

Online Gaming and the Emergence of a New Type of Leader

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Abstract

The paper examines the phenomenon of online gaming and the emergence of a new type of leader - the virtual leader - in the context of technological evolution and social changes brought about by the Internet. Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) are explored as platforms that facilitate the development of complex virtual communities and the rise of leaders who influence the dynamics of these groups. The distinctive characteristics of virtual leaders are highlighted, as well as the differences from traditional (real life) leaders and the specific challenges of the online environment, such as anonymity and multiple identities. The paper explores how virtual leaders contribute to the creation of new social relationships, influencing both online communities and those in the real world. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the relevance of this type of leadership for understanding contemporary social and organizational processes is emphasized.

Keywords: *Online games; virtual leader; leadership; virtual communities; MMOG; anonymity; social relationships; technology; digital leadership; group dynamics.*

1. Introduction

Technological advancements in recent decades, particularly the development of the Internet and associated technologies, have redefined how we communicate, socialize, and engage with communities. Online games, an integral part of this digital landscape, have evolved from simple forms of entertainment into complex social ecosystems capable of fostering collaboration, competition, and leadership. In this context, virtual leaders have become influential figures in online communities, exerting an impact that transcends the

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digital realm and extends into real life. This evolution raises fundamental questions about the nature of social relationships and the new forms of authority emerging in virtual environments (Rheingold, 2005; Tisseron & Gravillon, 2010).

Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) serve as a compelling example of how technology can transform social behaviors. These platforms not only facilitate interactions among millions of users globally but also create contexts for the development of new types of relationships and leadership structures. Virtual leaders within these communities assume complex roles, similar to those of traditional leaders, but operate in environments characterized by anonymity, multiple identities, and distinct social dynamics (Sherif et al., 1961; Zlate, 2004). In this regard, the study of virtual leaders provides valuable insights into decision-making processes, group coordination, and resource management in unconventional settings.

This article aims to explore the characteristics of virtual leaders and how they shape social relationships in online games. Through an interdisciplinary analysis encompassing sociological, psychological, and technological perspectives, we will highlight the influence of anonymity, multiple identities, and social dynamics on virtual leadership. Furthermore, we will examine the impact of these behaviors and skills developed in digital spaces on real-life contexts and discuss the broader implications for understanding leadership in contemporary society (Breton, 2001; Huizinga, 2003).

2. Defining the leader and social groups

The leader and social groups are two fundamental concepts in sociology and social psychology, essential for understanding social dynamics. A leader is defined as a person who influences the behaviors, attitudes, or opinions of group members to achieve common objectives (Zlate, 2004). They stand out through their ability to coordinate, motivate, and mobilize human and material resources, becoming a reference point for other group members. In the context of online games, the virtual leader exerts influence through strategic skills, effective communication, and the creation of a strong digital identity.

Social groups, in turn, are defined as assemblies of people who interact regularly, share norms, values, and common goals, and develop interdependent relationships (Sherif et al., 1961). These groups can vary in size, structure, and purpose, with their dynamics depending on factors such as cohesion, role distribution, and the

presence of a leader. In the virtual space, groups become more fluid, structures less hierarchical, and leaders must address new challenges, such as anonymity and the cultural diversity of members (Breton, 2001).

In MMOGs, social groups evolve into virtual communities that collaborate to achieve shared objectives, such as completing missions or constructing complex virtual structures. The leaders of these groups emerge from interactions and demonstrate skills such as quick decision-making, conflict management, and coordination of international teams—qualities that are equally essential in traditional groups.

3. Leadership in organizational theory

Leadership, as an organizational phenomenon, has been extensively studied in the academic literature and is considered essential for the functioning and success of groups and organizations. According to Zlate (2004), leadership involves the process of influencing the behavior of a group of individuals to achieve a specific objective in a way that maximizes both efficiency and the motivation of group members. Leadership models can range from authoritarian styles, based on control and strict hierarchy, to democratic styles that encourage active participation from members.

In organizational theory, leadership is often associated with management roles, but in the virtual environment, these roles take on different nuances. Leaders in online communities do not possess the formal authority of managers in traditional organizations. Instead, their authority derives from practical competencies, such as knowledge of the game, effective communication skills, and the ability to build trust among group members (Huizinga, 2003). This type of leadership is characterized by flexibility and adaptability, reflecting the fluid and dynamic nature of online groups.

