

# The role of followership in enhancing teachers' organizational commitment dimensions

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between followership and three dimensions of organizational commitment: affective, normative and continuance among primary school teachers in Sarawak, Malaysia. Research on how followership behaviours affect employee commitment is weak despite increased understanding of their role in organisational success. To fill this gap, the study surveyed 899 primary school teachers using the revised Kelley followership questionnaire (KFQ-R) and the three-component model employee commitment survey (TCM-ECS). Data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The results demonstrate significant positive relationships between followership and all three commitment dimensions, with the strongest association observed for affective commitment ( $\beta=0.564$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), followed by normative commitment ( $\beta=0.388$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and continuance commitment ( $\beta=0.337$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). These findings suggest that effective follower behaviors significantly enhance employees' emotional attachment, sense of obligation and perceived cost of leaving their organizations. Although this is cross-sectional research, it adds to our understanding of how followership may assist establish organizational loyalty. It also suggests that organizations may be able to increase employee commitment by teaching people how to follow others.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The success of educational institutions has traditionally been attributed to strong leadership, yet this perspective overlooks the crucial power of followership. While principals lead, it is teachers who ultimately transform educational visions into reality through their daily engagement and critical thinking. Kelley's groundbreaking work in the 1980s challenged the notion of followers as passive participants, revealing their vital role in organizational outcomes [1]. Despite this insight, the educational sector continues to focus predominantly on principals' leadership, leaving teachers' followership roles largely unexplored. This gap is particularly significant as teachers' active engagement, questioning and support of leadership may fundamentally shape school commitment and performance.

The three-component model of organizational commitment by Meyer and Allen [2] provides a framework to explore followership's relationship with organizational commitment. This model divides commitment into affective (emotional attachment), continuance (cost of leaving), and normative (sense of responsibility). Few studies have directly examined the connection between followership and these types of

commitment particularly in education. This gap is important because commitment dimensions have been widely studied in other fields, yet their link to followership among teachers remains underexplored. The need for such research is underscored by challenges schools face in retaining effective teachers and improving teacher performance [3]. Research indicates that followership behaviors influence commitment in various ways. Teachers who actively engage and think critically often develop stronger affective commitment through emotional investment in their schools. Similarly, normative commitment may rise when teachers see their followership as aligned with broader ethical responsibilities [4]–[6]. However, the connection between followership and continuance commitment is less clear, as it may be shaped more by external factors like job stability [7]. Addressing this research gap is vital for improving teacher retention and enhancing educational outcomes [8].

Recent studies increasingly highlight followership as essential to organizational success, acknowledging that both leader-centric, and follower-centric perspectives recognize followers' role in achieving goals [9]. Kelley [10] initially proposed that followers contribute significantly to outcomes, challenging the notion that success is solely leader-driven. Chaleff [11] emphasized courageous followers who not only support leaders but also challenge them constructively, while Uhl-Bien *et al.* [12] introduced a relational framework that views followership as a dynamic interactive process. Carsten *et al.* [13] further suggest that followership roles are socially shaped and adapt to organizational contexts. In education, followership remains underexplored with research often centered on principals, overlooking the significant impact of teachers' followership behaviors on school effectiveness [4], [5]. Educational research has begun applying organizational commitment frameworks to understand teacher engagement. Erdoğan and Cavli [14] utilized Allen and Meyer's organizational commitment scale to assess commitment levels among physical education and classroom teachers, revealing significant variations across teaching disciplines. These findings reinforced the relevance of the three-component model in educational settings. Building on this work, Bozat [15] examined generational differences in organizational commitment, noting that the three-dimensional framework effectively captured commitment variations between generation X and Y teachers. These studies demonstrate the model's robust applicability in educational contexts while highlighting the need to consider diverse teacher demographics and roles.

Followership plays an important role in building organizational commitment in educational settings. Teachers' commitment to their schools can significantly influence student outcomes and school success. The researcher [7], [16]–[18] observed that teachers with high engagement and critical thinking skills form stronger emotional bonds, enhancing affective commitment. Research by Choi and Park [19] empirically demonstrated that followership serves as a primary predictor of organizational commitment, accounting for 41% of the variance in their model. Active engagement and critical thinking are shown to correlate with stronger organizational commitment [20]. Research reveals varying relationships between followership and different commitment types. According to Nguyen *et al.* [5], [21], followership activities like school changes increase duty and normative commitment. Both individual behaviors and organizational culture shape these relationships with transformational leadership enhancing followers' commitment to change and indirectly boosting organizational commitment [22]. However, the connection between followership and continuance commitment in education is less understood [9]. Gatti *et al.* [16] suggested that while effective followership may increase a teacher's value to their school, it does not always lead to stronger continuance commitment, as external factors like the job market may play a larger role. The lack of empirical research on followership in education highlights the need for studies that explore how followership impacts organizational commitment. Understanding this relationship could help schools foster followership behaviors to build a more dedicated staff.

