

**Leader Narcissism, Crab Syndrome, and Employee Inaction: A COR-  
Based Examination**

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**Abstract:** This study aims to investigate the impact of leader narcissism (LN) on inability to act (ITA) and examine the mediating role of crab syndrome (CS) in this dynamic. The relationships are theoretically grounded in the conservation of resources (COR) theory, which provides a framework for understanding how resources are allocated and depleted in organisational settings. SPSS was used for descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, and partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used for measurement and structural model testing. In the study, LN was found to be the antecedent of CS and ITA. In addition, CS was also found to be the antecedent of ITA. Furthermore, it was determined that CS mediates the relationship between LN and ITA. The research extends the literature on LN and CS. The theoretical, managerial, and practical contributions and limitations of the research are presented, along with recommendations for future research.

**Keywords:** Leader narcissism, Crab syndrome, Inability to act, Conservation of resources theory, Nurses.

### **Introduction**

Narcissism, characterised by dominance and a need for fame, impacts interpersonal relationships and behaviours through a motivation focused on competition and self-admiration (Huang et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2024). Narcissism is a personality trait characterised by a quest for fulfilment driven by arrogance or selfish admiration for one's own qualities (Hodson et al., 2018). Mohd Shamsudin et al. (2023) evaluated the role of narcissism in the relationship between a competitive climate and envy, and Li et al. (2023) identified it as an antecedent to workplace envy. However, these studies do not comprehensively assess all parties affected by narcissism (leader-employee-organization).

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A leader's narcissistic personality traits can be defined as leader narcissism (LN) (Den Hartog et al., 2020). Narcissism characteristics emphasise narcissists' desire to stand out as leaders (Brummelman et al., 2021). Engelen et al. (2016) argued that chief executive officers of businesses with innovative cultures gained a competitive advantage when they were prone to narcissistic personality. This may explain why they are preferred as leaders, but it does not provide information about their impact on employees and the organisation. Furthermore, Carnevale et al. (2018) reported that LN negatively impacts employees' sense of organisational belonging, organisational-based self-esteem, and organisational citizenship behaviour. According to Zhang et al. (2023), LN adversely affects employee creativity and performance. LN is associated with organisational members' perceptions of leader behaviours and their effects on followers (Nevicka et al., 2018b). In light of Braun's (2017) perspectives, this research primarily aims to identify the effects of LN on employees and the organisation at multiple levels. Understanding the individual and organisational outcomes of LN is crucial for developing new interventions, procedures, and practices to address these impacts.

Crab syndrome (CS) is defined as the negative form of jealousy, "wanting someone else to fail" (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Envy and competition are among the elements of CS (Özdemir & Üzümlü, 2019). Braun et al. (2018) questioned the impact of LN on followers and found that it motivates followers' malicious envy. However, it has not been questioned whether LN activates feelings of competition and jealousy at the organisational level. In this study, the question of whether LN can create organisational CS is addressed, and the relationship between LN and CS is explored through the individual's perception of the organisation.

Jemal (2022) stated that stress experienced in the first period of life can cause behavioural changes throughout life, and in this context, he emphasised that CS is "a historical, psychological, socio-political and cultural occurrence that affects personality and emotions". CS, which has socio-psychological origins, is focused on resource development as well as consuming personal resources (Üzümlü & Özkın, 2023; Üzümlü et al., 2024). Individuals are not independent from their environment, and resource depletion is stressful for them (Hobfoll et al., 2018). When assessed through the lens of competition, uncertainty, and feelings of individual frustration, negative outcomes are observed (Spurk et al., 2021). Conversely, CS encourages investment in resources. To address whether organisational CS can be a way to prevent individuals with fewer resources from spending more resources than they can tolerate, this study examines the relationship between CS and inability to act (ITA). ITA can be defined as a withdrawal behaviour aimed at minimising possible resource losses in unforeseen situations (Sarı & Dağ, 2009).

Hochwarter and Thompson (2012) argued that followers create a control mechanism against the LN that prevents the loss of resources. In this context, the question emerges: Can LN enhance ITA? Liu et al. (2022) discussed the detrimental impact of LN on job performance, while Bernerth (2022) focused on the relationships between well-being (satisfaction and emotional exhaustion). In this context, this research seeks to answer whether LN prevents employees from taking action (ITA) and to extend the understanding of how employees victimised by LN are affected. However, there is a notable scarcity of studies examining the mediating effect of CS on LN outcomes (Carnevale et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2022). Furthermore, envy, a part of CS, is known to mediate the relationship between moral disgust and aggression (Xiang et al., 2023) as well as workplace ostracism and negative health (Kim & Jang, 2023). Conversely, this research seeks to answer whether LN can increase ITA through CS.

In this research, the effect of LN on CS, which emphasises inter-employee competition and jealousy at the organisational level, is questioned, and its individual consequences (ITA) are discussed through the victims. The relationships mediating LN are also revealed through CS.

