical methods. He is particularly known for his ‘montage collision’ approach and his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which emphasised the heterogeneous nature of images and the ‘pathos formulas’ of the body in movement (Michaud, 2004). Warburg pays attention to movements that are activated by the juxtaposition of still images – the ‘iconology of interval’, that is ‘the space that separates the images. For Warburg, the image has no intrinsic meaning – it’s the encounter with the images spread out on the plates that produces sense’ (Michaud, 2015). According to Michaud (2004), Warburg fashioned a ‘critical iconology’ to reveal the irrationality of the image in Western culture. Opposing the grand teleological narratives of art, Warburg’s method operated through historical anachronisms and discontinuities. He used ‘montage-collision’ to create textless collections of images (Michaud, 2004). His methodological ideas were developed by Panofsky in his *Studies in Iconology* (1939), where he connects objects of interpretation with acts of interpretation, and equipment for interpretation with controlling principles of interpretation, pointing out the history of cultural symptoms, or ‘symbols’ in general (Panofsky, 1939: 14).

Just as images may not have intrinsic meanings, verbal texts, such as humorous texts, rely on context to acquire interpretations. Still, basic ingredients of humour may be postulated, such as those summarised by Kuipers (2009). Humour as such is like an invitation and it aims at decreasing social distance. It is ‘generally shared, and most people attempting to be humorous seek out an audience’ (Kuipers, 2009: 222). The central ingredient to all humour is incongruity, which needs to be non-serious in context, as opposed to incongruities which are non-humorous, e.g. those occurring in metaphors (*cf.* Muller, 2015) or crime stories (*cf.* Triezenberg, 2004). The third

ingredient of humour is pleasure: humour should be agreeable to the producer and to the receiver as well. As Lewis notes, ‘The final two ingredients may seem at odds with humor’s pleasurable and social character – which explains the persisting confusion in humour studies as well as in life at large whether humor is a good or a bad thing’ (2006). One is transgression (Kuipers, 2009: 222), the mechanism by which humour marks social and symbolic boundaries. Humour often deals with sensitive topics, touching on or transgressing social norms and moral boundaries. Such sensitivities vary greatly between groups, cultures, and contexts. Partly, this has to do with knowledge: you have to realise that something is a transgression to appreciate it as such. However, the affective component here is more important than the cognitive aspect: you have to *feel* the transgression to enjoy the joke (Kuipers, 2009: 229). The related and most contested ingredient is aggression, hostility, and degradation, which humour is often linked with.

To explain the virality of internet memes, we draw on the analysis of internet humour by Attardo, and his claim that memes are the locus of evolution, which depends on three mechanisms: variation, selection and replication. Variation is provided by the individual producing a new meme or a variant of an old one. Selection is provided by the choices of other users to adopt or share specific memes. Replication for memes means the reposting, sharing, forwarding, etc., of a meme. When we say that a meme has ‘gone viral’: we mean that the meme spreads fast, like a virus (Attardo, 2023: 23). Especially interesting is *memeiosis*, ‘the process of meme production’ (Attardo, 2023: 24–25), including the phenomena such as intertextuality, remixing, mashup, or invention.

In the process of replication, the initial (founder/anchor) meme may be classified as belonging to *fails* (Attardo, 2023). This happens, for example, to short video clips including somebody’s unsuccessful attempt at performing some action. Their popularity may be related to the high emotional arousal they may cause; this is one of the reasons named by Attardo in his answer to the central questions of why certain memes become popular and why later on they go out of fashion, side by side with their tendency to form clusters, simplicity, novelty/distinctiveness, and usefulness (Attardo, 2023: 161–172). The popularity of internet texts in relation to emotions was confirmed in the studies by Guadagno et al. (2013; cf. Molina 2020). The role of emotional contagion, which involves the convergence of one’s emotional state with the emotional states of those whom one is observing or interacting with, evokes a vicarious experience of sorts: ‘when people watch Internet video clips, they may experience the same emotions as the people in the clip, and by forwarding that clip, they anticipate that the receiver will experience similar emotions’ (Guadagno et al., 2013: 4). Another factor that may contribute to the proliferation of Internet memes is social validation,

which is the tendency for individuals to look to others to see what others are doing to determine if a behaviour is normative and appropriate (Guadagno et al., 2013: 4). The viewer feels called to comment on the protagonist crossing the boundaries of proper behaviour, thus further spreading the popularity of the video or meme in which the person appears.

### 3. Stereotypes of Poles

The case study to be discussed in section 5 raises the issue of how Polish stereotypes (both auto- and hetero-stereotypes) function in the Slavic world. Comparing stereotypes entrenched in different languages, Anna Tyrpa (2013) asks about their national, international or maybe even universal character:

Analysis of numerous ethnic stereotypes in different languages reveals that transnational semantic patterns exist independently of linguistic affinity, e.g. in Indo-European as well as in Finno-Ugric languages. These patterns (models) contain slots for specific ethnonyms; how they are filled depends on extra-linguistic factors: historical experience, geographical neighbourhood, mutual friendly or hostile relations. The existence of petrified references to other nations in each language appears to be a universal feature (Tyrpa, 2013: 154; our translation).

This research trend runs parallel to studies on communication styles, which tend to take advantage of the references to ethnic groups petrified in cultural discourse, complete with the related emotions and other features. A communication style could then be defined as ‘a cluster of aspects of conversational language behaviours which collectively specify a cultural communication pattern’ (see also Brzozowska and Chłopicki, 2015). For example, Fitzgerald (2003) identifies a spontaneous/argumentative style (one of her 6 cultural styles): blunt, direct, sincere, characterised by negative emotions and typically long turns, common in Eastern Europe (see also Chłopicki, 2017: 13). This emotional style of communication is well known among the older generation of Poles, particularly men, who tend to lash out at others when they touch a raw nerve. The Polish communication style of young people, on the other hand, seems highly cooperative and supportive of speakers in storytelling; they are engaged, linguistically creative, their narratives abound in humour and irony, are expressive and emotional, with negative emotions seeming to prevail, although a lot of positive affectivity is present as well (e.g. in the use of diminutives; cf. Chłopicki, 2017: 24). A feature of Polish communication style that is shared by both groups is its spontaneous, emotional, and sometimes aggressive nature.

