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From Leader's Heart to Employee's Hustle: The Psycap-Spirituality Connection

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ABSTRACT

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The influence of leader behavior on employees has gained much attention for a while. This study extends our knowledge by examining the influence of Authentic Leadership (AL) on Employee Performance (EP) within Pakistan's private banking sector, incorporating Workplace Spirituality (WS) as the mediator, and Psychological Capital (PC) as the moderator. This research uses the Social Exchange Theory. Using quantitative methods, this study gathered data from 302 non-managerial workers across private banks in Pakistan, via convenience sampling. Data were gathered via structured questionnaires, and the model was tested utilizing Smart-PLS and SPSS software. This research found that AL does not have a direct effect on EP. However, AL significantly enhances WS, which in turn positively affects EP. Additionally, PC shows a positive correlation between WS and EP. These results highlight the indirect mechanisms by which AL affects EP. This research provides insights for managers in high-pressure environments, emphasizes the role of authentic leadership and workplace spirituality in improving employee performance, and offers conceptual frameworks for emerging markets. The novelty of the current research is the literary contribution via empirical testing of WS as mediator, and PC as moderator, between AL and EP, in Pakistan's private banking sector.

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Leadership remains a central theme in management research because of its critical role in shaping employee outcomes and organizational performance (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Liu et al., 2023). While substantial progress has been made in understanding leadership's influence, many organizations continue to face persistent challenges such as disengagement, job dissatisfaction, and underperformance (Hajiali et al., 2022). Recent evidence suggests that beyond technical competencies and incentives, employees increasingly seek meaning, value alignment, and supportive leadership in their work environments (Dorta-Afonso et al., 2023; Rastogi et al., 2018).

Authentic Leadership (AL), characterized by self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective (Walumbwa et al., 2011), has attracted growing scholarly attention as an ethical and relational approach to leading. Empirical studies have linked AL to enhanced employee engagement, creativity, and job satisfaction in various sectors (Ayça, 2023; Chen & Sriphon, 2022; Kleynhans et al., 2022). For instance, Liu et al. (2023) found that AL improved healthcare workers' performance through positive employee health, while Kim et al. (2022) reported that AL in technology firms enhanced initiative behavior and task performance via communication satisfaction. However, not all contexts yield the same outcomes; Ayça (2023) showed that in the Turkish service sector, AL's effect on performance was mediated by trust, indicating that contextual and cultural factors may condition the AL–performance relationship.

In addition to leadership style, Workplace Spirituality (WS)—the sense of purpose, community, and alignment between personal and organizational values—has emerged as an important factor influencing employee outcomes (Jena, 2022; Mohammed & Elashram, 2022). WS has been empirically linked to higher performance, commitment, and job satisfaction in education (Mousa, 2020), hospitality (Ribeiro et al., 2022), and tourism (Sapta et al., 2021). Authentic leaders, through ethical conduct and relational openness, have been found to foster WS by creating value-driven environments (Alomar et al., 2022), yet little research has examined this relationship in high-pressure, compliance-driven industries such as banking.

Moreover, research in positive organizational behavior highlights Psychological Capital (PC)—comprising hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy—as a personal resource that enables employees to maximize the benefits of supportive work environments (Avey et al., 2011; Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2015). Recent studies show that PC not only predicts performance directly but also strengthens the impact of positive workplace conditions (Akhtar et al., 2023; Santisi et al., 2020). However, the moderating role of PC between WS and performance remains underexplored, especially in service industries with intense performance pressures.

In Pakistan's private banking sector—one of South Asia's largest and most competitive financial services industries—employees face high workloads, strict regulatory compliance, and limited autonomy, conditions that can undermine engagement (Munir et al., 2022). Only a fraction of banks offer structured leadership development or employee well-being programs (Muhammad, 2022), despite evidence that leadership style, workplace meaning, and psychological resilience are critical for sustaining high performance in challenging environments.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the influence of AL on EP in Pakistan's private banking sector, examining WS as a mediating mechanism and PC as a moderator. By situating

the analysis within Social Exchange Theory (SET) and incorporating recent empirical findings, the study addresses notable gaps in leadership research within regulated service contexts and contributes both theoretical refinement and practical insights.

Research Gap and Contribution

While Authentic Leadership (AL) has been shown to benefit employee performance in sectors like education and hospitality, empirical evidence in financial services within emerging economies remains scant. Despite the importance of AL to foster green creativity, which is a kind of performance, in Pakistan's renewable energy sector, it was recently highlighted (Rehman & Zeb, 2023). There remains a shortage of studies on identical connections between AL and performance in banking (Bockorny et al., 2025; Jeon & Wu, 2020; Khan & Ghayas, 2022; Rauniar & Cao, 2025; Rehman & Zeb, 2023; Srivastava & Mohaley, 2022). Recent studies show the significance of organizational and psychological factors that influence employee outcomes within the banking sector. Koksai and Aksoy Kuru (2025), for instance, demonstrate that Psychological Capital (PC) serves as an intermediary between stress and life satisfaction within banking employees, highlighting PC's relevance as an important moderator in high-stress financial environments. Additionally, Syahir et al. (2025) examined studies from all over the globe, which show Workplace Spirituality (WS) improves employee wellbeing. While this mechanism still has not been empirically investigated in banking environments, it is likely that a sense of purpose and belonging while at work mediates the connection between leadership and performance (Khumalo et al., 2025; Mhatre & Mehta, 2023; Sultan & Hussain, 2025; Syahir et al., 2025). Besides individual outcomes, Rauniar and Cao (2025) show that organizational sustainability and strategic adaptability are facilitated via authentic leadership (AL), which indicates that leadership practices influence not only the immediate responsibilities but additionally more long-term performance pathways.

