



## **The Ownership Pathway: Psychological Ownership as a Mediator of Paternalistic Leadership and Work Engagement**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Leadership is an essential managerial function that directs an organization's resources towards achieving optimal efficiency and goals. By inspiring, motivating, and guiding individuals to complete their tasks, leadership acts as a pivotal force in driving engagement and fostering psychological ownership within an organization. This sense of ownership can subsequently elevate levels of work engagement among employees. Consequently, this research aims to investigate how psychological ownership mediates the link between paternalistic leadership and work engagement in the context of corporate managers.

**Methodology:** Structured questionnaires were administered to middle level corporate managers for the collection of the data. The study garnered 300 valid responses from participants employed in multi-national companies of Delhi-NCR. A correlational design was employed for the analyzation of the data collected from the corporate managers.

**Results:** The analysis showed a positive correlation between Paternalistic Leadership, Psychological Ownership, and Work Engagement. It also indicated that Paternalistic Leadership and Psychological Ownership serves as a significant predictor of Work Engagement among corporate managers. Additionally, Psychological Ownership was found to significantly mediate the relationship between Paternalistic Leadership and Work Engagement.

**Conclusion:** This research seeks to support corporate managers in adopting Paternalistic Leadership within their organizations and by incorporating Paternalistic Leadership, managers can foster a deeper sense of psychological ownership, ultimately driving higher levels of work engagement within their teams. It highlights the dual role of Psychological Ownership, not only as significant predictor but also as mediators that strengthen the connection between leadership style and employee engagement.

**Keywords:** paternalistic leadership, psychological ownership, work engagement, corporate managers.



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## Main Text

### **1. Introduction**

In today's competitive corporate landscape, engaging employees remains a core challenge, with leadership style identified as a pivotal influence on workplace commitment and productivity. In order for organizations to achieve long-term growth and survival in a global market that is intensely competitive, they need to develop and concentrate on their essential competencies. According to Hunter, Cords, and Hirschman (2005), in order for organizations to boost their productivity and influence the beliefs, attitudes, and values of their employees, they must consciously embrace their leadership style and consistently implement the procedures that they have established. Thomas (2005) contends that this is extremely important since, as a consequence of this, staff workers will be better ready to adapt to new difficulties and emerging technologies. One of the most important management tasks is to steer the resources of a company in the direction of enhanced efficiency and the accomplishment of goals.

Leadership is essential in guiding, motivating, and directing others to carry out tasks effectively on their own. It involves much more than simply issuing directives; it requires influencing others through actions, values, and the example set by the leader. Leaders encourage employees to take initiative, concentrate their ideas, and make decisions that align with the best interests of the organization, both within and outside the formal chain of command. Farh and Cheng (2000) define paternalistic leadership as "a style that combines strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence and moral integrity". In this approach, leaders cultivate a family-like dynamic, combining authority with genuine care for employee well-being. This blend, distinct from authoritarian or purely transactional styles, fosters loyalty, trust, and a supportive work environment by addressing both personal and professional needs. Strong bonds and a sense of attachment arise, contributing to psychological ownership—a mindset described by Shukla and Singh (2015) as taking responsibility for organizational issues and embracing ownership across all levels of the organization. Paternalistic leadership aligns somewhat with transformational leadership, yet it diverges with its focus on moral guidance and protection beyond professional development, which enhances work engagement as employees feel personally and professionally supported. In organizational psychology, work engagement reflects an employee's enthusiasm, energy, and dedication towards their job, leading to higher productivity, job satisfaction, and well-being. Unlike mere job satisfaction, work engagement entails a deeper psychological investment in one's work. A manager's engagement not only boosts their own performance and well-being but also has a positive ripple effect on their team and the organization as a whole.

