

# WHEN YOU MEET LEAN CONSTRUCTION GURUS - BEWARE!

Eelon Lappalainen<sup>1</sup>, Antti Ainamo<sup>2</sup>, Dominic Desmarais<sup>3</sup>, & Ana Reinbold<sup>4</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Research shows that people can become dependent on “gurus” or teachers whose theories and systems they deeply respect. Such dependence can become an anxious form of attachment that hinders critical thinking, genuine understanding, and independent decision-making. Building on these premises, this article revisits lean construction (LC), a recent, fashionable construction management paradigm that challenges established construction practices. Limited attention has been paid to guru discourse in the context of LC. Drawing on prior research on gurus and LC, we argue that the interpretive flexibility of LC has enabled continuous reinterpretation and provided fertile ground for guruism. Using a Google search, we collected LC discourse-related data in the form of 100 posts posted between 2019 and 2025 on LinkedIn, a professional social media platform. We analyzed these posts using netnographic methods as a theory-testing approach. Our findings identified five interrelated dimensions: (a) charismatic expertise, (b) rhetorical simplification, (c) framing LC as a universal solution, (d) emphasis on doctrinal purity and orthodoxy, and (e) prosocial community building. We argue that these dimensions shape online communities on social media platforms and crowd out reflexive, critical, professional judgment in contemporary LC discourse.

## KEYWORDS

Lean construction, guru, charismatic leadership, social media, discourse analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

The title of this article refers to findings in management research that humans can become dependent on any phenomenon, teacher, theory, or system that they pay attention to and learn to respect (Ainamo & Tammi, 2013; Kopp, 1982). In this paper, we focus on how humans sometimes make another person their guru, becoming psychologically and socially dependent on that person to an extent that hinders critical thinking, genuine understanding, and the capacity for independent decision-making (Sperber, 2010). “Guru” is a Sanskrit term for a revered teacher, mentor, or spiritual guide who leads disciples from ignorance (darkness) to enlightenment (light) by sharing deep knowledge, wisdom, and experiential guidance (Sears, 2008). Research has shown that sometimes the only way to achieve personal liberation is to abandon one’s guru (Hassan, 2022). We use these theoretical concepts as a framework to

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<sup>1</sup> Visiting Scholar, Civil Engineering, Aalto University, Espoo, Finland, [ext-eelon.lappalainen@aalto.fi](mailto:ext-eelon.lappalainen@aalto.fi), [orcid.org/0000-0002-7573-344X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7573-344X)

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Institute of Computer Science, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia, [antti.ainamo@ut.ee](mailto:antti.ainamo@ut.ee), [orcid.org/0000-0003-0210-0294](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0210-0294)

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Researcher, Civil Engineering, University of Alberta, Alberta, Canada, [ddesmarl@ualberta.ca](mailto:ddesmarl@ualberta.ca), [orcid.org/0009-0002-0506-5041](https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0506-5041)

<sup>4</sup> Doctoral Researcher, Civil Engineering, Aalto University, Espoo, Finland, [ana.reinbold@aalto.fi](mailto:ana.reinbold@aalto.fi), [orcid.org/0000-0002-7774-7984](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7774-7984)

critically revisit the lean construction (LC) paradigm, which in many ways challenges established construction management (CM) methods.

Both industrial practice and scientific investigation trace “lean management” to manufacturing practices whose impacts on efficiency are well proven, which gives all lean management concepts credibility. At the same time, research has shown that the term “lean” is interpreted in diverse ways and is shaped by local context (Abrahamson, 1996; Clark & Salaman, 1998; Johansen & Walter, 2007; Kifokeris, 2021; Lee, 2022). Sometimes, it refers to a collection of methods, other times to a management philosophy and, in some cases, to a personal way of thinking (Benders & Van Veen, 2001; Green & May, 2005; Melles, 1997). This interpretive flexibility may ensure that the concept of lean management remains relevant across contexts, but it also results in continuous negotiation of its meaning within professional communities. In such contexts of interpretive flexibility, influential individuals may play a central role in shaping how the concept is understood and communicated. These actors often function as thought leaders who translate complex ideas into accessible narratives for practitioners. When interpretations become strongly associated with these thought leaders, they may be recognized as charismatic individuals. At the same time, the idea of lean management may become a “moving target,” constantly redefined for followers by these influential thought leaders, who are sometimes described in both management practice and scientific research as “gurus” (Koskela, 2004; Koskela et al., 2007; Peck, 2016). While guru figures may play a significant role in defining and disseminating ideas, management research has also noted potential risks when authority becomes personalized and difficult to challenge. In these situations, guru discourse can discourage critical reflection and encourage adherence to particular interpretations (Kieser, 1997; Huczynski, 1993).

