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Exploring upstream affective influence: how followers can shape leader support

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Abstract

Purpose – Little is known about how followers can influence leaders through affect display. This paper explores the relationship between follower affect and leader support through the mediating processes of leader social mindfulness and leader affect.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on two studies (Pakistan and New Zealand) and employs a multisource time-lagged design. Multilevel analysis was conducted using the MLwiN program to test hypotheses.

Findings – Follower positive affect has a beneficial impact on leader support behavior, and negative affect has a detrimental effect. Leader affect and social mindfulness partially mediate these direct relationships.

Practical implications – Leaders should acknowledge that followers, too, can influence them via affect display. Organizations need to train leaders to boost their emotional intelligence.

Originality/value – This research provides additional evidence on follower-leader influences. It adds to leadership literature by providing a novel understanding of the underlying mechanisms of how follower affect can shape leader factors.

Keywords Leader–follower, Upstream affective influences, Social mindfulness, Leader support

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Few leaders would expect their followers to influence them by displaying affect. While followers perform a core role in leadership processes and outcomes, extant leadership research remains heavily focused on understanding how leader affect shapes followers' work outcomes (Van Knippenberg and Van Kleef, 2016). For instance, leader positive and negative affect have been found to influence followers' task performance (Clarkson *et al.*, 2020), engagement and burnout (Ten Brummelhuis *et al.*, 2014), and citizenship behaviors (Koning and Van Kleef, 2015). This leader-follower focus is problematic because it presumes that only leaders can influence followers, not vice versa (Oc *et al.*, 2023).

While there are growing calls for more follower-centric leadership research (e.g. Oc *et al.*, 2023; Van Knippenberg and Van Kleef, 2016), the area of follower affective influences has not received much attention. In particular, there is a dearth of empirical evidence on the processes through which followers might influence leaders. Only a few studies have examined how follower affect can predict leader affective experiences and work outcomes. For example, Hsee *et al.* (1990) were the first to find that leaders were more susceptible to emotional contagion from followers. Later, Tee *et al.* (2013) found that followers' positive and negative

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moods infused leaders' moods and subsequently shaped their task performance. Overall, this limited evidence suggests that followers can infuse feelings in leaders through an emotional contagion (Hatfield *et al.*, 1994), which refers to how leaders "catch the affect" from followers. In addition, workplace affect are laden with social information that observers use to distill meaning and make attributions (Bartels *et al.*, 2022). This is also supported by extant literature (see Van Knippenberg and Van Kleef, 2016), which established that interpersonal affective influences pass through parallel mechanisms of emotional contagion and cognitive interpretations, but evidence is particularly absent on the cognitive inferences that leaders make when observing followers' affect.

This research's motivation lies in the scarce empirical evidence on whether and how followers' affect can influence leaders. We draw on the emotions-as-social-information (EASI) theory (Van Kleef, 2014) to better understand this transmission process. EASI theory suggests that interpersonal affect transfer and resultant influence on work outcomes occur through affective and inferential pathways. Leaders taking an affective pathway may respond with complementary affect. For instance, a leader may respond to followers' disinterest with frustration, resulting in decreased support. In the inferential pathway, leaders rely on attributions and interpretations to respond to followers' affect. Guided by the EASI theory, we expect followers' affect to shape leader support through affective and inferential mechanisms. That is, followers' positive (PA) and negative affect (NA) will elicit a similar affective reaction from leaders via automatic mirroring, ultimately shaping their support. In parallel, followers' affect will trigger social mindfulness in leaders, which involves deliberate cognitive and empathetic efforts to extract information from others' emotions to understand underlying issues and intentions.

We employed a multisource time-lagged survey design, which was well-suited to capture self and other-reported data and test causal relationships. This method also enabled us to gather data across various Pakistan and New Zealand industries to help generalize our findings. Since the extant evidence on follower-leader influence is limited to the Western contexts, the selection of Pakistan and New Zealand as the research settings is based on the idea of examining whether the above-mentioned affective processes vary across different cultural contexts (e.g. Ahmed *et al.*, 2020). For example, high power distance in Pakistani workplaces and egalitarianism in New Zealand workplaces might determine how leaders respond to followers' affect.

Overall, our research makes several contributions. First, by testing the mediating mechanisms of leader affect and social mindfulness, this research moves beyond the previous focus on emotional contagion in the leadership literature and sheds light on the parallel inferential and affective processes of how follower factors can shape leader support. Second, we provided additional evidence from culturally diverse countries to enhance generalizability and better understand how different working cultures might shape the leader response. Third, previous research focused on work outcomes for affect observers, our research extended the EASI theory by showing the change in work support for affect expressors (i.e. followers) and indicating that apart from organizational/leadership factors, followers can mold leader behaviors.

Literature review

Follower affect

Literature uses affect as an umbrella term to represent affective states, traits, and moods (see Van Knippenberg and Van Kleef, 2016). This paper focuses on affective states, which represent short-lived and intense feelings triggered by a specific event or person and are mainly grouped into positive and negative affect. Positive affect includes the experience of joy, hope, interest, and enthusiasm. Negative affect include sadness, anxiety, anger, and frustration (Watson *et al.*, 2023). When individuals express positive or negative feelings, these become affective displays. Affective displays represent the conscious or unconscious affect expression

via verbal communication and nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, voice tone, and body language. When observed by others, such cues can lead to affective influences. Thus, followers' affect could be observed by leaders, potentially infusing them with similar feelings and triggering cognitive interpretations.

