Job Stress and Counterproductive Work Behaviours: The Roles of Negative Affect States, Vulnerable and Grandiose Narcissism

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Abstract

Drawing on the stressor-emotions model, this study examines the effect of job stress on employee counterproductive work behaviours (CWB) via negative affect states. In line with the conservation of resources theory, it also explores the moderating roles of vulnerable and grandiose narcissism in the job stress–negative affect link. Two-wave survey data were collected from 358 full-time Nigerian employees across various organisations. Regression analysis tested the direct relationships, while mediation and moderation hypotheses were assessed using bootstrapping methods in PROCESS macro. Findings show that job stress is positively related to negative affect states, which in turn increase CWB. Negative affect states mediate the relationship between job stress and CWB. Moreover, the indirect effect of job stress on negative affect states is stronger for employees high in vulnerable and grandiose narcissism. These findings offer practical insights for organisations seeking to reduce CWB and foster positive work behaviours. Targeted job stress interventions ranging from proactive job redesign, stressor reduction and mindfulness training, to recovery-focused counselling are recommended. Additionally, tailored support for narcissistic employees through empathetic communication, mentoring, and promoting a culture of openness can buffer emotional reactivity and reduce CWB.

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Introduction

Studies have established a link between job stressors and negative work behaviours (e.g., Akaighe et al., 2025; Clercq et al., 2019; Penney & Spector, 2005; Striler et al., 2021). Job stress is conceptualised as "an individual's awareness or feeling of personal dysfunction as a result of perceived conditions happening in the work setting" (Parker & DeCotiis, 1983, p. 161). More closely, existing research shows that economic hardship and job insecurity motivated workers to engage in counterproductive work behaviours (CWB; Striler et al., 2021). Similarly, interpersonal conflict and organisational constraints positively influenced employees' CWB (Meurs et al., 2013) while self and peer-rated interpersonal conflict was positively related to CWB (Penney & Spector, 2005). The findings of these studies show the undesirable consequences of workplace stress on employee behaviours, encouraging scholars to query how job stressors influence workplace behaviours and what boundary conditions might better explain the nexus between job stress and CWB (e.g., Fida et al., 2014). Understanding the explanatory pathway and boundary conditions is important to give organisations and human resource practitioners more insights into the antecedents of CWB and what job stress intervention programmes can be implemented to better manage work stress. To this end, this study explores the mediating role of negative affect states in the relationship between job stress and CWB and trait vulnerable and grandiose narcissism in employees, as boundary conditions.

Despite growing evidence linking job stressors to CWB (e.g., Clercq et al., 2019; Striler et al., 2021), there remains a limited understanding of the emotional mechanisms and personality-based boundary conditions that explain why some employees are more prone to CWB under stress than others (e.g., Li et al., 2014; Samreen et al., 2022; Tett et al., 2021). Most existing studies focus on general stressor-behaviour relationships without unpacking the emotional pathways or considering nuanced personality traits like vulnerable and grandiose narcissism. This lack of clarity poses a challenge for organisations seeking targeted interventions to reduce CWB. Therefore, the problem this study addresses is the insufficient exploration of how job stress leads to CWB through negative affect states, and how narcissistic traits amplify this pathway.

For the emotional pathways, we examine negative affect states, which are the display of negative emotions or feelings that individuals experience in relation to their environment (Watson et al., 1988), and how they influence how people behave at work. The stressor-emotion model (Spector & Fox, 2005) explains that work stress does not influence individual behaviour directly but often invokes emotions that propel behavioural responses. Relying on this model, we contend that negative affect states serve as an explanatory pathway in how job stress stimulates employees to behave in CWB, which is a dysfunctional workplace reaction to one's adverse evaluation of one's work situation (Robinson, 2008). CWB consists of intentional behaviours that harm organisations and employees in the organisations (Spector & Fox, 2002). For example, research shows that organisations lose billions of dollars through CWB (Dunlop & Lee, 2004), which is a prevalent problem that organisations seek to mitigate (Whelpley et al., 2016). We argue that mitigating the effect of job stress might contribute to reducing CWB in organisations, and this may be explained by the negative affect states of employees.

Additionally, this study explores the boundary condition of trait narcissism in the nexus between job stress and CWB, to better understand how personality traits and for which levels of narcissism- high or low evoke the most behavioural responses in the form of CWB as a result of job stress. The role of personality traits such as the Big Five personality and proactive personality, in understanding job stressors and employee behaviours has been well studied in the literature (e.g., Sur & Ng, 2014; Zhang et al., 2019). However, the roles of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism as two related but independent facets of narcissism (Zajenkowski & Szymaniak, 2021) as a boundary condition have been largely understudied (for an exception on grandiose narcissism, and the dark triad of narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy, see Clercq et al., 2019; Meurs et al., 2013). This is relevant considering that personality differences can explain how individuals respond to workplace stressors and display CWBs (Meurs et al., 2013).

