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Leadership in the eye of the beholder: Follower self-esteem is associated with divergent perceptions of leadership ability for dominant and prestigious leaders

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Abstract

Objective: Drawing from dual-strategies theory, leader-member exchange theory, and several theories of self-esteem, we develop and test hypotheses about how followers' self-esteem predicts their perceptions of dominant and prestigious leaders' leadership ability.

Method: Across four studies ($N = 1568$), we tested the association between self-esteem and perceptions of leadership ability for dominant and prestigious leaders.

Results: Individuals with high self-esteem perceived greater leadership ability in prestigious leaders than did those with low self-esteem and individuals with low self-esteem perceived greater leadership ability in dominant leaders than did those with high self-esteem. These results emerged across ratings of leaders from hypothetical vignettes (Studies 1 and 4), abstract beliefs about what constitutes good leadership (Study 1), past personal experiences with leaders (Study 2) and clips of leaders from reality television (Study 3). In Study 4, we also tested potential mechanisms. Compared with followers with low self-esteem, followers with high self-esteem found prestigious leaders more trustworthy, and they anticipated feeling inauthentic around a dominant leader.

Conclusions: Self-esteem is reliably and robustly related to perceived leadership ability of dominant and prestigious leaders, and these differences might stem from differences in trust in prestigious leaders and anticipated authenticity around dominant leaders.

KEYWORDS

dominance, followership, leadership, prestige, self-esteem

1 | INTRODUCTION

No matter how talented or charismatic a leader might be, they depend on followers to accomplish group goals. As a result, leaders must influence followers in ways that motivate them to execute the leader's vision (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Their choice of influence strategies can determine whether followers develop a relationship with the leader characterized by enthusiastic commitment, grudging obedience or active revolt. These relationships are massively consequential, affecting outcomes including follower performance and satisfaction (Gerstner & Day, 1997) that may well decide the fate of the leader and the entire group.

According to dual-strategies theory (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001), leaders differ in their use of two influence

strategies—dominance and prestige. Dominant and prestigious leaders demonstrate notably different behavioural tendencies, personal desires and impacts on group performance (for reviews see Maner & Case, 2016; Tracy et al., 2020), but it remains unclear whether dispositional factors of followers are associated with their perceptions of dominant and prestigious leaders. Here, we investigate how followers' self-esteem predicts perceptions of leadership ability. By doing so, the present research can help explain why followers vary in their reactions to specific leadership strategies and how these reactions predict important outcomes in followers' lives such as job satisfaction and performance.

We apply dual-strategies theory, leader-member exchange theory, and several theories of self-esteem to develop and test hypotheses about the association between followers' self-esteem and their perceptions of dominant and prestigious leaders' leadership ability. One of the most widely studied individual differences in psychology (Harris & Orth, 2020), self-esteem reflects how worthy and valuable people feel relative to others (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem affects individuals' self-evaluations of their agentic qualities like skills and competencies (Rentzsch & Schröder-Abé, 2022) as well as their expectations and desires for social interactions and relationships (e.g., Harris & Orth, 2020; Leary & Baumeister, 2000), both of which can influence followers' reactions to leaders (Lord et al., 2017; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Thus, it is possible that the notable differences between how dominant and prestigious leaders engage with their followers are experienced quite differently by followers based on their self-esteem, and these different experiences result in different perceptions of leadership ability.

By testing this question, we answer a recent call for research on dual-strategies theory to address the perspective of followers, specifically leader–follower fit (McClanahan, 2020). Although past research has examined how self-esteem level and stability interact to predict implicit beliefs about the success of autocratic versus democratic leadership after priming participants with self-uncertainty (Schoel et al., 2011), research has yet to examine the role of followers' dispositions in their explicit evaluations of dominant and prestigious leaders.

1.1 | Dual strategies theory: Dominant and prestigious leadership

Dominance involves using intimidation and aggression to force deference from followers out of fear; in turn, dominant individuals are typically perceived as selfish, uncooperative and immoral (Cheng et al., 2010), and followers generally dislike and desire to avoid them (Cheng et al., 2013). In contrast, prestigious leaders inspire admiration in followers by demonstrating valuable knowledge and expertise, resulting in freely conferred deference based on desire to emulate the leader (Cheng et al., 2010). Prestigious individuals are seen as altruistic, cooperative and moral, and followers generally like and desire close contact with prestigious leaders (Cheng et al., 2013). Dominant and prestigious leadership are prevalent across several different contexts including traditional small-scale societies (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001), among university students (Cheng et al., 2013; McClanahan et al., 2022; Redhead et al., 2019), and contemporary workplaces around the world (Lee et al., 2021; Sung & Choi, 2021). Both strategies are effective ways to attain leadership (Cheng et al., 2013), but certain situational features moderate the effectiveness of each strategy, such as environmental uncertainty (Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017) and social conflict (Laustsen & Petersen, 2017).

Despite these advances in understanding the *situational* moderators of followers' attitudes towards dominant and prestigious leaders, as well as the factors that lead to perceptions of leaders' levels of dominance and prestige themselves (e.g., Halevy et al., 2011; van Kleef et al., 2021), no extant research has investigated whether *dispositional* factors of followers influence the perceived leadership ability of dominant and prestigious leaders (McClanahan, 2020). Across contexts, do all followers view dominant leaders as equally undesirable? And might some be generally less attracted to prestigious leaders than others?

1.2 | The role of self-esteem in judgments of leadership ability

Leader-member exchange theory posits that leaders have a unique relationship with each follower (Henderson et al., 2009). As such, this theory sees leadership as a relational process between leaders and each follower, rather than a leader-centric process in which followers are influenced by leaders, but not the other way around (Lord et al., 2017; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). High-quality leader–follower relationships are associated with many positive outcomes for followers, including greater job performance and reduced turnover intentions (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Henderson et al., 2009). Perhaps as a result, followers with high-quality relationships with leaders tend to evaluate the leader more positively than followers with lower-quality relationships (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961). Leaders and followers tend to develop high-quality relationships when leaders meet followers' expectations and desires for how leaders should behave (Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). In fact, one study found that

new employees who anticipated that their leader will meet their expectations and desires had higher-quality relationships with these leaders 6 months later (Liden et al., 1993). Therefore, if followers with different levels of self-esteem hold different expectations and desires for leaders, and these expectations and desires are related to dominance and prestige, then followers' self-esteem should, in part, affect their relationship with dominant and prestigious leaders, and ultimately their perceptions of leadership ability.

Compared with people with high self-esteem, people with low self-esteem feel less worthy and valuable, less socially included, and less respected and admired by others (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Mahadevan et al., 2019; Rosenberg, 1965). In addition, they are more attracted to social relationships and interactions that affirm their relatively negative attitude towards themselves (Swann, 2012). In contrast, those with high self-esteem tend to feel worthy, valuable, included by others, and respected and admired, and they show greater preference for relationships and interactions that affirm their self-perceived desirable qualities (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Mahadevan et al., 2019; Rosenberg, 1965; Swann, 2012). Considering these aspects of self-esteem, we propose that followers with high self-esteem perceive dominant leaders as worse leaders, compared with followers with low self-esteem, because dominant leaders more greatly violate these followers' expectations and desires. For example, dominant leaders' tendency to provide followers with negative evaluations (Cheng et al., 2010) violates the desire of individuals with high self-esteem to have others affirm their positive qualities (Swann, 2012). Additionally, dominant leaders exert strong control over followers (Lee et al., 2021), through tactics like isolating them from each other (Case & Maner, 2014; Maner & Mead, 2010), and are coercive towards them (Sung & Choi, 2021), which may be experienced more negatively by followers with high self-esteem due to greater expectations for social inclusion (Leary & Baumeister, 2000) and respect and admiration from others (Mahadevan et al., 2019).

