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Essay

Viral Leadership: Algorithmic Amplification and the Rise of Leadership Fashions

Dag Øivind Madsen * and Kåre Slåtten

Department of Business, Marketing and Law, USN School of Business, University of South-Eastern Norway, 3511 Hønefoss, Norway; kare.slatten@usn.no
* Correspondence: dag.oivind.madsen@usn.no

Abstract: This essay examines how AI-driven content curation reshapes leadership fashions through algorithmic amplification on social media platforms. Algorithms designed to maximize engagement selectively elevate certain leadership styles, such as authentic, servant, and transformational leadership, while marginalizing others, including transactional or directive approaches. Drawing on leadership fashion theory, an extension of management fashion theory, this essay analyzes how viral content, influencer dynamics, and algorithmic prioritization collectively construct contemporary leadership ideals. It highlights the central role of leadership gurus such as Simon Sinek, Brené Brown, and Gary Vaynerchuk, and critiques the risks of oversimplification and performative authenticity in algorithmically mediated leadership discourse. Using recent empirical findings and real-world examples, the analysis shows how emotionally resonant and morally charged content gains disproportionate visibility, potentially distorting leadership development and practice. This essay concludes by discussing implications for organizations, leadership education, and research, and calls for a renewed commitment to evidence-based leadership theory and practice in the face of algorithmic influence.

Keywords: leadership fashion; algorithmic amplification; leadership gurus; AI content curation; social media; management fashion theory

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1. Introduction

There is an extensive body of research and writing on leadership theory and practice, encompassing countless models, styles, and competencies that have been studied, taught, and debated over decades (Avolio et al., 2009; Bryman et al., 2011; Northouse, 2025). Traditionally, the dissemination of leadership ideas occurred through scholarly publications, books, executive education, and consulting practices. However, much has changed in the management and leadership sphere with the rise of digital and social media (Barros & Rüling, 2019; Madsen & Slåtten, 2015; Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020). In recent years, social media algorithms have emerged as powerful forces shaping which leadership ideas gain prominence and which fade into obscurity. Social media platforms such as LinkedIn, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter now use artificial intelligence-driven content curation systems that filter and amplify content to maximize user engagement (Born et al., 2021; Huszár et al., 2022; Milli et al., 2025; Pariser, 2011). These algorithmic mechanisms do not merely distribute leadership ideas; they actively prioritize certain styles, messages, and influencers based on what drives clicks, shares, and emotional reactions, thereby reshaping the leadership discourse in profound ways.

To avoid conceptual ambiguity, in this essay, we differentiate between algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI). Algorithms refer to structured sets of rules that automate

tasks or data processing, such as ranking posts based on recency or explicit user preferences. AI systems, in contrast, use algorithms in adaptive, learning-based ways to make inferences or decisions based on patterns in user behavior (Born et al., 2021; Huszár et al., 2022; Narayanan, 2023). Not all platforms use advanced AI, but many now employ hybrid systems that combine static algorithmic filters with machine learning models to prioritize certain types of content—typically based on engagement, emotional resonance, or predicted virality. This clarification matters because critiques of influence and bias apply differently depending on whether one refers to fixed algorithmic logic or dynamic AI-driven content curation.

AI-driven content curation appears to be elevating certain leadership styles and "fashions" (for example, authentic leadership, servant leadership, transformational leadership) to viral popularity. These styles generally align with themes that platforms like LinkedIn tend to favor, particularly ideals such as authenticity, emotional openness, and personal vulnerability, traits that not only resonate with professional audiences but also encourage engagement, sharing, and algorithmic amplification (Orgad, 2024; Tolbert, 2025; Zeimyte & Kharrat, 2024).

This phenomenon raises important questions for organizational and management studies. How do algorithmically curated feeds affect leadership theories and practices that become trendy? Are we witnessing the rise of "leadership fashion" (Guthey et al., 2022) analogous to the well-documented concept of "management fashion" in organizational theory (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020)? What role do popular leadership gurus and influencers play in shaping these trends, and to what extent do social media dynamics distort or accelerate the spread of leadership ideas (Barros & Rüling, 2019; Madsen & Slåtten, 2015)?

The analysis draws on recent empirical findings and real-world examples of leadership influencers ("gurus") who have risen to prominence in the algorithmic spotlight. By investigating these issues, this essay aims to illuminate AI-curated media's opportunities and pitfalls for leadership theory and practice. It also considers the implications for organizations and individuals in how they consume, adopt, or resist the latest leadership "fashions" circulating in digital media.

Although this is a conceptual essay rather than an empirical study, illustrative examples are drawn from recent leadership discourse and platform dynamics. Where available, these observations are contextualized through the scholarly literature and evidence-based critiques, but the reader should not conflate viral trends with rigorously tested findings.

The rest of this essay is structured as follows: Section 2 explores the concept of leadership fashions in the social media era, distinguishing leadership fashions from the more widely studied management fashions and identifying key leadership styles that have risen to prominence. Section 3 examines the leadership industry and the roles played by actors such as business schools, consulting firms, gurus, and influencers in amplifying leadership trends. Section 4 analyzes the mechanisms of algorithmic amplification, highlighting how AI-driven platforms shape the visibility and popularity of leadership ideas. Section 5 examines the selective amplification of certain leadership styles. Section 6 examines leadership gurus and influencers in the age of AI. Section 7 critically discusses the implications of algorithmically amplified leadership fashions for organizations, leadership development, and scholarly research. Section 8 concludes by summarizing key findings and offering recommendations for navigating leadership fashions in an era of algorithmic influence.

2. The Rise of Leadership Fashions in the Social Media Era

2.1. Management Fads and Fashions

Management scholars have long observed that the business world is prone to cycles of fads and fashions in managerial thinking (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020). Ideas about how to manage and lead can surge in popularity, touted as revolutionary solutions, only to be later discarded or replaced by the next "big idea" (Abrahamson & Piazza, 2019; Gunter & Rayner, 2020). Classic examples such concepts and ideas include quality circles, Six Sigma, management by objectives (MBO), Balanced Scorecard, and emotional intelligence, among numerous others that have experienced periods of intense attention (Hindle, 2008). These phenomena are often referred to under the umbrella of management fashion theory, which provides a lens for understanding the evolutionary trajectory of management concepts and ideas. Management fashion has been defined as a "relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads rational management progress" (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 257). In other words, at any given time, managers may collectively believe that certain techniques or styles are state-of-the-art solutions, creating a bandwagon effect. These beliefs are propagated by "fashion setters", actors such as gurus, consulting firms, business media, and business schools, who package and promote the concepts (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997).

2.2. Leadership Fashion vs. Management Fashion

Leadership fashions, like their management counterparts, reflect shifting trends in the styles and qualities considered desirable in leaders. While management fashions typically emphasize technical rationality and organizational efficiency, such as process optimization or performance metrics, leadership fashions are more concerned with moral, emotional, and interpersonal dimensions of organizational life (Guthey et al., 2022). They often respond to changing cultural expectations and organizational challenges, offering visions of leadership that promise authenticity, inspiration, or emotional intelligence rather than just operational control. Guthey et al. (2022, p. 397) suggest that leadership fashions are an ongoing process that "constantly reconfigures the rational norms and expectations attached to leadership, and that elevates certain approaches as the best way to fulfill those norms and expectations".

In effect, leadership fashions are the leadership-specific variant of management fashions—the collective trends regarding what qualities or behaviors make an effective leader at a given time. As clothing fashions change seasonally, leadership fashions can shift as new ideas catch on and older ones lose appeal. For example, one era's emphasis on charismatic, heroic CEO figures may give way to another era's preference for humble, servant-like leaders, depending on what is culturally admired. In other words, like in the market for management fashions, the "zeitgeist" plays a role (Kieser, 1997). Importantly, leadership fashions are not purely random or aesthetic; they often emerge in response to organizational challenges or zeitgeist shifts and can have real consequences in organizations.

Yet, like management fads and fashions, leadership fashions are frequently criticized for lacking rigorous evidence and for "dumbing down" complex realities. Scholars note that many popularized leadership ideas are supported by anecdotes more than data, and that hype can outpace substance. Indeed, critics such as O'Reilly and Reed (2010), Kellerman (2012) and Pfeffer (2015) have argued that the "leadership industry" promotes simplistic prescriptions and feel-good bromides that often fail to deliver measurable results. Arnulf and Larsen (2015) note that leaders are often seen as "heroes". Still, the influence of these

ideas is undeniable—they shape training programs, leadership development initiatives, and leader behavior, at least for the duration of their popularity.

