Introducing vulnerable narcissistic leader behaviour into the workplace: Exploring effects on follower well-being

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Abstract

Leaders' vulnerable narcissism may cause followers irritation due to its antagonistic and neurotic nature. Based on conservation of resources theory, we propose and test a model of between-person and reciprocal within-person relations between weekly experiences of vulnerable narcissistic leader behaviours (VNLB) and followers' irritation in subsequent weeks. We argue that in time of crisis and uncertainty, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns related to it, VNLB adds to follower irritation. We drew a sample from a population affected by workplace uncertainty, that is, the UK education sector during the first weeks of the Covid pandemic (N = 159). Five weeks of longitudinal data were collected. We conducted a random intercepts cross-lagged panel model and separated within- from between-person sources of variance in VNLB and follower irritation. Our findings show that VNLB positively related to follower irritation at the between-person level. The relationships at the within-person level of analysis were less clear. Experiences of VNLB resulted in follower irritation in subsequent weeks for some of the time lags, but not for others. We find limited indicators for a reciprocal relationship between VNLB and irritation. We discuss implications and link our findings to the study context of Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Leadership, Narcissism, Behaviour, Vulnerable Narcissism

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Vulnerable narcissistic leadership meets Covid-19: The relationship between vulnerable narcissistic leader behaviour and subsequent follower irritation

Introduction

The interest in narcissism and leadership has soared in the last decade (e.g., Braun, 2017), often coupled with the assumption that narcissism is related to destructive leadership (e.g., Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Gauglitz et al., 2022; but see Wisse & Sleebos, 2016) which negatively impacts follower well-being (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). To date, research into narcissism and leadership has focused almost exclusively on (a) grandiose narcissism and (b) narcissism as a personality trait (Braun, 2017; Lee et al., 2022; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). However, this approach has two limitations. First, focusing exclusively on grandiose narcissism ignores a common differentiation in personality research between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Wink, 1991). Both types of narcissism are relevant for leadership as their sense of entitlement coupled with antagonism (Miller et al., 2016) makes them problematic in leader-follower interactions. However, while grandiose narcissism is overt (Miller et al., 2016) and more obvious due to its link with extraversion (Krizan & Herlache, 2018), comprehending that one deals with a vulnerable narcissistic leader is challenging. Vulnerable narcissism is often called covert narcissism (e.g., Given-Wilson et al. 2011), as these individuals suppress their sense of entitlement (Kohut, 1971), and are emotional instable (Miller et al., 2016). We therefore focus on vulnerable narcissism in this study, as vulnerable narcissism is relatively under-researched domain in leadership studies compared to grandiose narcissism (Gauglitz, 2022) and accordingly, its implications (i.e., for follower irritation) are not well recognized.

Second, the prevailing emphasis on leader narcissism as a personality trait has limitations for measurement. Followers are often requested to rate their leaders. Yet, rating a

leader's personality is problematic as it asks followers to judge something that is happening in the target's mind and often reflect a summary judgment rather than a more refined behavioural rating (Harms, 2022; Palmer et al., 2022). At the same time, personality is not expressed consistently across situations (Tett & Guterman, 2000). That is, the behavioural expression of a trait varies, which should be reflected in follower ratings of the behavioural expression of a trait. Indeed, we know from previous research into different forms of leadership including destructive leadership that follower ratings of leadership vary across time (Johnson et al., 2012; Liao et al., 2020). Hence, instead of focusing on a self-rated personality assessment, we investigate the behavioural expression of a personality trait as rated by followers (e.g., Christiansen & Tett, 2008) contextualized in the workplace. We introduce Vulnerable Narcissistic Leader Behaviour (VNLB), which we define as the specific behavioural expression that vulnerable narcissistic leaders show in their daily work life. Such a concept acknowledges that more concrete behavioural statements are better suited to assess leadership and to predict work-related outcomes than more general personality assessments (DeRue et al., 2011; Hansbrough et al., 2021). We argue here that it is important to investigate the expression of vulnerable narcissism at a behavioural level, so that others can more easily detect and understand their leader's behaviour.

We assume that dealing with a vulnerable narcissist as a leader is problematic for followers. Followers who deal with a vulnerable narcissistic leader are likely to have to use cognitive resources to make sense of their leader (similar to inconsistent leadership, Schilling et al., 2022), which drains available resources. In organizational research, strain in reaction to uncertainty is often defined as irritation (Mohr et al., 2006). More specifically, irritation is the "subjectively perceived emotional and cognitive strain in occupational contexts" (Mohr et al., 2006, p. 198), comprising cognitive rumination (i.e., being unable to mentally switch off from work during one's leisure time) and emotional irritability (i.e., feeling anxious and on edge or sudden rushes of anger; Mohr et al., 2006). Irritation is an indicator of reduced well-being

(Grebner et al. 2003) and stress (Merino-Tejedor et al. 2013) and seen as an antecedent of more severe mental health impairments (Mohr et al., 2006). Understanding how VNLB relates to this early indicator can help organizations to prevent future health impairment of their employees.

Prior research supports the notion that destructive leadership in general can be detrimental for followers' well-being (e.g., Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Specifically, we agree with Whitman et al. (2014), who argue, based on conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), that destructive leadership drains followers' resources and consequently leads to impaired follower well-being. We investigate here how this is specifically the case for a leadership behaviour that is an expression of a dark personality trait such as vulnerable narcissism. COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) is a particularly useful framework in the context of our study as it theorises that resource-draining experiences at work are associated with reduced resources and increased stress levels. Thus, we posit that employees who experience more VNLB in general also report higher levels of irritation.

The covert and neurotic nature of VNLB also makes it particularly pertinent to investigate VNLB not only as a stable leadership style - as is common in destructive leadership research (e.g., Mackey et al., 2017) - but also to investigate its variations over time, similar to research into abusive supervision variations (Johnson et al., 2012). Investigating the positive effects of VNLB on follower irritation cross-sectionally does not allow for causal conclusions to be drawn and therefore, we do not know whether VNLB causes irritation, whether follower irritation causes VNLB, or whether VNLB and irritation reciprocally influence each other. On a more general level, Rudolph et al. (2022, p. 441) conclude that:

"it is likely that there are different relations between leadership and wellbeing "in general" (i.e., when considered at the between-person level of analysis), compared to relations that vary and co-occur within-person, over time."

