

# Exploring leadership on Instagram: A visual model for online leadership analysis

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## Abstract

Online visual communication is becoming an established and central component of citizens' everyday life. User activity on large-scale platforms, such as Instagram, can be mapped by tracing the rise and fall of communities of practice that share different visual languages, aesthetic values and forms of leadership. Accordingly, the present study proposes an analytical model for the identification, measurement, and categorization of leadership on visual-based social networks, by asking: how does the digital performance of leaders on Instagram construct different forms of leadership? To answer this question, the Leadership Visual Performance Model (LVPM) will be presented as a theoretical tool to analyze and compare leadership performance on Social Networking Systems. While previous models mostly employed theme-based coding, this analytical tool relies on a set of structural indicators that enable a higher level of comparability across domains. To demonstrate, the LVPM will be employed to investigate the Instagram activity of Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson during the 2019 UK General Election. Findings show how the LVPM indicators enable us to highlight differences in leadership style, compare them and employ them to build a typology.

Keywords: leadership; Instagram; visual; election

## 1. Introduction

The primary goal of this study is to propose an analytical model for the identification, measurement and categorization of leadership performance on social networks, with specific focus on visual communication. In the last decade, the use of social network platforms (SNSs) specifically designed to host visual and audio-visual content have grown exponentially. This includes popular apps such as Instagram, Tik Tok, Periscope, Snapchat or 9gag. At the same time, mixed-content websites, such as Facebook or WordPress, have also rushed to expand their capacity to circulate photos, videos or live-streaming feeds. The rapid expansion of visual communication online, technically supported by the introduction of smart technologies and broadband wireless connections, has radically reshaped contemporary visual ecologies. Firstly, users' possibility to independently create, circulate and evaluate visual content has generated new markets characterized by peculiar forms of value- production and exchange (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Secondly, users' receptivity towards innovative

forms of visual communication has propelled the proliferation of digital visual formats, such as GIF (Graphic Interchange Format) or YouTube encrypted EXO. In other words, companies competing to optimize production, circulation and storage of visual content have initiated a process of permanent transformation of the very nature of digital images; a transformation which is tightly linked to the emergence of new communities of users with specific ways of assessing the value of their own productions. Finally, the expansion of visual-based platforms has enabled the emergence of a vast array of diverse visual grammars whose existence and evolution are connected to specific groups of users, their shared meanings and aesthetic preferences.

Within this vibrant landscape the issue of leadership, of its construction and maintenance or its challenges, is crucial. However, a single platform can host different communities which articulate and construct leadership in completely different ways. Most users are usually part of more than one community and are capable of quickly shifting from one system of values to another in a “swipe of a finger”. Each user understands more than one visual language and can evaluate leaders’ digital performances, defined as an assemblage of technological and human agency (Leeker, Schipper, & Beyes, 2017), according to different community standards. Alongside digitally native forms of leadership, institutional authorities have also embraced new media platforms to connect to their target audience. This includes not only politicians, but also top-ranked religious figures, human rights activists, public intellectuals, and popular CEOs. On the one hand, these leaders can transfer part of their existing popularity to the digital platform, thus quickly gathering a significant group of followers. On the other hand, once they have entered a digital arena, institutional leaders are required to “play by the rules”, i.e. to respect and possibly benefit from the affordances and restrictions imposed by a specific platform, such as content moderation and community guidelines.

The present study focuses on the ways in which institutional leaders struggle to translate their well-established authority into a digital performance able to compete or align with other forms of leadership. More precisely, this paper proposes a basic model for the analysis of leadership performance on social networks and thus asks:

**RQ:** How does the digital performance of leaders on Instagram construct different forms of leadership?

**RQ1:** Does a digital platform host different types of digital performance?

**RQ2:** Can different types of digital performance be identified through a set of indicators?

**RQ3:** Can specific forms of digital performance be univocally related to specific forms of leadership?

To answer these questions, the present article will first propose a new framework for the analysis of leaders’ digital performance and subsequently test it on a specific case study: the Instagram activity of Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn during the 2019 UK General Election campaign. In line with Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), this paper argues that “distance” is a central and measurable parameter to analyze the technological performance of leaders. In other words, while each single feed is composed of a series of heterogeneous visual contents, the reiteration of specific proximity structures is the key to categorizing leaders’ technological performance on Instagram.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 *The emergence of leader distance as an analytical parameter*

The analytical tool proposed in this study is the result of the combination of two different theoretical approaches, leadership studies and visual semiotics, and their application in the field of new media

studies. The literature discussed in the following sections should not be considered an exhaustive overview of the current state-of-the-art in the different fields, but rather as a selective review aimed at describing the theoretical basis of the proposed method. Accordingly, the first section will discuss the legacy of leadership studies and the second the basis of visual semiotics and the rise of networked visibility. In conclusion, recent studies on the use of Instagram by political actors will be reviewed.

The origin of the systematic study and theorization of leadership can be traced back to the fundamental work *Economy and Society* (1978), where Weber defines three main forms of authority: traditional, legal-bureaucratic and charismatic. These forms of authority differ not only in the ways they function within human groups, but first and foremost in the ways in which these groups legitimize their existence. In other words, social legitimization is identified as the *conditio sine qua non* for the rise of authoritative figures. From this first categorization, the study of leadership has evolved into two main streams. On the one hand, leadership has been studied in sociology and anthropology as a social construction. In this line of inquiry, the ground for the emergence of leadership is sought, beside the relationship between leaders and followers, also in a series of macro- structural factors, such as specific religious worldviews (Bilu & Ben-Ari, 1992; Feldman, 2007) or socioeconomic customs (McLeod, 2002; Miller, Wills & Scanlan, 2013). On the other hand, leadership has been investigated as a psychological dynamic that constantly re-tunes the structure of a certain community by allowing the emergence of leader and follower roles. This approach is usually employed in studying the functioning of medium and small-scale organizations, such as schools or companies, and has led to the development of specific tools and indicators for the assessment of leader performance.

