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How do followership behaviors encourage job performance? A longitudinal study

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Abstract

Followers have often been reported as recipients in previous leadership studies and have usually been associated with negative connotations. Drawing from self-determination theory (SDT) and social exchange theory, we argued that followers can be proactive and that followership behaviors are positively related to leader-follower relationships. The purpose of this study was to examine how followership behaviors promote job performance in terms of perceived supervisor support (PSS) and dyad tenure. Data from a three-wave survey of 219 leader-follower dyads in high-tech manufacturing firms were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The results indicated that active engagement (AE) and independent critical thinking (ICT) were positively related to PSS and that PSS mediated the relationship between followership behaviors and job performance. Additionally, dyad tenure positively moderated the relationship between AE and PSS but negatively moderated the relationship between ICT and PSS. This study revealed that followers' support for leaders can encourage supervisor support, which may result in high job performance. Furthermore, considering the important roles of followers found in this study, leaders should endeavor to support and promote followership.

Keywords: Followership, perceived supervisor support, job performance, dyad tenure, reciprocity

Introduction

In response to recent social changes, such as the recognition of the importance of empowerment, the development of flat organizations, and attention to labor rights, followers have started to grow their power and the amount of attention they receive in organizations (Baker, 2007; S. Xu et al., 2019). Followers are individuals who act in relation to leaders. According to Zhang and Morris (2014), followers' outcomes are positively related to certain organizational performance indicators, such as long-run profitability. Therefore, it is evident that followers play a crucial role in organizational success.

However, there are still far fewer studies on followers and followership than there are on leaders and leadership (Blom & Lundgren, 2020; Crossman & Crossman, 2011). The lack of research on followership can be attributed to three main factors. First, followers were originally referred to by the term subordinates, which usually has a negative connotation and is associated with passivity or inability (Agho, 2009; Bjugstad et al., 2006). Early leadership studies assumed that a leader holds a fixed position (Vanderslice, 1988) and that his or her main role is to lead or direct others, while subordinates are expected to automatically follow the leader's orders (Kelley, 1992). Furthermore, some researchers, such as Ford and Harding (2018), have claimed that no one identifies oneself as a follower, suggesting that the study of followership is meaningless. Second, research has greatly exaggerated the role of leadership and undervalued that of followers; leadership and leaders' actions have been considered essential to organizational success and even to the performance of entire industries (Meindl et al., 1985). Additionally, there is an erroneous assumption that the skill of leading needs to be learned, while that of following is instinctive (Agho, 2009). This assumption has led to a predominant focus on leadership in both academic research and corporate training.

To date, followers are still regarded as recipients in some leader-follower discussions and usually have negative connotations (e.g., Schneider et al., 2014). In addition, the leader-follower relationship is considered a key factor in previous followership studies (Baker, 2007). However, empirical evidence is still lacking. Existing empirical research has mainly focused on the direct effect of followership on followers themselves by exploring aspects such as followers' job satisfaction (e.g., Jin et al., 2016), while relational outcomes have been overlooked.

To address these gaps, we conducted this empirical study to explore how followership affects the leader-follower relationship, specifically the followers, by applying self-determination theory (SDT) of Deci and Ryan (2008) and social exchange theory of Homans (1961). We presumed that followers are active employees with inherent growth tendencies based on SDT. We further examined the relationship between followership and followers' job performance in terms of perceived supervisor support (PSS) and leader-follower dyad tenure. Moreover, this study selected PSS based on social exchange theory, which concentrates on the leader-follower dyad and exchange processes. Additionally, the strength of the social exchange relationship between leaders and followers (e.g., the strength of the causal relationship between followership and PSS) changes over time (Guarana & Barnes, 2017); thus, dyad tenure was used as a moderator in this research. Specifically, this research hypothesized that PSS mediates the relationship between followership and job performance and that tenure moderates the relationship between followership behaviors

and PSS. Therefore, the major contribution of this work is that it tests the causal pathway by which followership facilitates job performance through PSS and dyad tenure.