These developments affirm that while leadership, spirituality, and psychological capital each show promise in boosting employee outcomes, their combined effects in regulated, high-pressure contexts like Pakistan's private banking remain uncharted. This study addresses that gap by examining AL's impact on EP through WS as a mediator and PC as a moderator in this specific setting, refining Social Exchange Theory and Positive Organizational Behavior frameworks and offering actionable insights tailored to regulated service contexts.

Theoretical Foundations

Social Exchange Theory

The Social Exchange Theory (SET) is the basis for the current research. SET is a well-established framework in management and psychology that explains how ongoing interactions create mutual obligations (Cook & Rice, 2006; Lawler & Thye, 2006; Salas-Vallina et al., 2020). Blau (1964) argued that organizations often initiate supportive actions with the expectation that employees will reciprocate, gradually building relationships rooted in trust and commitment (Ward & Berno, 2011; Wayne et al., 1997). The quality of these exchanges strongly shapes how employees think and behave, encouraging stable, cooperative relationships over time (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Lawler, 2001). When leaders and organizations act responsibly and transparently, employees feel valued, which fosters genuine engagement and

positive workplace attitudes (Mora Cortez & Johnston, 2020; Nasrolahi Vosta & Jalilvand, 2023).

Authentic leadership fits neatly within this framework. By emphasizing openness, ethical conduct, and trust, authentic leaders inspire employees to reciprocate through greater engagement and stronger performance (Alomar et al., 2022; Asim et al., 2023; Yasmin et al., 2021). When followers perceive leaders as genuine, they feel a moral obligation to respond positively, which elevates workplace spirituality and strengthens overall effectiveness (Afsar et al., 2018; Akhtar et al., 2023). SET therefore provides a useful lens to understand how authentic leadership nurtures reciprocal relationships that not only deepen WS but also enhance employee performance (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

Hypotheses and the Conceptual Framework

Authentic Leadership and Employee Performance

Authentic Leadership (AL) is characterized by self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Empirical studies link AL to higher Employee Performance (EP) through mechanisms such as trust, value alignment, and ethical conduct (Chen & Sriphon, 2022; Kleynhans et al., 2022). For example, Hadian Nasab and Afshari (2019) found that AL improved performance via organizational commitment in education, while Iqbal et al. (2018) reported similar effects in hospitality through enhanced citizenship behaviors. In healthcare, Liu et al. (2023) showed that AL promoted job performance by improving employee well-being.

However, findings are not universally consistent. Ayça (2023) found no direct link between AL and EP in the Turkish service sector without trust as a mediator, and Sürücü (2022) reported similar dependency on organizational commitment in manufacturing. This inconsistency suggests that AL's impact may be context-dependent. In high-pressure, compliance-driven environments such as banking, procedural rigidity and performance monitoring may limit the direct influence of leader authenticity. Testing AL's direct effect on EP in such a context is therefore warranted. Thereby:

H1: AL has a positive effect on EP.

Authentic Leadership and Workplace Spirituality

Workplace Spirituality (WS) reflects employees' sense of purpose, community, and alignment with organizational values (Jena, 2022). Recent empirical evidence supports a positive association between Authentic Leadership (AL) and WS. Alomar et al. (2022) found that AL in educational institutions fostered WS, which in turn enhanced organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Similarly, Ribeiro et al. (2022) reported that AL in hospitality created inclusive, value-driven environments that strengthened employees' sense of belonging and purpose. Extending to the healthcare context, Anwar et al. (2019) showed that AL significantly boosted WS, which mediated improvements in teamwork and service quality. Most recently, Wu (2025) demonstrated that AL indirectly enhanced employee engagement via WS, emphasizing the role of authenticity in cultivating spiritual meaning at work.

These insights are consistent with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017), which suggests that authentic leaders foster relationships built on transparency, ethical

behavior, and mutual respect. Such conditions strengthen trust, create a shared sense of purpose, and help align employees with organizational values. However, while evidence supporting this link is growing, studies on the connection between AL and WS within the financial sector—especially in emerging markets—are still limited. Because banking operates under unique stressors, intense performance pressures, and strict regulatory demands, examining this relationship in that setting fills an important industry-specific gap. Hence:

H2: AL positively influences WS.

