

When Leaders Drain Rather Than Inspire: Narcissistic Leadership, Emotional Exhaustion, and the Path to Job Burnout

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000800>

Received: 28 September 2025; Accepted: 03 October 2025; Published: 30 October 2025

ABSTRACT

Narcissistic leadership has emerged as a critical organizational issue, as leaders characterized by arrogance, self-centeredness, and lack of empathy often undermine employee well-being and long-term sustainability. This review develops a conceptual framework that explains how narcissistic leadership contributes to job burnout, with emotional exhaustion positioned as the key mediating mechanism. Using an AI-assisted narrative review design, Scopus AI outputs—summaries, expanded summaries, concept maps, and linkages—were systematically synthesized to identify thematic clusters and disciplinary patterns. The findings reveal three core pathways: psychological strain, organizational culture, and employee outcomes, with emotional exhaustion emerging as the pivotal bridge linking narcissistic leadership to burnout. Explicit moderator hypotheses are proposed, highlighting the buffering roles of intrinsic motivation, leader accountability, and positive leadership climates, alongside organizational culture as a contextual mediator. Practically, the review advances concrete interventions, including validated leader selection tools, 360-degree feedback systems, accountability protocols, and measurable KPIs such as engagement, burnout, and turnover. While the AI-assisted methodology strengthens transparency and triangulation, the heterogeneity of primary studies limited the feasibility of effect-size aggregation, underscoring the need for future empirical validation across diverse cultural contexts. Taken together, the review contributes theoretically by clarifying the psychological and cultural mechanisms of toxic leadership and practically by equipping organizations with actionable strategies to safeguard employee well-being.

Keywords — Narcissistic leadership, emotional exhaustion, job burnout, employee well-being, toxic leadership

INTRODUCTION

Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping organizational culture and influencing employee well-being. While effective leadership can motivate and inspire, toxic forms of leadership often generate harmful consequences for individuals and organizations alike. Among these, narcissistic leadership—characterized by arrogance, self-focus, and lack of empathy—has emerged as one of the most destructive styles, undermining collaboration, trust, and psychological safety [1], [2]. In increasingly competitive and high-pressure workplaces, such leadership accelerates employee strain, particularly in the form of emotional exhaustion and job burnout [3], [4].

Existing research consistently shows that narcissistic leadership drains employees' cognitive and emotional resources, reducing engagement, creativity, and satisfaction while increasing stress and turnover risk [5], [6]. Yet, much of the literature remains fragmented, often examining leadership, emotional exhaustion, and burnout in isolation rather than through an integrated conceptual lens. Emotional exhaustion—the core dimension of burnout—has been identified as a critical mediating mechanism, but its role in linking narcissistic leadership to broader employee outcomes has not been systematically consolidated [3], [2].

To address this gap, the present study adopts an AI-assisted narrative review methodology. Specifically, Scopus AI outputs—summaries, expanded summaries, concept maps, and linkages—were synthesized using an adapted PRISMA framework [7]. Grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [8], the review develops a

