



## Article

# Attachment Styles, Vulnerable Narcissism, Emotion Dysregulation and Perceived Social Support: A Mediation Model

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**Abstract:** Attachment styles have been shown to significantly influence individuals' social and emotional functioning. Furthermore, vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation are both relevant factors to consider in understanding individuals' social interactions and support networks. However, the mechanisms underlying such relationships are not fully understood yet. The objective of this research was to assess whether vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation sequentially mediate the connection between different attachment styles and perceived social support. Self-report questionnaires were administered to a sample of 1260 emerging adults (50% women) aged 18–25. Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were conducted. Preliminary analyses indicated significant effects of gender on some study variables, thus gender was controlled in the mediation analyses. The findings indicated that there was no mediation for secure attachment, full mediation for dismissing and preoccupied attachment, and partial mediation for fearful attachment. The results suggest that addressing vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation may be crucial in promoting individuals' perceived social support, particularly for those with insecure attachment styles. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the need for personalized approaches, as interventions may need to be tailored to individuals' unique attachment styles.

**Keywords:** attachment; narcissism; emotion regulation; social support; emerging adults



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## 1. Introduction

Attachment styles encompass psychological frameworks that reflect individuals' patterns of emotional and behavioral responses within close relationships, particularly during early childhood. These styles are influenced by the quality of caregiving experienced in infancy and have far-reaching implications for subsequent social interactions and overall well-being (Cann et al. 2008). One of the significant contributions of attachment theory is the identification of four primary attachment styles: secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful. These styles represent distinct patterns of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors exhibited in close relationships (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991). The secure attachment style is regarded as the most adaptive and healthy pattern of attachment (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991). In the context of emotional regulation behavior, individuals with a secure attachment style generally possess a positive self-image and have trust in others. This secure foundation enables them to navigate emotional intimacy comfortably. They actively seek close relationships, engaging in behaviors that foster emotional connections, and exhibit confidence in the responsiveness and availability of their partners (Roisman et al. 2002). Securely attached individuals typically demonstrate effective emotion regulation skills and possess a strong sense of self-worth. In contrast, individuals with a dismissing attachment style prioritize independence and self-reliance over emotional closeness (Bartholomew and

Horowitz 1991). This emphasis on autonomy may contribute to challenges in emotional regulation behavior, as dismissing individuals often downplay the significance of intimate relationships. Specifically, the literature suggests that they may struggle with expressing or recognizing their own needs for connection, hindering the development of effective emotional regulation skills (Marganska et al. 2013). The preoccupied attachment style is characterized by a strong desire for closeness coupled with an intense fear of rejection or abandonment (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991). Individuals with this attachment style often grapple with excessive worry and concern regarding their relationships, frequently relying heavily on their partners for reassurance and validation. This reliance on external sources for emotional stability can contribute to heightened levels of anxiety and pose challenges in maintaining healthy emotional boundaries (Marganska et al. 2013). The fearful attachment style reflects a combination of avoidance and anxiety within relationships (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991). Individuals with this attachment style desire closeness but also harbor deep-seated fears of both rejection and intimacy. These conflicting emotions often manifest in contradictory behaviors, as they may oscillate between actively seeking closeness and distancing themselves as a protective measure against potential emotional harm (Troisi et al. 2001).

Attachment styles and narcissism are two psychological constructs that exert significant influence over individuals' interpersonal relationships and overall well-being. Narcissism encompasses a collection of personality traits characterized by grandiosity, self-centeredness, and a craving for admiration (Miller et al. 2017).

Recently, researchers have directed their attention towards examining the connection between attachment styles and a specific manifestation of narcissism known as vulnerable narcissism. Vulnerable narcissism involves a fragile and insecure sense of self, combined with a constant need for validation and reassurance from others (Miller et al. 2021). Individuals with this form of narcissism commonly experience deep-rooted feelings of unworthiness and fear of rejection, which underlie their narcissistic behaviors. They may exhibit traits such as heightened sensitivity to criticism, excessive self-consciousness, and a propensity to exploit interpersonal relationships for personal gain (Rohmann et al. 2012). The relationship between attachment styles and vulnerable narcissism might be understood within the context of early experiences and the development of attachment patterns. Research indicates that individuals with insecure attachment styles, including the dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful styles, might be more susceptible to the development of vulnerable narcissistic tendencies (Dickinson and Pincus 2003; Rohmann et al. 2012). For example, individuals with a preoccupied attachment style might be particularly vulnerable to the emergence of vulnerable narcissistic traits as a means of safeguarding themselves against perceived threats to their self-worth. Conversely, individuals with a fearful attachment style, to shield themselves from potential rejection, might adopt narcissistic behaviors and attitudes as a defense mechanism. Long-term research appears to support these theoretical interpretations, notably underscoring a persistent association between insecure attachment styles and narcissistic inclinations (Dakanalis et al. 2016).

