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Posted Date: 11 February 2026

doi: 10.20944/preprints202602.0900.v1

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Article

Charisma and Conscience: Narcissistic Leaders' Use of Ethical Language to Justify Control

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Abstract

The article explains the narcissism leadership paradox in the existing organizations in relation to the rhetoric of ethics used strategically to legitimize the use of control. The loss of trust in leaders and in employees are both practiced in the sense that leaders manifest the disjunction between organizational discourses and reality by instantiating values in superficial ways in what they say and in real ways in what they do. The study relies on three guiding questions: (1) How do narcissistic leaders legitimize themselves by thinking that they are right in the moral sense? (2) What are a few of the stressors related to employees where ethics and practice collide? (3) Does dissonance cause organizational cynicism? Semi-structured interviews with 24 employees working in Higher Education Institutes were used to collect qualitative data to answer the following questions: The similar patterns and their comparison across cases were determined by coding and performing thematic analysis in computer through excel. The outcomes show 3 broad themes. First, the Virtue Costume demonstrates that both virtue signaling and moral language are being offered to fulfill personal interest and acquire power. Second, Branding the Self as the Company causes us to concentrate on how egoistic leaders project their own image as the identity and values of the company. Third, the Contagion of Cynicism explains how employees who become disillusioned, cynical and detached respond when they feel hypocrisy in the words and actions of their leaders. The paper associate's impression management and moral justification of narcissist leaders with falling trust and calls on authentic leadership and open cultural supervision to restrain cynicism and provide theoretical and practical organizational knowledge. This study's implications align with Alowais and Suliman (2025), who demonstrated how Leader Dark Triad (LDT) traits can cascade into Employee Dark Triad (EDT) behaviors. By extending this logic, our findings show how narcissistic leaders' ethical rhetoric similarly shapes organizational climates, reinforcing manipulative dynamics.

Keywords: narcissistic leadership; ethical rhetoric; employee cynicism; impression management; trust in the organization

1. Introduction

This paper builds directly on the work of Alowais and Suliman (2025), who revealed the powerful influence of Leader Dark Triad (LDT) traits on Employee Dark Triad (EDT) behaviors within higher education institutions (HEIs). Their findings demonstrated how toxic leadership not only corrupts organizational ethics but also cascades downward, shaping employee conduct and culture. Expanding this line of inquiry, the present study focuses specifically on narcissism and the rhetorical use of ethics by leaders in HEIs. By interrogating how narcissistic leaders deploy moral language to justify control, this study aims to expose hidden mechanisms of manipulation, advance theoretical understanding of the LDT in academic contexts, and contribute to practical strategies for fostering authentic leadership in higher education.

1.1. Background

Within the past 10-20 years, the degree of trust that leaders have shown to the population is at all-time lows, and the degree of distrust that the employees and other stakeholders have of the leadership authenticity is on the rise (Nyquist, 2024). In the meantime, institutions have embraced the ethics, sustainability and values-based purpose language as an identity and branding tool (Ibn-Mohammed et al., 2024). The leaders have now learned the language of integrity, corporate social responsibility and stakeholder capitalism in a way that no longer makes them appear like decision-makers but rather moral guardians of their organizations. A paradox, however, lurks beneath this moralized rhetoric; the truth behind this moralized rhetoric that most of the employees subscribe to is that there appears to be no connection between the moral values that leaders preach, and the behaviors that they observe in organizational practice (Zettna et al., 2025).

The paradox has taken a very keen twist particularly when it comes to cases of leaders with narcissistic traits. Narcissistic leaders are charismatic and authoritative, even though their leadership model is associated with personal interests, manipulations, and lack of concern about the general good (Braun, Sleebos & Wisse, 2025). When such leaders apply ethical rhetoric, they do not amount to a values-based leadership, but to a superior form of impression management. The self-serving choices are legitimized, and power is consolidated using ethical language instead of behavior. This paper seeks to better understand how this paradox functions by studying through the prism of employees who, most often, get exposed to the consequences of such leadership by living experiences that are likely to make the consequences more real to them than any other external message or leader self-reports.

1.2. Problem Statement and Significance

The main problem, and hence the subject of this research, is the growing gap between rhetoric and the working reality of leaders, and, specifically, the application of rhetoric of ethics as a convenient to practice narcissistic rules. Although trust, involvement, and reduced wrongdoing are universal attributes of ethical leadership (Ukeni, 2024), this paper holds that the positive outcomes would not be achieved unless ethics is exercised with personal gain in view. When the employees are unable to reconcile the realities of ordinary life with those values they are purported to hold, they feel confused, disappointed and eventually cynical (Tufflenell, 2025).

This issue functions on more than just one level. The result of such an organizational disconnection between rhetoric and reality is the loss of trust, culture, and performance (Verhey, 2024). Moral stress and disengagement at the individual level exist when the workers perceive moral hypocrisy among the leaders (Yalçın & Aktaş, 2024). Lastly, institutional trust is ruined by organizational hypocrisy on the socialization level, thus strengthening cynicism not only of companies, but also of leadership as a practice in general.

1.3. Research Gap and Justification

Although a large body of literature has been published about narcissistic leadership, it has been more satisfied with the features of leaders, the effects of their behavior, and performance indicators (Khorram-Manesh, Goniewicz, & Burkle 2024). Similarly, ethical leadership has been studied to find out the level where followers of the values-driven leaders can be influenced by them and mold their behavior (Nkan et al., 2025). Minor attention has been paid, however, to how ethical speech itself can be manipulated. Ethical rhetoric is typically assumed to be either authentic or ineffective, and seldom do we find research examining the application of narcissistic leaders of ethical rhetoric in an instrumented manner.

Further, the existing literature is skewed towards leader-center, self-reported, survey or case-based approaches that predetermine the leader picture but not the employee one (Wang, Jin & Yoo, 2024). That leaves a cavernous hole: we know relatively little about how employees experience and respond to the disillusionment between the said values and the behaviors put in place. This paper

addresses this gap by preempting the voices of employees and looking at how they understand the ethical paradox.

Finally, there is the subject of impression management and virtue signaling in the political and public realm (Burnett, 2025), yet virtually nothing is understood about how it works within the organization. This study has made a new contribution into the body of literature in leadership, organizational psychology and business ethics by exploring how narcissist leaders can strategically apply ethical language in business.