Narcissism is mostly studied in its subclinical form in industrial/organisational psychology (e.g., Braun et al., 2018; Wirtz & Rigotti, 2020). Although, grandiose narcissism has been linked to increased psychological reactivity of women when faced with workplace adversity or frustration (Cheng et al., 2013), there is an opportunity to know how both vulnerable and grandiose narcissists (those high on the continuum) behave when faced with job stress, with research suggesting that vulnerable narcissists exhibit more emotional and psychological reactions in response to stress (Borráz-León et al., 2023). We rely on the conservation of resources theory (COR, Hobfoll, 2001) and integrate it into the stressor emotions model (Spector & Fox, 2005) as our overarching theoretical framework, to contend that exploring both facets of narcissism will give us a better understanding of the behavioural responses of individuals in relation to their emotions at work. This will inform organisations on how best to manage employees in the face of ever-present job stressors (Liu et al., 2021). In so doing, our study contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, we extend the emotions and job stress literature (e.g., Akaighe et al., 2025; Rathi & Kumar, 2022; Sprung & Jex, 2012) by proposing an emotional pathway, specifically, negative affect states, through which job stress may evoke CWB. Drawing on the stressor-emotions model (Spector & Fox, 2005), we posit that job stress triggers emotional strain, which in turn influences behavioural responses in the workplace. Second, we examine vulnerable narcissism as a boundary condition in the relationship between job stress and negative affect states. Vulnerable narcissism, characterised by emotional sensitivity and insecurity (Jauk et al., 2017), may heighten employees' emotional reactivity to stress, making them more susceptible to negative affective states (Coleman et al., 2019; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Grounded in the COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), we propose that individuals high in vulnerable narcissism perceive stress as a threat to their psychological resources, thereby amplifying emotional strain and its behavioural consequences. Third, we explore grandiose narcissism as a distinct moderator in the same pathway. While traditionally viewed as emotionally resilient (Sękowski et al., 2023), emerging perspectives suggest that individuals high in grandiose narcissism may also exhibit emotional volatility under stress, particularly when their inflated self-concept is challenged (Borráz-León et al., 2023). By investigating both narcissism subtypes independently, we contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how personality traits shape emotional and behavioural responses to job stress, with implications for workplace interventions and support strategies. See our theoretical model in Fig. 1.
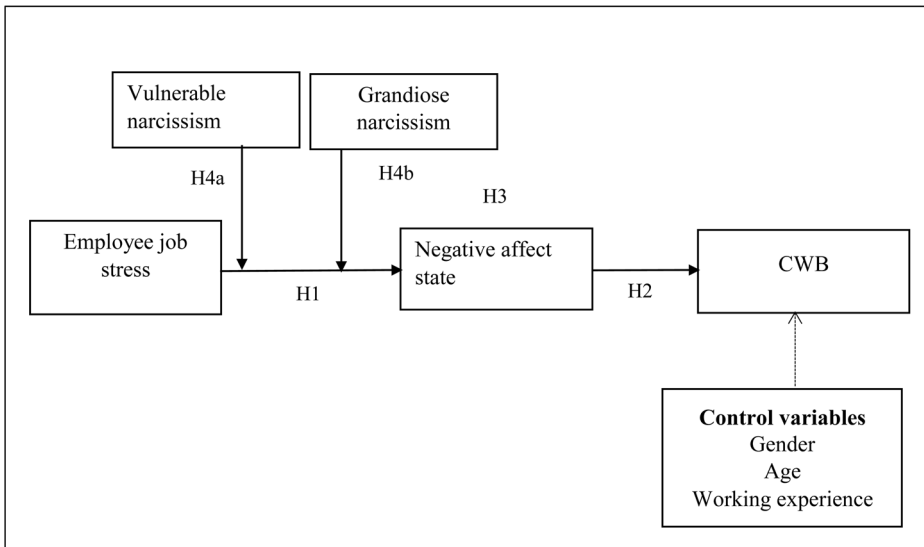
Fig. 1 The hypothetical model. Source: Authors conceptualisation

Understanding the Context

While job stress is universal across employees in all countries and contexts, the workplace is often a reflection of broader infrastructural and cultural challenges (Alika & Ejechi, 2024; Van Fossen & Chang, 2021). In Nigeria, employees across sectors navigate a landscape marked by high job demands, weak infrastructure, and a high-power distant culture (Oruh & Dibia, 2020; Okon et al., 2025). The Nigerian work culture is characterised by intense workloads, often without corresponding resources or support (Adisa et al., 2017). Empirical research shows that employees under high stress conditions tend to experience psychological withdrawal behaviours, such as disengagement, minimal effort, and mental absenteeism. These behaviours are not signs of laziness but rather coping mechanisms in response to overwhelming demands and lack of autonomy (Akaighe et al., 2025).

Nigeria's infrastructural deficits, especially poor transportation systems and erratic electricity supply, are notable socio-cultural realities (Ani et al., 2025; George & Akaighe, 2017a). Employees often arrive at work already fatigued from traffic congestion or power outages that disrupt sleep and home routines (Echebiri et al., 2024). These stressors are rarely acknowledged in performance evaluations but have a direct impact on concentration, punctuality, and emotional stability (Gbadamosi & Ross, 2012). In their study on university employees, Adeleke et al. (2025) found that perceived stress was strongly associated with anxiety and depression, especially among staff who had to juggle professional responsibilities with infrastructural challenges like unreliable internet and power supply.

