FACULTY OF
MANAGEMENT & FINANCE
UNIVERSITY OF COLOMBO

Followership in Organisational Leadership Studies: A Systematic Literature Review

Margaret Sonia Loyola[a] ✉, B. Aiswarya[b]

[a][b]Loyola Institute of Business Administration, Loyola College, India

Abstract

Although followership is just as important as leadership, it is often overlooked in leadership research due to the stereotypical belief that only leaders are responsible for organisational success and failures. However, without followers, leaders would not exist, and thus, studying followership is essential to improve our understanding of organisational leadership. This systematic literature review paper aims to contribute to the body of literature on leadership research by examining the conceptualisation of followership from both leader-centric and follower-centric perspectives. Employing the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) method as a framework, this paper conceptualises followership and examines various aspects of follower conceptualisation, including definitions, styles, and attributes. It further investigates follower-centric predictors of leadership effectiveness. The paper also examines the theoretical perspectives utilised in understanding followership.

*Keywords***:** Followership; Leader-centric Approach, Follower-centric Approach

✉ dr.marsonloy@gmail.com   ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3196-5297

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in the use of the terms, 'follower' and 'followership' in discussions on organisational leadership. Followership can be interactive or independent and is influenced by the follower, the leader, and situational variables (Sutherland et al., 2022). When leaders and followers operate selflessly, it models a discovery process where the leader leads the followers to achieve for themselves. Hence, followership is essential to organisational leadership, as it provides support, diverse perspectives, feedback, and accountability to leaders (Crossman & Crossman, 2011); without followers, leaders cannot achieve their goals. In other words, effective leadership cannot exist without effective followership (Carsten et al., 2018; Uhl Bien & Carsten, 2018; Van Vugt et al., 2008).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of followership in the leadership process, it is not adequately discussed in the literature (Carsten et al., 2018; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018; Van Vugt et al., 2008). However, demands for increased attention are raised highlighting several reasons. First, Uhl-Bien and Carsten (2018) highlighted, followership is an essential and distinct aspect of organisational leadership that deserves its own attention and exploration. While leadership has been the primary focus of leadership studies, followership has been often overlooked or considered as a secondary concept (Wrench et al., 2020) . Further, followership research can help to address the gap in our understanding of the relationship between leaders and followers, and how this relationship impacts organisational outcomes. In summary, there is an increasing call for studying followership separately to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of followership dynamics (Ndonye, 2022; Riggio, 2020; Stern, 2021).

There are a few reasons why followership has not been thoroughly examined in the literature. Firstly, the traditional view of leadership strongly emphasises the leader's role in the success or failure of an organisation, with little attention paid to the importance of followers (Martin, 2015). Secondly, there is a common stereotypical view that followers are passive and unimportant in the leadership process (Riggio, 2020); as a result, their perspectives and experiences have been largely ignored. Thirdly, researchers have historically focused more on the positive aspects of leadership, such as leadership styles and qualities, rather than on followership, which has been seen as a more passive and less influential role (Malakyan, 2014). However, in recent years, scholars have recognised the importance

of studying followership, and there has been a growing interest in examining followers' roles, characteristics, and experiences in the leadership process. As a result, research on followership has been gaining momentum, and it is expected that this area will continue to attract increasing attention in the future.

In this context, understanding the way how followership is conceptualised in organisational leadership is crucial, as it can offer valuable insights into the current understanding of the followership concept (Theriou et al., 2020). However, the current literature on leadership and followership is fragmented and lacks a comprehensive understanding of this concept (Collinson et al., 2018; Denis et al., 2012; Empson, 2020). There are various elements of followership that contribute to leadership success. However, there remains a lack of consensus regarding the specific role followership plays in the leadership process, as noted by Malakyan (2014). Further, even though leadership outcomes are co-created by both leaders and followers, most leadership theories predominantly focus on the leader, neglecting the importance of followers (Chaleff, 2016; Malakyan, 2014) . Therefore, it is imperative to conduct a systematic review of followership literature, including the prominent theories used, in order to establish followership as an independent construct within the domain of leadership. In order to address the above issues, this systematic literature review raises three questions: How is followership conceptualised in organisational leadership literature and what are the key dimensions that comprise followership? What are the predictors related to followership that determine the effectiveness of leadership? and What theoretical perspectives are used in the organisational leadership literature to conceptualise followership?

By answering the above three questions, this systematic literature review can contribute to knowledge in several ways. First, the paper synthesises the existing followership literature: It provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of research in the field of followership, identifying key themes, trends and theories both from the leader-centric perspective and follower-centric perspective. This will provide a better understanding of the current state of knowledge in the field of followership. Further, the paper explores areas of inquiry that have not yet been explored in terms of exploring the key theoretical underpinnings of followership and their role in understanding the leadership process. Overall, this literature review on followership can contribute to a deeper understanding of the followership literature in terms of follower-centric and leader-centric perspectives which will facilitate gaining a comprehensive understanding of followership.

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is three-fold. Firstly, it aimed to delve into the conceptualisation of followership, which includes understanding its definitions, attributes, and styles. Secondly, it sought to identify the predictors associated with followership that contribute to the effectiveness of leadership. Lastly, it aimed to uncover the theoretical perspectives employed in organisational leadership literature to conceptualise followership. For this purpose, the paper focuses on examining the chemistry between followership and leadership from the contingency perspective by using (PRISMA) (Haddaway et al., 2022; Page et al., 2021).

