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## Article

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## Article

# Followership in Business Transformation: Hyundai Motor Group Case

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**Abstract:** This study explored the employees' perception of followership and its evolution in business transformation, given the case of the Hyundai Motor Group (HMG). Using a case study approach for explorative research, we conducted informal conversations and in-depth interviews with twenty participants to solicit employees' and stakeholders' perceptions of followership and its cultural formation through interpersonal relationships. Drawing on Kelley's followership typology, we found three characteristics in participants' followership perceptions: Ill-sa-bul-lan (extraordinarily well-organized), speed, and devotion. To explore the cultural formation of followership between leaders and followers, which is under-explored in Kelley's theory, we adopted alternative theories (i.e., responsible leadership and implicit followership) to analyze the interpersonal relationship during the business transformation. Consequently, we found that the HMG followership, shaped by the relationships between leaders and followers within the Korean cultural context, evolved to facilitate successful business transformation. Initiated by top management, new and diverse elements from outside spurred the drive for business transformation and instigated changes in organizational culture, including perceptions of followership. This evolution of followership, in turn, reinforced the business transformation, creating a virtuous cycle. This study offers valuable insights into the dynamics of followership and its impact on organizational performance, providing a foundation for further empirical research in this underexplored area of followership.



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**Keywords:** Hyundai Motor Group (HMG); followership; followership typology; mechanism; business transformation; Korean culture

## 1. Introduction

The Hyundai Motor Group (hereafter, HMG) has exhibited a successful business transformation from a traditional internal combustion engine (ICE) manufacturer to a smart mobility solution provider (Rhee et al. 2022). Chairman Chung has been recognized as the most disruptive innovator in the automotive industry with his vision and actions toward future mobility such as advanced air mobility (AAM), hydrogen energy, AI, and robotics (Lombard 2022). The HMG's successful business transformation was based on strong visionary leadership, which created a new technological foundation and human resources in a fast-changing business environment. Although followership is one of the driving forces to facilitate business transformation (Sunwoo et al. 2024), insufficient research has been conducted to understand the nature of followership, how the majority of employees perceive followership, and how to develop coordinated business transformation.

Given this background, we decided to excavate the details of the business transformation mechanism with follow-up research. The research objective of this study was mainly focused on understanding the characteristics and evolution of followership at the HMG

and finding a dynamic of how the HMG's followership formulated its business transformation. However, the scope of the research covers even wider issues such as exploring how traditional followership traits, rooted in Korean cultural and psychological contexts, influence and interact with the rise of the new generation and culture.

We conducted informal conversations and in-depth interviews with twenty participants to solicit employees' and stakeholders' perceptions of followership and its cultural formation through interpersonal relationships. We collected data from former and current HMG employees of various ages, genders, positions, and nationalities, and with business partners and experts. We applied Kelley's followership typology (Kelley 2008) to identify the features of the HMG's followership. We also applied the concept of responsible leadership and implicit followership theory (ITF) to better understand the change in the HMG's followership, which was closely related to the HMG's business transformation. Based on the content analysis, we found that the HMG's followership was characterized as well-organized, dedicated, diligent, and agile while carrying negative connotations such as being passive, blindly obedient, military-like, and uncritical. Traditionally, the HMG's followership was associated with a hierarchical organizational structure deeply rooted in Korean culture. However, it began to evolve with new young followers with critical thinking, who exhibited a strong engagement simultaneously. This transformation became the foundation for the business transformation of electrification and future mobility.

This research aims to investigate the perceived meaning of followership, how people perceived, shared, and developed followership within the organization, and to help facilitate the HMG's business transformation. This research is important because it provides the opportunity to look into the actual dynamics of how business transformation in the automotive industry could be possible under the context of the HMG's corporate culture. We also sought to make an academic contribution by illuminating the relatively under-explored area of followership, aiming to inspire corporate managers in their approach to organizational management.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Leader-Oriented Followership Theories

Followership has traditionally been discussed in close connection with leadership (Kellerman 2007). Initially, leadership studies were predominant, and followership was considered a supplementary role to leadership (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014). One of the recently developed concepts of 'responsible leadership' (Starratt 2005) still focused on the leaders but it contributed to drawing academic interest in the importance of followership in the process of elaborating leadership–followership relations (Brown and Mitchell 2010). As followership began to be recognized as a significant factor in leadership dynamics, the importance of followership itself started to gain attention (Carsten et al. 2016) and Kelley's followership typology was a seminal work in making followership an academic interest (Lok and Crawford 2004). However, Kelley's typology was still based on leaders' perspectives, and implicit followership theory (IFT) emerged treating followership from the followers' point of view (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. 2022).

According to (Kelley 1988; Kelley and Jang 1992), followers are categorized into five groups based on the level of engagement and critical thinking: (1) Exemplary Followers (or Star Followers), and committed thinkers taking responsibility and supporting leaders with constructive criticism; (2) Yes People (or Conformists), actively engaged and complying but lacking critical thinking; (3) Alienated Followers, skeptical and disengaged critical thinkers; (4) Passive Followers (or The Sheep), dependent followers requiring constant supervision; and (5) Pragmatic Followers (or Survivors) with adaptable, situational, and middle ground approach. Kelley's typology shared the core ideas of responsible leadership in terms of promoting critical thinking, active participation, and inclusive decision-making (Voegtlin 2016), but it brought followership to the forefront of academic research by focusing on the followers rather than leaders (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. 2022).

The concept of responsible leadership refers to a form of leadership that goes beyond merely achieving the economic goals of the organization. It emphasizes the leader's responsibility to various stakeholders, including followers, and focuses on the creation of positive and ethical relationships (Maak and Pless 2006). It discusses how responsible leaders should inspire and guide their followers while considering the well-being of the broader community and the environment (Brown and Mitchell 2010). Responsible leadership encourages critical thinking and active participation from followers, which involves active listening to realize inclusive decision-making with followers in the discussion (Pless 2023). Although responsible leadership still puts leaders at the center, it extends beyond a leadership-focused view by demonstrating its impact on followers' attitudes and actions toward organizational sustainability (Zhang et al. 2023).

