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ABSTRACT

Although previous studies have examined the effects of employee job stress on their workplace behaviours, the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions in this relationship remain largely elusive in Human Resource Development literature. Drawing on the conservation of resources theory, this study examined the mediating role of self-efficacy and the moderating role of leader narcissism in the relationship between employee job stress and their psychological withdrawal behaviours. Using two-wave data from 358 Nigerian employees from various organisations, we found that self-efficacy mediated the relationship between job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours. Our study also found that the indirect relationship between job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours was stronger when leader narcissism was high. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our study for human resources development practitioners.

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Job stress; self-efficacy; psychological withdrawal behaviours; leader narcissism; conservation of resources theory

Introduction

Human Resource Development (HRD) research has continued to explore how to balance employees' professional, personal, and social needs in organisational context (Wirawan et al., 2024). This is because work shapes employees' professional, personal, and social identities (Kuchinke et al., 2010), but modern workplace complexity has often resulted to employees' disillusionment with their organisation due to stress from increasing workload. For example, in the quest to maximise engagement, employees are inundated with stimuli – emails, instant messages, blog reactions, and personal Skype calls – posing a constant threat to their work engagement.

These seemingly minor behaviours interrupt employees' work and personal lives negatively, resulting in psychological withdrawal behaviours manifestations (Jo & Lee, 2022), like daydreaming, handling personal tasks during work, excessive chatting with colleagues, putting minimal effort into tasks, letting others shoulder the

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workload and higher turnover rates (Lehman & Simpson, 1992). It is therefore imperative for HRD professional to have the skills to identify and mitigate these behaviours' antecedents to support working individuals, teams, and the organisations (Rastogi et al., 2018).

HRD research has investigated strategies for reducing psychological withdrawal behaviours including supporting employee engagement (Shuck et al., 2011), cross-cultural adjustment (Finstad et al., 2024), high-performance work systems (Han et al., 2025) and managing stress during organisational change (Smollan, 2017). Additionally, Taris et al. (2001) seminal work underscores the role of job stress on withdrawal behaviours (e.g. lowered organisational commitment), but these studies often overlook the boundary conditions underpinning job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours. More so, recent studies suggest that more knowledge about antecedents of withdrawal behaviours are required e.g. Sagie et al. (2002); van Ruysseveldt et al. (2023). Our study addresses this gap by investigating how and when employee job stress predicts psychological withdrawal behaviours, adding a crucial layer to our understanding of this complex interplay in the organisational context.

Job stress arises due to tensions, hardness, worry, exhaustion, frustrations, and distress stemming from work (Blau et al., 1986; Mensah et al., 2023) and has been linked to negative outcomes such as errors, inefficiency, and diminished energy and motivation, ultimately leading to poor job performance (Clauss et al., 2021; Kuchinke et al., 2010; Monteiro et al., 2016; Taris et al., 2001) and psychological withdrawal behaviour (Khawaja et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; McKee et al., 1992).

To explain job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviour relationship, research has found variations due to contextual demographic factors such as job demand/resources (Taris et al., 2001), generational differences (Semonis, 2022), the meaning of work associated with different demographic groups (Kuchinke et al., 2010), and family living situation (McKee et al., 1992). In addition, Smollan (2017), Khawaja et al. (2022), Zimmerman et al. (2016), and Chênevert et al. (2019) uncovered the role of aggression, individual differences, and change readiness. However, our understanding of underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions in the relationship between job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours is limited. We attempt to address this gap by investigating the mediating role of self-efficacy as a personal resource and the moderating role of leader narcissism as a contextual factor.

Self-efficacy, one's belief in their ability to complete an activity and generate expected accomplishments (Bandura, 1997), is intricately associated with job stress. HRD research demonstrates that stress levels impact self-efficacy (Agrawal, 2023), affecting employees' drive and motivation to tackle tasks and persevere through challenges (Bandura, 1997). We posit that self-efficacy serves as a key explanatory factor in the complex relationship between job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours.

Moreover, the effective management of job stress necessitates HRD professionals understanding of job design, workload allocation, and overall employee management (Drotz & Poksinska, 2014; Kwakman, 2001, Cregård and Corin, 2019; Mathieu et al., 2006). The behaviour of leaders and their impact on employees' experience of job stress and workplace behaviours is well-established in HRD research (e.g. Akdere & Egan, 2020; Wirawan et al., 2024). Negative leader behaviour, for instance, abusive supervision impacts employee creativity and work engagement (Wirawan et al., 2024). However,

the dynamics are more complex (Mathieu et al., 2006). As such, we provide more clarity by uncovering how employees interpret and respond to leader narcissism in relation to their work stress, subsequently influencing their psychological withdrawal behaviours.