One of the major diachronic studies on such Polish auto-stereotypes have been pursued by Niewiara:

Diachronic studies make it possible to assert that there exists something like a pattern of Polishness—a cultural matrix of Polish traits. This matrix consists of characteristics that have been repeated in texts over the centuries. These traits form certain profiles, for example, in the psychosocial aspect: the combative Pole (brave, valiant, skilled in battle, prone to brawling), the quarrelsome Pole (argumentative, contentious, disobedient, jealous), the proud Pole (honourable, proud, haughty), the noble/virtuous Pole (noble, magnanimous, honest, virtuous, sincere, open, modest, simple), the gentle/hospitable Pole (good-natured, gentle, hospitable), the wise/intelligent Pole (wise, intelligent, clever, foolish), and the cheerful/frivolous Pole (reckless, immature, frivolous, fiery, excitable, full of imagination, cheerful, spirited, prone to boasting, unreliable). The same applies to other aspects in which the Pole is consistently characterised, among others, as strong, healthy, impressively built, religious, prone to drunkenness, and valuing freedom above all else. Importantly, however, these traits are evaluated differently in various historical periods—the frequency of their appearance in texts changes, as does their cultural interpretation (Niewiara, 2010: 179; our translation).

Among these, the easily recognisable negative stereotype of a combative, quarrelsome Pole who tends to get drunk, but is also blunt, values freedom and does not care much of what others will think, has a humorous potential that seems to hit a sensitive nerve in other Slavs, as we will discuss in section 5 below.

#### 4. Beaver in Polish Culture

The fact that it was the beaver that became an internet hero and caused such a viral reaction was not coincidental, as the animal is associated with a variety of cultural knowledge, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, beavers are widely

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting other cultural constructions of the beaver, although the detailed discussion of these falls outside of the scope of the present study. The anthropomorphised depiction of the talking beaver in the fantasy film 'The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' (2005; highly popular in Poland), who is a good-hearted even if somewhat grumpy individual, the embodiment of an Englishman, could have boosted the virality of the Polish video, even though the Polish beaver is a much less friendly character. Another friendly beaver image appeared in the main street of the Belarusian city of Babruysk (translatable as Beaver City) in 2006, when the bronze statue of the animal in a smart outfit was unveiled there (The Bronze Monument to the Beaver, 2022), while two years later another appeared, this time sitting on a bench in a relaxed posture, apparently symbolising the typical residents of the city, or maybe even Belarusians themselves. Incidentally, one of the three statues of beavers in Moscow was the smiling, anthropomorphised animal sitting on a bench, a gift of the city of Babruysk, although the wooden statue was stolen in mysterious circumstances in 2014 (Three Moscow monuments to beavers, 2022).

known for being strictly connected with nature, especially water, as skilful dam builders, but one needs to be aware of the cultural history of the animal:

The European beaver is a native animal of Poland. In the early Middle Ages, it was one of the most common animals in our country. For many centuries, the beaver was a highly valued game animal. Clothing made from Polish black beaver was considered the most beautiful on foreign markets (Misiukiewicz, 2003; our translation).

Furthermore, stereotypes of a beaver were spread internationally and related to treating the animal as a source of good quality waterproof fur, meat and castoreum. Beavers' castoreum, a secretion from the skin glands of beavers, had been extracted for use not only in the perfume industry, but also for medicinal and food taste enriching purposes. Beavers were hunted for their skin, which was used to produce coats, caps and collars, and because of their price treated as a symbol of high status. Their meat was used for food, and the tail valued in medieval monasteries and noble courts, especially during fast seasons because of its scales, enabling it to be treated as fish, thus allowing the consumption for those who wanted to avoid meat eating restrictions (Nawrot, 2019). The belief in the fish nature of beavers persisted much longer than it might be thought. At the turn of the 20th century, Zygmunt Gloger wrote: 'Polish cuisine adopted 'plusk' [lit. 'splash'], i.e. the beaver's tail, which was eaten during Lent, because it was considered a fish on account of its being covered with scales' (Gloger, 1900 in Spodaryk, 2019; our translation).

In Polish, just as in English, the word 'beaver' has sexual connotations. 'Beaver' in the gynaecological sense is a British slang meaning dating from 1927, transferred from the earlier sense of 'a bearded man' (1910), or from the appearance of split beaver pelts (Beaver, 2025). The Latin word for beaver, 'castor,' had also been connected in the past with the word 'castare' – 'castrate', which led to legends illustrated in multiple works of art about the self-castration of beavers who wanted to avoid death from the hand of hunters. Aesop's tale 'The Beaver' used this motive, which was repeated in stories created later as well. The belief in the self-castration of beavers had remained in folklore until very recent times and became the basis for various proverbs. Zygmunt Gloger noted:

The use of castoreum as a medicine gave rise to the [Polish] proverb, meaning: 'Okupić się jako bóbr skórą' (lit. Pay for one's freedom like a beaver with its castoreum), because it was claimed that the beaver, while escaping, bit off its own castoreum (i.e. the tail). Hunters claimed that when a beaver is killed or hunted, it

is crying, hence the proverb in Polish: ‘płakać jak bóbr rzewnie’ (lit. lament like a beaver) (Gloger, 1900 in Spodaryk, 2019).

Also, the playful, rhyming expression ‘Dobrze panie bobrze’, (‘Good, Mr Beaver’) indicating agreement, became a common saying in Polish, invented by well-known early 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish playwright and comedy writer Aleksander Fredro. Below is the quotation from the original poem, where the expression in question has been translated contextually as ‘Eager beaver’ for the sake of euphony.

