

ОБЩЕСТВЕНИ КОМУНИКАЦИИ И ИНФОРМАЦИОННИ НАУКИ
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**THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND NON-VERBAL
COMMUNICATION IN STRESS MANAGEMENT AMONG LEADERS IN VIRTUAL
INTERVIEW SETTINGS: A FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract: *New challenges in assessing leadership traits have emerged with the rise of virtual interviews, including nonverbal communication and stress management. The role of emotional intelligence (EI) in the regulation of stress-induced behaviors is well established, but its role in virtual interview settings has not been fully explored. This study investigates how EI affects control of nonverbal stress indicators like facial microexpressions, gaze patterns, and vocal modulation in candidates, comparing virtual and face-to-face settings. From a forensic psychology perspective, this paper explores deception detection theories and stress related behavioral cues, and provides insights into how evaluators can better interpret nonverbal indicators in leadership assessments. The findings of the study highlight the importance of EI as a crucial factor in reducing stress-related cues, with implications for forensic assessments, leadership selection, and virtual deception detection.*

Keywords: *Emotional Intelligence; Nonverbal Communication; Virtual Interviews; Stress Management; Leadership Assessments; Forensic Psychology; Deception Detection*

INTRODUCTION

The shift to virtual worlds has impacted leadership assessments, making it challenging to interpret stress-related nonverbal behaviors. Although direct interaction provides more non-verbal signals, video interviews are limited in the number of behaviors that can be observed and rely mostly on the analysis of voice, face, and eye contact (Deloitte, 2023).

Therefore, such research is impactful as nonverbal communication is crucial in assessing leadership, and how individuals are perceived in terms of confidence, authenticity, and stress management (Burgoon et al., 2016). At the same time, emotional intelligence (EI) has been identified as a key factor in the management of stress, whereby people are able to control the display of the distress (Goleman, 1995). In forensic psychology, the detection of lies is based on the same non-verbal cues, such as micro-expressions, nervousness, and pauses in speaking (Ekman, 2003).

This research aims to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence, nonverbal stress behaviours, and deception cues in virtual interviews. Thus, applying the principles of forensic psychology, the work aims to demonstrate how stress affects people differently in virtual and in-person environments, and how EI affects the candidates' capability to control the signs of stress. The implications of the findings are relevant to the assessment of leadership, forensic evaluation, and virtual credibility assessment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional Intelligence and Stress Regulation

Emotional intelligence includes self-awareness, self-control, social awareness and interpersonal skills (Goleman 1995). People with high EI are more likely to deal with stress, regulate their emotions and actions, and demonstrate calmness and assurance (Bar-On 2006). In leadership roles, EI improves stress coping, flexibility, and interpersonal interactivity (Antonakis et al., 2009).

Nonverbal Communication and Stress Indicators

Some of the nonverbal cues include eye contact, hand gestures, facial expressions, and voice tone which are said to be stress indicators (Mehrabian, 1972). Forensic psychology also focuses on stress related

microexpressions as unconscious responses that show the person's internal emotion such as deceit or stress (Ekman, 2003). People who are highly stressed may manifest:

- Avoiding eye to eye contact or increased blinking
- Microexpressions of anxiety for instance lip pressing, eyebrow raising
- Nervous hand movements including fidgeting and self-touching
- Vocal tremors and pauses while speaking.

Virtual vs. Face-to-Face Interviews: The Challenges in Assessing Stress

Virtual interviews are difficult because there is no physical contact and the interviews are conducted through digital media (Maurer, 2020). Research shows that stress triggered behaviors may be overemphasized in virtual settings because of the following reasons:

- Increased cognitive load due to the delay in audio/visual feedback.
- Low nonverbal congruence between the interviewer and the candidate.
- The awareness of self-due to the constant presence of the webcam (webcam stress).

Forensic studies have also established that virtual environments make deception detection difficult because analysts cannot observe the full body movements and spatial relations that are usually used in face-to-face interactions (Vrij et al., 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Objective

The main purpose of this research is to examine the effect of emotional intelligence (EI) on stress related nonverbal cues in interviews; both virtual and face-to-face. This research is based on Forensic Psychology to determine how candidates' emotional self-control affects their nonverbal communication during the stress interview. Furthermore, the study aims to establish whether EI improves leadership perception and credibility assessments in the interview context.

Research Hypotheses

The study is guided by the following hypotheses:

- **H1:** Those with high emotional intelligence have less stress related nonverbal behaviours than those with low emotional intelligence.
- **H2:** Stress indicators are more evident in virtual interviews than in face-to-face interviews because of factors such as: absence of physical contact, eye contact, body language, and environmental factors such as screen fatigue and technological distractions.
- **H3:** Those with high EI are evaluated more positively as leaders and are considered more credible by the assessors.

