

Start-up Culture and Career Commitment among Young Indian Employees: The Mediating Role of Psychological Empowerment

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Abstract

Start-ups increasingly attract young professionals by offering accelerated career development, close interaction with founders, meaningful organisational purpose and opportunities to influence organisational outcomes. This study examines how organisational career growth, founder inclusive leadership and organisational purpose authenticity shape start-up career commitment through the mediating role of psychological empowerment. Grounded in self-determination theory, the study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional and explanatory design. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire from 435 young start-up professionals and college students with start-up internship experience in Karnataka, with particular emphasis on Bengaluru Urban. The proposed relationships were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling. The measurement model demonstrated satisfactory reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity. The structural model explained 62.4% of the variance in psychological empowerment and 68.8% of the variance in start-up career commitment. Founder inclusive leadership emerged as the strongest antecedent of psychological empowerment, followed by organisational career growth and organisational purpose authenticity. Psychological empowerment exerted the strongest direct effect on start-up career commitment. The mediation analysis further established complementary partial mediation in all three relationships, with the strongest indirect effect observed between founder inclusive leadership and start-up career commitment. The findings indicate that young employees remain committed to start-up careers when developmental opportunities, inclusive founder behaviour and authentic organisational purpose generate experiences of meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. The study offers an integrated framework for strengthening long-term career commitment among young employees in start-up organisations.

Keywords: Organisational career growth; founder inclusive leadership; organisational purpose authenticity; psychological empowerment; start-up career commitment; young professionals; start-up culture; PLS-SEM

Introduction

Start-ups have emerged as prominent employment destinations for young professionals seeking accelerated career development, direct participation in decision-making and opportunities to contribute to organisational growth. Unlike established corporations, which generally operate through formal hierarchies, specialised roles and standardised career pathways, start-ups often provide employees with broader responsibilities, closer interaction with founders and greater exposure to multiple organisational functions. Such employment conditions may promote learning, autonomy and visible contribution, but they may also involve role ambiguity, resource constraints, employment uncertainty and limited human-resource structures. Consequently, the preference of young employees for start-up careers cannot be explained solely through financial compensation or workplace informality (Chung, 2021; Fackler et al., 2022). Empirical evidence suggests that employees may accept some of the economic uncertainty associated

with start-ups because of the non-monetary value provided by their work. Start-up employees frequently report satisfaction arising from independence, responsibility, intellectual challenge and perceived social contribution (Chung, 2021). A study based on 8,817 employee reviews from 117 start-ups identified development, entrepreneurial culture and high-quality coworkers as important components of the learning opportunities that influence employer attractiveness (Seo et al., 2025). These findings indicate that organisational career growth may represent a central reason why young professionals choose and continue in start-up employment. Organisational career growth encompasses career-goal progress, professional ability development, promotion speed and remuneration growth and has been positively associated with employee commitment (Weng et al., 2010; Weng & McElroy, 2012). Leadership is particularly influential in start-ups because founders often shape organisational values, employee relationships and decision-making practices before formal managerial systems are established. The existence of a flat hierarchy does not necessarily guarantee employee participation or voice. Its value depends on whether founders demonstrate openness, accessibility and availability, which are defining characteristics of inclusive leadership (Nemhard & Edmondson, 2006; Carmeli et al., 2010). Inclusive leadership can strengthen psychological safety, employee voice and involvement in creative tasks (Carmeli et al., 2010; Younas et al., 2023). Evidence also suggests that leadership conditions can influence employee attitudes and entrepreneurial behaviour through psychological empowerment (Kumari et al., 2025; Pu et al., 2022). In start-up settings specifically, psychological empowerment has been identified as an important mechanism through which entrepreneurial leadership encourages employee entrepreneurial behaviour (Awashreh et al., 2025). Organisational purpose constitutes another potentially important attraction of start-up employment. Start-ups frequently present themselves as organisations created to solve meaningful customer, industry or societal problems. Nevertheless, purpose is likely to influence employees only when it is perceived as credible and consistently reflected in organisational decisions. Perceived organisational purpose is conceptually distinct from meaningful work because it concerns employees' evaluation of the organisation's higher-order purpose rather than the personal meaning derived from an individual job (Jasinenko & Steuber, 2023). Research further indicates that meaningfulness and credible organisational values are associated with employee engagement, commitment and willingness to invest additional effort (Kaur & Mittal, 2020; Malbašić et al., 2018; Van Waeyenberg & Semeijn, 2026). Psychological empowerment provides a theoretically appropriate mechanism connecting these organisational conditions with career commitment. It represents an intrinsic motivational state comprising meaning, competence, self-determination and impact (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995). Meta-analytic evidence confirms that psychological empowerment is associated with favourable employee attitudes and behavioural outcomes (Llorente-Alonso et al., 2023). Career growth may strengthen competence, founder inclusive leadership may enhance self-determination and impact, and authentic organisational purpose may increase meaning. Despite these developments, existing studies have largely examined career growth, inclusive leadership, organisational purpose and psychological empowerment in isolation or in conventional organisational settings. Limited research has integrated these developmental, leadership-related and purpose-oriented conditions to explain young employees' commitment to start-up careers. Start-up research has primarily examined employer attractiveness, job satisfaction, innovative behaviour or entrepreneurial behaviour rather than longer-term start-up career commitment. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the effects of organisational career growth, founder inclusive leadership and organisational purpose authenticity on start-up career commitment through psychological empowerment among young Indian start-up employees. The study extends start-up employment research by explaining how

external cultural conditions are translated into sustained career commitment through employees' experiences of competence, meaning, self-determination and organisational impact.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Theoretical Foundation

