

Identification of Followership Styles and Examining Association with Demographics in Indian Public Sector Telecommunication Corporation

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Abstract

Leadership research has too often neglected the follower, choosing instead to pursue what Meindl referred to as ‘The Romance of Leadership’. Execution and goal achievement is primarily dependent upon the follower in the leader–follower relationship. In the context of prevailing COVID-19 situation and prevalent work from home culture, it is argued that there is permanent shift in the dynamics between followership and leadership in favour of followership. This study contributes by empirically testing Kelley’s The Followership Questionnaire (TFQ) with its two sub-scales of Independent Critical Thinking (ICT) and Active Engagement (AE) in Indian context, identifying followership style prevalent in the studied organisation and examining the relationship of followership styles with demographic variables. The Followership Questionnaire was administered to 331 respondents from North, East, South and West zones of India.

Keywords

Followership, questionnaire, self-assessment, organisational performance, leadership, COVID-19, pandemic

Introduction

Kelley (1992) has reported that effectiveness of followers contributes to 80% of organisation’s success, and only 20% of organisation’s performance can be attributed to leadership. Further, Hurwitz and Hurwitz (2015) has also reported that ‘effective followership is linked to improvement of 17% to 43%

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on many key performance metrics such as sales, production, and quality, revenue per employee and customer's satisfaction'. It is need of the hour and concentrated efforts are required to be put up by organisations to increase the effectiveness of the followers. In hierarchical organisations (most of the companies whether large to medium size, govt. departments and organisation and even NGO (non govt. organisation are hierarchal organisations), every officer and employee is acting both in followership as well as leadership role simultaneously. 'We are all followers in some way' (Steger et al., 1982) and 'even those with the highest level of leadership responsibility answer to someone' (Tanoff & Barlow, 2002, p. 157). Every organisation has more followers than leaders (Collinson, 2006). Therefore, organisations, instead of neglecting the followers, should move from the romance of leadership to romance of followership (Meindl, 1995).

Further, digitisation has caused, and COVID-19 pandemic has hastened, the emergence of virtual organisations and virtual spaces. The classic industrial era divide between leaders and followers, i.e., leaders doing leadership and followers doing followership, may no longer exist. Due to remote interactions, the power dynamics between leaders and followers is slowly changing. In the virtual world, it is observed that followers are acting and behaving like leaders. This phenomenon permeates not only in virtual organisations but also in traditional organisations as they increase their online presence and adopt IT revolution forced by the current pandemic situation. What we are seeing are macro trends that inform how organisations have to evolve differently. These changes are around ubiquitous connectivity, which is undermining traditional power structures and dynamics between leader and follower (Chen and Sripthon, 2021).

Defining Followers and Followership

The definition of followership has evolved over the years. Katz and Kahn (1978) first introduced the concept of followership in modern literature when they defined followership as a role, whether formal or informal, that existed under the context of direction from a leader. Hollander and Webb (1955) defined followership as 'the degree to which a person is sought by potential leaders of a group operating within a set of institutional constraints'. Another definition by Townsend and Gebhart (1997) also considers the concept of followership from the perspective of the leader: 'Followership can be defined as a process in which subordinates recognize their responsibility to obey their leaders' orders and take suitable action appropriate to the situation and carry out those orders to the best of their ability. If there are no orders, they estimate the suitable action required for accomplishing the mission, perform and take that action.' In the same way, Bjugstad et al. (2006) also adopted leader-centric view and defined followership as 'the ability to effectively follow the directives and support the efforts of a leader to maximize a structured organization'.

Kelley (1988) expanded upon Katz and Kahn's work to define followership as a pursuit of a shared purpose through participation. Further, Kelley (1992) chose to define leadership and followership in distinctive ways: 'People who are effective in the follower role have the vision to see both the forest and the trees, the social capacity to work well with others, the strength of character to thrive without heroic status, the moral and psychological balance to pursue personal and corporate goals without harming others, and, most importantly, the desire to participate in a team effort for the accomplishment of some greater common purpose.'