The resources (i.e., journal articles) considered for the study were chosen from data repositories accessible through the authors' university library system. The authors decided to cover the search period range of last 10 years, i.e., 2012 – 2022, since followership is a relatively new, emerging concept and to see how followership fits in leadership literature (Paul & Criado, 2020). All results – only peer-reviewed journal articles published in the recognised sources – were limited to English. A systematic search approach was employed using the PIco framework following the order of the databases listed in Table 1. The search approach started with identifying the search terms related to the population/problem followed by the interest and the context. Then, an overall outcome (i.e., what is the current state of research in terms of definition, theories and leadership effectiveness in studies of followership in organisational leadership?) was framed aligning with the aim of the paper to guide the search approach and to ascertain which among the articles retrieved best address the question (Methley et al., 2014). The search string used in the websites of NDLI, EBSCO, JSTOR, PROQUEST and SCOPUS for data extraction is given in Table 1. The search strings were developed using the Boolean operators 'AND' and/or "OR" in line with the research questions (Jesson et al., 2011). Further, searches in databases of Google Scholar and Semantics Scholar were conducted only after the searches in the other databases were exhausted.

Table 1: Strategy for Data Collection Using the PICo Framework

Protocol Parameter	Search Terms
Definition of the question using PICo	**Population:** "follower*" OR "subordinates*" OR "member*" OR "leader*" OR "supervisor*" OR "followership*"
	Interest: "upward influence" OR "power" OR "theory*" OR "influence" OR "leader effectiveness" OR "definition" OR "follower effectiveness"

Protocol Parameter	Search Terms
	Context: "Organisational leadership*"
	Outcome: What is the current state of research in terms of definition, theories and leadership effectiveness in empirical studies of followership in organisational leadership?
Keywords used	follower; upward influence; follower effectiveness; definition, theory; followership; power; subordinate; influence; member, leadership effectiveness
Databases and date accessed	NDLI: "follower*" OR "member*" OR "subordinate" OR "theory*" OR "employee" AND "power" OR "upward influence" AND "leader effectiveness" OR "leadership effectiveness" OR "employer effectiveness" OR "organisation effectiveness" (Last searched on: 29.06.2022)
	EBSCO: "follower*" OR "member*" AND "leader*" OR "theory*" AND "power" OR "upward influence" (Last searched on: 29.06.2022)
	JSTOR: "follower*" OR "member*" AND "leader*" AND "power" OR "upward influence" (Last searched on: 01.07.2022)
	PROQUEST: "follower*" OR "member*" AND "leader*" OR "theory*" AND "power" OR "upward influence"(Last searched on: 30.06.2022)
	SCOPUS: "follower*" OR "member*" AND "leader*" AND "power" OR "upward influence" (Last searched on: 30.06.2022)
	Google Scholar: "follower" OR "member" OR OR "theory*" "subordinate" OR "employee" OR "followership" AND "leader" OR "supervisor" OR "employer" OR "leadership" AND "influence" OR "upward influence" OR "power" AND "leader effectiveness" OR "leadership effectiveness" OR "employer effectiveness" OR "Organisational effectiveness" (Last searched on: 03.07.2022)
	Semantic Scholar: "followership" AND "leadership" AND "theory*" AND "upward influence" AND "leadership effectiveness"
	(Last searched on: 03.07.2022)
Search scope	Language(s): English
	Publication Type: Peer-reviewed **Journal Articles**
Databases accessed	NDLI, EBSCO, JSTOR, PROQUEST, SCOPUS, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar

As part of Phase I, the selection criteria for this systematic review were defined and framed by including studies without any restrictions on the category or the rank of journal enabling a complete array of literature. The exclusion criteria were articles that did not belong to the broad domain of business and management such as agriculture, natural sciences, medical sciences and literature. Books, book chapters,
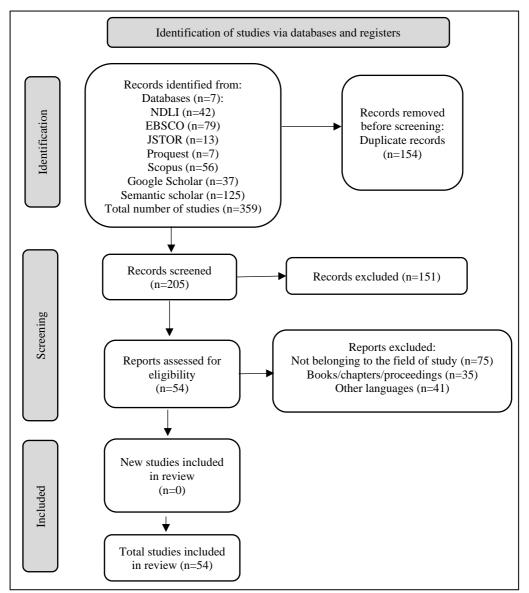
Figure 1: The PRISMA Flowchart

Source: Adapted from Haddaway et al. (2022)

conference proceedings, thesis/dissertations and reports were excluded in the search. Then studies employing poor methodology were also excluded. Here, a manual search to identify articles with poor methodology was performed and the journal articles lacking sufficient information about their methodology were excluded.