Indeed, COR theory stresses the dynamic nature of resource-draining experiences such that these experiences can lead to a decrease in subsequent resources and an increase in subsequent stress levels (Hobfoll, 1989). Taking these assumptions into account, we conduct a multi-wave longitudinal study across five work weeks to disentangle between-person from within-person relationships of VNLB and (subsequent) follower irritation. We additionally examine possible reciprocal relationships over time. Based COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we assume that higher levels of VNLB in general are associated with increased follower irritation in general (between-person level) and that increases in VNLB are associated with subsequent increases in follower irritation (within-person level).

While we posit that VNLB is probably difficult to deal with for followers across times and populations, we argue that it can be particularly difficult at a time of crisis where followers' resources are already drained, and where the circumstances call for additional guidance and support from a leader. According to COR theory, individuals are most susceptible to resource losses when their resources are already low (Hobfoll, 1989), such as at the beginning of the Covid pandemic (see Zacher & Rudolph, 2021, regarding decreased well-being during this period). For many employees, the lockdowns related to the Covid pandemic meant significant changes in their day-to-day work and many were new to remote work, often lacking adequate equipment to carry out essential work (Ahrendt et al., 2020). This was particularly the case for the education sector where teaching went from in-class teaching to online teaching with little or no time to prepare. This challenging situation was then being made worse by the poor provision of online tools for teaching, learning, and administrative work. This means that employees in the education sector during the Covid pandemic had to deal with particular stressors, which made resource losses likely (see COR theory, Hobfoll, 1989). In this context, leadership and leaders are tasked with providing an important resource for followers faced with a unique set of challengers and stressors. We argue that the behaviour of vulnerable narcissistic leaders would be inappropriate when faced with such a context such

that higher levels of VNLB would increase followers' irritation during that period. At the same time, at a weekly level, resource loss due to the experience of VNLB will result in subsequent irritation for followers. In terms of COR theory, we would assume that these followers because of the strain that the external crisis posed did not have the resources to cope with VNLB which makes irritation more likely. Hence, we collected data from the UK education sector during the Covid pandemic and controlled for their concerns regarding the Covid pandemic.

Our study makes several contributions. First, we extend the literature on narcissism and leadership by introducing vulnerable narcissistic leader behaviour (VNLB) which makes a difficult to detect personality trait visible through concrete behaviours. Second, we add to the leadership literature by investigating leadership in a particular context, following Rudolph et al.'s (2022) recommendation to study leadership and its effects in the context of Covid. Third, using the VNLB instrument, we contribute to our understanding of the variations across time of leadership by investigating the role of followers' experience of weekly VNLB on their irritation. Here, we add to the increasing research acknowledging that not every work day or week is the same in terms of follower experiences (Sonnentag et al., 2010). In addition, we also investigate reciprocal effects of follower irritation on VNLB to better understand the dynamics of the leadership process.

Vulnerable narcissism

Research into personality acknowledges the multi-dimensional structure of narcissism, differentiating between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Campbell & Miller, 2017). Vulnerable narcissism is defined as "a defensive and insecure grandiosity that obscures feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and negative affect" (Miller et al., 2011, p. 1013f). Vulnerable narcissists are deeply insecure (Bosson et al., 2008), and depend on others' positive feedback and appraisal to bolster their brittle self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008). Both types of narcissism are characterised by entitlement (Miller et al., 2016). However,

while grandiose narcissism is linked to extraversion (Miller et al., 2016), vulnerable narcissism is typified by neuroticism (Miller et al., 2016) and has been called covert in nature (e.g., Wink, 1991). Recently, work and organizational scholars have called for more attention to vulnerable narcissism to reflect the full spectrum of narcissistic expression in the workplace and leadership in particular (Gauglitz, 2022; Wirtz & Rigotti, 2020). For example, Gauglitz (2022) argues that as vulnerable narcissists feel entitled, they are likely to aim for leadership positions (but see Schyns, Lagowska, et al., 2022). Yet, while vulnerable narcissists are similarly self-centred as grandiose narcissists (Miller et al., 2017), vulnerable narcissists are likely to be more problematic leaders as they tend to be more antagonistic but less openly so, which makes building and maintaining secure relationships (e.g., leader-follower relationships) difficult. For instance, due to their hypersensitivity to criticism, we assume that vulnerable narcissistic leaders might become excessively defensive or reactive to feedback and this can disrupt communication. Also, as vulnerable narcissistic leaders have chronic feelings of inadequacy, we assume that they might overcompensate by micromanaging or demonstrating a heightened need for affirmation.

Vulnerable Narcissistic Leadership Behaviour and Follower Irritation at the Between-Person Level

There is little doubt that followers who generally experience destructive forms of leadership report higher levels of stress and lower levels of well-being (e.g., Mackey et al., 2017; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). This relationship can be explained through COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which argues that stress occurs as a result of exhausted resources. VNLB is a norm-violating behaviour, such that experiencing generally high levels of VNLB requires the investment of affective resources (e.g., handling the negative emotions induced by this norm-violating behaviour) and followers' sense-making, which ties up cognitive resources. VNLB comprises behaviours such as making up rules that only apply to others but not the leader him/herself, distributing tasks as a means of retaliation, and blaming others for their own

shortcomings. Thus, vulnerable narcissistic leaders do not establish clear rules which means that followers are left to their own devices when it comes to tackling a task and have no guidelines on how to accomplish goals. It is therefore likely that experiencing a leader with generally high levels of VNLB is associated with irritation for followers as a reaction to their uncertainty and effortful sense-making.

COR theory further argues that in contexts where resources are already exhausted, as in the case of the Covid pandemic, further resource-draining factors, such as VNLB, are particularly likely to be associated with stress. In these contexts, resources are already stretched and may block resource creation. Hence, when such a context is met with generally high levels of VNLB, the behaviour of a leader implies a further lack of resources or potential future resource losses. Research into destructive leadership supports our notion that these types of leadership affect follower resources. For example, a recent study argued that rumination is especially prevalent when followers experience a lack of control, for instance in response to abusive supervision (Liao et al., 2020). Further research shows that abusive supervision is linked to follower irritation (Otto et al., 2018; Perko et al., 2017; Schyns et al., 2018). We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: At the between-person level of analysis, VNLB is positively associated with follower irritation.