Literature review

Followers and followership

Followership is described as followers' ability to proactively follow instructions and support supervisors, with the aim of achieving organizational goals (Agho, 2009; Bjugstad et al., 2006). It is important to distinguish followers from subordinates because the latter has a negative connotation. In addition, past relevant studies argue that subordinates do not make meaningful contributions (Baker, 2007). According to Kelley (1992), followers can be active individuals, and their main objectives are personal development and contributing to organizational success. This assumption is consistent with SDT, which indicates that individuals have inherent growth tendencies (Jin et al., 2016) and autonomous motivation, rather than controlled motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). As growth-oriented individuals, followers are inclined to proactively complete tasks without influence from other people or situations (Jin et al., 2016; Leroy et al., 2015).

Followership is a set of "characteristics, behaviors, and processes of individuals acting in relation to leaders" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 96) and is often discussed alongside leadership. Based on previous studies, it is possible to divide the discussions on both leaders and followers into three viewpoints (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The first is the leader-centric perspective (Meindl et al., 1985), which considers leaders as having absolute power and argues that they are closely linked to organizational outcomes (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). This perspective regards followers as the recipients of leaders' influence and largely ignores the role of followers or followership.

In contrast to the leader-centric perspective, the follower-centric perspective focuses on followers' contributions in the leadership process and organizational outcomes, without ignoring the importance of leaders. For instance, this perspective considers implicit leadership theory as being crucial (Oc & Bashshur, 2013). Implicit leadership theory examines followers' assumptions about the traits and behaviors of good leaders and provides deep insights into individuals' willingness to support leaders (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). In addition to this perspective, the two-way influence process (later called the relational perspective), which attaches importance to followers, has grown in popularity (Herold, 1977), drawing attention to the mutual influence of leaders and followers. This social exchange relationship has been regarded as an antecedent of followership theory (Baker, 2007).

These three views are all leadership theories and aim to explore leaders and leadership (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). Followership, in contrast, focuses on followers' characteristics, roles, and outcomes. Early followership studies began with the classification of followers, and Kelley (1992) is one of the major scholars who contributed to the classification of followership. On the basis of two dimensions—active engagement (AE) and independent critical thinking (ICT)—he divides followers into five types: alienated, passive, conformist, exemplary, and pragmatist. Following Kelley, Chaleff (1995, pp. 6-8) develops the widely accepted courageous followership theory, and his model includes the following five dimensions: (1) courage to serve, (2) courage to assume responsibility, (3) courage to challenge, (4) courage to participate in

transformation, and (5) courage to take moral action. Additionally, a number of scholars have contributed to the development of followership classification. For example, Kellerman (2008) proposes a follower-type model based on the level of engagement.

Effect of followership behaviors on PSS

Although the literature has extensively discussed the nature of followership, few scholars have attempted to empirically explore its role and outcomes (Baker, 2007; Carsten et al., 2018). Followership outcomes can be achieved at the individual, relationship, and work-unit levels (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). However, the existing literature on the relational-level outcomes of followership is currently lacking. Relationship-level outcomes refer to the perception and exchange between leaders and followers (e.g., PSS), which could help deepen the understanding of followership from a dyadic perspective (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Furthermore, followership behaviors focus on how employees interact with their leaders rather than with their work (e.g., work engagement), which is highly associated with leader-follower relationships (Carsten et al., 2010). Thus, it is essential to investigate followership at the relationship level.

PSS is described as including the general views about the extent to which supervisors value followers' contributions and care about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Representing followers' perceptions of leaders' supportive responses, PSS concentrates on the leader-follower dyad, which is consistent with the relationship level. Generally, followership behaviors include supporting leader decisions, solving problems for leaders, and upward influence behaviors, which ultimately contribute to the achievement of leaders' goals (Carsten et al., 2010; S. Xu et al., 2019). According to social exchange theory, there is a mutual influence and exchange relationship between leaders and followers (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Given that goodwill behaviors are reciprocated (Homans, 1961), leaders who feel supported by their followers (e.g., receive advice from followers) are likely to be more supportive of their followers (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006) as a form of reciprocation.

Kelley (1992) conducts significant research in the field of followership and proposes a two-dimensional followership model. Based on his conceptualization, the first dimension of followership is AE, which suggests the propensity to initiate, actively participate, and be a self-starter (Gatti et al., 2014). These types of followers always proactively solve problems for leaders, take extra responsibility for their jobs, and strive to achieve common aims (S. Xu et al., 2019). Instead of waiting for instructions from leaders, followers who adopt AE are clear regarding the needs of their leaders and organizations. They regard themselves as coproducers in the leadership process (Carsten et al., 2018), tend to perform organizational citizenship behaviors, and focus more on collective interests (S. Xu et al., 2019), which could help leaders advance their goals (Carsten et al., 2010). Considering the reciprocal obligations and social exchange relationship, when leaders feel supported (e.g., problem solving and goal advancement), they appreciate their followers' efforts and provide support (material or psychological benefits) to these followers (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. AE is positively associated with PSS.