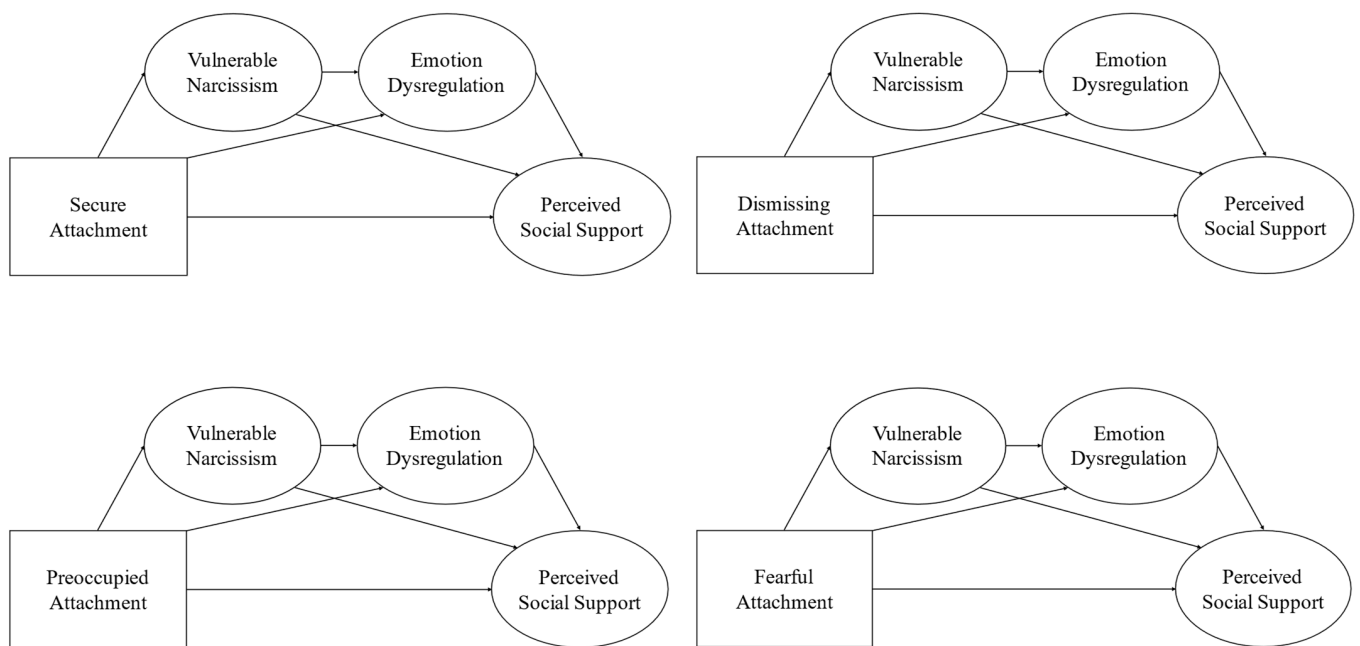
The correlation between vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation has received increased attention in psychological research. Emotion dysregulation refers to challenges in effectively managing and regulating emotions, resulting in intense and unpredictable emotional experiences (Thompson 2019). Research suggests that the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation can be comprehended through various underlying mechanisms (Ponzoni et al. 2021). To begin with, individuals with vulnerable narcissism often possess fragile self-esteem and an incessant need for external validation. When confronted with perceived threats to their self-worth, such as criticism or rejection, they might thus encounter significant emotional distress and encounter obstacles in regulating their emotional responses (Zhang et al. 2017). Consequently, it is reasonable to argue that they might display emotional volatility and struggle to recover from negative emotional encounters. Secondly, individuals with vulnerable narcissism might encounter difficulties in accurately recognizing and labeling their emotions. For example, they might

