

The Role of Transformational, Transactional, and Passive-Avoidant Leadership in Remote Work Engagement: A Sequential Mixed Methods Investigation

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the FRL styles relate to remote work engagement. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, 212 remote employees were surveyed in the UK and Ireland with the MLQ 5X-Short and the UWES-9 scales. 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted afterwards to unpack the insights behind the quantitative findings. Our results suggest that transformational leadership emerges as the most robust driver of work engagement, primarily by empowering employees through autonomy, growth-oriented practices, and a compelling vision. Transactional methods prove insufficient without empathetic, context-aware management that adapts reward and feedback mechanisms to individual needs. Passive-avoidant approaches benefit experienced, self-directed employees, provided trust and open communication are maintained. Our mixed-methods integrated findings suggest that blending FRL styles to balance autonomy, personal and professional development, and structured oversight better meets the diverse preferences of remote workers. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed, along with limitations and directions for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

Remote working is not a new concept, yet it has only recently become more important worldwide. One key reason for this importance is the recent pandemic, which paralysed businesses worldwide, including major multinationals. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2020), an estimated 2.7 billion employees were affected, forcing organisations to respond. Initially, remote work was seen as a temporary fix. However, new global statistics (Sherif, 2024) suggest otherwise: the proportion of remote employees rose from 10% in 2019 to 28% in 2023. A simple explanation for this sharp increase is satisfaction. Research shows many employees have a positive attitude and greater happiness with remote work (Carlson *et al.*, 2024) thanks to decreased travel costs, more time at home, and flexibility to meet individual needs.

Unsurprisingly, most remote employees today are reluctant to return to office-based work. This reluctance creates tension and pressure for employers considering a return to traditional face-to-face operations. Even more striking, many employees would accept a pay cut or are prepared to quit their jobs entirely if forced back into the office (Smite and Moe, 2024; Gibson *et al.*, 2023). This phenomenon highlights how quickly organisational behaviours and expectations can shift. Yet, does this mean remote work is a panacea with no drawbacks? The short answer is no.

Remote work presents numerous challenges for both employees and organisations—more than one might expect. Research suggests that the sudden transition to remote work has led to heavier workloads and longer working hours, consuming significant energy and resources and reducing engagement (Adisa *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, some scholars argue that remote work can cause feelings of isolation due to fewer in-person interactions with colleagues. The absence of direct supervisory support heightens this effect, as many remote employees report feeling undervalued and disconnected, further diminishing their engagement (Thasipan *et al.*, 2024).

In short, remote work does not suit everyone. Elshaiekh *et al.* (2018) note that it may be more fitting for disciplined individuals with strong self-motivation who can effectively manage their time and maintain higher engagement levels without direct oversight. Nonetheless, remote work is not the sole challenge. From our perspective, remote work is simply a different working context—a setting where operations continue as usual but in a possibly more comfortable environment. The real issue lies in the ongoing decline in employee engagement. A Gallup survey (2024) indicates that only 23% of employees worldwide were engaged in their work in 2023, which is strikingly low—fewer than one in five employees.

But what do these findings mean for organisations, and why does the problem matter? First, disengaged employees are more likely to quit, forcing organisations to bear the costs of recruiting and training replacements (Khan and Jin, 2024). Second, disengagement reduces productivity and customer satisfaction, harming profitability (Hassan *et al.*, 2024). Third, disengaged employees can create a toxic environment, lowering morale, fostering distrust, and straining relationships with management—factors contributing to dysfunction and conflict (Rasool *et al.*, 2021). Finally, disengagement not only hurts organisations but also negatively impacts employees. As Rasool *et al.* (2021) note, disengaged employees often suffer poorer mental health, burnout, and job dissatisfaction, weakening overall well-being across the organisational ecosystem.

A growing body of research indicates that effective leadership can mitigate these issues and, in many cases, boost work engagement. Leaders who establish supportive, fair practices (e.g., promoting trust, self-efficacy, and organisational identification through transparent communication, consistent behaviour, and growth opportunities) often foster environments

where employees thrive (Ali *et al.*, 2018). Of course, certain leadership styles and behaviours are more effective than others. Transformational leadership, for instance, is widely linked to positive workplace outcomes, higher engagement, and proactive employee behaviour that stimulates extra effort (Valldeneu *et al.*, 2021).

Meanwhile, transactional leadership, focusing on clear structures, rewards, and penalties, can also strengthen engagement—primarily through mechanisms like talent development and performance feedback (Ali *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, transformational leadership generally proves more impactful in enhancing engagement because it emphasises intrinsic motivation, trust-building, and a supportive work environment (Al-Serhan *et al.*, 2021). By contrast, passive-avoidant leadership is commonly linked to adverse workplace outcomes, including reduced engagement. Characterised by passive behaviour and avoidance of decision-making, it fails to inspire or energise employees (Muddle, 2020).

Although transformational and transactional leadership styles are well-studied in face-to-face contexts, passive-avoidant leadership receives less attention. However, this shortfall, while noteworthy, is not the primary concern of this paper. More pressing is the limited evidence on which leadership styles effectively strengthen work engagement in remote environments. Given the global challenges of remote work, its unique hurdles compared to traditional office environments (Adisa *et al.*, 2023), and persistently low engagement levels (Gallup, 2024), this topic demands urgent attention.

Accordingly, this paper aims to investigate and provide conclusions regarding how effective leadership styles and behaviours can mitigate this broader problem. It integrates three previous studies, one quantitative and two qualitative, to form a unified, mixed-methods perspective on effective leadership in remote environments. By drawing on each study's findings, we highlight insights that neither the quantitative nor qualitative research alone could reveal (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Study 1 (Makowski *et al.*, 2025a, under review) tested four hypotheses linking transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership to remote work engagement. Studies 2 and 3 (Makowski *et al.*, 2025b; Makowski *et al.*, 2025c, both under review) showed transformational leadership had the strongest positive link, transactional leadership had a moderate effect, and passive-avoidant leadership revealed a more complex dynamic than expected. Nonetheless, questions remain about how and why these relationships manifest, especially in fully remote contexts.

Addressing these gaps would assist leaders in daily management and support policymakers in creating more employee-friendly policies. Combining effective leadership with pro-employee policies is essential, as employees and their needs should be central in every company. Finally, this study contributes both theoretically and practically, offering researchers direction for developing new frameworks and practical solutions to a real-world issue that millions face daily.

Guided by these considerations, this study seeks to answer the following question:

How do transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership influence remote work engagement?

