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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sparking or smothering darkness: Motivational climates influence the leader grandiose narcissism–follower trust relation via leader self-serving behaviour

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Abstract

Research suggests that the effects of leader narcissism can be complex and context dependent, causing a lack of clarity about the conditions under which leader narcissism affects follower perceptions. We posit that the organizational climate plays an important moderating role in the relationships between leader narcissism, leader self-serving behaviour and follower trust. Based on trait activation theory, we argue that organizational-level cues can spark or smother narcissistic leaders' self-serving behaviour with downstream consequences for followers' trust. Our focus lies on motivational climates in organizations, encompassing both performance climate and mastery climate, as providers of trait-relevant cues. A multilevel and multisource survey of 546 leaders and 1718 followers supports the hypothesized relationships. We find a negative effect of leader narcissism on trust in the leader via leader self-serving behaviour when the performance climate is high (vs. low). We also find a negative effect of leader narcissism on trust in the leader via leader self-serving behaviour when the mastery climate is low (vs. high). We discuss how leader self-serving behaviour as a quintessential behavioural expression of leader narcissism is sensitive to specific cues from the organizational context, how motivational climates help to inform the understanding of leader narcissism, and the practical implications.

KEYWORDS

leader narcissism, mastery climate, performance climate, self-serving behaviour, trait activation theory, trust

BACKGROUND

While grandiose narcissism is characterized by bold, confident and attention-seeking characteristics, vulnerable narcissism is marked by sensitivity, insecurity and emotional withdrawal (Miller et al., 2021). Consequently, grandiose narcissism seems to be particularly relevant in organizational contexts, and especially for leadership (Braun, 2017; Campbell et al., 2011). Grandiose narcissists frequently obtain leadership positions, presumably because they pursue and claim power and status (Grapsas et al., 2020; Nevicka & Sedikides, 2021), are confident in their own abilities (Macenczak et al., 2016), easily progress in their careers (Rovelli & Curnis, 2021; Wille et al., 2019) and others recognize their leader-like qualities (Brunell et al., 2008; Nevicka et al., 2011, 2013).

Leader grandiose narcissism (which we will hitherto refer to as leader narcissism for the sake of brevity) is often considered to be detrimental to organizational and follower outcomes (Judge et al., 2006). Leaders high in narcissism focus primarily on their own egocentric needs and are insensitive, dismissive and manipulative (Blair et al., 2017). Their striving for self-enhancement can motivate unethical (Blair et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2013) and fraudulent behaviour (Rijsenbilt & Commandeur, 2013). Leader narcissism is also positively related to dysfunctional follower behaviour (Carnevale et al., 2018a), such as displaying malicious envy and counterproductive work behaviour (CWB; Braun et al., 2018), and it is negatively related to functional follower behaviour, such as task performance and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB; Bernerth et al., 2021).

However, findings suggest that some factors can mitigate or protect against the negative effects of leader narcissism. For instance, leader narcissism can have positive effects on follower job attitudes and behaviours, when the leaders also show humility (Owens et al., 2015) or consult their followers (Carnevale et al., 2018a), or when followers have fewer opportunities to observe their leaders (Nevicka et al., 2018). Moreover, narcissistic characteristics in a leader are considered desirable in some situations, particularly when followers face high uncertainty (Nevicka et al., 2013). Therefore, it seems that leader narcissism often has negative effects, unless mitigating factors are present. This warrants a better understanding of possible mitigating factors and how they operate.

Our research addresses how contextual variables may 'spark' or 'smother' the display of leader self-serving behaviour (Williams, 2014; Wisse et al., 2019) as a quintessential behavioural expression of trait narcissism. This view is grounded in trait activation theory, which posits that personality traits are expressed in response to trait-relevant situational cues (Christiansen & Tett, 2008; Tett et al., 2013, 2021; Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000). While narcissists' self-enhancement motivation may be chronic (Grijalva & Zhang, 2016), the contexts in which narcissistic leaders operate may activate or attenuate the expression of behaviours that they believe will help them to obtain the recognition they so desire (Liu et al., 2022).

In the current research, we specifically focus on performance and mastery climates in organizations (Nerstad et al., 2013). Based on trait activation theory, we expect performance and mastery climates to serve as trait-relevant situational cues. For leaders with narcissistic traits, the self-centred focus inherent in performance climates aligns with their emphasis on the self over others, while the collaborative nature of mastery climates contrasts with this trait (Černe et al., 2014; Nerstad et al., 2013, 2018). Given that we examine leader self-serving behaviour as a primary behavioural manifestation of leader narcissism, these climates that promote self-orientation (performance climate) and other-orientation (mastery climate) respectively, are likely moderators of the relationship between leader narcissism and the trait expression of self-serving behaviour.

Performance and mastery climates have been shown to shape behaviour because they serve as a backdrop against which the individual interprets the criteria of success and failure in the organization. In a high performance climate, success requires an individual's superiority over others, whereas in a high mastery climate success requires collaboration, sharing and learning (Nerstad et al., 2013). Each of the climates thus signals a different type of pathway to the self-enhancement that narcissistic leaders crave (Grijalva & Zhang, 2016). High (vs. low) performance climates will spark the propensity of leaders high in narcissism to behave egocentrically, expressed in self-serving behaviour, because the climate signals

that it is appropriate to display superiority, out-perform others and act in one's self-interest (Zhang et al., 2022). In contrast, high (vs. low) mastery climates will signal that self-serving behaviours are ineffective because the climate requires to collaborate, share, and support mutual learning (Nerstad et al., 2018), and thus smother the expression of leader narcissism in the form of self-serving behaviour.

Leader self-serving behaviour in turn is likely to diminish followers' trust in the leader (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau, 1998). Followers who perceive that their leader is acting self-servingly will fear that they are being taken advantage of or exploited. Followers' trust is indispensable for a leader's ability to be effective, and it is essential for organizational and employee functioning (Burke et al., 2007; Dirks & de Jong, 2022). Trust is also a central ingredient of interpersonal processes between leaders and followers in the context of organizational climates (Nerstad et al., 2018). We expect a negative effect of leader narcissism on trust in the leader via follower perceptions of leader self-serving behaviour, to the extent that the performance climate is high or the mastery climate is low (see Figure 1).

Our research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of leader narcissism by explaining how motivational climates affect the expression of this personality trait. Our study investigates key tenets of trait activation theory, which has been fruitfully applied to the study of leader narcissism as it allows us to explain when the trait translates into (negative) behavioural expressions of a narcissistic personality (Gauglitz et al., 2023; Gauglitz & Schyns, 2024; Liu et al., 2017; Nevicka et al., 2013, 2018), and corroborates further evidence which complements previous findings on climates in organizations as activators of leaders' Dark Triad trait expression (De Hoogh et al., 2021; Laurijssen et al., 2024).

Our first contribution relates to how according to trait activation theory (Tett et al., 2021) trait-relevant cues can operate at three different levels: task, social, and organizational (Tett et al., 2013). Our research specifically focuses on organizational-level cues, which encompass organizational culture, climate, and policies (Tett et al., 2013, 2021; Tett & Burnett, 2003). Our research therefore extends prior studies that primarily addressed social-level cues (for exceptions see Hoffman et al., 2013, Nevicka et al., 2013) such as those related to how followers interact with their leader (Gauglitz et al., 2023; Gauglitz & Schyns, 2024), how leaders behave towards individual followers (Carnevale et al., 2018a; Liu et al., 2017; Nevicka et al., 2018) or the team as a whole (Carnevale et al., 2018b). We argue that gaining a deeper understanding of organizational-level cues, particularly motivational climates, is essential. These cues are likely to maintain a persistent and influential presence, with a lesser propensity for change over time compared to task and social-level cues, which fluctuate even throughout the workday (e.g., task-specific conscientiousness cues; Minbashian et al., 2010).

