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FOLLOWERSHIP IN FOCUS: A COMPREHENSIVE BIBLIOMETRIC REVIEW OF RESEARCH FROM 1951 TO 2024

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Abstract:

This study examines publication trends in followership research over a 70-year period (1951-2024) using bibliometric analysis of data sourced from the Scopus database. A systematic search yielded 3,480 published articles, which were analyzed using tools such as Microsoft Excel, Scopus Analyzer and VOSviewer. The analysis encompassed key bibliometric techniques including annual publication trends, top contributing authors, subject areas, influential countries, collaboration networks and the most popular keywords in the field. The findings indicate that research on followership has shown a consistent upward trend with notable contributions from key scholars such as Haslam, S.A., Reicher, S.D., and Steffens, N.K. These scholars collectively account for 43.47% of publications in this domain and significantly shaping foundational theories to a significant degree. The study also reveals that the most represented subject areas are Social Sciences (23.52%) and Business, Management and Accounting (26.45%) with underscoring the close relationship between organizational success and followership. Researchers from Germany, France, and the Netherlands have formed partnerships that stand out as examples of foreign cooperation. Keyword analysis identifies four topic clusters: The yellow cluster focuses on leadership and followership dynamics; the red cluster investigates psychological aspects such as charisma and social identity; the blue cluster emphasizes the use of followership in healthcare and digital communication contexts; and the green cluster investigates cultural and evolutionary perspectives including political leadership and dominance. These findings underscore the expanding relevance of followership in various disciplines and its growing recognition as a critical field of study.

Keywords:

Bibliometric Analysis, Followership, Leadership, VOSviewer

Introduction

Beginning in the middle of the 20th century, the study of followership has developed into its own unique field of research within the field of leadership studies. This transition occurred from a leader-centric perspective to an acknowledgment of the significant role that followers play in determining the dynamics of organisations. Scholars have placed considerable emphasis on active involvement, critical thinking and autonomous judgment as fundamental characteristics of good followership (Grant et al. 2020). Previously, followership was regarded as a dependent and passive role. However, this perception has been significantly revised (Uhl-Bien,et al. 2014). This awareness has led to an increase in academic studies on followership types, organizational commitment, performance and culture. Despite the expanding body of literature, there remains a need for a comprehensive overview of the evolution of followership research. The majority of the research that has been done up until now is largely focused on leaders. Only a small number of studies have given equal weight to the role that followers play in the results of organisations (Oc et al. 2013). For example, Ribbat Nohe et al. (2023) state that while studies of leadership have grown, studies of followership have slowed down. This indicates that we do not fully understand how followers influence organizational outcomes. The majority of followership work is divided among disciplines and geographies, making it difficult to appreciate its global influence and multidisciplinary connections (Crossman et al. 2011).

The fragmented nature of followership research across disciplines such as business, psychology and healthcare presents a significant challenge in consolidating knowledge within the field. As Crossman et al. (2011) explain, the proliferation of followership research across disciplines results in a variety of theoretical frameworks and definitions that are inconsistent with one another. This makes it challenging to arrive at a cohesive understanding of the influence that followership has on the outcomes of organisations. For instance, studies have shown that medical trainees often experience a shift in focus from leadership to followership, highlighting the importance of proactive support in team activities (Phillips et al. 2021). This lack of integration makes it difficult to generalise findings across organisational settings, which may limit followership theories usefulness. In addition, academics such as Carsten et al. (2010) point out that a significant portion of the present research is too concentrated on high-level theoretical constructs. For instance, Chiang et al. (2022) empirically demonstrated that effective followership can enhance creative performance among university administrative staff, suggesting that a focus on follower-centric practices can yield positive organizational outcomes. This has resulted in a deficiency of empirical studies that investigate the applicability of followership models in the real world settings.