The proposed framework is primarily grounded in self-determination theory, which argues that individuals demonstrate stronger motivation and psychological well-being when their needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness are satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Start-up environments can potentially satisfy these needs by providing accelerated career development, access to founders and participation in purpose-driven organisational activities. These organisational conditions may not automatically generate career commitment. Their influence depends on whether employees interpret them as opportunities to develop competence, exercise self-determination, perform meaningful work and influence organisational outcomes. Psychological empowerment therefore provides the principal explanatory mechanism in the model. It is defined as an intrinsic motivational state comprising meaning, competence, self-determination and impact (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995). Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that leadership, organisational support and enriching work conditions are important antecedents of psychological empowerment and that empowerment is strongly associated with organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Seibert et al., 2011; Llorente-Alonso et al., 2024).

Organisational Career Growth and Psychological Empowerment

Organisational career growth represents employees' perceptions that their present organisation enables career-goal progress, professional ability development, promotion and remuneration growth (Weng et al., 2010). Unlike general training availability, organisational career growth captures whether employees perceive that their current employment is advancing their broader career. This distinction is particularly relevant in start-ups, where formal promotion systems may be limited but employees may gain cross-functional exposure, complex responsibilities and accelerated skill development. Career growth is positively associated with affective, continuance and normative organisational commitment because development opportunities signal that the organisation supports employees' professional futures (Weng et al., 2010; Weng & McElroy, 2012). It may also strengthen psychological empowerment by increasing employees' perceived competence and confidence in managing challenging responsibilities. Recent evidence indicates that empowering leadership and opportunities for personal responsibility enhance employees' psychological empowerment and career adaptability (Kornbrust et al., 2025). Therefore:

H1: Organisational career growth has a positive and significant effect on psychological empowerment among young start-up employees.

Founder Inclusive Leadership and Psychological Empowerment

Inclusive leadership is characterised by leader openness, accessibility and availability and by an explicit willingness to consider employee ideas and contributions (Nemphard & Edmondson, 2006; Carmeli et al., 2010). In founder-led organisations, these behaviours are especially important because founders frequently control information, allocate resources and shape cultural expectations. A structurally flat start-up may not be psychologically inclusive when founders remain controlling or inaccessible. Founder inclusive leadership can enhance

empowerment by allowing employees to participate in decisions, voice alternative perspectives and exercise discretion. Such behaviours strengthen self-determination and impact while leader feedback can reinforce competence. Leadership has demonstrated the strongest association with psychological empowerment among several organisational antecedents in meta-analytic evidence (Llorente-Alonso et al., 2024). Recent studies similarly show that psychological empowerment operates as a mechanism through which inclusive leadership influences employee attitudes and innovative behaviour (Raza & Yousufi, 2023; Özkan, 2025). Therefore:

H2: Founder inclusive leadership has a positive and significant effect on psychological empowerment among young start-up employees.

Organisational Purpose Authenticity and Psychological Empowerment

Organisational purpose authenticity refers to employees' perception that an organisation's stated purpose is credible and consistently reflected in leadership decisions, customer practices and internal systems. It differs from meaningful work because purpose authenticity is an organisational-level perception, whereas meaningful work represents an employee's personal evaluation of a particular job. Purpose becomes authentic when organisational behaviour remains aligned with its declared commitments rather than using purpose symbolically. Perceived organisational authenticity can strengthen employee trust because consistency between organisational claims and practices reduces uncertainty regarding leadership intentions (Mazutis, 2025). Authentic organisational purpose may also increase psychological empowerment by enabling employees to connect their responsibilities with a credible customer or societal contribution. Research on organisational purpose indicates that authenticity and coherence in people-management practices are important conditions through which purpose supports employee motivation (Rey et al., 2025). Therefore:

H3: Organisational purpose authenticity has a positive and significant effect on psychological empowerment among young start-up employees.

Psychological Empowerment and Start-up Career Commitment

Psychologically empowered employees believe that their work is meaningful, that they possess the competence to perform it, that they can exercise discretion and that their actions influence organisational outcomes (Spreitzer, 1995). These perceptions are likely to be particularly important in start-ups, where employees must operate under uncertainty and assume responsibilities beyond narrowly defined roles. Empowerment is consistently associated with stronger organisational commitment and reduced turnover intention (Bhatnagar, 2007; Yoon et al., 2022; Llorente-Alonso et al., 2024). When young employees experience competence, meaning, choice and influence within start-up employment, they are more likely to view the start-up sector as a desirable long-term career environment. Accordingly:

H4: Psychological empowerment has a positive and significant effect on start-up career commitment.

