

LEADING THROUGH TRUST: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF HOW FOLLOWERS' TRUST SHAPE LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS AND STYLES

Mehreen Mansoor*

Sarah Wali Qazi**

Abstract

Trust is an important attribute that determines whether followers are satisfied from their leaders. It is a belief or set of expectations that acts out as a glue binding leaders and followers together. However, previous literature on the leader-follower trust relationship has primarily focused on followers' side particularly the Influence of leaders' trust on followers, leaving a significant gap regarding the influence of follower's trust on leaders. This systematic review aims to explore the existing literature on influence of followers' trust on leadership behaviors and styles and proposes a framework for future research. The review includes 120 research articles published between 2014 till 2025 retrieved from various databases. Of these, 47 articles met the inclusion criteria of focusing on leader-follower trust relationship. The selected studies comprise both quantitative and qualitative research studies. Prior research can be categorized into three streams. The first examines followers' improved performance resulting from trust in their leaders. The second focuses on leaders who trust their followers and consequently provide greater benefits and important assignments to trusted employees. The third highlights followers' perspective and performance outcomes associated with receiving trust from leaders. An emerging stream, however, focuses on leadership outcomes resulting from followers' trust and requires further scholarly attention. The findings strongly support the need for additional research on leaders' perspectives as an outcome of followers' trust. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, Moral Licensing Theory, and Affective Events Theory, the review suggests that followers' trust can significantly influence leadership styles and behaviors. Feelings of obligation, moral credits, and hubristic pride may lead leaders to display benevolent, laissez-faire, or autocratic leadership styles.

Keywords: Affective events theory, followers, leaders' feeling trusted, leadership styles, moral licensing theory, trust-based leadership systematic review

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Preamble

Trust can be defined comprehensively as a fiduciary relationship between the two parties, trustor and the trustee (Rasheed, Rashid, & Ngah, 2025). In this relationship the first party (Trustor) provides some rights to the second party (trustee) which evokes the sense of confidence to the trustee that the trustor believes his integrity and honesty (Campagna et al., 2019). As the reciprocal of the relationship, the trustee feels indebted and obliged and tries to reciprocate this relationship by undertaking in favourable behaviors (Chen et al., 2019). When it comes to the workplace relationships, the interpersonal trust – one's perception that the other party or the person will not do anything harmful and holds only positive expectations from them – had attracted extensive recognition from the researchers (De Jong et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2019; Palanski et al., 2019). Similarly, feeling of being trusted contemplates the perception of the trustors' positive expectations from the trustees and signals that the trustees are honest, trustworthy, proficient, and innocuous (Subramanian & Banihashemi, 2024).

The trusting relationship between a leader and the follower who have difference in their hierarchical positions may portray a more complex picture of the scenario and needs more attention from the researchers (Norman et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2019; Moorman et al., 2018; Bowler et al., 2018). Previous research studies on leader-follower trust can categorized into three streams. The first stream, recognized that followers who trust their leaders demonstrates a very positive work performance, e.g. increased organizational commitment, higher work

* Assistant Professor, Department of Management and Human Resource Management at College of Business Management (CBM), Institute of Business Management (IoBM), Karachi.

**Corresponding Author, Associate Professor and Acting Associate Dean, Graduate and Post-Graduate Programs CBM, IoBM, Karachi. Email: sarah.wali@iobm.edu.pk



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engagement, job satisfaction and increased organizational citizenship behavior (Laundon et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2019; Sendjaya et al., 2019). Research studies in second stream suggests that when the leaders trust their employees or followers, they give preference only to their trusted employees and provide them more benefits and important jobs as compare to non-trusted employees (Chen et al., 2019; Gjerde, 2018; Dwyer, 2019). Third category of the research streams, highlights that when the followers receives trust from their leaders, they feel more pride and confidence resulting in higher self-esteems and better performance at the workplace (Ahmed, 2025). However, these trusted employees are given more work assignments and projects which results in increased workload and decreased work-life balance (Chan et al., 2017; Pandu & Sankar, 2018; Lau et al., 2018).