Leader support

Leader support refers to helping behavior and is defined by availability, encouragement, and noninterference (Wu and Parker, 2017). Availability support means the leaders are readily available when followers need guidance and assistance in work tasks. Encouragement support represents the leader behavior to endorse followers' decisions and motivate them to grow. Noninterference highlights how leaders avoid unwarranted involvement in followers' decisions and actions. Previous research shows that organizational and individual factors predict leader behaviors (Armenta *et al.*, 2017), but the literature lacks insights on whether followers can shape leader support.

Leader social mindfulness

Social mindfulness represents motivation to consider others and is defined as "being thoughtful of others in the present moment, and considering their needs and wishes before making a decision" (Van Lange and Van Doesum, 2015, p. 18). It comprises perspective-taking and empathetic concern. Perspective-taking is a deliberate cognitive process to understand others' behaviors and underlying reasons. It implies that socially mindful people distance themselves from their viewpoints and appraise situations through other's perspectives. Empathic concern means feeling for others and having an inner drive to improve their situation. It involves sympathy and compassion and subsequently taking action to resolve the issues. Social mindfulness is essential for leaders since they need to attend to the affective needs of their followers and make decisions for them (Gerpott *et al.*, 2020).

Table 1 summarizes previous research on followers' affective influences on leaders.

Hypotheses development

Follower affect, leader affect, and leader support

Much theory and evidence confirm that leaders influence followers through affective displays (e.g. Kim and Park, 2019), but few have asked: "Whether and how followers can influence leaders by expressing affect?" Emerging research (e.g. Bartels *et al.*, 2022) posits that affect transfers are reciprocal and bidirectional – i.e. leaders influence followers through affective displays and get affected by their followers.

Notably, evidence is scarce on how followers' affect could influence leaders. Initially, Hsee *et al.* (1990) observed that individuals with greater power (leaders) were more susceptible to catching emotions from lesser power individuals (followers). Adding to this, Tee *et al.* (2013) found that followers' moods infused leaders with similar moods and shaped their task performance so that leaders working with positive mood followers performed better. Moreover, leaders high in neuroticism caught more negative moods and performed less effectively. More recently, Bartels *et al.* (2022) showed that followers' affective states predicted followers' task performance, which shaped leaders' help and exchange relationships. Overall, this suggests that followers can, in part, influence leader outcomes by displaying affect. Follower positive affect might contribute to relationships and work climate, motivating leaders to reciprocate with enhanced support. Thus, building on the above empirical evidence and meta-analytical support for interpersonal affective influences (see Clarkson *et al.*, 2020), we posit:

H1. Follower (a) PA will be positively related to leader support, and (b) NA will be negatively related to leader support.

Table 1. Followers' affective influences on leaders – summary of previous work

Author (s)	Year	Title/research topic	Methodology	Sample	Key findings
Hsee *et al*.	1990	The effect of power on susceptibility to emotional contagion	Laboratory experiment	40 university students	Leaders were more susceptible to catching emotions from followers
Tee *et al*.	2013	The influence of follower mood on leader mood and task performance: An affective, follower-centric perspective of leadership	Laboratory experiments in two different studies	288 university students	Followers' moods infused leaders' moods and shaped their task performance. Leaders whose followers expressed more positive moods performed significantly better at work tasks. Furthermore, leaders high on neuroticism were more prone to catch followers' negative moods and perform less effectively
Van Knippenberg and Van Kleef	2016	Leadership and affect: Moving the hearts and minds of followers	Systematic literature review	–	An integrative review of the empirical research on leadership and affect. This paper highlights the evidence scarcity and calls for follower-centric leadership research, especially around follower-leader affect transfer
Bartels *et al*.	2022	With a frown or a smile: How leader affective states spark the leader-follower reciprocal exchange process	Experience sampling design	76 leader-follower dyads	Followers' affective states predicted their task performance, which in turn shaped leaders' perceptions of exchange relationships and helping behaviors
Lanaj and Jennings	2020	Putting leaders in a bad mood: The affective costs of helping followers with personal problems	Experience sampling design	43 managers	Leaders who help followers with personal problems during the day (e.g. addressing followers' negative emotions were found to experience negative effects by the end of the day)
Güntner *et al*.	2021	The power of followers that do not follow: Investigating the effects of follower resistance, leader implicit followership theories and leader negative affect on the emergence of destructive leader behavior	Online experiment and survey	122 Managers	Followers' resistance increases the leaders' negative affect, predicting their destructive behaviors. This underscores the notion that follower factors can shape leader emotions and negative behaviors
Oc *et al*.	2023	The study of followers in leadership research: A systematic and critical	Systematic literature review	–	The paper highlighted seven factors through which followers can influence leadership outcomes. Emotional states and psychological well-being of followers were identified as key factors of influence

Source(s): Authors' own work

Consistent with the idea of affect reciprocity (Dasborough *et al.*, 2009) and employing EASI theory, we suggest that followers' display can infuse similar affective experiences in leaders via the affective reaction mechanism. That is, followers' verbal and nonverbal cues are picked and automatically mimicked by the leaders. For instance, followers exhibiting interest and confidence might converge into the good mood of the leader. Thus, we hypothesize:

H2a. Follower PA will be positively related to leader PA.