1.4. Research Questions and Objectives

This research will be based on three research questions: (1) What is the way that narcissistic leaders present their decisions as ethical decisions in the framework of ethical language? (2) What are some of the tensions that employees encounter where they feel there is a disconnect between ethical messages and unethical behavior? (3) Does this paradox help to propagate cynicism in the organizational culture? To respond to these questions, the study aims to acquire the following objectives: (1) To examine the rhetoric devices that narcissistic leaders employ to make legitimate decisions. (2) To investigate the experiences of dissonance, moral stress, and resistance that employees experience when there is a difference in values and behaviors. (3) To analyze the cultural implications of ethical rhetoric as a manipulation tool, especially the emergence of cynicism.

2. Literature Review

This section provides the theoretical and empirical foundations for this study. It reviews literature on narcissistic leadership, ethical rhetoric, and organizational trust, sitting within wider debates on dark traits in higher education institutions. By linking these perspectives to the claims of Alowais and Suliman (2025) on the influence of leader dark traits, this chapter highlights the gaps that the current research addresses and connects directly to the broader aims of the thesis.

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

This study builds on the work of Alowais and Suliman (2025), who demonstrated how Leader Dark Triad (LDT) traits influence and reinforce employee behaviors in higher education institutions. By integrating narcissistic leadership theory and the ethics of change in leadership, this paper extends their insights by focusing specifically on narcissism's rhetorical use of ethics to legitimize control, thereby deepening the understanding of how dark leadership traits shape organizational culture and trust.

The type of leadership behaviors in organizational research has appropriated the clinically defined narcissistic personality disorder to describe the nature of the behaviors (Day et al., 2025). All these attributes find their reflection at workplaces in pride, bullying of subordinates, and excessive sensitivity to criticism (Liu et al., 2022.). Theorists prefer to describe clinical and organizational narcissism and add that hierarchies and power systems in business corporations support organizational narcissism.

The psychoanalytic model invented by Sarfarazi (2022) has the following characteristics: grandiosity and insensitivity, with the help of which, it is possible to establish the image of charisma and vision and offer a manipulative and theatrically cold environment. The rest intend to strengthen the control: withhold the information, scapegoat the subordinate, etc. (Choi and Phan, 2022). It is important to note that Brownell (2022) differentiates between constructive and destructive narcissists that utilize their ambition and charisma to serve the organization or leverage their influence, suppress criticism and skewed morals to satisfy their ego needs.

Narcissistic leadership is, therefore, hard to categorize. Leaders appear to be visionary and end up destroying culture because they are destructive. Leadership narcissism is a cognitive problem and a challenge that is culturally, and employee oriented that considers the fact that narcissist leaders can

create an impact with charismatic and impression, silence defiance as Williams (2025) suggests gaining power.

According to Faherty and Clinton (2025), ethical leadership is defined by creating a balance between the moral person and the moral manager. In this model though it assumes that authenticity accompanies that behavior which in practice is always found false. Ethical rhetoric is a good performance strategy that leaders can employ to enhance legitimacy and compliance, but not moral conviction. Here we have a contradiction, those who do it out of ethical motives, and those who apply ethics to an instrumental goal, i.e., reputation or power.

Another reason ethical conduct gives credit to future wrongdoing is the moral licensing theory (Griep, Germeys & Kraak, 2021). Narcissistic leaders jump at this chance and use the functions and activities of philanthropy or CSRs as a way of escaping criticism and, in the process, further entrench their selfish interests. This is maximized by ethical fading (Luchkowec, 2023), which repackages a decision in terms of profitability and efficiency and considers morality to be nonexistent. In these situations, rhetorical ethicality justifies dubious activities and an environment within which manipulation through narcissism thrives.

Finally, the example of ethical leadership shows the conflict between motive and rhetoric. Because it can create trust it is also able to cover up exploitation. The mobilization of moral discourse by narcissist leaders which institutionalizes power, perpetuates organizational legitimacy and conceals the degrading quality of the ethical culture needs further research.

2.2. *The Rhetoric of Virtue*

The rhetoric of virtue highlights how ethical language can be strategically employed to project credibility and legitimacy, even when leaders' actions contradict their words. Alowais and Suliman (2025) showed in higher education institutions that Leader Dark Triad (LDT) traits, particularly narcissism, often exploit such rhetorical tools to influence Employee Dark Triad (EDT) behaviors. This demonstrates that the moral discourse used by leaders is less about genuine virtue and more about impression management, reinforcing the contagion of unethical conduct across organizational hierarchies.

The virtue costume is a phrase describing the way self-interest is clothed in the language of virtue by leaders. Impression management theory and particularly the dramaturgical approach of Li et al. (2021) postulates that leaders manipulate their roles in such a way to make other people think of them in a particular manner. The narcissistic leaders use this to masquerade as the morally upright leader with the outward look of integrity but with ulterior motives.

Moral grandstanding is one of them; Vijay and Nair (2022) refer to it as the moral talk employed to prove oneself as superior and even gain social status. This has also been shown in organizations whereby decisions, which are mostly personal and political in nature, are packaged by leaders in terms of ethics to show virtue.

Corporate social responsibility campaigns are also a masquerade. According to the theory of legitimacy (Crossley, Elmagrhi & Ntim, 2021), when organizations attempt to act in a manner that is congruent to the actions of the society, they are attempting to achieve legitimacy. Through the veil of CSR, narcissistic leaders mask all types of exploitative operations by highlighting the presence of charitable activities or sustainability initiatives.

Language manipulation also helps to reinforce the virtue costume. Right sizing (instead of mass layoffs), or the rebranding of practices that are hurtful as necessary sacrifices help leaders make toxic choices ethical (Pan, 2025). Narcissistic leaders can cover the immoral facade by wording it in such a manner that it looks like they are ethical leaders when they are not.

Individual character and company brand are confounded in narcissistic leadership about morality. Even though the theory of personal branding is built upon sincerity and principles (Venciute, April Yue & Thelen, 2024), the narcissist leaders use branding with self-interest in mind. They ensure that their own narrative is not tied to an organizational value by sitting themselves as the moral compass of the company. This generates conformity at the cost of nonconformity since

disobeying the leader is disobeying the organization. Stakeholder or values-oriented leadership as the basis of decision-making is another means of legitimizing authority through concealing self-serving interests. Ethical rhetoric is thus a method of showing power, that centralizes the power and makes the image of the leader identical to the image of the company, which is harmful to the legitimate organizational identity.

2.3. *Experience and Impact on the Organization by the Employees*

Employee experiences of leadership are not passive but shape organizational culture and performance. Alowais and Suliman (2025) revealed that when leaders exhibit Dark Triad traits, employees mirror or adapt to these behaviors, reinforcing toxic dynamics in higher education institutions. This highlights how leader influence extends beyond individual relationships to systemic organizational impact, where ethical erosion translates into diminished trust, engagement, and long-term effectiveness.