In the sections that follow, we discuss this study's theoretical premises, outline the methodology, present integrated findings from the sequential mixed methods approach, and conclude with implications for research and practice, limitations, and directions for future inquiry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Full Range of Leadership

Bass and Avolio (1994) developed the Full Range of Leadership Model (FRLM), encompassing three leadership styles: transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant. The concept of a “full range” highlights behaviours ranging from highly effective (transformational) to transactional exchanges and the least effective styles involving decision avoidance and passivity.

Bass (1985) refined this model and expanded Burns’ (1978) earlier work by introducing specific “components” to describe each leadership style, with all components collectively forming the style (see Figure 1). A key aspect of Bass’s work was his emphasis on the moral and ethical dimensions of leadership. He cautioned against “pseudo-transformational” leaders who may exhibit traits like acting as role models and earning followers’ trust yet exploit followers for personal gain. By contrast, true transformational leaders value their followers, inspiring collective good and intellectual stimulation.

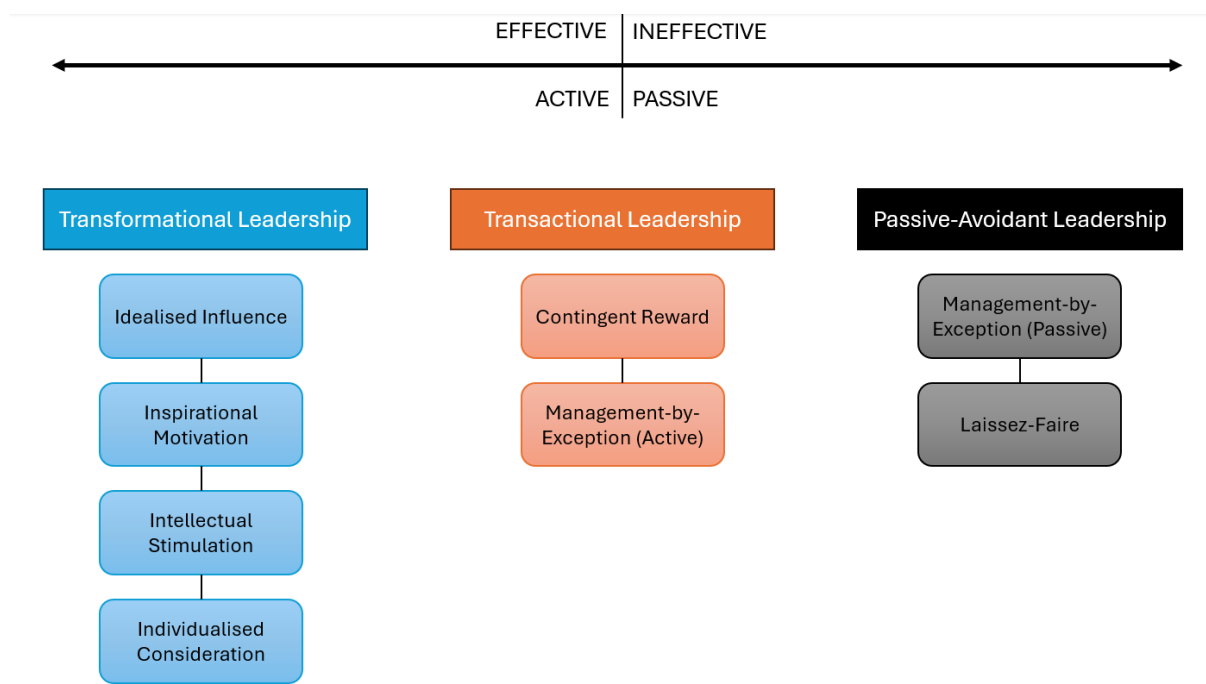


Figure 1: The Full Range of Leadership Model
(Adapted from Bass and Riggio, 2006, p. 9)

The second leadership style in the FRLM, transactional leadership, hinges on leader-follower exchanges, with compliance driven by rewards and punishments. This approach can be effective, depending on circumstances. However, Bass (1985) proposed an augmentation relationship between transformational and transactional leadership, arguing that transformational leadership enhances transactional leadership’s predictive power for follower satisfaction and performance.

The third style in the FRLM is passive-avoidant leadership (PAL), which is generally ineffective and involves minimal active leadership. Passive-avoidant leaders avoid duties and responsibilities or delegate tasks without sufficient support or supervision. Unsurprisingly, this

often creates workplace tension, leading Bass (1985) to classify PAL as the least effective style—positioning it as the opposite of transformational leadership in terms of what leaders *should* and *should not* do.

The FRLM has been validated across diverse cultural contexts, demonstrating broad applicability (Avolio, 2011). Organisations worldwide have used it to train employees and develop policies fostering productivity, innovation, and adaptability (Sosik and Jung, 2018). Nonetheless, the FRLM is not without criticism. One concern is that it does not fully capture the “dark side” of leadership behaviours, such as destructive styles (Itzkovich *et al.*, 2020). Although Bass (1985) acknowledged that pseudo-transformational leadership could drift into destructive territory, critics argue that the model could benefit from more comprehensive updates to encompass these elements (Itzkovich *et al.*, 2020). While extending the FRLM to include destructive leadership behaviours is important, it is equally important to consider how remote work influences existing leadership theories, thus the importance of the current study.

Work Engagement

Work engagement is another key theoretical concept underpinning this study. The concept has evolved considerably since Kahn’s (1990) initial conceptualisation of personal engagement. However, the contribution by Schaufeli *et al.* (2002) significantly expanded the theory of work engagement. Schaufeli *et al.* (2002, p. 74) define work engagement as a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption,” offering a distinctive lens on employees’ psychological experience at work.

Vigour refers to an employee’s energy and enthusiasm for tasks, reflecting dynamic involvement in responsibilities. Dedication captures employees’ pride and importance to their jobs, indicating a deeper, values-based bond. Absorption describes intense focus and immersion, marked by a sense that time passes quickly and distractions are minimal (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002).

Despite its growing popularity, partly due to global workforce disengagement, work engagement remains subject to varied interpretations and debates. The lack of a universal definition has caused measurement inconsistencies and misunderstandings, fueling disputes over what constitutes engagement (Kim *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, a lag in academic research compared to practical applications and confusion between constructs like organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and workaholism exacerbates these issues. Thus, this study deliberately distinguishes “work engagement” from “employee engagement,” a broader concept concerning the overall employee–organisation relationship. Work engagement emphasises an individual’s emotional and cognitive connection to their job (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010).