The second dimension is ICT, which followers use to conscientiously assess situations and

independently make judgments (Kelley, 1992). Followers who engage in ICT voluntarily evaluate information, provide constructive criticism, and participate in decision making (Carsten et al., 2010; S. Xu et al., 2019). Moreover, they tend to voice their opinions that both challenge leadership and offer advice, which contribute to leaders' recognition of follower support (Carsten et al., 2018). Based on social exchange theory, when leaders perceive followers' support, they likely offer support in return. Indeed, previous research has supported the view that followers could receive the needed resources (i.e., supervisor support) as a form of exchange through some voice behaviors (Carsten et al., 2010). In addition, these followers are considered innovative and creative, and their ideas can be vital to problem solving or contribute to organizational innovation (Gatti et al., 2014; S. Xu et al., 2019). To implement the innovative suggestions put forward by followers, leaders likely provide the required resources and support wherever and whenever possible. Thus, due to the importance of critical thinking by followers, leaders may offer support as an exchange. Considering these arguments and social exchange theory, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. ICT is positively associated with PSS.

Mediation effect of PSS

Past studies have found that PSS may positively affect job satisfaction (Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2009), employee retention (Eisenberger et al., 2002), and work performance (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). Notably, many scholars have reported a positive relationship between supportive supervision, such as feedback about job performance (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006), and followers' performance (Bhantumnavin, 2003). When followers perceive material or psychological support (e.g., work resources or praise) from leaders, they are motivated to increase their devotion to their work, which may result in improved job performance. Thus, we argue that PSS has a positive influence on followers' job performance.

Additionally, SDT posits that autonomous motivation is related to job performance (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to Leroy et al. (2015), autonomous motivation requires fundamental nutrients like basic need satisfaction, which includes the feeling of being supported. Therefore, within SDT, growth-oriented followers proactively perform tasks and help leaders accomplish common goals. This behavior may result in leaders feeling supported by their followers (Carsten et al., 2018), and based on social exchange theory, leaders are inclined to provide support in return. When followers perceive support (i.e., their relatedness need is satisfied), they have greater autonomous motivation, which could lead to higher job performance. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a. PSS mediates the relationship between AE and job performance.

H3b. PSS mediates the relationship between ICT and job performance.

Moderating effect of dyad tenure

As a crucial factor in the workplace, dyad tenure represents the duration during which followers have worked with their direct leaders and is closely related to leader-follower relationship quality (Guarana & Barnes, 2017). Generally, a long dyad tenure contributes to high leader-follower relationship quality. Evolving from social exchange theory, followership attaches great importance

to the leader-follower relationship. Thus, researchers believe that dyad tenure plays a key role in exploring the social exchange relationship in followership research.

When dyad tenure is short, especially when a follower is a newcomer, leaders and followers are not familiar with each other and, thus, are not sure if their efforts to build good relationships will be reciprocated (Guarana & Barnes, 2017). As such, these followers are always regarded as out-group members, and in such a case, the social exchange level between leaders and followers is relatively low. As dyad tenure increases, relationships with leaders gradually improve through leader-follower interactions (Guarana & Barnes, 2017). Consequently, followers who have worked together with leaders for a long time are supposed to be in-group members, and thus, their social exchange relationships are expected to be stronger (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). When belonging to the in-group (i.e., long dyad tenure), followers who adopt AE (e.g., take the initiative to solve problems for leaders) are supposed to receive more support or rewards from leaders.