<p><b>‘Taki to świat’</b>          Autor: Aleksander Fredro          [...] Przyjdzie kto z prośbą do ciebie          I dajmy na to, że błaga          Gwiazdy, co świeci na niebie,          Powiedz zaraz: <b>“Dobrze, dobrze          Panie Bobrze,</b>          Ty ją zasłużyłeś godnie          Będziesz ją miał niezawodnie,”          Bo obiecać cóż to szkodzi? [...] (Fredro)</p>	<p><b>‘Such is the world’</b>          Author: Aleksander Fredro          [...] Someone comes to you with a plea,          Let’s say he begs most earnestly          For a star that shines in the sky—          Say at once: <b>“Eager beaver,          Eager beaver,</b>          You’ve earned it fair and proper.          You shall have it, without a doubt,”          For what harm is there in a promise? [...] (our translation)</p>
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A number of other writers took after him and used the expression, as well as the corresponding negative variant of it, ‘niedobrze, panie bobrze’ (‘Not good, Mr Beaver’), e.g. in a poem by Jerzy Jurandot, put to music in 1934 (Chór Dana – Niedobrze, panie Bobrze!).

In addition, the beaver used to be associated with good fortune, an association which Poles shared with Russians:

When Russians wanted to say that someone made a bad deal, they would say that he ‘killed a beaver’. In the seventeenth century, the Poles had a proverb, ‘Slay the beaver, fortune’s gone’. [‘jak zabijesz bobra, nie będziesz miał dobra’.] Killing beavers, which were under the protection of their owners, was threatened with serious sanctions because beavers were valuable and sought after. Another proverb said, ‘Beavers don’t always take the bait’ [Pol. ‘nie zawsze się dają łapać bobry’], which meant that an opportunity does not always arise, and another rhymed, ‘If a beaver’s by your side, good fortune will abide’ [Pol. ‘jak masz bobra, to sprawa dobra’] (Bralczyk, 2016; our translation).

## 5. The Viral Polish ‘Bober’ Video Case

The rich cultural spectrum of stereotypes of Poles happens to coincide with a range of cultural associations with beavers in an amateur video which has evoked incongruity and humorous reactions and became viral across Slavdom. In the video, a tipsy man spots a beaver and exclaims in amazement:

Ja pierdolę, patrzcie co spotkałem. Bóbr kurwa. Ja pierdolę, jakie bydle! Bober! Ej! Kurwa! Bober!<sup>2</sup> Bober! Nie spierdalaj! Mordo! Chodź tu, kurwa, do mnie. Bober! Ale ty jesteś, kurwa, duży, ty! Bober! Ja pierdolę! Pierwszy raz w życiu widzę bobra! Jakie bydle jebane! Spierdolił do wody i się utopił!

Fuck me! Look what I met. Fucking beaver. Fuck me, what a monster! Beaver, Hey! Fuck! Beaver! Don’t fucking run away! Dude! Come to me, fuck. Beaver! Hey, you are so fucking big, you! Beaver! I see a beaver for the first time in my life. What a fucking monster! He fucking went to water and drowned (Drak Bóbr, 2022)

The video has a history to it,<sup>3</sup> since, as Weedston (2024) claims, ‘[s]tarting in the 2010s, it became a trend in Poland for young men to go out and make hysterical videos of beavers’. Liznikova (2024) agrees, saying:

Back in 2012, a local trend emerged in Poland – trying to catch a beaver, emotionally swearing at it and filming it all. This trend was picked up first in the English-speaking part of the Internet, and later in the RuNet (our translation).

Weedston (2024) continues the story:

The earliest example of a Polish YouTube video that follows a beaver around is by Krowi, published on Oct. 5, 2012. However, the man filming is not shouting, laughing hysterically, or bothering the beaver like the trend demands. A more likely source of the meme could be Marcin Kalinowski, who posted a more appropriate beaver video on April 12, 2014. Both videos feature the words ‘bobr’ and ‘kurwa’. But in Kalinowski’s, he pets and grabs the animal while laughing and ends up getting bit. The video’s title translates to ‘Beaver in the city.’ Over the years, many more

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<sup>2</sup> The form ‘bober’ is non-standard in Polish (‘bóbr’ being the correct nominative form) and as such provides an additional incongruity for Polish users as it sounds funny as the regional and slang version of the proper form. It was popularised by the whole series of memes entitled: What a cute bober/ ‘Ale fajny bober’ (Ale fajny bober).

<sup>3</sup> Details on the history of Polish beaver’s videos and memes’ popularity are explained in the Polish language video (Bądźmy poważni, 2024).

YouTube videos appeared along the same theme, emphasizing the surprising tendency of Poles to chase their beaver and react emotionally to the encounters. Other Slavic nations (esp. Belarusians) got in on the trend, as shown in a 2018 compilation video with over a million views (*cf.* FoxCast Media, 2018).

Starting in 2023, Bobr Kurwa videos made it to TikTok where they went viral among Slavic as well as English language speakers. One particularly popular entry, with 5.4 million views by user @mxtteo.ws, shows him picking up a wombat and declaring ‘bóbr kurwa’ to its baffled little face. Sakshi (2025) adds: ‘A notable “Bóbr” video was posted to YouTube by Fred Pierwszy Wielki on April 26th, 2017. The video shows a man cackling while chasing a beaver, gathering over 8 million plays in six years’. Liznikova (2024) adds:

Other countries also tried to repeat the success of the guy who saw the beaver. For example, residents of Kaliningrad even made a remake of the legendary video. They saw a beaver in the river, started filming it and shouting phrases from the original video.

