

Followership: Leader narcissism and follower work engagement

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Data availability statement

The data for this study is available upon reasonable request by emailing the corresponding author.

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Abstract

Purpose: Drawing on the **Conservation of Resources (COR) theory**, this study examines how leader narcissism influences follower work engagement. We develop a cross-level mediation and moderation model to investigate the mediating role of follower self-efficacy and the moderating role of follower locus of control, incorporating both leader self-ratings and follower perceptions of leader narcissism to capture perception distance.

Design/methodology/approach: Multi-source, three-wave data were collected from 293 followers and their leaders in professional service firms. The model was tested using **multilevel mixed-effects linear regression in R**.

Findings: Leader narcissism negatively affected follower work engagement only when rated by followers, not when self-rated by leaders, indicating a perception distance in how leader narcissism is interpreted. Follower self-efficacy mediated the relationship between follower-rated leader narcissism and follower work engagement, consistent with COR's resource-loss pathway. Additionally, follower locus of control moderated the negative effect of follower-rated leader narcissism on self-efficacy, with the effect being stronger for those with low internal (external locus of control).

Originality: This study advances the narcissism and leadership literature by demonstrating that the consequences of leader narcissism are perception-driven and by identifying follower self-efficacy as a key psychological mechanism linking leader narcissism to engagement. It further highlights follower locus of control as a boundary resource shaping vulnerability to resource depletion, offering new insight into how followers internalise and respond to perceived leader narcissism.

Keywords: Leader narcissism, self-efficacy, work engagement, locus of control.

Introduction

Since the concept of “The Dark Side of Personality” was introduced to personality and leadership studies (e.g., Hogan and Hogan, 2001; Paulhus and Williams, 2002), research has increasingly examined how these traits, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, manifest in leaders and influence follower behaviours (e.g., Akaighe et al., 2026a; Cai et al., 2024; Gaddis and Foster, 2015; Guillén et al., 2023; Moorman et al., 2025). Among these traits, narcissism has attracted particular attention because of its strong association with leadership roles (Akaighe and Adisa, 2025; Haertel et al., 2023; Schyns, 2015). Grandiose leader narcissism, referred to here as leader narcissism, is characterised by grandiosity, excessive arrogance, and a sense of entitlement, with low empathy towards followers (e.g., Akaighe et al., 2026b; Gauglitz et al., 2023; Braun et al., 2018). Although often considered a dark trait, leader narcissism is not uniformly harmful, as prior research suggests it has both bright and dark sides (e.g., Braun, 2017; Campbell et al., 2011; Choi and Phan, 2022; Helfrich and Dietl, 2019). On the positive side, leader narcissism motivates followers to engage in more information search and creativity (Zhou et al., 2019) and enhances leadership emergence and effectiveness (Grijalva et al., 2015; Nevicka et al., 2018). Conversely, its negative effects on followers include suppressing voice (Huang et al., 2020), hindering innovative behaviours (Yang et al., 2021), and reducing job satisfaction, performance, embeddedness and psychological safety (Bernerth, 2022; Erkutlu and Chafra, 2017; Wang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023).

Overall, the negative consequences of leader narcissism tend to outweigh the benefits, leading scholars to call for more research to understand its effects, explanatory processes, and potential moderating factors on follower outcomes (e.g., Braun, 2017; Gruda et al., 2023; Lartey et al., 2025; Lynch and Benson, 2024). While prior research has examined the relationship between leader narcissism and follower work engagement (Gruda et al., 2023;

Owens et al., 2015), much of this work has focused on broad associations or specific contexts, leaving important explanatory mechanisms and boundary conditions underdeveloped. For instance, Fehn and Schütz (2021) explored job engagement from physical and affective perspectives, and Gruda et al. (2023) applied machine learning to study online interactions, whereas Owens et al. (2015) examined job engagement in relation to leader humility. However, these studies do not fully explain how and when leader narcissism influences follower work engagement in organisational settings. Our study addresses this gap by investigating the mediating role of follower self-efficacy and the moderating role of locus of control, using multi-source, multi-wave data. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of the processes and conditions that shape the impact of leader narcissism on follower work engagement, an issue of practical importance given that only 23% of employees worldwide were engaged in 2022 (Pendell, 2023), and low engagement is linked to dissatisfied customers, high turnover rates, reduced innovation, and overall poor organisational performance.

Recent scholarship underscores both the timeliness of this inquiry and the precise gap we address: Braun et al. (2025) demonstrate, through the lens of trait activation, that the consequences of leader grandiose narcissism are context-dependent, with organisational cues determining whether narcissistic self-serving behaviour is “sparked or smothered”, and that follower perceptions are the conduit through which leader narcissism erodes trust; similarly, Gauglitz et al. (2026) show that follower perceptions of leader narcissism dimensions relate differentially to follower work engagement and emotional exhaustion, reinforcing the view that what followers perceive, rather than what leaders report, drives follower outcomes. Yet this emerging perception-focused stream has neither simultaneously modelled leader self-ratings and follower ratings of the same leaders nor identified the motivational mechanism and follower-side boundary condition through which perceived leader narcissism depletes engagement. In parallel, contemporary resource scholarship cautions that claims about

resource-loss processes require careful specification of mechanisms, boundary conditions, and temporal ordering (Sonnentag and Meier, 2024), while engagement research continues to call for resource-based explanations of when and why leadership shapes engagement (Bakker et al., 2023; Holúbek et al., 2026); our multi-source, three-wave, cross-level design responds directly to these calls.