Even though followership became an apparent subject in academic research, both responsible leadership and Kelley's followership typology were still based on the leader-centric perspectives of how leaders could have proactive followers with critical thinking (Fernando and Fernando 2016; Ribbat et al. 2023). To overcome this limitation, constructionist approaches such as implicit followership theory (hereafter, IFT) emerged (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. 2022), which emphasized the possibility that followers actively influence leaders, particularly leader behavior (Van Vugt et al. 2008), and followers began to be perceived as playing a critical role in the organization (Aghaei et al. 2023). IFT deals with the social construction of how leaders and followers mutually perceive, interact, and influence each other in the organization (Guo 2018). However, IFT still tended to focus more on leaders' perceptions and did not deal with what followers believed about followers' behaviors and traits (Antonakis and Day 2017). Therefore, more empirical followership research on followers' perception of being followers is necessary to come up with a thorough understanding of the social construction of followership (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. 2022). In this study, we analyzed HMG's followership from a genuine follower-centric perspective to supplement the leader-oriented approaches in the previous research.

## 2.2. West-Oriented Followership Research

The majority of leadership and followership research has been conducted from a Western perspective, with relatively few studies focusing on Eastern viewpoints. This imbalance is highlighted in the "Handbook of Global Leadership and Followership", which emphasizes the need to integrate leadership and followership theories and practices between Western individualistic cultures and Eastern collectivistic cultures. Additionally, it discusses the predominance of Western perspectives in leadership studies and underscores the importance of incorporating Eastern cultural contexts to achieve a more comprehensive understanding (Dhiman et al. 2023).

There is little previous followership research with an East-oriented perspective, we found a recent study conducted in China, examining how subordinate subjective ethical congruence influences followership behaviors. This research highlights the importance of cultural context in understanding leadership dynamics, suggesting that ethical congruence and identification with supervisors are significant factors in Asian settings, which may differ from Western perspectives (Fan et al. 2024). We also found a study in Pakistan, which focuses on the relationship between ethical leadership and followership dimensions within the context of public sector employees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This study contributes to the understanding of leadership and followership dynamics in an Asian setting, highlighting the significance of ethical leadership in influencing followership styles among employees in this region (Hashim 2023). However, these studies did not focus on followership and did not deal with Korea where the HMG is located. Therefore, in our research, we delved into the HMG's followership in the Korean context.

## 2.3. The HMG's Followership Case Study

According to our comprehensive literature review, there are few case studies explicitly dealing with the HMG's followership. Instead, a few studies indirectly addressed the

HMG's traditional followership in the context of leadership or organizational culture, where '(Hyundai) Speed' was implied as the major characteristic (Hyun and Song 2014; Park and Cho 2010). Tenacity or determination was also pointed out as another feature of the HMG's traditional followership when it pursued its quality enhancement (Rhee et al. 2003; Jeong et al. 2019).

As regards the impact of Korean culture on the HMG's followership, we could not find a matching case study either. However, we found a few studies that generally dealt with Korean enterprises' leadership and followership influenced by Korean culture. Korean leadership patterns are deeply intertwined with cultural values, which influence followership. Korean leadership often involves a collective approach, emphasizing harmony, respect for hierarchy, and strong interpersonal relationships (Steers and Shim 2020). The Korean companies' leadership style embodies Korean cultural values through a hierarchical structure that emphasizes respect for authority and collective harmony. This approach fosters strong loyalty and commitment among followers, aligning with the Confucian principles prevalent in Korean society. The combination of "Follow the Leader" and cultural adaptation allows leaders to effectively guide their teams while promoting a sense of belonging and shared purpose, ultimately enhancing organizational performance and cohesion within the group (Yoon 1998).

### 3. Research Methodology

This study employed a case study approach (Yin 2009) to explore how the HMG's followership facilitated business transformation, drawing on interviews with 20 participants, including HMG employees and external stakeholders, in Seoul, South Korea. By using purposive quota sampling, diverse perspectives were captured, considering factors like age, nationality, and career experiences. The first author, an HMG employee, conducted interviews to leverage his access, while efforts were made to minimize bias and ensure confidentiality.

The author tried to conduct the interviews in casual and comfortable circumstances due to the participants' sensitivity to confidentiality issues. So, during the interviews, only key note-taking was carried out with the participants' permission. After each interview, we asked them to write their responses on the answer sheet, which had the same format as the 'interview guidelines' in Appendix B. Content analysis was utilized to identify traditional and evolving HMG followership and their impact on business transformation.

#### 3.1. Qualitative Case Study

In this paper, we used a case study approach (Yin 2009) to produce deeper insights into the dynamics of how HMG followership operated as a mechanism to yield business transformation. Our research is a practice-oriented case study (Dul and Hak 2008), which explored the development of HMG followership chronically based on empirical testimony of related individuals.

#### 3.2. Data Collection and Research Design

##### 3.2.1. Selecting Interviewees (Participants)

We interviewed twenty individuals both internal employees and external stakeholders such as retired personnel, partners, researchers, and experts between June and July 2024 in the metropolitan city, of Seoul, South Korea. We interviewed four people for the pilot study, where we found the understanding of the HMG's followership would be potentially different by generation, cultural background, position (including insiders vs. outsiders), and career experiences. Therefore, we applied the quota sampling method to include various participants of different ages, nationalities, positions, and talent origins to capture the different perspectives on the HMG's followership. We especially expected to hear various perspectives and experiences of followership from HMG employees according to their differences in their roles, career types, nationalities, and ages. We also wanted to hear from non-HMG employees who were expected to provide their insights as ex-



employees or observers from outside. In particular, we tried to obtain professional insights from professors and academic researchers on leadership and followership based on their understanding of Korean socio-cultural psychology. In this manner, we expected to cover the theoretical concepts of followership, such as hierarchical connotation, constructionist approach, and IFT in a socio-cultural context. The detailed sampling quota and participants' profiles are presented in Appendix A at the end of this document.