The authors skimmed each article independently by reviewing the title, abstract and keywords, and disagreements between the authors were resolved through discussion and consensus. The articles were extracted and grouped according to the databases. The relevant journal articles that discuss a combination of followership and leadership and/or upward influence and power were sorted. In Phase II, the extracted data was divided into two datasets and each author screened articles based on title, abstract and keyword equally. Since the articles were primarily chosen to be in English script, articles in other languages scripts were excluded without translation. Since no machine learning classifier or automation tool was used in the screening process, the manual screening of data was conducted with precision by the authors to synthesise the studies. The two datasets were merged and uploaded in Mendeley Reference Manager Software to facilitate removing of duplicates, as part of Phase III. The combined set was screened once again and data correction in terms of authors, title and journal details were manually entered by the authors to be considered eligible for the study. The PRISMA flow chart was prepared based on the data and is presented in Figure 1.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the outcomes of the literature review in relation to the three initial research questions. The results are organised into three distinct clusters that align with the respective research inquiries. Cluster I addresses the definition of followership in organisational leadership literature and identifies the key dimensions that constitute followership. Cluster II examines the literature insights into the relationship between the leader-follower dyad and its influence on leadership effectiveness. Lastly, Cluster III focuses on the theoretical perspectives utilised in conceptualising followership within the organisational leadership literature.

Cluster I - Conceptualisation of Followership

Based on the first research question raised above, this cluster presents the findings in relation to conceptualization of followership including its definitions, attributes and styles.

Kelley (1988), a pioneer and prominent advocate of followership literature, argued that leadership holds no significance and leaders do not exist without followers. In conceptualising what followership is, the literature has used multiple perspectives such as cognitive processes, attributions, traits, behaviours, and contextual factors. Therefore, to comprehensively grasp the conceptualisation of followership, it is imperative to explore definitions of followership, followership styles, and attributes that constitute followership.

The word, 'follower' connotes subordination (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2020), lack of drive or aspiration till persuaded, predictability mechanism (Empson & Alvehus, 2020) and passivity (Young et al., 2020) from the leader-centric approach. Thus, the leader-centric approach places the primary focus on the leader's qualities, behaviours, and actions in the context of leadership. It emphasises the leader's role in influencing and directing followers toward achieving organisational goals. The followers are seen as passive recipients of the leader's influence and direction (Chaleff, 2016). This approach, therefore, often overlooks the active and dynamic role of followers in the leadership process.

In contrast, from the follower-centric approach, other terms such as participants, co-producers (Lin & Sun, 2018), contributors, team integrators (Parmer et al., 2013), companions (Zoogah, 2020), associates, collaborators (Joseph, 2016), colluders, conformers (Bligh et al., 2011; Dhiman, 2017; Dorasamy, 2018; Ford & Harding, 2018; van Knippenberg & van Kleef, 2016), partners (van Knippenberg & van Kleef, 2016) and (in nobler terms) samurai (Pascoe, 2016) are attributed to followers. As a result, the follower-centric approach shifts the focus to the followers. It recognises that followers have their own agency, motivations, and contributions to the leadership dynamics (Lin & Sun, 2018). This approach acknowledges the followers' active role in shaping and influencing the leadership process. It highlights the importance of followers' contributions to the overall effectiveness of leadership.

In addition to these two perspectives, it is observed that some literature (e.g., Chaleff, 2016; Ford & Harding, 2018) emphasises 'followership' as a distinct concept which emphasises the importance of followers' role and behaviour in the leadership process, from a relational viewpoint (Dorasamy, 2018). This view recognises followers as active participants who contribute to the success or failure of leadership. It encompasses followers' attitudes, behaviours, and engagement in supporting and aligning with the leader's vision and goals. It specifically focuses on understanding and exploring the role of followers in the dynamics of leadership effectiveness.

Proponents of this view (Carsten et al., 2010; Hurwitz & Koonce, 2016; Meindl, 1995) argue that leadership is as socially-constructed or self-constructed in relations (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) through mechanisms such as upward influence (Bryant, 2010; Cunningham, 2019; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988; Wayne & Ferris, 1990; Yukl & Falbe, 1990, 1991) or implicit beliefs about what makes the leadership-followership process, effective (Hurwitz & Koonce, 2016).

Overall, in defining the follower and followership, the leader-centric approach emphasises the leader's role, the follower-centric approach emphasises the followers' role, and the relational-centric approach examines the followers' active participation and impact in the leadership process.

Follower 'styles' is another key area of conceptualisation in the literature. These can be categorised into different types based on various frameworks and models proposed in the literature. Kelley's followership theory, and early work, categorises followers on two factors: *level of independent/critical thinking* and *active/passive orientation*. Kelley labelled them based on intersecting axes: *alienated followers* (high thinking skill), *sheep* (low independent thinking), *conformists* (high engagement and low independent thinking), *pragmatists* (low-risk tolerant followers) and *exemplary* (high critical thinking skills and active personality) (Kelley, 1988; Kudek et al., 2020).

Subsequently, there have been several other different categorisations. Following are some of the more recent ones: Based on the leader-member exchange theory (Wang et al., 2019), posits two categories of followers based on their exchange relationship: *In-group* followers are those who have more responsibilities, stronger commitment, are dependable and tend to do extra things for their leader. In contrast, *out-group* followers are not accepted by their leaders and are provided with limited resources (Dorasamy, 2018).