face obstacles in distinguishing between various emotional states and may demonstrate a limited emotional vocabulary. This compromised emotional awareness might impede their ability to effectively regulate their emotions, potentially leading to heightened emotional reactivity and dysregulation (Ponzoni et al. 2021). Moreover, the underlying insecurities and fear of rejection experienced by individuals with vulnerable narcissism might contribute to an enhanced sensitivity to emotional cues from others. Hence, they might display a heightened sensitivity to perceived threats or perceived slights, possibly resulting in exaggerated emotional responses and challenges in modulating their reactions during social interactions (Zhang et al. 2017). Longitudinal research appears to support the connection between vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation, specifically suggesting that narcissistic traits can result in significantly heightened negative emotional responses and negative affect (Besser and Zeigler-Hill 2010).

The association between emotion dysregulation and perceived social support has attracted considerable attention in psychological research due to the vital roles both factors play in individuals' emotional well-being and interpersonal relationships. Perceived social support refers to an individual's subjective assessment of the availability and sufficiency of support from their social network (Gülaçtı 2010). Consistent research findings indicate that individuals with higher levels of emotion dysregulation tend to report lower levels of perceived social support (Kitahara et al. 2020; Malkoç et al. 2019). Several explanations can account for this relationship. Firstly, individuals grappling with emotion dysregulation may encounter difficulties in effectively communicating their emotional needs to others, impeding their capacity to seek and receive adequate support (Chang et al. 2020; Malkoç et al. 2019). Their emotional instability can pose challenges in establishing stable and fulfilling relationships, thus contributing to a perception of limited social support. Secondly, emotion dysregulation may influence individuals' perceptions of social interactions and the support they receive (Chang et al. 2020; Kitahara et al. 2020). This biased perception can contribute to a diminished sense of social support and further exacerbate their emotional well-being. Moreover, individuals struggling with emotion dysregulation may resort to maladaptive coping mechanisms such as withdrawal, avoidance, or aggression (Saladino et al. 2024a, 2024b; Verrastro et al. 2024), which can strain their social relationships and reduce the availability of support from others (Kitahara et al. 2020; Malkoç et al. 2019). Consequently, they may perceive their social support network as insufficient or unresponsive to their needs. The aforementioned points align with pertinent long-term studies, suggesting that improved abilities in regulating emotions are linked to heightened satisfaction in relationships and more positive daily interactions (Cameron and Overall 2018).

Attachment styles have been extensively examined in the field of psychology and have demonstrated a significant impact on individuals' social and emotional functioning. By exploring the potential mediating roles of vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation, which are relevant factors in understanding individuals' social interactions and support networks, this study seeks to uncover the underlying processes that elucidate how attachment styles influence perceived social support. Comprehending these mediation processes carries substantial practical implications. Perceived social support holds a pivotal position in individuals' well-being and mental health outcomes. By identifying the mechanisms through which attachment styles affect perceived social support, interventions and therapeutic approaches can be informed to enhance individuals' social support networks and enhance their overall psychological well-being. Targeting vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation can potentially facilitate the development of interventions that address underlying concerns, fostering healthier attachment styles and more robust social support.

Due to the aforementioned reasons, the present study aims to address the knowledge gaps in the existing literature. Specifically, the aim of this study was to test if vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation sequentially mediate the relationship between attachment styles and perceived social support (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized models.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

This study comprised a sample of 1260 emerging adults in Italy, consisting of an equal number of women (630) and men (630), ranging in age from 18 to 25 years old (mean age = 21.47, SD = 2.30). The participants were recruited through online platforms, primarily utilizing social networks. With regard to educational attainment, 16% of the participants had completed middle school, 50% held a high school diploma, 31% possessed a university degree, and 3% had attained a postgraduate degree. In terms of occupational status, 48% of the participants were students, 8% were unemployed, 32% were employed, and 12% were self-employed. Regarding marital status, 41% of the participants were single, 41% were engaged, 10% were cohabiting, and 8% were married.