This study's theoretical framework integrates Kelley's followership model with Meyer's three-component model of organizational commitment, contextualized for the educational sector. Kelley's follower model emphasizes critical thinking and active participation, which is crucial in a changing educational environment where teachers must adapt to legislation and curriculum changes [4], [14]. Teacher followership can be shown by curriculum creation, school improvements, or actively opposing administration choices. The framework illustrates followership's influence on affective, normative and continuance commitment, and showing how followership can serve as a predictor for each type of commitment.

Studies indicate that effective followership behaviors strengthen affective commitment through increased self-efficacy and organizational identification [16], [23]. Crippen and Willows [7] and Shahbazi *et al.* [17] found that teachers demonstrating active followership through engagement and critical thinking develop stronger emotional connections to their schools. This relationship is further supported by empirical evidence showing followership as a primary predictor of organizational commitment [20]. Based on these findings, the research proposes that followership has a significant positive impact on affective commitment (H1). Research indicates that effective followership strengthens normative commitment through enhanced ethical awareness and organizational value alignment [11], [16]. Studies by Nguyen *et al.* [5] and

Jun and Lee [22] demonstrate that teachers who actively engage in followership behaviors, particularly through participation in school reforms and decision-making, develop a heightened sense of professional duty. Additionally, followers who demonstrate courageous and ethical behaviors show stronger moral obligations to their institutions [11]. Based on this empirical evidence, the research proposes that followership has a significant positive impact on normative commitment (H2). Studies demonstrate that followership behaviors contribute to continuance commitment through multiple mechanisms. Teachers who demonstrate strong followership often develop valuable skills, institutional knowledge, and professional networks [24]. While Gatti *et al.* [16] note that external factors influence continuance commitment, research suggests that effective followers gain access to development opportunities and establish organizational connections that increase their perceived costs of leaving [22]. Therefore, the research proposes that followership has a significant positive impact on continuance commitment (H3).

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of this study. The model shows followership as the independent variable linking to affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment as dependent variables. These proposed relationships are represented by direct paths from followership to each commitment component, reflecting hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 respectively.

In summary, this theoretical framework establishes clear connections between followership and organizational commitment in educational settings. The proposed relationships suggest that effective followership behaviors among teachers may strengthen multiple dimensions of their commitment to schools. Testing these hypotheses will provide valuable insights for educational leaders and administrators in fostering stronger organizational commitment through enhanced followership practices. Understanding these relationships holds practical implications for school management and teacher development programs.

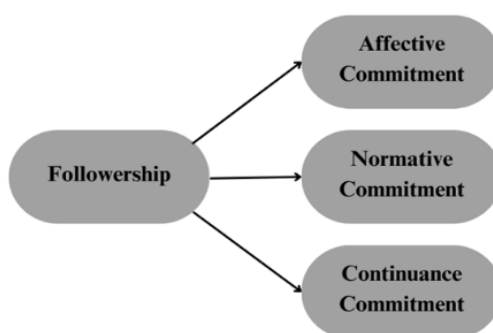


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Research design

This quantitative study utilized a survey methodology with data collected through Google Forms, a tool known for its affordability, ease of use, and efficient data collection capabilities [25]. This approach allowed for streamlined data gathering from a large sample of participants.

### 2.2. Population and sampling

The study targeted 899 elementary school teachers from Sarawak, Malaysia. A cluster sampling method was applied across the 30 District Education Offices in Sarawak to ensure diversity among participants in terms of gender, age, and teaching experience. The sample size was calculated based on the Krejcie and Morgan [26] method, ensuring that the sample was sufficiently representative of the population.

### 2.3. Instrument

Two primary instruments were used in this study. Followership was measured using the revised Kelley followership questionnaire (KFQ-R) developed by Ligon *et al.* [27], while organizational commitment was assessed using the three-component model employee commitment survey (TCM-ECS) by Allen and Meyer [28]. Both instruments demonstrated high internal consistency with Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.93, indicating strong reliability.

### 2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SmartPLS version 4.0, with inferential analysis carried out via partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine the direct relationships between

followership and the dimensions of organizational commitment. The analysis followed the guidelines set forth by Hair *et al.* [29]. Within the structural model, hypothesis testing focused on the path coefficients ( $\beta$ -values) and the variance explained ( $R^2$  values), to assess the impact of followership on affective, continuance, and normative commitment as outlined by Cohen *et al.* [30].