Leaders play a pivotal role in stimulating follower work engagement (Knight et al., 2017) through their responsibilities and influence, including coaching, mentoring, directing, supervising, performance appraisal, and reporting authority (Armstrong, 2022). However, narcissistic leaders, characterised by self-centeredness, lack of empathy, arrogance, and demeaning behaviour, are likely to negatively impact follower work engagement. Therefore, understanding and mitigating the negative effects of leader narcissism on follower work engagement is essential for organisational success. Additionally, prior research has often relied on leader self-reports to examine leader narcissism (Braun et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2020; Owens et al., 2015). This approach is understandable, as traits are real and demonstrate consistent patterns in how people think, feel, and behave. However, it does not account for the multistakeholder and multifaceted nature of leadership perception, given that leadership is in the eyes of the beholder (Hildenbrand et al., 2021; Schyns and Sanders, 2007). Similarly, there is a growing acknowledgement that assessing leader narcissism solely from the leader's perspective fails to capture its dynamics and impact on followers. Multi-source studies and relational analysis (e.g., Gruda et al., 2023; Bernerth et al., 2022) show that follower-rated assessments often reveal a stronger effect of leader narcissism than self-reports. Furthermore, narcissistic leaders are unlikely to admit their narcissistic tendencies, often demonstrating attribution bias and providing scores that do not reflect their true traits (Taylor, 2010; Wang et al., 2021). In contrast, followers' perceptions are based on their experiences with the leader and their expectations of the leader's role as it affects their work outcomes (Yang and Li, 2018).

Therefore, drawing on conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001), we explore the impact of leader narcissism on follower work engagement using both leader and follower narcissism ratings. This approach aims to better understand the multi-source perspective and the perceptual distance between leader and follower assessments of leader narcissism. Thus, we propose a cross-level mediation and moderation model (see Figure 1) to examine the direct and indirect effects of leader narcissism on follower work engagement.

Our study posits that follower self-efficacy mediates the relationship between leader narcissism and follower work engagement, consistent with the COR theory and its resource caravans' mechanism (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll, 2011; Hobfoll, 2014). Self-efficacy, defined as the belief in one's ability to complete tasks and achieve goals (Bandura, 1997), is a core personal resource. Although other plausible mediators, such as follower emotions or psychological safety, have been examined in prior research (e.g., Braun et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021), these constructs primarily capture affective reactions or relational climates. In contrast, self-efficacy is theoretically proximal to work engagement because it directly governs individual capacity to mobilise effort, persist in the face of obstacles, and invest personal energy at work (Bandura, 2014). From a COR perspective, self-efficacy functions as a central node within a resource caravan, enabling the accumulation and protection of related motivational resources such as vigour, dedication and absorption. Supportive leadership styles, such as transformational leadership, often foster self-efficacy, enabling followers to build additional resources and achieve positive outcomes (Nielsen and Munir, 2009). Conversely, when supportive leadership is absent, such as under narcissistic leaders, followers may experience resource depletion, losing interconnected personal resources like self-efficacy and work engagement (Akaighe et al., 2026b; Helfrich and Dietl, 2019). Because the treatment followers receive from their leaders can either enhance their sense of belonging or undermine

their motivation and well-being (Yukl, 2008), self-efficacy is a pivotal factor in explaining how leader narcissism impacts follower work engagement.

Additionally, our model examines the moderating role of follower locus of control. Locus of control refers to the extent to which individuals believe they have control over events affecting their lives (Rotter, 1966). Followers with a high (internal) locus of control generally perceive themselves as capable of influencing outcomes, whereas those with a low (external) locus of control attribute outcomes to external forces such as luck or powerful others. Although a range of individual differences could potentially shape responses to leader narcissism, such as resilience, the Big Five personality traits, or demographic factors, we focus on locus of control because it directly reflects followers' perceived agency in managing resource threats. Within the COR framework (Hobfoll, 2001), locus of control operates as a higher-order personal resource that shapes how individuals appraise adverse leadership behaviours (Xu et al., 2022), whether it is controllable or overwhelming. This makes locus of control uniquely suited to explaining differential resource loss trajectories, compared to broader trait models that describe relatively stable dispositions but do not directly address how individuals interpret and respond to resource depletion in specific work contexts. Under the COR framework (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll, 2011), contextual factors like perceived lack of leadership support or toxic environments create resource-depleting pathways that amplify the negative impacts of leader narcissism on follower outcomes (Chiu et al., 2005; Galvin et al., 2018; Hobfoll, 2011). We propose that followers with a low (external) locus of control are more likely to internalise these negative experiences, resulting in diminished self-efficacy and lower work engagement. In summary, this study examines how leader narcissism influences follower work engagement through the mediating role of follower self-efficacy and the moderating role of follower locus of control. Rather than reiterating that narcissistic leaders are broadly harmful, this study theoretically specifies how leader narcissism, when expressed in leadership roles, operates

through a resource-depleting process by identifying a COR-based motivational mechanism (follower self-efficacy), clarifying a follower-side boundary condition (locus of control), and demonstrating that follower-perceived leader narcissism, rather than leaders' self-views, is the theoretically proximal driver of engagement. In doing so, the study advances leadership theory by foregrounding perceptual distance and a follower-centric resource process, thereby moving beyond meta-analytic generalisations to explain why engagement suffers, for whom, and through whose lens leader narcissism exerts its effects. It makes three key contributions.

First, it advances the narcissism and broader leadership literature (e.g., Gruda et al., 2023; Lartey et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2022) by identifying follower self-efficacy as a central psychological mechanism linking leader narcissism to follower work engagement. This responds to calls to uncover more mediating pathways through which leader narcissism shapes follower outcomes (Gruda et al., 2023; Owens et al., 2015). Second, this study introduces follower locus of control as a boundary condition, demonstrating which follower control orientations buffer or amplify the effects of perceived leader narcissism. This adds to the literature emphasising the role of follower characteristics in shaping responses to leader narcissism (e.g., Braun et al., 2018; Nevicka et al., 2018). Third, by incorporating both leader self-assessment and follower perception of leader narcissism, this study highlights the importance of perception distance, showing that follower interpretations, not leader self-views, drive the motivational process. Overall, we develop a cross-level mediation and moderation model using three-wave data from a sample of Nigerian employees and their leaders. See the theoretical model in Figure 1.

.....INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE.....

