The Concept of Maintaining Face in Global Virtual Teams

Karin Väyrynen
University of Oulu
karin.vayrynen@oulu.fi

Riitta Hekkala
Aalto University
riitta.hekkala@aalto.fi

Abstract
This study takes a new approach to studying global virtual team (GVT) leadership by applying Goffman’s dramaturgical view, specifically the concept of “maintaining face,” focusing on roles and rituals in GVTs. We argue that one main task of a GVT leader in ensuring team effectiveness is to create an environment in which team members can maintain face (i.e. conduct their roles and conform to the rituals needed for the GVT to successfully fulfill its tasks). In this qualitative case study, we identified 20 factors affecting whether and how well members can maintain face in a GVT setting. Our study has theoretical and practical implications for GVT leaders when trying to create a setting in which members can maintain face.

1. Introduction

Global virtual teams (GVT), where members of a team are dispersed at different sites and/or countries, have become a common practice in how companies organize work. Previous research has recognized the central role the team leader plays in GVT effectiveness [16][20][30], and several studies have been conducted on virtual team (VT) leadership (e.g. [2][15][18][19][20][30]). Recent studies in information systems (IS) have suggested that the IS community might also consider alternative research traditions (e.g. [4][28]) such as a new class of publication genres that would encompass presentational innovations like theater (e.g. [28][36]). Various approaches have been taken to use Goffman’s theater metaphor in the IS field (e.g. [12][24][25][34][36]). The concept of face—the positive self-image that an individual holds when interacting with others—is central. Young et al. [36] presented the difference between personal (i.e. myself) and collective (i.e. my family, business, etc.) face. They highlighted that face-work is the effort that one makes to satisfy oneself or others so that threats to lose face are minimized. However, a detailed examination of these studies using Goffman’s dramaturgical theory reveals that very little attention has been given to how face is maintained in GVT settings (i.e. how GVTs and their members are able to live up to their positive self-image). The present paper attempts to fill this gap by studying GVT leadership from a dramaturgical perspective and focusing on the concept of face as presented by Goffman [6][7][8][9]. Scholars in different fields have studied the concept of face to understand human behavior, such as in the Asian culture (e.g. [11][36]). Presenting selves is argued to be more limited in virtual settings than in face-to-face spaces (e.g. [26][33]).

We chose Goffman’s theory to guide our data analysis because it provides an opportunity to analyze why it is important to allow persons to maintain face in GVTs. The fact that GVT members might never meet face to face [10] may be a reason that team members become vulnerable to miscommunication and conflicts [29]. Especially in GVT settings, conflicts may be aggravated by communication delays, time zone differences, and lack of face-to-face contact [22]. Poorly managed conflict can also lead to ineffective teamwork [23]. Another reason is that in a setting where a GVT member fears the loss of face by admitting to his/her inability to solve a certain task or by pointing out a problem, delays in solving the tasks given to the GVT might be incurred due to communication delay and lack of face-to-face contact. In the case of a conflict, a person might not give in even though he/she is aware of being wrong, just to maintain face. We attempt to show that the concept of maintaining face plays an essential role in GVT work, related to both cultural differences and everyday work. We posit that the creation of an environment where GVTs and their members can maintain face helps prevent the abovementioned examples of problems up front.

We argue that for a GVT to maintain face (i.e. successfully conduct its role in an organization), its members have to be able to maintain face. We also argue that one of the main tasks of a GVT leader is to create an environment or setting in which members do not lose face or fear the loss of face. Specifically, this research is guided by the following questions: “Which factors affect whether and how well members maintain...
face in a GVT setting, and what are their implications for GVT leaders?”

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we briefly review previous research on GVT leadership and the concept of face in virtual environments. Next, we describe the research methodology, the results, and the main contribution of the study: 20 factors related to role, ritual, relations between individuals, and additional factors that affect whether or how well persons and the GVT are able to maintain face. We discuss how the identified factors relate to the Theory of Planned Behavior and how GVT leaders can consider these factors when leading the GVT. We conclude with research limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Leading GVTs

Several definitions of VTs exist, but common to these definitions is that VTs “consist of (a) two or more persons who (b) collaborate interactively to achieve common goals, while (c) at least one of the team members works at a different location, organization, or at a different time so that (d) communication and coordination is predominantly based on electronic communication media (email, fax, phone, video conference, etc.).” [13].