H2b. Follower NA will be positively related to leader NA.

We also suggest that leader affect (infused by followers) determine their support. Affective experiences predict individuals' helping behaviors. Armenta *et al.* (2017), using the broaden-and-built theory, concluded that positive emotions allow the accumulation of psychological and social resources crucial to supporting others. Meta-analytical evidence also supports positive emotions predicting citizenship behaviors. Conversely, negative emotions were found to discourage support (Chang *et al.*, 2007). For instance, a sad leader may avoid interaction with followers, causing a temporary cessation of availability. Hence, we posit:

H3. Leader (a) PA will be positively related to leader support, and (b) NA will be negatively related to leader support.

Based on research explaining the transmission of affect (e.g. Tee *et al.*, 2013; Lanaj and Jennings, 2020) and related influences on support (e.g. Chang *et al.*, 2007). We predict that leader affect will mediate the relationship between follower affect and leader support. This proposed mediation process is supported by the affective reaction mechanism of EASI theory, suggesting that follower positive or negative displays can elicit similar feelings in leaders via automatic mimicry and affect convergence. Consequently, these infused feelings can determine how much leaders are ready to support their followers. EASI theory has been used to explore leadership influences (e.g. Koning and Van Kleef, 2015). However, we took an upstream approach and applied this theory to explore the followers' affective influences on leaders. We posit:

H4. Leader affect mediates the relationship between follower affect and leader support.

Follower affect, leader social mindfulness, and leader support

Leaders can use a social mindfulness lens to understand and respond to followers' affective displays and behaviors. Prior research has examined how leaders induce social mindfulness in followers. For example, Gerpott *et al.* (2020) studied the role of leadership social mindfulness in encouraging knowledge sharing. However, follower factors influencing leader social mindfulness still need to be explored. We argue that followers can, in part, shape the leader's social mindfulness. Follower positive display could enhance a leader's social mindfulness since expressing positive affect signals concern for others. For instance, followers paying attention (a positive affect) to a leader's work suggestions may signal that they value others' perspectives. Plausibly, a leader may respond with positive reciprocation and start taking the followers' perspectives when making decisions. Notably, this response is likely cognitive and deliberate (Israelashvili *et al.*, 2020) rather than spontaneous and affective. Conversely, followers' negative displays can detriment the leader's social mindfulness since expressing negative affect could indicate a disregard for others. Making leaders ignore followers' perspectives and show less empathetic concerns. Accordingly:

H5a. Follower PA will be positively related to leader social mindfulness.

H5b. Follower NA will be negatively related to leader social mindfulness.

We also suggest that socially mindful leaders increase opportunities for followers and are more supportive (e.g. Gerpott *et al.*, 2020). For example, a leader's perspective-taking may facilitate

growth opportunities for individual followers, keeping in view their career goals because leaders who take others' perspectives are more likely to understand followers' learning and growth needs. Similarly, leaders' empathetic concerns can facilitate the availability support. Such leaders may take a genuine interest in followers' need to seek work-related assistance and are determined to act. Meta-analytical evidence confirms that individuals' social mindfulness predicts their support and helping behaviors (Longmire and Harrison, 2018). We posit:

H6. Leader social mindfulness will be positively related to leader support.

Building on the above details illustrating how follower affect can shape leader social mindfulness and prior evidence on how social mindfulness predicts support (e.g. Gerpott *et al.*, 2020; Longmire and Harrison, 2018), we expect that leader social mindfulness will mediate the influence of follower affect on leader support. Previous research (Tee *et al.*, 2013) documented such a mediation relationship between follower affect and leader task performance using emotional contagion as an underlying mechanism.

However, we suggest that social mindfulness processes differ from emotional contagion since these are based on a deliberate (Israelashvili *et al.*, 2020) social approach to processing information from others' emotions. EASI theory (Van Kleef, 2014) explains this proposed mediation effect; the inferential process posits that affect displays are laden with social information. Leaders could extract and use this information to interpret followers' feelings, intentions, and behaviors. Since extracting social information involves cognitive processes, this may underscore leaders' perspective-taking and empathic concerns, ultimately shaping their support. Taken together:

H7. Leader social mindfulness will mediate the influence of follower affect on leader support.

Method

Participants and procedure

We considered two important factors in our methodology. First, Nuzzo (2014) argued the importance of replication; therefore, we conducted two studies to build confidence in our findings. Second, following Podsakoff *et al.*'s (2003) recommendations, we used the multisource time-lagged data to strengthen the relationship tested. Hence, we utilized two samples of leaders and their followers in Pakistan (Study 1) and New Zealand (Study 2). We used our professional networks in both countries to start recruitment of survey respondents. Such an approach is typical of leader-follower studies due to requirements of matching data (e.g. Khan and Chaudhary, 2023). We sought a diverse sample to enhance generalization across industries and occupations, and our network contacts were used only at the start, with additional respondents gained through snowballing. We contacted managers and explained the research objectives. Later, those interested were contacted, and data collection via surveys was conducted anonymously. Participants were only included if they worked a minimum of 20 h a week and had daily interaction with their managers.