Chaleff (2009) continued with Kelley's definition and has defined followership as an exchange of influence between people who share a common purpose. On the other hand, Kellerman (2008) defined

‘followers’ with regard to hierarchy, as ‘subordinates who have a lesser amount of authority, power and influence than do their superiors/leaders and who as a result, usually, but not always, fall into line’. Many of these definitions establish that roles are inextricably linked to one’s position in the hierarchy. Stech (2008) has called this viewpoint into question and argued that leadership/followership represents an influential process, irrespective of rank and state. The idea of followership/leadership as a process is central to Agho’s (2009) claim that one can only become an effective leader after being an effective follower, implying that followership is an experiential necessity of leadership.

To summarise, followership and leadership are frequently thought to be very similar or to have a symbiotic relationship. While followership can be defined as a process in which one or more people accept the influence of others in order to achieve a common goal, leadership can also be considered as a collaborative effort.

Followers Typology

The earliest role-based views are provided in typology that identify follower’s characteristics and styles. First such typology was provided by Zaleznik (1965), who characterised followers by placing them along two axis: dominance and submission, activity and passivity. Accordingly, he divided them into four groups: impulsive subordinates, compulsive subordinates, masochistic subordinates, and withdrawn subordinates. The most widely used typology in academia and research is proposed by Kelley. According to Kelley (1992), ‘effective followers are individuals who are enthusiastic, intelligent, ambitious, and self-reliant’. Kelley identified two underlying behavioural dimensions that distinguish types of followers. The first behavioural dimension is the degree to which the individual is an independent, critical thinker. The second dimension is the degree to which the individual is active or passive. Depending on where a person falls on these two dimensions, there are five different follower types as listed in Table 1.

Kelley advocated turning all followers into ‘Exemplary Followers’, arguing that the best followers are anything but passive sheep—they engage actively and exhibit courageous conscience.

Table 1. Kelley’s Typology of Followers.

Types of Followers	Characteristics
Passive followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack commitment and require constant supervision from the leader – Score low both in independent thinking and in level of engagement
Conformist followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Are content to take orders, to defer to their leaders; they do not question the decisions or actions of the leader – Score high in active engagement and low in independent thinking
Pragmatist followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Question their leader’s decision, but not too critically and not very often – Score ‘middling’ in independent thinking and ‘middling’ in terms of engagement
Alienated followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Think freely and critically but they do not participate in the groups and organisations of which they are members, often questioning the decisions and actions of the leader – Score high in independent thinking and low in active engagement
Exemplary or effective followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Exercise independent, critical thinking, separate from the leader or the group – Take initiatives and engage actively – Score high across the board

Linkage between Effective Followership Style and Organisational Performance/Job Satisfaction

Only a few empirical researches have looked into the phenomenon of followership. ‘To address this imbalance and gain a better comprehension of organisations, we must look into how well leaders lead as well as how well followers follow’ (Kelley, 1988). The effective follower is not someone who simply follows rules, but someone whose effectiveness improves organisational performance. To examine the relationship between followership and organisational performance, Kim et al. (2011) did an empirical study on US Federal Government employees (sample size more than 400 thousands) and found that encouragement of effective followership is important in public organisations. Jin et al. (2016) established linkage between Active Engagement (AE) of followers and Job Satisfaction. The mentioned comprehensive researches generated interest on gathering empirical evidence on effective followership. Many studies examining the above-mentioned issues have been conducted in Malaysia, India, Italy, Botswana, Iran, etc., in the health care institutions and educational institutions (Mojtbha et al., 2013; Oyetunji, 2013; Saraih, 2018; Kim & Schachter, 2015). In view of the possibility of a significant relationship between followership styles and organisational performance, more research is required on theoretical framework of followership as well as empirical research to identify which followership style is more effective in different types of organisations, countries and cultures.

Review of Instruments of Followership Measurement/Need for Study

Kelley’s followership instrument was proposed by Kelly (1992) based on extensive research to identify different followership styles. This is the most widely used self-reporting questionnaire on followership. Chaleff (1995, 2008) also proposed a questionnaire for identifying followership styles. However, Chaleff himself observed that this instrument is to be used only for classroom/training purposes due to reliability and validity issues.