### 3.2.2. Interview Methods

The first author, the current HMG employee, recruited participants and conducted interviews because of his proximity to the corporation and access to participants. His insider position allowed him to gain access and obtain consent from participants. We tried to avoid potential bias coming from the interviewer's position at HMG by recruiting individuals with established relationships to conduct interviews based on rapport and trust, which are very important in this type of qualitative research (Marshall and Rossman 2014). The interviewees were able to answer the questions and discuss the topics in casual settings, such as having meals or tea together, without feeling unnecessary pressure, which was emphasized in the research paper 'Narrative Inquiry' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face except for a few (20%) that were carried out over Zoom for the convenience of the participants.

All the interviews were conducted based on the structured interview guidelines as attached in the Appendix B. Considering the participants' concerns about confidentiality and anonymity (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007), we did not record the interviews. Instead, we wrote down key notes during the interviews or received an answer sheet from each interviewee after the interview (Hayes and Mattimoe 2004). The length of each interview was around thirty to forty minutes and additional interviews were conducted on an exceptional basis if there were answers to clarify or missing information from the original answer sheets.

### 3.2.3. Data Analysis

We used the content analysis method, a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use (Krippendorff 2019). The methodology of content analysis involves quantitative and qualitative study of content to measure trends and facts in texts (Neuendorf 2017). We applied quantitative content analysis to identify the traditional perception of the HMG's followership by conducting a frequency analysis. We also applied qualitative content analysis to understand the context of both the traditional and recent evolution of the HMG's followership and its influence on the HMG's business transformation.

## 4. Findings

From the content analysis, we found that the HMG's followership was characterized as extraordinarily well organized, devoted, diligent, and agile in fulfilling the leaders' direction, which was also associated with negative connotations such as passive, blindly obedient, military-like, and uncritical. The traditional perception of HMG followership was related to hierarchical organizational structure, which is deeply rooted in Korean culture. However, the HMG's followership began to change together with the new leadership supported by the characteristics of the young generation, requiring followers more critical and creative thinking while maintaining a high level of engagement as in the past. This change became the basis for architecting and driving new businesses of electrification and future mobility.

### 4.1. The Perception of the Traditional HMG Followership

The characteristics of HMG's followership were positively described with words such as Ill-sa-bul-lan (extraordinarily well-organized), speed, and devotion, demonstrating a high engagement level. However, there were a few words like passive and compliant,

which were mentioned in negative context, indicating a lack of critical thinking. In this manner, according to Kelley's followership theory, HMG's followership falls into the conformist type.

All through the interviews, the most frequently mentioned word to describe the HMG's followership was *Ill-sa-bul-lan* (一絲紛亂, 일사분란) meaning "A status where not even a single thread is tangled, meaning everything is orderly and perfectly arranged without the slightest disruption" (<https://ko.dict.naver.com> (accessed on 1 September 2024)). We may translate it as 'extraordinarily well organized', but it implies more contextual meanings such as determination, team spirit, solidarity, cohesion, discipline, and unity, which were also mentioned multiple times in many interviews. A HMG executive who joined from outside explained the HMG's followers' *Ill-sa-bul-lan* as follows:

Since joining this company, I have observed that, although decision-making can sometimes take a while, once a decision is made, the entire organization moves in that direction with remarkable cohesion and engagement. Even those who initially had different opinions became fully immersed in their work, finding solutions as if they had always been aligned. It was truly impressive to see so many people operate as if they were a single team.

The next most frequently occurring word was speed, which we grouped with other expressions like 'swift execution' and 'lightning fast'. In many research papers, 'Hyundai Speed' has already been dealt with as the typical factor of business success as a fast follower (Hyun and Song 2014; Choi et al. 2015; Kim 2015), and it is deeply related to the typical Korean culture of 'Bbali-bbali', which means 'hurry, hurry' (Lee 2001). As regards, an interviewee from a competitor brand jealously stated as follows:

I did not anticipate that Hyundai Motor Group would be able to catch up with us so rapidly. Features that we developed were incorporated into Hyundai cars within just a year, and their vehicles were not only more affordable but also of excellent quality. I attribute this to their relentless drive and the distinctive 'Bbali-bbali' culture, which emphasizes speed and efficiency. This level of agility is unimaginable at our company, and as someone who observes the slower pace of progress here, I find it highly admirable and enviable.

Other commonly appearing words were devotion, passion, diligence, and indomitable spirit, which we thought were associated with the mentality and attitude of following up duties with sincerity. An automotive industry expert presented several episodes that stand for these HMG characteristics as follows:

HMG has many anecdotes symbolizing indomitable will, passion, and dedication. Stories were told of securing shipbuilding orders without having a shipyard and proceeding with the shipyard and ship construction simultaneously. Another tale spoke of a young engineer relentlessly pursuing an Italian designer during the development of Pony, the company's first proprietary model, filling several notebooks with detailed notes that formed the basis of the development. These sorts of episodes were reproduced and spread over time in the organization and became a part of the company's DNA.

On the other hand, words like responsive, reactive, compliant, military-like, inflexible, and uncritical were also mentioned in a negative context. For instance, an HMG business partner commented:

While HMG followership has the advantage of achieving goals with strong execution in a short time, it also has the drawback of limiting an individual's work freedom, preventing the maximization of their abilities. Most of the HMG employees I met would not proceed further if they thought they were stepping beyond the boundaries of their instructions. What mattered was whether they had carried out their superior's instructions, not their own thoughts.

Table 1 is a comprehensive list of words and expressions on the characteristics of the traditional HMG followership, which we categorized into a few word groups.