### 2.2. Procedures

The current study followed the ethical principles established in the Helsinki Declaration and the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP). Approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio (reference number: ISP-IRB-2023-4) on 9 January 2023). Participants were invited to complete a comprehensive online survey, and their responses were mandatory, resulting in no missing data. Only participants who provided informed consent were included in the study, and their participation was voluntary and without any compensation. The study prioritized the privacy and confidentiality of participants throughout all stages of the research.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Attachment Styles

Attachment styles were evaluated using the Italian version of the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991; Carli 1995). The RQ is a self-report questionnaire consisting of four items that assess specific attachment styles: secure, preoccupied, fearful, and dismissing. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all like me) to 7 (very much like me). The questionnaire includes statements such as "It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on others and having others depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me". Higher scores on each item indicate greater levels of the respective

attachment style. While the calculation of Cronbach's alpha was precluded due to the single-item composition of each subscale (Chen et al. 2012; Stanojević et al. 2020), the existing literature underscores the robust test–retest and concurrent validity coefficients associated with the instrument (Davila et al. 2004; Scharfe and Bartholomew 1994).

### 2.3.2. Vulnerable Narcissism

Vulnerable narcissism was assessed using the Italian version of the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Fossati et al. 2009; Hendin and Cheek 1997). The HSNS is a self-report questionnaire comprising 10 items that capture traits associated with vulnerable narcissism. Examples of items include “I often interpret the remarks of others in a personal way”. Participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores on the HSNS indicate higher levels of vulnerable narcissism.

### 2.3.3. Emotion Dysregulation

Emotion dysregulation was measured using the Italian short version of the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS-20; Gratz and Roemer 2004; Lausi et al. 2020). The DERS-20 is a self-report questionnaire consisting of 20 items that assess difficulties in regulating emotions (e.g., “When I am upset, I feel guilty for feeling that way”). Participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). Higher scores on the DERS-20 indicate higher levels of emotion dysregulation.

### 2.3.4. Perceived Social Support

Perceived social support was assessed using the Italian version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Di Fabio and Busoni 2008; Zimet et al. 1988). The MSPSS is a self-report questionnaire consisting of 12 items that measure the extent of support perceived from significant others. Participants indicate their agreement with each item on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (absolutely false) to 7 (absolutely true). Example items include “I can speak about my problems with my friends”. Higher scores on the MSPSS indicate higher levels of perceived social support.

## 2.4. Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and preliminary analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS. The main analyses were performed using the lavaan package in RStudio. To examine the influence of gender, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted, treating attachment styles, vulnerable narcissism, emotion dysregulation, and perceived social support as dependent variables, with gender as a fixed factor.

For the subsequent analyses, a Hybrid Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach was employed. Attachment styles were treated as observed variables, while vulnerable narcissism, emotion dysregulation, and perceived social support were treated as latent variables. Four separate mediation models, one for each attachment style, were tested. In these models, attachment styles served as predictors, vulnerable narcissism as the first mediator, emotion dysregulation as the second mediator, and perceived social support as the outcome variable (Figure 1). The significance of the indirect effects was assessed using the bootstrap-generated bias-corrected confidence interval approach with 5000 resamples.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables examined in the study. The means are consistent with those observed in prior studies (Tatnell et al. 2018; Purton et al. 2018; Quaglieri et al. 2021; Zhao et al. 2014).

**Table 1.** Descriptive analyses and correlations.

	M	SD	Ske	Kur	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Secure	3.75	1.74	0.09	−0.78	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Dismissing	3.92	1.81	0.01	−0.93	-	0.18 **	-	-	-	-	-
3. Preoccupied	3.72	1.70	0.04	−0.82	-	0.10 **	0.04	-	-	-	-
4. Fearful	3.95	1.85	0.02	−0.96	-	−0.07 *	0.16 **	0.45 **	-	-	-
5. Vulnerable Narcissism	2.86	0.74	−0.04	0.02	0.81	−0.03	0.14 **	0.37 **	0.44 **	-	-
6. Emotion Dysregulation	2.57	0.70	0.17	−0.49	0.89	−0.04	.01	0.36 **	0.42 **	0.51 **	-
7. Perceived Social Support	5.36	1.28	−0.67	−0.11	0.93	0.15 **	−0.01	−0.19 **	−0.23 **	−0.27 **	−0.30 **

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . Internal consistency for the RQ scales cannot be calculated because they consist of single-item measures.