Furthermore, Nigeria's hierarchical organisational culture often discourages open communication and feedback (Akanji et al., 2020). Employees are expected to defer to authority, even when leadership is narcissistic or unsupportive (Akaighe et al., 2025). This cultural dynamic creates a psychological distance between employees and decision-makers, limiting opportunities for stress relief through dialogue or reform (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Workers feel unheard, undervalued, and trapped in rigid systems that prioritise control over well-being (Akaighe et al., 2025; Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

In Nigeria's diverse professional sectors, from hospitals to banks, universities to police departments, job stress has emerged as a pervasive force shaping employee behaviour, performance, and well-being (e.g., Akaighe et al., 2025; Ayatse & Ikyanyon, 2012; Daniel, 2019; Oladipupo, 2016). A growing body of research paints a vivid picture of how stress, often overlooked, silently erodes productivity, morale, psychological withdrawal, and organisational citizenship behaviours (Akaighe et al., 2025; Ayatse & Ikyanyon, 2012; Oladipupo, 2016). In the healthcare sector, nurses grapple with intense workloads, emotional strain, and limited support systems. Studies reveal that stress not only diminishes nurses' quality of life but also affects their caring behaviours towards patients (Abdulhameed et al., 2024; Olusegun et al., 2014). The ripple effect is profound on reduced empathy, increased absenteeism, and compromised patient outcomes (Abdulhameed et al., 2024). Similarly, unmanaged stress among nurses leads to aggression and withdrawal behaviours (Paul & Obed-Ojukwu, 2025).

In academic institutions, lecturers face stressors ranging from work-home conflict to management neglect (Sonna & Nkechi, 2021). Research evidence shows that while management support improves lecturer-student relations, work overload impairs teaching effectiveness and research output, and other adverse effects like passive resistance to active sabotage (Sonna & Nkechi, 2021). In the banking industry, research reveals a direct correlation between work stress and workplace deviance (Adekanmbi & Ukpere, 2019). Employees under pressure are more likely to engage in behaviours like time theft, insubordination, and falsification of records (Adekanmbi & Ukpere, 2019; Suroso et al., 2020). Similarly, in manufacturing firms, studies found that stressors such as role ambiguity, long hours, and lack of control over work pace significantly reduce employee performance (Olukayode, 2017). The more intense the stress, the lower the productivity (Olukayode, 2017). In the public service, police officers face a unique blend of supervisory pressure and occupational stress, leading to job dissatisfaction and increased turnover intention (Adebayo & Ogunsina, 2011).

Across sectors, these studies collectively underscore a critical insight that job stress in Nigeria is not just a personal burden; it is an organisational and societal challenge. Whether in hospitals, universities, banks, police stations, or diverse professional settings, stress undermines the very fabric of productivity and positive workplace behaviours (Akaighe et al., 2025; Olukayode, 2017). Building on these insights and contextual background, this study integrates employees' emotions and traits, specifically, negative affect states, vulnerable narcissism and grandiose narcissism into a mediation and moderation model, examining how employee job stress affects their CWB.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

In theorising how an individual's stress level evokes emotions that influence their behaviours, both the stressor-emotion model (Spector & Fox, 2005) and COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) have been employed to juxtapose the linkage between work stress and individual behaviours on the one hand, and the intervening emotional states that may induce the relationship on the other hand. Arguments from the stressor-emotion model are that chronic

stressful work conditions could evoke emotions, and the emotions can occasion individual employee behaviours (Spector & Fox, 2005). The model emphasises that a stressor cannot cause an individual to behave in an unproductive way without first inducing an emotional reaction necessitating the behaviours. Hence, an employee's perception of work environmental situations/conditions as unfair may evoke emotional affect, which plays a cardinal role in inducing CWB (Zhang et al., 2019). Going with this reasoning and domiciling in our study context, we argue that stress may evoke emotional states causing CWB in the workplace.

In addition, the COR theory also substantiated the intervening factors contributing to the stress-CWB relationship. As posited by Hobfoll and colleagues (2018), the COR theory is based on four cardinal principles, including the primacy of loss, resource investment, the gain paradox, and desperation. While the first three principles postulate why stress occurs within the threshold of the resources conserved or depleted, the fourth posits that individuals tend to respond with irrational behaviours (such as CWB) when their resources are overstretched or depleted (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Drawing on the COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018), we argue that both vulnerable and grandiose narcissism may function as psychological strategies for conserving or compensating for threatened resources in response to job stress. These narcissistic traits may intensify emotional reactions to stressors, thereby increasing the likelihood of engaging in CWB as a maladaptive coping mechanism (see Grijalva & Newman, 2015).

Both vulnerable and grandiose narcissism are personality traits characterised by self-aggrandisement, aggressiveness, heightened ego, a desire for control and recognition, admiration for success, and self-love (Grapsas et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2012). Although these two dimensions of narcissism may overlap in their antagonistic interpersonal responses, they differ in their underlying symptoms and behavioural expressions (Miller et al., 2012). Vulnerable narcissism is often associated with distrust, interpersonal hostility, negative affectivity, and histories of abuse or neglect, whereas grandiose narcissism is marked by immodesty, deceitfulness, and rebelliousness (Miller et al., 2011). Drawing on the stress-emotion model (Spector & Fox, 2005) and the COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), we argue that employees' experiences of job stress may lead to the exhibition of CWB. We further contend that this relationship is not only driven by negative emotional affect but is also exacerbated by dispositional traits of vulnerable and grandiose narcissism.