Drawing upon the conservation of resources (COR) theory, this research provides valuable insights into organisational behaviour and leadership practices by facilitating a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics between LN, CS, and ITA. The implications of the findings have not only academic significance but also practical recommendations for leaders and practitioners.

## **Theory and Hypotheses**

### *Conservation of Resources Theory*

COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) may help explain behavioural strategies in the workplace. COR theory defines every element that is considered valuable as a resource. Its behavioural strategies are associated with the conservation of resources, the use of one to increase the other, and the response to their depletion. Hobfoll et al. (2018) classified a wide range of things as resources, including status, self-esteem, money, time, ability to cope with stress, and ability to manage social relationships. COR theory interprets the shared evaluations of threats or losses to resources among individuals working in the same organisation (Hobfoll, 2011). The behavioural strategy of LN concerning resource augmentation can transform into CS within the organisational culture. COR emphasises the universality of resources for everyone, suggesting efforts will be made to protect oneself and maintain well-being (Hobfoll, 2011). In this context, the individual effort to prevent resource loss can also manifest as ITA. Consequently, COR theory can be applied in research to understand LN, CS, and ITA (Huang et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2019; Üzüm & Özkan, 2023).

### *Leader Narcissism and Crab Syndrome*

LN can cause employees to experience the leader's disruptive behaviours and encourage them to engage in negative behaviours (Zhang et al., 2023). Braun et al. (2018) argued that when LN reached a noticeable level, employees tended to engage in counterproductive work behaviour and targeted their leaders in response. This indicates that LN has a negative impact on the organisation.

LN wants to be seen as “the most successful” (Bosson et al., 2008; Back, 2018) with a competitive worldview (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021) and a sense of self-admiration (Kaufman et al., 2020). It is stated that the competitive atmosphere causes jealousy (Mohd Shamsudin et al., 2023). CS is seen as a psycho-social behavioural change (Jemal, 2022) and is a phenomenon affected by the conditions of the environment (Özdemir & Üzüm, 2019). CS symbolizes a mindset that is paired with negative emotions such as jealousy, fear, anxiety and stress (Özdemir & Üzüm, 2019), low self-esteem (Üzüm et al., 2022), and a mentality that does not want others to be in a better position than oneself and wants to “take down” those who are more successful than oneself (Bulloch, 2013; Miller, 2019; Spacey, 2015). CS represents a metaphor that crabs cannot get out of the barrel even if the mouth of the barrel is open (Üzüm et al., 2022). LN has been reported to have an impact on organisational culture (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Followers who refer to leader behaviours, by pulling down those who want to get out of the barrel, accept these behaviours as the norm of the organisational atmosphere and may cause CS.

LN leads the leader to focus on increasing personal (self-esteem, approval) (Braun, 2017; Lynch et al., 2021) and situational (status) resources (Mahadevan & Jordan, 2022) and to act by prioritising their own interests (Lynch et al., 2021). The COR theory predicts that actions will be taken to develop and enhance resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Personal resources are used to increase resources such as status, praise, and promotion (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In this context, it is likely that the organisational climate will also be affected by LN's efforts to enhance its own resources. LN negatively affects employees and organisation (Braun et al., 2018; Mousa et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). It is thought that this situation will spread to the

organisational atmosphere due to the leader and each member of the organisation's behaviour focused on protecting their own resources. The hypothesis designed in this direction is given below:

Hypothesis 1: LN is positively related to CS.

#### *Crab Syndrome and Inability to Act*

Hobfoll et al. (2018), by defining "resource caravan", stated that resource development was not independent of environmental conditions. Jemal (2022), in his work on the conceptual understanding of CS, stated that stress leads to behavioural change in the rest of life. In this context, it should be understood that environment and resources are closely interrelated (Hobfoll et al., 2018). It is possible to see CS as a behavioural strategy that is influenced by environmental factors, competitive and seeking access to resources (Özdemir & Üzüm, 2019; Spacey, 2015; Üzüm & Özkan, 2023). However, tolerating resource loss requires having more resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). CS is thought to have a twofold consequence of investing in resources and preventing resource loss. Hobfoll et al. (2018) mentioned that the reactions to resource loss were stronger with "resource loss cycles". Resource loss causes stress, and when this process becomes cyclical, available resources to support resource augmentation may be depleted.

