# How self leadership enhances normative commitment and work performance by engaging people at work?

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## Abstract

Leadership and its connection with social sustainability are frequently prescribed for effective management. Integrating self-leadership among the employees is an emerging area to focus on empowering an organization. The principal objective of this study was to empirically investigate the impact of self-leadership on normative commitment and work performance through the mediating role of work engagement. This phenomenon of self-leadership was explained by using the theoretical lens of the social cognitive theory and intrinsic motivation theory. Data was collected from 318 employees who worked in the telecom sector in Pakistan and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) AMOS. The findings revealed that in the presence of self-leadership, employee's work engagement, commitment to the organization, and overall work performance elevated significantly. Furthermore, the results also illustrated the occurrence of two significant mediating paths. First, the mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between self-leadership and normative commitment, and second, the mediation of work engagement in the relationship between self-leadership and work performance. The findings of the study significantly contribute practically, and theoretically to the existing literature.

**Keywords** Self leadership · Work engagement · Work performance · Normative commitment · Intrinsic motivation theory · Social cognitive theory

## Introduction

Rising organizational competition and rapid technological advancement require human resources in Pakistan to adapt to several internal challenges related to employee commitment and performance (Qureshi et al., 2019). In this regard, strategies to utilize the untapped potential of inducing self-leadership have gained organizational attention (Cranmer et al., 2019). While traditional leadership styles have generally been identified as effective in addressing how leaders/supervisors will influence followers/subordinates, scholars have now turned their attention to self-leadership to enhance individual and team performance (Alnakhli et al., 2020; Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2011).

An individual's performance has become more important now at a time when many organizations are trying to maintain their performance amidst the economic turmoil brought upon by the pandemic. As the COVID-19 forces many organizations to implement remote working, there is a need for employees at all levels to take greater responsibility for their job tasks, and work behaviors while teams become more self-directed. While employees experience greater self-management during the COVID-19 pandemic (Training Industry, 2020), organizations have had to adapt to diverse ways of organizing work and managing their teams. These changes include switching to self-managed or self-directed work teams (Union for International Cancer Control, 2020). Such self-

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managed and self-leading individuals are granted control over their work processes and are allowed to select and govern their preferred behaviors for better performance (Stewart et al., 2019). Self-leadership is used in this study to explain the degree to which individuals are encouraged to exert self-influence to devise strategic motives for meeting corporate expectations and goals and to improve their performance.

The term self-leadership was first used by Manz (1986) who defined self-leadership as "a comprehensive self-influence perspective that concerns leading oneself toward the performance of naturally motivating tasks as well as managing oneself to do work that must be done but is not naturally motivating" (Manz, 1986, p. 589). Employees who have low self-leadership tend to believe that they cannot achieve their goals and are said to have a low level of self-efficacy while employees high in self-leadership are intrinsically motivated to achieve the desirable objectives (Bandura, 2008; Neck & Houghton, 2006). This motivation instills a sense of self-control and self-management which acts as emotional strategic drivers to foster work engagement (Harunavamwe et al., 2020).

Self-leadership lies along the continuum from high (individual or teams control how and why the task should be performed) to low (externally governed). The idea of self-management exists within these two continuums, and this mainly influences how tasks are to be carried out. At the higher end, the individual decides how the work will be carried out and why it should be executed. On the contrary, in the lower end of the continuum, the senior management sets the criteria for tasks for the individuals to follow. Thus, when the individual addresses the goals and objectives set by the upper management, the individuals are considered higher up in the self-leadership continuum (Stewart et al., 2011).

Self-managing employees have higher levels of work engagement and effective performance because these self-led employees have improved cognitive functions and can utilize their psychological resources effectively to meet their desired goals (Harunavamwe et al., 2020). It is the engagement in these self-regulatory activities (i.e. self-leadership) that builds an individual's capacity and capabilities for the long-term (Stewart et al., 2019). Highly engaged employees are also more energetic, have a deeper association with their job-related activities, believe that they can meet the complex job demands, and have a stronger commitment to their organizations than their less engaged counterparts (Nazir & Islam, 2017; Tisu et al., 2020). While engagement encompasses a dedication and attachment towards the performance of one's job, it is the individual's organizational commitment that determines whether an employee wants, needs, or feels that they should remain in the organization (Park & Pierce, 2020). Employees who are committed to their organizations are

psychologically attached and consider the organization as part of themselves (Mowday et al., 1979).

Although organizational commitment has been identified to consist of three different dimensions (i.e., affective, continuance, and normative), we have chosen to examine the influence of self-leadership on normative commitment. We have chosen to focus on normative commitment because the literature on organizational commitment has highlighted that employees with high levels of normative commitment will possess a sense of obligation which results in them staying in their organizations since this would be considered as the "right" and moral thing to do (Wiener, 1982). Employees with high normative commitment also choose to remain in their organizations to avoid creating any subsequent consequences for the peers and the organization and to repay the organization for benefits received (Meyer et al., 2006; Meyer & Allen, 1997). Several studies have also reported that normative commitment is linked to the individual's responsibility or obligation to stay committed to the organization (Meyer et al., 2006; Meyer & Allen, 1997). Normative commitment is also suitable for our research context given that Pakistan is a collectivistic society where loyalty in such society is paramount and employer/employee relationships are viewed in moral terms (Hofstede Insights, 2017).