We assume that the rhetorical dimension is central in any guru discourse (Kieser, 1997). Commercial “packaging” or framing is often evident; such packaging is an important part of the marketing of any fashionable discourse and may include individualized certificates, books, impressive visual publications, and heroic stories that lend themselves to personal branding (Clark & Salaman, 1998; Groß et al., 2015; Huczynski, 1993).

Guru discourse in the context of LC has received little scholarly attention (Green, 1999a; Green, 1999b; Peck, 2016; Simonsen et al., 2014). Yet, there are seminal findings on which to build. In the past, LC discourse in a range of industries has often emphasized the moral ethos of a better way of working, along with business benefits, such as efficiency, value, and maximizing the flow (Koskela et al., 2007). The discourse emphasized themes of embarking on a journey and undergoing cultural transformation, which have served to create and frame narratives highlighting simple principles, the efforts required to achieve them, and ultimately, a redemptive transformation brought about by the journey (Flinchbaugh & Carlino, 2006; Tommelein, 2015). This rhetoric has encouraged LC gurus and experts to act as guides in a ritualistic change process, providing their students with a chance at lean awakening (Chaharbaghi & Newman, 2007; Clark & Salaman, 1996).

Against this background, this paper addresses two research questions. First, to what extent does guru discourse appear in LC discourse on social media? Second, what discursive dimensions characterize guru-style communication in LC discourse? Toward the end of the paper, we outline directions for future research that may help mitigate the detrimental effects of over-dependence on LC guru discourse and provide implications for further research.

## **FROM GURUS TO CULTS: THE RISK OF SECT-LIKE DYNAMICS**

Prior research has identified that dogmatism sometimes comes to dominate a discourse. When dogmatism becomes entrenched, criticism is ignored, rejected, and even suppressed. Religious metaphors, rituals, and symbols arise, along with an acceptance that the leader knows best (Pagel & Westerfelhaus, 2026; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002). Critical thinking weakens as

formulaic principles or patterns of behavior are repeated without any reference to their practical or ideological basis (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Røvik, 2011).

These features of dogmatism, taken together, can exert “mind control” (Hassan 2022) by discouraging criticism, which in turn, can lead to behavior control, characterized by unquestioned rituals, a superiority complex, a follow-the-leader mentality, and a battle between insider and outsider groups and their doctrines. Thought control begins with black-and-white thinking, a single-minded search for scientific-sounding proof of one’s doctrine, simplified vocabulary and rhetoric, and even brainwashing. At the extreme, adherents’ emotions are controlled through a cult-like collective experience, marked by the disappearance of the individual identities of followers (Hassan, 2022). Both rhetorical and performative power create an illusion of step-by-step transformation that evades critical evaluation (Boonstra, 2023). At the individual level, the guru phenomenon constrains an individual’s identity, role, and behavior. Affected individuals look to a stereotypical savior-hero to transform their actions for the better in ways that rule out alternative actions (Lovelace et al., 2018). Charismatic leadership in organizations can thus lead to conformity, which is reinforced by organizational vulnerability to environmental disruption. Guru- and cult-like characteristics can weaken dissent and whistleblowing (Tourish & Pinnington, 2002). Normative pressure promotes a decline in critical thinking on the one hand, and on the other hand, dependence on rituals and branded solutions defined by the guru. In the absence of intellectual questioning and suppression of critical dialogue, the quality of decision-making deteriorates (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

The most prominent examples of guru-like and cult-like phenomena in the construction sector are found in the field of architecture, as exemplified by several experimental societies established during the twentieth century. In these communities, individuals dedicated themselves to the ideological beliefs and vision of their masters (Meyer, 2016). For example, Frank Lloyd Wright’s Taliesin Fellowship community has been characterized as a personality cult characterized by the availability of cheap labor provided by apprentices, Wright’s dominance over his apprentices, and the community’s hierarchical organization (Friedland & Zellman, 2006). There are also indications that some architectural studios may possess similar characteristics, such as long working hours, intense commitment, lasting camaraderie, punishing critiques, a strong sense of community, and a requirement for personal sacrifice (Aderonmu et al., 2015).

Mythical and simplified storytelling and guruism perpetuate a cycle of management fashion and fads that direct resources toward symbols and ceremonies rather than evidence-based practices (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Kieser, 1997; Pagel & Westerfelhaus, 2019). Social media can be seen as a modern forum where gurus in many fields (Farbman et al., 2025) are free to proclaim their teachings, followers can share their admiration and experiences, and the community can reinforce its belief in the guru’s solutions to its problems (Raicu, 2021). Similarly, LC guru discourse can be found on social media, where certain gurus and consultants sell their views on the right way to implement lean thinking (Madsen & Slåtten, 2025).