The analytical tool proposed in this study owes the definition of its key parameters mostly to psychological research on leadership. On this point, it could be objected that propaganda images traditionally use the body of the leader to synthesize a whole system of meanings; a system of meanings which transcend the mere physical appearance of leaders and therefore requires a more comprehensive analysis. While this criticism remains valid, this study argues that the ways in which visual content exists on social networks today has radically redefined visual communication, to the point that it can be better understood as a public digital performance rather than a series of embodied yet crystallized expressions of power. In this regard, the seminal work of James MacGregor Burns (2010 [1978]) differentiates between power-holders and leaders on the basis of purpose. While power-holders mobilize resources to achieve personal goals, “leadership is exercised in a condition of conflict or competition in which leaders contend in appealing to the motive bases of potential followers. Naked power, on the other hand, admits of no competition or conflict—there is no engagement.” (p.28). Accordingly, leadership is perceived as a dynamic and constant interaction between different actors. This is reflected in one of the first established models for the analysis of leadership: the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) created by Bass and Avolio (1990). Developing further Downton’s basic categories (1973), this model identifies three main types of leadership (*laissez-faire*, transactional and transformational) and nine different parameters for leadership evaluation. Without entering into the details of this model, it is apparent that all these parameters, even those which characterize the most passive form of leadership (*laissez-faire*), attempt to measure leaders’ action towards their followers. This includes, for example, encouraging innovation, monitoring deviation and reacting to exceptional situations.

The development of MLQ and its adaptation to different contexts brought Avolio and Bass to propose the Full-Range Leadership Theory (2001), which reaffirms the centrality of leader performance and repropose the macro-typology discussed above. In examining this model, Antonakis and House (2002; 2014) suggest the introduction of a fourth macro-category of leadership, i.e. instrumental leadership, that goes beyond ideals-based leadership towards an effectiveness-based one. They also began to unpack the followers’ assemblage by dividing it on the basis of three main needs: need for power, need for achievement and need for affiliation. In the same year, however, Antonakis and Atwater (2002) proposed the adoption of a single general parameter for the analysis of leadership. A parameter which was not central in the Full-Range Leadership Theory: leader distance. In their work, leader distance is presented

as a general operational concept that subsumes previous parameters under a common umbrella or, perhaps, a spatial metaphor. Antonakis and Atwater argue that the management of leader-follower distance is a central variable and, accordingly, elaborate an eight-folded typology. This typology, which is expanded by the analytical model proposed in this paper, relies on the measurement of three main variables: leader-follower physical distance (PD), perceived social distance (SD), and perceived outreach frequency (OF). The definition of these variables makes clear that, in this model, the concept of distance does not indicate uniquely a spatial arrangement but rather the followers' perception of their distance to the leader. This concept will be further discussed in the theoretical framework (section 3) and operationalized through visual semiotics theory.

Antonakis and Atwater's typology includes the idea of e-leadership which, according to their model, identifies those leaders which are physically detached from their followers (PD=High) but perceived as being closed to them in terms of social class (SD=Low) and very active in the community (IF=High). The idea of e-leadership was proposed the year before by Avolio, Kahai and Dodge (2001) to investigate the mutual influence between leadership and new media. Recognizing the importance of studying leadership in the context of its emergence (House & Aditya, 1997), they observed the ongoing transformation of several companies and identified three main traits of digitally enhanced organizations: real-time interaction, knowledge sharing, and customized relationships. In this early work, their definition of e-leadership is essentially leadership through Internet Communication Technologies (ICT) and, among other things, they ask themselves whether and how distance "matters when leaders and followers are working virtually across organizations, time zones, and cultures" (p.651). In line with a popular current of thought that saw in the rise of ICTs the "death of distance" (Cairncross, 1997), early studies ambiguously perceived the management of distance both as the main trait (or problem) of emerging ICT-based organizations and a possible analytical variable.

More than a decade later, considering the expansion of digital means, Avolio led a re-assessment of ICT-based leadership (Avolio et al., 2014). In this study, e-leadership is redefined as a social influence process "embedded in both proximal and distal contexts" mediated by ICTs (p.107). This specification, which was not present in the first study, highlights the problematic role of distance in defining leader-follower relations online. Similarly, in presenting their model the authors propose an adaptation of the categories used to describe face-to-face interactions, i.e. traits, behaviors, cognition and affect. However, even though distance is not assumed here as an analytical concept, it is employed throughout the manuscript to hint at qualitatively different kinds of relationship (e.g. relational distance, social distance or power distance). Accordingly, recognizing the need to further systematize and operationalize the concept of leader-follower distance, the present study integrates the theoretical background offered by leadership studies with the analytical tools of visual semiotics.

## ***2.2 Networked visibility and transforming visual ecologies***

Integrating visual semiotics into the study of leadership is more than sticking a sharp analytical tool into the extremities of an already defined body of theory. Metaphorically speaking, the risk is to create a theoretical Edward Scissorhands which finds no place in either field of research. For this reason, this section will endeavour to sketch the longstanding and permanently transforming entanglement between visual communication and leadership, leaving the presentation of the analytical tools for the following section. To begin with a famous example, currency coined in the Roman Empire was continuously redesigned to include in its engraving personalities and events of public interest. Being among the widest circulating objects of the time, currency was systematically employed to familiarize illiterate subjects with the image of the leader, impressed on one side of coins, and what the leader stands for, impressed on the other (e.g. favourite deities or victorious soldiers). The meaning of this visual communication exceeded greatly the mere juxtaposition of two images. On the one hand, it was a symbolic point of

juncture between political, economic, and moral power. On the other hand, it yielded the advantage of being reproducible, resistant, easily transferable and, last but not least, valuable.

