

Reading Hidden Red Flags: The Moderating Role of Anxious Attachment on The Relationship between Vulnerable Narcissism and Violence in Romantic Relationships

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Keywords	Abstract
Vulnerable Narcissism; Anxious Attachment; Intimate Partner Violence; Moderation; Emerging Adulthood	Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant public health concern among young adults. Previous evidence regarding the role of vulnerable narcissism in IPV has been inconsistent, suggesting the presence of an unidentified moderating factor. This study examined the moderating role of anxious attachment in the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and IPV based on the I3 Model (Instigation–Impellance–Inhibition). The participants were 163 emerging adults aged 18–30 years who had been involved in a dating relationship for at least six months and were selected from an initial pool of 200 respondents. Participants completed the Vulnerable Narcissism Scale (VNS), the anxiety subscale of the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R), and the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2) through an online survey. Data were analyzed using hierarchical moderated regression based on Hayes’ moderation analysis approach, corresponding to PROCESS Model 1. The results showed that vulnerable narcissism was a strong positive predictor of IPV ($\beta = 0.886$, $p < .001$), and anxious attachment significantly moderated this relationship ($\Delta R^2 = 0.028$, $p = .006$). The moderation effect was found to be buffering in nature, indicating that the effect of vulnerable narcissism on IPV decreased as anxious attachment increased, with regression slopes of 0.104, 0.085, and 0.066 at low, average, and high levels of anxious attachment, respectively. These findings were interpreted through the inhibitory pathway proposed by the I3 Model while also considering the possibility of a statistical suppression effect due to the strong correlation between the two predictors ($r = .810$). The reduction in overt aggression at higher levels of anxious attachment should not be interpreted as an indicator of a healthy relationship. Rather, the findings suggest that violence may not disappear but instead shift in expression, where aggression that might otherwise be directed toward a partner may be internalized as psychological distress experienced by the individual.

INTRODUCTION

Violence in romantic relationships, commonly referred to in the literature as intimate partner violence (IPV), represents a significant yet frequently underreported form of interpersonal violence. The World Health Organization (2021) defines IPV as any behavior within a romantic relationship that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including physical assault, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors. This broad conceptualization is important because IPV extends beyond visible physical violence and includes more concealed forms of abuse. Global prevalence data highlight the magnitude of the issue: approximately 27% of women aged 15–49 years who have ever been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner (WHO, 2021). Similarly, a survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022) in the United States reported that more than one-third of women (36%) and more than one-

quarter of men (29%) had experienced physical violence, sexual violence, or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime.

In Indonesia, the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan, 2023) recorded 457,895 cases of gender-based violence throughout 2022, with violence occurring within personal relationships, including dating and marriage, representing the largest proportion of reported cases. The 2026 annual report of Komnas Perempuan, which documented cases reported in 2025, recorded 376,529 cases, representing a 14.07% increase compared with the previous year, with the personal sphere accounting for 89.76% of all reported cases. Most victims were within the 18–24 and 25–40 age groups, which correspond to periods when individuals commonly develop romantic relationships and begin achieving financial independence. Dating violence requires particular attention because, unlike marital violence, which has clearer legal protection and social recognition, violence within dating relationships is often normalized or misinterpreted as an intense expression of affection, a pattern commonly described as a toxic relationship (Wahyuni & Sartika, 2020). Victims often experience difficulties recognizing early warning signs or red flags in their partners, causing subsequent violence to appear unexpected (Walker, 2017).

Dating violence is frequently observed among emerging adults aged 18–30 years, a developmental period characterized by intensive exploration of identity and romantic relationships that are not yet fully established (Arnett, 2000). This period is particularly relevant because IPV prevalence tends to be high, and conflict patterns may become more established after the initial honeymoon phase of a relationship, often around the six-month period (Straus, 2004). Therefore, emerging adults represent an important population for studying IPV. The central question concerns the personality factors that increase vulnerability to perpetrating violence within romantic relationships. A meta-analysis by Kjaervik and Bushman (2021), synthesizing findings from 437 studies, demonstrated that narcissism was associated with aggression, with this association becoming stronger under conditions of provocation. However, these findings are not equally distributed across narcissism subtypes, as grandiose narcissism has received substantially more empirical attention than vulnerable narcissism.

Most research examining narcissism and aggression has focused on grandiose narcissism, particularly through Bushman and Baumeister's (1998) threatened egotism framework, which proposes that an inflated yet fragile ego may contribute to aggressive responses. In contrast, vulnerable narcissism represents a distinct subtype characterized by hypersensitivity to rejection, insecurity, and a strong need for external validation (Crowe et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2011). Unlike the overt self-enhancement associated with grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism is characterized by hidden vulnerability, making it more difficult to identify as an early red flag in romantic relationships. Vulnerable narcissism involves introversion, sensitivity to criticism, and defensive self-enhancement that conceals fragile self-esteem (Willis, 2025).

