

**How Narcissism, Promotion Criteria, and Empowering Leadership Jointly Influence
Creativity through Diverse Information Searching: An Expectancy Perspective**

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ABSTRACT

While narcissism is commonly regarded as a dark personality trait associated with many negative outcomes, it also carries potential benefits. How to suppress the negative aspects of narcissism and promote its benefits has important implications for both scholars and practitioners. This study proposes two managerial practices (i.e., promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership) that motivate employees with high narcissism to bring benefits to the workplace. Drawing on expectancy theory, we theorize that narcissism, promotions based on relative performance, and empowering leadership each influence valence, instrumentality, and

expectancy, respectively, thereby driving diverse information searching, which indirectly increases radical and incremental creativity. The results of a multi-time and multi-source field study of 462 employees on 88 teams indicate that narcissism is positively associated with diverse information searching when team leaders evaluate promotions based on relative performance and empower narcissistic employees. Moreover, there is an indirect relationship between a three-way interaction (i.e., narcissism \times promotions based on relative performance \times empowering leadership) and radical and incremental creativity via diverse information searching. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, offering insights into more effective management of employees with high narcissism at work.

Keywords: narcissism; creativity; diverse information searching; promotion criteria; empowering leadership

Narcissism, a personality trait marked by an inflated self-view, feelings of entitled importance, and grandiosity, has received increasing amounts of attention from psychological and organizational scholars over the last 20 years (for reviews, see Campbell et al., 2011; LeBreton et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2021). This increase in attention aligns with a rise in narcissism among recent generations (Twenge and Campbell, 2008), implying an upward trend in the proportion of employees with high narcissism in contemporary organizations. Prior research indicates that narcissistic employees¹ tend to engage in counterproductive work behaviors, such as aggression and unethical behaviors (Grijalva and Newman, 2015; O’Boyle et al., 2012), and are unlikely to cooperate (Grijalva et al., 2020). However, they may also engage in behaviors that seem beneficial to organizations, such as creativity (Mao et al., 2021) and taking charge (Zhou et al., 2020), to demonstrate their superiority. In other words, working with narcissistic employees can be challenging, as their self-focused mindset often makes them care less about others and engage in self-serving behavior.

Although narcissism has been found to be associated with many negative influences and limited positive outcomes (Campbell et al., 2011; LeBreton et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2021), we still know little about how to suppress narcissism’s negative influences while promoting its positive outcomes. The lack of clarity on effective management strategies for narcissistic employees poses a unique challenge to management. In their natural state, narcissistic employees may become overly focused on themselves and neglect the viewpoints of others (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001). Therefore, exploring appropriate management strategies that weaken their self-focus tendency and encourage these individuals to consider the perspectives of others has

¹ Narcissism is a continuous personality trait (Campbell et al., 2011). For the sake of expositional simplicity, we use dichotomous labels in this article to refer to individuals/employees who score relatively higher on the narcissism continuum as “narcissists” or “narcissistic individuals/employees.”

both theoretical and practical implications. Such a shift can harness the unique potential of narcissistic employees, such as their confidence, willingness to take risks, and high energy (Campbell et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2020). By guiding them to become other-focused, their distinctive qualities can be channeled positively, contributing to both organizational success and promoting aspects of effective performance, such as creativity—the generation of novel ideas that could be useful to the organization concerning products, services or work-related processes (Amabile, 1996). Moreover, past research on the relationship between narcissism and creativity has been highly inconclusive (Goncalo et al., 2010; Martinsen et al., 2019; Nevicka et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2023), thus further highlighting the importance of identifying effective strategies for managing narcissistic employees. Therefore, our objective is to investigate the types of managerial practices that can be used to direct the attention of narcissistic employees from themselves to others, thereby unleashing their creative potential.

Specifically, we propose that diverse information searching (i.e., the search for variegated and new knowledge and information; Li et al., 2013) is a key indicator that demonstrates that narcissistic employees are focused not only on themselves but also on others and is also an essential action for unlocking their creativity. Narcissistic employees typically trust their internal insights above others and might not seek out external perspectives or new information (Howes et al., 2020) as they are confident in their own expertise and ideas (Campbell et al., 2004). Actively seeking diverse information from external sources shows that narcissistic employees recognize the value of others and are not solely self-focused. Moreover, in the creativity literature, it is a widely held view that diverse information is inherently critical to the creativity process (Hirst et al., 2015; Rodan and Galunic, 2004). However, narcissists are overconfident, self-focused, and less likely to learn from others (Campbell et al., 2004; Howes et al., 2020; Krizan and Herlache,

2018), which hinders their creativity. Diverse information searching may serve as a prerequisite for narcissistic employees to be creative. Exposure to diverse information and perspectives can help to challenge narcissistic employees' assumptions and biases, forcing them to see problems from different angles and leading to more nuanced and well-rounded solutions.

To enable narcissistic employees to actively seek diverse information and perspectives that will allow them to realize their creative potential, appropriate controls that encourage them to shift from focusing on themselves to also paying attention to others must be strategically provided by managers. Drawing on expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), we propose two managerial practices that push narcissistic employees to engage in diverse information searching, consequently enhancing their creativity. One is a formal type of structural control: promotions based on relative performance (i.e., a promotion criterion that reflects that team leaders evaluate team members' qualifications for promotion based on relative criteria [e.g., developing more new products than any other team member in the last year], Lazear and Rosen, 1981); the other is an informal type of behavioral control: empowering leadership (i.e., leaders' sharing power and delegating authority and responsibility to subordinates, Ahearne et al., 2005; Zhang and Bartol, 2010).