Supported by COR theory, it was found that employees' work effort was negatively affected by supervisors' CS (Üzüm & Özkan, 2023), while CS decreased innovative behaviour (Özkan et al., 2022). It is seen that CS reduces the positive behaviours of employees in the organisational context. Hobfoll et al. (2018) argued that losing resources caused a disproportionately large negative feeling compared to winning. Therefore, at the individual level, employees enter "resource loss cycles" and fail to take action. When each member of the organisation wants to get out of the crab barrel, he/she will fall into the barrel again, and instead of falling into the barrel again and again, he/she will prefer not to take action with an individual choice to prevent resource loss. It has been noted that a competitive environment can lead to negative outcomes in employee behaviour by reducing career success (Spurk et al., 2021). In this context, it is proposed that the prevailing CS in the organisation will increase employees' ITA. The hypothesis designed in this direction is as follows:

Hypothesis 2: CS is positively related to ITA.

#### *Leader Narcissism and Inability to Act*

Narcissism is paired with superiority-seeking (Nguyen et al., 2021), selfish, aggressive (Kaufman et al., 2020) behaviours. Roberts et al. (2018) stated that LN could not tolerate negative criticism and responded aggressively to the critic (Roberts et al., 2018). When exposed to aggressive behaviour, the follower's trust in the leader is shaken (Benson & Jordan, 2018), and the follower prefers to remain silent (Huang et al., 2020). Mousa et al. (2021) stated that LN positively affected employee silence and cynicism. These results are an indication that employees are negatively affected by LN.

LN is characterised as exploitative (Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012). The LN tends to exploit his/her followers for personal gain even if it is against the interests of the organisation (Braun et al., 2018; Mousa et al., 2021). In such a situation, while the leader aims to increase his/her own resources, followers may exhibit withdrawal behaviour in order not to lose more resources. According to COR theory, even if the same amount of resource loss and gain is experienced, the effects of resource loss are felt longer (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Employees behave proactively when leader-member relationships are high (Liao et al., 2019). In the opposite case, in the form of LN and follower relationship, employees are predicted to engage in passive behaviour. If employees prefer an attitude of silence in the face of LN, they

will hesitate to take action and exhibit withdrawal behaviours. According to Hochwarter and Thompson (2012), followers can create a control mechanism to protect themselves from the negative effects of LN. From this point of view, it can be argued that followers experience a sense of inhibition when taking action to minimise resource loss. According to COR theory, followers exhibit withdrawal behaviour to avoid losing more resources.

Hypothesis 3: LN is positively related to ITA.

#### *Crab Syndrome as a Mediator*

Narcissism is often associated with seeking approval and appreciation from others, dominance, and grandiosity (Brummelman et al., 2021; Hodson et al., 2018). A leader with these traits' reluctance to share organisational resources may mean that the leader will not provide enough support to employees to "succeed" (Campbell et al., 2011).

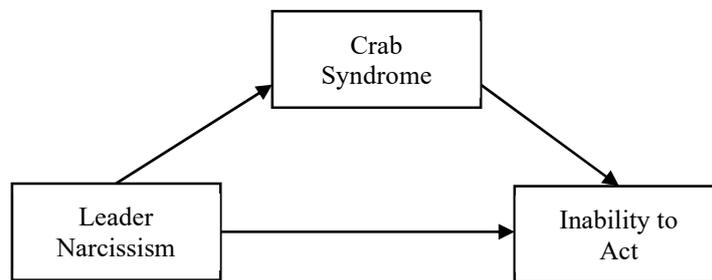
The leader serves as a reference for employees on what to do in the face of uncertainty (Madera & Smith, 2009). However, employees focus on protecting their resources if the leader is perceived as the source of threat and uncertainty (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012). According to COR theory, employees may perceive LN as a threat to their personal resources and focus on not losing resources rather than gaining resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In fact, Hochwarter and Thompson (2012) pointed out that behavioural (resuscitation) strategies against LN improved employee frustration, tension and performance outcomes. It has been reported that employees become indifferent to LN and choose cynicism and employee silence (Huang et al., 2020; Mousa et al., 2021). In response to LN, employees aim to protect their resources.

D'Souza and Lima (2021) pointed out that the leader's personal characteristics affect the organisation and its employees. Therefore, it is thought that LN will have organisational (CS) and individual (ITA) level consequences and provide a mediator between these relationships. When the behavioural strategy of narcissism, which supports establishing superiority (Nguyen et al., 2021), is spread throughout the organisation, it will create a competitive/jealous climate (CS) and, as a result, each member of the organisation will focus on increasing their own resources.

LN's attempts to replicate its resources may lead employees to choose withdrawal strategies such as silence and cynicism, aiming to conserve (personal-work-situation-energy) resources (Huang et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2019; Mousa et al., 2021). For employees, the way not to lose more resources may be to choose not to take action as a withdrawal behaviour (ITA) against LN (Braun et al., 2018; Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012; Mousa et al., 2021). Narcissism has been portrayed as a factor affecting organisational culture (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Therefore, narcissism is likely to trigger CS. CS is motivated by competition, jealousy and carrying the title of success alone (Üzüm et al., 2022). The COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) suggests that as LN amplifies its own resource spiral, employees will withdraw to prevent their own resource losses (ITA). It also supports the assumption that the relationship between LN and ITA will be further strengthened through organisational CS. The hypothesis designed in this direction is given below:

Hypothesis 4: CS mediates the relationship between LN and ITA.