This research intends to add to the current body of literature in various ways. It is the first to interweave the concepts of paternalistic leadership, psychological ownership and work engagement in a single study. Leadership serves as a cornerstone of organizational effectiveness, impacting everything from employee morale to productivity. Within this broad framework, our study zeroes in on the Indian corporate context to examine how paternalistic leadership a style



characterized by authority and familial care affects middle-level managers. By fostering a sense of psychological ownership, this leadership approach may inspire managers to invest more deeply in their roles, thereby enhancing their work engagement. This research seeks to unveil the mediating influence of psychological ownership, providing a nuanced understanding of how culturally resonant leadership styles can cultivate commitment and motivation in corporate settings.

### *1.1 Paternalistic Leadership & Psychological Ownership*

A paternalistic leadership style is characterized by the presence of ideals such as unquestioning devotion and personal loyalty to the leader (Aycan et al., 2000). A paternalistic leader can be seen as either "manipulative" or "caring and considerate" depending on the culture. Paternalistic leadership is characterized as the sum of three characteristics: "**authoritarianism**," which refers to the powerful and unquestionable authority of the leader over his or her followers; "**benevolence**," which refers to the interest of the leader in the lives and welfare of the employees; and finally, "**moral leadership**," which refers to a leader who is not only virtuous but also selfless (Cheng et al., 2004, pg. 91). Paternalistic leadership cultivates loyalty and trust between leaders and employees, often strengthening employees' sense of belonging to the organization. When employees feel they are an integral part of the team, they are more likely to develop psychological ownership, viewing their work and the organization as an extension of themselves. The term "psychological ownership" was coined by Pierce et al. (2001) and described as "a state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership (material or immaterial in nature) or a piece of it is "theirs" (i.e., "It is MINE!")" (pg 299). According to Shukla and Singh (2015), pg. 231, the term "psychological ownership" refers to a "mental state in which an individual develops a strong sense of possessiveness towards an object in the absence of any legal entitlement over it. This ownership mentality encompasses taking responsibility for organizational issues and accepting ownership from all stakeholders, regardless of their social standing. Previous studies have found a positive correlation between paternalistic leadership and psychological ownership (SözbiLiR, 2020 & Zhu, Chen, Li, & Zhou, 2013). Accordingly, the following hypothesis was proposed:

*H1. Paternalistic leadership has positive impact on psychological ownership.*

### *1.2 Paternalistic Leadership & Work Engagement*

The concept of work engagement was initially articulated by William A. Kahn. As stated, the concept of "passion to work" refers to the fact that when an individual does his or her duties, they devote themselves to the job in all aspects, including physically, cognitively, and emotionally (Kahn, 1990). An active, positive job-related condition that is marked by energy, devotion, and absorption is what Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) proposed as the definition of work engagement. According to Attridge (2009), Work Engagement is a positive motivational state in which employees have positive feelings toward their work, find their work meaningful, think their professional responsibilities are manageable, and think positively about the future of their work. Yavan (2016), defines Work Engagement as the feeling of joy and pride in the work one does and as a concept that guarantees goal-oriented attitudes, requires a high level of mobility,



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provides permanence to reach goals, and examines the basic dimensions of intrinsic motivation. Therefore, Work Engagement is defined as a positive mood state where job satisfaction is high (Schaufeli et al., 2002). While engagement has been defined in various ways (Albrecht, 2010; Bakker & Leiter, 2010), the definition by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) is among the most commonly referenced in discussions of work engagement. Vigor refers to having high levels of energy and resilience at work, whereas dedication is marked by a deep involvement in one's work, accompanied by feelings of purpose, enthusiasm, and challenge. Vigor and dedication thus represent distinct concepts. The state of being fully absorbed and joyfully engrossed in one's activity, to the point where time flies swiftly, is a defining characteristic of absorption. Leadership is often regarded as one of the elements that may be utilized to increase employees' work engagement. According to Social Exchange Theory by Homans, G. C. (1958), relationships are built on reciprocal exchanges between leaders and employees, where favourable treatment leads to positive responses. Paternalistic leaders often engage in benevolent actions, showing care, loyalty, and support for their employees. When employees experience this type of positive leadership, they feel valued and secure, leading them to reciprocate with greater engagement and commitment. Paternalistic Leadership positively and significantly affects Work Engagement supported by various studies (Aybar & Cark, 2023 & Kiliç et al., 2020). Accordingly, the following hypothesis was proposed:

*H2. Paternalistic leadership has positive impact on work engagement.*

### *1.3 Psychological Ownership & Work Engagement*

Social identity theory, as developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), explains how individuals within social groups form their self-concept based on group affiliation. This theory suggests that people shape their identities according to the groups they belong to (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Social identity is defined as an individual's sense of self that arises from their recognition of being a group member, along with the value and emotional significance associated with this membership (Tajfel, 1978). Through social identity, team members view the group as an essential part of their personal identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Given that much of organizational behaviour occurs within group settings, organizations themselves can be viewed as social groups from a social psychological perspective. This perspective underscores the importance of social identity theory in the study of organizational behaviour. Although social identity theory has been previously applied to organizational research (Brown, 1978; Cheng et al., 2016), focused exploration of social identity processes within organizations has only recently gained substantial momentum. Based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), this study suggests that corporate managers' attitudes and performance are likely influenced by psychological ownership. Managers who experience a higher level of psychological ownership may view the organization as a place they strongly identify with, leading to increased work engagement. Additionally, corporate managers with a greater sense of psychological ownership may feel more empowered to take on responsibilities. When given opportunities to utilize their skills, they are likely to experience reduced stress, enhanced work engagement. Accordingly, the following hypothesis was proposed:



*H3. Psychological ownership has positive impact on work engagement.*

#### *1.4 Paternalistic Leadership, Psychological Ownership & Work Engagement*

Over the past few decades, leader-member exchange (LMX) theory has been recognized as one of the most effective frameworks for understanding organizational leadership (Dinh et al., 2014; Schriesheim et al., 1999). Advocates of this theory argue that strong leader-follower relationships yield positive employee outcomes, including improved job attitudes, increased citizenship behaviour, enhanced job performance, and a lower likelihood of turnover (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Dulebohn et al., 2012). In a meta-analysis, Lee et al. (2018) found LMX to act as a mediator between empowering leadership and task performance, a finding slightly relevant to our study. Given the beneficial effects of leadership on employees' psychological empowerment, it is plausible that this leader-follower dynamic enables employees to perform more effectively. Additionally, paternalistic leadership, psychological ownership, and work engagement are interrelated in fostering a motivated and committed workforce. Paternalistic leadership, which combines authority with benevolence, creates a nurturing environment where employees feel valued and supported. This environment promotes psychological ownership, allowing employees to feel a personal connection to the organization, identifying with its successes and challenges. With increased psychological ownership, employees are more engaged in their roles, showing enthusiasm, dedication, and resilience. Therefore, paternalistic leadership indirectly enhances work engagement by cultivating psychological ownership, fostering a reciprocal cycle of commitment and motivation. To the best of our knowledge, no study has yet examined the mediating role of psychological ownership in the relationship between paternalistic leadership and work engagement. Hence to propose a new model, the following hypothesis was proposed:

*H4: Psychological ownership will mediate the relationship between paternalistic leadership and work engagement.*

## **2. Research Methodology**

### *2.1 Participants and Data Collection*

This research employed a survey approach to collect data, conducted as a cross-sectional study, meaning that data were gathered at one specific point in time using Google Forms. The study focused on middle-level managers working in multinational corporations located in Delhi and the surrounding NCR region. The sampling method used was purposive, targeting 300 managers of both genders within the age range of 30 to 45 years. Only participants with at least five years of professional experience and a postgraduate educational background were selected for inclusion in the study. A total of 327 completed questionnaires were received, but 27 of these were excluded due to participant ineligibility. The primary reason for exclusion was insufficient or incomplete information provided in the responses.

### *2.2 Research Design*

A correlational design would be used to investigate the relationship between Paternalistic Leadership, Psychological Ownership and Work Engagement among middle level corporate managers.