## METHOD AND CODING FRAMEWORK

We chose LinkedIn as our source of data because it serves as a key professional networking platform where experts and consultants typically present their views, build their personal and company brands, and participate in public discussions. This makes it a suitable environment for testing theoretical concepts about guruism in LC discourse.

To avoid our own LinkedIn profile algorithms influencing the search results, we collected our data in the incognito mode of the Microsoft Edge internet browser, without logging into LinkedIn. We performed our search using a Google search engine (google.com), with the search term <site:linkedin.com/posts “lean construction”>. The collection process was carried out manually. Our search was unrestricted by time, so the search engine organized the results

according to its internal algorithm. The search took 0.16 seconds and yielded 74,300 results. This is an exploratory study; therefore, we focused on public posts written in English and to save the text content and any images of the first 100 of such posts (0.13% of all results) in chronological order. We analyzed only these first 100 primary posts, excluding any comments on these posts from our analysis.

We saved our selected posts in Microsoft Word format in a text file that could be read and post-processed during the analysis phase. The analysis was conducted using qualitative meta-journalistic content and discourse analysis (De Maeyer & Holton, 2016). The posts were thematically coded using a theory-based coding framework based on the definitions of the guru phenomenon provided by Tourish and Pinnington (2002) and Hassan (2022). The definitions offered by these studies, which were then categorized as codes, highlighted recurrent patterns related to orthodoxy, charisma, interpretive flexibility, impression management, rhetorical simplification, and community formation. The coding was done iteratively, and reliability was confirmed by parallel coding and comparison by the whole research team. Atlas.TI software (version 25) was used for coding.

The study followed the ethical principles of netnography (Kozinets, 2015). Specifically, we included only public posts in the analysis, and personal data was anonymized. We “scrambled” the sentence structure of direct quotations; that is, we modified these sentences using the paraphrasing tool QuillBot so that individual users could not be identified, although the meaning of the quotations was not affected. We did not include the time that the messages were posted or detailed descriptions of the authors of the messages to ensure anonymity. Our coding framework is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Qualitative coding framework

| Code Class                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Theoretical Connection (Tourish & Pinnington, 2002; Hassan, 2022)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
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| <b>Communality and parasociality:</b><br>-Inviting discussion (e.g., “What do you think?”)<br>-Audience comments and reactions and critical remarks from anti-fans                                                                         | <b>Followership and collective charisma.</b> A guru’s influence arises from a shared belief. Collective faith, in which followers reinforce each other’s belief in the guru/leader and his teachings. Social media “micro-celebrity leadership” is built precisely on such parasocial bonds and interaction (likes, comments, recognition).                                                             |
| <b>Orthodoxy:</b><br>-Claims about “true lean” and “wrong lean”<br>-Polarization (e.g., “those who don’t understand lean”)<br>-References to authority figures and original sources (e.g., Toyota, Womack)                                 | <b>Dogmatism, ideological closure, and the “true believer” phenomenon.</b> In corporate cultism, charismatic leadership may create a faith-based community where criticism is perceived as a threat and adherence to the “right” doctrine becomes a moral obligation. On social media, this can appear as the uncritical repetition of gurus’ teachings and the marginalization of dissenting opinions. |
| <b>Interpretation flexibility:</b><br>-Lean is redefined in the context of construction<br>-Local variations (e.g., “lean as a mindset,” “lean as tools”)                                                                                  | <b>Ideological plasticity and ease of diffusion.</b> The guru’s message is deliberately flexible—it allows different organizations to identify themselves as “disciples.” An indicator of adaptability is when a successful guru produces a message that is easy to contextualize and replicate.                                                                                                        |
| <b>Impression management:</b><br>-Showing achievements (e.g., photos from workshops and certificate ceremonies)<br>-Authority references (e.g., references to Toyota and international gurus)<br>-Authentic posts (e.g., sharing failures) | <b>Performativity and curating the public self.</b> The guru’s credibility is reinforced through staging; conferences, certificates, and visual symbols serve as rituals. Social media serves as an arena for legitimacy, where gurus present “authenticity” in a controlled manner.                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Charisma and legitimacy:</b><br>-Credentials (certificates, publications, conference presentations)<br>-Hero stories (e.g., “the project was saved by LC”)<br>-Thanks and recommendations from followers                                | <b>Charismatic leadership and personal authority.</b> Transformational and charismatic leadership builds the role of “savior” and creates emotional commitment among followers. The guru’s legitimacy is based on personal branding, symbolic authority, and the affective recognition of followers. Credentials and heroic stories demonstrate this charismatic construction.                          |
| <b>Rhetorical packaging:</b><br>-Step-by-step lists and slogans<br>-Catch phrases (e.g., “lean journey,” “lean transformation”)<br>-Universal promises (e.g., “always works,” “for all organizations”)                                     | <b>Mythical and ritualistic communication.</b> Guru speech is built on myths, catch phrases, and simple universal truths. Corporate cultism: leaders create shared rituals and phrases that reinforce a belief in a common doctrine.                                                                                                                                                                    |