The Performance and Relationship Questionnaire (PRQ) by Rosenbach, Pittman and Potter (1996) measures followership on two dimension, namely performance initiative and relationship initiative. Further, Dixon and Westbrook (2003) purposed the followership profile based on Chaleff’s 1998 typology. Baker (2006) argued that ‘research on followership theory and practice can only be sustained if proper measuring instruments are available. These instruments should be extensively tested for validity and reliability in different countries, different cultures, and different industries empirically’.

In Italy, Gatti et al. (2014) tested Kelley’s instrument on 610 respondents drawn from different organisational settings, namely healthcare and bank retailers, of Italy using EFA and CFA. Blanchard et al. (2009) tested The Followership Questionnaire (TFQ) on university employees in USA and put forward a modified version of TFQ. In India only one study—by Walia (2018)—has been performed on followership using Kelley’s TFQ; this study is limited to one city of India, not covering various sub-cultures, sub-nationalities of a continental-size country like India. Therefore, the current study has chosen to empirically test Kelley’s TFQ in Indian context covering all the 04 sub-cultural zones, namely South, North, East and West.

Description of TFQ

The TFQ consists of total 20 questions and has two sub-scales, namely Independent Critical Thinking (ICT) and AE. Each sub-scale is measured through 10 set of questions using Likert scale. The followership style is extracted by plotting ICT and AE as shown in Figure 1.

Research Methodology/Purpose of Study

The main purpose of this quantitative and empirical research study is to test reliability and validity of TFQ, explore followership styles and also examine the relationship between followership styles and demographic variables, in a large public sector telecommunication company, having hierarchical organisation structure evolved through more than a century in India. Research questions are as follows:

1. Testing the normality of TFQ scores in Indian context.
2. What is the reliability and validity of TFQ in Indian context?
3. What are the followership styles prevalent in an Indian telecommunication public sector organisation?
4. To study the linkage between demographic variables and followership styles in a public sector setting in an emerging economy like India.

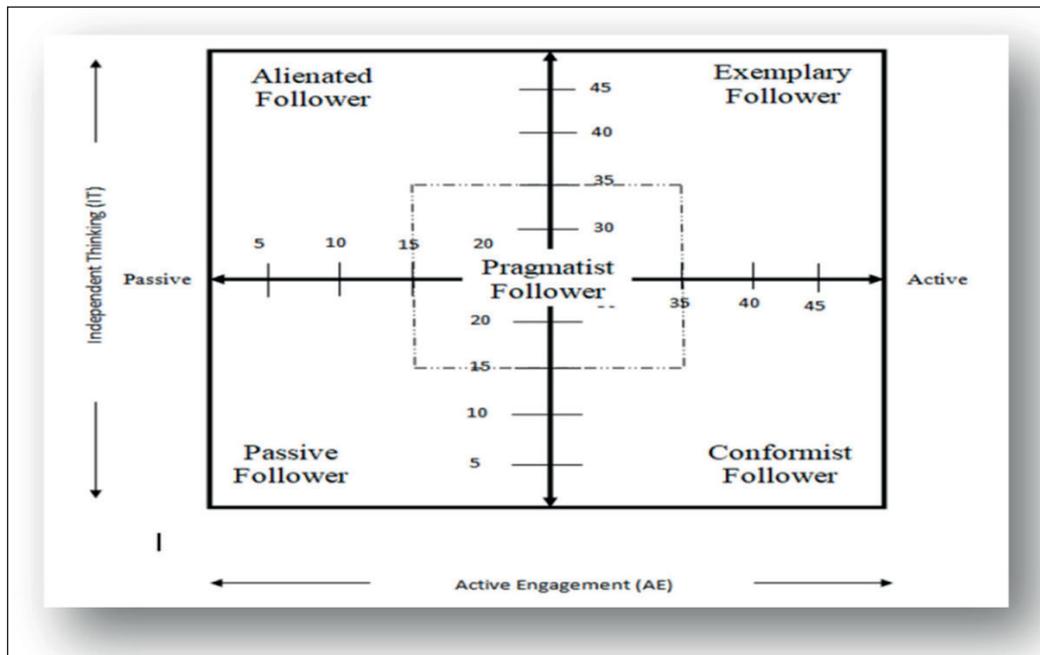


Figure 1. Two Dimensional Measures by Kelley (1992).