conceptual framework in which emotional exhaustion operates as the central mediator connecting narcissistic leadership to burnout. In addition, explicit hypotheses are proposed to guide empirical testing, with moderators such as intrinsic motivation, leader accountability, and leadership climate identified as potential buffers. Practically, the study advances concrete organizational strategies—including validated leader selection tools, 360-degree feedback systems, accountability protocols, and measurable KPIs—to mitigate the adverse impacts of toxic leadership. In doing so, this review contributes both theoretically, by clarifying the psychological and cultural mechanisms of narcissistic leadership, and practically, by equipping organizations with actionable tools to safeguard employee well-being and resilience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Narcissistic leadership, a subset of toxic leadership, is characterized by excessive self-admiration, arrogance, lack of empathy, and a persistent pursuit of power and recognition [5]. Such leaders prioritize personal goals over organizational and employee well-being, often creating dysfunctional work environments that negatively affect employee performance, job satisfaction, and creativity. Wirtz and Rigotti [2] distinguished between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in leaders, demonstrating that both forms undermine employee well-being, with grandiose narcissism amplifying the negative effects of vulnerable narcissism on work engagement. Narcissistic leaders, therefore, operate in ways that drain employees' psychological resources, foster distrust, and diminish organizational commitment, setting the stage for stress-related outcomes such as emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Emotional exhaustion represents the depletion of employees' emotional and cognitive resources due to prolonged exposure to workplace stressors. Narcissistic leaders, by imposing unrealistic demands and neglecting employees' needs, contribute significantly to this state of resource loss [3]. Research further shows that toxic leadership behaviours, including narcissism, increase role stress, which in turn exacerbates emotional exhaustion and prompts reactive work behaviours [6]. However, organizational and individual factors can play buffering roles. Engel *et al.* [9] found that a positive leadership climate mitigates emotional exhaustion, particularly in high-stress environments such as policing. Similarly, Koç *et al.* [10] demonstrated that intrinsic motivation moderates the relationship between toxic leadership and exhaustion, enabling employees to cope more effectively with the detrimental effects of narcissistic leadership. These findings suggest that both individual resilience and organizational climate can moderate the relationship between narcissistic leadership and exhaustion.

Job burnout, a syndrome encompassing emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, is strongly linked to narcissistic leadership through its mediating relationship with emotional exhaustion. Prolonged exposure to narcissistic leaders who exploit and drain employees' energy increases the incidence of burnout, which manifests in reduced work engagement, increased turnover intentions, and overall poor well-being [11]. Carnevale *et al.* [3] describe narcissistic leaders as “emotional vampires,” consuming employees' work energy and ultimately impairing productivity and voice behaviours. While narcissistic leadership fosters a climate of stress and cynicism, evidence also shows that interventions such as leader accountability and supportive organizational cultures can reduce burnout risks [9], [11].

Building on the reviewed literature, this study proposes a conceptual framework in which emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between narcissistic leadership and job burnout. Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [8], the model suggests that narcissistic leaders deplete employees' emotional and cognitive resources by fostering stressful, self-serving, and unsupportive work environments. This depletion manifests as emotional exhaustion, which subsequently drives employees toward burnout, encompassing depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment [11]. The framework highlights resource loss as the critical pathway linking narcissistic leadership to burnout outcomes, while also underscoring the potential moderating role of intrinsic motivation, leader accountability, and positive leadership climates [10], [9]. Additionally, organizational culture is positioned as a contextual mediator that can either amplify or buffer the impact of toxic leadership [1], [15]. Collectively, these insights provide a foundation for the hypotheses presented in the Discussion and underscore the importance of cross-cultural validation, since much of the current literature originates from Western organizational contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a conceptual literature review design supported by Scopus AI, which integrates bibliometric data and semantic clustering to generate synthesized insights on the topic. Unlike conventional systematic reviews that rely on RIS/CSV exports for manual screening, Scopus AI provides structured outputs in the form of summaries, expanded summaries, concept maps, and linkages. These features enable an integrated synthesis of themes across disciplines while maintaining transparency and replicability [12].

Sources of Data

The Scopus database was chosen as the primary source because of its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals across disciplines [13]. The final search string applied was:

("narcissistic leadership" OR "narcissism" OR "self-centered" OR "egotism")

AND ("job burnout" OR "work exhaustion" OR "occupational burnout" OR "employee fatigue")

AND ("employee well-being" OR "workplace stress" OR "mental health" OR "job satisfaction")

AND ("leadership style" OR "management" OR "supervision" OR "organizational behavior")

Scopus AI does not provide raw records for manual export; instead, it synthesizes the underlying literature into thematic clusters, expanded summaries, and conceptual linkages. These AI-generated outputs formed the empirical basis for the present conceptual paper.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Because Scopus AI automatically filters content by relevance, the inclusion and exclusion process was conceptual rather than record-based. Articles were retained if they contributed to the understanding of narcissistic leadership in relation to employee outcomes such as emotional exhaustion and burnout. Themes outside the scope of organizational behavior (e.g., clinical psychology without workplace relevance) were excluded at the screening stage.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Key insights were extracted from Scopus AI's summaries, expanded summaries, concept maps, and variable linkages. The concept map visually highlighted three major clusters—psychological effects, organizational culture, and employee outcomes—which were further interpreted to reveal thematic connections and potential moderating factors. This process served as a form of computational triangulation, where AI clustering was cross-validated with manual narrative synthesis to enhance interpretive rigor [14].