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Structural equation modelling

Partial least squares (PLS) modelling using SmartPLS 4.0 was employed to assess the measurement and structural model since survey research is rarely normally distributed [31]. Following the recommendations of Kock and Lynn [32] and Kock [33], the issue of common method bias (CMB) was assessed through a comprehensive collinearity test, as the data was collected using a single source. The variance inflation factor (VIF) values were calculated for all variables: affective commitment (2.449), continuance commitment (3.085), normative commitment (3.179), and followership (1.486). All values fell below the threshold of 3.3, indicating no significant multicollinearity or bias from single-source data in this study. These results confirm that the variables are sufficiently distinct from each other and can be reliably used in the analysis.

#### 3.2. Measurement model

The analysis followed a two-step strategy advised by Allen and Meyer [28] and Chooi *et al.* [34]. This approach begins with examining the measurement model to ensure construct reliability and validity, followed by testing the structural model for hypothesis validation. For the measurement model, three key metrics were assessed: loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR). The acceptance criteria were set as: loadings  $\geq 0.5$ , AVE  $\geq 0.5$ , and CR  $\geq 0.7$ . Following the rule of thumb, item loading values between 0.40 and 0.70 were retained, while those less than 0.40 were removed [35]. As shown in Table 1, all AVE exceeded 0.5 and all CR exceeded 0.7. The measurement model is illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 1. Measurement model

Construct	Item code	Loading	Outer weights	CR	AVE
Followership	C1	0.684	0.079	0.942	0.503
	C3	0.709	0.080		
	C4	0.746	0.085		
	C5	0.747	0.091		
	C6	0.751	0.086		
	C7	0.729	0.086		
	C8	0.662	0.074		
	C9	0.669	0.087		
	C15	0.724	0.088		
	C16	0.760	0.102		
	C17	0.760	0.098		
	C18	0.700	0.089		
	C19	0.672	0.091		
	C20	0.639	0.086		
	C22	0.662	0.09		
	C23	0.725	0.099		
Affective commitment	C24	0.684	0.079	0.885	0.57
	D1	0.746	0.170		
	D2	0.698	0.190		
	D3	0.880	0.293		
	D5	0.472	0.138		
	D6	0.809	0.245		
Normative commitment	D7	0.776	0.285	0.907	0.622
	D8	0.829	0.213		
	D9	0.817	0.157		
	D10	0.173	0.786		
	D11	0.262	0.858		
	D12	0.176	0.646		
Continuance commitment	D13	0.824	0.824	0.907	0.622
	D14	0.792	0.792		
	D15	0.803	0.803		
	D16	0.830	0.830		
	D17	0.754	0.754		
	D18	0.740	0.740		