Workplace Spirituality and Employee Performance

WS has been consistently associated with better employee performance, largely by strengthening intrinsic motivation, increasing job satisfaction, and fostering greater organizational commitment (Bharadwaj & Jamal, 2020; Mohammed & Elashram, 2022). Empirical studies across various sectors reinforce this association. For instance, Mousa (2020) found WS to be a significant predictor of teaching performance in higher education institutions, while Sapta et al. (2021) reported that WS enhanced commitment and service quality in the tourism sector. Earlier findings extend this evidence: Sony and Mekoth (2019) demonstrated that WS significantly improved job performance in Southeast Asia, through fostering meaning and purpose at work; Rahmi and Desiana (2023) found that WS boosted innovative work behavior and overall performance in public-sector organizations; and Wu (2025) showed that WS directly enhanced work engagement, a key antecedent to sustained high performance.

These findings suggest that WS functions as a non-material social resource, consistent with Social Exchange Theory, encouraging employees to reciprocate supportive and value-aligned environments with higher effort and productivity. However, the direct WS–EP link remains underexplored in the banking sector, where the high-stress, compliance-driven environment may make psychological and spiritual resources particularly important for maintaining performance. Thus:

H3: WS has a positive effect on EP.

Workplace Spirituality as a Mediator

WS has increasingly been identified as an important mechanism through which leadership behaviors influence employee performance. WS refers to employees' sense of purpose, community, and alignment between personal and organizational values, which fosters stronger commitment and intrinsic motivation. Recent studies reinforce such a mediating role by WS across various organizational settings. For example, Ekowati (2022) found WS mediated between leadership style and employee performance in Indonesian Islamic banks. Similarly, Rahmi and Desiana (2023) found that inclusive leadership boosts job performance in the public sector via WS. Moreover, Gustari and Widodo (2024) found that leadership indirectly enhances job performance via WS in Indonesia's finance, trade, and service industries.

In sum, these studies suggest that in highly-regulated contexts or compliance-driven sectors, where leaders' direct influence is constrained, WS functions as a vital channel that converts leadership authenticity to stronger employee performance. In Pakistan's private banking sector,

this implies that authentic leadership is most likely to drive performance, with a spiritually enriched workplace, fostering shared meaning and value alignment. Thereby:

H4: WS mediates the relationship between AL and EP.

Psychological Capital as a Moderator

Psychological Capital (PC)—covering hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy—functions as a personal resource to employees, maximizing the benefits of supportive work environments (Avey et al., 2011; Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2015). Drawing from Positive Organizational Behavior theory and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, individuals with higher PC are better positioned to acquire, retain, and leverage resources, particularly under demanding conditions.

Recent empirical evidence reinforces PC's moderating role. Akhtar et al. (2023) found that high-PC employees more effectively leveraged social capital to improve team performance, while Santisi et al. (2020) demonstrated that PC buffered the negative effects of work stress on quality outcomes. In healthcare, Zhang et al. (2024) reported that nurses with higher PC experienced weaker associations between burnout and perceived stress, highlighting PC's resilience-building effect. Similarly, Muluneh and Bejji (2024) showed that PC moderated the relationship between workplace challenges and performance, particularly where supportive climates existed.

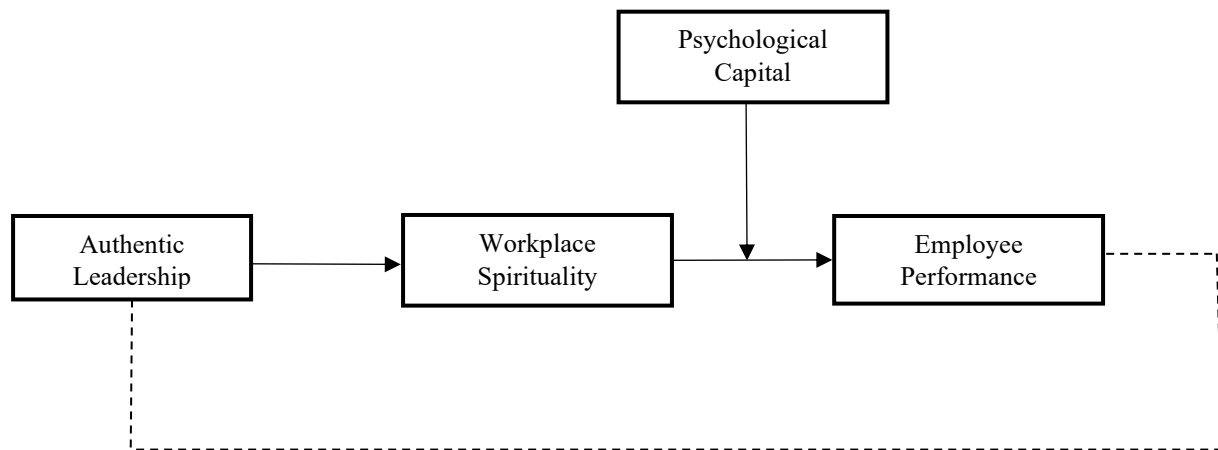
In financial services, Koksai and Aksoy Kuru (2025) found that PC significantly moderated the relationship between negative workplace states and employee well-being, suggesting that in high-pressure, compliance-driven industries, PC acts as a resilience buffer. Furthermore, Wu (2025) demonstrated that PC amplified the positive relationship between Workplace Spirituality (WS) and work engagement, implying that employees with high PC can translate WS into stronger discretionary effort and higher performance.