Prisma Reporting (Adapted)

The review process was guided by the PRISMA framework [7], but adapted to reflect the AI-assisted methodology used in this study. Unlike conventional systematic reviews that generate record-level counts of screened, excluded, and included articles, this study employed Scopus AI, which synthesizes literature into summaries, expanded summaries, concept maps, and linkage pathways. As shown in Figure 1, the review progressed through four main stages. In the identification stage, the topic query was entered into Scopus AI, which generated a synthesized body of literature relevant to narcissistic leadership, emotional exhaustion, and job burnout. In the screening stage, irrelevant clusters and non-conceptual themes were excluded based on thematic fit with the research objectives. During the eligibility stage, the AI-generated concept map and linkages were critically examined and refined to ensure conceptual alignment with the proposed framework. Finally, in the inclusion stage, the consolidated AI-synthesized clusters and representative studies formed the evidence base

for the conceptual model.

This adapted PRISMA process ensures transparency while acknowledging the unique nature of AI-assisted evidence synthesis. Although exact counts of duplicate removal and article-level exclusions are not available, the emphasis is placed on documenting how Scopus AI outputs were systematically interpreted and refined to construct the conceptual framework.

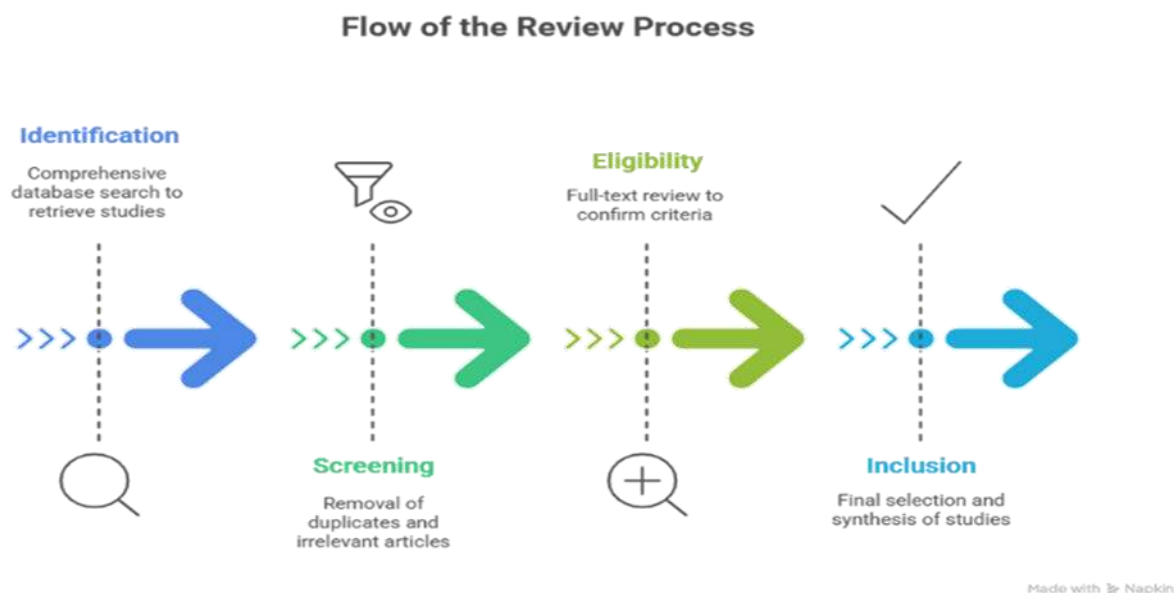


Fig. 1 Adapted PRISMA flow of the review process using Scopus AI.