Job Stress, Negative Affect States and CWB

Numerous studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between job stress and CWB. As previously discussed, we further examine negative affect states as a key mechanism underlying this association. Extant literature (e.g., Fox & Freeman, 2011a, b) on stress suggests that a stressor can significantly impact employees' physical and mental well-being. A stressed employee is likely to experience anxiety, depression and other negative emotional states that are detrimental to their well-being (Sonnentag et al., 2023). These can therefore evoke negative work behaviours such as CWB (Spector & Fox, 2005). Micro-level stressors such as role ambiguity, role overload, and abusive supervision affect employees' behaviours at work (Ugwu et al., 2017). Beyond these micro-level antecedents, macro-level stressors (e.g., poor economy, financial constraints, infrastructure deficits, the experience of transportation stress to work, and weather, etc.) have been reported to influence workers'

workplace behaviours. Each of these factors reported has been empirically found to evoke stress and elicit undesirable workplace behaviours (e.g., Nwani et al., 2017; Odle-Dusseau et al., 2018).

As job stressors elicit negative emotions, we expect and argue that the negative emotions will constitute negative affect states that will, in turn, evoke negative behaviours. Negative affect is a psychological strain experienced by an individual, indicating the presence of a problematic situation that cannot be eliminated but managed with coping mechanisms (Krischer et al., 2010). It is expected that when an employee experiences negative emotions due to a stressor, such an individual may likely perceive the negative feelings as jeopardising their goals and situation. Hence, CWB can be employed by the employee as a means of not only expressing the negative affect states but also as a coping mechanism. CWB can be used as a less effective negative response by individuals who experience stressor-induced negative emotions (Spector & Fox, 2002). From the above review, we develop the following hypotheses:

H1: Job stress is positively related to negative affect states.
H2: Negative affect states are positively related to CWB.
H3: Negative affect states mediate the job stress-CWB relationship.

Vulnerable and Grandiose Narcissism as a Moderator between Job Stress and Negative Affect States

Central to the stressor-emotion model (Spector & Fox, 2005) is the idea that individual personality traits shape how employees perceive and respond to workplace stressors. Employees do not react uniformly to stress, rather, their emotional responses are filtered through dispositional tendencies that influence both the intensity and expression of affective states (Joo et al., 2012) This perspective is supported by a growing body of research showing that traits such as proactive personality (Zhang et al., 2019), work locus of control (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024), and emotional intelligence (Ugwu et al., 2017) moderate the stress-affect relationship. In line with this, we focus on vulnerable and grandiose narcissism as distinct personality traits that may moderate the link between job stress and negative affect. Drawing on the COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), we argue that narcissistic traits influence how individuals appraise stress and regulate emotions. COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) posits that stress arises when individuals perceive a threat to their valued resources, be they emotional, psychological, or social. For narcissistic individuals, particularly those high in vulnerable or grandiose traits, stress may be perceived as a direct threat to their self-concept, triggering intense emotional reactions.

Vulnerable narcissists, characterised by insecurity, hypersensitivity, and emotional fragility (Miller et al., 2011), are especially prone to negative affect when exposed to stress. Their heightened sensitivity to criticism and perceived inadequacy makes them more likely to interpret workplace stressors as personal failures or threats, leading to emotional depletion. Empirical evidence supports this view that individuals high in vulnerable narcissism exhibited stronger cortisol responses to psychosocial stress, indicating heightened physiological and emotional reactivity (Borráz-León et al., 2023). Similarly, research demonstrated that vulnerable narcissists are more likely to experience negative affect when exposed to evaluative stress, due to their low tolerance for perceived rejection or failure (Shankar, 2021).

These findings suggest that vulnerable narcissism intensifies the emotional impact of stress, making the stress-negative affect relationship stronger for individuals high in this trait.

Grandiose narcissists, on the other hand, are typically viewed as emotionally resilient due to their self-assuredness, dominance, and inflated self-concept (Wirtz & Rigotti, 2020). However, emerging research challenges this assumption. While grandiose narcissists may project confidence, they are not immune to emotional volatility, especially when their status or self-image is threatened. Borráz-León et al. (2023) showed that grandiose narcissists also exhibit measurable cortisol reactivity under stress, suggesting that their emotional responses are more reactive than previously assumed. Research further revealed that grandiose narcissists experience moment-to-moment fluctuations in narcissistic states, including vulnerability, indicating that their emotional stability may be more fragile than it appears (Edershile & Wright, 2021). These findings imply that grandiose narcissists may react strongly to stress when it undermines their sense of control or superiority, thereby amplifying negative affect. Taken together, these insights support our hypotheses that both vulnerable and grandiose narcissism moderate the relationship between job stress and negative affect states, albeit through different psychological mechanisms. Vulnerable narcissists internalise stress as a threat to their emotional security, while grandiose narcissists react defensively when their self-enhancing beliefs are challenged. Therefore, we hypothesise:

> H4a: Vulnerable narcissism moderates the job stress–negative affect states relationship such that the relationship is stronger when employee vulnerable narcissism is high (vs. low).
> H4b: Grandiose narcissism moderates the job stress–negative affect states relationship such that the relationship is stronger when employee grandiose narcissism is high (vs. low).

Method

Procedure and Participants

The sample consists of employees working full-time from various industries in Nigeria, which include banking, insurance, education, information technology, logistics, manufacturing, energy, oil and gas, and healthcare. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from a UK university, and informed consent was sought from all participants. The purpose of the study was clearly outlined in the participant information sheets, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time and of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. The participants were recruited via the Human Resources Department of their organisations and personal and professional contacts. They were asked to complete a set of questionnaires in two parts with a six-week interval between the two waves to mitigate common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). At time 1, participants completed questions about their demographic information, job stress, vulnerable and grandiose narcissism. At time 2, they completed questions about their negative affect states and CWB. After excluding some participants due to dropout and data screening, the final sample consisted of 358 employees. Of these, 56% were male and 44% were female. The average age of the respondents was 30 years (SD = 9.8).