A better way to address the cognitive dissonance theory will be the one that Chatterjee et al. (2023) propose when they seek to know how employees address dissonance between the ethical speech and the real behavior of leaders. Leaders cause psychological discomforts in the employees when they practice what is viewed as unethical in the presence of the employees. The incongruity is dissonant and as such they have to justify the inconsistency, or dissociate, or fight back.

Moral stress is now added to this tension. Morley, Bradbury-Jones and Ives (2022) define moral distress as the knowledge of what the right thing to do (ethically) is that cannot be accomplished due to organizational forces. Others under narcissistic leadership know that ethical communication is hypocritical, but they lack avenue to raise their voice to authority and that may cause stress and disillusionment and burnout.

The second factor that generates workforce dissonance is broken psychological contract. The psychological contracts are informal agreements between workers and employers like being fair, treating them with respect and morality. Employees of bosses who do quite the reverse of what they so much prattle about will feel cheated in the deal and be less pious and enthusiastic.

It is also a threatened identity dissonance. As soon as the organizational values are identified as being fronted, the employees whose identity aligns with the values which are being falsely fronted are put at risk. Such conflicts not only destroy the individual integrity and sense of belonging to the organization, but also cause withdrawal, cynicism or even turnover (Atalay, Aydemir & Acuner, 2022).

When the employee loses the belief of organizational leadership values that encompass the attitudes of betraying, getting angry, or ridiculing a person or being uninterested, cynicism is realized in organizations (İnal, 2023). That is accelerated in narcissistic leadership through continuous breaches of moral demands. The reason is that social contagion is proliferating dissent (Homan, 2024) and subcultures of skepticism and resistance. This lack of trust is evident when integrity, which is core in the model of trust developed, seems to be disrespected and results in dissatisfaction, absenteeism and turnover. The workers adjust through moral disengagement (Hindriks, 2015) without worrying about their feelings or having some reason behind certain immoral acts. Lastly, when ethics are abused, culture, performance and sustainability are killed by the cynicism loop.

2.4. *Research Gaps & Synthesis*

Despite all that has been written about narcissistic and ethical leadership there are several significant gaps. First, most of the studies are dedicated to narcissism at the personal but not at the systems level. Despite the situation that research has already determined the psychological traits of grandiosity, abuse, and indifference by the narcissistic leaders (di Giacomo et al., 2023), little literature explains how it becomes the long-term organizational culture of cynicism. The connection between the features of narcissistic leadership and group performance therefore requires to be examined further.

Second, the views of the employees are not included, regardless of the broad scope of the literature on leadership rhetoric and impression management. Little is known about how employees perceive, resist or internalize manipulative ethical language, yet the evidence suggests that ethical dissonance is a potent driver of trust, motivation and engagement (Faherty & Clinton, 2025).

Third, there exists a methodological limitation. Most of the literature is founded on cross-sectional designs that provide snapshots of but not the cumulative effects of repeated moral manipulation in the formation of long-term cynicism. Longitudinal research is needed to understand how the disillusionment is slowly altering the culture of the organization (Liu, Wang & Luo, 2025).

Finally, there remains an integration gap in theory. This is mostly clinical psychology of narcissism, and the study of organizational cynicism is based on behaviors and cultural theories (Rawal, 2024). The narrowing of the gaps could offer further insights into how the moral rhetoric of leaders in correlation to employee responses to them-resistance or silence-contributes to cultural outcomes in the long-term. According to the theoretical paradigm, narcissistic leadership corrupts the integrity of the organization through manipulation of ethical rhetoric to create employee dissonance and cultural cynicism. The first is the way leaders have used grandiosity and moralized language to justify power a phenomenon which has been called Narcissistic Leadership to Rhetoric of Virtue. It is during virtue signaling and impression management that they build a moral image that hides self-interest. This can build credibility in the short term, but it will not take long before workers begin to notice discrepancies between words and actions and experience cognitive dissonance, moral stress, and a sense of violation of psychological contract.

Otherwise, such tensions become contagious, transmitting cynicism, normalized disillusionment, and a deficit of trust, interest, and reputation. Organizational culture is weak, performance is poor and the credibility of the institution is weak as well. Culture mediates such forces: culture may not be easily manipulated in high-integrity environments, but it may be in hierarchical cultures. Further mediation of outcomes in the face of increasing cynicism is carried through employee resilience, and ethical voice.

3. Methodology

A qualitative methodology was particularly suitable for this study because it allowed for deep exploration of lived experiences and hidden dynamics that could not be fully captured through numbers. Alowais and Suliman (2025) emphasized that Dark Triad influences in HEIs required interpretive, narrative-based methods to reveal manipulation, ethical erosion, and employee adaptation. Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis thus provided the depth and flexibility needed to uncover the subtleties of narcissistic rhetoric and its organizational consequences.

3.1. Research Philosophy and Approach

This paper applied an interpretive paradigm to understand processes by which employees interpreted the ethically declared and manipulative acting leaders (Lenart Gansiniec, Lenart-Gansiniec, & Sukowski, 2025). It was based on social constructionism and supposed that organizations' realities were co-constructed not only through discourse and contacts, but also through a relatively shared set of meanings (Burr, 2024). Methodologically, it was an inductive study, i.e., the patterns were built upon the data in contrast to data being analyzed to prove hypotheses created in earlier stages of the research. Accordingly, it generated a theory of the cultural influence of narcissistic leadership rhetoric. To illustrate the subtle psychological and cultural aspects of employees' experiences that were not quantifiable, the qualitative method was selected.

3.2. Research Design

The phenomenological design formed the basis of the study and was applied to describe and meaningfully interpret lived experiences (Lindseth & Norberg, 2022). The design was appropriate as the subjective experiences of employees regarding leadership paradox were central to the research

questions. Although phenomenology was inherently qualitative, it used a cross-sectional design to capture an organizational image of dynamic flows in various workplaces at a specific point in time. The research also employed some components of a case study to gain depth and compare trends across organizations and industries.

Coding and interpretation were guided by the six-phase thematic analysis method of Braun and Clarke (2023). This included familiarization, preliminary coding, theme searching, reviewing, defining and labelling themes, and creating final narratives. The framework provided a systematic approach to the data and offered flexibility to accommodate emergent insights.

3.3. Sampling Strategy

To ensure that insights were relevant and rich, they were filtered according to specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria required that workers must have had at least two years of experience within their current organization to have sufficient exposure to leadership dynamics. They also must have been directly or indirectly connected with senior leadership and have felt the disengagement between values discussed and leadership practices portrayed. The exclusion criteria eliminated employees who were subjected to disciplinary action or those below the age of 18.