As a second contribution, our study advances the understanding of how both the presence and absence of features that signal (un)wanted behaviour in the workplace can affect leaders' self-serving

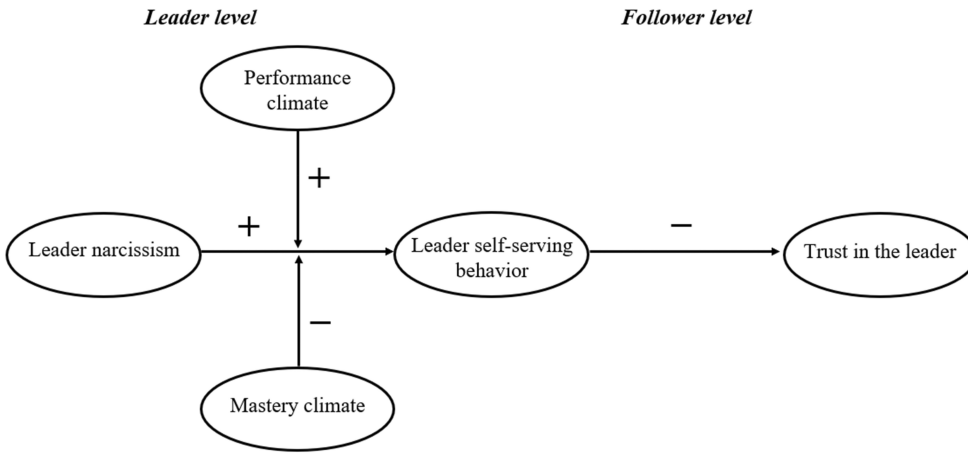

FIGURE 1 Research model: The effect of leader narcissism on trust in the leader via leader self-serving behaviour as moderated by both performance climate and mastery climate.

behaviour depending on their personality. According to Tett and Burnett's (2003) taxonomy, trait-relevant situational cues can serve various functions, including as demands, distracters, constraints, releasers and facilitators (Tett et al., 2013). Demands signal wanted behaviour by providing 'an opportunity to act in a positively valued way' (Tett & Burnett, 2003, p. 505), whether formally (e.g., included in a job description) or informally through group norms and organizational features such as climates. Constraints signal unwanted behaviour, limiting opportunities for trait expression and acting as trait deactivators (Tett & Burnett, 2003). We argue that performance climate and mastery climate will act as two distinct functional cues for narcissistic leaders and regulate leader self-serving behaviour, an exemplary behavioural expression of trait narcissism, in different ways. For leaders high in narcissism, high performance climates will serve as trait activators, signalling that self-serving behaviour is rewarded (i.e., presence of a demand). In contrast, low performance climates will signal that self-serving behaviour is not valued, thus smothering this natural tendency for leaders high in narcissism (i.e., absence of a demand). Conversely, high mastery climates will serve as trait deactivators for leaders high in narcissism, signalling that self-serving behaviour is unrewarded and discouraged (i.e., presence of a constraint), while low mastery climates will not overtly impose restrictions on this natural tendency for leaders high in narcissism (i.e., absence of a constraint). In sum, we utilize Tett and Burnett's (2003) taxonomy of functional cues, and test if it adequately helps to explain why narcissistic leaders are motivated to exhibit self-serving behaviour in some organizational contexts while they refrain from it in others.

Lastly, our study expands the existing literature by demonstrating that follower trust in leaders can be contingent on the interplay between leader narcissism and the organizations' motivational climate. While prior research has emphasized the pivotal role of effective leadership for follower trust (Dirks & de Jong, 2022), there is a growing recognition of the detrimental impact that poor leadership can have on followers' trust in the leader (Legood et al., 2021; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Yet, the trust literature lacks insights into the contextual factors that shape how leaders either foster or erode trust among followers (Dirks & de Jong, 2022). Understanding the circumstances and mechanisms by which narcissistic leaders jeopardize their followers' trust is a good step forward and crucial for safeguarding follower productivity, well-being, and organizational functioning.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Leader narcissism and leader self-serving behaviour

Narcissism is 'a relatively stable individual difference consisting of grandiosity, self-love and inflated self-views' (Campbell et al., 2011, p. 269). Narcissism in organizational contexts, especially leader narcissism, typically refers to grandiose narcissism, characterized by (over)confidence, extraversion and high self-esteem, while also lacking interpersonal skills and empathy, dominating others and acting in an aggressive and entitled fashion (Campbell et al., 2011). Narcissists' entitlement is rooted in a sense of superiority over others (Freis & Hansen-Brown, 2021). Interpersonal relationships serve the function of facilitating and preserving the narcissist's grandiose self-views (Horvath & Morf, 2010; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissistic individuals employ self-regulatory strategies to self-enhance by augmenting their positive self-views (e.g., in the leadership domain; Judge et al., 2006), rejecting negative feedback (Atlas & Them, 2008; Stucke, 2003; Tortoriello & Hart, 2018), self-promotion or other-derogation (Grapsas et al., 2020), seeking affirmation from others (Mao et al., 2021), claiming power (Nevicka & Sedikides, 2021) and overstating own abilities (Macenczak et al., 2016).

As narcissists' entitlement makes them greedy, their sense of superiority prevents them from feeling bound by rules, their self-centred nature makes them egotistic, and they are prone to focus on their own needs even if it is at the expense of others and the organization. Thus, leader narcissism is likely to be positively related to leader self-serving behaviour. Leader self-serving behaviour or 'any action in which a leader uses his or her power with the primary intention to benefit the self' (Williams, 2014, p. 1366) entails prioritizing self-interest and disregarding organizational and follower interests. Leaders

who engage in self-serving behaviour might use their position to obtain benefits (e.g., a bonus, time off) for themselves at the expense of their followers, claim credit for tasks that others have performed or blame followers for the leader's own mistakes. Self-serving behaviour undermines the effectiveness and functioning of organizations and the people working in them (see Williams, 2014; Wisse et al., 2019). The self-serving behaviour of leaders matters particularly as they have more power than rank-and-file employees do, and their decisions and behaviours have a substantial impact on the organization and other members, especially followers (Galinsky et al., 2015).

Previous theorizing and studies corroborate evidence to support the notion that leader narcissism is positively related to leader self-serving behaviour. For instance, narcissists tend to overestimate their relative performance, such as their creativity (Goncalo et al., 2010) and they are even quite capable of convincing others that they are creative (Goncalo et al., 2010; Wisse et al., 2015). Narcissists often overclaim and receive support for their overclaiming, which may ultimately lead them to feel entitled to a 'bigger slice of the cake' and stimulate self-serving behaviour. Also, narcissism is related to CWB (see meta-analyses by Grijalva & Newman, 2015; Liu et al., 2017; O'Boyle et al., 2012)–a behaviour that arguably may benefit the self but could harm the organization. Other studies found key characteristics of narcissism such as contempt (Schriber et al., 2017) to be related to leader self-serving behaviour (Sanders et al., 2015). Moreover, it has been found that leaders who believe that their position entitles them to obtain extra benefits (as narcissists often do) are more likely to act self-servingly than leaders who feel they should renounce their status by forfeiting perks (Rus et al., 2010b).

