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Narcissistic Leadership and Auditors' Job Satisfaction: The Role of Meaningful Work as a Mediator

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ABSTRACT

As the issue of talent loss among Chinese auditors becomes more severe, job satisfaction, which is a critical factor in employee retention, is indicative of the positive attitude and pleasant mood of employees in the workplace. Consequently, it is essential to examine the factors that contribute to job satisfaction. Leadership is a significant antecedent. Narcissism has attracted considerable attention in business settings in recent years. The characteristics of narcissistic leaders are both destructive and constructive. This study focuses on the auditing industry and aims to explore the impact of narcissistic leadership on auditors' job satisfaction based on Social Exchange Theory. Since auditors are required to follow professional ethics and objectively review financial statements, the profession may be personally meaningful, and this study also examines the role of meaningful work. The research sample was drawn from 320 Chinese auditors. The questionnaire survey results indicate that narcissistic leadership significantly influences meaningful work, thereby affecting auditors' job satisfaction. In addition, to supplement the survey results, this study interviewed five auditors to explore their views on narcissistic leadership, meaningful work, and job satisfaction. The research findings enhance comprehension of the influences of narcissistic leadership on subordinate auditors and provide certain implications for leaders, human resources practitioners, and accounting firms.

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Job satisfaction is actually an attitude, an evaluation or evaluative judgment of the attitude object (Weiss, 2002). It is an important psychological indicator of organization management (Alegre et al., 2016). When job satisfaction declines, employee turnover rates tend to increase, leading to attrition (Han & Jekel, 2011). Currently, China's demand for auditors is increasing, although the issue of talent attrition is as severe. This contradictory situation restricts the healthy

development of the audit industry and accounting firms (Knechel et al., 2021). Auditors generally believe that working in an accounting firm is beneficial to their early career development, and their ultimate goal is to hold an accounting-related position in a company (Alves et al., 2024). This also exacerbates the problem of staff turnover. Therefore, attracting and keeping audit professionals is a critical concern. The phenomenon of auditor turnover has consistently garnered significant attention; in the long term, job satisfaction is a determining factor in employee retention and performance improvement (Nemteanu & Dabija, 2021). Job satisfaction is associated with happiness and can reduce the risk of voluntary turnover (Han & Jekel, 2011; Hayat & Afshari, 2022).

An important factor influencing employee job satisfaction is their superiors (Tang et al., 2014). Good superior-subordinate relationships help improve subordinates' job satisfaction and help organizations retain talent (Han & Jekel, 2011). However, it cannot be ignored that the negative impact of poor leadership on subordinates should also be paid attention to and studied. In recent years, the examination of narcissistic leadership has gained prominence and garnered the attention of scholars in the context of Eastern culture (Li et al., 2018). Rosenthal and Pittinsky (2006) noted that leaders possess the authority to distribute organizational resources and are therefore prone to a sense of superiority; narcissistic leaders may amplify this sense of superiority. Narcissists are usually very confident and tend to exaggerate their own advantages; they are highly self-centered (Choi & Phan, 2022). Therefore, narcissistic leaders may be overly focused on themselves and ignore the interests and needs of others. Given that people with narcissistic personalities are more likely to strive for leadership positions (Choi & Phan, 2022), potentially occupying positions within accounting firms, which could adversely affect subordinate auditors who follow such leaders for a long time. A study reveals that narcissistic auditors are more inclined to refuse to share resources and offer help in accounting firms (Salehi & Rouhi, 2023). In the current context of emphasizing audit teamwork, narcissistic leadership may weaken team trust and undermine individual enthusiasm, thereby indirectly affecting auditors' job satisfaction. As a professional and stressful occupational group, auditors' job satisfaction may directly correlate with audit quality. Therefore, studying the impact of leadership style may be imperative for mitigating the challenges of audit staff turnover and auditors' mental health concerns.

Narcissistic leaders often have the virtues of being visionary and innovative, but they may also engage in unethical behavior for their own benefit (Choi & Phan, 2022), which may affect subordinate auditors' experience of meaningful work. Recent organizational behavior research has increasingly emphasized the significance of meaningful work, positing that when employees recognize value and meaning in their work, they will show higher satisfaction and engagement (Albrecht et al., 2021). Employees' experience of meaningful work depends on "others", and leaders are an important factor (Wang & Xu, 2019). Therefore, meaningful work should be regarded as a management task. Research has examined leadership styles linked to meaningful work (Shafaei & Nejati, 2024), while less attention is paid to the impacts of narcissistic leadership on meaningful work. Although meaningfulness often comes from employees' own exploration, it is easy for leaders to destroy it (Bailey & Madden, 2016). Audits often require teamwork, and a positive working environment is conducive to discussion and the identification of errors. A negative work environment, however, may have a detrimental effect on employees. Meaningful work is a significant factor affecting employee attitudes and is

becoming increasingly important. To enhance employee retention, strengthening the sense of meaningfulness of the profession may be necessary (del-Pozo-Antúnez et al., 2021). Consequently, the significance of meaningful work was examined in this study.

