

University Professor's Digital Image: Transition from Conventional Image in the COVID-19 Pandemic Period

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Abstract: Penetrated into pedagogical research from PR, advertising and politics, the concept of "image" is actively used to describe the ideal portrait of a university professor and his/her most demanded professional skills. As a result of rapid spreading of electronic technologies into the educational process of universities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become possible to form university professor's digital image. The relevance of this study lies in the fact that the essence of "professor's digital image", its content and structure, as well as the ways of posting information in the electronic environment have been studied not sufficiently. In the paper, several trends in the scientific interpretation of the concept of "image" were identified, and the author's definition of the concept of "university professor's digital image" was also suggested. The structure and main functions of the professor's digital image, developed for the first time, convince that its purposeful formation should be perceived as a compulsory element of the professional activity of a university educator, since the digital image not only contributes to the growth of professor's authority and recognition, but can also attract more interested agents to interact with the university.


1 INTRODUCTION

Any achievements in the service industries are inextricably linked with the concept of "image", i.e. with the perception of an object or person in the mass consciousness. It is quite logical that in recent years this concept has been applied to a university professor (by the term "university professor" we mean all teaching staff of higher educational institutions (hereinafter HEI), regardless of the position held). As A. Mynbayeva and K. Yessenova state: "Personal image contributes to professional's competitiveness in the labor market, especially in the modern globalizing world ... it encourages personal self-fulfillment through recognition by the society and personal success" (Mynbayeva and Yessenova, 2016). In most cases, the professor's image is considered as a set of ideas about the activities of a university educator, "expressively coloured stereotype", formed on the basis of information provided by the media or discussed in the family (Luchinkina et al., 2019); the educator's ability to identify himself with the academic community and experience loyalty to his / her HEIs (Rodríguez et

al., 2019).

The surveys of students, their parents and colleagues as target groups, with which a professor has the closest contacts, are conventional sources of ideas about his/her image (Guzhva, 2017; Mynbayeva and Yessenova, 2016).

However, this interpretation of the concept of "professor's image" seems insufficient due to the changes in the professional activities of university faculty as a result of the transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the boom in the use of various electronic technologies and conference platforms during two recent years. Moreover, the researchers draw attention to the fact that in the modern electronic educational environment, the university educator has real conditions for active formation of his/her digital image in order to present professional activities and the results achieved in accordance with the updated goals (Lukashenko et al., 2021). Thus, the professor's image can be formed not only spontaneously, but also purposefully (Mynbayeva and Yessenova, 2016). However, as the analysis of scientific publications proves, studies of the digital image in this direction, its nature, structure,

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methods of location in the electronic environment have not been conducted yet.

Therefore, the purpose of our research is to identify the nature of the university professor's image as a whole, and also his/her digital image as a special form of self-presentation and self-actualization in the electronic environment.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

Both theoretical (critical study and analysis of scientific publications in Philosophy, Pedagogy, Psychology, Sociology, synthesis, comparison, generalization) and practical (questionnaire and online survey) methods of research were used to find the changes in the professor's image during COVID-19 pandemic.

The study involved 38 respondents, who presented all levels of university staff, of different age groups and gender, working at 7 universities of the Russian Federation. The data were collected by means of electronic survey.

3 RESULTS

3.1 To the Meaning of the Term "Image"

During many centuries, there have been many complications with the word "image" in science, firstly, due to its polysemy and, secondly because of dissimilarity of its meanings in different languages.

In Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English, the word "image" has the following meanings: a picture (visual or mental), a statue, a reflection, an appearance, a representation, exact counterpart of something / somebody else, a generalized idea or reputation that other people have of the person, organization or the goods, the impression that a person, an organization, a product, etc. gives to the public (Oxford Dictionary).

So, the first layer of scientific contradictions arose due to availability of various meanings of the word "image" connected with different ways of our perception of an object (visual, mental, verbal, etc.). Besides, the word "image" can be used in two opposite connotations: on the one hand, it implies to be only a copy of the real object, on the other hand, we can judge ourselves to what extent this copy is faithful and accurate. Moreover, image as a term is connected with a very significant issue that is called

"the fundamental question of Philosophy": how we perceive the reality; if this reality and these images can exist without us; how exact our impressions and ideas are; and what our conscience adds to the images. It was this quite complicated and contradictory nature of the concept "image" that gave it the status of the interdisciplinary term.