## FINDINGS

The 100 posts that we selected for coding were made by 27 individuals (coded with letter i and a number), 20 companies (coded with the letter c and a number), six LC-promoting organizations (coded with the letter o and a number), and one university (coded as u-1). Some of the quotations that we extracted from the posts were coded into more than one category. While the posts in the data mainly represented one or two posts per posting individual, 16 posts were from one individual. Another individual was responsible for six posts in our dataset. For the six LC-promoting organizations, 12 posts were from one organization and seven posts from another, with the other posts represented one or two posts per organization. There was only one post from a university. The countries of origin of the posts were the US, Egypt, Canada, India, Germany, Qatar, UK, Ethiopia, Finland, Cambodia, Ireland, Indonesia, Sweden, Israel, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, and Taiwan. Table 2 presents the coding results.

Table 2: Coding results

| Code Class                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Factors Connecting Categories                                                                                                                                                                                       | Core Category                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
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| <b>Charisma and legitimacy</b> (total of 5 quotes); sample quotes (5) include the following:<br><b>Quote 12 (i-4):</b> ...involving an LC specialist in the early stages of a project can save up to 30% on costs, reduce project duration, and reduce arbitration or legal claims by 75%....<br><b>Quote 79 (c-8):</b> ...we really enjoyed this week's conference...we follow lean concepts for continual improvement and waste reduction...this has improved our platform and reviews for over 500 projects...at this conference, we hope to implement and test new approaches to improve our work delivery predictability...<br><b>Quote 84 (o-4):</b> ...N.N., the keynote speaker...shared insights on difficulties and opportunities, as well as lessons learned...M.M. joined a panel of <b>industry experts</b> to explore how lean tools, ideas, and processes help...firms get their products to market...K.K...emphasizing the necessity of...maintaining improved effectiveness, efficiency, productivity, and profitability for all stakeholders in the value chain...<br><b>Quote 86 (c-11):</b> ...we are hosting... a panel discussion with <b>industry leaders</b> to learn about lean construction practices and views... <b>expert panelists</b> will share their experiences in implementing lean strategies in the real world...<br><b>Quote 112 (o-2):</b> ... <b>certifications</b> are for lean practitioners with more than three years of experience...it <b>certifies actual lean design and construction experience</b> ... | 1. Expert aura and technical/rational communication style.<br>2. Institutional credibility.<br>3. Public performance.<br>4. Mission-oriented speech.<br>5. Promise of the future and visionary thinking.            | Charismatic expertise.<br><br>Charismatic expertise means that a guru's credibility comes not only from knowledge and expertise, but also from their ability to present themselves convincingly, appeal to values, and promise a better future.<br><br>This combines the aura of an expert, official credibility, public appearance, and visionary speech. The guru seems to know not only what to do, but also why and in which direction to go. |
| <b>Rhetorical packaging</b> (total of 68 quotes); sample quotes (10) include the following:<br><b>Quote 16 (i-3):</b> ...guide...their <b>lean journey</b> ...<br><b>Quote 32 (i-1):</b> ...learn about LC practices that improve planning, procurement, and project delivery processes for <b>maximum value</b> ...<br><b>Quote 37 (i-8):</b> ...although the <b>concepts of LC</b> are well-defined and <b>have significant potential</b> for the industry, implementing them can be difficult...<br><b>Quote 52 (i-3):</b> ...the <b>simplest thing to do is utilize the following methods</b> in construction. A...B...C...D...E...F... the next level of expertise is to use more advanced LC                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | 1. Clarifying complexity.<br>2. Travel and development metaphors.<br>3. List-based functional promises.<br>4. Appeal and positive narrative.<br>5. Universality and omnipotence.<br>6. Emphasis on experientiality. | Rhetorical simplification.<br><br>Difficult issues are presented as clear, easy-to-follow steps and stories that make people believe that change is possible, achievable for everyone, and suitable for all. This sums up how gurus create an impact through clarity and hope—they don't just teach; they make complex things sound easy and appealing.                                                                                           |