Narcissism, characterised by grandiosity with self-preoccupation, a lack of empathy for other people, self-promotion, and self-entitlement (Akaighe & Adisa, 2025; Fehn & Schütz, 2021), poses challenges in developing and nurturing employees, particularly in the realm of managing job stress. Notably, leader narcissism has been shown to exacerbate the relationship between job stressors and counterproductive work behaviours (Meurs et al., 2013). Thus, our study delves into the moderating role of leader narcissism in the relationship between employee job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours. Taken together, our study examines the mediating role of self-efficacy and the moderating role of leader narcissism in the relationship between employee job stress on their psychological withdrawal behaviours, using the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) as an overarching theoretical framework, and reflecting on the Nigerian culture.

Nigerian culture exhibits a high power-distance orientation, where subordinates are expected to revere leaders (Oseghale et al., 2023; D. Pepple et al., 2024) and often endorse leader narcissism (Samian & Budihardjo, 2021). With globalisation, Nigeria and similar Sub-Saharan African countries are attracting more foreign direct investment, bringing multinational companies and expatriates (Oseghale et al., 2023). HRD professionals must understand the boundary conditions of job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours to provide effective expatriate training and support (Agrawal, 2023; Oruh & Dibia, 2020).

Our study contributes to HRD literature in several ways. First, we highlight self-efficacy as a psychological mediating mechanism through which job stress leads to psychological withdrawal behaviours. Second, using COR theory, we examine leader narcissism as a boundary condition affecting the relationship between job stress and employee self-efficacy (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). This underscores the detrimental impact of narcissistic leaders in exacerbating workplace stress and depleting employees' psychological resources. Third, we extend the literature on leader narcissism's impact on employee behaviour in high power-distance contexts by revealing how leader narcissism influences employees' innate reactions (self-efficacy and psychological withdrawal), despite their outward loyalty and endorsement behaviours (Samian & Budihardjo, 2021; Wirawan et al., 2024; Yao et al., 2020). Our theoretical model is illustrated in Figure 1.

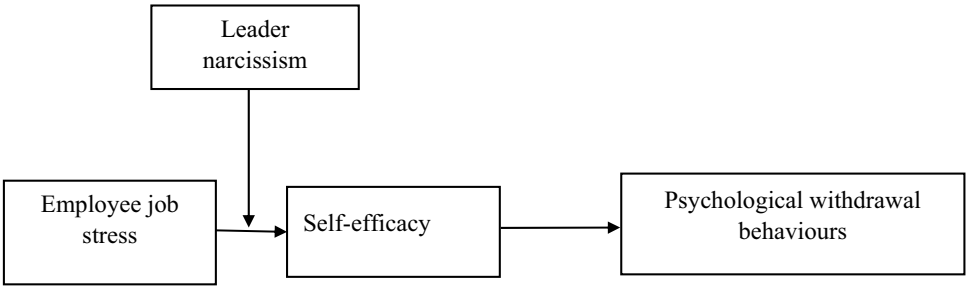

Figure 1. The hypothetical model. Source: Authors conceptualisation

Theory and hypotheses development

COR theory

The theoretical underpinning of this research is the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). The COR theory holds that individuals work hard to acquire and preserve their resources, whatever may be perceived as valuable (Hobfoll, 2001; Taris et al., 2001). The theory extends its premise by asserting that negative outcomes, such as job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours, frequently occur when valuable resources are either lost or threatened, proving inadequate to meet demands, or failing to yield the anticipated returns (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). In essence, COR theory offers a broad perspective on stress, suggesting that individuals experience stress when their resources are depleted without adequate replenishment. Particularly poignant is the notion that individuals with limited resources encounter difficulty responding to threats in their work environment, potentially spiralling into a cycle of resource loss (Bakker et al., 2023a; Wirawan et al., 2024). Under this theory, the investment of remaining resources, including energy and attention, into work activities becomes increasingly challenging when employees suffer from the depletion of their energetic resources, experiencing chronic fatigue and a waning interest in their jobs (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Furthermore, Bakker et al. (2023a) argued under the COR theory how high levels of stress/burnout lead to dysfunctional coping, reflecting the depletion of employees' job resources in the workplace. That is, the demands of a job, when not matched with job resources, drain employees' resources, leading to chronic stress. Thus, employees respond with dysfunctional coping and self-undermining behaviours (Bakker, 2015; Bakker et al. 2023a). Additionally, Just Bakker et al. (2023b) pointed out that macro resources relating to the context of work, such as culture, can serve as spillovers to explain how employees deal with job demands and stress. Thus, our study context contributes to its significance.

High power distance orientation is prevalent in the Nigerian context (Hofstede, 2003; Okon et al., 2025), for example, power relationships determine employment and promotion decisions. As such, displaying loyal behaviours to leaders was as important as performance (Oseghale et al., 2023). Nigeria's regulatory context also further emboldens the power of organisation leaders as more than a third of the population of the country is unemployed coupled with weak institutions for enforcing labour laws (Ezeoha et al., 2022; Okon et al., 2025), even though Nigeria is a destination of choice for investors (Akanle & Ola-Lawson, 2022). These factors, taken together, may foster a higher prevalence of leader narcissism (Akaighe & Adisa, 2025). This cultural perspective will help interpret our findings. Taken together, we rely on the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) as our overarching theoretical framework to argue that employee job stress will incline them to engage in psychological withdrawal behaviours, and we develop our hypotheses further.