Nevertheless, the situation may be different when followers are involved in ICT. As mentioned above, followers with long dyad tenure appear to be in-group members, have close relations with leaders, and trust their leaders (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Leaders expect these employees to support their ideas and plans due to their good relationships and a strong sense of trust. However, ICT (e.g., questioning the wisdom of the leader's decisions) has always been associated with being in opposition to leaders or groups. This perspective suggests that the act of challenging leaders (i.e., through conflicts or dissent between leaders and followers) can make leaders feel not trusted by in-group members and even create tension within groups, which may result in negative responses from leaders (Benson et al., 2016). When leaders' expectations for long dyad tenured followers are not met, the social exchange level can decline. As such, the following hypotheses are proposed:

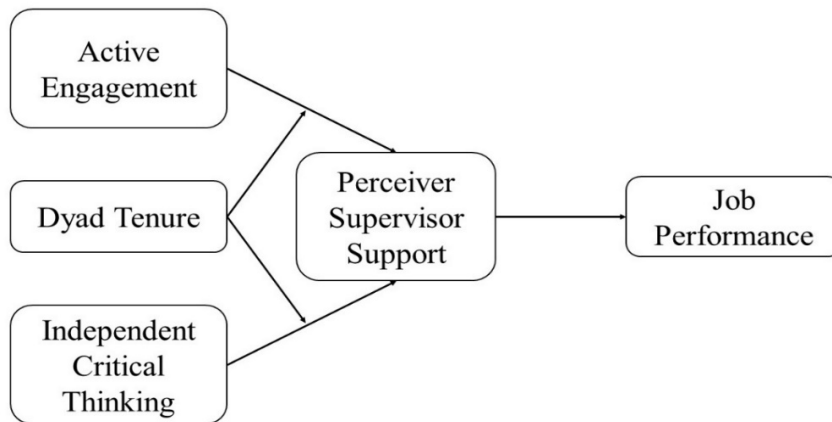
H4a. Dyad tenure positively moderates the relationship between AE and PSS.

H4b. Dyad tenure negatively moderates the relationship between ICT and PSS.

H5a. Dyad tenure positively moderates the indirect relationship between AE and job performance.

H5b. Dyad tenure negatively moderates the indirect relationship between ICT and job performance.

The research model is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Research model

Methods

Procedure and sample

The targets in this study were employees and supervisors from four high-tech manufacturing firms in eastern China. It was argued that followership played a vital role in promoting organizational development in the era of the knowledge-based economy (S. Xu et al., 2019). Depending on the knowledge and technologies to be developed, high-tech manufacturing firms are assumed to be appropriate research targets. Additionally, these companies attach great importance to employee autonomy and leader-follower partnerships, which is important for followership research (Carsten et al., 2018).

Data were collected through a three-wave questionnaire survey conducted using a one-month interval. At time 1, 656 questionnaires were distributed, and followership behaviors were measured. After removing the responses from individuals who did not match the target audience criteria (i.e., employees who were senior executives or part-time employees), 392 usable responses were retained. After one month (time 2), PSS was measured, and 263 responses were retained (67.1%). At time 3, followers' job performance was evaluated by their supervisors, and 219 responses were retained (83.3%). Among respondents, 77 were female (35.2%), and the average age was 32.1 years. Regarding dyad tenure, 8.2% of respondents had less than 1 year, 15.5% had 1 to 2 years, 38.8% had 3 to 4 years, 24.7% had 5 to 6 years, 10.5% had 7 to 8 years, 1.8% had 9 to 10 years, and the rest (0.5%) had more than 10 years.

Measures

A revised Kelley's followership scale from Blanchard et al. (2009) was used to assess followership. The first dimension was AE with 9 items (mean = 3.44, SD = 0.47). Cronbach's alpha was 0.9. A sample item was as follows: "Do you take the initiative to seek out and successfully complete assignments that go above and beyond your job?" Another dimension was ICT with 4 items (mean = 2.52, SD = 0.57). Cronbach's alpha was 0.84. A sample item was as follows: "Do you make a habit of internally questioning the wisdom of the leader's decision, rather than just doing what you are told?"

PSS was assessed using the three-item scale from Jokisaari and Nurmi (2009). Cronbach's alpha was 0.81 (mean = 3.01, SD = 0.53). A sample item was as follows: "To what extent does your supervisor provide task assignments that improve skills and knowledge?"

Job performance was evaluated by supervisors using the four-item scale from Eisenberger et al. (2001). Cronbach's alpha was 0.80 (mean = 3.09, SD = 0.53). A sample item was as follows: "Meets the formal performance requirements of the job."

Confirmatory factor analysis

To evaluate measurement validity, we performed confirmatory factor analysis, the results of which showed that construct validity was acceptable ($\chi^2 [164] = 299.62$, confirmatory fit index (CFI) = 0.93, root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06, and standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) = 0.055). For convergent validity and reliability, all the items loaded above the recommended minimum threshold of 0.5 on the respective constructs, and all average variance extracted (AVE) estimates were higher than 0.5. In addition, the researchers evaluated composite reliability (CR) and determined that all values were higher than the reference value (0.60). Additionally, Table 1 displays the discriminant validity estimates. For all square roots of the AVEs, the estimates were higher than the correlation coefficients between the latent variables, which exhibits adequate discriminant validity.