Moreover, the existing literature often overlooks the cultural and contextual dimensions of followership. As argued by Kelly (2008), followership behaviors can vary significantly depending on the cultural and organizational context. For example, in collectivist societies, followers may exhibit more passive or deferential behaviors in contrast to more independent or critical followership in individualistic cultures (Dorfman et al. 2012). Despite this, many followership studies adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, failing to account for these crucial cultural differences. Additionally, Liao et al. (2021) warn that when interpreting data linked to followership and leadership dynamics, it is important to take into account cultural features such as power distance. This is crucial in non-Western societies. The significance of this underscores the necessity for academics to integrate broader and culturally sensitive models of followership. These models should be representative of the numerous realities of follower-leader interactions

in a range of settings for the purpose of achieving this goal. This presents an opportunity for future research to explore how cultural factors influence follower behaviors and their subsequent impact on leadership effectiveness and organizational outcomes. Through the integration of more complex and culturally aware models of followership, researchers may enhance their comprehension of the ever changing dynamics of follower-leader interactions in many settings. Therefore, this bibliometric review will not only identify key contributors and trends in followership research but also highlight these critical gaps and encouraging a more holistic approach to studying followership .This analysis will provide a useful basis for future studies to expand upon. In order to assess the evolution, this research examines the papers on the study of followership since the year 1951 to 2024. The following are the seven research questions that guide this examination of the followership research papers for this study. They include:

RQ1: What are the research trends for followership according to the year of publication?
RQ2: Who writes the greatest number of articles?
RQ3: What is the most popular subject area in this research?
RQ4: Who is the top 10 authors based on citation by research?
RQ5: What are the most co-authorship influential countries?
RQ6: What are the collaboration networks based on the co-authorship?
RQ7: What are the popular keywords related to the study?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative bibliometric methods to examine articles from the Scopus database spanning a seven-decade period (1951–2024). This literature review on followership was undertaken using Vosviewer for map visualisation, statistical calculations and descriptive analysis. The main focus was on articles retrieved from journals. Pritchard (1969) defines bibliometrics as an approach that uses statistical and mathematical tools to examine document publishing across various communication channels. In August 2024, a search for articles in the Scopus database was conducted. Scopus is the most comprehensive and highly indexed database with the largest collection of searchable citations and abstracts in the literature (Burnham 2006; Ahmi et al. 2019). The publication searches focused on trends, the greatest number of articles, the most popular subject area, the top ten authors, the most co-authorship influential countries, collaboration networks based on co-authorship and popular keywords. The Scopus database was queried using terms like TITLE-ABS-KEY ("followership*") AND PUBYEAR > 1950 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 covering the period from 1951 to 2024.

A search of the Scopus database produced a total of 3480 documents. The exported files consisted predominantly of journal articles and were saved in two distinct formats: comma-separated values (.csv) and research information systems (.ris). The (.csv) files were subjected to an in depth descriptive analysis using Microsoft Excel. In the meanwhile, a visual network depiction of the study was made possible by processing the (.ris) files with VOSviewer software (Jan Van Eck et al. 2022; Wong 2018). The tool is widely used for visualising and analysing scientific literature and specialises in building attractive network visualisations, grouping similar objects and generating density maps. The adaptability of this tool enables researchers to investigate co-authorship, co-citation and keyword co-occurrence networks, which in turn provides them with a full knowledge of research landscapes. The interactive interface coupled with continuous updates ensures efficient and dynamic exploration of large datasets. VOSviewer's ability to compute metrics, customize visualizations and its

compatibility with various bibliometric data sources make it a valuable resource for scholars seeking insights into complex research domains.

Result and Finding

RQ1: What Are The Research Trends For Followership According To The Year Of Publication?