Theory and Hypotheses Development

COR theory

The COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) explains how people strive to gain and protect valued resources such as self-efficacy, social support and energy because these resources are essential for coping and thriving in work environments (Hobfoll, 2001). Resources rarely exist in isolation; rather, they are interconnected and tend to accumulate in clusters, forming what Hobfoll describes as resource caravans (Hobfoll, 2014; Bon and Shire, 2022). This mechanism suggests that gaining one resource often facilitates the acquisition of others, creating spirals of resource gain. In organisational settings, resource caravans are transmitted through social interactions and contextual factors, which COR refers to as resource caravan pathways (Hobfoll, 2011; Holmgreen et al., 2017). These pathways can either foster resource accumulation, such as when leaders provide support and recognition or hinder it, as in toxic environments where resources are depleted (Wirtz et al., 2017). Thus, a leader trait such as leader narcissism plays a critical role in shaping these pathways while followers experience resource gain or resource loss. We draw on this theory to further develop our arguments and hypotheses. In doing so, we heed recent guidance that tests of COR's loss processes should clearly specify the focal mechanism, its boundary conditions, and the temporal ordering of measurements (Sonnentag and Meier, 2024), requirements our mediation-moderation design and three-wave data are structured to meet.

Leader narcissism and follower work engagement

Work engagement is a central construct in organisational psychology because it reflects how individuals invest physical, cognitive and emotional energy into their work roles (George et al., 2022; George et al., 2023; Lesener et al., 2020) and remains at the forefront of contemporary management inquiry (Bakker et al., 2023; Holúbek et al., 2026). Defined as a positive, work-related state characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et

al., 2002; Schaufeli et al., 2006), engagement predicts creativity, citizenship behaviours, and service-orientation (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008). Drawing on COR theory and its resource caravan pathway (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll, 2014), we argue that leader narcissism undermines follower work engagement. As outlined above, resource loss is disproportionately more impactful than resource gain (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018), and leadership constitutes a key caravan passageway: supportive leadership creates resource-rich environments, whereas negative leader traits can trigger resource loss spirals. Narcissistic leaders, characterised by self-centeredness, a need for admiration, and lack of empathy, often fail to provide critical social and emotional resources such as support, recognition and trust (Luo and Chen, 2024; Nevicka et al., 2018). Instead, they create resource-depleting environments marked by poor communication, low psychological safety and diminished social exchange quality (Grijalva et al., 2020; Lubit, 2022). Followers who expect mentorship and support perceive such behaviours as signals that their contributions are undervalued (Choi and Phan, 2022), which erodes their sense of meaning and motivation; key psychological resources for sustaining work engagement. Consistent with the COR resource caravan pathway, the absence of leadership support initiates a resource loss spiral, reducing followers' enthusiasm and energy, and ultimately lowering work engagement. Empirical evidence supports this, showing that narcissistic leadership is associated with emotional exhaustion, stress and poor work embeddedness (Bernierth, 2022; Erkutlu and Chafra, 2017; Zhang et al., 2023). Taken together, we propose that leader narcissism and follower perception of leader narcissism negatively influence work engagement by disrupting resource caravans and triggering resource loss spirals.

H1a: Leader narcissism (leader-rated) is negatively related to follower work engagement.

H1b: Follower perception of leader narcissism is negatively related to follower work engagement.

The mediating effect of follower self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to accomplish tasks and achieve goals (Bandura, 1997), is a critical personal resource that influences motivation, persistence and performance. Within the resource caravan logic introduced above, self-efficacy is a central personal resource whose gain attracts further resources and whose loss can erode others in the caravan (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Leader behaviours and how they are perceived by followers play a pivotal role in shaping followers' self-efficacy. Supportive leaders provide social and emotional resources that strengthen followers' confidence, while destructive leader traits and behaviours undermine these resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Lubit, 2022). Narcissistic leaders, characterised by self-centredness, lack of empathy and exploitative tendencies, often fail to provide affirmation and instead engage in behaviours like blame-shifting and belittlement (Luo and Chen, 2024; Blair et al., 2017). These behaviours signal to followers that their contributions are undervalued, creating a resource-depleting environment that weakens their sense of competence.

From a COR perspective, leader narcissism disrupts the resource caravan pathway by removing critical social resources, which diminishes followers' self-efficacy, a key personal resource that attracts other resources such as motivation and engagement. Reduced self-efficacy limits followers' ability to cope with challenges, lowers their confidence in achieving work goals, and ultimately undermines their work engagement (Chan et al., 2017). Empirical evidence supports this mechanism, showing that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between leadership styles and follower work outcomes (e.g., Nielsen and Munir, 2009; Liu et al., 2010). In the context of leader narcissism, this mediation reflects a resource loss spiral; diminished self-efficacy leads to reduced vigour, dedication and absorption, the hallmarks of

work engagement. Taken together, we argue that leader narcissism negatively impacts follower work engagement through its detrimental effect on follower self-efficacy. This applies to both leaders' self-rated narcissism and followers' perception of leader narcissism.

H2a: Follower self-efficacy mediates the relationship between leader narcissism (self-rated) and follower work engagement.

H2b: Follower self-efficacy mediates the relationship between follower perception of leader narcissism and follower work engagement.

The moderating role of follower locus of control

Locus of control reflects individuals' generalised expectations about whether outcomes are contingent on their own action (internal locus of control) or determined by external forces (external locus of control) (Rotter, 1966; Spector, 1988). In the work context, locus of control is a well-established personal resource associated with motivation, coping and performance (Ng et al., 2006). From a COR perspective, locus of control likewise participates in the resource caravan, shaping how contextual pathways facilitate or hinder resource flows (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018). As argued above, supportive leadership nourishes these caravans, whereas negative leader traits precipitate resource loss spirals. Leader narcissism, marked by self-focus, entitlement and low empathy, signals a resource-hostile passageway that deprives followers of socioemotional resources (e.g., recognition, psychological safety), thereby threatening self-efficacy, a pivotal personal resource in COR (Lubit, 2022; Nevicka et al., 2018). However, followers differ in the extent to which they absorb or buffer this loss. We contend that follower locus of control is a boundary condition that shapes how leader narcissism translates into self-efficacy erosion.