Based on the developed hypotheses, the research model is presented in Figure 1.



*Figure-1 Research Model*

## **Methods**

### *Data Collection and Sample*

The research data was collected using a web-based online survey (<https://www.onlineanketler.com>), similar to the study conducted by Özkan et al. (2024b). The human resources department sent the survey link to employees via WhatsApp (Özkan et al., 2024a). An explanation letter regarding the research topic was appended to the survey link, emphasising that participation was voluntary and that all participants were assured of the anonymity of their responses. The survey consisted of two parts. The first part covered demographic characteristics, and the second covered LN, CS, and ITA measurements.

This research focuses on nurses in private hospitals in Kocaeli, Türkiye, because this setting provides a suitable context for examining resource-based mechanisms, particularly those related to loss (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Nursing work involves sustained emotional labour, high time pressure, and safety-critical coordination, all of which increase perceived resource threat and depletion. Private hospitals also impose performance targets and throughput demands, raising exposure to environments where LN may trigger CS and, consequently, ITA. Based on information from the hospitals featured in this study, hospitals treat approximately fifty patients daily, in a setting characterised by high task interdependence and hierarchical coordination. The convenience sampling method, chosen for its speed and simplicity, was employed for data collection in the research (Khanam & Tarab, 2023). This method, however, may limit the direct generalisability of the results to a broader employee population (Özkan et al., 2025a). As a result, the findings may not be directly applicable to all nursing staff. As in Lin et al.'s (2023) research, the study has used a cross-sectional study design. This approach entails the concurrent collection of data from different individuals.

The study employed an “a-priori sample size calculator for structural equation models” to ascertain the minimum required sample size (Gupta et al., 2022; Özkan et al., 2023; Soper, 2015). The calculated minimum sample size was determined to be 119. In this regard, 328 healthcare professionals participated in the research, but after the screening, the answers of 22 participants were not taken into consideration (due to incomplete answers), resulting in 306 valid surveys. As a result, 93.29% of the healthcare professionals who were questioned responded to the questionnaires. Regarding marital status, 53.3% of participants are single, while 46.7% are married. In terms of educational level, 9.8% of participants possess an associate degree, 83.3% hold an undergraduate degree, and 6.9% have obtained an advanced degree. The mean age of the participants is 29.66 years with a standard deviation of 5.07, while the mean tenure is 6.00 years with a standard deviation of 4.18.

### *Measurement*

Participants were asked to evaluate each item using a five-point Likert scale that ranged from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” The items (except CS and ITA) employed in the study were adapted from relevant literature and translated from English to Turkish using Brislin’s (1980) translation–back-translation procedure to ensure translation quality.

LN was measured using a four-item scale adapted from Jonason and Webster (2010). As observed in previous studies (Channa et al., 2022; Karatepe et al., 2023; Özkan et al., 2025b), item LN4 had a low factor loading ( $<0.50$ ); accordingly, it was removed from the measurement model. After removing LN4, the model exhibited improved psychometric properties, including higher composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) (Hair et al., 2019). In the survey, participants were asked to evaluate their leaders using the scale’s items, and for this purpose, the term “I” in the original survey was changed to “my leader”. The statement “My leader tends to seek prestige or status” is an example of the items included in the scale.

CS was assessed using the five-item scale developed by Üzüm and Özdemir (2020). A sample item is “I want to be the only one successful in the organisation I work for”.

A four-item scale was used to evaluate ITA. It was developed by Buhr and Dugas (2002) and adapted into Turkish by Sarı and Dağ (2009). A sample item for ITA is “When it is time to act, uncertainty paralyses me”.

### *Ethical Considerations*

This study adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Kocaeli University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (protocol code: E.523444; approval date: January 2024). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and participation was voluntary and anonymous.

### *Analytic Strategy*

SPSS software was employed to assess the study’s data for descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) method was used to estimate the structural model’s pathways, and SmartPLS 4 software was employed for statistical analysis. PLS-SEM is more suitable than other statistical methods, especially when assessing correlations between newly introduced variables (Dash & Paul, 2021).

## **Results**

Measurement model findings (Table 1 and Table 2), descriptive statistics and correlation values (Table 3), model assessment (Table 4), and hypotheses testing results (Table 5) are presented below. Furthermore, Harman’s one-factor technique was used to assess the presence of common method variance (CMV), which could have been present given the cross-sectional design.