The sample consisted of purposive sampling of relevant (in terms of experience) individuals (Magnone & Yezierski, 2024). This was supplemented with snowball sampling that utilized participants' networks to locate other individuals who had similar experiences. To guarantee maximum variation in the sample population—industries, size, and organizational positions—maximum variation sampling was applied.

The sample consisted of approximately 24 people across eight organizations, as it met the qualitative research threshold of thematic saturation (Naeem et al., 2024). This scale was adequate to add depth and breadth and allowed comparison of insights without sacrificing the richness of phenomenological descriptions.

3.4. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used as the method of data collection because they were both flexible and consistent. An interview guide as a four-category framework was developed based on the following areas: (1) patterns of leadership communication, (2) personal experience of value-behaviour gaps, (3) organizational culture perceptions, and (4) individual coping strategies. Open-ended questions encouraged expansion without losing focus on the research objectives. The design also allowed participants to narrate fine-grained experiences and enabled the researcher to probe emergent themes (Xiao et al., 2024).

Interviews lasted 20–30 minutes and were conducted online via secure platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. They were audio-recorded, with participants' consent, to ensure accuracy. Anonymous coding was used to ensure confidentiality, and all data were stored in coded files. The online format minimized logistical challenges and enabled greater geographic participation.

3.5. Data Analysis

To preserve detail, verbatim transcription of interviews took place within 48 hours of collection. Coding was done in three phases, including (1) open coding, where text was broken down into concepts; (2) axial coding, where the same concepts were grouped into categories; and (3) selective coding, where the most relevant categories were chosen to answer the research questions (Aguas, 2022).

To complement Alowais and Suliman (2025), this study integrated participants' direct quotes within the thematic analysis while also presenting standalone quotations before each theme to preserve participants' authentic voices. Importantly, the analysis was conducted manually, as recommended by Alowais and Suliman, to allow deeper engagement with the data and expose

subtle, often hidden intentions of actors in HEIs. This dual strategy enhanced interpretive rigor and strengthened the study's trustworthiness through credibility, dependability, and transparency.

3.6. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore how leaders used ethical rhetoric and how employees experienced gaps between stated values and actual behavior. The guide was organized into five sections to ensure depth, flexibility, and consistency across all interviews. It allowed participants to narrate their experiences freely while also enabling the researcher to probe emerging themes.

- Section A (Background & Context) captured participants' roles, tenure, and exposure to leadership communication.
- Section B (Leadership Communication Patterns) explored how leaders communicated values and ethics, and whether participants perceived these messages as genuine or strategic.
- Section C (Value–Behaviour Gaps) examined contradictions between leaders' rhetoric and behavior, and how these inconsistencies affected employees emotionally and socially.
- Section D (Organizational Culture & Employee Experience) investigated broader cultural reactions, including trust, morale, and patterns of silence or voice.
- Section E (Coping Mechanisms and Outcomes) focused on how employees responded to perceived hypocrisy and how these contradictions influenced long-term motivation, trust, and workplace engagement.

At the end of each interview, participants were invited to add any additional reflections on leadership authenticity, narcissistic behaviour, or organizational outcomes. This concluding prompt helped capture spontaneous or unstructured insights that were not directly elicited by previous questions.

Opening Remark: Thank you for participating. This study explores how leaders use ethical rhetoric and how employees experience gaps between stated values and actual behavior. Your reflections will remain confidential and voluntary. Are you comfortable to begin sharing your experiences?

Section A: Background & Context

1. Can you briefly describe your role and responsibilities in the organization?
2. How long have you been with this organization, and how has leadership communication evolved during this time?
3. What organizational values are most frequently emphasized by leadership?

Section B: Leadership Communication Patterns

1. How do leaders typically communicate organizational values and ethics (e.g., policies, speeches, campaigns)?
2. Do you feel their communication is clear, consistent, and genuine? Why or why not?
3. In your view, do leaders use ethical language more for inspiration or for control?
4. How often do you feel leaders' ethical messages align with organizational decision-making (e.g., promotions, resource allocation)?
5. Can you recall a moment when leadership's communication positively influenced your motivation or trust?

Section C: Value–Behaviour Gaps

1. Have you witnessed leaders behaving in ways that contradict the values they promote?
2. If yes, what specific examples stand out to you?
3. How did such contradictions make you feel as an employee?
4. Do employees openly discuss these contradictions, or are they ignored/hidden?
5. How frequent do you think such inconsistencies are within your organization?

Section D: Organizational Culture & Employee Experience

1. How would you describe the current organizational culture (e.g., supportive, distrustful, competitive, collaborative)?
2. How do employees generally react when leadership actions don't match their words?
3. Have you observed changes in trust levels or morale because of leadership inconsistencies?
4. To what extent do you feel the organization encourages honesty and voice when employees notice gaps between values and actions?

Section E: Coping Mechanisms and Outcomes

1. How do you personally cope when you experience contradictions between leaders' rhetoric and behaviour
2. What long-term effects do you believe these contradictions have on employee motivation, trust, or performance?
3. In your opinion, how does leadership authenticity (or lack thereof) shape the organization's overall success and reputation?

Closing Remark: Thank you for openly sharing your views on leadership rhetoric and its impact on workplace trust and culture. Your contributions are invaluable. Before closing, is there anything further you wish to add about leadership authenticity or organizational outcomes?

These questions were intentionally drafted to elicit rich, reflective, and psychologically revealing accounts of how employees made sense of ethical rhetoric and leadership behavior. Because narcissistic leadership operates through subtle impression-management, moral language, and symbolic control, direct questions alone would not have captured the underlying dynamics. The structure of the guide that moved from descriptive to interpretive to reflective prompts was necessary to allow participants to first anchor their experiences in concrete events, then articulate perceived contradictions, and finally evaluate their emotional and organizational impact. This sequencing ensured that participants were not led toward predefined assumptions and instead constructed their own narratives, consistent with phenomenological rigor. Furthermore, the open-ended format allowed the researcher to uncover hidden meanings, unintended consequences, and sensitive reflections that are often suppressed in hierarchical HEI environments. In this way, the interview guide was purposefully designed to surface the moral dissonance, rhetorical manipulation, and cynicism contagion that lie at the core of the narcissistic leadership paradox.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The research complied fully with institutional ethical standards and received approval through the low-risk self-assessment process of the British University in Dubai (BUiD) Ethics Committee. This study formed part of the researcher's ongoing PhD project. All participants provided informed consent and were fully briefed on the aims of the study, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. The use of pseudonyms (rather than participant names) guaranteed anonymity, and organizations were disguised. The data were kept in encrypted files accessible only to the researcher. Once recordings were transcribed, the tapes were destroyed, and the transcripts were stored securely. Ethical protection was a necessary tool because the critique of leadership is a delicate matter that could expose participants to professional repercussions (Nasir, Khan, & Bai, 2024).