### 2.3 Instruments

*Paternalistic Leadership Scale:* Paternalistic Leadership Scale by Cheng et al. (2004) offers a comprehensive approach to understanding a leader's role in organizations. The scale consists of 26 items in total, with 11 items assessing Benevolent Leadership, 6 items focused on Moral Leadership, and 9 items addressing Authoritarian Leadership. Originally, it utilized a 6-point Likert scale ranging from (1) 'I completely do not agree' to (6) 'I completely agree,' providing finer distinctions in attitude responses. However, in this current study, a 5-point Likert scale was adopted to standardize responses in line with other measurement tools used. Developed for organizational settings, particularly in businesses, the scale has shown high reliability across all dimensions, with Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.84 for Benevolent Leadership, 0.95 for Moral Leadership, and 0.87 for Authoritarian Leadership. These values indicate strong internal consistency, confirming that the scale is a dependable instrument for assessing paternalistic leadership styles across diverse organizational cultures.

*Psychological Ownership Scale:* The Psychological Ownership Scale, developed by Avey, Avolio, Crossly, and Luthans (2009), utilizes a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 6 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree) and is composed of 16 items categorized into two main dimensions: preventative and promotive psychological ownership. Preventative ownership, characterized by a protective or territorial stance, is assessed through 4 items with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84, indicating strong reliability. Promotive psychological ownership, on the other hand, includes four interconnected facets: self-efficacy, accountability, sense of belonging, and self-identity. These facets measure a proactive approach to ownership, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.90 for self-efficacy, 0.81 for accountability, 0.92 for belongingness, and 0.73 for self-identity, each demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency and supporting the scale's robustness in capturing the nuanced dimensions of psychological ownership.

*Utrecht Work Engagement Scale:* UWES developed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003). It is a three-factor scale of 17 items for assessing the various three dimensions of work engagement viz., Vigor, Dedication and Absorption. All 17 items are anchored in a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always). Reliability of the present scale is 0.93

### 2.4 Statistical Analysis

Data analysis began with descriptive statistics, followed by correlation and regression to test the relationships among the study variables. Subsequently, Jamovi's GLM mediation model analysis was applied as it gives the precise estimation of the significance of the indirect effect in a mediation model, a key focus here where psychological ownership is theorized to mediate the relationship between paternalistic leadership and work engagement.

### 2.5 Procedure

Participants were approached individually to fulfil the research objectives, with data being collected through an online platform. The scales measuring paternalistic leadership, psychological ownership, and work engagement were consolidated into a single Google Form. The participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, and those who provided written consent

received standardized instructions for completing each questionnaire or scale after rapport had been established. The session ended with a note of thanks for their contribution.

### 3. Results

Table 1 provides descriptive data of paternalistic leadership, psychological ownership and work engagement among corporate managers, including mean and standard deviation. The relationship between paternalistic leadership, psychological ownership and work engagement is additionally apparent in the same table.

Variables	Mean/ SD	Paternalistic Leadership	Psychological Ownership	Work Engagement
Paternalistic Leadership	99.37 (21.41)	1	.363**	.364**
Psychological Ownership	88.64 (3.36)	.363**	1	.377**
Work Engagement	94.58 (8.34)	.364**	.377**	1

\*\*p< 0.01

On the basis of the Table No.1, we can conclude that both Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3 have been confirmed. **Paternalistic Leadership** has a mean of 99.37 (SD = 21.41) and shows significant positive correlations with **Psychological Ownership** ( $r = .363$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and **Work Engagement** ( $r = .364$ ,  $p < .01$ ). **Psychological Ownership** has a mean of 88.64 (SD = 3.36) and is also positively and significantly correlated with **Work Engagement** ( $r = .377$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Table 2 Summary of Regression Analysis of Psychological Ownership

Variables	a Constant	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
Paternalistic Leadership	82.97	0.057	0.132	0.129

Table3 Summary of Regression Analysis of Work Engagement

Variables	a Constant	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
Psychological Ownership	11.747	0.934	0.142	0.139



Table 4 Jamovi's GLM mediation model results depicting mediating effect of Psychological Ownership in the link of Paternalistic Leadership and Work Engagement among corporate managers.