It has been observed that majority of the previous literature regarding leader-follower trust relationship has focused more on followers' side i.e. Influence of leaders' trust on followers, leaving behind the important gap of influence of follower's trust on leaders (Hoffman et al., 2011; Lau et al. 2014; Jaiswal & Dhar, 2017; Chen et al., 2019; Ahmed, 2025). The relationship of follower's trust on leaders may explicate an another side of the coin thus more exploration required on how do leaders feel about when they are being trusted by their followers (Norman et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2019; Moorman et al., 2018; Bowler et al., 2018). Furthermore, when it comes to leader-follower relationship in a hierarchical structure, especially when followers (employees) are dependent on leaders for their evaluations, insightful information or performance feedback, the scenario and attitudinal dimensions of trust would be different as compare to when followers trust their leaders in a hierarchical setting. The reason being that leaders are not dependable on them, therefore, the influence of followers' trust can provide a different perspective and attitudinal dimension on their leadership style and behavior. As such, influence of followers' trust on leadership behaviors and style would be a new focus and can extend the existing literature (Baer et al., 2020; Farrukh et al., 2019; Lau et al., 2018; De Jong et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2019; Palanski et al., 2019).

Therefore, the current literature review seeks theoretical understanding of the existing literature on leadership style & behavior as an outcome of followers' trust by reviewing the previous literature in order to provide a proposed framework for future researchers. The current review would benefit the future researchers to address this important area of leadership which needs further exploration and to identify the potential pros & cons of leaders feeling of being trusted (Dianawati et al., 2025). The below research questions led the full systematic literature review and analysis.

1.2 Research Questions

The current review is a systematic literature review based on the following research questions in mind.

1. How has the previous literature focused the relationship amongst leadership, followers and trust?
2. What information do we get from the existing literature based on the relationship between followers' trust and consequent leadership behaviors and styles in order to identify the research gaps?
3. What could be the futuristic outlook for future researchers based on the identified research gaps through this literature review?

1.3 Literature Contribution

The current literature review will contribute in several ways to extend the existing literature. Initially, the review has focused on the existing knowledge on leaders' feelings of being trusted by followers and its consequent influence on their leadership styles and behaviors. The prior research studies have given less attention on the leaders' behaviors and leadership styles as an outcome of followers' trust. Majority of the previous literature has focused effects of leader's trust on employees' behaviors and performance (Baer et al., 2020; Farrukh et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2011; Lau et al. 2014; Jaiswal & Dhar, 2017; Chen et al., 2019). Only a limited amount of work has been done on leaders' side perspective (Ahmed, 2025; Alkaabi, Alghizzawi, Daoud, & Ezmigna, 2024). The future researchers may take advantage of the current systematic literature review and may extend the literature by investigating the leader's side perspective (Leaders feelings of being trusted) as an outcome of follower's trust. Secondly, the review has identified several gaps that are still unanswered and needs more attention from the researchers especially the another side of the coin i.e. the positive and negative side of leaders' reaction to followers' trust or leaders' feeling of being trusted and its ultimate influence on their behavior and leadership style. The review provides a double-edge sword analysis on this relationship through the lens of different theories.

1.4 Scope of the Review

The current literature review spans the last 10 years' research papers on the relationship of Leadership, trust and followers published between 2014 till 2024. The review has analysed both quantitative and qualitative research studies. In total 120 research articles were reviewed from four databases such as Scopus, google scholar, web of science and ProQuest using pre-established keywords. Amongst 120 research studies, almost 47 duplicate research studies were found and excluded at this stage. The remaining 73 research studies were screened by reading their titles and abstracts. During this stage those research studies were further excluded that did not meet

the inclusion criteria of being focused on leadership, followers and trust relationship. Consequently, 47 research studies were included in the systematic review. Figure 1.1 shows this process through a flow chart.