We choose these two managerial practices because they reflect two types of control (i.e., formal and informal) that managers often use. In the workplace, the team leader's promotion criteria signal to employees what they need to achieve to get promoted, and they can widely shape employees' instrumentality of specific behaviors (Bamberger et al., 1995; Rosenbaum, 1984). The promotion criterion has been regarded as an important practice for controlling employee mobility in a manner that reflects career success (Beehr et al., 1980; Ferris et al., 1992). Additionally, the leadership literature has widely accepted that leader behaviors are

critical interpersonal factors controlling employees' perceptions and behaviors (Banks et al., 2022). Prior research has shown that empowering leadership behaviors can strongly influence employees' efficacy in achieving desired outcomes (Zhang and Bartol, 2010). Thus, team leaders' promotion criteria and empowering leadership can be two useful factors shaping narcissistic employees' diverse information searching.

When team leaders evaluate promotions based on relative performance and empower team members, narcissistic employees engage in diverse information searches, which consequently increases their creativity. Previous research on creativity (e.g., Gong et al., 2017; Jaussi and Randel, 2014; Malik et al., 2019) and the narcissism–creativity relationship (e.g., Mao et al., 2021) suggest dividing creativity into radical and incremental forms to gain a more nuanced understanding (Litchfield et al., 2015; Madjar et al., 2011). Radical creativity refers to novel ideas that substantially diverge from the organization's established practices, while incremental creativity involves minor modifications to these practices (Madjar et al., 2011). To build upon prior findings and engage effectively with the literature, we also differentiate between radical and incremental creativity and analyze the impact of narcissism on each form. Figure 1 presents our theoretical model.

By exploring how to effectively manage and develop narcissistic employees, our study offers several theoretical contributions to the narcissism literature. First, we propose that, under the right conditions, narcissistic employees have the potential to transition from being self-focused to other-focused. This presents a direction for solving the management challenges posed by the increasing prevalence of narcissistic employees in the workplace. Specifically, we propose two critical managerial practices (i.e., promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership) that can encourage narcissistic employees to pay attention to others and

search for diverse information from external sources, thereby enhancing their creativity. It also reconciles prior opposing views on the narcissism–creativity relationship (e.g., Goncalo et al., 2010; Mao et al., 2021; Wallace and Baumeister, 2002). Second, by suggesting that the key to unlocking the creative potential of narcissistic employees lies in their search for diverse information, we reveal a novel perspective for understanding how narcissistic employees can influence their own creativity through actions that are not self-focused. Although prior research has examined the underlying mechanisms through which narcissistic employees achieve creativity, it has focused primarily on self-related variables, such as creative self-efficacy (e.g., Ames et al., 2006; Mao et al., 2021). Finally, we introduce a new theoretical perspective (i.e., expectancy theory) to explain narcissistic employees’ behavior at work. We propose that promotion criteria and empowering leadership influence narcissistic employees’ instrumentality and expectancy perceptions, respectively, which provides a new and valuable perspective for understanding the factors shaping the workplace behavior of narcissistic employees.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Narcissism and Expectancy Theory

Narcissism, which is characterized by an inflated self-perception and sense of entitlement (Campbell et al., 2011; Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001), has received extensive research attention in clinical psychology, psychiatry, and social personality. In the field of social personality, narcissism is regarded as a common personality trait: the narcissist has an inflated ego, does not care about others, and craves power and attention from others (Campbell et al., 2006; Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001). Moreover, narcissists also have some positive potential. They are more likely to become leaders (Grijalva et al., 2015), exhibit high efficacy (Mao et al., 2021), tend to engage in explorative learning (Wu et al., 2022), and show a propensity for taking charge (Liu et al.,

2022; Zhou et al., 2020).

However, according to the prevailing consensus in the literature, narcissistic employees are difficult to work with because they are preoccupied with themselves and do not show much concern for others (Miller et al., 2021). Narcissists attach greater importance to status and are more likely to set status-relevant goals (e.g., achieving high performance and acquiring leadership) than people with low narcissism (Grapsas et al., 2020). Additionally, narcissists' self-importance results in self-focus, overconfidence, and experience superiority (Campbell et al., 2004; Krizan and Herlache, 2018). Even if employees with high narcissism receive help from others, they do not experience an increase in prosocial motivation (Zhong et al., 2022). Such tendencies impede narcissists' learning (Howes et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2019) and advice-taking (Kausel et al., 2015). Thus, it is important to identify managerial practices that can shift narcissistic employees' focus from internal insights to external perspectives to make the best use of their potential.

Drawing from expectancy theory, we propose that promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership are two important managerial practices that guide narcissistic employees to seek diverse information and consequently achieve their creative potential. According to expectancy theory, three factors—valence, instrumentality, and expectancy—jointly determine individual action (Vroom, 1964). Simply put, an individual's intended effort toward a specific action is influenced by a) valence, the attractiveness of external rewards; b) instrumentality, or the probability that the desired performance or goal achievement is associated with external rewards; and c) expectancy, or the probability that exerting effort can lead to the desired performance or goal achievement. We argue that all three factors are relevant in determining the relationships between narcissism and creativity through diverse information

searching under promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership. In the following section, we first theorize how promotions based on relative performance, as a formal structural form of leadership control, and empowering leadership, as an informal behavioral form of leadership control, jointly influence narcissistic employees' diverse information searching. Subsequently, we theorize that diverse information searching acts as an important mediating mechanism linking the three-way interaction among narcissism, promotions based on relative performance, and empowering leadership to creativity.

Narcissism, Promotion Criteria, and Empowering Leadership: A Three-way Interaction

According to expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), individuals' behavior is jointly influenced by the essential components of valence, instrumentality, and expectancy. We believe that narcissistic employees exert effort in diverse information searching because they highly value promotions (valence); promotions based on relative performance tighten the link between performance and promotions (instrumentality); and empowering leadership instills in them the belief that they can achieve a desired performance level by put efforts in diverse information searching (expectancy). Therefore, we must consider these factors together to understand how to encourage narcissistic employees to shift their focus outward by searching for diverse information.

