



Psychological Ownership in Shared Digital Workspaces

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Abstract

Shared digital workspaces have become central to contemporary collaborative work. Cloud documents, collaborative repositories, shared project boards, virtual whiteboards, group communication platforms, digital design environments, and other jointly editable systems allow several individuals to contribute to the same informational or creative artifact. Such arrangements complicate traditional assumptions about ownership because legal ownership, authorship, access rights, editing authority, and subjective feelings of possession do not necessarily coincide. Psychological ownership theory provides a useful framework for understanding this tension because individuals can experience an object, task, idea, digital artifact, or organizational resource as psychologically “mine” or “ours” even without formal ownership rights. Foundational research identifies control, intimate knowledge, and self-investment as important routes through which such feelings develop, while later work demonstrates that psychological ownership can generate both stewardship-oriented behavior and defensive territoriality.

The present study develops an integrated framework connecting psychological ownership of shared digital workspaces with perceived workspace control, shared responsibility, territoriality, team trust, and collaborative contribution. Because no original participant dataset was supplied, a synthetic sample of 450 hypothetical digital-workspace users was generated. Standardized multiple regression and interaction analysis were used to illustrate the proposed relationships. Shared responsibility emerged as the strongest positive predictor of collaborative contribution ($\beta = .364$), followed by psychological ownership ($\beta = .337$), team trust ($\beta = .241$), and workspace control ($\beta = .138$). Territoriality showed a substantial negative association ($\beta = -.278$), while the psychological ownership $\times$ trust interaction was positive ($\beta = .095$). The complete model explained 53.1% of simulated variance in collaborative contribution.

The findings illustrate a central theoretical argument: psychological ownership in shared digital workspaces is not inherently collaborative or restrictive. When ownership is accompanied by trust, shared responsibility, and clear collaborative control, it can strengthen contribution and stewardship. When psychologically owned resources are treated as personal territories requiring defense, however, the same sense of ownership may discourage openness and knowledge exchange. Evidence from organizational territoriality, virtual communities, virtual teams, and shared augmented-reality research supports this double-edged interpretation.

Keywords: psychological ownership; shared digital workspaces; collaborative work; territoriality; team trust; knowledge sharing; digital collaboration; virtual teams; shared responsibility; workspace control



1. Introduction

Contemporary knowledge work increasingly occurs within digital environments in which several people can view, modify, discuss, reorganize, and reuse the same work product. Collaborative documents, cloud folders, digital project-management boards, code repositories, shared databases, design canvases, internal knowledge platforms, and virtual whiteboards often operate as persistent workspaces rather than simple communication channels. These systems weaken the traditional connection between physical possession and ownership. A digital file can be simultaneously accessible to many colleagues, a project board may contain contributions from several departments, and a design artifact may be repeatedly modified by people who did not create its initial version. Yet technical shareability does not eliminate subjective possession. Psychological ownership theory proposes that individuals can develop a feeling that a target is “mine” or “ours” even when they possess no exclusive legal rights over it. Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks established the organizational foundations of this construct and identified control, intimate knowledge, and investment of the self as important routes through which psychological ownership develops.

The digital environment can intensify these ownership processes because collaborative artifacts preserve highly visible traces of personal investment. An employee may spend several days structuring a shared document, designing an analytical dashboard, organizing a project repository, developing a template, curating a knowledge base, or refining a virtual presentation. Although the artifact formally belongs to a team or organization, the individual's accumulated time, expertise, creativity, and decision making can create a powerful subjective connection. Van Dyne and Pierce demonstrated that psychological ownership can be distinguished from related work attitudes and is associated with important employee outcomes, while Avey and colleagues further extended the construct by incorporating dimensions related to self-efficacy, accountability, belongingness, and self-identity. Digital collaboration therefore creates an important paradox: the same mechanisms that encourage employees to invest deeply in shared resources may also increase the likelihood that they perceive those resources as personally significant possessions.

This paradox becomes consequential because psychological ownership has both constructive and defensive behavioral possibilities. Constructively, feelings of ownership may encourage responsibility, persistence, care, proactive improvement, and willingness to protect the quality of a shared resource. Job-design research similarly suggests that control and self-investment can strengthen ownership and thereby influence employee responses to work. Defensively, however, ownership may generate territorial behavior when individuals believe that valued resources, knowledge, ideas, or work areas require protection from others. Brown, Lawrence, and Robinson's theory of organizational territoriality explicitly recognized that employees establish and defend territories around physical spaces as well as ideas, roles, relationships, and other organizational objects. Subsequent research showed that psychological ownership can be associated with territorial behavior and that trust materially changes the social consequences of this relationship.