Measures

Job Stress

We measured job stress using the 4-item stress questionnaire (Keller, 2001). An example item is "Aspects of my job are a source of frustration to me" (Cronbach's alpha = 0.70). The scales ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Negative affect states. We measured negative affect states using the 10-item Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1998). An example item is "In the past few days, have you felt hostile" (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84). The scales ranged from 1 = very slightly or not at all to 5 = extremely.

Vulnerable Narcissism

We measured vulnerable narcissism using the 10-item Hendin and Cheek (1997) Hyper-sensitive Narcissism Scale, which is widely used in measuring vulnerable narcissism in individuals (Fossati et al., 2009). An example item is "my feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or the slightest remarks of others" (Cronbach's alpha = 0.83). The scales ranged from 1 = very untrue to 5 = very true.

Grandiose Narcissism

We measured grandiose narcissism using the 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames et al., 2006). An example item is "I like having authority over people" (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91). The scales ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree, which have been shown to increase reliability (Grosz et al., 2019).

CWB. We measured CWB using the 10-item scale (Spector et al., 2010). An example item is "I purposely wasted my employer's materials/supplies" (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88). The scale ranged from 1 = never to 5 = every day.

Control Variable

We controlled for employee gender (1 = male, 2 = female), age and working experience, which are likely to influence job stress (e.g., Havlovic & Keenan, 2020; Vagg et al., 2002).

Analysis

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in Analysis of Moments Structure (AMOS, 28.0) to confirm if the hypothesised measurement model fits the data (Kline, 1998). The indices included Chi-square/degree of freedom (CMIN/df), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Root Mean Square Error of Estimation (RMSEA). We ran a five-factor structural model including job stress, negative affect states, vulnerable narcissism, grandiose narcissism, and CWB. Thereafter, we conducted a CFA with four other different models (four-factor, three-factor, two-factor, and one-factor). Before conducting the main analyses, the data were examined for both univariate and multivariate assumptions (Nimon, 2012). Univariate normality was assessed through skewness and

kurtosis values, which fell within acceptable ranges. Multivariate assumptions, including linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity, were also evaluated (Cain et al., 2017). Variance inflation factors (VIFs) were below the recommended threshold of 5, indicating no serious multicollinearity issues (Kalnins & Praitis Hill, 2025). These checks ensured the robustness and validity of the subsequent analyses.

To assess the reliability and convergent validity of the constructs, we calculated both Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The CR values for all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency (Cheah et al., 2018). The CR values are job stress (CR = 0.90), negative affect states (CR = 0.98), vulnerable narcissism (CR = 0.98), grandiose narcissism (CR = 0.99), and CWB (CR = 0.98). Similarly, the AVE values for all constructs were above the 0.50 benchmark, supporting convergent validity (Cheah et al., 2018) are job stress (AVE = 0.70), negative affect (AVE = 0.84), vulnerable narcissism (AVE = 0.83), grandiose narcissism (AVE = 0.91), and CWB (AVE = 0.88). These results, alongside the strong model fit indices from the confirmatory factor analysis, provide robust evidence of construct validity. For the hypothetical relationships, we used linear regression analysis in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to test the direct relationships posited in H1 and H2. To test the mediation and moderation hypotheses, we used the PROCESS macro for SPSS with 5,000 iterations (Hayes, 2018). We centred all continuous variables for the indirect test to reduce multicollinearity between the interaction term and its constituent variables, and to ensure accurate interpretation of the moderating effects (Shieh, 2011).

Results

The five-factor model estimation show a stronger fit ($\chi2$ /df = 1.59, RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90) than other alternative models; four-factor ($\chi2$ /df = 2.16, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.83, TLI = 0.81), three-factor ($\chi2$ /df = 2.19, RMSEA = 0.04, CFI = 0.82, TLI = 0.80), two-factor ($\chi2$ /df = 2.85, RMSEA = 0.04, CFI = 0.73, TLI = 0.69) and one-factor ($\chi2$ / df = 3.47, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.63, TLI = 0.58). We present the means, standard deviations and correlation coefficients of the study variables in Table 1 and the results of the direct hypotheses in Table 2 and indirect hypotheses in Table 3. The results show that job stress was significant and positively related to negative affect states ($B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.05$, p

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations of the study variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	1.51	0.62								
2. Age	30.67	6.83	-0.04							
3. Working experience	6.91	5.12	-0.06	0.76**						
4. Job stress	2.80	0.89	-0.16*	-0.15*	-0.02	(0.70)				
5. Negative affect	1.97	0.70	-0.09	-0.02	-0.03	0.18*	(0.84)			
6. Vulnerable narcissism	2.88	0.81	-0.04	-0.23**	-0.16**	-0.19**	0.18**	(0.83)		
7. Grandiose narcissism	4.51	0.91	-0.02	-0.10*	-0.07	-0.21**	0.21**	0.44**	(0.91)	
8. CWB	1.54	0.62	-0.05	-0.02	-0.04	0.19**	0.48**	0.11	0.02	(0.88)

CWB = Counterproductive work behaviours. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01. Gender: 1 = male; 2 = female. Coefficient alpha reliability estimates are presented along the diagonal