First, under normal circumstances, narcissistic employees do not devote effort to searching for diverse information because of their overconfidence and arrogance (Kausel et al., 2015; Williams and Williams, 2017). However, they might value diverse information searching if it is necessary to obtain a very attractive reward, such as a promotion. Narcissists have an inflated self-view and are eager to demonstrate their uniqueness and superiority (Campbell et al., 2011; Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001). For narcissistic employees, promotion is an attractive external

reward that can validate their uniqueness and superiority. Therefore, they are more likely than those low in narcissism to value a promotion (Benson et al., 2016). That is, a promotion has high valence for narcissistic employees. If a behavior (e.g., diverse information searching) can lead to narcissistic employees' promotion and they have the ability to perform this behavior, they will strategically engage in this behavior (Konrath et al., 2016).

Second, promotions based on relative performance set the rule that employees must outperform others to receive promotions, which is closely related to instrumentality (i.e., the performance–rewards linkage). When team leaders adopt this relative standard, team members need to compete against each other to receive promotions (Lazear and Rosen, 1981). Narcissistic employees are characterized by excessive self-confidence, often leading them to overestimate their abilities and performance relative to others (Gabriel et al., 1994; John and Robins, 1994). When promotion criteria are based on relative performance, narcissistic employees feel that an excellent performance will help them outperform their peers and receive the desired promotion. In other words, under this condition, they have a high instrumentality belief.

In a work environment in which promotions are based on relative performance, narcissistic employees' status-seeking motivation is highly activated (Wallace and Baumeister, 2002). Therefore, they remain vigilant in understanding how they are perceived by others and in gaining external validation (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001). They may collect information about their colleagues as a point of reference to ensure that their uniqueness and superiority are recognized. That is, narcissistic employees may search for diverse information to maintain their sense of superiority and remain ahead of the competition. In contrast, when team leaders evaluate employees' qualifications for promotion based on an absolute performance level, narcissistic employees see no need to seek diverse information to gauge how they compare to other

colleagues (Howes et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2023). Therefore, when promotions are based on relative performance, narcissistic employees will put effort into diverse information searches, as they believe that this action will help them secure promotions.

Finally, if individuals perceive that they are incapable of achieving a desired performance level, they will not be motivated to devote any effort, even if good performance can bring them a desirable reward (Vroom, 1964). Thus, we propose that empowering leadership is another important factor that determines narcissistic employees' motivation to engage in diverse information searching by enhancing their expectancy. Empowering leadership is defined as "a process of sharing power, and allocating more autonomy and responsibilities to followers through a specific set of leader behaviors that entails enhancing the meaningfulness of work, fostering participation in decision making, expressing confidence in high performance, and providing autonomy from bureaucratic constraints" (Cheong et al., 2016: 603–604). By engaging in these behaviors, leaders can increase employees' self-efficacy (e.g., Ahearne et al., 2005; Cheong et al., 2016), which enhances their expectancy of diverse information searching.

In particular, empowering leadership enables employees to have the ability and autonomy to search for diverse information at work. Searching for diverse information requires employees to step out of their familiar knowledge areas to those unfamiliar areas to learn information. If the leader does not empower employees, these employees may have less self-efficacy (Cheong et al., 2016), high role ambiguity (Harris et al., 2014; Humborstad and Kuvaas, 2013), and high emotional exhaustion (Rai and Kim, 2021), which decreases employees' perceptions that they have the ability to successfully search diverse information at work. More importantly, employees need to process diverse information in order to transform this information into desired performance. If employees lack autonomy and discretion to make decisions stemming from

empowering leadership, they will struggle to convert the effort invested in diverse information searching into a high level of performance. That is, when levels of empowering leadership are high, employees are confident that their diverse information searching can help them successfully achieve superior performance (Magni and Maruping, 2013).

When promotions based on relative performance prompt narcissistic employees to pay more attention to others' perspectives and information, they may realize that diverse information searching can actually help enhance their performance. Diverse information searching can provide employees with useful knowledge, which enables them to continuously improve their performance (Homan et al., 2007). It can also increase employees' cognitive ability to interpret and subjoin disparate knowledge (Baer, 2010; Li et al., 2013), which further enhances their uniqueness and superiority (Mao et al., 2021). When leaders empower them, narcissistic employees can take control of and assert their ambition to effectively realize their diverse information searching efforts to achieve high performance. However, without empowering leadership, narcissistic employees may feel that there is limited space for them to showcase their talents and abilities, rendering their efforts in diverse information searching futile.

In summary, we theorize that the three-way interaction among narcissism, promotions based on relative performance, and empowering leadership influences diverse information searching. Under promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership, narcissistic employees have the highest motivation to put effort into searching for disparate and new knowledge that is useful for their work because of high valence, instrumentality, and expectancy.

Hypothesis 1: Promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership moderate the relationship between narcissism and employees' diverse information searching in

such a way that this relationship is strongest when levels of promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership are both high.

The Implications of Diverse Information Searching

Diverse information searching includes searching for disparate and new knowledge that is useful for work purposes (Li et al., 2013). By seeking new information across different sources (internal and external), individuals add to their existing knowledge base, which can benefit creativity (Li et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2020). This action is critical for narcissistic employees to achieve creativity, as they tend to be self-focused and may be more likely to rely on their own knowledge and perspectives (Campbell et al., 2004; Krizan and Herlache, 2018), which can limit their creativity. Diverse information searching exposes them to a wide range of ideas, perspectives, and information that is different from their existing knowledge. When employees continuously engage in diverse information searching, they are more likely to find valuable knowledge and improve their cognitive ability to interpret and subjoin this disparate knowledge (Baer, 2010; Li et al., 2013). Thus, employees' diverse information searching can help them gain insight and develop more creativity at work.