Table 1 presents illustrative examples of leadership ideas that have gained traction in the contemporary digital landscape; the selection is not intended to be systematic but rather to highlight prominent trends. Each leadership style listed, such as transformational, servant, and authentic leadership, reflects distinct values and aspirations that resonate with prevailing organizational and societal expectations. Transformational leadership emphasizes vision and inspiration (Bass & Riggio, 2006), appealing to a desire for leaders who can drive change and rally collective purpose. Servant leadership focuses on humility and prioritizing others' needs (van Dierendonck, 2011), aligning with calls for more empathetic and people-centered workplaces. Authentic leadership highlights self-awareness and transparency (Gardner et al., 2011), fitting a broader cultural emphasis on sincerity and vulnerability. Emotional intelligence and agile leadership similarly reflect evolving demands for interpersonal adeptness and adaptability in fast-changing environments (Attar & Abdul-Kareem, 2020; McCleskey, 2014). Lastly, charismatic leadership emphasizes leading through personal charm, vision articulation, and emotional influence, often inspiring devotion and exceptional performance (Antonakis et al., 2016). While these styles offer valuable ideals, their amplification through social media and leadership industries can sometimes lead to oversimplification, encouraging organizations to adopt popular labels without fully grappling with their complexities. Understanding these leadership fashions as both reflections of genuine needs and products of broader social and algorithmic forces is crucial for critically engaging with contemporary leadership discourse.

Table 1. Examples of leadership fashions and key characteristics.

Leadership Fashion	Key Characteristics
Transformational Leadership	Inspiring followers by creating a vision and fostering commitment to organizational goals.
Servant Leadership	Prioritizing the needs of others, especially team members and stakeholders.
Authentic Leadership	Being true to personal values and fostering trust through transparency.
Emotional Intelligence	Understanding and managing emotions to enhance interpersonal relationships.
Agile Leadership	Emphasizing adaptability and responsiveness in dynamic and uncertain environments.
Charismatic Leadership	Leading through personal charm, vision articulation, and emotional influence, often inspiring devotion and exceptional performance.

2.3. Drivers of Leadership Fashions

Why do certain leadership approaches become fashionable? Traditional management fashion theory points to several drivers that are likely to apply. First, there is often a promise of performance improvement or organizational progress attached to fashionable ideas (Kieser, 1997; Røvik, 2002). New leadership concepts typically claim to solve pressing problems (improving employee engagement, driving innovation, etc.), making them attractive. Second, fashionable leadership ideas usually have a catchy label or slogan that aids their spread (Cluley, 2013). Terms like "Authentic Leadership" or "Servant Leadership" serve as simple, memorable tags that practitioners can rally around. Third, they allow for wide interpretation and adaptability (Benders & Van Veen, 2001), enabling various organizations to latch on and implement the idea in their own way. For instance, a broad

concept like "authenticity" can be interpreted differently in different contexts, which helps adoption. Fourth, adopting the latest leadership fashion can confer legitimacy; organizations and individual leaders signal that they are progressive, modern, and in tune with best practices. Research on management fads finds that companies often gain social legitimacy and admiration by embracing the trend of the day, even if tangible performance gains are absent (Staw & Epstein, 2000). Notably, firms that adopted popular management practices were perceived as more innovative and admired (and even rewarded with higher CEO pay) despite no actual improvement in profitability (Pollach, 2022).

This suggests that the appearance of being forward-thinking can be beneficial in itself. In the leadership realm, a CEO who espouses whichever leadership style is currently celebrated (say, "visionary transformational leadership" in the 2000s or "empathetic servant leadership" in the 2020s) may bolster their personal brand and stakeholder goodwill, independent of hard results. In addition, as we will explore in Section 3, there is a leadership industry that actively disseminates and diffuses leadership fashions.

2.4. Cultural and Ideological Dimensions of Leadership Fashions

While leadership fashions often appear stylistically neutral, they are embedded in cultural, ideological, and economic structures. For instance, leadership styles that emphasize authenticity, servant-like humility, or emotional openness may reflect Western, individualistic norms of expression and vulnerability. Algorithmic amplification can unintentionally—or systematically—favor these traits by rewarding content that resonates with dominant cultural assumptions. This includes privileging white, male, English-speaking, and media-savvy influencers who perform leadership in platform-friendly ways.

Moreover, many of the popularized leadership styles are filtered through corporate values of productivity and engagement. As such, the elevation of "fashionable" leadership may reproduce ideological norms while marginalizing styles or voices that are culturally dissonant or less performative. This risks creating a narrow band of acceptable leadership discourse, thereby sidelining alternate expressions of authority and leadership grounded in collectivist, non-Western, or less media-adaptable frameworks.

3. The Leadership Industry

3.1. The Leadership Industry Actors

The leadership industry is a complex ecosystem composed of multiple actors such as leadership gurus, authors, educators, and influencers—essentially, the fashion setters in the leadership ideas marketplace (Guthey & Ferry, 2024; Guthey et al., 2022). The actors contribute to developing, packaging, and disseminating leadership fashions. These actors can be viewed as similar to what Abrahamson (1996) refers to as the management fashion-setting community, or what other researchers refer to as the management fashion arena (Jung & Kieser, 2012; Klincewicz, 2006; Madsen & Slåtten, 2013).

As shown in Table 2, in the context of leadership, these fashion-setting actors include traditional institutions such as business schools, consulting firms, training firms, coaching services, and newer players like social media influencers and digital platforms. Each group plays a distinct role: business schools (in particular, executive education programs) codify and teach emerging leadership models; consulting firms operationalize leadership frameworks into tools for practice; gurus and authors translate complex ideas into accessible narratives; conferences and media outlets (e.g., the self-help business press) provide mass platforms for amplification; and influencers harness algorithmic dynamics to popularize leadership ideals directly to global audiences. Together, these actors form an interconnected network that both responds to and shapes leadership trends, often reinforcing certain fashions through mutually reinforcing cycles of promotion, adoption, and repetition. Un-

derstanding this leadership industry is crucial to appreciating how leadership fashions gain legitimacy, momentum, and cultural staying power in the contemporary era.

Table 2. The actors involved in the leadership industry.

Industry Actor	Role	Examples
Business Schools	Develop and teach leadership courses and executive programs.	Harvard Business School, INSEAD.
Consulting Firms	Create leadership frameworks and tools to address organizational challenges.	McKinsey & Company, Deloitte.
Leadership Gurus	Share motivational and theoretical insights on leadership through books, speeches, and seminars.	Simon Sinek, Brené Brown, John Maxwell
Conferences and Seminars	Disseminate leadership concepts to large audiences through workshops and talks.	TED Talks, John Maxwell Leadership Summit.
Publishing and Media	Spread leadership ideas through books, podcasts, and articles.	"Good to Great" by Jim Collins, leadership-focused podcasts, LinkedIn articles.
Social Media Influencers	Popularize leadership fashions through engaging content and viral posts.	TikTok creators, LinkedIn influencers, Instagram Live hosts discussing leadership topics.

This leadership industry has sometimes been chastised for promoting style over substance, but undeniably plays a key role in diffusing new trends (Kellerman, 2012; Leavy, 2016; O'Reilly & Reed, 2010; Pfeffer, 2015). Guthey et al. (2022) note that leadership fashions and the "leadership industries" that produce and promote them can influence practice and even scholarly research on leadership. In short, the leadership ideas market is a dynamic social arena, and as we will explore next, it has been profoundly impacted by the advent of algorithm-driven social media.

In the next section, we examine leadership gurus more closely, since they are arguably the most important actors in the leadership industry in the age of social media. These individuals often develop, package, and champion new leadership concepts through books, keynote speeches, training seminars, and, increasingly, social media content. First, we examine some of the classic leadership gurus of the late 20th century before looking closer at the new generation of leadership gurus that have emerged in the digital and social media age.

3.2. Classic Examples of Leadership Gurus

The term "guru" has deep spiritual and cultural origins in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, denoting a revered teacher or guide (Hookham, 2021; Mlecko, 1982; Rigopoulos, 2022). In the management literature, however, "guru" has become a widely adopted term for high-profile thought leaders who popularize business and leadership ideas (D. Collins, 2019, 2020; Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 2001). This essay uses the term critically and analytically, following that tradition, but acknowledges its cultural roots and the importance of not erasing that context.