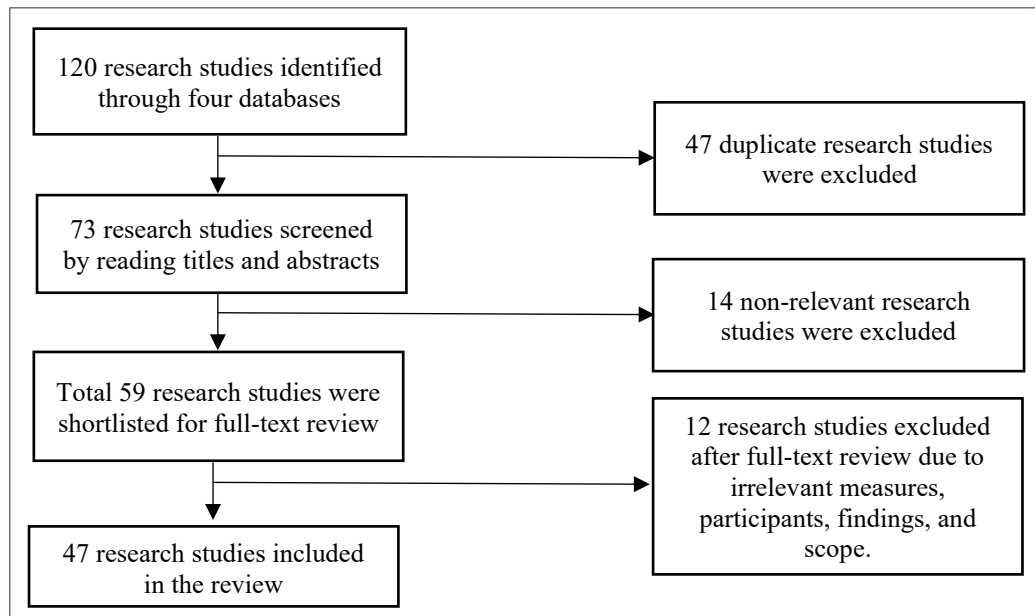


Figure 1.1: Inclusion and exclusion Criteria

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Current Research Streams on Leadership, Trust and Followers

By reviewing and analysing the previous literature, it has been observed that majority of the previous literature regarding leader-follower trust relationship has focused more on followers' side i.e. Influence of leaders' trust on followers and its impact on the follower's performance & behavior (Hoffman et al., 2011; Lau et al. 2014; Jaiswal & Dhar, 2017; Chen et al., 2019). Research studies on the relationship of follower's trust on leaders' behaviour and leadership styles is still scarce (Norman et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2019; Moorman et al., 2018; Bowler et al., 2018). Prior research can be categorized into three streams. The first stream is focused on followers who felt confident because they trust their leaders and due to this they perform better at the workplace (Laundon et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2019; Sendjaya et al., 2019). The second stream concentrated on those leaders who trust their employees or followers; as an outcome they give preference only to their trusted employees and provide them more benefits and important jobs as compare to their non-trusted employees (Chen et al., 2019; Gjerde, 2018; Dwyer, 2019). Third category of the research streams shed light on the followers' perspective again specifically to those who receives trust from their leaders and due to this they feel more pride and confident resulting in higher self-esteem and better performances at the workplace. However, these trusted employees are given more work assignments and projects by their leaders which results in increased workload and decreased work-life balance (Chan et al., 2017; Pandu & Sankar, 2018; Lau et al., 2018). See table 2.1 for more details.

Table 2.1: Leader-follower trust Research Streams as per Literature

Literature Streams on Leader-Follower Trust	Concentration	Results	References
Literature Stream 1	Followers who trust their leaders	Increased organizational commitment	(Engelbrecht et al., 2014)
	Influence of their trust on their own performance	- Higher work engagement - Job satisfaction - Increased organizational citizenship behavior	(Caza et al., 2015; Bligh, 2017) (Laundon et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2019) (Sendjaya et al., 2019) (Zhao et al., 2025)