| Code Class                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Factors Connecting Categories                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Core Category                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
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| <p>methods a, b, c, d, e, f... teams can apply these methods in a <b>specific order</b>...</p> <p><b>Quote 82 (i-3): ...this journey is the only one that works...only journey that leads to real results...</b></p> <p><b>Quote 88 (i-11): ...there is another way...change your process...</b></p> <p><b>Quote 104 (c-16): ...how to shift from chaos to clarity...</b></p> <p><b>Quote 105 (o-2): ...discover this step-by-step description and exclusive tools to support your journey...</b></p> <p><b>Quote 107 (i-20): ...going lean doesn't require a consultant or expensive software. Begin with this checklist...</b></p> <p><b>Quote 111 (i-22): ...it is a path to...excellence...lead to long-term success...</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <p>"Lean pyramids," "five steps" lists, and "lean journey" stories serve as convincing structures that transform the abstract into a practical, even salvific, model of action. This type of presentation not only simplifies a complex reality but also generates guru-like charisma—the clarity and form of communication are perceived as proof of competence in themselves. Impact and credibility are built less on content and more on rhetoric.</p>                          |
| <p><b>Interpretation flexibility</b> (total of 7 quotes); sample quotes (2) include the following:</p> <p><b>Quote 2 (i-2): ...lean does not focus on takt or pull planning...I might just think of this as managing a project or business well, but if the term "lean" fits, then pick your poison...</b></p> <p><b>Quote 13 (i-3): ...how many versions of LC exist worldwide? I believe that each person has their own definition of LC. There are about 10,000 different definitions of LC worldwide...for most people, it is a vague and fuzzy concept...</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Conceptual vagueness and fragmentation.</li> <li>2. Ideological flexibility and applicability to different contexts.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                     | <p>The power of interpretation.</p> <p>The vagueness of the concept makes it useful to many. Conceptual vagueness is not a weakness, but part of the phenomenon's power. The guru gains his position as the definer of meaning—he is the one who interprets what lean means to others. The guru's influence stems from his ability to fill a vague concept with meaning.</p>                                                                                                        |
| <p><b>Impression management</b> (total of 5 quotes); sample quotes (3) include the following:</p> <p><b>Quote 74 (o-2): ...a new...report highlights the significant impact of lean and the missing possibilities when companies do not embrace them...over 60% report schedule delays. Almost 50% have budget overruns. Only 6% of organizations are heavily involved in lean techniques...the message is clear: lean works. It leads to measurable gains.</b></p> <p><b>Quote 76 (l-1): ... he has personally contributed to the delivery and highlights the importance of not missing out on this opportunity. Projects are delivered 20–50% faster, with improved safety, ease, and quality...</b></p> <p><b>Quote 119 (i-27): ...contractors applying lean principles report improvements of over 80% in quality and client satisfaction, close to 80% gains in productivity, and nearly 80% better safety outcomes. Despite these results, around 90% of professionals are still unfamiliar with these methods...</b></p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Presentation of science and evidence.</li> <li>2. Emphasis on heroism and personal achievement.</li> <li>3. Narrative of exclusivity and urgency.</li> <li>4. Emphasis on collective success.</li> </ol>                                            | <p>Heroic expertise.</p> <p>Guru combines scientific discourse with personal heroic narratives. He presents himself as evidence-based, yet visionary and redemptive, leading collective change. This is clear and easy to understand—emphasizing personal and collective success. The guru's scientific and emotional rhetoric motivates people to take action. He not only convinces but also invites people to join in—through urgency, achievements, and collective success.</p> |
| <p><b>Orthodoxy</b> (total of 20 quotes); sample quotes (7) include the following:</p> <p><b>Quote 1 (i-1): ...is LC real?...do you really understand it?...two-thirds of the community's awareness of lean is weak, with many only grasping some aspects...there is a lot of misinformation out there, spread by self-appointed "lean experts" wanting to promote their services. Toyota and its TPS, as well as the...Taylor and Ford, have all contributed to the development of LC.</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Limiting authenticity and naming false beliefs.</li> <li>2. Returning to the original and canonical sources.</li> <li>3. The saving truth is the only way.</li> <li>4. Philosophy before technology.</li> <li>5. Emphasizing experience.</li> </ol> | <p>Authentic orthodoxy.</p> <p>The guru acts as the original interpreter of his teachings. He determines between "right" and "wrong," appeals to the founders, emphasizes the importance of experience and humility in achieving true understanding, and guides his followers toward the correct way of thinking and acting.</p>                                                                                                                                                    |