A comprehensive breakdown of the number of papers that were published on followership between the years 2015 and 2024 is presented in Figure 1 and Table 1. Additionally, the percentage contributions that each document made to the overall volume of research conducted during this time are also included. From 52 papers in 2015 (5.89% of the total) to 127 documents (14.38% of the total) in 2023. The number and percentage of publications increased gradually. This peak signifies heightened scholarly focus, potentially due to evolving concepts or significant breakthroughs in followership studies. The following years show modest changes in publishing counts with 2024 recording 83 papers (9.40%), showing a drop but still retaining a strong interest in the subject. The distribution indicates that the area is expanding and becoming more active. Years such as 2018 and 2020 also show important contributions which reflects the continued involvement of scholars and the growing significance of followership in the field of leadership and organisational studies.
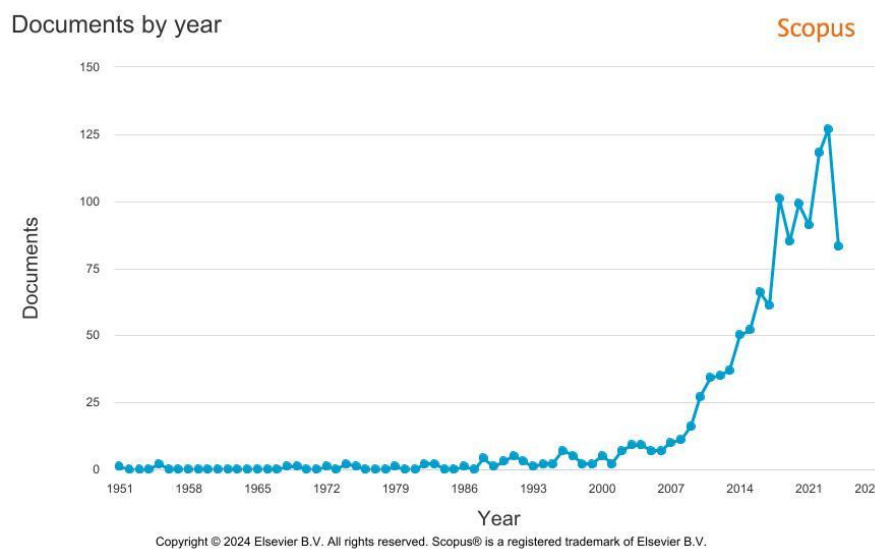

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Figure 1: Plotting Document Publication By Years

Table 1: Number Of Document And Percentages By Year

Year	Number of Document	Percentages (%)
2024	83	9.40
2023	127	14.38
2022	118	13.36
2021	91	10.31
2020	99	11.21
2019	85	9.63

2018	101	11.44
2017	61	6.91
2016	66	7.47
2015	52	5.89

RQ2: Who Writes The Greatest Number Of Articles?

Based on the Figure 2 and Table 2 provided, the bibliometric analysis using Scopus reveals that the most prolific authors in the field of followership from the provided data are led by Haslam, S.A., who has contributed 20 documents accounting for 17.39% of the analyzed publications. This is followed closely by Reicher, S.D. with 17 documents (14.78%) and Steffens, N.K. with 13 documents (11.30%), indicating a significant impact by these authors in shaping followership research. McKimm, J. and Uhl-Bien, M. also show substantial contributions with 12 (10.43%) and 11 (9.57%) documents respectively, underscoring their influential roles in this academic field. Van Vugt, M., Laustsen, L., and Carsten, M.K. provide a robust middle group of contributors, each offering 10, 9, and 8 documents with percentages ranging from 8.70% to 6.96%. Notably, the list includes both a singular entry and a typo for Van Vugt, M., indicating an oversight in the data compilation. Alvesson, M. rounds out the list with 7 documents, contributing 6.09%. It is clear from this distribution that a very small number of academics are driving the conversation around followership. This is a reflects of the crucial roles that these scholars have played in both theoretical breakthroughs and empirical research within the area.

Documents by author

Compare the document counts for up to 15 authors.
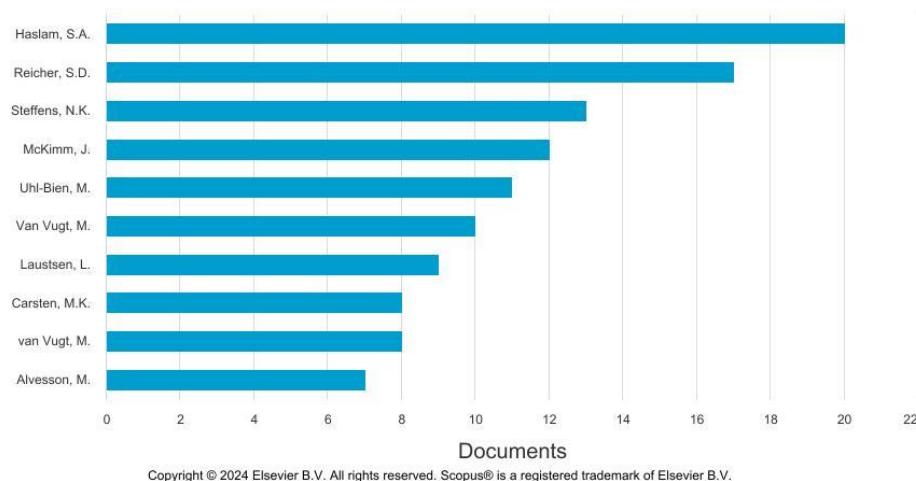
Scopus