Given the intense performance demands and regulatory constraints in the banking sector, employees with greater PC are likely to derive more tangible performance gains from WS. By fostering optimism, self-belief, adaptability, and persistence, PC may enable individuals to transform meaning, purpose, and community at work into measurable productivity outcomes. Hence:

H5: PC positively moderates the relationship between WS and EP, such that the WS → EP effect is stronger at higher levels of PC.

Based on the above discussions, the following conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



Method

Scales

This research measured four constructs such as AL, WS, EP, and PC. Each construct was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). All the measures were validated via earlier research. In this study, AL, an eight-item scale ($\alpha = .76$), is adapted from Hadian Nasab and Afshari (2019). The sample item is, e.g., “listens carefully to different points of view before coming to conclusions”. EP is measured via Walumbwa et al.'s (2011) scale ($\alpha = .92$), e.g., “this employee’s efficiency is much higher than average”. WS is measured through Saeed et al.'s (2022) scale ($\alpha = .88$), e.g., “I feel pleasure at work” and “I feel part of a community”. PC is measured through the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (Santisi et al., 2020) scale, covering efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism ($\alpha = .92$). Next, we discuss data collection.

Data Collection

Data were collected via a cross-sectional, structured survey from the non-managerial workforce operating in various private banks in Lahore, Multan, and Islamabad. These banks were selected for their accessibility and relevance to the research context (Munir et al., 2022). This study used non-random convenience sampling. Data was gathered using a combination of self-administered printed questionnaires, which were presented during bank visits, and online surveys via Google Forms that were disseminated via emails and LinkedIn from the non-managerial staff in private banks. To improve the questionnaire and its reliability, a pilot test was conducted using 20 participants. This gave Cronbach's alpha $> .7$ and adequate internal consistency; the pilot verified the items' appropriateness and clarity (Grimm et al., 2010; Hair et al., 2022). A priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1.9.2 (Faul et al., 2007) indicated a minimum sample size of 250 to detect a medium effect (.15) with 80% power at a 5% significance level. For Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), a sample size between 100 and 200 is acceptable, but exceeding 400 can complicate model fit (Faul et al., 2007). With prior consent, 400 questionnaires were distributed to employees in Punjab’s private banking sector, using random sampling for participant selection within a bank, yielding 302 (75%) complete responses after data screening, which includes outliers and missing values, for further analysis. The detailed demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics

Demographic variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	133	57.2
	Female	105	34
	Prefer not to say	64	21.2
Qualification	Bachelors	170	56.3
	Masters	98	32.5
	Others	13	4
	PhD	21	7.5
Experience	1 to 3 years	1	3
	4 to 6 years	184	60.9
	7 to 9 years	10	3.3
	Less than 1 year	41	13

Results

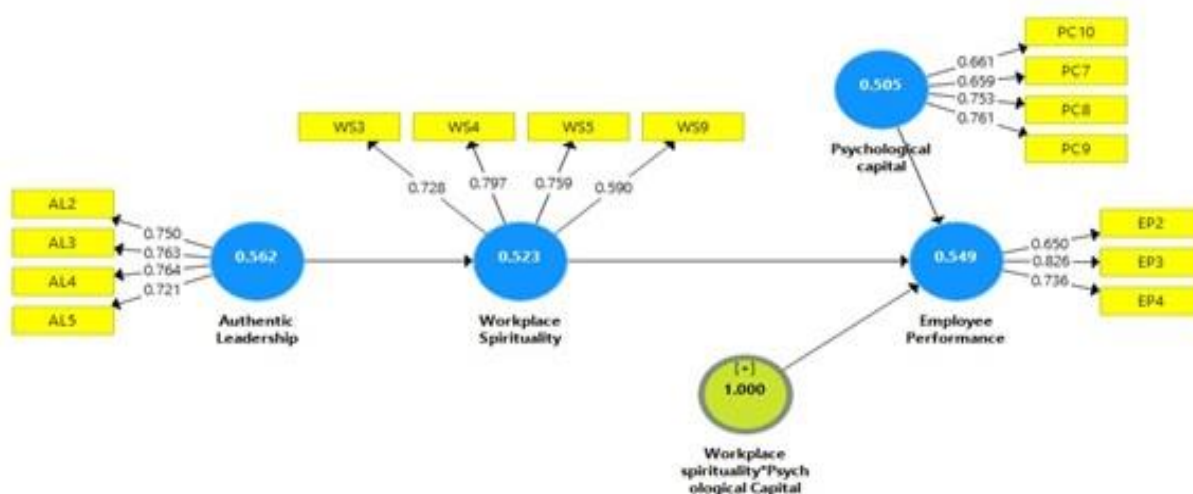
Measurement Model

Following Hair et al. (2022), the model fit was assessed using the measurement model assessment, structural model assessment, and PLS-specific global fit indices.