This study examines the mechanism of narcissistic leadership on subordinate auditors in China, filling the gap in non-Western contexts and enhancing our comprehension of how leadership behavior affects employee job satisfaction. The Chinese audit industry has a unique organizational culture and interpersonal relationship structure, such as high authority orientation and relationship-oriented management (Gillis, 2014). These background factors may influence the characteristics of narcissistic leadership differently in the local context compared to those in the West. The study introduced meaningful work as a mediator, revealing the mechanism between leadership style and job satisfaction from a new viewpoint. Unlike previous studies, which primarily employed quantitative methods, this study investigated auditors' subjective feelings through interviews. This study not only enriches the theoretical paradigm of leadership style and employee satisfaction research but also provides useful, practical insights for managers, leaders, and human resources practitioners, which will help improve auditors' job satisfaction and alleviate the problem of staff turnover.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

SET is employed to explain workplace behavior, suggesting that varying exchange relationships influence employee behavior and, ultimately, the effectiveness of the organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This theory emphasizes that exchange relationships are long-term social exchanges based on the principle of reciprocity. Both parties trust each other and each believes that their efforts will be rewarded by the other party in the future (Blau, 2017). However, Molm (1988) pointed out that reciprocity between two parties involves not only positive behavior but also negative behavior. Specifically, the pattern of reciprocity between the two parties determines the perceived balance of the exchange (Gouldner, 1960). SET is often used in research to describe how leadership affects employees (Liao et al., 2019). In this study, narcissistic leaders treat subordinates in their own way, and then subordinates respond with behavior, and a relationship is formed.

Narcissistic Leadership and Job Satisfaction

Research has indicated that job satisfaction is a key indicator of employee psychological and behavioral reactions, and it is highly correlated with job performance (Aziri, 2011; Katebi et al., 2022), making it a crucial variable in organizational management practices. A study of accountants in Istanbul revealed a negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intention (Torlak et al., 2021). Another study of Saudi auditors showed that job satisfaction significantly enhances performance (Hakami, 2024). These findings imply that enhancing employee job satisfaction is crucial for stabilizing the organization's human resources and improving organizational effectiveness. Consequently, recognizing the principal aspects that affect job satisfaction is essential for attaining the organization's sustainable development.

Current research frequently employs Herzberg's two-factor theory to analyze the influence of motivational factors (e.g., promotion) and hygiene factors (e.g., salary and management) on employee satisfaction (Lee et al., 2022). In terms of specific variables, leadership, as one of the

core factors affecting employee job satisfaction, has received widespread attention and has been studied across several industrial contexts. For example, in the healthcare industry, Specchia et al. (2021) revealed that different leadership styles have different effects on nurse satisfaction. Dami et al. (2022) and Rizal et al. (2024) also found leadership behavior significantly influences staff job satisfaction in higher education. Hilton et al.'s (2023) study of commercial bank employees also indicated transformational leadership had a positive influence on employee satisfaction. However, there are few empirical studies on the audit industry, especially on the mechanism by which individual characteristics of leaders affect auditors' satisfaction.

Narcissistic personality traits are characterized by grandiosity, arrogance, desire for power, excessive self-focus, and fragile self-esteem (Ghislieri & Gatti, 2012). Previous research has shown that employees' assessments of leadership efficacy, employee performance, and creativity are negatively impacted when they perceive their leaders as possessing narcissistic characteristics (Zhang et al., 2023). Furthermore, narcissistic leaders may foster a negative team environment, thereby inhibiting employees' organizational citizenship behaviors (Fang et al., 2024). Empirical research found that narcissistic leadership has a substantial statistical correlation with psychological variables, including job embeddedness (Wang et al., 2022) and turnover intention (Badar et al., 2023). Despite most studies have identified its detrimental effects, some studies have suggested that narcissistic leadership may have a twofold influence: on the one hand, it may incite employees' hostility and result in counterproductive behavior; on the other hand, it may encourage organizational citizenship behavior by improving psychological accessibility (Chen et al., 2024). This shows that the impact of narcissistic leadership is complex and situational and deserves further exploration. However, research on how leader narcissism affects subordinates' psychological attitudes, such as job satisfaction, is still relatively limited. Meanwhile, previous studies on narcissistic leadership have primarily concentrated on the Western cultural setting, which prioritizes individualistic principles (Li et al., 2018). Recently, some scholars have begun to explore cross-cultural research on leadership narcissism (Schyns et al., 2023). Therefore, in the Chinese cultural context, the manner in which leadership narcissism affects employee attitudes and behaviors may vary.

Narcissists prefer positive self-presentation and, therefore, seek leadership positions. However, leaders' narcissistic traits may not necessarily lead to long-term success. Instead, they may lead to some negative consequences, especially for subordinates, which may manifest as decreased happiness and work performance (Choi & Phan, 2022; Ghislieri et al., 2019). Braun (2017) also pointed out that narcissists need to gain affirmation from others and they need an "audience" to appreciate their performance. However, they often struggle to form strong, positive relationships and tend to prioritize their own interests over the well-being of others. The research conducted by Lynch and Benson (2024) indicated that as subordinates increasingly interact with and comprehend narcissistic leaders, their affinity for them diminishes. Narcissists may disguise fewer desirable traits of their personality, but these traits will continue to be revealed as they interact with others.