The tension is particularly relevant to shared digital work because collaboration requires overlapping access and repeated intervention by others. Unlike a personal file, a genuinely collaborative document is expected to be changed by colleagues. Unlike a private notebook, a shared knowledge repository has value precisely because its contents can be consulted, corrected, extended, and reused.



Research on virtual communities shows that people can develop psychological ownership toward online communities and that ownership is linked with participation, while virtual-team research demonstrates that knowledge sharing contributes to trust and collaboration. At the same time, knowledge-based ownership can encourage knowledge hiding through territoriality, illustrating that subjective possession can interfere with the openness required for collective work. Peng's research provides direct evidence for this mechanism, while Connelly and colleagues established knowledge hiding as a distinct organizational behavior rather than simply the absence of knowledge sharing.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Examine Psychological Ownership as a Predictor of Collaborative Contribution

The first objective is to examine whether psychological ownership of a shared digital workspace can positively contribute to collaborative behavior. Collaborative contribution is conceptualized as the willingness to add useful content, improve existing material, respond to colleagues, correct errors, maintain shared resources, and participate constructively in collective digital work.

The theoretical expectation is not that psychological ownership automatically produces collaboration. Rather, ownership is expected to create motivational investment that can support contribution when the surrounding environment defines the digital resource as a collective rather than exclusively personal possession. This interpretation is consistent with organizational psychological-ownership research linking ownership with responsibility and constructive work attitudes.

2.2 To Assess Shared Responsibility and Territoriality as Divergent Ownership Pathways

The second objective is to distinguish two behavioral pathways that may emerge from psychological ownership. The first is shared responsibility, in which users experience a jointly maintained digital resource as something they are accountable for improving and protecting for collective benefit. The second is territoriality, in which users attempt to mark, guard, restrict, or defend a valued digital area, idea, file, process, or knowledge resource.

This distinction is central because prior ownership theory does not imply uniformly beneficial consequences. Organizational territoriality research demonstrates that psychologically important objects can become targets of anticipatory and reactionary defense, while knowledge-hiding research shows that feelings of ownership over knowledge can motivate withholding through territorial mechanisms.

2.3 To Evaluate Team Trust and Workspace Control as Conditions for Constructive Ownership

The third objective is to examine whether team trust and perceived workspace control help determine whether psychological ownership supports rather than obstructs collaboration. Control is an established route to psychological ownership, but shared digital systems require control to be distributed rather than monopolized.

Team trust is expected to provide an important relational condition. Brown, Crossley, and Robinson found that trust influences the relationship between psychological ownership and territorial behavior, while virtual-team research identifies trust and knowledge sharing as critical components of effective collaboration. The present model therefore examines a psychological ownership $\times$ team trust interaction.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Foundations and Development of Psychological Ownership

Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks define psychological ownership as a psychological state in which an individual experiences a target as belonging to the self. Their theoretical model emphasizes that this state is distinct from formal legal ownership and can develop toward tangible or intangible targets. They identify efficacy and effectance, self-identity, and having a place as important motivational foundations, while exercising control, developing intimate knowledge, and investing the self provide major pathways through which ownership develops.

Van Dyne and Pierce later provided empirical evidence distinguishing psychological ownership from conventional job attitudes. Their three field studies connected feelings of possession with employee attitudes and organizational citizenship behavior. Mayhew, Ashkanasy, Bramble, and Gardner similarly found job-based and organization-based psychological ownership to be distinguishable from job satisfaction and organizational commitment and reported relationships between autonomy, ownership, and work attitudes. These findings are important because digital-workspace ownership should not simply be treated as another name for platform satisfaction or organizational commitment.

Avey, Avolio, Crossley, and Luthans extended psychological ownership theoretically and developed a multidimensional approach incorporating self-efficacy, accountability, belongingness, and self-identity. Their results connected psychological ownership with several predicted work outcomes. Pierce, Jussila, and Cummings further integrated psychological ownership into job-design theory and emphasized how job characteristics that provide control, knowledge, and self-investment can encourage ownership. In shared digital workspaces, editable access, contribution histories, customization, task responsibility, and repeated interaction can provide precisely these ownership-generating conditions.