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Figure 2: The Greatest Number Of Article By Authors

Table 2: Number Of Document And Percentages By Authors

Author Name	Number of Document	Percentages (%)
Haslam, S.A.	20	17.39
Reicher, S.D.	17	14.78
Steffens, N.K.	13	11.30
McKimm, J.	12	10.43
Uhl-Bien, M.	11	9.57
Van Vugt, M.	10	8.70
Laustsen, L.	9	7.83
Carsten, M.K.	8	6.96
Van Vugt, M.	8	6.96
Alvesson, M.	7	6.09

RQ3: What Is The Most Popular Subject Area In This Research?

The bibliometric study of followership research using Scopus data demonstrates a broad distribution across many topic areas, reflecting the multidisciplinary character of this discipline. This is shown in Figure 3 and Table 3 respectively. The most prominent domain is Business, Management, and Accounting, which holds the top spot with 523 papers and accounts for 26.45% of the total. This indicates that followership is predominantly regarded through the lens of an organisational perspective. The Social Sciences come in second with 465 papers or 23.52%. This shows the broad social effects and academic bases of followership in society. With 275 publications (13.91%), psychology is another important category that emphasises the importance of both individual and group psychological processes in comprehending followership. The fields of Economics, Econometrics and Finance (149 papers, 7.54%) and Medicine (139 documents, 7.03%) have made smaller but still significant contributions demonstrating the applicability of followership in contexts related to economic leadership and health respectively. Arts and Humanities, Computer Science, and Decision Sciences exemplify the broad range of topics explored in followership research, encompassing cultural, technical and strategic decision-making themes respectively. The scope of this spread exemplifies the extensive applicational and conceptual reach of followership studies, which extends beyond purely professional sectors to more general social and scientific disciplines.

Documents by subject area
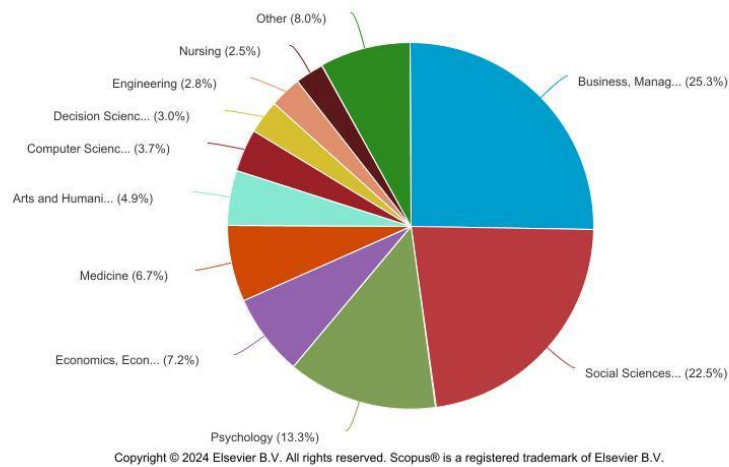
Figure 3: Type Of Document By Subject Area

Table 3: Number Of Document And Percentages By Subject Area

Subject Area	Number of document	Percentages (%)
Business, Management and Accounting	523	26.45
Social Sciences	465	23.52
Psychology	275	13.91
Economics, Econometrics and Finance	149	7.54
Medicine	139	7.03
Arts and Humanities	101	5.11
Computer Science	77	3.89
Decision Sciences	62	3.14
Engineering	58	2.93
Nursing	52	2.63
Agricultural and Biological Sciences	29	1.47
Environmental Science	28	1.42
Mathematics	19	0.96
Biochemistry, Genetics and Mole	0	0.00

RQ4: Who Is The Top 10 Authors Based On Citation By Research?