Virtual leaders also face challenges unique to the digital environment. The lack of face-to-face interactions can reduce group cohesion, while anonymity can facilitate deviant or conflictual behaviors. Nevertheless, effective leaders overcome these barriers by employing clear communication strategies and fostering a culture of mutual respect and collaboration (Tisseron & Gravillon, 2010).

4. The Internet – Short history and its impact

The Internet, one of the most transformative inventions of the 20th century, was initially conceived as a communication network between computers, developed in the 1960s under the ARPANET

project in the United States. Its original purpose was to enable the rapid exchange of information between research institutions, ensuring redundancy and resilience in the event of cyberattacks or natural disasters (Breton, 2001).

Over the decades, the Internet has evolved significantly. While in the 1980s it was used almost exclusively for academic purposes, the 1990s saw it become accessible to the general public with the development of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee. The emergence of browsers, HTTP protocols, and web programming languages paved the way for the creation of a global network of information and communication (Huizinga, 2003). Today, the Internet is no longer just a tool but a critical infrastructure supporting economic, social, educational, and cultural activities. Its expansion has been accompanied by the emergence of platforms and technologies such as online gaming and social networks, which have reshaped human interactions and created new opportunities as well as challenges.

5. The cult of the internet in online gaming, from a sociological perspective

A study examining the impact of the Internet and new media highlights the transformative changes in how individuals engage with knowledge, interact socially, and seek information. As digital media become increasingly prominent due to their potential benefits and inherent risks, a generation of young people is growing up in a technologically advanced environment that significantly shapes their developmental experiences. While the expanded use of the Internet has fueled optimism about its positive contributions, it has also sparked concerns, particularly among adults and policymakers, about the potential dangers it poses to children.

This concern often stems from the perception of young people as inexperienced users who may be vulnerable to online threats. To address these issues, a study employing a child-centered approach explored the perspectives of 24 school-aged adolescents (9–16 years old) who access the Internet at least once a week. Through three focus-group discussions, the research investigated how these young users incorporate the Internet into their daily lives and navigate online risks independently.

By analyzing the responses from these groups, the study revealed diverse interpretations and perceptions of online dangers encountered while exploring the virtual space. By placing young people at the forefront of the discussion, it provided valuable insights

into how they understand, assess, and manage risks in the digital environment. This research underscores the complexity of the child-virtual environment interaction, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges faced by a generation growing up in an era dominated by digital advancements (Răcățău, 2014, pp. 6–25).

From a sociological perspective, the Internet has often been viewed as a cult due to its potential to fundamentally transform social and cultural relationships (Breton, 2001). Sociologists have emphasized that the Internet is not merely a technology but also an environment that redefines societal norms and values. Anonymity, the speed of communication, and instant access to information have reshaped how people interact, learn, and work. However, this transformation is not without controversy. On the one hand, the Internet has been praised for democratizing information and creating new forms of community. On the other hand, it has been criticized for fostering individualism, superficiality, and technological dependence (Tisseron & Gravillon, 2010). In the realm of online gaming, these perspectives are obvious: the Internet provides an environment for collaboration and interaction but can also encourage deviant or antisocial behaviors. From a sociological standpoint, communities created on the Internet differ fundamentally from traditional ones. They are often more fluid, temporary, and based on shared interests rather than geographic proximity or kinship ties. In this context, virtual leaders become central figures, capable of organizing and mobilizing these communities.

In Romania, the widespread adoption of the Internet began in the 1990s, a period marked by the country's transition to a market economy and its reintegration into global networks after decades of isolation under a communist regime. The initial use of the Internet was concentrated in academic and governmental institutions, as infrastructure was limited and access was primarily reserved for research and administrative purposes. However, the liberalization of the telecommunications sector and increased foreign investment in the late 1990s and early 2000s led to rapid development of digital infrastructure. This expansion paved the way for broader access, gradually bringing the Internet into homes, businesses, and public spaces.

Today, Romania stands out on the global stage for its exceptionally high-speed Internet connections, ranking among the fastest in the world. This achievement is largely attributed to investments in fiber-optic technology and a competitive telecommunications market that fosters innovation and affordability.