Preliminary analyses were conducted to investigate the impact of gender on the study variables. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was utilized, and the results revealed significant multivariate effects of gender: Wilks’s  $\lambda = 0.97$ ,  $F(7, 1252) = 4.63$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ . Subsequent univariate ANOVAs showed the effects of gender on fearful attachment,  $F(1, 1258) = 12.66$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ , and on emotion dysregulation,  $F(1, 1258) = 8.88$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ . Specifically, women reported higher levels of fearful attachment and higher levels of emotion dysregulation. Due to the above results, the mediation analyses were controlled for gender.

### 3.2. Mediation Models

The secure attachment model fit the data well:  $\chi^2(36) = 132.33$ ;  $p < 0.001$ , CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.05 (90% CI = 0.04–0.06), SRMR = 0.02. The direct path between secure attachment and perceived social support was significant, although the indirect path was not mediated by vulnerable narcissism or by emotion dysregulation.

The dismissing attachment model fit the data well:  $\chi^2(36) = 116.12$ ;  $p < 0.001$ , CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.04 (90% CI = 0.03–0.05), SRMR = 0.02. The direct link between dismissing attachment and perceived social support was not significant, even though the indirect link was mediated by vulnerable narcissism and by emotion dysregulation.

The preoccupied attachment model fit the data well:  $\chi^2(36) = 130.63$ ;  $p < 0.001$ , CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.05 (90% CI = 0.04–0.05), SRMR = 0.02. The direct path between preoccupied attachment and perceived social support was not significant, although the indirect path was mediated by vulnerable narcissism and by emotion dysregulation.

The fearful attachment model fit the data well:  $\chi^2(36) = 148.77$ ;  $p < 0.001$ , CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.05 (90% CI = 0.04–0.06), SRMR = 0.02. The direct link between fearful attachment and perceived social support was significant, and the indirect link was mediated by vulnerable narcissism and by emotion dysregulation.

All direct and indirect paths of the four models are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Path estimates, SEs and 95% CIs.

	$\beta$	$p$	SE	CI LL	CI UL
<b>Secure attachment model</b>					
<b>Direct Effect</b>					
Secure Attachment → Vulnerable Narcissism	−0.04	0.28	0.01	−0.04	0.01
Secure Attachment → Emotion Dysregulation	−0.02	0.57	0.01	−0.03	0.02
Secure Attachment → Perceived Social Support	0.14	<0.001	0.02	0.06	0.14
Vulnerable Narcissism → Emotion Dysregulation	0.57	<0.001	0.04	0.60	0.74
Vulnerable Narcissism → Perceived Social Support	−0.18	<0.001	0.09	−0.54	−0.17
Emotion Dysregulation → Perceived Social Support	−0.20	<0.001	0.06	−0.47	−0.22
<b>Indirect Effect via Vulnerable Narcissism</b>					
Secure Attachment → Emotion Dysregulation	−0.02	0.28	0.01	−0.02	0.01
Secure Attachment → Perceived Social Support	0.01	0.32	0.01	−0.004	0.02

Table 2. Cont.