| Code Class                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Factors Connecting Categories                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Core Category                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
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| <p><b>Quote 5 (c-1):</b> ...if you continue to build <b>traditional methods</b>, you will fall behind...</p> <p><b>Quote 10 (i-4):</b> ...the <b>traditional</b>...management style <b>has failed</b> ...</p> <p><b>Quote 28 (i-3):</b> ...when practicing LC, it's crucial to identify the "<b>true</b>" <b>origins</b>...</p> <p><b>Quote 31 (c-5):</b> ...are projects out of track? LC is <b>the cure</b>...</p> <p><b>Quote 89 (i-3):</b> ...most companies do not pursue the <b>true LC</b>...<b>true LC necessitates a paradigm shift and a knowledge</b> ...To learn the <b>true LC</b>, get this free eBook...</p> <p><b>Quote 110 (i-22):</b> ...<b>traditional</b> project execution <b>approaches often fail</b>...<b>as a solution, many are adopting LC</b>...</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <p>The guru acts as a teacher who cherishes the original teachings and rejects false interpretations. Orthodox discourse distinguishes between those who represent "true" lean and those who "only think they understand" it. The guru warns against "false" lean, which focuses on tools without understanding the philosophy.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <p><b>Communality and parasociality</b> (total of 23 quotes); sample quotes (9) include the following:</p> <p><b>Quote 4 (i-2, criticism):</b> ...<b>I do not follow lean principles</b>...<b>lean is a label</b> similar to TQM...same thing, new package. While not damaging, it <b>does not lead to revolutionary change or results</b>...I discovered what industry leaders do to differentiate their performance...<b>lean is not among them</b>...<b>lean methodology fails</b> to include other factors...</p> <p><b>Quote 9 (i-3):</b> ...the complexity of tasks varies based on individuals' skills, capacities, and comprehension. <b>How are your opinions about this approach?</b></p> <p><b>Quote 20 (i-5):</b> ...did you <b>find this helpful?</b> <b>Follow me</b> and my mentor!...</p> <p><b>Quote 36 (i-8, criticism):</b> ...LC is a <b>widespread industry jargon</b>, but <b>rarely fully utilized</b> in construction projects...</p> <p><b>Quote 45 (i-9):</b> ...<b>change begins with you</b> right now! So, what are you waiting for? Let's work together to achieve success...<b>we can help you</b>...</p> <p><b>Quote 46 (u-1, criticism):</b> ...the research indicated that only <b>less than 5% showed measurable evidence of enhanced building performance</b>...despite decades of LC lobbying, <b>there is still a lack of comprehensive and uniform measurement</b>...</p> <p><b>Quote 68 (c-3):</b> ...interested? Check it out and be intrigued...<b>we would love to hear your opinions!</b> What is your point of view with LC? <b>Share your thoughts</b> in the comments!...</p> <p><b>Quote 83 (i-3):</b> ...<b>what are your opinions</b> about this? <b>Do you agree</b> with the conclusion, and why may this become a major problem?</p> <p><b>Quote 115 (c-19):</b> ...the solution to addressing...cost overruns using lean thinking? <b>Let's talk about this</b> in the comments! <b>What is your point of view?</b></p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Building an audience.</li> <li>2. Personal appeal.</li> <li>3. The illusion of dialogue.</li> <li>4. Mentoring during change.</li> <li>5. Critical counter-discourse.</li> <li>6. Emphasizing communal identity.</li> </ol> | <p>Building a community.</p> <p>The guru makes people feel like they are part of a meaningful community. He addresses his followers personally, creates the impression of dialogue, and guides them on a journey of change where a common goal strengthens their sense of belonging.</p> <p>Questions, encouragement, and invitations create the illusion of shared discussion and learning, even though no real dialogue takes place.</p> <p>Critical voices may at first glance appear to challenge the guru and the community, but they often reinforce the community's boundaries and identity. When someone questions the teachings or the guru's position, followers may defend themselves and define more precisely who belongs to "us" and who is an "outsider."</p> |

## SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS

The findings of the study indicate that the guru phenomenon associated with LC in social media appears to be co-constructed by individuals and organizations engaging in LC discourse on several interrelated discursive dimensions. The credibility of a given LC guru appears to be based on a sense of community or communality, within which there is interpretive flexibility as to what is claimed to be orthodox and what is believed. Attempts are made to bridge claims across guru candidates, and the need for interpretive flexibility is emphasized. The power of

interpretative flexibility and ambiguity lies in enabling the portrayal of LC as a universally applicable methodology for all within the construction sector. In addition, many of those involved in LC guru discourse engage in impression management. Charisma and authority are established when followers recognize a guru's possession of superior characteristics in comparison to others, for example, in the form of technical knowledge, confident presentation, morally charged speech, or any combination of these. Complex ideas are simplified by these gurus through rhetorical simplification into easy-to-follow, step-by-step models and stages, along with stories that demonstrate that learning and change are achievable, while simple ideas are represented as highly complex ideas that require the guru's interpretation.