Conversely, prestigious leaders tend to encourage social bonding among followers and provide them with autonomy (Case & Maner, 2014; Lee et al., 2021), be highly sensitive to followers' negative emotions (Case et al., 2021) and incorporate followers' preferences into their decisions, even when they know these preferences are counterproductive (Case et al., 2018). These tendencies should be especially valued by followers with high self-esteem due to their greater sense of worth and greater expectations for social inclusion and respect and admiration. In contrast, those with low self-esteem are less likely to expect and desire these kinds of behaviours because they are in opposition to their self-concepts (Swann, 2012). As a result, they might evaluate prestigious leaders more negatively than do followers with high self-esteem.

Alternatively, one might expect the opposite pattern of relationships. Studies show that self-esteem has a buffering effect to negative experiences such that individuals with high self-esteem report less distress both when anticipating negative events in the future and in response to negative events that actually occur (Baumeister et al., 1989; Brockner et al., 1987; Brown, 2010). These findings suggest that followers with high self-esteem would be less fearful of dominant leaders and suffer less emotionally when interacting with them, which may lead them to evaluate their leadership ability more positively than followers with low self-esteem. Importantly, however, a less negative emotional experience might not necessarily translate into more positive leadership evaluations. Despite greater emotional resilience, followers with high self-esteem are still unlikely to believe that a leader *should* interact with them in a dominant manner (Swann, 2012). As a result, their perceptions of leadership ability might decline because of this violation of their expectations and desires even though they are unlikely to feel as badly as followers with low self-esteem. By the same principles, followers with low self-esteem might be more likely to fear dominant leaders and feel worse after interacting with them. However, people with low self-esteem nonetheless report that negative evaluations feel more accurate and appropriate for them compared with positive evaluations, and they more greatly desire to interact with people who evaluate them negatively (North & Swann, 2009), suggesting they might not view dominant leaders as poor leaders even though they elicit greater negative emotions in these followers.

Similarly, after a positive experience with a prestigious leader, followers with low self-esteem might feel a greater emotional boost relative to their typical feelings about themselves, but they are still more likely to view positive feedback as unwarranted and inaccurate (North & Swann, 2009). This might reduce their perceptions of the leader's leadership ability because it violates their expectations, suggesting the leader either poorly understands them or has some ulterior motive for appraising them positively. Followers with high self-esteem, in contrast, should view these leaders' behaviours as both warranted and appropriate for them, thus increasing their perceptions that prestigious leaders are skilled and effective leaders.

In addition, although we hypothesize that self-esteem predicts divergent perceptions of leadership ability, we do not expect many, if any, followers to view dominant leaders as superior leaders to prestigious leaders because

objectively low self-esteem is quite rare. Distributions of self-esteem tend to be highly negatively skewed such that the mean level in any given sample is typically above the conceptual midpoint of the scale (Baumeister et al., 1989; Heine et al., 1999), indicating that individuals with low self-esteem tend to have slightly positive or ambivalent feelings about their self-worth. Given that these observations were made over 20 years ago, and evidence suggests that self-esteem has increased in recent generations in the West (Twenge et al., 2017), the distribution of self-esteem in America today is likely even more negatively skewed. As a result, we do not expect followers with low self-esteem to effusively praise dominant leaders or severely denigrate prestigious leaders, only that they will perceive dominant leaders more positively, and prestigious leaders more negatively, compared with their counterparts with high self-esteem. Said differently, we expect followers with high self-esteem to evaluate prestigious leaders' leadership ability much more positively than that of dominant leaders, but followers with low self-esteem to evaluate their leadership ability more equally.

We tested these hypotheses in four studies employing multiple methods with American adults recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk; total $N = 1568$). In each study, participants reported their self-esteem[1] and their perceptions of the effectiveness of dominant and/or prestigious leadership. In Study 4, we also assessed multiple mechanisms that might underlie the relationships observed in the prior studies, namely distrust, fear of negative evaluation, and anticipated authenticity, all of which might be relevant to confirming or denying followers' expectations and desires for leaders. Prior to Study 4, we describe these mechanisms and the rationale for their inclusion in detail. Three of these studies were pre-registered (https://osf.io/em23r/?view_only=7774ba0d87d647bfa39397bba4fdfdfe). In each study, we report all measures, manipulations and exclusions.

2 | STUDY 1

In Study 1, participants rated the leadership ability of a hypothetical dominant leader and a hypothetical prestigious leader. As a second test of our hypotheses, they also rated the extent to which they perceive "good leaders" as dominant and prestigious. For both measures, we pre-registered the hypotheses that people with high self-esteem would evaluate dominance more negatively, and prestige more positively, compared with those with low self-esteem (https://osf.io/em23r/?view_only=7774ba0d87d647bfa39397bba4fdfdfe).

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants

We recruited 265 American participants from Mturk. Three participants were excluded for failing an attention check, resulting in a final sample of 262 participants (45% female, 54% male, 1% neither male nor female or prefer not to answer; age range = 18–73, median = 34.5 years; see SOM.2 for detailed demographic information for each study). A power analysis conducted prior to data collection indicated that 212 participants would provide 80% power to detect a correlation between self-esteem and perceived leadership ability of size $r = .21$ (the average effect size in psychology; Richard et al., 2003).

2.1.2 | Procedure

After completing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965; $\alpha = .91$),[2] participants read two vignettes that described a dominant and a prestigious leader, respectively, in counterbalanced order. The vignettes were written based on the Dominance and Prestige Scale items (Cheng et al., 2010) and theoretical notions about how followers generally react to dominant and prestigious leaders (e.g., Maner & Case, 2016). The dominant leader, Manager A, was described as "a strong-willed leader who is willing to be aggressive to achieve Company A's goals" and "likes to have control over all of the employees' work"; these descriptions came directly from the Dominance Scale items "I am willing to use aggressive tactics to get my way" and "I enjoy having control over others" (Cheng et al., 2010). Participants also read that "the employees listen to Manager A because Manager A has power over them, and they are worried about what Manager A might do if they did not listen", which was included based on the notion that followers obey dominant leaders out of fear of punishment (Maner & Case, 2016). The prestigious leader, Manager B, was described as "having strong managerial skills and thorough knowledge of the industry", and "is always willing to give advice and suggestions about the employees' work"; these descriptions came directly from the Prestige Scale items "I have unique talents and abilities that are recognized by others" and "Others seek my advice on a variety of matters". Participants also read that "the employees listen to Manager B because Manager B is a role model and they want to learn from Manager B's expertise", which was included based on the notion that followers obey prestigious leaders due to admiration and a desire to emulate them (Maner & Case, 2016). Participants evaluated the leader's leadership ability immediately after reading each vignette using a 12-item scale (see SOM.3).

Example items include "[Manager A/B] tends to demonstrate strong leadership abilities" and "[Manager A/B] is a poor leader" (reversed).

Next, participants reported the extent to which they perceive "good leaders" as dominant and prestigious using an adapted version of the Dominance and Prestige Scale (Cheng et al., 2010). Two example items are "*Good leaders* enjoy having control over others" (dominance) and "Others seek *good leaders*' advice on a variety of matters" (prestige). All materials can be found in the SOM.4.[3]

2.2 | Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables in each study are reported in SOM.5. We first tested how self-esteem predicted perceptions of leadership ability for the leaders described in the vignettes. Given that each participant evaluated both leaders, we conducted a multilevel regression analysis with a random intercept for each participant in which leadership ability was regressed onto self-esteem, condition (i.e., dominance or prestige), and an interaction between self-esteem and condition. Results revealed a significant interaction, $\beta = .44$, $t(520) = 8.40$, $p < .001$. Supporting our hypotheses, individuals with low self-esteem reported that the dominant leader had greater leadership ability than did individuals with high self-esteem, $\beta = -.19$, $t(520) = -5.18$, $p < .001$, and those with high self-esteem reported that the prestigious leader had greater leadership ability than did people with low self-esteem, $\beta = .25$, $t(520) = 6.70$, $p < .001$; see Figure 1 (left panel).