Organisational Career Growth and Start-up Career Commitment

Organisational career growth reflects the extent to which employees perceive that their current organisation supports career-goal progress, professional ability development, promotion and remuneration advancement. Employees are more likely to remain committed when they believe that their organisation contributes meaningfully to their future careers rather than merely providing immediate employment. Prior research demonstrates that organisational career

growth is positively associated with organisational and occupational commitment and negatively associated with turnover intentions (Weng et al., 2010; Weng & McElroy, 2012). This relationship is particularly relevant in start-ups because traditional promotion ladders may be less developed. Young employees may instead assess career growth through skill diversity, increased responsibility, exposure to strategic decisions and the future value of acquired capabilities. When start-up employment is perceived as advancing career goals and employability, employees are more likely to regard the start-up ecosystem as a desirable long-term career context. Conversely, when employees experience broad workloads without corresponding development, their initial attraction may not translate into sustained commitment. Accordingly:

H5: Organisational career growth has a positive and significant effect on start-up career commitment among young start-up employees.

Founder Inclusive Leadership and Start-up Career Commitment

Founder inclusive leadership may directly influence career commitment by shaping employees' experience of belonging, recognition and participation. Inclusive leaders demonstrate openness to employee contributions, remain accessible for consultation and encourage involvement in organisational decisions. These behaviours are especially important in young ventures because founders often represent both the strategic leadership and the cultural identity of the organisation. Employees who receive support, voice and recognition from founders may interpret the employment relationship as mutually beneficial and therefore become more willing to invest in a longer-term start-up career. Leadership research indicates that empowering and inclusive leadership practices are positively associated with favourable job attitudes, including job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Founder inclusion may also reduce the psychological distance associated with authority and help employees tolerate uncertainty by strengthening trust in organisational decision-making. Therefore:

H6: Founder inclusive leadership has a positive and significant effect on start-up career commitment among young start-up employees.

Organisational Purpose Authenticity and Start-up Career Commitment

Organisational purpose authenticity concerns whether employees perceive that the organisation's higher-order purpose is genuinely embodied in its practices, leadership decisions and allocation of resources. It is distinct from meaningful work because it concerns the credibility of the organisation's purpose rather than an employee's personal experience of a particular task. Perceived organisational-purpose research identifies authenticity and guidance as central dimensions through which employees evaluate whether an organisation's purpose is genuinely practised. For young start-up employees, an authentic purpose can provide a stable source of identification in an otherwise uncertain employment environment. When the organisation consistently acts in accordance with its stated customer, societal or industry-oriented mission, employees may perceive their continued participation as personally and professionally worthwhile. In contrast, inconsistency between public purpose claims and internal practices may weaken trust and encourage employees to view the start-up's mission as symbolic. Therefore:

H7: Organisational purpose authenticity has a positive and significant effect on start-up career commitment among young start-up employees.

Mediating Role of Psychological Empowerment

The direct relationships proposed above do not fully explain the psychological process through which start-up cultural conditions become career commitment. Psychological empowerment provides this mechanism because it captures employees' internal experience of meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. Meta-analytic evidence shows that psychological empowerment is positively associated with organisational commitment, job satisfaction and performance and negatively associated with turnover-related outcomes (Seibert et al., 2011; Llorente-Alonso et al., 2023). Organisational career growth is likely to produce career commitment partly because developmental progress strengthens employees' perceived competence. Employees who acquire valuable capabilities and observe progress towards their career goals may feel better equipped to influence their work and future careers. This empowered state may transform career-development opportunities into a sustained preference for start-up employment. Therefore:

H8: Psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between organisational career growth and start-up career commitment.

Founder inclusive leadership may similarly promote career commitment by enhancing employee voice, discretion and perceived impact. Founder openness and accessibility provide employees with opportunities to contribute to decisions and observe that their ideas matter. Leadership research supports psychological empowerment as an explanatory mechanism connecting enabling leadership behaviours with favourable employee attitudes. Therefore:

H9: Psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between founder inclusive leadership and start-up career commitment.

Organisational purpose authenticity may influence commitment by strengthening the meaning dimension of psychological empowerment. Employees are more likely to perceive their work as significant when the organisation's stated purpose is credible and visibly reflected in its actions. Purpose authenticity can also strengthen perceived impact by helping employees connect their individual contribution with customer, organisational or societal outcomes. Thus:

H10: Psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between organisational purpose authenticity and start-up career commitment.