Subordinates frequently must endure the behavior of a narcissistic leader instead of seeking alternative employment owing to economic, familial, or occupational constraints (Ellen et al., 2017). However, this may trigger negative emotions among employees (Braun et al., 2016) and is detrimental to their healthy growth. Furthermore, audit work is usually carried out in a team form, and it is difficult to avoid contact with leaders. Increased interactions with narcissistic

leaders diminish subordinates' perceptions of their effectiveness (Nevicka et al., 2018). In accounting firms, unfair resource allocation, performance evaluation, and rewards may contribute to high turnover rates and low job satisfaction (Liu & Wang, 2014). According to SET, when employees receive spiritual or material support from their leaders, they are inclined to reciprocate with positive actions. Nevertheless, the personality traits of narcissistic leaders may promote negative reciprocity patterns (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Molm, 1988). That is, when subordinates feel that their leaders are treating them negatively, they will also respond negatively. Therefore, narcissistic leaders' negative attitudes toward their subordinates may trigger negative emotions in their subordinates, such as job satisfaction. This study predicts that narcissistic leadership will affect auditors' job satisfaction. Previous research in high-contact service industries has also highlighted that negative treatment from leaders contributes to diminished employee satisfaction (Stamolampros et al., 2019). In summary, we hypothesize:

H1: Narcissistic leadership negatively affects auditors' job satisfaction.

Narcissistic Leadership and Meaningful Work

Meaningful work is associated with positive, subjective, and personal experiences; some studies have even attempted to combine it with specific occupational contexts to construct a more targeted definition (Bailey et al., 2019). This study refers to Steger et al. (2012), which defines meaningful work as growth-oriented and goal-oriented positive valence rather than happiness-oriented enjoyment. Researchers often use meaningful work and work meaningfulness interchangeably (Shafaei & Nejati, 2024). Self, others, work environment, and spiritual life, are the main sources of meaningful work (Rosso et al., 2010), among which leaders, categorized as "others", assume a significant role. At the organizational level, a values-driven culture and intentionally designed working conditions are associated with meaningful work (Soren & Ryff, 2023). Leaders are responsible for job design and daily administration by understanding the organizational culture and helping employees connect their daily activities to a greater purpose, thereby establishing a connection between work circumstances and a sense of meaning.

Close relationships at work help employees experience meaningful work (Pratt, 2003). Leadership significantly influences employees' perceptions of a meaningful work experience (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020). Scholars have studied the relationship between different leadership styles and meaningful work, including transformational leadership (Han et al., 2020), ethical leadership (Mostafa & Abed El-Motalib, 2020), and inclusive leadership (Shafaei & Nejati, 2024). Research indicates that effective leaders, particularly inclusive leaders, can foster an environment of psychological safety for employees (Randel et al., 2018), which creates meaningful work for employees.

Emphasis on a fair and just work environment, recognition of employee contributions, and positive relationships are all positively correlated with meaningful work (Morin, 2008). In a workplace where leaders are inclined to delegate authority to subordinates, employees are more prone to perceive meaningful work, whereas a rigidly hierarchical atmosphere diminishes this sense of meaningful work (Lee et al., 2017; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Shafaei & Nejati, 2024). These characteristics highlight leadership, and as a negative leadership style, narcissistic leadership often creates a less harmonious work environment. Notably, Bailey and Madden (2016) indicated that when employees described meaningful moments at work, they rarely

mentioned the quality of their leadership; however, when the sense of meaning was undermined, poor management was often the primary cause. According to SET, when employees perceive value and respect, they are more likely to feel obligated to give back to the organization, which may enhance their perception of meaningful work. When leaders demonstrate respect, recognition, and support, followers feel cared for and psychologically safe, which leads to meaningful work (Shafaei & Nejati, 2024). However, the self-interest and arrogance displayed by narcissistic leaders may induce subordinates to ignore their work, thereby reducing the perception of meaningful work. A supportive workplace environment can also promote meaningful work, particularly when the alignment of values instills a sense of purpose and meaning in employees' contributions (Rai et al., 2023). Narcissists, however, exhibit a deficiency in empathy (Hepper et al., 2014) and frequently struggle to genuinely comprehend and address the feelings and needs of their subordinates, so undermining the supportive environment in the workplace and subsequently influencing employees' perception of meaningful work. Thus, we propose:

H2: Narcissistic leadership negatively affects meaningful work.