The categorisation by (Kudek et al., 2020) identified seven types of followership: *Apprentices* need to gain more expertise and experience, in order to become leaders. *Disciples* emulate and bond with the leader and learn from other individuals. *Mentees* look to others to gain a level of personal maturation. *Comrades* are ones who face the situation with the help of their team. *Loyalists* decide to follow based on their personal loyalty to the leader. *Dreamers* follow based on their ideals and reasons that have nothing to do with the leader. *Lifeway* people follow out of personal preference based on compatibility between the leader' and their own personality.

As per (Tripathi, 2021), followers are categorised into five types as *'isolates'* are alienated and uncaring about the leaders and their vision, indirectly strengthening the leaders' position by giving power to them; *'bystanders'* make a deliberate decision to stand beside the leader with a neutral stance providing tacit support; *'participants'* clearly favour the leader and involve themselves if they find the need; *'activists'* are engaged, energetic and eager and work on behalf of the leader; *'diehards'* are deeply dedicated to their leaders and are risk-takers. Uhl-Bien and Carsten (2018) categorise followers into three types: *proactive followers* accentuate constructive challenge and voice*, active followers* accentuate partnership and *passive followers* accentuate reverence and obedience and work well in bureaucratic environments (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018).

Overall, it is evident that Kelly (1988) work has laid the foundation for conceptualising followership in terms of follower styles. Subsequent scholars (e.g. Kudek et al., 2020; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018; Wang et al., 2019) ;   have expanded on these dimensions and proposed additional frameworks to categorise follower styles or behaviours.

The final criterion used to conceptualise followership is follower attributes or dimensions. Research on follower attributes can be broadly categorised into two approaches: the follower-centric approach, which focuses on attributes specific to followership, and the leader-centric approach, which emphasises the leader's perception of followers and their impact on leadership outcomes, positive or negative.

From a follower-centric perspective, attributes associated with followership include exemplariness, loyalty (Seaton, 2021), courage (Young et al., 2020) and engagement (Young et al., 2020). Additionally, attributes such as commitment, initiative, creativity and innovation, having a sense of direction, drive, and intensity have been noted (Chong & Wolf, 2010). Prilipko (2019) further argues that followers must demonstrate several characteristics to ensure optimal leadership and organisational outcomes, such as, the courage to support, contribute, assume responsibility, challenge, and drive change.

The leader-centric approach tends to focus more on 'following' behaviours in contrast to the attributes indicating active engagement identified in the follower-centric approach. These encompass activities such as claiming, granting, deferring, obeying, resisting, negotiating, and influencing, among others (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Although the attributes identified by Bufalino (2018) comprise somewhat active

engagement aspects such as taking initiative, attributes more closely aligned with following behaviour such as obedience and expressing opinions were also identified as key follower attributes. Junker and van Dick (2014) depicted three primary follower characteristics: obedience, deference, and conforming.

In summary, similar to the observations with regard to definitions and styles, followership attributes also seem scattered, and no common list can be found in the literature.

Cluster II – Follower-centric Predictors of Leadership Effectiveness

Cluster II presents the findings in relation to the second research question: What are the predictors related to followership that determine the effectiveness of leadership? Several key themes focusing on followers' impact on leadership effectiveness emerged from the review of followership literature. These themes are broadly categorised into three: follower psychology, follower personal attributes, and leader-follower dyad. Table 2 summarises the identified follower-related predictors under these three themes with their sub elements.

Table 2: Summary of the Follower-centric Predictors on Leadership Effectiveness

Theme	Broad meaning	Sample variables
Follower psychology	Psychological states from followers that contribute to determining leadership effectiveness	Needs, moods, job attitudes, personality traits, , identity, preferences for a specific leadership style, voice, organisational citizenship, affective well-being
Follower demographics and behaviours	Demographic characteristics and specific behaviour patterns of followers	Demographics, followership typologies based on different styles (see the discussion on Cluster I), communication styles, influence tactics.
Leader-Follower Dyad	The quality of the relationship between leaders and followers	leader trust in followers, Leader-follower fit, leader-member exchange

Follower psychology. The concept of follower psychology encompasses the positive mental state of followers (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Literature has explored various elements of follower psychology, including needs, moods, job attitudes, emotional exhaustion, and follower identity (Epitropaki et al., 2017). Psychological characteristics also include personality traits, beliefs and values (Seaton, 2021). These

factors have been studied to understand their influence on leader outputs, such as job performance, and satisfaction (e.g., Day & Antonakis, 2012; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Follower demographics and behaviours. In addition to psychological characteristics, literature also identifies follower demographics and behaviours as predictors of effective leadership outcomes. For example, Seaton (2021) identifies demographics as a predictor alongside psychological characteristics such as personality and values. Further, various follower behaviours described in followership typologies discussed previously as well as different communication styles and influence tactics that have been identified in the literature as predictors (see, for example, Bufalino, 2018; Junker & Van Dick, 2014; Seaton, 2021; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018)