Empirical findings regarding the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and IPV have been inconsistent. Several studies have identified vulnerable narcissism as a significant predictor of aggressive relationship behaviors, including cyber dating abuse, where it was found to be the only narcissism subtype with a significant predictive effect (Deans & Bhogal, 2017; Green et al., 2020). Other studies have shown that vulnerable narcissism predicts

relational aggression and controlling behaviors even after controlling for other personality characteristics (Scott & Davis, 2012; Fossati et al., 2014). However, Day and Carroll (2004) reported no significant association between vulnerable narcissism and aggression, instead identifying grandiose narcissism as a more consistent predictor. Similarly, Carton and Egan (2017) concluded that evidence regarding vulnerable narcissism remains fragmented. A recent meta-analysis by Oliver et al. (2024), involving 22 studies with 11,520 participants, identified a positive but weak relationship ($r = 0.15$) between narcissistic traits and IPV perpetration, with a slightly stronger association observed for vulnerable narcissism. These inconsistent findings suggest the presence of an unidentified moderating mechanism influencing the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and IPV.

A recent meta-analysis by Willis and colleagues (2025), which synthesized 33 studies involving more than 10,000 participants, revealed that vulnerable narcissism was consistently associated with insecure attachment styles, particularly preoccupied and fearful attachment patterns, whereas grandiose narcissism showed no comparable association. These findings suggest that insecure attachment may represent an important psychological factor in the development of vulnerable narcissism, potentially emerging as a defensive adaptation to early experiences involving inconsistent, neglectful, or abusive caregiving.

This study proposes that attachment style, specifically anxious attachment, represents an appropriate moderating factor for four interconnected reasons. First, from a theoretical perspective, romantic relationships function as attachment bonds (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), making attachment style an internal framework through which individuals interpret relational threats (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Second, empirical evidence consistently identifies insecure attachment as one of the strongest psychological predictors of IPV (Dutton & White, 2012; Spencer et al., 2021; Velotti et al., 2022). Among attachment dimensions, anxious attachment is particularly relevant because it involves hyperactivation of the attachment system, heightened sensitivity to rejection cues, and persistent fear of abandonment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Brennan et al., 1998). Third, conceptually, anxious attachment and vulnerable narcissism share substantial similarities, including negative self-perception, fear of rejection, and dependence on external validation, suggesting that both operate through overlapping threat-related mechanisms (Mohay et al., 2025; van Schie et al., 2021). Fourth, methodologically, attachment anxiety has previously demonstrated a moderating role in aggression-related models (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004; Mayseless, 1991).

This conceptual overlap has two important implications. On the one hand, it strengthens the rationale for examining anxious attachment as a moderator because effective moderators often operate through mechanisms related to the predictor variable. On the other hand, it requires methodological caution because highly overlapping constructs may demonstrate strong correlations, potentially affecting discriminant validity. This issue is therefore considered in the interpretation of the results and discussion.

The primary theoretical framework guiding this study is the I3 Model (Instigation–Impellance–Inhibition; Finkel, 2014), which explains aggressive behavior as the outcome of interactions among three independent processes. Instigation refers to situational triggers, such as provocation or rejection from a partner. Impellance refers to dispositional or situational factors that increase the likelihood and intensity of aggressive responses when triggers occur. Inhibition refers to factors that enable individuals to regulate aggressive impulses and prevent

aggressive behavior. Within this framework, vulnerable narcissism is conceptualized as an impellance factor because underlying ego fragility may contribute to hostile interpretations, narcissistic injury, and reactive aggression when individuals perceive threats to their self-image (Krizan & Johar, 2015; Sen-Pakyurek & Bariskin, 2022). Wong and Denson (2025) further demonstrated within the I3 Model framework that interpersonal factors, including dominance, control needs, and relationship dissatisfaction, function as mediating mechanisms in the relationship between attachment and IPV, particularly among individuals with anxious attachment.

The role of anxious attachment within the I3 Model remains theoretically ambiguous, allowing for two possible interpretations. Based on existing evidence, anxious attachment may function as an amplifying moderator: when vulnerable narcissism and anxious attachment coexist at high levels, heightened threat sensitivity and fragile self-esteem may interact to strengthen pathways toward IPV. However, the I3 Model also allows for an alternative explanation. Because fear of abandonment may increase motivation to preserve relationships, anxious attachment may enhance inhibitory processes and reduce aggressive expression (Slotter et al., 2012). Due to these competing theoretical possibilities, the moderation hypothesis in this study was formulated without predicting a specific direction, allowing the empirical findings to determine the nature of the relationship. This theoretical uncertainty highlights the importance of further investigation into the mechanisms underlying IPV perpetration.

Based on this synthesis, the study proposes the following two hypotheses:

1. H1: Vulnerable narcissism has a positive and significant effect on intimate partner violence; the higher the vulnerable narcissism, the higher the tendency toward IPV.
2. H2: Anxious attachment style moderates the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and intimate partner violence.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach with an explanatory design using a cross-sectional survey. This design was selected because the study aimed to examine the direct effects and moderating relationships among variables at a single point in time without experimental manipulation, which was appropriate for investigating relatively stable personality traits and attachment patterns (Malhotra, 2010).