**Table 1.** Words describing the HMG’s followership.

Word Group (Category)	Word	Frequency (# of Participants Who Mentioned)
Ill-sa-bul-lan (extraordinarily well-organized)	Ill-sa-bul-lan	12
	Team spirit	8
	Determination, determined	8
	Solidarity	3
	cohesion	3
	Discipline, disciplined	5
	Unity	5
	Harmony	5
	Homogeneous	3
	Uniform	2
Speed	Speed, Speedy, Hyundai speed	10
	Bbali-bbali (hurry, hurry)	6
	Swift execution	4
	Lightening fast	2
Devotion	Devotion	3
	Passion	3
	Diligence	5
	Indomitable spirit	1
	Concentration	1
	Bold, boldness	2
	Recklessness, reckless	2
Passive	Passive	8
	Responsive, reactive	6
	Compliant	5
	Rigid, inflexible	3
	Military-like	6
	Hierarchical	6
	Obedience (top-down obedience)	5
	Uncritical	2

#### 4.2. Analysis of the Traditional HMG Followership

The corporate culture of Korean enterprises was historically developed under the strong influence of Korea’s patriarchal and authoritarian culture, which is deeply rooted in Confucian philosophy, which emphasizes hierarchy, obedience, and the importance of male roles within the family and society (Lee and Cochran 2023). It created a strict power distance and hierarchy in the organizations (Lee 2012), and an HMG executive-level participant agreed that it was also the case for the development of the HMG’s followership:

At HMG, the hierarchy was outstanding, resulting in a strong tendency among followers to comply with and adhere to the leader’s directives. Influenced by Confucian culture, there was a widespread perception that top management



should be regarded with the same respect as the head of a household or a nation. Consequently, most employees fulfilled their roles by offering diverse alternatives, information, and data to support superiors in making informed decisions, rather than directly expressing differing opinions and challenging authority. Under this context, HMG leaders, especially top management, felt privileged and overwhelmed by the heavy responsibility, while expecting their employees to be loyal subordinates.

Applying Kelley's typology, the HMG had few Exemplary Followers (or Star Followers), the most desirable follower type essential for a successful business. In this regard, HMG seemed to be an exceptional case, considering its huge and unprecedented success of becoming the third-largest global auto OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) with the majority of Conformist followers. An HR expert (also a PhD holder in leadership and followership research) shared his professional diagnosis of this phenomenon in terms of Kelley's theory as follows:

It is difficult to fully explain HMG's followership only using Kelley's typology. Many HMG employees were not merely Conformists. Many devoted themselves to their work with a sense of indispensability, working tirelessly day and night and making sacrifices. It is insufficient to simply label those who equated their work with their life just as 'YES people.' On the other hand, it was also questionable whether HMG employees completely lacked critical thinking. While it is true that they have shown passive and unassertive behavior during strategy formulation and decision-making processes, they actively exerted their critical thinking and creativity to find solutions for their assigned jobs. In other words, although they appeared to lack critical thinking overall, many HMG employees substantially demonstrated a significant level of subjectivity in achieving objectives within their limited work scope.

A business consultant also recalled a surprising event when he worked with the HMG:

During a new car evaluation survey for American consumers, we suddenly received instructions from the HMG headquarters to display competitor brands' models of the same matching color as the new HMG car to ensure the objectivity of the evaluation (originally, the comparison models from competitors used to be displayed in the most popular colors in the market). In another company, they might have prepared a report stating the difficulty of obtaining cars in less popular colors. However, the HMG members personally put great effort into finding cars with matching colors on the street, and they even wrapped the models with colored vinyl, in case they could not find the matching cars. I was deeply impressed by their determination to find a creative way to execute the instructions, rather than being negative without questioning if there could be solutions.

As indicated above, the HMG's followers were neither pure Conformists nor typical Exemplary Followers. To better understand the HMG's followership, it is necessary to consider the unique cultural background of Korea, especially the subjectivity of Korean people, which is crucial to understanding the roots of such a 'proactive' engagement of a group of 'subordinates' (Huh 2017). According to Professor Huh from Korea University, who has studied the psychology of Koreans: "Korean subjectivity appears in the form of flexibility to deal with matters. They like to think and constantly ask themselves about the better alternatives rather than following what was given. They even use products creatively, not just according to the manual, but in innovative ways and purposes." (Huh 2015). In this manner, we concluded that we should be careful to apply Kelley's theory even to explain the HMG's traditional followership, since Kelley did not seriously consider the cultural context, especially the unique psychology of Korea.

#### 4.3. Changes in the HMG Followership

Although the HMG's inherited followership played a great role in the company becoming the third-largest global auto brand, it began to change during its business transformation to become a game changer in electrification and future mobility (Sunwoo et al. 2024). According to an HMG executive, the HMG's business transformation required comprehensive changes in most areas, including the followership:

HMG's transition to electrification and future mobility posed challenges that could not be addressed with our existing resources and systems. As the Chairman has emphasized, we must adopt a startup-like mindset in our thinking and operations. This necessitated not only a departure from established processes but also the adoption of innovative ways of working. Our corporate culture must evolve towards a more horizontal structure, necessitating comprehensive changes ranging from our dress code to the entire operation system. Throughout this transformation, the traditional dynamics of leader–follower relationships, mutual perceptions, and communication styles should inevitably undergo significant change.

To better understand the changes in the HMG's followership, we organized the interviewees' responses on how HMG's followership has changed into three categories (change trigger, change booster, and change keeper); these are given below.

##### 4.3.1. Change Trigger

All the interviewees agreed that HMG's followership change was initiated by Chairman Euisun Chung, who had a strong vision for the future and wanted to make a holistic change for the entire organization. He put great effort into breaking down the traditional corporate culture and introducing a new organizational structure with less hierarchy to foster the idea of a horizontal relationship between leaders and followers (Rhee et al. 2022). He also made efforts to invigorate the complacent HMG employees by recruiting numerous external talents, including foreigners and those with experience in global companies, and by acquiring companies with new technologies (Sunwoo et al. 2024). During the interview, a professor in the field of organizational management shared his insights as follows:

Given that the existing HMG organization operated on a strict hierarchy, it would have been difficult for followers to initiate change themselves, and senior executives were also unlikely to voluntarily alter their management style that had been in place for decades. In such an environment, decisive action from top management was inevitable. To eliminate the inertia and complacency prevalent in the organization, Chairman Chung had to demonstrate his commitment to change by introducing new systems and regulations across almost all areas.

