

The Impact of Identity Leadership on Follower Emotions, Work Engagement and Leader Trust

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Identity leadership theory tends to focus on leader behaviour rather than leader rhetoric, for example email communication. This reliance on behavioural indicators may obscure how leaders shape identity discursively. In this study we examine how identity leadership conveyed through emails affects followers' work engagement, trust, and emotions. We randomly assigned 200 participants to a high identity leadership group where they read an email exemplar of the 5R (identity leadership) framework, and 200 participants to a low identity leadership group where they read an email that was unrelated to the 5R framework. Participants in the high identity leadership group reported significantly fewer negative emotions than those in the low identity leadership group. This result suggests that identity leaders can minimise negative emotional experiences through email communication and highlights the need to reconsider the behavioural bias in identity leadership theory.

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Identity leadership theory has traditionally emphasized the behaviour of leaders in shaping group identity (Haslam et al., 2023; Hogg, 2001). This focus assumes that identity leadership is inherently tied to observable behaviours (see Identity Leadership Inventory; Steffens et al., 2014), however, this potentially underplays the way leaders influence identity through written communication. In this paper, we challenge that assumption by examining whether identity leadership can be effectively conveyed through email—a medium devoid of non-verbal cues and direct interpersonal interaction. Email communication matters in leadership, as leaders often communicate through email, particularly for those working remotely (Yoo & Alavi, 2004). Thus, we problematize the behavioural bias embedded within identity leadership research and explore how leadership influence may vary across communication contexts.

The social identity approach to leadership ('identity leadership') argues that a leader's ability to influence and inspire others depends on creating, advancing, representing and embedding a shared sense of social identity (Haslam et al., 2023). Although there are several theories that recognise the importance of groups and teams (e.g., Dinh et al., 2014), identity leadership is unique in that it asserts that leadership derives from social identity-based perceptions of the leader as a group member (Hogg, 2001; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Identity leaders help create a sense of trust, psychological safety, and collective effort (Fransen et al., 2015; Fransen et al., 2020; Khumalo et al., 2022; Stevens et al., 2019), while also supporting the mental health and well-being of subordinates (Steffens et al., 2014; van Dick et al., 2021). In this paper, we argue that identity leaders will enhance follower work engagement, trust in the leader, and evoke positive rather than negative follower emotions (see Figure 1).

These outcomes are likely to arise because identity leaders foster employee engagement by creating a sense of organisational belonging and attachment (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Such employees have high organisational identification, which refers to: (1) a perception of shared interests and goals with organisational members, (2) a sense of belongingness to the organisation, and (3) support towards organisational goals and policies (Patchen, 1970). When employees have high organizational identification, they exhibit a preference for the organization and feel more strongly for the achievements and downfalls of the organization than their own (Chen et al., 2011). The stronger the identification, the more important it will be for the individual to see the organisation succeed, as their sense of self is more strongly linked to the organisation. As such, individuals become more devoted and absorbed in their work. A positive relationship between organizational identification and work engagement has been found in several studies (see Karanika-Murray et al., 2015; Guo et al., 2020).

Hypothesis 1. Identity leadership positively relates to employee work engagement levels.

Numerous studies have found that prototypical leaders, i.e., those who are representative of the group's identity, are more trusted than less prototypical leaders. This is particularly relevant in groups where group membership is salient and members identify strongly with the group (Barreto & Hogg, 2017; Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008; Giessner et al., 2009; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005; Hogg et al., 2012). Such leaders are seen as legitimate leaders because they are perceived to be “one of us” (i.e., prototypical) and “doing it for us”, i.e., displaying group-oriented behavior (Haslam & Platow, 2001b). For example, a leader who has much in common with group members and displays commitment to the group's mission is likely to engender trust from group members. Group members trust these leaders to protect and promote group interests.

Hypothesis 2. Identity leadership positively relates to follower's trust in the leader.