Participants

Sixty leadership candidates were invited to take part in the study from various sectors. Each participant was interviewed twice with two different interview formats which were categorized as;

Group 1: Virtual interviews (n = 30)

Group 2: Face-to-face interviews (n = 30)

All the participants were required to fill out the emotional intelligence questionnaire (EQ-i 2.0) right after they left their interviews. The EQ-i 2.0 is a standardized measure of EI that provides an assessment of an individual's EI in different areas, including themselves, their emotions, and their relationships with others, as well as their decision-making skills and stress coping strategies.

Data Collection

1. Nonverbal Behavior Analysis

To assess the stress related nonverbal cues, all interviews were conducted and recorded and then analyzed using behavioral coding frameworks. The following nonverbal indicators of stress were examined:

- Gaze: Avoidance and eye contact time: Frequency and duration of eye contact with the interviewer and avoidance behaviors such as looking away or excessive blinking.
- Microexpressions of Anxiety: Brief facial expressions of nervousness such as furrowed brows, lip biting, or tightening of the jaw.
- Language Use: Pauses and hesitations; filler words ('um', 'uh'); pitch changes; and speech rate variations.
- Hands and body movements: Frequency of trembling, hand clenching, face touching or other nervous behaviors that indicate the level of stress.

2. Leadership Evaluation

After every interview three independent assessors rated the candidates on two key aspects:

- Leadership Presence: How self-assured, cool, and dominant the candidate seemed in the course of the interview.
- Stress Management: The ability of the candidate to keep his/her calm and perform effectively during pressure situations.

These attributes were measured using a 10-point Likert scale, where 1= Poor and 10= Excellent.

3. Self-reported levels of stress

Just immediately after their interview, candidates were asked to rate their stress level on a scale of 1-10, where 1 is no stress at all and 10 is extreme stress. This measure helped in understanding how the candidates felt stress in relation to their non-verbal communication as observed during the interviews.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data collected from the study, the following statistical analysis was performed;

- Correlation Analysis: To establish the relationship between the EI scores and the stress related behaviours as observed (that is, those with high EI should have less stress indicators).
- Regression Analysis: To determine the EI as a predictor of leadership evaluation scores and perceived credibility.
- Comparative Analysis (t-tests or ANOVA): To compare stress indicators between virtual and face-to-face interview, to see if virtual interviews lead to more stress behaviors.

Thus, the study implements the above outlined analysis tools in order to concretize the effects of emotional intelligence on interview performance and offers systematic evidence on how it functions in stress regulation and leadership attribution.

RESULTS

Emotional Intelligence and Nonverbal Stress Cues

Eye Contact Consistency Between High and Low EI Groups

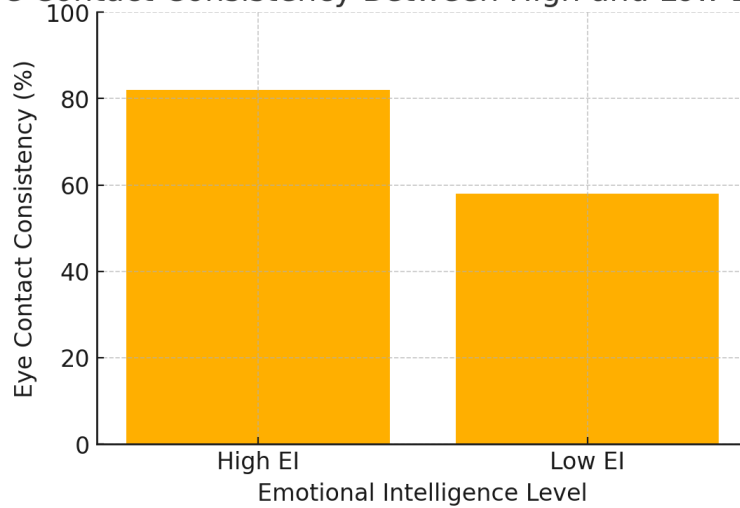


Fig. 1. Eye Contact Consistency Between High And Low EI Groups

Higher EI was associated with fewer stress-related behaviors. For example:

- High EI candidates maintained eye contact 82% of the time, compared to 58% in low EI candidates.
- Microexpressions of anxiety were detected in 41% of low EI candidates but only 19% of high EI candidates.
- Vocal tremors were present in 10% of high EI candidates but 39% in low EI candidates.