As a result, Romania has experienced a rapid digital transformation, with a significant portion of its population adopting new technologies for communication, education, entertainment, and commerce.

Online gaming has emerged as a particularly prominent aspect of digital culture in Romania, appealing to a wide demographic spectrum. From casual mobile games to immersive multiplayer experiences, gaming has become an integral part of the Romanian digital landscape. The communities that form around these games are diverse, encompassing players from various age groups, regions, and cultural backgrounds. These communities reflect not only the social dynamism of Romanian users but also their adaptability and creativity in engaging with global gaming trends.

Internet games have undergone significant evolution since the emergence of the first forms of digital entertainment, diversifying based on purpose, target audience, and technological complexity. Today, online games can be classified into several categories, including casual games, strategy games, role-playing games (RPGs), and Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). Casual games are the most accessible, featuring simple interfaces and intuitive rules. They are often used for relaxation and leisure. In contrast, strategy games require critical thinking and planning, often involving economic, military, or social simulations (Huizinga, 2003). Role-playing games (RPGs) allow users to create and develop their own characters in a complex virtual universe, fostering creativity and emotional engagement. Among all types, MMOGs stand out for their global popularity and the complexity of the social interactions they generate. These games are not merely a form of entertainment but also environments where users build communities, develop collaboration skills, and explore various social roles (Breton, 2001).

The ability of video games to foster connections between people has grown exponentially in the digital age. With the advent of the Internet, video games have surpassed the boundaries of physical proximity, paving the way for the creation of complex virtual communities. In this new context, individuals can actively engage in the social life of these communities, regardless of geographical distance. Online games are no longer mere entertainment programs; they have evolved into platforms that support the development of genuine social relationships. They provide players with opportunities to interact, collaborate, and build meaningful connections with others around the world, fostering a sense of belonging and connection. Through the virtual environment, video games have managed to redefine the concept of socialization, proving that authentic

interactions are not constrained by space or time. Rather than being solely a source of entertainment, they have become a tool through which people can explore new forms of communication and collaboration (Ghețău, 2024, p. 20).

MMOGs are defined by three fundamental characteristics: massive user interaction, persistent virtual worlds, and distinctive social dynamics. First, these games enable the simultaneous interaction of thousands or even millions of users worldwide. This creates an environment where players can collaborate or compete in real time, fostering the formation of communities and social groups. The virtual worlds of MMOGs are persistent, meaning they continue to operate and evolve even when users are not logged in. This feature adds a sense of realism and immersion, providing the ideal context for the development of complex social structures. Another essential characteristic is the social dynamic inherent to these games. MMOGs often require player cooperation to achieve shared objectives, such as completing missions or battling virtual adversaries. These interactions are governed by internal rules and hierarchical structures, promoting the emergence of virtual leaders who take on organizational and coordination roles (Tisseron & Gravillon, 2010).

Online games, particularly MMOGs, have a significant impact on human behavior, influencing both the positive and negative aspects of personality and social relationships. On the positive side, these games enhance cognitive skills such as strategic thinking, quick decision-making, and problem-solving. They also promote collaboration, communication, and the development of social skills, especially in games that require teamwork.

However, excessive use of online games can lead to negative effects, such as addiction, social isolation, and the deterioration of real-world interpersonal relationships (Breton, 2001). The anonymity provided by the virtual environment can encourage antisocial behaviors, such as trolling or online harassment, while excessive competition can heighten stress and anxiety. Despite these risks, the impact of online games largely depends on how they are used. When integrated into a balanced lifestyle, games can be a valuable source of learning, entertainment, and personal development (Huizinga, 2003).

The Internet has profoundly reshaped the structure of social relationships, providing a medium where interactions transcend geographical boundaries and physical limitations. Traditional relationships, built on proximity and direct contact, are now

complemented or even replaced by virtual connections. Through social networks, online games, and forums, users can instantly communicate with people from around the world, forming new types of bonds based on shared interests, ideologies, or hobbies. This shift allows for a diversification of social relationships but also raises questions about their authenticity and durability. For instance, relationships based solely on virtual interactions often lack the intimacy and depth characteristic of face-to-face connections. However, they compensate by creating opportunities for individuals who might otherwise never interact to connect.