According to our analysis, guruism takes on various forms. Heroic expertise and experience combine with scientific knowledge and personal achievements into a mobilizing message that promises processes that will ensure success—processes that will soon become standardized and taken for granted in the construction industry. As a condition for success, the guru presents claims about the authentic requirements for mastering the original and “authentic” lean doctrine. At the same time, the guru identifies what will soon be considered heretical practices. The community of orthodox believers is typically built in a parasocial manner: Followers feel a personal connection with the guru and share a belief in a common mission, even though communication is mostly one-sided. Charisma, simplification of complex issues, ambiguity, emphasis on orthodoxy, and communality intertwine to form the guru phenomenon and form of influence in the digital age.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This exploratory study identifies various characteristics of the guru phenomenon in LinkedIn discussions about LC. As such, it provides an initial theory-testing perspective on LC discussions on LinkedIn and identifies indications of a guru phenomenon within the LC community. For example, we found indications of the dogmatism by gurus in phrases such as “true lean” and “the only journey that works,” in which the guru's view is presented as the only correct truth. “Us versus them” rhetoric appeared in the opposition between “those who do not understand lean” and “true lean professionals.” Religious-like metaphors and rituals were somewhat visible in, among other things, recurring “journey” and “transformation” narratives, certification ceremonies, conference gatherings, and slogans (mantras) repeated in various messages.

These findings of our netnographic analysis also support the presence of elements of mind control in social media, described by Hassan (2022) as follows: (a) Behavior control first takes the form of a guru shepherding his followers to perform rituals (i.e., “read this eBook,” “join the next conference,” and “follow the method”; (b) a guru exerts information control on their followers by making sure they access references selectively, with little critical reflection, by describing these references as “the real” and “the original” authorities (e.g., Toyota is often referred to); (c) thought control is visible in black-and-white language and loaded slogans (such as “Lean works. Always.”) and little consideration of alternative perspectives; and finally, d) emotional control is observed in expressions of uniqueness and excellence (such as “We are the pioneers of modern construction”), as well as in the attribution of shame or failure to individuals or companies practicing lean incorrectly (“If lean doesn't work, you haven't done it right”).

In prior research, Green (1999a; 1999b) examined the early years of LC from the perspective of critical theory and warned against guru hype. For example, Green argued that Womack and Jones's (1997) “lean thinking” was presented dogmatically, without critical reflection, and described its adoption as a quasi-religious phenomenon in which evangelical leadership and the promise of universal efficiency replaced critical reflection. According to Green, this “guru hype of lean thinking” produced a form of managerialist totalitarianism, in which charisma, simplified truths, and management control displaced dialogue, pluralism, and scientific

independence (Green, 1999a; Green, 1999b). Our findings support and extend Green's (1999a; 1999b) analysis.

Our findings also support those of Simonsen et al. (2014), who take a critical view of the guru phenomenon in LC. They approach LC as a management style and analyze its life cycle as a "market arena" in which gurus, consultants, the media, and companies operate. On the other hand, they recognized the central role of the gurus in this arena, showing how LC is promoted by "innovation brokers," consultants, and local gurus who "sell" the idea as a tool for success (Simonsen et al., 2014). Their work further suggests that LC loses its appeal and vitality without continuous storytelling and visibility. In our data, this dynamic appears to be sustained through LinkedIn visibility and constant rhetorical recycling. Various "step-by-step" lists, "lean journey" metaphors, and "success stories" may function as rituals that keep the concept alive, while social media algorithms amplify repetitive visual and emotional content, thereby reinforcing the continuous visibility of LC gurus.

As Sperber (2010) has argued, a fundamental component of all guru phenomena is trust in authority. In this study, we have shown how, in LC guru discourse, when an individual reading a LinkedIn post perceives the author as an expert, they may abstain from critical scrutiny, even though these posts are ambiguous or exhibit inconsistent expression—their obscurity signifies complexity and the guru's unique proficiency (Sperber, 2010). Social media algorithms establish a cycle of overvaluation in which authority is amplified, and individuals elevated to guru status may gain significant respect, despite the ambiguity of their message.