Although managers were contacted first, data collection started with the followers, per the studies' focus (i.e. follower-leader influences). Our studies had data collection divided into three parts: (1) followers completed a survey on their demographic information and affective experiences and emotional acting, (2) one week later, leaders completed a survey on demographic details, their affective experiences, and social mindfulness, and (3) a further one week later, followers again filled a survey regarding their leaders' support. Aligned with leader-follower studies, the surveys were short and easy to complete (less than 5 min). We conducted a basic power calculation (standard 90% confidence level, a 6% margin of error, and an estimated overall workforce population of three million, which led to an ideal sample size of 188. Study 1 (Pakistan) had 150 surveys distributed to leaders, and 106 surveys were completed (70.7% response rate). Approximately 3–5 surveys were distributed to followers in each team (500 in total), and 330 completed surveys were received (66% response rate). Study 2 (New Zealand) had 110 surveys distributed to leaders, and 73 surveys were completed (67% response rate).

Again, approximately 3–5 surveys were distributed to followers in each team (385 in total), and 226 completed surveys were received (58.7% response rate). Pakistan sample has a better response rate, which is typical of South Asian cultures and perhaps related to participant commitment (Khan and Chaudhary, 2023). Response quality was checked by calculating early versus late responses (assuming late responses may be more similar to non-responses). We divided each sample into the first and second half (by date). In both samples, *t*-tests showed no significant differences between leader support rated by followers (both $p > 0.05$). This suggests that non-responses are likely random rather than systematically related to variables.

Leaders were more likely to be male in both Pakistan (55.8%) and New Zealand (57.1%) but were more educated (master's degree) in Pakistan (83.1%) than in New Zealand (27.9%). Leaders were similar in age bands (both 36–45 years) and worked fewer hours in Pakistan (47.3% more than 40 h/week) compared to New Zealand (69.9%). Followers were more likely to be male in Pakistan (59.1%) but the opposite in New Zealand (61.5% females). Like leaders, Pakistan followers were more educated, with only 1.2% having a high school diploma compared to 47.3% in New Zealand. Followers were younger in New Zealand (26–35 years) compared to Pakistan (average 36–45 years). Pakistan followers also worked more hours, with 51.5% working more than 40 h/week compared to only 12.3% in New Zealand.

Measures

We employed the same surveys and items in both studies. Measure reliabilities are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlations and descriptive statistics of study 1 (Pakistan) and study 2 (New Zealand) variables

	Study 1		Study 2		Study 1/2 Alpha (α)					
Variables	M	SD	M	SD		1	2	3	4	5
Followers										
1. Age (T1)	2.78	1.17	1.67	0.74	–	–	−0.01	0.22**	−0.05	−0.02
2. Emotional acting (T1)	2.04	1.08	3.25	0.57	0.94/ 0.94	−0.05	–	0.18**	−0.07	0.04
3. PA (T1)	4.06	0.79	4.08	0.52	0.74/ 0.70	−0.09	−0.50**	–	−0.34**	0.42**
4. NA (T1)	1.87	0.88	1.68	0.49	0.82/ 0.75	0.02	0.54**	−0.62**	–	−0.36**
5. LSB (T3)	4.10	0.82	4.51	0.54	0.97/ 0.87	−0.05	−0.53**	0.83**	−0.73**	–
Leaders										
1. Age (T2)	2.72	0.94	2.98	0.93	–	–	0.19**	0.18**	−0.25**	0.04
2. Team size (T2)	2.62	1.13	2.41	1.15	–	0.55**	–	−0.03	−0.16*	0.12
3. PA (T2)	4.23	0.77	3.95	0.52	0.77/ 0.84	−0.05	0.02	–	−0.50**	0.20**
4. NA (T2)	1.98	0.83	1.72	0.49	0.82/ 0.74	0.08	−0.30**	−0.46**	–	−0.15*
5. Social mindfulness (T2)	4.05	0.83	4.12	0.50	0.87/ 0.76	−0.10	0.04	0.72**	−0.66**	–

Note(s): Study 1 below diagonal ($N = 330$ followers and 106 leaders). Study 2 above diagonal ($N = 226$ followers and 73 leaders). *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$. LSB = Leader Supportive Behaviors. T1 = Time 1, T2 = Time 2, and T3 = Time 3

Source(s): Authors' own work

At time 1, follower affect was measured using three items each for PA and NA using Watson *et al.*'s (2023) PANAS schedule, coded 1 = very slightly or not at all, 5 = extremely. Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they felt and expressed during the last week, such as "inspired" (PA)and "distressed" (NA).

At time 2, leader affect was measured using the same scale (three items each). Leader social mindfulness was also measured at time 2 using four items from Koller and Lamm (2014), coded 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. A sample item was "I try to look at everyone's side of a disagreement before making a decision."

Finally, at time 3, leader support behavior was measured among followers using four items from Wu and Parker (2017), coded 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. A sample item was "My manager is sympathetic and supportive when I am worried or upset about something."