Vulnerable Narcissistic Leadership Behaviour and Follower Irritation at the Within-Person Level

In addition to arguing that followers who experience more VNLB also experience more irritation (between-person level), we also argue that the same follower experiences more irritation in weeks when they experience more VNLB (within-person level). That is, the relationship between VNLB not only holds on a general level but also when investigated within a person across time.

COR theory incorporates dynamic arguments on resource loss spirals, that indicate that resource loss due to VNLB provokes subsequent irritation on the within-person level. COR argues that when individuals experience a loss of resources (e.g., due to resource-draining leadership), they respond with additional resource investment in order to replace these lost resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). However, employing new resources in order to cope with a resource loss may further diminish already stretched resources (such as time and energy). Thus, every attempt to regain resources may be resource-draining, making loss-spirals likely (Hobfoll, 1989).

Building on this logic, we assume that the experience of higher levels of VNLB than usual, will provoke subsequent irritation in followers. When individuals experience higher levels of VNLB than usual, it requires them to investing their resources in dealing with their leader. That is, following the experience of VNLB (a resource loss), followers will try to regain resources (such as support from their co-workers, attempts to make sense of the situation etc.). These attempts to regain resources require the investment of further resources (e.g., talking about the situation can be emotionally stressful), which may be resource-draining and therefore make subsequent irritation likely.

Not all days or weeks at work are experienced equally (Kelemen et al., 2020; Ohly et al., 2010; Sonnentag et al., 2010), and both leadership behaviours (e.g., Johnson et al., 2012) and well-being of followers (e.g., Sonnentag, 2001) are likely to fluctuate. Accordingly, we assume that VNLB fluctuate, such that in some weeks, followers will experience more VNLB than in other weeks, which has subsequent consequences for their irritation. Specifically, when followers experience more VNLB than usual in a given work week, this will drain their resources and provoke subsequent irritation.

Building on this research and on COR theory, we therefore assume:

Hypothesis 2: At the within-person level of analysis, VNLB is positively associated with subsequent follower irritation.

Finally, not only do leaders provide important resources to their followers, followers can also offer important resources to their leaders, such as commitment, loyalty, and respect (Wilson et al., 2010). However, when followers have high levels of irritation, they have fewer resources to offer (e.g., because they are preoccupied with replacing lost resources or building new resources). Hence, it is likely that they cannot provide valuable resources to their leaders, such that leaders themselves loose resources too. Based on COR theory, one could assume that consequently leaders (just as followers) experience increased irritation when their followers cannot provide them with resources, which prevents them from being able to show constructive leadership (Kaluza et al., 2020). Hence, any further loss of resources through drained followers may trigger defensive responses in leaders. In line with COR theory, when resource loss is experienced, individuals seek to regain resources and behave accordingly. Arguably, for leaders this can include negative behaviours towards their followers (including VNLB). Indeed, Harms et al. (2017) have shown that leader stress is related to subsequent negative leadership behaviour.

Based on COR theory and our assumptions, we formulated an exploratory question: "At the within-person level of analysis, is follower irritation positively associated with subsequent VNLB?" and strove to answer this question with our data.

Method

To test our proposed research model, we collected five weeks of cross-lagged panel data from followers in the UK education sector during the first onset of the Covid-19 pandemic lock-down in the UK. Our design was a fully crossed and lagged design, with time lags of one week between each of the five surveys, in order to take the expected frequency of VNLB into account (Dejonckheere & Erbas, 2021) as previous research has found that negative leadership behaviour are low base rate phenomena (Fischer et al., 2021). In addition, during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic daily contact with leaders was reduced, further reducing the frequency of observable VNLB. Hence, we deemed a weekly design as

the most reasonable approach to use in order to capture how experiences of VNLB affect respondent irritation. Also, at the time of data collection, the British government issued updates on a weekly basis that affected the work of followers from the education sector (see Figure 1).

---- Add Figure 1 here --

Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited via the online provider Respondi and were aged between 18 and 65 years. We conducted an initial baseline survey to assess socio-demographic variables, followed by five weekly surveys. The weekly surveys were sent out on Friday afternoons, and they asked participants about their experience of VNLB, their level of irritation, and Coronavirus-worry during the week.

Initially, 636 participants completed the baseline survey. After excluding 81 participants via quality checks, we invited the remaining 555 participants to the first weekly survey. Initially, we had a response rate of 441 (week 1), 389 (week 2), 374 (week 3), 360 (week 4), and 336 (week 5). To ensure data quality we only invited participants to the subsequent weekly surveys who completed the preceding survey and additionally passed several checks. First, we confirmed participants' age and gender in each survey to ensure the same person repeatedly responds to our surveys. Second, we checked for overly long or short response times which led us to exclude a total of 44 participants (week 1: n = 11; week 2: n = 9; week 3: n = 5; week 4: n = 6, and week 5: n = 3). Third, we excluded participants who reported no contact with their supervisors (week 1: n = 21; week 2: n = 24; week 3: n = 27; week 4: n = 17, and week 5: n = 21). This resulted in 406 (week 1), 372 (week 2), 360 (week 3), 350 (week 4), and 329 (week 5) participants. After matching the data, we obtained useable data for 248 followers (1240 data points).

Of the participants, 159 were female and 86 were male, with an average age of 46.52 (*SD* = 12.13) years. Participants had an average work experience of 23.7 years (*SD* = 12.34), an average organizational tenure of 8.77 years (*SD* = 7.78), and a supervisor tenure of 4.06 years (*SD* = 3.73). Participants indicated that prior to the pandemic they worked from home an average of 14.98% of their time (*SD* = 23.2), while on the date of the baseline questionnaire they worked 61.9% of their time from home (*SD* = 43.06). The percentages of work from home for the subsequent five weeks ranged from 64.26% to 67.9% (week 1: 67.9%, *SD* = 41.65; week 2: 67.72%, *SD* = 41.77; week 3: 66.48%, *SD* = 41.75; week 4: 66.29%, *SD* = 42.38, and week 5: 64.26%, *SD* 42.45).