##### 4.3.2. Change Booster

Based on the participants' statements, we found two major change boosters that injected heterogeneity into the organization. The first one was the import of foreign executives who already had different perspectives on the leader–follower relationship. They exerted implicit pressure on older generations (mostly executives) and existing employees in their comfort zones to change. Most team leaders shared similar experiences of the new foreign leadership as below:

Initially, there was some discomfort when encountering foreign executives, but they possessed a distinctly different leadership style compared to the existing Korean executives. Firstly, they fostered an atmosphere where people could speak freely during meetings. Instead of merely delivering preliminarily arranged reports and getting directions from above, we were able to discuss and share thoughts without any pressure of heavy paperwork. They were also free from existing processes and practices, preferring short Word documents over lengthy PowerPoint presentations. It was also possible to contact them anytime via email

or messenger, and even to knock on their door and have a meeting without a prior appointment when necessary.

Once, I was unexpectedly brought into a high-level management meeting by my foreign boss, which was an unimaginable action that a team leader like myself expected. What surprised me more was that he had no hesitation to express his opinion which could make other counterpart executives uncomfortable.

The other change booster was MZ(Millennials and Generation Z) employees who had different characters from the older generation. These young employees naturally became strong advocates of followership change from hierarchical to horizontal, regarding which many HMG participants had the following opinions:

As a 10-year veteran at HMG, I found that the new hires these days are more outspoken. They are unhesitant in expressing their thoughts and are not afraid to speak their minds even to team leaders and executives. It seems they don't care about what HMG was like in the past and they just take the democratic working atmosphere for granted.

Honestly, even as a team leader, I find myself very conscious of the younger employees these days, and the same goes for the executives. While some old-school executives may resist change despite directives from the top management, they ultimately have no choice but to adapt because the younger staff no longer follow their leadership style as before.

#### 4.3.3. Change Keeper

Social structures change when ideas, material foundations, and institutions operate while interacting with one another (Cox and Sinclair 1981). To sustain the change in followership perception, both institutional support and managerial investment were accompanied by the role of change keeper, to push leaders and followers to adjust their perspectives on their roles and mutual relationships. A HMG executive elaborated on this during the interview as below:

People's perceptions don't change simply by talking. To shift employees' perspectives on leaders and followers, a matching environment must be created that fosters such perception change. For this purpose, the top management simplified the job-band structure, allowing employees to set their work hours freely, to work from home without worrying about their team leaders or executives, and to take as much leave as they want when they want. Employees are now guaranteed to have opportunities to move to other departments they desire, and team leaders and executives must pay attention to the evaluations by their 'subordinates'. In addition, continuous investment is being made to transform the workplace environment into a smart office where they can't feel a sense of authority and hierarchy. These measures are irreversible and serve as a mechanism to ensure ongoing change.

#### 4.4. Analysis of the Evolution of HMG Followership

Since Kelley's theory is based on the hierarchical order, it cannot provide an adequate foundation for the theoretical analysis of the new followership perspectives (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. 2022). To adopt the different connotations of followership, the constructionist approach such as IFT is more useful in understanding the social construction process of how followership changed (Aghaei et al. 2023). During the interviews, we asked participants about the evolution of the HMG's followership in terms of (1) leaders' perception of leadership and followership, and (2) followers' perception of leadership and followership.

##### 4.4.1. Leaders' Perception of Leadership and Followership

Most home-grown executives admitted that the HMG's leaders had regarded followers merely as their subordinates who must show obedience and fulfill whatever orders as directed. Recalling the past, an executive mentioned below:

When we were young, we were taught by our superiors to value hard work, dedication, sincerity, persistence, and speed. We demanded the same from our subordinates and evaluated them based on these criteria. If someone had expressed different thoughts or opinions, many leaders would have considered it detrimental to the organization's teamwork. In other words, leaders were like the head coaches of a sports team, while subordinates were like the players who had to execute the instructions flawlessly.

Another executive, who joined from outside, pointed out the dual nature of the HMG leaders' perception of their leadership from his early observation:

From an outsider's point of view, HMG leaders seemed to perceive themselves not as leaders but as high-ranked subordinates serving a small number of the top executives. They sought recognition by leading the organization to execute the assigned tasks quickly and efficiently, rather than making new suggestions or taking initiatives. In the meetings, they tried not to voice up and tended to view their role as providing information for the top executives' decisions. They just waited for the final decisions from the top rather than participating in the decision-making processes. As a result, it appeared to me that most of the existing HMG leaders were more like highly experienced followers, and this mindset seemed to have been passed down to their subordinates.

However, these leaders' perceptions of leadership and followership began to change with Chairman Chung's initiatives to renovate the overall corporate culture, which mostly resonated with young generations with different mindsets. Some interviewees described this situation with their interpretations:

By orders from top management, executives had to switch from suits to casual attire overnight. They were also told to stop relying solely on strong words and charisma to demand employees' dedication and commitment. In meetings, top management instructed high-ranked leaders 'Don't just present information and leave the final decision to me. Share your own thoughts and opinions.' This situation made many leaders reconsider their roles as well as the ways to deal with followers. In addition, competition with newly hired executives from outside further pushed them toward a new direction.

Of course, executives should indeed be affected by the orders from the top management, but the old methods didn't work anyway with young employees. While it's somewhat disappointing for me not to see the same passion, dedication, and camaraderie as in the past, I was amazed by the brilliant ideas of young people and sometimes I even felt envious of how confidently they express their thoughts. In addition, I found young employees often become surprisingly engaged and deliver unexpected results when they feel respected and valued. It seems that today's leaders need to leverage the critical minds of young employees effectively.

#### 4.4.2. Followers' Perception of Leadership and Followership

Followers' perceptions of leadership and followership has not been a major subject of interest in academic research ([Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. 2022](#)). In a strong hierarchical context, followers are treated as objects of leadership, and many HMG interviewees agreed that this was also the case at HMG:

I have never deeply considered how followers perceive leadership at HMG. Employees were seen as entities that follow orders, and the virtue of good leadership was giving clear instructions and conducting fair performance evaluations. During the times of previous chairmen, when the patriarchal culture was still prominent, leaders were sometimes perceived as someone important like kings, fathers, or teachers.

