

The Impact of New Employee Demographic Characteristics on Implicit Followership: An Empirical Exploration Based on Analysis of Variance

Wei Zhang*

School of Management, Guangdong University of Science and Technology, Dongguan, Guangdong, China

**Corresponding Author*

Abstract: Implicit followership, as employees' psychological representation of the follower role, significantly influences new employees' behavioral adaptation and role identification during organizational socialization. This study focuses on new employee cohorts to explore the mechanisms by which demographic characteristics—including gender, educational attainment, and employment experience—affect their perception of implicit followership. Based on questionnaire data from 429 newly hired employees, variance analysis was employed to test for differences. Results indicate that: On the gender dimension, new male employees demonstrated significantly higher perceptions than females across dimensions including “Diligence,” “Good Citizenship,” “Loyalty,” and “Positive Implicit Followership,” suggesting a stronger tendency to identify with traditional positive follower archetypes. Regarding educational attainment, significant differences emerged across the dimensions of “good citizenship,” “loyalty,” “incompetence,” and “disobedience.” Employees with associate degrees or lower scored higher on “loyalty” and “incompetence” than those with bachelor's degrees, while postgraduate degree holders demonstrated more pronounced tendencies toward “disobedience”; Regarding employment experience, new employees in their first full-time role scored significantly higher on “conformity” and “disobedience” dimensions than non-first-time workers, reflecting a dual tendency toward compliance and latent resistance during role adaptation. The study reveals the differential shaping effect of demographic variables on new employees' implicit followership cognition, expanding the application boundaries of follower theory

in organizational early stages. It also provides empirical support for differentiated guidance and leadership matching strategies in human resource management.

Keywords: Implicit Followership; New Employees; Demographic Characteristics; Organizational Socialization

1. Introduction

In the digital economy era, the values and career expectations of new-generation employees are highly diverse. The rise of strong individual value represents one of the primary shifts in organizational management during the internet age. As individual value ascends, personal capabilities now transcend organizational boundaries, fundamentally altering the relationship between employees and their organizations. Individuals no longer depend on organizations as they once did; conversely, organizations sometimes require the knowledge and creativity of strong individuals. Consequently, individual needs are gaining organizational attention. While most organizations now offer personalized employment agreements, a significant gap persists between what employees value and demand versus the benefits organizations provide. Employee turnover and resignations severely impact corporate cohesion and productivity. However, businesses lack a clear understanding of the multifaceted value employees bring, making this a major challenge in the digital transformation of human resource management[1].

Within an individual's cognitive framework, the perception of employee roles constitutes a component of personal cognition. The schema of the follower role formed in people's minds—that is, the assumptions about the behaviors and traits an individual believes a follower should

possess[2]-is known as Implicit Followership Theories (IFT). These theories construct implicit expectations about the behaviors associated with holding that position[3]. In workplace settings, where there are leaders, there are followers, and implicit followership is prevalent across diverse groups within organizations[4]. Research indicates that individuals' implicit expectations influence employee behavior. Followers interpret and respond based on prior experiential contexts[5], drawing upon existing knowledge structures to guide their actions. Knowledge structures encompass specific memories and schemas, as well as existing expectations about how individuals in particular roles should behave[6]. When individuals develop certain implicit follower cognitions, they guide their behavior as followers based on these formed cognitions. As a critical group in organizational socialization, the formation of new employees' implicit followership cognition warrants particular attention. During their initial onboarding phase, they often lack clear role models and tend to construct their self-positioning by observing, imitating, and internalizing behavioral norms within the organization[7]. In this process, individual demographic characteristics may serve as important antecedent variables shaping their cognitive structures. Existing research indicates that foundational demographic factors such as gender, educational background[8,9], and professional experience not only influence individual work attitudes and behaviors but may also impact role expectations and organizational adaptation through distinct socialization pathways[10].

Specifically, gender role theory suggests that societal expectations for how men and women should behave in the workplace may lead to cognitive differences in dimensions such as compliance and initiative[11]. Educational attainment reflects an individual's knowledge structure and critical thinking skills. Employees with different educational backgrounds may exhibit distinct psychological or behavioral traits[12]. Individuals with higher education may be more inclined to question authority and exhibit "constructive disobedience"[13], while those with lower education may place greater emphasis on loyalty and compliance. Furthermore, whether an individual is entering their first full-time position represents different

starting points in occupational socialization: First-time employees lack workplace experience and rely more heavily on organizational guidance, while "job-hoppers" with prior work experience may bring pre-existing organizational perceptions into new environments, thereby influencing the activation and expression of their followership schemas[14].