GVTs fulfill the characteristics of VTs but are usually dispersed across different continents or countries [19]. Previous research has identified several ways in which team leaders can affect GVT effectiveness, success, or functioning. Challenges arising from the lack of physical co-location and the use of lean media create challenges for a VT to coordinate its work, to get and stay motivated, to create commitment, and to develop trusting relationships. These can be overcome if the GVT leader properly facilitates the team’s process (see [10][15][17]).

Väyrynen and Aalto [31] summarized previous research on activities that help GVT leaders overcome the prevalent challenges arising in GVTs during different stages of the GVT lifecycle, taking the study of Hertel et al. [13] as a starting point and comparing it to other sources. These stages can be interrelated with feedback loops. In summary, activities during the preparation stage are the development of a mission statement [2][3][13][21], personnel selection [2][10][13], task design [10][13][21], creation of a rewards system [10][13], ensuring that technology works [2][10][13], and organizational integration [3][13]. Activities during the launch stage are team building (e.g. with a kickoff workshop) [10][13], getting acquainted with team members and helping team members get acquainted [10][13], clarifying goals [13][14], and developing intra-team rules ([10][13]). Activities during the performance management stage are leadership [2][10][13][21], regulation of communication [13], maintenance of motivation and focusing on emotions [2][13], and knowledge management [13][14]. Activities during the team development stage are the assessment of needs/deficits [13], individual and/or team training [10][13], and evaluation of training effects [13]. Finally, activities during the disbanding stage are recognition of achievements [2][13] and reintegration of team members [13]. In addition, leaders who show empathy for their members, are able to show authority without seeming inflexible, and are very effective at regularly communicating with peers and articulating responsibilities among team members were found to be highly effective [20].

2.2. The concept of face in Goffman’s dramaturgical view

Goffman [6] developed the dramaturgical theory, which compares social (face-to-face) situations to theater. He saw all interaction and communication between people as a “ritual,” and argued that rituals go well when everyone is conducting their assumed duties successfully. His basic assumption is that whatever we do, we play out some role on the stage of life. In the present paper, we look at the “play” conducted by GVTs and their individual members. We propose that GVTs/individuals performing a task can be seen as actors playing a role. GVTs/individuals try to maintain face by successfully fulfilling their assigned tasks/roles. Goffman stated that actors can belong to a group that organizes its performance to give a special impression. Examples would be a working group presenting its work to a customer or a GVT presenting the status of its tasks to upper management. Goffman’s [9] theater metaphor contains five principles: (1) others have certain assumption(s) about the play; each individual’s actions are influenced by the other’s actions. Others (the audience) are following the persons’ or groups’ enactment of the play (role), which should produce a desired impression; (2) “backstage” is the assumption that to a certain level, people are aware of their performances and it is appropriate to plan, act, and evaluate the management of the role; (3) the success of rituals, including interaction rituals, is the assumption that everything we do is just a pure game or a self-purposeful routine in which certain rituals are followed; (4) the basic principle of social life is how to prevent the loss of face, which is a
common threat that actors try to avoid; and (5) how people maintain face, how people act as themselves, and how they hide their “true” selves. Goffman [6][9] defined face as one’s situated identity. Face emerges within the events in specific encounter(s). Goffman’s dramaturgical lens has been developed for and applied to face-to-face situations. Lately, the concept of face-work has also been studied in virtual settings (e.g. [27][36]). In the present study, we applied Goffman’s dramaturgical lens in a GVT setting to study which factors influence whether or how well individuals and the GVT as a group can maintain face. Successfully maintaining face depends on a mutual agreement among actors/individuals to accept one another’s presentation of self. A person in a GVT maintains face if others (i.e. the audience, including the GVT leader, members, customers, and managers) are contented with that person’s performance and a positive self-image can be maintained. A GVT maintains face if the audience (e.g. upper level management, customers, collaboration partners) are contented with the performance of the GVT; it loses face if it does not act according to the audience’s expectations. For brevity, in the remainder of the paper, we will use the expression “how well face can be maintained” to mean “whether or how well one can maintain face or wants to maintain face.” We focus on the role of the individual and the GVT, as well as on the rituals (i.e. interaction and communication within the GVT and between the GVT and others).