Participants indicated how much contact they had with their supervisors normally on a scale ranging from: Several times a day, Every day, Every other day, Once a week, to Fewer than once a week. For the baseline, 30.2% indicated to normally have contact several times a day, followed by 32.7% every day. For the subsequent weeks, those numbers dropped to between 6% and 12.5% for several times a day and 16.1% and 23% for once a day. Equally, face-to-face contact as means of interaction dropped from normally 72.6% to between 9.52% and 16.74% in the subsequent weeks. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample characteristics.

Insert Table 1 about here

Measures

For the weekly surveys, we instructed participants to think about the past week for their rating.

VNLB. As no prior measures for VNLB were available, we conducted a set of 4 qualitative and quantitative pre-studies to develop an instrument (a detailed summary for all

pre-studies is available from the Online Supplementary Material [OSM][4]). The instruments lists 8 specific behaviours and asks followers to rate the frequency of these behaviours on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*most of the time*). Example items are: "This week, my supervisor blamed others for his/her own shortcomings." "This week, my supervisor punished others for taking the initiative.". The reliability of vulnerable narcissism was on average $\alpha = .97$, ranging from .96 to .97.

Irritation. We used seven items of the irritation scale (Mohr et al., 2006) to assess weekly work-related affective and cognitive irritation (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). We excluded one item that related to holidays, and slightly shortened and rephrased the items to fit the weekly assessment (e.g., "In the past week, I felt like a bundle of nerves"). Cronbach's α was .93, ranging from .93 to .94.

Control variable. Since the Covid pandemic represented a dynamic context with changing rules determined by government and organizations, we accounted for the time-varying effect of followers' corona worry in our study. To do so, we assessed participants' weekly cognitive and affective reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic via two self-developed items ("How much did you this week worry about the effects of the Coronavirus epidemic?" "How much did you this week think about the effects of the Coronavirus epidemic?"), using slider scales from 0 to 100 (average M = 58.54; SD = 26.72 across the five weeks). The reliability as estimated via the Spearman-Brown coefficients for 2-item scales (Eisinga et al., 2013) was .80, ranging from .73 to .87. Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities are depicted in the OSM. We introduced participants' reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic as a time-varying control variable in our analysis.

Analysis

[4] Via the OSM there is a full 21-item version available, as well as a shortened 8-item version, with the latter being used in the present study. Items for the shortened version were chosen based on factor loadings and fit to weekly assessments. The shortened version correlated highly with the full version in the baseline survey ($r = .93$, $p < .001$).

We used Mplus 8.6 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2021) and tested our Hypotheses simultaneously via a random intercept cross-lagged panel model (RI-CLPM; Hamaker et al., 2015) with Maximum Likelihood Estimator (ML). The RI-CLPM represents an extension to the traditional cross-lagged panel model to separate stable between-person differences from within-person fluctuations over time (Hamaker et al., 2015; Usami et al., 2019; Zyphur et al., 2019). To represent the stable individual differences (e.g., in VNLB, irritation), a random intercept is specified for each construct of interest across all five weeks, with measurement error variances being constrained to 0. These scores represent individuals' general level across the specified time period. The variance at the within-person level captures the individual's week-to-week fluctuations relative to their general levels. The lagged relationships (i.e., autoregressive effects, cross-lagged effects) thereby pertain to true within-person relationships. While the autoregressive effects inform about the carry-over effects from one week to the next, the main interest of our study relies on the cross-lagged parameters that indicate the relationship between VNLB and follower irritation. In addition to our main variables VNLB and irritation, we included followers' worry about the Covid-19 pandemic as a time-varying control variable in our model.

Results

Table 2 indicates the means, standard deviations and correlations among our study variables. Intra-class correlations (ICC) showed that the amount of variance due to within-person variability was 18% for VNLB, 25% for irritation, and 26% for Covid-19 pandemic worry.

Insert Table 2 about here

We tested a basic RI-CLPM without imposing constraints (i.e., the lagged relationships are allowed to vary across time) and compared it to two alternative and more

constrained models that would theoretically make sense too (Mulder & Hamaker, 2021). The basic RI-CLPM yielded a good fit ($\chi2 = 89.41$, df = 52, $p < .01$; RMSEA = .05; CFI = .99, SRMR = .04) and compared favourably to as alternative model with time-invariant lagged relationships and an alternative model time-invariant grand means (see Table 3). Hence, the effects that the variables (i.e., VNLB, irritation, Covid-19 pandemic worry) have on each other (Hamaker et al., 2015) and that they have in general varied over time (Mulder & Hamaker, 2021). We thus resumed with the basic RI-CLPM.

Insert Table 3 about here

Table 4 displays the results for the RI-CLPM. Hypothesis 1 suggested that at the between-person level, VNLB should be positively related to follower irritation. In support of Hypothesis 1, our results showed that at the between-person level of analysis, VNLB was positively related to irritation ($r = .59$, $p < .001$). This indicates that in general, followers who experience more VNLB across the five-week period, reported more irritation.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that at the within-person level, VNLB is positively related to follower irritation in the subsequent week. Our results showed a positive cross-lagged relationship of VNLB on irritation for week 2 and 4, but not for week 1 and 3. That is, VNLB in weeks 1 and 3 did not predict irritation in the subsequent weeks ($b = -.18$, $p = .21$; $b = .00$, $p = .91$). However, for the weeks 2 and 4, VNLB resulted in higher levels of irritation in the subsequent week ($b = .23$ and .22, both $p < .05$). Hypothesis 2 was thus partially supported, with support for week 2 and 4, but not weeks 1 and 3.

With regard to our exploratory question [5], we found a positive cross-lagged effect of follower irritation on VNLB in the subsequent week for week 3 ($b = .21$, $p < .05$) but not for

[5] As a robustness check, we repeated our RI-CLPM without including Covid-19 worry as control variable. Excluding Covid-19 worry produced similar results for the cross-lagged relationship between VNLB on irritation in subsequent weeks, such that there was a positive relationship for weeks 2 and 4. However, when excluding Covid-19 worry, we did not find a reversed cross-lagged effect of irritation on VNLB in any week.

weeks 1, 2 or 4 (b = .04, p = .78; b = -.03, p = .72; and b = -.07, p = .37). This provides partial evidence for experienced follower irritation resulting in subsequent VNLB. We can, therefore, not rule out the possibility of a bidirectional relationship between VNLB and follower irritation.