In the context of online games, these relationships take on a unique dynamic. Players collaborate to achieve common goals, with virtual leaders playing a central role in organizing and maintaining group cohesion. While these relationships are often more flexible, they are also more vulnerable to behavioral fluctuations and changes in participants' interests (Tisseron & Gravillon, 2010).

In the realm of video games, players' real identities often remain hidden. Even in online games, the names chosen for characters are typically designed to avoid revealing details about the person behind the avatar. Players have the option to share personal information with others but can equally choose to remain entirely anonymous, maintaining their privacy if they so desire (Ghețău, 2024, p. 120).

Anonymity is one of the defining features of online interactions, significantly influencing social behavior. On one hand, it can encourage free expression, reducing inhibitions and enabling discussions on sensitive topics. In this sense, the Internet becomes a safe space for identity exploration and for connecting with others who share similar interests or experiences (Huizinga, 2003). On the other hand, anonymity can also foster deviant behaviors, such as trolling, cyberbullying, and the expression of extreme opinions. In online gaming environments, anonymity may amplify unfair competition and lead to conflicts among players. However, it also provides opportunities for creating new identities and exploring different roles within groups. This dual nature of anonymity highlights the crucial role of virtual leaders, who are essential in fostering a positive environment and mediating conflicts. They contribute to establishing behavioral norms and promoting a culture of respect within online communities.

Virtual communities are a manifestation of the new social relationships enabled by the Internet. These are groups of individuals who interact within a digital space, united by shared interests such as

gaming, art, politics, or education. Defined by their flexibility and diversity, virtual communities provide an environment where participants can collaborate, exchange ideas, and learn from one another.

The dynamics of groups in the virtual space differ from those of traditional groups. Asynchronous communication and the absence of physical proximity allow members to engage at their own pace, but this can sometimes diminish cohesion and the sense of belonging. In this context, virtual leaders play a pivotal role, bearing the responsibility of maintaining group interest and ensuring active participation (Tisseron & Gravillon, 2010).

In online games, group dynamics are often shaped by shared objectives, such as achieving higher levels or winning competitions. These common goals foster group cohesion and help build a collective identity. However, they can also lead to tensions, especially in the face of failures or personality conflicts among members.

6. The emergence of the virtual leader

The virtual leader is a central figure in digital environments, characterized by the ability to influence, coordinate, and motivate a group of individuals within a virtual community. Unlike traditional leaders, virtual leaders exercise their influence entirely in digital spaces, leveraging communication and interaction technologies to build relationships and achieve common goals.

In settings such as online games, virtual leaders play a critical role in organizing teams, managing resources, and resolving conflicts, becoming key reference points for other community members (Zlate, 2004). This form of leadership has emerged as a necessity within online communities that rely on collaboration and coordination for success. Virtual leaders gain respect and influence not through formal authority but through expertise, communication skills, and the ability to inspire and motivate.

Virtual leaders share many traits with traditional leaders, but their activities in the digital realm imbue them with unique characteristics: *advanced technological skills* - virtual leaders are proficient with digital platforms and tools that facilitate communication and coordination. These skills are essential for organizing virtual groups and maintaining cohesion within online communities (Breton, 2001); *flexibility and adaptability* - the virtual environment is dynamic and unpredictable, requiring leaders to respond quickly to changes and adapt to diverse communication styles and group member personalities (Tisseron & Gravillon, 2010); *empathy and emotional*

intelligence - in the absence of face-to-face interactions, virtual leaders must develop heightened empathy to understand and address the needs of group members. They need to build relationships rooted in trust and respect; *excellent communication skills* - clear, concise, and effective communication is vital in the virtual space, where messages can often be misinterpreted. Virtual leaders employ communication techniques tailored to the digital environment to avoid misunderstandings and foster collaboration (Huizinga, 2003).

Despite the many advantages of the digital environment, virtual leaders face unique challenges: *lack of direct contact* - without face-to-face interactions, building strong group cohesion can be challenging. Leaders must compensate for this limitation by fostering a supportive and encouraging virtual environment (Zlate, 2004); *anonymity and cultural diversity* - in online environments, anonymity can encourage inappropriate behavior or a lack of accountability. Additionally, the cultural diversity of group members can lead to differences in opinions and work styles, requiring leaders to manage these with sensitivity; *fluctuating commitment* - members of virtual communities may be less engaged, often leaving groups or shifting priorities. Leaders need to find ways to sustain motivation and active participation.