With the development of trade in the 20-th century, the word "image" acquired the meaning connected with the attempts of a person, a product or an organization to become highly popular thanks to his or its appearance, high achievements or quality and capability to keep this popularity for rather long time. Since that period, the word "image" has been borrowed in a number of other languages from English, precisely in this very meaning. To distinguish it from the meanings of "a reflection", "a figure", other lexical units exist in some languages, for example, in Russian – "obraz" or in German – "die Gestalt", though, in the English language, polysemy of "image" has increased even more. Since many scientific articles are written in English, this semantic contradiction have given rise for a new wave of misunderstanding or misuse of the term "image".

3.2 Image as One of the Fundamental Concepts in Philosophy

In historical terms, "image" not as a word, but as a concept was known even in Ancient Egypt, where every effort was made to achieve the maximum similarity between the pharaohs and the existing concept of the celestials: in skin complexion, eyebrow shape, clothing, etc.

In Antiquity, the foundations of modern imagology were laid: the greatest popularity in society is achieved by a person whose spiritual purity is combined with physical beauty or strength, therefore, the ways of forming the image of rulers and sovereigns were an integral part of ancient philosophy.

The Renaissance highlighted the visual perception of the image of a person, his/her beauty and harmony with nature as one of the prerogatives. The importance of the image was especially vividly described in the works of N. Machiavelli, who noted that the inner qualities of the ruler would not be immediately visible to those around him, but special attention should be paid to his image: "Everyone sees what you appear to be, few really know what you are, and those few dare not oppose themselves to the opinion of the many, who have the majesty of the state to defend them" (Machiavelli, Ch. 18, 2019).

The era of capitalism brought with it the awareness of the need to “serve the goods in the best possible way,” therefore, in the works of Francis Bacon, antiquity is criticized for inattention to manners, human behaviour, ability to conduct a conversation, use facial expressions and other non-verbal means of communication. At the same time, the philosopher recognized situations when a person had to play a different role, to pretend if he wanted to achieve success (Bacon, 2011).

Theoretical ideas related to the role of image / die Gestalt in the process of sensory perception and cognitive activity reached their summit in the works of I. Kant. As Samantha Matherne puts it, the philosopher's reasoning about a person's desire to externally show such qualities that he considers important for attracting the attention of others, the ability of self-presentation and broadcasting one's “ego” through the image to other people in the process of interaction are especially significant (Matherne, 2015).

We find further development of theoretical ideas about the image in G.W. Hegel's works, in which the process of transition from contemplation to comprehension, imagination, and awareness based on the systematization of individual images was substantiated (Hegel, 2018). E. Fromm, in his turn, focuses on the role of a positive image, which, according to his opinion, is nothing more than a way to adapt to the surrounding reality (Fromm, 1994).

3.3 University Professor's Image in Scientific Research

For hundreds of years the concept of “Teacher's image” or “Professor's image” has been considered one of the most influential effects on the developing personality of a young person thanks to it possibility to combine professional, personal and moral qualities of the teacher. As A.I. Luchinkina et al. put it, “the characteristics of the teacher's image include the audio-visual culture of the individual, the system of moral and ethical values of the teacher, teacher's behaviour in various aspects, pedagogical reflection, teacher's status and self-assessment, a certain set of personal qualities” (Luchinkina et al., 2019).

Till recently, in pedagogical and psychological articles, two main trends of dealing with “teacher's image” could be traced. According to one of them, image of a modern university professor was presented through his/her main activities (educational, research, enlightening, etc.), personal traits and competences required for a successful implementation of the professional tasks (Litvinova, Bushmina, 2020).

According to the second trend, “professor's image” can be judged through the opinions of students, their parents and colleagues and their ideas of his / her features, abilities, attitudes towards the surrounding people and mastery of the subject, which stay in their memory after contacts with the person (Guzhva, 2017).

In this article, I would like to focus on another manifestation of the professor's image, namely, on the conscious and purposeful formation of an idea of him/her as a knowledgeable, highly skilled educator and authoritative scientist in the eyes of the academic community and among students. In this meaning, according to A. Mynbayeva and K. Yessenova, image is created by the educator as a kind of information capsule, which includes his/her personal features, reputation and authority to represent the individual in information society (Mynbayeva and Yessenova, 2016). And M.A. Lukashenko and A.A. Ozhgikhina propose to consider the image as a tool of pedagogical influence and mandatory competence of a professor, which reflects his/her purposeful work on self-development and professional self-perfection (Lukashenko and Ozhgikhina, 2019).