The literature on self-leadership proposes that self-leadership generates work engagement (Harunavamwe et al., 2020), enhances performance (Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2019), and increases commitment (Cranmer et al., 2019). However, the evidence regarding self-leadership and how it translates into commitment and performance is still inconclusive (Castellano et al., 2021; Cranmer et al., 2019; Kim & Sim, 2020). For example, Castellano et al. (2021) reported that self-leadership can increase commitment and performance. However, the evidence of how self-leadership specifically influences normative commitment still needs to be investigated. Marques-Quinteiro et al. (2019) found a positive relationship between self-leadership and performance whereas Kim & Sim (2020) reported this relationship to be insignificant. Therefore, to understand the phenomenon of how self-leadership translates into performance and normative commitment, we consider work engagement as this study's endogenous construct, self-leadership as the antecedent and both normative commitment and work performance as the outcomes as the study. These constructs are deemed relevant since more organizations have implemented working from home arrangements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and as employees become more self-directed. As remote work becomes the "new normal", an overlap between family and work-related commitments may occur which can result in role ambiguity, physical and emotional exhaustion, lower work performance, and work-related fatigue (Ahmad et al., 2019; Palumbo, 2020). These issues may impact the employee's normative commitment and work performance.

Up until now, far too little attention has been paid to the role of self-leadership in identifying and developing resources (i.e., psychological, work, and non-work resources) to perform better at work, especially in the field of industrial psychology (Harunavamwe et al., 2020). Therefore, this study's fundamental purpose is to utilize the theoretical lenses of social cognitive theory and intrinsic motivation theory to empirically examine the role of self-leadership in determining the employee's normative commitment and work performance through work engagement.

This study contributes to extending the literature by explaining the phenomenon of self-leadership and how it increases normative commitment and work performance in a collectivist culture. Pakistan is considered a collectivist society in which an individual's paramount importance is on forming affiliations, and long-term commitments (Hofstede Insights, 2017). Hence, we posit that inducing self-leadership qualities in such a culture will allow employees to use their resources in synergy with other group members to achieve their goals and form higher commitment with their organizations.

## Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

### Self-Leadership

The term "self-leadership" embodies a multitude of concepts. Neck and Houghton (2006) refer to self-leadership as an individual's competence (or process) to engage in optimal self-regulation which increases the individual's ability to self-motivation, self-direction, and self-influence to enhance work performance (Manz, 1986). In other words, self-leadership is the extent to which an individual controls one's behaviors and uses proper behavioral, cognitive, and intrinsic motivational strategies for leading oneself effectively (Neck & Houghton, 2006). These strategies are classified into three distinct groups (Anderson & Prussia, 1997; Manz & Angle, 1986): i) behavior-focused strategies that assist in self-goal setting for the accomplishment of challenging, unpleasant or difficult tasks; ii) natural reward strategies that make the completion of the tasks more pleasant and enjoyable and iii) strategies related to constructive thought patterns which enable individuals to change their thought patterns in desirable ways through mental imagery, positive self-talk and challenging irrational beliefs and assumptions.

Based on the perspectives of self-leadership, an entity (individual or team) identifies the current state with the already established expectations and standards (Stewart et al., 2011). The discrepancy in the standards becomes the reason for the entity to engage in self-regulated behaviors until the desired outcomes are achieved. During this process, the self-leaders align their actions with the expected results, while continuously monitoring their cognitive aspects to encourage desired behaviors and to influence the situation (Manz, 1986).

Since self-leadership explains how leaders ought to behave based on certain moral principles or norms (Neck & Houghton, 2006) as opposed to describing how leaders act, it is considered a normative leadership approach. According to Neck and Houghton (2006), self-leadership encompasses the concepts of self-regulation and intrinsic motivation where self-leadership strategies enhance self-regulation by improving an individual's self-focus, goal-setting processes, and task-related confidence or performance expectancies (Neck & Houghton, 2006). In terms of self-motivation, Manz and Angle (1986) and Neck and Houghton (2006) posit that self-leadership includes two perspectives: (i) self-imposed strategies for managing the performance of tasks of low intrinsic motivational potential and (ii) self-influence that focuses on the natural rewards which result from performing the task itself. In this regard, recent studies on self-leadership indicate its positive organizational outcomes (Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2019). For example, self-leadership qualities assist salespersons in adapting selling behaviors which result in improved performance (Alnakhli et al., 2020) and enhances an individual's adaptive performance and job satisfaction (Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2019).

### Work Engagement

Work engagement is defined as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). For Schaufeli et al. (2006), work engagement refers to a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind, which is characterized by dedication (i.e., strong involvement, enthusiasm, pride, and experience of significance), vigor (i.e., high levels of energy and mental resilience), and absorption (full concentration and difficulties with detaching oneself from work). According to Kahn (1990), while performing the functions, the employees express and employ themselves in three different ways: emotional, cognitive, and physical. The "cognitive" aspect refers to an organization's image in an employee's mind while the "emotional" element is related to how employees feel about the three factors. The third factor which is the "physical" element is concerned with the energy that employees exert to achieve their goals. Work engagement is considered as the physical, intellectual, and emotional commitments towards the organization and the effort that an employee exerts to accomplish their goals (Nazir & Islam, 2017). Employee engagement influences different factors such as employee performance and mental health (Tisu et al., 2020).

## Normative Commitment

According to Mowday et al. (1979), organizational commitment is the strength of an individual's identification and involvement in the organization and is conceptualized as the personal attachment that cultivates with the organization. It is conceptualized as the extent to which an employee embraces the organizational goals and values and explains whether employees "want to", "need to" or "feel they should" stay in the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1997, p. 21). Normative commitment refers to the internalized pressure to align an individual's goals to the organizational values and interests (Meyer & Allen, 1997). This seems suitable for this study because the concept of self-leadership is argued to affect commitment in which employees use self-leading strategies such as goal setting and mental imagery (Cranmer et al., 2019). Since employees tend to align personal goals with the organizational goals (Meyer & Allen, 1997), it is more likely that this will enhance normative commitment which also refers to the alignment of personal and organizational goals and interests.