In the field of management, most accounts identify classic "gurus" in management history, including figures like Peter Drucker, Tom Peters, and Stephen Covey, who each popularized certain philosophies (e.g., Drucker on management by objectives, Peters on excellence, and Covey on principle-centered leadership).

Peter Drucker, regarded by some as the "father of modern management" (Buford, 2014) and one of the most influential management thinkers of the 20th century (Kurzynski, 2009)

introduced numerous concepts that shaped leadership discourse for decades (Drucker, 2006, 2020), including the importance of management by objectives (MBO). Drucker's ideas were embraced widely, partly because of his authoritative position as a thought leader and the broad appeal of his frameworks. During the 1980s, Tom Peters also emerged as a major figure in the leadership and management discourse, particularly through his co-authored work *In Search of Excellence* (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Peters popularized the idea that organizational success stemmed from embracing decentralized decision-making, employee empowerment, and strong corporate cultures (Peters, 1988, 1994, 2010). His energetic presentation style and focus on practical excellence resonated widely with executives during the 1980s and 1990s (D. Collins, 2020), helping to shift management and leadership thinking toward a more dynamic and people-centric orientation.

John C. Maxwell, another influential leadership guru, promoted transformational leadership by emphasizing personal growth, influence, and motivation (Maxwell, 1995, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2019), which are concepts that resonate well on social media platforms that favor emotionally engaging content. The influence of gurus such as Warren Bennis and Stephen Covey also cannot be overlooked. Warren Bennis was instrumental in advocating for leadership as a distinct discipline, focusing on qualities like authenticity, vision, and the development of leadership competencies (Bennis, 2004, 2009; Bennis & Biederman, 2009; Bennis & Goldsmith, 2010). His works helped frame leadership as an aspirational endeavor, often detached from the situational complexities that real-world leaders face.

Stephen Covey, through his bestselling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, (S. R. Covey, 1989) promoted principles-based leadership that became popular globally. Covey expanded his ideas to cover families (S. R. Covey, 1997), and his sons Sean and Stephen Covey continued this line of thinking about leadership and extended the work to include kids and teenagers (S. Covey, 2008, 2011; S. M. R. Covey & Merrill, 2006), to name a few examples. The Coveys' emphasis on personal leadership and habit formation aligned well with the self-improvement trend. Finally, Jim Collins is another guru who rose to prominence during the 1990s and shaped leadership thinking through his influential book *Built to Last* (J. C. Collins & Porras, 1994) and *Good to Great* (J. C. Collins, 2001). His "Level 5 Leadership" concept—leaders who blend personal humility with professional will—gained widespread traction, challenging the dominance of charismatic and heroic leadership models. Collins' frameworks resonated strongly with organizations seeking more sustainable approaches to leadership excellence.

Table 3 summarizes the key classic leadership gurus discussed above, highlighting their principal contributions and influence on modern leadership thought.

Table 3. Examples of classic leadership gurus and their notable contributions.

Classic Leadership Guru	Notable Contributions	Selected References
Peter Drucker	Introduced foundational management and leadership concepts such as management by objectives (MBO); emphasized the importance of leadership in organizational success.	(Drucker, 2006, 2020)
Warren Bennis	Advocated for leadership as a distinct discipline; emphasized authenticity, vision, and emotional intelligence in leadership.	(Bennis, 2004, 2009; Bennis & Biederman, 2009; Bennis & Goldsmith, 2010)

Table 3. *Cont.*

Classic Leadership Guru	Notable Contributions	Selected References
Stephen R. Covey (continued by his sons Sean and Stephen M. R. Covey)	Popularized principles-based leadership focusing on personal integrity, proactive behavior, and habit formation through *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.	(S. Covey, 2008, 2011; S. M. R. Covey & Merrill, 2006; S. R. Covey, 1989, 1992, 1997)
John C. Maxwell	Developed influential frameworks around transformational leadership, personal growth, influence, and organizational leadership development.	(Maxwell, 1995, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2019)
Tom Peters	Popularized excellence-driven leadership emphasizing decentralized decision-making, employee empowerment, and strong organizational culture.	(Peters, 1994, 2010; Peters & Waterman, 1982)
Jim Collins	Developed the concept of "Level 5 Leadership," emphasizing a blend of humility and fierce resolve as drivers of organizational greatness.	(J. C. Collins, 2001; J. C. Collins & Porras, 1994)

3.3. New Generation of Leadership Gurus

In the 21st century, a new generation of leadership gurus has emerged (Table 4), many with an even larger global reach thanks to digital platforms. For example, Simon Sinek became world-famous after his TED Talk *Start With Why* went viral on YouTube (approx. 12.4 million views as of April 2025), spreading his ideas on purposeful, inspirational leadership to millions. He followed up with a series of best-selling books (Sinek, 2009, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2024) and an active social media presence, solidifying a guru status around the themes of authenticity and purpose in leadership. Similarly, Brené Brown garnered a massive following with her books (Brown, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2022) and related talks on vulnerability and authentic leadership, which have been extensively shared on platforms like LinkedIn and TED's YouTube channel.

Table 4. Examples of contemporary leadership gurus and their notable contributions.

Leadership Guru	Notable Contributions	Selected References
Simon Sinek	Popularized the concept of "Start With Why," emphasizing purpose-driven leadership and inspirational communication.	(Sinek, 2009, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2024)
Brené Brown	Advanced the role of vulnerability, emotional courage, and authenticity in leadership discourse.	(Brown, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2022)
Adam Grant	Brought evidence-based leadership and organizational psychology insights into the popular discourse through social media.	(Grant, 2013, 2017, 2023)
Frances Frei	Focused on building trust, leadership authenticity, and diversity through organizational transformation.	(Frei & Morriss, 2020a, 2020b)
Robin Sharma	Advocated self-leadership and personal growth through works like "The Leader Who Had No Title".	(Sharma, 2003, 2010a, 2010b)
Marshall Goldsmith	Executive coaching pioneer; emphasized behavioral change and feedback for leadership improvement.	(Bell & Goldsmith, 2013; Goldsmith, 2010; Goldsmith & Reiter, 2015)
Liz Wiseman	Developed the "Multipliers" model, highlighting how effective leaders amplify the capabilities of their teams.	(Wiseman, 2014; Wiseman & McKeown, 2010)

Other contemporary influencers have carved out niches: former Navy SEAL Jocko Willink advocates for extreme ownership and discipline in leadership (Willink, 2020, 2023; Willink & Babin, 2017, 2024), amassing a large audience through his podcasts and YouTube clips; entrepreneur Gary Vaynerchuk ("Gary Vee") promotes a fast-paced, empathetic yet hard-driving leadership ethos via daily social media videos; and academic-turned-influencer Adam Grant brings organizational psychology concepts to the masses through viral LinkedIn posts and tweets, often emphasizing humility, generosity, and rethinking assumptions in leadership.

In parallel, Frances Frei, associated with Harvard Business School, has emerged as a key voice on trust, authenticity, and leadership diversity, using both academic and practitioner platforms to advocate for more inclusive organizational cultures (Frei & Morriss, 2020a, 2020b). Liz Wiseman popularized the "Multipliers" concept, emphasizing how leaders can amplify the capabilities of their teams (Wiseman, 2013; Wiseman, 2014; Wiseman & McKeown, 2010). Marshall Goldsmith, a pioneer of executive coaching, has focused attention on behavioral change and leadership feedback processes, gaining wide recognition in leadership development circles (Bell & Goldsmith, 2013; Goldsmith, 2010). Meanwhile, Robin Sharma has advanced ideas around self-leadership and personal growth through works like *The Leader Who Had No Title* (Sharma, 2003, 2010a, 2010b), resonating with calls for greater personal responsibility and autonomy in leadership roles.

These individuals, among others, exemplify how leadership thought leadership itself has become a media product. Gurus are instrumental in shaping leadership fashions and play a significant role in defining what effective leadership looks like. They are often driven by their ability to inspire and communicate complex ideas in relatable ways. These leadership gurus have contributed significantly to the idealization of leadership, often presenting models that appear universally applicable but lack the nuanced discussion required for context-specific application. Their charisma and storytelling abilities have made their messages highly shareable, which, in turn, has led to their amplification by AI algorithms that prioritize content engagement over depth. Social media platforms like YouTube, LinkedIn, and TikTok are particularly influential in this regard, as their algorithmic structures favor short, emotionally compelling content that can quickly go viral. As a result, these figures' leadership models become widely adopted as best practices, even when they may not suit all situations.