Transformational Leadership and Work Engagement

For decades, researchers have examined which leadership style most effectively manages employees to benefit both leaders and followers. Transformational leadership consistently stands out for delivering positive outcomes. From the employee perspective, this style directly enhances work engagement by fostering vigour, dedication, and absorption—core components of work engagement (Dukhaykh *et al.*, 2024). Research also shows that employee voice behaviour mediates this positive effect: leaders who encourage employees to share ideas,

opinions, and concerns help create a culture where input is valued and acted upon (Ike *et al.*, 2024).

Additionally, Albrecht *et al.* (2021) highlight that employees who find their work meaningful are more engaged, showing alignment between employees' values and organisational goals. These findings suggest that a sense of belonging to the organisation and team drives higher engagement, with transformational leaders achieving this by addressing individual needs and empowering employees to pursue aspirations. Transformational leadership is particularly suited to building strong leader-follower relationships that boost engagement. Recent research suggests that job crafting (e.g., allowing employees to adjust roles to match strengths and interests) yields greater engagement under transformational leaders (Dukhaykh *et al.*, 2024).

But what about remote working environments? How does this relationship hold up when supervisors face greater challenges in managing and overseeing employees? While the literature is limited, some evidence suggests that the transformational leadership–work engagement relationship remains strong despite remote work constraints. For instance, Boccoli *et al.* (2024) found that transformational leadership positively affects work engagement in remote environments, mirroring face-to-face results. The authors note that leaders skilled in digital tools can maintain a psychological presence and offer support, enhancing work engagement.

This finding implies that leaders must receive proper training to navigate complex technology; otherwise, their presence may diminish, and the benefits of transformational leadership may fail to materialise. Alsolamy (2021) similarly highlights that employees who perceive stronger organisational support have higher engagement, suggesting transformational leaders in remote environments must understand and use technology effectively to support teams.

Transactional Leadership and Work Engagement

Transactional leadership originates from traditional social-exchange concepts and is often cited as less effective than transformational leadership (Bass and Riggio, 2006). However, it would be incorrect to say transactional leadership fails to foster positive outcomes like work engagement. On the contrary, it can raise engagement and even surpass transformational leadership in some short-term scenarios. According to Aboramadan and Kundi (2020), transactional leadership increases engagement by setting clear expectations and offering rewards for meeting them. Employees “give” high performance and “receive” a reward (e.g., a bonus) in return.

While effective for achieving immediate objectives, its long-term impact is more limited. Researchers note that transactional leadership initially drives engagement through structured guidance and rewards but loses motivational force overtime when deeper incentives are absent (Nielsen *et al.*, 2019; Udin *et al.*, 2022). Scholars agree that overemphasising contingent rewards and punishment mechanisms can diminish engagement without balancing personal and professional development opportunities (Maundu *et al.*, 2020). Thus, transactional leadership is best suited for shorter-term goals rather than long-term organisational transformation.

In light of these limitations, many researchers recommend combining transactional and transformational leadership within the same leader to achieve beneficial outcomes, including higher work engagement (Li *et al.*, 2018; Nielsen *et al.*, 2019). While transformational leadership inspires and develops employees, transactional leadership provides structure and tangible rewards to reinforce engagement.

This synergy is especially critical in remote work environments, where employee isolation poses a greater challenge to sustained engagement (van Zoonen and Sivunen, 2022). Unfortunately, current literature has paid little attention to how transactional leadership functions in remote environments. The goal is not for transactional leadership to replace transformational leadership—given its weaker long-term effects—but to determine how transactional behaviours can support transformational leadership under remote work’s unique circumstances. Researchers should shift from comparing the two styles to exploring how to integrate them to meet the complex demands of remote workplaces.

Passive-Avoidant Leadership and Work Engagement

Passive-avoidant leadership often leads to negative outcomes, such as increased safety non-compliance and diminished performance (Olsen *et al.*, 2021). Researchers argue that PAL is particularly damaging in high-stress environments, signalling a lack of commitment to objectives (Brandebo, 2020). Some studies even compare PAL to destructive leadership behaviours with similar organisational repercussions. For instance, Fosse *et al.* (2019) classify PAL as a destructive form of leadership, noting its detrimental effects on performance and employee well-being. Ramig (2024) also finds overlap with broader destructive tendencies. However, many scholars argue that destructive leadership typically exerts more severe and direct negative impacts than PAL (Hancock *et al.*, 2023).

Even if PAL is not as harmful as overtly destructive behaviours like abusive supervision, it is often grouped into these categories. Its negative reputation is justified: PAL leaves employees without direction or support, fostering feelings of abandonment and elevated stress (Hancock *et al.*, 2023). Costin *et al.* (2023) note that remote employees lacking consistent organisational support face higher job stress, strain, and burnout—the opposite of work engagement. These outcomes suggest that PAL is poorly suited for remote work, where proactive communication and psychological support are critical to offset isolation (Yu and Liu, 2023). But is this truly the case?

Some research suggests that individual traits, such as self-leadership and motivation, can moderate the effectiveness of passive-avoidant leadership. For instance, employees with strong safety moral beliefs or high intrinsic motivation may perform well under PAL, relying less on direct supervision (Liu *et al.*, 2021). Other scholars argue that PAL may not significantly hinder performance in less safety-sensitive or more autonomous contexts (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Employees who value autonomy or work in creative roles could thrive under PAL, as it allows greater freedom to innovate without micromanagement. Some researchers suggest it can foster idea generation and implementation, though it generally remains less effective than other styles (Zappalà *et al.*, 2021).

In remote work, this style may benefit some while disadvantaging others. Experienced employees with strong self-motivation and minimal need for oversight (Liu *et al.*, 2021) might achieve better results under PAL. However, passive-avoidant leadership is underexplored due to its poor reputation and limited scholarly interest, offering little insight into its influence on work engagement in remote environments. It seems plausible that PAL need not be universally disliked, as it may suit certain employees’ preferences. Yet, significant gaps remain regarding the contextual factors determining its success or failure, which underscores the need for further research.

Cross-Cutting Gaps

Despite considerable knowledge from physical work environments, robust findings specific to remote contexts remain scarce. It is unclear whether practices proven successful in traditional settings lose effectiveness in remote work—or might even perform better.

The central gaps lie in limited evidence on how each leadership style affects work engagement amid remote work challenges, such as physical isolation, reduced face-to-face interaction, and reliance on digital tools (Thasipan *et al.*, 2024). Understanding how these styles shape engagement could reshape leader-employee dynamics and clarify whether they adapt effectively, fail, or need modification for remote environments. If adaptation is needed, remote environments might demand an adaptive leadership approach that balances inspiration, structure, and autonomy—suggesting underexplored synergies (Li *et al.*, 2018; Nielsen *et al.*, 2019).