The video that we are discussing here was published by the user named Drak Bóbr (2022), and became viral, obtaining 3,044,801 views by 12 April 2022 (three years later, in 2025, it was still watched and commented on). Among the multiple comments, a few have been selected to demonstrate how the video, originally unintended as amusing, was considered funny by the viewers from various countries. Among the triggers of funniness, they underline the surprisingly easy understanding of the exclamations and profanities, followed by equally surprising positive emotions for Poles and their language (original spelling):

- ‘Все мы разные, но все мы понимаем “bóbr kurwa, ja pierdolę”’ @ee3660, [Russian] [‘We are so all different, but we all understand “bóbr kurwa, ja pierdolę”’].
- ‘As a Slovene I understood 70% of what was said, and thankfully all the swear words :)’ @nejcfrelihcrv3476, 2024.
- ‘Uczę się polskiego od dwóch miesięcy i jestem dumna, że rozumiem każde słowo w tym filmie :o)’ @QQ-my2rq, 2023 [‘I have been learning Polish for two months and I am proud that I understand every word in this film’].
- ‘Divided by languages. United by Bobr’ @juanddperez, 2025.
- ‘лайк если ни минуты не учил польский, но понял каждое слово’ @MrPman1999, 2023 [‘Even if you haven’t studied Polish for a minute, you understood every word’].

- ‘I have no fucking idea what this guy said and yet I feel like I understand exactly what he meant’ @liammitchell2540, 2024.
- ‘I fuckin love Polish language. They are so fucking weird. But i still feel love.’ @Stevee085, 2025.

The video and the viral reactions to it invoked the recreation of the pre-digital, traditional stereotype of a primitive and emotional Pole, and became viral, disseminating the ‘bober trope’. The popularity of it resulted in an explosion of online reactions and parodies, to such an extent that ‘Bóbr’ became an entry in *Nonsensopedia. Polish Encyclopedia of Humor*, where the exclamations of the videomaker (‘Bóbr kurwa. Ja pierdołę, jakie bydle! Bober!’) are defined as standard words of a Pole seeing a beaver. Bóbr is defined there as:

Bóbr (properly *bober*) – an animal with large teeth and a tail. Seen rarely, sometimes wandering around Warsaw, mainly around the Sejm [Polish Parliament] or off-licence shops (although it doesn’t matter anyway) (Bóbr, 2024; our translation).

Furthermore, it turned out that the image of the ‘bober’ easily spread from the original video to other genres, especially memes, all kind of mashups and parodies, but also songs, which contributed to spreading the image of the stock Polish character and stereotypical associations with the typical and easily recognizable Polish profanity ‘kurwa,’ as well as with the Polish language as such (as exemplified by the comments above).

Liznikova (2024) thus analyses the meme, summarizing the comments above:

‘Bober kurwa’ is a very tenacious meme, it has been around for many years. At the same time, it has no meaning. The phrase is simply used to enhance any emotion, and is also added to images of beavers, sometimes other animals. The meme became funny thanks to the sonorous Polish curses, and the history of its appearance also played a role.... The Polish and Russian languages are similar, so the Russian audience immediately appreciated the curses, and for the English-speaking audience, the situation itself simply seemed funny (our translation).

Overall, one could argue that the viral spread of the video stems less from explicitly evoking national stereotypes of the Poles among other Slavs than from its remarkable emotional openness and linguistic accessibility across Slavic and non-Slavic audiences. Still, this is only part of the picture, since in our view this does explain the curious sense of simple, basic ethnic closeness with the Poles that Russian speakers in particular display. Furthermore, the video and its popularity may serve as interesting evidence

of how unhindered emotionality may evoke humorous incongruity, although the profanities themselves are rarely admitted to evoke humour by themselves (see the critical discussion of profanity and humour in Chafe, 2007) as they normally demand contextual reinforcement or at least the value of surprise. At the same time the beaver image becomes an icon of sorts, deprived of meaning as Wartburg would claim, and only when juxtaposed with the image of the stereotypical Pole does it acquire the status of ‘interval,’ helping the transformation of the video into a viral one.

## 6. Multiple Reactions to the Viral Beaver Video

The reactions to the above-mentioned viral Tik-Tok video from 2023 were multiple and highly diverse, and illustrate the above-mentioned icons of the beaver and the stereotypical Pole juxtaposed in such a way that their contrast (or ‘interval’) produces humorous effects. Our corpus consisted of 100 items—videos, memes and comments collected from various platforms such as Facebook or other groups devoted to the ‘bober’ meme collections (e.g. Chief Bober, 2024), YouTube, Tik-Tok, and Polish meme aggregators like Kwejk, JBZD, [meme.jeja.pl](https://meme.jeja.pl) or knowyourmeme. We looked at specific platforms and websites and used search engines to look for the materials by means of the following keywords: *bóbr*, *bober* [beaver] combined with words: *humor*, *memy*, *dowcipy*, *zabawny* [humour, memes, jokes, funny]. We chose these particular items due to their popularity, diversity and the relation to the beaver video. Looking at the multiple examples, we noticed some thematic similarity between particular items, hence we grouped them in the categories that described their common features. The coding was done using the iterative system. We collected the material between May 2024 and September 2025, but the majority of examples come from the year 2024; even though we collected them mainly from the Polish cyberspace, Ukrainian, Belarusian or Russian meme-makers are strongly present and sometimes equip memes or videos with captions in the Cyrillic. We have tried to make a selection that would be most representative in terms of themes and images, although for the sake of coherence and space we had to drop a number of interesting themes. As a result, we have divided the examples into four categories in order to focus on the hetero-stereotype and auto-stereotype of Poles as reverberating across the Slavdom: 1/ the mutual attitudes of Poles to beavers and 2/ beavers to Poles, 3/ the beaver posing for the Pole with their stereotypical features, and finally 4/ the beaver presented on the symbolic plane. This classification reflects well the discourse structure of the memes: the perceived relationships between narrators and characters as well as their cultural setting. Consequently, the analysis below follows the methodology of qualitative discourse analysis with elements of visual semiotics, illustrating Warburg’s (1892) iconology of intervals.