We next conducted an identical analysis for perceptions of the extent to which good leaders are dominant and prestigious. Results revealed a significant interaction, $\beta = .49$, $t(520) = 8.03$, $p < .001$. Mirroring what was found for the vignettes, people with high self-esteem reported that good leaders are less dominant, $\beta = -.20$, $t(520) = -4.66$, $p < .001$, and more prestigious, $\beta = .29$, $t(520) = 6.70$, $p < .001$, than did those with low self-esteem; see Figure 1 (right panel).

In sum, supporting our pre-registered hypotheses, self-esteem predicted divergent perceptions of leadership ability for hypothetical dominant and prestigious leaders, and it was also associated with different judgments about the extent to which good leaders are dominant and prestigious. These judgments were reported in the abstract, rather than in response to any real or hypothetical individual, so it is very unlikely that they are confounded with some other factor that co-occurs with dominance and prestige, although that is one potential limitation of the vignettes. Nonetheless, Study 1 does not address whether participants would report the same perceptions of leaders they have actually worked with. We address this limitation in Study 2.

3 | STUDY 2

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants

We recruited 400 American participants from Mturk. Twenty-two were excluded for failing an attention check,

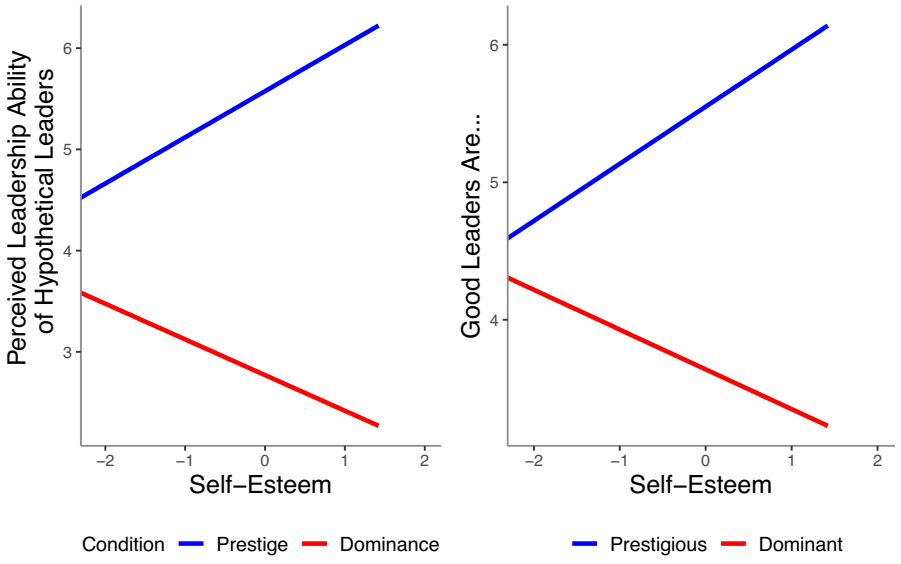

FIGURE 1 Left: The relationship between self-esteem and perceived leadership ability of the vignette leaders. Right: The relationship between self-esteem and ratings of dominance and prestige of "good leaders", Study 1. The *x*-axes are in terms of standardized units. The *y*-axes are in terms of unstandardized scores on a 7-point Likert scale.

resulting in a final sample of 378 participants (44% female, 55% male, 1% neither male nor female or prefer not to answer; age range = 20–70, Median = 33 years). A power analysis conducted prior to data collection indicated that 356 participants would provide 80% power to detect a difference between conditions in the relationship between self-esteem and perceived leadership ability of size Cohen's $q = 0.30$, which is slightly smaller than the effect size observed for the vignettes in Study 1.

3.1.2 | Procedure

After completing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ($\alpha = .91$), participants were randomly assigned to recall an experience with either a dominant or a prestigious leader. The prompts for both conditions come from past findings about how people generally perceive dominant and prestigious leaders and adaptations of scale items (Cheng et al., 2010, 2013). In the Dominance condition, participants recalled "a particular situation in which someone (e.g., a boss, a coach, a teacher, etc.) had power over you because they could make you feel bad... By power, we mean that that they were able to influence your behavior because you were worried about what they might do". We wrote the prompt in this way based on the notion that dominant leaders use aggression and intimidation to elicit deference out of fear (e.g., Maner & Case, 2016; Tracy et al., 2020). For example, one participant wrote:

> [My former boss] accomplished this through sharp criticism of my work, taking away responsibilities I enjoyed and replacing them with things she knew I did not enjoy. She also isolated each of us from one another and attempted to instill a sense of distrust among the rest of the team. This made me feel nervous and unsettled. I was constantly on edge and eventually left the company.

In the Prestige condition, participants were asked to recall "a role model you know personally and have worked with (e.g., a boss, a coach, a teacher, etc.) in which you looked up to the role model because he/she had unique and valuable expertise... This person was able to influence your behavior because you looked up to him or her, and perhaps wanted to learn from or follow him or her". We wrote the prompt in this way based on the notion that prestigious leaders elicit followers' admiration and a desire to emulate the leader by demonstrating expertise (e.g., Maner & Case, 2016; Tracy et al., 2020). For example, a participant in this condition wrote:

> It was this time when we were working with some team members. We were stuck not knowing what to do next. We approached our manager. She sacrificed her free time to help us try to work on the project. It was so humble of her to dedicate her free time to help us out.

They then rated the leader's leadership ability using the same items as in Study 1.

To validate that both prompts worked as intended, we recruited a separate sample ($N = 214$ Canadian undergraduates) who read one of these two prompts, thought of a leader who fit the description and rated the leader on dominance and prestige (Cheng et al., 2010). Supporting the validity of the prompts, participants in the Dominance condition recalled leaders who were significantly more dominant ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 0.95$) than prestigious ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.05$, $t(101) = 6.03$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [0.65, 1.29]), and those in the Prestige condition recalled leaders who were significantly more prestigious ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 0.71$) than dominant ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.26$, $t(109) = 16.50$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [2.29, 2.92]).

3.2 | Results and discussion

In the Dominance condition, participants wrote about the following kinds of leaders: bosses at work (68%), teachers (7%), family members (7%), coaches (4%), peers (2%), landlords (<1%), religious leaders (<1%) and the remaining 11% of participants did not clearly indicate the kind of leader they had in mind. In the Prestige condition, participants wrote about the following kinds of leaders: bosses at work (55%), teachers (10%), family members (7%), coaches (5%), peers (3%), religious leaders (3%), volunteer/charity leaders (2%), politicians (1%) and 10% of participants did not clearly indicate the kind of leader they had in mind. These percentages are quite similar between conditions, suggesting that dominant and prestigious leaders do not tend to be associated with particular kinds of leadership roles.

We conducted a regression analysis in which perceived leadership ability was regressed onto self-esteem, experimental condition and an interaction between self-esteem and experimental condition. Results revealed a significant interaction, $\beta = .45$, $t(374) = 6.93$, $p < .001$. Consistent with Study 1, individuals with low self-esteem rated the leadership ability of dominant leaders more positively than did those with high self-esteem, $\beta = -.15$, $t(374) = -3.08$, $p = .002$, and people with high self-esteem rated the leadership ability of prestigious leaders more positively than did those with low self-esteem, $\beta = .31$, $t(374) = 6.82$, $p < .001$.

Taken together, the results of Studies 1 and 2 conceptually replicate these findings using three different methods. Nevertheless, two of these three methods may have led participants to interpret the stimuli differently from each other. In Study 1, given the sparse description of the hypothetical leaders, participants may have imagined these leaders quite differently, and this difference may be related to self-esteem. In Study 2, each participant evaluated a different leader, and self-esteem may influence the leader from their past that came to mind after reading the assigned prompt. We address these limitations in Study 3 by asking participants to evaluate dominant and prestigious leaders depicted in video clips from reality television.