Narcissistic Leadership, Job Satisfaction and Meaningful Work

Work significantly influences individual existence, and meaningful work, as a beneficial element, is positively associated with numerous favorable results (Shafaei & Nejati, 2024). Research has shown that meaningful work is strongly correlated with favorable outcomes, including employee promotive voice behavior (Fürstenberg et al., 2021), job embeddedness (Dechawatanapaisal, 2021), and employee engagement (Albrecht et al., 2021). Mulki and Lassk (2019) noted that work meaningfulness can enhance job performance and reduce turnover intentions. Meaningful work may also initially impact employees' emotional state, which can then influence individual work behaviors, attitudes, and performance (Bailey et al., 2019; Gui et al., 2022). Meaningful work has also been studied within many specific professions, such as nurses (Ghislieri et al., 2019), counselors (Allan, Owens, et al., 2019), and teachers (Fouché et al., 2017). Although research indicates that meaningful work correlates with numerous positive outcomes, it has been neglected as a determinant of auditors' job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is a significant indicator of employee happiness, potentially motivating individuals to make greater contributions to the organization (Nemteanu & Dabija, 2021). Especially in the auditing industry, the high intensity of work, heavy responsibilities and high ethical requirements make auditors more prone to professional stress and burnout (Al-Ameedee et al., 2024; Tawiah et al., 2025). In this setting, if auditors derive meaning from their work, it may help alleviate negative psychological effects and enhance their work motivation and career satisfaction. Therefore, this research considers meaningful work and auditors' job satisfaction, and we propose:

H3: Meaningful work positively affects auditors' job satisfaction.

Meaningful work and its outcomes may be influenced by many organizational practices and preceding conditions. In psychology and organizational research, meaningful work is frequently utilized as a mediating or moderating variable to explain the mechanisms of interaction between individuals and organizations or leadership (Bailey et al., 2019; Tummers & Knies, 2013). Leadership style has an impact on employees' experience of meaningful work.

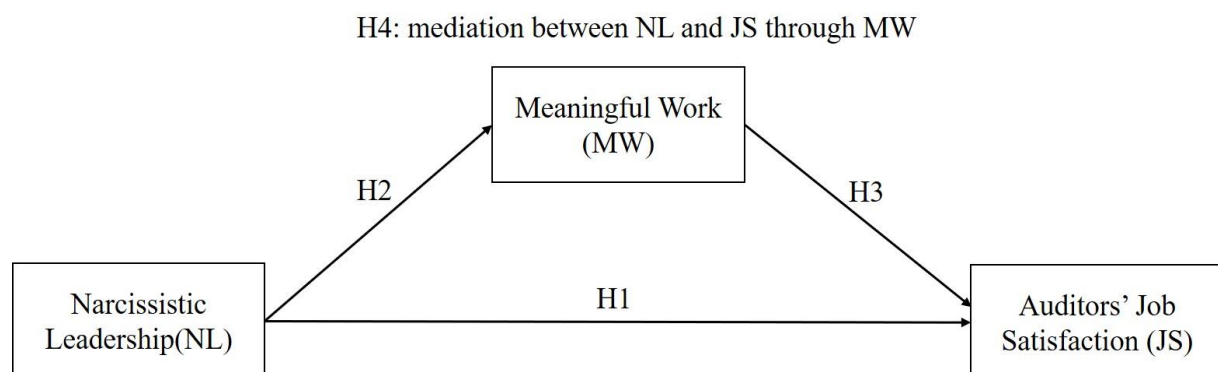
Servant leadership or ethical leadership behaviors may allow subordinates to experience meaningful work, while some destructive leadership behaviors, such as abusive supervision, may damage subordinates' social relationships and reduce their ability to experience meaningful work (Blustein et al., 2023). Likewise, the reduction in meaningful work that auditors experience when faced with narcissistic leadership behaviors can lead to decreased engagement and enthusiasm for their work, which may result in decreased job satisfaction. Narcissistic leadership has not been thoroughly examined within the audit profession; however, inappropriate behavior by individuals in leadership roles may result in losses for audit-related stakeholders. The auditor is tasked with ensuring the credibility of financial statements, preventing financial fraud, and being responsible to the audit clients and the public (Johnson et al., 2021). Narcissism is associated with unethical and selfish behavior (Harrison et al., 2018), which may be related to the outbreak of accounting scandals. Studies indicated that meaningful work enhances employees' perception of moral obligation (Rai et al., 2023). Bailey (2017) noted that when employees' values align with those of the organization, they derive a sense of meaning from their job. Narcissistic leaders, who focus on their own interests rather than the collective interests (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006), may threaten the social nature of the auditing profession. In other words, the egoism of narcissistic leaders may be inconsistent with the morals and values of their subordinates, which may lead to lower job satisfaction among subordinates. Furthermore, audits are usually conducted in groups. Narcissistic leadership can affect team dynamics (Fang et al., 2024). Leadership characters with narcissistic traits may frustrate subordinate auditors and affect subordinates' experience of meaningful work and job satisfaction. Thus, we propose:

H4: Meaningful work mediates the relationship between narcissistic leadership and auditors' job satisfaction

Figure 1 describes the research model, showing the hypothesized relationships proposed above.