## Work Performance

Work performance is the subjective or objective measure of work productivity that has gained immense attention especially in the field of psychology (Koopmans et al., 2011). It encompasses work quality, work quantity, and job knowledge (Campbell, 1990). Broadly, two types of performance can be observed: task performance and contextual performance (Motowildo et al., 1997). Task performance refers to activities that convert raw resources into goods and services which enable the organization to function efficiently and effectively while contextual performance is the behaviors that add value to the organization's efficiency by facilitating a pleasant environment (Motowildo et al., 1997).

Self-leadership strategies such as mental imagery and self-talk have been found to improve the individual's performance in a variety of tasks and activities (Neck & Manz, 1992). These strategies assist an employee to utilize personal reflection and imagine the success that comes with completing an activity/task before its actual execution, which further translates into higher levels of performance (Neck & Manz, 1992; Alnakhli et al., 2020; Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2019).

## The Hypothesized Model

Our hypothesized model is broadly based on the cognitive focus strategy. The cognitive focus strategy uses the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2008) and intrinsic motivation theory (Miller et al., 1988) as the theoretical foundation for justifying the ability in self-regulation, self-control, and self-manage in shaping individual performance and sustaining

their commitment to the organization. The social cognitive theory portrays a unique way by which an individual effectively manages and control one's behaviors to maintain their performance in the given environment (Bandura, 2008). Based on the concepts of intrinsic motivation that rewards come from the work itself (Miller et al., 1988), individuals would find enjoyment in their work which gives rise to actions that are necessary for organizational achievement. Therefore, using the theoretical lens of the social cognitive theory and intrinsic motivation theory, this study draws attention to the need for explaining the employee's competence (i.e. self-leadership) in engaging them in optimal self-regulation (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Our research model is presented in Fig. 1, and our hypotheses are developed in the following sections.

## Self-Leadership and Work Engagement

Self-leadership teaches individuals to use resources that fulfill their own needs and encourages a higher level of cognitive functioning which results in improved work engagement (Kotzé, 2018). Hence, such employees tend to self-regulate, influence, and lead themselves by using certain sets of behavioral and psychological strategies (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Self-leaders will use the natural rewards strategy to enhance their intrinsic motivation and work engagement and focusing on natural rewards which allow individuals to shape their work environments to be more pleasant and enjoyable (Houghton & Neck, 2002).

Employees who expand and stimulate their psychological and personal resources, perform self-leadership behaviors, and show continuous self-management will result in enhanced levels of work engagement because they are keen on conserving and mobilizing their resources to fit well with their organizations (Harunavamwe et al., 2020). Based on the intrinsic motivation theory (Miller et al., 1988), it can be hypothesized that employees increase their work engagement when they use natural reward strategies to shape the work which motivates them to engage more in their work. Similarly, it is hypothesized that the self-leaders utilize job resources to shape the work environment which sustains their motivation and interests in the work and lets them maximize their potential gains for self-regulated motives. Based on the above argument, we hypothesize that:

> **Hypothesis 1:** *Self-leadership is positively related to work engagement.*

## Self-Leadership and Normative Commitment

Normative commitment is the internalized pressure to behave in ways that are congruent with the organizational objectives and interests (Meyer & Allen, 1997). The core of normative

**Fig. 1** Research model
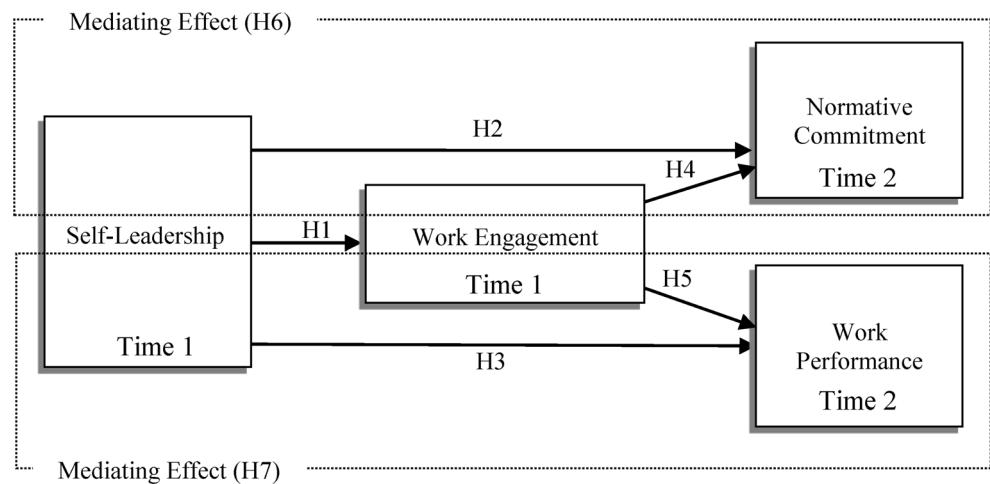


commitment discusses employees' emotional ties, feeling guilty of leaving, and the feeling of working best for the organization (Wiener & Vardi, 1980). One explanation of the relationship between self-leadership and normative commitment can be that the self-leaders embrace proactive attitudes and behaviors, encourage positive adjustment to the specified tasks and the organizational activities, and encourage future orientation within employees. They also invest their psychological and job-related resources, in addition to practicing self-reward and behavioral strategies, which become the reason for them to remain committed and develop ties with their organizations (Cranmer et al., 2019).

Normative commitment is likely to be elevated due to the positive influence of self-leadership strategies such as behavior-focused strategies that assist in the self-goal setting and the fulfillment of the challenging and difficult tasks (Anderson & Prussia, 1997). Self-leadership strategies such as an individual's beliefs, assumptions, mental imagery, self-talk, and thought patterns have been found to generate a feeling of belongingness and commitment (Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stewart et al., 2011). Morris and Steers (1980) reported that task independence and commitment towards organization have a positive relationship with each other because, during the process of task independence, the employee's ego involvement increases due to high participation in the decision-making process and they become more aware of their self-contributions (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Morris & Steers, 1980) thus, are likely to show normative commitment.