4 | STUDY 3

In Study 3, we aimed to replicate the key findings of Studies 1 and 2 (https://osf.io/em23r/?view_only=7774ba0d87d647bfa39397bba4fdfdfe). We also measured three traits that could provide alternative explanations for the results of prior studies: narcissism, self-efficacy and generalized anxiety. By doing so, we address whether self-esteem uniquely predicts the pattern of results observed in the prior studies, or if these results are better predicted by one of these related traits. The rationale for including each trait is as follows:

4.1 | Narcissism

Narcissism refers to an inflated sense of self-importance and entitlement, and it is related to self-esteem because it is another form of self-regard; both narcissistic individuals and individuals with high self-esteem feel positively about themselves (e.g., Bosson et al., 2008). Narcissistic individuals deeply value their agentic qualities like intelligence and competence and are highly motivated to pursue social status (Campbell & Foster, 2007; Grapsas et al., 2020). Thus, compared with less narcissistic individuals, they may view dominant leaders as poor leaders because these leaders often threaten followers' agency and status by seeking to control them and hinder their personal advancement (Case & Maner, 2014; Lee et al., 2021; Maner & Mead, 2010). Conversely, narcissistic individuals may view prestigious leaders as better leaders than less narcissistic individuals because these leaders foster followers' agency and promote their status by delegating responsibilities to talented followers and providing them with autonomy. Thus, if self-esteem does not predict perceived leadership ability after controlling for narcissism, the relationships found in the prior studies may be better explained by leaders' tendencies to promote or hinder followers' agency and status.

4.2 | Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to one's sense that they can successfully complete tasks autonomously (Chen et al., 2001). Though closely related to self-esteem, self-efficacy more narrowly represents self-perceptions of competence. If self-esteem does not predict perceived leadership ability after controlling for self-efficacy, this may indicate that differences in perceived leadership ability stem from followers' needs for instruction and guidance. Dominant leaders' controlling nature may be more attractive to followers with low self-efficacy because they do not have to make autonomous decisions or work independently. In contrast, prestigious leaders' tendency to delegate responsibilities and provide autonomy may overwhelm followers with low self-efficacy, but match the preference of those with high self-efficacy.

4.3 | Follower anxiety

We measured anxiety as a potential alternative explanation specifically for the finding for dominant leaders. Dominant leaders are often preferred in uncertain environments because followers see them as particularly capable of defeating threats (Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017). People with low self-esteem tend to be more anxious than those with high self-esteem (Löwe et al., 2008), and anxious people tend to overperceive external threats (Eysenck, 1992), which may lead them to evaluate dominant leaders' leadership ability more positively. People with high self-esteem, who perceive fewer threats, may instead see dominance as unnecessary or counterproductive.

4.4 | Method

4.4.1 | Participants

We recruited 250 American participants from Mturk. Thirty-one participants were excluded for failing an attention check. Another 36 participants were excluded because they left the page with the video (the experimental manipulation) before watching the entire video,[4] resulting in a final sample of 183 participants (49% female, 51% male, 0 neither male nor female or prefer not to answer; age range = 18–68, median = 35 years). A power analysis conducted prior to data collection indicated that 204 participants would provide 80% power to detect a difference

between conditions in the association between self-esteem and perceived leadership ability of size Cohen's $q = 0.40$. We estimated this effect size based on the results of Studies 1 and 2.

4.4.2 | Procedure

Participants began by completing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ($\alpha = .93$), a 25-item version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Ackerman et al., 2011; $\alpha = .91$), the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen et al., 2001; $\alpha = .95$), and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 Scale[5] (Spitzer et al., 2006; $\alpha = .92$) in a random order.

They were then randomly assigned to either a Dominance or Prestige condition. In the Dominance condition, participants watched a 4-min video from the reality television show, *Hell's Kitchen*, in which celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay leads two teams of chefs through a restaurant dinner service.[6] Throughout this clip, Ramsay is constantly yelling and cursing, ruthlessly criticizing the chefs, and punching and throwing food across the kitchen. In the Prestige condition, participants watched a 4-min video of celebrity chef Curtis Stone teaching a novice chef how to cook a meal at home. Throughout this video, Stone offers advice about home cooking, encourages the novice chef and compliments him on a job well done.[7] We chose these videos because we noticed clear differences in the reactions of the followers to each chef, such that the followers were primarily afraid of Ramsay, suggesting he is leading through dominance, and the novice chef admired Stone, suggesting he is leading through prestige.

To test whether participants perceived the chefs as intended, they then completed a manipulation check in which they rated the chef on dominance and prestige (Cheng et al., 2010; $\alpha_{\text{Dominance-Ramsay}} = .89$, $\alpha_{\text{Dominance-Stone}} = .81$; $\alpha_{\text{Prestige-Ramsay}} = .80$, $\alpha_{\text{Prestige-Stone}} = .87$) and completed the same leadership ability questionnaire as in previous studies ($\alpha_{\text{Ramsay}} = .93$; $\alpha_{\text{Stone}} = .87$).[8]

4.5 | Results and discussion

The manipulation was successful. Gordon Ramsay was rated as significantly more dominant ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 0.91$) than prestigious ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 0.84$, $t(84) = 6.58$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [0.53, 0.99]), and Curtis Stone was rated as significantly more prestigious ($M = 5.95$, $SD = 0.84$) than dominant ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.09$, $t(97) = 15.54$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [2.21, 2.85]). Additionally, Ramsay was rated as significantly more dominant than Stone ($t(181) = 18.63$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [2.47, 3.05]) and Stone was rated as significantly more prestigious than Ramsay ($t(177) = -4.26$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [−0.77, −0.28]).

We conducted a pre-registered regression analysis in which ratings of leadership ability were regressed onto self-esteem, experimental condition and an interaction between self-esteem and experimental condition. Results revealed a significant interaction, $\beta = .40$, $t(179) = 3.11$, $p = .002$. Supporting our hypotheses, people with low self-esteem rated Ramsay as a better leader than did those with high self-esteem, $\beta = -.19$, $t(179) = -2.12$, $p = .04$, and the opposite pattern emerged for Stone, $\beta = .20$, $t(179) = 2.28$, $p = .02$.

Next, to test whether the interaction between self-esteem and condition is robust to controlling for narcissism, self-efficacy and anxiety, we conducted three regression analyses in which we added one of these traits and the interaction between the trait and condition to our original model (Yzerbyt et al., 2004); see Table 1. The interaction between self-esteem and condition held in each model, indicating that self-esteem uniquely predicts this pattern of results independent of shared variance with these related individual differences. Additionally, the main effect of each related trait and the interaction between each related trait and condition were non-significant in each model, suggesting that these traits are unrelated to the perceived leadership ability of dominant and prestigious leaders independent of shared variance with self-esteem.

TABLE 1 Interaction between self-esteem and condition predicting perceived leadership ability controlling for each related trait, Study 3.

	Narcissism			Self-efficacy			Anxiety		
Coefficient	***β***	***t***	***p***	***β***	***t***	***p***	***β***	***t***	***p***
Intercept	**−.53**	**−5.68**	**<.001**	**−.53**	**−5.65**	**<.001**	**−.53**	**−5.65**	**<.001**
Self-esteem	**−.19**	**−2.10**	**.04**	−.27	−1.86	.07	−.20	−1.76	.08
Condition	**.97**	**7.57**	**<.001**	**.96**	**7.52**	**<.001**	**.97**	**7.54**	**<.001**
Related trait	−.03	−0.35	.73	.10	0.67	.51	−.01	−0.10	.92
Self-esteem × Condition int	**.41**	**3.17**	**.002**	**.38**	**1.94**	**.054**	**.37**	**2.31**	**.02**
Related trait × Condition int	−.05	−0.41	.68	.03	0.13	.90	−.04	−0.23	.82

Note: Condition coded such that dominance is the reference group. Related trait refers to narcissism, self-efficacy and anxiety, respectively. Bolded values indicate statistical significance, $p = .05$.