Literature Stream 2	• Leaders who trust their followers	• Leaders give preference only to their trusted employees and provide them more benefits and important jobs as compare to non-trusted employees	(Schaubroeck et al., 2011) (Mineo, 2014) (Gjerde, 2018) (Chen et al., 2019) (Dwyer, 2019) (Elkhwesky et al., 2022) (Fischer et al., 2023) (Shal et al., 2024)
	• Influence on their own behavior		
Literature Stream 3	• Followers whom their leaders trust on	• Followers feel more pride and confident • Higher self-esteems • Better performance	Newman et al., 2014 Guay & Choi, 2015; Gabriel, 2015 (Chan et al., 2017) (Pandu & Sankar, 2018) (Lau et al., 2018) (Gjoneska et al., 2019) (Pattali et al., 2024) (Alghizzawi et al., 2024) (Nazarian et al., 2025)
	• Influence on Follower's performance	• Increased motivation • Are given more assignments	
	• Influence on leaders' behavior	• Increased workload • Decreased work-life balance	
Emerging Stream	• Leaders who are trusted by their followers	• Trusted leaders are more likely to demonstrate feeling of obligation, moral licensing or hubristic pride. • As an outcome of these behaviors, benevolent, laissez-faire or autocratic leadership style may be developed.	Chen et al., 2019 Yuchun & Shuang, 2020; Baer et al., 2020 (Elkhwesky et al., 2022) (Fischer et al., 2023) (Shal et al., 2024) (Raziq et al., 2025)
	• Influence of followers' trust on leadership styles and behaviours		

Through the above categorization it is clearly visible that previous research studies are more focused on the followers' side as to how the followers may feel and perform when their leaders have trust on them (Bello, 2012; Jyoti & Dev, 2015; Wang & Hsieh, 2013; Chen et al., 2019). However, the literature is still scarce on leaders' side perspective and their perceptions of being trusted (Baer et al. 2015; Farrukh et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2011; Lau et al. 2014; Jaiswal & Dhar, 2017; Chen et al., 2019; Baer et al., 2020). Chen et al. (2019) has identified in his study that leaders who are trusted by their followers brings both positive and negative behavioural reactions which triggers different leadership styles. However, this stream has received very less attention from the researchers and may be treated as an emerging stream for the future researchers. Prior research studies have focused on followers' feeling of being trusted by their leaders and its ultimate impact on their workplace performances, but scarce research work could be found out on leaders' feeling of being trusted by their followers and its ultimate influence on their leadership styles and behaviors.

2.2 Subsequent Leadership Behaviors & Styles After Being Trusted by Followers

Prior literature concentrating on leaders' perspective suggests that when followers trust their leaders, it likely to influence on their behavior which ultimately influence their leadership style (Baer et al., 2020; Lyu et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2019). The prior literature drawing this conclusion based on social exchange theory i.e. when followers trust their leaders then as a norm of reciprocity, the leaders feel obliged and indebted towards their followers and tries to reimburse their trust by pleasing them with benevolence behaviors such as show kindness and understanding, which results in benevolent leadership style (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Paillé et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2018). However, few evidences could also be found in the literature concluding deleterious effects of followers' trust on leadership style and their behaviors (Robertson & Barling, 2013; Zhu et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2017; Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2018). When leaders recognized that their followers are trusting them, it may generate a positive moral self-perception by them, which can lead them towards aggregation of moral credits and eventually converted into contentious behaviors such ignoring followers' queries and needs and starts neglecting important issues at workplace (Merritt et al., 2010; He et al., 2014; Blanken et al., 2015; Kim & Park, 2017). Drawing this conclusion based on moral licensing theory, this behavior could be translated into Laissez-Faire leadership style (Chen et al., 2019). In addition to these leadership styles, the literature also enlightens a

third behavioural category which says that leader feeling of being trusted could also lead them towards developing a feeling of hubristic pride such as they feel more powerful and coercive because their followers are dependent them and their decisions and they start feeling that they have more knowledge and strength that's why their followers trust them (Cheng et al., 2010; Back et al., 2013; Brescoll, 2016). As a result, this feeling can indulge them in using coercion, aggression and intimidation to maintain their status quo which can ultimately converted into Autocratic leadership style based on Affective events theory (Yeung, 2017; Yeung & Shen, 2019). Table 2.2 is given below for more clarity.