Insert Table 4 about here

Additional Analyses

We conducted an additional RI-CLPM to separate followers' irritation into its cognitive and affective form. Thus, we conducted an RI-CLPM with four time-varying variables (VNLB, cognitive irritation, affective irritation, Covid-19 worry). At the between-person level of analysis, VNLB was positively related to both cognitive (r = .60, p < .001) and affective irritation (r = .56, p < .001). At the within-person level of analysis, VNLB predicted both cognitive and affective irritation for weeks 2 ($b_{cognitive}$ = .22; $b_{affective}$ = .21, both p < .05) and 4 ($b_{cognitive}$ = .21; $b_{affective}$ = .20, both p < .05) , but not for weeks 1 ($b_{cognitive}$ = - .19, p = .18; $b_{affective}$ = - .10, p = .44) and 3 ($b_{cognitive}$ = - .02, p = .83; $b_{affective}$ = - .00, p = .98). For the reversed direction of effects, we found that only affective but not cognitive irritation was related to subsequent experiences of VNLB in week 3 (b = .26, p < .05). This may indicate that the reversed cross-lagged effect that links follower irritation to their subsequent experiences of VNLB is primarily driven by affective irritability rather than cognitive rumination.

Further, including Covid-19 worry as time-varying covariate provided us with insights into the relationships between Covid-19 worry with VNLB and follower irritation both at the between-person and within-person level of analysis (see Table 3). Results at the between-person level of analysis showed that Covid-19 worry was positively correlated with irritation (r = .31, p < .001). Further, Covid-19 worry was positively correlated with VNLB (r = .15, p

< .05), indicating that followers who experienced in generally more VNLB reported more worry about the Covid-19 pandemic. Results at the within-person level of analysis indicated that no relationships between Covid-19 worry and VNLB or irritation in neither direction of effect. Thus, a higher level of Covid-19 worry was not related to subsequent higher levels of VNLB or irritation. Likewise, higher levels of VNLB or irritation did not affect subsequent Covid-19 worry.

Discussion

With this study, we aimed to extend the literature on narcissism and leadership by shifting the focus from grandiose narcissism as a personality trait to the behavioural expression of vulnerable narcissism. Furthermore, we investigated VNLB as a dynamic process in context using COR theory as our theoretical framework.

In a longitudinal study across five weeks, we found that at the between-person level, VNLB was positively associated with follower irritation. This means that in general, followers who reported more VNLB across the study period reported more irritation, too. Furthermore, we also found that at the within-person level, VNLB in one week was positively associated with follower irritation in the subsequent week, at least for weeks 2 and 4. Furthermore, we also found some support for the reverse effects, as at the within-person level of analysis, follower irritation in one week was also associated with VNLB in the subsequent week, at least for week 3. Our results remained mainly the same when separating followers' irritation into its cognitive and affective components in an additional analysis – with one notable difference concerning the reverse effect of follower irritation on VNLB. Here, we found that at the within-person level at analysis, only followers' affective irritation was positively associated with VNLB in week 3, but not cognitive irritation.

Theoretical Implications

The present study makes several contributions. First, we introduced a new concept to the leadership area, that is, VNLB. While Banks et al. (2018) rightfully point out the issue of

concept proliferation in leadership research, we took care to create a new concept based on several principles. VNLB is grounded in thorough theoretical considerations in the area of personality, which differentiates between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Campbell & Miller, 2017). Despite this differentiation and the relevance of both forms of narcissism for leadership (Gauglitz, 2022), vulnerable narcissism has received limited attention. We argued that it adds to the leadership landscape to better understand VNLB as an expression of a trait that is characterised by entitlement and neuroticism and likely difficult to cope with for followers. The assessment of the present study is based on behavioural expression rather than more general impressions of leaders, which addresses a recent criticism of leadership assessments (Hansbrough et al., 2021). Results of our pre-studies (see OSM) show that VNLB meaningfully contributes to the understanding of work-related outcomes, making it an instrument that can be used in future research – particularly in contexts where leaders behave in ways that makes it difficult for followers to make sense of.

We aimed to align our study with recent research acknowledging that leadership varies across time (e.g., Rudolph et al., 2022). We argued that this is particularly important when leaders behave in ways that are emotionally unstable and obscure to followers – such as leaders high in vulnerable narcissism. Building on COR theory (Hobfoll 1989), we proposed that VNLB is resource-draining for followers, as it consists of norm-violating and behaviours which requires affective and cognitive resources to make sense of and to deal with it. Indeed, our longitudinal study with five weekly assessments showed a positive association of experienced VNLB with follower irritation between-persons. Thus, in general, it seems that followers who experience VNLB have fewer resources and accordingly report more irritation. Mohr (1991; see also Dormann and Zapf 2002; Mohr et al. 2006) argues that organizational stressors lead to psychosomatic complaints, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced self-esteem via irritation. Hence, Mohr et al. (2006) see irritation as an early indicator of severe health consequences and early interventions can help prevent those further consequences.

Knowing that VNLB is an antecedent of irritation thus provides the possibility to intervene and prevent a further impairment of follower mental health.

At the within-person level, we demonstrated that stronger VNLB in one week explained higher levels of follower irritation in the subsequent week, at least in some weeks during the first lockdown of Covid-19 pandemic. These findings support that short-term weekly increases in VNLB have detrimental effects for followers' irritation. This finding is in accordance with COR theory, according to which individuals try to replace resources following a resource loss – which in turn is resource draining. Building on this logic, we suggest that followers who experience VNLB (a resource loss) try to regain resources (e.g., attempt to make sense of the situation) which is resource draining (e.g., as it costs time and energy) and thus contributes to follower irritation.