This simple example highlights how the life of images within human groups cannot be properly understood without taking into consideration technical and material conditions, such as means of production and circulation. Indeed, for a long time the production of images was expensive. For this reason, it was the monopoly of elites united by similar cultural and economic conditions (Benjamin, 2008 [1936]; Mitchell, 2005). Visual representations were regulated by shared standards, usually defined by religious authorities or noble families, and were hardly accessible to the average citizen. Moreover, any deviance from these standards would have been considered an insult, a sin or even a crime. With the advent of photography and photojournalism, the abundant production of standardized pictures became a core component of 20th century propaganda. While strictly top-down, the presence of pictures progressively became part of citizens' everyday life and this led, in 1925, to an early yet important moment of rupture: the publication of *War against War!*. In the aftermath of World War I, this self-published underground book displayed for the first time 200 pictures of the battle fields that were not produced for the official media but retrieved mostly from military and medical classified archives (Martini, 2017). The sudden appearance of these images in the public domain provoked a violent reaction from official authorities: all copies of the book were confiscated at bayonet point and bookshop owners who sold them were threatened or arrested (Apel, 1999). Beyond its political relevance, this event was the symptom of an important change: for the first time a private citizen had the technical and economic possibility to challenge established authorities by independently circulating unofficial pictures.

The publication of *War against War!* represents, in a way, the beginning of what is today a common practice: the public circulation of privately produced images. The hyperbolic expansion of visual communication online and its sociopolitical implications have been the object of several studies, from the reshaping of human interactions (Jaynes, 2019; Warfield et al., 2019) to counter-surveillance projects (Gregory, 2019; Newell, 2019). The popularization of the means of production and circulation of images has progressively blurred the boundaries between producer and consumer (Jenkins et al., 2009; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010) while generating new markets and forms of value production (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2018; Couldry, & Hepp, 2018). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that, in spite of the fast-transforming media ecology of the early 2000s, even scholars who acknowledged the ongoing change seem reluctant to imply a power-shift. In a seminal article significantly titled *The New Visibility* (2005), Thompson claims that we are witnessing the emergence of a new form of human interaction based on online visual communication. He interestingly traces a short history of the relationship between visibility and political leadership but states that "it is primarily those who exercise power, rather than those over whom power is exercised, who are subjected to a new kind of visibility" (p.40-41). In other words, while theorizing a radical change in visual communication and the rise of grassroots production, he does not expect a shift in content: the object of this new communication will remain the established powerholders.

In hindsight, there is a certain irony in the fact that Thompson's work was published in the same year companies such as Facebook and YouTube were founded. By making user-generated content their core business, these Internet giants have completely remapped the circulation of images on a global level. The intersection between broadband internet connection and affordable personal technologies has created the conditions for the emergence of widespread visual communication, to the point that today this media market directly influences the development of smart devices. Accordingly, the study of the relationship between leadership and visual communication cannot prescind from the analysis of the logics regulating digital environments (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra & Tormey, 2016; Van Dijck, & Poell, 2013). Indeed, digital platforms act as organizing structures which define possibilities and limits of user activity (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Motensen, 2015). At the same time, however, these digital environments are in constant dialogue with the communities of users inhabiting them (Burgess, Green, & Rebane, 2020; Martini, 2018). Users expect companies to guarantee the values of their platforms from external influence, such as artificially inflated view-counts, hidden advertisement, bots or even censorship. In broader terms,

SNSs have to act as mediators between groups characterized by often conflicting interests, i.e. users, governmental bodies and their own shareholders. Waves of discontent from any of these parties might be extremely disruptive, such as in the case of Indian Tik Tok users who sunk the app's global rating from 4.6 to 1.3 (out of 5) within weeks through massive downvote (Megha & Kar, *The Economic Times*, 21 May 2020).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 *Introducing the leadership visual performance model*

The transformations outlined above pushed political leaders into uncharted waters. On the one hand, SNSs offer the possibility of inexpensive public outreach but, on the other hand, the functioning of these platforms is regulated by several variables and often resist external control. Current research on the use of Instagram by political parties tends to avoid this issue by focusing mostly on content. For example, Russmann, Svensson, & Larsson (2019) propose a four-fold framework for content analysis (broadcasting, mobilization, image management and hybridity) while Poulakidakos & Giannouli (2019), focusing on the personalization of politics, categorize leaders' Instagram activity in relation to the strategic exposure of their public and private life. In this line, Lalancette & Raynauld (2019) propose a comprehensive analysis of Trudeau's presence on Instagram which integrate parameters such as image structure and textual analysis of caption. The model proposed in this article integrates aspects of the methodologies elaborated in these works. However, its theoretical basis differs in two fundamental aspects. Firstly, while previous studies relied mostly on communication theory and political science, the present approach directly integrate the categories developed in leadership studies and with the five dimensions elaborated by Construal Level Theory, thus operationalizing the concept of "distance" for analytical purposes. Secondly, this study will approach leaders' activity on Instagram as a digital performance, defined as an assemblage of technological and human agency where "the human reacts to the agency the technologies suggest, and vice versa" (Leeker, Schipper, & Beyes, 2017: 21). In other words, the present study argues that while analytical categories maintain their heuristic value, they should not be interpreted in isolation but rather as interacting factors which concur to generate the leadership performance.

Drawing on this background, the analytical model proposed in this study aims at creating a dialogue between the typologies elaborated in the field of leadership studies and the empirical investigation of the digital performance (hereafter DP) of contemporary leaders. While the first are fundamental in subsuming the analytical facets into a form of leadership, the second highlights the limits of such typologies and identifies the appearance of new forms of leadership. As previously discussed, this dialogue will be centred around the articulation and expansion of a single concept: distance.