They often introduce foundational narratives or frameworks (e.g., "leaders eat last"—a concept Sinek popularized, echoing servant leadership principles). They provide compelling success stories or personal anecdotes that make the concept relatable. Critically, they leverage media, especially social media, to broadcast their messages. In doing so, they accumulate large followings of practitioners who begin to experiment with and advocate the promoted styles within their own organizations, creating a grassroots diffusion effect in parallel to top-down consulting or training dissemination.

It is also worth noting that despite the cultural richness of leadership traditions worldwide, the most prominently amplified gurus tend to represent dominant cultural identities—Western, white, and male—suggesting an algorithmic reinforcement of existing power hierarchies within the global leadership discourse.

4. Algorithmic Amplification and the Dynamics of Leadership Discourse

The rise of social networking platforms in the past two decades—and their ubiquitous use by professionals—has radically changed how management and leadership ideas spread (Madsen & Slåtten, 2015; Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020). No longer do managers and aspiring leaders consume new concepts solely through books, journals, and workshops (Alvarez,

1998); now, much of the day-to-day discourse on leadership happens on LinkedIn feeds, Twitter timelines, YouTube recommendations, and even TikTok "For You" pages.

Throughout this section, we refer to algorithmic and AI-driven amplification interchangeably only when the platform dynamics involve machine learning and adaptive content prioritization. Not all algorithms involve AI, and some use more static, rules-based logic. However, most major platforms, such as LinkedIn, YouTube, and TikTok, now employ AI-enhanced recommender systems that continuously adapt based on user engagement. This distinction is important, as critiques of influence, bias, and manipulation operate differently depending on the underlying system architecture. Our analysis focuses on systems where algorithmic sorting is coupled with machine-learned optimization for visibility and emotional impact.

These platforms do not simply neutrally host content; they actively curate and prioritize content using complex AI algorithms. This algorithmic curation is designed primarily to maximize user engagement (clicks, views, likes, shares, comments, and time spent). In doing so, the algorithms effectively act as gatekeepers and amplifiers for ideas, determining which leadership posts or videos go viral and which remain barely visible.

Importantly, this algorithmic mediation not only shapes audience exposure but also shapes content production. Many leadership gurus and influencers now adapt their messaging, delivery style, and visual presentation to align with what the algorithm rewards, favoring emotionally resonant narratives, digestible slogans, performative vulnerability, and content optimized for visibility and shareability. This section examines algorithmic amplification and its specific implications for leadership trends, with particular attention to how this dynamic reshapes the behavior of content creators themselves.

4.1. Understanding Algorithmic Amplification

Social media algorithms consider numerous signals, such as content popularity, user preferences, past behavior, and network relationships, to decide what to show each user. To achieve this, their recommender systems tend to amplify content that triggers strong user responses (Narayanan, 2023). These platform algorithms, especially those enhanced by AI, learn from user behavior and prioritize material that maximizes engagement. This is not an accidental side effect. One of the core design goals of platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), YouTube, TikTok, and LinkedIn is to keep users engaged and coming back. Therefore, algorithms are optimized to sustain attention and generate revenue through advertising and platform stickiness. As such, their amplification of certain leadership styles or influencers reflects economic design choices rather than neutral technical outcomes. The system is structured to reward emotionally charged, moralized, and visually compelling content because that content performs best economically, not ethically.

Recent research on social learning in digital environments provides a useful framework for understanding what kind of content gets a boost. Brady et al. (2023) describe how social media algorithms exploit human biases to capture attention, identifying "PRIME" information—prestigious, in-group, moral, and emotional content—as especially likely to be amplified. In an evolutionary sense, humans are wired to pay attention to high-status people (prestige), to heed information from our peer groups, to react to moral violations, and to be drawn to emotionally charged content. Platform algorithms have learned that emphasizing such content drives engagement metrics. As a result, users scrolling through their feeds are inundated with PRIME information that is abundant but often lacks rarity or diagnostic value regarding truth or quality. As Brady et al. (2023) argue, the consequence is a distortion in social learning: people online see a skewed sample of behavior and ideas, overweighted by extreme or eye-catching examples.

In the context of leadership ideas, certain types of leadership content have structural advantages in algorithmic competition. Posts or videos portraying prestigious individuals and their leadership lessons will likely be favored. For example, a flashy story of a famous CEO's success or a billionaire guru's advice tends to draw attention. Content that appeals to in-group identity can also thrive (e.g., messages tailored to entrepreneurs or a professional community that say "we leaders in tech do things *this* way" create a sense of insider knowledge). Messages with a moral tone—such as calling out unethical leadership or conversely praising leadership as a moral calling—often provoke strong reactions (outrage or inspiration) that feed the engagement loop. And certainly, emotional storytelling in leadership posts—whether it is a tale of a compassionate boss changing an employee's life, or a dramatic account of a leader's failure and redemption—can go viral by eliciting empathy or awe from the audience. Indeed, authentic, personal stories of leaders overcoming adversity or showing vulnerability have become a staple of viral LinkedIn posts in recent years, precisely because they are emotionally resonant.

4.2. Gaming the Algorithms

As social media platforms increasingly determine content visibility through engagement metrics, savvy users, including leadership gurus and everyday professionals aspiring to thought leadership, have learned to "write for the algorithm". While some of these ranking systems rely on fixed, rules-based algorithms (such as boosting posts with early likes or dwell time), others incorporate AI-driven mechanisms that learn and adapt based on ongoing user behavior. Recognizing whether content visibility is shaped by static logic or dynamic AI curation is crucial, as it affects how we interpret amplification patterns, user strategies, and systemic biases embedded in platform design.

On LinkedIn, this gave rise to a now-infamous posting style known as "broetry"—a portmanteau of "bro" and "poetry" (McGackin, 2011). Typically composed of single-line sentences stacked vertically, broetry posts open with a dramatic hook and unfold in pseudo-poetic fragments that prompt the reader to click "... see more". The goal: maximize dwell time and early engagement—key factors in LinkedIn's algorithmic ranking.

This formula proved wildly effective. Viral broetry posts—usually moralized personal anecdotes ending in leadership clichés like "Always put people first"—routinely reached millions. BuzzFeed News noted how LinkedIn "power users" perfected these tactics to game visibility (Mac & Kantrowitz, 2017) even if the content itself was banal. The platform responded by downranking broetry in 2018, acknowledging that its algorithm had inadvertently rewarded clickbait over substance (Ranieri, 2024).

The broetry phenomenon offers a vivid example of algorithmic shaping of discourse. It was not just that leadership advice was being shared online; it was being reshaped to fit a format optimized for virality: emotive, simplistic, and easily consumed. Complex discussions—say, about the methodological validity of authentic leadership—were algorithmically disadvantaged. As one critic observed, broetry thrived because LinkedIn prioritized how long users engaged with posts over the actual content quality (Hallab, 2024).

This episode highlights a broader concern: when virality becomes the dominant selection pressure, leadership discourse risks being flattened into motivational fluff. Leadership insights become memes, stripped of nuance, and delivered as performative anecdotes designed more for engagement than education.

4.3. Prestige, Popularity, and the Amplification of Gurus

Another consequence of algorithmic curation is the reinforcement of a winner-takes-all dynamic among leadership voices. When one individual's content catches on, the algorithms often show that content to more people (snowballing the exposure) and also

suggest that individual's profile or channel to other users. This creates superstar effects where a few gurus attain outsized influence. For instance, on YouTube, the recommendation engine may notice that viewers who watch leadership videos tend to gravitate towards a handful of charismatic speakers. It will then more frequently recommend Simon Sinek's talks or Jocko Willink's podcasts to new viewers interested in leadership, perpetuating their dominance. These personalities, in turn, accumulate millions of followers across various platforms, meaning each new post they share already has a large, ready-made audience that will engage—a virtuous cycle for amplification. As a result, the platform algorithms often amplify the same set of "prestigious" voices repeatedly, making their messages ubiquitous in online leadership conversations. A newcomer with insightful ideas but no initial following faces a significant challenge in gaining comparable traction.