Figure 1

Research Model



Method

This research adopted a convenience sampling method. The researcher obtained samples through a combination of personal network and field visits. The research sample consists of auditors from accounting firms in three cities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. A

total of 427 questionnaires were collected between April and July 2024. After deleting questionnaires that were not answered seriously or had missing data, the final sample size was 320. This study used G*power software (Kang, 2021), resulting in a minimal sample size of 107 (with a power of .95, α of .05, a predictor of 2, and an assumed effect size f^2 of .15). Therefore, the sample size is acceptable. Ethical approval was obtained from Universiti Putra Malaysia before data collection. At the outset, the questionnaire explicitly disclosed the survey's anonymity and confidentiality. Respondents were free to resign from the study.

Among the 320 respondents, 56.9% were female, and 43.1% were male. The highest percentage of responders was 26 to 35 years old (52.5%), while the lowest percentage was 4.4% for individuals aged 46 and older. As for education level, 56.6% of the participants had a bachelor's degree. 24.4% of the participants possessed less than 1 year of experience. In Table 1, the respondents' demographic data is illustrated in detail.

Table 1

Demographic Profile (N=320)

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	182	56.9%
Male	138	43.1%
Age		
18-25	68	21.3%
26-35	168	52.5%
36-45	70	21.9%
46 and above	14	4.4%
Education Level		
Associate degree or below	11	3.4%
Bachelor's degree	181	56.6%
Postgraduate and above	128	40.0%
Job experience		
Less than 1 year	78	24.4%
1-3 years	60	18.8%
4-6 years	67	20.9%
7-9 years	58	18.1%
10 years and above	57	17.8%

Measures

Narcissistic leadership was measured with six items (Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012), Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$. Meaningful work was measured using 10 items (Steger et al., 2012), Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$. Job satisfaction was measured with eight items adapted from two different scales, three of which were about evaluation of coworkers, sense of achievement, and work environment (Zhou et al., 2021), and the other five were about overall evaluation of the job (Judge et al., 1998), Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$. All scales were answered using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. The scales were translated into Chinese, which was subsequently reviewed and revised by bilingual scholars to ensure the questionnaire was expressed clearly and concisely.

Results

Prior to data analysis, the researcher had rescored all reverse questions. The data in this research was analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4.1.0.0 software. Initially, Common Method Bias (CMB) and collinearity concerns were assessed by employing the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The VIF values of each construct were between 1 and 1.41. If the index was lower than 3.3, it indicated that the model was not significantly affected by CMB and collinearity (Kock, 2015). In order to alleviate the CMB problem, the questionnaire uses reverse questions to allow respondents to provide more precise responses and concentrate more on the questions (Jordan & Troth, 2020).

Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated to test the acceptable levels of reliability and validity. Table 2 illustrates the values of the external loadings of the research constructs range from .61 to .89. The values of MW6 and JS1 are less than the recommended value of .7. When removing the indicator does not optimize the validity and reliability of the model, it is acceptable to retain these two items (Hair et al., 2014). Cronbach's α and Composite Reliability (CR) meet the recommended standard of more than .7 (Hair et al., 2014). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used to assess convergent validity. The recommended threshold for AVE is .5 (Urbach & Ahlemann, 2010).

Table 2

Measurement Constructs

Constructs		Loading	α	CR	AVE
Narcissistic Leadership (NL)	NL1	.89	.92	.92	.71
	NL2	.88			
	NL3	.83			
	NL4	.84			
	NL5	.81			
	NL6	.82			
Meaningful Work (MW)	MW1	.85	.90	.91	.59
	MW2	.85			
	MW3	.79			
	MW5	.77			
	MW6	.61			
	MW7	.73			
	MW8	.73			
	MW10	.77			
	JS1	.62	.89	.90	.64
	JS3	.80			
Job Satisfaction (JS)	JS4	.84			
	JS6	.76			
	JS7	.87			
	JS8	.87			

The Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) was used to measure discriminant validity. This study calculated HTMT_{inference} by checking the bootstrapping of 5000 subsamples. The discriminant

validity is deemed adequate when the confidence interval does not contain 1 (Henseler et al., 2015). As illustrated in Table 3, the confidence interval results were all less than 1, indicating acceptable discriminant validity. In summary, the data results demonstrated that the measurement model assessment was satisfactory.