Employee job stress, self-efficacy, and psychological withdrawal behaviours

Job stress is often characterised as an unpleasant amalgamation of undesirable emotional and physiological conditions (Judge & Colquitt, 2004) or as an individual's response to

environmental pressures that compel compromises and deplete their resources within the dynamic interplay of person-environment interactions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), serves as a potent catalyst for a cascade of behavioural responses. This includes the manifestation of counterproductive work behaviours (Fox et al., 2021; Spector & Fox, 2005), underscoring the pervasive and far-reaching impact of job stress on employee conduct within the workplace. Besides, job stress drains individuals' resources and makes it difficult for them to cope with the demands of their roles, subsequently influencing their self-efficacy (Heuven et al., 2006).

Self-efficacy, defined as one's belief in their ability to successfully execute an action plan and achieve desired results (Bandura, 1993), emerges as a critical casualty in the face of job stress. Existing research shows a negative correlation between job stress and self-efficacy (Nassani et al., 2021). The underlying mechanism for this phenomenon lies in the exhaustive nature of job stress, depleting individuals' resources and eroding their determination to execute planned tasks with timeliness and efficiency. Aligning with the COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) which posits that individuals are inherently driven to preserve their resources, the loss of energy resulting from job stress compels employees to diminish their work efforts and compromise their capacity to achieve work goals (Nekoranec & Kmosena, 2015; Singh et al., 2022).

Moreover, the interplay between self-efficacy and work-related behaviours has been a subject of extensive research, revealing a link between self-efficacy and positive outcomes such as enhanced work performance, heightened job satisfaction, and strengthened organisational commitment (Demir, 2020; Sadri & Robertson, 1993). Leveraging the wealth of existing research, we contend that individuals harbouring a strong belief in their ability to accomplish organisational tasks exhibit a reduced inclination to engage in psychological withdrawal behaviours. This is underpinned by the premise that these individuals, armed with personal resources and a steadfast belief in their capabilities, are active and psychologically present in their work, enabling them to tackle tasks in a timely and efficient manner. This argument is supported by empirical evidence showing that employee self-efficacy promotes work engagement (Simbula et al., 2011) and fosters citizenship behaviours and prosocial motivation (Ullah et al., 2021). Referring to the COR theory, we argue that employees with elevated self-efficacy possess preserved personal resources that they strategically deploy to navigate their work roles, making them motivated to work and prone to demonstrating attentive behaviours in the workplace.

Furthermore, existing research underscores the mediating role of self-efficacy, a dynamic factor that can explain how stress-related factors impact employees at work (e.g. Ebner et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2015). The COR theory explains that individuals endowed with the ability to preserve their resources are not only primed to invest more in their jobs but are also more likely to cultivate a heightened interest in their professional roles (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018). This, in turn, equips them to effectively handle job demands, thereby mitigating the manifestation of negative work behaviours (Halbesleben et al., 2014). In the context of psychological withdrawal behaviours, employees fortified with a reservoir of self-efficacy are better equipped to withstand the pressures induced by work stress and are less inclined to engage in psychological withdrawal behaviours.

Conversely, employees with lower self-efficacy have diminished confidence (Peng et al., 2015) in their capacity to control psychologically withdrawn behaviours and deal with work-related challenges. Their perception of workplace stress transforms into an obstacle, amplifying the likelihood of succumbing to psychological withdrawal behaviours (Du et al., 2023). We contend that self-efficacy may explain the relationship between job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours, with research showing that self-efficacy mediated the relationship between work stress and burnout (Yu et al., 2015). The personal evaluation of one's ability to complete tasks (Kamen et al., 2013) can explain why employees who perceive job stress are inclined to engage in psychological withdrawal behaviours. Thus, we posit the following hypothesis:

H1: Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between employee job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours.

The moderating role of leader narcissism

We incorporate leader narcissism as a moderator in the relationship between employee job stress and self-efficacy. Leaders are responsible for managing employees' work workload, clarifying work roles, and fostering an environment conducive to employees efficiently accomplishing their tasks (Kalshoven et al., 2011). However, their personality trait of narcissism often emerges as a disruptive force in this delicate equilibrium. Narcissistic leaders, characterised by an inflated sense of self, a reluctance to establish close relationships, a lack of empathy for other people, and a proclivity to perpetuate their grandiosity within organisational confines (Grijalva & Harms, 2014), have the potential to exacerbate rather than alleviate the stress levels experienced by employees.