### *Measurement Model Assessment*

The measurement model results are reported in Tables 1 and 2. As shown in Table 1, Cronbach’s alpha and CR exceed the 0.70 threshold, AVE is above 0.50, and all standardised factor loadings lie between 0.64 and 0.91, indicating internal consistency reliability and convergent validity (Hair et al., 2020). Multicollinearity was assessed via variance inflation factors (VIFs); all VIFs were below 5 (range = 1.50–3.55), suggesting no collinearity concerns (Hair et al., 2014).

*Table-1 Summary of Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity*

Constructs	Items Codes	Loadings	VIF	$\alpha$	CR	AVE
Leader Narcissism	LN1	0.80	1.66	0.78	0.78	0.54
	LN2	0.71	1.78			
	LN3	0.70	1.50			
Crab Syndrome	CS1	0.84	2.63	0.87	0.86	0.55
	CS2	0.67	2.58			
	CS3	0.89	1.50			
	CS4	0.64	2.54			
	CS5	0.65	1.89			
Inability to Act	ITA1	0.73	1.64	0.88	0.88	0.65
	ITA2	0.77	2.46			
	ITA3	0.91	3.55			
	ITA4	0.82	3.07			

Note: LN4 was discarded due to low loading (<0.50)

The assessment of discriminant validity relied on the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio criteria. For each construct, the square root of AVE was higher than its highest correlation with any other construct, satisfying the Fornell–Larcker test. All HTMT values were below 0.85 (see Table 2), meeting the recommended threshold. Overall, these results support discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2019; Henseler et al., 2015).

*Table-2 Summary of Discriminant Validity*

Fornell–Larcker Criteria	Crab Syndrome	Inability to Act	Leader Narcissism
Crab Syndrome	(0.74)	-	-
Inability to Act	0.42	(0.80)	-
Leader Narcissism	0.38	0.42	(0.74)
HTMT Criteria	Crab Syndrome	Inability to Act	Leader Narcissism
Crab Syndrome	-	-	-
Inability to Act	0.41	-	-
Leader Narcissism	0.38	0.41	-

#### *Common Method Variance Assessment*

The survey employed in this study comprised 12 items, categorised into three distinct variables. To examine the potential presence of CMV, the statistical software SPSS was employed to perform Harman’s single-factor test (O’Connor, 2000). Following that, all measurements were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis, with the requirement that the loading on the first factor not exceed 50% (Murphy, 2002). The findings indicated that the loading of the first component accounted for only 34.26% of the variance, falling short of the 50% benchmark. There are indications that CMV did not affect the study.

#### *Descriptives and Correlations*

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables in this study. The correlation analysis results for these constructs are also presented in Table 3. The relationships between LN and CS, as well as between CS and ITA, are positive. These relationships are statistically significant, with *p*-values less than 0.01.

*Table-3 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Study Variables*

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Leader Narcissism	3.48	0.93	1		
2. Crab Syndrome	2.01	0.85	0.32**	1	
3. Inability to Act	3.21	1.05	0.34**	0.36**	1

Notes: n = 306; \*\*p < 0.01

### Hypotheses Assessment

The present study involved testing four hypotheses after validating the measurement model. The structural model was analysed using the bootstrapping method with 5,000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval (CI) in SmartPLS 4 (Hair et al., 2017). The results for VIFs, effect size ( $f^2$ ), and explained variance ( $R^2$ ) are presented in Table 4, whereas the outcomes from hypothesis testing are shown in Table 5.

Table-4 Summary of Model Assessment

Paths	VIF	$f^2$	$R^2$
Leader Narcissism → Crab Syndrome	1.00	0.17	
Leader Narcissism → Inability to Act	1.17	0.10	0.25
Crab Syndrome → Inability to Act	1.17	0.10	

Examining the  $R^2$  values in Table 4 shows that LN and CS jointly account for 25% of the variance in ITA (Hair et al., 2017). The  $f^2$  statistics indicate that both LN and CS exert a low effect on ITA, whereas LN has a moderate effect on CS (Cohen, 1988). VIFs are below 5, indicating no multicollinearity issues (Hair et al., 2014).

Table-5 Summary of Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

HYP	Path	$\beta$	Std. Dev.	$t$	$p$	CI	Decision
H1	Leader Narcissism → Crab Syndrome	0.38	0.05	6.74	0.000***	(0.270–0.498)	Supported
H2	Crab Syndrome → Inability to Act	0.30	0.06	4.62	0.000***	(0.174–0.425)	Supported
H3	Leader Narcissism → Inability to Act	0.30	0.07	4.20	0.000***	(0.085–0.386)	Supported
H4	Leader Narcissism → Crab Syndrome → Inability to Act	0.11	0.02	4.12	0.000***	(0.064–0.173)	Supported

Notes: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; Coefficients are standardised ( $\beta$ )

According to the PLS-SEM results presented in Table 5, LN was positively and statistically related to both CS ( $\beta = 0.38$ ;  $t = 6.74$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) and ITA ( $\beta = 0.30$ ;  $t = 4.20$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). Therefore, this supports hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 3. Additionally, CS was positively and statistically associated with ITA ( $\beta = 0.30$ ;  $t = 4.62$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ), supporting hypothesis 2.