There are reasons to believe that boundary conditions can affect the extent to which leader narcissism is reflected in their tendency to engage in self-serving behaviour. In line with trait activation theory (Christiansen & Tett, 2008; Tett et al., 2013, 2021; Tett & Burnett, 2003), we argue that narcissistic leaders' behaviour might be contingent on how they interpret cues from their environment. Organizational-level cues appear particularly important as they can shape the behaviour of all employees, including the behaviour of narcissistic leaders, but they have received limited attention in research to date (Tett et al., 2021). We thus focus on the motivational climate in organizations. A meta-analysis of 245 independent samples also supports the role that organizational context (e.g., ingroup collectivism) plays in shaping the trait expression of employee narcissism influencing job performance and CWB (O'Boyle et al., 2012). Likewise, De Hoogh et al. (2021) found that unethical climates, characterized by low adherence to rules and high instrumentalism, activated Machiavellian traits in leaders, leading to abusive supervisory behaviours. These behaviours, in turn, negatively impacted followers' OCB and increased their emotional exhaustion. In a similar vein, Laurijssen et al. (2024) also found that psychopathic leaders' display of self-serving and abusive behaviour can be restrained by organizational contextual factors. The results of one experiment, one survey of leader–subordinate dyads, and one survey of teams showed that clear rules, more so than sanctionability of misconduct, and transparency of behaviour, weakened the positive association between leaders' primary psychopathic traits and their self-serving and abusive behaviour. Organizational climates and contexts thus seem to be able to affect trait expression. Our study shifts the focus to leader narcissism, which we argue manifests primarily through self-serving behaviour.

Motivational climates moderate the effects of leader narcissism

The concept of motivational climates addresses how contextual factors (i.e., norms and expectations reinforced by organizational policies, practices and procedures; Tett et al., 2021) shape the ways in which employees strive for success and avoid failure (Ames, 1992; Ames & Ames, 1984). Motivational climate theory assumes that employees will interpret information about valued and non-valued behaviour (e.g., what is rewarded in the organization) by observing behaviour that leads to success and avoids failure (Nerstad et al., 2013, 2018). According to trait activation theory, this information triggers people to behave more or less in line with their traits. Indeed, trait activation theory considers organizational climates as one type of situational cue that can affect the extent to which personality traits translate

into behaviour. It classifies such cues into demands, which signal positively valued responses, and constraints, which signal unwanted behaviour (Tett et al., 2021). The theory of trait activation follows a person-situation interactionist tradition and stipulates that traits can be seen as latent propensities to behave in response to trait-relevant cues. Expressing one's traits is intrinsically satisfying and if the situation allows for it people will happily behave according to their traits. If the situation does not allow for it, trait expression will be subdued. Trait activation theory attempts to understand individuals in terms of their strategies to improve the quality of their lives in the context of situational demands and constraints (see Harms et al., 2014).

Motivational climate theory distinguishes two conceptually distinct forms of motivational climates: performance climate and mastery climate. Performance climates emphasize competitiveness (i.e., success means achieving more than others), which aligns with narcissistic tendencies to seek self-enhancement, pursue power and status, and outperform others. It has been suggested that a performance climate leads to the development of negative interdependence, distrust, and opportunistic self-interested behaviour (Ames & Ames, 1984; Černe et al., 2014). Mastery climates emphasize cooperation (i.e., success by striving for mutual goals), which stands in contrast to narcissistic tendencies. In these climates, employees focus on improving their competencies (Nerstad et al., 2013) and show communal and considerate behaviours towards others in the organization (Černe et al., 2014; Nerstad et al., 2013). A workplace where people are incentivized to learn, share, and collaborate has been found to foster interpersonal trust (Nerstad et al., 2018; Song et al., 2009). Motivational climates may thus reinforce desirable and prevent undesirable behaviour through policies and reward systems (Tett et al., 2021), and we argue that leaders, especially those who are more narcissistic, are sensitive to such cues.

Narcissists may be self-oriented, but they are just as sensitive to environmental cues as other people are, if not more. Indeed, it has been argued that others form a critical social context for narcissistic behaviour in the workplace. Given that narcissists seek external validation (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), they are adept at self-monitoring, which enables them to observe and regulate their public self and the impressions that they make on others (Kowalski et al., 2018). Thus, narcissists regulate their behaviour in the hope of social reward (Rauthmann, 2011) and self-enhancement (Nevicka et al., 2011; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Narcissists are therefore sensitive to contextual cues (although their sensitivity is primarily selfishly motivated). For instance, Liu et al. (2022) showed that coworker narcissism is a key contingency that triggers narcissistic employees' comparative identity (where one's sense of uniqueness and self-worth are derived from perceived similarities with and differences from other individuals), which subsequently facilitates their taking charge behaviours. However, in our study, the organizational climate rather than the dyadic relationship between narcissistic co-workers creates this context.

We suggest that performance climates provide situational cues that can strengthen or weaken the relationship between leader narcissism and leader self-serving behaviour. A high performance climate signals that competition and self-orientation are the norm, and this justifies narcissistic leaders to pursue success at the expense of others (like descriptive and injunctive norms; Rus et al., 2010a). Therefore, high performance climates represent a demand for leaders high in narcissism (Tett & Burnett, 2003). The presence of this demand brings out the self-serving side of narcissistic individuals because the environment validates their natural sense of entitlement (de Cremer & van Dijk, 2005). Thus, we argue that acting self-servingly in a high performance climate is a strategy that fits the narcissistic leader's personality and brings about outcomes that the leader desires.

A low performance climate does not signal that self-orientation leads to success, that is, it reflects the absence of a demand for leaders high in narcissism. Narcissistic individuals look for a 'stage to shine' (Nevicka et al., 2011). When the performance climate is low, self-serving actions are not rewarded or positively reinforced by others, counteracting the natural tendency that narcissistic leaders might have towards the display of self-serving behaviour. Put differently, in a low performance climate, the narcissists' self-monitoring out of hope for social rewards and success (i.e., acquisitive self-monitoring; Rauthmann, 2011) does not lead to the conclusion that self-serving behaviour is likely to yield valued outcomes. Furthermore, in a low performance climate, individual behaviour is less visible and opportunities to show off are reduced, thereby diminishing the comparative context which triggers narcissists'

chronic self-enhancement motivation (Grijalva & Zhang, 2016). In sum, low performance climates will smother the narcissistic leader's self-enhancement motivation and opportunities to display their own superiority. Although narcissistic individuals naturally tend to emphasize the self over others, high performance climates reinforce that kind of behaviour while low performance climates do not.

> **Hypothesis 1a.** Performance climate perceptions will moderate the relationship between leader narcissism and leader self-serving behaviour, such that leader narcissism and leader self-serving behaviour will be positively related in high (but not in low) performance climates.

In contrast, in mastery climates employees are expected to help others and to contribute to shared goals. Cooperation to achieve shared goals is one aspect of a mastery climate (Nerstad et al., 2013), together with an emphasis on learning, task mastery, self-growth and equality between employees (Zhang et al., 2022). In line with trait activation theory, a high mastery climate represents a constraint (Tett & Burnett, 2003) that should rein in the self-serving tendencies of narcissistic leaders. A high mastery climate (i.e., the presence of a constraint) signals that the narcissist's quintessential tendency to value the self over others is not rewarded in the organization. In this climate, self-serving behaviour is not an appropriate strategy to obtain the outcomes that the narcissistic leader values (see Back et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2017). A low mastery climate (i.e., the absence of a constraint), however, lacks signals to suggest that self-serving behaviour does not lead to success. This type of climate may create a contextual vacuum that gives the narcissistic leader leeway to express their quintessential self-serving tendencies. We therefore assume that narcissistic leaders will see no reason to refrain from acting self-servingly in low mastery climates whereas this tendency will be reined in by the constraints for narcissistic trait expression present in high mastery climates.