Table 1 Reliability, validity, and correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Age	-						
2 Gender	.018	-					
3 Dyad tenure	.526***	-.155*	-				
4 AE	.115	.014	.399***	(0.71)			
5 ICT	.021	.008	.008	.099	(0.74)		
6 PSS	-.240***	.156*	-.418***	.317***	.171*	(0.77)	
7 Job performance	.057	-.067	.091	.391***	.179**	.381***	(0.71)
AVE	-	-	-	0.50	0.56	0.59	0.51
CR	-	-	-	0.90	0.84	0.81	0.80

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. The square roots of the AVEs are shown in brackets on the diagonal.

Common method bias (CMB)

Although the data were collected by a three-wave survey and job performance was evaluated by supervisors, there were still three self-reported variables. Therefore, it was necessary to evaluate whether CMB affected the results. First, Harman's one-factor test was conducted via exploratory factor analysis (EFA) without rotation. Four factors were extracted, with one factor explaining 31.2% of the variance, which was below 50%. The results showed that CMB was not a concern (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Second, the researchers used an unmeasured latent method factor technique, and two confirmatory factor analyses were conducted—one with a common latent factor (CLF) and one

without this factor. The results showed that the CLF did not have a large influence on the regression weights. The differences were all lower than 0.1, which indicates the absence of serious CMB.

Results

Structural equation modeling was conducted with Mplus 8.0, and the results are presented in Table 2. The standardized coefficient for AE as a predictor of PSS was 0.35 ($p < 0.01$), which indicated that Hypothesis 1 was supported. Hypothesis 2 was also supported, with the results indicating that ICT was positively related to PSS (0.37, $p < 0.01$). Mediation effects were estimated, and the results are presented in Table 3. The findings suggested that the indirect effect of AE on job performance through PSS was significant (95% CI [0.01, 0.18]) and that the direct effect was also significant (0.35, $p < 0.001$), which showed that Hypothesis 3a was partially supported. As predicted by Hypothesis 3b, PSS completely mediated the relationship between ICT and job performance with a significant indirect effect (95% CI [0.01, 0.18]).

Table 2 Results of structural equation modeling

Path		Estimate	SE
AE	→ PSS	0.35**	0.14
ICT	→ PSS	0.37**	0.14
Dyad tenure	→ PSS	-0.29***	0.03
Interaction 1	→ PSS	0.13**	0.04
Interaction 2	→ PSS	-0.09*	0.04
AE	→ Job performance	0.35***	0.09
ICT	→ Job performance	0.10	0.07
PSS	→ Job performance	0.25**	0.08

Note: N = 219. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. Interaction 1 = AE × Dyad tenure; Interaction 2 = ICT × Dyad tenure.

Table 3 Mediating and moderated mediating effects

Effects	Estimate	SE	95% confidence intervals	
			Lower	Upper
Indirect effects				
AE→PSS→JP	0.09*	0.04	0.01	0.18
ICT→PSS→JP	0.09*	0.04	0.01	0.18
Conditional Indirect effects				
Low dyad tenure (AE→PSS→JP)	0.06	0.05	-0.04	0.15
High dyad tenure (AE→PSS→JP)	0.12*	0.05	0.03	0.22
Difference	-0.07*	0.03	-0.13	-0.01
Low dyad tenure (ICT→PSS→JP)	0.11*	0.05	0.01	0.22
High dyad tenure (ICT→PSS→JP)	0.07*	0.03	0.01	0.13
Difference	0.04	0.03	-0.01	0.09

Note. N = 219. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. AE = active engagement, ICT = independent critical thinking, PSS = perceived supervisor support, and JP = job performance.