The mediation effect was tested using 5,000 bootstrap resamples; the indirect effect (LN → CS → ITA) was considered significant when the 95% CI did not include 0. As shown in Table 5, this effect was statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $t = 4.12$ ,  $p = 0.000$ , 95% CI [0.064, 0.173]). Based on this result, hypothesis 4 was supported.

### Discussion

Based on the COR theory, this study examined the dark side of LN and how leaders' narcissistic traits influence employees' ITA behaviours through the mediating role of CS.

In the study, it was initially determined that LN triggers CS (H1). LN tends to foster an insecure, competitive environment within the organisation by heightening competition and malicious envy, which undermines interpersonal harmony. This finding also supports previous

research emphasising that LN can foster a negative climate in organisations by increasing comparison, competition, and malicious envy among subordinates. (Braun et al., 2018; Long et al., 2023). As stated by Lith (2017), emotions such as hatred and aggression are more pronounced in individuals with high levels of narcissistic tendencies.

Secondly, it was found that CS triggered ITA behaviours (H2). The findings are consistent with the literature, which suggests that feelings of ambition and competition lead to ITA behaviours through procrastination (Anderson, 1987). Malicious envy creates pressure and fear among employees (Leheta et al., 2017), and such negative emotions, including anger, can trigger withdrawal behaviours (Fox et al., 2023).

Another significant finding of the study is that LN also had a positive effect on ITA behaviours (H3). This finding indicates that LN may have negative effects on employees. (Campbell et al., 2011). Huang et al. (2020) noted a negative relationship between LN and employee voice. Similarly, Liu et al. (2017) emphasised that LN reduces employees' willingness to express themselves or provide criticism, which may lead to more passive behaviours. In addition, Carnevale et al. (2018) reported a positive relationship between LN and dysfunctional behaviours. Overall, these results suggest that the findings of this study are generally consistent with previous research.

Subsequently, in this study, CS was found to be an important mediating variable between LN and employees' withdrawal behaviours (H4). The emergence of both positive and negative results across studies investigating the effect of LN on employee behaviours has highlighted the need to introduce additional variables to understand the model's internal mechanisms (Campbell et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2023). In this context, revealing the mediating role of CS in the study offers a new perspective on how LN indirectly influences employee behaviours and makes an original contribution to the literature. Based on the findings, the theoretical, managerial, and practical implications of the research are outlined below.

## **Implications**

### *Theoretical Implications*

This study provides some theoretical contributions by extending the existing literature on the variables examined. First, this is the first research study to comprehensively examine the relationships among LN, CS, and ITA. Furthermore, the model is the first to explain these relationships together with the COR theory. In this context, the study addresses the theoretical gaps identified in previous research regarding the outcomes of LN and the antecedents and consequences of CS (Özkan et al., 2022; Üzümlü & Özkan, 2022; Üzümlü et al., 2023).

Primarily, this study extends the literature on LN by highlighting its dark side and its impact on followers. The findings make a valuable contribution to the literature by showing that the dark side of LN affects followers and triggers the expression of CS, thereby drawing attention to a previously neglected relationship between LN and CS. In other words, the study shows that LN harms intra-organisational relationships by provoking negative emotional responses such as envy, competition, and hostility among employees. Antagonism (rivalry or entitlement), one of the three main factors of narcissism (Crowe et al., 2019; Krizan & Herlache, 2018), is a factor that explains LN's behaviour towards individuals in organisational life (Gauglitz et al., 2023), and this trait constitutes the basis of LN's dark side (Back et al., 2013; Campbell & Campbell, 2009). In light of the findings, the view that LN, which is especially related to fear of failure and insecurity (Lange et al., 2016), may lead to the emergence of negative dynamics such as competitiveness, malicious envy, hostility, and social conflict is supported (Gauglitz et al., 2023; Lange et al., 2016; Mahadevan et al., 2019). This finding also shows that LN is not only an individual personality trait but also a factor that shapes the organisational climate. In this way, LN, which refers to the tendency to gain

superiority over other employees and protect one's own greatness, facilitates the emergence of CS by revealing a tendency to exhibit feelings of hostility and competition (Helfrich & Dietl, 2019).