Social media, therefore, can magnify the guru phenomenon. It enables some leadership experts to become full-blown social media influencers. Consider the case of Simon Sinek: beyond his TED Talks, Sinek consistently produces a steady stream of bite-sized content, including quotes, short video clips, and mini-essays, on social platforms. His inspirational leadership snippets—e.g., a 2 min video on "why good leaders make you feel safe" (TED, 2014)—are highly shareable, often generating tens of thousands of reactions. The algorithms detect popularity and further amplify it to reach a wider audience. Over time, Sinek's name has become nearly synonymous with contemporary leadership philosophy for many users, overshadowing less media-savvy academics or alternative viewpoints. Another example is Gary Vaynerchuk, whose energetic exhortations on leadership and entrepreneurship (tailored perfectly for viral consumption) have flooded platforms like Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok. Gary Vee's knack for packaging advice into catchy one-liners (e.g., "kindness is ROI", "lead with empathy AND accountability") and his encouragement of sharing have led algorithms to elevate his content to many users' feeds. The end result is that certain leadership ideas, particularly those championed by these popular gurus, enjoy algorithmic amplification by proxy of the guru's personal brand. When millions of people are repeatedly exposed to Sinek's advocacy of purpose-driven, empathetic leadership, or Gary Vee's gospel of hustle and heart, those approaches solidify as dominant paradigms in the social media zeitgeist.

Conversely, voices that do not fit the algorithmic mold may struggle to be heard. Traditional scholars or practitioners who could contribute evidence-based insights might find their nuanced articles or talks receiving little algorithmic love because they do not incite quick engagement. Moreover, the nature of many social platforms favors short-form, visually engaging content. With its 60 second videos, TikTok is an extreme case: only very particular leadership messaging can succeed there (for instance, a quick tip with on-screen captions and trendy music might go viral, whereas a detailed discussion will not). This could bias the popular leadership discourse toward simplistic advice and charismatic showmanship. There is a concern that leadership concepts on social media become more about entertainment and affirmation than critical reflection. A telling phrase by one critic is that some high-profile social media leadership gurus are essentially "soundbite sellers", reducing complex leadership challenges into easily digestible platitudes (Sweeney, 2025). While these platitudes resonate widely and yield algorithmic success, they may not adequately prepare leaders for real-world difficulties.

These dynamics underscore that algorithmic bias is not merely a technical flaw but a feature of systems designed to reflect and reinforce profitable norms—often aligned with dominant cultural values and aspirational professional identities.

5. Selective Amplification of Certain Leadership Styles

The amplification of specific leadership styles online is not value-neutral; rather, it reflects deeper ideological, emotional, and cultural preferences embedded in both algorithmic systems (some rule-based, others AI-driven) and the societies that produce and reinforce them.

The net effect of these algorithmic and behavioral dynamics is that certain leadership styles or themes get disproportionately amplified in online discourse. Based on informal observation of trending content over the past few years, rather than a systematic content analysis, we can identify a few styles that have emerged as clear "winners" in the social media era, as well as others that appear to be "losers". That said, recent empirical surveys support these observed trends. For instance, a 2025 DDI Global Leadership Forecast found that "authentic leadership" and "empathetic leadership" ranked among the top requested competencies in executive development programs, showing a measurable shift toward these styles beyond social media discourse (DDI, 2025). It should be noted that these distinctions do not necessarily reflect the intrinsic value or effectiveness of the styles themselves, but rather how well they align with the formats, tones, and emotional cues that algorithms tend to reward.

5.1. Authentic Leadership

Authenticity is arguably the star of modern leadership fashions online. Authentic leadership emphasizes genuineness, self-awareness, transparency, and relational honesty by leaders. On social media, authenticity is a highly attractive theme—it is positive, personal, and encourages emotional storytelling. Many viral LinkedIn posts extol the virtues of leaders being open about their failures, mental health, or personal values, aligning with the notion of authenticity. For instance, posts where a leader admits a mistake or shows vulnerability (perhaps inspired by Brené Brown's work) tend to receive an outpouring of support and shares. The LinkedIn algorithm in recent years has even been seen to encourage more "real" and personal content from professionals (in contrast to overly formal corporate announcements) (van Beinum, 2025). This created a feedback loop: people who share personal leadership reflections (e.g., "I was terrified on my first day as a manager, here's what I learned. . .") are rewarded with engagement, reinforcing the idea that authentic leadership is the preferred style. Authentic leadership as a theory has also gained academic popularity in the last two decades, showing up in many studies and leadership development programs (Duarte et al., 2021; Obuba, 2023). Social media likely accelerated its diffusion to practice. By repeatedly encountering posts championing authenticity, professionals come to view it as the fashionable, even normative, way to lead in the current era. The message "be yourself" and "show vulnerability" is omnipresent, promoted by influencers and micro-influencers alike. While authenticity is generally seen as positive, the concern is that the algorithm may elevate performative authenticity—people showcasing curated imperfections to gain sympathy and attention—as opposed to genuine integrity. There is a thin line where authenticity itself can become a buzzword devoid of substance if everyone parrots it without critical thought.

Moreover, the algorithmic favoring of authentic leadership may privilege those already aligned with dominant communication norms—particularly extroverted, English-speaking, and Western users who are comfortable disclosing vulnerability in performative formats. This can marginalize leaders from cultures that value restraint, hierarchy, or collective identity over personal transparency. The popular discourse around "authenticity" thus risks becoming exclusionary, celebrating a narrow ideal of leadership while obscuring the diversity of legitimate leadership expression across contexts.

5.2. Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is another style enjoying significant airtime, which centers on leaders serving their followers, prioritizing others' needs, and practicing humility and empathy. Once a somewhat niche concept (with roots in Robert Greenleaf's 1970s writings and often espoused in faith-based contexts) (Greenleaf, 1977; Frick, 2004; Spears, 1996), servant leadership has become an important stream of leadership research (Eva et al., 2019). It has also entered mainstream business dialogue, in part due to high-profile examples and social media amplification. Empathy, kindness, and servant-like behavior are frequently celebrated in viral stories. A compelling case was that of Dan Price, the CEO of Gravity Payments, who in 2015 famously slashed his own salary to raise all his employees' minimum wage to USD 70k. When that story hit the internet, it "pulsated around the world" with 500 million social media interactions and turned Price into a "poster boy" for compassionate, people-first leadership (Rock, 2015). Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn were inundated with both praise for Price's servant leadership and debates about its practicality. The sheer virality demonstrated how algorithmic sharing can elevate a single act of servant leadership into a global conversation.

More broadly, during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a surge of content urging leaders to be empathetic and serve employees dealing with hardship. The consulting firm McKinsey and others published pieces on compassionate leadership, which were widely shared (Nielsen et al., 2020). LinkedIn articles expound how top CEOs are embracing servant leadership, highlighting that this approach has "gained popularity" for fostering trust and engagement (Rana, 2024). Those same articles note, almost as a requisite caveat, that servant leadership has its critics who worry it may be "too soft" in some competitive contexts (Rana, 2024). However, the overall tone in social media is strongly favorable. The algorithm tends to push positive, inspiring narratives, so success stories of servant leaders (like generous policies at Starbucks or humble practices by celebrated CEOs) are promoted. The risk, however, is a simplified portrayal: social media might downplay servant leaders' challenges (such as balancing compassion with tough decisions) and instead feed a steady diet of feel-good anecdotes. There is also the potential for virtue signaling, where leaders perform symbolic acts of "serving" that play well on social media, without making deeper changes.

5.3. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership, characterized by inspiring vision, motivational communication, and driving change, has been a dominant paradigm in leadership theory since the 1980s, originating from James MacGregor Burns and later Bernard Bass (Bass, 1999; Bass & Riggio, 2006). It, too, finds a natural ally in social media's amplification. Content portraying leaders as visionary innovators or change agents fighting the status quo can be highly engaging. Think of TED Talk titles like "How great leaders inspire action" (Sinek's classic talk)—these essentially preach transformational ideas (vision, inspiration, challenging the norm). Video platforms love these narratives; a rousing speech by a charismatic leader or guru can rack up millions of views. For example, a YouTube video entitled "What It Takes To Be a Great Leader" featuring Sinek or others will often emphasize transformational qualities like courage, integrity, and communication, as noted in one such popular video (Sinek, 2024). The algorithm boosts content that sparks ambition and emotion in viewers, so transformational leadership's dramatic flair is a good fit.