However, the leadership connotation of followers has changed as well, regarding which many of the HMG's working-level managers made similar comments as below:

It seems that what we expect from leaders has changed significantly. While the ability to give clear instructions might still be necessary, a more important virtue is providing us with a vision and helping us grow both as professionals and as individuals, allowing us to achieve work-and-life balance. In the past, charismatic control of an organization was crucial, but nowadays, I believe it becomes more important for leaders to implant a sense of self-efficacy and presence among followers with maximum empowerment and open communication.

Meanwhile, followers' self-perception of followership had been unclear at the HMG as well. However, it began to change with the rise of the young generation and the import of new faces from outside. In particular, MZ managers did not have a clear idea of followership itself because they implicitly denied the connotation of both 'subordinates' and 'followers':

I don't believe I should be subservient to someone or follow someone blindly at work. Of course, I still have a lot to learn, and I greatly need the help and cooperation of those around me. However, I am also contributing to the organization in my position and believe I should be recognized and respected at least for what I did. After all, can any company exist without its employees? Without us, there is no company and no leader.

Although I'm not an executive or a team leader yet, I sometimes think of myself as the backbone of this company. We at the middle management level know the day-to-day operations and handle them much better than executives and team leaders. We might not see the big picture, but at least in our areas, we are the ones in charge and leading the way.

#### *4.5. Followership Evolution and Business Transformation*

The HMG's followership change coincided with the business transformation of electrification and future mobility. The HMG's business transformation was such a significant change that it could not be achieved with the existing mentality, resources, and operating methods (Rhee et al. 2022). As a component of the mechanism to foster the business transformation, the HMG's followers and followership played an important role (Sunwoo et al. 2024), and we asked interviewees about their experiences of the actual dynamics of how the evolution of HMG's followership was interwoven in the process of business transformation. Major statements were as follows:

In the past, only high-ranked executives spoke at meetings with top management, while working-level staff were not expected to voice their knowledge and opinions. However, it's changed nowadays and I saw many working-level staff actively sharing their thoughts at meetings. I believe this is very crucial in new business areas that require diverse perspectives and creativity.

One of the biggest changes is that we are working in an environment where we are allowed to make mistakes. Even a couple of years ago, we tried not to make a mistake for personal job security. There was almost no spontaneous innovation since we avoided taking risks. However, we are now encouraged to try things without the fear of being punished in case of failure. For instance, we invested a lot in many technology start-ups but some of them turned out to be a failure, which was OK once if we could learn a single lesson from it.

In the past, leaders were often seen as figures to be avoided if possible. It's because they issued unilateral commands, which often led us into difficult situations. However, this atmosphere has significantly weakened recently. More and more employees are beginning to see leaders not as opponents but as collaborators. This shift is creating a new style of teamwork, which I believe is positively impacting

the advancement of electrification and future mobility. Since these are uncharted territories, leaders can no longer give directives unilaterally as they did before.

Based on the followership evolution with the change in leader–follower dynamics, business transformation toward electrification and future mobility was vigorously pursued, about which participants mentioned the following:

I believe that the development of e-GMP (HMG's dedicated platform for EVs), which opened the door to the electrification business transformation for HMG, was only made possible by the evolution of followership under new leadership and a changed environment. While there was a culture of faithfully executing orders from above in the past, it was more about quickly following what others were doing. In contrast, the electrification challenge was a task where there was no one to follow among legacy OEMs. It was also difficult to catch up with new ICT brands like Tesla due to different production and organizational structure approaches. Now, employees had to find new paths both internally and externally, which required creative and critical thinking. In this regard, I think HMG's transition to electrification is closely related to a shift in traditional followership.

The acquisition of Boston Dynamics was indeed driven by the will of top management. However, the idea of integrating future mobility with robotics spread and materialized within the company faster than expected. Robotics technology, in particular, has been actively adopted in the production sector. After being experimentally applied at the smart factory in Singapore, its implementation is now rapidly expanding to major factories in Korea. I believe that the evolving followership is playing a significant role in the realization of these new ideas. Nowadays, it has become more important to be smart and effective rather than just working hard.

The concept of a 'Frying Car' was a new business idea that would have been hard to imagine even within the traditional automotive industry. If it had been left to the existing employees, they probably wouldn't have dared to start it. In HMG's case, we were able to pursue the AAM (Advanced Air Mobility) business by bringing in a new leadership group from outside and forming a new team to support them. Sometimes, it is necessary to put 'new wine into new bottles' to push forward with new businesses. Through this process, a different type of follower, unlike the traditional HMG followers, was brought into the organization, and they became the driving force behind the planning and execution of new business initiatives.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

### 5.1. Discussion

Not all interview participants offered exclusively positive perspectives. Certain participants highlighted that the HMG's followership has yet to undergo a substantial transformation from its traditional form, which remains passively defined by dominant leadership. They noted a persistent inclination towards uniformity, with limited progress in fostering diversity. Particularly, some voices pointed out that the company's human resources and training systems continue to operate in a leader-centric manner, with insufficient attention and support given to followership at the organizational level:

There appears to be uncertainty about whether the concept of "future mobility" articulated by leadership has been fully internalized by all members. Many people observed lingering conservative hesitation in decision-making, which contributes to ambiguity among frontline employees regarding the rationale behind certain initiatives. This raises the question of whether the "necessity" and "direction" of the transition to future mobility have been sufficiently communicated and understood across the organization. While the vision seems aligned with a desirable trajectory, there is a need for improvement in ensuring that this vision is not merely a top-level declaration but is also actively translated into management



practices by lower-tier executives, effectively conveying both the vision and its strategic importance to operational teams.

The organization has shown relatively greater interest and support for leaders, while attention and resources directed toward followers remain insufficient. It appears that responsibility for follower engagement has largely been delegated to leaders themselves. However, if leaders fail to actively engage with and support their followers, significant issues may arise, such as leaderphobia, passive-aggressive behavior, and organizational cynicism. Consequently, followers are less likely to take initiative or embrace new challenges, instead adopting a risk-averse and self-preserving attitude that hampers innovation and organizational adaptability.