Employees who frequently evaluate their beliefs and assumptions will feel more positive and certain about their abilities. As a result, these employees would view their job-related challenges more optimistically (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011). In accordance with the notion of intrinsic motivation (Miller et al., 1988), employees who feel that their job is challenging might have a sense of obligation and an internal urge to utilize their abilities which might trigger their normative commitment. Thus, self-leaders may be committed and

feel that it is their moral obligation to stay and comply with their organization's values and interests which represents the employee's attachment and involvement in the organization. Therefore, it is likely that this self-leadership may trigger normative commitment. Hence, we posit that:

> **Hypothesis 2:** *Self-leadership is positively related to normative commitment.*

## Self-Leadership and Work Performance

Self-leaders set their goals and show adaptive behaviors to perform in the organization (Alnakhli et al., 2020). They take guidance from self-awareness in this goal-setting process (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006). Marques-Quinteiro et al. (2019) indicated that the leaders often use the combination of different self-leadership strategies such as goal setting and mental imagery to adjust their believes and values for the changing working environment and which develop employee's adaptive performance. This is because self-leadership enhances the individual's ability to control one's cognition and self-lead to meet the organizational standards and enhance work performance (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006). It may be due to the person-organizational congruence where organizational and personal goals are aligned. Since, the self-leaders are motivated to perform to meet the standards of the organization (Neck & Houghton, 2006), it likely creates person-organization congruence which encourages the employees to engages in behaviors that facilitate group productivity. Therefore, based on the social cognitive theory, and the evidence suggesting that the positive link between self-leadership strategies and adaptive behaviors is likely to increase performance (Alnakhli et al., 2020; Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2019), it is likely that the individual will use their cognitive abilities to effectively elevate their

work performance. Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated:

> **Hypothesis 3:** *Self-leadership is positively related to work performance.*

## Work Engagement and Normative Commitment

Normative commitment occurs when an employee feels a sense of obligation and a desire to benefit the organization for the resources utilized and received from the organization, even though the employee may feel unhappy on the job (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Rather than compelling the individuals to avoid the negative outcomes, normative commitment happens when the individual is self-motivated to stay and satisfy the expectations and norms set by the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1997). As normative commitment refer to the sense of willingly benefiting and meeting the organizational expectations, Schaufeli et al. (2002) indicated that individuals who are highly engaged in their work tend to have an inner belief that they can meet the expectations and demands of their jobs. This engagement and high inclusion in their work will also increase their normative commitment (Peplińska et al., 2020). In view of intrinsic motivation theory, the work itself can create an internal sense of motivation which leads to actions that are for the organizational benefit (Miller et al., 1988). Similarly, highly engaged employees feel that they have utilized personal and organizational resources which makes them remain normatively committed and motivated to comply with the expectations of the assigned tasks set by the organization. These employees are likely to stay, believe in positive outcomes and have a better ability to manage work-related demands even in the time of distress for the organization. Accordingly, they believe that by engaging in work-related activities, they can satisfy their sense of moral obligation towards the organization which may stem from already invested psychological, social and organizational resources, and work-related needs (such as autonomy, competence, relatedness). Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

> **Hypothesis 4:** *Work engagement is positively related to normative commitment.*

## Work Engagement and Work Performance

Engaged employees are usually motivated to work performance (Babin & Boles, 1996; Tisu et al., 2020). Using the theoretical lens of intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy which explains that the rewards can come from the work itself (Miller et al., 1988), employees who find enjoyment in the work drive them to perform requisite actions in organizational

accomplishment. Tisu et al. (2020) indicate that engagement at work has an immediate effect on job performance because these employees increase their engagement at work by keeping in mind their output. Although work engagement is positively related to work performance because it develops the individual's beliefs and capabilities to augment the required skills and knowledge, it also escalates efforts and encourages them to modify their strategies to achieve the organizational goals (Nazir & Islam, 2017). Therefore, based on the above discussion, we hypothesize that:

> **Hypothesis 5:** *Work engagement is positively related to work performance.*

## Mediating Role of Work Engagement

Self-leaders apply strategies such as self-talk, beliefs, assumptions, thought patterns during the conversations to comply with the job demands, and positively frame work-related events that can enhance their commitment and the sense of belonging (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Cranmer et al. (2019) stated that self-leaders encourage proactive attitudes and behaviors within employees and assist them to adjust to the assigned tasks and work activities which further translate into commitment. Normative commitment requires an environment where organization values and rewards their employees. However, self-leaders use self-reward strategies such as choosing their reward after fulfilling their job responsibilities and work obligations (Anderson & Prussia, 1997). Thus, self-leadership is likely to self-enhance normative commitment. Moreover, a behavioral-focused self-leadership strategy allows the individual to engage in a self-goal setting and assists them in fulfilling the challenging and difficult tasks (Anderson & Prussia, 1997). To meet the job demands and organizational expectations, self-leaders become highly engaged in their work which further leads to increased normative commitment (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Such self-leadership strategies also increase the feelings of belongingness and commitment (Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stewart et al., 2011).