Control variables. We controlled for leaders' and followers' demographics on: Age (in bands, 1 = 18–25 years, 2 = 26–35 years, 3 = 36–45 years, 4 = 46–55 years, 5 = 56–65 years) due to meta-analytic support (Ng and Feldman, 2010). We also controlled for team size (1 = 1–5 followers, 2 = 6–10 followers, 3 = 11–15 followers, 4 = 16+ followers) (e.g. Spell *et al.*, 2011). Finally, we controlled for followers' emotional acting using the 4-item scale from Diefendorff *et al.* (2005) because the lack of genuine expression could impact transfer quality.

Measurement models

The measures were confirmed using CFA with R (lavaan) using the measureQ package. Overall, the hypothesized measurement model best fits the data. Study 1: χ^2(df) = 432.2(155), CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.06, and SRMR = 0.05, and Study 2: χ^2(df) = 317.6(155), CFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.07, and SRMR = 0.06. For both studies, we tested alternative CFA models, and these were all significantly poorer fit (all $p < 0.001$) than the hypothesized models (Hair *et al.*, 2010).

Analysis

We followed Ten Brummelhuis *et al.* (2014) and conducted the multilevel analysis with the MLwiN program because we had followers nested in teams with a leader. We used a two-level model, with the first level being followers (n = 330 Pakistan, n = 226 New Zealand) and the second level being leaders (n = 106 Pakistan, n = 73 New Zealand). Leader (level 2) variables were centered on the grand mean, as they have no Level-1 variance. We followed standard practice and centered predictor variables on the grand mean (e.g. Ten Brummelhuis *et al.*, 2014).

Both studies had the follower's rating of leader support as the dependent variable. Followers' affect predicted this, and we tested potential mediation effects via leader affect and social mindfulness.

Results

Following Ten Brummelhuis *et al.* (2014), we determined the proportion of variance attributed to the two levels. The amount of variance attributed to the leader level (level 2) was 57.8% for Pakistan (Study 1) and 65.9% for New Zealand (Study 2). Thus, significant amounts of variance were left to be explained by followers justifying our multilevel approach.

Descriptive statistics

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities of study 1 and 2 variables.

Multilevel models

Results of the multilevel models towards leader factors are presented in Table 3 (Study 1 and 2) and Table 4 (Study 1 – Pakistan) and 5 (Study 2 – New Zealand).

Table 3. Multilevel results towards leader outcomes (self-rated) – study 1 (Pakistan) and study 2 (New Zealand)

	Study 1 leader outcomes (self-rated)						Study 2 leader outcomes (self-rated)					
	Direct effects model to PA (L)		Direct effects model to NA (L)		Direct effects model to social mindfulness (L)		Direct effects model to PA (L)		Direct effects model to NA (L)		Direct effects model to social mindfulness (L)	
	β	*SE*	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*
Intercept	4.407‡	0.04	1.862‡	0.04	4.055‡	0.04	4.200‡	0.02	1.571‡	0.02	4.054‡	0.02
Age (F)	0.01	0.03	−0.02	0.03	−0.01	0.03	0.01	0.03	−0.07**	0.03	−0.06	0.03
Age (L)	−0.03	0.04	−0.17‡	0.04	−0.01	0.04	0.09‡	0.03	−0.02	0.03	0.01	0.03
Team size (L)	0.02	0.04	−0.29‡	0.04	0.00	0.04	−0.02	0.02	−0.07‡	0.02	−0.01	0.02
Emotional acting (F)	0.00	0.04	−0.03	0.04	−0.05*	0.04	0.05	0.04	−0.05	0.04	0.00	0.04
PA (F)	0.48‡	0.06	−0.38‡	0.06	0.50‡	0.06	0.35‡	0.05	−0.13**	0.06	0.12*	0.05
NA (F)	−0.16**	0.06	0.28‡	0.05	−0.30‡	0.06	−0.09	0.06	0.04	0.07	−0.16‡	0.06
Variance level 1 (F)	0.44‡	0.03	0.40‡	0.03	0.45‡	0.04	0.11‡	0.01	0.12‡	0.01	0.11‡	0.01
−2 Log likelihood	663.033		629.826		676.113		147.450		165.028		132.078	

Note(s): *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ‡$p < 0.001$. (L) = Leader, (F) = Followers. SE = standard estimate
Study 1: $N = 330$ followers and 106 leaders, Study 2: $N = 226$ followers and 73 leaders
Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 4. Multilevel results towards leader support – study 1 (Pakistan)

	Leader support (follower-rated)											
	Null Model		Control Model		Direct effects Model (F)		Mediators Model 1 (L)		Mediators Model 2 (L)		Mediators Model 3 (L)	
	β	*SE*	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*
Intercept	4.102‡	0.07	4.103	0.06	4.101‡	0.03	4.103‡	0.03	4.102‡	0.03	4.103‡	0.03
Age (F)			−0.04	0.03	−0.01	0.02	−0.01	0.02	−0.01	0.02	−0.01	0.02
Age (L)			−0.12*	0.06	−0.01	0.03	−0.02	0.03	−0.01	0.03	−0.02	0.03
Team size (L)			0.08	0.06	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.00	0.03	0.03	0.04
Emotional acting (F)			−0.32‡	0.03	−0.06*	0.03	−0.06*	0.03	−0.05*	0.03	−0.05*	0.03
PA (F)					0.53‡	0.04	0.48‡	0.05	0.50‡	0.04	0.48‡	0.05
NA (F)					−0.32‡	0.04	−0.31‡	0.04	−0.30‡	0.04	−0.31‡	0.04
PA (L)							0.19‡	0.05			0.17**	0.06
NA (L)							0.07	0.05			0.08	0.05
Social mindfulness (L)									0.11**	0.04	0.09	0.06
Variance level 2 (F)	0.40‡ (57.8%)	0.07	0.25‡	0.05	0.04‡	0.01	0.04‡	0.01	0.04‡	0.01	0.03**	0.01
Variance level 1 (L)	0.29‡ (42.2%)	0.03	0.25‡	0.02	0.16‡	0.02	0.15‡	0.02	0.14‡	0.02	0.15‡	0.02
−2 Log likelihood	706.990		625.346		390.449		375.049		383.700		374.331	