> **Hypothesis 1b.** Mastery climate perceptions will moderate the relationship between leader narcissism and leader self-serving behaviour, such that leader narcissism and leader self-serving behaviour will be positively related in low (but not in high) mastery climates.

As narcissistic leaders' self-serving behaviour poses risks to the effective functioning of organizations and the people working in them (Williams, 2014), it is important to understand how leaders' self-serving behaviour affects their followers. We test a key element of effective organizational functioning: followers' trust in the leader (Dirks & de Jong, 2022; Mayer et al., 1995). We argue that leaders who act self-servingly diminish followers' faith in their good intentions, thus putting their followers' willingness to be vulnerable to them (i.e., trust) at risk.

Consequences of leader self-serving behaviour for follower trust

Trust is indispensable in harmonious social relationships and its importance can hardly be overstated (Dirks & de Jong, 2022). Trust describes the trustor's willingness to be vulnerable to the trustee. The trustor accepts risks in the relationship based on the assumption that the trustee has positive behavioural intentions (Mayer et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995; Rousseau, 1998). Lewis and Weigert (1985) argue that trust enables people to take a 'leap of faith' beyond what reason alone would warrant. In such a leap, the person suspends any potential doubt that another's actions will meet their positive expectations and acts as if his or her own vulnerability is minimal. As long as there is trust, to a lower or higher degree the leap of faith is possible.

Trust has a range of positive implications such as satisfaction with one's supervisor and job, work engagement, task performance, and OCB, and it prevents followers from lashing out against leaders (Burke et al., 2007; Decoster et al., 2021; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Legood et al., 2021). We argue that followers who perceive their leader's behaviour as self-serving will question the leader's positive intentions

and so be less willing to be vulnerable to them. By acting self-servingly, the leader signals that he/she does not prioritize the interests of followers. We argue that followers lack trust in leaders with high narcissism because of the leaders' self-serving behaviour. In fact, in a scenario study with students and a cross-sectional field survey, Decoster et al. (2021) show that employees are less trusting of leaders who act self-servingly. Previous research has also demonstrated that followers experience increased uncertainty and negative emotions in the face of self-serving leader behaviour (Camps et al., 2012). Moreover, self-serving leader behaviour decreases followers' psychological safety in teams, with negative downstream implications for team performance (Mao et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2019). Finally, other research has shown that leaders with a high general propensity to act self-servingly can also undermine followers' trust. For example, in a study of 196 leader–follower dyads, leader Machiavellianism was found to intensify the negative relationship between follower Machiavellianism and trust in the leader (Belschak et al., 2018).

In sum, we assert that the leaders' tendency to engage in self-serving behaviour is one reason why followers lack trust in narcissistic leaders, as Hamstra et al. (2021) have recently shown. Moreover, we expect that high (vs. low) performance climates and low (vs. high) mastery climates will strengthen the indirect link between leader narcissism, leader self-serving behaviour, and follower trust in the leader.

Hypothesis 2a. The indirect effect of leader narcissism on follower trust in the leader via leader self-serving behaviour will be moderated by performance climate perceptions, such that there will be a negative indirect relationship in high (but not in low) performance climates.

Hypothesis 2b. The indirect effect of leader narcissism on follower trust in the leader via leader self-serving behaviour will be moderated by mastery climate perceptions, such that there will be a negative indirect relationship in low (but not in high) mastery climates.

METHOD

Sample and procedure

We invited 634 teams (3296 individuals) working in various for-profit and non-profit organizations in the Netherlands to participate in our study. In each team, data were collected from employees in leadership positions and their followers (i.e., direct subordinates; a total of 2451 completed responses – 574 leaders and 1877 followers – an overall response rate of 74%). After matching the leaders and their followers who completed all the conceptual measures in the questionnaire, our final sample consisted of 546 teams (i.e., 546 leaders matched with 1718 followers, corresponding to an average of 3.15 follower ratings per leader). Among the 546 leaders in our sample, 45.6% identified as female and seven identified as a gender other than male or female. The mean age was 40.88 years ($SD = 11.48$). The leaders reported an average organizational tenure of 9.60 years ($SD = 9.45$) and their average tenure in the team was 5.16 years ($SD = 5.79$); 87% had a bachelor's degree or higher. Among the 1718 followers, 55% identified as female, and eight followers identified as a gender other than male or female. The mean age was 35.21 years ($SD = 12.88$).[1] Followers reported an average organizational tenure of 6.70 years ($SD = 8.65$) and their average tenure in the team was 3.86 years ($SD = 5.25$); 74% had a bachelor's degree or higher.

[1]One follower did not indicate his/her age.

The data were collected as part of a larger study on leadership.[2] Master's students contacted respondents via their work environment, their personal networks, and their networks of acquaintances. The students served as a point of contact between the research team and respondents. Potential respondents were approached by email/social media, telephone or face-to-face. The requirements for participating in the study were: (1) respondents were in paid employment; (2) respondents worked in teams with only one identifiable leader and (3) the team consisted of at least three followers. Leaders and followers interested in participating in the study were sent an electronic questionnaire hosted by Qualtrics. We relied on numerical identifiers to match leader-follower data. All respondents provided active informed consent to participate in the study and participation was voluntary, confidential, and unpaid. When the data collection ended, the respondents were debriefed via e-mail. All procedures were conducted in compliance with the APA ethics code and approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the university of the second author prior to data collection.

Measures

Leader narcissism

Leader narcissism was assessed using Ames et al.'s (2006) 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16). The NPI-16 was designed to cover the four sub-dimensions of grandiose narcissism, namely exploitativeness/entitlement, leadership/authority, superiority/arrogance, and self-absorption/self-admiration (Emmons, 1987). We collected responses on a 5-point Likert scale (Andreassen et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2020). Example items are 'I can make anybody believe anything I want them to' and 'I am an extraordinary person' (1 = *totally disagree*, 5 = *totally agree*; $\alpha = .86$).

Performance climate

Leader perceptions of a performance climate were measured with the eight-item performance climate subscale of the Motivational Climate at Work Questionnaire (MCWQ; Nerstad et al., 2013). Leaders indicated how much they agreed (1 = *totally disagree,* 5 = *totally agree*; $\alpha = .83$) with statements such as 'In my organization, work accomplishments are measured based on comparisons with the accomplishments of coworkers' and 'In my organization, there exists a competitive rivalry among the employees'.

Mastery climate

We measured leader perceptions of a mastery climate with the six-item mastery climate subscale of the MCWQ (Nerstad et al., 2013). Leaders indicated how much they agreed (1 = *totally disagree,* 5 = *totally agree*; $\alpha = .84$) with statements such as 'In my organization, one is encouraged to cooperate and exchange thoughts and ideas mutually' and 'In my organization, cooperation and mutual exchange of knowledge are encouraged'.