Table 3

HTMT_{inference}

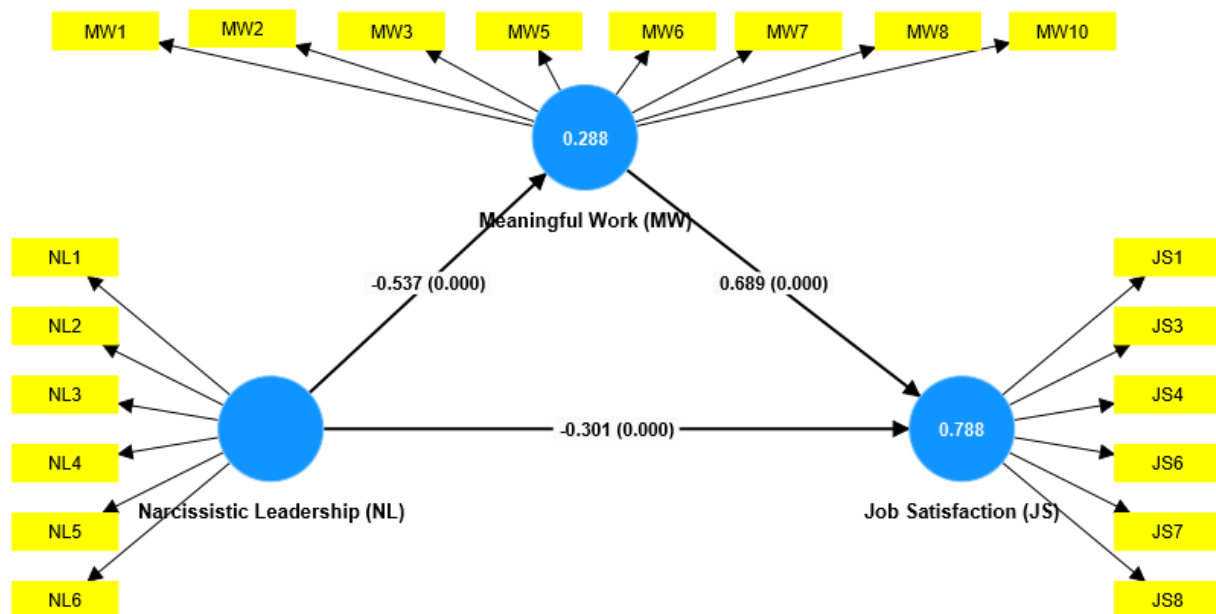
Path	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	2.5%	97.5%
Narcissistic Leadership <-> Job Satisfaction	.73	.73	.64	.82
Narcissistic Leadership <-> Meaningful Work	.58	.58	.46	.68
Meaningful Work <-> Job Satisfaction	.95	.95	.90	.98

Structural Model

The assessment of the structural model primarily aims to test the significance of the path coefficient, the explanatory power, and the model fit. Figure 2 displays the structural model produced by SmartPLS.

Figure 2

Structural Model



Firstly, the hypotheses suggested were validated. Table 4 presents that both the direct path hypothesis and the indirect path hypothesis of this study were supported. The findings indicated that narcissistic leadership negatively affects auditors' job satisfaction ($\beta = -.30$, $t = 6.97$, $p < .001$), H1 was accepted. Narcissistic leadership was also negatively correlated with meaningful work ($\beta = -.54$, $t = 10.34$, $p < .001$), therefore, H2 was accepted. H3 posited meaningful work is positively connected with auditors' job satisfaction, and the findings corroborated this prediction ($\beta = .69$, $t = 18.87$, $p < .001$). Finally, the analysis of indirect effects revealed that meaningful work mediates the relationship between narcissistic leadership and auditors' job satisfaction ($\beta = -.37$, $t = 9.26$, $p < .001$); thus, H4 was acceptable.

Table 4*Hypothesis Results*

Path	β	t	p	Results	f^2	Effect size
H1: Narcissistic Leadership \rightarrow Job Satisfaction	-.30	6.97	.000	Accepted	.30	Medium
H2: Narcissistic Leadership \rightarrow Meaningful Work	-.54	10.34	.000	Accepted	.41	Large
H3: Meaningful Work \rightarrow Job Satisfaction	.69	18.87	.000	Accepted	1.59	Large
H4: Narcissistic Leadership \rightarrow Meaningful Work \rightarrow Job Satisfaction	-.37	9.26	.000	Accepted	-	-

An R^2 value approaching 1 indicates a stronger explanatory power of the model (Hair et al., 2019). Table 5 and Figure 2 show that the joint effect of NL and MW explains 78.8% of JS, and NL explains 28.8% of MW. The f^2 value is used to validate the effect size of the construct on R^2 . f^2 values over .02, .15, and .35 signify small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively (Hair et al., 2019). Table 4 shows that medium size f^2 of NL \rightarrow JS = .34, large size f^2 of NL \rightarrow MW = .41 and large size f^2 of MW \rightarrow JS = 1.59. The prediction correlation uses the blindfolding technique to obtain the Q^2 value, usually .02, .15 or .35 represents small, medium and large prediction correlation (Hair et al., 2014). Table 5 illustrates the values of JS and MW are .50 and .16, respectively, signifying that the model possesses large predictive relevance for auditors' job satisfaction and moderate predictive relevance for meaningful work.

Lastly, the model fit was evaluated using the Standardized Root-Mean-Square Residual (SRMR) and the Normed Fit Index (NFI). According to Hu and Bentler (1999) and Henseler et al. (2016), SRMR should be lower than .08 and NFI should be greater than .9. Table 5 shows that the model fit is acceptable (SRMR = .06 and NFI = .89, close to .9).