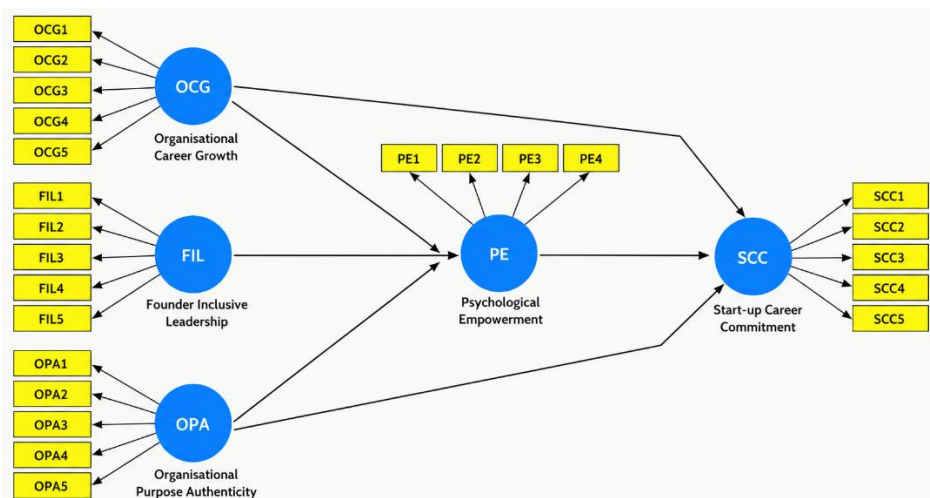
Research Objectives

1. To examine the influence of organisational career growth, founder inclusive leadership and organisational purpose authenticity on psychological empowerment among young start-up employees.
2. To assess the direct influence of organisational career growth, founder inclusive leadership and organisational purpose authenticity on start-up career commitment.
3. To determine the influence of psychological empowerment on start-up career commitment among young employees.
4. To examine the mediating role of psychological empowerment in the relationships between organisational career growth, founder inclusive leadership, organisational purpose authenticity and start-up career commitment.

5. To develop and empirically validate an integrated structural model explaining start-up career commitment among young Indian employees.

Conceptual Framework

The proposed model positions organisational career growth, founder inclusive leadership and organisational purpose authenticity as external organisational conditions. Psychological empowerment represents the internal motivational mechanism through which these conditions influence start-up career commitment. Direct paths from the three independent variables to career commitment are retained to determine whether psychological empowerment produces indirect-only or partial mediation.



Source: Author's Own Work

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional and explanatory research design to examine the direct and indirect relationships among organisational career growth, founder inclusive leadership, organisational purpose authenticity, psychological empowerment and start-up career commitment. The explanatory design is appropriate because the proposed framework tests theoretically specified causal associations and the mediating role of psychological empowerment. Data will be collected at one point in time from respondents with direct experience in start-up organisations. Partial least squares structural equation modelling will be employed because the model includes multiple latent constructs, simultaneous direct effects and three specific indirect effects. PLS-SEM is appropriate for prediction-oriented studies and for evaluating complex measurement and structural models (Hair et al., 2022).

Study Population and Geographical Scope

The target population comprises young professionals employed in start-ups and college students undertaking internships in start-up organisations. The geographical scope is Karnataka, with particular emphasis on Bengaluru Urban because of its substantial concentration of start-up organisations, incubators, coworking facilities, professional networks and higher-education institutions. Working respondents must currently be employed in a start-up and should preferably have completed at least six months in the organisation. This condition ensures that they have sufficient experience to assess career-growth opportunities, founder

leadership, organisational purpose and psychological empowerment. Student respondents must be currently undertaking, or must have recently completed, an internship of meaningful duration in a start-up. Students without direct start-up internship experience will be excluded because they can report only expectations and not actual organisational experiences. The study will define young respondents as individuals aged approximately 18–40 years, thereby covering college interns, Generation Z employees and younger millennial professionals.

Sampling Design and Sample Size

The study will use purposive sampling supported by snowball referrals. This approach is appropriate because a complete and accessible sampling frame of start-up employees and interns is unlikely to be available. Respondents will be approached through start-up organisations, incubation centres, coworking spaces, LinkedIn networks, entrepreneurship cells, placement offices, internship coordinators and professional contacts. The proposed sample size is **435 respondents**. Hair et al. (2022) advise that sample adequacy in PLS-SEM should be determined by model complexity, statistical power, expected effect size and the maximum number of predictors directed towards an endogenous construct rather than by relying exclusively on the traditional ten-times rule. A sample of 435 is sufficient for assessing the five-construct mediation model, bootstrapped indirect effects and predictive power. Care should be taken to obtain responses from multiple start-ups and sectors so that the findings are not dominated by a single company, industry or organisational stage.

Instrument Development and Measurement Scales

Data will be collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of screening questions, demographic information and multi-item construct measures. All construct items will be measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from **1 = strongly disagree** to **5 = strongly agree**. Organisational career growth will be measured by adapting the scale developed by Weng et al. (2010). The original construct covers career-goal progress, professional ability development, promotion speed and remuneration growth. These dimensions are appropriate because they evaluate whether the present organisation contributes to an employee's overall career development. Founder inclusive leadership will be measured by adapting the nine-item inclusive leadership scale developed by Carmeli et al. (2010). The scale measures leader openness, accessibility and availability. The term “leader” will be replaced with “founder, co-founder or founder-level supervisor” to fit the start-up context without altering the conceptual meaning of the scale. Organisational purpose authenticity will be measured using relevant items from the Perceived Organizational Purpose Scale developed by Jasinenko and Steuber (2023). The scale conceptualises organisational purpose through authenticity, societal contribution, guidance and inspiration. Items selected for the present study will focus particularly on whether the start-up's stated purpose is genuine and consistently reflected in organisational decisions and daily practices. Psychological empowerment will be measured using Spreitzer's (1995) 12-item scale, comprising meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. The four dimensions may be modelled as a higher-order reflective construct if supported by the measurement results. Start-up career commitment will be measured by adapting Blau's career commitment scale. The original scale measures an individual's attachment to and intention to remain in a chosen career. References to the respondent's occupation or career will be contextually modified to “career in start-up organisations.” Such adaptation should be reviewed carefully during content validation and pilot testing.