3. Methodology

We conducted an empirical, qualitative case study (see [35]) in company Alpha to get an in-depth understanding of factors affecting the maintenance of face in GVTs. Alpha is a multinational large corporation in the ICT industry that has grown quickly in the 1990s and 2000s and currently employs people in more than 100 countries. The company conducts research and product development mainly in Asia, Europe, and North America. Alpha’s headquarters are in Europe.

3.1. Data collection

This study represents an extension of data collection that took place in autumn 2011. The results of that study have been published [31]. In the follow-up study (September 2012–January 2013), we interviewed six team leaders (TL1–TL6) and eight team members (TM1–TM8) who all worked in Alpha at the same site in Europe. Although TL2, TL3, TL4, and TM3 were also interviewed in the 2011 study, for the present study, only the follow-up interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013 were analyzed. Table 1 summarizes information on the GVTs to which the different interviewees belonged. TL2, TM3, and TM4 belonged to the same team. All other members and leaders belonged to different teams. One person was interviewed twice: once as team leader (TL6) and once as team member (TM6). Therefore, the data represents the views of persons who belonged to 12 distinct GVTs. Interviews with team members lasted 115 minutes on average, while those of team leaders lasted 109 minutes on average. All interviews were semi-structured, digitally recorded, and transcribed. Interviews represent an important data source in case study research [32]. The interview questions covered all stages in the GVT lifecycle (see [13]). We asked about the challenges, advantages, and disadvantages that interviewees saw in relation to GVTs. We asked what they considered important concerning leadership in each lifecycle stage, what challenges they faced, and how each stage was implemented in their team. In addition, we asked about their motivation to lead or participate in the GVT, the role of information technology, how VTs should be led, and the upper management’s role in GVT management. In some cases, team members or team leaders talked about their experience of working in several different GVTs over the past years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Part of GVT for</th>
<th>Number of members</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TL1</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>10–15</td>
<td>Europe, Asia, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL2</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Europe, Asia, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL3</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>16–40</td>
<td>Europe, Asia, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL4</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Europe, Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL5</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>14–50</td>
<td>Europe, Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL6</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>–10</td>
<td>Europe, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM1</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>–10</td>
<td>Europe, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM2</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>–15</td>
<td>Europe, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM3</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Europe, Asia, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM4</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>–6</td>
<td>Europe, Asia, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM5</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>3–10</td>
<td>Europe, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM6</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Europe, Asia, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM7</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>4–10</td>
<td>Europe, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM8</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>–15</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2. Data analysis

Applying Goffman’s principles, we focused on roles and rituals in GVTs. For example, any interaction between two or more persons, work processes that persons are expected to adhere to, team meetings (face-to-face, teleconference, etc.), and the use of certain IT tools represent rituals. How a ritual proceeded and how
well an individual/GVT acted its role defined whether face could be maintained. Thus, we first conducted deductive coding, extracting interview paragraphs and their contextual information concerning “role” and “ritual” in the context of maintaining face. Next, we conducted an inductive thematic analysis of the extracted paragraphs, focusing on identifying factors that affected the “maintaining of face.” Both authors first analyzed the same three interviews and compared their analyses to ensure that the analysis process was consistent. Additional codes from other interviews were identified by the first author and then shared with the other author, who used them in analyzing three more interviews. Finally, the identified factors were aggregated into four distinct groups: (1) the role (individual and GVT), (2) the ritual (including intra- and inter-team interaction), (3) the relations between individuals, and (4) additional factors, which include factors that proved to affect the maintaining of face in GVTs but which we could not clearly assign to roles, rituals, or the relations between individuals. The results section is structured according to these four groups.

4. Results

We identified 20 factors, aggregated into four groups, related to maintaining face within GVTs and as a GVT (Figure 1).

4.1. Factors related to the role

We identified seven factors that affect how well individuals or GVTs can maintain face in their roles.