Leader self-serving behaviour

The degree to which leaders demonstrated self-serving behaviour was assessed using the eight-item leader self-serving behaviour scale (Rus et al., 2010b). We asked followers how frequently their leader

[2]The study materials, processed data, and syntax for our analyses are available from the second author upon request. The study was not preregistered.

engaged in behaviour like 'Instead of giving credit to me or my colleagues for jobs requiring a lot of time and effort, my leader took the credit him/herself' and 'Although he/she was partly to be blamed, my leader did not take personal responsibility for my team's failure to meet a goal'. Followers rated their leaders' self-serving behaviour using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *very often*; $\alpha = .88$).

Trust in the leader

We used de Jong and Elfring's (2010) five-item scale slightly adjusted to fit the purpose of our study (i.e., by replacing 'my team members' with 'my supervisor'). Followers rated the extent to which they agreed with items like 'I am able to count on my leader for help if I have difficulties with my job' and 'I can rely on my supervisor to keep his/her word' (1 = *totally disagree*, 5 = *totally agree*; $\alpha = .91$).

RESULTS

Preliminary analysis

Given the nested nature of our data (i.e., followers in a team headed by the same leader), we conducted multilevel confirmatory factor analyses (MLCFA) in M*plus*8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). We estimated four different models to assess the construct validity of the five model variables, that is, leader narcissism, performance climate and mastery climate (Level 2), and leader self-serving behaviour and trust in the leader (Level 1). Considering our substantial sample size, we relied on the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) to assess model fit (see Hu & Bentler, 1999). It has been suggested that a satisfactory fit is indicated by values greater than or equal to .90 for CFI and TLI, and by values less than or equal to .08 for RMSEA and SRMR (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003). The results of our MLCFA showed that the suggested five-factor solution was superior to the other factor solutions and demonstrated a satisfactory fit (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Multi-level confirmatory factor analyses.

Model	χ^2	*df*	$\Delta\chi^2$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	$SRMR_{within}$	$SRMR_{between}$
Model A	1778.95***	466	–	.040	.91	.90	.036	.057
Model B	4624.68***	467	2845.73	.072	.72	.70	.123	.057
Model C	5558.78***	469	3779.83	.079	.66	.63	.123	.096
Model D	6601.12***	470	4822.17	.087	.59	.55	.123	.137

Note: $N = 546$ leaders, 1718 followers. Listwise deletion. Model A: hypothesized 5-factor model: Leader narcissism, performance climate, mastery climate (Level 2), leader self-serving behaviour and trust in the leader (Level 1). Model B: 4-factor model: Leader narcissism, performance climate, mastery climate (Level 2), leader self-serving behaviour and trust in the leader load on one factor (Level 1). Model C: 3-factor model: Leader narcissism loads on one factor, performance climate and mastery climate load on one factor (Level 2), leader self-serving behaviour and trust in the leader load on one factor (Level 1). Model D: 2-factor model: Leader narcissism, performance climate and mastery climate load on one factor (Level 2), leader self-serving behaviour and trust in the leader load on one factor (Level 1). The high χ^2 statistic for the models might be attributable to the factor structure of the NPI-16, as mentioned (Ames et al., 2006; Emmons, 1987). We followed the standard practice adopted in previous research that used the NPI-16 without singling out sub-dimensions as part of the analysis (Andreassen et al., 2017; Maaß & Ziegler, 2017; Owens et al., 2015). In sum, the CFA results suggest satisfactory structural validity for our constructs considering the multilevel data structure (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003).

Abbreviations: CFI, comparative fit index; *df*, degrees of freedom; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root-mean-square residual; TLI, Tucker-Lewis index; $\Delta\chi^2$, difference in chi-square values compared to the best fitting model (Model A); χ^2, chi-square.

***$p < .001$.

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations and correlations among the study variables.

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
Level 2: Leader level							
1. Leader narcissism	2.73	.54	–				
2. Performance climate	2.42	.71	.20**	–			
3. Mastery climate	3.93	.61	.02	−.15**	–		
Level 1: Follower level							
4. Leader self-serving behaviour	1.57	.64	.04†	.06*	−.05*	–	
5. Trust in the leader	4.01	.69	−.01	−.03	.05*	−.48***	–
Level 2: Leader demographic variables							
Gender	–	–	−.16***	−.07**	.03	−.01	.01
Age	40.88	11.48	−.12***	−.14***	.02	−.05*	−.00
Tenure with organization	9.60	9.45	−.16***	.02	.07**	−.03	.00
Tenure with team	5.16	5.79	−.05	−.04	.10***	−.02	.02
Level 1: Follower demographic variables							
Gender	–	–	−.02	−.04†	−.01	−.05*	.01
Age	35.21	12.88	−.02	−.05†	−.01	−.07**	.00
Tenure with organization	6.70	8.65	−.05*	−.02	−.04†	−.06*	.02
Tenure with team	3.86	5.25	−.02	−.06*	−.04	−.03	.01

Note: Level 2 $N = 546$ leaders; Level 1 $N = 1718$ followers. Level 2 means, standard deviations and Pearson correlations are based on leader data. Level 1 means, standard deviations and Pearson correlations are based on follower data. The correlations between Level 1 and Level 2 variables are multilevel correlations. Gender is coded as 1 = male, 2 = other, 3 = female. Note that alternative coding (e.g., including 'other' in the 'male'/'female' categories and coding 'other' with the highest or lowest value) did not change the correlational results. Age and tenure with organization/team are in years.

†$p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed significance).

To justify hierarchical linear modelling, we computed (1) within-group and between-group variances, (2) within-group interrater agreement r_{wg} (reliability within group; James et al., 1993) and (3) intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC1, ICC2) (Bliese, 2000) for our Level 1 variables. For leader self-serving behaviour, we observed within-group ($\sigma^2 = .34$) and between-group ($\sigma^2 = .57$, $p < .001$) variance, high group interrater agreement, $r_{wg} = .90$ ($SD = .19$) and satisfactory ICC values of .15 for ICC(1) and .50 for ICC(2). For trust in the leader, we observed within-group ($\sigma^2 = .39$) and between-group ($\sigma^2 = .65$, $p < .001$) variances, high group interrater agreement, $r_{wg} = .89$ ($SD = .19$) and satisfactory ICC values of .15 for ICC(1) and .48 for ICC(2). See Table 2 for the means, standard deviations and correlations between the study variables.

Hypothesis testing

We used Jamovi – an open-source graphical user interface for the R programming language (The jamovi project, 2023) – to conduct multilevel multiple regression.[3] We estimated the leader narcissism (predictor) × performance climate (moderator) interaction (see Hypothesis 1a) together with the leader narcissism (predictor) × mastery climate (moderator) interaction (see Hypothesis 1b) on leader self-serving behaviour (outcome). The results confirmed our hypotheses. Leader narcissism

[3]Considering the theoretical and empirical significance of leader gender, leader age, and follower tenure as covariates of leader narcissism (De Hoogh et al., 2015; Grijalva et al., 2015; Weidmann et al., 2023; Wetzel et al., 2020), we incorporated these covariates into a second estimation of our model. Results revealed that only leader age negatively predicted leader self-serving behaviour ($\gamma = -.004$, $p < .05$), indicating that older leaders exhibited less self-serving behaviour. However, none of the covariates altered the relationships between our model variables. Hence, we followed standard recommendations (Becker et al., 2016; Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016) to report the results for the model without covariates.

was positively related to leader self-serving behaviour when the performance climate was high and not related to leader self-serving behaviour when the performance climate was low, confirming Hypothesis 1a. In addition, leader narcissism was positively related to leader self-serving behaviour when the mastery climate was low and not related to leader self-serving behaviour when the mastery climate was high, supporting Hypothesis 1b (see Table 3). The simple slopes of these models are presented in Figure 2.