Table 2 also shows the results of Hypotheses 4a and 4b. The moderating role of dyad tenure between AE and PSS was significant ($0.13, p < 0.01$); thus, Hypothesis 4a was supported. Additionally, a simple slope test (Figure 2) showed that followers involved in AE appeared to receive more support when tenure was relatively long. Hypothesis 4b was also supported, with the results indicating that dyad tenure negatively moderated the relationship between ICT and PSS ($-0.09, p < 0.05$). The result of the simple slope test is displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 2 Moderation effect of dyad tenure on the relationship between active engagement and perceived supervisor support

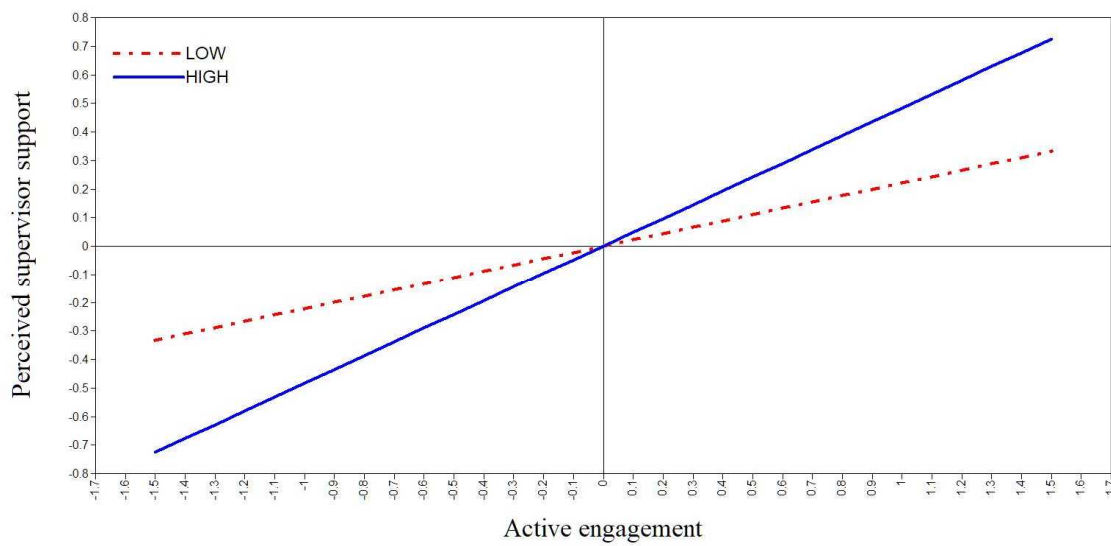
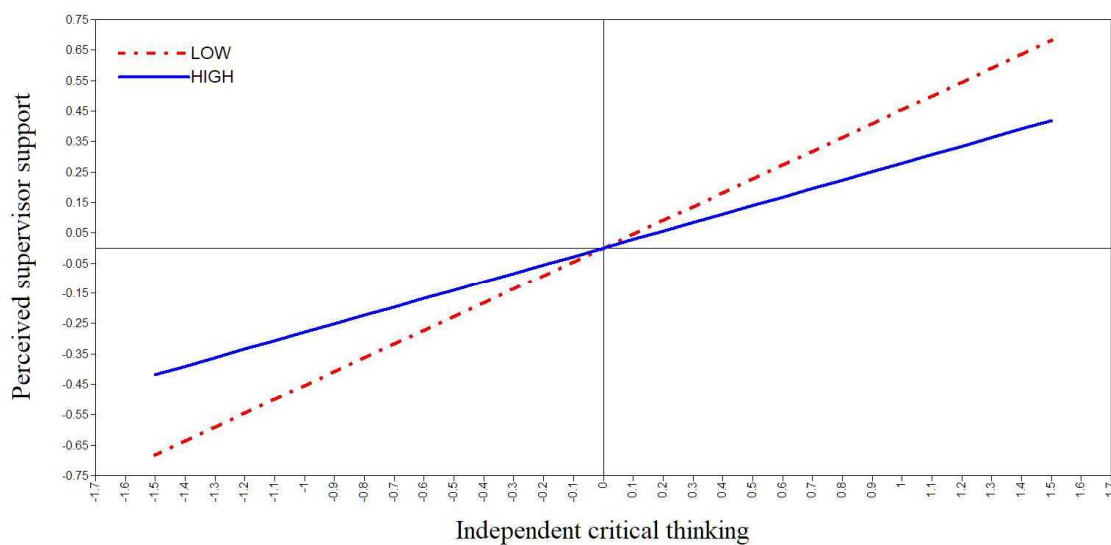
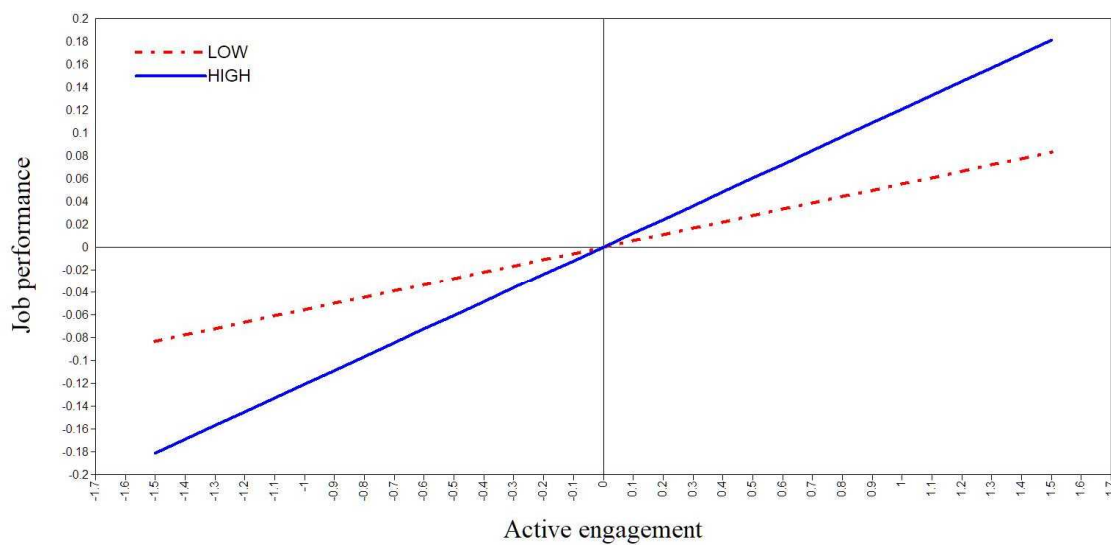