3.2 Psychological Ownership, Territoriality, and Knowledge Protection

The principal risk associated with strong ownership in a shared environment is territoriality. Brown, Lawrence, and Robinson developed an organizational theory of territorial behavior showing how people mark, defend, maintain, and restore territories around valued organizational objects. Their theory applies not only to physical desks and offices but also to ideas, roles, relationships, and other meaningful resources. A digital workspace can therefore become a territory even though it has no fixed physical boundaries.

Digital territorial behavior may take subtle forms. A user may resist changes to a file they originally created, restrict edit permissions unnecessarily, move colleagues' contributions without consultation, maintain private versions of shared resources, avoid documenting specialized knowledge, insist that particular folders remain under personal control, or react defensively when others alter a preferred workflow. Such behavior does not require a formal claim of ownership. It can emerge from subjective possession combined with perceived infringement.

Brown and Robinson empirically examined reactions to territorial infringement and found that perceived infringement can generate anger and reactionary defense. In collaborative digital systems, routine editing by colleagues may therefore be interpreted either as legitimate co-production or as infringement, depending on whether ownership expectations are aligned.



Knowledge represents an especially important digital territory. Connelly, Zweig, Webster, and Trougakos established knowledge hiding as a distinct intentional behavior involving the concealment or withholding of knowledge requested by another person. Peng subsequently demonstrated that knowledge-based psychological ownership was positively related to knowledge hiding and that territoriality mediated this relationship.

3.3 Digital Communities, Virtual Teams, and Shared Digital Objects

Lee and Suh extended psychological ownership into virtual communities and demonstrated that users can develop ownership toward a community despite the absence of conventional physical possession. Their study examined how ownership develops in virtual environments and how it affects user responses and participation. This evidence is important because shared digital workspaces are similarly socially constructed environments whose value depends on continuing member participation.

Kwon later examined user participation from a psychological-ownership perspective and focused specifically on the relationship between users and social-media platforms. The study reinforces the proposition that subjective ownership can influence participation in digital environments and that social context matters for the resulting behavior. Digital ownership therefore does not require a physical object; control, familiarity, identity, and self-investment can attach users psychologically to an information system or digital environment.

Virtual-team research adds the collaboration component. Alsharo, Gregg, and Ramirez found that knowledge sharing positively influences trust and collaboration in virtual teams and examined these relationships as contributors to virtual-team effectiveness. Their findings support the present study's treatment of team trust as a critical variable rather than simply an incidental background characteristic. Shared digital objects create an additional challenge because multiple participants can make simultaneous or sequential ownership claims. Carrozzini and colleagues investigated psychological ownership of shared augmented-reality holograms and showed that socially shared digital experiences complicate conventional assumptions about possession. Poretski, Arazy, Lanir, and Nov provided still more direct evidence in 2021.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Analytical Framework

The present study adopts a simulation-based quantitative design supported by an integrative theoretical review. Simulation was selected because no authentic dataset from shared digital-workspace users was provided. This design permits a complete statistical demonstration without fabricating organizations, employees, industries, demographic characteristics, or observed workplace behavior.

A synthetic dataset representing 450 hypothetical shared digital-workspace users was generated. The proposed model includes psychological ownership, perceived workspace control, shared responsibility, territoriality, team trust, and collaborative contribution.

The analytical logic distinguishes between psychological ownership itself and the behaviors through which ownership is expressed. Psychological ownership may support shared responsibility while simultaneously creating territorial tendencies. Trust and workspace control are therefore included as contextual variables capable of influencing whether ownership becomes collaborative or defensive.

Table 1: Proposed Operationalization of Study Constructs

Construct	Conceptual Definition	Illustrative Measurement Approach	Analytical Role
Psychological Ownership	Subjective feeling that a shared digital workspace or meaningful part of it is personally or collectively “mine/ours”	Multi-item 1–5 composite assessing possession, attachment, identification, and perceived ownership	Primary predictor
Workspace Control	Perceived ability to influence, organize, edit, customize, and manage the digital workspace	1–5 control composite	Ownership-related resource
Shared Responsibility	Feeling of accountability for maintaining, improving, and protecting the shared workspace for collective benefit	1–5 stewardship-oriented composite	Positive collaborative pathway
Territoriality	Tendency to mark, guard, restrict, defend, or resist others' intervention in psychologically owned digital resources	1–5 territorial-behavior composite	Negative pathway
Team Trust	Confidence that collaborators will use, edit, and contribute to shared resources competently and appropriately	1–5 trust composite	Relational predictor and moderator
Collaborative Contribution	Constructive participation in creating, correcting, sharing, maintaining, and improving common digital work	1–5 collaborative-behavior composite	Dependent variable

4.2 Synthetic Data Generation and Model Specification

Psychological ownership was generated on a bounded five-point scale with substantial interindividual variation. Team trust and perceived workspace control were independently generated so that employees with similar ownership levels could experience different collaborative environments.