FINDINGS

The concept map generated using Scopus AI (Figure 2) highlights three main thematic clusters that link narcissistic leadership with employee outcomes: psychological effects, organizational culture, and impact on employees. Within these clusters, emotional exhaustion and job burnout emerge as central pathways, reinforcing their role as bridging constructs between toxic leadership behaviors and negative employee well-being.

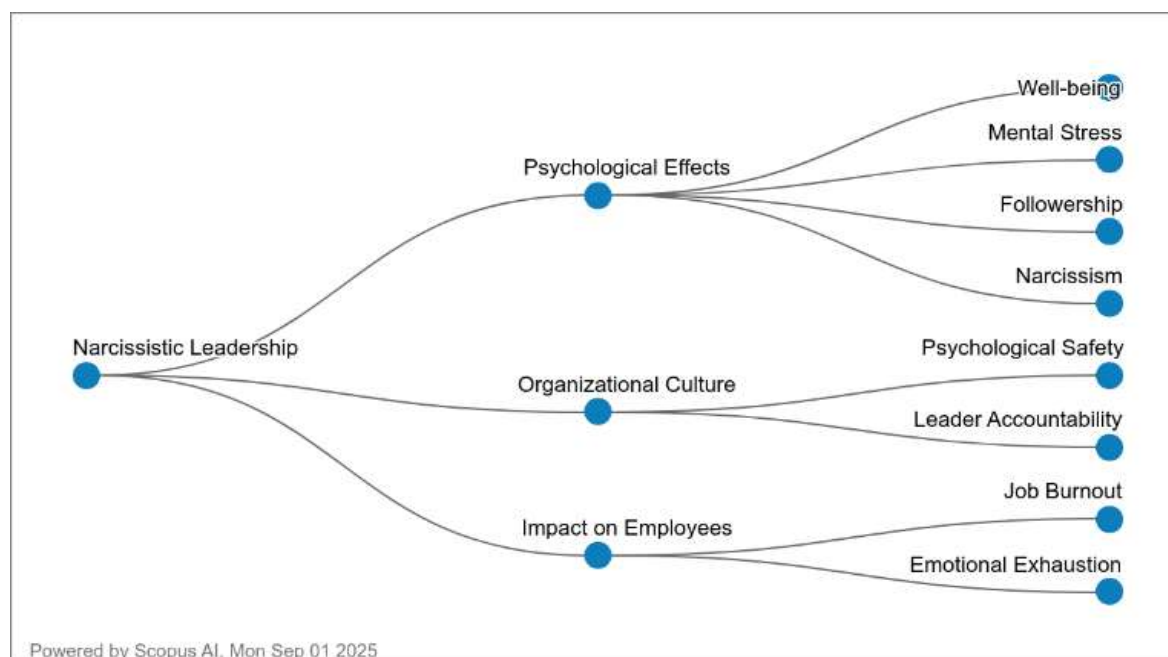


Fig. 2 Concept Map

Concept Path Summaries

Psychological Effects

The first cluster demonstrates how narcissistic leadership affects well-being, stress, followership, and narcissism itself. Leaders characterized by self-centeredness and arrogance often erode psychological safety, elevate stress, and diminish trust in followers. This aligns with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, which suggests that constant resource depletion leads to exhaustion [3], [2].

Organizational Culture

The second cluster emphasizes the role of organizational culture, particularly through diminished psychological safety and weakened leader accountability. Narcissistic leaders foster climates of fear and mistrust, prioritizing personal image over collective values [1], [15]. Such toxic cultures not only undermine collaboration but also exacerbate conditions that accelerate burnout.