The proposed model integrate the various forms of distance proposed in the field of leadership studies (Antonakis and Atwater, 2002; Avolio et al., 2014) with the 5 forms of distance defined by Construal Level Theory (CLT) for the analysis of visual perception (Trope & Liberman, 2010). This psychological theory is based on the idea that various forms of distance concur to generate a mental construal whose "reference point is the self, here and now, and the different ways in which an object might be removed from that point - in time, space, social distance, and hypotheticality" (p. 440). From this perspective, then, digital performance on Instagram can be understood as the way in which subjects strategically construct around themselves a system of distance that includes, among other things, the position from which other users will observe them. In this regard, it is important to stress that while CLT considers the various types of distance as mutually related, the nature of this relation is still under discussion. Accordingly, as distance will be at the core of our analytical model, it should be kept in mind that this variable does not measure the quantity of information available but rather the qualitative traits attributed to specific blocks of visual information; traits that are subsequently ordered to create a spectrum (close/far).

### 3.2 The leadership visual performance model

The Leadership Visual Performance Model (LVPM) is a theoretical tool designed to analyse leadership performance on visual-based SNSs, such as Instagram or Tik Tok. More specifically, this model enables the tracing of the spatial system centred around the leader that is constructed through visual content. Accordingly, the LVPM is designed to describe how distance is managed by leaders and how, in turn, the resulting spatial structures define their leadership performance.

Some parameters utilized in LVPM are not exclusively tailored to visual content and can be extended to encompass various forms of communication across Instagram. It's important to acknowledge that we view online visual performance as a subset of broader activities within social networking sites (SNSs), which may encompass diverse communication modalities.

The LVPM articulates distance in 5 different dimensions and 14 parameters, as follows:

- **Temporal Distance:** the leaders' positioning in relation to temporal coordinates.
  - *Outreach Frequency:* frequency of upload of new contents.
  - *Time Gap:* temporal distance between the time of upload of a given image and the time of the scene represented in the image.
- **Physical Distance:** the leaders' positioning in relation to both the space of representation and geographical coordinates.
  - *Leader Presence:* Whether the leader is present in the image/video or not.
  - *Topological Reference:* explicit topological reference either inside the content or as metadata.
  - *Leader's Framing:* distance between the leader and the camera<sup>1</sup>.
- **Social Distance:** the leaders' positioning in relation to existing social classes and institutions.
  - *Hierarchical Positioning:* social status of the people surrounding or interacting with the leader.
  - *Leader's Focus:* element at the centre of the attention of the leader.
  - *Leader's Standing:* position of the leader in relation to other people represented in the content.
- **Hypothetical Distance:** the leaders' positioning in relation to their goal, i.e. how the leader's DP constructs success as a likely event in terms of probability.
  - *Leader's Endorsement:* number of supporters/followers standing with the leader.
  - *Leader's Attire:* clothing standards adopted by the leader.
  - *Leader's Agency:* leader's expressed agency in relation to the surrounding environment.
- **Affective Distance:** the leaders' expressed level of intimacy and emotional engagement with followers.
  - *Leader's Emotions:* the emotional status expressed by the leader.
  - *Haptic Engagement:* the elements touched by the leader.
  - *Picture's Focus:* the centre of attention of the picture as indicated by its structure.

The five forms of distance and their related parameters constitute the core of LVPM and can be connected to different typologies of leadership. As clarified in the coding scheme, each parameter needs to answer a specific question. However, while the parameters' definition is necessarily narrow, the identification of the relevant indicators might be adapted to the different cases. This serves a double purpose. On the one

<sup>1</sup> With reference to this parameter, the point of view of the camera is seen as constructing that of the observer. Accordingly, the two terms will be used interchangeably.

hand, it enables a more precise description of the spatial structure. On the other hand, it facilitates a dialogue between case-studies and employed analytical categories, thus allowing a bottom-up questioning of the latter if deemed necessary.

### **3.3 Data collection procedure and analysis**

The LVPM will now be employed to comparatively analyse Boris Johnson's and Jeremy Corbyn's Instagram activity during the 2019 UK General Election campaign. This campaign was chosen as a test case for LVPM to demonstrate its application due to the high level of polarization and the significant difference in leadership styles exhibited by the two candidates. However, it's important to note that the model can be applied to various scenarios beyond electoral contexts. In a similar vein, the choice of focusing on Instagram rather than other platforms is due to (i) its popularity across different demographic sectors in the UK and (ii) the possibility to easily collect an exhaustive corpus of images. However, the LVPM can be applied to visual content retrieved from different digital platforms.

The corpus was assembled by screen-capturing the entire output of Johnson's and Corbyn's official Instagram accounts from the beginning of the General Election campaign (29 October 2019) to the Election Day (12 December 2019). Data collection was conducted between the 13 and the 15 of December 2019 and resulted in the extraction of 583 contents (pictures and videos). Contents were uploaded in a mixed-method software (Dedoose) and coded according to the parameters presented in the LVPM. It should be noted that videos were watched and coded according to the dominant content and framing. Series of multiple images were coded as single images. Results of the coding process were elaborated in statistical form through spreadsheet software (LibreOffice), compared and prepared for publication.

### **3.4 Ethics statement**

In line with the guidelines published by the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham, Buchanan & AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2012), the research design was based on an unobtrusive collection of publicly available information. The extraction and analysis of data were conducted by investigators who have no personal or political ties with the analysed leader, parties or platforms. Data were stored in password-protected archives and will be presented in the form of statistics. No personal identifying information was processed. On this basis, the publication of this study presents minimal risk for both the observed groups and the researchers.