Construct validity and reliability are checked as a preliminary step in PLS-SEM. Reliability is evaluated via factor loadings; loadings over .70 are considered suitable (Hair et al., 2022). Moreover, as referred in Figure 2, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values greater than .50 (Chin et al., 1997) meet these criteria. Internal consistency is assessed using a Composite Reliability (CR) value greater than .70, which indicates that all constructs are sufficiently reliable (Nunnally, 1978).

Figure 2

Measurement Model



All reflective indicators demonstrated satisfactory reliability, with outer loadings exceeding .70. Composite reliability (CR) values ranged from .76 to .81, exceeding the minimum threshold of .70, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were between .51 and .56, above the recommended .50 level (See Table 2). To confirm internal consistency, Cronbach's α is calculated; in exploratory research, values greater than 0.5 are deemed adequate. Together, these findings support the measurement model's convergent validity and internal consistency reliability, and are presented in Table 2.

Table 2*Internal Consistency Reliability, And Convergent Validity*

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach α	CR	AVE
Authentic Leadership	AL2	.75	.74	.76	.56
	AL3	.76			
	AL4	.76			
	AL5	.72			
Workplace spirituality	WS3	.73	.69	.81	.52
	WS4	.79			
	WS5	.76			
	WS9	.59			
Psychological Capital	PC7	.66	.67	.80	.50
	PC8	.75			
	PC9	.76			
	PC10	.66			
Employee Performance	EP2	.65	.59	.78	.55
	EP3	.83			
	EP4	.74			

Discriminant Validity (DV), which shows how independent a variable is from other variables in the framework, was subsequently examined (Chin et al., 1997). The square root of each construct's AVE must be higher than its highest correlation with any other construct, as per the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015). DV is validated using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT); values less than 0.90 indicate sufficient discriminant validity. The assumptions about discriminant validity were confirmed by the HTMT ratio, which was continuously below the .85 cut-off (See Table 3). This indicates that the presumptions regarding discriminant validity were upheld.

Table 3*Discriminant Validity*

Variables	AL	EP	PC	WS
Authentic Leadership	.75			
Employee Performance	.24	.74		
Psychological capital	.42	.38	.71	
Workplace Spirituality	.58	.28	.45	.72

When combined, these findings support the previous research on convergent validity and internal consistency reliability by confirming that the model's constructs have sufficient discriminant validity. As a result, the measurement model meets all validity and reliability requirements.

Structural Model

When assessing a structural model, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is a crucial consideration. According to Hair et al. (2022), the cut-off value for multicollinearity should be 5.0. There were no collinearity problems in this investigation because the VIF value for each construct was less than the 5.0 cut-off (See Table 4).

Table 4*Multicollinearity Test*

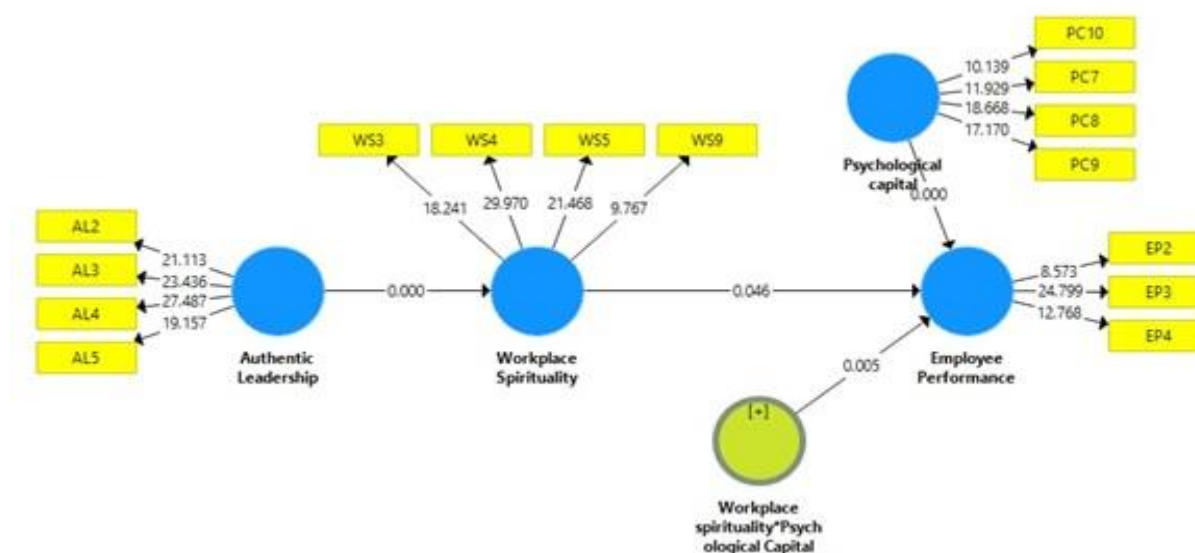
Construct Items	VIF
AL2	1.39
AL3	1.54
AL4	1.47
AL5	1.28
EP2	1.14

EP3	1.32
EP4	1.21
PC7	1.27
PC8	1.35
PC9	1.40
PC10	1.26
WS3	1.38
WS4	1.50
WS5	1.38
WS9	1.13

The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) value of .06 was below the recommended threshold of .08, indicating good model fit. The Normed Fit Index (NFI) was .91, exceeding the .90 benchmark for acceptable fit. The RMS_theta value was .08, below the recommended .12 cut-off, suggesting a well-fitting measurement model. Collectively, these indices confirm that the proposed model fits the observed data adequately.