Moving forward, one notable aspect of this study is that both leaders were judged as significantly higher on one strategy than the other. Thus, it remains unclear how followers' self-esteem is related to their perceptions of leadership ability for a leader who is equally high in both dominance and prestige. In Study 4, we address this issue with vignettes that describe hypothetical leaders who are either highly dominant and low in prestige, highly prestigious and low in dominance, or equally high in both dominance and prestige. In addition, we measured potential mechanisms that might underlie the observed associations.

5 | STUDY 4

We recruited two samples of participants for Study 4 from Mturk (https://osf.io/em23r/?view_only=7774ba0d87d647bfa39397bba4fdfdfe). For both samples, we pre-registered confirmatory predictions for the High Dominance/Low Prestige and Low Prestige/High Dominance conditions (henceforth referred to as the "mismatched" conditions), because these conditions represent the closest replication of the prior studies. Specifically, we expected that individuals with low self-esteem would evaluate the leader in the High Dominance/Low Prestige condition more positively than those with high self-esteem, and the opposite pattern would emerge in the Low Dominance/High Prestige condition. In Sample 1, we also made an exploratory prediction that this pattern would hold in analyses with all three conditions, such that highly dominant leaders (controlling for their level of prestige) would be evaluated more positively by individuals with low self-esteem compared with individuals with high self-esteem. In Sample 2, we removed this exploratory prediction; instead, we made a confirmatory prediction that self-esteem would positively predict evaluations of leadership ability in the High Dominance/High Prestige condition.[9] In Sample 1, we also made predictions about perceptions of warmth (Fiske et al., 2002) in the mismatched conditions, which we discuss in SOM.10 for reasons described under Endnote 8.

In addition, we included three measures in Study 4 to assess more specific judgments about leaders that may help explain the observed relationships between self-esteem and perceived leadership ability. As described in the introduction, self-esteem is relevant to numerous different aspects of individuals and how they engage in social interactions and relationships. Therefore, we included several measures of potential mechanisms in an attempt to assess multiple judgments that might result from violating individuals' expectations and desires based on their self-esteem.[10] We explain the rationale for each measure below:

5.1 | Distrust

One reason why followers might perceive lesser leadership ability in leaders who violate their expectations and desires is that they distrust these leaders for behaving unpredictably. This is consistent with recent research demonstrating that predictable individuals are perceived to have greater moral character, including being considered more trustworthy (Turpin et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2021). Thus, a prestigious leader who incorporates followers' preferences into their decision-making (Case et al., 2018), for example, might more greatly violate the expectations and desires of followers with low self-esteem than those with high self-esteem due to the former group's lesser belief in their worth and value (Rosenberg, 1965) and greater desire to protect themselves from the public consequences of poor performance (Baumeister et al., 1989). Thus, compared with followers with high self-esteem, those with low self-esteem might be more likely to distrust prestigious leaders. In turn, greater distrust should harm the leader–follower relationship (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002), ultimately resulting in lesser perceptions of leadership ability. We measured distrust in Samples 1 and 2.

5.2 | Fear of negative evaluation

Compared with individuals with high self-esteem, those with low self-esteem are more receptive to negative feedback because it is more consistent with their self-views (North & Swann, 2009; Swann, 2012). In turn, despite that negative evaluations can be a more negative emotional experience for followers with low self-esteem (e.g., Brockner et al., 1987), they might be less likely to fear negative evaluations because these evaluations do not challenge their self-concepts like they do for people with high self-esteem (Swann, 2012). As a result, followers with low self-esteem might be less fearful of interacting with dominant leaders, leading to a superior leader–follower relationship, and thus, greater perceptions of leadership ability. Likewise, although followers with high self-esteem might be more emotionally resilient after negative evaluations, they might still be more fearful of them due to the challenge they present to these followers' self-concepts. As a result, they might be more fearful of dominant leaders whom they expect to evaluate them negatively, ultimately leading to perceptions of poor leadership ability. Thus, compared with those with low self-esteem, one possible reason why followers with high self-esteem perceive lesser leadership ability in dominant leaders might be greater fear of negative evaluation. We measured fear of negative evaluation in Sample 1.

5.3 | Anticipated state authenticity

State authenticity represents feelings of fit between oneself and the environment (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018), and it is fostered when features of the situation are congruent with one's self-concept, goals or social desires. Working with a leader who meets one's expectations and desires likely creates an environment wherein followers feel that they can be their authentic selves, achieve their goals and have rewarding social relationships, thus increasing state authenticity. This might lead them to perceive greater leadership ability in these leaders by virtue of enhancing the leader–follower relationship because followers feel like the leader understands their true self and treats them appropriately. Indeed, a recent study has demonstrated the costs of inauthenticity by showing that feeling inauthentic around one's leader was associated with greater withdrawal from work (Li et al., 2022). Thus, we expect that followers with low self-esteem feel more authentic working under dominant leaders whereas those with high self-esteem feel more authentic working under prestigious leaders.

Importantly, this measure captures something different than fear of negative evaluation because fear of negative evaluation reflects one's anticipated emotional reaction to negative evaluations whereas state authenticity is an evaluation of the extent to which an environment makes one feel like their true self (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). In contrast to our prediction above, fear of negative evaluation might be heightened among individuals with low self-esteem across situations (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1989; Brockner et al., 1987). However, compared with followers with high self-esteem, negative evaluations should still make them feel more authentic due to their relatively negative self-views (Swann, 2012), which might enhance their relationship with dominant leaders, thereby leading to greater perceptions of leadership ability.

Similarly, in contrast to our prediction above, followers with high self-esteem might feel less fear of negative evaluation across situations because they are more emotionally stable in response to negative feedback and events (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1989; Brockner et al., 1987). Nonetheless, negative evaluations should still make them feel inauthentic, and they might evaluate dominant leaders more negatively for that reason. When faced with warm behaviour and positive appraisals from prestigious leaders, however, these individuals might not feel especially elated because these behaviours do not lead them to feel much differently from their typical feelings about themselves, and thus these experiences are not as self-enhancing as they would be for someone with low self-esteem. Yet, positive feedback should still elicit greater state authenticity in followers with high self-esteem, which might explain why they perceive relatively greater leadership ability in prestigious leaders. We included this measure in Sample 2.

5.4 | Method

5.4.1 | Participants

Sample 1

We recruited 377 American participants from Mturk (40% female, 60% male, <1% neither male nor female; age range = 19–74, median = 33 years). As pre-registered, we tested whether participants who failed the attention check showed a significantly different pattern of results for the confirmatory predictions compared with participants who passed the attention check, and we did not observe any significant differences, so we did not exclude any participants from analyses. A power analysis indicated that a sample size of 204 participants would provide 80% power to detect an effect of size Cohen's $q = 0.40$ for the interaction between self-esteem and leadership evaluations in the "mismatched" conditions.

Sample 2

We recruited 368 American participants from Mturk (31% female, 68% male, 1% neither male nor female or prefer not to answer; age range = 19–70, median = 33 years). As pre-registered, we did not exclude any participants for failed attention checks for the same reason as in Sample 1. We determined this sample size using the same power analysis as in Sample 1.

5.4.2 | Procedure

Participants first completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965; $\alpha = .82$). They were then assigned to one of three between-subjects conditions: High Dominance/High Prestige, High Dominance/Low Prestige, or Low Dominance/High Prestige. In each condition, participants read about a leader named Manager A. To communicate high dominance or high prestige, we used the same descriptions as in Study 1, and we provided the opposite descriptions to communicate low dominance or low prestige. For example, to communicate low dominance, Manager A was described as "a weak-willed leader who is not willing to be aggressive to achieve Company A's goals", and to communicate low prestige, Manager A was described as someone who "does not have strong managerial skills or a thorough knowledge of the industry". Within each condition, participants were randomly assigned to one of two versions of the vignette, which varied in the order and the content of the statements

communicating dominance and prestige (see SOM.14 for all materials). As a manipulation check, participants rated Manager A on dominance and prestige using four-item versions of the dominance and prestige scale (Witkower et al., 2020; αs across conditions for dominance: .77–.97; αs across conditions for prestige: .65–.87).