## **4. Findings: Comparing digital performances in the 2019 UK general election campaign**

### **4.1 Temporal distance**

The present study analysed 583 images and videos, of which 382 (65.5%) were uploaded by Jeremy Corbyn and 201 (34.5%) by Boris Johnson. In terms of Outreach Frequency, the DP of the two leaders presents some relevant differences. Corbyn uploaded almost twice as much content as Johnson and, while both progressively increased their online presence in the run-up to the Election Day, their posting frequency differs significantly. Johnson's interaction frequency varies irregularly from 0 to 8 posts/day, with an average of 3.5 posts/day. While increasing towards the end of the campaign, his posting activity does not follow a clear pattern. Conversely, Corbyn's DP is generally more intense, with an average of 8.4 posts/day during the campaign and a sharp increase towards the end. Indeed, in the last week Corbyn uploaded from 12 to 25 contents per day, with a peak of 50 posts on Election Day. In terms of represented events (Time Gap), both leaders remain strongly focused on contemporary issues and follow the various



stages of their campaign (C: 94,2%, J: 95.5%)<sup>2</sup>. Corbyn is more inclined to post historical pictures (4.2%) and Johnson to post timeless advertisement-like graphics (4%), but these images have minor significance.

Drawing on these data, Johnson’s DP is based on a daily engagement with followers which ranges between 1 to 8 posts/day and remains unvaried throughout the campaign. This communicative style, mostly stable and untouched by unfolding events, may be interpreted as a way to express firmness, certainty and a bigger distance between the leader and his followers. Conversely, Corbyn’s high-frequency posting that significantly increases towards the Election Day constructs a task-oriented leader who, by close and continuous engagement with his followers, personally leads the common struggle

#### 4.2 Physical distance

In terms of physical distance, the differences between the two leaders’ DPs are significant (Chart 1). Johnson is present in almost all his posts (96%), barely mentions his opponent (2%) and his body is mostly represented as relatively close to the observer (Close-Up: 18.9%, Waist Shot: 41.8%, American Shot: 20.9%)<sup>3</sup> with relatively few images falling outside of this range. Conversely, Corbyn is physically present in less than half of his uploads (44.8%). The remaining posts contain either third actors (34.8%, see 5.5) or screenshots of the leader’s Tweets (21%). When present, Corbyn’s body loosely shifts from close to distant positions (Close-Up: 8.4%, Waist Shot: 16.8%, American Shot: 7.3%, Medium Shot: 7.3%, Long Shot: 4.2%). He mentions his opponent in about a fifth of his total posts (18.9%).

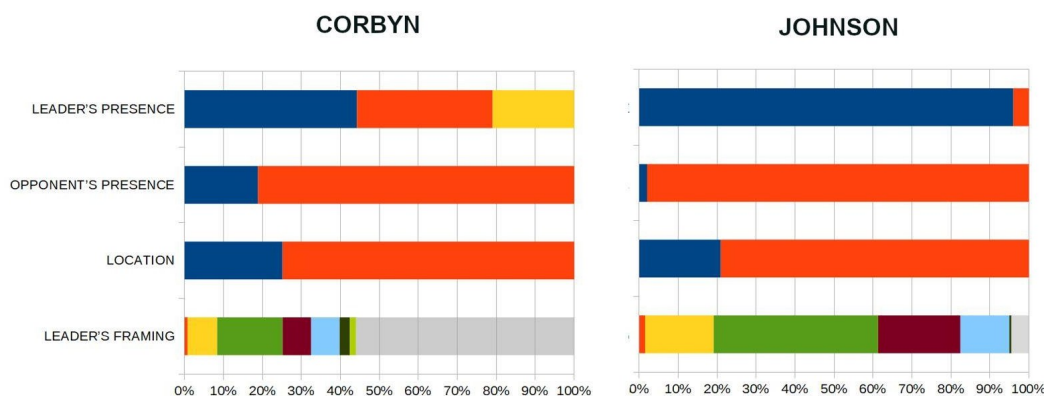


Figure 1. Visualization of “Physical distance” data.

In the order: (1) Leader’s Presence [Blue=Yes / Red= No / Yellow= Twitter screenshot]. (2) Opponent’s Presence [Blue=Yes / Red=No]. (3) Location [Blue=Yes / Red=No]. (4) Leader’s Framing [Red=Detail / Yellow=Close Up / Green=Waist Shot / Purple=American Shot / Light Blue=Medium Shot / Dark Green = Long Shot / Light Green = Extreme Long Shot / Gray = Not Applicable].

Looking at these data, we can see how Johnson’s DP aims at constructing a personal, direct and almost physically-charged engagement with followers. Johnson is clearly the main content of his own DP: he is almost always present, he is firmly in front of the camera, he is close to the observer and very rarely give space to his opponent. On the other hand, in terms of physical distance Corbyn is significantly more ethereal. His relationship with the observer is based on a mix between presence, absence and re-mediated communication (Twitter screenshots). When visible, Corbyn does not maintain a stable stance in relation to the camera: he continuously shifts from close to very distant, and sometimes is even hardly visible. The presence of his opponent, on the contrary, is a returning feature of Corbyn’s DP. He regularly

<sup>2</sup> For brevity, some results will be presented between brackets using the initials of the two leaders. Since the aim of the present research is to compare two DPs conceived as single unities, the presented percentages are calculated on the total posting of each leader and not on the full corpus.

<sup>3</sup> Also known as “plan américain”, the American Shot is a term borrowed from the cinema industry defining a medium- long film shot which portrays characters from the knees up. This framing became famous in western movies and is still associated with that kind of narrative.

mentions Johnson and the Conservative Party, hence making them present to his followers and positioning himself in a relationship of opposition.