According to Henseler et al. (2015), the structural model looks into causal relationships between constructs. Hair et al. (2022) estimated the statistical significance of the hypothesized model using a bootstrapping technique with 5,000 resamples. Figure 3 presents the outcome of the structural model. As presented in Table 5, the data show that AL (H1: $\beta = .12$, $t = 1.55$, $p < .06$) is not a significant positive predictor of EP. However, there is a positive correlation between AL and WS (H2: $\beta = .58$, $t = 15.23$, $p < .00$). Similarly, it was expected that WS is positively linked with EP (H3: $\beta = .21$, $t = 15.23$, $p < .00$). Using the indirect effect technique, the mediating influence of WS on AL and EP was examined (H4) (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The indirect effect results showed that the association between AL and EP is mediated by WS (H4: $\beta = .12$, $t = 2.94$, $p < .00$). Additionally, PC (H5: $\beta = .13$, $t = 2.53$, $p < .00$) increases the influence on EP and, as predicted, moderates the link between WS and EP.

Figure 3
Structural Model



In conclusion, whereas H2, H3, H4, and H5 were supported, H1 was not. Table 5 presents the findings of the structural model evaluation.

Table 5

The Outcome of the Evaluation of the Structural Model

Hypotheses	Beta (β)	STDEV	t-value	P-value	Supported
(H1)AL \rightarrow EP	.12	.08	1.55	.06	No
(H2)AL \rightarrow WS	.58	.04	15.23	.00	Yes
(H3)WS \rightarrow EP	.21	.07	3.02	.05	Yes
(H4)AL \rightarrow WS \rightarrow EP	.12	.04	2.94	.00	Yes
(H5)PC*WS \rightarrow EP	.13	.05	2.53	.00	Yes

The model explained $R^2 = .34$ for workplace spirituality and $R^2 = .17$ for employee performance, suggesting substantial and weak explanatory power, respectively (See Table 6).

Table 6

Results of R2

Variables	R^2	R^2 Adjusted	Results
EP	.18	.17	Weak
WS	.34	.34	Substantial

Researchers should include the coefficient of determination (R^2) and effect size (f^2) in addition to the importance of connections, as per Hair et al. (2022). It is proposed that R^2 values of .02, .13, and .26 can be regarded as modest, weak, and substantial, respectively. The amount that an independent variable contributes to the dependent variable's R^2 is measured by the effect size (f^2) (See Table 7). Use the formula $f^2 = (R^2 \text{ included} - R^2 \text{ omitted}) \div (1 - R^2 \text{ included})$ to calculate f^2 . Cut-off values for effect size were determined by Cohen (1988) and are $f^2 = .02$; .15; and .35, which denote small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively.

Table 7

Effect Size (f^2)

Variables	EP	WS	Results
AL		.52	Large
EP			
PC	.06		Small
WS	.01		Small
WS*PC	.02		Small

Summary of Findings

The results of the structural model revealed that the employee performance (EP) was not significantly impacted by authentic leadership (AL), (H1: $\beta = .12$, $t = 1.55$, $p > .05$), which remains in contrast to the previous research, where AL radically improved performance in less regulated or flexible industries, such as the higher education (Hadian Nasab & Afshari, 2019) and hospitality (Iqbal et al., 2018). From a Social Exchange Theory (SET) perspective (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017), this inconsistency suggests that mutual leader-follower interactions may not have a direct influence on task outputs in high-pressure, compliance-driven contexts, such as private banking. Leader authenticity alone may not be able to yield quick performance aids in such contexts, due to their rigid structures, standard procedures, and performance monitoring.

In contrast, AL has a strong relationship with WS (H2: $\beta = .59$, $t = 15.23$, $p < .001$), in line with the earlier research, indicating that authentic leaders build trust, ethical contexts, with an overall sense of purpose among employees (Alomar et al., 2022; Jena, 2022). SET provides a clear explanation: by engaging in relational transparency, balanced processing, and moral integrity, authentic leaders build high-quality exchanges that enhance employees' sense of meaning and community at work (Rego & Pina E Cunha, 2008).

WS also exhibited a significant positive effect on EP (H3: $\beta = .21$, $t = 3.02$, $p < .05$), corroborating studies by Bharadwaj and Jamal (2020) and Mohammed and Elashram (2022) that link spiritual work environments to higher motivation, job satisfaction, and task effectiveness. Within SET's framework, WS acts as an intangible social resource that strengthens employees' commitment and willingness to reciprocate through enhanced performance.