Intergroup emotions theory asserts that individuals experience different emotions when thinking about themselves as members of one group compared to when categorised as belonging to another group, e.g., as an American or as a university student (Mackie et al., 2008). In line with the social identity theory and intergroup emotions theory (Mackie et al., 2008; Smith, 1993), leaders who uphold and promote a group identity trigger fewer negative emotions in the workplace. Such leaders are perceived more favourably and arouse more positive emotion from followers while leaders who engage in actions that threaten the group's salient identity will produce negative perceptions and negative emotions, resulting in them being viewed as a member of an outgroup (Tee et al., 2013). For example, employees may experience a threat to the group's value when the value of the group is undermined, such as the leader suggesting that the ingroup is performing less well compared to an outgroup (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Hypothesis 3. Identity leadership positively relates to the experience of positive state emotions in followers.

Hypothesis 4. Identity leadership negatively relates to the experience of negative state emotions in followers.

Method

Procedure

We directed 401 participants to an online survey through Prolific.com and asked them to give their consent to participate in the study. We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions: the high identity leadership group ($N = 203$) or the low identity leadership group ($N = 198$). Participants in both conditions read an email from the CEO of Frontier airlines (a fictitious company) who urged the heads of three departments (cabin crew, baggage handling and customer service) to improve on-time aircraft departures. The email for the high identity leadership condition reflected high levels of identity leadership whereas the

email for the low identity leadership condition displayed low identity leadership. Identity leadership was assessed with regard to the following 5R framework: (1) the importance of team membership (readying), (2) team roles (reflecting), (3) team goals (representing), (4) setting actions to achieve team goals (realising), and (5) tracking progress toward achieving set goals (reinforcing).

We instructed participants to complete: (1) demographic questions (e.g., level of education), (2) the Identity Leadership Inventory, (3) work engagement scale, (4) PANAS (i.e., positive and negative state emotions), and (4) trust in the leader.

Results

Manipulation Check

We conducted an independent groups t-test to check whether participants in the high identity leadership group viewed their email as displaying greater identity leadership than those in the low identity leadership group. We found a non-significant difference across the mean identity leadership scores for the high identity leadership group ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.35$) and the low identity leadership group ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.44$), $t(384) = -.74$, $p = .461$.

Descriptive Statistics

See Table 1 for a summary of the descriptive statistics of all the study variables.

Work Engagement

We found a non-significant difference across the high identity leadership group ($M = 3.06$, $SD = .93$) and the low identity leadership group ($M = 3.02$, $SD = .93$) for work engagement, $F(1,388) = .21$, $p = .646$. Thus, we did not find support for H1.

Trust in Leadership

We found a non-significant difference across the high identity leadership group ($M = 3.21$, $SD = .88$) and the low identity leadership group ($M = 3.21$, $SD = .90$) for trust in leadership, $F(1, 397) = 0.0$, $p = .986$. Thus, we did not find support for H2.

Positive State Emotions

We found a non-significant difference across the high identity leadership group ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.05$) and the low identity leadership group ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.09$) for positive emotion, $F(1, 389) = .002$, $p = .965$. Thus, we did not find support for H3.

Negative State Emotions

To test H4, we conducted a one-way ANOVA with type of condition as the independent variable and negative emotion as the dependent variable. Participants in the high identity leadership condition ($M = 1.48$, $SD = .59$) experienced significantly fewer negative emotions than those in the low identity leadership condition ($M = 1.66$, $SD = .80$), $F(1, 389) = 6.27$, $p = .013$.

Discussion

The non-significant effect on work engagement suggests that written communication may not engage employees in the same way as face-to-face interactions. This could indicate that while behavioural identity leadership enhances engagement through direct social interaction, written communication might require sustained exposure or integration with other leadership behaviours to influence engagement levels effectively.

The lack of significant differences in trust levels between conditions may reflect the complex nature of trust development. Written communication might require different trust-building mechanisms or longer-term relationship development compared to traditional face-to-face leadership, which can leverage non-verbal cues and immediate reciprocity.

The non-significant effect on positive emotions, contrasted with the significant reduction in negative emotions, suggests that written identity leadership may be more effective as a buffer against negative experiences than as an amplifier of positive ones. This asymmetric effect provides insight into how different aspects of emotional experience might be differently susceptible to leadership influence through written communication. These non-

significant findings highlight the limitations of email as a medium for fostering engagement, trust and positive emotions in the workplace.