### 6.1 Memetic portrayals of Polish attitudes toward the beaver

The spread of the beaver video is reflected in memes (many of them with English captions) that appear to draw attention to stereotypical Polish communicative behaviours—this simplifies the communication style discussed above, reducing it to a stereotype. Polish people are among the complaining cultures (Wojciszke, Baryła, 2005), as well as the cultures which display very little emotions in public (labelled as neutral in the terminology of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997), which means that the first impression the foreigners get of Poles is they see them as rather sad and resigned, and showing dissatisfaction with their lives rather than a positive attitude or enthusiasm. The following example (Figure 1) shows this simplified contrast and implied radical change in Polish behaviour: the highly emotional reaction which

is evoked in Poles when ‘a good reason’ occurs. In the meme, the apparent reason for the stock Pole to become suddenly optimistic and alert is the unexpected encounter with the beaver. What enhances the humour in the second line is the ungrammatical verbal use of the noun ‘bober’ (beaver), which in this case means ‘seeing a beaver’. This associates the implied speaker with the restricted code in the sense of Bernstein (1977) since the implied Polish speaker apparently is not able to use language properly. The images in the lower part of the meme illustrate the clash of icons, which form ‘an interval’ (space between images); they are deprived of meaning by themselves unless embedded in cultural context as in this example, where their otherwise incompatible juxtaposition suddenly generates an interpretable whole, evoking a humorous effect. What is interesting in this and virtually all the other examples we have found is that the video or meme makers do not seem to make any effort to subvert the stereotypes, but rather play with them.

In Figure 2, the middle-aged man is leaning toward the beaver in a hugging, patronising gesture, keeping his hand on the beaver’s furry back and trying to look the animal in the eyes. The image is clearly a collage of images, placed as if ‘at interval’ again. What the man is implied to be saying is that the beaver is unhappy and seeks emotional help in humans. The fictitious encounter takes place in fresh air, next to a wooden cottage in run down surroundings. The human character and the beaver use the cut-down tree trunk as a table, talk friendly, smoke cigarettes and drink canned



Figure 1: Polish people normally and when [seeing] a beaver (Pjuropurz, 2024). <https://kwejk.pl/tag/bober> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].

beers. Here again, the language is English and the second sentence of the caption, which constitutes a punch line, quotes the Polish expletive *kurwa*; literally meaning ‘whore’, here it is broadly interpretable as ‘bad human being’, and not as an expletive as in the original video, thus adding another twist to the meme series. This meme essentially depicts the stereotypical excessive emotionality and instability of the tipsy Pole as well as their use of the restricted code again.

The next example is similar in displaying an affectionate attitude although the reason is different. **Figure 3** shows a screenshot from an AI generated short clip where a Polish village *baba* (typically a strongly assertive character) refuses the offer of a car brought to her by her grandson (he refers to her as *babusia*, which rings nearly identical to *bobuś*—the unusual diminutive of the beaver that she uses). She says ‘Na chuj mi ta kupa chińskiego złomu, Ja mam swojego boberka. Jedziemy bobuś, jedziemy’ [‘I fucking don’t need this pile of Chinese scrap. I have my little bober, Come, *bobuś*, come’], whereupon she leaps up and mounts the beaver—a blatant example of the icon juxtaposition forming an interval. The oddly aggressive village woman thus incongruously shows her affectionate attitude to the beaver, which she treats as a domestic animal (nearly a pet).

– Don't listen to them  
Bober. You're a cool  
guy, not a kurwa!



**Figure 2:** Bober as a cool guy (Bober Kurwa, 2024a). <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=122160219758125471&set=a.122109954830125471> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].



**Figure 3:** Bober as a mounted animal, replacing a car (Marta Malinowska, 2024). <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1408118493752549> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].

## 6.2 Memetic portrayals of the beaver's attitude to the Poles

A typical memetic motif shows the Polish people from the perspective of the anthropomorphised and personalised beaver which is chased and traumatised and seeks professional help of a psychotherapist to overcome the encounter with a drunken Pole. The setting of the prim and proper therapist surgery in **Figure 4** (AI generated as well) is contrasted with the wooden litter left by the beaver on the floor. The wild animal is relaxing in a comfortable chair, discussing its emotional state in English, but then concludes with the Polish expletive 'ja pierdole' (characteristically misspelt, the final letter missing a diacritic (ę), to suggest sloppy speech), showing its anger after all and mimicking the style of the Pole who filmed it in the viral video. This imaginary scene, where the iconic beaver steps in for the patient, evokes visual and linguistic contrasts that build up the humorous effect of the meme.