The bibliometric analysis focused on the top 10 cited authors in followership research highlights significant contributions that have shaped the field. Based on Table 4, the most cited work is by Gardner W.L., Avolio B.J., Luthans F., May D.R., and Walumbwa F., titled "Can you see the real me?" A self-based model of authentic leader and follower development," published in 2005 in Leadership Quarterly with a remarkable 1236 citations. This seminal work explores the development of authentic leaders and followers emphasizing self-awareness and authenticity in leadership dynamics. Following this, Uhl-Bien M., Riggio R.E., Lowe K.B.,

and Carsten M.K. contributed substantially with their 2014 paper "Followership theory: A review and research agenda" in Leadership Quarterly, which has amassed 693 citations and serves as a foundational text that outlines a comprehensive research agenda for followership. The article "Leadership, Followership, and Evolution: Some Lessons From the Past" written by Van Vugt M., Hogan R., and Kaiser R.B. (2008) and published in American Psychologist has been mentioned 546 times. In it, the authors address the evolutionary views of leadership and followership, indicating that there are biological and psychological roots. The analysis also includes works by Van Vugt M., Carsten M.K., Uhl-Bien M., and others who have explored various dimensions of followership from evolutionary origins to social constructions and the impact of implicit leadership and followership theories in organizational settings. These highly cited writers and the impact works they have produced highlight the interdisciplinary interest in followership, which spans the fields of psychology, business and social sciences. This interest reflects the significance and progression of followership in the field of leadership studies.

Table 4: Number Of Document And Percentages By Subject Area

Authors	Title	Year	Source title	Cited by
Gardner W.L.; Avolio B.J.; Luthans F.; May D.R.; Walumbwa F.	"Can you see the real me?" A self-based model of authentic leader and follower development (Gardner et al. 2005)	2005	Leadership Quarterly	1236
Uhl-Bien M.; Riggio R.E.; Lowe K.B.; Carsten M.K.	Followership theory: A review and research agenda (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014)	2014	Leadership Quarterly	693
Van Vugt M.; Hogan R.; Kaiser R.B.	Leadership, Followership, and Evolution: Some Lessons From the Past (Van Vugt et al. 2008)	2008	American Psychologist	546
Van Vugt M.	Evolutionary origins of leadership and followership (Van Vugt 2006)	2006	Personality and Social Psychology Review	380
Carsten M.K.; Uhl-Bien M.; West B.J.; Patera J.L.; McGregor R.	Exploring social constructions of followership: A qualitative study (Carsten et al. 2010)	2010	Leadership Quarterly	338
Collinson D.	Rethinking followership: A post-structuralist analysis of follower identities (Collinson 2006)	2006	Leadership Quarterly	302
Leroy H.; Anseel F.; Gardner W.L.; Sels L.	Authentic Leadership, Authentic Followership, Basic Need Satisfaction, and Work Role Performance: A	2015	Journal of Management	281

	Cross-Level Study (Leroy et al. 2012)			
Epitropaki O.; Sy T.; Martin R.; Tram-Quon S.; Topakas A.	Implicit Leadership and Followership Theories "in the wild": Taking stock of information-processing approaches to leadership and followership in organizational settings (Epitropaki et al. 2013)	2013	Leadership Quarterly	242
Sy T.	What do you think of followers? Examining the content, structure, and consequences of implicit followership theories (Sy 2010)	2010	Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes	234
Haslam S.A.; Platow M.J.	The link between leadership and followership: How affirming social identity translates vision into action (Haslam et al. 2001)	2001	Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin	229

RQ5: What Are The Most Co-Authorship Influential Countries?