We expect that diverse information searching is conducive to both radical and incremental creativity. Specifically, radical creativity “often arises from unfamiliar knowledge and information located outside an individual’s current area of expertise or organizational boundary” (Gong et al., 2017: 833). To generate radical ideas, employees need to gather diverse information and explore different perspectives (Gilson and Madjar, 2011; Tang and Ye, 2015; Tang et al., 2017). Thus, when individuals have high levels of diverse information searching, they are more likely to generate useful ideas that differ substantially from existing practices. In contrast to radical creativity, incremental creativity involves only minor adaptations or changes

to existing services, products, and processes (Madjar et al., 2011). Although employees may generate incremental creativity by delving deeply into existing knowledge or concrete practice-related ideas (Gilson and Madjar, 2011), diverse information can still contribute to incremental creativity (Zhang et al., 2023). Prior research has also shown that seeking diverse information can enrich individuals' existing knowledge base, which can enhance creativity (Hirst et al., 2015; Li et al., 2013; Rodan and Galunic, 2004; Tang et al., 2020). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Diverse information searching is positively related to a) radical creativity and b) incremental creativity.

By integrating Hypothesis 1 with Hypothesis 2, we propose that promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership jointly push narcissistic employees to engage in diverse information searching, which increases their radical and incremental creativity. Thus, we develop the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership moderate the indirect relationship between narcissism and employees' a) radical creativity and b) incremental creativity via diverse information searching such that this indirect relationship is strongest when levels of promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership are both high.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a field study by collecting data from 88 medium-sized high-tech companies in China. The first author initially contacted the chief executive officers of 150 medium-sized high-tech companies and asked them to randomly choose a team

from the research and development (R&D) department to participate in our research. There were 120 chief executive officers who responded that their R&D teams were willing to participate in our research. Before we formally collected the data, we randomly interviewed three team members to determine their job content, promotion criteria, and team leadership style. One week after the interview, we sent invitations to the 120 R&D team managers to inform them of our research purposes and requirements. However, only 105 R&D teams agreed to participate in our study. Most of these R&D teams' job requirements involved helping the company design and develop products (e.g., software platforms), which requires a certain level of creativity. In the team's daily work, the team leader was responsible for arranging the work plan of the entire team, fostering communication and collaboration, and providing performance feedback. In addition, 105 R&D team leaders were directly involved in the team's R&D activities, and they had the power to decide whether to promote employees (i.e., team members).

We adopted a multi-source and multi-time design to alleviate common method variance. In particular, team leaders (105) were asked to rate their promotion preferences, and team members (620) were asked to rate their narcissistic personality and perceived empowering leadership at Time 1. There were 93 team leaders (*response rate* = 88.6%) and 527 team members (*response rate* = 85.0%) who successfully completed the questionnaires. One month later (Time 2), the 93 team leaders were asked to rate each team member's creativity, and the 527 team members were asked to rate their diverse information searching. Finally, we obtained 88 R&D team leader responses (*valid response rate* = 83.8%) and 462 usable employee responses (*valid response rate* = 74.5%)². Of the 88 team leaders, 27.3% were female, and 56.8% had at

² In the process of distributing our surveys, we tried our best to ask team members to fill them in. However, the valid data for the final match does not include all team members' ratings. Only team leaders and members who completed the questionnaire in both phases were counted as valid responses.

least a bachelor's degree. The average age of these team leaders was 38.3 years ($SD = 7.97$). Of the 462 team members, 36.1% were female, and 50.4% held a bachelor's degree. The mean age of these team members was 35.5 years ($SD = 8.57$); the average tenure of the team members was 9.64 years ($SD = 8.91$). The team size varied (ranging from 3 to 35), and the mean team size was 11.90 ($SD = 7.84$).

Measures

Because all the study items were developed in English, we translated them into Chinese following the standard procedure of Brislin (1986). One of the coauthors, who is fluent in both English and Chinese, translated the English version of the survey into Chinese and then reconciled any disagreements regarding word choice and expression with another coauthor. The questionnaire was then back-translated by a third bilingual person to ensure the accuracy of the translation.

Narcissism. Narcissism ($\alpha = 0.74$) was measured using the 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Ames et al., 2006). Employees were forced to choose the statement that best described themselves (0 = *nonnarcissistic*, 1 = *narcissistic*). Sample items are “I am an extraordinary person” and “I am much like everybody else.”

Promotions based on relative performance. We measured promotions based on relative performance using a single-item scale developed for this study³. The R&D team leaders were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following statement: “In your team, when you evaluate your subordinates' promotions, to what extent do you evaluate promotions

³ Since we did not find a valid scale in the literature to measure promotions based on relative criteria, we developed a single-item scale for this study. We randomly selected five teams from our sample for interviews conducted to gather perceptions of team leaders and members on team promotion criteria. The results of our interviews showed that the promotion criteria of a department or team are rules that employees pay close attention to and that these rules are generally very clear. As the item is constructed to be sufficiently narrow and unambiguous, a single-item measurement is accepted (Jones and Shah, 2016; Wanous et al., 1997). Thus, we used a single item to measure promotions based on relative criteria.

based on subordinates' relative ranking in the team members' performance hierarchy?" Leaders responded on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *to a very large extent*). Higher scores indicated that the team leader tends to evaluate team members' promotions based on relative performance.

Empowering leadership. Empowering leadership was measured using Ahearn et al.'s (2005) twelve-item scale ($\alpha = 0.91$). Employees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statements on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Sample items are "My direct leader believes in my ability to improve even when I make mistakes" and "My direct leader allows me to do my job my way." As leaders may implement differentiated empowering behaviors based on team members' characteristics (Li et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2010), we ask team members to rate empowering leadership to capture each team member's perceived empowering leadership.

Diverse information searching. Diverse information searching ($\alpha = 0.85$) was measured using a four-item scale adapted from Li et al. (2013). Employees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statements on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Sample items are "I devote a large percentage of my time to searching for new information" and "I invest a great deal of personal effort into gathering diverse information that is potentially valuable to my work."