Indirect and Total Effects							
			95% C.I. (a)				
Type	Effect	Estimate	Lower	Upper	$\beta$	z	p
Indirect	$A \Rightarrow B \Rightarrow C$	0.0399	0.0207	0.0592	0.102	4.07	< .001
Component	$A \Rightarrow B$	0.0571	0.0405	0.0737	0.363	6.75	< .001
	$B \Rightarrow C$	0.6993	0.4304	0.9682	0.282	5.10	< .001
Direct	$A \Rightarrow C$	0.1019	0.0596	0.1442	0.261	4.72	< .001
Total	$A \Rightarrow C$		0.1007	0.1830	0.364	6.76	< .001

On the basis of the Table No.4, we can conclude that Hypothesis 4 have been confirmed.

#### 4. Discussion

The analysis reveals significant positive relationship between paternalistic leadership, psychological ownership, and work engagement among corporate managers, highlighting the role of leadership style in shaping managerial attitudes and behaviours in the workplace. Managers who experience higher levels of paternalistic leadership characterized by guidance, support, and a nurturing approach tend to develop a deeper sense of psychological ownership ( $r = 0.363$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and exhibit greater engagement at work ( $r = 0.364$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that when leaders create a supportive and protective work environment, employees feel a heightened sense of belonging, accountability, and commitment to their roles. Furthermore, the strong correlation between psychological ownership and work engagement ( $r = 0.377$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) indicates that managers who view their work as personally significant are more likely to be motivated, dedicated, and enthusiastic about their responsibilities. These findings align with existing research on the relationships between paternalistic leadership, psychological ownership, and work engagement. Kavgacı (2023) found that trust in leadership moderates the impact of paternalistic leadership on organizational citizenship behaviours and work engagement, highlighting the importance of trust in enhancing employee commitment. Similarly, Aybar and Cark (2023) identified the relational psychological contract as a key factor mediating the relationship between paternalistic leadership and work engagement, suggesting that a supportive and nurturing leadership style strengthens employees' sense of responsibility and motivation. Additionally, Çetin et al. (2017) emphasized that paternalistic leadership contributes to employees' psychological well-being by increasing the meaningfulness of their work, which in turn enhances psychological ownership and engagement. Collectively, these studies reinforce the



idea that paternalistic leadership fosters a workplace culture in which employees feel valued, responsible, and committed, ultimately deepening their psychological connection to their work. The regression analyses in Table 2 and Table 3 provide additional insights into the predictive relationships among these variables. In Table 2, paternalistic leadership is shown to predict psychological ownership with a  $\beta$  (beta) coefficient of 0.057, indicating a small but positive relationship. While this predictive effect is modest, the  $R^2$  of 0.132 and adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.129 suggest that paternalistic leadership accounts for around 13% of the variance in psychological ownership. This means that while leadership style does have a significant impact on managers' sense of ownership, other factors may also play important roles in shaping how employees internalize and take responsibility for their work. In Table 3, psychological ownership is found to be a strong predictor of work engagement, with a  $\beta$  of 0.934. This suggests that when managers feel a sense of ownership over their work, they are significantly more likely to be engaged in their roles. The model explains around 14.2% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.142$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.139$ ) in work engagement, demonstrating that psychological ownership has a stronger influence on engagement than paternalistic leadership has on ownership. This finding underscores the importance of fostering a sense of psychological ownership among employees to improve their work engagement.