However, current research on implicit followership has primarily focused on leader-follower matching or team dynamics[2], with limited empirical exploration of this phenomenon among new employees and its demographic antecedents. Particularly within Chinese organizational contexts, hierarchical cultures and collectivist values may further reinforce individuals' specific perceptions of the follower role, adding complexity to the influence of demographic variables. Therefore, this study systematically examines how factors such as gender, educational attainment, and whether it is one's first full-time job influence new employees' perceptions of implicit followership. By using analysis of variance to identify differences across subgroups in both positive and negative dimensions of implicit followership, this research not only deepens our understanding of the cognitive mechanisms underlying follower formation but also provides theoretical foundations for organizations to develop differentiated management strategies in talent recruitment, onboarding training, and team configuration.

2. Research Subjects and Methods

The primary subjects of this study are new employees with less than three years of tenure at their companies. In designing the basic demographic questions, this research drew upon authoritative literature analyzing individual factors of new employees. A total of seven questions were developed, covering gender, age, educational background, company industry, company type, work experience, and whether this is their first full-time position. To alleviate participants' concerns about privacy disclosure, the questionnaire explicitly stated at the beginning that all information collected would be used solely for academic research and that personal details would never be disclosed externally. Additionally, the anonymous format reduced the likelihood of respondents withholding truthful answers due to privacy

concerns.

To empirically test the aforementioned implicit followership cognition among new employees, this study designed a survey questionnaire and commissioned Wenjuanxing to conduct an online survey. The online survey primarily involved placing the questionnaire on the Wenjuanxing website (a relatively professional domestic online survey platform) and commissioning Wenjuanxing to conduct the online survey among newly hired employees meeting the criteria. Overall, the survey covered a broad range of respondents with a substantial sample size, ensuring the representativeness of the research subjects. After a two-month distribution period, 429 valid questionnaires were collected. The specific sample distribution is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Variables Analysis Table

Category	Classification	Frequency
Gender	Male	180
	Female	249
Education	College diploma or below	94
	Bachelor's degree	285
	Master's degree or above	50
Occupation Public institution	3 months or less	28
	4 months to under 1 year	78
	1 year to under 3 years	323
Occupation	Public institution	52
	State-Owned Enterprise	129
	Foreign-Invested Joint Venture	39
	Private Enterprise	198
	Other	20
First Full-Time Job	Yes	367
	No	62

As shown in the table 1, women account for 27.2%. Regarding educational attainment, the largest group holds associate or bachelor's degrees, representing 93.2%. A total of 367 respondents were entering their first full-time position, constituting 85.5%, while 62 new hires were recruited from other companies to join their current employer.

3. Research Tools

Table 2. Analysis Results of Gender Structure Differences across Dimensions

Latent variable	Options	Number of cases	Mean	Standard deviation	T Value	Significance
Diligence	1	180	5.90	0.71	2.29*	0.022
	2	249	5.73	0.74		
Good Citizen	1	180	5.65	0.96	2.89**	0.004

The implicit followership scale used in this study primarily draws upon the scale developed by Sy[2], comprising two dimensions: positive implicit followership and negative implicit followership. Each dimension further includes three second-order subdimensions. Positive implicit followership encompasses diligence, good citizenship, and loyalty as its three second-order subdimensions; negative implicit followership includes incompetence, compliance, and noncompliance as its three second-order subdimensions.

4. Research Findings

Considering that varying degrees of sample characteristic factors may influence different dimensions within the model, this study employed SPSS 25.0 software to conduct independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA on implicit followership. The factor variables included gender, educational attainment, and whether the new employee was in their first full-time job, all derived from questionnaire data.

4.1 Gender

Table 2 reveals gender differences across dimensions. The significance test for gender differences in the diligence dimension of positive implicit followership yielded a p-value of 0.022, significantly lower than 0.05, indicating that new employees of different genders exhibit differences in diligence levels. The mean values show that the female mean is lower than the male mean. Similarly, differences exist between genders in the good citizenship dimension, loyalty dimension, disobedience dimension of negative implicit followership, and conformity dimension. Furthermore, new employees also exhibit differences in the cognitive structure of positive implicit following. Mean comparisons reveal that male new employees possess a stronger cognitive structure of positive implicit followership than female new employees. This further indicates that, as new employees, male new employees demonstrate greater cognitive identification with the role of positive followers.