Leader-follower dyad. This denotes the nature of the formally established designated relationship between a leader and follower. According to literature, leaders cultivate distinct relationships with individual followers, and the quality of these relationships influences the outcomes for leaders (Gottfredson & Aguinis, 2017; Hofmans et al., 2019). In other words, when the leader-follower dyad is of higher quality, followers are more motivated to invest their efforts in performing at a high level, with the expectation of receiving positive outcomes from the leader. This, in turn, results in more effective leadership. In ideological models, there is an assumption that ethical interactions will result from a leader's belief of positive followership. In contrast, leaders offer their followers what they desire but not necessarily what they need, and if a socially constructed dyadic relationship results, then an effective relationship between the leader and follower takes place (Mumford & Fried, 2014). While some authors, draw an analogy of the relationship between a leader and follower to an opera (Gabriel, 2017) where the romance, sacrifice, and strife are clearly experienced by both, others term the relationship as 'leadership constellation' (Empson, 2020). According to the distributed leadership model, individuals shape themselves according to the power relations and agency they participate in and exercise influence upon others (Humphreys & Rigg, 2020).

Scholars in the field of organisational leadership have recently devoted considerable attention to studying the role of followers, recognising them as a critical integral factor in the formation of leadership outcomes. Within this context, it can be concluded that the literature underscores the importance of exploring the role of followers with increased frequency and depth, acknowledging its significance alongside leadership in shaping organisational outcomes.

Cluster III – Theoretical Perspectives Used in Followership

The last set of findings focus on the third research question, which examines the theoretical perspectives employed in the organisational leadership literature to conceptualise followership. The review indicates that theories concerning followership can be classified into two main categories. The first category consists of leader-centric theories that explore followership, while the second category covers follower-centric theories utilised to establish the link between follower-centric predictors and leadership effectiveness.

Leader-centric Theories in Followership

Traditional leadership theories primarily focused on leader characteristics and behaviours to determine leadership effectiveness (Collinson et al., 2018). Consequently, followers were often assumed to have little influence over the leadership process and were seen as passive recipients of leader influence (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2019). However, there are notable exceptions to this perspective. For instance, contingency theories of leadership, which consider situational and contextual factors in understanding leadership, were among the earliest works exploring the potential role of followers in leadership processes (Ndonye, 2022). The contingency schools of leadership treated followers as part of the leader's context and proposed that follower traits, cognition, and leader-member relations moderate, along with other situational factors, the relationship between leader traits and behaviours (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2019). Additionally, the leader-member exchange theory (Graen & Schiemann, 1978) viewed leadership as an interpersonal and relational process in which both leaders and followers contribute in unison (Fousiani & Wisse, 2022; Wang et al., 2014). Furthermore, implicit leadership theory (Mohamadzadeh et al., 2015) and charismatic leadership theory (Howell & Shamir, 2005) argued that follower cognition and perceptions of leadership play a significant role in the leadership process. Finally, the path-goal theory also identified followership as predictor to leadership success. Table 3 summarises the leader-centric theories that acknowledge the role of followership.

Table 3: Leader-centric Theories Recognising Followership

Theory	Follower perspective
Contingency theories of leadership	Identified followers as integral components of the leader's context and proposed that factors such as follower traits, follower cognition, leader-member relations, and other situational variables moderate the relationship between leader traits and behaviours, as well as their effectiveness and emergence as leaders.

Theory	Follower perspective
Leader-member exchange (LMX) theories	Viewed leadership as an interpersonal and relational process. It recognises that both leaders and followers actively contribute to the dynamics and outcomes of leadership.
Implicit leadership theories	Suggested that the cognition and perceptions of followers significantly influence how leaders are perceived in terms of their effectiveness.
Path-goal theory	Argued follower's role and identity are predictors of leadership effectiveness

Follower-centric Theories in Followership

Although early leader-centric theories did explore certain aspects of followership in relation to the leadership process, they failed to generate significant enthusiasm for the concept. However, the work of Kelley (1988) played a crucial role in directing attention towards follower-centric approaches and gaining momentum in considering followers within the context of leadership. Kelley's followership typologies emphasised that effective followers actively contribute to group functioning and help achieve shared goals. The emotions perspective theory delves into the intricate connections between leader behaviour, follower emotions, and perceptions of leader effectiveness (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2016). This perspective sheds light on the complex dynamics of followers' feelings and emotional states in the leadership process. Then, social influence theories of followership (Oc & Bashshur, 2013) emerged, examining how both followers and leaders perceive followership in terms of role orientation and the impact of these perceptions on outcomes. The implicit followership theory, on the other hand, provides the idea of follower's perception towards work, their professional ability, behaviour and relationship with their leader (Mohamadzadeh et al., 2015). These theories offer valuable insights into understanding the dynamics of followership and its role in shaping effective leadership. Table 4 summarises the follower-centric theories of followership.

Table 4: Follower-centric Theories of Followership

Theory	Follower perspective
Kelley's perspective	Suggested, by introducing a follower typology, that an effective follower is characterised by active contribution to group dynamics and commitment to achieving shared goals.
Emotions perspective	Unpacked the connections between leader behaviour, the emotions and feelings of followers, and how these factors influence followers' perceptions of leader effectiveness.

Theory	Follower perspective
Social influence theory	Leaders place high value on power distance, unintentionally creating social barrier between themselves and their followers. As a result, the emotional opinions of leaders have less of an impact on the followers due to the psychological separation, which impacts approachability, the degree to which followers are aware of their own emotional intelligence, and the simplicity of communication between leaders and followers.
Implicit followership theories	Explore follower traits and classify how well they match follower prototypes.
Game theory perspective	Proposes that engaging in the act of following can be a deliberate and strategic decision made by individuals, highlighting its adaptability, explore various types of followership behaviours that can arise from this choice and provide insights into the underlying mechanisms that drive and explain these behaviours.