In alignment with the COR theory, we rely on the principle of loss spirals to explain the mechanism for how leader narcissism moderates job stress and self-efficacy. This principle highlights how experiencing the loss of a resource will further result to the loss of another (Bon & Shire, 2022; Salanova et al., 2013). Loss spirals are amplified when there is a reciprocal relationship between the resources with the levels of resource having to decrease over time. A supportive and empathetic leadership creates a climate for employees to cope better with job stress through good communication and cordial workplace relationships (Levrouw et al., 2025). However, in the presence of narcissistic leadership, this resource is depleted due to a lack empathy and support for employees resulting in increased job stress and lower self-efficacy. Thus, we posit that leader narcissism may act as a depleting force on employees' resources, eroding employees' their ability to cope with job stress, and thereby weakening their self-efficacy. This is particularly accentuated under conditions of high leader narcissism, where leaders display self-interested actions and lack of care for their subordinates, the effects of job stress on their self-efficacy will be stronger. Conversely, in environments marked by low leader narcissism, where leaders exhibit empathy, support, acknowledgement, and genuine care for their subordinates, the impact of employees' job stress on their ability to achieve work goals is anticipated to be mitigated. In sum, hypothesise that:

H2: Leader narcissism will moderate the relationship between employee job stress and self-efficacy such that the negative relationship is stronger when leader narcissism is high (vs low).

Integrating the previous hypotheses that rely on the COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), we expect the relationship between employee job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours, via employee self-efficacy, to be moderated by leader narcissism. We argue that under high leader narcissism, characterised by a lack of empathy, an aura of grandiosity, and a sense of self-entitlement, the pressure on employees intensifies. This, in turn, amplifies job stress and undermines self-efficacy, with empirical evidence indicating that leaders can significantly impact self-efficacy (Cremer et al., 2005). Conversely, when leader narcissism is low, employees experience a sense of empowerment and mobilise their resources in alignment with the tenets of the COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) to attain their work objectives. Therefore, we develop our final moderated mediated hypothesis, as follows:

H3: The indirect relationship between employee job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours, via self-efficacy, is moderated by leader narcissism, in such a way that the negative relationship is stronger when leader narcissism is high (vs low).

Method

Our study draws on a quantitative research approach to understand the boundary conditions underpinning job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviour through the mediated-moderation effects self-efficacy and leader narcissism. We chose this approach as the constructs are psychological in nature and needs to be scientifically determined to ensure validity (Gardner et al., 2021; Rothe, 2017). Also, the research area is matured, with measurable research instruments (Nardi, 2018). Furthermore, the contextual factors controlled for are important for gaining insights in culturally specific context like Nigeria to support a quantitative approach (Jenkner et al., 2022).

However, our theoretical framing using COR (resource loss spiral principle) warrants a quantitative approach to understand the relationship between variables, and especially the reciprocal relationship over leader narcissism impact on self-efficacy and by extension psychological withdrawal behaviours over time (Bon & Shire, 2022; Salanova et al., 2013). More so, we ensured theoretical triangulation as findings from control variables were in line with established theoretical expectations for gender and age in a high-power distance culture context (Nwankwo, 2025; Pepple et al., 2024). In addition, Rothe (2017) suggested that personality traits (narcissism as one type) are better investigated scientifically through quantitative analysis.

Participants and procedure

The participants of the study were recruited through the Human Resource Departments of various organisations in Lagos, Nigeria. They were informed of the purpose of the study and assured of their confidentiality and anonymity along with informed consent to participate in the research. They held various job titles from a wide variety of industries including manufacturing, sales, oil and gas, banking, insurance, telecommunication, logistics, and health care. The data for the study was collected using an online format, using Qualtrics. The link to the survey was sent to the participants via their email addresses. Ethics approval was received from a UK University Research Ethics Committee, with number 032602.

A pilot study was conducted before administering the questionnaires to the study participants. This allowed a pre-testing of the research instruments to ensure the likelihood that the participants understood the research aim and questions. The pilot survey was administered to seven researchers with origin from the study context because they understood the study context and cultural interpretations of the research items. They provided feedback that the questions were clear and easy to understand and the time frame for completing the survey was within 20 min. Thereafter, the questions were administered to the study participants.

To mitigate concerns about common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), we utilised a two-wave survey design. At time 1, we asked participants to complete their demographic information and statements about their job stress and their leader's narcissism. At time 2, 6 weeks later, they completed questions about their self-efficacy and the extent to which the extent to which they engage in psychological withdrawal behaviours. Participants were asked to create a personal identification number (PIN) to use when completing the survey at different times. The Qualtrics system recorded the time and date of each entry. By combining this information with the participants' PINs, we ensured that there were no multiple responses from the same participant. The survey was sent to 625 employees, with response from 415, representing 66%. After matching the responses and removing incomplete data, the final sample consisted of 358 employees working full-time in Nigeria, 56% male, with an average age of 30.3 years old (SD = 9.8). The socio-demographic data of the participants are displayed in Table 1. Finally, we

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

Profile	Frequency	Percentages
Gender		
Male	202	56
Female	156	43
Total	**358**	
Age range		
21–30 years	183	51
31–40 years	130	36
41–50 years	43	12
51 years & above	2	1
Total	**358**	
Work experience		
1–10 years	283	79
11–20 years	68	19
21–30 years	5	1
31 years & above	2	1
Total	**358**	

conducted Harman's single-factor test, which revealed that a single factor accounted for 19.55% of the variance, thus, common method bias was not a threat to the data.