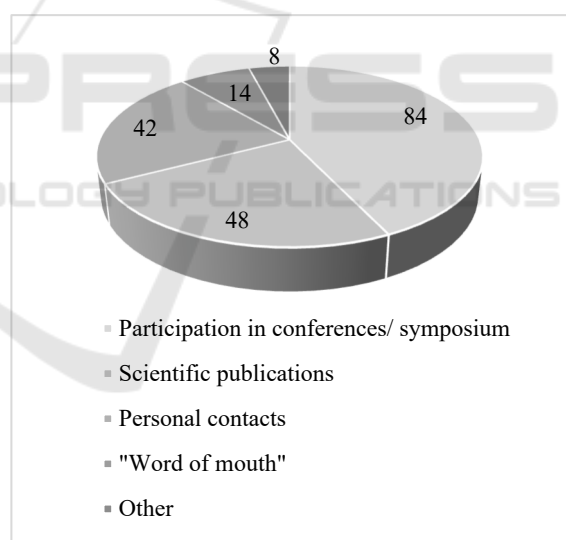


Figure 1: The most effective ways of forming the university professor's image in “pre-electronic” time.

In this sense, I understand “university professor's image” as a result of purposeful actions of both the professor and/or the educational institution, in which he / she works to create in the minds of students, the academic community and the interested social environment a positive portrait of an educator and scientist possessing to a full extent all the qualities, abilities, competences for the effective implementation of all types of professional activities,

as well as able to present the results of the work in the form of scientific publications, textbooks, training materials and other achievements to prove their efficacy, credibility and relevance in the professional market of educational and research services.

Before the advent of computer technologies, social networks and various information bases on the Internet, such an image of a university professor as evidence of the high level of his/her professional and research skills was created mainly through real contacts in the professional environment. Information about the success and achievements of a certain professor was disseminated in rather narrow circles of colleagues, scientists, and students

As a result of our survey in order to determine the most effective conditions for the formation of the university professor’s image in the “pre-electronic era” (the participants were 38 professors from 7 universities of the Russian Federation, and 22 of them had professional experience before the 1990s), we obtained the following results: “Participation in scientific conferences / seminars / meetings of dissertation councils” was the most popular answer (84%), followed by "Scientific publications" (48%); “Personal contacts” (42%); “Word of mouth” (14%), “Other” (8%) (Fig. 1).

The situation changed radically in the early 2000s. with the introduction of computer technologies and the use of Internet resources in the

educational process. As social networks expanded and electronic connections were established with colleagues in other cities, the professors got the opportunity to make virtual contacts and form their “digital image” by means of personal e-mail and accounts on social networks.

Moreover, if in the “pre-COVID” period the majority of professors were rather indifferent to their digital image and did not care much about its development, then, as the results of our survey show, during the times of lockdown, restrictions on social and professional contacts, and the transition of education to remote learning, professors realized that availability of a digital image could significantly increase their rankings, both among students and colleagues.

The task of forming a special type of reputation - a high-skilled professional who is fluent in all modern conference platforms, digital learning technologies, social networks and resource bases, forced the professors of Russian universities to master the listed digital resources in the shortest possible time and start creating their digital image. It should be borne in mind that if to create a conventional image, professors would use various kinds of activities that involve contact in real communication during classes or during scientific events, then locations in the electronic space are required for a digital image.