Followers with a high internal locus of control are more likely to construe workplace adversities as influenceable, activate problem-focused coping, and maintain a sense of agency, all of which protect and replenish their resource caravan (Ng et al., 2006; Parkes, 1994). In

COR terms, internal locus of control is itself a foundational personal resource that attracts other resources (e.g., self-efficacy, optimism) and helps interrupt resource loss (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Evidence shows that internal locus of control buffers stressor-strain links and mitigates the detrimental effect of adverse contexts (e.g., high demands, politics) on wellbeing and functioning (Hochwarter et al., 1999; Parkes, 1994). By implication, when leader narcissism constricts the resource passageway, followers high in internal locus of control should be less likely to internalise the leader's devaluation and more capable of preserving self-efficacy. Conversely, followers with a low internal (more external) locus of control are prone to appraise outcomes as outside their control, rely more on external validation and engage in less proactive coping, patterns that amplify resource loss in corrosive climates (Spector, 1982; Ng et al., 2006). Under narcissistic leadership, they are more likely to absorb the negative passageway, experience resource depletion, and show steeper declines in self-efficacy. This aligns with COR's principles that loss begets further loss, especially among those with fewer internal personal resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Meta-analytic and empirical evidence support these arguments. Internal locus of control is associated with higher motivation, performance and positive work attitudes, and it moderates the impact of stressors on strain functioning (Hochwarter et al., 1999; Parkes, 1994). Parallel literature indicates that personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, optimism) buffer the effects of adverse demands on engagement and well-being (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), mirroring the protective logic we ascribe to an internal locus of control in narcissistic leadership contexts. Thus, consistent with COR's resource caravan and passageway logic, internal locus of control should attenuate the negative association between leader narcissism and follower self-efficacy. Taken together, we hypothesise as follows:

H3a: Follower internal locus of control moderates the relationship between leader narcissism (leader-rated) and follower self-efficacy, such that the negative relationship

is weaker when followers have a high locus of control (vs low internal/greater external locus of control).

H3b: Follower internal locus of control moderates the relationship between follower perception of leader narcissism and follower self-efficacy, such that the negative relationship is weaker when followers have high internal locus of control (vs low internal/greater external locus of control).

Method

Research design and data collection procedure

This study utilised a multisource, multi-wave research design to enhance the validity and replicability of our findings. This approach was chosen for three key reasons. First, collecting data from different sources at separate time points mitigates concerns about common method bias (Kock et al., 2021). Second, the lagged structure allows for temporal separation among predictor, mediator and outcome variables, providing stronger support for the hypothesised mediation pathway (Podsakoff et al., 2024). Third, multisource data strengthen the robustness of our analysis by enabling accurate matching of leader and follower responses while preserving individual-level variance (Lartey et al., 2025). Data collection was conducted online via Qualtrics at three different time points, **each separated by six weeks** to allow for temporal ordering. At Time 1, leaders reported their narcissism, while followers provided information about their locus of control and their perceptions of leader narcissism. At Time 2, followers completed measures of self-efficacy. At Time 3, followers reported their work engagement. To ensure accurate matching and track attrition, participants were assigned **a team code and generated a personal identification number**. This design aligns with best practices in leadership research, where multi-wave, multi-source approaches have been shown to yield more rigorous tests of theoretical models compared to single-source, cross-sectional designs (e.g., Lartey et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023).

Sample

We targeted leaders and their followers in professional service organisations for three reasons. First, professional service contexts (e.g., consulting, finance, legal, oil and gas and banking) are highly interdependent and team-based, making leader-follower dynamics particularly salient for understanding resource exchanges and engagement processes (Zhang et al., 2023). Second, requiring leader-follower data with at least one year of working together ensures that participants had sufficient interaction history for followers to form an accurate perception of leader traits (e.g., narcissism) and for leaders to influence followers' personal resources (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Third, Nigeria represents an emerging economy where hierarchical leadership structures and resource constraints are common, providing a rich context for leader-follower relationships (Ani et al., 2026; Okon et al., 2025; Pepple et al., 2024). We collaborated with organisations' Human Resource departments to recruit full-time professionals from various professional service organisations in Nigeria. A total of 1,200 surveys were distributed to both leaders and followers. After screening and matching the data, the final sample consisted of 293 followers and 96 leaders, with an average of three followers per leader, which provides adequate statistical power for multilevel analysis. Of the participants, 56% were male, with a mean age of 30 years ($SD = 10.2$) for followers and 35 years ($SD = 9.8$) for leaders.

Measures

Leader narcissism was assessed by leaders ($\alpha = 0.86$) and their followers ($\alpha = 0.90$) using the 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames et al., 2006). Both leaders and followers rated the items on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), which is preferred over a forced-choice rating for its increased reliability (Schmid et al., 2021). An example item for leader self-rating is "I really like to be the centre of

attention,” while for follower perceptions, the item was modified to “My leader really likes to be the centre of attention.”

Follower self-efficacy was measured ($\alpha = 0.87$) using the 8-item self-efficacy scale (Chen et al., 2001) on a 5-point scale from 1 (very untrue) to 5 (very true). An example item is “I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I set for myself.”

Follower locus of control was assessed ($\alpha = 0.76$) using 4 items from Judge et al.’s (2003) CSE scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example item is “I determine what will happen in my life.”

Follower work engagement was measured ($\alpha = 0.84$) using the 9-item short version scale (Schaufeli et al., 2006) on a 5-point scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). An example item is “At my work, I feel bursting with energy.”

Control variables included follower gender (1 = male, 2 = female), follower age, and follower frequency of interaction with their leader (1 = less than a week, 2 = about once a week, 3 = a couple of times a week, 4 = most days, 5 = daily), as used in previous leader narcissism research (e.g., Nevicka et al., 2011; Owens et al., 2015).

Analysis strategy

First, to examine the model fit and construct distinctiveness involving leader self-assessment and follower perception of leader narcissism, we conducted two separate multi-level confirmatory factor analyses (MCFA) with leader-rated narcissism and follower-rated leader narcissism on the other follower-rated variables. This is because of the nested nature of the data with multiple followers under leaders, and leader narcissism is at the team level (see Farh and Chen, 2014; Liu et al., 2024). We further tested the between-group agreement, usually assessed by the $r_{wg(j)}$ index and within-group variability, that is, the intraclass correlation (ICC) of leader narcissism at the leader group level, to support leader narcissism aggregation at level 2. Our theoretical model is a cross-level first-stage mediation and moderation model with a

predictor variable at level 2, a mediator, moderator and outcome variables at level 1. Thus, we adopted the following procedures to test the 2-1-1 model. We tested the predictor variable and outcome variable with multilevel mixed-effects linear regression and the indirect effect of the mediator. Finally, we used the Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications to obtain the confidence interval of conditional indirect effects of high (+1 SD internal locus of control) and low (-1 SD external locus of control) in the R package (Fang et al., 2019). Preliminary data analyses, including intercorrelations and internal consistencies, were carried out using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29.