The research also deepens the literature on the negative effects of CS on employee behaviour. When ITA is evaluated from the perspective of the COR theory, it can be interpreted as a behavioural pattern driven by two distinct triggering processes. First, in managing resources effectively, employees tend to adopt ITA as a strategy to prevent excessive resource loss, which serves as a kind of defence mechanism. In other words, the feelings of ambition and competition that arise under the influence of CS further exacerbate the negativity in the employees' perspective of events, leading them to engage in passive behaviours in line with the tendency to prevent resource loss, to avoid negative consequences triggered by envy (Boekhorst et al., 2024). In line with the literature, the second reason behind employees' ITA-based passive behaviours is associated with a tendency to harm the organisation or their colleagues (Farooq & Sultana, 2021). In particular, employees who experience malicious envy tend to display primarily active behaviours to harm the other party, but they also display passive behaviours (Bauer & Spector, 2015). Employees experiencing envy may display ITA behaviours aimed at harming the organisation or the envied individual, a tendency consistent with the literature (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007). Similarly, other researchers have reported in studies among nurses that employees exposed to malicious envy may prefer to leave their jobs (Gan, 2022) or experience a decline in performance (Abbas et al., 2017).

This study made another contribution to the literature by finding that LN positively affects ITA behaviours. LN is intolerant of criticism, developing defence mechanisms that involve using negative verbal (active) or nonverbal (passive) communication patterns in response to criticism (Fehn et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2016; Nevicka et al., 2018a). Such defensive communication patterns that support ITA behaviours may create a psychologically insecure work environment. By exhibiting ITA behaviours in such an environment, the LN avoids collaborating with others (Jørstad, 1996). Moreover, since the LN serves as a role model for employees (Den Hartog et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023), followers tend to display withdrawal behaviours that mirror the LN's defensive reactions. From the COR theory perspective, this situation can be interpreted as employees exhibiting ITA behaviours to preserve their resources. In this sense, the results help to understand how LN's self-protective defence mechanisms similarly prompt employees to display ITA behaviours as a reaction aimed at conserving their resources, reinforcing the core assumptions of the COR theory. In addition, followers who become tired of constantly meeting the LN's special and self-centred demands may not obey the leader and exhibit ITA behaviours to disrupt the organisation's workflow (Carnevale et al., 2018). Similar studies in the literature also emphasise that LN, by disrupting interpersonal relationships (Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012), lowers followers' motivation, leads them to exhibit inefficient work behaviours (Cohen & Özsoy, 2021), and causes them to harbour hidden hostility toward the leader (Bergman et al., 2010; Carnevale et al., 2018).

Consequently, the proposed model elucidates how LN elicits ITA through CS and contributes to the literature on LN and CS. In organisational hierarchies where prestige and status are at the forefront, nurses increase their status based on merit by possessing certain skills and abilities. In addition, although they take the leader's ethical values, such as integrity, honesty, and transparency, as role models (Lange et al., 2016; Yue et al., 2023), they may also inherit the leader's unethical talents and skills to achieve their goals and protect their resources. For this reason, nurses who take the dark side of the LN as a role model may exhibit emotions and behaviours that may harm their organisations under the influence of CS.

### *Managerial Implications*

Some managerial recommendations have also been made based on the results. First of all, managers should remember that they serve as role models for their employees (Den Hartog et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023) and should be aware that their narcissistic tendencies may lead to CS among employees. Therefore, it may be recommended that human resource management organise personal development programs for leaders who are negatively affected by LN (Fox et al., 2023) to improve their empathy skills, enhance their ability to regulate negative emotions that may arise towards events or individuals, and strengthen their interpersonal communication skills. In addition, by establishing an organisational culture based on cooperation, solidarity, and trust, it may also be aimed at reducing CS's impact within the organisation.

On the other hand, managers should not ignore that CS may lead to withdrawal behaviours that hinder organisational effectiveness. In this context, it may be recommended that managers set goals focused on the team's collective success rather than on individual employee performance. Thus, it can be prevented that negative emotions such as anger trigger withdrawal behaviours among employees (Boekhorst et al., 2024; Fox et al., 2023). In addition, to prevent CS from leading to negative work behaviours that may arise from the tendency to pull others down to a lower position (Bauer & Spector, 2015; Braun et al., 2018), managers are advised to prioritise fair practices aimed at strengthening the perception of organisational justice among employees. In this regard, management may establish an AI-supported fair performance–reward system based on transparent criteria to minimise human biases.

When the finding that LN triggers ITA, which is another result of the study, is evaluated from a managerial perspective, it is understood that individuals working with leaders who have high narcissistic tendencies gradually lose their sense of commitment to these leaders, begin to display negative emotions and behaviours (Zhang et al., 2018), and cause a decrease in organisational effectiveness. In this context, it may be recommended that managers schedule regular one-on-one meeting hours to strengthen employees' sense of commitment to them. In addition, it may be suggested that management conduct regular surveys in which employees evaluate their leaders' behaviour. This practice can support ongoing monitoring and enhancement of leadership processes.