First, the **clearness of the role** affects how well one can maintain face. If a person’s role in the GVT is not clear to him/her, the person cannot maintain face in that role. Likewise, if a GVT does not know what its role in the organization is, the GVT will have difficulties maintaining the team face in front of customers or upper management. Several interviewees emphasized the importance of knowing one’s own role in the team (e.g. TM1, TM2, TM6, TM8), as well as the role the GVT plays in the organization (e.g. TM2, TL2, TL3). TM4 said there were sometimes small problems in the team because it was not clear who was responsible for a certain task. In addition, TL4 said, “the lower one goes in the organizational hierarchy, the less ability to understand the overall vision exists. To them, it is necessary to explain in great detail where we [the GVT] are in the organization, what is expected of us, where we are going in future, and why the things we do are important for the organization.” TL6 mentioned this as well.

Second, if a person’s or GVT’s **role is not appreciated** by the person/GVT or by others (e.g. upper management, customers), the motivation to maintain face in that role is usually low. Two mechanisms were identified: reward for a role played well (i.e. good performance) and encouraging good performance. Appreciation for the individual/GVT can be expressed through these two mechanisms (e.g. TL6). TM5 stated that his British superior shared much more information with team members who were in the UK (but not at the same site with the team leader). The other team members felt that the team leader valued the British members more than those located in other countries. TL4 said that it was very frustrating when the contributions of his GVT were not acknowledged by upper management.

Third, if individuals do not **believe in their/the GVT’s role**, it is more difficult to maintain face, as it demands more effort to act according to a certain role when one does not really believe in that role. For example, TL4 said that when big personnel cuts were being announced by the organization, he tried to hide his disappointment even though he did not believe in the decision: “Almost like acting and motivating people. Trying, even though I hadn’t yet sorted out my own feelings about it. But I tried to find the positive sides in that decision and tried to make the others more positive. It’s difficult, it’s very tiring to act more positive than one actually feels.”

Fourth, individuals who have the **possibility to influence their or the GVT’s role** might be more
willing or motivated to maintain face, partly because it is more likely that they also believe in that role. Several team members (e.g. TM1, TM5) expressed frustration over situations in which their roles were changed without being consulted or asked for their opinion.

Fifth, a network supporting the role can help individuals/GVTs maintain face in their roles or can negatively affect their ability to maintain face. TM2 said that after coming back from her maternity leave, she was the contact person for questions related to a certain testing tool but had forgotten how some functions worked: “And when everyone asked questions in case they had problems, I had to call one person I trusted to ask how this or that worked.” TL1 said that when he became responsible for a big global team, he immediately had to answer questions concerning execution problems but had good managers around him whom he could ask for help. TL3 stated that it is important for a team member to know that the other team members are his/her support network. On the other hand, when there are problems between two GVTs that should collaborate, or between the GVT and its “supplier” team, it can have negative effects on how well the GVT face can be maintained (e.g. TL3, TM4).

Sixth, how well an individual, and in turn the GVT, can maintain face is also dependent on the individual’s identification with the role/GVT. TM3 explained that it is important for the team leader to be in personal contact with team members who are not located at the same site, to have some social contact: “Otherwise, there is danger, such as if one doesn’t have much to say about a certain thing, then that person doesn’t feel as much of a team member if there are no other team members at his site.” Other interviewees also emphasized that it is easy for a GVT member to drop off the grid when there are no other members or leader at the same site (e.g. TM2).

Seventh, persons usually need certain skills (e.g. technical know-how) to comply with their roles and succeed in maintaining face in their roles. Similarly, if the skill level in the team is too low, the GVT cannot maintain face. Several team leaders (e.g. TL2, TL4, TL6) said that the main selection criterion for new members was their know-how that was needed to do a certain job (i.e. to play their role well). TM8 said that the other team members were not satisfied with her because her level of know-how was not good enough. TL3 said that he took the communication skills of team members into consideration when assigning them to different roles; people who were not good at communicating “virtually” were assigned technical challenges or local support responsibilities, whereas people who were good at communicating “virtually” were assigned team leader roles or global responsibility for a certain service. One important aspect we found was that the loss of face of an individual does not automatically mean the loss of face of the GVT. If a member does not act according to his/her defined role, other members or the leader might interfere to ensure that the GVT as a whole does not lose face in front of others outside the GVT (TL2, TL6).