Measures

Job stress: We measured job stress with a 4-item scale (Keller, 2001). Participants were asked to rate how they experience stress in their jobs on a 5-point Likert scale of (*1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)*. An example item is 'I experience tension on my job'. The Cronbach alpha was 0.70.

Leader narcissism: We measured leader narcissism using the 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames et al., 2006). Participants rated their leader's narcissism on a 7-point Likert scale (*1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)*. An example item is 'My leader finds it easy to manipulate people'. The Cronbach alpha was 0.91.

Self-efficacy: Self-efficacy was measured using the 8-item self-efficacy scale (Chen et al., 2001). Participants answered statements on how they felt about their self-efficacy on a 5-point scale of (*1 = very untrue to 5 = very true*). An example item is 'I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I set for myself'. The Cronbach alpha was 0.87.

Psychological withdrawal behaviours: We measured psychological withdrawal behaviours using the 8-item scale (Lehman & Simpson, 1992). Participants rated the extent to which they behaved on a 5-point of (*1 = very untrue to 5 = very true*). An example item is 'I left workstation for unnecessary reasons'. The Cronbach alpha was 0.88.

Control variable: We controlled for employees' gender (*1 = male, 2 = female*) and frequency of interactions with leader (1 = less than a week, 2 = about once a week, 3 = a couple of times a week, 4 = most of the days, 5 = daily) and age, which are likely to influence how employees respond to the experience of job stress (Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Hesselgreaves & Scholarios, 2014).

Results

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) test that the model fits the data, using indices including the Confirmatory Fit Index (CFI), Tucker Lewis Index (TLI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The results of the four-factor model including employee job stress, self-efficacy, leader narcissism, and psychological withdrawal behaviour had a better fit ($\chi^2 = 872.95$, df = 419, $\chi^2/df = 2.08$, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.04) than the alternative models such as the three-factor model ($\chi^2 = 2720.56$; df = 557, $\chi^2/df = 4.88$, CFI = 0.68, TLI = 0.64, RMSEA = 0.08); two-factor model ($\chi^2 = 3760.41$; df = 559, $\chi^2/df = 6.73$, CFI = 0.52, TLI = 0.46, RMSEA = 0.09); or one-factor model ($\chi^2 = 4922.15$; df = 560, $\chi^2/df = 8.79$, CFI = 0.35, TLI = 0.27, RMSEA = 0.11). The means, standard deviation, internal consistencies, and correlations between the study variables are presented in Table 2.

From the correlation matrix, three control variables including gender, age and frequency of interactions and their relationships with the study constructs are reported. The gender and age of the participants were significantly related to job stress. Gender was negatively related to job stress indicating that males (lower coded) experienced more job stress than their female counterparts. Moreover, age was positively related to job stress,

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations of the study variables.

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Variable	*M*	*SD*							
1. Gender	1.51	0.62							
2. Age	30.3	9.8	0.10						
3. Frequency of interactions with leader	4.95	1.13	−0.01	−0.05					
4. Employee job stress	3.15	0.97	−0.15*	0.17*	0.01	(0.70)			
5. Self-efficacy	4.42	0.53	0.11	0.14	−0.03	−0.25**	(0.87)		
6. Leader narcissism	5.24	1.07	0.09	0.05	−0.04	0.27**	0.07	(0.91)	
7. Psychological withdrawal behaviours	2.25	0.94	−0.06	−0.08	−0.23	0.17**	−0.40**	0.02	(0.88)

$n = 358$. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$. Gender: 1 = male; 2 = female, Cronbach alphas are in parentheses on the diagonal.

Table 3. Estimates of mediation of self-efficacy, moderation, and moderated mediation of leader narcissism.

Variables	Effect	Boot SE	CI
The mediating effect of self-efficacy	0.09	0.02	([0.05, 0.13])
The indirect effect of job stress X- 1 SD leader narcissism	−0.11	0.04	([−0.32, −0.15])
The indirect effect of job stress X + 1D leader narcissism	−0.23	0.04	([−0.18, −0.03])
The indirect effect of job stress X-1 SD leader narcissism	−0.11	0.04	([−0.32, −0.15])
The indirect effect of job stress X + 1SD leader narcissism	−0.24	0.04	([−0.18, −0.03])

$n = 358$; Gender 1 = male; 2 = female. Findings were obtained via bootstrapping with 5,000 repetitions, 95% CI.
CIs that do not include zero show significant mediation, moderation, and moderated mediation.

indicating that the older the employees, the more they experienced job stress. Moreover, employee frequency of interactions was not significantly related to job stress or other variables, indicating that the number of times that employees have contact with their leader is not a factor affecting their stress levels from the sample.

