



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



The psychology of perception: Valeriia Volodina on which details in a lawyer's image inspire trust and which cause rejection

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Abstract

This article examines the psychosemantic aspects of building trust in legal professionals through the analysis of their visual image. The aim of the study is to systematize and provide a scientific justification for the influence of nonverbal signals and stylistic elements on the initial perception of a lawyer by potential clients. The study explores the cognitive mechanisms of heuristic evaluation that underlie the formation of first impressions and analyzes the semantic meaning of clothing details, accessories, and overall stylistic presentation. Based on research in social psychology and the theory of nonverbal communication, markers that contribute to the perception of a competent and reliable professional are identified, as well as elements that may evoke mistrust or rejection. The practical application of the research results lies in developing recommendations for law firms and private practitioners on creating effective visual branding aimed at strengthening client trust.

Keywords: Psychology of Perception; Nonverbal Communication; First Impression; Visual Branding; Lawyer's Image; Trust Heuristic; Social Psychology

1. Introduction

In the field of legal services, where the subject matter often involves intangible values such as justice, protection, and security, a client's trust in a professional becomes critically important. The formation of this trust begins long before the demonstration of professional competence—at the stage of the first visual contact.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that, in conditions of high competition in the legal services market, visual image becomes an important tool for differentiation and positioning. The purpose of this article is to identify and classify the details in a lawyer's appearance that function as subconscious signals in shaping either trust or rejection among potential clients, based on an analysis of research in the fields of social psychology and nonverbal communication.

1.1. Cognitive Foundations of First Impression Formation

The human brain is designed to process information and make decisions as quickly as possible under conditions of uncertainty. When evaluating an unfamiliar person, mechanisms of heuristic processing are activated—that is, rapid, subconscious judgments based on stereotypes and past experience.

Studies show that judgments about competence, reliability, and friendliness are formed within fractions of a second after visual contact [1].

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This phenomenon, known as “thin-slicing,” refers to the ability of people to draw conclusions about a person’s character based on a very limited set of nonverbal cues. In the context of legal practice, this means that a potential client forms an opinion about a lawyer based on their appearance even before the lawyer says a single word.

These instantaneous evaluations can be remarkably persistent and may subsequently influence the interpretation of all further information [2]. Thus, managing one’s visual image ceases to be merely a matter of aesthetics and becomes a tool for managing perception.

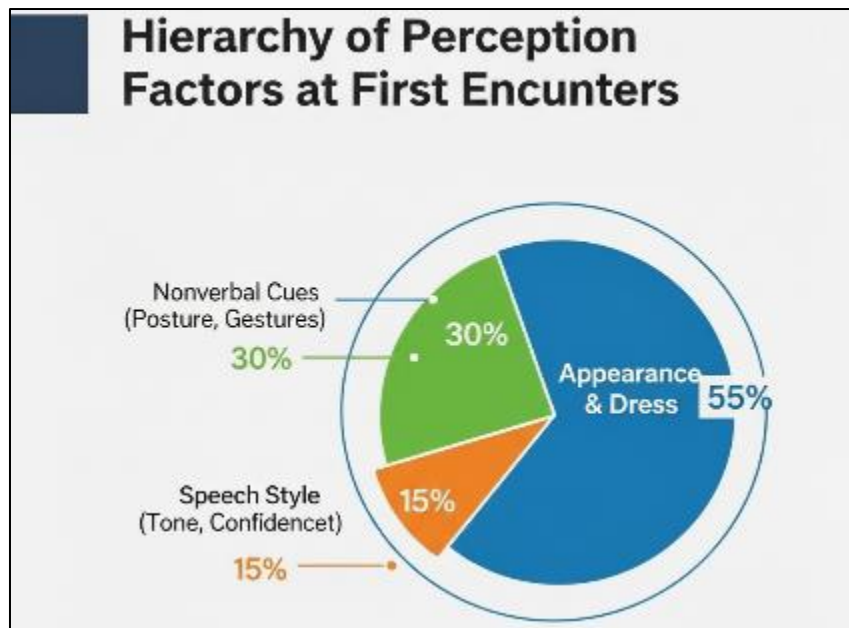


Figure 1 Hierarchy of perception factors at first encounters: appearance and dress, nonverbal cues, and speech style

1.2. Details That Shape Trust and Perceived Competence

An analysis of research in the psychology of clothing and nonverbal signals makes it possible to identify several groups of elements that positively correlate with perceptions of trust and professionalism.