4.2. Factors related to the ritual

Rituals in GVTs are all types of interaction between different persons or teams (see Section 3.2). We identified five factors related to the ritual that influence how well a person/GVT can or wants to maintain face.

First, the clearness of the ritual to those involved in the ritual affects how well face can be maintained. For example, if the “rules” of how to act within the GVT or how to interact with a customer or manager are not clear, or if one does not know whom to contact to ask for help (e.g. TM8), it is difficult to act according to the ritual and maintain face. Documentation of work processes (e.g. TM2, TM3) and knowing which tasks to prioritize (e.g. tasks of the GVT always have priority over tasks given by the local organization [TM2, TM3, TM4]) were examples that helped clarify the ritual.

Second, the possibility to influence the ritual helps one maintain face in that ritual. For example, intrateam rules (i.e. rituals of how to act in the GVT) were decided on together (e.g. TL4, TM2). TL6 explained how these rules were developed: “I hardly say anything. If it goes well, then already the fact that there is a need induces ideas from the team, and they are much better committed because it was their own idea. Few criticize their own ideas [laughs].”

Third, the appreciation for the ritual affects how well a person maintains face in that ritual. A person who does not appreciate the ritual usually has a lower motivation to act according to the ritual than one who appreciates it. TL2 said that the hierarchical British way of not being allowed to talk directly to the superior of one’s superior is extremely inefficient and stiff. He had been on the upper management level before stepping down to become the GVT leader and therefore knew the people on the upper level. He made use of his direct connection to the upper level by stepping over his own superior in certain cases, contacting the higher management level directly: “This caused a bit of an argy-bargy.”

Fourth, familiarity with the ritual proved important to be able to maintain face. This became especially apparent in connection to cultural differences and how well interviewees were aware of these differences. Several interviewees (e.g. TL2, TL3, TL5, TL6, TM2) described differences in how tasks should be given in
different cultures. Indian and Chinese team members usually demand much more detailed step-by-step instructions when they are given tasks and much better follow-up on those tasks on behalf of the team leader (e.g. TL1, TL2, TL6). British and Indian leadership cultures are very hierarchical (e.g. TL1, TL2, TM5), and criticizing the team leader or upper management is seen as an insult (e.g. TM5). In addition, in the Indian culture, it is always the upper level manager who has to contact the lower level manager, not the other way around, as in the case study site (e.g. TL1). TL2 said that in the beginning, when he was inexperienced, he made several mistakes out of ignorance of the ritual: “I commanded someone to do a task. When that person didn’t manage to do the task, and because the task was given in a commanding style, in the Asian culture, the loss of face was extremely bad.” TL1 mentioned that one has to be careful when starting to talk about a problem in the Indian culture. TL3 said that in Asian cultures, one has to make sure that feedback to team members is given in private, not in public, to ensure that face is not lost. Being familiar with the ritual in the organization can also help get more resources for the team, as TL4 mentioned when explaining why he chose to lead a certain GVT: “Mainly because I knew that my future superior knew how to play the money game and resource game. … He was very skilled in the organization’s processes and knew who to soothe to get things accepted and make it work.”

Fifth, time and resources allocated for the ritual have an influence on how well face can be maintained in the team. The lack of resources was mentioned several times as affecting the possibility to achieve the team’s goals, pushing people to their limit. In addition, travel restrictions and budget cuts affected the GVT’s possibility to arrange face-to-face meetings (e.g. TL2, TL3, TL6, TM4), which were considered essential for keeping the team motivated and giving team members and the leader a chance to become more familiar with the others (see Section 4.3).

4.3. Factors related to relations between individuals

We identified four factors concerning relations between two persons (within the GVT or between the GVT and customers, upper management, other teams, etc.), which have an influence on how well a person/GVT can or wants to maintain face.