Results

Preliminary results

The model fit with follower-rated leader narcissism as a predictor confirms that the four-factor model including leader narcissism, follower self-efficacy, follower locus of control and follower work engagement fits the data better; $\chi^2 = 881.25$, $df = 419$, $\chi^2/df = 2.05$, Confirmatory Fit Index; CFI = 0.93, Tucker Lewis Index; TLI = 0.91, and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; RMSEA = 0.04) than the alternative models such as the three-factor model where follower self-efficacy and follower work engagement were combined as one factor ($\chi^2 = 2520.56$; $df = 557$, $\chi^2/df = 4.79$, CFI = 0.78, TLI = 0.76, RMSEA = 0.08); two-factor model where other factors were combined except follower rated leader narcissism and follower locus of control ($\chi^2 = 3890.41$; $df = 556$, $\chi^2/df = 6.71$, CFI = 0.61, TLI = 0.59, RMSEA = 0.09); or one-factor model with all variables combined except follower rated leader narcissism ($\chi^2 = 4702.15$; $df = 560$, $\chi^2/df = 8.29$, CFI = 0.46, TLI = 0.33, RMSEA = 0.11). Similarly, the fit for model 2 with leader-rated leader narcissism as a predictor and other variables including follower self-efficacy, follower locus of control and follower work engagement was better (CFI = 0.91, Tucker-Lewis Index; TLI = 0.90, and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; RMSEA = 0.05) than the alternative models.

The $r_{wg(j)}$ for follower-rated leader narcissism was 0.73, which is above the recommended threshold of 0.7 (James et al., 1984) and ICC₁ of 0.17 and ICC₂ of 0.42, which are above 0.05 and 0.20, respectively (Bliese, 2000). The ICC₁ and ICC₂ for the individual-level variables of self-efficacy were 0.24 and 0.52, locus of control was 0.23 and 0.50, and work engagement was 0.33 and 0.62, respectively. Taken together, the aggregation of data to the leader level is justified, and the nested data had a good degree of dependence within the group (James et al., 1984). The means, standard deviation, internal consistencies and correlations between the study variables are presented in Table 1.

.....INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE.....

.....INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE.....

Hypotheses testing

H1a proposed a negative relationship between leader narcissism (leader-rated) and follower work engagement, while H1b proposed that follower perception of leader narcissism would also be negatively related to their work engagement. The results shown in Table 2 indicate that leader self-assessment was not significantly related to follower work engagement ($B = -0.04$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.126$), not confirming H1a. However, follower-rated leader narcissism was negatively and significantly related to follower work engagement ($B = -0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.01$), confirming H1b. Furthermore, H2a predicted that follower self-efficacy mediates the relationship between leader narcissism (leader-rated) and follower work engagement, while H2b predicted the same relationship but with follower perception of their leader narcissism. The results as presented in Table 3 showed that the result was not significant for leader self-assessment narcissism (*indirect effect* = 0.01, $SE = 0.13$; 95% CI [-0.16; 0.19]), not confirming H2a whereas follower self-efficacy mediated the relationship between follower-rated leader narcissism and follower work engagement (*indirect effect* = 0.04, $SE = 0.02$; 95% CI [0.01; 0.08]), supporting H2b.

Finally, we predicted that follower locus of control moderates the relationship between leader narcissism (leader-rated) (H3a), follower perception of leader narcissism (H3b) and follower self-efficacy, such that the negative relationship is weaker when followers have high locus of control (vs low internal/greater external locus of control). The results showed that for leader self-assessment, the interaction between leader narcissism and follower self-efficacy was not significant ($B = -0.01$, $SE = 0.01$; $p = 0.126$), not confirming H3a. However, the interaction was significant for follower-rated leader narcissism and follower self-efficacy ($B = -0.11$, $SE = 0.04$; $p < 0.05$). The simple slope test revealed that the interaction was weaker when followers had high internal locus of control (+1 SD; $B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.04$; 95% CI [-0.08; 0.08]) and stronger when followers had low internal/greater external locus of control (Figure 2; -1 SD; $B = 0.16$, $SE = 0.04$; 95% CI [0.07; 0.25]) confirming H3b.

.....INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE.....

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Discussion

This study developed a cross-level mediation and moderation model to examine how follower self-efficacy mediates the relationship between leader narcissism and follower work engagement, and how follower locus of control moderates this process, drawing on COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001). Anchored in the resource caravans and resource pathways, our findings offer several insights. First, our findings show that follower-rated leader narcissism negatively affects follower work engagement, whereas leader self-assessed narcissism did not. This highlights a perception gap between leaders and followers in how leader narcissism is experienced and internalised. In COR terms, leader narcissism operates as a disruptive passageway only when followers experience it as threatening to their resource caravans, such as social support, recognition, and confidence. This aligns with the view that leadership effects

are perception-driven, and follower interpretations are central to outcomes (Schyns and Sanders, 2007; Fehn and Schütz, 2021).

Second, follower self-efficacy mediated the link between follower-rated leader narcissism and follower work engagement. Within COR's resource caravans' logic (Hobfoll, 2014), self-efficacy is a core personal resource that travels with other resources such as vigour, dedication and absorption; its erosion can trigger a resource loss spiral, diminishing work engagement. Narcissistic leaders create resource-hostile passageways, marked by low empathy, blame and lack of support that undermine followers' confidence to handle work challenges, thereby reducing engagement. Importantly, this mediation appeared only for follower-rated leader narcissism, underscoring that resource loss processes are perception-contingent, and leaders may be unaware of the extent to which their behaviours deplete followers' resource caravans.