	$\beta$	$p$	SE	CI	CI
				LL	UL
Indirect Effect via Emotion Dysregulation					
Secure Attachment → Perceived Social Support	0.003	0.58	0.004	−0.01	0.01
Vulnerable Narcissism → Perceived Social Support	−0.12	<0.001	0.04	−0.32	−0.15
Dismissing attachment model					
Direct Effect					
Dismissing Attachment → Vulnerable Narcissism	0.15	<0.001	0.01	0.03	0.07
Dismissing Attachment → Emotion Dysregulation	−0.08	0.003	0.01	−0.05	−0.01
Dismissing Attachment → Perceived Social Support	0.02	0.49	0.02	−0.03	0.05
Vulnerable Narcissism → Emotion Dysregulation	0.58	<0.001	0.04	0.61	0.75
Vulnerable Narcissism → Perceived Social Support	−0.18	<0.001	0.09	−0.55	−0.18
Emotion Dysregulation → Perceived Social Support	−0.21	<0.001	0.06	−0.47	−0.23
Indirect Effect via Vulnerable Narcissism					
Dismissing Attachment → Emotion Dysregulation	0.09	<0.001	0.01	0.02	0.05
Dismissing Attachment → Perceived Social Support	−0.03	0.002	0.01	−0.03	−0.01
Indirect Effect via Emotion Dysregulation					
Dismissing Attachment → Perceived Social Support	0.02	0.01	0.004	0.003	0.02
Vulnerable Narcissism → Perceived Social Support	−0.12	<0.001	0.04	−0.32	−0.16
Preoccupied attachment model					
Direct Effect					
Preoccupied Attachment → Vulnerable Narcissism	0.40	<0.001	0.01	0.12	0.17
Preoccupied Attachment → Emotion Dysregulation	0.17	<0.001	0.01	0.05	0.09
Preoccupied Attachment → Perceived Social Support	−0.05	0.12	0.02	−0.08	0.01
Vulnerable Narcissism → Emotion Dysregulation	0.51	<0.001	0.04	0.52	0.66
Vulnerable Narcissism → Perceived Social Support	−0.17	0.001	0.10	−0.52	−0.14
Emotion Dysregulation → Perceived Social Support	−0.20	<0.001	0.06	−0.46	−0.21
Indirect Effect via Vulnerable Narcissism					
Preoccupied Attachment → Emotion Dysregulation	0.20	<0.001	0.01	0.07	0.10
Preoccupied Attachment → Perceived Social Support	−0.07	0.001	0.01	−0.08	−0.02
Indirect Effect via Emotion Dysregulation					
Preoccupied Attachment → Perceived Social Support	−0.03	<0.001	0.01	−0.04	−0.01
Vulnerable Narcissism → Perceived Social Support	−0.10	<0.001	0.04	−0.27	−0.12
Fearful attachment model					
Direct Effect					
Fearful Attachment → Vulnerable Narcissism	0.48	<0.001	0.01	0.14	0.18
Fearful Attachment → Emotion Dysregulation	0.19	<0.001	0.01	0.06	0.10
Fearful Attachment → Perceived Social Support	−0.10	0.004	0.02	−0.11	−0.02
Vulnerable Narcissism → Emotion Dysregulation	0.48	<0.001	0.04	0.49	0.64
Vulnerable Narcissism → Perceived Social Support	−0.15	0.003	0.10	−0.49	−0.10
Emotion Dysregulation → Perceived Social Support	−0.19	<0.001	0.06	−0.44	−0.20
Indirect Effect via Vulnerable Narcissism					
Fearful Attachment → Emotion Dysregulation	0.23	<0.001	0.01	0.08	0.11
Fearful Attachment → Perceived Social Support	−0.07	0.003	0.02	−0.08	−0.02
Indirect Effect via Emotion Dysregulation					
Fearful Attachment → Perceived Social Support	−0.04	<0.001	0.01	−0.04	−0.01
Vulnerable Narcissism → Perceived Social Support	−0.09	<0.001	0.04	−0.25	−0.11

Note:  $p$  level of significance; SE standard error; CI confidence interval; LL lower limit; UL upper limit.

#### 4. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to explore whether vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation play sequential mediating roles in the relationship between attachment styles and perceived social support. Our findings uncovered a nuanced and complex

relationship between attachment styles and perceived social support. Specifically, we observed a direct link between secure attachment and perceived social support. However, this relationship was not mediated by vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation. On the other hand, the associations between dismissing attachment and perceived social support, as well as between preoccupied attachment and perceived social support, were found to be fully mediated by vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation. Additionally, the path between fearful attachment and perceived social support was partially mediated by vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation. Although the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow causal inferences, and it must be acknowledged that various possible connections might exist among the variables, some theoretical explanations can support the present findings and pave the way for future longitudinal studies.