Next, we employed the MLMED macro (MLMED Beta 2; Hayes & Rockwood, 2020; Rockwood & Hayes, 2022) – a computational macro for SPSS that simplifies the fitting of multilevel moderated mediation models – to test Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 2b. We tested the hypotheses in two models as MLMED only accommodates one moderator at a time. In both models, we controlled for the contrasting climate. We used maximum likelihood estimation, and the intercepts included in the model were specified as random and all slope terms as fixed (cf. Bickel, 2007; Edwards & Lambert, 2007). In addition, the Level 2 predictor variables (leader narcissism and performance climate to test Hypothesis 2a; leader narcissism and mastery climate to test Hypothesis 2b) were grand-mean centred (Hayes & Rockwood, 2020), the Level 1 predictor variable (leader self-serving behaviour) was within-group centred, and within-group and between-group direct and indirect effects were decomposed (Zhang et al., 2009). The Monte Carlo confidence interval method (10,000 samples) was used to calculate confidence intervals for indirect effects (Preacher & Selig, 2012). We first estimated whether the leader narcissism (predictor) × performance climate (moderator) interaction predicts trust in the leader (outcome) via leader self-serving behaviour (mediator) (Hypothesis 2a), while controlling for mastery climate (covariate). The results show that the indirect effect of leader narcissism on trust in the leader via leader self-serving behaviour was significant when performance climate was high (+1 *SD*; $\gamma = -.10$, $SE = .03$, p

TABLE 3 Testing of moderation effects.

	Leader self-serving behaviour				
Variables	***γ***	***SE***	***t***	**95% CI**	
Intercept	1.56***	.02	83.35	1.52	1.60
Leader narcissism	.08*	.04	2.28	.01	.15
Performance climate	.06*	.03	2.26	.01	.11
Mastery climate	−.07*	.03	−2.44	−.13	−.01
Leader narcissism × performance climate	.12**	.04	2.70	.03	.21
Leader narcissism × mastery climate	−.15*	.06	−2.55	−.27	−.03
Performance climate					
Mean −1 *SD*	.00	.05	−.09	−.09	.09
Mean +1 *SD*	.17**	.05	3.37	.07	.26
Mastery climate					
Mean −1 *SD*	.18**	.06	3.17	.07	.29
Mean +1 *SD*	−.02	.05	−.35	−.11	.08
Model fit					
AIC	3269.0925				
BIC	3312.6838				
−2Loglikelihood value	−1626.5462				
R^2 marginal/R^2 conditional	.03/.19				

Note: Level 2 $N = 546$ leaders; Level 1 $N = 1718$ followers. Model estimation testing one interaction at a time, with or without the contrasting climate as covariate, did not significantly change the results.

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike information criterion; BIC, Bayesian information criterion; *SE*, standard error; low and high CI values represent 95% Confidence Intervals; *γ*, unstandardized regression coefficient.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed significance).

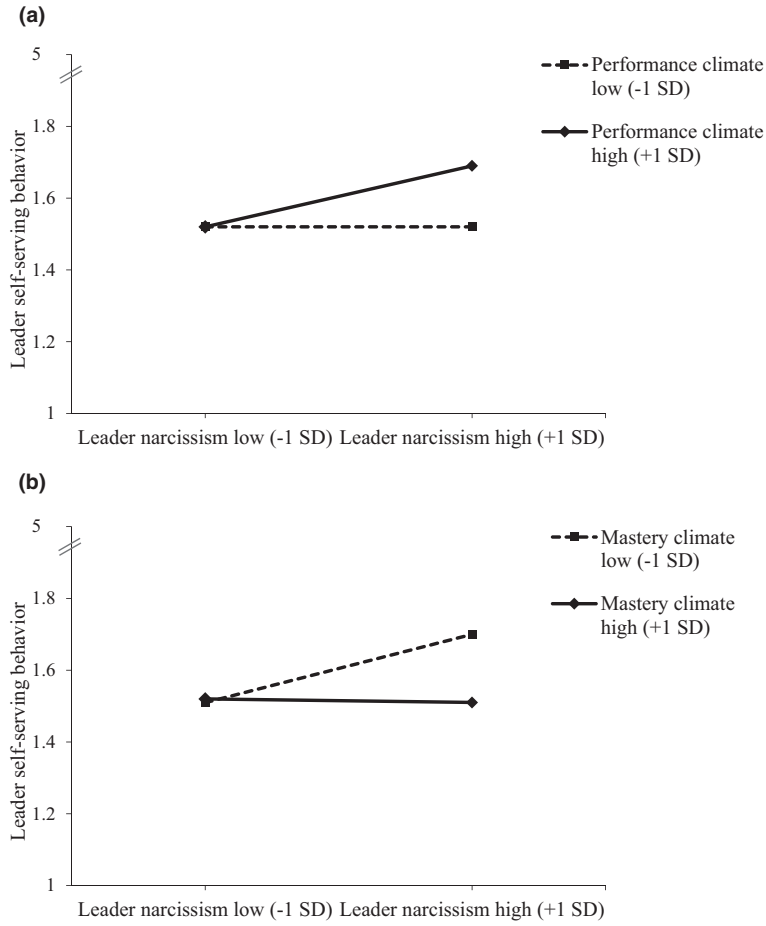

FIGURE 2 Results of multilevel simple slope analyses. (a). The interaction of leader narcissism and performance climate on leader self-serving behaviour. (b). The interaction of leader narcissism and mastery climate on leader self-serving behaviour.

<. 01, MC [−.15, −.04]) and not significant when performance climate was low (−1 *SD*; $\gamma = .02$, $SE = .03$, $p =$ ns, MC [−.03, .07]). The index of mediated moderation – a test of moderation of the indirect effect (Hayes, 2015; Hayes & Rockwood, 2020) – was significant ($\gamma = -.08$, MCLL −.13, MCUL −.03) and confirmed the role of performance climate in shaping the effects of leader narcissism.

Second, we estimated whether the leader narcissism (predictor) × mastery climate (moderator) interaction predicts trust in the leader (outcome) via leader self-serving behaviour (mediator) (Hypothesis 2b), while controlling for performance climate (covariate). The results revealed that the indirect effect of leader narcissism on trust in the leader via leader self-serving behaviour was not significant when mastery climate was high (+1 *SD*; $\gamma = .02$, $SE = .03$, $p =$ ns, MC [−.03, .08]) and significant when mastery climate was low (−1 *SD*; $\gamma = -.11$, $SE = .03$, $p <$ .01, MC [−.18, −.05]). The index of mediated moderation showed significance ($\gamma = .10$, MCLL .04, MCUL .17) which also confirmed a meaningful role of a mastery climate in shaping the effects of leader narcissism.

In sum, these findings support Hypotheses 1a, 1b, 2a and 2b. We find that leader narcissism interacts with the performance climate on the one hand, and the mastery climate on the other hand to predict leader self-serving behaviour: Leader narcissism positively predicts leader self-serving behaviour when the performance climate is high (and not low), supporting Hypothesis 1a, and when the mastery climate is low (and not high), supporting Hypothesis 1b. We find a negative effect of leader narcissism on trust

in the leader via follower perceptions of leader self-serving behaviour when the performance climate is high (and not low), supporting Hypothesis 2a, and when the mastery climate is low (and not high), supporting Hypothesis 2b.