First, the most important factor in maintaining face in GVTs where face-to-face contact is very limited is the familiarity with the other person (i.e. how well two persons know each other). Several interviewees (e.g. TL3, TL5, TM5) mentioned that it is much easier to pick up the phone and call someone they have met in person, and talking about problems was seen as being easier with persons they knew well (e.g. TL2). If one knows the other person well, it is even possible to anticipate the other person’s body language when talking on the phone, as TL3 described: “A phone conference works really well if one personally knows all participants. Then it’s even possible to already anticipate what the other person’s body language is, or how the other person reacts just from hearing their voice.” That is why it is important to have regular face-to-face meetings to keep the team alive and to ensure it is easy for them to call each other and open up about problems. This can help them tackle problems within the team before the GVT loses face. In addition, knowing the other person helps one maintain face by being able to adjust one’s way of communication (e.g. TL4): “You should always try to keep in mind who you talk to and how you talk. It’s important to understand who is on the other end of the line. Every time you write an email—who are you writing to, what kind of person is he/she. Face to face, it is easy to explain things, but when you write or are in phone contact, it has to be done in a certain way so that the other is not being hurt.”

Second, an individual’s nature was seen to affect how well that individual can maintain face. TL2, when asked what hindered his ability to lead the GVT, said, “I have a really annoying nature. And quite many Asian people are afraid of me, because sometimes I say things a bit unnecessarily mean.” Cultural differences were also considered part of a person’s nature. TL1, for example, said “the Indian nature demands for more managing,” meaning it demands closer follow-up on tasks and more instructions. TM2 said that in the line meetings, there was no task list and no strict follow up. Some did their tasks, while others “happily forgot them.” TM7 mentioned that the team leader should have very good knowledge of human nature to understand that people are different.

Third, personal chemistry also affects how well two individuals can maintain face. When asked about why he evaluated the social skills of a future team member, TL2 said, “I evaluated it because in this type of organization, there can be very ‘unusual’ people. I tried to avoid the most unusual of those.” TL4 also emphasized the importance of being able to get along with his team members: “I always tried to search for people with whom I get along easily. I know that I probably did not hire some skilled persons because of that.” It was also mentioned that if two persons really cannot get along, it is wise to give them unrelated tasks (e.g. TL2, TL3) to prevent problems. Problems in the personal chemistry between two persons can also threaten the GVT face. TM3 said that he had personal problems with a member from a related team, which
was affecting his own tasks and his motivation in the GVT.

Fourth, trust (e.g. between individuals or between upper management and the GVT) was seen as the basic requirement for working as a GVT (e.g. TL2). When people know each other, it increases trust. Team members have to be able to trust that the team leader has their back and defends them (e.g. TL2, TM6). TM6 said that if the team leader says “this team member has made a mistake,” it would be impossible to create a trustful team leader–team member relationship afterwards. In addition, several interviewees connected trust to being able to talk openly about problems (e.g. TL1, TL2), which again is a prerequisite for the GVT to be able to tackle problems within the team before the “audience” (e.g. customers) notices that there is a problem. Thus, trust is a prerequisite to maintaining the GVT face. Micromanagement was seen as an indicator of lacking trust from upper management.

4.4. Additional factors

We identified four factors that have an influence on how well a person/GVT can or wants to maintain face but that could not be directly attributed to either the role or the ritual. First, a very interesting factor was the existence of an audience for the individual’s/GVT’s performance. We found that the lack of an audience negatively affects the willingness or motivation to maintain face. Team members may no longer try to give their best if they notice that the team leader is not interested in their performance (e.g. TM1): “No one was interested in what I was doing, so I would rather take a three-hour lunch break, for example. What was most worrisome was that it didn’t interest anyone; I could do whatever I wanted, and no one cared. And that was decreasing my motivation even further.” Similarly, a GVT might lose motivation to perform well if its achievements are not recognized by upper management (e.g. TL4). Several interviewees mentioned that it is motivating when superiors or the superior’s superiors are interested in what the team does (e.g. TL3, TL4). TL1 said that when he, as a high-level manager, went to India to talk to his own team member’s teams, it was seen as an honor to have him talk to them. The existence of an audience for the performance can also be indicated by getting feedback about one’s performance (e.g. TL2, TL6).