Taken together, both leader-centric and follower-centric theories indicate a growing emphasis on theorising followership. While each perspective may approach follower-related factors differently, they have all made valuable contributions to understand the role of followers in leadership processes.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to provide clarity on the conceptualisation of followership and highlight key areas of interest within the literature, using three research questions: First to explore the conceptualisation of followership including its definitions, styles and attributes; second, to find predictors related to followership that determine the effectiveness of leadership; and finally, to identify the theoretical perspectives used in the organisational leadership literature to conceptualize followership. The findings presented in relation to these three aims organized under three clusters, make several contributions to literature, and also have implications for practice and future research.

In all three clusters of findings, the paper emphasised the shift from a leader-centric approach to a more contemporary, follower-centric perspective of followership. It positioned followership as a distinct concept that highlights the unique role, style, and attributes of followers within the leadership relationship with the ability even to predict leadership success. By differentiating between leader-

centric and follower-centric conceptualisations, this study facilitates a distinct conceptualisation of followership that is independent of leadership.

In this context, the paper also identified three themes categorising follower-centric predictors that contribute to leadership effectiveness: follower psychology, follower demographics and behaviours, and the leader-follower dyad. While the literature acknowledges a variety of follower-oriented predictors, there has been a lack of comprehensive review that systematically examines the array of follower-related factors used to predict leadership outcomes (Carsten et al., 2010). Therefore, the identification of these three categories is a useful contribution to followership literature.

Finally, despite substantial efforts to organise the literature on followership, the theories pertaining to followership have not been explicitly explored (Ford & Harding, 2018). Addressing this gap, the paper examined notions of followership in leadership theories representing both leader-centric and follower-centric perspectives. The findings suggest that while each perspective may approach follower-related factors differently, each has played an important role in enhancing our understanding of the followers' role in leadership processes.

A key practical implication derived from this review is the recognition of the pivotal role that followers play in shaping leadership processes and outcomes, as well as their significance for leaders and the overall leadership process. The synergy between effective leadership and followership skills contributes to overall organisational development. By enhancing the skills and capabilities of both leaders and followers, organisations can achieve substantial improvements (Akhilele et al., 2021). Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge that leadership development initiatives should not solely focus on leaders, but also on followers. Organisations should strive to foster an environment that values and invests in the development of both leaders and followers.

In conclusions, this systematic review has identified that the journey of followership studies has evolved through the adoption of various research approaches that explore the role of followers and following in leadership. These studies have progressed from solely considering followers from the leader's perspective to incorporating followers' own views and experiences. This recognition has led to the development of followership studies. The recent work highlighting the active role of followers in effective organisational leadership indicates the importance of further in-depth study in this area.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

References

Akhilele, S., Buford, M., Shannon, M. R., & Winston, B. E. (2021). The role of organizational support in followership skills development. *International Leadership Journal*, *13*(1), 3–16.

Alegbeleye, I. D., & Kaufman, E. K. (2019). Reconceptualizing followership identity: A useful guide for leadership educators. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics*, *16*(5), 34–39. https://doi.org/10.33423/jlae.v16i5.2652

Alegbeleye, I. D., & Kaufman, E. K. (2020). Relationship between middle managers' transformational leadership and effective followership behaviors in organizations. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *13*(4), 6–19. https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21673

Bligh, M. C., Kohles, J. C., & Pillai, R. (2011). Romancing leadership: Past, present, and future. *Leadership Quarterly*, 22(6), 1058–1077. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.09.003

Bryant, A. (2010). Influence – Upwards, laterally, downwards and in circles. *Self Leadership International*. https://www.selfleadership.com/influence-upwards-laterally-downwards-and-in-circles/

Bufalino, G. (2018). We need great "followers", not just great leaders: A brief questionnaire for followership development. *Development and Learning in Organizations*, *32*(1), 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1108/DLO-04-2017-0040

Carsten, M. K., Uhl-Bien, M., & Huang, L. (2018). Leader perceptions and motivation as outcomes of followership role orientation and behavior. *Leadership*, *14*(6), 731–756. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715017720306

Carsten, M. K., Uhl-Bien, M., West, B. J., Patera, J. L., & McGregor, R. (2010). Exploring social constructions of followership: A qualitative study. *Leadership Quarterly*, *21*(3), 543–562. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.03.015

Chaleff, I. (2016). In praise of followership style assessments. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *10*(3), 45–48. https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21490

Chong, E., & Wolf, H. (2010). Factors influencing followers' perception of organisational leaders. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, *31*(5), 402–419. https://doi.org/10.1108/01437731011056434

Collinson, D., Smolović Jones, O., & Grint, K. (2018). 'No more heroes': Critical perspectives on leadership romanticism. *Organization Studies*, *39*(11), 1625–1647. https://doi.org/10.1177/017084061772778

Cunningham, D. P. (2019). *Influencing Upwards: A phenomenological study of 'effective followership' in the UK HE sector*. Lancaster University Management School