Table 2.2: Subsequent Leadership Behaviors & Styles as an outcome of Followers' Trust

Influence of Followers' Trust on Leaders	Ultimate Behaviors	Leadership styles	Description	Theory Implied
Leaders' feeling of being trusted by their followers	Feeling of obligations	Benevolent Leadership Style	Leaders feel obliged and indebted towards their followers and tries to reimburse their trust by pleasing them with benevolence behaviors e.g. Kindness and special favours	Social Exchange Theory
	Feeling of Moral Credits	Laissez-Faire Leadership Style	Followers' trust may generate a positive moral self-perception by leaders, which can lead them towards aggregation of moral credits and eventually converted into contentious behaviors e.g. ignoring followers' needs and important workplace issues.	Moral Licensing Theory
	Feeling of hubristic Pride	Autocratic Leadership Style	Leader feeling of being trusted could also lead them towards developing a feeling of hubristic pride such as they feel more powerful and coercive because their followers are dependent them and their decisions.	Affective Events Theory

2.3 Identified Research Gap after Literature Review

After a thorough literature review of last 10 years' research papers starting from 2014 till 2024 on the subject matter, following research gaps are identified.

2.3.1 Leaders' Perspective as an outcome of Followers' trust

By reviewing and analysing the previous literature, it has been observed that majority of the previous literature regarding leader-follower trust relationship has focused more on followers' side i.e. Influence of leaders' trust on followers and its impact on the follower's performance & behavior (Hoffman et al., 2011; Lau et al., 2014; Jaiswal & Dhar, 2017; Chen et al., 2019). Research studies on the relationship of follower's trust on leaders' behaviour and leadership styles is still scarce (Norman et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2019; Moorman et al., 2018; Bowler et al., 2018).

2.3.2 Leader feeling trusted and their subsequent leadership styles & behaviors

As already mentioned that majority of the prior literature has focused on followers' perspective and their subsequent behaviors as an outcome of leader's trust; only a few studies could be found that concentrated on this untouched area of leader feeling trusted and their ultimate behaviours and leadership styles (Chen et al., 2019). The current review will open an avenue for the future researchers to conduct more studies on leaders' feeling trusted and their subsequent behaviors and styles.

2.3.3 Quantitative v/s Qualitative

After reviewing the last 10 years' research articles based on leadership, followers and trust relationship. The review also concludes that 60% of research studies were empirical evidences(quantitative), however, only a limited number of qualitative studies could be found on leadership topic. Therefore, more qualitative studies on the recommended topic are much needed (O'Boyle et al., 2019; Beck, 2020).

3. CONCLUSION

Leaders' feeling of being trusted contemplates the perception of the followers' positive expectations from them which signals that the leaders are honest, trustworthy, proficient, and innocuous (Baer et al., 2020; Lyu et al., 2018). The trusting relationship between a leader and the follower who have difference in their hierarchical positions in the workplace may portray a more complex picture of the scenario. The findings of this systematic

review fully supports the need of more research work on leaders' side perspective as an outcome of followers' trust as little work has been done by the previous researchers. Considering the different theories in the review, it has been concluded that followers' trust can influence both positive and negative behavioural reactions on leaders which ultimately triggers their different leadership styles.

3.1 Practical Implications

The findings of this systematic literature review offer several practical implications for organizations and leaders. The review highlights that followers' trust in leaders not only improves employee outcomes but may also significantly influence leaders' own behaviors and leadership styles. Organizations should therefore recognize trust as a two-way relational process rather than focusing solely on employees' responses to leadership. Leadership development and training programs should emphasize ethical responsibility, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness so that leaders respond positively to followers' trust through supportive and benevolent behaviors instead of developing complacency, overconfidence, or autocratic tendencies. Human resource practitioners may also incorporate trust-building mechanisms, transparent communication, and feedback systems to strengthen healthy leader–follower relationships within organizations.