Second, related to the existence of an audience, we also found that the setting in which the interaction (or ritual) takes place has an effect on how well one can maintain face. Often, there is a difference in whether the ritual takes place in a one-on-one setting or a setting with multiple participants. Several interviewees stated that they got negative feedback from their team leader in private (e.g. TM5, TM7). TL3, when talking about Asian culture, said that if one wants to get a truthful picture about how things really are, one has to arrange a private, not public, session. On a GVT level, TL6 said that when the team encounters a problem, it is important to defend the team, not to reveal to the outside which member caused the problem. He added that afterward, he can talk about the situation with the member in private or within the team. These examples indicate that in a public setting, people are more careful to maintain face, and that it is easier to lose face in certain types of settings.

Third, motivation was mentioned as a factor that is used to make others want to maintain face (i.e. perform well according to their roles and adhere to the ritual). TL2 said that he proposed several times for one of his team members to receive a personal reward for work well done, but the upper level did not react to his proposal: “If it is continuously rejected, it can’t stay unnoticed. The team member doesn’t necessarily know that this was even suggested for him, but it is so demotivating for the team leader who suggested it. This can be seen at once in the day-to-day work; there’s no actor good enough that it wouldn’t shine through when the team leader gets frustrated with something.” A superior’s interest in the GVT (e.g. TL3, TL4) and communicating and sharing information with the team members (e.g. TL1, TM5) were also seen as motivators.

Fourth, the stability of the environment affects how well one can maintain face. In case of organizational changes or changes in the role of a person/GVT or a ritual, one is more likely to lose face, because it will take some time until everyone can find their place again. TL1 said that when they created new teams, they made small changes at a time because execution would have suffered for a long time if those changes had been radical. This indicates that the GVT would not have been able to maintain face. TL6 said that when there is some sort of incident in his GVT’s service, he gives rather straight commands. After the incident is solved, he talks with the person he gave straight commands to and tries to laugh about the situation, depending on the person he is talking to.

5. Discussion

Goffman’s [6][9] dramaturgical approach together with the qualitative case study gave us the opportunity to investigate how one can maintain face in GVTs. In this study, we focused on the roles and rituals in GVTs. Several factors identified in this study have already been identified in previous research as important for GVT success (see Section 2.1). The positive effect of feedback on non-motivated team members has been
confirmed in previous research (e.g. [5]), and we found that feedback from customers and upper management to the GVT serves as a way to show the team that an audience exists. Similarly, rewarding has been identified as an important activity (e.g. [10][13]) and can be seen as a way to show the individual or the team (e.g. by focusing on the achievement of team goals instead of on individual contributions only) that an audience exists and appreciates the efforts undertaken by the individual/GVT. From a practical point of view, this creates a challenge for team leaders to create the impression that each member, as well as the GVT, has an audience. For individuals, this impression can be created by regularly asking for status updates, giving feedback on a member’s performance, and being accessible to team members. For the GVT, it is important that team leaders do not act as “information blockers” between the GVT and others (e.g. upper level management or customers) and that they forward information from the GVT to the audience and vice versa.

Previous research has emphasized that it is important that team and personal goals/roles are clear to team members ([13][14]) and that intra-team rules (which are essentially rituals) are clear (e.g. [10][13]) for the GVT to function. However, these factors can have a different meaning if they are reinterpreted in light of this need to have an audience. **Clearness vs. appreciation for one’s role/ritual and the GVT’s role** is a prerequisite for being able to maintain face in one’s role. If people do not know what is expected of them and what their performance and face are measured against, it is more difficult to maintain face. We found that for people to want to maintain face in the GVT or to act according to their roles, it is not enough to have clear roles and rituals; it is essential to appreciate one’s role and to appreciate the ritual. This is especially interesting from an impression management perspective. According to Goffman, people act in everyday interactions in ways that make others have a positive impression of them [27].

Maintaining face is often also based on the person’s interpretation of what is expected of him/her. If people try to perform their roles purely based on what they think is expected, it is highly possible that important tasks will stay undone because of their lack of appreciation for their roles, which makes them feel that not much is expected of them. To appreciate one’s role, it is important that the achievement of goals (i.e. whether a person/team acts according to their role) is measured and the audience is visible to a person/GVT (e.g. by receiving feedback from the audience).