Figure 3 Moderation effect of dyad tenure on the relationship between independent critical thinking and perceived supervisor support



Further, moderated mediation effects were tested. As dyad tenure level increased, the indirect effect of AE on job performance via PSS increased from an insignificant result, 0.06 (95% CI [-0.04, 0.15]), to a significant result, 0.12 (95% CI [0.03, 0.22]), and the difference between the two groups was significant (95% CI [-0.13, -0.01]); hence, Hypothesis 5a was accepted. Hypothesis 5b, however, was not supported as the difference was insignificant (95% CI [-0.01, 0.09]). Additionally, a simple slope test (Figure 4) suggested that the indirect relationship between AE and job performance via PSS was relatively stronger with longer dyad tenure.

Figure 4 Moderation effect of dyad tenure on the indirect relationship between active engagement and job performance



Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine how followership behaviors promote job performance in terms of PSS and dyad tenure. The results indicated that AE and ICT had direct effects on PSS and indirect effects on job performance. Moreover, dyad tenure positively moderated the relationship between AE and PSS and negatively moderated the relationship between ICT and PSS. Additionally, when dyad tenure was longer, the indirect effect of the relationship between AE and job performance was stronger.

Theoretical implications

The findings of this research enhance the understanding of followership in three important ways. First, the present study contributes to a better understanding of social exchange theory from followers' perspective, instead of from a leader-centric perspective. Given that most previous studies have regarded leaders as the main influencers in leader-follower relationships, some scholars argue that focusing on followers as the key drivers could be conducive to a more complete understanding of this relationship (Gesang & Süß, 2021; Güntner et al., 2020; A. J. Xu et al., 2019). Among studies from the perspective of followers, followers' characteristics were the focus at the

early stage of the leader-follower relationship (Dulebohn et al., 2012). A. J. Xu et al. (2019) focuses on followers' behaviors and finds that proactive engagement has a positive effect on the social exchange relationship. Our study further extends the research by demonstrating a positive relationship between followership behaviors (both AE and ICT) and PSS, which is beneficial in understanding the role of specific followership behaviors in reciprocal relationships.