Description of Participants

The self-reporting TFQ was administered to 331 participants in a very large public sector telecommunication corporation in India spread across the four sub-cultural zones, namely North, East, South and West zone. Participants belong to the hierarchical levels of frontline managers (JE/JTO) to top level management (GM/DGM). To summarise, 86% of the participants were male and 95% were married reflecting the overall general trend in governmental organisations in India. 56% of the participants were living in joint families. Further, 61% of the samples were from employees of the age more than 40 years and 58.9% participants held bachelor's degree. Approximately 90% of the participants reported to hold bachelor's or master's degree. Highest participation was from JTO/JAO level which is entry level in the executive cadre in the organisation. Further, 52.3% of the participations were serving the organisation for more than 15 years. 42.6% of the participations were from West zone followed by 22% from each South and North zones. The lowest level of participation was from the East zone.

Data Analysis and Results

Normality Test of TFQ Score

The histogram in Figure 2 shows that the distribution of the overall score of The Followership Questionnaire (TFQ) is nearly normal. The skewness value calculated by SPSS was -0.387 which is within the acceptable range of -1 to $+1$. Further, calculated excess Kurtosis (Kurtosis $- 3$) value was

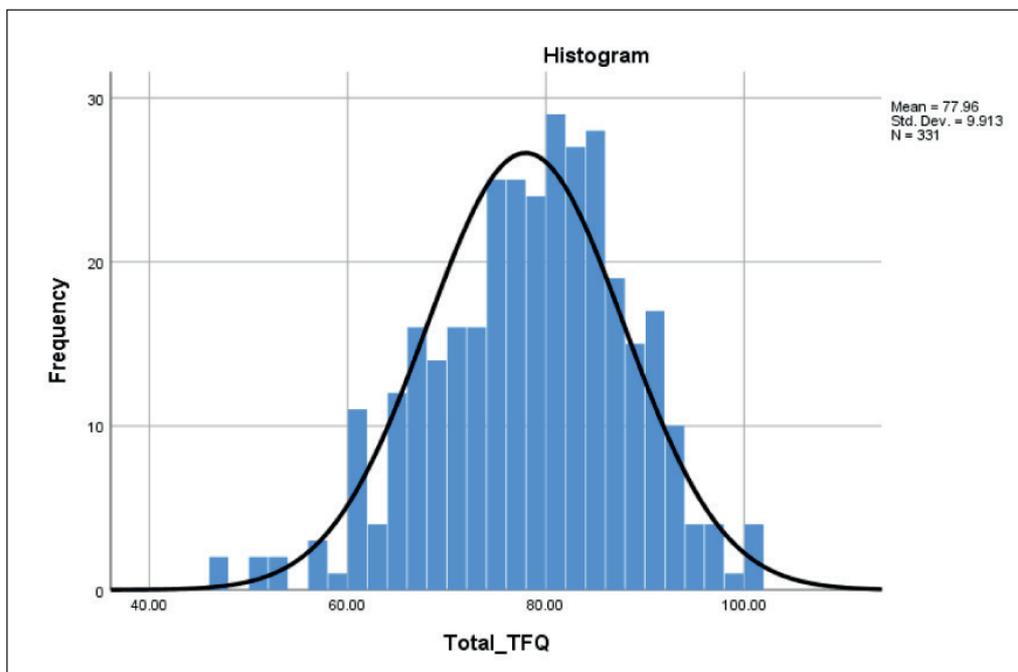


Figure 2. Histogram with Normal Curve for Overall TFQ Score.