4. Finding and Results

The chapter contains the results of the research based on 24 semi-structured interviews coded and thematically analyzed in Excel. The data disclosed three dominant themes which were (1) The Virtue Costume Strategic Moral Positioning, (2) Branding the Self as the Company Identity Fusion, and (3) Cultural Deterioration Cynicism Contagion. All themes are explicated, with direct quotations of participants, which are italicized to avoid any violation of authenticity (DeLaughter et al., 2021). Participant demographics and organizational contexts are profiled in the beginning of the chapter.

4.1. Demographics of Participants

The research is based on interviews conducted with 24 participants who hold various positions in different industries such as finance, retail, healthcare and technology. The participants were between 25 and 58 years of age with the median being 38. Tenure was quite heterogeneous: six had less than three years of experience in their respective organizations, and eight had over ten years, which offers fresh and experienced insights. The distribution at the organizational level was equal: nine participants were working in managerial or supervisory roles, eleven were professionals of the middle level, and four were frontline workers (Scott, 2024).

The organizations represented were of various sizes and structures. Seven respondents were employed at large private universities that employed more than 2500 employees, ten were employed in medium-sized companies (500-2,000 employees) and seven were employed in small HEIs of less than 300 employees. The leadership models were hierarchical corporate landscapes and flatter, and more nimble organizations, but all of them reported a strong leader figure who influenced ethical discussion.

The response rates were high and all 24 attended the sessions to the end. The quality of data was high: transcripts were characterized by high involvement, and participants were often able to provide in-depth examples and rarely answered a question with a single word. The consistency of recurrent themes including conflicts between declared values and practices supported the credibility of the dataset to be analyzed thematically.

4.2. Theme 1: “The Virtue Costume” Strategic Moral Positioning

The findings around *The Virtue Costume* strongly advance Narcissistic Leadership Theory, showing how leaders cloak self-interest in moral narratives to secure authority and admiration. By demonstrating that ethical rhetoric functions as impression management rather than genuine value, the study highlights the manipulative core of narcissistic leadership (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). At the same time, the results connect to the Ethics of Change in Leadership, revealing that superficial invocations of integrity and fairness undermine the very conditions for authentic change, replacing reform with staged virtue. This aligns with Alowais & Suliman (2025), who show how Leader Dark Triad traits are reflected downward into employee culture; here, narcissistic leaders project façades that employees must decode, often at the expense of trust and morale. Together, these insights underscore that ethical language, when used as costume, does not foster transformation but deepens cynicism and erodes organizational conscience.

4.2.1. Ethical Language as Performance

“Every town hall starts with words like honesty and fairness, but by the end of the week those words mean nothing in practice.” (P03)

“The language of values is everywhere emails, posters, speeches. But for us inside, it feels like a show staged for outsiders.” (P05)

Ethics comes up when they want us to sacrifice, not when leadership makes choices about their own perks.” (P08)

“They frame every decision as being about ‘integrity,’ but it’s really about maintaining their image in front of stakeholders.” (P10)

“Sometimes I feel like the code of ethics is just a marketing tool. It’s quoted more in press releases than in real meetings.” (P11)

“When leaders speak about values, it sounds polished, rehearsed. But in practice, I see fear-driven decisions that contradict those same values.” (P13)

“We hear a lot about sustainability, but when budgets are tight, sustainability is the first thing to disappear.” (P14)

“They don’t lie outright, but they act as if the language of ethics is a kind of costume they wear when cameras are on.” (P16)

Participants consistently described how leaders deployed moral language as a performance tool rather than as a genuine value system. Leaders frequently spoke of integrity, sustainability, or fairness in official communications, yet these claims rarely aligned with their private decision-making. As one participant explained, *“Our CEO always talks about ‘doing the right thing,’ but the moment profits are threatened, that whole line disappears. It’s like he wears a mask that slips the second money is on the line”* (P07).

Employees highlighted the selective application of ethical principles. For example, decisions that boosted reputation were celebrated as value-driven, while those that undermined employee well-being were justified as necessary compromises. Another participant reflected, *“They tell us we’re a family, then cut bonuses overnight. Families don’t do that”* (P12).

What became evident was that moral discourse functioned as a stage performance. Public announcements and external branding emphasized virtue, but internal practices revealed self-interest and expediency (Ahmad, Ahmad & Siddique, 2024). This pattern created growing disillusionment among employees, who felt compelled to reconcile public virtue signaling with privately contradictory decisions.

4.2.2. Moral Justification Mechanisms

“They always found a nicer word for it cuts became ‘optimizations,’ layoffs became ‘realignments.’ It felt dishonest.” (P02)

“We were told losing benefits was an ‘empowerment initiative.’ Honestly, it just insulted our intelligence.” (P06)

“When the company pulled out of a local project, they said it was to ‘protect our long-term vision.’ For us, it just meant no jobs.” (P09)

“Comparisons were their favourite trick they’d say, ‘at least we’re not shutting down like others.’ That doesn’t make my pay cut feel better.” (P12)

“Every unpopular move was framed as someone else’s fault regulators, clients, shareholders. Leaders never owned their decisions.” (P14)

“It’s hard to argue back when the framing makes you feel guilty, like you should be thankful for the scraps left behind.” (P18)

“We all knew the board had the final say, but they made it sound like their hands were tied. It was a convenient excuse.” (P20)

“The language was always polished, but the reality was brutal. It forced us to repeat narratives we didn’t even believe.” (P22)

Alongside performance, participants observed that leaders actively rationalized ethically questionable choices through rhetorical devices. Euphemistic labeling was a common mechanism. As one respondent recalled, *“We weren’t firing people, we were ‘rightsizing.’ It sounded neat and clean, but it was devastating in reality”* (P03).

Leaders also drew advantageous comparisons to justify harm. A participant in the manufacturing sector described management’s defense of outsourcing: *“They told us it was better than shutting the whole plant. It felt like a guilt trip, like we should be grateful for losing only half the jobs”* (P15).

Displacement of responsibility was another recurring justification. Leaders frequently attributed unpopular decisions to external stakeholders, as if their hands were tied. *“Every tough call was blamed on shareholders or regulators. It gave the impression they were powerless, but everyone knew they weren’t”* (P21).

Such mechanisms not only allowed leaders to preserve their image but also placed employees in difficult positions, where they were expected to echo justifications, they did not believe. This intensified feelings of complicity and deepened workplace cynicism (Martinez, 2025).