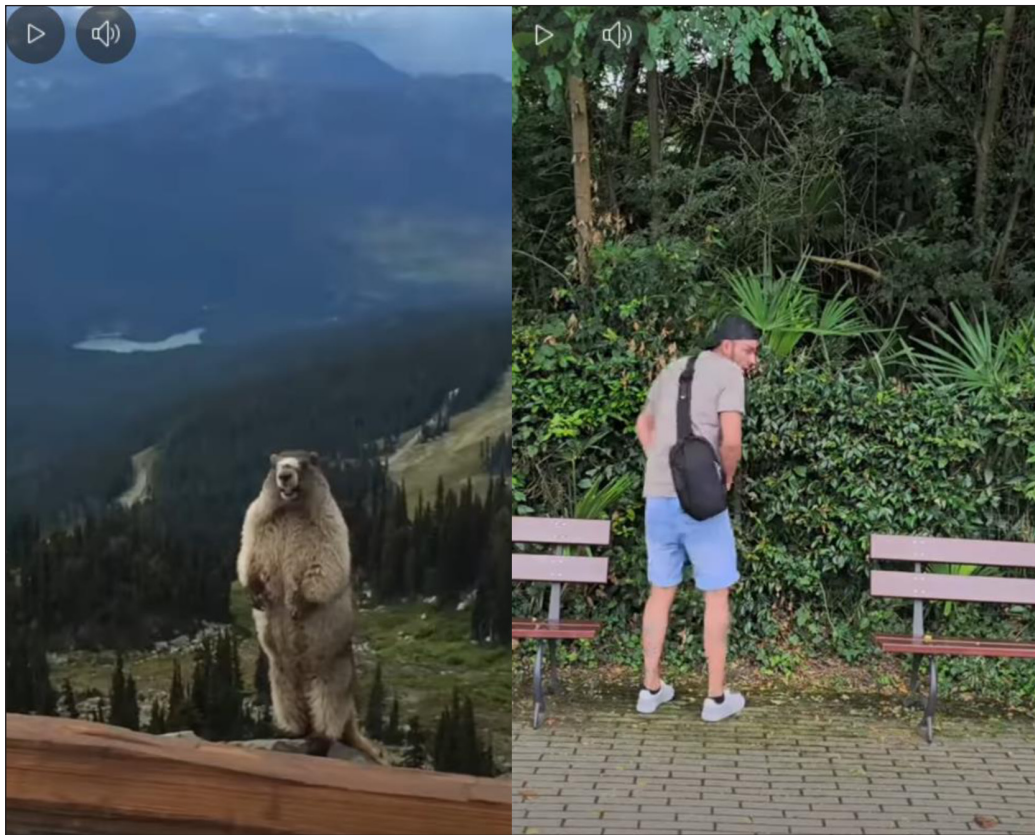
**Figure 4:** Bober visiting a psychotherapist (Humor, 2024) <https://9gag.com/gag/aW4Z7GZ> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].

In another video (**Figure 5**), the angry beaver calls the Polish young man to action: 'Co, główka, boli, kurwa? A mówiłem wczoraj, żeby tyle nie pić!' ['Your little head is fucking aching? And I told you yesterday not to drink so much!'], thus stereotyping the Pole as a lazy drunk. Hearing that, the young man recontextualises the phrase from the original video 'Bober, kurwa, co za bydlę!' ['Fucking beaver. What a monster!'], evoking an incongruity. Like in the previous examples, the figures of the beaver and the young man are 'at interval,' coming from different visual contexts.

The screenshots from another clip (**Figure 6**) show the beaver (in a size that resembles a bear more than a beaver, or



**Figure 5:** Screenshot from video. Bober tells off a man who drank too much the previous night saying, 'Get the fuck up' (Halina Leszyńska, 2024). <https://www.facebook.com/reel/3090443234451885> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].



**Figure 6:** Screenshot from video. Bober as environment protector, scaring away a pissing Pole (Nuotaika, 2024). <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1281618646436808> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].

maybe even a man dressed as one) standing motionless against the backdrop of the mountain landscape (probably a national park) and observing the disorderly Polish man who relieves himself onto a park lane in between two benches (probably the result of having drunk a beer or two). Suddenly, it makes a loud screeching sound, startling the Pole, who turns his head and tries to hush the animal, incongruously assuming the animal is ‘talking to him’. Unperturbed, the beaver keeps screeching angrily, thus acting as a guardian of the cleanliness of the park, and the embarrassed Pole quickly scurries away—the man’s disorderliness clashed with his embarrassment makes the incongruity stronger. Overall, the clip seems to bring together images from at least three different contexts: a mountain national park, a city park with benches as well as the incongruously looking beaver, the intervals enhancing the humorous effect.

### 6.3 Memetic portrayals of the beaver impersonating a Pole

This category contains multiple examples of a beaver impersonating the negative features of a vulgar, drunk, lazy, arrogant Pole. These features tend to coincide with

some of those from the previous category, the main distinction being the beaver's impersonating perspective. 'Bober' as a drunk is the most popular feature, with pictures of rural scenes where characters drink or sleep with empty vodka bottles or a cigarette in their mouth. In the AI-generated **Figure 7**, the beaver has drunk pickle brine (a typical hangover cure drink) together with an old man, who is smiling happily until the wife, stereotypically portrayed, emerges from behind the wooden door and scolds them: 'Who drank my *ogórki* [cucumber] juice? I needed it for tomorrow's *schabowy* [pork chop, mispronounced *shabowi*], you alcoholics!'. Interestingly, the scene has the American English soundtrack, with Polish food items characteristically appearing in Polish, pronounced with the English accent. Thus, the soundtrack seems to be at interval with the two visually incongruous images—the rural scene and the beaver figure apparently inserted in it.

**Figure 8** is a screenshot from an AI-generated video in which the imaginary beaver journalist runs up towards the boy who is crying having been refused service by the kebab shop. Asked by the beaver what has happened there, the boy apparently quotes the kebab seller 'Nie chcą sprzedać kebaba, mam wypierdalać, bo jestem za duży i się nie mieszczę' ['They don't want to sell the kebab and I am to fuck off because I am too big and I don't fit in']. Hearing this beaver simply bursts into laughter and does not show any sign of compassion, thus coming across as a callous (Polish) character. This portrayal shares the impersonation perspective with the previous example, although the characters portrayed by the beaver are different—the feature they share is the tendency of the 'bober' to break social



**Figure 7:** Screenshot from video. Bober drinks pickle brine with an old man to cure hangover and is scolded by his wife. (Bober Kurwa 2024b) <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1168322715117624> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].