	2	249	5.39	0.92		
Loyalty	1	180	5.92	0.90	3.16**	0.002
	2	249	5.62	1.00		
Positive Followership	1	180	6.06	0.68	2.84**	0.005
	2	249	5.86	0.77		
incompetent	1	180	3.20	1.54	0.68	0.498
	2	249	3.30	1.38		
Conformity	1	180	3.74	1.49	3.04**	0.003
	2	249	4.17	1.33		
Insubordination	1	180	3.77	1.45	2.51*	0.012
	2	249	3.43	1.25		
Negative Followership	1	180	3.65	1.33	0.95	0.342
	2	249	3.54	1.08		
	2	249	4.13	1.57		

Note: (1)1 represents males; 2 represents females. (2)*: $P < 0.05$; **: $P < 0.01$; ***: $P < 0.001$

4.2 Education

According to the results of the one-way ANOVA in Table 3, significant differences were found in the Good Citizen dimension and Loyalty dimension of positive implicit followership, the Incompetence dimension and Disobedience dimension of negative implicit followership, and the overall negative implicit followership across different educational levels. The significance test results were respectively: ($F=3.037$, $P=0.047<0.05$), ($F=3.495$, $P=0.031<0.05$), ($F=6.346$, $P=0.002<0.01$), ($F=4.701$, $P=0.01<0.05$), and ($F=3.223$, $P=0.041<0.05$), with all P-values significantly less than 0.05. However, the P-values for the diligence dimension within positive implicit followership, overall positive implicit followership, the conformity dimension within negative implicit followership. Thus, no significant differences existed across new employees of varying educational backgrounds

for the diligence dimension within positive implicit followership, overall positive implicit followership, the conformity dimension within negative implicit followership.

Furthermore, post hoc multiple comparisons reveal that while the tests for Good Citizen and Passive Implicit Compliance yielded significant results, pairwise comparisons between different educational levels did not show significant differences. This outcome may stem from the P-values for these two dimensions being close to 0.05, combined with the fact that the Scheffé method is the most stringent test, leading to such comparative results. Additionally, the comparison results reveal that on the loyalty and incompetence dimensions, employees with associate degrees or lower scored higher than those with bachelor's degrees. Conversely, on the insubordination dimension, employees with master's degrees or higher scored higher than those with associate degrees or lower.

Table 3. Analysis of Differences across Dimensions by Educational Attainment

Latent variable	Options	Number of cases	Mean	Standard deviation	F	Significance	Multiple Comparisons
Diligence	1	94	5.92	0.93	1.591	0.205	/
	2	285	5.77	0.65			
	3	50	5.75	0.72			
Good Citizen	1	94	5.69	1.05	3.073*	0.047	/
	2	285	5.42	0.92			
	3	50	5.58	0.81			
Loyalty	1	94	5.97	0.92	3.495*	0.031	1>2
	2	285	5.67	0.97			
	3	50	5.79	1.02			
Positive Followership	1	94	6.07	0.84	2.584	0.077	/
	2	285	5.89	0.70			
	3	50	6.04	0.68			
incompetent	1	94	3.91	1.37	6.346*	0.002	1>2

	2	285	3.41	1.31			
	3	50	3.86	1.39			
Conformity	1	94	3.26	1.52	0.044	0.957	/
	2	285	3.24	1.42			
	3	50	3.31	1.53			
Insubordination	1	94	3.68	1.41	4.701*	0.010	3>1
	2	285	4.03	1.40			
	3	50	4.41	1.36			
Negative Followership	1	94	3.76	1.15	3.223*	0.041	/
	2	285	4.05	1.60			
	3	50	4.15	1.54			

Note: (1)1 represents associate degree or below, 2 represents bachelor's degree, 3 represents master's degree or above; (2)*: $P < 0.05$; **: $P < 0.01$; ***: $P < 0.001$

4.3 Is This the First Full-time Job?

Table 4 shows the differences across dimensions based on whether the employment was the first full-time job. The significance tests for the differences in the dimensions of passive-covert conformity and non-conformity between first-time and non-first-time full-time employees yielded p-values of 0.044 and 0.003,

respectively, both significantly less than 0.05. This indicates that new employees who are first-time full-time workers exhibit distinct cognitive patterns in the dimensions of conformity and non-conformity. Based on the mean values, the scores for first-time full-time employees are slightly lower than those for non-first-time full-time employees.