Impact on Employees

The third cluster shows the direct impact on employees, with emotional exhaustion and job burnout appearing as dominant outcomes. Narcissistic leaders drain employees' emotional and cognitive resources, leading to disengagement, decreased creativity, and heightened turnover intentions [4], [5]. Emotional exhaustion thus emerges as the central mediator connecting narcissistic leadership to job burnout.

Integrative Note

Together, these clusters illustrate a cascading pathway: narcissistic leadership induces psychological strain, reshapes organizational culture, and ultimately accelerates negative employee outcomes. The central positioning of emotional exhaustion underscores its bridging role in this process. However, the Scopus AI clustering also reflects disciplinary and geographic biases, with much of the literature originating from psychology and organizational studies in Western contexts. This highlights the need for broader cross-cultural validation to strengthen the generalizability of the framework.

To complement the visual presentation in Figure 2, Table I provides a structured summary of the concept path clusters, outlining the key linkages, thematic insights, and representative pathways through which narcissistic leadership contributes to employee burnout.

TABLE I Concept Path Summary Of Narcissistic Leadership And Its Effects

Cluster Pathway /	Key Linkages / Variables	Thematic Insights
Psychological Effects	Well-being, Mental Stress, Followership, Narcissism	Narcissistic leadership erodes psychological safety, increases stress, and undermines follower trust. Highlights the psychological cost of toxic leadership, consistent with COR theory [3], [2].
Organizational Culture	Psychological Safety, Leader Accountability	Self-centered leaders weaken accountability and foster mistrustful, fear-driven climates. Suggests organizational culture as a mediating factor shaping burnout risk [1], [15].
Impact on Employees	Emotional Exhaustion, Job Burnout	Emotional exhaustion is the central mechanism through which toxic leadership translates into burnout. Underscores exhaustion as the bridge from narcissistic leadership to negative outcomes [4], [5].

As shown in Table I, the clustering reinforces emotional exhaustion and burnout as central bridging constructs.

To further interpret these patterns, the following Narrative Synthesis integrates findings with prior empirical and conceptual studies, deepening the theoretical understanding of these relationships.

Narrative Synthesis

The concept path summaries presented in Table X highlight that narcissistic leadership exerts a cascading influence, beginning with psychological strain, extending to organizational culture, and culminating in adverse employee outcomes. This interpretation is supported by prior research demonstrating that narcissistic leaders drain employees' emotional and cognitive resources. Carnevale, Huang, and Harms [3] describe such leaders as "emotional vampires" who consume followers' energy, thereby impairing their ability to remain engaged. Similarly, Wirtz and Rigotti [2] differentiate between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, showing that both forms increase psychological strain and reduce overall well-being. These findings corroborate the psychological effects cluster, underscoring that narcissistic leadership directly compromises mental health and workplace resilience.

The organizational culture cluster further illustrates how narcissistic leadership undermines collective values by eroding trust and accountability. O'Reilly, Chatman, and Doerr [1] argue that narcissistic leaders foster toxic cultures where self-interest prevails over shared goals, while O'Reilly, Doerr, and Hua [15] confirm that such environments suppress psychological safety. Such toxic climates are not only abstract constructs but represent concrete organizational conditions that magnify stress, disengagement, and vulnerability to burnout. In contexts where leaders prioritize image and authority over transparency and collaboration, employees become more susceptible to exhaustion and eventual withdrawal.

Finally, the impact on employees is most directly captured through the central role of emotional exhaustion. Gravili, Manuti, and Meirinhos [4] demonstrate that toxic leadership behaviors heighten burnout risk by increasing turnover intentions and lowering job satisfaction, while Yousif and Loukil [5] show how narcissistic leadership reduces performance by draining motivation and commitment. These outcomes validate emotional exhaustion as the key mediating pathway between leadership behaviors and burnout. Collectively, this evidence affirms that narcissistic leadership operates as a destructive force through both psychological and cultural mechanisms, producing cascading effects that compromise employee well-being and long-term organizational sustainability.

Building on the concept path summaries and their integration with prior literature, the key themes of this review are consolidated in Table II. This table provides a structured synthesis of antecedents, mediators, outcomes, and moderators, alongside explicit hypotheses (H1–H4), which extend the conceptual model and create avenues for empirical testing.