From Table-4, the mediation analysis demonstrates that variable A (Paternalistic Leadership) significantly impacts variable C (Work Engagement) both directly and indirectly through variable B (Psychological Ownership). The indirect effect ( $A \Rightarrow B \Rightarrow C$ ) is statistically significant, with an estimate of 0.0399 (95% CI [0.0207, 0.0592],  $\beta = 0.102$ ,  $z = 4.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that variable A influences variable C through its effect on variable B. The component pathways further reveal that variable A has a strong positive and statistically significant effect on variable B (Estimate = 0.0571, 95% CI [0.0405, 0.0737],  $\beta = 0.363$ ,  $z = 6.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and variable B, in turn, significantly impacts variable C (Estimate = 0.6993, 95% CI [0.4304, 0.9682],  $\beta = 0.282$ ,  $z = 5.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Beyond this indirect pathway, the direct effect of variable A on variable C remains significant (Estimate = 0.1019, 95% CI [0.0596, 0.1442],  $\beta = 0.261$ ,  $z = 4.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that variable A influences variable C independently of variable B. Finally, the total effect of A on C, combining both direct and indirect effects, is statistically significant (Estimate = 0.1007,  $\beta = 0.364$ ,  $z = 6.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These findings highlight the critical role of psychological ownership as a mediator that links leadership style to work engagement. These findings align with Hayes (2018), who emphasizes the importance of examining both direct and indirect effects in mediation models, and Shrout and Bolger (2002), who stress that indirect pathways provide critical insights into underlying mechanisms of complex relationships. Psychological ownership acts as the mechanism through which paternalistic leadership translates into higher work engagement. The confirmation of psychological ownership as a mediator suggests that managers can enhance engagement by fostering a culture of ownership, wherein employees feel an intrinsic connection to their work. Psychological ownership arises when managers perceive that their roles and the organization's goals align with their personal values



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and objectives. Paternalistic leaders foster this sense of ownership by creating a supportive workplace environment where employees feel valued and trusted. Through care, guidance, and protective behaviours, these leaders cultivate responsibility over work, leading managers to internalize their tasks as personally significant. This emotional and psychological attachment manifests as increased engagement, enthusiasm, and dedication.

As employees feel cared for and respected, they develop a deep personal connection to their work, believing their efforts contribute directly to the organization's success. This ownership fuels intrinsic motivation, driving them to achieve not just for the organization but also for their personal fulfilment. Such a commitment enhances work engagement, encouraging employees to invest additional effort, time, and passion into their roles. Psychological ownership transforms routine tasks into meaningful contributions, fostering a higher level of involvement and commitment (Pierce et al., 2001; Liu et al., 2013).

In the Indian context, paternalistic leadership aligns well with cultural values that prioritize respect for authority, community loyalty, and familial bonds. Leaders adopting this style are perceived as mentors rather than just supervisors, gaining employees' trust and loyalty through personalized guidance, care, and protective behaviors. This leadership approach fosters a sense of being valued and responsible among employees, thereby strengthening their attachment to their roles and boosting work engagement. Studies support this cultural alignment; for instance, Pellegrini and Scandura (2008) noted that paternalistic leadership is particularly effective in collectivist societies like India, where hierarchical respect and relational harmony are deeply ingrained. Similarly, Ghosh (2015) highlighted that Indian employees often respond positively to leaders who demonstrate care and foster a sense of family-like connections in the workplace, as it resonates with cultural expectations.

This culturally sensitive leadership approach is particularly effective in Indian corporate settings, as it strengthens team cohesion and aligns employees' intrinsic motivations with organizational goals. Tailoring leadership practices to these cultural norms not only drives higher engagement but also enhances overall organizational performance, particularly in diverse or multinational organizations operating in India.

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**7. Key points:**

- Paternalistic leadership combines authority, benevolence, and moral integrity to build trust and loyalty in the workplace.
- Psychological ownership leads to higher job satisfaction and a stronger emotional connection to organizational goals.
- Work engagement increases when employees feel valued and empowered through leadership that fosters responsibility.



- Organizations should integrate leadership development programs that emphasize psychological ownership to improve performance.
- Public health initiatives should address workplace mental well-being by promoting leadership styles that reduce stress and enhance engagement.

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