Third, follower locus of control moderated the negative link between follower-rated leader narcissism and self-efficacy. Consistent with COR (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll, 2014), locus of control functions as a personal resource shaping the resource caravan. Followers with a high internal locus of control were better able to protect and retain resources, buffering the disruptive effects of leader narcissism. Conversely, followers low in internal (more external) locus of control were more likely to internalise negative experiences, amplifying resource loss and reducing self-efficacy. This moderation appeared only for follower-rated narcissism, again emphasising the primacy of followers' experience in resource dynamics. Overall, narcissistic leaders influence resource passageways in ways that can undermine followers' resources, but these effects materialise when followers perceive resource threats and are mitigated when followers possess strong personal resources. The COR framework thus explains why leader self-assessed narcissism does not directly map onto follower outcomes. Without follower

perception of threat, the passageway does not transmit depletion through the caravan to engagement.

Returning to the theoretical agenda set out in the introduction, our results map directly onto COR theory's (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll, 2014) core propositions. The expectation that leader narcissism functions as a resource-depleting passageway was supported, but only through followers' eyes (H1b), confirming the perception-distance argument that motivated our dual-source design. The resource caravan proposition, that erosion of one central personal resource cascades into the loss of adjacent motivational resources, was evidenced by the mediating role of self-efficacy (H2b): perceived leader narcissism depleted followers' task confidence, which in turn drained the vigour, dedication and absorption that constitute engagement. COR's (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll, 2014) contention that personal resources determine vulnerability to loss spirals was supported by the moderating role of locus of control (H3b), with externally oriented followers suffering the steepest self-efficacy erosion. This close correspondence between theory and results aligns with recent evidence that follower perceptions, rather than leader self-views, transmit the effects of leader narcissism (Braun et al., 2025; Gauglitz et al., 2026). It also carries a direct managerial message, developed below: because the damage travels through perception and personal resources, intervention should target perception monitoring, resource replenishment, and the protection of resource-vulnerable employees.

Theoretical implications

Our paper has three major theoretical implications. First, it contributes to the narcissism and self-efficacy literature (e.g., Akaighe et al., 2026b; Nielsen and Munir, 2009; Lartey et al., 2025; Owens et al., 2015) by illuminating the mediating role of self-efficacy in explaining how leader narcissism shapes follower work engagement. Importantly, we demonstrate that this mediating effect emerges only when followers evaluate their leader's narcissistic tendencies,

but not when leaders self-assess their narcissism. This asymmetry highlights a crucial perception distance (Tafvelin et al., 2024), signalling that what matters for follower motivation is not the leader's actual narcissism, but rather followers' interpretation of it. Integrating these findings into the COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), we show that follower self-efficacy acts as a resource mechanism through which leader narcissism becomes either depleting or enabling. Our findings extend COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) by highlighting that the effects of leader behaviours on followers are shaped by the resource caravan pathways created by followers' subjective perceptions. When followers perceive leader narcissism as threatening or self-serving, their resource passageways constrict, lowering their self-efficacy and, in turn, diminishing engagement. When leaders self-report their narcissism, however, their internal resource caravan passageways do not transfer to followers, reinforcing that resource flows are **perception dependent**. Thus, our study adds nuance to COR theory by showing that resource caravans in the leader-follower relationship are not objective but filtered through followers' meaning-making process.

Second, we contribute to research examining boundary conditions that mitigate or exacerbate the consequences of leader narcissism on follower outcomes (e.g., Nevicka et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2021). Our findings show that follower locus of control moderates the relationship between leader narcissism and follower self-efficacy, but again, only when narcissism is rated by followers. Followers with a low internal locus of control, who believe that external forces shape outcomes, are more susceptible to resource depletion when they perceive their leader as narcissistic. In COR (Hobfoll, 2002) terms, these individuals possess less stable personal resource caravans, making them more vulnerable to the loss spirals triggered by threatening leader behaviours. Conversely, followers high in internal locus of control appear to maintain more robust resource passageways that buffer against the negative appraisal of narcissistic leaders. Critically, this moderating effect was absent when leader

narcissism was based on leader self-ratings, reinforcing that the consequences of leader narcissism are anchored in follower perception, not leader intention or self-view. This further supports the theoretical argument that perception distance shapes the degree to which leader behaviours activate or impede follower resource processes (Tafvelin et al., 2024; Fehn and Schütz, 2021). By integrating locus of control into the COR framework, we highlight how individual differences shape the permeability of resource caravans and determine whether leader narcissism becomes a resource loss threat or is discounted as irrelevant.

Third, by combining COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) with resource caravan passageways, perception distance, and multi-source rating of leader narcissism within our cross-level moderated mediation model, our study offers a novel theoretical framework for understanding the psychological mechanisms through which leader traits shape follower functioning. We advance the argument that resource processes in leader-follower relationships are fundamentally perception-driven, and that alignment (or misalignment) between self-views and follower perception determines whether resource caravans expand or constrict. In so doing, we extend existing leader narcissism research (e.g., Braun et al., 2018; Gauglitz et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2020) by conceptualising leader narcissism not merely as a trait of the leader, but as a relational resource phenomenon shaped by subjective interpretation, psychological distance, and individual resource structures.

Practical implications

From a practical standpoint, our study provides several actionable implications for organisations seeking to manage the resource processes underpinning follower motivation and engagement. Each theoretical mechanism confirmed above translates into a corresponding management lever: perception distance calls for perception-monitoring systems, the self-efficacy mechanism calls for resource-replenishing development, and the locus-of-control boundary condition calls for the targeted protection of resource-vulnerable employees. First,

our results show that the effects of leader narcissism on follower self-efficacy and work engagement are driven primarily by follower perceptions, not leader self-assessment. This perception distance suggests that organisations should not rely solely on leader self-reports to understand the relational impact of leader narcissism. Instead, organisations should implement anonymous upward feedback systems that give followers a safe channel to express their experiences of leader behaviours. This aligns with COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) by enabling organisations to monitor when follower resource caravan passageway (e.g., confidence, psychological safety) begins to constrict. Such systems allow HR departments to detect early signs of resource depletion triggered by perceived leader narcissism and intervene before engagement declines.

Second, because narcissistic tendencies are relatively stable, organisations should focus on not changing the leader's personality but on shaping leader awareness and behaviours, particularly around behaviours that followers interpret as self-serving, dismissive, or lacking empathy. Structured development programmes should include self-awareness, perspective taking and the relational consequences of narcissistic impression management (Mao et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2025). These interventions can help leaders recognise how their behaviours may inadvertently undermine follower resource caravans (e.g., self-efficacy) even when their intentions are not negative.