Note(s): *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ‡$p < 0.001$. $N = 330$ followers and 106 leaders. (L) = Leader, (F)=Followers. SE = standard estimate
Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 3 presents the direct effects of follower affect on leader affect and leader social mindfulness in studies 1 and 2. In Study 1, Follower PA is significantly related ($\beta = 0.48(0.06)$, $p < 0.001$) to leader PA. Follower NA is significantly related ($\beta = 0.28(0.05)$, $p < 0.001$) to leader NA. Then, towards leader social mindfulness, follower PA ($\beta = 0.50(0.06)$, $p < 0.001$) and follower NA ($\beta = -0.30(0.06)$, $p < 0.001$) are significantly related. In Study 2, Follower PA is significantly related ($\beta = 0.35(0.05)$, $p < 0.001$) to leader PA. However, follower NA is not significantly related to leader NA. Then, towards leader social mindfulness, follower PA ($\beta = 0.12(0.05)$, $p = 0.011$) and follower NA ($\beta = -0.16(0.06)$, $p < 0.001$) are significantly related.

Table 4 shows the direct and mediation effects towards leader support (Study 1). Follower PA is significantly related ($\beta = 0.53(0.04)$, $p < 0.001$) as is follower NA ($\beta = -0.32(0.04)$, $p < 0.001$). In the first mediation model, leader PA is significantly related ($\beta = 0.19(0.05)$, $p < 0.001$), although leader NA is not. The influence of follower affect on leader support was modestly changed, with follower PA dropping from $\beta = 0.53$ to $\beta = 0.48$ and follower NA dropping from $\beta = -0.32$ to -0.31. In the second mediation model, leader social mindfulness is significantly related ($\beta = 0.11(0.04)$, $p < 0.001$) to leader support. The influence of the follower affect on leader support was changed, with follower PA dropping from $\beta = 0.53$ to $\beta = 0.50$ and follower NA dropping from $\beta = -0.32$ to -0.30. In the third mediation model, we included all three mediators and the only significant predictor is leader PA ($\beta = 0.17(0.06)$, $p = 0.008$). The influence of the follower affect on leader support was modestly changed (i.e. follower PA dropping from $\beta = 0.53$ to $\beta = 0.48$ and follower NA dropping from $\beta = -0.32$ to -0.31).

Table 5 shows the direct and mediation effects towards leader support (Study 2). Follower PA is significantly related ($\beta = 0.33(0.06)$, $p < 0.001$) as is follower NA ($\beta = -0.28(0.06)$, $p < 0.001$). In the first mediation model, leader PA and NA are not significantly related to leader support. In the second mediation model, leader social mindfulness is significantly related ($\beta = 0.31(0.07)$, $p < 0.001$). The influence of follower affect on leader support was changed, with follower PA dropping from $\beta = 0.33$ to $\beta = 0.31$ and follower NA dropping from $\beta = -0.28$ to -0.24. In the third mediation model, we included all three mediators, and the only significant predictor is leader social mindfulness ($\beta = 0.32(0.07)$, $p < 0.001$). Again, the influence of the follower affect on leader support was modestly changed, with follower PA dropping from $\beta = 0.33$ to $\beta = 0.30$ and follower NA dropping from $\beta = -0.28$ to -0.23.

The results largely confirm our hypotheses. In study 1 (Pakistan), all direct effects were supported except 3(b), and we found strong support for partial mediation effects. In study 2 (New Zealand), all direct effects were supported except 2(b) and 3 (a and b), and we found support for mediation Hypothesis 7 (leader social mindfulness) but not for Hypothesis 4. The slight differences in the results of both studies may be attributed to cultural factors discussed below.

Discussion

Much research presents leaders as a source of affective influence on followers. While theoretical understanding of follower-leader affect transfer is increasing (e.g. Oc *et al.*, 2023), only a few studies have empirically examined followers as a source of affective influences. This paper adopted an atypical approach and examined upstream influences in leadership research. It is argued that followers' affect could shape leader support, as well as their affective experiences and social mindfulness. We examined direct and mediation effects. Across both studies (Pakistan and New Zealand), we found strong support for our core hypotheses that followers' affect can directly and indirectly impact leader support behavior.