To test the mediation, moderation, and moderated mediation hypotheses (H1, H2, and H3), we conducted the analyses using PROCESS macro (model 7) for SPSS (Hayes, 2018), with 5,000 interactions and a 95% confidence interval. We centred all variables and controlled for gender, age, and frequency of interactions with the leader. We present the results in Table 3. The indirect effect of self-efficacy in the relationship between employee job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours was significant (*indirect effect* = 0.07, *SE* = 0.02; 95% CI [0.03; 0.12]), which implies support for H1. For the moderation of leader narcissism in the employee job stress and self-efficacy link, the results revealed that the interaction was significant ($B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$; $p < 0.05$). The simple slope test revealed that the interaction was negative, significant, and stronger when leader narcissism was high (Figure 2; $B = -0.23$, $SE = 0.04$; 95% CI [−0.18; −0.03]) as opposed to low (B = −0.11, $SE = 0.04$; 95% CI [−0.32; −0.15]), as expected, providing support for H2. Additionally, for the moderated mediation of leader narcissism in the relationship between employee job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours via self-efficacy, the index of moderated mediation result was significant (*index*; $B = -0.03$, $SE = 0.02$; 95% CI [−0.07; −0.01]), thus, supporting H3.

Discussion

Understanding how to reduce job stress and foster a climate where employees feel engaged is important for HRD professional especially in international context (Agrawal, 2023). To address this, we developed a moderated mediation model that

Figure 2. Interaction of job stress and leader narcissism on self-efficacy.

explored the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between employee job stress and their psychological withdrawal behaviours. Additionally, we explored the moderating role of leader narcissism in the employee job stress and self-efficacy link and the moderated mediation of leader narcissism in the relationship between employee job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours via self-efficacy. Using COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), we found evidence that self-efficacy mediated the relationship between employee job stress and their psychological withdrawal behaviours. This is consistent with previous research that showed that self-efficacy explained the relationship between work employee stress and their well-being (Agrawal, 2023; Yu et al., 2015).

Our study demonstrated that the personal evaluation of one's ability to complete tasks (Kamen et al., 2013) explains why employees who experience job stress are inclined to engage in psychological withdrawal behaviours see Table 2. Similarly, our analysis reported evidence that leader narcissism serves as an important moderating factor in the relationship between employee job stress and their self-efficacy, such that the negative relationship was stronger when leader narcissism was high as opposed to low. This was further evidenced in the moderated mediation model such that the relationship between employee job stress and their psychological withdrawal behaviours via self-efficacy was stronger when leader narcissism was high rather than low see Table 3.

This finding is significant as it highlights how the loss of resources from leadership due to leader narcissism can spiral to other employee resources. We show how leader narcissism amplified the negative effect of employee job stress on their psychological withdrawal behaviours via self-efficacy. Our data set also helps us to further support the assertion of reciprocal exchange between the variables over the two time periods. Thus, we contribute to the limited empirical research into the notion of loss spiral (Bon & Shire, 2022). Furthermore, our research aligns with existing research evidence on the role of leaders in managing employees' job stress, such that the negative relationship between

employee job stress and their voice behaviour was reduced when employees had high trust in their leader as opposed to low trust in their leader (Yao et al., 2020).

Discussing this result in relation to the Nigerian context, we found that high leader narcissism weakened employees' self-efficacy in the face of job stress and inclined them to engage in psychological withdrawal behaviours. Research suggests that employees in such a context may display unhealthy loyal behaviour such as ignoring ethical behaviour, choosing to align with their leader over what is right, not questioning authorities regardless of the impact of their actions (Irangani et al., 2020; Oseghale et al., 2023; Rao & Pearce, 2016) and endorse leader narcissism for fear of losing their jobs (Oruh & Dibia, 2020; Samian & Budihardjo, 2021). Our findings extend the understanding of the impact of negative leader behaviours in a high-power distance culture. However, psychological withdrawal behaviour may not be overtly displayed and may have negative consequences for organisations.

Beyond our hypothesised relationships, we observed that the gender and age of the participants were significantly related to job stress. Gender was negatively related to job stress indicating that males experienced more job stress than their female counterparts. Although research posits men to be more agentic (goal driven) and as such able to cope better with stress (Karatepe, 2006), our findings observed the opposite. Nigeria's high power distance orientation is underpinned by a patriarchal culture which positions men not only as leaders in organisation context (Nwankwo, 2025) but as breadwinners (Dogo, 2014; Pepple et al., 2024). The societal culture in Nigeria is dominant in organisation context making men have more leadership roles than women (Anibaba & Akaighe, 2020; Pepple et al., 2024). Thus, experiencing more psychological demands from work. This is further compounded by society's expectations for men to support their families (Pepple et al., 2024). Thus, explaining why male employees experience higher levels of job stress in comparison to women.