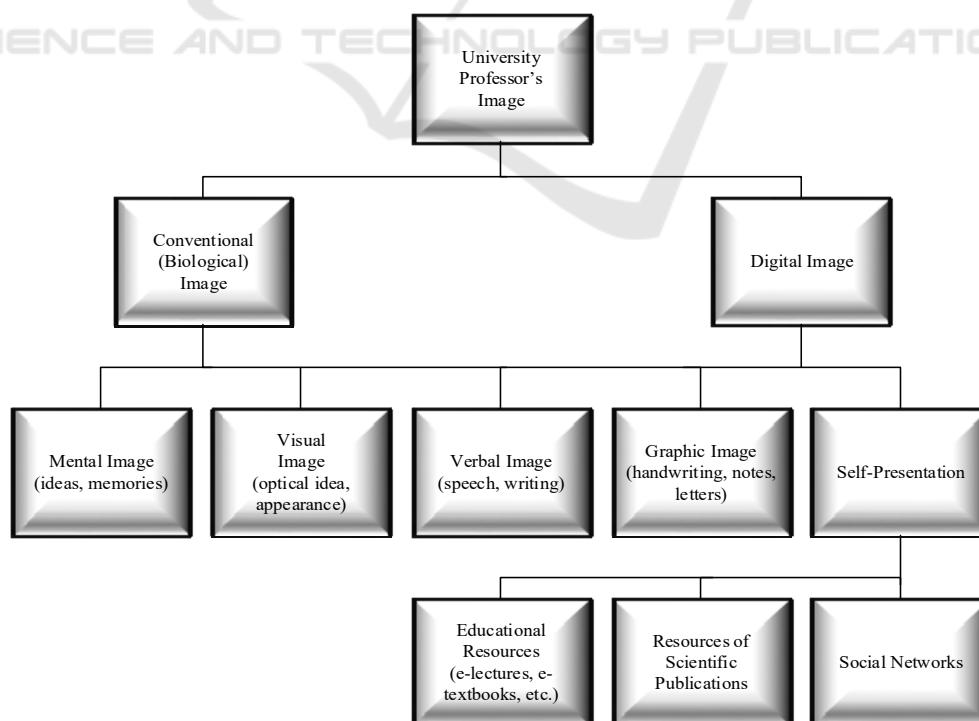


Figure 2: University professor’s images.

There were several attempts to present classification of image in general (Mitchell, 1984) and university professor's image in particular as well as its structural components (Mynbayeva and Yessenova, 2016; Harrison, 2021). We consider that introduction of distant and remote learning during COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced the professor's image, which has acquired such a new form as a digital image and its manifestations that are presented in figure 2.

We consider it necessary to introduce into the pedagogical thesaurus the concept of "digital image location", by which we mean a deliberately created personal account, channel or personal page, in which a university professor or an educational institution where he / she works, or a public organization that aggregates information about employees of HEI, can post information about their professional activities and their success in order to participate in various kinds of professional events, increase personal authority and self-presentation in the academic environment. According to the interviewed respondents who took part in our survey, the digital image of a modern Russian professor has the following locations (fig. 3):

- a personal account in the Electronic Information and Educational Environment (EIEE) of the university (100%), as this is a requirement of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation;
- personal accounts in Electronic Libraries (hereinafter - EL: in the Russian scientific EL e-library, university EL, Yurayt EL, IPRBooks, etc.) (88%);
- accounts in social networks (mainly VKontakte, LinkedIn, Facebook, ResearchGate, etc.) (74%);
- accounts on foreign search Internet platforms that combine databases of publications in scientific journals and patents (SCOPUS, Web of Science, etc.) (65%), since it is during the pandemic that the requirements for the availability of publications in international databases for Russian professors have increased significantly;
- personal website or blog (32%);
- channel on YouTube video hosting (24%);
- personal pages on the websites of public organizations (for example, the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences (<https://rae.ru/>), Professor Rating (<https://professorrating.org/>), one of the leading Internet sites in Russia with a rating of universities and teachers in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus, etc.) (18%).

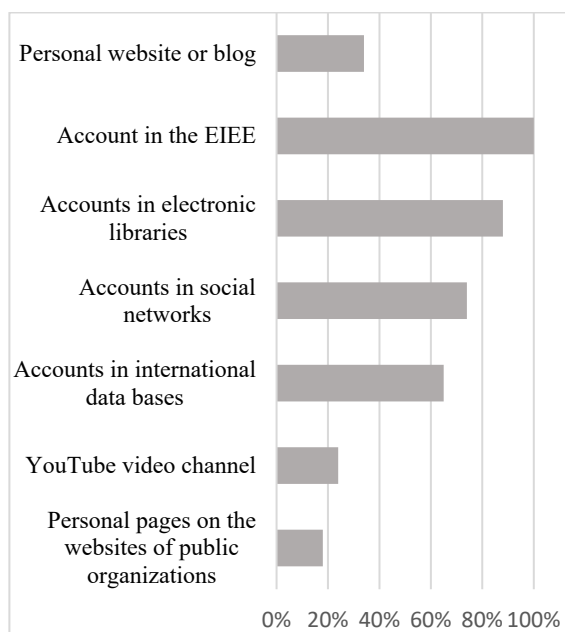


Figure 3: Locations of professor's digital image.

At the same time, the respondents noted that a number of locations, for example, a personal account in the University EIEE or on the websites of some EL (with the exception of the e-library), although they are considered the most common locations containing information about university professors, are not effective in forming their digital image, as external users or students do not have access to them. The most effective, in their opinion, are personal sites, blogs and YouTube posts due to their accessibility through search queries, but their creation requires specialized skills in the field of digital technology and they are constantly time-consuming.