### 4.3 Social distance

Differences in the management of social distance are not as clear as they were in the two previous cases (Chart 2). In terms of hierarchical positioning, both leaders favour being surrounded by supporters (J: 27.4%, C: 20.2%) and, occasionally, by party activists (C: 5.2%, J: 5%). However, unlike Corbyn, Johnson appears often with regular citizens (C: 4.2%, J: 28.4%) and seldom with public officers (C: 2.1%, J: 6.5%). These stark differences are related to the fact that, by not appearing in more than half of his posts, Corbyn has far less occasions to visually associate himself with other actors. Also, in terms of visual attention, both leaders generally disregard institutional figures (C: 0.8%, J: 0%) and party activists (C: 1.8%, J: 1.5%), while focusing on two specific elements: the camera, i.e. the observer-user, and the supporters. Nonetheless, Corbyn focuses primarily on supporters (C: 31.2%, J: 23.8%) while Johnson looks often towards the camera (C: 18%, J: 31.3%). Finally, in terms of standing the two leaders seems to adopt a similar approach, even though Johnson’s style is far more emphasized. Both leaders stand mostly either among the crowd (C: 18.3%, J: 45.2%) or in front of it (C: 15.7%, J: 24.9%). However, Johnson also appears alone in one fifth of the pictures (C: 6.8%, J: 22.9%) and, unlike Corbyn, is never in the background (C: 3.7%, J: 0%).

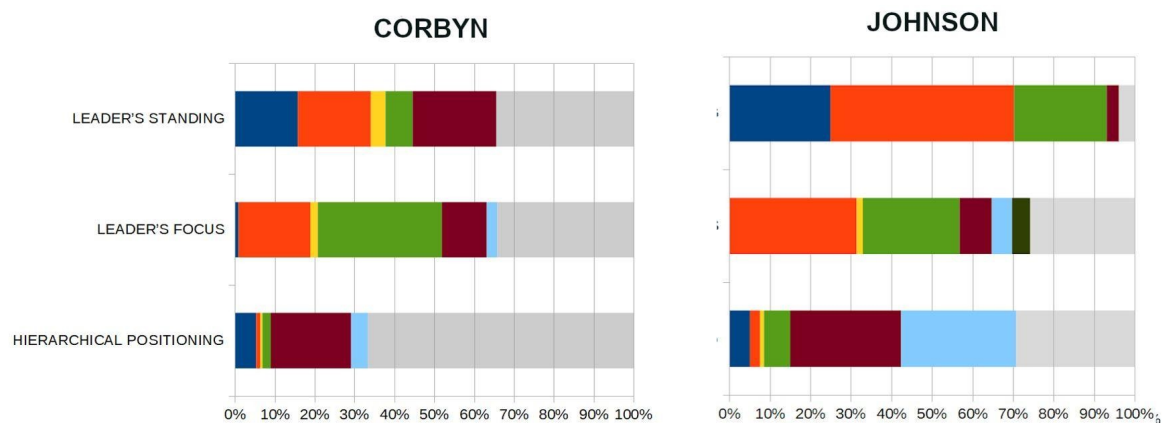


Figure 2. Visualization of “Social Distance” data

In the order: (1) Leader’s Standing [Blue=Foregrund / Red=Middle-ground / Yellow=Background / Green=Solo / Purple=Icon / Gray=Not applicable.] (2) Leader’s Focus [Blue=Camera / Red=Citizens / Yellow=Institutions / Green=Supporters / Purple=Party Activists / Light Blue=Media / Dark Green=Objects / Gray=Not Applicable]. (3) Hierarchical Positioning [Blue=Citizens / Red=High-ranked Figures / Yellow=Party Activists / Green=Supporters / Purple=Community Leaders / Light Blue=Public Officers / Gray=Not Applicable].

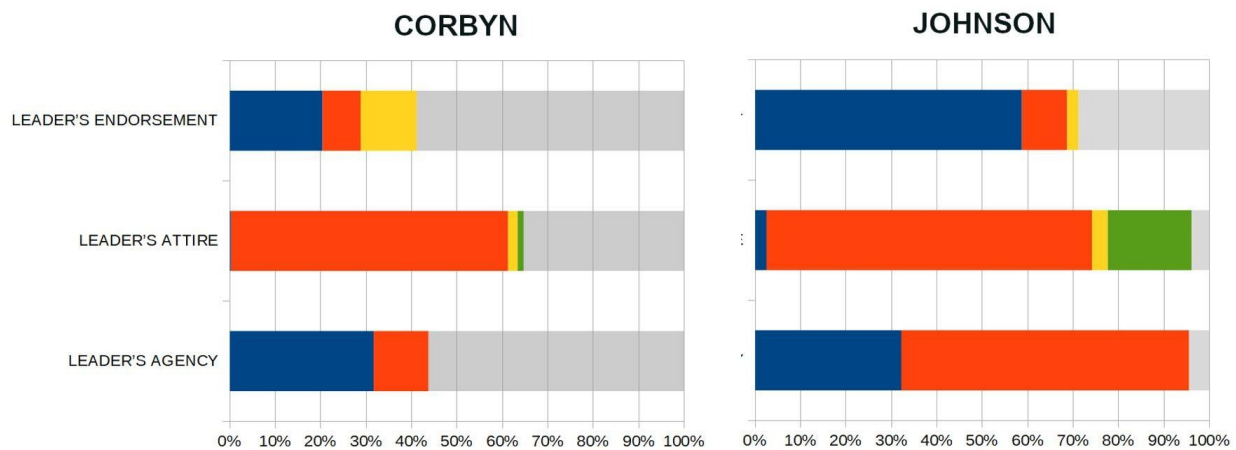
Synthesizing the presented data, both leaders clearly privilege the expression of a direct relationship with supporters by both appearing among them and focusing their attention on them. This similarity notwithstanding, differences in ways of managing social distance can be observed. Corbyn is often surrounded by supporters and party activists, but rarely by people not explicitly expressing their political affiliation. Physically present supporters get most of his attention and he stands among them. From this perspective, Corbyn presents himself as a leader focused on his followers: a leader that is one of “them”, is attentive to their demands and recognizes their importance (to the point of remaining in the background on a few occasions). While not distancing himself from this meaning, Johnson appears to leverage his official position. He equally associates himself with both supporters and regular citizens, but also appears alone. He interacts with public officers, thus linking himself to the operative branch of the state, but not with institutional figures. He stands among or in front of his supporters, but often looks directly at the

camera to address the viewer. In other words, where Corbyn is socially almost indiscernible from his followers, Johnson manages to constantly defuse this identification.