Table 4. Analysis Results of Differences across Dimensions in Whether It Is the First Full-Time Job

Latent variable	Options	Number of cases	Mean	Standard deviation	T Value	Significance
Diligence	1	367	5.80	0.67	0.03	0.976
	2	62	5.81	0.99		
Good Citizen	1	367	5.47	0.93	1.41	0.158
	2	62	5.65	1.01		
Loyalty	1	367	5.73	0.97	0.73	0.465
	2	62	5.83	0.97		
Positive Followership	1	367	5.94	0.70	0.15	0.878
	2	62	5.96	0.92		
incompetent	1	367	3.53	1.37	1.38	0.166
	2	62	3.79	1.21		
Conformity	1	367	3.31	1.47	2.02*	0.044
	2	62	2.91	1.30		
Insubordination	1	367	4.07	1.42	2.95**	0.003
	2	62	3.51	1.27		
Negative Followership	1	367	3.59	1.23	0.12	0.907
	2	62	3.57	0.95		
	2	62	3.98	1.74		

Note: (1) 1 indicates the first full-time job; 2 indicates a subsequent full-time job. (2) *: $P < 0.05$; **: $P < 0.01$; ***: $P < 0.001$

5. Conclusion

This study systematically examined the influence of three demographic characteristics--gender, educational attainment, and employment experience (whether it was the first full-time job)--on new employees' implicit followership cognition through analysis of variance (ANOVA), using a sample of 429

newly hired employees. The findings are as follows:

First, gender differences significantly shape new employees' implicit followership cognitive tendencies. Data indicates that male new hires scored significantly higher than females across all three sub-dimensions--Diligence, Good Citizenship, and Loyalty--as well as the overall dimension of Positive Implicit followership.

This suggests male new hires more readily identify with the positive follower role aligned with traditional organizational expectations, while female new hires exhibit relatively more reserved role perceptions in this category. This finding aligns with the logic of how gender role expectations in Eastern cultural contexts shape follower psychological representations. Specifically, differing societal and cultural positioning of gender roles indirectly influences individuals' tendencies to identify with follower traits. This reflects how gender factors may exert differential effects on new employees' psychological representations of follower roles through pathways such as social role expectations and organizational cultural perceptions.

Second, the influence of educational attainment on new employees' implicit followership cognition exhibits stratified characteristics. Significant differences exist across four dimensions—"good citizenship," "loyalty," "incompetence," and "insubordination"—in the cognitive perceptions of employees with varying educational backgrounds: employees with associate degrees or lower demonstrate stronger cognitive in incompetence, and disobedience, employees with different educational backgrounds exhibit significant differences in their perceptions: Employees with associate degrees or lower demonstrate stronger cognitive intensity on the loyalty dimension while also exhibiting more pronounced negative perceptions on the incompetence dimension, reflecting this group's dual tendency toward positive loyalty and negative avoidance in their follower roles; Employees with master's degrees or higher scored significantly higher on the disobedience dimension than other educational groups. This reflects that highly educated new employees possess stronger independent judgment within the follower role, exhibiting greater tendencies toward "disobedience" toward instructions or rules that conflict with their own perceptions. This is closely related to the knowledge base, critical thinking abilities, and career expectations of highly educated groups. Existing research confirms that the core self-evaluation of highly educated individuals positively influences positive implicit follower cognition while reinforcing their tendency toward autonomous choices based on rational judgment.

Third, employment experience (whether it is the first full-time job) is a key contextual variable influencing new employees' implicit followership cognition. New employees in their first full-time role scored significantly higher on both seemingly contradictory dimensions--conformity and non-compliance--compared to those with prior full-time experience. This finding aligns with recent research on organizational socialization among new hires: first-time employees lacking workplace experience often exhibit dual psychological tendencies of "integration needs" and "self-assertion" during role exploration, revealing their unique role adaptation state during early organizational socialization: On one hand, to rapidly integrate into the organization and complete role transitions, they tend to exhibit conformist behaviors to align with the overall organizational atmosphere and others' expectations; On the other hand, confronted with a new work environment, role demands, and management practices, they may internally question unwritten rules or insist on their own needs, thereby exhibiting latent non-compliance. This cognitive dissonance is a quintessential psychological trait of new employees during their role exploration phase.

6. Research Prospects

In summary, this study clarifies the differential influence mechanisms of gender, educational attainment, and employment experience on new employees' implicit followership cognition. It not only enriches the study of follower theory during the initial stages of organizational socialization from a demographic perspective, providing empirical support for understanding the formation logic of new employees' follower role psychology; It also offers targeted implications for corporate human resource management practices—in guiding and managing new employees, organizations should develop differentiated role-guidance strategies and leadership matching plans tailored to the implicit followership cognition differences among distinct demographic groups. This practical logic is supported by recent research, which indicates that precise segmentation and personalized management based on demographic characteristics are key pathways to enhancing new employees' adaptation efficiency and organizational talent development effectiveness. For instance, highly

educated new hires may be granted independent workspaces and opportunities for expression, while first-time full-time employees may benefit from enhanced role clarification and emotional support. Such approaches more effectively promote behavioral adaptation and role identification among new employees, thereby elevating the organization's overall talent development efficacy.

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