The Figure 4 demonstrates an examination of co-authorship networks among nations in the field of followership research is presented in the visualisation that was created using VOSviewer. These two countries, the United States of America and the United Kingdom are at the core of this network. Both of these countries are represented by bigger nodes which indicates a greater number of partnerships and a central position in the international research community on followership. These countries not only have a substantial number of internal publications but also serve as key nodes for international scholarly cooperation as evidenced by their numerous and varied linkages. Surrounding them, European countries such as Germany, France, and the Netherlands also show strong international links underscoring their significant contributions to the research field. Even though Asian countries like China, South Korea and Japan have smaller nodes than the US and UK, they have strong regional networks and are working together more and more on global projects. By highlighting the interconnected nature of academic research in followership, this map illustrates how developed countries are at the forefront in terms of both output and partnerships. Meanwhile, emerging research nations are gradually integrating themselves into the global network, which is increasing the variety and depth of scholarly discourse in this rapidly developing field.
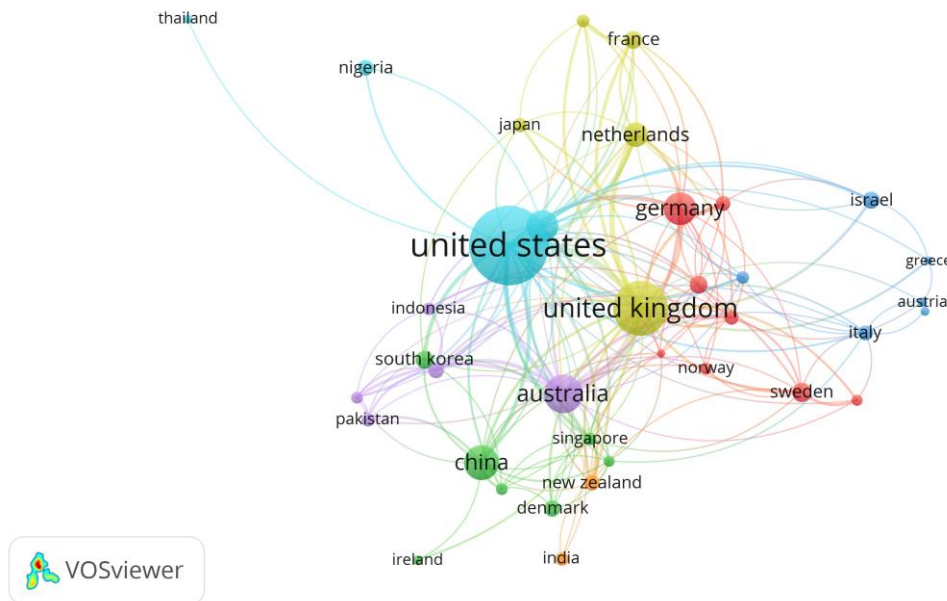
Figure 4: The Density Visualisation Of Co-Authorship Influential Countries

RQ6: What Are The Collaboration Networks Based On The Co-Authorship?

