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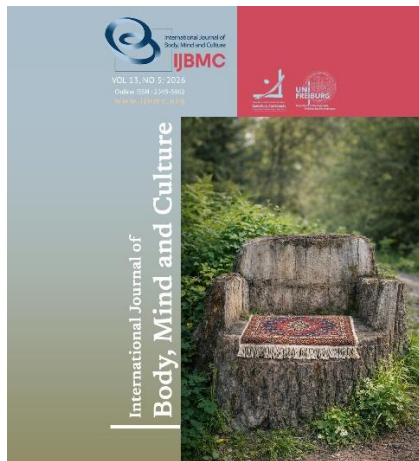
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Immature Defense Mechanisms and Vulnerable Narcissism: Mediating Roles of Shame and Attachment Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examined shame and attachment anxiety as mediators in the relationship between immature defense mechanisms and vulnerable narcissism among university students.

Methods and Materials: This cross-sectional correlational study included 250 university students from Kermanshah, Iran, recruited through convenience sampling. Participants completed the Pathological Narcissism Inventory, Defense Style Questionnaire-40, Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale, and Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were computed using SPSS-26, and path analysis was performed using AMOS-24. Missing data below 5% were handled using multiple imputation.

Findings: Immature defense mechanisms were positively correlated with vulnerable narcissism ($r = 0.43, p < 0.01$), shame ($r = 0.40, p < 0.01$), and attachment anxiety ($r = 0.47, p < 0.01$). Vulnerable narcissism was also positively correlated with shame ($r = 0.42, p < 0.01$) and attachment anxiety ($r = 0.44, p < 0.01$). The model showed acceptable fit: RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.93, GFI = 0.97, and $\chi^2/df = 2.42$. Immature defense mechanisms directly predicted vulnerable narcissism ($\beta = 0.22, p < 0.001$), shame ($\beta = 0.40, p < 0.001$), and attachment anxiety ($\beta = 0.47, p < 0.001$). Indirect effects through shame ($\beta = 0.223, p < 0.001$) and attachment anxiety ($\beta = 0.260, p < 0.001$) were significant.

Conclusion: Shame and attachment anxiety partially mediated the association between immature defense mechanisms and vulnerable narcissism. Therapeutic interventions targeting shame, attachment insecurity, and maladaptive defenses may reduce vulnerable narcissistic traits.

Keywords: Narcissism, Defense Mechanisms, Shame, Anxiety, Students, Iran.

Introduction

Narcissism is a complex personality construct encompassing two primary subtypes: grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Zajenkowski et al., 2018). Grandiose narcissism is characterized by traits such as exploitation, exhibitionism, reduced empathy, superiority, aggression, fantasies of unlimited power, and avoidance of deep emotional ties, often accompanied by distrust, overconfidence, dismissiveness of advice, and lack of remorse (Kaufman et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2018). In contrast, vulnerable narcissism is marked by low self-esteem, shame-proneness, hypersensitivity to criticism and rejection, interpersonal avoidance, emptiness, mistrust, and a negative self-concept (Busmann et al., 2021; Fadhila, 2024). These individuals are often distrustful, overconfident, dismissive of advice, and lack remorse (Kesman et al., 2024).

Psychoanalytically, defense mechanisms play a critical role in protecting individuals from threats to self-esteem, such as shame or narcissistic injury, providing a sense of security (Gholami Zarch et al., 2024). Vulnerable narcissists, characterized by heightened sensitivity and low self-worth, often rely on immature defense mechanisms like splitting, projection (attributing personal flaws to others), and denial (avoiding uncomfortable realities) to cope with interpersonal challenges and emotional suffering (Fegan & Bland, 2021; Imamoglu & DURAK BATIGÜN, 2020). According to Liu et al. (2021), these defenses, however, perpetuate a cycle of shame, inadequacy, and psychological distress, exacerbating mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Marković et al., 2019). Instead, these defense mechanisms result in a cycle of low self-esteem and shame that worsens psychological suffering (Miller et al., 2018).