These perceptual differences largely stem from the distinct nature of work across different business units. Divisions directly engaged with future mobility tended to have a more robust followership foundation, as they were better positioned to swiftly absorb the leader's vision and proactively implement it. This was facilitated by their unique workforce composition, work styles, and organizational culture. In contrast, business units focused on traditional operations found it challenging to fully experience the magnitude of the transformation, aside from a few tangible changes, such as dress code flexibility or flexible working hours. Moreover, even participants with a negative outlook on the current HMG followership acknowledged that these changes would be likely to continue spreading. They anticipated that organizational restructuring, business expansion, and generational differences would accelerate the pace of transformation across various business units:

Regarding electrification and future mobility initiatives, the integration of Generation Z into the organization, along with their strengths, could create opportunities through the adoption of innovative approaches and methods suited to new business landscapes. This generational synergy has the potential to pave the way for expanding into additional business domains and fostering fresh avenues for growth.

## 5.2. Conclusions

The characteristics of the HMG's traditional followership (Hyun and Song 2014; Park and Cho 2010; Rhee et al. 2003; Jeong et al. 2019) was established on the hierarchical understanding of subordinates and their roles. According to Kelley's followership typology (Kelley 2008), the HMG's traditional followership belongs to the Conformist type, where followers have a high level of engagement but a low level of critical thinking. This means that the HMG became the third-largest global auto OEM with Conformist (or Yes People) Followers, which is contrary to Kelley's theoretical implication that a successful business should have Exemplary Followers (or Star Followers). To explain this contradiction, we should consider the sociocultural context of Korea, where Koreans tend to deliberate on creative solutions for assigned jobs without defying the authority of seniors (Huh 2017). The HMG's followers showed little contribution to strategic planning and decision-making; they exhibited a great level of autonomy with creative solutions to address assigned tasks, which led to the fast and remarkable growth in the global automotive industry. From this analysis, we concluded that we should be careful of applying Kelley's followership typology when we deal with the followership phenomenon in regions of different cultural backgrounds.

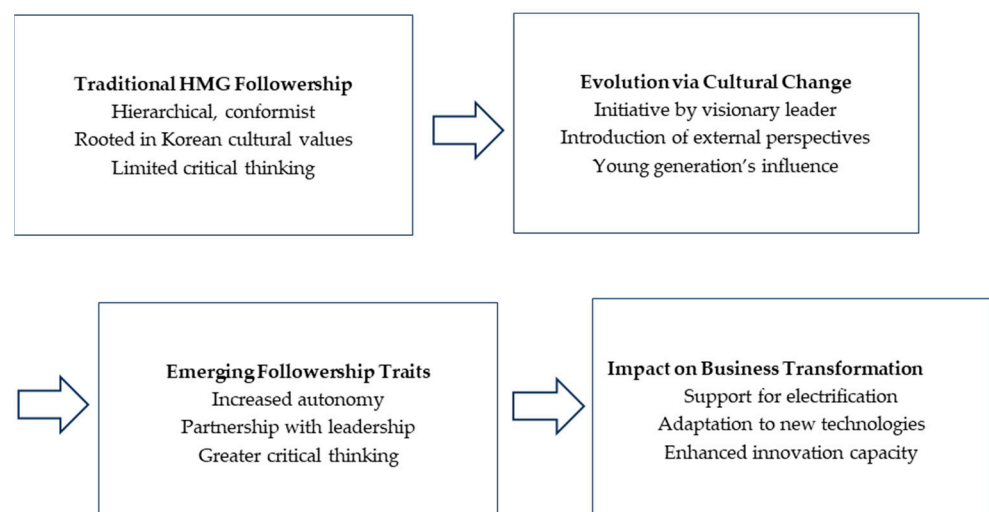
The recent change in the HMG's followership was well explained with the concept of responsible leadership, especially in terms of how the followership change began. The evolution of the HMG's followership was initiated by the top management as a part of holistic change in organizational culture. New resources were imported to enhance the asset for the business transformation and new faces from outside contributed with their domain knowledge and their different perspectives of followership (and leadership), which was necessary for igniting the transformation. However, responsible leadership was insufficient in analyzing the entirety of the HMG's followership change in the era of business

transformation, since followership was still being understood from the leaders' point of view, which lacked the followers' perceptions of the leaders and followers themselves. Based on this understanding, we concluded that it is critical to apply a holistic framework which encompasses the recent evolution of the followership perception.

To analyze the change dynamics of the HMG's followership from the followers' perspective, we applied implicit followership theory (IFT) as a framework, which focused more on the perception change of followers on themselves and leaders. Since HMG followers had been influenced by authoritarian leadership for a long time, they tended to regard leaders (especially the top management) as individuals they had to follow unconditionally. Accordingly, they took it for granted that employees were servants to realize the common goal by following the directions from the above. However, these perceptions were changed by the strong drive of Chairman Chung, with the import of new forces from outside and the rise of the younger generation (MZ) in the organization, who were relatively distanced from the old-school leadership style and easily proliferated the non-hierarchical and democratic behaviors and ways of thinking in the organization. As a result, followers began to regard themselves as partners who have co-responsibility with leaders and play a critical or valuable role in the organization. This perception change also influenced back to the leader groups, who had to depart from the old perception to treat their employees as pure subordinates. This momentum was reinforced by new rules and institutions, which even pushed the remaining skeptical leaders and followers in the same direction.

As a result, the changed perception of followership (and the relationship between leaders and followers) boosted the HMG's business transformation, which would not have been pursued with the traditional followership. The transformation of followership at the HMG, characterized by a move from traditional obedience to a more innovative and critical approach, has significantly facilitated the company's business transformation. This shift has empowered the HMG to effectively develop new technologies such as e-GMP, integrate robotics into production, and initiate advanced projects like AAM, demonstrating the critical role of adaptive and strategic followership in driving organizational innovation and growth.

In a nutshell, the HMG's traditional followership was socially constructed by the relations between leaders and followers in the Korean cultural context (Steers and Shim 2020) and evolved to lead the successful business transformation. As shown in Figure 1, with the top management's initiation, new and heterogeneous elements introduced from outside not only fueled the drive for new business transformation but also triggered changes throughout the organizational culture, including the perceptions of followership. The evolution of followership, in turn, reinforced the business transformation, creating the virtuous cycle. Below is a summary of the evolution of the HMG's followership and its impact on the business transformation.