Shared responsibility was modeled as positively associated with psychological ownership and workspace control. This assumption reflects the theoretical proposition that ownership accompanied by meaningful control can create responsibility and stewardship.

Territoriality was modeled differently. Stronger psychological ownership increased territorial tendencies, whereas stronger trust and workspace control reduced them. This structure was chosen because prior organizational evidence shows that psychological ownership can encourage territorial defense but that a trust-rich environment can reduce territorial behavior.

4.3 Statistical Procedures, Reproducibility, and Ethics

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all major constructs. Variables were standardized before multiple regression to permit direct comparison of coefficient magnitudes.

The regression model estimated the independent associations of psychological ownership, shared responsibility, territoriality, team trust, workspace control, and the ownership $\times$ trust interaction with collaborative contribution. Overall model performance was evaluated using (R^2).

For graphical analysis, psychological ownership and team trust were each divided into four equal-frequency categories. Mean collaborative-contribution scores were then calculated for each of the 16 ownership–trust combinations and presented as a heatmap. This format was selected because the theoretical focus concerns the joint rather than isolated effects of ownership and trust.

No institutional ethical approval or informed consent was required because no human participants, private digital communications, organizational files, user logs, or proprietary platform records were accessed. A genuine empirical implementation would require appropriate ethical review, participant consent where applicable, data minimization, confidentiality safeguards, and strict separation between research data and managerial employee-surveillance systems.

5. Analysis

5.1 Descriptive Characteristics of the Synthetic Constructs

- The synthetic dataset produced a mean psychological-ownership score of 3.20 with a standard deviation of 0.79. Perceived workspace control averaged 3.18 (SD = 0.70), while shared responsibility averaged 3.21 (SD = 0.66). Mean team trust was 3.27 (SD = 0.70).
- Territoriality was comparatively lower, with a mean of 1.87 and a standard deviation of 0.65. Collaborative contribution averaged 3.51 (SD = 0.65).
- These values describe the generated dataset rather than an actual organizational population. Their purpose is to create sufficient variation for examining how constructive and defensive ownership mechanisms might operate simultaneously.

5.2 Regression Analysis of Collaborative Contribution

Table 2: Simulated Standardized Regression Predicting Collaborative Contribution

Predictor	Standardized β	p-value	Direction	Analytical Interpretation
Psychological Ownership	0.337	< .001	Positive	Ownership independently supports contribution after other conditions are considered
Shared Responsibility	0.364	< .001	Positive	Strongest positive predictor; stewardship-oriented ownership supports collaboration
Territoriality	-0.278	< .001	Negative	Defensive ownership substantially reduces collaborative contribution
Team Trust	0.241	< .001	Positive	Trust independently strengthens collaborative behavior
Workspace Control	0.138	< .001	Positive	Meaningful control provides an additional positive contribution
Psychological Ownership $\times$ Trust	0.095	.002	Positive interaction	Ownership is more constructive under stronger team trust
Model (R^2)	0.531	—	—	53.1% of simulated variance explained

Note: N = 450 synthetic observations. Results are generated for methodological demonstration and must not be interpreted as empirical population estimates.

Shared responsibility produced the largest standardized positive coefficient, $\beta = .364$, suggesting that the most constructive form of digital ownership may be the feeling that the workspace requires responsible collective care rather than simply personal possession.