Shame, a maladaptive emotion tied to feelings of worthlessness and vulnerability, is a central feature of vulnerable narcissism and is often linked to adverse childhood experiences, such as emotional neglect or insecure parent-child relationships (McElvaney et al., 2022). People who have been emotionally neglected as children are more likely to feel shame and unhappy with themselves and may develop depression and anxiety (Kealy et al., 2023). Similarly, attachment anxiety, characterized by fear of rejection and a strong need for approval, is a significant determinant of vulnerable

narcissism (Rohmann et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2024). Individuals with high attachment anxiety may exhibit narcissistic traits or maintain emotional distance in relationships to shield themselves from vulnerability, driven by heightened emotional responses rooted in their relational pasts (Set, 2021). Shame and attachment anxiety may mediate the relationship between immature defense mechanisms and vulnerable narcissism, maintaining maladaptive coping patterns (Ellina & Parpottas, 2023). They tend to develop heightened emotional responses and use defense mechanisms to protect their self-esteem, as these negative perceptions are often linked to their relational pasts (Vesković, 2022).

Despite extensive research on grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism remains underexplored, particularly in non-Western contexts like Iran. The mediating roles of shame and attachment anxiety in linking immature defenses to vulnerable narcissism are poorly understood, limiting the development of effective therapeutic approaches. This study aims to address this gap by testing a mediation model to examine the interrelationships among immature defense mechanisms, shame, attachment anxiety, and vulnerable narcissism. By elucidating these dynamics, the study seeks to enhance understanding of the pathological patterns associated with vulnerable narcissism and inform more targeted therapeutic interventions.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This cross-sectional correlational study used path analysis to examine shame and attachment anxiety as mediators between immature defense mechanisms and vulnerable narcissism. A convenience sample of 250 students (52.4% female, $M_{age} = 25.3$, $SD = 3.8$) was recruited from universities in Kermanshah via email. Inclusion criteria: aged 20–45, no severe psychiatric diagnoses. Exclusion criteria: incomplete responses (>10% missing items), unwillingness to participate. Informed consent was obtained electronically, ensuring anonymity. The sample size followed the guidelines for power in path analysis (Kline, 2023).

Data Collection Tools

Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI): Measured pathological narcissism with a 52-item self-report

questionnaire developed by Pincus (2013) utilizing a 6-point Likert response format rating items ranging from "Not at all like me" to "Very much like me." Seven subscales comprise it: Contingent Self-Esteem, Exploitativeness, Self-Sacrificing Self-Enhancement, Hiding the Self, Grandiose Fantasy, Devaluing, and Entitlement Rage. These subscales load onto two higher-order dimensions: Grandiose Narcissism (Grandiose Fantasy, Exploitativeness, and Self-Sacrificing Self-Enhancement) and Vulnerable Narcissism (Contingent Self-Esteem, Hiding the Self, Devaluing, and Entitlement Rage). Together, they have two greater-dimensional constructs. Pincus and colleagues reported coefficient alpha ranging from 0.78 to 0.93 for the subscales, with an overall alpha of 0.95 for the entire scale. Good test-retest reliability over a 15-day interval was found for Soleimani et al. (above 0.70), indicating stable scores. Construct validity was supported by exploratory factor analysis (using principal component and parallel analyses), which indicated a seven-factor structure as appropriate. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.82 for vulnerable narcissism.

Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ-40): This questionnaire assesses the defense mechanisms developed by Andrews et al. (1993) and classifies them into three styles: immature, mature, and neurotic. It has 40 items scored on a 9-point Likert scale, measuring 20 defense mechanisms. The test-retest values range from 0.46 to 0.86, while Cronbach's alpha for the mature style is 0.68; for the immature style, it is 0.58, resulting in 0.80 for neurotic styles. Much has been said about construct validity, as correlations among defense mechanism levels have been reported as 0.97, 0.93, and 0.95. In an Iranian study, the content, convergent, and construct validity of the DSQ were examined, along with its reliability. In this case, Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.81 to 0.87, and test-retest correlations were high, indicating acceptable reliability and validity for the Iranian population. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.75 for the immature.

The Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale (GASP), designed by Cohen et al. (2011), is a 16-item scale that measures shame sensitivity and related compensatory behaviors. In this study, only the shame sensitivity items were used. Respondents rate their likelihood of reacting to hypothetical shame-inducing situations on a 5-point scale (1 = very unlikely, 5 = very likely). Shame

sensitivity comprises two components: internalized shame (personal shame experience) and social shame (fear of others' judgment). Cohen et al. (2011) reported reliability coefficients ranging from 0.61 to 0.71. In Iran, reliability coefficients were 0.86 for shame sensitivity and 0.82 for compensatory behaviors. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.79.

Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R): Developed by Brennan et al. (1998) and revised by Fraley et al. (2000), this 36-item questionnaire assesses attachment styles based on Bartholomew's theory. It uses a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), with 18 items for anxiety and 18 for avoidance. Higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety and avoidance. Excellent reliability and validity have been reported in foreign studies. In one Iranian study, this construct was modeled as a two-factor model of anxiety and avoidance, with internal consistency coefficients of 0.86 and 0.88, respectively, and test-retest reliability coefficients of 0.81 and 0.84 over two weeks. Some evidence was produced for convergent validity through relationships with depression and anxiety (DASS-21), self-esteem (Rosenberg), and extraversion (NEO-FFI). Significant relationships were found between attachment anxiety and depression (0.42), anxiety (0.28) and self-esteem (-0.44), and attachment avoidance and extraversion (-0.30), all significant at the 0.01 level. This tool measures anxiety and avoidance in two dimensions in insecure attachment styles. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.80.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 26 (descriptive statistics) and AMOS 24 (path analysis). Missing data (<5%) were handled via multiple imputation. Normality was confirmed (Shapiro-Wilk, $p > .05$). Multicollinearity was assessed ($VIF < 5$). Pearson correlations and path analysis were used to test relationships.

Findings and Results

Demographic profile

The sample consisted of 250 university students, with a nearly balanced gender distribution (52.4% female, 47.6% male). Participants were predominantly young adults: 55.6% were under 26 years of age, 40.8% were 26–30 years, and only 6.3% were 31 years or older. A majority of participants were single (79.2%), 20.4%

were married, and 0.4% reported being divorced or widowed.

Descriptive & Correlational Analysis

A series of bivariate Pearson correlations was conducted to examine the relationships among immature defense mechanisms, vulnerable narcissism, shame, and attachment anxiety. As expected, immature defense mechanisms showed significant positive associations with vulnerable narcissism ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$), shame ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$), and attachment anxiety ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$). Likewise, vulnerable narcissism correlated positively with both shame ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$) and attachment anxiety ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, shame was positively related to attachment anxiety ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$). These findings indicate that higher levels of immature defense mechanisms and vulnerable narcissism are consistently linked to elevated experiences of shame and attachment anxiety,

underscoring the interconnected nature of these intrapersonal and interpersonal processes.

Direct Effects

Table 1 presents the results of the direct effects analysis, which examines the relationships between the study variables. The results in Table 1 indicate significant and positive direct effects of immature defense mechanisms on both vulnerable narcissism ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$), shame ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$), and attachment anxiety ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$). These results suggest that individuals exhibiting higher levels of immature defense mechanisms are likely to report elevated levels of narcissism, shame, and attachment-related anxiety. Additionally, shame ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$) and attachment anxiety ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$) both significantly predict vulnerable narcissism, indicating that these emotional experiences play an important role in the development of narcissistic traits.

Table 1

Standardized Coefficients and Significance Levels of Direct Effects

Path	β	S.E.	C.R.	p
Immature defense mechanism → Vulnerable narcissism	0.22	0.12	3.91	< 0.001
Immature defense mechanism → Shame	0.40	0.04	8.10	< 0.001
Immature defense mechanism → Attachment anxiety	0.47	0.05	9.69	< 0.001
shame → Vulnerable narcissism	0.24	0.13	4.87	< 0.001
Attachment anxiety → Vulnerable narcissism	0.24	0.09	4.75	< 0.001

Note: β = standardized regression coefficient; S.E. = standard error; C.R. = critical ratio; p = significance level.