The mediation analysis confirmed that WS significantly mediated the AL–EP relationship (H4: $\beta = .12$, $t = 2.94$, $p < .01$). This supports Dubey et al. (2022) and Sapta et al. (2021), who argue that leadership's impact on performance is often indirect, transmitted through meaning-making processes and cultural alignment. In this study's context, AL enhanced EP only when it first cultivated WS, suggesting that spirituality is the key conversion mechanism through which authenticity translates into tangible outcomes in banking institutions.

Finally, psychological capital (PC) was found to positively moderate the WS–EP relationship (H5: $\beta = .13$, $t = 2.53$, $p < .01$). This is consistent with Positive Organizational Behavior theory (Luthans & Avolio, 2003) and prior empirical work (Avey et al., 2011), which highlight the role of hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy in amplifying the benefits of positive work conditions. Employees with higher PC appear better equipped to leverage the meaning and community derived from WS into higher task performance, even under the sector's high-stress demands.

Overall, the results reinforce SET by showing that leadership effectiveness in high-pressure service sectors is largely mediated by cultural and psychological mechanisms rather than direct behavioral influence. The findings extend both theoretical and empirical knowledge by clarifying when and how AL can shape EP in industry-specific contexts and by demonstrating that WS and PC are central to this process.

Discussion

Using Social Exchange Theory (SET) as a guide, this study investigated the connections between Employee Performance (EP), Psychological Capital (PC), Workplace Spirituality (WS), and Authentic Leadership (AL) in Pakistan's private banking industry. The findings provide a number of significant theoretical and empirical revelations.

Initially, the lack of a substantial direct correlation between AL and EP (H1) contrasts with other studies in less restrictive organizational contexts, such as hospitality (Iqbal et al., 2018) and education (Hadian Nasab & Afshari, 2019), where AL was a powerful predictor of performance. Recent research confirms this contextual flexibility. While Hussain et al. (2025) in the Chinese healthcare sector verified that context greatly impacts AL–performance pathways, Ayça (2023) demonstrated that AL's direct effect on performance was negligible in the Turkish service sector without mediating trust. According to the SET theory, the high-pressure, compliance-focused structure of banking might break the reciprocity loop by reducing

the extent to which leader authenticity affects voluntary effort (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017). Formal procedures frequently regulate performance in these settings, which reduces the opportunity for leader-follower interactions to directly influence results. This implies that the direct effects of AL can be quite context-dependent and necessitate sector-specific modification.

Second, the significant positive correlation between AL and WS (H2) validates SET and earlier research (Alomar et al., 2022; Jena, 2022), suggesting that authentic leaders promote shared purpose, trust, and ethical environments. Recent evidence further validates this link; Khumalo et al. (2025) demonstrated in South African banks that spiritual leadership—closely aligned with WS—was effective in transforming toxic workplace cultures and enhancing employee well-being. Leaders who demonstrate self-awareness, relational transparency, and moral integrity provide employees with a sense of belonging and meaning, triggering the reciprocal exchanges central to SET. This finding also supports the view that WS can be cultivated intentionally through leadership practices aligned with organizational values (Rego & Pina E Cunha, 2008).

Third, WS emerged as a significant predictor of EP (H3), consistent with empirical studies linking spiritual work environments to enhanced motivation, satisfaction, and productivity (Bharadwaj & Jamal, 2020; Mohammed & Elashram, 2022). Similar results were found by Ribeiro et al. (2022) in hospitality and Sapta et al. (2021) in tourism, where WS contributed to both commitment and performance. Within the SET framework, WS acts as a non-material social resource that encourages employees to reciprocate with greater effort and commitment. By aligning personal and organizational values, WS reduces dissonance and promotes intrinsic motivation, which is especially valuable in high-pressure roles.

Fourth, WS was established as a mediator in the AL–EP relationship (H4), supporting arguments that leadership effects are often indirect and mediated through cultural or psychological factors (Dubey et al., 2022; Sapta et al., 2021), in line with Asif et al.'s (2025) findings that AL used meaning-based processes to mitigate the detrimental impacts of organizational politics. In the context of current research, AL only improved performance by encouraging WS, indicating that leader authenticity must be converted into shared meaning and value alignment before impacting performance.

Lastly, the WS–EP relation moderation by PC (H5) suggests that workers high on resilience, optimism, hope, and self-efficacy can reap advantages from a spiritually enriched workplace. This is in line with earlier empirical research (Avey et al., 2011) and Positive Organizational Behavior theory (Luthans & Avolio, 2003), suggesting psychological resources enhance the positive impacts of supportive organizational settings on performance. More recently (Akhtar et al., 2023; Rauniar & Cao, 2025), PC improves the conversion of organizational resources into long-term performance results. In the banking sector's high-stress condition, PC acts as a resilience buffer, enabling employees to sustain performance in demanding workloads.

