Tsuprikova Ulyana Vladislavovna, Master's student,
Belgorod State National Research University

PSYCHOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS OF LEADERSHIP IMAGE CONSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Abstract. This article explores the characteristics of how a manager's image is formed in the context of virtual communication. It analyses the impact of the specific nature of the digital environment on subordinates' perception of their manager, and identifies the main groups of psychological factors that determine the formation and integrity of the manager's image in the digital space.

Keywords: Executive image, digital communication, psychological determinants, image construction.

'A leader's image is defined as a deliberately crafted portrayal that exerts a specific emotional and psychological influence on those around them' [5, p. 92].

Hybrid and fully remote working arrangements have significantly altered the nature of interaction between a leader and their subordinates, shifting it into the digital sphere. In these circumstances, a leader's image takes on qualitatively new characteristics.

An image comprises 'cognitive, affective (value-based) and conative (behavioural) components' [8, p. 10]. The cognitive component refers to 'subjective knowledge about an object' [6, p. 320] (linked to subordinates' perceptions of the manager's competence, reliability and status). The affective component describes 'emotional, feeling-driven evaluations of an object' [6, p. 320] (for example, trust, liking, respect or, conversely, wariness). The behavioural component is expressed in expectations regarding management style and a willingness to follow instructions.

The theoretical basis for understanding image as a process of construction is provided by E. Goffman's concept of impression management. In his work, he views social interaction as a dramaturgical process [3]. Key to our analysis are the concepts of the 'stage' (the space in which the performance takes place), the 'facade' (a set of status and role signals) and the 'backstage' (the space hidden from the audience). In the digital environment, all three elements undergo significant changes.

The digital communication environment possesses a number of characteristics that fundamentally distinguish it from face-to-face interaction and directly influence the process of image construction.

'Virtual communication differs from traditional face-to-face interaction in the mediated nature of the contact', which significantly limits 'access to non-verbal channels – facial expressions, gestures, posture, tone of voice and tactile sensations' [4, pp. 32–33].

'Another important feature of virtual communication is its asynchronous nature, which allows participants to control the pace and content of the interaction.' A manager has 'the opportunity to edit messages and choose when to reply', which 'creates the conditions for more deliberate management of the impression' made on subordinates. 'As a result, online communication often becomes less a matter of spontaneous interaction and more a process of purposeful self-presentation' [4, p. 33].

Furthermore, the multiplicity of communication channels (video calls, messaging apps, email, corporate social networks) requires managers to ensure consistency in the image signals they convey across different platforms. Inconsistency gives rise to cognitive dissonance among subordinates and undermines the coherence of their perception.

J. Walther's model of hyper-personal communication [9] is theoretically significant for understanding the specifics of the digital environment. According to this model, in conditions of a limited flow of social signals, the recipient of information tends to idealise or demonise the sender's image, filling in the missing elements based on their own expectations.

Equally significant is the theory of social information processing [10], according to which participants in mediated communication adapt to limited channels and form interpersonal impressions based on available verbal and textual cues, although this process takes longer than face-to-face interaction.

The psychological determinants of constructing a leader's image in digital communication can be categorised into four groups:

1. Expressive and symbolic determinants. This group relates to how a leader conveys an image through the expressive means available in the digital environment. Video conferencing transforms E. Goffman's concept of the 'facade'. The background on the screen, image quality, clothing in the frame and camera angle all become elements of image construction. At the same time, the domestic setting visible in the frame blurs the boundary between the 'stage' and 'backstage'. This can both humanise the leader's image and undermine status distance.

In text-based communication, verbal and paralinguistic markers play a key role: vocabulary, message length, punctuation and the use of emojis, 'which act as a kind of compensatory mechanism in the new realities of communicative interaction' [7, p. 769]. A manager who uses emojis in moderation and appropriately projects the image of an approachable and empathetic leader.

2. Temporal and behavioural determinants. The timing and rhythm of communication become an image resource in their own right. An immediate response may signal engagement or, in a different context, a controlling style. A prolonged silence may indicate a heavy workload or detachment.

3. Emotional and affective determinants. The digital environment presents leaders with the challenge of conveying emotional engagement and empathy. The phenomenon of 'digital coldness' (the tendency to perceive short text replies as a sign of irritation or indifference) stems from the absence of softening non-verbal context (smiles, a friendly tone of voice, a nod).

Emotional contagion, as described within the theory of emotional intelligence [1], does not disappear in the online environment, but is transformed. A manager's mood during a video meeting, their tone of voice and the pace of their speech set the emotional tone for the whole team. As D. Goleman emphasises, 'a leader is the person who shapes the emotional reactions of others' [2, p. 25].

4. Cognitive and perceptual determinants. This group of determinants relates to the processes by which subordinates perceive and interpret their leader's image. Implicit theories of leadership act as a cognitive filter through which employees evaluate a leader's digital behaviour. If the leader's behaviour corresponds to the subordinate's internal schema ('a true leader must be decisive / empathetic / competent'), the image is evaluated positively. A discrepancy gives rise to the attribution of negative qualities.

Thus, a leader's image in the digital communication environment constitutes a qualitatively different socio-psychological construct, governed by its own patterns. The psychological determinants of its construction form a multi-level system comprising expressive-symbolic, temporal-behavioural, emotional-affective and cognitive-perceptual components.

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