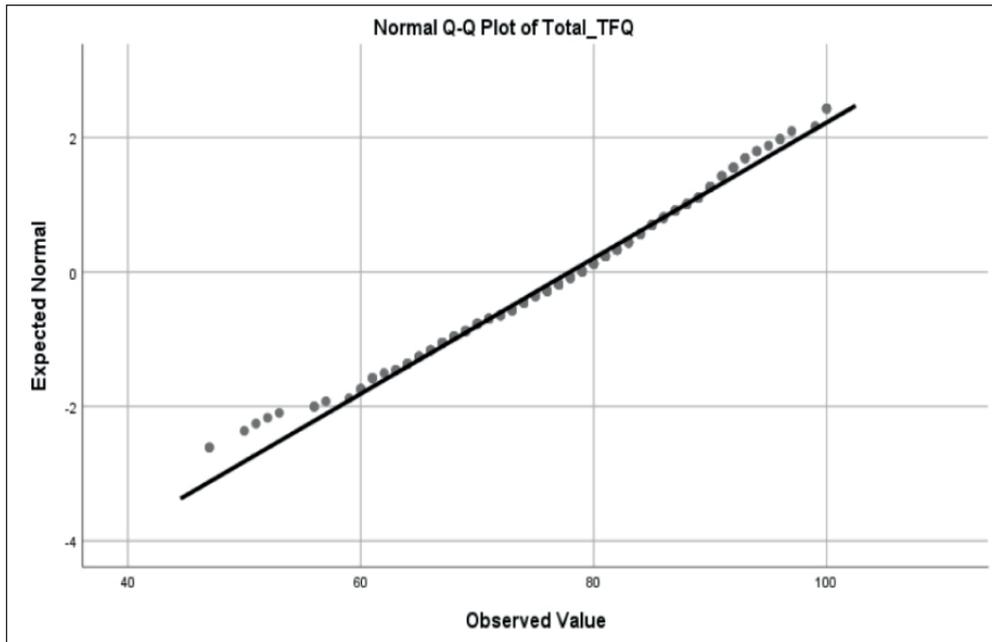


Figure 3. Q-Q Plots for Overall TFQ Score.

0.087, which is also within the acceptable range. ‘On the basis of above, it may be concluded that the distribution of the overall TFQ score is nearly normal and researcher has the freedom to apply parametric method for analysis of data.’ Further, Q-Q plot also shows that the distribution is nearly normal (Figure 3).

Reliability and Validity Tests of TFQ

Reliability Test of TFQ

Reliability test was done using SPSS 25 tool. Here, data reliability is assessed to check the internal consistency of the data based on Cronbach’s alpha. According to L. J. Cronbach (1951), an alpha value greater than 0.70 should be considered acceptable value for reliability of instrument. The results show good reliability for the overall TFQ with Cronbach’s alpha of 0.78. Further, Cronbach’s alpha was checked for both the sub-scales and it is found that it is 0.68 for ICT and 0.71 for AE questionnaires. Reliability was also checked by deleting questions one by one and it was found that there is no significant variation in Cronbach’s alpha. Therefore, it may be concluded that TFQ along with its sub-scales is a reliable measurement instrument for followership.

Validity Test of TFQ

The validity of TFQ has been tested using Pearson’s correlation coefficient between each question’s score and the total score using two-tailed test with confidence interval of 95%. Table 2 shows the result of the test performed using SPSS 25.

Table 2. The Pearson Correlations/Validity Test of TFQ.

Pearson Correlations			
Question	Coefficient	Question	Coefficient
Follower_Q1	.431**	Follower_Q11	.356**
Follower_Q2	.483**	Follower_Q12	.403**
Follower_Q3	.581**	Follower_Q13	.484**
Follower_Q4	.390**	Follower_Q14	.546**
Follower_Q5	.509**	Follower_Q15	.467**
Follower_Q6	.438**	Follower_Q16	.540**
Follower_Q7	.487**	Follower_Q17	.573**
Follower_Q8	.416**	Follower_Q18	.385**
Follower_Q9	.385**	Follower_Q19	.357**
Follower_Q10	.473**	Follower_Q20	.393**

Note: **Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

It is observed from Table 2 that correlation is significant at the .01 level for all the questions with reference to the total score of TFQ. Further, the sample size (N) = 331. Therefore, degree of freedom ($331 - 2$) = 329. Using the Pearson's correlation coefficient significance table for degree of freedom of 329 with significance level of .05 (confidence level of 95%), the critical value found was 0.1129. As per Table 2, for all the questions, Pearson's correlation value is greater than the critical value of 0.1129. Thus, all the 20 questions of TFQ are valid questions.