Table 2 Unstandardized regression coefficients of job stress on negative affect States (Model 1) and negative affect States on CWB (Model 2)

| Variables | Negative affect states | | | CWB | | |
| | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
	B	SE	P	B	SE	P
Constant	1.77	0.35	0.000**	0.47	0.29	0.106
Gender	-0.73	0.09	0.397	-0.42	0.07	0.558
Age	-0.01	0.01	0.961	0.01	0.01	0.372
Working experience	-0.01	0.02	0.698	-0.12	0.01	0.365
Job stress	0.11	0.05	0.030*			
Negative affect				0.55	0.07	0.000**
Job stress X vulnerable narcissism	0.09	0.05	0.049*			
Job stress X grandiose narcissism	0.10	0.04	0.018*			
R^2	0.04			0.32		
Adjusted R^2	0.01			0.29		
ΔR^2	0.03			0.30		
F	1.57			18.47		

Gender: 1 = male; 2 = female. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

Table 3 Estimates of mediation of positive and negative affect States and moderation of vulnerable and grandiose narcissism

Variables	Effect	Boot SE	CI
The mediating effect of negative affect	0.06	0.03	([0.01, 0.12])
M -1 SD vulnerable narcissism	0.06	0.05	([-0.03, 0.15])
M +1D vulnerable narcissism	0.21	0.06	([0.09, 0.32])
M-1 SD grandiose narcissism	0.12	0.05	([0.02, 0.22])
M + 1SD grandiose narcissism	0.30	0.06	([0.18, 0.41])

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

< 0.05), supporting H1. Also, negative affect states are significantly and positively related to CWB ($B = 0.55$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.01$), thus supporting H2.

For the mediation effect, negative affect states mediated the relationship between job stress and CWB (*indirect effect* = 0.06, *SE* = 0.03; 95% CI [0.01; 0.12]), supporting H3. For the moderation tests, vulnerable narcissism and grandiose narcissism moderated the indirect effect of job stress on negative affect states (B = 0.09, SE = 0.05; $p < 0.005$) and (B = 0.10, $SE = 0.04$; $p < 0.005$) respectively, lending support for H4a and H4b. The simple slope test revealed that this interaction was stronger for those high in vulnerable narcissism (Figure 2; *B = 0.21*, *SE* = 0.06; 95% CI [0.09; 0.32]), as opposed to those low (*B* = 0.06, *SE* = 0.05; 95% CI [−0.03; 0.15]). Similarly, the simple slope test revealed that the interaction between job stress and grandiose narcissism on negative affect states was stronger for those high in grandiose narcissism (Fig. 3; *B = 0.30*, *SE* = 0.06; 95% CI [0.18; 0.41]) vs. low (*B* = 0.12, *SE* = 0.05; 95% CI [0.02; 0.22]).
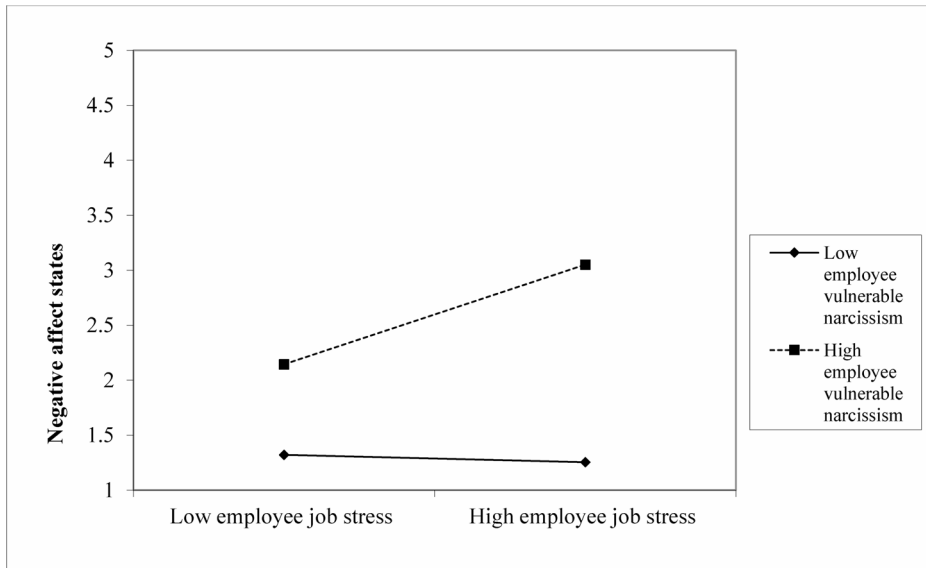
Fig. 2 Interaction of job stress and vulnerable narcissism on negative affect states

Discussion

We developed a mediation model of negative affect states in the relationship between employees' job stress and CWB, drawing on the stressor-emotions model (Spector & Fox, 2005). Our findings confirmed that job stress significantly predicted negative affect states, which in turn significantly predicted CWB. Our analysis further revealed that negative affect states mediated the relationship between employee job stress and CWB, highlighting the emotional pathway through which stress translates into deviant workplace behaviours. Importantly, the effect size of the path from negative affect to CWB (B = 0.55) is substantial, suggesting that emotional dysregulation is a strong predictor of behavioural outcomes. Our moderation analyses further revealed that both vulnerable and grandiose narcissism intensified the relationship between job stress and negative affect states. The interaction effects (B = 0.09 and B = 0.10, respectively, both $p < 0.005$) suggest that narcissistic traits serve as amplifiers of emotional reactivity to stress. Notably, the simple slope tests showed that the effect of job stress on negative affect was stronger for employees high in narcissism, particularly grandiose narcissism. This underscores that employee narcissism traits are notable boundary conditions under which stress leads to emotional and behavioural dysfunction, aligning with COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), which posits that individuals with fragile self-concepts may perceive stress as a greater threat to their psychological resources.