Interestingly, our findings also provided some indication that we cannot fully rule out that followers' irritation may predict subsequent VNLB in terms of reverse effects. This may indicate that strong irritation can, on the one hand, increase followers' experiences of VNLB. Previous research has, for example, shown that follower characteristics are linked to the perception of leadership (for an overview see Hansbrough et al. 2015). Based on our findings, this could imply that when followers are irritated, they are more likely to perceive their leaders as behaving in a vulnerable narcissistic way. These perceptions might then also lead to further irritation and create a loss spiral (Hobfoll, 1989). On the other hand, followers with high levels of irritation have few resources and can therefore not provide valuable resources to their leaders (e.g., respect, loyalty, and commitment), which in turn may trigger negative reactions (in the form of VNLB) in those leaders (see Gauglitz et al., 2022, for a similar process relating to leaders high in the rivalry dimension of narcissism). The reversed effect of follower irritation on subsequent VNLB needs to be considered as a preliminary finding as it was less consistent in robustness checks and additional analysis than the effect of VNLB on subsequent. follower irritation.

In sum, our research may underly that while the effect of VNLB on followers may be stronger, leadership, and thus also VNLB nevertheless should be considered as a dynamic process with instances in which leaders and followers may mutually influence each other across time. This has implications for future research that should more explicitly take into account that leadership and specifically VNLB varies across time and has different effects on different weeks. That means that VNLB has to be considered within its context that might explain both the variations in VNLB as well as its effects.

Notably, our research also speaks to the importance of considering the context in which leadership takes place (Antonakis et al., 2012). We explicitly placed our study during a time of external uncertainty and hence conducted our research early in the lockdown period in the UK. Lockdown started on the 23rd of March 2020 and we started collecting data mid May 2020. We argued that in times of uncertainty, vulnerable narcissistic leader behaviour fails to provide necessary resources to overcome resource loss from uncertainty due to external crisis. That is, we found that VNLB differently affected follower irritation in different weeks, which could be due to the changes in external uncertainty related to the Covid crisis. Indeed, the timeline of the Covid lockdowns and government announcement can potentially explain some of the variance in effects we found between weeks. For example, while mental well-being decreased during lockdown (e.g., in Germany, Zacher & Rudolph, 2021), there is also some evidence that at subsequent stages of the pandemic, well-being improved (EU data for July 2020; Ahrendt et al., 2020). For example, on the 1st of June, that is, our week three, schools started reopening in England. Indeed, just before week 1, a partial lifting of the lockdown was announced and just after week 3, schools partially reopened. Thus, it is possible that in those two weeks, the uncertainty of the measures related to the Covid pandemic seemed to be slightly less pertinent.

In addition, we found that Covid-19 worry was positively associated with follower irritation and VNLB between-persons, showing that the context is relevant for follower well-

being (as assessed by irritation) and leader behaviour (VNLB). Future research should more explicitly examine this possibility, for example, by comparing contexts which are comparable but differ in uncertainty (Germany might serve as an example here where regional governments took different measures regarding the Covid crisis, leading to different contextual uncertainties in a comparable environment).

Practical Implications

Our results show that VNLB is problematic for followers, as it is positively associated with follower irritation at the between-person level and partly also at the within-person level. Hence, a first recommendation for organizations is to look out for red flag behaviours (for an example of follower related red flag behaviours see Schyns et al., 2019). By using mixed methods to identify concrete behaviours of vulnerable narcissistic leaders, our instrument can help supervisors, HR staff, and followers to be able to identify if they have any leaders who show these problematic behaviours as a potential expression of their personality. Our instrument provides examples such as blaming others for the leader's own shortcomings, punishing others for taking the initiative, using others to control their followers. We know little about whether or not leaders high in vulnerable narcissism are trainable and are responsive to feedback, however, their high sense of entitlement casts doubt on this. Hence, a more promising road to protect followers from VNLB might be to introduce checks and balances and adjust HR practices to better deal with VNLB (e.g., Cohen, 2016; Schyns, Gauglitz, et al., 2022).

Limitations and Future Research

While we collected longitudinal data across five weekly measurement points to show effects of VNLB in a particularly difficult context, limitations remain. First, what can be considered a strength, namely, the choice of context, is also a limitation as it limits generalisability. Future research should examine these relationships in other contexts, that is, other industries and different types of crisis or indeed in times of stability. While we expect

that VNLB is rarely if ever positive for follower well-being, we assume that it is particularly problematic in times of crisis when followers need guidance from their leaders. Arguably, in times of crisis, leadership is particularly relevant to follower well-being (Košir et al., 2020). An example for a crisis could be mergers or restructuring. At the same time, some of the changes introduced during lockdown measures, such as teaching being delivered online and working from home are likely here to stay, meaning that our diary study partly reflects the new normal of work conditions. It would be interesting to see if once remote work is more normal, the effects of VNLB will also decrease as followers had time for sense-making and to develop coping mechanisms.

For both our pre-studies as well as the main study, we focussed on one sector only. We note that the context we conducted our studies in, education, is rather specific. For example, it is characterised by a high percentage of female employees. While we do not assume that our results would be very different in other industries, including those with a higher percentage of male employees, future research should replicate our results not only in a different type of crisis but also in different industries.

We introduced VNLB and conducted extensive pre-work to establish the instrument. However, we only tested VNLB in the context of UK education. While there is no specific reason to assume that the instrument would not work in other contexts, future research should validate the instrument in the relevant context prior to using it.

While in the pre-studies, we investigated the relationship between VNLB and vulnerable narcissism as a personality variable as well as narcissistic leadership, we did not control for grandiose narcissistic leadership behaviour (GNLB) in our analyses. At the current point, no measure of GNLB exists. Since our focus was on furthering our understanding the role of vulnerable narcissism in the workplace, creating and testing an assessment of GNLB was beyond the scope of our research. However, future research could specify GNLB and

examine both GNLB and VNLB at the same time to ascertain that the effects we found are not the same for both types of narcissism.

Furthermore, we cannot rule out the possibility that the relationship between VNLB and irritation is driven by third variables that we did not control for in our study. Particularly, as all ratings in our study stem from followers, it is possible that follower characteristics might have influenced both VNLB and irritation ratings at the between-person level. For instance, previous research has shown that individual differences influence both leadership ratings of followers (Hansbrough et al. 2015) and well-being of individuals (Anglim et al. 2020). Accordingly, future research could control for follower personality.