Table 5*Model Evaluation*

Variables	R^2	R^2 adjusted	Q^2	SRMR	NFI
Job Satisfaction (JS)	.79	.79	.50	.06	.89
Meaningful Work (MW)	.29	.29	.16		

Interview Findings

The interviews were to explore auditors' perceptions of narcissistic leadership, meaningful work, and job satisfaction. The participants were auditors working in accounting firms recruited by the researcher through their personal social networks. Five participants were interviewed. The interview format was mainly through text communication. The average interview time was 15 minutes. Before the interviews, the researchers informed the respondents of the confidentiality and anonymity of the research information and obtained their consent. The interview questions are as follows:

1. What is your understanding of narcissistic leadership? Do you think narcissistic leadership will affect your job satisfaction?
2. What is your understanding of meaningful work? Do you think meaningful work affects your job satisfaction?

All respondents mentioned self-centeredness and neglect of subordinates' feelings in their understanding of narcissistic leadership. One of the respondents shared experience, pointing

out that narcissistic leaders are very controlling and have low recognition of their subordinates, making it difficult to get positive evaluations from narcissistic leaders. Only one respondent noted that narcissistic leaders could be positive, as they might have sufficient experience and expertise. In the auditing industry, professionalism and experience are very important. This supports that narcissistic leaders may have a complex dual nature. Narcissistic leaders are frequently diligent and possess strong confidence in their professional competencies; nonetheless, their personality traits and activities may induce distress in others (Choi & Phan, 2022). Regarding the impact of narcissistic leadership, two of the respondents pointed out that narcissistic leadership affects the conduct of audit work. One respondent said, “Narcissistic leaders are not good for the career development of their subordinates.” Another respondent stated that narcissistic leaders make their subordinates do meaningless things. In accordance with this, findings from an interview study indicated that subordinates had a sense of meaninglessness when tasked with activities unrelated to their primary work responsibilities (Bailey & Madden, 2016).

Regarding meaningful work, the respondents believe that the existence of audit work is reasonable and can prevent some risks to a certain extent. Respondents noted that meaningful work is associated with self-worth, fulfillment, and happiness. One responder asserted that meaningful work is subjective and should facilitate continuous upward socialization and advancement. It is worth mentioning that one interviewee expressed concerns about China’s auditing work. This respondent stated that many auditors in China did not achieve truth and fairness during the auditing process, which resulted in the auditing work seeming to become meaningless and instead became a channel to make money. The interviewee’s perspective has prompted us to reconsider meaningful work from an alternative viewpoint. The true meaning of a job should not only be a means of earning income but also bear the responsibility and value to society.

Finally, most respondents mentioned the salary. Whether it is meaningful work or job satisfaction, salary seems to be a good mediator of some negative effects. One respondent said, “As long as the salary is satisfactory, the work is meaningful.” Lips-Wiersma et al. (2016) noted that for some people, the meaning of work is income, but many people also expressed that they hope that their work can have a deeper and more existential sense. The results of the interviews support their conclusions to a certain extent.

Discussion

First, this study confirms that narcissistic leadership negatively affects auditors’ job satisfaction (H1). Narcissistic leaders are characterized by egotism and the exploitation of all available resources for personal gain (Chen et al., 2024). This study corroborates the detrimental aspects of narcissistic leaders, indicating that their conduct might adversely affect subordinates. Prior research indicated that leadership styles contrasting with narcissistic leadership, such as servant and charismatic leadership, positively influence employees and enhance their job satisfaction (Adiguzel et al., 2020; Aydogmus et al., 2016). Therefore, this study suggests that accounting firms should be cautious about the presence of narcissistic leaders, as their influence on subordinate auditors’ job satisfaction may lead to a decline in audit quality.

Narcissistic leadership negatively affects meaningful work (H2). This study examines narcissistic leadership as an antecedent of meaningful work and finds a negative association between the two variables, suggesting that narcissistic leaders may overlook the needs of subordinates and fail to demonstrate sufficient respect and understanding, thereby reducing subordinates' experiences of meaningful work. Shafaei and Nejati (2024) pointed out that leaders who appreciate and honor their subordinates enhance employees' perception of meaningful work. Their findings and our findings indicate that various leadership styles exert distinct influences on meaningful work. Although organizational researchers have worked to identify factors that contribute to meaningful work (Michaelson et al., 2014), this study suggests that narcissistic leadership is, instead, a hindering factor.

Meaningful work positively affects auditors' job satisfaction, H3 was confirmed. This result reveals that meaningful work may increase auditors' perception of social value and can be considered as a need and value, which positively affects auditors' satisfaction. This supports the notion that meaningful work serves as a motivator for employees (Rai et al., 2023). Both meaningful work and job satisfaction are intricately linked to employees' psychological health. Understanding the relationship between the two is of enormous significance to enhancing the effectiveness of human resource management in the audit industry. Finally, the mediating effect of meaningful work was confirmed (H4), with this finding also confirmed within the nursing profession (Ghislieri et al., 2019). This study highlights the existence of meaningful work in the audit industry and supports the importance of meaningful work for auditors. The results indicate the negative side of narcissistic leadership. Narcissistic leaders may shape a negative organizational culture, potentially influencing followers' values and expected behaviors. This may indirectly affect the work of auditors in a long-term working environment, resulting in a decline in audit quality, and even auditors may withdraw from the audit industry, thus causing the loss of audit talent. The findings of Hypotheses 3 and 4 indicate that meaningful work is a significant contributor to enhancing auditors' job satisfaction and is instrumental in the manner in which leadership style influences staff attitudes. This further verifies the core position of meaningful work in stimulating employees' positive psychological state. Especially in the context of auditing, a profession with high stress and ethical requirements, the confirmation of its motivational effect has many practical significances for accounting firms.