Radical creativity and incremental creativity. We measured radical creativity ($\alpha = 0.87$) and incremental creativity ($\alpha = 0.82$) using three items, each developed by Madjar et al. (2011). Leaders were asked to rate to what extent each subordinate had displayed creativity in the past

year⁴ on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Sample items are “This employee suggests radically new ways of doing his or her work (radical creativity)” and “This employee uses previously existing ideas or work in an appropriate new way (incremental creativity).”

Control variables. We controlled for five demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, education level, organizational tenure, and dyadic tenure with the team leader) in all our analyses because prior research has shown that these factors may influence employees’ creativity (Oldham and Cummings, 1996; Shalley et al., 2004; Zhang and Bartol, 2010). Both gender (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*) and education level (0 = *below a bachelor’s degree*, 1 = *bachelor’s degree or above*) were measured using dichotomous variables. Removing these control variables did not change any of our conclusions.

Analytic Strategy

Given the nested nature of our data, we used multilevel path analysis with Mplus 8.10 (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2017) to test our proposed relationships. In particular, we modeled narcissism, empowering leadership, and five demographic variables as Level-1 variables and modeled promotions based on relative performance as a Level-2 variable. Additionally, we controlled for the group means of narcissism and empowering leadership ($Rwg_{\text{mean}} = 0.96$ and $Rwg_{\text{median}} = 0.97$) at Level-2. Following the suggestions of Hofmann and Gavin (1998), we group-mean centered exogenous variables measured at the Level-1 and grand-mean centered Level-2 variables. We did not use group-mean centered mediators or dependent variables because Mplus latently partials the within- and between-person variances of these variables.

⁴ Since radical creativity occurs less frequently in the short term, we used a yearly measurement method. Theoretically, the time horizon will not change our predictions (i.e., narcissists can generate more creativity under promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership in a week, a month, or a year). Moreover, using a yearly measurement interval is also common in prior creativity literature (e.g., Baer, 2012; Caniëls et al., 2022).

To test our hypotheses, we first created the interaction term (group-mean centered narcissism \times group-mean centered empowering leadership) and then constructed a multilevel path model. In this model, we modeled “diverse information searching–radical/incremental creativity” relationships and control variable-related relationships at Level-1 as fixed effects to reduce model complexity. Additionally, we modeled other relationships at Level-1 as random effects to estimate the cross-level interaction effects. Finally, to examine the conditional indirect effects, we conducted Monte Carlo bootstrapping ($N = 20,000$) to construct 95% confidence intervals (CIs) using the open resource software R.

RESULTS

Confirmatory Factor Analyses, Descriptive Statistics, and Correlations

We conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to examine the discriminant validity of narcissism, empowering leadership, diverse information searching, radical creativity, and incremental creativity. Before we conducted a series of CFAs, we parceled empowering leadership into four subdimensions given the relatively small sample size (Little et al., 2002). We then ran a measurement model that included five measures (a five-factor model). The results indicated that the five-factor model fit the data well: $\chi^2 = 715.39$, $df = 395$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.04, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, SRMR = 0.06. Then, we ran a four-factor model in which radical creativity and incremental creativity were combined ($\chi^2 = 804.06$, $df = 399$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89, SRMR = 0.06). Based on these results, we considered our focal variables as distinct constructs. The descriptive statistics and correlations of all the study variables are shown in Table 1.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 proposed that narcissism, promotions based on relative performance, and

empowering leadership jointly influence radical creativity and incremental creativity. As shown in Table 2, the interaction term (narcissism \times empowering leadership \times promotions based on relative performance) was positively related to diverse information searching ($B = 0.05, p = 0.02$). We plotted the three-way interaction in Figure 2. The results of simple slope tests revealed that when both promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership were high, narcissism was positively related to diverse information searching ($B = 0.10, p = 0.047$). In contrast, under other conditions, narcissism was negatively associated with (promotions based on relative performance were high, and empowering leadership was low, $B = -0.10, p < 0.001$) or unrelated to diverse information searching (promotions based on relative performance were low, and empowering leadership was high, $B = -0.09, p = 0.06$; both promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership were low, $B = -0.03, p = 0.47$). Additionally, the relationship between narcissism and diverse information searching under high-level promotions based on relative performance and high empowering leadership was stronger than the relationships under low-level promotions based on relative performance and high empowering leadership (*difference* = 0.20, $p = 0.001$); under high-level promotions based on relative performance and low empowering leadership (*difference* = 0.19, $p = 0.03$); and under low-level promotions based on relative performance and low empowering leadership (*difference* = 0.13, $p = 0.03$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Additionally, Table 2 also indicates that diverse information searching was positively related to radical creativity ($B = 0.26, p = 0.01$) and incremental creativity ($B = 0.29, p = 0.002$), supporting Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

The bootstrapping results indicated that the indirect relationship between the three-way interaction and radical creativity via diverse information searching was 0.01 (95% CI = [0.001, 0.033]). We also examined the indirect relationships between narcissism and radical creativity

via diverse information searching under different conditions and the differences among these indirect relationships. As shown in Table 3, when both promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership were high, narcissism was positively related to radical creativity via diverse information searching (*indirect effect* = 0.02, 95% CI = [0.001, 0.061]). Under other conditions, narcissism was negatively related to radical creativity via diverse information searching (promotions based on relative performance were low, and empowering leadership was high, *indirect effect* = -0.02, 95% CI = [-0.060, -0.001]); promotions based on relative performance were high, and empowering leadership was low, *indirect effect* = -0.02, 95% CI = [-0.058, -0.0001]) and was not related to radical creativity via diverse information searching (both promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership were low, *indirect effect* = -0.01, 95% CI = [-0.036, 0.014]). Moreover, the indirect relationship under high-level promotions based on relative performance and high empowering leadership was more positive than the indirect relationships under low-level promotions based on relative performance and high empowering leadership (*difference* = 0.05, 95% CI = [0.008, 0.110]); under high-level promotions based on relative performance and low empowering leadership (*difference* = 0.05, 95% CI = [0.006, 0.110]); and under low-level promotions based on relative performance and low empowering leadership (*difference* = 0.03, 95% CI = [0.001, 0.081]). These findings demonstrated that the relationship between the three-way interaction and radical creativity was mediated by diverse information searching. Thus, Hypothesis 3a was supported.