These gaps lead to our research question: “How do transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership influence remote work engagement?” Through our mixed-methods study, we aim to provide fresh insights into which leadership behaviours resonate most with remote employees. Ultimately, we seek to spark discourse to improve engagement in remote environments and offer solutions to the persistently low engagement levels troubling organisations worldwide.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (QUAN → QUAL) to examine how transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership (as conceptualised in the FRL Model) influence remote work engagement. We chose this design because it allowed us to quantify the relative impact of each leadership style in a broad survey and then explore those effects through targeted qualitative interviews. Rather than collecting new data for this paper, we integrate findings from our three prior quantitative and qualitative studies to extract deeper insights and strengthen our evidence. By embracing methodological pluralism, we triangulate and cross-validate results to produce a richer, more robust account of leadership styles’ influence on engagement in remote environments. Creswell and Clark (2018) argue that mixed methods design provides insights beyond those of purely quantitative or qualitative approaches. Similarly, Fetter (2018) contends that mixed methods create a synergistic effect, generating knowledge greater than the sum of its parts.

In this study, explanatory sequential logic stems from Study 1’s quantitative findings, which guided the development of interview protocols in Studies 2 and 3. We integrate numeric results and qualitative themes to create a cohesive view of remote leadership and engagement. Rather than merely re-stating previous results, we use an explanatory sequential design (QUAN → QUAL) to show how each leadership style’s numeric impact (Study 1) is further explained through contextual insights from Studies 2 and 3. Figure 2 below illustrates the study’s design sequence.

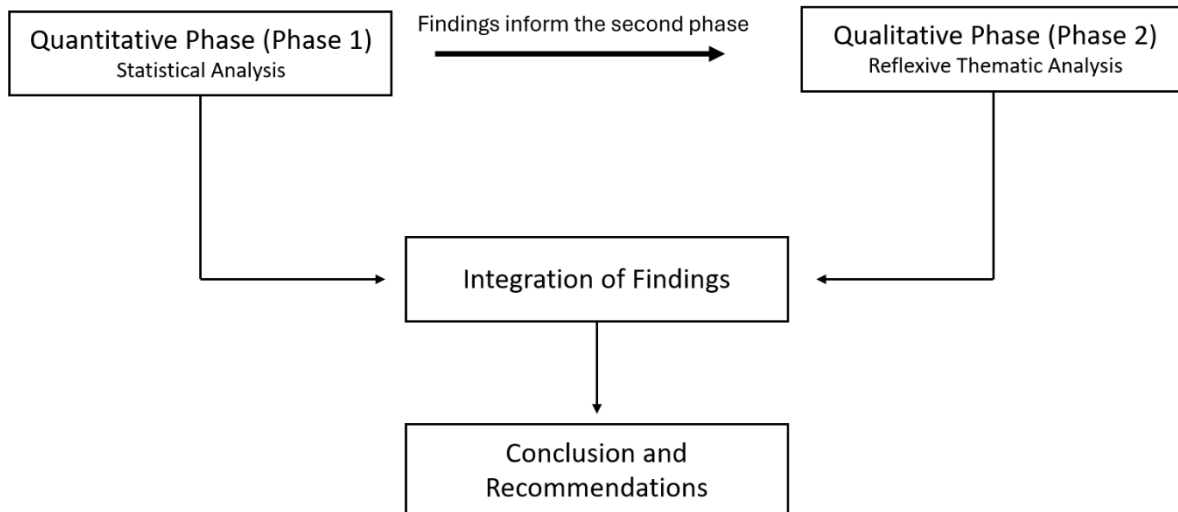


Figure 2: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Design
Source: Authors' Own Work

Original Data Sources and Procedures

Quantitative Phase

Sample and Data Collection. A cross-sectional survey of 212 remote employees was conducted from June to September 2023 in the UK and Ireland's private sector. Participants were at least 18 years old and had six months or more of remote work experience. Surveys were administered online via Qualtrics, with informed consent and ethical approval obtained beforehand.

Measures. Two key instruments measured leadership and work engagement: the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) 5x-Short (Avolio and Bass, 2004) and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). The MLQ 5x-Short assessed transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership behaviours on a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 4 ("frequently, if not always"), demonstrating robust validity and reliability across diverse contexts. Meanwhile, the UWES-9 captured employees' work engagement (vigour, dedication, absorption) on a continuum from 0 ("never") to 6 ("always"), supported by strong psychometric properties and extensive validation. Cronbach's α ranged from .80 to .94, indicating strong internal consistency across the leadership styles and work engagement components, and all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded .50 (TL = .53; TRL = .51; PAL = .51; WE = .57), confirming acceptable convergent validity.

Data Analysis Summary. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS 28 and AMOS. Descriptive and correlational statistics identified key relationships, followed by correlational statistics and hierarchical regression to evaluate the relationships and the effects of leadership style on remote work engagement.

Qualitative Phase

Sample and Data Collection. Between June and December 2023, nineteen participants were recruited via purposive sampling across various industries in the private sector in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Eligibility criteria required participants to have worked remotely for at least six months. All data were collected through online semi-structured Zoom interviews, each

lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. Before each session, participants were informed of the study's aim, estimated duration, and confidentiality measures. Informed consent was obtained, along with consent to record the interviews. Each participant was then assigned an anonymous ID number to protect their identity.

Procedure. Study 2 focused on transformational leadership experiences, while Study 3 focused on transactional and passive-avoidant leadership and their experiences from the employees' perspective. A semi-structured interview guide was prepared based on relevant background research, focusing on remote leadership, autonomy, and training or development aspects. Three pilot interviews were run to refine the questions. A total of nineteen formal interviews followed, at which point data saturation was reached. Ethical approval was secured prior to data collection, and all interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and stored securely.

Data Analysis Summary. A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2021) was conducted using NVivo 14 software to ensure methodological rigour and transparency. This iterative process involved familiarising ourselves with the transcripts, systematically coding meaningful text segments, reviewing and refining preliminary themes, and finally defining each theme's core content and boundaries. In this manner, we generated a coherent narrative linking participants' experiences to broader conceptual insights about remote leadership. Direct quotations were selected to illustrate key points, ensuring the participants' perspectives were accurately represented.

Data Integration

Creswell and Clark (2018) note that mixed methods research involves interpreting both quantitative and qualitative findings to assess how combined information addresses the central research question. Following an explanatory sequential design (QUAN → QUAL), this paper integrates Study 1's quantitative results with thematic insights from Studies 2 and 3 for each leadership style. Rather than re-coding or re-analysing transcripts, we rely on existing themes and sub-themes from reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) in Studies 2 and 3, aligning them with the three examined leadership styles in Study 1's quantitative data.