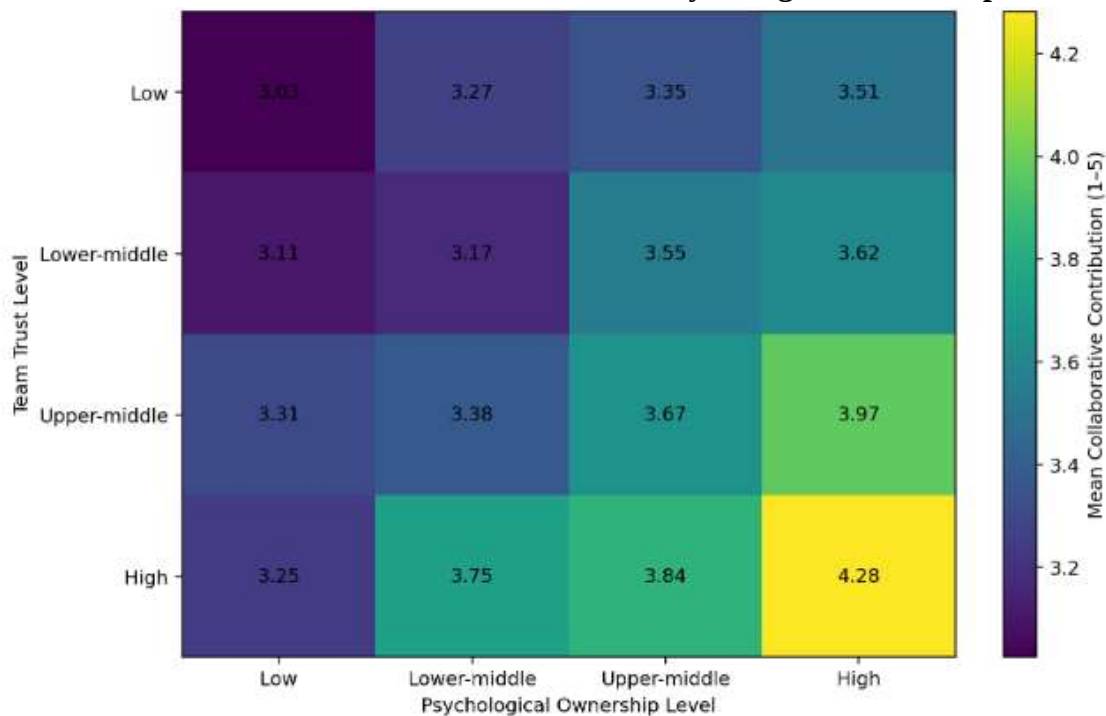
Psychological ownership itself remained strongly positive at $\beta = .337$. This simulated relationship illustrates the possibility that employees who experience a meaningful personal connection with a shared workspace can become more willing to improve and sustain it rather than behaving as detached users.

Territoriality moved in the opposite direction, $\beta = -.278$. The size of this association illustrates the central double-edged character of psychological ownership. Ownership can encourage investment, yet its benefits can be substantially undermined when users begin defending files, ideas, knowledge, or digital regions from legitimate collaboration. This pattern is theoretically consistent with organizational territoriality and knowledge-hiding research.

Team trust was also positively associated with collaboration, $\beta = .241$, while workspace control produced a smaller positive coefficient, $\beta = .138$. The ownership $\times$ trust interaction was significant at $\beta = .095$, suggesting that psychological ownership becomes more compatible with collaboration when users trust colleagues to interact appropriately with psychologically valued resources.

5.3 Joint Pattern of Psychological Ownership and Team Trust

Graph 1: Simulated Collaborative Contribution Across Psychological Ownership and Team Trust



The heatmap demonstrates the joint pattern particularly clearly. When both psychological ownership and team trust were low, mean collaborative contribution was approximately 3.03. Higher psychological ownership under low trust increased the mean only to approximately 3.51, indicating that ownership alone does not generate the strongest collaborative environment.

The highest mean collaborative-contribution score, approximately 4.28, occurred when both psychological ownership and team trust were high. High trust accompanied by upper-middle ownership produced a mean of 3.84, while high ownership accompanied by upper-middle trust produced approximately 3.97.

These differences support an interaction-based interpretation. Psychological ownership creates stronger constructive value when team members believe that colleagues will respect contributions, use shared resources appropriately, and reciprocate collaborative effort.

The lower-trust cells are also important. They demonstrate why increasing employees' feeling that a project is "theirs" without creating a trustworthy collaboration climate may produce limited benefits. In low-trust environments, employees may perceive others' interventions as potential infringement rather than legitimate co-creation.



Key Finding: The simulation suggests that psychological ownership contributes most strongly to collaborative digital work when it is accompanied by shared responsibility and high team trust, while territoriality represents the principal mechanism through which ownership can become counterproductive.