In the organizational literature, Ajzen [1] created the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). This theory has several interesting features to analyze in more detail. We demonstrate how the conceptualization of our findings can be mapped to the TPB. This theoretical integration helps us not only achieve a higher level of abstraction, but also evaluate our practical implications. This offers new insights into how GVTs work from a GVT leadership perspective.

The TPB states that attitude toward the behavior (the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior in question), subjective norm (the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior), and perceived behavioral control (the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior) influence the intention to perform a behavior, which in turn affects the actual behavior. We propose that the TPB could be used to evaluate the intention to conform to a role and ritual (i.e. intention to perform a behavior) as a predictor of whether face will be maintained (i.e. the actual behavior, see Figure 2). Text in bolding in Figure 2 represents the variables as outlined in the TPB; regular text represents the mapping of factors identified in the present study to the TPB variables.

![Figure 2. Mapping the identified factors to TPB](image_url)

Maintain face would represent the actual “behavior”, and motivation would be an indicator of the “intention to conform to the role and ritual”. Appreciation for the role and the ritual and believing in the role would represent “attitude toward the behavior,” whereas existence of an audience would represent “subjective norm.” The more resources and opportunities individuals believe they possess, the greater their perceived control over the behavior should be [1]. These resources and opportunities would be a network supporting the role, the possibility to affect the role and ritual, time and resources allocated for the ritual, and skills (as a representation of past experience with the behavior). Perceived behavioral control, however, may not be particularly realistic when a person has little information about the behavior or when new and unfamiliar elements have entered into...
the situation [1]. This would be reflected in the factors of familiarity with the ritual, identification with the role, and clearness of the role and ritual. Figure 2 illustrates our mapping of factors to the TPB model. All factors related to the role and ritual seem to map to attitude toward the behavior and to perceived behavioral control. We were not able to map the factors we identified related to the relations between individuals to the TPB model, indicating that the TPB could possibly be extended. However, more empirical and conceptual work would be necessary to confirm this. When a team member or GVT felt that there was no audience and that no one was interested in how he/she performed, the member/GVT eventually started to feel demotivated and lost the ambition to perform well and to maintain face. This would confirm the link proposed by the TPB between the existence of an audience as subjective norm and the intention to conform to role and ritual.

We found that a person who does not appreciate the ritual might decide not to act according to the ritual, either losing face or causing someone else to lose face intentionally. When confronted with cultural differences, which is often the case in a GVT setting, familiarity with the ritual was crucial to be able to maintain face and prevent others from losing face unintentionally. However, in this situation, both familiarity with the ritual and appreciation for the ritual are important. This means that a team leader has to ensure that team members are aware of why rituals (e.g., weekly meetings, communication, giving tasks to team members) are conducted in a certain way, to help them appreciate the ritual and in turn be more likely to conform to the ritual (i.e. try to maintain face).

6. Conclusion

This paper contributes to GVT leadership research by taking an alternative approach to studying factors that affect how well GVTs work, focusing on the concept of maintaining face in a GVT setting. Our main contribution is the identification of 20 factors related to role, ritual, relations between individuals, and additional factors that affect whether or how well persons as well as the GVT are able to maintain face. Consideration of these factors can help GVT leaders create a setting in which the team members are able and willing to maintain face, which in turn can help the GVT work effectively and maintain face in front of upper management, customers, and collaboration partners.

Our study has several limitations. It is based on one case company; further factors might be identified when extending the study to a different setting. The study was conducted at one European site only, limiting the possibility to make comparisons of findings across different cultures. In addition, it relied on interviews as a source of information; thus, source triangulation was not possible. Moreover, the study took only “official” roles of individuals into consideration, excluding “enacted” roles.

Future research could analyze how the factors identified in this study are related to each other and how they affect each other. In addition, this study could be replicated in a different cultural context, allowing for comparison across cultures. The present study focused on roles and rituals but did not consider frontstage and backstage concepts. Virtual settings are seen to limit the presentation of selves [33] while at the same time enabling a person to present different identities ([26]) on the frontstage. Further insight into GVT dynamics could be gained by extending the analysis to different frontstages and backstages—as conceptualized by Goffman [6]—in a GVT setting.

7. References