Second, this study demonstrates the importance of followership behaviors in improving job performance via PSS, which extends the research on followership outcomes. Although the study by Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) reports a relationship between followership behaviors and individual-level outcomes, most studies focus on the effects of followers on, for example, leaders' motivations (Carsten et al., 2018; Gesang & Süß, 2021; Matthews et al., 2021); few previous studies identify a relationship between followership behaviors and followers' job performance, including a potential mechanism for mediating these two variables (Kim & Schachter, 2015). The results of this study affirm that PSS mediates the relationship between followership behaviors and job performance, indicating that the outcome of followership behaviors can occur at the relationship level (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), and relational-level outcomes mediate the relationship between followership behaviors and individual-level outcomes. Moreover, this work also supports the idea inherent in SDT that proactive followers have greater autonomous motivation when their relatedness needs are satisfied (perceiving support from leaders), from which higher job performance results.

Third, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of followership in terms of dyad tenure. Dyad tenure is a crucial factor in the social exchange process, which is supposed to positively affect the leader-follower relationship (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Guarana & Barnes, 2017). Specifically, our findings suggest that with longer dyad tenure, followers who are involved in AE perceive more support from leaders, which results in higher job performance. In contrast, given that ICT is associated with the questioning of leaders, which might disrupt mutual trust and be contrary to leaders' expectations, followers who adopt critical thinking perceive less support with longer dyad tenure. This finding is consistent with the assumption that proactive followers with long dyad tenure do not always receive supportive responses from leaders (Benson et al., 2016). Despite the lack of supervisor support, long-tenured followers are inclined to have more experience, which is beneficial to effective performance (Lai et al., 2010). Thus, the negative effect of dyad tenure on the indirect relationship between ICT and job performance is not significant.

Practical implications

This study's findings highlight some practical implications for followers' career development in the workplace. First, our research focuses on leader-follower interactions from followers' perspective, indicating the importance of followers' initiative in organizations. Our results reveal that followers' support for leaders can encourage supervisor support, which may result in higher job performance. Therefore, it is effective for followers to adopt followership behaviors, rather than automatically following leaders' orders in the workplace. Specifically, AE and ICT are both effective ways for newcomers and short-tenured followers to obtain more support from their superiors, which can improve their performance. For followers with long dyad tenure, AE seems

to be more helpful in gaining support from their superiors than does ICT. Additionally, it is crucial to question leaders or give constructive criticism correctly that is acceptable for leaders. For example, it could be effective to talk with superiors privately, instead of questioning them in front of coworkers.

Second, given the importance of social exchange relationships in organizations, followers need to know how to get along well with their superiors and peers. It is necessary for followers to acknowledge mutual responsibilities and avoid taking a free ride at the expense of others or focusing solely on their own rights. Furthermore, followers should understand superiors' needs and constraints and work cooperatively with superiors. Doing so could help followers improve mutual relationships and receive more support from superiors, which in return would contribute to their improved performance.

Third, considering the important roles of followers found in this study, leaders should endeavor to support and promote followership. It is argued that leaders' sharing of power with followers or empowering followers could improve followers' motivation and make them more proactive (Baker, 2007; Carsten et al., 2010), as these may contribute to sustainable PSS and job performance.

Finally, organizations need to recognize the importance of followership roles. Past research has focused more on leadership training programs from a leader-centric perspective. However, given that followership skills can be taught (Carsten et al., 2018; Crossman & Crossman, 2011), implementing followership training programs is also essential. Furthermore, selecting employees with a high tendency to adopt proactive behaviors, that is, followership behaviors, is also an effective strategy. Thus, an efficient approach may be to adopt the followership behavior scoring tool built of Kelley (1992) for hiring new employees.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study has several limitations. First, the interval of our three-wave research is one month, which is too short and not adequate for evaluating job performance. Therefore, the time interval should be increased in future research designs. However, sample attrition, common in increased time intervals, can affect the accuracy of the results. We can reduce sample attrition through increasing monetary incentives, etc., in future research designs.

Second, this study does not consider organizational culture. Certain organizational cultures, such as performance-oriented culture, can influence individual job performance. Moreover, followers' motivations and behaviors can be affected by environmental and organizational factors (Bjugstad et al., 2006). Thus, it is necessary to explore the function of environmental factors in followership studies.

Finally, while using a sample of respondents from Chinese manufacturing companies contributes to an understanding of followership, it still has some limitations. There is a potential concern that national culture can affect behaviors and outcomes. For example, Lun et al. (2010) points out that the critical thinking skills of Western university students are better than those of Asian university students. As such, future research should be conducted using samples from other industries and countries.

Although there are some study limitations, this research contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between followership behaviors and job performance.

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