In view of the intrinsic motivation theory, self-leaders who have the internal motivation to comply with the job-related expectations are more likely to utilize their psychological and organizational resources that will result in them being even more engaged in their work. As a result of their continued investment in such resources, these self-leaders start creating an internal sense of obligation to morally benefit the organization which translates into higher normative commitment. According to the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2008), an individual's behaviors are the results of how one manages and internally reinforces one's cognitions. Employees are likely to feel normatively committed when they are involved in their work and have invested a considerable amount of personal and organizational resources in trying to fulfill their organizational responsibilities. This resource

utilization and involvement towards the job develop an internal sense of moral obligation and mastery over their tasks and environment and satisfy the need for competence, whilst having the autonomy to do so in a manner they like (Anderson & Prussia, 1997; Van den Broeck et al., 2010). Since self-leaders exercise task autonomy, their engagement is also likely to arise due to the utilization of self-leadership strategies such as self-regulation, self-reward, and behavior focused strategies which results in the internalization of the norms and values instilled by the top management. It is likely that the employees also instill a feeling to not leaving the organization in distress and morally work for organizational benefit i.e., elevating normative commitment. Thus, pertaining to the above arguments, the following hypothesis is developed:

> **Hypothesis 6:** *Work engagement mediates the relationship between self-leadership and normative commitment.*

Self-leadership is an essential way of enhancing personal capital as it allows individuals to look for ways of replacing self-defeating thought patterns with optimistic values that contribute to an individual's cognitive effectiveness (Harunavamwe et al., 2020; Kotzé, 2018). This drive to improve one's mindfulness and encourages the self-leaders to utilize workplace resources which give a positive impact on the workplace environment (Kotzé, 2018) and improves their work engagement (Harunavamwe et al., 2020). Both shared cognition, and work engagement have been found to improve employee's performance at work (Gevers et al., 2020; Tisu et al., 2020).

Recently, the emphasis has been given to the concept of self-management i.e. the ability to cope with challenges and to practice self-control for achieving the end goals through work engagement (Harunavamwe et al., 2020). Self-leaders realize that relying too much on themselves may limit their abilities. Hence, such individuals will enhance their ability to utilize the work environment to achieve their set work goals (Stewart et al., 2019). According to the intrinsic motivation theory, employees are intrinsically motivated and engaged in their work when they have control over themselves and their surroundings which then leads to higher levels of work performance (Tisu et al., 2020). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

> **Hypothesis 7:** *Work engagement mediates the relationship between self-leadership and work performance.*

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Data was collected from middle-level managers who worked in the telecom sector in Pakistan because they were directly involved in devising strategies for task fulfillment. Four cities (i.e., Karachi, Islamabad, Lahore, and Multan) were selected because of the higher concentration of telecom offices and their activities than other parts of Pakistan. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed among the employees in four telecom organizations (i.e., Mobilink, Telenor, Ufone, and Zong). These companies are among the four largest telecom providers in Pakistan. At time 1, 350 employees gave the responses on their self-leadership and work engagement which resulted in a response rate of 87.5%. After the temporal gap of two weeks, the same employees were contacted again at time 2 to give responses on their normative commitment and work performance. Out of 350 employees, 330 questionnaires were returned which resulted in a response rate of 94.28% for time 2. In sum, of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 330, responses were obtained (response rate = 82.5%). After screening the data for potential outliers, 318 responses were used for the data analysis.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections and contained 26 items, i.e., Self-leadership (9 items), Work Engagement (9 items), Normative Commitment (3 items), and Work Performance (5 items). We also included demographic questions and the respondent profile is shown in Table 1. The geographical coverage of the data was 40.6% from Karachi, 25.8% from Lahore, 23.6% from Islamabad, and 10.1% from Multan. The results revealed that 87.1% were male and 12.9% were female. Further, 82.1% had job experience which ranged from 0 to 3 years, and the remaining 17.9% were between the experience ranges of 4 to 6 years. Lastly, the sample represented 60.4% people having a salary below PKR 19,999, 32.7% for the salary range from PKR 20,000 to PKR 39,999, 1.9% for the salary range from PKR 40,000 to PKR 59,999, 3.1% for the salary range from PKR 60,000 to PKR 79,999, and 1.9% for the salary exceeding PKR 80,000.

### Measures

All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

### Self-Leadership

Nine items were adopted from Anderson and Prussia's (1997) Self-leadership Questionnaire (SLQ). This scale identified employees' self-goal setting, visualization of successful performance, self-reward, evaluating beliefs and assumptions, and self-talk. Sample items were, "I establish specific goals for my performance" and "I visualize myself successfully performing a task before I do it".

**Table 1** Demographic profile (N= 318)

| Demographics | | Mean (S.D.) | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | | 1.13 (0.336) | |
| | Male | | 87.1 |
| | Female | | 12.9 |
| Salary *(In Rupees)* | | 1.53 (0.839) | |
| | 0–19,999 | | 60.4 |
| | 20,000-39,999 | | 32.7 |
| | 40,000-59,999 | | 1.9 |
| | 60,000-79,999 | | 3.1 |
| | Above 80,000 | | 1.9 |
| Organization | | 2.20 (1.105) | |
| | Mobilink | | 35.5 |
| | Telenor | | 26.1 |
| | Ufone | | 21.1 |
| | Zong | | 17.3 |
| Experience | | 1.18 (0.384) | |
| | 0–3 Years | | 82.1 |
| | 4–6 Years | | 17.9 |
| City | | 2.19 (1.232) | |
| | Karachi | | 40.6 |
| | Lahore | | 25.8 |
| | Multan | | 10.1 |
| | Islamabad | | 23.6 |

*SD*, Standard Deviation

## Work Engagement

To measure work engagement, we took nine items from the scale proposed by Schaufeli et al. (2002). Sample items from this scale included, "My job inspires me" and "I am immersed in my work".

## Normative Commitment

In this study, three items of normative commitment were selected which were proposed by Wiener and Vardi (1980). These items are used to represent organizational commitment. Sample items include, "I feel that I am loyal to my organization", and "I feel that I can make sacrifices on behalf of my organization".

## Work Performance

Babin and Boles (1996) introduced a five-item scale to measure self-reported work performance. These items measured the perception of the individuals about their topmost position in the organization with respect to performance, and how much the employees feel about their performance as compared to others. Examples of these items included, "I

get along better with customers than do others" and "I am the top performer".