During periods of technological or societal change, we also see trending conversations about the need for transformational leaders to navigate disruption. Hashtags like #digitaltransformation or #changemaker trend on Twitter and LinkedIn implicitly boost transformational leadership ideals. One could argue that transformational leadership

has become almost taken for granted as the default desirable style taught in business schools and echoed on social media since it is consistently fashionable to talk about leaders "inspiring and transforming" rather than, say, just managing operations. On the other hand, one might question if the prevalence of transformational rhetoric online sometimes leads to the overuse of grandiose language. Every small team leader is encouraged to brand themselves as a visionary; every incremental project becomes a "transformation". In this sense, algorithmic amplification might inflate the language and expectations around leadership roles.

5.4. Transactional and Other "Unfashionable" Styles

While authentic, servant, and transformational styles have thrived, more traditional or less glamorous leadership approaches have been mainly marginalized in social media discourse. Transactional leadership—focused on setting clear goals, using rewards/punishments, and maintaining the status quo—is rarely celebrated in viral posts. A straightforward, by-the-book manager who quietly meets targets does not make for a compelling hashtag or story, even though transactional leadership can be effective in many contexts. It simply lacks the inspirational or emotional hook that algorithms feed on. Similarly, authoritarian or autocratic leadership is essentially taboo in modern discourse except when vilifying it. One will not easily find a LinkedIn influencer proudly advising "be more autocratic". Platforms encourage content that flatters the audience's self-image (people like to share posts that make them look enlightened and modern).

Claiming adherence to an authoritarian style would be deeply unpopular and thus is not aired, except in historical or cautionary discussions. Bureaucratic leadership, emphasizing strict process and hierarchy, is also absent from the trending topics—it is the antithesis of what the social media age glamorizes. In fact, these less fashionable styles may still be practiced widely behind the scenes, but they have been pushed out of sight in the online narrative about good leadership. This skewing can create a form of collective blind spot: leaders might be disinclined to admit using directive or transactional methods even when appropriate, for fear of social disapproval in the age of servant leadership evangelism. Moreover, some niche or emerging styles that lack a big marketing push might never gain traction if they do not resonate with the algorithms. For example, nuanced concepts like quiet leadership or adaptive leadership (beyond buzzword mentions) seldom go viral, perhaps because they require explanation and context that do not compress well into a tweet or TikTok clip. In contrast, something like "leading with vulnerability" (#LeadingWithVulnerability) became a catchphrase (helped by a book and LinkedIn influencers) that algorithms could easily propagate, since it builds on the already trending idea of vulnerability.

In doing so, the algorithmic environment promotes a vision of leadership that aligns with aspirational neoliberal ideals—emotive, individualized, and performative—while downplaying competence-based or collective approaches that resist easy monetization or virality.

6. Leadership Gurus and Influencers in the Age of Algorithms

Given the dynamics described, the individuals who drive leadership trends—the gurus and influencers—have had to adapt their modes of influence to the algorithms. Here, we examine how a few notable leadership influencers exemplify the interplay of guru advocacy and algorithmic spread, as well as the broader consequences of this interplay.

6.1. The Guru–Algorithm Synergy

Modern leadership gurus often consciously produce content that is algorithm-ready.

These adjustments often target engagement-based ranking systems, some of which are rules-based algorithms (e.g., boosting posts with early reactions), while others involve AI that dynamically learns from user behavior and adapts in real time. In practice, the gurus may distill their teachings into catchy quotes, design visually appealing quote cards or short videos, and maintain a frequent posting schedule to appease platform algorithms.

For example, Simon Sinek (to return to him as a case study) may share a one-minute clip from a longer talk, focusing on a single resonant point like "Leadership is not about being in charge, but taking care of those in your charge". This pithy, emotive statement is highly shareable—it fits in a LinkedIn video with caption text, it provokes an emotional reaction (in-group solidarity and moral sentiment about good leadership), and it carries the prestige of Sinek's brand. As users like and share it, LinkedIn's algorithm notes the engagement and pushes it further, sometimes even to users who have not heard of Sinek but are interested in leadership topics. This strategy results in massive reach—arguably more than traditional channels ever allowed for. A single LinkedIn post by a guru today can reach millions within days, something that a physical conference or book tour could rarely accomplish so quickly.

Other gurus, like Adam Grant, leverage a slightly different approach. Grant, being a well-known management professor and author (Grant, 2013, 2017, 2023), shares data-driven insights or provocative questions about leadership on Twitter and LinkedIn. He often cites studies or uses one-liners that challenge conventional wisdom (e.g., something along the lines of "The best way to lead is not to have all the answers but to ask the right questions"). His content taps into the intellectual appeal (prestige of evidence, since he is a highly cited academic) while still being concise and relatable. The algorithms amplify his posts because they tend to generate high engagement from professionals who feel smart sharing science-backed advice. Thus, Grant's more evidence-based leadership ideas achieve a popularity that academic research rarely would on its own—largely because he has translated them into the language of social media thought leadership.

A different persona, Gary Vaynerchuk, acts almost as a performance artist in the leadership space (e.g., Vaynerchuk, 2016; Vaynerchuk, 2018). He documents his life, shouts motivational mantras, and bluntly addresses workplace topics in extremely high volumes of content. The frequency and energy of his posts are a tactic to dominate feeds. He might post multiple TikToks a day with quick leadership tips for young entrepreneurs, knowing that TikTok's algorithm rewards regular content creators and will test-show his videos to many people. Gary Vee's style—brash, emotive, optimistic—is highly meme-able (indeed, his clips are often remixed by fans). This generates a cultural presence that extends beyond his own following, as the algorithms sometimes surface his memes to users who were not originally following him. The result: his particular blend of leadership advice (centered on work ethic, kindness, and disruption) becomes omnipresent to a generation of users, effectively setting a fashion in that demographic for what being a good entrepreneurial leader looks like.

Yet this synergy between guru content and algorithmic preference also raises concerns: whose voices are being amplified, and whose leadership models are systematically excluded because they do not align with the algorithm's criteria for virality?

6.2. Risks of Guru Dominance

While gurus leveraging algorithms can spread knowledge, there are risks to their dominance. One is the oversimplification of leadership concepts to maintain broad appeal. Many gurus use simplistic models or metaphors (a "Golden Circle", a cute acronym, a set of "5 tips") because they are easier to sell online. However, leadership in practice is complex and contingent; by oversimplifying, these influencers may be selling false confidence.

Jeffrey Pfeffer warned in *Leadership BS* (Pfeffer, 2015) that much popular leadership advice is disconnected from reality and creates unrealistic expectations.

On social media, this may be exacerbated: to receive likes, a guru might emphasize how wonderful a certain style is, glossing over caveats. As an illustrative critique, a Substack essay excoriating Simon Sinek referred to his popular frameworks as a "remarkably simplistic representation" of how success works (Sweeney, 2025). Indeed, one can see a pattern where gurus rarely discuss when their approach might fail—those nuanced discussions do not go viral. So, a generation of followers might be left ill-prepared when the rosy picture does not match workplace reality.

Another risk is the creation of personality cults or excessive guru-centric thinking. With algorithms pushing the same few faces, there is a tendency for audiences to treat those individuals' words as gospel. Social media encourages parasocial relationships (Balaban et al., 2022; Zafina & Sinha, 2024)—followers feel they know the guru personally due to their daily presence in the feed. This can inhibit critical analysis of their ideas. If a guru makes a questionable claim, fans may defend it vehemently (sometimes drowning out legitimate critique). The personal branding aspect, where leadership advice is tied to a charismatic persona, can mean that decisions in companies get influenced more by "what would Guru X do?" rather than what is contextually appropriate. In extreme cases, one might see faddish behaviors like companies imitating superficial traits of a famous leader because that story was viral (e.g., a CEO deciding to emulate Elon Musk's extremely demanding work culture after seeing endless coverage of Musk, despite their company being very different from a tech giant). Here, algorithmic amplification of one leader's style (Musk's iron-fist approach being a recent controversial example, widely discussed on LinkedIn and Twitter) might lead to misapplication of that style by others, misunderstanding the nuance that made it work or not work in the original scenario.