Next, participants evaluated the leader's leadership ability using the same items as in the prior studies (αs: .65–.85). They then reported their distrust for Manager A using an adapted version of the Cynical Distrust Scale (Wong et al., 2013; αs: .69–.97). An example item is "The employees should wonder what hidden reason Manager A may have for doing something nice for them". We chose this specific measure of distrust because we felt it was well-suited for measuring distrust in high-status individuals like leaders. In Sample 1, participants also reported fear of negative evaluation if they worked for Manager A with the Fear of Negative Evaluation scale (Leary, 1983; αs: .61–.83). An example item is, "I would be afraid that Manager A would not approve of me". In Sample 2, participants instead completed a 15-item measure of anticipated authenticity while working for Manager A (Aday et al., submitted; αs: .85–.95). An example item is, "Working for Manager A would feel right for who I am".

5.5 | Results and discussion

To maximize statistical power, we combined the data from both samples into a multilevel model with observations nested within samples (results for each sample are available in SOM.15; the conclusions are identical to what is reported here). The manipulation was successful (see SOM.16 for manipulation check results by vignette version within each condition). Participants in the High Dominance/High Prestige condition rated the leader as high in both dominance ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 0.97$) and prestige ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 0.94$) but not as significantly higher in one strategy than the other ($t(248) = 0.66$, $p = .51$, 95% CI = [−0.09, 0.17]). Participants in the Low Dominance/High Prestige condition rated the leader as highly prestigious ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 0.89$) and significantly more prestigious than dominant ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.96$, $t(244) = 9.22$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [1.01, 1.53]). Participants in the High Dominance/Low Prestige condition rated the leader as highly dominant ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 0.94$) and significantly more dominant than prestigious ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.85$, $t(250) = 9.35$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [1.04, 1.60]).

We first conducted a pre-registered regression analysis in which perceived leadership ability was regressed onto self-esteem, experimental condition (a categorical variable with three levels: "Low Dominance/High Prestige", "High Dominance/Low Prestige", and "High Dominance/High Prestige"), and an interaction between self-esteem and experimental condition with the Low Dominance/High Prestige condition as the reference group. We used a single variable to denote condition because the three conditions in this study do not evenly cross the levels of dominance and prestige (i.e., low prestige only co-occurs with high dominance). As a result, this analysis reflects how follower self-esteem predicts leadership evaluations based on the use of dominance and prestige strategies relative to each other. We also conducted this analysis with separate variables for dominance condition and prestige condition (see SOM.15), and the conclusions from that analysis are identical to what is reported below. We also included a random intercept for sample to account for the multi-level structure of the data.

Supporting our hypothesis, we found one significant interaction between self-esteem and condition for the mismatched conditions, $\beta = -.79$, $t(738) = -10.51$, $p < .001$. Consistent with the prior studies, people with high self-esteem evaluated the leadership ability of the Low Dominance/High Prestige leader more positively than did those with low self-esteem, $\beta = .23$, $t(732) = 4.30$, $p < .001$, and they evaluated the leadership ability of the High Dominance/Low Prestige leader more negatively than did those with low self-esteem, $\beta = -.57$, $t(727) = -10.32$, $p < .001$. We did not find a significant interaction between the Low Dominance/High Prestige condition and High Dominance/High Prestige condition, $\beta = .05$, $t(738) = 0.70$, $p = .49$. As in the Low Dominance/High Prestige condition, self-esteem positively predicted perceptions of leadership ability in the High Dominance/High Prestige condition, $\beta = .28$, $t(733) = 5.24$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 2). In a follow-up analysis, we used separate variables for dominance condition and prestige condition (see SOM.15). Consistent with the results from the main analysis, this analysis revealed that self-esteem was unrelated to evaluations of the highly dominant leaders after controlling for their level of prestige, $\beta = -.05$, $t(739) = -0.70$, $p = .49$. Thus, we did not support the exploratory prediction (pre-registered for Sample 1) that self-esteem would negatively predict evaluations of highly dominant leaders after controlling for their level of prestige.

Thus, in combination with the results of the prior studies, it seems that the relationship between self-esteem and perceptions of leadership ability is derived from *relative* levels of dominance and prestige. When the leader was significantly more prestigious than dominant or equally high in both, individuals with high self-esteem evaluated the leader more positively than did those with low self-esteem. When the leader was significantly more dominant than prestigious, however, individuals with low self-esteem evaluated the leader more positively. This occurred in this study, in Study 3 for Gordan Ramsay, and in Study 2

where the validation sample indicated that the prompt led participants to imagine leaders who were more dominant than prestigious. In each case, leaders were rated above the scale midpoint on prestige, but significantly higher on dominance, and in each case, individuals with low self-esteem perceived greater leadership ability in these leaders.

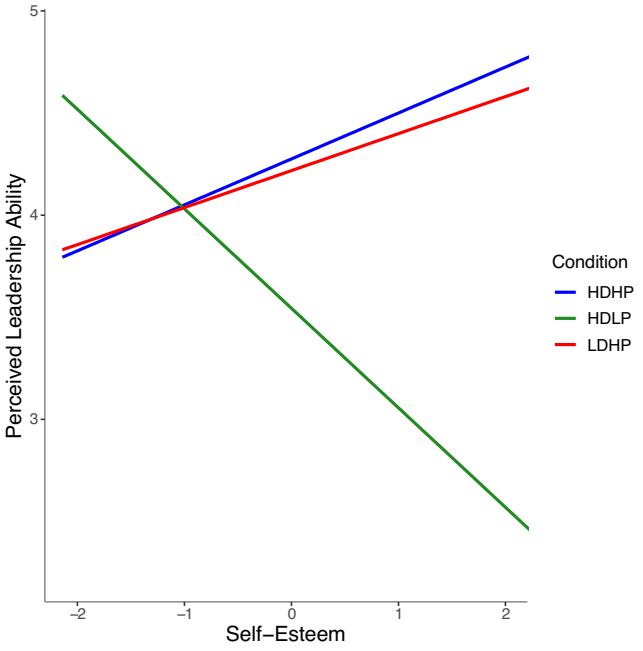

FIGURE 2 The relationship between self-esteem and perceived leadership ability in each condition, Study 4. HDHP, High Dominance/High Prestige; HDLP, High Dominance/Low Prestige; LDHP, Low Dominance/High Prestige. The *x*-axis is in terms of standardized units. The *y*-axis is in terms of unstandardized scores on a 7-point Likert scale.

We next tested for indirect effects through distrust, fear of negative evaluation and authenticity. To do so, we conducted path analyses within each condition using structural equation modelling with *lavaan* in R (R Core Team, 2017; Rosseel, 2012). In each model, self-esteem predicted leadership ratings and the chosen mechanism, and the chosen mechanism also predicted leadership ratings. We calculated indirect effects through each mechanism within each model with path analysis and we calculated the confidence intervals around each indirect effect in order to compare the indirect effects across conditions; see Table 2. We also conducted models with the mechanisms tested in parallel for each sample, and those results are provided in SOM.17. All significant effects reported in Table 2 hold when tested in parallel mediation models.

5.6 | Distrust

In both High Prestige conditions, we observed significant indirect effects of self-esteem on leadership evaluations through distrust. People with low self-esteem reported greater distrust in these leaders than did those with high self-esteem, and distrust was associated with lesser perceived leadership ability across conditions. For the High Dominance/Low Prestige leader, we did not observe a significant indirect effect through distrust, and the confidence intervals around the indirect effects in both High Prestige conditions did not include this coefficient. Therefore, greater distrust might explain, in part, why followers with low self-esteem perceive prestigious leaders as worse leaders than do those with high self-esteem.