Our findings are also consistent with the experience of employees in Western countries with low power distance orientation. Meurs et al. (2013)'s study in the United States of America (USA) found that leader narcissism resulted to counterproductive behaviours. However, upon controlling for gender, no significant variation was found between men and women (Meurs et al., 2013). We note that the USA like many western countries has a low power distance culture with an egalitarian orientation requiring society to give equal opportunities to men and women and a strong institutional framework (Oseghale et al., 2023; Wollast et al., 2025). Hence, the non-significant variation in employees' experience of narcissism' impact on stress and counterproductive work behaviour (Meurs et al., 2013).

Age was positively related to job stress, indicating that the older the employees, the more they experienced job stress. This is consistent with existing research on generational differences in stress management, which indicates that younger employees are more agile in managing workplace stress than older employees (e.g. Zacher et al., 2018). For instance, research shows that willingness to learn is negatively correlated with employee age, that is, the older the employees, the less likely they are to go through the rigour of learning new things at work (Drazic & Schermuly, 2021), thus, exhibiting psychological withdrawal behaviours. Similar to gender, we compared our findings with extant research in Western countries and found different outcome. Bowles (2024) investigated the lived experience of higher education professionals with narcissistic

leaders in the USA and found that younger employees were more impacted. Interestingly, the study found that they were less likely to report abusive leaders for fear of retribution. This is regardless of the strong institutional framework available in the Western context (Oseghale et al., 2023).

Lastly, employee frequency of interactions was not significantly related to job stress or other variables, indicating that the number of times that employees have contact with their leader is not a factor affecting their stress levels from the sample. One possible explanation of our findings is that when employees experience job stress, which is further exacerbated by leader narcissism resulting in diminished self-efficacy, the frequency of their interactions with the leader makes no difference to their experience of drained resources as underpinned by the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). More so, employees in the context may be more interested in keeping their jobs, given the prevalent high unemployment rate (Oseghale et al., 2023).

Theoretical implications

Our study contributes to the HRD and broader organisation studies literature by uncovering important explanatory pathway and boundary condition underpinning job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours (e.g. Dartey-Baah et al., 2020; Finstad et al., 2024; Ghafoor & Haar, 2022; Pradoto et al., 2022; Smollan, 2017) by theorising a resource-based model through the lens of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Our theorisation provides empirical evidence into how COR theory supports the development of human resources (Wirawan et al., 2024) as follows:

Our study adopts a resource-based perspective to offer new insights into how job stress contributes to employee withdrawal from work tasks. Specifically, we demonstrate that self-efficacy which is an individual's belief in their ability to successfully perform tasks (Kamen et al., 2013) mediates the relationship between job stress and psychological withdrawal behaviours. This approach moves beyond the demographic-focused frameworks that dominate existing literature (e.g. Kuchinke et al., 2010; McKee et al., 1992; Semonis, 2022; Taris et al., 2001). By identifying self-efficacy as a key psychological mechanism, our findings deepen the understanding of how job stress translates into withdrawal behaviours, thereby enriching the theoretical landscape on stress and work disengagement (Zimmerman et al., 2016).

Second, our investigation of leader narcissism as a key moderating factor of employee job stress and self-efficacy extends previous studies (e.g. Chênevert et al., 2019; Yao et al., 2020). For instance, Chênevert et al. (2019) found that co-worker social support moderated the relationship between role stressors and withdrawal behaviours among healthcare employees, while Yao et al. (2020) research shows that narcissistic leaders instigate employee stress and overall voice behaviour. Taken together, our research adds a layer of understanding of the boundary conditions underpinning stress and psychological withdrawal behaviour by uncovering a moderated mediation relationship wherein the negative effect of employee job stress on their self-efficacy was stronger when leader narcissism was high, indicating that leader narcissism is detrimental to employees' ability to achieve work tasks considering their job-related stress. The emphasis on leader narcissism as a boundary condition adds a novel perspective to our knowledge of job

stress as organisations seek to manage employees and motivate them to achieve planned tasks through supportive and effective leadership practices (Wirawan et al., 2024).

Finally, our empirical context adds to the HRD debate in international context. We provide insights into employees' behaviours especially innate reactions in response to exposure to narcissistic leaders. Research shows that employees in a power culture context coupled with institutional challenges like high unemployment (Oseghale et al., 2023) may endure leader narcissism and overtly demonstrate unhealthy loyal and endorsement behaviours (Samian & Budihardjo, 2021; Yao et al., 2020). We extend the literature by uncovering the boundary condition of leader narcissism that amplifies employee job stress on their self-efficacy and psychological withdrawal behaviours. We extend HRD research international context by calling for managers to be aware that regardless of the overt gestures displayed by affected employees (Wirawan et al., 2024), their overall performance may be impacted due to the negative impact of job stress on their self-efficacy and psychological withdrawal behaviours, with the potential to leave the organisation at the slightest opportunity.