DISCUSSION

Prior research shows that narcissistic leaders are prone to behave poorly and often are a detriment to their followers (Gauglitz & Schyns, 2024; Liu et al., 2017; Nevicka et al., 2013, 2018). However, the extent to which leader narcissism translates into the display of unwanted behaviour has been argued to be dependent on task, social, and organizational-level cues (Tett et al., 2013). We argued that leader self-serving behaviour, although a quintessential expression of leaders' trait narcissism, is sensitive to contextual cues. In line with the hypothesized relationships, our research illustrates how motivational climates can spark or smother leader self-serving behaviour, which crucially shapes followers' trust in the leader.

We found that high performance climates fuel the risk that leader narcissism poses to leader behaviour and leader-follower relationships. That is, narcissistic leaders feel encouraged to express their trait in organizational contexts which signal that competition and self-orientation are valued (i.e., presence of a demand according to trait activation theory; Tett & Burnett, 2003). When performance climates are low and competition and self-orientation do not lead to success (i.e., absence of a demand), the self-serving tendencies of narcissistic leaders are subdued. We also found that a high mastery climate alleviates the risks of leader narcissism. When the organizational context signals that collaboration, sharing, and mutual learning are required (i.e., presence of a constraint for narcissistic leaders; Tett & Burnett, 2003), the trait expression of leader narcissism via the display of self-serving behaviour is smothered. Notably, our study also shows the risk of omission of clear signals. That is, abstaining from pointing out that self-oriented behaviours are not acceptable – as is the case in low mastery climates – can be damaging, too. Under these conditions, narcissistic leaders are more likely to behave self-servingly and are less likely to be trusted by their followers. Taken together, and in line with the tenets of trait activation theory, performance climate and mastery climate are independent organizational-level cues that affect how leader narcissism translates into leader self-serving behaviour and subsequent follower trust.

Theoretical implications

Our results speak to the need for differentiated theorizing of the conditions under which the behavioural blueprint of leader narcissism translates into actual behaviour and consequently influences follower perceptions, and our findings support key tenets of trait activation theory (Tett et al., 2021). The extent to which narcissistic leaders' self-serving tendencies are activated and displayed in behaviour depends on cues that leaders receive from the organizational environment (i.e., organizational-level cues). Previous work has predominantly focused on social-level cues (i.e., how one interacts with and feels treated by relevant others) as trait activators. For example, Liu et al. (2017) demonstrated that leader narcissism is positively related to leader self-serving behaviour (with negative downstream consequences for follower pro-social behaviour and voice), but only if leaders feel treated unfairly. Unfairness perceptions are considered a threat to the individual's self-esteem (Koper et al., 1993), that is, as an indication of an existing negative perception of one's interpersonal worth and standing. When narcissistic leaders feel treated unfairly, they see no reason to stop themselves from behaving according to their natural tendencies. When treated fairly, narcissists might attempt to self-enhance in more pro-social ways and downregulate their self-serving tendencies. Our approach adds to this theorizing by concentrating on broader organizational-level cues created by policies, procedures, and social norms that go beyond individual-level perceptions of how one is treated by others. These cues – representing demands and constraints (Tett & Burnett, 2003) – delineate what behaviours are valued (or not) within

the organization, which may consequently affect how leader narcissism impacts the strategies that leaders use to improve the quality of their own lives (Harms et al., 2014).

Motivational climates furnish individuals with contextual cues for what brings success, shaping their motivation and goal orientation (Nerstad et al., 2013). Conversely, the absence of cues from motivational climates is relevant, too. When the constraints imposed by a mastery climate are absent, leader narcissism predicts self-serving behaviour, whereas when the demands from a performance climate are absent, leader narcissism does not predict self-serving behaviour. Thus, narcissistic leaders can be restrained when organizational-level cues suggest that self-serving behaviour – an expression of their narcissistic personality – is less useful for achieving success in the organization. As narcissists look for a 'stage to shine' (Nevicka et al., 2011), our results support that they can 'tone down' what is regarded as undesirable behaviour if the situation calls for it. Both high mastery climates or low performance climates can help organizations to hold their narcissistic leaders in check because they function as either (present) constraints or (absent) demands for these leaders.

Our results speak to the wider literature on motivational climates, specifically the distinction between performance climate and mastery climate. Previous research shows that a mastery climate promotes employees' harmonious passion, while a performance climate leads to obsessive passion, with subsequent implications for proactive work behaviour and pro-job unethical behaviour (Zhang et al., 2022). These findings suggest that motivational climates elicit different types of behaviour, either self-improvement oriented or self-enhancement oriented. Our study adds to this the notion that the presence or absence of both climates can be particularly influential for certain employee groups (such as narcissistic leaders), which can have downstream effects on others. Notably, our results can be interpreted as an example of the unwanted 'side effects' of a performance climate. The organization may aim to encourage competitiveness as a pathway towards better performance, but inadvertently spark self-serving behaviour in narcissistic leaders, which may negatively affect others and ultimately hamper organizational performance (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009; Williams, 2014; Wisse et al., 2019). Additionally, we show that a mastery climate can function as an amplifier for intended outcomes. That is, the organization may aim to encourage collaboration and learning as a pathway towards better performance, and at the same time also diminish the expression of self-serving tendencies in narcissistic leaders, which may have extra benefits (e.g., for employee satisfaction or trust) on top of the desired effect.

Strengths, limitations and future research

We have presented findings from a multisource multilevel study with a large sample of leaders and followers in organizations. Including leader and follower ratings of our focal variables reduces concerns that common source bias may have affected our results (Podsakoff et al., 2012). We also followed several best practices in data collection and data management (Aguinis et al., 2021). We sampled leaders and followers in a range of different organizations, thus underscoring the generalizability of our results. We collected and analysed data following a multilevel paradigm, which is particularly suitable for constructs that span multiple levels in organizations (Mathieu & Chen, 2011). In our study, followers nested in teams rated their leader, which allowed us to distinguish conceptually and empirically between variables operating at the team level (i.e., leader narcissism, motivational climates) and followers' reactions (i.e., perceptions of leader self-serving behaviour, trust in the leader). Notably, the results from the MLCFA also demonstrated that our focal variables were empirically distinct.

Despite these clear strengths, there are limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting our results. Due to the correlational nature of our study, we cannot rule out the possibility of reciprocal effects such as between followers' trust in the leader and perceptions of the leader's self-serving behaviour. We conceptualized and measured our independent variable leader narcissism as an individual difference. As such it is likely to remain stable over time and across situations as compared to the state-like constructs of leader self-serving behaviour and trust in the leader (Antonakis et al., 2012; Tuncdogan et al., 2017). However, organizational climates can change. Although changing an organizational climate

is notoriously slow and difficult, the work on antecedents of climates seems to suggest that interventions that seek to change climate best focus on leadership (Schneider et al., 2017). Future research may for instance investigate if higher management is able to change organizational climate over time, and if these changes affect how narcissistic leaders behave vis-à-vis their followers. Additionally, previous research suggests that narcissistic leaders can also shape organizational climates (O'Reilly et al., 2021). Therefore, future studies could also investigate if narcissistic leaders change climates according to their wishes, instead of treating leader narcissism and perceptions of performance climate and mastery climate as independent variables.