TABLE 2 Results of path models testing indirect effects of self-esteem on perceived leadership ability through each mechanism, Study 4.

Mechanism	Condition	Self-esteem → mechanism	Mechanism → leadership ability	Self-esteem → leadership ability	Indirect effect	95% CI for indirect effect
Cynical distrust	High Dominance/High Prestige	−0.41***	−0.58***	0.03	0.24***	[0.16, 0.31]
	Low Dominance/High Prestige	−0.82***	−0.32***	−0.04	0.26***	[0.17, 0.36]
	High Dominance/Low Prestige	−0.10*	−0.60***	−0.18*	0.02	[−0.003, 0.04]
Fear of negative evaluation	High Dominance/High Prestige	−0.10	−0.09	0.17*	0.01	[−0.01, 0.03]
	Low Dominance/High Prestige	−0.49***	0.11	0.21*	−0.05	[−0.17, 0.06]
	High Dominance/Low Prestige	−0.20*	0.10	−0.67***	−0.02	[−0.05, 0.01]
Anticipated state authenticity	High Dominance/High Prestige	−0.56***	0.02	0.42***	−0.01	[−0.09, 0.06]
	Low Dominance/High Prestige	0.001	0.14	0.40***	<0.001	[−0.02, 0.02]
	High Dominance/Low Prestige	−0.68***	0.41***	0.03	−0.28***	[−0.40, −0.16]

Note: All coefficients are standardized.

*$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$.

5.7 | Fear of negative evaluation

Across conditions, people with low self-esteem reported greater fear of negative evaluation than did those with high self-esteem, but fear of negative evaluation was not associated with perceived leadership ability in any condition. As a result, we did not observe a significant indirect effect through fear of negative evaluation in any condition.

5.8 | Anticipated state authenticity

People with low self-esteem anticipated feeling more authentic around the High Dominance/Low Prestige leader than did those with high self-esteem, and anticipated authenticity predicted greater perceptions of leadership ability in this condition. Thus, we observed a significant indirect effect through state authenticity in the High Dominance/Low Prestige condition. Individuals with high self-esteem also anticipated feeling inauthentic around the High Dominance/High Prestige leader, but we found no difference in anticipated authenticity for the Low Dominance/High Prestige leader. Although the relationship between self-esteem and anticipated authenticity differed between the two High Prestige leaders, anticipated authenticity was unrelated to leadership evaluations in both conditions, resulting in similar non-significant indirect effects in these conditions. The confidence intervals around these indirect effects do not include the coefficient for the indirect effect in the High Dominance/Low Prestige condition, suggesting that feeling more authentic around this leader may be one reason why people with low self-esteem perceived this leader to have greater leadership ability than did those with high self-esteem.

6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across four studies, we found that followers' self-esteem is associated with reliable, diverging perceptions of leadership ability for dominant and prestigious leaders such that followers with high self-esteem perceived greater leadership ability in prestigious leaders than did followers with low self-esteem, and followers with low self-esteem perceived greater leadership ability in dominant leaders than did followers with high self-esteem. These effects emerged for hypothetical leaders described in vignettes (Studies 1 and 4), abstract beliefs about "good leaders" (Study 1), leaders that participants had worked with in the past (Study 2), and leaders that participants watched in clips from reality television (Study 3). Drawing from leader-member exchange theory (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Henderson et al., 2009), we propose that these differences in perceptions of leadership ability result from differences in how followers expect and desire leaders to behave based on their self-esteem, leading to differences in the quality of the leader–follower relationship (Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). In turn, followers who have, or expect to have, higher quality relationships with leaders evaluate these leaders more positively (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961). Higher-quality leader–follower relationships benefit followers in myriad ways (Gerstner & Day, 1997); therefore, these results seem to reflect how followers are biased to perceive the leader's overall leadership ability in terms of how well-suited the leader is for them in particular.

Furthermore, we found two distinct mechanisms that might underlie these associations: distrust and authenticity. Both of these mechanisms speak to followers' anticipated relationship with leaders. For prestigious leaders, including a leader who was equally high in dominance and prestige, we found indirect effects through distrust in Study 4, and this effect did not emerge for a leader who was significantly more dominant than prestigious. Given that prestigious leaders engage with followers in ways that better meet the expectations and desires of individuals with high self-esteem, followers with high self-esteem might be less likely to question their sincerity. These followers sense nothing abnormal about their interactions with prestigious leaders, and thus have no reason to distrust them, which might explain their greater perceptions of leadership ability. In contrast, followers with low self-esteem seem to adopt a more cynical perspective. For these followers, the inconsistency between prestigious leaders' behavioural tendencies and their expectations and desires seems to suggest that the leader might have nefarious ulterior motives for their warmth and inclusion. For the highly dominant, less prestigious leader, we did not observe as large of a difference in followers' distrust based on self-esteem. Given that dominance is generally socially undesirable (Cheng et al., 2013) and these leaders are coercive and controlling with followers (Lee et al., 2021; Sung & Choi, 2021), this might reflect that behaving dominantly implies a lack of concern with pleasing others, and thus there is no reason to believe that these leaders are concealing their true motives or desires.

In addition, we found evidence that anticipated authenticity around the leader might be a relevant mechanism for dominant leaders who are significantly lower in prestige. Followers with low self-esteem anticipated greater authenticity around a highly dominant, less prestigious leader despite that they also reported greater fear of negative evaluation from this leader (and all other leaders in Study 4). Therefore, these findings help adjudicate how self-esteem is related to perceptions of leaders who

provide self-verifying versus self-enhancing feedback. Consistent with their greater desire for self-protection (Baumeister et al., 1989) and greater reactivity to negative events (Brockner et al., 1987; Brown, 2010), followers with low self-esteem expect negative evaluations to engender a more intense emotional response in them compared with followers with high self-esteem. Nonetheless, being evaluated negatively by dominant leaders, as well as other dominant behaviours such as exerting strong control over followers (Lee et al., 2021), would still make followers with low self-esteem feel more like their authentic selves due to their relatively negative self-views (Swann, 2012). In turn, these feelings of authenticity were associated with more positive views of dominant leaders, possibly because the leader seems to understand followers' authentic selves and interact with them accordingly.

For leaders who were highly prestigious, however, anticipated authenticity was unrelated to perceived leadership ability, regardless of their level of dominance. This might reflect how followers desire to learn from prestigious leaders' valuable knowledge and skills (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Followers might not value authenticity around these leaders as much because they recognize that feeling inauthentic or uncomfortable can facilitate learning and personal development. In contrast, for dominant leaders who are also not prestigious, and thus do not have much to teach followers but still have power over them, followers might value feeling authentic much more because this enhances their relationship with the leader, and they are not missing opportunities for learning or development that may be facilitated by feeling inauthentic.

These findings also suggest that leader–follower relationships are unique from other kinds of relationships regarding whether negative interactions threaten the relationship. As observed in Study 4, followers' fear of negative evaluation was unrelated to their perceptions of leadership ability in all three conditions, suggesting feeling fearful of leaders does not lead followers to view them as poor leaders. This probably differs greatly from other kinds of relationships because someone who regularly inspires fear in their partner would likely be considered a poor friend or romantic partner, but this question requires future research.

These findings have several implications. Primarily, followers' self-esteem may influence decisions about which leaders they want to work with and their resultant job commitment and satisfaction. Furthermore, to the extent that industries are thought to employ one leadership style more than the other, people's self-esteem may affect their choice of career, such that individuals with low self-esteem more often select into industries where dominance is thought to be prominent (e.g., military), whereas those with high self-esteem may gravitate towards industries where prestige is thought to be prominent (e.g., teaching). This implication may be especially important to consider in recent times given that employees often cite their relationship with their supervisor as a reason for leaving a job (Chen et al., 2016), and employees switch jobs much more frequently now than they did in the past (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Thus, employees today exist in an environment where it is commonplace to enter and exit organizations based on fit with the organization and its leaders, suggesting that self-esteem may exert greater influence on individuals' employment decisions now than in the past.