## Control Variables

The reason for the inclusion of control variables was to establish the incremental validity of normative commitment and work performance. For this purpose, gender, salary, and experience were considered as control variables of this study. Previous studies also controlled for gender and salesperson's experience in examining the behavioral outcome of self-leadership (Alnakhli et al., 2020).

## Data Analysis

Initially, the data was screened for potential outliers and inappropriate responses by using the box plot and standard deviation analysis. Responses that were outside the plot's whisker's were excluded from the analysis. In standard deviation analysis, the outliers were identified by examining the distance from the mean.

The descriptive analysis was conducted to extract means and standard deviations of all the constructs of this study including self-leadership (Mean = 3.98, SD = 0.82), work engagement (Mean = 3.89, SD = 0.76), normative commitment (Mean = 3.93, SD = 0.85), and work performance (Mean = 3.97, SD = 0.76). After that, reliability and validity statistics were assessed for the measurement model. The two-tailed correlations among the constructs of the study were also assessed and these results are presented in Table 2. To analyze the reliability and validity concerns, both CR and AVE of the variables were calculated. As represented in Table 3, the composite reliability scores of self-leaderships (CR = 0.92), work engagement (CR = 0.94), normative commitment (CR = 0.84), and work performance (CR = 0.92) showed that the data has high internal consistency. As seen in Table 3, the average variance extracted (AVE) of self-leadership (AVE = 0.57), work engagement (AVE = 0.63), normative commitment (AVE = 0.63), and work performance (AVE = 0.80) exceeded 0.50 which indicated good convergent validity.

The factor loadings of all the items of the constructs were appropriate. However, due to the lowest factor loading (0.60) of one item (WP05), the correlation of work performance and normative commitment was becoming greater than the square root of AVE of normative commitment, thus, discriminant validity issue was occurring. Additionally, the item WP05 was also showing cross-loading. Thus, WP05 was deleted to avoid cross-loading and validity issues. Table 2 indicates that all constructs exhibited sufficient or satisfactory discriminant validity, where the square root of AVE (diagonal) was larger than the correlations (off-diagonal) for all constructs. Moreover, the positive and significant beta values shown in

**Table 2** Inter-construct correlations, descriptive statistics, and the square root of the average variance extracted

| Sr. | Variables | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|-----|-----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | Self-Leadership (Time 1) | 3.98 | 0.82 | **0.76** | | | |
| 2 | Work Engagement (Time 1) | 3.89 | 0.76 | *.599\*\** | **0.79** | | |
| 3 | Normative Commitment (Time 2) | 3.93 | 0.85 | *.570\*\** | *.699\*\** | **0.79** | |
| 4 | Work Performance (Time 2) | 3.97 | 0.76 | *.530\*\** | *.684\*\** | *.753\*\** | **0.89** |
| 5 | Gender | 1.13 | .336 | .004 | −.074 | .013 | .026 |
| 6 | Salary | 1.53 | .839 | .017 | .128* | .053 | .037 |
| 7 | Experience | 1.18 | .384 | .060 | .023 | .003 | .001 |

$N = 318$, $* = p < .001$, values in *italic* are the two-tailed Pearson correlation values. Values in Bold = $\sqrt{AVE}$, M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation

Table 2 indicate that hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5 were supported.

Based on the results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in Table 3, all constructs and their respective items

**Table 3** Construct's reliability average variance extracted and measures of dispersion and results of CFA

Full Model Fit: CMIN/DF=2.562, CFI=0.92, RMSEA=0.07, GFI=0.90, SRMR=0.01, TLI=0.90

| Constructs | λ | % of Variance Explained | AVE | α | CR |
|-----------|-----|-------------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Self-Leadership | | 63.97% | 0.57 | .928 | 0.92 |
| SL1 | .65 | | | | |
| SL2 | .84 | | | | |
| SL3 | .69 | | | | |
| SL4 | .88 | | | | |
| SL5 | .87 | | | | |
| SL6 | .71 | | | | |
| SL7 | .80 | | | | |
| SL8 | .67 | | | | |
| SL9 | .65 | | | | |
| Work Engagement | | 51.97% | 0.63 | .829 | 0.94 |
| WE1 | .79 | | | | |
| WE2 | .72 | | | | |
| WE3 | .64 | | | | |
| WE4 | .79 | | | | |
| WE5 | .80 | | | | |
| WE6 | .95 | | | | |
| WE7 | .80 | | | | |
| WE8 | .80 | | | | |
| WE9 | .82 | | | | |
| Work Performance | | 66.43% | 0.80 | .822 | 0.92 |
| WP1 | .90 | | | | |
| WP2 | .94 | | | | |
| WP3 | .93 | | | | |
| WP4 | .79 | | | | |
| Normative Commitment | | 75.56% | 0.63 | .838 | 0.84 |
| NC1 | .68 | | | | |
| NC2 | .83 | | | | |
| NC3 | .86 | | | | |

λ = Factor Loadings, CR = Composite reliability, (α) = Cronbach's alpha

illustrated above 50% of variance explained indicating that the variance in the items sufficiently explains the parent constructs. After executing the investigation, the model fit was obtained. To increase model fit, modification indices were utilized. The model fit indices such as CMIN/DF (2.562), CFI (0.92), RMSEA (0.07), GFI (0.90), SRMR (0.01), and TLI (0.90) were examined which illustrated an acceptable model fit.

Common method bias was statistically checked by using Harman's single factor test. The result from this test indicated the single factor accounted for an acceptable covariance among all items of 38.5%, indicating the common method bias was not an issue for this study.

While conducting structural equation modeling in AMOS (see Fig. 2), all the factor loadings of the items were found appropriate for the model. Hence, none of the items was deleted. To analyze the indirect effects of the mediation analysis, the bootstrap samples were 2000, and the confidence interval was 95%.