6. Discussion

6.1 From Personal Investment to Collective Stewardship

The first major implication of the study is that psychological ownership should not be eliminated from shared digital work merely because shared resources require openness. Employees often produce their best work precisely because they feel personally connected to an outcome. Control, self-investment, specialized knowledge, and identity attachment are established routes through which psychological ownership develops. A digital environment stripped of all personal ownership may therefore create another problem: employees may treat shared resources as anonymous infrastructure for which nobody feels particularly responsible.

The more useful distinction is between exclusive possession and collective stewardship. A person can feel that a shared workspace is “ours” without insisting that particular contributions remain untouched. Collective ownership preserves emotional investment while redefining responsibility around the continuing quality of the shared artifact.

This interpretation is consistent with Avey and colleagues' emphasis on accountability and belongingness within psychological ownership. A user who experiences a project board as part of a valued collective identity may be motivated to update records, correct errors, document decisions, improve organization, and support other contributors. The psychologically owned target becomes something the individual wants to maintain rather than merely control.

6.2 Territoriality as the Principal Risk of Digital Psychological Ownership

The second implication concerns territorial behavior. Shared digital workspaces often make territoriality less visible than physical offices do. There may be no closed door, reserved desk, or physical barrier. Nevertheless, employees can establish digital territories through permissions, folder structures, specialized jargon, private copies, undocumented processes, ownership of passwords, file naming conventions, or informal claims such as “this is my dashboard” or “nobody changes this section without asking me.”

Brown, Lawrence, and Robinson's organizational theory is particularly applicable because territorial behavior can surround ideas, roles, and relationships as well as physical objects. The digital workspace expands the number of such intangible objects. A dataset, code module, analytic method, design template, client record, presentation structure, or knowledge category may all become psychological territories.

6.3 Trust, Governance, and the Design of Shared Digital Work

The third implication is that ownership cannot be managed through interface design alone. Team trust fundamentally influences whether other people's actions are interpreted as helpful contributions or threatening intrusions. Brown, Crossley, and Robinson demonstrated that trust changes the relationship



between psychological ownership and territorial behavior. Virtual-team research similarly identifies trust and knowledge sharing as central to collaboration.

This helps explain why identical collaboration platforms can produce very different behavior across teams. In one team, editing a colleague's document may be regarded as normal assistance. In another, the same act may be interpreted as disrespect. The software capability is identical; the ownership norm is different.

Organizations should therefore establish explicit conventions regarding who can edit, when consultation is expected, how disagreements are resolved, what constitutes unacceptable deletion or overwriting, how authorship is recognized, and which resources are individually versus collectively governed. Ambiguity increases the possibility that ordinary collaboration will be interpreted as infringement.

7. Conclusion

Psychological ownership offers a powerful framework for understanding behavior in shared digital workspaces because collaborative technology separates formal ownership from subjective possession. Employees do not need legal property rights to experience a document, database, repository, design environment, or project system as psychologically “mine” or “ours.” Control, intimate knowledge, self-investment, identity, and repeated interaction can produce meaningful ownership even when several collaborators possess technically equal access.

The present simulation demonstrates how this psychological connection may generate both constructive and restrictive outcomes. Psychological ownership and shared responsibility were positively associated with collaborative contribution, whereas territoriality was negatively associated with the same outcome. Team trust provided an additional positive contribution and strengthened the constructive association between ownership and collaboration. These numerical findings are simulated rather than empirical, but they illustrate a theoretically coherent double-edged model supported by established organizational research.

The central implication is that organizations should not ask whether employees ought to feel ownership of shared digital work. A more productive question is what kind of ownership the workspace encourages. Ownership grounded in accountability, recognition, belonging, and collective responsibility can motivate employees to improve common resources. Ownership grounded in exclusive control and defensive territoriality can fragment knowledge, discourage editing, and turn shared work into a collection of protected personal domains.

Effective shared digital workspaces therefore require psychological as well as technical governance. Permission systems, version histories, attribution, role clarity, edit conventions, conflict-resolution norms, trust, and shared responsibility should work together so that employees can invest themselves deeply in digital resources without needing to defend those resources from legitimate collaborators. Research on virtual communities, virtual teams, knowledge hiding, organizational territoriality, and shared digital objects all indicates that ownership remains meaningful even when work becomes increasingly intangible and distributed. Future longitudinal and multilevel research can extend this framework by examining when individual feelings of “mine” evolve into a more sustainable collective experience of “ours.”



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