As Creswell and Clark (2018) emphasise, explanatory sequential integration connects quantitative and qualitative phases, so the latter explains the specific results of the former. Additionally, Fetter et al. (2013) highlight this process as a “staged” approach to integration, where each phase may be published separately but is ultimately merged into a final interpretive narrative. By mapping key themes from Studies 2 and 3 onto Study 1's numeric findings, we create a cohesive narrative of how and why each leadership style shapes engagement in remote environments. This approach offers deeper insight than either dataset alone, revealing whether qualitative themes confirm, refine, or challenge quantitative patterns. Essentially, the quantitative phase identifies relationships, while the qualitative phase explains their context and meaning. The staged integration then combines these phases into a single interpretive narrative, generating deeper theoretical and practical insights for leadership in remote work.

FINDINGS

Transformational Leadership

Key Quantitative Findings

Study 1’s correlation analysis revealed a notably strong relationship between transformational leadership (TL) and work engagement (WE), with a Pearson’s coefficient of $r = .401$ ($p < .001$)—the highest among the three examined leadership styles (Figure 3). Moreover, the hierarchical regression confirmed TL as the most robust predictor of work engagement ($B = .832$, $p < .001$), aligning with expectations that transformational leadership exerts the strongest positive influence on employee work engagement in remote environments.

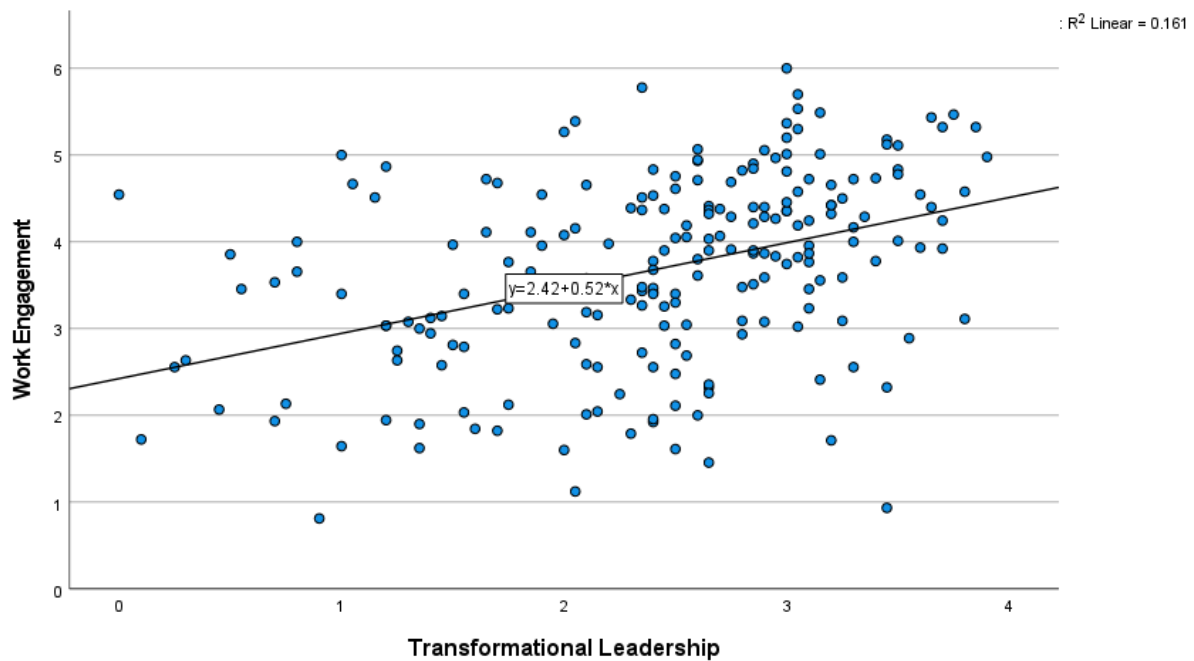


Figure 3: Scatter Plot of Transformational Leadership and Work Engagement
Source: Authors’ Own Work

Key Qualitative Findings

Study 2 identified two overarching themes describing how transformational leadership enhances remote employees’ work engagement. The first theme called “Empowering remote employees” captured how leaders foster autonomy, decision-making, personalised support, and inspirational motivation. Most participants valued the freedom to structure their schedules and make independent decisions, noting that losing autonomy would reduce their investment and commitment. Meanwhile, leaders who adapted to individual needs and assessed resources proactively were crucial in strengthening engagement. Additionally, frequent emphasis on inspirational leadership highlighted the importance of sharing a compelling vision and motivating employees beyond physical proximity, instilling a sense of purpose that boosted engagement.

The second theme called “Addressing remote challenges through growth and professional development” showed how transformational leaders sustain engagement by supporting skill-building, creative problem-solving, and remote training. Developmental feedback fostered a growth mindset and inclusion. Participants frequently cited project-based initiatives and open opportunities for innovation as key motivators, particularly when aligned with broader societal or organisational goals. Leaders also encouraged employees to shape their learning paths through interactive, customised remote training. These measures helped overcome isolation and limited on-site guidance, maintaining higher engagement in distributed teams.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

After analysing both phases through an explanatory sequential lens, the strong quantitative link between transformational leadership and remote work engagement (Study 1) gains further meaning from qualitative insights (Study 2). For instance, granting autonomy and decision-making capability helps leaders address employee challenges and foster ownership. Higher engagement is also explained by transformational leaders' care and support, which are crucial in distributed contexts where physical distance can undermine motivation.

Additionally, emphasising inspiration, skill-building, and problem-solving mitigate remote hurdles like isolation and limited on-site guidance, clarifying why transformational leadership sustains stronger and more sustained engagement. Ultimately, the synergy between a compelling vision, personal development, and meaningful autonomy fosters a deeper emotional and cognitive connection to work, confirming its role as the most influential driver of engagement among the leadership styles examined.

Transactional Leadership

Key Quantitative Findings

According to Study 1's correlation analysis, transactional leadership is positively associated with work engagement ($r = .307$, $p < .001$), albeit less apparent than transformational leadership (Figure 4). Moreover, the hierarchical regression model indicated a non-significant negative effect of TRL on engagement ($B = -0.283$, $p = .094$). In other words, while transactional leadership demonstrated a moderate positive correlation with engagement overall, it did not emerge as a significant predictor once included in the full regression model.