4.3. Theme 2: “Branding the Self as the Company”, Identity Fusion

The theme of *Branding the Self as the Company* advances Narcissistic Leadership Theory by illustrating how narcissistic leaders fuse their personal identity with that of the organization, making the company’s mission a projection of their ego and image. This identity fusion magnifies the leader’s influence while stifling alternative perspectives, showing that narcissism in leadership extends beyond control to the monopolization of organizational identity. From the perspective of the Ethics of Change in Leadership, such fusion undermines collective ethics and silences plural voices, replacing shared values with a leader’s personal ambitions. These findings reinforce Alowais & Suliman (2025), who highlight how Dark Triad dynamics cascade through higher education institutions; in this case, narcissistic leaders imprint their self-concept on the institution, compelling employees to conform to the leader’s brand rather than organizational goals. Thus, identity fusion transforms ethical language into an instrument of domination, blocking genuine reform and exacerbating organizational cynicism.

4.3.1. Personal-Organizational Values Conflation

“Every slogan on the wall was just his words. It wasn’t about us; it was about him.” (P02)

“When the company talks about ‘innovation,’ it’s really just the CEO’s pet idea being recycled.” (P05)

“Awards were chosen not for what they meant to the company, but for how they looked on his personal résumé.” (P07)

“It felt like we were employees of his image, not of an institution with its own culture.” (P10)

“Decisions weren’t made through consultation. They were extensions of the CEO’s personality.” (P13)

“I sometimes joked we should rename the company after him, because that’s how it operated.” (P16)

“Any pushback was treated like disloyalty. It wasn’t about business performance; it was about echoing his worldview.” (P19)

“The organization became a mirror for his ego — and we all had to live inside that reflection.” (P22)

A striking pattern was the way narcissistic leaders merged their personal identity with the organizational mission. Employees felt the company’s stated values were fewer collective principles and more reflections of the leader’s persona. *“Our mission statement is basically our CEO’s autobiography, his values, his ambitions. It feels like we’re working for his personal brand, not for the company”* (P09).

Participants described how strategic goals often mirrored leader ego rather than organizational needs. Sponsorships, awards, and partnerships appeared designed to enhance leader visibility. One respondent observed, *“So many of our initiatives had nothing to do with business priorities. They were projects that got the CEO in the press”* (P18).

This identity fusion left little room for alternative viewpoints. Employees who questioned alignment between leader-driven values and organizational needs risked marginalization. As one participant explained, *“If you don’t echo the CEO’s philosophy, you’re labeled as not fitting in. It stifles creativity and diversity of thought”* (P18).

4.3.2. Marketing Ethics as Competitive Advantage

“Our sustainability report was a glossy brochure, but inside the office, the printer never stopped running.” (P02)

“Every investor meeting had a new ethical slogan. It was like changing costumes depending on the audience.” (P05)

“They loved saying we were ‘inclusive,’ but our leadership team was the same five people for a decade.” (P08)

“At conferences we were champions of fairness, but promotions inside the company told a different story.” (P10)

“We were told to repeat the company’s values in every presentation, but it felt like a script, not a belief.” (P13)

"The ethics narrative was a sales pitch. Customers bought it, but staff could see through it every day." (P14)

"When I challenged the gap between talk and practice, the response was: 'Don't ruin the brand.'" (P17)

"It wasn't about living the values — it was about selling them. That was the real business." (P22)

Externally, leaders leveraged ethical positioning as a competitive advantage. Companies branded themselves as pioneers of sustainability, fairness, or inclusivity. However, participants noted stark internal contradictions. *"We marketed ourselves as the 'most sustainable company in the sector,' but our own offices didn't even recycle. It was all optics"* (P06).

Internally, values functioned as tools of motivation and control. Employees were told they were "guardians of ethics," a label that initially inspired pride but later became coercive. *"At first, being called the 'guardians of ethics' felt meaningful. But soon it became emotional blackmail, if you questioned leadership, you weren't living the values"* (P20).

Ethical rhetoric was also tailored to stakeholders, adjusted to suit investors, regulators, or customers. While this enhanced reputation, employees quickly recognized the instrumental nature of such narratives. As one participant put it, *"It was ethics on demand. The message changed depending on who was listening, which made it feel hollow to us"* (P11).

These findings suggest that ethical branding, while outwardly successful, sowed distrust internally. Employees increasingly viewed such practices as manipulative rather than inspiring, undermining organizational cohesion.

4.4. Theme 3: "Cynicism Contagion" Cultural Deterioration

The theme of *Cynicism Contagion* extends Narcissistic Leadership Theory by showing how the hypocrisy and self-branding of narcissistic leaders trigger not only individual disillusionment but also collective cynicism that permeates organizational culture. This cultural deterioration illustrates how leadership rooted in self-interest erodes psychological safety, discourages innovation, and replaces trust with passive resistance. From the lens of the Ethics of Change in Leadership, the findings highlight that when ethical rhetoric is used as camouflage, the intended transformative power of ethics is inverted producing disengagement rather than commitment. The contagion effect emphasizes that ethical manipulation is not contained at the dyadic level but spreads through networks, normalizing sarcasm, withdrawal, and symbolic defiance. These insights reinforce Alowais & Suliman (2025), who demonstrate how Dark Triad leadership traits cascade downward into organizational behavior, and show that once cynicism becomes culturally embedded, reform requires systemic not individual but an intervention.

4.4.1. Trust Erosion Patterns

"In the beginning, I gave them the benefit of the doubt. Now I just assume they're saying whatever looks good." (P03)

"Every contradiction chips away at you. It's not one big betrayal; it's death by a thousand cuts." (P05)

"I went from raising ideas in meetings to sitting silent why bother when no one is honest?" (P07)

"Once trust is gone, every message sounds fake, no matter how sincere they try to make it." (P09)

"We used to volunteer for extra projects. Now people do the bare minimum just to protect themselves." (P12)

"It wasn't just disappointment; it was exhaustion always waiting for the gap between words and actions." (P16)

"I stopped investing in this place emotionally. I do my job, but my loyalty is gone." (P18)

"Trust doesn't break overnight. It unravels piece by piece until there's nothing left." (P21)

The combined impact of virtue signaling and identity fusion was a gradual but profound breakdown of trust. Employees described a three-stage process beginning with initial cognitive dissonance, progressing to skepticism, and culminating in disengagement. *"At first I thought I misread things. Then I saw the same contradictions again and again. Eventually, I just stopped caring"* (P11).

Behavioral indicators of erosion included declining participation in voluntary initiatives, reduced willingness to speak up, and guarded communication. One respondent captured this shift bluntly: *"When you don't trust leadership, you stop giving extra. Why put your heart in when they clearly don't?"* (P14).

This breakdown reflected not isolated incidents but systemic patterns. Leaders' repeated failure to align words with deeds created a culture where trust was no longer viable.