Finally, when evaluating the mediating role of CS in the effect of LN on ITA in terms of managerial practices, although it is quite challenging for employees to work with LN, senior management prefers to collaborate with leaders who have high narcissistic tendencies due to their characteristics such as risk-taking, competitiveness, and performance orientation. (Luchner et al., 2011; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021). Accordingly, it may be recommended to establish training rooms (Zhu et al., 2024) and AI-supported training programs to support the personal development of both LN and the nurses who will work with these leaders. In these programs, the presence of electronic resources, educational videos or different materials with practice-based sample applications can improve the performance of nurses. It is very important for nurses working at a busy pace to have flexible access to these programs to strengthen their health service delivery and personal development.

### *Practical Implications*

The findings of this study present several practical implications for nurses working in healthcare institutions. In settings where LN behaviours are common, it is crucial for nurses to recognise that these leadership styles can foster distrust within the team (Back et al., 2013; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Ofei et al., 2022). For this reason, in the first stage, nurses should be made aware that they should not compete with the LN or present themselves as a threat to him/her, to protect themselves from the LN. In this context, non-work activities can be organised with the LN and nurses who are under the influence of narcissism to strengthen the existing relationship positively. On the other hand, nurses can be advised to communicate

openly about issues such as job expectations, goals, and objectives that may be perceived as competitors to the LN. Another practical recommendation of the study is focused on how LN can manage organisational CS. Those who are confident in themselves and their abilities are less affected by negative emotions such as competitive envy, malicious envy, hostility, and social conflict (Gauglitz et al., 2023; Lange et al., 2016; Mahadevan et al., 2019). In this context, in the second stage, instead of suppressing their feelings of envy or competition, nurses who recognise these emotions and take short breaks during busy periods may help reduce their emotional strain. Additionally, establishing peer support groups where nurses can share their experiences might strengthen their social resources and help decrease feelings of envy and isolation.

On the other hand, in line with the findings that CS triggers ITA behaviours, it is important to create supportive work environments that will reduce competition and envy among nurses. In this context, it is important for nurses to communicate openly with their teammates about their goals, expectations, duties, and responsibilities. In addition, another important point that should not be overlooked is that they should not avoid giving constructive feedback to colleagues in need of help or asking for support from their coworkers when necessary.

Another practical implication of the study is related to how ITA behaviours triggered by LN can be managed. The excessive focus of leaders with high narcissistic tendencies on individual achievement may create distrust within the team, thereby increasing the tendency toward withdrawal among nurses (Bernerth, 2022). Therefore, it may be recommended that nurses improve their skills in setting boundaries, building psychological resilience, and coping with stress. In addition, the transparency of LN, especially in reward, promotion, and recruitment decisions, may strengthen nurses' perception of organisational justice and prevent withdrawal behaviours (Ali & Johl, 2020).

Finally, as a practical implication for reducing the indirect effect of LN on ITA through CS, it may be recommended that nurses develop a strong professional identity within the organisation. Building this professional identity through a consistent, dedicated, and ethical work approach can help colleagues respect rather than envy them. Therefore, nurses with a reputable professional identity are likely to avoid ITA behaviours to protect their reputation.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite the study's theoretical, managerial and practical implications, it has some limitations. First, the use of convenience sampling may limit the representativeness of the findings. To address this limitation, future studies should explore more reliable sampling methods, such as stratified random sampling. This approach improves the representativeness of the samples and helps to minimise bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Second, the results cannot be generalised to the entire healthcare sector, as the sample covers only one employee category. Each sector's unique dynamics can significantly impact the behaviour and outcomes analysed, and these dynamics might not apply to other sectors (Pfeffer, 1994). To overcome this constraint, future research should incorporate multiple sectors into the analysis. This can be accomplished by conducting studies that gather data from various industries. This will enable the analysis of industry-specific impacts and yield a more thorough comprehension of the phenomena being studied. Third, the study was conducted only in Türkiye, which is a limitation of the research, as cultural characteristics were ignored. Fourth, the study measured LN using narcissism, a sub-dimension of the dark triad scale developed by Jonason and Webster (2010). Carnevale et al. (2018) and Liu et al. (2017) used the narcissistic personality inventory to measure LN. This indicates that no direct scale exists to measure LN. Therefore, a scale can be developed for LN. Another study limitation is the lack of distinction between nurses working in private and public hospitals. Furthermore, it could not be determined whether the relationships between the

variables were affected by a specific process, so it is recommended that future research should be longitudinally designed (Özkan et al., 2023; Özkan et al., 2024b). Furthermore, although the study examined the effects of LN and CS on ITA, the study can be replicated by including additional variables in the model. For this reason, the mediating or moderating effects of variables such as justice, emotional intelligence, psychological capital, burnout, and cynicism can be examined in future studies. In addition, a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, may be employed.

## Conclusion

This study found that LN caused employees to exhibit withdrawal behaviour (ITA) and that CS played a mediating role in this relationship. Based on the COR theory, the study expanded the existing literature on LN and CS by analysing these among healthcare employees in Türkiye and highlighted avenues for future research by contributing to the health sector.

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