TABLE II Summary Of Main Findings

Area of Focus	Main Findings (with citations)	Implications	Hypotheses
Antecedent: Narcissistic Leadership	Leaders with narcissistic traits exhibit arrogance, self-centeredness, and lack of empathy [1], [16].	Creates a toxic organizational climate, undermines trust, and reduces collaboration.	—
Mediator: Emotional Exhaustion	Narcissistic leadership drains employees' emotional and cognitive resources [3], [2].	Emotional exhaustion is the central mechanism linking narcissistic leadership to burnout.	—
Outcome: Job Burnout	Prolonged exposure to toxic leadership	Leads to lower job satisfaction, reduced	—

	increases stress, reduces motivation, and heightens burnout risk [4], [6], [5].	creativity, and higher turnover intentions.	
Moderators	Intrinsic motivation, leader accountability, and positive leadership climates buffer negative impacts [10], [9].	Interventions can mitigate adverse effects and promote resilience among employees.	H1: Intrinsic motivation weakens the effect of narcissistic leadership on exhaustion. H2: Leader accountability weakens the effect of narcissistic leadership on exhaustion. H3: Positive leadership climate weakens the effect of narcissistic leadership on exhaustion.
Contextual Mediator	Organizational culture amplifies or buffers the effects of narcissistic leadership [1], [15].	Toxic cultures exacerbate burnout, while supportive cultures mitigate risk.	H4: Organizational culture mediates the relationship between narcissistic leadership and job burnout.

By articulating these hypotheses, the review moves beyond descriptive clustering to provide a testable conceptual framework. This not only clarifies the psychological and cultural mechanisms through which narcissistic leadership drives burnout but also establishes a foundation for future empirical validation across different contexts.

Taken together, the findings summarized in Table II demonstrate both the theoretical and practical contributions of this review. Theoretically, the study advances understanding by positioning emotional exhaustion as the central mechanism linking narcissistic leadership to job burnout, thereby clarifying the psychological pathways involved. Practically, the integration of moderating factors and organizational interventions highlights actionable strategies—such as validated leader selection tools, 360-degree feedback systems, ethical governance, and resilience-building programs—that can mitigate the adverse impacts of toxic leadership and promote long-term employee well-being.

DISCUSSION

This review underscores the destructive role of narcissistic leadership in shaping employee experiences, particularly through its cascading effects on emotional exhaustion and job burnout. By integrating Scopus AI outputs with established literature, the findings confirm that narcissistic leadership depletes psychological resources, corrodes organizational culture, and directly accelerates employee burnout. This aligns with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [8], which explains how resource loss and depletion undermine employees' ability to cope with stress. In this context, emotional exhaustion operates as the pivotal mechanism that links narcissistic leadership to burnout, corroborating evidence from Carnevale *et al.* [3], Wirtz and Rigotti [2], and Gravili *et al.* [4].

The findings also emphasize the importance of organizational culture as a mediating condition. Narcissistic leaders foster climates of mistrust and fear, undermining collaboration and suppressing psychological safety [1], [15]. Such toxic environments exacerbate employees' vulnerability to exhaustion, confirming that leadership style is not only an individual trait but also a contextual force shaping collective outcomes. This reinforces the need for leadership research to adopt a multilevel perspective, integrating psychological and cultural mechanisms.

Practical Recommendations

Beyond theoretical contributions, this review provides actionable recommendations for organizations seeking to mitigate the negative effects of narcissistic leadership. First, validated leader selection tools can be applied during recruitment to identify narcissistic tendencies and reduce the likelihood of appointing toxic leaders. Second, 360-degree feedback systems offer continuous monitoring by incorporating evaluations from subordinates, peers,

and superiors, thereby enhancing accountability and reducing unchecked leader behavior. Third, organizational accountability protocols—such as ethics committees, transparent governance structures, and clear reporting channels—can prevent destructive leadership practices from escalating.