Day, D. V., & Antonakis, J. (2012). *The nature of leadership*. SAGE

Dhiman, A. (2017). Effect of employee's upward influence tactics on managerial decision making. *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, *53*(1), 152–166. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26536444

Dorasamy, N. (2018). The nexus between narcissist followers and leaders-Antecedent for toxic leadership. *Journal of Economics and Behavioral Studies*, *10*(6), 251–260. https://doi.org/10.22610/jebs.v10i6(J).2615

Empson, L. (2020). Ambiguous authority and hidden hierarchy: Collective leadership in an elite professional service firm. *Leadership*, *16*(1), 62–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715019886769

Empson, L., & Alvehus, J. (2020). Collective leadership dynamics among professional peers: Co-constructing an unstable equilibrium. *Organization Studies*, *41*(9), 1234–1256. https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406198442

Epitropaki, O., Kark, R., Mainemelis, C., & Lord, R. G. (2017). Leadership and followership identity processes: A multilevel review. *Leadership Quarterly,28*(1), 104–129. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2016.10.003

Erkutlu, H., & Chafra, J. (2016). Impact of behavioral integrity on organizational identification: The moderating roles of power distance and organizational politics. *Management Research Review*, *39*(6), 672–691. https://doi.org/10.1108/MRR-01-2015-0011

Ford, J., & Harding, N. (2018). Followers in leadership theory: Fiction, fantasy and illusion. *Leadership*, *14*(1), 3–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015621372

Fousiani, K., & Wisse, B. (2022). Effects of leaders' power construal on leader-member exchange: The moderating role of competitive climate at work. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1177/15480518221075229

Gabriel, Y. (2017). Leadership in opera: Romance, betrayal, strife and sacrifice. *Leadership*, *13*(1), 5–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715016663302

Gottfredson, R. K., & Aguinis, H. (2017). Leadership behaviors and follower performance: Deductive and inductive examination of theoretical rationales and underlying mechanisms. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *38*(4), 558–591. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2152

Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995). Relationship-based approach to leadership: Development of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years: Applying a multi-level multi-domain perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *6*(2), 219–247. https://doi.org/10.1016/1048-9843(95)90036-5

Graen, G., & Schiemann, W. (1978). Leader-member agreement: A vertical dyad linkage approach. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *63*(2), 206–212 https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.63.2.206

Haddaway, N. R., Page, M. J., Pritchard, C. C., & McGuinness, L. A. (2022). PRISMA2020: An R package and Shiny app for producing PRISMA 2020-compliant flow diagrams, with interactivity for optimised digital transparency and open synthesis. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, *18*(2), Article No e1320 https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1230

Hofmans, J., Dóci, E., Solinger, O. N., Choi, W., & Judge, T. A. (2019). Capturing the dynamics of leader–follower interactions: Stalemates and future theoretical progress. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *40*(3), 382–385. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2317

Howell, J. M., & Shamir, B. (2005). The role of followers in the charismatic leadership process: Relationships and their consequences. *The Academy of Management Review*,*30*(1). 96–112 https://www.jstor.org/stable/20159097

Humphreys, D. M., & Rigg, C. (2020). The inseparable connection between leadership, agency, power and collaboration in a primary educational setting. *Leadership*, *16*(6), 712–737. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020931285

Hurwitz, M., & Koonce, R. (2016). The practice of followership: From theory to application. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *10*(3), 41–44. https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21491

Jesson, J., Matheson, L., & Lacey, F. M. (2011). *Doing your literature review: Traditional and systematic techniques*. Sage

Joseph, T. (2016). Developing the leader-follower relationship: Perceptions of leaders and followers. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics*, *13*(1), 132–144. https://www.articlegateway.com/index.php/JLAE/article/view/1930

Junker, N. M., & Van Dick, R. (2014). Implicit theories in organizational settings: A systematic review and research agenda of implicit leadership and followership theories. *Leadership Quarterly*, *25*(6), 1154–1173. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.09.002

Kelley, R. E. (1988). In praise of followers. *Harvard Business Review*, *66*(6), 142–148.

Kipnis, D., & Schmidt, S. M. (1988). Upward-influence styles: Relationship with performance evaluations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *33*(4). https://www.jstor.org/stable/2392642

Kudek, R. D., Winston, B., & Wood, A. J. (2020). Followership and the relationship between Kelley's followership styles and the big five factor model of personality. *Journal of Organisational Psychology*, *20*(3), 102–117. https://doi.org/10.33423/jop.v20i3.2943

Lin, C. H. V., & Sun, J. M. J. (2018). Chinese employees' leadership preferences and the relationship with power distance orientation and core self-evaluation. *Frontiers of Business Research in China*, *12*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s11782-018-0027-9

Malakyan, P. G. (2014). Followership in leadership studies: A case of leader-follower trade approach. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 7*(4), 6-22. https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21306

Martin, R. (2015). A review of the literature of the followership since 2008: The importance of relationships and emotional intelligence. *SAGE Open*, *5*(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015608421

Meindl, J. R. (1995). The romance of leadership as a follower-centric theory: A social constructionist approach. *Leadership Quarterly*, *6*(3), 329–341. https://doi.org/10.1016/1048-9843(95)90012-8

Methley, A. M., Campbell, S., Chew-Graham, C., McNally, R., & Cheraghi-Sohi, S. (2014). PICO, PICOS and SPIDER: A comparison study of specificity and sensitivity in three search tools for qualitative systematic reviews. *BMC Health Services Research, 14*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-014-0579-0