Traditional and virtual leaders share some common traits, such as the ability to influence and coordinate groups, but the environments in which they operate create significant differences between the two: *physical presence vs. digital presence* - traditional leaders interact directly with group members, benefiting from nonverbal communication and personal dynamics. Virtual leaders, by contrast, exert influence exclusively through digital means, relying on technology and communication skills to make up for the lack of physical contact; *formal authority vs. informal authority* - traditional leaders are often appointed to leadership roles and hold formal authority. Virtual leaders, however, build their authority through practical skills and the trust they earn from group members; *hierarchical structures vs. flexible structures* - traditional leadership is frequently associated with well-defined hierarchical structures, while virtual leadership thrives in the more fluid structures typical of online communities; *stability vs. volatility* - groups led by traditional leaders tend to be more stable and well-defined. In the virtual environment, groups are more volatile, with members joining and leaving easily. This dynamic requires virtual leaders to be more flexible and adaptable.

7. Leadership styles in the virtual space

Leadership in the virtual space can be categorized into various styles, with two prominent ones being democratic and dictatorial leadership. In online games, these styles reflect how leaders manage their teams and exercise influence. Democratic leadership is characterized by the involvement of team members in decision-making processes. Democratic leaders encourage participation, discuss strategies with the group, and ensure that each member has the opportunity to contribute to decisions. This leadership style is commonly observed in MMOGs, where team success relies heavily on effective collaboration among players (Zlate, 2004).

On the other hand, dictatorial leadership involves strict control by the leader over the team. Thus, leaders make decisions without consulting team members, impose strict rules, and focus on discipline and quick execution. While this style can be effective in situations requiring rapid decision-making, such as intense battles in games, it can also create tension and lower team morale if applied excessively (Breton, 2001).

Both styles have their advantages and disadvantages, and their effectiveness depends on the context of the game and the group dynamics. Democratic leadership is well-suited for environments where creativity and collaboration are critical, whereas dictatorial leadership is more effective in scenarios that demand swift responses and strict organization.

Personal experiences in online games provide concrete examples of how different leadership styles influence team success and group dynamics. An example of democratic leadership can be observed in games like *World of Warcraft*, where guild leaders organize regular meetings to discuss strategies and assign tasks to members. For instance, a leader might seek the team's input before selecting a strategy for a raid, fostering a sense of involvement and improving group cohesion (Huizinga, 2003). Conversely, an example of dictatorial leadership is often found in intense e-sports competitions, where professional team leaders must make quick decisions and enforce clear strategies. While this style may be perceived as authoritarian, it is often essential for success in highly competitive environments.

The success or failure of leaders in the virtual space depends on several factors, including the leadership style adopted, the ability to communicate effectively, and the capacity to adapt to group

dynamics. A successful virtual leader is one who can maintain group cohesion, inspire trust, and achieve established goals. In online games, this involves not only coordinating team activities but also managing conflicts, motivating members, and fostering a positive atmosphere (Zlate, 2004). Leaders who adopt a democratic style are more likely to build long-term relationships with team members, contributing to group stability. Conversely, leaders who fail in the virtual space often struggle to adapt their leadership style to the needs of the group. For example, a dictatorial leader who grants no autonomy to members or enforces excessive rules may lose the team's support, leading to decreased performance and, in some cases, the dissolution of the group.

Anonymity is one of the defining characteristics of the virtual space, offering users greater freedom of expression and exploration. This feature enables individuals to overcome inhibitions and engage in activities or discussions they might avoid in face-to-face interactions. For example, in virtual communities and online games, users can discuss sensitive topics or experiment with different social roles without fear of judgment (Tisseron & Gravillon, 2010). Anonymity also provides opportunities for experimentation and learning. In MMOGs, players can participate in complex scenarios that foster critical thinking, decision-making, and group coordination. Moreover, anonymity allows players to make mistakes and learn from their experiences without impacting their personal (real life) reputation (Breton, 2001). However, anonymity also has its drawbacks, often facilitating antisocial behaviors. This highlights the need to understand and regulate the use of anonymity in virtual spaces to maximize benefits and minimize risks.