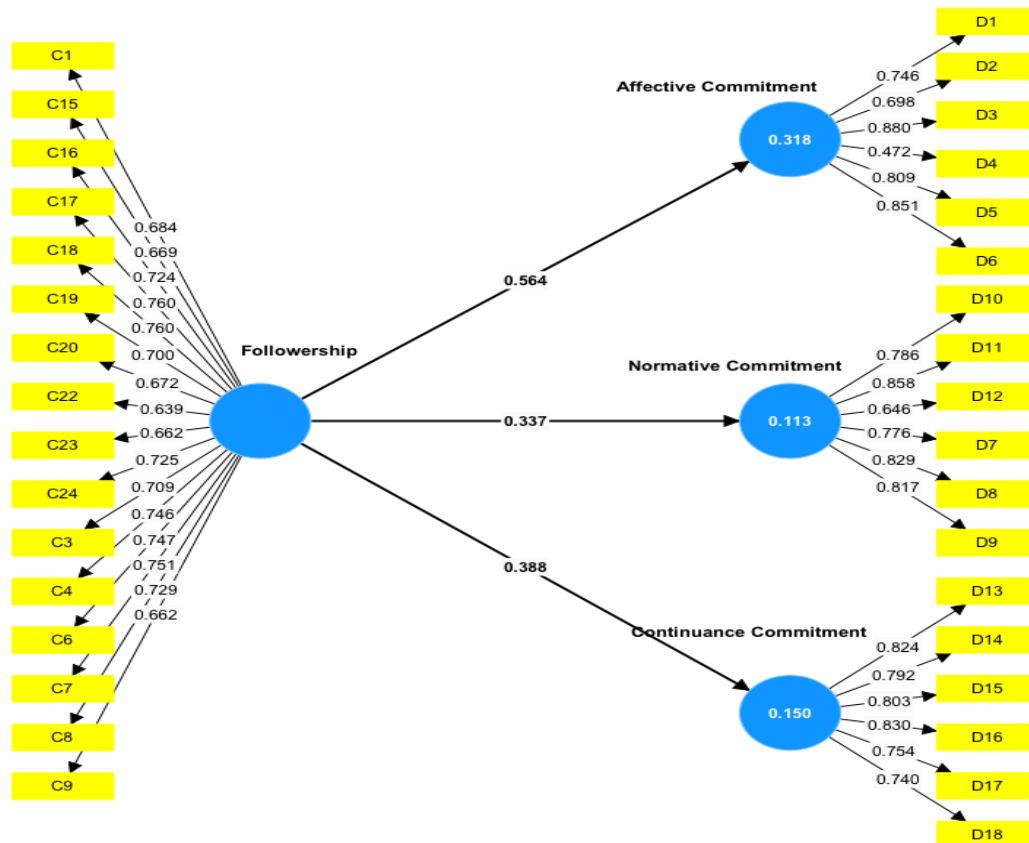


Figure 2. Measurement model

Discriminant validity was assessed using the HTMT criterion as suggested by Henseler *et al.* [36] and updated by Franke and Sarstedt [37]. The criterion specifies HTMT values should be  $\leq 0.85$  for strict assessment and  $\leq 0.90$  for lenient assessment. As shown in Table 2, all HTMT values fell below the stricter criterion of  $\leq 0.85$ , indicating respondents understood all constructs as distinct. These results collectively demonstrate the validity and reliability of the measurement items.

Table 2. HTMT (heterotrait–monotrait ratio)

Variable	Affective commitment	Continuance commitment	Followership	Normative commitment
Affective commitment				
Continuance commitment	0.762			
Followership	0.617	0.402		
Normative commitment	0.764	0.922	0.353	

### 3.3. Structural model

The multivariate skewness and kurtosis were assessed according to Hair *et al.* [35] and Cain *et al.* [38] to test the data set's multivariate normalcy assumption. Mardia's multivariate skewness test showed considerable symmetry in the joint distribution of variables, with a  $\beta$ -value of 1.970004 and a  $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ . In Mardia's multivariate kurtosis test, a  $\beta$ -value of 30.381607 and a  $p$ -value below 0.01 indicate an excessive peak in the distribution. Table 3 shows Mardia's multivariate kurtosis tests and confirming the data's non-normality. Following Hair *et al.* [35] the structural model was investigated using PLS-SEM. Due to the non-normality of the data proposed bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples to estimate path coefficients, standard errors,  $t$ -values, and  $p$ -values [34]. The path coefficients, standard errors,  $t$ -values, and  $p$ -values are in Table 4. Following Hahn and Ang [39] criticism of hypothesis testing using only  $p$ -values, significance tests included confidence intervals and effect size metrics. This multidimensional method better assessed the study's hypotheses.

The data strongly supported all three hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 (H1) showed a statistically significant positive link between followership and affective commitment with a 0.000  $p$ -value and 22.985

t-value. Relatively high positive effect with beta coefficient of 0.564. Hypothesis 2 (H2) similarly indicated a substantial positive link between followership and normative commitment ( $p=0.000$ ,  $t=13.084$ ). The beta coefficient of 0.388 shows a considerable favorable effect, although not as strong as affective commitment. Hypothesis 3 (H3) showed a favorable correlation between followership and continuance commitment. This association has a 0.000 p-value, 11.218 t-value, and 0.337 beta coefficient. This suggests a moderate beneficial effect slightly weaker than affective and normative commitment. Followership positively affects all three components of organizational commitment with emotional commitment being the most affected, followed by normative and continuance commitment.

Table 3. Mardia's skewness and kurtosis values

Mardia's test	$\beta$ -value	p-value
Skewness	1.970004	0.000
Kurtosis	30.381607	0.000

Table 4. Hypothesis testing direct effects

Effect	Relationship	Beta	Mean	(STDEV)	t-value	p-value	Decision
H <sub>1</sub>	Followership → affective commitment	0.564	0.567	0.025	22.985	0.000	Yes
H <sub>2</sub>	Followership → normative commitment	0.388	0.391	0.030	13.084	0.000	Yes
H <sub>3</sub>	Followership → continuance commitment	0.337	0.341	0.030	11.218	0.000	Yes