Finally, the bootstrapping results indicated that the indirect relationship between the three-way interaction and incremental creativity via diverse information searching was 0.02 (95% CI = [0.002, 0.036]). As shown in Table 3, when both promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership were high, narcissism was positively related to

incremental creativity via diverse information searching (*indirect effect* = 0.03, 95% CI = [0.002, 0.063]). Under other conditions, narcissism was negatively related to incremental creativity via diverse information searching (promotions based on relative performance were low, and empowering leadership was high, *indirect effect* = -0.03, 95% CI = [-0.065, -0.002]; promotions based on relative performance were high, and empowering leadership was low, *indirect effect* = -0.03, 95% CI = [-0.061, -0.001]) or not related to incremental creativity via diverse information searching (both promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership were low, *indirect effect* = -0.01, 95% CI = [-0.039, 0.016]). Moreover, the indirect relationship under high-level promotions based on relative performance and high empowering leadership was more positive than the indirect relationships under low-level promotions based on relative performance and high empowering leadership (*difference* = 0.06, 95% CI = [0.012, 0.117]); under high-level promotions based on relative performance and low empowering leadership (*difference* = 0.05, 95% CI = [0.009, 0.116]); and under low-level promotions based on relative performance and low empowering leadership (*difference* = 0.04, 95% CI = [0.003, 0.085]). These findings demonstrated that the relationship between the three-way interaction and incremental creativity was mediated by diverse information searching. Thus, Hypothesis 3b was supported.

Robustness Check

We conducted two robustness checks of our results. We first ran our models without controls. As shown in the online supplementary materials (Tables S1, S2, and S3), the results showed that our conclusions were unaffected after removing these controls from the data analyses. Then, we created one model that modeled empowering leadership as a Level-1 variable and another model that modeled empowering leadership as a Level-2 variable. As shown in the

online supplementary materials (Tables S4 and S5), these two models yielded comparable results. These two robustness checks confirm our conclusions.

DISCUSSION

How to manage narcissistic employees is an important issue that has received increasing attention from both managers and scholars. This study examines how to positively engage narcissistic employees in diverse information searching efforts, which leads to creativity. Leveraging expectancy theory, we suggest that the interaction among narcissism, promotions based on relative performance, and empowering leadership influences both radical and incremental creativity via diverse information searching. Our results indicated that narcissistic employees were most inclined to search for diverse information and exhibit the highest levels of creativity when levels of promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership were high. Without empowering leadership, even with relative performance-based promotions, such employees were less likely to seek diverse information. Therefore, for the optimal motivation of narcissistic employees, leaders should combine relative performance-based promotions with empowering practices, aligning with the principles of expectancy theory that state that valence, instrumentality, and expectancy jointly drive behavior (Vroom, 1964).

Theoretical Implications

Our study contributes to the literature on narcissism in several ways. First, we extend the literature on narcissism by presenting how managerial practices can guide narcissistic employees from being self-focused to other-focused. Prior research has shown that narcissists are self-focused and arrogant and tend to engage in deviant behaviors (Campbell et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2006; LeBreton et al., 2018). Scholars have also started to identify strategies that could mitigate the negative effects of narcissism (e.g., Webster and Smith, 2019). However, our findings

indicate that under the right conditions, narcissistic employees have the potential to transition from being self-focused to other-focused. In particular, when team leaders evaluate promotions based on team members' relative performance and by empowering narcissistic employees, these narcissistic employees engage in diverse information searching, which increases their radical and incremental creativity. The discovery that narcissistic employees can actively engage in diverse information searching opens up many possibilities for future research, such as exploring the relationship between narcissism and more other-focused variables. These findings are also consistent with recent studies in the narcissism literature indicating that narcissistic employees may exert positive influences at work (e.g., Liu et al., 2022; Mao et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2023).

Moreover, our study reconciles prior opposing views on the narcissism–creativity relationship by proposing two critical managerial practices for facilitating narcissistic employees to increase their creativity: promotions based on relative performance and empowering leadership. Scholars in psychology and organizational behavior have generated mixed findings on the narcissism–creativity relationship (e.g., positive findings, Ames et al., 2006; e.g., nonsignificant findings, Dahmen-Wassenberg et al., 2016; e.g., negative findings, Jonason et al., 2017). To resolve these mixed findings, a few scholars proposed an interactional view that whether narcissists could generate creativity depends on perceptions of self-enhancement opportunities (Wallace and Baumeister, 2002). Consistent with this perspective, our findings indicated that promotion criteria and empowering leadership jointly influence narcissistic employees' motivation to perform, which indirectly affects creativity. Unlike prior research, our results emphasized that the creativity of narcissistic employees does not emerge naturally but rather is a product of effective management from supervisors.

We also provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between narcissism and

creativity by demonstrating that the key to whether narcissistic employees can generate creativity lies in their diverse information searching. Although several studies have begun to empirically examine how narcissistic employees can generate creativity (Ji et al., 2023; Mao et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2023), these studies have largely focused on self-related variables and have failed to explain how self-focused narcissists could be other-focused (i.e., diverse information searching). For example, both Mao et al. (2021) and Zhao et al. (2023) theorized creative self-efficacy as a critical bridge linking narcissism and creativity, building on narcissists' confidence and attention-seeking motivation, providing a possible explanation for narcissists engaging in bold and unconventional behavior (e.g., generating novel ideas). Our study complements these studies by demonstrating that narcissistic employees can perform creativity when they have high levels of diverse information searching. This study provides an other-focused mechanism explaining the narcissism–creativity relationship, which can help us gain a full understanding of why narcissistic employees can generate creativity.