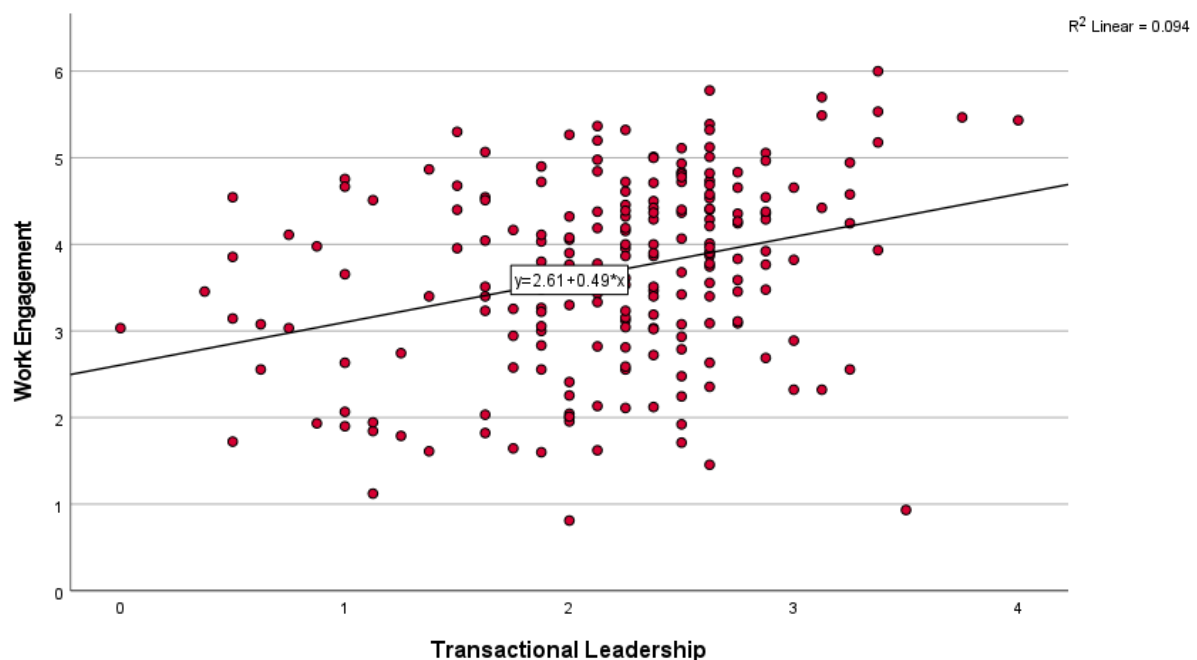


Figure 4: Scatter Plot of Transactional Leadership and Work Engagement
Source: Authors' Own Work

Key Qualitative Findings

Study 3 captured how transactional leadership influences remote work engagement. First, recognition and rewards systems were critical, with participants emphasising how effective links between recognition (monetary or non-monetary) and performance reinforced engagement. While some valued financial incentives as evident appreciation, others preferred intangible rewards like flexibility or broader acknowledgement of good work. Participants also noted potential inequities if leaders failed to tailor rewards to the remote context or adapt them to employees' shifting needs.

Second, performance assessment and feedback emerged as key to sustaining motivation and engagement. Participants described how tracking performance over time, aligning it with clear objectives, and offering constructive input made them feel “seen” despite not sharing a physical office. However, a minority noted that the absence of formal feedback led to disengagement and confusion about their roles. Participants further highlighted that empathetic, context-aware performance management was essential for addressing remote work challenges. This concept suggests transactional leadership must accommodate individual circumstances and ensure fairness to support engagement effectively.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The quantitative results and qualitative themes present a nuanced view of transactional leadership in remote work. While Study 1 showed a moderate positive correlation between transactional leadership and work engagement, this effect disappeared in the regression model. However, qualitative findings from Study 3 help explain this discrepancy.

Remote employees who value clear connections between rewards and performance—whether bonuses or flexibility—may initially respond well to transactional leadership, but such rewards alone may not sustain engagement. Equitable and consistent feedback made employees feel “seen” and motivated, while the absence of formal feedback left some questioning their roles. This circumstance suggests transactional leadership alone may be insufficient in remote environments unless leaders adapt reward structures, feedback mechanisms, and performance expectations to employees' needs. Ultimately, the quantitative data indicate that while transactional methods correlate with engagement, they may not predict it strongly unless leaders adopt a context-aware and empathetic approach suited to remote work challenges.

Passive-Avoidant Leadership

Key Quantitative Findings

In Study 1's correlation analysis, passive-avoidant leadership showed no significant association with work engagement ($p > .05$) (Figure 5). However, the hierarchical regression showed a positive effect of PAL on work engagement ($B = .335, p < .001$), contrasting the initial expectations. Thus, although PAL did not correlate with work engagement overall, it emerged as a statistically significant predictor once other variables (leadership styles) were controlled in the regression model, suggesting a more complex dynamic for passive-avoidant leadership in remote contexts.

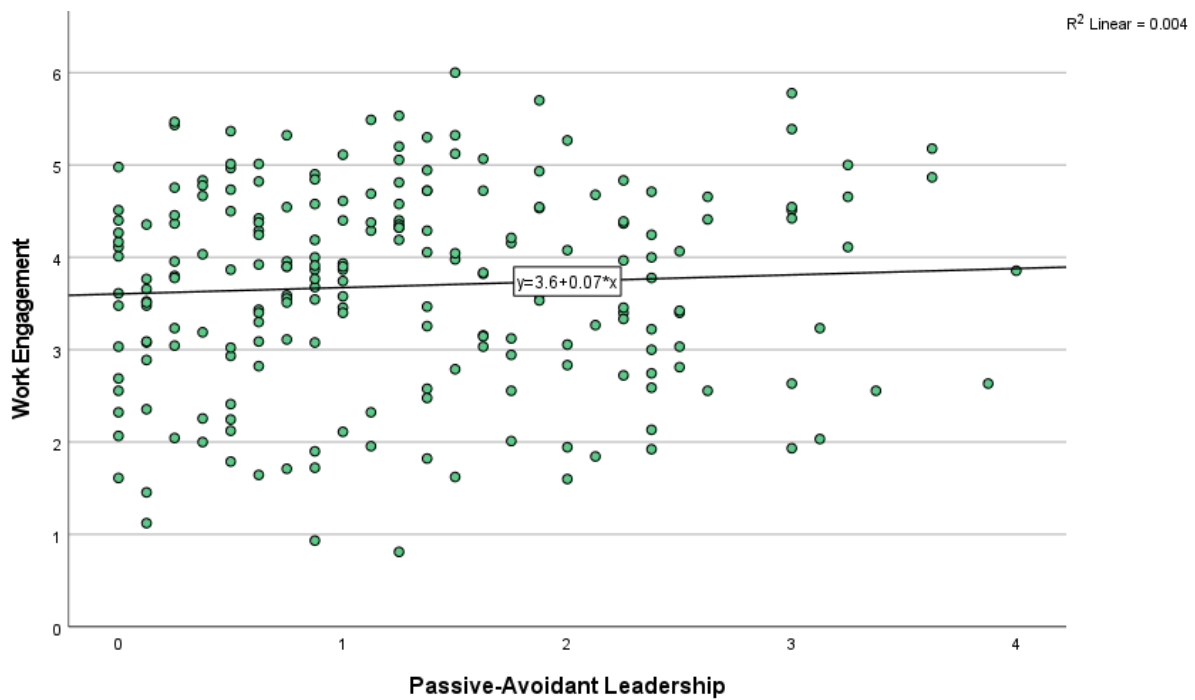


Figure 5: Scatter Plot of Passive-Avoidant Leadership and Work Engagement
Source: Authors' Own Work