6.3. Democratization or Concentration?

It is worth noting that social media have the potential to democratize thought leadership, allowing for many practitioners to share their on-the-ground insights and perhaps challenge academic or guru-driven narratives (Madsen & Slåtten, 2015; Sturdy, 2019). To some extent, this does happen: there are grassroots LinkedIn writers or bloggers who, without being famous beforehand, build a following by consistently sharing valuable leadership lessons from their experience. The algorithms do occasionally elevate new voices, especially if they strike a chord. This can be seen as a positive development, adding diversity to the conversation. While social media ostensibly lowers the barriers to entry for leadership commentary, it simultaneously raises the bar for emotional resonance and visibility, often privileging spectacle over substance.

However, the overall trend we observe is still a strong concentration of influence. The sheer scale of content means attention is a scarce resource, and algorithms concentrate it where they see proven engagement. While anyone can hypothetically contribute, relatively few accounts garner the majority of the attention. Those who do often invest in the techniques mentioned (frequent posting, packaging ideas for virality, etc.). It raises a question: are the ideas that rise to prominence truly the most effective or insightful, or just the best marketed? The danger is that valuable insights from less savvy communicators remain buried.

This concentration of influence mirrors broader dynamics of platform capitalism, in which a handful of highly visible content creators dominate discourse not necessarily because of the depth of their insight but due to their brandability and emotional appeal. The repeated algorithmic elevation of these figures may reinforce homogeneity in leadership discourse—skewing the field toward charismatic, Western, male figures with mass appeal.

Meanwhile, emerging or marginalized voices, especially those from non-Western contexts, collectivist traditions, or less performative styles, may find themselves excluded by design. In effect, the algorithms may be not only curating content but also narrowing the scope of what counts as "leadership".

7. Implications and Critical Discussion

The convergence of AI-driven algorithms and leadership fashions carries several implications for organizations, leadership development, and researchers:

7.1. Impact on Organizational Practices

Organizations now must be aware that the leadership philosophies adopted by their managers may be significantly influenced by social media trends. These trends are not culturally neutral; they reflect the emotional, aesthetic, and ideological preferences embedded in platform design. Organizations may find themselves unintentionally reinforcing norms that privilege performative, Western, or individualistic leadership styles over more context-sensitive or inclusive models.

This can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, positive ideas (like empathy, authenticity) spreading quickly can genuinely improve workplace culture if embraced sincerely. For instance, the widespread discussion of mental health and vulnerability in leadership during the pandemic era has encouraged many companies to train leaders to be more understanding and open—potentially reducing stigma and improving employee well-being. On the other hand, there is a risk of faddish implementation: companies may roll out new leadership initiatives or training simply because "everyone is doing it" or it was trending, without fully considering their specific context or the depth of commitment needed. As an example, a firm might declare "we are now a servant leadership organization" after seeing competitors praised for it on LinkedIn, but if the senior executives fundamentally do not buy into the servant mentality (beyond lip service), the result will be cynical employees who see a disconnect between rhetoric and reality. Organizations should be cautious of jumping on bandwagons solely for PR or legitimacy reasons—the earlier point about legitimacy benefits is real (stakeholders might applaud the announcement), but empty posturing can backfire on credibility. The key is to align any adopted trend with authentic organizational values and ensure structural support for it, rather than treating it as a quick reputational fix.

Moreover, while many fashionable leadership styles, such as authentic or servant leadership, enjoy widespread popularity, the evidence for their consistent impact on organizational performance is mixed. For instance, meta-analyses on authentic leadership have shown only moderate associations with outcomes like employee engagement and performance (Banks et al., 2016). This raises the concern that organizations may invest heavily in trendy leadership development initiatives without achieving the expected returns, particularly if adoption is superficial or misaligned with contextual needs.

7.2. Leadership Development and Education

Those who design leadership development programs need to adapt to the influence of algorithmic trends. Participants in training often come in already exposed to the latest buzzwords, which can be beneficial as a common starting point, but also challenging if their understanding is shallow or skewed by hype. Educators might have to "myth-bust" some oversimplifications that learners bring (for example, clarifying that while servant leadership is admirable, it does not mean avoiding all tough decisions or that leaders must please everyone—a nuance often lost in social media narratives). There is also an opportunity to harness social media for development: encouraging leaders to engage with diverse content and even share their reflections online as a way to practice thought leadership.

Some progressive companies now incorporate social media literacy into leadership training, teaching leaders how to discern credible ideas (backed by evidence) from fads, and how to contribute positively to online discourse without falling into the trap of shallow posting. In other words, digital leadership literacy is becoming part of being a well-rounded leader.

7.3. Evidence-Based Approach vs. Popular Approach

A tension exists between evidence-based leadership (ideas and practices grounded in research and proven through systematic observation) and popular leadership (ideas that are widespread and appealing, as seen on social media). Ideally, there is overlap—many popular ideas like emotional intelligence, humble leadership, etc., do have research backing. But in practice, the popularity of an idea online does not guarantee its validity or effectiveness. Scholars and evidence-minded practitioners should not cede the narrative entirely to social media influencers; they should participate and inject evidence into the conversation.

Such efforts align with a broader movement toward evidence-based leadership models that prioritize research validation and sustainable effectiveness over immediate popularity. Some scholars have already advanced research-driven frameworks that counterbalance popularization with empirical rigor. For example, Morten Hansen (J. C. Collins & Hansen, 2011; Hansen, 2009, 2018) emphasizes disciplined, evidence-based approaches to leadership performance, offering models that focus on sustainable effectiveness rather than viral appeal. As leadership fashions continue to evolve through algorithmic amplification, there may be a growing tension—and opportunity—between rapidly amplified leadership ideas and quieter, empirically grounded models. Leadership educators and practitioners will increasingly need to navigate between these currents, recognizing the appeal of fashionable ideas while critically assessing their research foundations.

Encouragingly, early signs of greater scholarly engagement with popular leadership discourse are emerging. Researchers have begun examining how leadership influencers communicate on social media platforms and how these new dynamics shape follower perceptions (Council & Olowoyo, 2024; Matthews et al., 2022). These studies mark important steps toward understanding and potentially shaping leadership trends at the algorithmic level. Nevertheless, if evidence-based perspectives fail to achieve visibility alongside viral content, there is a risk that leadership practice will increasingly drift toward performative leadership—styles that look good in social media narratives but may lack substance in real organizational contexts. Balancing engagement with evidence will therefore become a critical leadership competency in the algorithmically curated knowledge economy.

To navigate this terrain, evidence-based leadership must also evolve. It should not only prioritize rigorous empirical validation but also adapt its communication strategies to reach broader audiences. Scholars and educators could benefit from translating findings into more accessible, resonant formats, without compromising nuance, to compete in the same media ecosystems as viral leadership influencers. At the same time, platforms must be held accountable for promoting informational integrity. Just as public health misinformation has prompted algorithmic reform, similar attention should be given to the epistemic quality of leadership advice being amplified at scale.

7.4. Ethical and Diversity Considerations

Algorithmic amplification has come under fire in other domains (politics, health misinformation) for creating echo chambers and promoting extreme content (Brady et al., 2023). While the stakes are different in the leadership realm, similar ethical questions arise. Are algorithms inadvertently favoring certain types of leaders (e.g., English-speaking, extroverted, media-savvy individuals) and thus marginalizing others (perhaps culturally different expressions of leadership or those less comfortable self-promoting)? Leadership

fashions propagated on global platforms might carry a Western bias, for example, emphasizing individualistic traits like self-disclosure that may not resonate in other cultures. If everyone online pushes vulnerability as essential, leaders in cultures valuing modesty or formality might be deemed "behind" or pressured to conform, potentially clashing with local norms. This can create a monoculture of leadership ideals that overlook context. It is important for the thought leadership community to ensure that a diversity of models is respected. Algorithmic systems themselves could be tuned (in an ideal scenario) to present a variety of content rather than homogeneously amplifying one note. There have been calls in technology ethics to reduce the amplifiers that create "one-size-fits-all" narratives (Farid, 2021). While those calls are usually about political content, one could imagine analogous tweaks for professional content to ensure less popular but high-quality posts (say, a deep-dive on when charismatic leadership fails) receive some exposure.