Finally, we enrich the narcissism literature by introducing a new theoretical perspective (i.e., expectancy theory) to explain narcissistic employees' behavior at work. Prior research has used trait activation theory (Tett and Burnett, 2003) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) to explain how narcissistic employees' motivation to pursue status is activated, influencing their behaviors (Mao et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2023). Our findings suggest that when examining whether employees will perform a certain behavior, considering their traits, the activation of specific motives or self-efficacy in isolation may not be sufficiently comprehensive. A more holistic approach requires examining the effects of all elements on valence, instrumentality, and expectancy.

Practical Implications

Our study provides valuable practical implications. With the increasing prevalence of narcissism among younger generations (Twenge and Campbell, 2008), finding effective ways for leaders to manage narcissistic employees is crucial and beneficial. Our findings showed that one way to develop a positive view of narcissistic employees is to drive them to search for diverse information. Narcissism is found to be associated with many negative interpersonal behaviors because of self-focus and arrogance (Campbell et al., 2011; O'Boyle et al., 2012). However, our findings showed that with proper management, narcissistic employees can shift from being solely self-focused to actively seeking diverse information, a transformation that benefits both the organization and the narcissistic employees themselves. Thus, organizations should view narcissistic employees not as liabilities but as potential human resources that need strategic management. If organizations take the right steps, they can effectively weaken the negative influences of narcissism and channel the actions of narcissists to create positive contributions.

Moreover, our findings also show that team leaders must use formal and informal controls to take advantage of narcissistic employees. In particular, leaders can set relative performance standards for team members' promotions (formally structural controls) and empower team members (informally behavioral controls) to enhance narcissistic employees' efforts to search for diverse information, which consequently increases their radical and incremental creativity. To manage narcissistic employees effectively, managers need to apply both types of control. Neglecting one or not fully implementing both will not be sufficient to shift the focus of narcissistic employees away from themselves and toward seeking diverse information.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Our research has several limitations that suggest avenues for future investigation. First,

given the inherent limitations of our correlational design, we cannot determine the exact causal direction of our variables. Employees with high levels of diverse information searching and creativity may tend to be empowered by their leaders due to their information advantages. Thus, to empirically examine causal inferences, future studies could use laboratory experiments manipulating promotion criteria and empowering leadership to confirm our findings.

Second, leadership position directly reflects the degree to which a job provides opportunities to lead others and to achieve dominance or influence over others (i.e., status and power). Narcissists who hold leadership positions will perceive more status needs fulfillment and power than those who do not have leadership positions (Barrick et al., 2013). Thus, the moderating effects of empowering leadership are stronger for narcissistic employees than for narcissistic leaders. That is, the power that comes with a leadership position can substitute for the positive effects of empowering leadership. Since we did not collect information on employees' positions in the company, we could not further examine the moderating effect of employees' positions. We believe that future studies empirically examining the moderating role of employee position in our model are worthwhile.

Third, promotions based on relative performance were reported by team leaders, overlooking the possibility that employees might have different perceptions of this promotion method. For the companies from which we collected the data, the promotion criteria were actually quite transparent. Prior to the formal data collection, our interviews with a random sample of employees showed that team members were highly consistent with the promotion criteria adopted by their team leaders. Thus, we used leader-rated promotions based on relative performance. However, we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that some employees may not accurately recognize whether leaders implement promotions based on relative performance.

Therefore, we suggest that future research should also measure this variable from the employees' perspective to validate our results.

Finally, we wish to highlight a note of caution with respect to our findings. While our research indicates that, under suitable conditions, narcissistic employees may become more receptive to others' viewpoints, this should not be misconstrued as an indication of a genuine concern for others. Their motivation may still primarily be driven by a desire to outperform their peers. Furthermore, although such employees might demonstrate creativity, it is essential to recognize that certain studies have associated creativity with deviance (Ng and Yam, 2019). This raises the possibility that the creativity exhibited by narcissistic employees could be fundamentally deviant in nature. Consequently, we advocate for continued research into the management of narcissistic employees, with a particular focus on assessing their job performance and examining how their behaviors, including creativity, align with organizational objectives.

Conclusion

Based on expectancy theory, this study advances the understanding of how narcissistic employees can be motivated by managerial practices to engage in diverse information searches, which in turn enhances radical and incremental creativity. We encourage future research that explores how to guide and motivate narcissistic employees to focus more on others, thereby benefiting both organizations and themselves.

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Table 1*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Study Variables*

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Employee gender	0.36	0.48	—										
2. Employee age	35.53	8.57	-0.07	—									
3. Employee education	0.50	0.50	0.24**	-0.25**	—								
4. Employee organizational tenure	9.64	8.91	-0.06	0.75**	-0.31**	—							
5. Dyadic tenure	4.32	4.98	-0.09*	0.34**	-0.24**	0.48**	—						
6. Narcissism	9.93	3.40	-0.04	0.16**	-0.18**	0.16**	0.10	(0.74)					
7. Diverse information searching	3.60	0.66	-0.14**	0.00	-0.10	0.00	0.05	-0.08	(0.86)				
8. Radical creativity	4.20	1.05	0.00	0.09	-0.06	0.03	0.06	0.06	0.17**	(0.78)			
9. Incremental creativity	4.12	1.07	-0.02	0.00	0.12*	-0.11*	-0.07	-0.03	0.14*	0.69**	(0.78)		
10. Empowering leadership	5.13	0.85	-0.01	-0.13**	0.13**	-0.13**	-0.02	-0.18**	0.24**	0.03	0.05	(0.91)	
11. Promotions based on relative performance	4.62	1.41	0.02	-0.12*	0.09	-0.11*	-0.05	0.01	0.02	0.15**	0.06	0.03	—