While we used irritation as our final outcome, it could also serve as a mediator or moderator in the process from VNLB to further outcomes such as burnout or performance. For example, in a chain of mediators, irritation as an outcome of VNLB would be related to higher burnout or lower performance. Alternatively, irritation from a different source (e.g., the context) could lead to different effects of VNLB on burnout or performance, such that for followers who are irritated, VNLB leads to higher burnout and lower performance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study into VNLB adds a valuable instrument to the destructive leadership research area. Organizational stakeholders are well-advised to consider possible red flag behaviours indicating vulnerable narcissistic leader behaviour to avoid negative consequences for followers. VNLB varies over time and has different effects on follower irritation likely due to external changes that affect how VNLB relates to subsequent irritation.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

	Original sample	Excluded (quality)	Excluded (no supervisor contact)	Remaining sample
Week 1	441	11	21	406
Week 2	389	9	24	372
Week 3	374	3	27	360
Week 4	360	6	17	350
Week 5	336	3	21	329

Matched sample	% work from home	% supervisor contact several times a day/ every day	% face-to face contact
	67.9	10.5/16.1	16.5
	67.72	6/23	10.12
	66.48	8.9/19.4	9.52
	66.29	10.9/20.2	14.8
248	64.26	12.5/19.8	16.74

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables

		M	SD	1	2	3	4
1	VNLB (week 1)	1.44	0.82				
2	VNLB (week 2)	1.45	0.82	.781**			
3	VNLB (week 3)	1.43	0.85	.799**	.874**		
4	VNLB (week 4)	1.46	0.84	.804**	.849**	.817**	
5	VNLB (week 5)	1.42	0.81	.799**	.797**	.776**	.885**
6	Irritation (week 1)	3.33	1.63	.475**	.455**	.412**	.428**
7	Irritation (week 2)	3.25	1.71	.416**	.451**	.411**	.404**
8	Irritation (week 3)	3.11	1.62	.454**	.514**	.500**	.487**
9	Irritation (week 4)	3.24	1.73	.514**	.505**	.469**	.558**
10	Irritation (week 5)	3.17	1.72	.477**	.468**	.447**	.504**
11	C19 worry (week 1)	62.32	25.77	0.101	0.12	0.091	0.093
12	C19 worry (week 2)	58.94	25.54	.162*	.192**	.148*	.130*
13	C19 worry (week 3)	57.65	26.38	0.114	0.081	0.074	0.088
14	C19 worry (week 4)	57.29	27.72	.132*	0.109	0.085	0.109
15	C19 worry (week 5)	56.48	28.21	.131*	0.056	0.05	0.065

Note. N = 248 followers

	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
*										
*	.379**									
*	.395**	.748**								
*	.444**	.709**	.802**							
*	.486**	.739**	.758**	.755**						
*	.489**	.725**	.742**	.734**	.802**					
	0.077	.298**	.243**	.215**	.206**	.246**				
	.138*	.261**	.276**	.274**	.246**	.269**	.669**			
	0.1	.206**	.211**	.267**	.251**	.243**	.676**	.765**		
	0.098	.250**	.193**	.206**	.265**	.264**	.676**	.756**	.818**	
	0.074	.249**	.228**	.236**	.250**	.285**	.672**	.723**	.835**	.871**

Table 3. Model comparison

Model	$\chi 2$	df
Basic model	89.41*	52
Alternative model: Time-invariant lagged relationships	186.81**	87
Alternative model: Time-invariant grand means	117.74**	64

Note: * p < .01; ** p <.001

RMSEA	CFI
.05	.99
.07	.97
.06	.99

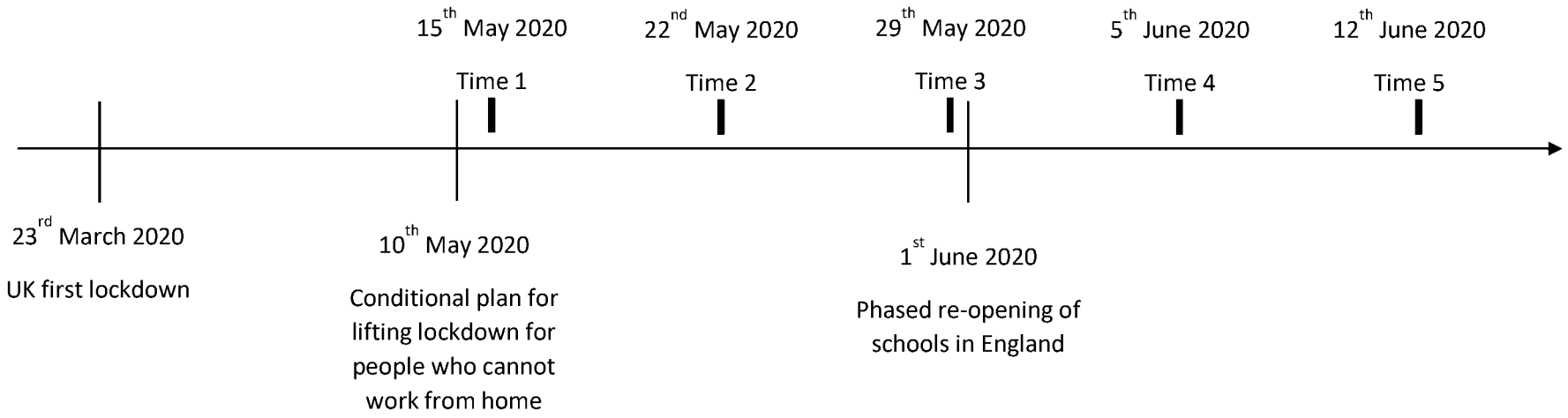
Table 4. Relevant Parameters from RI-CLPM