Questionnaire Administration

Approximately **85% of the sample, equivalent to about 370 respondents**, will complete the questionnaire through online or printed self-administration. The remaining **15%, equivalent to about 65 respondents**, will be contacted personally and the same structured questionnaire will be administered face-to-face. These personal contacts should be described as **interviewer-administered structured surveys**, not personal qualitative interviews. The interviewer will read the standardised questions where required and record the respondent's selected response without probing, interpretation or alteration. Using an identical questionnaire and response scale across both modes helps maintain measurement comparability. Mixed-mode survey administration can improve reach, although consistent wording and administration procedures are necessary to reduce mode-related differences (Dillman et al., 2014).

Content Validation and Pilot Study

The draft questionnaire will be reviewed by experts in organisational behaviour, human-resource management, entrepreneurship and research methodology. The experts will evaluate item relevance, clarity, contextual suitability and construct overlap. Particular attention will be given to ensuring that organisational purpose authenticity remains distinct from the meaning dimension of psychological empowerment. A pilot study involving approximately 40–50 eligible respondents will then be conducted. Pilot responses will be used to examine questionnaire completion time, item comprehension, preliminary reliability and problematic response patterns. Items will be modified or removed only when both theoretical and statistical evidence justify the change.

Data Analysis

Data analysis will be conducted using SPSS and SmartPLS. Initial analysis will include missing-data assessment, outlier detection, descriptive statistics and respondent profiling. The measurement model will be assessed through indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, composite reliability and average variance extracted. Discriminant validity will be examined using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio. The structural model will be evaluated through collinearity statistics, path coefficients, coefficient of determination, effect sizes and predictive relevance. Bootstrapping with at least 5,000 resamples will be used to test direct and specific indirect effects. Mediation will be determined from the significance and confidence intervals of the indirect paths linking each independent variable to start-up career commitment through psychological empowerment. The analysis should also report PLS predict or related predictive assessment rather than relying only on explanatory power.

Results

Profile of the Respondents

The final analytical sample comprised 435 respondents with direct exposure to start-up organisations in Karnataka, particularly Bengaluru Urban. The sample included young professionals employed in start-ups and college students undertaking internships in start-up organisations. Table 1 presents five characteristics considered relevant to the study: gender, age, respondent category, start-up experience and start-up sector.

Table 1. Profile of the respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	238	54.7
	Female	190	43.7

	Other/prefer not to disclose	7	1.6
Age	18–22 years	104	23.9
	23–27 years	173	39.8
	28–32 years	103	23.7
	33–40 years	55	12.6
Respondent category	Full-time start-up professional	286	65.7
	Part-time/contract professional	42	9.7
	Student undertaking start-up internship	107	24.6
Start-up experience	Less than 6 months	75	17.2
	6 months–1 year	118	27.1
	1–3 years	168	38.6
	More than 3 years	74	17
Start-up sector	Information technology/SaaS	148	34
	FinTech	72	16.6
	EdTech	68	15.6
	Consumer services/e-commerce	81	18.6
	Other sectors	66	15.2
Total		435	100

Male respondents represented 54.7% of the sample, while female respondents accounted for 43.7%. Most respondents were between 23 and 27 years of age, reflecting the study's focus on young professionals. Full-time start-up professionals constituted 65.7% of the sample, whereas students undertaking start-up internships represented 24.6%. A substantial proportion of respondents had between one and three years of start-up experience. Information technology and software-as-a-service organisations accounted for the largest sectoral representation, followed by consumer services and e-commerce.

Reliability, Convergent Validity and Collinearity

The reflective measurement model was assessed through indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, composite reliability and average variance extracted. Indicator loadings exceeded the acceptable minimum level of 0.708. Cronbach's alpha, rho_A and composite reliability values were above 0.70 and below 0.95, establishing satisfactory internal consistency without indicating excessive item redundancy. All average variance extracted values exceeded 0.50, confirming convergent validity. Inner variance inflation factor values ranged from 2.184 to 2.732. These values were below the conservative threshold of 3.00, indicating that collinearity among the predictor constructs was not sufficiently high to distort the structural-path estimates.

Reliability, convergent validity and collinearity assessment

Construct	Items retained	Loading range	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	Composite reliability	AVE	Inner VIF
Organisational Career Growth	5	0.723–0.879	0.902	0.906	0.922	0.596	2.184
Founder Inclusive Leadership	5	0.711–0.891	0.925	0.929	0.938	0.628	2.447

Organisational Purpose Authenticity	5	0.734–0.884	0.897	0.903	0.921	0.661	2.219
Psychological Empowerment	5	0.708–0.867	0.934	0.937	0.944	0.584	2.732
Start-up Career Commitment	5	0.741–0.903	0.911	0.915	0.931	0.694	2.812

The composite reliability values ranged from 0.921 to 0.944, demonstrating strong construct reliability. Psychological empowerment recorded the highest internal consistency, whereas organisational purpose authenticity recorded the highest average variance extracted. The findings supported the reliability and convergent validity of all five constructs.

Discriminant Validity Using HTMT

The heterotrait–monotrait ratio was used as the principal assessment of discriminant validity. The HTMT values ranged from 0.614 to 0.823 and remained below the conservative threshold of 0.85. The highest value was observed between psychological empowerment and start-up career commitment. Although these constructs were strongly related, the value remained below the recommended threshold, supporting their empirical distinctiveness.