3.4 Professor's Digital Image

Not so long ago, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers noted that Russian teachers lag significantly behind their foreign counterparts in the frequency, efficiency and diversity of the use of electronic devices and digital technologies in the classroom (Lukashenko et al., 2021). However, the situation changed dramatically in connection with the introduction of distance learning in early 2020, when university professors practically "overnight" had to master the technologies of online classes on conference platforms, synchronous and asynchronous interaction with students, training and knowledge control in the EIEE of their universities. At all subsequent stages of the transition from F2F to remote learning, such emotional stress no longer

arose, since during this time the experience of professors in the digital environment has grown significantly, they worked out electronic lectures (Isaeva, 2021), accumulated electronic databases of assignments and visual presentations, and also mastered various electronic learning technologies (electronic simulation technologies (Isaeva et al., 2021), Mind Maps (Odaryuk, 2021), etc.).

Due to the threat of COVID-19, the faculty and students practically switched to "online existence", using the capabilities of the university EIEE, social networks, and unlimited Internet resources for education and personal development (Lukashenko et al., 2021). In parallel with these processes, professors, finding themselves in a situation of forced social restrictions and limitation of personal contacts, realized the need to transfer their educational and scientific experience to the electronic environment, the resources of which they could use to implement their professional activities and develop their image, but now the digital one.

Professor's digital image, as we understand it, is a set of personal and professional information posted in the electronic space both by the university faculty member himself or by various public organizations in order to present the results of his/her activities in education and research.

As noted in a number of studies, during the pandemic, university faculty while teaching classes remotely has faced special difficulties associated with changing the perception of their image by students on computer screens. To more effectively broadcast their digital image, professors had to rethink the choice of clothing, makeup, posture, facial expressions, gestures and other means of non-verbal behaviour (Isaeva and Goryunova, 2021; Nemr et al., 2021).

The information posted by professors on social networks, YouTube, WhatsApp, synchronous and asynchronous interaction platforms has become more purposeful and deliberate, and there is a clear tendency to observe pedagogical tact and pedagogical ethics. M.A. Lukashenko, N.V. Gromova and A.A. Ozhgikhina managed to identify several strategies for using social networks, depending on the goals being solved and personal attitude to the possibilities of these resources in promoting their image (Lukashenko et al., 2021).

Overall, the distance learning experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic has played a positive role in advancing university professors towards creating their digital image.

4 DISCUSSION

Creating of the university professor's digital image during the COVID-19 pandemic has great potential in the future due to the following functions:

- - comparison of the professor's achievements in educational, research, and other types of professional activity with the achievements of his/her colleagues, both at the level of educational institution and in the academic community as well, in order to increase the tacit professional rating;
- - increasing the students' motivation to study with this particular professor;
- - ensuring the recognition of the professor in student groups and the academic community;
- - creation of an "electronic portfolio" containing educational and methodological materials (cases, video and audio materials, educational simulators, Mind maps, etc.) for conducting classes;
- - establishing scientific contacts with scientists from all over the world;
- - search for potential students for tutoring;
- - advertising of the professor's achievements for the purpose of promotion or search for a new job;
- - a practical resource for obtaining financial rewards.

However, speaking about positive effects of the digital image, some negative consequences should be taken into account, for example:

- - cyberbullying, cyber harassment, trolling and excessive critique of the professors during online and offline electronic contacts within different educational, ideological, scientific, political, religious and non-ideological settings due to the possibility of anonymous reviews of the electronic posters in social networks and unidentified presence at the lessons in the conditions of distant education during COVID-19 pandemic (Noakes and Noakes, 2021);
- - the loss of a certain amount of morality, so valued earlier as the main personal qualities of an educator, in the pursuit of outwardly catchy and technical modern effects in the digital image that can give a momentary effect (Mynbayeva and Yessenova, 2016).

5 CONCLUSION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the rapid growth in the use of electronic technologies, favourable conditions have developed for transition from the conventional image of a university professor to digital image in the information environment:

- - professors have acquired important skills in working with electronic resources;
- - the need to transfer the entire learning process to a remote mode led to creation of online courses by means of modern electronic technologies and a variety of Internet resources;
- - interested educational agents have obtained more time to spend on social networks and work out educational digital materials;
- - the presence of a well-formed digital image has begun to bring real dividends in the form of private tutoring, inviting professors to various online seminars and conferences, which not only increases their authority, but sometimes is accompanied by financial payments, which are important during the economic crisis;
- - the recognition of a professor on the network is accompanied by an increase in his popularity among students and colleagues, is an important factor in the growth of his/her rating both at the university level and in the world educational community.

The image of a professor in the information society, including a digital image, is no longer “a matter of personal interest”, but a compulsory tool in organizing pedagogical communication with students, which ensures their high motivation and the effectiveness of the educational process, as well as an effective lever in the establishment of scientific contacts with scientists from all over the world, without which the scientific activity of a university professor is inconceivable today.

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