Beyond the focal variables, our correlation matrix (Table 1) revealed significant associations between age, working experience, and narcissistic traits. Specifically, age and experience were negatively correlated with vulnerable narcissism (r = -0.23 and -0.16, respectively), suggesting that maturity and tenure may buffer narcissistic vulnerability. This finding is particularly relevant in cultural contexts where hierarchical respect and seniority are valued, such as in many African and collectivist cultures (Akaighe et al., 2025; George
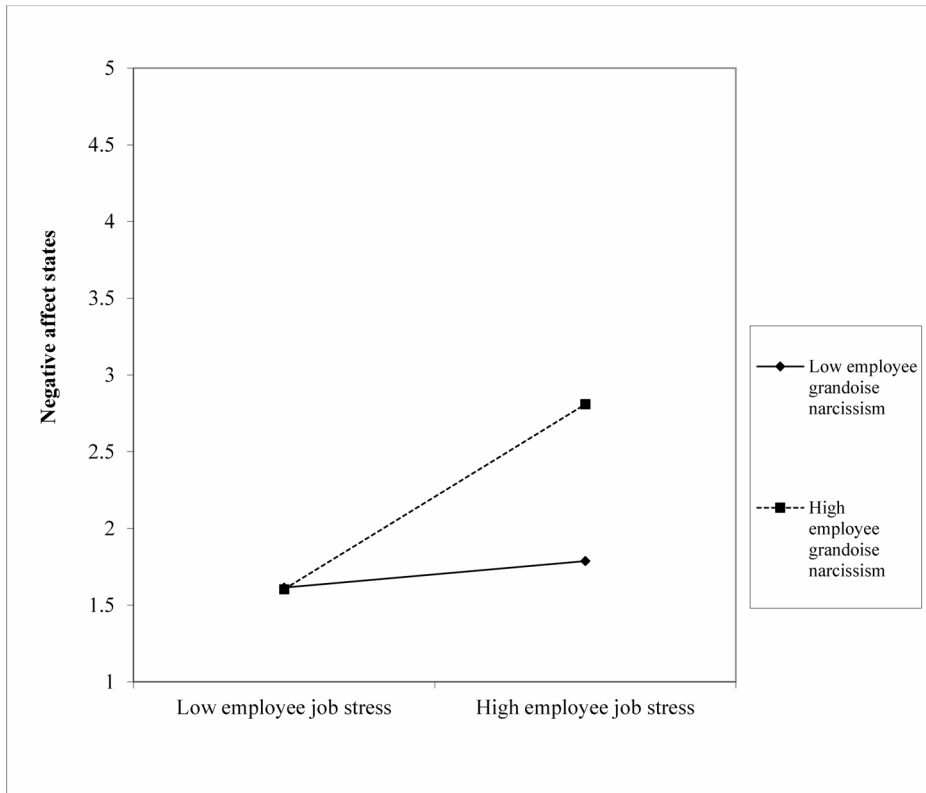
Fig. 3 Interaction of job stress and grandiose narcissism on negative affect states

& Akaighe, 2017b). In such settings, older or more experienced employees may internalise norms of humility and emotional restraint, reducing the expression of narcissistic traits and their behavioural consequences (Scheibe & Moghimi, 2021). Furthermore, our analysis also revealed that age and gender are significantly related to job stress, adding a valuable layer of insight. Specifically, older employees reported lower levels of job stress, suggesting that with age and experience comes greater emotional maturity and resilience. This aligns with research showing that older individuals tend to develop more adaptive emotion regulation strategies and internalise norms of humility and emotional restraint (Scheibe & Moghimi, 2021; Hendijani & Sohrabi, 2019). In cultural contexts such as Nigeria, where respect for seniority and emotional composure are highly valued, older employees may be better equipped to navigate workplace stress without resorting to maladaptive behaviours. Similarly, female employees in our sample reported lower job stress than their male counterparts, a finding that may reflect gendered differences in coping styles and emotional expression. Women in collectivist cultures often adopt communal and emotionally expressive roles, while men by the patriarchal culture as more of breadwinners who feel compelled to work harder and provide for their families in line with societal gendered congruity norms (Akaighe et al., 2025; Del Triana et al., 2024; Pepple et al., 2024), thus explaining while men experience more stress among male employees.

Theoretical Implications

Our research makes three key theoretical contributions to the literature on job stress, emotional responses, and personality dynamics in the workplace. First, we advance the stressor-emotions model (Spector & Fox, 2005) by identifying negative affect states as a critical emotional pathway through which job stress leads to CWB. While prior studies have acknowledged the emotional consequences of stress (e.g., Liu et al., 2021), our findings provide empirical support for a mechanism of negative affect states through which job stress drives employees to engage in behaviours that undermine organisational goals. By integrating this with COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), we show that stress not only triggers emotional strain but also depletes psychological resources, thereby increasing the likelihood of behavioural dysfunction. This contribution deepens our understanding of how emotional exhaustion translates into workplace deviance.