Furthermore, organizations should monitor the possible negative consequences of excessive trust, such as leaders neglecting accountability or becoming overly dependent on their authority. By understanding the dual effects of followers' trust, organizations can design more balanced leadership practices that enhance employee well-being, organizational commitment, and overall workplace effectiveness.

3.2 Future Directions

After a thorough analysis of this systematic review, the future studies could be carried out based on the grounds discussed in this review. Prior research studies have focused on followers' feeling of being trusted by their leaders and its ultimate impact on their workplace performances, but scarce research work could be found out on leaders' feeling of being trusted by their followers and its ultimate influence on their leadership styles and behaviors. The current review provides a double-edge sword analysis on this relationship through the lens of different theories. The future researchers should address this important area of leadership which needs further exploration as suggested by different researchers. Below is the proposed model based on the findings received from this review.

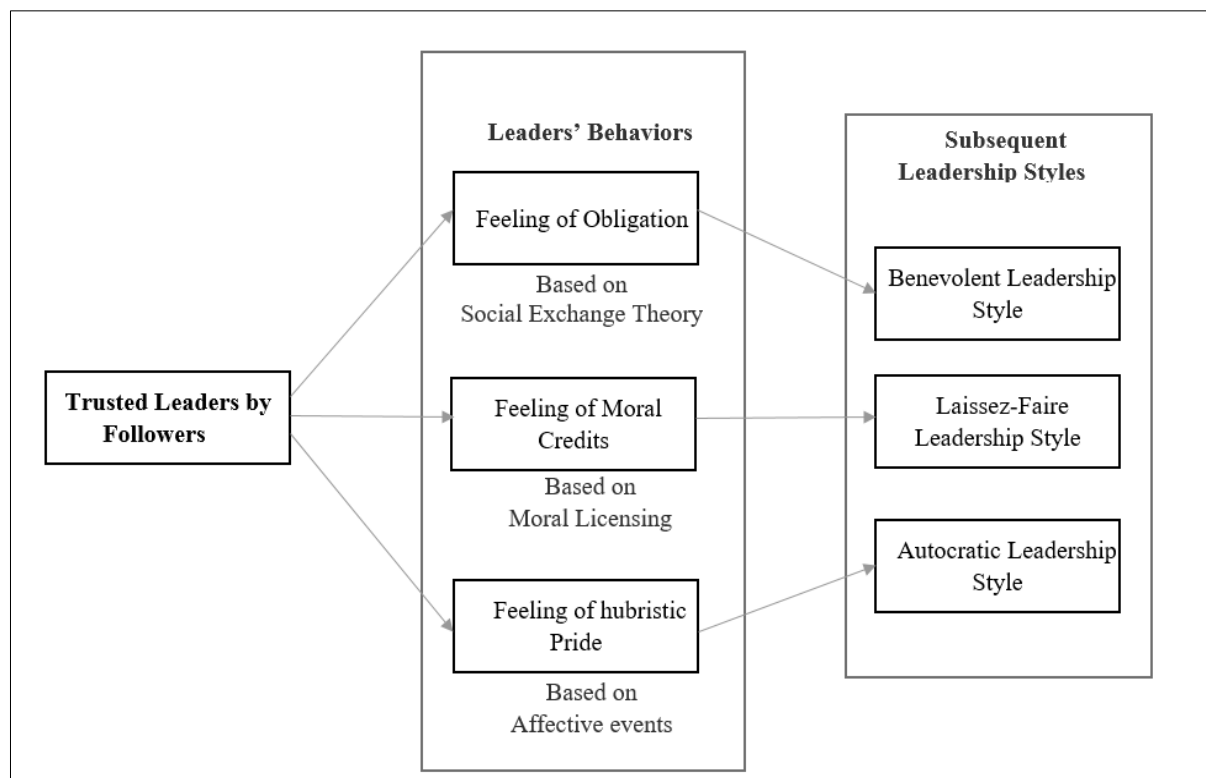


Figure 3.1: Proposed Model for Future Studies

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