Practical implications

The study has significant implications for HRD managers. First, psychological withdrawal behaviours have significant implications for organisational learning and development as those affected display higher levels of absenteeism, lack of creativity, and an unwillingness to learn (Khalid, 2024). We uncover how job stress reduces self-efficacy and, thus, increases psychological withdrawal behaviours exacerbated by leader narcissism. Consequently, HRD managers especially in international context need to implement training programmes for leaders on how to create a climate that fosters socially supportive relations between employees and managers to enable employees effectively manage their job stress (Chênevert et al., 2019; Pepple & Davies, 2019). This may involve opportunities for managers and employees to interact through team bonding exercises and, where possible, provide sufficient resources (opportunities) for managers to mentor employees experiencing job stress.

Second, HRD managers need to regularly assess the behaviour of line managers especially in contexts like Nigeria and other Sub-Sahara African countries. This is because employees may still display overt loyalty behaviour due to cultural orientation prevailing in the context, whereas they are psychologically withdrawn, and are likely to leave the organisation at the slightest opportunity. Therefore, well-being interventions should be deployed regardless of employee behaviours to reduce psychological withdrawal behaviours. Third, HRD managers should introduce targeted interventions aimed at minimising the negative effects of leader narcissism on the stress-self-efficacy-withdrawal pathway. Promoting a culture of open communication and feedback can serve as a counterbalance, fostering a healthier work environment and reducing the potential for psychological withdrawal behaviours in the face of elevated job stress.

Third, to foster employee self-efficacy caused by job stress, organisations should implement targeted strategies. This includes offering stress management workshops and cultivating a culture of flexible work arrangements to empower employees in managing stressors. Clear communication, recognition for achievements, and opportunities for professional development bolster self-efficacy. Establishing robust social

support networks, workload management, and encouraging mindfulness contribute to self-efficacy. We suggest that by adopting these measures, organisations create a resilient and empowered workforce, mitigating the impact of job stress on employee self-efficacy.

Finally, given the findings from the control variables, we suggest that HRD managers in Nigerian and similar contexts should pay closer attention to men and encourage those affected to participate in support groups. Men may not be willing to come forth for such programmes given the patriarchal culture prevailing in the context. Collaborative efforts with occupational psychologists and organisation development teams may be useful here to frame meaningful interventions for men. In relation to age, we suggest that organisation development programmes like training should be structured to support older employees' engagement. This will ensure that their skills are up to date, and they can contribute meaningfully to their organisations.

We are aware that the power dynamics in organisation context may make it difficult for HRD managers to deploy these recommendations. Narcissistic leaders tend to be resistant to feedback and criticism and may want to dominate the discussion on the decisions to support employees (Eck et al., 2025). In high power distance culture such as the context of the study, narcissistic leaders may manipulate cultural values which may result in ethical dilemmas for managers (Nwankwo, 2025). To address these challenges, we recommend that HRD managers align the proposals towards the image of the leaders as narcissistic leaders are inclined to take actions that promote their image. HRD managers may also leverage allies by building coalition with other leaders to help reduce the influence of narcissistic leaders.

Limitations and future research directions

Our study has notable strengths, with hypotheses supported by a well-developed theoretical framework and validated through two-wave data, accounting for potential common method bias. Despite this strength in the study design, our study still has some limitations. First, despite the strengths of our data collection that rule out the possibility of common method bias, drawing causal inferences is not possible. The use of cross-sectional data though separated in two-waves limits the generalisation of the study as findings may not be the same in the future or in different time periods where the study to be conducted over a long period of time (Spector, 2019). Thus, scholars are encouraged to use longitudinal designs for data collection over multiple periods for strong causal inferences. A second limitation is that our investigation of the job stress-psychological withdrawal behaviours relationship was at the individual level of analysis. Thus, future multi-level group research is welcome to understand how psychological withdrawal behaviours occur at group or organisational levels.

Third, our sample belonged to organisations in Nigeria where we explained how the high-power distance culture may further embolden leader narcissism and exacerbate its impact on employee stress. However, the generalisation of our findings spans beyond Nigeria as aspects of the cultural orientation of the county are applicable across other Sub-Sahara African (SSA) countries. Nigeria has three dominant cultural groups whose language and orientations are embedded in regions of other (SSA) like Ghana, Chad, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Sudan, Benin, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Cameroon (Achebe, 2003; Appiah et al., 2018). Given the attractiveness of the SSA context to global investors, the

knowledge from this study will enable HRD managers to support expatriate acculturation. Nonetheless, we welcome future comparative studies involving organisations in high and low power distance cultures to further understand how culture may influence the impact of job stress on employee work outcomes. Undertaking multi-country/culture studies will further help to support the robustness of the findings and enhance external validity.

Finally, future research could explore the impact of demographic dissimilarity (e.g. gender-dissimilarity and geographical dissimilarity) on employee attitudes and well-being (Chattopadhyay et al., 2020). For instance, gender bias against female leaders suggests they are less accepted than male leaders, with male subordinates often less willing to accept female leaders (Li et al., 2022). This could deepen our understanding on leader-employee relationship with regard to job stress and workplace behaviours.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data that supports the findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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