Second, we contribute to the literature on vulnerable narcissism (Han et al., 2024) by demonstrating its role as a moderator in the stress-emotion-behaviour pathway. Employees high in vulnerable narcissism, characterised by hypersensitivity, insecurity, and emotional fragility (Borráz-León et al., 2023), exhibited significantly stronger negative affective responses to job stress. This finding suggests that vulnerable narcissism amplifies emotional reactivity and impairs coping (Stern et al., 2025), making these individuals more susceptible to stress-induced behavioural problems. Our study thus extends COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) by showing that vulnerable narcissists perceive stress as a greater threat to their self-concept and resource stability, leading to heightened emotional and behavioural consequences (Borráz-León et al., 2023).

Third, we isolate grandiose narcissism as a distinct moderator in the same pathway. Unlike vulnerable narcissists, grandiose individuals, marked by dominance, entitlement, and self-enhancement (Akaighe & Adisa, 2025), also showed intensified emotional responses to job stress, but through a different psychological lens. Their inflated self-view may make them more reactive to perceived threats to status or control, resulting in elevated negative affect. This finding challenges the assumption that grandiose narcissists are emotionally invulnerable and highlights their potential for emotional volatility under stress (Borráz-León et al., 2023). By distinguishing between these two narcissism subtypes, our study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how personality traits shape emotional and behavioural outcomes in the workplace.

Practical Implications

Our study provides practical insights for organisations seeking to reduce CWB and foster a workplace culture that promotes positive behaviours and employee thriving. Our findings show that job stress increases negative affect, which in turn elevates the likelihood of CWB. First, our research suggests that organisations should implement structured job resource audits, where line managers and HR teams jointly assess whether employees have the tools, autonomy, and support needed to meet job demands (Bakker et al., 2007). For example, monthly one-on-one check-ins can be institutionalised to discuss workload, clarify role expectations, and identify signs of role overload or ambiguity. These conversations should be documented and followed up with tailored support plans, such as workload redistribution or mentoring.

Second, to manage job stress and foster positive emotions, organisations should design and implement tiered job stress intervention programmes. These should include primary interventions such as redesigning high-stress roles, introducing flexible work arrangements, and training managers in stress-preventive leadership styles. For instance, rotating employees out of high-pressure roles every six months can reduce chronic stress exposure. Also, secondary interventions such as offering stress management workshops, mindfulness training, and access to digital mental health platforms. Organisations can partner with providers of digital mental health to offer guided meditation and resilience-building exercises. Furthermore, tertiary interventions, such as after peak stress periods (e.g., product launches or audits), offer recovery strategies such as mandatory rest days, short sabbaticals, or access to in-house counselling services (Cooper & Cartwright, 1997; Perski et al., 2017). HR should track usage and outcomes of these services to ensure effectiveness.

Third, regarding the moderating role of narcissism, our findings have important implications for managing employees with high levels of vulnerable or grandiose narcissism. Since these individuals are more reactive to job stress, organisations should train managers to recognise narcissistic traits and respond with empathy and structure. For example, leadership development programmes can include modules on managing difficult personalities and emotional regulation. Additionally, management should foster a culture of psychological safety by encouraging open communication, regular feedback loops, and peer support groups. Anonymous pulse surveys can be used quarterly to monitor emotional climate and identify departments where narcissistic expressions or stress reactions are escalating. Promoting a climate of openness, feedback, and authenticity can serve as an antidote to narcissistic expressions (Gardner et al., 2021), reduce emotional reactivity, and ultimately lower the risk of CWB.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Notwithstanding the valuable theoretical contributions and practical implications of our study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although our use of two-wave time-lagged data helped reduce the potential for common method bias, we did not account for autocorrelations. As a result, causal inferences cannot be confidently drawn (Ogbonnaya et al., 2023). Future research should consider longitudinal designs with repeated measurements of key variables to better capture the dynamic and reciprocal relationships between job stress, emotional states, and workplace behaviours. Second, our data were collected from multiple organisations within a single country. While this approach allowed us to reflect job stress across diverse organisational settings and extend research on job stress and CWB in both Western and non-Western contexts, the generalisability of our findings remains limited. Sociocultural and contextual factors unique to non-Western countries like Nigeria may influence how job stress is experienced and expressed. We therefore encourage future studies to replicate this research in other cultural contexts, particularly comparing collectivist and individualist societies (Mesquita, 2001), to explore how cultural norms moderate the relationship between job stress and workplace behaviours. Third, while our study discussed micro and macro-level antecedents of job stress and highlighted contextual factors that may contribute to stress in the workplace, we did not empirically examine or establish these factors as predictors of employee job stress. Future research should investigate specific organisational, interpersonal, and individual-level antecedents such as leader-

ship style, workload, role ambiguity, and job insecurity as potential predictors of job stress to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its origins. Finally, although we drew on the stressor-emotion model to examine negative affect as a mediator in the job stress-CWB relationship, other psychological mechanisms may also play a role. Future research could explore alternative mediators such as role-breadth self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion, or psychological detachment to deepen our understanding of how job stress translates into behavioural outcomes.

Conclusion

This study advances our understanding of how job stress influences CWB through the mediating role of negative affect, while also highlighting the moderating effects of vulnerable and grandiose narcissism. Drawing on the stressor-emotion model and COR theory, our findings underscore the emotional mechanisms through which job stress translates into behavioural outcomes in the workplace. Specifically, employees experiencing high levels of job stress are more likely to exhibit negative emotional states, which in turn increase the likelihood of engaging in CWB. Moreover, individuals high in narcissistic traits, both vulnerable and grandiose, are more emotionally reactive to stress, amplifying the risk of maladaptive behaviours.

Declarations

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