1.2.1. Conservatism and structure

A classic business suit (in dark blue or gray tones) is associated with qualities such as organization, seriousness, and authority. Clear lines and a structured silhouette subconsciously signal order and control, which are expected qualities for a legal professional.

1.2.2. Quality of materials and moderation.

The use of high-quality materials and accessories that are refined but not ostentatiously expensive indicates success and attention to detail without creating a barrier through the demonstration of excessive wealth. Moderation in accessories (for example, wearing a quality but understated watch) is perceived as a sign of good taste and a focus on professional work rather than self-presentation [3].

1.2.3. Neatness and well-groomed appearance.

Impeccably clean and well-pressed clothing, a well-groomed hairstyle, and well-maintained hands serve as universal signals of discipline and respect for oneself and others. These details directly convey the idea that the professional is equally attentive to detail in their work.

1.2.4. Openness and friendliness

Elements that contribute to visual openness—such as the absence of large items that obscure the face (for example, dark sunglasses indoors) and the use of lighter tones in shirts or blouses—help create the perception of a person who is more approachable and trustworthy.

1.3. Signals That Evoke Rejection and Distrust

Similarly, it is possible to identify details that may function as negative triggers, undermining trust in a lawyer.

1.3.1. Excessive trendiness and informality.

Overly trendy, avant-garde, or informal clothing elements (such as bright colors, unusual silhouettes, or denim) may create the impression of a lack of seriousness, unreliability, and insufficient respect for the conservative values of the profession.

1.3.2. Demonstrative luxury.

An excessive number of expensive accessories, jewelry, or clothing from well-known brands with large logos may be perceived as boasting or as an attempt to impress rather than as a sign of professional success. This may cause clients to question whose interests the specialist is primarily focused on.

1.3.3. Untidiness and negligence.

Any signs of carelessness (wrinkled clothing, dirty shoes, or an unkempt appearance) immediately undermine the image of a competent professional, as they signal that the individual is unable to handle even basic tasks of self-organization.

1.3.4. Closedness and aggressiveness.

Details associated with closedness or aggression—such as an entirely black outfit, an abundance of sharp shapes in accessories, or an excessively strict and impenetrable appearance—can create a psychological barrier and hinder the establishment of trust with a client.

The visual image of a lawyer represents a complex symbolic system that is actively perceived and interpreted by potential clients on a subconscious level. Managing this image is not a form of manipulation, but rather a conscious construction of nonverbal communication aimed at reinforcing the professional qualities of a specialist.

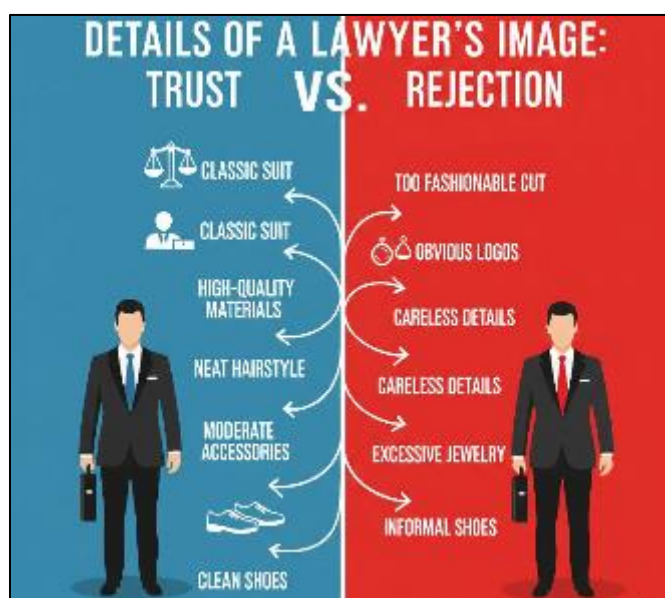


Figure 2 Visual elements of a lawyer's professional image associated with trust versus rejection

2. Conclusion

Based on the conducted analysis, it can be concluded that an image that inspires trust is built on the principles of moderation, conservatism, neatness, and quality. These elements serve as visual confirmation of qualities that are particularly important for a legal professional, such as reliability, attention to detail, structured thinking, and responsibility.

At the same time, excessive trendiness, demonstrative luxury, and any form of carelessness may become serious barriers that undermine trust even before professional interaction begins.

For law firms, this implies the need to develop and implement unified standards of visual positioning as part of their overall brand strategy.

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