### 3.4. Discussion

The results for H1 show a strong positive link between affective commitment and followership. The beta value is 0.564, and the t-value is 22.985, indicating that followership significantly impacts employees' emotional attachment to the organization. These findings align with past research that highlights the role of engaged followers in building a sense of belonging and loyalty within an organization [40]. Theoretically, this supports Kelley's [10] followership model, which suggests that followers who think critically and participate actively are more likely to develop affective commitment. This theoretical framework suggests that the quality of followership is significantly enhanced when individuals are encouraged to think critically and take ownership of their contributions. Critical thinking fosters a deeper understanding of organizational goals and enhances the emotional connection between followers and their leaders, thereby promoting affective commitment [41]. Practically, organizations can benefit from fostering a followership culture that encourages autonomy. This can increase employees' emotional investment, which leads to higher retention and overall organizational success. By implementing strategies that encourage critical thinking among employees, organizations can create an environment where followers feel empowered to contribute meaningfully [42]. For H2, the analysis shows a positive link between followership and normative commitment ( $\beta=0.388$ ,  $t=13.084$ ). This means that engaged and active followers are more likely to feel a duty to stay with the organization [43]. This finding supports Uhl-Bien *et al.* [12] relational theory of followership, which suggests that followers' contributions foster mutual responsibility and loyalty. Normative commitment driven by a sense of obligation to the organization is often strong where followers feel valued. Meyer and Allen [2] note that organizations investing in follower development programs may see higher normative commitment which can reduce turnover and improve stability. For H3, followership shows a positive effect on continuance commitment ( $\beta=0.337$ ,  $t=11.218$ ), though with a lower beta value than for affective and normative commitment. This suggests that followership influences employees' perceived costs of leaving, but the effect is weaker than for other commitment types. Continuance commitment often depends on the perceived benefits of staying versus the costs of leaving, as noted by Meyer and Allen [2], Matshoba-Ramuedzisi *et al.* [44], and Zafar *et al.* [45]. Followership practices strengthen job and organizational ties, though this commitment may be more transactional based on factors like pay and benefits. To develop a more resilient workforce, organizations should engage followers emotionally and morally not simply practically.

To enhance teachers' organizational commitment, schools should focus on professional development that builds skills and employability. These programs can increase teachers' desire to stay by raising the perceived costs of leaving through better job security and career growth [6]. Moreover, Crippen and Willows [7] and Gatti *et al.* [16] argue that training teachers to be effective followers benefits school development, boosting their involvement and commitment. The development of followership skills enhances the professional competence of teachers and strengthens their connection to the aims of the school, which ultimately results in a greater level of normative commitment. Such initiatives promote accountability and ethical responsibility, strengthening the psychological contract between teachers and their schools [14],

[23], [46], [47]. Future development programs could include data-driven evaluations of followership training and commitment levels [9]. Schools have the ability to cultivate a staff that is engaged and motivated by investing in the professional and personal growth of teachers. This helps schools reduce employee turnover and improve educational results [48].

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design makes it difficult to establish causality between followership behaviors and commitment types. Future research could use longitudinal designs to study these relationships over time and reveal causal processes. Second, the study focuses on Sarawak which may limit its applicability to other cultural and educational settings. Sarawak unique multicultural and indigenous education context could influence followership and commitment differently. Future research could address these limitations in several ways. Longitudinal studies could track how followership and commitment evolve throughout teachers' careers. Comparative studies between Malaysian and international contexts could also identify cultural factors that shape the followership-commitment relationship. Additionally, examining factors like job satisfaction perceived organizational support and work engagement as potential mediators could deepen understanding of the followership-commitment link. Qualitative studies could provide insights into Sarawak teachers' followership experiences and commitment levels. Lastly, future studies should investigate how global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, impact educational followership and commitment.

In conclusion, this study highlights the powerful influence of followership behaviors on teachers' organizational commitment, particularly in its affective, normative, and continuance dimensions. Effective followership strengthens teachers' emotional attachment, sense of responsibility, and the perceived value of staying with their organization. These insights underscore the critical role of fostering followership behaviors in educational settings to boost teacher commitment. By investing in followership development, school administrators can enhance teacher retention and engagement, building a more dedicated and motivated teaching staff. Ultimately, these efforts can contribute to a more stable and resilient educational environment.

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#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft

E : Writing - Review & **E**ding

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest related to financial matters or personal connections that might have influenced the research findings presented in this paper.

#### INFORMED CONSENT

All study participants provided informed consent. Teachers who participated were fully briefed on the study objectives and informed of their right to discontinue participation at any time.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study adhered to all applicable national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration principles and received approval from the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak Ethics Committee.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The research data supporting this study's findings can be obtained from the corresponding author, [AHB] through reasonable request. The dataset is not publicly accessible due to privacy and ethical considerations, as it contains information that could potentially compromise participant confidentiality.

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