We found support for Hypothesis 4, where participants in the high identity leadership condition experienced significantly fewer negative state emotions (e.g., distressed, upset, and nervous) after reading the email than those in the low identity leadership condition. This finding suggests that identity leaders can reduce negative emotions in subordinates, e.g., by promoting a group identity (Tee et al., 2013). This is an interesting finding as the experience of negative emotions in the workplace is related to subordinates' health and well-being. A good example is the role of prolonged psychological stress, which has a negative impact on an individual's mental and physical health both on the job and after work (e.g., Folkman et al., 1986; Cohen et al., 1991).

Social-functionalist emotions theory suggests that reducing negative emotions through reappraisal may eliminate their beneficial functions (Denny & Ochsner, 2014; Elfenbein, 2007; Feinberg et al., 2020; Hartley & Phelps, 2012; Keltner & Haidt, 1999). This theory claims that emotions have evolved to be useful, particularly in our social lives because emotions attune us to the norms and desires of others (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Goldenberg et al., 2016). That is, negative emotions can be useful for various functions, including motivation and behaviour (providing determination), cognition (guiding attention and memory), and social interaction and relationships (e.g., critical feedback used to improve relationships and social standing; Parrott, 2014).

Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

The study advances our understanding of identity leadership by demonstrating that leadership effects vary across communication modalities. It challenges assumptions about the universality of leadership influence mechanisms and highlights the need to consider communication modality in leadership research.

Other studies have looked at the negative impact of leaders who display less prototypicality (e.g., Van Dijke & De Cremer, 2010) but our study manipulates whether the leader exemplifies identity leadership (high versus low) based on the 5R framework. The experimental approach demonstrates the feasibility of manipulating leadership through written communication and provides a template for studying leadership effects in digital communication contexts.

Practical Implications for Leadership Training

The findings suggest that leaders should tailor their communication strategies based on desired outcomes. Written communication might be particularly effective for managing negative emotional experiences, indicating the need for multi-modal leadership approaches in modern organizations.

The study opens several promising avenues for future research, such as investigating how different communication modalities (e.g., face-to-face meetings, video calls) might complement each other in terms of leadership effectiveness, exploring the temporal aspects of written leadership influence, and examining how digital communication technologies might modify leadership effects. Beyond specific findings, the study challenges assumptions about leadership communication in digital contexts and highlights the need to reconsider traditional leadership theories in light of modern communication practices.

Future studies could also consider additional validation measures, such as qualitative feedback on how participants interpreted the emails to determine whether the written manipulation for identity leadership was too subtle, or if participants' pre-existing attitudes toward leadership influenced their responses.

In summary, our findings problematize the implicit assumption that leadership influence mechanisms are modality-neutral. This opens up new avenues for exploring how

leadership operates differently across communication channels, questioning the dominance of behaviour-centric models.

Figure 1. Proposed Relationship between Identity Leadership and Work Engagement, Trust in the Leader and Follower State Emotions



Table 1. Means, standard deviations, internal reliabilities and intercorrelations.

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender ^a	-	-	-	.04	.01	-.02	-.02	-.07	-.09	-.06
2. Age ^b	38.21	12.48	.09	-	.08	.02	.02	.03	-.06	-.02
3. Education ^c	-	-	-.07	.31**	-	-.06	-.11	-.03	.15*	-.06
4. Work Engagement	3.04	.93	-.01	.15*	-.18*	-	.74**	.84**	-.10	.81**
5. Trust in the Leader	3.22	.89	-.08	.16*	-.06	.80**	-	.73**	-.23**	.75**
6. Positive Emotions	2.71	1.07	-.05	.18*	-.11	.83**	.70**	-	-.05	.73**
7. Negative Emotions	1.57	.71	.12	-.12	.10	-.30**	-.33**	-.12	-	-.17*
8. Identity Leadership	4.80	1.39	-.02	.18*	-.18*	.84**	.82**	.72**	-.37**	-

Note: $N_{\text{LowIdentityLeadership}} = 198$ (below the diagonal), $N_{\text{HighIdentityLeadership}} = 203$ (above the diagonal)

^a 1 = Male, 2 = Female, 3 = Non-Binary, 4 = Prefer Not to Say;

^b years;

^c 1 = High School Diploma, 2 = College, 3 = Tafe, 4 = Associate Degree, 5 = Bachelor's Degree, 6 = Master's Degree, 7 = Professional Degree, 8 = Doctorate Degree;

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$.

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