**Figure 1.** Evolution of the HMG's followership and its impact on the business transformation.

### 5.3. Research Limitations and Suggestions

Our research is a qualitative case study on the HMG's followership, aiming to make an academic contribution by concentrating on the relatively underexplored area of followership. In particular, we provide valuable insights for researchers studying corporations by highlighting the importance of considering the socio-cultural context of the country in which a company operates when applying existing followership theories. In addition, by conducting interviews with internal and external stakeholders with limited access, we identified a vivid and concrete aspect of corporate dynamics, thereby providing high-quality information to researchers interested in studying the HMG.

Although our research is the first case study to show the evolution of the HMG followership in the era of business transformation, its limitation is that it is a single case study, which should be complemented by follow-up research from other countries, industries, and companies. In addition, as a qualitative study, our research cannot be free from criticism of subjectivity in regard to the fact that the interviews were conducted by the author who is a current employee of the HMG, even if we tried to avoid any bias. However, we expect our research to be cross-validated, and there will be opportunities to improve this research with enhanced inter-subjectivity as more studies on the HMG's followership are conducted in the future.

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### Appendix A. Sampling Quota and Participants' Profiles

Sampling Quota	Group	Sample Size (20)	Representation
Age	50+	9	Old generation (Gen X)
	40~50	7	A mixture of Gen X and Y
	Under 40	4	Young generation (Gen Y and Z)
Nationality	Korean	15	Korean culture
	International	5	Global culture
Workplace (Position/Job)	HMG (internal)	11	Insiders
	Executive	4	20+ years at HMG
	Team leader	3	~20 years at HMG
	Senior manager	2	10~20 years at HMG
	Manager	2	~10 years at HMG
	Non-HMG (external)	9	Experts/partners from outside
Talent origin	Home-grown	7	Career only at HMG
	External hire	6	Career at multiple companies
	N/A	7	(No HMG career)

The HMG has a very simplified job structure: executives, senior managers (some of these have the title of team leaders), and managers. That is to say, a university graduate obtains the title of manager when they join the HMG and are promoted with time to senior manager and to executive.

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Position (Workplace)	Talent Origin
Sihyuk	50~55	Korean	Executive (HMG)	Home-grown
Heejin	45~50	Korean	Executive (HMG)	Home-grown
Kevin	50~55	International	Executive (HMG)	External hire
Joonhyung	50~55	Korean	Executive (HMG)	External hire
Jungmin	40~45	Korean	Team leader (HMG)	Home-grown
Jiwon	40~45	Korean	Team leader (HMG)	External hire
Tom	35~40	International	Team leader (HMG)	External hire
Minsu	40~45	Korean	Senior manager (HMG)	Home-grown
Yohan	35~40	Korean	Senior manager (HMG)	External hire
Aera	30~35	Korean	Manager (HMG)	Home-grown
Dongman	25~30	Korean	Manager (HMG)	Home-grown
Yujin	55~60	Korean	Retired (from HMG)	Home-grown
Linda	65~70	International	Retired (from HMG)	External hire
Jingu	40~45	Korean	Business Partner	N/A
Jungkuk	50~55	Korean	Consultant	N/A
Yejin	50~55	Korean	Professor	N/A
Jihoon	40~45	Korean	Researcher	N/A
Jane	50~55	International	Executive (competitor)	N/A
James	55~60	International	Expert (auto industry)	N/A
Soohyun	45~50	Korean	Expert (other industry)	N/A

## Appendix B. Interview Guidelines

Thank you for participating in this interview despite your busy schedule. This interview is conducted to write an academic paper on followership within the Hyundai Motor Group (HMG). All responses and the participants' identities will be anonymized and used solely to write this paper.

To give you some background on the upcoming academic paper: Last year, I conducted an initial study on the mechanisms within HMG that enabled its successful transition to electrification, positioning it as a leader among traditional Legacy OEMs. In this study, I identified "leadership + followership" characteristics and changes within HMG as key elements of this mechanism. Since leadership was extensively covered in the previous research, I aim to focus on followership this time.

A literature review has revealed two contrasting approaches to followership:

- Follower = Subordinate: This view presupposes a vertical hierarchy and seeks to understand followership from the leader's perspective as a passive response to the leader's directives.
- Follower = Partner: This perspective assumes a horizontal relationship where followers interact with leaders and influence organizational performance, understanding followers as active participants influencing leaders.

Given this background, I request you to freely share your thoughts on the following topics. You are not limited to the listed items and may add/edit or skip issues as you see fit. Thank you in advance for your valuable insights.

- 1 What do you think are the general characteristics of followership within the Hyundai Motor Group (HMG)?
  - What words/expressions come to mind when you think of "HMG followership"?
  - Do you have any personal experiences or anecdotes that exemplify the characteristics of HMG followership?
  - Why do you think these characteristics have developed?
  - What factors do you think have influenced the formation of followership within HMG? (e.g., leadership style, characteristics of Korean culture, etc.)
  - What are the strengths and weaknesses of HMG followership, and how do you think they have impacted corporate performance?

# If you find it difficult to clearly define the characteristics of “HMG followership,” what do you think is the reason for that?

- 2 Do you think there have been changes in HMG followership recently (around the time of Chairman Chung Eui-sun’s inauguration)?
  - If you think there have been changes, what kind of changes do you think have occurred (or are occurring)?
  - Do you have any experiences or examples that illustrate these changes?
  - What do you think are the causes of these changes? (What were the catalysts or drivers of these changes?)
  - What are the pros and cons of these changes, in your opinion?
  - How do you think these changes are affecting the push for electrification and new mobility businesses?
  - If you think there have been no noticeable changes, why do you think that is?
  - Do you think changes in HMG followership are necessary in the future? If so, in what direction should these changes be made?
- 3 Please feel free to share any other thoughts or opinions you have on HMG’s leadership, followership, and corporate (organizational) culture.

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