Table 4 shows that work engagement partially mediates the relationship between self-leadership and normative commitment (beta = 0.333, $p = 0.000$) and between self-leadership and work performance (beta = 0.343, $p = 0.01$). According to the results presented in Table 4, the indirect effects and total effects were significant, indicating partial mediation exists in both paths. Hence, hypotheses H6 and H7 were supported. Our findings show that work engagement mediates the positive relationship between self-leadership and work performance and also between self-leadership and normative commitment. This indicates that enhancing the work engagement of self-leaders is paramount for increasing their work-performance and normative commitment. Although self-

leaders strive to use specific behavioral and cognitive self-influencing strategies with the aim to optimize their work-performance and motivation (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006), a job always has tasks that are not naturally motivating, but which simply need to be done and therefore self-leaders will rely on the positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that comes with being engaged at work (Schaufeli et al., 2006) to increase their work performance and remain committed to the organization.

## Discussion

Self-leadership is considered an individual motivator that facilitates work engagement and performance (Alnakhli et al., 2020; Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2019). For organizational development and sustainability, the role of work engagement is vital to understand, particularly in a demanding workplace environment (Harunavamwe et al., 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to observe the impact of self-leadership on work performance and normative commitment with the mediating effect of employee engagement.

The empirical testing of the hypotheses reveals significant and positive associations between the constructs and indicates that self-leadership does improve work engagement which further increases normative commitment and work performance. The positive relationship between self-leadership and work engagement is congruent with the study conducted by Harunavamwe et al. (2020) who also indicated self-leadership strategies as a driver of work engagement. The positive association between self-leadership and work performance found from the results of our study further supports the notion of
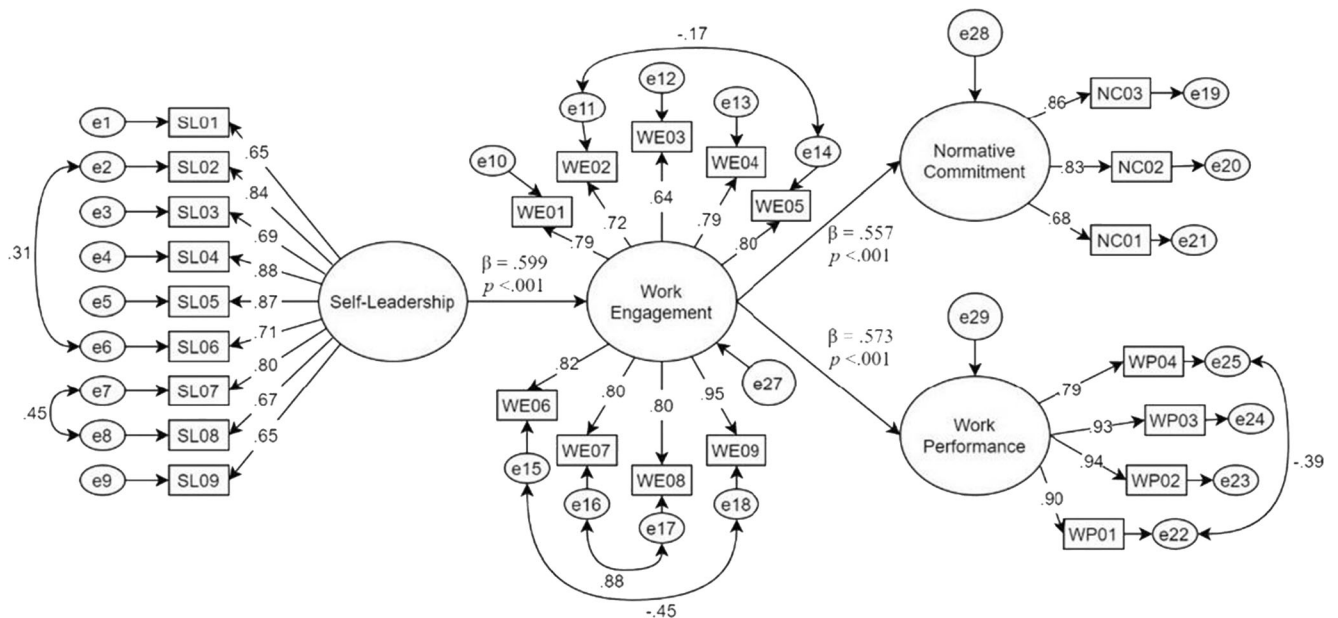


Fig. 2 Structural equation modeling

**Table 4** Mediation analysis

| Path | Total Effects (TE) | P Value | Direct Effects (DE) | P Value | Indirect Effects (IE) | P Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SL ➜ WE ➜NC | 0.570 | 0.000** | 0.237 | 0.001** | 0.333 | 0.000** |
| SL ➜ WE ➜WP | 0.530 | 0.000** | 0.187 | 0.001** | 0.343 | 0.000** |

**p < .01, *TE*, Total Effects; *IE*, Indirect Effects; *DE*, Direct Effects

Marques-Quinteiro et al. (2019) and Alnakhli et al. (2020) that self-leadership strategies lead employees to adapt to the situation that would improve their performance. Our findings also support the works of Peplińska et al. (2020) who reported a positive relationship between work engagement and organizational commitment and Tisu et al., (2020) who found a link between work engagement and job performance. These results link back to the initial concept of self-leadership which is of the view that intrinsic motivation and self-influence are driven by high level of organizational standards (Neck & Houghton, 2006). The notion of intrinsic motivation and self-regulation of self-leaders to perform and meet the standards corroborates with the intrinsic motivation theory (Miller et al., 1988) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2008) in such a way that a leader's self-motivation, self-direction, and self-influence will guide, make them committed to fulfilling the objectives and engage them in subsequent behaviors to improve performance.