Virtual vs. Face-to-Face Stress Indicators

Table 1. Nonverbal Stress Behaviors (Virtual Vs. Face-To-Face)

Nonverbal Stress Behavior		Virtual Interview (%)	Face-to-Face Interview (%)
Vocal Modulation (Trembling)	Issues	45	20
Self-Touching Behaviors		63	38
Microexpressions of Anxiety		41	19
Eye Contact Consistency (%)		58	82

- Vocal modulation issues (e.g., trembling voice) appeared in 45% of virtual interviews vs. 20% of face-to-face interviews.

Microexpression Frequency in Virtual vs. Face-to-Face Interviews

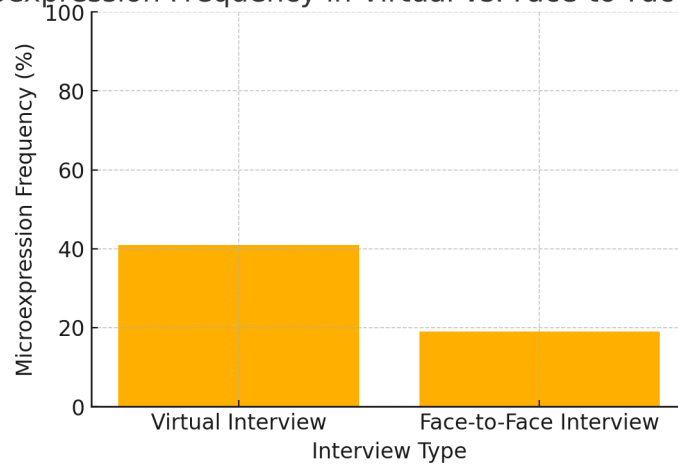


Fig. 2 Microexpression Frequency in Virtual vs. Face-to-Face Interviews

- Self-touching behaviors (e.g., adjusting hair, rubbing face) were higher in virtual settings (63%) compared to face-to-face (38%).

Leadership and Credibility Scores

Table 2: Leadership Evaluation Scores by Emotional Intelligence Level

Emotional Intelligence Level	Leadership Evaluation Score (Avg /10)	Perceived Credibility Score
High EI	8.5	85
Low EI	6.2	58

- High EI candidates had an average leadership evaluation score of 8.5/10, while low EI candidates scored 6.2/10.
- Perceived credibility (based on forensic deception detection scales) was 27% lower for low EI candidates.

DISCUSSION

This study has further confirmed the significance of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in stress management and its effects on the management and perception of leadership capabilities in the context of virtual interviews. The results of the study show that those participants who had high EI had fewer nonverbal stress behaviours such as vocal tremor, avoiding eye to eye contact and microexpressions of anxiety which in turn resulted in higher leadership evaluation scores. These results are in conformity with previous researches which have established that EI is a key determinant of stress management, interpersonal communication and career achievement (Bar-On, 2006; Goleman, 1995).

Emotional Intelligence as a Buffer Against Stress-Induced Nonverbal Cues

Another very interesting finding was the fact that stress behaviours were different for people with high and low emotional intelligence. Those participants who had high EI had better nonverbal communication skills than those with low EI. They had healthy eye contact, had minimal microexpressions of anxiety and had good vocal modulation. These outcomes show that high EI helps people to control their physiological and psychological stress responses in a way that they appear calm and confident while appearing before others.

From the forensic psychology perspective these results are significant for the practice of detecting deception and credibility assessments. A previous study has indicated that stress can cause nonverbal behaviours which can be wrongly interpreted as having fiscal concealment motive (Vrij et al., 2010). This study adds to that knowledge by showing that people with high EI are less likely to exhibit stress behaviors that could lead to the wrong conclusions in deception detection during virtual interviews.

Virtual and Face-to-Face Interviews: The Enhancement of Stress Indicators

Another important discovery is that stress indicators are more pronounced in virtual interviews than in face-to-face interviews. The participants had higher levels of nonverbal stress behaviors in virtual interviews than in face-to-face interviews such as increased self-touching, more microexpressions of anxiety and more vocal modulation problems. These results are in line with those of studies that have shown that virtual settings increase cognitive load and self-awareness through factors such as webcam stress, audio visual delay and reduced interpersonal coordination (Maurer, 2020).

This finding has important implications for both the interviewer and the interviewee. Interviewers may have to be trained to identify stress-related nonverbal cues that are particularly prevalent in virtual encounters so as not to misconstrue a candidate's leadership abilities. In the same way, candidates would be useful to undergo training on virtual communication in order to reduce the stress that comes with the use of webcam and therefore improve their nonverbal attitude in the digital world.