Attachment theory suggests that early experiences with caregivers may play a role in shaping individuals' attachment styles, which could potentially influence their patterns of relating to others throughout their lives (Harlow 2021; Mikulincer and Shaver 2019). Secure attachment tends to be associated with a positive view of self and others, whereas insecure attachment styles are often linked to negative self-perceptions and challenges in forming and maintaining relationships (Mikulincer and Shaver 2019; Welch and Houser 2010). Dismissing attachment is often characterized by a notable inclination towards self-reliance and a preference for avoiding close emotional connections (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991). Individuals with dismissing attachment styles may thus tend to downplay the significance of relationships and could exhibit a dismissive attitude towards vulnerability and emotional needs, which may suggest a potential association with vulnerable narcissistic tendencies (Gentzler et al. 2010; Welch and Houser 2010). More specifically, it is plausible that individuals with dismissing attachment styles might lean towards a sense of superiority and self-sufficiency as a potential defense mechanism against emotional intimacy. This defensive stance could potentially contribute to behaviors that align with narcissism as a way to safeguard their delicate self-esteem (Gentzler et al. 2010; Welch and Houser 2010). Preoccupied attachment is commonly characterized by a notable desire for closeness and validation from others (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991). Individuals with preoccupied attachment styles often demonstrate heightened sensitivity to rejection and may exhibit a significant dependence on others for reassurance, potentially increasing the likelihood of features associated with vulnerable narcissism (Gentzler et al. 2010; Pace et al. 2019). It might be reasonable to suggest that individuals with preoccupied attachment styles could potentially engage in self-enhancing behaviors as a way to seek external validation and cope with their underlying insecurities and fears of abandonment. These behaviors could form the basis for the development of traits associated with narcissism (Gentzler et al. 2010; Pace et al. 2019). Fearful attachment is commonly characterized by both a desire for closeness and a fear of rejection or abandonment (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991). Individuals with fearful attachment styles often grapple with conflicting emotions and may develop a negative view of both themselves and others. It could be considered that a fearful attachment might be often be intertwined with higher levels of vulnerable narcissism (Pace et al. 2019; Set 2021). Specifically, individuals with fearful attachment styles may exhibit behaviors that could be interpreted as narcissistic tendencies, potentially serving as a defense mechanism to protect themselves from perceived threats in relationships. Simultaneously, there may be a longing for emotional connections they find challenging (Pace et al. 2019; Set 2021). The literature suggests that insecure attachment styles, including dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful, might be connected with the development of vulnerable narcissism, potentially stemming from underlying self-esteem issues and feelings of rejection (Harlow 2021; Set 2021). It is thus plausible that these attachment styles could have an impact on individuals' beliefs about themselves and others, potentially shaping their inclinations towards seeking external validation and displaying behaviors that might align with aspects of narcissism. Longitudinal research seems to corroborate these theoretical explanations, particularly emphasizing a sustained link between insecure attachment styles and narcissistic tendencies (Dakanalis et al. 2016).



Individuals displaying traits associated with vulnerable narcissism may encounter challenges in effectively modulating their emotional responses, potentially leading to experiences of intense and unstable emotions. It has been suggested that negative emotions like anger, shame, or sadness could pose particular difficulties for these individuals to manage, prompting the adoption of potentially maladaptive coping strategies and impairing emotional functioning (Ponzoni et al. 2021; Rohmann et al. 2019). The fragile self-esteem observed in individuals with vulnerable narcissistic traits offers a potential explanation for the association between vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation. Their lower self-esteem may render them more susceptible to emotional triggers and more prone to negative emotional reactions (Rohmann et al. 2019; Underwood et al. 2021). When facing perceived threats to their self-worth, individuals exhibiting vulnerable narcissism might demonstrate emotional overreactions or engage in defensive behaviors such as aggression or withdrawal. These observable emotional responses could be interpreted as potential indicators of challenges in effectively regulating their emotions and maintaining emotional stability (Blasco-Belled et al. 2022; Underwood et al. 2021). Furthermore, individuals presenting traits associated with vulnerable narcissism often display a heightened sensitivity to perceived negative evaluation or disapproval from others. They may interpret even mild feedback or neutral comments as personal attacks on their self-worth. This hypersensitivity could contribute to difficulties in emotion regulation, as individuals with tendencies towards vulnerable narcissism may grapple with managing the distress associated with perceived criticism or rejection (Blasco-Belled et al. 2022; Ponzoni et al. 2021). Therefore, their emotional responses may be intense and prolonged, posing challenges for them to regain emotional equilibrium. Long-term studies seem to affirm the association between vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation, indicating that traits linked to narcissism can lead to notably increased negative emotional responses and negative affect (Besser and Zeigler-Hill 2010).