The results support the view of SET that the interaction and exchange between employees and leaders affect the attitudes and behaviors of both parties (Cropanzano et al., 2017). This study emphasizes the path of leaders' influence on their followers. According to SET, narcissistic leaders undermine the reciprocal exchange relationship between leaders and employees due to their deficiency in respect and support for employees. This unequal interaction weakens employees' emotional rewards for the organization, thereby reducing their job satisfaction and perception of meaningful work. Meanwhile, narcissistic leaders excessively prioritize their own interests, neglecting the requirements of their subordinates. Via the lens of social exchange, narcissistic leaders break the psychological contract of input and output, making it difficult for employees to connect daily tasks with larger goals, thereby damaging meaningful work.

Finally, interview results also indicated the respondents' descriptions of narcissistic leadership were mostly negative, which is similar to the characteristics of narcissistic leadership summarized in previous studies. Second, respondents' descriptions of meaningful work are

subjective. Previous studies have found people who perceive meaningful work are more inclined to reject other high-paying jobs (Hu & Hirsh, 2017). However, interview results indicate that auditors' evaluations of meaningful work and job satisfaction are closely linked to salary. The relationship between money and meaningful work is similarly tense (Michaelson et al., 2014). Views on salary provide insights for future research.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Prior research has demonstrated a connection between supportive leadership and meaningful work, while this study seeks to investigate the impact of negative leadership styles on meaningful work. The study enriches empirical research by demonstrating an antecedent and consequence factor of meaningful work. The sense of meaningfulness is often emphasized in research on job design. This study has certain implications for future job design that cultivates a sense of meaningfulness. Additionally, the study significantly contributes to the auditing literature. First, the results provide evidence that narcissistic leadership is associated with meaningful work and job satisfaction in a sample of Chinese auditors. Second, by incorporating meaningful work as a key variable in an auditing context, the study highlights its critical role within the audit profession. The results support social exchange theory, which asserts that an imbalance in exchanges between two individuals can lead to a negative response from one party in the future.

For narcissistic leaders, it is essential to be aware of the impact of their leadership style on their subordinates, allowing them to mitigate potential harm to employees in practice. Leaders can enhance their awareness of their own behavior through leadership role training (Ghislieri & Gatti, 2012), reduce their narcissistic style, and cultivate a good leadership style. For subordinates working with narcissistic leaders, the findings can help them understand narcissistic personality and thus adjust their expectations when interacting with these leaders to avoid psychological disappointment and reduce harm. Accounting firms must identify and address narcissistic leaders to create a more positive work environment for employees and promote the healthy development of the audit industry. Human resource managers can use personality tests to evaluate leadership candidates.

The study of meaningful work is important for organizations broadly and particularly relevant for the auditing profession, which involves numerous stakeholders. It would be of practical value if accounting firms could optimize job design. Moreover, the findings indicate that accounting firms ought to prioritize the enhancement of meaningful work since it contributes to increased job satisfaction among auditors.

Conclusion

This study finds that narcissistic leadership has a direct impact on auditors' job satisfaction and suggests that it can also indirectly affect job satisfaction through the provision of meaningful work. In the context of the high-pressure, high-responsibility professional service of the audit industry, how leaders' narcissistic traits affect audit employees' job satisfaction is an under-researched but important issue with theoretical and practical value. This study addresses theoretical gaps by introducing specific cultural and industry perspectives, thereby offering new evidence for understanding the mechanisms of toxic leadership conduct across various

situations. The research results also provide practical guidance for improving employee stability and organizational health development in the audit industry.

Limitations and future suggestions

Due to temporal and financial limitations, data collection in this study was confined to a designated timeframe, which may have impacted the comprehensive understanding of the causal link between factors. Future studies may implement a longitudinal design to address this restriction and improve causal inference capabilities. This study is conducted in China, and its results may be influenced by local cultural traits. Therefore, future research can consider replicating this study in diverse cultural contexts. Similarly, the occupations investigated in this study are only auditors, but the investigated variables are also applicable to other occupations, and future research may examine additional professions to assess the generalizability of the findings. The interview results demonstrated that auditors emphasize the importance of salary; however, this study does not include salary in its measurement of job satisfaction. Therefore, future research can consider the impact of salary on auditors. Ultimately, the interviews in this study provided some qualitative evidence regarding this topic. In particular, respondents' opinions on whether audit work is meaningful are subjective. However, the participant count was limited; subsequent research should aim to augment the sample size to derive more significant insights.

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