Key Qualitative Findings

In Study 3, participants discussed a single overarching theme capturing both the benefits and drawbacks of passive-avoidant leadership in remote environments. Many interviewees found unexpected advantages in a hands-off approach, noting that minimal oversight reduced stress and granted autonomy, especially when trust and clear communication were present. Such leaders were seen as accessible when needed but otherwise allowed experienced employees the freedom to set their own pace and structure tasks. However, participants emphasised that this style's success depended on employees' competency and self-motivation. Newer or less confident workers often felt neglected without more active guidance. Trust, therefore, emerged as essential in meeting objectives and ensuring psychological safety, helping employees feel valued despite physical distance.

At the same time, participants, particularly experienced remote employees, strongly resisted micromanagement. Authoritarian practices like constant monitoring and strict performance tracking intensified isolation, undermined morale, and sometimes drove skilled professionals to seek more flexible workplaces. Leaders needed to strike a balance: too little oversight left employees feeling unsupported, while excessive surveillance eroded autonomy and motivation. This tension was amplified by the common challenge of remote work—heightened isolation. Rather than alleviating loneliness, micromanagement worsened it by creating a sense of distrust and persistent scrutiny.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The quantitative and qualitative data provide a more detailed view of passive-avoidant leadership in remote contexts than initially expected. While Study 1's correlation analysis showed no direct link between PAL and work engagement, its positive effect in the regression

model suggests that once other leadership styles are accounted for, PAL may play a meaningful role—particularly for specific employees or conditions.

Study 3's findings help explain this: a hands-off approach can reduce stress and enhance autonomy when trust and communication structures are strong. Leaders who remain accessible but avoid micromanaging may empower experienced, self-driven employees. However, newer or less confident workers risk feeling overlooked without adequate support, highlighting the need to tailor oversight to individual capabilities. Participants also warned that excessive surveillance could increase isolation and distrust, ultimately reducing engagement. These insights help explain the varied relationship between PAL and work engagement found in Study 1. The summary of the results across each phase can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Results

Leadership Style	Key Quantitative Findings	Key Qualitative Findings	Integration Summary
Transformational	• $r = .401$ ($p < .001$), the highest correlation among the three examined styles. • $B = .832$ ($p < .001$), the strongest predictor of engagement overall.	• Encourages autonomy and decision-making empowerment. • Demonstrates support and understanding of individual needs to develop a successful working experience. • Inspires by aligning personal goals with the organisation's vision. • Focuses on growth and development mechanisms and creative problem-solving assignments to stimulate growth and innovation.	• It fosters a sense of ownership, motivation, and resilience that transcends physical distance. Moreover, it establishes a deeper emotional and cognitive bond between employees and their work that goes beyond a mere transactional exchange.
Transactional	• $r = .307$ ($p < .001$) indicates a moderate positive correlation. • $B = -0.283$ ($p = .094$): not significant once other leadership styles are controlled in the model.	• Recognition and rewards can increase engagement in remote environments. • Performance tracking and feedback are the keys to maintaining motivation to work and engagement levels. • Leaders should emphasise fairness, empathy, and tailored approaches for context-aware performance management.	• While rewards and performance feedback are viewed as mechanisms that enhance engagement, they may not sustain it long-term unless leaders adapt to individual circumstances. • The results highlight the need for consistent, empathetic management and equitable reward structures to maintain engagement in remote environments.

Passive-Avoidant	• No significant correlation with WE ($p > .05$). • Positive effect in regression ($B = .335$, $p < .001$), once other styles are controlled in the model.	• Hands-off approach can reduce stress and grant autonomy, especially for experienced, self-driven employees. • Trust and open communication are essential to prevent feelings of neglect. • Over-correction (i.e., micromanagement) can exacerbate isolation and undermine morale.	• A surprising positive regression result suggests that certain employees flourish under minimal oversight. We can assume that these are more experienced staff; however, newcomers may be left unsupported. • Leaders must emphasise trust, clarity, and balanced oversight to leverage potential autonomy advantages in remote environments.
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Source: Authors' Own Work

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the sequential mixed-methods study and provide integrated conclusions that neither quantitative nor qualitative phases alone could reveal. Overall, the integrated findings reveal a distinct hierarchy among the three examined leadership styles in remote contexts. Transformational leadership emerges as the most effective style to enhance work engagement, consistent with other research across various environments (Boccoli *et al.*, 2024; Dukhaykh *et al.*, 2024). Our quantitative results support these findings, showing their highest correlation and strongest predictive power. We explained this positive relationship and impact through our qualitative insights, highlighting transformational leaders' emphasis on providing their followers with greater autonomy, support, compelling vision, and growth-oriented practices. Together, they highlight a deeper emotional and cognitive connection between leaders and followers that transcends into higher engagement levels in the long term. These outcomes mirror earlier studies in traditional work environments, where transformational leaders are shown to build a strong sense of organisational belonging by addressing individual needs and empowering employees to pursue their goals (Albrecht *et al.*, 2021).

However, it is important to note that while most participants in our study valued autonomy, a number expressed a need for more structure and guidance. This divergence suggests that transformational leaders must balance self-direction with individualised support, particularly for less experienced employees or those lacking self-motivation. Holstad *et al.* (2014) likewise argue that an employee's professional ambition plays a significant role; as noted in our Study 2, not everyone seeks to advance or progress within an organisation. Another consideration is the risk of over-relying on a leader's vision, which can paradoxically curb creativity if employees need to wait for "inspirational cues" rather than generate independent ideas. Garrelfs *et al.* (2022) similarly caution that excessive dependence on a visionary figure may stifle initiative; for employees without strong intrinsic motivation, such an approach may not yield optimal results over time. In these cases, more immediate, transactional practices might be needed to maintain engagement in the short term.