Individuals who may face difficulties in effectively regulating their emotions (Saladino et al. 2020a, 2020b) might, as a result, also encounter challenges in forming and maintaining supportive relationships (Saladino et al. 2021; Verrastro et al. 2020). Emotion dysregulation has been associated with challenges in expressing emotions appropriately, potentially influencing the quality of communication and emotional connection with others (Kitahara et al. 2020; Malkoç et al. 2019). Hence, it is plausible to argue that individuals with higher levels of emotion dysregulation might perceive less support from their social networks. One potential explanation for the observed relationship between emotion dysregulation and perceived social support is linked to the impact of emotional intensity and instability on interpersonal interactions (Chang et al. 2020; Malkoç et al. 2019). Emotionally dysregulated individuals may experience intense and unpredictable emotional responses (Barberis et al. 2019), making it challenging for others to provide effective support (Barberis et al. 2020). The erratic nature of emotions may introduce strain into relationships, as it can be challenging for others to understand and respond appropriately to the emotional needs of individuals with emotion dysregulation (Chang et al. 2020; Kitahara et al. 2020). Therefore, these individuals may perceive a potential lack of support or feel misunderstood by others. Additionally, emotion dysregulation may contribute to the adoption of maladaptive coping strategies, such as emotional avoidance or impulsive behaviors, possibly straining social relationships (Kitahara et al. 2020; Malkoç et al. 2019). Arguably, individuals experiencing challenges in regulating their emotions might thus withdraw from social interactions or engage in behaviors that could negatively impact their relationships, thereby reducing their perceived social support. Furthermore, emotional dysregulation may contribute to heightened sensitivity to rejection or criticism, potentially leading individuals to interpret ambiguous social cues as indications of unsupportive or negative intentions (Chang et al. 2020; Malkoç et al. 2019). The above considerations are in line with relevant longitudinal research, which highlights that greater emotional regulation skills predict higher relationship satisfaction and daily interactions (Cameron and Overall 2018).

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1. Limitations

Our research shows some limitations: (1) due to its cross-sectional nature, establishing the causal direction becomes challenging, hence, the findings should be considered preliminary and interpreted with caution. Longitudinal investigations are necessary to validate these results; (2) reliance solely on self-reported data in the study introduces the potential for interpretive bias. Future studies could incorporate data from multiple sources to mitigate this bias; (3) the study exclusively utilized online data collection, potentially restricting the generalizability of findings to individuals without internet access. Therefore, future research endeavors should aim to incorporate diverse data sources to enhance the precision of the findings.

### 5.2. Future Directions

This article significantly contributes to our comprehension of the intricate dynamics involving attachment styles, vulnerable narcissism, emotion dysregulation, and perceived social support. It illuminates the interactions and influences among these factors on individuals' capacity to establish and maintain supportive relationships. Firstly, the findings suggest that specific attachment styles may predispose individuals to vulnerable narcissistic tendencies and challenges in regulating their emotions, which can impact their social support networks. Professionals in the field can consider targeting vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation as potential intervention areas to enhance individuals' perceptions of social support and overall well-being. Additionally, the article underscores the significance of individual differences, such as attachment styles, and their susceptibility to vulnerable narcissism and emotion dysregulation. It emphasizes the necessity for a personalized approach to understand and address these vulnerabilities, as interventions may require customization based on individuals' unique attachment styles. Early identification and intervention can aid individuals in developing healthier attachment styles, improving emotional regulation skills, shaping narcissistic features, and enhancing their perceptions of social support, thereby mitigating the risk of negative outcomes in relationships and mental health. The implications of this article extend to educational settings, where understanding the roles of attachment styles, vulnerable narcissism, emotion dysregulation, and perceived social support can inform strategies for fostering students' social and emotional development. Future studies could delve into the underlying mechanisms and causal relationships among attachment styles, vulnerable narcissism, emotion dysregulation, and perceived social support, offering a more comprehensive understanding of these phenomena. Furthermore, exploring how these dynamics vary across cultures and contexts would provide a broader perspective on these relationships.

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