Results show that followers' positive affect enhances leader support while negative affect detriments it, which aligns with the previous research (e.g. Bartels *et al.*, 2022). Followers' positive displays might contribute to the work environment, motivating leaders to reciprocate by extending more support. Another explanation might be that followers' positivity confirms

Table 5. Multilevel results towards leader support – study 2 (New Zealand)

	Leader support (follower-rated)											
	Null Model		Control Model		Direct effects Model (F)		Mediators Model 1 (L)		Mediators Model 2 (L)		Mediators Model 3 (L)	
	β	*SE*	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*
Intercept	4.503‡	0.05	4.505‡	0.05	4.509‡	0.04	4.509‡	0.04	4.510‡	0.03	4.510‡	0.03
Age (F)			−0.05	0.05	−0.09*	0.04	−0.10*	0.04	−0.07	0.04	−0.07	0.04
Age (L)			0.11*	0.05	0.07	0.04	0.06	0.04	0.06	0.04	0.06	0.04
Team size (L)			0.07*	0.04	0.06*	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.03
Emotional acting (F)			−0.00	0.06	−0.05	0.05	−0.06	0.05	−0.05	0.05	−0.06	0.05
PA (F)					0.33‡	0.06	0.32‡	0.07	0.31‡	0.06	0.30‡	0.06
NA (F)					−0.28‡	0.06	−0.27‡	0.07	−0.24‡	0.06	−0.23‡	0.06
PA (L)							−0.05	0.09			−0.10	0.08
NA (L)							−0.14	0.09			−0.13	0.08
Social mindfulness (L)									0.31‡	0.07	0.32‡	0.07
Variance level 2 (F)	0.19‡ (65.9%)	0.02	0.19‡	0.02	0.05**	0.02	0.05**	0.02	0.03*	0.02	0.03**	0.01
Variance level 1 (L)	0.10‡ (34.1%)	0.03	0.08‡	0.03	0.16‡	0.02	0.16‡	0.02	0.16‡	0.02	0.16‡	0.02
−2 Log likelihood	338.514		329.544		276.990		274.716s		259.458		256.546	

Note(s): *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ‡$p < 0.001$. $N = 226$ followers and 73 leaders. (L) = Leader, (F) = Followers. S-Mindfulness = Social Mindfulness. SE = standard estimate
Source(s): Authors' own work

the leaders' ability to inspire and motivate others, encouraging leaders to engage more supportively (Lanaj *et al.*, 2020).

Followers' positive affect also predicted the leaders' positive affect, adding to previous evidence on emotional convergence (e.g. Koning and Van Kleef, 2015). Notably, followers' negative affect was related to the leaders' negative affect in the Pakistan study but not in the New Zealand study. Perhaps leaders in collectivist cultures like Pakistan feel the responsibility to attend to the emotional needs of the followers to maintain workplace harmony and relationships. Such collective focus can make leaders more susceptible to "catching emotions". Further, New Zealand has an individualistic culture that values personal boundaries and self-emotional regulation. Leaders are perhaps trained to regulate their emotions and might be less expected to manage followers' emotions, resulting in less emotional contagion (e.g. Hofstede, 2011).

Further, we found support for the mediating role of the leader affect in the relationship between follower affect and leader support in the Pakistan study, which aligns with previous research (Tee *et al.*, 2013) and explained by affective reaction mechanism of EASI theory (Van Kleef, 2014). For instance, followers displaying feelings of joy and interest could put leaders in a good mood via automatic affect mirroring, potentially boosting their social and cognitive resources (Armenta *et al.*, 2017). Leaders might use these resources to extend support and reinforce the positive climate. This mediating relationship was not established in the New Zealand study.

Our results also confirm the role of leader social mindfulness. Firstly, the followers' positive affect was positively related to the leader's social mindfulness, while the negative affect was negatively associated. Leaders could perceive followers' positivity as attempts to create an open and collaborative environment and show concern for others. Therefore, leaders become mindful of followers' needs and start taking more input from them to sustain a positive environment. Conversely, a negative display might be seen as challenging and disregarding others, making leaders defensive and inward-looking (Gerpott *et al.*, 2020). Secondly, leader social mindfulness mediated the relationship between follower affect and leader support, as explained by the inferential process mechanism of the EASI theory (Van Kleef, 2014). For example, when team members frequently exhibit enthusiasm and confidence in their work tasks, a socially mindful team leader will be more likely to infer that followers enjoy the work and are deeply immersed. Such mindful inference may encourage leaders to take an outward approach and provide followers with more job resources and development opportunities.

Interestingly, findings reveal that Pakistani and New Zealand workplace leaders might respond differently to followers' affective displays. Leader affect and leader social mindfulness were included as two underlying pathways in the mediation analyses (model 3). It appears that Pakistani leaders usually take an affective pathway, which primarily involves affect sharing. In comparison, New Zealand leaders rely on inferential pathways (e.g. social mindfulness), which include sharing affect and taking action to resolve issues. Cultural variations in values and interpersonal norms can explain these different responses (Hofstede, 2011; Ahmad *et al.*, 2020). It might be that the collectivist culture in Pakistan values group harmony and close relationships, requiring leaders to express complementary affect. Thus, the affective pathway might become the core mechanism through which leaders connect with followers and manifest their support. In addition, high power distance in Pakistani workplaces may require followers not to display negative affect towards leaders. Leaders may see such expression as a challenge to authority and leadership identity, pushing them to take the affective path and responding with adverse reactions (e.g. showing anger in response to frustration). In contrast, the individualistic and egalitarian culture in New Zealand might help to create psychologically safe environments where followers can freely express feelings and leaders are trained to show awareness and consideration for others as opposed to spontaneous affective responses. New Zealand leaders may not overtly engage in affect sharing with followers due to respecting personal boundaries but provide actionable assistance to address the situation.