Distribution of Followership Styles of Executives in Telecom PSU in India

As described in research methodology, the followership styles were extracted using two sub-scales of TFQ. Overall distribution is given as shown in Figure 4 and Table 3.

As depicted in Figure 4 and Table 3, in this study the most prevalent followership style is 'exemplary followership style representing 85.8%, followed by pragmatist followership style which represents 10.6%, conformist followership style representing 3.3% and only 01 participant to be an alienated follower. There were no participants classified as passive follower'. To understand the distribution of followership style in the right perspective, in Table 4 we compare it with other empirical studies.

All five studies referred above have identified on average 57.2% followers as exemplary followers, 34.7% as pragmatist followers and 3.08% as conformist followers. Except Oyetunji (2013) study, all other studies have found zero passive followers and almost zero alienated followers. The finding of this study in Indian telecom sector public corporation with hierarchical organisation seems to be in line with latest studies. The high percentage of exemplary followers may be gauged from the perspective of highly unionised atmosphere in public sector unit coupled with high job security being a hundred percent government organisation. High job security might have reduced fear of coercive action from the boss (leader) resulting in a high ICT score. Similarly, union activities might have increased engagement as frequent interaction takes place during office hours and even off office hours, resulting in a high AE score.

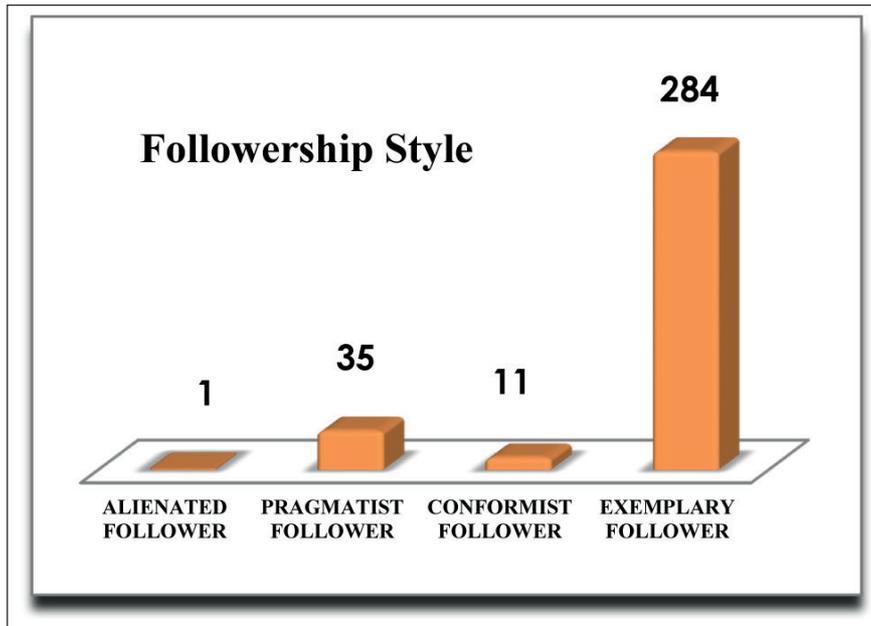


Figure 4. Distribution of Followership Styles.

Table 3. Followership Styles.

Followership Style	Frequency	%
Alienated follower	1	0.3
Pragmatist follower	35	11
Conformist follower	11	03
Exemplary follower	284	86
Total	331	100

Table 4. Followership Style: Comparative Analysis.