Indirect Effects

To examine the mediating roles of shame and attachment anxiety in the relationship between immature defense mechanisms and vulnerable narcissism, Table 2 presents the results of the indirect effects analysis. Table 2 shows the results of the indirect effects analysis, testing the mediating roles of shame and attachment anxiety in the relationship between immature defense mechanisms and vulnerable

narcissism. The analysis reveals significant indirect effects of immature defense mechanisms on vulnerable narcissism through both shame (indirect effect = 0.223, $p < 0.001$) and attachment anxiety (indirect effect = 0.260, $p < 0.001$). Both pathways suggest partial mediation, meaning that while the direct effects are significant, the relationship between immature defense mechanisms and vulnerable narcissism is partially explained by these emotional factors.

Table 2

Indirect Effects

Relationship	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		P	Conclusion
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Immature defense mechanism → shame → Vulnerable narcissism	0.223	0.12	0.34	< 0.001	partial mediation
Immature defense mechanism → Attachment anxiety → Vulnerable narcissism	0.260	0.14	0.38	< 0.001	partial mediation

The proposed research model is presented in Figure 1, illustrating the hypothesized relationships between the study variables.

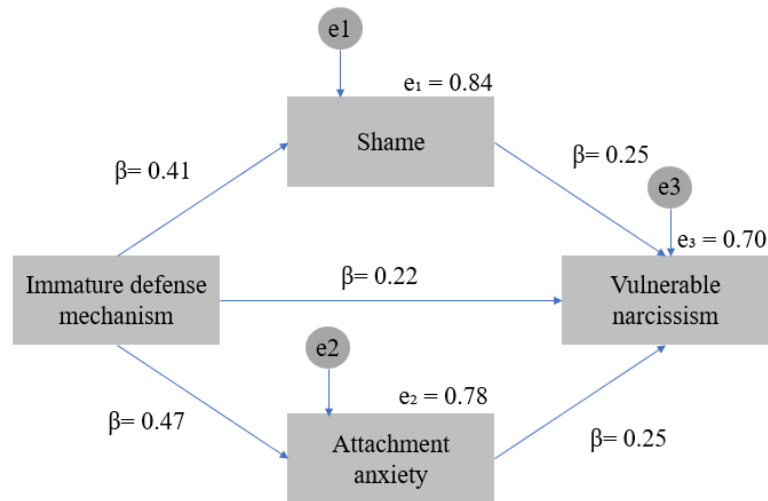


Figure 1

Proposed research model.

Model fit

Table 3 presents the fit indices of the developed model. Based on Table 3, the fit indices of the research model meet the acceptable criteria, indicating a good fit between the model and the data. According to (Kline, 2023), for a model fit, the ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom (X^2/df) should be less than 3, the comparative

fit index (CFI) and the goodness-of-fit index (GFI) should be greater than 0.90, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) should be less than 0.08. The values calculated for the research model are well within these acceptable parameters, suggesting that the model effectively represents the data.

Table 3

Fit Indices for the Developed Model

Fit Indices	RMSEA	CFI	GFI	X^2/df
Acceptable Range	< 0.08	> 0.90	> 0.90	< 3.00
Obtained Values	0.07	0.93	0.97	2.42

Table 4 presents the model summary, showing key statistics such as the R value, R-squared, adjusted R-squared, and Durbin-Watson statistic. The R-squared value of 0.309 indicates that approximately 30.2% of the variance in the dependent variable is explained by the model. The moderate-to-strong relationship between the variables suggests that the model effectively captures

the underlying patterns in the data. Additionally, the F-change statistic ($F = 48.69, p < 0.001$) further supports the model's significance in explaining the variation in the dependent variable. The Durbin-Watson value of 1.79 indicates no significant autocorrelation in the residuals, further supporting the model's reliability.