**4.4 Hypothetical distance**

Hypothetical distance is, perhaps, the less intuitive of the five dimensions of distance proposed by the LVPM. This dimension, originally proposed by Construal Level Theory, describes the probability of a represented event to occur as perceived by the viewer. In the case at hand, this dimension is translated as the perceived possibility of the two candidates becoming the next Prime Minister (PM) and how such perception is constructed through the leaders' DP.

In terms of the leaders' endorsement, both candidates often appear with small groups of supporters (C:20.4%, J: 58.7%). However, while Johnson almost exclusively interacts with a limited number of supporters, Corbyn regularly addresses large crowds throughout his campaign (C: 12.3%, J: 2.5%). In terms of bodily expression, both leaders overwhelmingly adopt a formal and standardized attire (C: 61%, J: 71.6%). Johnson, however, also appears several times wearing the working uniforms used by the workers he is visiting (C: 1.3%, J: 18.4%). Finally, an important difference concerns the leaders' expressed agency. Corbyn is shown mostly in a static posture (C: 31.7%, J: 31.8%) while Johnson consistently adopts a more dynamic attitude (C: 12%, J: 62.6%).



**Figure 3. Visualization of "Hypothetical Distance" data**

*In the order: (1) Leader's Endorsement [Blue=Small Crowd / Red=Medium Crowd / Yellow=Large Crowd / Gray=Not Applicable]. (2) Leader's Attire [Blue=Informal / Red=Formal / Yellow=Community Symbols / Green=Uniforms / Gray=Not Applicable]. (3) Leader's Agency [Blue=Static / Red=Dynamic / Gray=Not Applicable]*

The management of hypothetical distance is here particularly interesting (Chart 3). Indeed, while Corbyn is a candidate for premiership, his opponent already is the PM. Accordingly, their strategies differ on some significant points. Corbyn's construction of himself as a legitimate PM is mostly conventional and unambiguous: he shows himself receiving support from both small and large groups of people while standing composedly in formal attire. Johnson, conversely, is already the PM during the campaign and strategically plays on this public position. He focuses on small groups of supporters rather than seeking the legitimization of large crowds, thus showing himself as part of everyday life. His attire generally fits his institutional role but from time to time he wears workers uniforms, thus creating a visual link between himself as a top political figure and the working class. Finally, he is often represented in the middle of the action. While this might produce less symbolical and iconic images, it bears the advantage of imbuing them with energy, thus presenting Johnson as dynamically engaging with reality. To

summarize, Johnson does not present his premiership as a possibility but takes it as his already established role to work from.

#### 4.5 Affective distance

Affective distance is more intuitive and refers to the experience of feelings, as well as their expression and sharing. In other words, this dimension aims at describing the level of intimacy and empathy elicited by the leaders' DP. In this respect, the difference between the two candidates is, once again, clear (Chart 4). Corbyn assumes mostly a neutral expression (C: 36.1%, J: 15.9%) while Johnson is overwhelmingly expressing positive feelings (C: 12.6%, J: 60.2%). It should be noted that Johnson is also occasionally represented in a meditative stance (C: 2.9%, J: 16.9%) while Corbyn's emotions are at times not visible, as he turns his back to the camera or is too far away (C: 12.6%, J: 2.9%). In terms of haptic engagement, Johnson is far more expansive than Corbyn: he frequently interacts physically with his supporters (C: 5.2%, J: 18.8%), handles tools or objects (C: 6.8%; J: 18.8%) and, perhaps most importantly, expresses himself through hand gestures (C: 2.9%, J: 25.9%). Corbyn is a more distant figure because, even when present, his physical interaction with his surroundings is very limited. In this respect, the study of the focus of the image, i.e. where the viewer's attention will be drawn in the first place, highlights an interesting dynamic. Johnson is preponderantly the center of his own DP, as the vast majority of images focus on him (82.6%) and only marginally on his supporters (10%). Conversely, Corbyn's DP pushes forward his supporters (32.2%) while leaving the leader in an almost secondary position (27.5%). In addition, Corbyn's DP involves the posting of other media, such as Twitter screenshots or the front-page of magazines (C: 28.8%, J: 2.5%).

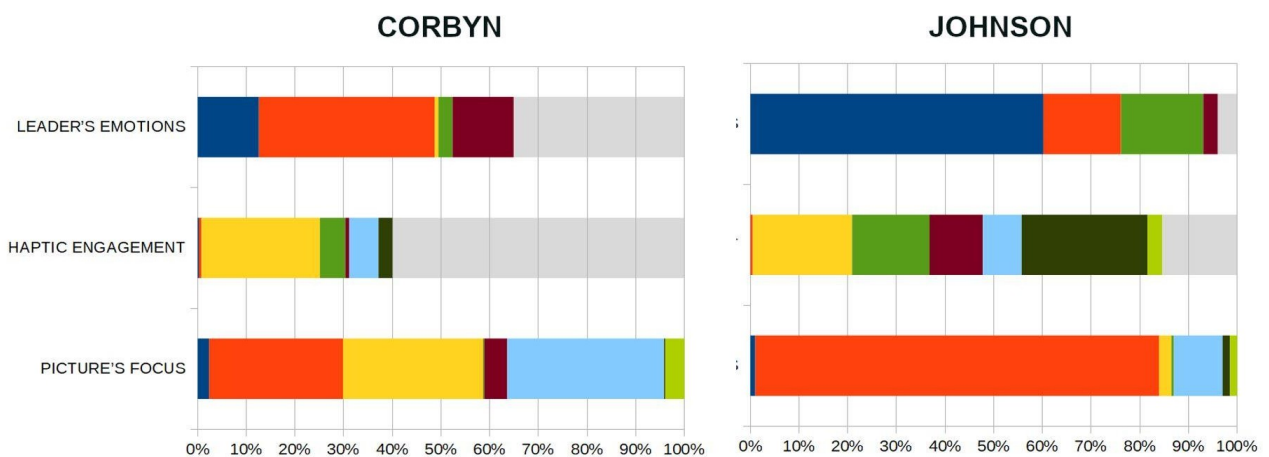


Figure 4.