Followership Style	Kelley (1992)	Mertler et al. ¹ (1997)	Francis ² (2014)	Oyetunji et al. ³ (2013)	Novikov ⁴ (2016)	Hicks et al. ⁵ (2018)	Present Study
Passive	5%–10%	0%	0%	10.2%	0%	0%	0%
Alienated	15%–25%	0%	0%	13.6%	1.8%	0%	0.3%
Conformist	20%–30%	1.6%	0%	0%	3.5%	8.7%	3.3%
Pragmatist	25%–35%	35%	36.4%	63.6%	24%	14.8%	10.6%
Exemplary	0%–35%	63.3%	63.6%	12.5%	70.2%	76.4%	85.8%

Relationship between Demographic Conditions and Followership Styles

Demographic data was collected from each participant, and the distribution of the same has been summarised under the heading 'Description of Participants'. Since demographic data as well as followership styles are non-parametric data, chi-square test was used to determine the relationship between demographic conditions and followership styles. Table 5 shows the output of SPSS 25.

As evident from the results in Table 5, the p value for each test has been found to be greater than the significance level of .05; therefore, all the 08 null hypotheses failed to be rejected which means that in an Indian public sector organisation, there is no difference between followership styles based on demographic characteristics.

Limitation of the Study

This is an empirical study performed by using a self-reporting questionnaire for followership style. Therefore, this study is limited by those responders who choose to respond or those who chose not to respond. Further, self-reporting bias is also a big limitation for any empirical study using a self-reporting questionnaire. Therefore, as found in this study, 85.8% respondents have reported themselves as exemplary followers against Robert Kelley's estimation of 0%–35%.

This study is also limited by the type of organisation studied which is large, hierarchal and government-controlled, having highly unionised working environment. Therefore, the result may not be generalisable to private sector organisations.

This research may also be limited by research instruments. Although reliability and validity have been tested for the research instruments and found to be satisfactory, the result of those instruments may not accurately capture highly educated, unionised and seasoned professional attitude. It might be the reason that only three followership styles out of five have been self-reported by respondents.

Table 5. Associations between Followership Styles and Demographic Characteristics, and the Related Effect Sizes.

Variable	Pearson Chi-Square (χ^2)	P Value	Effect Size Cramer's V (ϕ)	Degrees of Freedom (DF)
Statistically Significant Relationships (Ordered by p Value)				
Gender	0.733	.865	0.047	3
Marital status	0.584	.900	0.042	3
Family	3.406	.333	0.101	3
Age group	8.572	.478	0.093	9
Qualification	4.563	.871	0.068	9
Designation	8.757	.724	0.094	12
Length of service	7.754	.804	0.088	12
Office zone	9.208	.418	0.096	9

Practical Implications

A practical implication for the organisation under study is to harness these large number of exemplary followers in the interest of organisational performance thorough various human resource initiatives and suitable implementation of key result area and balanced score card. The leadership should be sensitised to use a commensurate leadership style with these followers to improve the organisational performance.

As effective followership skill can be learned and honed and is required for better performance of organisations as well as individuals, authors believe that instructions on followership should form integral part of undergraduate and postgraduate education in India. To start with, all the BBA and MBA programs in India should compulsorily teach at least one course on followership as a graduation requirement. Gradually, followership should be made part of all undergraduate programs. Similar efforts are required from senior management to include followership theory and practice in their management development programs and training.

Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic has brought back the focus on and need of increasing our knowledge on building effective followership and leadership for organisational resilience and sustainability. In time of crisis and in the era of remote working, supervisors/leaders require high level of understanding of followership theory and practice so that they can inculcate culture of effective followership behaviour in organisations. According to emerging literature on leadership and followership, effective followers/leaders assume role of leader or follower multiple times in a day and share many traits and qualities. Therefore, cultivating followership skills is a prerequisite for effective leadership which requires reliable and valid instrument for measuring followership styles across industries, countries and cultures. As per findings of this study, TFQ is a reliable and valid instrument in Indian context also. Therefore, it can be used for leadership and followership training in organisations. Further, findings of the study suggest that most prevalent followership style in the studied organisation is 'exemplary followership' and there is no significant relationship between followership style and demographic characteristics.

Notes

1. Study was conducted in USA; target population was elementary and secondary school teachers.
2. Study was conducted in UK; target population was secondary school teachers.
3. Study was conducted in Botswana; target population was private university teachers.
4. Study was conducted in USA; target population was army officers in project management unit.
5. Study was conducted in USA; target population was New Hampshire high school teachers.

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