We also acknowledge that trust in the leader and leader self-serving behaviour were both follower-rated variables, which raises the potential of common method variance to influence the relationship. To test the robustness of our results, we recommend that future studies measure self-serving leader behaviour and trust in the leader at different time points to conduct cross-lagged analyses to describe reciprocal relationships, or directional influences, between self-serving behaviour and trust (Zyphur et al., 2020). Another option is to include additional rating sources of self-serving behaviour (e.g., the leader's supervisor; Donia et al., 2016), or more objective measures of self-serving behaviour (e.g., leaders' decision-making in scenarios with more or less self-serving options). Another issue is that there are a host of other variables that might influence leader self-serving behaviour or follower trust, either directly or via trait expression processes. Cues at different levels (e.g., team, organization, industry) may interact to predict the expression of trait narcissism. While beyond the scope of our research, we would welcome future research investigating these potential intricate relationships.

Another potential limitation is that although we employed a widely used measure of leader narcissism, it has been subject to discussion regarding its factor structure (Ackerman et al., 2011; Grosz et al., 2019). Recent developments in theory and research on narcissism suggest that narcissism may have several facets and that these different facets may have distinct effects. The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC) contrasts the bright and dark sides of narcissism. It implies distinct self-regulatory mechanisms through which individuals maintain their grandiose sense of self (Back et al., 2013). Conceptualized as two pathways, narcissistic admiration represents assertive orientations, which reflect charming and charismatic behaviours, whereas narcissistic rivalry implies devaluing others and destructive behaviours. Recent empirical evidence underscores their differential implications for desirable outcomes such as leaders' fundraising success (Gruda et al., 2021) and undesirable leader behaviours such as abusive supervision (Gauglitz et al., 2023). We suspect that narcissistic admiration and rivalry would also result in different self-regulatory strategies to adapt to mastery and performance climates. Our findings on the negative effects of leader narcissism on follower trust more likely pertain to the rivalry than the admiration pathway. Future studies should test and expand our findings with this distinction in mind.

What drives the apparent adaptation of narcissistic leaders' behaviour to organizational climates is also an avenue that requires further study. We have argued that maintaining their grandiose self-image is a key driver of narcissists' behaviours. For example, previous research shows that this self-regulatory process is (at least partially) fuelled by their striving for personal glory (i.e., opportunities for self-enhancement through external recognition; Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017; Nevicka et al., 2011; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). However, even though our results are in line with this theorizing, we have not examined the effects of leader narcissism on self-enhancement motivations moderated by performance climate or mastery climate perceptions. Self-enhancement is a self-maintenance mechanism that strives to preserve one's perceived or aspirational levels of functioning (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). We recommend examining this potential mechanism and including measures of self-enhancement motivation and the need for status and recognition in future studies.

Trust in one's leader (or a lack thereof) should have further downstream consequences such as job satisfaction and satisfaction with one's supervisor, leader effectiveness perceptions, and followers' voluntary work behaviours (e.g., CWB). Future studies could also include objective performance measures (Braun et al., 2013) to further reduce the potential influence of common method bias and

evidence the implications of leader narcissism and the lack of trust in these leaders for organizational functioning.

Finally, we have zoomed in on the moderating effect of motivational climates. A climate can be seen as an informal mechanism that governs how people work together. Informal mechanisms are norms of behaviour, personal and professional conventions, and self-imposed codes of conduct (see Schein, 2009). However, there are also formal mechanisms that regulate behaviour in organizational contexts. These are the constraints and affordances that can often be found in official documents and include rules and policies, performance management systems, and incentives. Future research could investigate the extent to which these formal mechanisms activate or impede leaders' display of narcissistic traits.

Managerial implications

Our research provides insights that organizations can use to improve their strategies for managing 'dark leadership', especially from leaders with narcissistic traits (Wisse & Rus, 2022). There is a legitimate concern that leaders high in narcissism can cause significant disruption and wield negative effects on followers. Encouraging a performance climate, or failing to promote a mastery environment, can exacerbate the deleterious effects of leaders' narcissistic personalities. We caution organizations to consider whether their motivational climate, or their performance and reward structures, drive narcissistic leaders towards undesirable (e.g., self-serving) behaviour. We therefore recommend that organizations reflect on the performance cues (e.g., reward policies) that they communicate to employees. For example, they should consider the extent to which they reward the success of individuals or teams. In addition, rewards could be set not (only) in relation to outcomes (e.g., sales performance) but also emphasizing the underlying processes (e.g., helping behaviour between co-workers, learning). As especially top management teams set the tone for cohesion and collaboration in organizations (Raes et al., 2022) and shape the organizational culture (O'Reilly et al., 2021), we recommend that they are particularly careful in their communication. Our recommendations align with the view that to counter the dark side of leader narcissism, organizations should consider the dynamic interplay between leaders, followers, and the context in which they function (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). A more systemic approach could broaden the intervention toolkit that organizations may use by moving beyond a unidimensional, leader-centric approach to the lessening of dark leadership to include followers and the organization as a whole as well.

Research shows that when narcissistic leaders are held accountable or are encouraged to engage with their teams, their negative impact is diminished (Carnevale et al., 2018a, 2018b). Thus, it might be useful if (narcissistic) leaders gain insight into their display of self-serving behaviours. Although narcissistic leaders might view such behaviour as quite normal, they may not realize that it can trigger negative reactions from others (e.g., envy; Braun et al., 2018). By becoming aware of the consequences of their actions, these leaders might begin to reflect on their behaviour. Even if they are not genuinely concerned about their followers, they will be motivated to prevent backlash for strategic reasons.

Furthermore, it is important to support the followers of narcissistic leaders as they are the primary recipients of these leaders' negative behaviours (Braun, 2017). It may be helpful to increase the awareness of potentially harmful dynamics (Breevaart et al., 2022). This prevents followers from becoming complacent in destructive settings, such that they start seeing the self-serving behaviour of leaders as normal. Also, establishing support networks and creating avenues for raising concerns can help employees break the silence around dark leadership (Wisse & Rus, 2022). For instance, regular staff surveys in which followers can anonymously share their experiences with self-serving leader behaviour might provide useful information to senior leadership and work councils (and stir them on to foster the development of high mastery and low performance climates).

CONCLUSION

Our findings imply that narcissistic leaders adapt their self-serving behaviour to the organizational context with downstream consequences for followers' trust. Consistent with trait activation theory, we demonstrate that a performance climate can spark narcissistic leaders' propensity to behave self-servingly, eroding followers' trust: A high performance climate signals reward for self-serving behaviour (i.e., presence of a demand), whereas a low performance climate communicates that self-serving behaviour is not valued (i.e., absence of a demand). Conversely, a high mastery climate smothers narcissistic leaders' tendency to behave self-servingly, preserving followers' trust, as this climate signals that self-serving behaviour is discouraged (i.e., presence of a constraint), unlike in a low mastery climate (i.e., absence of a constraint). We seek to inspire future research challenging the current understanding of the role of leader narcissism in organizational contexts. Scholars may unveil additional mechanisms that activate or deactivate the dark side of narcissistic traits, shedding light on how to curb the negative effects of leader narcissism.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Susanne Braun: Supervision; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; conceptualization; methodology. **Ed Sleebos:** Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; visualization; writing – original draft; methodology; project administration; writing – review and editing. **Leah L. Zou:** Conceptualization; writing – original draft. **Barbara M. Wisse:** Writing – original draft; conceptualization; writing – review and editing; methodology; supervision.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The study materials, processed data, and syntax for our analyses are available from the second author upon reasonable request.

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