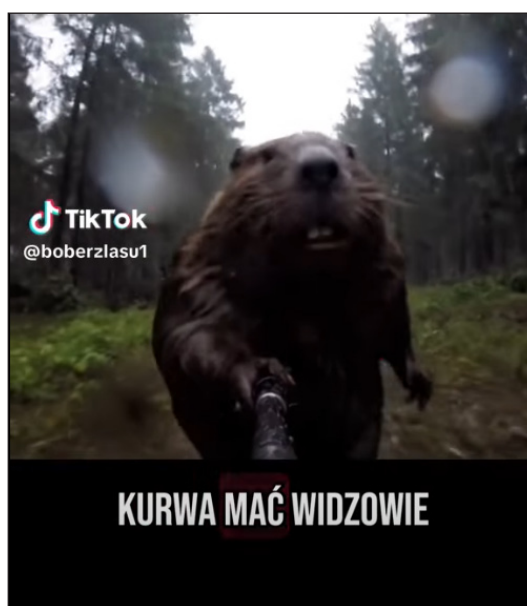


**Figure 8:** Screenshot from video. Bober as journalist, interviewing an obese boy, who is refused food (kebab in this meme) (Memuszki, 2024). <https://www.facebook.com/reel/24273422299014056> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].

etiquette conventions, either by overusing the hospitality or openly lacking in empathy.

In another series of videos, the beaver appears as a mock-journalist again, using profanities and thus both showing his attitude to the viewers and apparently imitating what a Pole really feels, but is afraid to say out loud. In **Figure 9**, the beaver comments, using the vernacular: ‘Kurwa mać widzowie, leje jak chuj, ha ha, zalało całą wioskę, ha ha. Ha ha normalnie se kajakiem płynę, ha ha. O chuj, ale rwie tą rzekę, ha ha.’ [‘O fuck, viewers, it pours like shit, ha ha, the whole village has been flooded, ha ha. Ha ha, look, I am kayaking, ha ha. O fuck, the river is wild, ha ha’]. The video (like the meme from Fig. 7) can also be interpreted as parodying sensational journalism, for which the beaver character would be ideally suited as an ignorant, callous, primitive, sensation-seeking individual. Here the iconic images that clash are those of a beaver in a forest, a sensational news reporter who lacks compassion, as well as a swearing village resident who experiences flooding.

The beaver character appears in memes as a powerful and angry politician as well. The screenshot in **Figure 10** features the beaver sitting behind the presidential desk who in the video clip bursts out with expletives: ‘Weto, kurwa, na wszystko i chuj. Same podwyżki mi dają do podpisania. Ich pojechało. Naród, najebany to naród szczęśliwy’ [‘Veto, fuck, veto for everything. And fuck off! They just give me price hikes to sign. They are fucking mad. The nation on



**Figure 9:** Screenshot from video. Beaver as a mock-journalist “Oh, fuck, viewers, it pours like shit” (@boberzlasu1, 2024). <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1099196388245501> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].



**Figure 10:** Screenshot from video. Bober as president of Poland (Warsaw.tw.inp, 2024). <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1308503393965488> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].

high is a happy nation’], whereupon the male secretary comes in and asks ‘Z piwkiem można?’ [‘May I (come in) with a beer for you?’. He comes across as a clearly angry and uncooperative figure, breaking social etiquette again, who is not entirely coherent, uses the restricted code of language and, to top it all, is given to drinking in excess.

#### 6.4 Beaver as a symbol

The presence of numerous videos where the soundtrack from the original bober encounter is played against various types of footage resulted in the bober acquiring a mock residence card (**Figure 11**), where its name is *Bóbr Kurwa* (Beaver Whore), the name of the ‘organ’ issuing the card is replaced with ‘*Ja pierdole jakie bydle*’ [‘Fuck me, what a monster!’], the type of permit is ‘*Bober, nie spierdalaj mordo*’ [‘Don’t fucking run away! Dude!’], and the names of parents are ‘*Kurwa Bóbr*’ [‘Fucking beaver’] and ‘*Ja pierdole*’ [‘Fuck me’].<sup>4</sup> Notably this meme was invented in 2023 by the Belarusian advertising company *Sanbaks Consult*, who are active in Poland and specialise in humorous ads. This card was invented as a humorously persuasive call for Belarusians and Ukrainians to legalise their stay in Poland, and it involves the clash of the iconic beaver figure with that of the official ID issued to humans, as well as with the original ‘bober’ video present here via its viral quotations.



**Figure 11:** Bober has its own residence card. (Filiżanka – Polska Nowosti 2023) <https://t.me/filizankanews/2106> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].

Further into the symbolic realm, the beaver has also found its way onto a coat of arms, highly typical of the nobility culture of old Poland. There is some tradition of placing

<sup>4</sup> Please note the missing diacritics, which indicate sloppy speech again.

beavers on coats of arms of towns (such as Łomża nasze miasto, 2017, or Herb Tłuszcz, 2024) or noble families (Bóbr 1, 2025). In **Figure 13**, there are two parodies of a coat of arms featuring a beaver, both referring to one viral video (@Maksmateriy, 2024); there, some ignorant user points at an animal (which happened to be a wombat) and exclaims ‘Fucking beaver!’, the entire soundtrack being copied from the original viral video mentioned at the beginning of section 5. In **Figure 12**, the animals are a weasel (probably) and a cat.



**Figure 12:** Bober as a heraldic symbol (Bober / Kurwa Bóbr / Bobrze – Bobr emblem, 2024; Liznikova, 2024) <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2778162-bober-kurwa-bobr-bobrze> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].

A very unusual but sophisticated twist to the beaver craze is an AI-generated opera, the venue of which is the imaginary Grand Theatre in the village called Adamczycha, which is the intertextual reference to the setting of the highly popular Polish Netflix comedy, *1670* (launched in 2023). The series essentially parodies Polish nobility culture, and its humour derives from the clashes of the past and present of Polish culture (see Brzozowska, Chłopicki, 2025). The operatic voice in the video (screenshot in **Figure 13**) sings the words of the original ‘fucking beaver’ video (appropriately with an Italian accent), accompanied by the orchestra and choir, while the running text below the screen recounts the fictional news narrative:

Last night in the Grand Theatre in Adamczycha, an extraordinary event occurred. During the performance of *Carmen* by the Polish National Opera, an unusual guest appeared on the stage. The appearance of a beaver dressed in the evening dress and top hat took both the audience and the singers by surprise. The main opera singer, Enrico Palazzo, who played the role of Don Jose, reacted to the presence of the beaver in a way that nobody expected. Instead of continuing his operatic aria, he started using profanities. His improvised composition was both shocking and amusing, The audience was stupefied, while the beaver seemed to be in its element (our translation).