6.1 | Limitations and future directions

All of these studies were conducted with American adults. Given that there are cultural differences in self-esteem such that cultivating high self-esteem is more socially valued in individualist contexts than in collectivist contexts (e.g., Heine & Hamamura, 2007), there may also be cultural differences in how self-esteem predicts perceptions of leadership ability. Indeed, much research has found that paternalistic leaders are valued more in many collectivist cultures, in which leaders are nurturing and caring but also authoritative and demanding, and they get involved in their employees' personal lives (e.g., Pellegrini et al., 2010). Given these cultural differences in responses to leaders, there may also be cultural differences in the relationship between self-esteem and perceptions of leadership ability for dominant and prestigious leaders. Also, all of the studies relied on online samples so it remains an open question as to how well the results would replicate with other samples. Additionally, all four studies tested our hypotheses with correlational methods, so future research is necessary to draw causal conclusions about these relationships.

Furthermore, another interesting direction for future research is to examine potential homophily between leaders and followers based on self-esteem. Given that self-reported dominance and prestige have been shown to predict genuine self-esteem (i.e., self-esteem after removing shared variance with narcissism) negatively and positively, respectively (Cheng et al., 2010), it is possible that followers provide superior evaluations of leaders who have similar levels of self-esteem. However, this explanation hinges on the ability of followers to infer leaders' level of self-esteem accurately. Cheng et al. (2010) found that peer-reports of dominance among collegiate varsity athletic teams were unrelated to self-reported genuine self-esteem, suggesting that observers do not detect that dominant individuals have low genuine self-esteem. Thus, given the limited information provided about leaders in

these studies, it seems unlikely that participants in the present research would infer the pattern of associations uncovered between self-reported dominance and prestige and genuine self-esteem in Cheng et al.'s (2010) research, but this interesting possibility should be investigated empirically in future research.

Moreover, we operationalized dominance and prestige in several different ways across the four studies, and each operationalization might introduce potential confounds, especially for vignette manipulations that provide brief descriptions of leaders that different participants might imagine quite differently. Nevertheless, the same pattern of results emerged across all of the different operationalizations of dominance and prestige, and this convergent evidence suggests a reliable and robust role of dominance and prestige in these findings. We also included manipulation checks in Studies 2–4 that asked participants to rate the target on dominance and prestige using the Dominance and Prestige Scale itself (Cheng et al., 2010). In each of those studies, the manipulation checks showed that participants perceived the targets as expected in terms of dominance and prestige. On a related note, another limitation of these studies is the lack of ecological validity in Studies 1, 3 and 4; only Study 2 asked participants about a leader they have actually worked with. We chose to prioritize highly controlled experiments in order to best test our hypotheses and the causal effect of dominance and prestige, but future research would benefit from examining these relationships in more ecologically valid contexts.

Finally, we focused on perceptions of leadership ability in general rather than incorporating specific conditions facing an organization. Given that followers' endorsement of dominant and prestigious leaders is affected by contextual factors such as economic uncertainty and external threats (Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017; Laustsen & Petersen, 2017), the relationship between self-esteem and perceived leadership ability may vary based on situational demands. For instance, if a company is near bankruptcy, followers might hold different expectations and desires for leaders than during times of prosperity, which may also vary based on self-esteem, leading to a different pattern of results. Alternatively, average ratings of leadership ability for dominant or prestigious leaders might change based on situational demands, but the difference between how people with high and low self-esteem perceive their leadership ability may persist. Similarly, self-regard can be domain specific such that people feel that they offer more value and worth in some domains compared with others. For example, past research has investigated organizational self-esteem (e.g., Pierce & Gardner, 2004), which might be highly relevant to leader–follower relationships in the workplace and less relevant in other domains, such as family life. Thus, another future direction is to examine whether these effects stem from context-specific self-esteem or general self-esteem.

In conclusion, the present research shows that self-esteem is associated with divergent perceptions of leadership ability for dominant and prestigious leaders. As a result, this research provides insights that help further the understanding of why individual followers respond differently to different leadership strategies and how these responses influence crucial outcomes such as follower satisfaction and performance.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Hypothesis Development: Eric J. Mercadante and Steven J. Heine; *Study Design*: Eric J. Mercadante, Steven J. Heine and Karl Aquino; *Data Analysis*: Eric J. Mercadante; *Manuscript Writing*: Eric J. Mercadante, Steven J. Heine and Karl Aquino.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia (ID H19-00941).

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ENDNOTES

[1] We also measured social dominance orientation in these studies and made pre-registered predictions about this variable. The analyses for social dominance orientation will be discussed in a separate manuscript. A working version of this manuscript is available on our OSF page (https://bit.ly/3MxD1JI). For each sample in which social dominance orientation was measured (all but Sample 2 of Study 4), we report the results of all of the analyses described below while controlling for social dominance orientation in SOM.1. None of the results reported here change significantly when controlling for social dominance orientation.

[2] For exploratory purposes, participants also completed the Belief in Genetic Determinism scale (Keller, 2005) at this time.

[3] After completing the procedure described here, participants also completed several exploratory items in which they rated former U.S. President Donald Trump's level of dominance and prestige and

general leadership ability. Participants also completed these items in Study 4 Sample 1 (see SOM.3 for descriptions and results from these measures for both studies).

[4] We did not pre-register this exclusion criterion because we did not anticipate this issue. The results change little when these participants are included (see SOM.7).

[5] The GAD-7 was developed as a clinical instrument for measuring generalized anxiety disorder, so it might be limited as an assessment tool for the non-clinical sample here. However, this measure is routinely used in non-clinical populations, suggesting it is a valid measure for this study.

[6] Since we conducted this study, the clip of Gordon Ramsay is no longer viewable on Youtube. There are several other clips from this TV show that are publicly viewable on Youtube (e.g., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvSdqHQwJwA&ab_channel=Hell%27sKitchen), which are quite similar to the video participants viewed. This video and the video of Curtis Stone used in this study are available on our OSF page (https://osf.io/em23r/?view_only=7774ba0d87d647bfa39397bba4fdfdfe).

[7] After watching the video, participants reported their familiarity with the chef they watched and rated their own cooking skills because both may be relevant covariates that affect their leadership evaluations. None of the results change if we include these two covariates. Participants also completed a recognition memory task for exploratory purposes. We describe this measure and its results in SOM.8.

[8] Participants also reported perceptions of warmth and competence for the chef they watched (Fiske et al., 2002). We included these exploratory measures in this study, and in Sample 1 of Study 4, to get an initial sense of the kinds of mechanisms that might mediate the relationship between self-esteem and perceived leadership ability. We report these results in SOM.9 and return to testing potential mediators in Study 4 with more specific measures.

[9] For the sake of completeness, we also included a Low Dominance/Low Prestige condition in both samples. We found a confusing pattern of results for this condition (e.g., distrust predicted *greater* perceptions of leadership ability). Given that the Low Dominance/Low Prestige condition does not bear on our research question of how self-esteem predicts the perceived leadership ability of leaders who are high in either dominance or prestige, and that leaders in the real world typically use at least one strategy to attain and maintain leadership, it is unclear what to make of the judgments about the Low Dominance/Low Prestige leader and their relation to self-esteem. We also included a fifth condition in Sample 2 strictly for exploratory reasons. We discuss the results for these conditions in SOM.11 and SOM.12.

[10] We also included two additional candidate mechanisms in Sample 1, envy for the leader and appropriateness of the leader's behavior. We chose to discuss and interpret the results for these measures in the SOM for reasons explained under SOM.12.

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