On the other hand, transactional leadership showed a moderate positive correlation with engagement in this study, yet its influence was no longer significant once other styles were considered. Qualitative evidence indicates that while rewards and feedback can boost

engagement in the short term, they may prove inadequate without empathetic, context-aware oversight. Consequently, although transactional leaders can improve remote work engagement initially, long-term success hinges on blending in more transformational elements, such as individualised consideration. These findings support prior work suggesting that transactional leadership has a lesser impact on sustained engagement than transformational leadership (Al-Serhan *et al.*, 2021; Udin *et al.*, 2022). Our results add to this literature by arguing that transactional leadership should be combined with a more subtle, transformational approach in remote contexts.

Additionally, although the correlation for transactional leadership was moderately positive, the non-significant regression effect hints that transformational strategies might overshadow rewards and feedback elements once all leadership styles come into effect. This inconsistency aligns with other studies showing that transactional behaviours can direct attention to tasks' short-term value but do not always produce enduring behavioural change (Nielsen *et al.*, 2019). While our study showed that some participants appreciated tangible rewards, others placed a higher value on intangible benefits such as flexibility—challenging the classic assumption that monetary incentives are universally effective. However, some studies suggest this is inconsistent across all tasks, contexts, or individuals (Makhija and Akbar, 2019). Indeed, high-powered incentives can sometimes even diminish performance if not carefully managed (Macera, 2024). This argument is especially relevant to remote work, where flexibility and autonomy may be among the most critical drivers of engagement (Adisa *et al.*, 2023).

In contrast, despite showing no direct correlation with work engagement in our study, passive-avoidant leadership demonstrated a positive effect in the regression analysis, suggesting that a hands-off approach can be beneficial under certain conditions when other leadership styles are integrated. Qualitative insights added to this by indicating that trust and open communication enable experienced, self-directed employees to flourish—aligning with prior evidence from face-to-face environments that this style may suit those with high self-motivation (Liu *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, the varied effects on less experienced employees confirm that passive-avoidant leadership is not a one-size-fits-all approach, echoing concerns that remote employees who lack adequate support may face higher stress and burnout (Costin *et al.*, 2023).

The puzzling combination of an insignificant correlation and a strong regression coefficient challenges the conventional portrayal of passive-avoidant leadership as entirely detrimental (Fosse *et al.*, 2019; Olsen *et al.*, 2021). Instead, our results suggest that this style can work effectively in remote environments for those who need minimal oversight, provided leaders maintain trust and stand ready to offer support when needed. In other words, leaders might integrate additional transformational or transactional elements for employees requiring more direct guidance, creating a balanced oversight approach. This finding calls for an alternative view of passive-avoidant leadership, indicating that with sufficient trust and employee expertise, a hands-off style can be unexpectedly effective in distributed teams—underscoring a need to reconsider how we categorise passive-avoidant behaviours in remote contexts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

Our findings extend the current understanding and applicability of the FRL model and provide evidence that remote transformational leaders who inspire a compelling vision, grant autonomy and offer individualised support address core human needs for purpose and competence. These practices, in return, develop robust emotional and cognitive connections to work. In contrast, remote transactional leadership aligns with the exchange-based underpinnings of FRLM, explaining its moderate correlation to engagement through rewards and feedback but revealing

gaps for long-term engagement if leaders fail to address deeper motivational and relational factors (Aboramadan and Kundi, 2020; Al-Serhan *et al.*, 2021). Meanwhile, the passive-avoidant style—though typically deemed least effective in FRLM—shows unexpected promise for highly self-directed and self-motivated employees in remote environments, suggesting that reduced oversight can satisfy their autonomy needs. When considered alongside work engagement theory (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002), these results confirm that leadership styles tapping into both relational and growth-oriented drivers (i.e., transformational) best sustain engagement over time, while transactional or passive-avoidant elements can be selectively employed to address specific remote-work needs.

Therefore, our study presents a twofold theoretical takeaway. First, passive-avoidant leadership has traditionally been depicted as a near-futureless style in the FRL model—an undesirable reference point indicating what leaders should avoid (Bass and Riggio, 2006). However, our findings demonstrate otherwise. We argue that the model should incorporate contextual moderators such as employee experience and self-efficacy to clarify when a hands-off approach can be beneficial or detrimental. Second, while transactional behaviours can spark short-term engagement, they require transformational elements for sustained impact. Consequently, a critical insight is that integrating various leadership behaviours (e.g., balancing autonomy and personal development with structured feedback and oversight) can appeal to a broader range of employees in remote contexts, aligning with similar conclusions from conventional work environments (Li *et al.*, 2018; Nielsen *et al.*, 2019).

In practical terms, we recommend that organisations adopt our suggestions by training leaders to combine transformational practices (e.g., vision, autonomy, growth opportunities) with transactional structures (e.g., rewards, feedback) and hands-off methods for self-directed employees. We believe that this approach accommodates diverse remote worker preferences. We likewise encourage managers to match oversight intensity and leadership style to employees' readiness and motivation levels, granting more support to newcomers or less confident staff while allowing greater autonomy for seasoned, self-motivated individuals.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study faced two main constraints. First, focusing primarily on remote employees in the UK and Ireland potentially limits the generalisability of our findings to other regions or cultures. Countries with differing norms, values, and cultural dimensions may experience different leadership–engagement relationships in remote environments, given that national cultural factors such as gender egalitarianism, human orientation, performance orientation, future orientation, and power distance can moderate these relationships (Li *et al.*, 2021).

Second, our cross-sectional design restricts the ability to capture the evolving nature of leadership styles and work engagement. A single point in time may overlook how these factors shift with organisational changes, personal development, or external influences (Meng *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, cross-sectional data cannot track long-term variations or the processes by which leadership styles and engagement either strengthen or weaken over time.

To address these limitations, we recommend that future studies employ longitudinal designs to observe how leadership styles and work engagement develop, particularly in remote contexts. Such an approach may reveal nuances not evident in a one-time snapshot. We also suggest examining whether the effects of the FRL model vary across diverse cultural settings or emerging remote-work markets. Moreover, exploring mixed remote and on-site teams, where

employees alternate between remote and in-person work, could shed further light on how leadership styles impact engagement under varying working conditions.

In conclusion, this integrated paper highlights how the FRL model applies to remote contexts in nuanced ways that challenge conventional assumptions. Transformational leadership remains the most robust driver of work engagement. However, transactional approaches can also benefit short-term engagement levels, while passive-avoidant behaviours unexpectedly suit certain experienced, self-motivated employees. By combining elements of each leadership style and acknowledging contextual factors such as employee readiness, trust, and open digital communication, organisations can more effectively foster engagement and well-being among remote teams. This study's insights thus contribute to a deeper, more flexible understanding of leadership practices in distributed work environments.

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