The VOSviewer map provides a visual representation of collaboration networks based on co-authorship among key researchers in the field of followership. Central figures in this network include Haslam, S.A., Reicher, S.D. and Steffens, N.K., who are depicted with stronger interconnection and indicating frequent collaborations among these authors. A core group that has potentially co-authored multiple significant studies is suggested by this trio, which is largely connected by the green and red lines. This core group reflects a consolidated approach to investigating the dynamics of followership. Mols, F., Platow, M.J., and Van Dick, R. are three more significant writers who also demonstrate links with the centre cluster, but to a lesser level. These links are indicated by their location on the outside of the main cluster. A dynamic and collaborative research community is implied by the structure of the network, which places Haslam at a pivotal point and is strongly connected to both Reicher and Steffens. It is possible that these authors have shared frameworks and methodologies in their scholarly work, which has made a significant contribution to the development and dissemination of knowledge within this specialised field. This map (Figure 5) emphasises the collaborative character of academic work in followership by demonstrating how related research efforts contribute to a better common understanding of the issue.
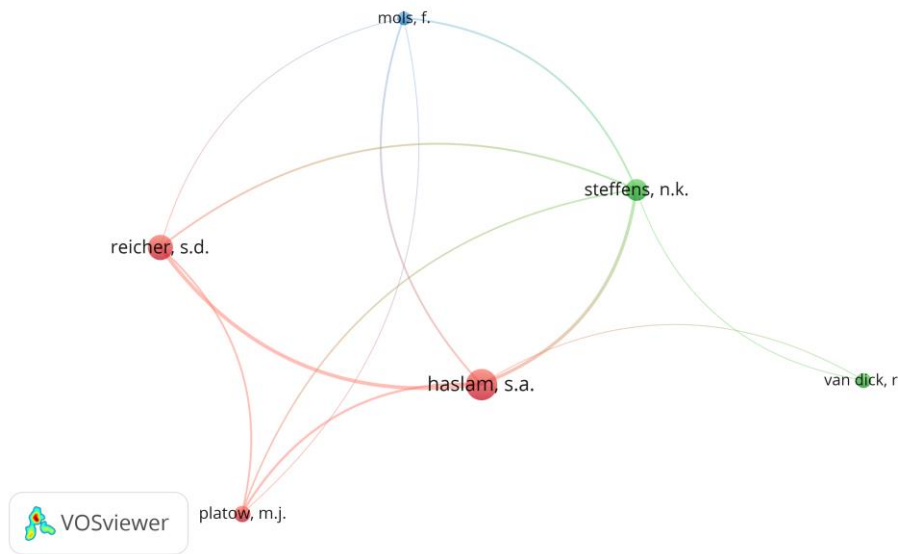
Figure 5: Network Visualization Map Of Co-Authorship

RQ7: What Are The Popular Keywords Related To The Study?

Based on Figure 6 and Table 5, the VOSviewer analysis identified four distinct clusters of popular author keywords that encapsulate the diverse themes and focal points in followership research. The yellow cluster emphasizes the core concepts of followership, focusing on the roles and interactions between leaders and followers. This cluster underlines the reciprocal dynamics of leadership, where followers are not passive actors but actively shape leadership outcomes through their engagement and critical thinking. By focusing on terms like leader and follower, this cluster provides foundational insights into the evolving role of followership as a key component in organizational success, especially in contexts that value collaborative leadership models .The red cluster delves into the psychological dimensions of followership, with terms like charisma, social identity and authentic leadership at its core. This cluster highlights the influence of followers' perceptions and social identities in determining leader effectiveness. It also addresses implicit followership theories which explore how preconceived notions about follower roles impact leadership dynamics. In contrast, the blue cluster focusses on how the theories can be used in real life especially in digital and healthcare settings. This shows how communication tools and clinical leadership models change models of following. Lastly, the green cluster investigates leadership and followership from a cultural and evolutionary perspective. Keywords such as political leadership, evolutionary psychology and dominance suggest a more comprehensive investigation into the ways in which power and dominance influence the dynamics between leaders and followers, particularly in political and evolutionary contexts.
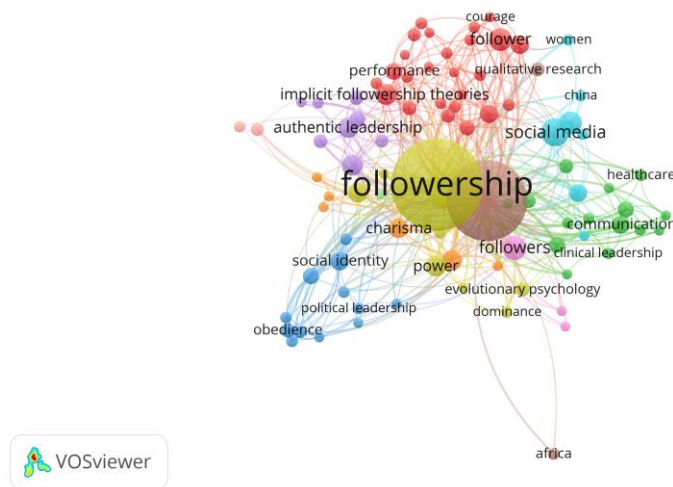
Figure 6: Network Visualization Map Of Keywords' Co-Occurrence