Although our results are based on data from Pakistan and New Zealand, we expect that the phenomenon of follower-leader affective influences is universal, and our research findings can be generalized to other countries. For instance, Pakistan's insights might apply to other South Asian countries and a broader set of developing countries with similar cultural norms and organizational settings. Relatedly, findings from New Zealand could be relevant to other developed countries having flatter hierarchies and high individualism.

Theoretical implications

Our findings make several contributions. First, we added to the research on understanding follower-leader affective influences by putting forward a novel model involving two parallel mediation pathways. Although theoretical possibilities exist for dual-mediating effects via affective reactions and inferential processes, previous empirical studies only relied on emotional contagion. Specifically, along with leader affect, we tested leader social mindfulness as a novel inferential mechanism linking follower affect with leader support. Our research is one of the first to use EASI theory (Van Kleef, 2014) to understand follower-leader affect transfer and empirically disentangle the underlying affective and inferential pathways. In doing so, we responded to calls for more research on the inferential mechanisms of affect-related influence (see Van Knippenberg and Van Kleef, 2016).

Second, we advanced research on follower-centric leadership models (Dasborough *et al.*, 2009) by providing additional evidence from two culturally diverse countries to build a comprehensive understanding of how followers could impact leaders. Our findings potentially indicate the role of cultural variations in determining leaders' responses (Hofstede, 2011). Furthermore, extant research primarily examined outcomes for affect observers, such as leader task performance (Tee *et al.*, 2013) and leader exchange perceptions (Bartels *et al.*, 2022), leaving outcomes for expressor neglected. We tested the outcomes for the source of affective display (i.e. followers). This is an important focus since the power distance in the leader-follower relationship might push leaders to extend or cease support upon observing positive or negative displays.

Third, our research adds to the leadership literature by moving beyond the conventional assumption that only organization and leadership factors can shape leader support. Our findings underscore the need to explore follower-centric predictors of leader behaviors.

Practical implications

Our research also provides implications for the practice. Leaders should be aware of the upstream affective influence and the processes through which followers could impact them. This realization is particularly relevant in high power distance cultures to moderate the leaders' spontaneous and intense response. Organizations may consider assessing candidates' emotional intelligence for leadership positions and training existing leaders to enhance their capability of managing their own and others' emotions. Besides, we recommend followers consider the detrimental impact of negative displays on leaders and the resultant support. A potential strategy could be to limit or delay interaction when feeling negative.

Considering the beneficial impact of leader positive affect and leader social mindfulness on leader support, we suggest organizations may not solely rely on followers to shape these leader factors but nurture these attributes more systematically. Organizations in developing countries may design leadership programs to enhance leaders' mindfulness and emotional intelligence, enabling them to respond effectively and alleviate emotional burdens in the workplace. Organizations in developed countries could train leaders in cultural adaptability and understanding different affective norms to manage diverse workforces.

Limitations and future directions

Multisource time-lagged design and replication across two culturally different samples provide methodological strength to this research. Nevertheless, as with all research, our work

is subject to some limitations that future researchers can address. First, we relied on theory and time-lagged data to establish the directional relationship between predictor and outcome variables. We acknowledge the challenges in capturing the transient nature of affect in field studies because of recall bias. Therefore, we contextualized the measurement of affect near the affective event – participants reported last week's affective experience. Future studies can utilize robust research designs such as experience sampling, which are capable of capturing emotions and moods near their occurrence.

Second, we did not test for moderating influences, but some individual and situational factors might buffer or exacerbate the direct and mediating influence of followers' affect on leader support. Our results signal that leaders across different cultures might take alternative pathways to respond; therefore, future researchers can explore the moderating role of cultural factors such as power distance (e.g. Ahmad *et al.*, 2020) to understand such pathway choices. The leader-follower relationship can also moderate this affect transfer, as LXM theory suggests that a high-quality relationship gives followers more leverage to influence leaders. Besides, followers' emotional arousal can be an important moderator since, in high power distance cultures, followers may be expected only to express low-arousal emotions towards leaders.

Third, we theorized the mediation effects of leader affective and social cognitive factors. However, future research can include other mediation mechanisms involving leaders' cognitive factors, such as leader attribution of followers' sincere or manipulative intentions. For example, a follower displaying sadness on losing a project bid may motivate a leader to attribute sincerity to such expression.

Conclusion

Existing understanding of the processes and outcomes of follower-leader affective influences is limited. We hypothesized and found that followers' affect through affective reaction processes infused similar feelings in leaders, resulting in an increase/decrease in leader support. In parallel, followers' affect could induce social mindfulness in leaders through inferential processes, bringing a corresponding change in leader support. Our research suggests follower-leader affective influences are likely but are complex and pass through parallel indirect pathways. Cultural context can further add to these complexities due to the possibility that collectivist/individualistic orientation and power distance might control how leaders respond. Organizations and managers should acknowledge this phenomenon and design interventions accordingly.

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