## Implications

This study has several implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, this study contributes in three ways. First, the results of this study suggest that self-leadership is a normative concept that may operate within the theoretical context of social cognitive theory and intrinsic motivation theory to explain its impact on work performance and organizational commitment. This study links the concept of social cognitive theory to the individual's self-regulation which is the cognitive oriented strategy and the reasons for executing organizational behaviors in the form of work performance. By using these theories, the results of this study explain the phenomenon of self-leadership; individuals high in self-leadership are more intrinsically motivated to engage at work and result in high commitment and performance. Second, the results of this study extend the self-leadership literature by examining its influence on normative commitment. Prior to this study, Cranmer et al. (2019) indicated the effect of self-leadership on affective commitment. The evidence from our study contributes to the understanding of how normative commitment can be enhanced through self-leadership. Third, the results of this study corroborates the previous research on self-leadership and work engagement (e.g. Gomes et al., 2015),

self-leadership and commitment (e.g. Cranmer et al., 2019), and self-leadership and performance (e.g. Neck & Manz, 1992). The results of this study reinforce the belief that the use of self-leadership techniques by employees makes them more involved in their jobs and contributes to an increase in the feeling of not leaving the company in distress and morally work for organizational gain, thereby increasing work performance and normative engagement. Fourth, the significant mediating results of this study provide insight for the role of work engagement in the self-leadership-work performance and self-leadership-work commitment relationship. Taken together, these results suggest that self-leadership leads to work performance and normative commitment through work engagement.

Practically, this research relates to the ever-changing workplace, with the drastic rise in the number of employees working from home due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our study indicates that top management including human resource managers should induce self-leadership strategies such as behavioral focused strategies, goal-setting, and self-rewards among their employees to maintain their engagement, commitment, and productivity even when organizations implement remote working. Since self-leadership strategies are driven by self-regulation and self-management, employees too can shape their work environment into a more pleasant and enjoyable one by utilizing self-leadership strategies which can then result in increased motivation and work performance.

Organizations can also allow their employee choose their own rewards and involve them in organizational decisions regarding the types of rewards to be given to the employees after the completion of their goals and objectives. Moreover, by inducing a natural reward strategy by the top management, leaders can let the employees see their work as a source of enjoyment and motivation i.e. employees will start to see their jobs as a motivator and a reward in itself (Anderson & Prussia, 1997; Houghton & Neck, 2002). The organization can also utilize the job characteristic model to increase the task identity and autonomy in making decisions related to their assigned tasks. In this way, they can make the work more meaningful, creative, and enjoyable for their employees (Wang, 2020). In addition, organizations can also promote constructive thought patterns such as self-analysis, belief systems, and positive self-talk through self-leadership training which also have been

found to increase self-efficacy (Neck & Manz, 1996). These strategies will enable employees to encourage one another especially in a complex task environment and maintain employee engagement in accomplishing the expected performance outcomes (Neck & Manz, 1992). Finally, organizations may consider enhancing self-leadership attributes through personnel empowerment which will increase the employee's self-efficacy, and which allows them to take initiative and control over their actions. Such empowerment is likely to pave the way for the employees to use self-leadership strategies for optimal performance and increase their commitment to their job and organization.

### Limitations and Future Recommendations

Some limitations can be considered for future research. First, as mentioned in this study that self-leadership seems to focus only on self-autonomy; it can be self-defeating on some occasions because it limits the overall capabilities of an individual. In this regard, the paradox of self-leadership explains that to increase an individual's performance, one of the self-leadership strategies is to collaborate with others to harvest the benefits of the team's cohesiveness (Stewart et al., 2019). Thus, self-leadership should be high to achieve effective results both at the individual and group levels (Stewart et al., 2011). Future studies can examine the influence of self-leadership strategies on work performance and organizational commitment at the team level. Scholars can also look beyond taking normative commitment as a dependent variable and examine its mediating impact in influencing discretionary or non-discretionary behaviors such as organizational citizenship behavior and job performance respectively (Meyer et al., 2006).

Second, this study only analyzed the mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between self-leadership and outcome variables (normative commitment and work performance). Future studies can provide insights into how self-leadership and its related dimensions can result in less organizational commitment because of the incongruence of the internal and external standards which may further lead to withdrawal behaviors (Stewart et al., 2011). Moreover, future research can take normative commitment as a mediator in the relationship between self-leadership and supervisor rated work performance.

Third, there may be other important factors that may influence the research model of this study as self-leadership explained less than 53% of the variance in normative commitment (R-square = 0.528) and work performance (R-square = 0.497). A natural progression of this work is to analyze different leadership styles such as servant leadership which in contrast focuses on serving others and make a comparative study to understand that in which situation, a particular leadership style is more appropriate in engaging employees and achieving better work performance and commitment.

Fourth, this study used the self-leadership scale mentioned by Anderson and Prussia (1997) to examine the hypothesized relationships. However, scholars can consider a more refined version of the scale by Houghton and Neck, (2002) for future self-leadership studies. In addition, a self-reported measure of work performance was used in this study. Based on the limitation of using a self-reported measure of performance, future scholars can use other self-reported measures that have a high correlation with the supervisor rating of performance or use supervisory ratings to address the issue related to self-reported data.

Finally, the study was carried out only in four cities in Pakistan. This study should be repeated in other cities of Pakistan and even in different countries that are categorized in a collectivist society like Pakistan for better generalizability of the results.

## Conclusion

This empirical study explains the outcomes of self-leadership by using the theoretical lens of social cognitive theory and intrinsic motivation theory. The findings reported the significant positive aftereffects of inducing self-leadership among the employees within teams, which in turn translate into higher work engagement and further lead to higher normative commitment, and performance.

## Declarations

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