4.4.2. Development of Collective Cynicism

"Cynicism became the only safe language — we joked because we couldn't protest." (P04)

"At first it was whispers, then it was the norm: don't believe what they say, just watch what they do." (P06)

"Laughter in the lunchroom was our coping mechanism, but it carried bitterness underneath." (P08)

"When leadership is a show, the employees write their own script and it's mostly sarcasm." (P10)

"I stopped offering solutions. Why give ideas when you know they'll be ignored or claimed by someone else?" (P12)

"Dragging your feet became a kind of silent rebellion. We knew they noticed, but they couldn't call it insubordination." (P13)

"Newcomers quickly learn either laugh with us or risk being seen as naïve. The culture teaches cynicism fast." (P15)

"The longer you stay, the more your hope erodes. Survival means blending into the cynics' crowd." (P17)

Cynicism soon spreads to people and then to the culture of organizations. Opponent networks among employees turned into places where doubt was expressed and strengthened. *During lunch the humor was always on management ethics theatrics. It made us united together, however, in a bad sense* (P02).

Subcultures had developed in which sarcasm, passive resistance or symbolic defiance had become normalized. Others held back new ideas, others took a long time to obey the orders, and some even resisted through covert means. *"We never said no outright. We simply dragged our feet till they surrendered. Our silent response was to push back, that is,* (P19).

This cynicism was contagious over time, and it influenced the approach of new hires to their employment. *"Fresh recruits catch on fast. You either become one of the cynics or you appear naïve. No one wishes to be the foolish one:* (P19).

The procedures murder group work, castrate creativity and eviscerate the organizational culture (Kinn & Estrada, 2025). What started as dissonance with leadership rhetoric, turned into a state of mistrust and disengagement within culture.

4.5. Cross-Cutting Patterns and Connections.

"The language of values became just another costume. We all knew it was acting, not belief." (P03)

"In bigger firms, it felt like a full theatre production; in smaller ones, the same script was just played more quietly." (P05)

"Every department had its own spin finance blamed regulators, education paraded slogans. The game was the same." (P07)

"Young hires gave up faster. They saw through the mask on day one and disengaged immediately." (P09)

"For senior staff, it was different we went through the motions, but the fire was gone." (P11)

"Cynicism spread like smoke in a room. You couldn't avoid inhaling it." (P13)

"The constant mismatch between what was said and what was done hollowed out the culture." (P15)

"At some point, ethics talk no longer inspired. It became background noise we all tuned out." (P16)

It was gradual corrosion of its culture: the first use of the dress of virtue established a distance between rhetoric and reality within which the executives could confuse the organizational self with the personal goal. This has helped to spread the virus of cynicism that dilutes faith and fortifies culture. The bigger hierarchical companies were actively involved in blatant manipulation of values, and the smaller companies did the same, only to a low profile. The discourse within the industry was adjusted to the situation: the head of finance and healthcare has been pushed out of the area of

concern once the industry was regulated, the heads of retail and education have had to resort to virtue signaling (Walton, 2022). The young workers lost interest practically at once, the old workers were forced to go through the motions of attending to the case, but cynicism was contagious everywhere. Ethical rhetoric eventually yielded to skepticism, then to general cynicism, and made performance poisonous.

5. Discussion

This discussion interprets the findings through the lenses of Narcissistic Leadership Theory and the Ethics of Change in Leadership, with further grounding in *Alowais and Suliman (2025)* on the cascading influence of Leader Dark Triad traits within higher education institutions. Together, these perspectives highlight how ethical rhetoric, when co-opted by narcissistic leaders, transforms from a source of organizational guidance into a tool of control and impression management. The themes identified as *The Virtue Costume*, *Branding the Self as the Company*, and *Cynicism Contagion* demonstrated how rhetoric, identity fusion, and cultural erosion intersect to reproduce cycles of distrust. By linking theory with evidence, the discussion advances understanding of how manipulative leadership reshapes not only leader–follower dynamics but also the broader ethical climate of organizations.

5.1. Interpretation of Findings

The results indicate that narcissist leaders construct their verdicts using morally appropriate rhetorical schemata in which they tend to disguise their egos with advanced rhetorical devices. The most obvious was the euphemistic labelling of contentious behavior that was repackaged as being righteous. To demonstrate that, one of our respondents remembered the moment when layoffs happened and the CEO informed him that it was time to reinvent oneself but he was referring to executive bonuses. The combination of these lines of thought results in the theory of moral disengagement (Hindriks, 2015) in which words allow an individual to be irresponsible. Moral licensing was also a window dressing of ethical behavior by leaders, and sustainability campaign activities to excuse opportunism, and a kind of stakeholder ventriloquism when decisions were claimed to be necessitated by external demand. These dispositions represent the evolutionary expansions of the previous research on impression management beliefs in leadership (Williams, 2025).

According to the respondents, tension existed when the ethical rhetoric of leaders and leaders-in-practice was in conflict and experienced cognitive dissonance and moral stress. According to one of the respondents, there is integrity written on the poster walls but whoever praises the boss the most is promoted. These inconsistencies are aligned with the evidence that value incongruence is a threat to employee identity (Wenjun, Panikarova & Zhiyuan, 2024). The ways of coping varied: some justified inconsistencies, some distanced themselves and a small group opposed them in an insidious manner. Marking the importance of resilience in such responses, Afota et al. (2024) report that tenure and career stage defined adaptation.

This rhetoric-practice gap led to cynicism, first via the comic path but later via oral tradition in the form of social learning. The informal networks also increased the distrust rate and changed the culture of trust into disconnection and, eventually, opposition (Williams, 2025). Therefore, narcissistic leadership kills the values it purports and leaves a void of legitimacy, cohesion and long-term performance.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

This paper also adds to the theory of narcissistic leadership by showing how the theory not only affects the relationship between a leader and followers, but the whole culture of an organization. Unlike the above studies which concentrate on individual attributes of grandiosity, dominance and entitlement (Freis & Hansen-Brown, 2021), our findings reflect processes, which turn these attributes into common meaning categories, euphemistic labelling, stakeholder ventriloquism and identity

fusion. Employee accounts reflected the realization that the process of making such practices normal is to rewrite the organizational stories and values. The gap that the study addresses in the literature regarding leadership is a characteristic that does not examine leaders as actors but the way they engage in cultural discourse (Mabey, 2013). The rhetorical exploitation of shared identity is thus what sustains the narcissistic leadership beyond charisma or power.