Mohamadzadeh, Z., Mortazavi, S., Lagzian, M., & Rahimnia, F. (2015). Toward an exploration of follower's implicit followership theories of Mashhad's large organizations using a qualitative approach. *Iranian Journal of Management Studies*, *8*(3), 397–419. https://ijms.ut.ac.ir/article_53635.html

Mumford, M. D., & Fried, Y. (2014). Give them what they want or give them what they need? Ideology in the study of leadership. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *35*(5), 622–634. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1921

Ndonye, D. M. (2022). Followership in leadership process and organizational performance: A review of literature. *International Journal of Organizational Leadership*, *11*, 26–43. https://ijol.cikd.ca/article_60618.html

Oc, B., & Bashshur, M. R. (2013). Followership, leadership and social influence. *Leadership Quarterly*, 24(6), 919–934. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.10.006

Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J. M., Akl, E. A., Brennan, S. E., Chou, R., Glanville, J., Grimshaw, J. M., Hróbjartsson, A., Lalu, M. M., Li, T., Loder, E. W., Mayo-Wilson, E., McDonald, S., … Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020

statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *The BMJ*, *372*. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71

Parmer, L., Green M., Duncan P., & Zarate C. (2013). The relationship between followers' personality and preferences in leadership. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics*, *10*(2), 55–64.

Pascoe, B. (2016). Followership and the Samurai. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *10*(3), 54–57. https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21494

Paul, J., & Criado, A. R. (2020). The art of writing literature review: What do we know and what do we need to know? *International Business Review*, *29*(4), Article No 101717 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2020.101717

Prilipko, E. V. (2019). Follower attributes: Perceptions of leadership and followership experts in the United States. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics*, *16*(2), 56–63. https://doi.org/10.33423/jlae.v16i2.2022

Riggio, R. E. (2020). Why followership? *New Directions for Student Leadership*, *167*, 15–22. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20395

Seaton, L. J. (2021). The new "social identity creator" type of leadership: The effect of social identity on leadership. *Academy of Business Research*, *3*, 117–126.

Stern, J. (2021). Do you follow? Understanding followership before leadership. *Management in Education*, *35*(1), 58–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020620942504

Sutherland, N., Bolden, R., Edwards, G., & Schedlitzki, D. (2022). Putting leadership in its place: Introduction to the special issue. *Leadership, 18*(1), 3–12 https://doi.org/10.1177/17427150221083498

Theriou, G., Chatzoudes, D., Augusto, C., & Moya, D. (2020). The effect of ethical leadership and leadership effectiveness on employee's turnover intention in SMEs: The mediating role of work engagement. *European Research Studies Journal: 13*(4), 947 – 963.

Tripathi, N. (2021). Reverse the lens, set focus on the followers: A theoretical framework of resource dependence, upward influence, and leadership. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.699340

Uhl-Bien, M., & Carsten, M. (2018). Reversing the lens in leadership: Positioning followership in the leadership construct. *Monographs in Leadership and Management*, *9*, 195–222. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-357120180000009005

Uhl-Bien, M., Riggio, R. E., Lowe, K. B., & Carsten, M. K. (2014). Followership theory: A review and research agenda. *Leadership Quarterly*, *25*(1), 83–104. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.007

van Knippenberg, D., & van Kleef, G. A. (2016). Leadership and affect: Moving the hearts and minds of followers. *Academy of Management Annals*, *10*(1), 799–840. https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2016.1160515

Van Vugt, M., Hogan, R., & Kaiser, R. B. (2008). Leadership, followership, and evolution: Some lessons from the past. *American Psychologist*, *63*(3), 182–196. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.63.3.182

Wang, H., Sui, Y., Luthans, F., Wang, D., & Wu, Y. (2014). Impact of authentic leadership on performance: Role of followers' positive psychological capital and relational processes. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *35*(1), 5–21. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1850

Wang, Z., Liu, Y., & Liu, S. (2019). Authoritarian leadership and task performance: The effects of leader-member exchange and dependence on leader. *Frontiers of Business Research in China*, *13*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s11782-019-0066-x

Wayne, S. J., & Ferris, G. R. (1990). Influence tactics, affect, and exchange quality in supervisor-subordinate interactions: A laboratory experiment and field study. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *75*(5), 487–499. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.75.5.487

Wrench S. J., Punyanunt-Carter M. N., & Thweatt S. K. (2020). *Interpersonal communication: A mindful approach to relationships*. Milne Library Publishing

Young, M., Camp M. K., & Bushardt C. S. (2020). Leadership development: A hierarchy of followership skills during a crisis. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics*, *17*(5), 127–133. https://doi.org/10.33423/jlae.v17i5.3225

Yukl, G., & Falbe, C. M. (1990). Influence tactics and objectives in upward, downward, and lateral influence attempts. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 75(2). https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.75.2.132

Yukl, G., & Falbe, C. M. (1991). Importance of different power sources in downward and lateral relations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *76*(3), 416–423. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.76.3.416

Zoogah, B. D. (2020). Companionate leadership: A Shemswian perspective. *Africa Journal of Management, 6*(3), 214–247. https://doi.org/10.1080/23322373.2020.1779944