					95% CI					95% CI		
	B_{raw}	SE_B	*p* value		Lower	Upper	B_{std}	SE	*p* value	Lower	Upper	R^2_{within}
Week 1 → Week 2												
VNLB (t1) → Irritation (t2)	-0.471	0.390	0.227		-1.235	0.294	-0.175	0.139	.208	-0.448	0.098	0.064
Irritation (t1) → Irritation (t2)	0.025	0.114	0.828		-0.199	0.248	0.025	0.116	.828	-0.203	0.253	
C19 worry (t1) → Irritation (t2)	0.010	0.006	0.098		-0.002	0.021	0.187	0.114	.100	-0.036	0.409	
VNLB (t1) → VNLB (t2)	-0.410	0.220	0.064		-0.845	0.024	-0.390	0.204	.056	-0.790	0.010	0.198
Irritation (t1) → VNLB (t2)	0.015	0.057	0.785		-0.095	0.126	0.040	0.147	.784	-0.248	0.329	
C19 worry (t1) → VNLB (t2)	0.005	0.003	0.124		-0.001	0.011	0.226	0.143	.114	-0.055	0.507	
VNLB (t1) → C19 worry (t2)	9.289	6.500	0.153		-3.451	22.029	0.234	0.162	.150	-0.085	0.552	0.062
Irritation (t1) → C19 worry (t2)	1.118	1.711	0.513		-2.236	4.473	0.077	0.119	.516	-0.156	0.310	
C19 worry (t1) → C19 worry (t2)	-0.031	0.119	0.792		-0.265	0.202	-0.041	0.155	.792	-0.344	0.262	
Week 2 → Week 3												
VNLB (t2) → Irritation (t3)	0.569	0.023	0.012	*	0.125	1.014	0.226	0.092	.014 *	0.045	0.406	0.105
Irritation (t2) → Irritation (t3)	0.218	0.089	0.014	*	0.043	0.392	0.221	0.089	.013 *	0.047	0.395	
C19 worry (t2) → Irritation (t3)	-0.001	0.007	0.851		-0.015	0.012	-0.019	0.102	.851	-0.219	0.181	
VNLB (t2) → VNLB (t3)	0.382	0.112	0.001	**	0.163	0.602	0.317	0.102	.002 **	0.118	0.516	0.147
Irritation (t2) → VNLB (t3)	-0.015	0.041	0.721		-0.096	0.066	-0.031	0.087	.719	-0.202	0.140	
C19 worry (t2) → VNLB (t3)	0.004	0.003	0.277		-0.003	0.010	0.117	0.106	.270	-0.091	0.324	
VNLB (t2) → C19 worry (t3)	-2.496	4.670	0.593		-11.648	6.656	-0.071	0.134	.594	-0.334	0.192	0.013
Irritation (t2) → C19 worry (t3)	1.056	1.625	0.516		-2.129	4.241	0.077	0.119	.518	-0.157	0.311	
C19 worry (t2) → C19 worry (t3)	-0.039	0.133	0.770		-0.300	0.222	-0.042	0.145	.772	-0.327	0.243	
Week 3 → Week 4												
VNLB (t3) → Irritation (t4)	-0.001	0.195	0.997		-0.382	0.381	0.000	0.093	.907	-0.183	0.183	0.018
Irritation (t3) → Irritation (t4)	0.009	0.108	0.932		-0.202	0.221	0.009	0.108	.932	-0.203	0.221	
C19 worry (t3) → Irritation (t4)	0.010	0.009	0.276		-0.008	0.024	0.133	0.123	.208	-0.108	0.374	
VNLB (t3) → VNLB (t4)	0.085	0.093	0.359		-0.097	0.267	0.090	0.097	.353	-0.100	0.281	

Irritation (t3) → VNLB (t4)	0.094	0.045	0.039	*	0.005	0.183	0.208	0.101	.040 *	0.009	0.407	0.079
C-19 worry (t3) → VNLB (t4)	-0.006	0.004	0.189		-0.014	0.003	-0.178	0.133	.182	-0.440	0.084	
VNLB (t3) → C19 worry (t4)	-0.440	3.075	0.886		-6.467	5.588	-0.013	0.090	.886	-0.189	0.163	0.056
Irritation (t3) → C19 worry (t4)	-0.440	3.075	0.886		-5.440	0.963	-0.137	0.098	.162	-0.328	0.055	
C19 worry (t3) → C19 worry (t4)	0.261	0.166	0.115		-0.064	0.586	0.221	0.145	.127	-0.063	0.505	
Week 4 → Week 5												
VNLB (t4) → Irritation (t5)	0.513	0.213	0.016	*	0.095	0.932	0.217	0.091	.017 *	0.039	0.396	
Irritation (t4) → Irritation (t5)	0.158	0.103	0.124		-0.043	0.360	0.148	0.097	.128	-0.043	0.339	0.094
C19 worry (t4) → Irritation (t5)	0.020	0.005	0.730		-0.009	0.013	0.029	0.085	.731	-0.137	0.195	
VNLB (t4) → VNLB (t5)	0.548	0.085	0.000	***	0.381	0.715	0.513	0.075	.000 ***	0.367	0.659	
Irritation (t4) → VNLB (t5)	-0.033	0.037	0.369		-0.106	0.039	-0.069	0.076	.365	-0.218	0.080	0.260
C19 worry (t4) → VNLB (t5)	-0.003	0.002	0.177		-0.007	0.001	-0.096	0.070	.170	-0.232	0.041	
VNLB (t4) → C19 worry (t5)	-6.610	3.381	0.051		-13.236	0.017	-0.178	0.089	.046 *	-0.353	-0.003	
Irritation (t4) → C19 worry (t5)	-2.239	1.633	0.171		-2.739	2.995	0.008	0.087	.930	-0.164	0.179	
C19 worry (t4) → C19 worry (t5)	0.482	0.094	0.000	***	0.299	0.666	0.473	0.089	.000 ***	0.298	0.648	0.268
Between-Person Relationship												
VNLB with Irritation	0.643	0.081	0.000	***	0.475	0.8100	0.594	0.045	.000 ***	0.505	0.682	
VNLB with C19 worry	2.449	1.182	0.038	*	0.132	4.766	0.144	0.067	.032 *	0.013	0.275	
Irritation with C19 worry	10.129	2.445	0.000	***	5.336	14.922	0.306	0.064	.032 *	0.181	0.432	

Note. B_{raw} = unstandardised regression coefficient; B_{std} = standardised regression coefficients; SE_B = standard errors of standardised regression coefficients; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval of standardised coefficients;

Figure 1. Timeline



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