Organizational cynicism theory is also constructed around the results. Organizational-integrity-related negative attitudes (Polowczyk, 2017), on the other hand, turned out to be developed in phases: individual dissonance, then interpersonal contagion and ultimately within subcultures (Ulusoy, 2016). This process and cynicism become self-perpetuating when institutionalized in narcissistic impressions management. It has contributed to lack of trust and moral corruption (Wenjun, Panikarova & Zhiyuan, 2024) and non-sustainability and non-validity once it is created.

5.3. Practical Implications

Organizations need to improve mechanisms of detecting and mitigating the risks of narcissistic leadership. In addition, throughout the selection processes, integrity tests should be conducted to determine the integrity behind the facade performance (Faherty & Clinton, 2025). In order to find out the gap between rhetoric and reality, employee survey, employee ethics audit and employee behavioral checks can be conducted during the initial stages of organization before cynicism propagates in the organization. They should have secure voice environments where people are at liberty to speak without any sort of fear of retaliation. Holding choices and rewards of the consequences of ethical choices institutionalized will simplify it to be accountable and will additionally lessen manipulation.

Employees also are critical. Peer support and stress: the former can help them understand how to critically recognize, and the latter can help them learn how to disengage moral strain. Collective action enhances resistance to cultural fall using ethical alignment groups (alternatively referred to as collective action). The career alternatives should be morally right, and this extends the requirement of being honest as far as well-being and satisfaction are concerned (Wenjun, Panikarova & Zhiyuan, 2024). It is possible to avoid cynicism and even to maintain the state of trust due to joint responsibility.

5.4. Limitations

There are some limited ways to this work. Cross-sectional study design cannot track the dynamics of cynicism through time, but the use of self-reported interview data makes the likelihood of perceptual bias and selective recollection of this data more likely, despite the attempt at making it seem credible. The sample region: the area of interest that is reduced to certain industries and culture cannot be extended to other areas. Besides, although thematic analysis has given us mechanisms by which narcissistic leadership was related to cynicism, it is not possible to draw a causal conclusion.

In the future, the longitudinal research design will have to be applied to trace the development of cynicism in cases involving a narcissist leader. Ethical degeneration can be prevented or reversed through intervention-based research (e.g., development of leadership courses or culture-resilience interventions). It would also be helpful to make intercultural comparisons, as the choice of rhetoric and the way the employees receive leadership may differ across cultures and institutions. More than that, the image of leaders can be employed as a potent instrument to understand whether the manipulative rhetoric is conscious or the manifestation of a low level of awareness. The omissions would confer value to the theory and improve the practical processes of the maintenance of ethical organizational cultures.

6. Conclusions

This study has examined how narcissistic leaders employ ethical language as a strategic tool, creating contradictions between values and practices that foster cynicism and erode trust. By applying Narcissistic Leadership Theory, the Ethics of Change in Leadership, and insights from

Alowais & Suliman (2025), the research demonstrates how impression management and identity fusion contribute to organizational deterioration. The findings underscore that ethical rhetoric, when weaponized, not only distorts leader–follower relations but also reshapes institutional culture in damaging ways.

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

As has been highlighted in this paper, this involves how moral rhetoric is used by narcissistic leaders to justify their self-centered actions, and how employees deal with the concomitant contradictions. Several key themes have been identified: virtue costuming, branding the self as the company and cynicism contagion. When personal interests took center stage, leaders were more likely to resort to ethical language, which is associated with euphemistic naming, moral licensing, and stakeholder ventriloquism tactics (Hindriks, 2015). These practices were perceived as virtue signaling by the employees and created the notion of manipulation among employees. In addition, narcissistic leaders blended their personal brand with the name of an organization, and thus the individual aspiration was re-packaged as a mission. Where values were mentioned, as noted by one respondent the CEO was referring to himself and the trust and good sense was breached (Faherty & Clinton, 2025). This practice-rhetoric disjunction generated, in the long run, cultural erosion, infidelity and alienation. All these are the implications that constitute the fact that the notion of narcissistic leadership is no longer a leadership problem and has become a cultural problem of infusibility of broad aspects, which abandons the identity and the credibility of the organization in the long-term. It also empirically confirms past presumptions of ethical leadership (Faherty & Clinton, 2025) and provides alternative directions of impression management and identity fusion.

6.2. Implications for Theory and Practice

The present article contributes to further development of the concept of narcissistic leadership by connecting the psychological characteristics to the consequences of the organizational culture. As it shows, the task of the mechanisms of disengagement of the leaders (Hindriks, 2015) is performed not only at the level of individual but also at the level of unity when the attitude ascribed to the employees and the organizational values are created. Theoretically, the focus that the study gives to perceptions of employees gives a rich contrast to other studies that are more interested in leaders and the degree to which manipulation is internalized and perceived. It also empirically confirms past assumptions of ethical leadership (Faherty & Clinton, 2025) and provides new directions of impression management and identity fusion.

In addition to the organization context, the findings can be extrapolated to questions of wider social concern about intuitional trust. Once incorporated into the group of employees, cynicism can be further transferred to a larger civic and democracy disengagement (Williams, 2025). As the evidence demonstrates, the other aspect that causes the loss of trust in business and leadership, in general, is the organizational culture of ethical branding that does not assume ethical behavior in its true sense. In this is to be found the necessity of establishing real ethical leadership not only in the performance of the health of an organization but also in the preservation in society of democratic and other forms of trust.

6.3. Recommendations

Leadership within an organization should be integrated within a culture of upright moral commitments in contrast to performance. Leadership development programs should be internal, meaning, they should be self-aware, humble and morally courageous. Measures to see to it that there is a disconnect age between values and acts can be taken: committees of ethics, whistleblowing, value audits, and other safety nets, can be taken. Trust and cynicism should be put on a scale between two poles since the act should be introduced by the time disillusionment is an epidemic.

Future scholarship should include longitudinal studies that would quantify an intervention-driven change in cynicism over time and intervention-based studies that would quantify what to do to change, i.e., to correct the value-behavior disconnects. Multicultural literature would contribute towards shedding light on how narcissistic styles of leadership are displayed in various situations in an institution. Ideally, a psychological and sociological approach to organizations will enable one to find out more about how individual traits of leaders are created in contexts of cultures. Applied research should favor solution-based models that extend past diagnosis to actual change.

6.4. Final Reflections

The leadership crisis described in this paper is a crisis with a short-term nature: the loss of credibility in the context of narcissist leaders who cover their personal self-centeredness with the rhetoric of morality. But it points, too, to ways of hope. The workers are sensitive to the moral predicament, and, given the push, they could become the drivers of the cultural renaissance. It is in the sharing of a commitment between the leaders, the employees and the scholars to acquire real values congruency in the future. Given that they are built, organizations can transfer to the culture of trust and transparency that is the foundation of sustainable performance and long-term trust in society.

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