Beyond content visibility, algorithmic systems may perpetuate what Roland Barthes called "exnomination" (Barthes, 1972): the erasure of dominant identities by presenting them as universal. When algorithmic leadership ideals center on white, male, English-speaking figures, they often appear as neutral or natural, while other models are marked as different or niche. This rhetorical invisibility reinforces structural inequities by masking the cultural specificity of dominant forms. Leadership diversity, then, requires not just representational inclusion but a fundamental challenge to what kinds of leadership expression are deemed legitimate, promotable, or worthy of virality.

7.5. The Pace of Change and Leadership Adaptability

Social-media-fueled trends can emerge and evolve rapidly. Leaders might feel whiplash—one year they are told to focus on vulnerability, the next the talk of the town is agility, then it is resilience, then empathy, and so on. While these are not mutually exclusive or truly new ideas, the shifting emphasis can be confusing. Leaders may wonder: Should I reinvent my style every year to keep up? The practical answer is that core principles of good leadership (integrity, communication, vision, etc.) remain steady, but the language and emphasis rotates. It may be wise for leaders to view fashions as refreshers or reinforcements of different facets of leadership, rather than entirely new commandments. For example, the current emphasis on "leading with purpose" (a fashionable phrase) can be seen as a reawakening of the age-old importance of mission and values in leadership—something that might have been taken for granted and is now being spotlighted again. Leaders can ground themselves by translating the fad into foundational principles and not overreact to every new trend.

However, adaptability is key. A completely rigid leader who ignores evolving expectations may fall out of sync with employees. For instance, if the workforce zeitgeist (shaped by social narratives) increasingly expects empathetic leaders, a manager who remains stoically transactional will likely face morale and retention problems. So, fashions can signal genuine shifts in what followers expect from leaders. The challenge for leaders is to discern which shifts are substantive and worth internalizing versus which are surface-level hype. Engaging with one's team in dialogue is crucial: often, employees will bring up, directly or indirectly, what they yearn for (e.g., "I wish our leadership communicated more about the 'why' behind decisions", reflecting the purpose trend). In this sense, leadership fashions might be seen as collective learning or negotiating processes, which is an idea Guthey et al. (2022) emphasize. They are society's way of iteratively updating the leadership model in response to current needs. Leaders who treat them thoughtfully—neither cynically dismissing everything as a fad nor blindly following the crowd—can use these trends as learning opportunities to enhance their effectiveness.

7.6. Future Outlook: AI and Personalization

Looking ahead, AI-driven content curation is likely to become even more personalized and pervasive. We may see the emergence of AI-generated leadership advice bots, custom-tailored leadership content feeds, etc. Beyond personalized feeds, future developments may include AI-generated leadership coaching avatars that simulate different leadership styles based on user preference, or even the creation of "deepfake gurus" where synthetic versions of popular thought leaders continually produce content tailored for different audiences. This could further blur the line between genuine expertise and algorithmically engineered authority, raising profound questions about authenticity, trust, and leadership legitimacy in the digital age.

This could mean that leadership fashions become even more segmented—micro-fashions for sub-groups—or conversely, a particularly effective meme could instantly blanket all channels. The responsibility lies with both platform designers and the leadership community to ensure that the technology is used to spread helpful and evidence-aligned practices. For example, if LinkedIn's algorithm in 2025 now explicitly prioritizes "valuable content and authentic expertise" over viral schlock (Pamart, 2025; TorontoDigits, 2025), as some reports suggest it is trying to do, that could mitigate the worst of amplification distortions. Some platforms are indeed adjusting to favor quality over quantity (LinkedIn announced changes to curb clickbait and reward niche expertise in 2023–24) (TorontoDigits, 2025). Whether those adjustments succeed remains to be seen, but it is a recognition that engagement metrics alone are not a perfect proxy for value. Researchers might also develop better tools to track leadership trends in real time (through text mining on social data, etc.), effectively creating an empirical basis for identifying "leadership fashion waves" and correlating them with organizational outcomes. Such studies could tell us, for instance, if companies that heavily adopted whatever was trending actually outperformed or not, adding a layer of accountability to the popularity of ideas.

8. Conclusions

The phenomenon of AI-driven content curation shaping leadership trends—the "challenges of algorithmic amplification"—represents a new chapter in the evolution of management and leadership ideas. Leadership gurus and fashions have always existed to some extent, but never before have they spread with such speed and global reach, nor has the barrier to entry for trend-setters been so low (Madsen & Slåtten, 2015; Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020; Sturdy, 2019). Yet this global reach often masks a narrowing of leadership ideals. The algorithms that power modern content curation tend to amplify dominant cultural expressions while muting alternative or non-conforming voices, particularly those that resist emotional oversimplification or platform-friendly performance.

In this essay, we have explored how social media algorithms amplify certain leadership styles and narratives, often those with emotive and eye-catching qualities. This popularizes approaches like authentic and servant leadership across professional networks. At the same time, other styles receive comparatively scant attention, creating an imbalanced discourse that may simplify the rich landscape of leadership into a few fashionable templates.

We discussed the concept of leadership fashion in depth, showing it to be closely related to management fashion but focused on normative leadership behaviors and identities. Leadership fashions are co-created by gurus, influencers, organizations, and audiences, all interacting within an algorithm-driven media ecosystem. The role of leadership gurus, from traditional management thinkers to modern LinkedIn influencers, is amplified by technology—whether through simple algorithmic sorting or AI-driven content personalization—which gives them unprecedented power to shape opinion. Real-world examples, such as viral leadership anecdotes and widely debated CEO behaviors, illustrate

the mechanisms by which algorithmic amplification can both inform and misinform our collective understanding of effective leadership.

From a critical perspective, while social media has democratized who can have a voice on leadership, it has also introduced biases in what kind of voice is heard. The engaging and novel often triumph over the nuanced and evidence-based in algorithmic feeds. This calls for a cautious approach: practitioners should remain open to learning from the wealth of shared experiences online yet also maintain a healthy skepticism and willingness to question trendy ideas. Likewise, scholars and responsible thought leaders have an opportunity—even an obligation—to inject rigor into public discourse (Abrahamson & Eisenman, 2001), ensuring that leadership fashions do not drift too far from foundational principles and research findings.

In comparing leadership fashion to management fashion, we see a similar cycle of enthusiasm and eventual reevaluation (Abrahamson & Piazza, 2019; Benders & Van Veen, 2001). Social media may accelerate this cycle but also externalize it, playing out in public view through posts and discussions rather than in closed managerial circles (Madsen & Slåtten, 2015). This transparency might be a net positive, allowing for quicker feedback and collective sensemaking about new leadership ideas. If a concept is truly hollow, the crowd's critique can surface swiftly (sometimes via satirical memes or pointed comments); conversely, if a concept has enduring merit, a community of practice can coalesce around it online, sharing implementation tips and sustaining it beyond the buzz phase.

In conclusion, algorithmic amplification is a powerful force that both shapes and reflects our current leadership fashions. Navigating this landscape requires balancing enthusiasm for fresh ideas with critical analysis. Organizations should integrate popular new ideas thoughtfully, testing them against organizational realities (Birkinshaw, 2014; Mol & Birkinshaw, 2009). Leaders should strive to be learners above all—absorbing input from social media but also seeking mentorship, diverse perspectives, and evidence beyond the algorithm's filter bubble. Researchers and educators should continue to study this intersection of technology and leadership, providing guidance on how to harness the benefits (global idea exchange, exposure to innovation) while mitigating downsides (fad-chasing, oversimplification).

Effective leadership in the digital age may require a new layer of reflexivity: the capacity to navigate the information environment thoughtfully—managing one's exposure to trends, maintaining perspective, and practicing discernment. Leaders who cultivate this awareness may be better equipped to avoid uncritical adoption of transient ideas while also using social media constructively to support their development and engagement. As algorithmic environments continue to evolve, enduring qualities such as judgment, integrity, and adaptability remain essential, perhaps offering a more stable foundation than the rapidly shifting currents of leadership fashion.

At the same time, we must remain vigilant against the uncritical adoption of leadership fashions that gain traction primarily through algorithmic reinforcement. Researchers, educators, and practitioners alike should interrogate not just the surface appeal of popular leadership content but also the systems that make it visible. This includes advocating for more pluralistic and culturally inclusive representations of leadership, challenging the economic logic of virality as a proxy for truth, and developing counterweights to guru-driven monocultures. Leadership in the digital age must be reflexive not only about people but also about platforms.

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