Third, our findings show that followers differ in their vulnerability to leader narcissism, depending on their locus of control. Followers low in internal locus of control (externals) experience greater self-efficacy depletion when they perceive their leaders as narcissistic. To address this, organisations can take these targeted steps. Offer coaching, resilience-building and self-mastery sessions aimed at enhancing followers' sense of control and self-efficacy (Xu et al., 2022). Such interventions expand followers' resource caravan passageway, buffering the resource loss triggered by perceived leader narcissism. Also, where possible, organisations

should avoid pairing highly narcissistic leaders with followers who score low on internal control, as this pairing is more likely to produce negative motivational outcomes. Instead, HR departments can use personality assessments (already widely used in organisations) to shape more suitable leader-follower matches or provide additional support where mismatches cannot be avoided (Meinecke and Kauffeld, 2019).

Finally, organisations should foster a climate in which employees feel safe to voice concerns about leader behaviours without fear of retaliation (Milliken et al., 2015). Such climates help preserve followers' psychological resources by preventing prolonged resource loss spirals. Encouraging voice behaviours is particularly important in the context where followers perceive narcissistic tendencies in leaders, as it provides employees with a strong coping mechanism to regain a sense of control and protect their self-efficacy.

Limitations and future research directions

Our study has several notable strengths, including the use of multi-source and multi-wave data within a theoretically grounded cross-level model. However, it is not without limitations. First, while the use of multi-wave data helps mitigate concerns over common method bias, it does not establish causality (Baillien et al., 2011). Therefore, we encourage future research to extend this study using multi-level longitudinal data from both leaders and followers to establish causality. Second, our study relied on data from various professional service firms in Nigeria, so generalising the findings to other countries and cultures should be done with caution. We recommend more research from non-Western countries and cultures to extend our study and investigate the effects of leader narcissism on follower outcomes in the workplace. Third, our model examines the individual effect of leader narcissism on work engagement via follower self-efficacy, but it does not account for team-level mediators and moderators. Future research should consider team-level mediators and moderators, such as

team efficacy, to explain the relationship between leader narcissism and team outcomes like teamwork engagement, cohesiveness, and creativity.

Conclusion

Our study explored the direct and indirect effects of leader narcissism on follower work engagement through the mediating role of follower self-efficacy as well as the moderating role of follower locus of control within a cross-level framework. A key insight from our findings is that the negative effects of leader narcissism on follower self-efficacy and work engagement emerged only when followers rated their leader narcissism, **not when self-assessed by leaders**. This highlights a meaningful perceptual distance, underscoring that followers' interpretation rather than leaders' self-views drives the motivational and resource processes outlined in COR theory. This study suggests that organisations should implement targeted training and coaching initiatives that build leader self-awareness and support follower development, helping them mitigate the effects of leader narcissism and foster a more engaged workforce.

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Table 1: Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations among study variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Follower gender	1.50	0.60	—							
2. Follower age	30.25	6.82	−.09	—						
3. Frequency of interactions with the leader	4.95	1.14	−.06	.01	—					
4. Leader narcissism (follower-rated)	5.24	1.07	−.06	−.02	−.03	(.90)				
5. Leader narcissism (leader-rated)	4.83	0.95	−.05	.04	.16*	−.06	(.86)			
6. Follower locus of control	3.46	0.85	.08	.11	.05	.08	.01	(.76)		
7. Follower self-efficacy	4.36	0.52	.09	.13*	.06	−.16*	−.09	.21**	(.87)	
8. Follower work engagement	4.08	0.62	.06	.08	.02	−.17**	−.07	.44**	.36**	(.84)

Note. $N = 293$ followers nested in 96 leaders. Pearson correlations are shown. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities appear in parentheses on the diagonal. Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female. Frequency of interactions: 1 = less than once a week, 2 = about once a week, 3 = a couple of times a week, 4 = most days, 5 = daily.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Source: Authors' own work

Table 2: Multilevel regression results predicting follower work engagement from follower-rated (Model 1) and leader-rated (Model 2) leader narcissism

Variable	Model 1: Follower-rated			Model 2: Leader-rated		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	2.82	0.37	< .001	3.90	0.78	.158
Team membership	−0.01	0.01	.066	−0.01	0.02	.245
Gender	0.13	0.08	.078	0.47	0.24	.296
Age	0.01	0.01	.030	0.55	0.07	< .001
Frequency of interactions	0.01	0.04	.948	0.01	0.02	.376
Leader narcissism	−0.14	0.04	< .001	−0.04	0.11	.126
Leader narcissism × Follower locus of control	−0.11	0.04	.009	−0.01	0.01	.126
<i>R</i> ²	.09			.38		
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.07			.34		
ΔR^2	.05			.19		
<i>F</i>	4.37			10.89		

Note. *N* = 293 followers nested in 96 leaders. Unstandardised coefficients from multilevel mixed-effects linear regression are reported. Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female.