Table 4

Model Summary

	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	R- Change Statistics					Durbin- Watson
					Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	Sig. Change	
Model	0.556	0.309	0.302	8.36	0.30	48.69	0.001	1.79	

Discussion and Conclusion

This study elucidates the complex interplay between immature defense mechanisms and vulnerable narcissism, emphasizing the mediating roles of shame and attachment anxiety. The findings align with prior research by Ghinassi et al. (2023), Mahadevan and Jordan (2022), Brailovskaia et al. (2020), Di Blasi et al. (2020), Bilevicius et al. (2019), and Smolewska and Dion (2005) and psychodynamic theory, which posits that immature defenses, such as projection (attributing personal flaws to others) and denial (avoiding uncomfortable realities), protect against narcissistic injury but perpetuate psychological distress.

Role of Shame: Shame is a pivotal factor in the use of immature defense mechanisms and the development of vulnerable narcissism (Bilevicius et al., 2019; Ghinassi et al., 2023). Individuals employ defenses such as denial, projection, and fantasized self-inflation to mitigate discomfort associated with shame, which is tied to feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy (Kavčič et al., 2022). Individuals with vulnerable narcissism, highly sensitive to criticism and adverse events, respond to shame-inducing situations by seeking external validation or inflating their self-image, perpetuating a cycle of shame, maladaptive behaviors, and psychological distress (Miller et al., 2018).

Vulnerable narcissism is closely linked to attachment anxiety, particularly fears of abandonment or rejection in relationships, often rooted in insecure early relationships (Smolewska & Dion, 2005). This anxiety drives emotional instability, feelings of incompetence, and a need for external validation, increasing reliance on immature defenses like denial or suppression to cope with shame or fear of abandonment (Brailovskaia et al., 2020). These defenses worsen emotional states by avoiding underlying issues, leading to behaviors such as self-advertisement or self-pity to counter feelings of inferiority. Over time, these coping strategies reinforce

narcissistic traits and become maladaptive (Di Blasi et al., 2020). Severe vulnerable narcissism is often characterized by emotional dysregulation, escapism (e.g., excessive gaming or social media use), and difficulties managing stress, as individuals seek external validation to compensate for internal vulnerabilities.

The study extends prior research by examining these dynamics in an Iranian context, where collectivist cultural norms may amplify shame. For example, social pressures to uphold family honor can intensify shame-driven defenses. Gender norms in patriarchal settings may also heighten attachment anxiety, particularly among women, due to increased fears of rejection, further influencing narcissistic traits (Kesman et al., 2024). Interventions such as schema therapy or psychodynamic therapy could target shame and attachment anxiety to promote adaptive coping strategies, such as mindfulness. Screening tools for vulnerable narcissism could incorporate measures of shame and attachment anxiety for more accurate identification.

The limitations of this study include its cross-sectional design, which restricts the ability to draw causal inferences. Moreover, the use of a convenience sample consisting of university students limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations, both within Iranian society and across other cultural contexts. The reliance on self-report measures introduces potential biases related to perception and social desirability. Additionally, important cultural variables—such as collectivism and gender norms—that could have moderated the observed relationships were not examined in the analyses.

Future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal designs to assess better causal relationships among the variables studied. Cross-cultural investigations could further elucidate how the experience and expression of shame and narcissistic traits vary across different societies. Employing multimethod assessments, including clinical interviews or behavioral data, may

enhance the validity of findings and help address limitations inherent in self-report instruments.

Overall, the findings of this study, by confirming the partial mediating role of shame and attachment anxiety in the relationship between immature defense mechanisms and vulnerable narcissism, contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the psychopathological patterns underlying this trait in non-Western contexts, particularly within Iranian culture. This insight may inform the development of more targeted therapeutic interventions aimed at improving mental health outcomes for individuals exhibiting features of vulnerable narcissism.

Conclusion

Shame and attachment anxiety partially mediate the link between immature defense mechanisms and vulnerable narcissism, offering insights for therapy in Iranian contexts. Future research should explore longitudinal and cross-cultural designs to enhance generalizability and inform interventions.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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