It is essential to differentiate between legitimate thought leadership and guru-like discourse. Thought leaders often occupy a pivotal position within professional communities, based on their ability to inspire experimentation with novel ideas and shape ongoing discourse (Brady et al., 2025). By contrast, guru-style discourse presents specific ideas and practices as indisputable facts, thereby hindering critical analysis and the evaluation of alternatives. On social media, however, the distinction between these roles is often blurred, as simplistic statements are rewarded with visibility. One contribution of this study is to help distinguish the generative and constructive potential of thought leadership from the more dogmatic and harmful forms of guruism.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

One limitation of this study is that the sample size was relatively small, which obviously limits broader generalizations. In addition, the opacity of LinkedIn's recommendation algorithms represents a key methodological limitation. The platform's visibility controls shape the content that users encounter and determines which posts appear in search results. Consequently, the dataset may not represent all LC-related discussions but rather those prioritized by the platform's algorithms, potentially amplifying already visible gurus while overlooking more marginal or critical perspectives.

To reduce personalization effects, data were collected without using the researchers' personal accounts, relying instead on incognito mode and Google-based searches. Search terms, dates, and results were documented to enhance transparency and support future replication. However, both LinkedIn and Google algorithms remain a black box, meaning that algorithmic bias cannot be fully eliminated. Moreover, Google indexes only publicly accessible LinkedIn pages, meaning that the dataset reflects posts that are externally visible and discoverable through search rather than the full population of LinkedIn discussions. Another limitation concerns the scope of the analysis, as comment threads were excluded. Since critical or alternative views often emerge in comments, and their omission may lead to a one-sided representation of guru discourse and limit insights into dialogue, counter-speech, and follower participation. Future research could include comment threads to better understand how skepticism, critique, or counter-expertise emerge in response to guru-style posts.

The dataset was also unevenly distributed, with a substantial share of posts originating from a small number of highly active contributors. To mitigate this effect, quotations were selected from a broad range of posters to ensure that a diversity of voices was reflected in the analysis. Future studies could use larger datasets to better capture wider perspectives. Finally, this study focused on textual content and did not analyze visual materials, such as images or videos. As LinkedIn increasingly relies on visual communication to construct authority and credibility, visual elements may represent an important focus for future research.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The warning articulated in the title of this article targets the issue of charismatic wisdom transforming into unchallenged authority. Evidence indicates that within the social media landscape, the phenomenon of guruism can emerge when streamlined communication, emotional involvement, and collective validation are incentivized, while critical discourse is discouraged. In this context, no red flags arise in relation to guru discourse. This is exactly what renders the phenomenon problematic. The warning is thus addressed to the community: When a philosophy, individual, or system is portrayed as the sole correct path, critical thinking becomes the primary casualty. The guru should neither be followed nor dismissed uncritically but rather evaluated critically.

One of the strengths of the LC community has been its sense of community and desire to develop the construction industry openly and in collaboration with researchers. Nevertheless, the findings of this study suggest that parts of LC discourse are shaped by charismatic gurus and by appeals to orthodoxy and universal truths rather than by critical discussion. Despite the small sample size, the LinkedIn data indicates that the guru phenomenon is reinforced by the logic of social media: visibility rewards simplicity and emotional appeal, not necessarily analysis, criticism, or learning. If discussion becomes polarized and critical voices are silenced, the original idea of LC as continuous improvement may turn into a ritual of repetition and a field dominated by those gurus who benefit from such dynamics. From this perspective, the LC community may need to be less concerned with the substantive content of LC alone and more attentive to the cultural forms through which it is communicated and sustained.

The question is not whether LC is a “good” or “bad” way of thinking, but whether it can maintain its reflectiveness and openness, even in the social media environment. Evidence suggests that charismatic thought leaders can serve as catalysts for change: they simplify complicated phenomena, inspire groups, and reveal innovative perspectives. In this capacity, they can facilitate learning, experimentation, and the development of professional identity. However, continuous improvement also requires the ability to challenge one’s own beliefs and to question authority constructively, including that of thought leaders and gurus. The findings of this study therefore suggest the need for further research on how to encourage critical thinking and reflection as orthodox interpretations gain prominence in LC discourse on social media, reinforced by algorithms. The examples of LC discourse in the construction industry provided in the literature review illustrate that there are often practical warning signs that alert a community to the need for reflection on its own discourse. These include claims that present a single method as the “right way,” a strong reliance on authority rather than argumentation, and the marginalization of critical voices rather than encouragement of learning and debate. Recognizing such signs and patterns can help professional communities maintain critical reflection in social media environments.

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