Visualization of "Affective Distance" data. In the order: (1) Leader's Emotions [Blue=Positive / Red=Neutral / Yellow=Negative / Green=Meditative / Purple=Not Visible / Gray=Not Applicable]. (2) Haptic engagement [Blue=Party Symbols / Red=Media Tools / Yellow=No Touch / Green=Supporters / Purple=Working Tools / Light Blue=Other / Dark Green=Hand Gesture / Light Green=Citizens / Gray=Not Applicable]. (3) Picture's Focus [Blue=Objects / Red=Leader / Yellow=Media / Green=Detail / Purple=Opponent / Light Blue=Supporters / Dark Green=Wide Angle / Light Green=Other / Gray=Not Applicable].

These data sketch two forms of leadership that, in terms of affective distance, present significant differences. Johnson expresses a positive and proactive attitude, as well as an interest in transmitting it personally to his followers. By putting his body at the forefront of his DP, he makes himself the primary (and almost exclusive) source of emotional involvement for his followers. Corbyn is emotionally neutral and physically disengaged. The main source of emotional influence for his supporters are the supporters

themselves, to whom he gives plenty of space in his own feed. To put it differently, rather than a source of emotional engagement, Corbyn presents himself as a spokesperson who creates the possibility for his followers to be heard.

### 5. Conclusion: Heuristic limits and possibilities of LVPM

The findings presented above results from the application of the LVPM to the case under scrutiny and highlighted the emergence of two distinct forms of leadership. For the purpose of this study, the level of comparison has been set on the individual parameters, i.e. the 14 variables whose analysis informs the definition of the 5 forms of distance. On the one hand, Johnson represents himself as a leader who, while socially distinct from his followers and measured in his interaction with them, personally channels his emotional and dynamic energy through an outward-leaning body performance. On the other hand, Corbyn interacts intensively with his followers and puts himself on their level, while constructing his role as that of a mostly neutral and often disembodied spokesperson of the popular will.

As previously stated, the 5 forms of distance and their 14 parameters constitute the core of the LVPM. From this nucleus, researchers can move in two opposite directions. Downwards, by developing new sets of indicators that can better describe the nuances of emerging forms of online leadership (e.g. fashion bloggers or religious leaders), and upwards, by proposing new or revised typologies of leadership. Both these movements, however, need to be based on empirical research. The movement towards the particular (i.e. indicators), requires a continuous retuning on the evolving digital landscape. The movement towards the general (i.e. typologies), implies a comparative approach either in relation to standardized forms or between different case studies. To clarify, the data presented above can be generalized and described as follows:

**Table 1.**

*Comparative representation of the leaders' positioning in line with the typology and parameters proposed by Antonakis and Atwater (2002).*

	Temporal	Physical	Social	Hypothetical	Affective
Corbyn	Close	Far	Close	Far	Far
Johnson	Far	Close	Far	Close	Close

This rough generalization clearly implies both a dramatic loss of information and, in absence of a unified scale, a mutual comparison between the two cases under scrutiny. However, it bears the

advantage of making our data readable through previously defined typologies. For example, according to Antonakis and Atwater's typology (2002), Johnson could be described as implementing a *Manor House Leadership* while Corbyn a *Virtually Close Leadership*. While these typologies might be useful to expand the scope of leadership studies far beyond the occurrences, their use should be based on a strict heuristic principle. Indeed, all levels of analysis (typologies, distances, parameters, and indicators) can be adopted as comparative frameworks, as long as their use increases our comprehension of the phenomenon at hand and systematically interrogates/informs all the other levels.

To conclude, we have seen how an online platform can host different digital performances of leadership (RQ1) and how such performances can be identified through a set of spatial indicators (RQ2). The present study has also shown how specific forms of digital performance can be linked to specific types of leadership (RQ3). These results are in line with previous studies, such as Munoz and Towner (2017), which employ a thematic coding scheme to investigate the 2016 US election campaign. This is significant,

as it shows that similar conclusions can be reached employing different analytical schemes. Indeed, being based on Construal Level Theory, the LVPM does not rely on a set of themes but rather on the articulation of 5 different forms of distance between the leader and the viewer; a structural characteristic that makes this tool adaptable and able to allow comparison between different sociocultural contexts.

This model opens various perspectives for future research. Firstly, the exploration of the novel forms of leadership emerging on digital platforms and the creation of a typology. Secondly, the process of migration of well-established authorities on social media and the translation of the traditional marks of their leadership in connective terms. Thirdly, given the quantifiable nature of the parameters proposed in the LVPM, attempts could be made to partially or completely automatize the process of analysis through the design of dedicated software. Such development would facilitate constant comparison of different DPs (digital performances) while helping to chart and monitor the evolution of leadership online. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, future research should endeavour to trace the emergence and disappearance of new visual languages. Indeed, the extensive use of visual communication allowed by digital platforms is generating complex visual languages whose functioning is connected to specific communities of practice. The study of the evolution of such languages, and specifically of the forms of internal leadership that drive this evolution, represents a still unexplored field of inquiry which potentially bears consequences on both a political and an economic level.

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