Taken together, these findings contribute to theory by refining SET in a service-sector context, demonstrating that leadership effectiveness is largely mediated by WS and amplified by PC. Empirically, they extend AL research into a non-Western, high-pressure industry, addressing a gap in the literature and offering context-specific insights. Practically, the results suggest that banking organizations should focus not only on developing authentic leaders but

also on cultivating WS and building PC through leadership training, values-based initiatives, and resilience programs.

Theoretical Implications

This study makes several contributions to leadership and organizational behavior theory. First, it refines Social Exchange Theory (SET) by showing that in highly regulated, hierarchical contexts such as Pakistan's private banking sector, Authentic Leadership (AL) may not directly improve Employee Performance (EP). Instead, AL's influence is transmitted indirectly through Workplace Spirituality (WS). This finding challenges the assumption, common in earlier studies (e.g., Hadian Nasab & Afshari, 2019; Iqbal et al., 2018), that leader authenticity automatically translates into higher performance. It suggests that the reciprocity mechanisms proposed by SET (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017) may require an intermediate cultural or psychological pathway to be effective in certain industries.

Second, this research strengthens the empirical basis for WS as a key mediating construct between AL and EP. By confirming that AL significantly enhances WS and that WS subsequently boosts EP, the study expands on prior work (Alomar et al., 2022; Bharadwaj & Jamal, 2020; Jena, 2022) and situates WS as a central mechanism for translating leader behavior into performance outcomes.

Third, the moderating role of Psychological Capital (PC) extends Positive Organizational Behavior theory (Luthans & Avolio, 2003) by demonstrating that hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy can amplify the benefits of WS for performance. This highlights the interactive effects of individual-level psychological resources and organizational-level cultural factors.

Overall, the study integrates leadership, spirituality, and psychological capital into a single tested framework, contributing to theory by offering a context-specific refinement of how AL operates in emerging market service industries.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study suggest that in high-pressure, compliance-driven industries such as banking, developing authentic leaders is necessary but not sufficient for improving employee performance. Leadership development programs should therefore extend beyond the traditional skill-building to focus on cultivating Workplace Spirituality (WS) and enhancing Psychological Capital (PC). Managers can foster WS by creating an environment grounded in trust, value alignment, and community through transparent communication, ethical decision-making, and participative management. Initiatives such as shared vision workshops, team-based values discussions, and inclusive goal-setting can strengthen employees' sense of purpose and belonging.

At the same time, organizations should invest in building PC by integrating resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy training into employee development programs, supported by coaching, mentoring, and stress-management interventions. Embedding organizational values into recruitment, performance appraisal, and reward systems—using tools such as personality assessments and engagement surveys—can further ensure alignment between individual and organizational priorities. Finally, managers must recognize that in regulated sectors, structural constraints may limit the direct behavioral influence of leaders, making it essential to focus

leadership strategies on generating meaning, psychological support, and value congruence as pathways to improved performance.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations, which provide future research opportunities. First, its cross-sectional design restricts the ability to make causal inferences. Longitudinal studies are needed to capture the dynamic nature of leader–follower exchanges, the evolution of Workplace Spirituality (WS), and the development of Psychological Capital (PC) over time. Second, the focus on Pakistan’s private banking sector limits the generalizability of the findings, as this industry operates under unique structural, regulatory, and cultural constraints. Replicating the study in other sectors—such as healthcare, manufacturing, and technology—would test the robustness of the proposed model in more diverse organizational contexts. Third, the study examined only one mediating variable (WS) and one moderating variable (PC). Future research could incorporate additional factors such as ethical climate, employee engagement, proactive personality, or organizational justice to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Authentic Leadership (AL)–Employee Performance (EP) relationship. Finally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for common method bias, despite procedural measures to mitigate it. Multi-source data, such as, supervisor ratings and objective performance metrics, would strengthen future study validity. Addressing these limitations will not only refine the theoretical integration of Social Exchange Theory and Positive Organizational Behavior but also expand the practical relevance of leadership strategies across different cultural and industrial contexts.

Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of Authentic Leadership (AL) on Employee Performance (EP) in Pakistan’s private banking sector, using Workplace Spirituality (WS) as a mediator and Psychological Capital (PC) as a moderator, framed within Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017). The results show AL not having a significant direct effect on EP, aligning with context-specific findings in high-pressure, hierarchical environments (Iqbal et al., 2018). However, AL significantly enhances WS (Alomar et al., 2022; Jena, 2022), which, in turn, positively influences EP (Bharadwaj & Jamal, 2020; Mohammed & Elashram, 2022). Furthermore, PC strengthens the positive relationship between WS and EP, underscoring the role of individual psychological resources—such as hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy—in maximizing the benefits of a spiritually enriched workplace (Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2015).

These findings advance leadership scholarship by confirming WS as a key mechanism linking AL to EP and by demonstrating PC’s moderating role. Practically, Leadership development in banking should integrate value-driven culture, community building, and resilience training. Future research should use longitudinal designs and test the model across diverse industries and cultures.

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