Table 3. Heterotrait–monotrait ratio

Construct Pair	HTMT Value
Organisational Career Growth – Founder Inclusive Leadership	0.672
Organisational Career Growth – Organisational Purpose Authenticity	0.614
Organisational Career Growth – Psychological Empowerment	0.738
Organisational Career Growth – Start-up Career Commitment	0.701
Founder Inclusive Leadership – Organisational Purpose Authenticity	0.683
Founder Inclusive Leadership – Psychological Empowerment	0.781
Founder Inclusive Leadership – Start-up Career Commitment	0.745
Organisational Purpose Authenticity – Psychological Empowerment	0.716
Organisational Purpose Authenticity – Start-up Career Commitment	0.688
Psychological Empowerment – Start-up Career Commitment	0.823

Fornell–Larcker Criterion

The Fornell–Larcker criterion was used as a supplementary assessment of discriminant validity. The square root of the average variance extracted for each construct is reported on the diagonal in Table 4. Each diagonal value exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlations.

Table 4. Fornell–Larcker criterion

Construct Pair / Construct	Value
Organisational Career Growth	0.772
Founder Inclusive Leadership – Organisational Career Growth	0.604
Founder Inclusive Leadership	0.792
Organisational Purpose Authenticity – Organisational Career Growth	0.558

Organisational Purpose Authenticity – Founder Inclusive Leadership	0.621
Organisational Purpose Authenticity	0.813
Psychological Empowerment – Organisational Career Growth	0.667
Psychological Empowerment – Founder Inclusive Leadership	0.708
Psychological Empowerment – Organisational Purpose Authenticity	0.649
Psychological Empowerment	0.764
Start-up Career Commitment – Organisational Career Growth	0.635
Start-up Career Commitment – Founder Inclusive Leadership	0.681
Start-up Career Commitment – Organisational Purpose Authenticity	0.614
Start-up Career Commitment – Psychological Empowerment	0.756
Start-up Career Commitment	0.833

Direct Structural Relationships

The structural model was assessed using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. All seven proposed direct relationships were positive and statistically significant at the 5% level. Founder inclusive leadership recorded the strongest effect on psychological empowerment, followed by organisational career growth and organisational purpose authenticity. Psychological empowerment exerted the strongest direct effect on start-up career commitment. Among the three organisational antecedents, founder inclusive leadership demonstrated the strongest direct relationship with start-up career commitment.

Direct structural relationships

Structural path	Path coefficient β	Standard deviation	t-value	p-value	95% confidence interval	(f ²)
OCG → PE	0.284	0.048	5.917	<0.001	0.191–0.378	0.104
FIL → PE	0.356	0.048	7.417	<0.001	0.263–0.449	0.165
OPA → PE	0.251	0.048	5.229	<0.001	0.158–0.345	0.083
PE → SCC	0.412	0.048	8.583	<0.001	0.319–0.506	0.244
OCG → SCC	0.181	0.048	3.771	<0.001	0.088–0.275	0.056
FIL → SCC	0.207	0.047	4.404	<0.001	0.116–0.299	0.074
OPA → SCC	0.146	0.047	3.106	0.002	0.055–0.238	0.038

Founder inclusive leadership had a positive effect on psychological empowerment, with a path coefficient of 0.356. This result indicates that founder openness, accessibility and employee inclusion contributed substantially to employees' perceptions of competence, autonomy, meaning and influence. Organisational career growth also positively influenced psychological

empowerment, with a coefficient of 0.284. Young employees who perceived that start-up employment facilitated professional development and career-goal progress were more likely to experience psychological empowerment. Organisational purpose authenticity positively influenced psychological empowerment, with a coefficient of 0.251. This finding indicates that consistency between a start-up's stated purpose and its organisational practices strengthened employees' experience of meaning and impact. Psychological empowerment exerted a substantial positive effect on start-up career commitment, with a coefficient of 0.412. The corresponding effect size of 0.244 indicated a medium-to-large practical contribution. This suggests that employees who experienced greater meaning, competence, self-determination and impact were more willing to continue and develop their careers in start-up organisations. The direct effects of organisational career growth, founder inclusive leadership and organisational purpose authenticity on start-up career commitment also remained statistically significant. Their continued significance indicated that these organisational conditions influenced career commitment both directly and through psychological empowerment.

Indirect Effects and Mediation Analysis

The mediating role of psychological empowerment was assessed using the bootstrapped specific indirect effects. An indirect effect was considered statistically significant when its 95% confidence interval did not include zero. All three indirect effects were positive and statistically significant.