To evaluate these interventions, organizations should track key performance indicators (KPIs) including employee engagement scores, burnout survey results, voluntary turnover rates, and creativity or innovation indices. By emphasizing measurable outcomes, these strategies move beyond generic advice and offer organizations a concrete toolkit to improve leadership quality, safeguard employee well-being, and build long-term resilience.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this review offers significant insights, its reliance on Scopus AI outputs represents both an innovation and a limitation. Unlike conventional systematic reviews, this approach does not generate record-level screening numbers, which restricts the granularity of methodological transparency. Furthermore, although some primary studies reported statistical results, the heterogeneity of designs, constructs, and outcome measures limited the feasibility of conducting a meta-analysis or calculating standardized effect sizes. Many works included in the synthesis were conceptual, qualitative, or exploratory in nature, while quantitative studies used inconsistent operationalizations of narcissistic leadership and burnout. Aggregating such results would risk misleading conclusions. Instead, this review emphasizes a conceptual integration of themes, triangulated through AI clustering and narrative synthesis, aligning with the aim of theory building rather than effect-size generalization.

Moreover, the concept map and clusters reflect a disciplinary bias toward psychology and organizational studies and a geographic bias toward Western contexts, with limited representation from non-Western and developing economies. Reflexively, the authors acknowledge that their interpretations are shaped by both reliance on AI-assisted synthesis and their academic context, which may privilege certain perspectives over others. Future studies should address these gaps through cross-cultural empirical research and the application of advanced computational methods, such as topic modeling and machine learning classification, to validate thematic clusters.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Theoretically, this review clarifies the psychological mechanism through which narcissistic leadership translates into burnout, positioning emotional exhaustion as the central mediator. It also emphasizes organizational culture as a contextual amplifier of toxic leadership. In addition, the explicit hypotheses (H1–H4) developed in this review extend the framework by providing testable propositions for future research. Practically, it offers concrete recommendations—selection tools, feedback systems, and accountability protocols—supported by measurable KPIs. By articulating these contributions, the study demonstrates how conceptual integration and AI-driven synthesis can advance leadership theory while equipping practitioners with evidence-based strategies to sustain organizational resilience.

CONCLUSIONS

This review highlights the destructive role of narcissistic leadership in shaping employee outcomes, particularly through its cascading effects on emotional exhaustion and job burnout. By synthesizing Scopus AI outputs with established literature, the study demonstrates that narcissistic leadership depletes psychological resources, corrodes organizational culture, and accelerates employee burnout. Emotional exhaustion emerges as the central mediating mechanism that clarifies how toxic leadership translates into adverse outcomes, a finding consistent with Conservation of Resources theory [8].

The study makes two primary contributions. Theoretically, it advances understanding by positioning emotional exhaustion as the pivotal link between narcissistic leadership and burnout, while also identifying moderators—such as intrinsic motivation, leader accountability, and positive leadership climates—that can buffer these effects. In addition, organizational culture is highlighted as a contextual mediator, amplifying or mitigating the relationship between toxic leadership and burnout. Practically, it provides concrete recommendations, including validated leader selection tools, 360-degree feedback systems, and accountability protocols, supported by

measurable KPIs for evaluation.

While the AI-assisted methodology represents an innovative approach to evidence synthesis, it also carries limitations, including the absence of effect-size aggregation and potential disciplinary and geographic biases. To address these limitations, future studies should test the proposed hypotheses across diverse cultural and organizational contexts and employ advanced computational methods, such as topic modeling or machine learning classification, to strengthen validation.

Taken together, this review enriches leadership scholarship by offering a conceptual framework that integrates psychological, cultural, and organizational perspectives, while equipping practitioners with actionable strategies to protect employee well-being and sustain organizational resilience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the Kedah State Research Committee, UiTM Kedah Branch, for the generous funding provided under the Tabung Penyelidikan Am. This support was crucial in facilitating the research and ensuring the successful publication of this article.

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