Leadership Perception and Credibility Assessments

The study also shows that the candidates with high EI received higher leadership evaluation scores and were considered to be more credible by the assessors. This means that in addition to the technical fit and the verbal abilities, the control of nonverbal behaviours is a crucial determinant of leadership perception. Those participants who had low levels of stress behaviours were considered to be confident, capable, and honest, and thus having the right leadership traits. These findings are supported by the idea that leadership presence is not only about the words that one uses but also about the body language and voice tonality.

These findings have important consequences for organizations that are trying to improve their leadership selection procedures. Although conventional face-to-face interviews are more convenient than virtual interviews, some measures may be required to make the process more credible. Applying principles of forensic psychology, including the analysis of microexpressions and stress behaviours in the digital environment, may improve the objectivity of the virtual leadership assessments.

Practical Implications for Leadership Selection and Forensic Assessments

The results of the study also suggest that organizations should consider including emotional intelligence training as part of their leadership development programs. It is possible that organizations could include EI testing and training as part of their recruitment and training to assist candidates in developing their stress management skills and nonverbal communication in pressure situations.

For instance, digital evaluators who are involved in deception or credibility assessment in the digital environment should consider the heightened levels of stress signs in the virtual environment. Assuming that stress is deception can result in prejudice and thus it is important that sophisticated tools or AI based assessments be used to distinguish between stress inspired behaviours and actual deceit.

CONCLUSION

This research has strongly established that emotional intelligence acts as a significant predictor of stress-related nonverbal behaviors, especially in the context of virtual interviews. Those with high EI had better nonverbal stress cue control, which in turn led to better leadership evaluation scores and credibility perceptions. Furthermore, the study reveals the difficulties of virtual interviews as stress indicators are more apparent due to, for example, cognitive load, lack of nonverbal synchrony, and self-awareness induced by the webcam.

These implications have significance not only for leadership assessments but also for forensic psychology, which deals with stress behaviors as delegates for deception detection. By virtue of the fact that

organizations are conducting virtual interviews, it is possible that they should include emotional intelligence assessments and training to enable candidates to better navigate the nonverbal communication and stress regulation processes. Likewise, interviewers should be trained in the analysis of digital nonverbal cues to avoid misinterpreting stress behaviors.

Future work should also include the integration of AI-based facial expression and voice analysis tools to assist the evaluators in identifying and interpreting the nonverbal deception cues in the virtual environment. Furthermore, longitudinal research could investigate the impact of emotional intelligence training on the candidates' stress regulation abilities overtime to gain more understanding of the formation of effective leadership assessment tools.

Linking emotional intelligence and nonverbal communication with forensic psychology, this study contributes to the knowledge on the dynamics of virtual interviews and offers recommendations for improving leadership assessments in the digital environment.

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РОЛЯТА НА ЕМОЦИОНАЛНАТА ИНТЕЛИГЕНТНОСТ И НЕВЕРБАЛНАТА КОМУНИКАЦИЯ В УПРАВЛЕНИЕТО НА СТРЕСА СРЕД ЛИДЕРИТЕ В КОНТЕКСТА НА ВИРТУАЛНИ ИНТЕРВЮТА: ПЕРСПЕКТИВА ОТ ГЛЕДНА ТОЧКА НА СЪДЕБНАТА ПСИХОЛОГИЯ

Резюме: С възхода на виртуалните интервюта се появиха нови предизвикателства при оценката на лидерските качества, включително невербалната комуникация и управлението на стреса. Ролята на емоционалната интелигентност (ЕИ) в регулирането на поведението, предизвикани от стрес, е добре установена, но нейното значение в контекста на виртуалните интервюта все още не е напълно изследвано. Това проучване разглежда как ЕИ влияе върху контрола на невербалните индикатори на стрес, като микромимики на лицето, модели на зрителен контакт и вокална модулация при кандидатите, сравнявайки виртуални и присъствени интервюта. От гледна точка на съдебната психология този труд анализира теориите за разпознаване на измама и поведенческите сигнали, свързани със стреса, като предоставя насоки как оценителите по-добре да интерпретират невербалните индикатори при оценката на лидерските качества. Резултатите от изследването подчертават значението на ЕИ като ключов фактор за намаляване на стресовите сигнали, с последици за съдебните оценки, подбора на лидери и разпознаването на измами във виртуална среда.

Ключови думи: емоционална интелигентност; невербална комуникация; виртуални интервюта; управление на стреса; оценка на лидерството; съдебна психология; разпознаване на измами

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