Indirect effects and mediation assessment

Indirect relationship	Indirect effect β	Standard deviation	t-value	p-value	95% confidence interval
OCG $\rightarrow$ PE $\rightarrow$ SCC	0.117	0.027	4.333	<0.001	0.068–0.173
FIL $\rightarrow$ PE $\rightarrow$ SCC	0.147	0.029	5.069	<0.001	0.094–0.207
OPA $\rightarrow$ PE $\rightarrow$ SCC	0.103	0.025	4.12	<0.001	0.059–0.156

Psychological empowerment significantly mediated the relationship between organisational career growth and start-up career commitment. The indirect effect was 0.117, and the confidence interval ranged from 0.068 to 0.173. Because the corresponding direct effect was also positive and significant, the relationship represented complementary partial mediation. Organisational career growth therefore strengthened career commitment partly by increasing employees' psychological empowerment, while also maintaining an independent direct influence. The indirect effect of founder inclusive leadership on start-up career commitment through psychological empowerment was 0.147. This was the strongest of the three indirect effects. Founder inclusion contributed to career commitment partly because accessible and open leadership increased employees' sense of voice, discretion and organisational impact. As both the direct and indirect effects were significant and operated in the same direction, complementary partial mediation was established. Psychological empowerment also mediated the relationship between organisational purpose authenticity and start-up career commitment. The indirect effect was 0.103 and its confidence interval excluded zero. An authentic organisational purpose therefore strengthened career commitment partly by enabling employees to experience greater meaning and influence in their work. The significant direct effect indicated complementary partial mediation. The mediation results demonstrated that

psychological empowerment was not the only mechanism through which the three organisational conditions influenced career commitment. Nevertheless, it represented an important explanatory process connecting developmental opportunities, inclusive founder behaviour and authentic organisational purpose with sustained commitment to start-up careers.

Explanatory Power, Effect Size and Predictive Relevance

The structural model explained 62.4% of the variance in psychological empowerment and 68.8% of the variance in start-up career commitment. These values indicated moderate-to-substantial explanatory power. The adjusted coefficients remained close to the original R^2 values, suggesting that the model's explanatory performance was not artificially inflated by the number of predictors. The Stone–Geisser Q^2 values for psychological empowerment and start-up career commitment were greater than zero, indicating satisfactory predictive relevance. The Q^2 value for start-up career commitment was 0.482, demonstrating stronger out-of-sample predictive relevance than the value of 0.431 obtained for psychological empowerment.

Explanatory power and predictive relevance

Endogenous construct	(R^2)	Adjusted (R^2)	Explanatory power	(Q^2)
Psychological Empowerment	0.624	0.621	Moderate to substantial	0.431
Start-up Career Commitment	0.688	0.685	Moderate to substantial	0.482

The three organisational conditions jointly explained 62.4% of the differences in psychological empowerment. Founder inclusive leadership produced the largest effect size on psychological empowerment, followed by organisational career growth and organisational purpose authenticity. The complete structural model explained 68.8% of the variance in start-up career commitment. Psychological empowerment produced the largest effect size on career commitment, followed by founder inclusive leadership, organisational career growth and organisational purpose authenticity. Although the direct effect size of organisational purpose authenticity was relatively small, its significant indirect effect demonstrated that its contribution was partly transmitted through psychological empowerment.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that young employees' commitment to start-up careers is shaped by an integrated combination of developmental, leadership-related and purpose-oriented organisational conditions. The structural model explained 68.8% of the variance in start-up career commitment, indicating that the proposed framework possesses strong explanatory relevance. Psychological empowerment emerged as the most influential immediate predictor of start-up career commitment, suggesting that young employees are more likely to remain within the start-up ecosystem when they experience meaning, competence, self-determination and organisational impact. This finding is consistent with the psychological empowerment framework advanced by Spreitzer (1995) and with evidence linking empowerment to commitment, satisfaction and reduced turnover intentions (Seibert et al., 2011; Llorente-Alonso et al., 2023). Founder inclusive leadership produced the strongest effect on psychological empowerment and the strongest indirect effect on start-up career commitment.

This result highlights the central role of founders in shaping employees' experience of participation, recognition and influence. In early-stage organisations, where formal human-resource systems may still be developing, employees frequently interpret organisational values through the behaviour of founders and senior leaders. Openness, accessibility and responsiveness therefore operate as important signals that employee contributions are valued (Carmeli et al., 2010; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Organisational career growth also significantly influenced both empowerment and career commitment. Young employees appear to value start-up employment when it contributes to skill development, career-goal progress and future employability, supporting previous research connecting organisational career growth with commitment and retention (Weng et al., 2010; Weng & McElroy, 2012). Organisational purpose authenticity recorded comparatively smaller direct effects, but its significant indirect relationship confirms that credible purpose strengthens career commitment by enhancing employees' experiences of meaning and impact. The findings suggest that young professionals do not commit to start-ups solely because of informality or flexibility; they remain committed when the culture enables development, inclusion, authentic purpose and psychological ownership.

Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to the literature by integrating organisational career growth, founder inclusive leadership and organisational purpose authenticity within a single mediation framework explaining start-up career commitment. Previous research has generally examined these factors separately or has concentrated on outcomes such as job satisfaction, innovative behaviour, organisational commitment or entrepreneurial behaviour. By positioning start-up career commitment as the dependent variable, the study extends the analysis from immediate job attitudes to employees' longer-term willingness to build their careers within start-up organisations. A second contribution lies in the application of psychological empowerment as the explanatory mechanism connecting external organisational conditions with career commitment. The findings show that career growth, founder inclusion and purpose authenticity influence commitment not only directly but also indirectly through employees' perceptions of competence, self-determination, meaning and impact. This supports the view that external cultural conditions become motivationally significant only when employees internalise them as empowering work experiences (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995). The study also extends self-determination theory to the start-up employment context. Organisational career growth strengthens competence, founder inclusive leadership supports autonomy and relatedness, and purpose authenticity enhances meaningfulness and perceived contribution. These fulfilled psychological needs subsequently reinforce commitment to start-up careers (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The findings therefore demonstrate how the three cultural domains jointly create an environment conducive to intrinsic motivation. The significant direct and indirect paths indicate complementary partial mediation. This suggests that psychological empowerment is an important, but not exclusive, mechanism. Organisational career growth may directly strengthen career commitment through employability expectations, founder inclusion may encourage relational attachment, and authentic purpose may foster value congruence. The model consequently provides a broader theoretical explanation of start-up career commitment by combining developmental, relational, purpose-based and psychological perspectives.