Even this intertextual placement of a beaver, clearly displaying numerous icons at interval (opera, the TV show *1670*, the beaver in its smart suit, and the swearing singer) does not seem to aim to subvert the stereotype of a Pole as an etiquette breaker, but rather intends to playfully enhance it by presenting contrasts.



**Figure 13:** Screenshot from the video 'Bóbr kurwa, ale to opera' (Obejrzałbym 2024) <https://youtu.be/fdlLVMayJyY> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].

The last example (**Figure 14**), however, goes against the grain of most of the previous memes, which stereotyped the beaver as an aggressive brute, and surprisingly presents the beaver as a loved and indispensable member of a perfect Polish family. The stereotypical nature of the meme is revealed also by the backdrop of the picture, which presents the Wawel royal castle in Kraków, overlooking the Vistula river, while the tower in the upper right corner is more generic. In the foreground, the typical Polish food items are displayed on a characteristic checkered tablecloth, including long bread (called *weka*, typical of Kraków), onion, potatoes,



**Figure 14:** Bober as member of perfect (stereotypical) Polish family (Remku, 2024) <https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/4042145/perfect.html> [Last Accessed 16 September 2025].

tomatoes, apples, pumpkin, eggs, slice of cheese, lard in a jar, tea in a glass, complete with wheat stems and a small Christmas tree. Still, what this meme appears to aim to achieve is subvert the idealised picture of a Polish family—the beaver placed in the middle of the bucolic scene ironically reminds the viewers that Poles are far from being sweet and polite.

## 7. Conclusions

This study explores the dynamic and essentially irrational nature of colliding images, to use Warburg's (1892) terms. It shows the way in which stereotypes are interpreted across cultures, and examines the qualities of the beaver video example which have—surprisingly—turned out essential to make it effective and resonant, relatable and comprehensible.

The multiplicity of humorous genres and material inspired by the original video allows us to discuss the phenomena from different points of view. Faced with such a variety, we have proposed four categories in order to focus on the hetero-stereotype and auto-stereotype of Poles as reverberating across the Slavdom: the memetic portrayals of mutual attitudes of Poles to beavers and beavers to Poles, the examples of memes with the beaver impersonating the Poles with their stereotypical features, and finally the beaver presented on the symbolic plane, evoking typical symbols, stereotypically related to Polish culture.

Poles (usually men) come across as callous characters, not caring for beavers, treating them as amusing live toys (especially because beavers are normally rare to see) and reacting emotionally, displaying anger, arrogance and disorderly behaviour, especially when under the influence of alcohol (although affectionate reactions occur as well). Personified beavers are represented as suffering trauma from this treatment, and they in turn impersonate Poles as being drunk, lazy, vulgar and uncaring, breaking the social etiquette, showing ignorance and prejudice as well as pride and self-confidence. This squares with their use of language in memes, which is generally substandard, occasionally incoherent, displaying the features of Bernstein's restricted code or at least the sloppy speech. The expletives of beavers Poles use, especially *kurwa*, are symbols of vulgarity and ignorance of speakers of Polish internationally, the emotionality and resilience being the redeeming factors. In fact, Poles may be argued to be seen as 'our kind of people' from the perspective of other Slavs, and an explanation of the viral popularity of the beaver memes in other Slavic countries, although this claim does require further verification and a cross-cultural study, particularly in Eastern Europe. All in all, we can clearly confirm the negative stereotypes quoted from Niewiara at the

outset: the Poles are seen largely as combative, and quarrelsome, while their positive features are limited perhaps to their pride and excitability.

In all the four categories analysed above the ambivalence of attitudes is present, shaping the love-hate relation of Poles and their beavers. Beavers as highly anthropomorphised animals are perceived in contradictory ways, being at the same time cute and nasty, friendly and aggressive, useful and harmful, innocent and dangerous, slow and dynamic, common and rare. Those oppositions highlighted in the collected material reinforce the incongruous and humorous potential of the beaver figure. Aggressive language, dominated by profanities easily recognised by the whole Slavdom, enriches the humorous effect by its transgressive character.

Warburg used ‘montage-collision’ to create textless collections of images noticing the ‘pathos formulas’ of the body in movement (Michaud 2004). The movements of both the heavy animal and disgracefully tipsy Pole who was chasing him were reinforced by the language and thus inspired the series of humorous comments and started the *memeiosis* (Attardo, 2023). The discussed video became the anchor starting the process of virality and forming the source of intertextuality, as well as stimulated remixing, mashup, and invention. Using studies pointing out that ‘in environments where the correct course of action is ambiguous, people rely even more heavily on the cues provided by others’, and that ‘people are also more likely to follow the cues of others when the others are a member of their in-group and thus more similar to them’ (Guadagno et al, 2013: 7), we conclude that that virality of the bober video is related to both the similarity of language clues shared by Slavic people and stereotypes known to the audiences. Apart from the sense of ‘emotional contagion’, there is an increasing possibility of social validation by providing participants with knowledge of other participants’ download choices. This implies that being forwarded a video or meme by an in-group member may serve as a signal that the video is appropriate to forward to others (Guadagno et al, 2013: 7). Thus, the multiple signals of appreciation in the comments that accompany the bober video or the memes inspired by it increased its spread and popularity.

By incorporating the features of stereotypical Poles, by behaving in habitual ways and by using symbols typical for Polish culture, the angry, callous, etiquette-breaking, but at the same time ‘our beaver’ becomes part of the Polish community, and simultaneously becomes a recognisable and established symbol of Polishness for the out-groups members.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Fiadotava and Chłopicki (2025) for a recent study of in-group and out-group humour.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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