Source: Authors' own work

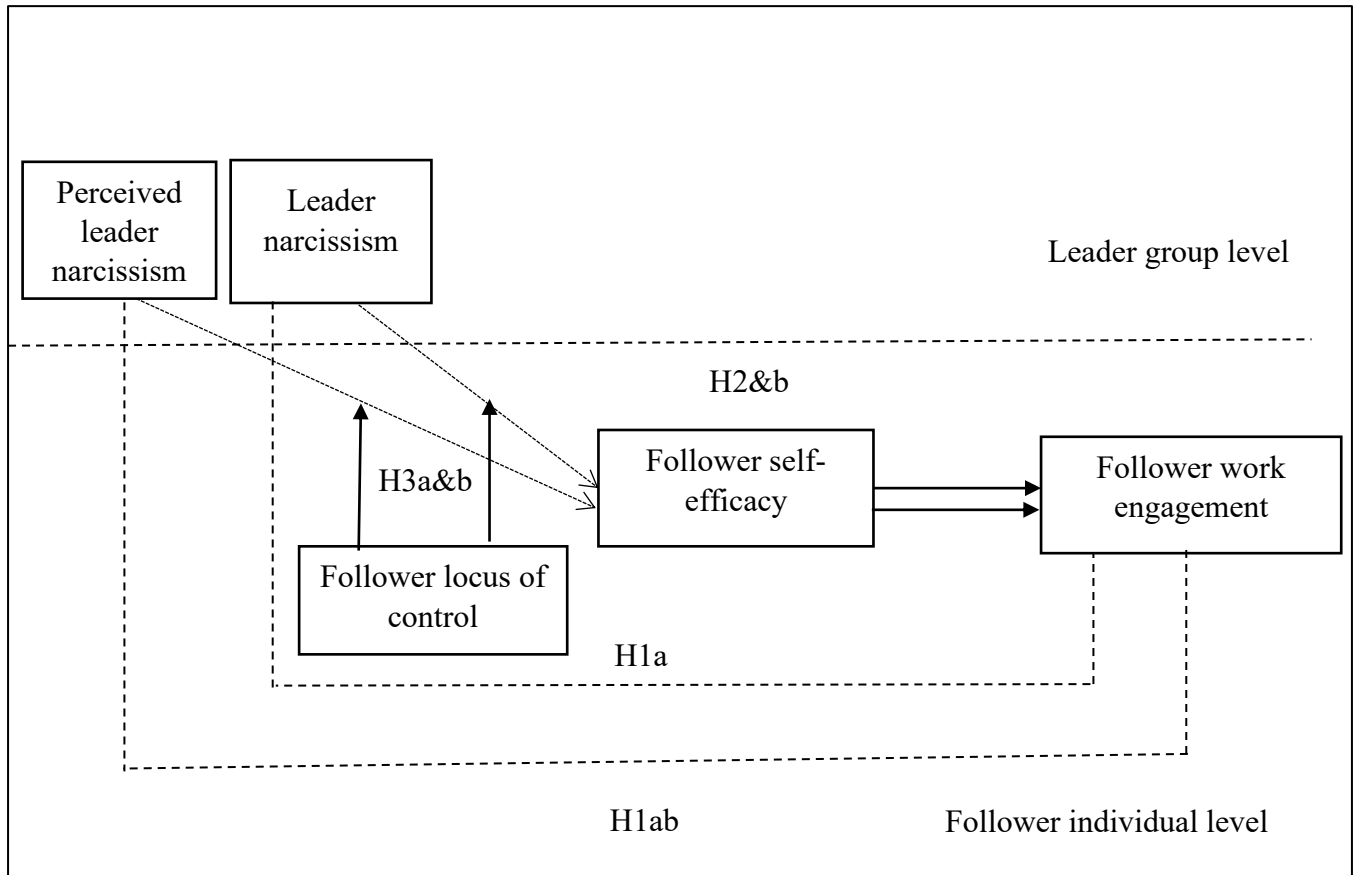
Table 3: *Estimates of indirect and conditional indirect effects of leader narcissism on follower work engagement via follower self-efficacy*

Effect	Estimate	Boot <i>SE</i>	95% CI
Indirect effect via follower self-efficacy (follower-rated leader narcissism)	0.04	0.02	[0.01, 0.08]
Indirect effect via follower self-efficacy (leader-rated leader narcissism)	0.01	0.13	[−0.16, 0.19]
Conditional indirect effect at −1 <i>SD</i> follower locus of control (external)	0.16	0.04	[0.07, 0.25]
Conditional indirect effect at +1 <i>SD</i> follower locus of control (internal)	0.01	0.04	[−0.08, 0.08]

Note. $N = 293$ followers nested in 96 leaders. Effects were estimated using Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications; confidence intervals (CI) are bias-corrected 95% intervals. An effect is statistically significant when its CI does not include zero.

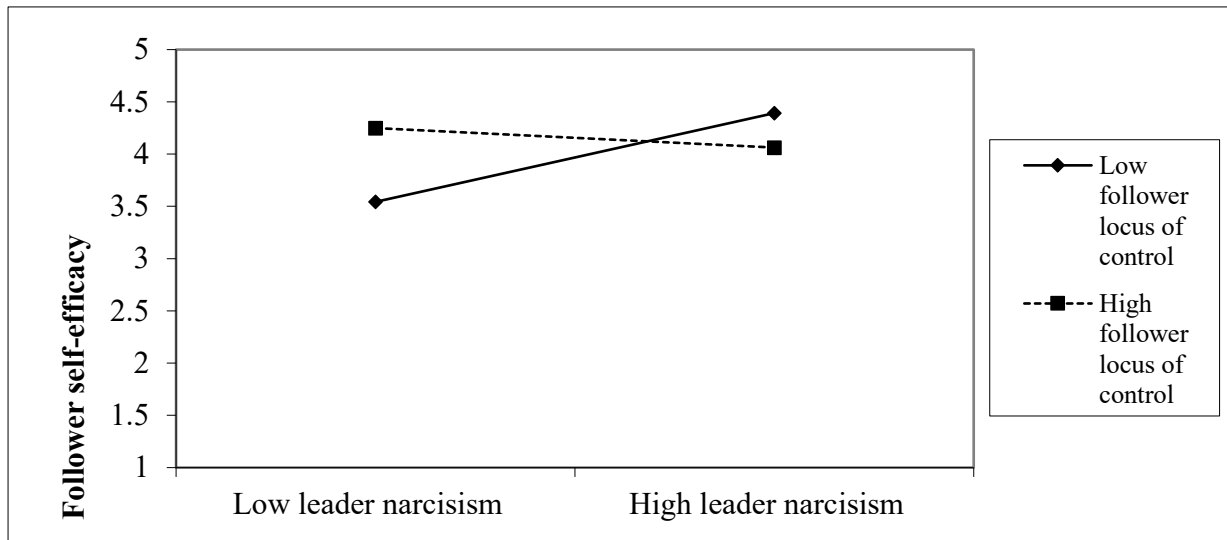
Source: Authors' own work

Figure 1: The hypothetical model



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 2: *Interaction of follower-rated leader narcissism and follower locus of control on follower self-efficacy.*



Note: High locus of control refers to a more internal orientation, while low locus of control refers to a more external orientation.

Source: Authors' own work