When it comes to personal data protection, there is increasing attention being paid to anonymity and the accessibility of personal information online (European Commission, 2021). The issue of anonymity requires a cautious approach, as both its reduction and increase in the online environment pose distinct challenges. Both trends can significantly impact behaviors related to cyberbullying. Reducing or even eliminating anonymity can expose users to considerable risks. The disclosure of sensitive information in plain view creates opportunities for these data to be exploited abusively. Conversely, heightened anonymity (concealed identity) can serve as a shield, behind which deviant behaviors often manifest (Ghețău, 2024, p. 120).

In the virtual environment, users have the possibility to create and manage multiple identities, a feature that expands an array of

possibilities for personal expression and identity exploration. These identities can range from simple pseudonyms to elaborate avatars, each representing a different aspect of the user's personality or an idealized version of themselves (Huizinga, 2003). Creating multiple identities offers numerous advantages. For instance, users can tailor their virtual identity to fit the context of an online community or a game, facilitating integration and participation. In MMOGs, players can choose identities that reflect their roles in the game, such as leaders, healers, or fighters. These roles contribute to group dynamics and the team's overall success (Breton, 2001).

However, managing multiple identities can be challenging. Users must maintain consistency across different identities and avoid conflicts between them. Additionally, multiple identities can lead to confusion or unethical uses, such as deception or manipulation within virtual communities.

Ethics in the virtual space is an increasingly relevant topic as online interactions become more frequent and complex. Anonymity and virtual identities provide a unique context for exploring morality and human behavior. In the absence of traditional social norms, users must navigate a space that encourages free expression but also requires responsibility and respect (Tisseron & Gravillon, 2010). Ethical behavior in the virtual space involves respecting other users, avoiding harassment, and contributing to the creation of a safe and positive environment. For instance, in online games, virtual leaders can promote ethical norms by encouraging cooperation, addressing deviant behaviors, and mediating conflicts. However, the lack of clear authority and well-defined rules can complicate the application of these principles.

On the other hand, anonymity can facilitate unethical behaviors, such as aggressive communication or trolling. These behaviors are often driven by a sense of invulnerability provided by anonymity, but they can negatively affect group dynamics and user comfort (Curlew, 2019). Another important ethical dimension is related to privacy and the use of personal data. In the virtual environment, users frequently share information about their real or virtual identities, which creates risks concerning the security and protection of this data (Breton, 2001).

7. Conclusions

Virtual leaders play a crucial role in the dynamics of online groups, acting as both organizers and cohesive forces within virtual communities. Unlike traditional leaders, their influence is not based

on formal authority or well-defined hierarchies but on skills such as effective communication, empathy, and the ability to mobilize teams toward achieving common goals. In MMOGs, virtual leaders manage player teams, coordinate complex strategies, and resolve conflicts, directly contributing to the group's success. Their influence often extends beyond the virtual realm, as they build relationships based on trust and respect with team members, which can become sources of emotional or professional support in real life. Through their roles, they shape the norms and values of online communities, promoting cooperation, solidarity, and mutual respect. Additionally, virtual leaders can foster a positive organizational culture that encourages collaboration and active engagement among group members.

The influence of virtual leaders is not confined to the digital space. Many of the skills they develop in online games are transferable to the real world and have significant implications for social and professional dynamics. These skills include decision-making under stress, resource management, conflict resolution, and coordinating diverse teams. For instance, virtual leaders can apply organizational and leadership strategies honed in online games to real-world environments, such as teamwork projects or crisis situations. Moreover, their ability to work with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds - a hallmark of the global communities in online games - is a valuable skill in today's globalized economy. Virtual leaders also contribute to the development of alternative leadership models based on collaboration and adaptability. These models can positively influence real-world organizational structures by promoting flexibility and inclusiveness. However, the influence of virtual leaders can also have negative consequences, particularly when they exploit anonymity and lack of accountability to manipulate or take advantage of community members.

Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR), open new avenues for studying virtual leaders. These technologies could transform how leaders exert influence and how online communities are formed. For instance, AI could be used to develop tools for analyzing the behavior of virtual leaders, while VR could enable more realistic and immersive interactions between leaders and members.

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