Table 5: The Most Popular Author Keywords

Cluster Colour	Keywords	Focus Description
Yellow	Followership, Leader, Follower, Leadership	Focuses on the fundamental concepts and dynamics between leaders and followers, exploring the direct roles and interactions central to followership studies.
Red	Charisma, Social Identity, Power, Implicit Followership Theories, Authentic Leadership	Deals with the psychological aspects of followership, exploring the influence of charisma, the role of social identity, and perceptions of leaders which enhance or diminish their effectiveness.
Blue	Social Media, Healthcare, Communication, Clinical Leadership	Reflects the application of followership theories in practical settings such as digital communication platforms and healthcare, emphasizing the impact on leadership structures.
Green	Political Leadership, Evolutionary Psychology, Dominance	Explores cultural and evolutionary perspectives on leadership and followership, including studies on political leadership and the primal aspects of dominance in leader-follower relationships.

Discussion

The examination of publication trends in followership research from 2015 to 2024 reveals a significant increase in scholarly interest with a peak observed in 2023. This surge suggests a growing recognition of the importance of followership within organizational studies likely spurred by emerging theoretical frameworks and breakthroughs in the field. (Oc et al. 2013). The ongoing level of interest illustrates the evolving nature of followership studies as academics continue to examine its complex influence on leadership and organizational outcomes. Although there was a tiny dip in 2024, the continued level of interest demonstrates the significance of this evolution. Notably, the concentration of publications by key scholars such as Haslam S.A. and Reicher S.D., points to their critical role in shaping foundational theories of followership (Haslam et al. 2017). This dominance by a select group of authors underscores the deep theoretical and empirical contributions that have solidified followership

as a distinct area of research. In terms of disciplinary intersections, followership research predominantly engages with Business, Management and Accounting reflecting its relevance to organizational behavior and leadership structures (Crossman and Crossman 2011).

Furthermore, its significant representation within Social Sciences and Psychology indicates the broader psychological and social implications of followership, particularly in relation to power dynamics and group identity (Carsten et al. 2010). Based on citation analysis, genuine leadership and follower development research that emphasise authenticity and self-awareness dominate the conversation (Leroy et al. 2012). Additionally, keyword analysis highlights the interdisciplinary nature of followership with terms such as social media and healthcare reflecting its practical application in contemporary digital and healthcare environments. The worldwide reach and significance of followership research is strengthened by international collaborations, notably between academics from the United States and the United Kingdom. This helps to build a complete knowledge of the dynamics of leadership. This research not only adds to the advancement of the academic knowledge of followership, but it also makes a contribution to practical applications such as educational leadership. As a result, it helps to promote Sustainable Development Goal 4 (DSG4) by improving leadership tactics in educational institutions.

Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

The analysis of publication trends, author contributions and subject areas in followership research highlights a significant expansion and interest in this field from 1951 to 2024. The concentration of scholarly works by a few prolific authors has shaped the theoretical and empirical landscape, emphasizing the influence of followership within organizational contexts. The frequent citation of seminal works underscores the foundational role these studies play in advancing the understanding of leadership dynamics. Furthermore, the wide range of applications and social importance of followership research are demonstrated by its broad multidisciplinary character which is demonstrated by its integration into other sectors including Business, Psychology and Healthcare. There are several limitations to the current investigation. First, bibliometric data from Scopus may be biassed since it does not include articles from other databases. This means that important contributions that are available in other academic repositories or languages may go unnoticed. Secondly, the study mostly looks at numbers like the number of publications and citations, which might not fully show the qualitative effects of research results and theoretical advances in the field. Moreover, the temporal scope of the study is confined to a decade, which may not adequately reflect long-term trends or shifts in followership research.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating a wider array of databases to broaden the scope of analyzed publications. Qualitative studies like content or theme analysis of publications may illuminate followership research theory and methodology progression. Additionally, extending the review period and including predictive analytics could offer a more comprehensive understanding of future trends and emerging themes in the field. Followership studies should also be applied to virtual environments, which are increasingly important in today's digital world. Further study of followership's function in encouraging sustainable practices inside organisations might integrate this research with global sustainability goals, increasing its social and environmental value.

Acknowledgment

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