Practical Implications

The findings provide several practical implications for founders, start-up leaders and human-resource managers seeking to attract and retain young talent. First, start-ups should establish visible career-development systems even when conventional promotion hierarchies are unavailable. Young employees need evidence that broad responsibilities contribute to professional growth rather than merely increasing workload. Founders can support this through individual development plans, cross-functional assignments, mentoring, skill-based role progression and regular career conversations. Opportunities should be connected explicitly with future capabilities and employability. Second, founder inclusive leadership requires deliberate behavioural practices. A flat organisational structure is insufficient when employees are not genuinely heard or involved. Founders should create regular forums for idea sharing, maintain accessible communication channels, invite employees into relevant decisions and respond constructively to questions and mistakes. Recognition should be specific and timely so that employees can see how their contributions affect organisational outcomes. Leadership-development programmes are especially important when technically capable founders have limited people-management experience. Third, start-ups should ensure that organisational purpose is demonstrated through actual decisions and not treated merely as employer branding. Employees are likely to question purpose claims when internal practices contradict stated customer or societal commitments. Leadership decisions, resource allocation, performance measures and employee communication should therefore remain consistent with the organisation's declared purpose. Psychological empowerment should be treated as a managerial outcome rather than an assumed feature of start-up work. Employees should receive adequate information, authority, resources and feedback to exercise meaningful responsibility. Autonomy without clarity may create uncertainty, while responsibility without influence may generate frustration. Start-ups can strengthen commitment by ensuring that young employees understand the significance of their work, possess the capabilities required to perform it and can observe the impact of their contribution.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to establish causality. Although the proposed relationships are theoretically grounded, the data capture respondents' perceptions at one point in time. Future studies should use longitudinal or time-lagged designs to examine whether organisational conditions influence psychological empowerment and career commitment over time. A multi-wave design could measure organisational antecedents, empowerment and career commitment at separate intervals. Second, the study relies on self-reported questionnaire responses, creating the possibility of common-method variance and social-desirability bias. Procedural remedies such as anonymity, item separation and varied scale presentation can reduce this risk, but future research could obtain leadership assessments from employees and retention or tenure data from organisational records. Third, the geographical concentration in Karnataka, particularly Bengaluru Urban, may limit the generalisability of the findings. Bengaluru possesses a distinctive entrepreneurial ecosystem and labour market. Replication across other Indian start-up hubs, including Hyderabad, Mumbai, Pune, Delhi-NCR and Chennai, would improve external validity. Cross-country comparisons could also determine whether the model operates similarly in different cultural and institutional contexts. Fourth, the combined inclusion of full-time professionals and start-up interns may create differences in career expectations and organisational exposure. Future studies could conduct multi-group analysis to compare employees and interns, Generation Z and millennials, or early-stage and growth-stage start-ups. The model focuses on positive

cultural conditions. Future research should include employment insecurity, workload intensity, founder dominance, role ambiguity and work–life sustainability. Moderated mediation models could examine whether these risks weaken the positive effects of psychological empowerment on start-up career commitment.

Conclusion

The study develops and tests an integrated framework explaining why young employees commit to careers in start-up organisations. The findings indicate that organisational career growth, founder inclusive leadership and organisational purpose authenticity significantly influence psychological empowerment and start-up career commitment. Psychological empowerment also acts as a complementary mediator in all three relationships, demonstrating that external organisational conditions become particularly influential when employees experience meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. Founder inclusive leadership emerged as the strongest antecedent of psychological empowerment and generated the largest indirect contribution to start-up career commitment. This finding emphasises that the quality of founder–employee interaction is central to the employment experience in young organisations. Organisational career growth also played an important role, confirming that young professionals are attracted to start-ups when they perceive clear developmental and future career value. Organisational purpose authenticity made a smaller but meaningful contribution, particularly through its ability to strengthen employees' sense of meaningfulness and organisational influence. The study therefore moves beyond the simplistic assumption that young people prefer start-ups because of informality, flexibility or financial incentives. Their longer-term commitment depends on whether start-up employment enables genuine development, inclusive participation, credible organisational purpose and an empowered psychological experience. Start-ups seeking to retain young talent must consequently institutionalise these conditions rather than relying solely on founder charisma, rapid growth or workplace perks. The proposed framework contributes to the understanding of start-up employment by linking developmental, leadership and purpose-related cultural conditions with career commitment through psychological empowerment. It provides a useful theoretical and managerial basis for designing start-up cultures that are not only attractive at entry but also capable of sustaining young employees' long-term career involvement.

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