Notes. N = 88, n = 462. Gender (0 = male, 1 = female) and education (0 = below college education, 1 = college education or above) are categorical variables. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Table 2*Results of Multilevel Path Analyses (Three-way Interaction)*

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables					
	Diverse information searching		Radical Creativity		Incremental Creativity	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
<i>Level-1 variable</i>						
Employee gender	-0.17	0.12	0.08	0.17	-0.16	0.14
Employee age	0.001	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Employee education	-0.20	0.14	0.22	0.13	0.24	0.14
Employee organizational tenure	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Dyadic tenure	0.02	0.01	0.002	0.02	-0.01	0.01
Narcissism	-0.03	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.004	0.02
Empowering leadership (EL)	0.22***	0.07	-0.01	0.05	-0.09	0.06
Diverse information searching			0.26**	0.10	0.29**	0.10
<i>Level-2 variable</i>						
Promotions based on relative performance (PBRP)	0.02	0.03	0.10	0.07	0.05	0.07
<i>Interaction Term</i>						
Narcissism × EL	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.002	0.04
Narcissism × PBRP	0.02	0.01	-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.01
EL × PBRP	-0.02	0.05	-0.01	0.04	-0.06	0.05
Narcissism × EL × PBRP	0.05*	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.02

Notes. N = 88, n = 462. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. * $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Table 3*Simple Slopes and Difference Tests*

Slope and Difference	Indirect Effect (Narcissism→Diverse information searching→Dependent Variable [DV])			
	(DV: Radical Creativity)		(DV: Incremental Creativity)	
	<i>B</i>	95% CI	<i>B</i>	95% CI
<i>Effects:</i>				
Condition 1: High EL, High PBRP	0.02	[0.001, 0.061]	0.03	[0.002, 0.063]
Condition 2: High EL, Low PBRP	-0.02	[-0.060, -0.001]	-0.03	[-0.065, -0.002]
Condition 3: Low EL, High PBRP	-0.02	[-0.057, -0.0001]	-0.03	[-0.061, -0.001]
Condition 4: Low EL, Low PBRP	-0.01	[-0.036, 0.014]	-0.01	[-0.039, 0.016]
<i>Effect Differences</i>				
Condition 1 and Condition 2	0.05	[0.008, 0.110]	0.06	[0.012, 0.117]
Condition 1 and Condition 3	0.05	[0.006, 0.110]	0.05	[0.009, 0.116]
Condition 1 and Condition 4	0.03	[0.001, 0.081]	0.04	[0.003, 0.085]
Condition 2 and Condition 3	-0.002	[-0.036, 0.032]	-0.002	[-0.040, 0.034]
Condition 2 and Condition 4	-0.02	[-0.064, 0.020]	-0.02	[-0.069, 0.023]
Condition 3 and Condition 4	-0.01	[-0.058, 0.019]	-0.02	[-0.063, 0.022]

Notes. EL = Empowering leadership; PBRP = Promotions based on relative performance.

Figure 1

Theoretical Model.

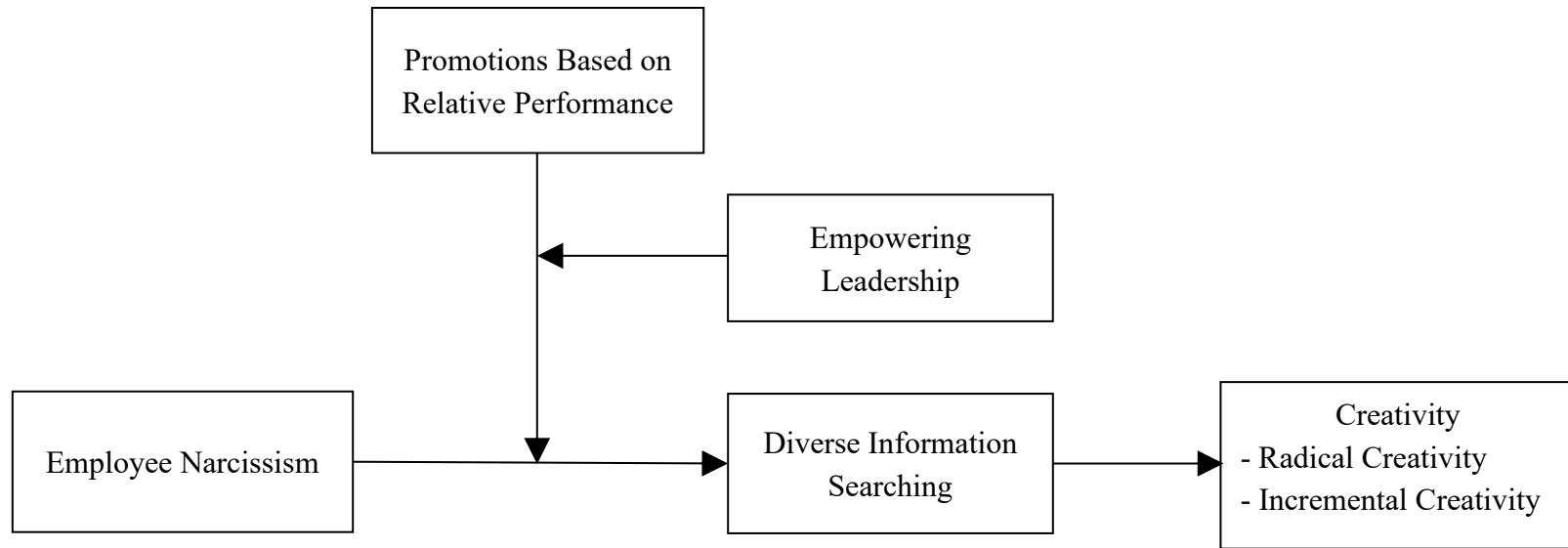


Figure 2

Three-way Interaction among Narcissism, Promotions Based on Relative Performance, and Empowering Leadership in Predicting Employees' Diverse Information Searching.