The population consisted of emerging adults in Indonesia who were currently involved in or had previously experienced a dating relationship. Sampling was conducted using a purposive sampling technique based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) Indonesian citizenship; (2) age between 18 and 30 years; and (3) having experienced a dating relationship lasting at least six months. The minimum required sample size was determined using G*Power 3.1.9.7 ($f^2 = 0.07$, $\alpha = .05$, power = .90, three predictors), which resulted in a recommended minimum of 204 participants. A total of 201 responses were collected, and after applying the inclusion criteria, 37 responses were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 163 participants. The difference between the planned and obtained sample sizes was acknowledged as a limitation of the study.

The final sample consisted predominantly of female participants (60.7%) and was entirely within the 18–30 age range. Of the participants, 58.9% had previously been involved

in a dating relationship lasting at least six months, while 41.1% were currently in such relationships.

Vulnerable narcissism was measured using the Vulnerable Narcissism Scale (VNS; Crowe et al., 2018), which consists of 11 adjective-based items rated on a 1–7 Likert scale. In this sample ($N = 201$), the VNS demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha = .951$), with item-total correlations ranging from .783 to .852. Anxious attachment was measured using the anxiety subscale of the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000), consisting of 18 items rated on a 1–7 Likert scale, including two reverse-scored items that were recoded prior to analysis. The subscale showed excellent reliability ($\alpha = .945$), with item-total correlations ranging from .728 to .818. Intimate partner violence was measured using the perpetration subscale of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2; Straus et al., 1996), focusing on psychological aggression and physical assault during the previous six months. The CTS2 perpetration scale demonstrated very high reliability ($\alpha = .977$).

All instruments, originally developed in English, were adapted using a forward–backward translation procedure involving translation into Indonesian, independent back-translation, and reconciliation to ensure semantic equivalence. A readability assessment was also conducted before data collection.

Following ethical approval, the questionnaire was administered online through Google Forms with an informed consent section provided at the beginning. Data preparation involved calculating IPV scores based on perpetration items using frequency weighting, recoding reverse-scored ECR-R items, applying the inclusion criteria, and performing a logarithmic transformation, $\ln(1+Y)$, on IPV scores to address non-normal distribution caused by positive skewness.

The hypotheses were tested using moderated regression analysis based on Hayes' (2018) approach, corresponding to PROCESS Model 1. The predictor (X) and moderator (M) variables were mean-centered before constructing the interaction term. The analysis was conducted hierarchically: Model 1 included sex as a covariate along with the main effects of X and M, while Model 2 incorporated the $X \times M$ interaction term. Moderation was considered significant when the interaction coefficient was statistically significant and resulted in a significant increase in explained variance (ΔR^2). Simple slope analysis was subsequently conducted at low (-1 SD), mean, and high ($+1$ SD) levels of anxious attachment. To examine potential common method bias, Harman's single-factor test and discriminant validity assessment were performed. Prior to hypothesis testing, classical assumption tests were conducted, including residual normality, multicollinearity (VIF), heteroscedasticity, autocorrelation, and linearity assessments (Ghozali, 2018; Hair et al., 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Raw IPV scores showed a strongly right-skewed distribution (skewness = 1.93), consistent with theoretical expectations for perpetration data in a community sample. The $\ln(1+Y)$ transformation normalized this distribution (skewness = -0.15) without altering participants' relative ordering. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 163)

Variable	Min	Max	M	SD
Vulnerable Narcissism (X)	11	74	44.39	18.65
Anxious Attachment (M)	18	121	79.55	27.04
Raw IPV (Y)	0	302	51.85	78.37
IPV ln(1+Y)	0	5.71	2.75	1.78

Source: Research findings, 2026.

Note. Skewness of raw IPV = 1.93; after ln transformation = -0.15.

All three instruments showed very high internal consistency: VNS (alpha = .951), the ECR-R anxiety subscale (alpha = .945), and CTS2 perpetration (alpha = .977).

Discriminant Validity and Common Method Variance

The correlation between vulnerable narcissism and anxious attachment was very high ($r = .810$), meaning the two constructs shared 65.6% of their variance, consistent with the theoretical closeness between them (Mohay et al., 2025; van Schie et al., 2021). To rule out a method artifact, a Harman's single-factor test was conducted, and the first factor explained only 46.0% of the variance, below the 50% threshold, indicating that common method variance did not dominate the data structure. Even so, the high correlation still points to limited discriminant validity between the two constructs, so the unique effect of each predictor needs to be interpreted with caution.

Classical Assumption Tests and Correlations

Assumption tests for Model 2 were generally satisfied: residual normality was supported by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($D = 0.095$, $p = .098$), residual variance was homogeneous (Breusch-Pagan LM = 7.30, $p = .121$), and no problematic multicollinearity was found (VIF: $X = 3.38$, $M = 3.67$, $X\text{-by-}M = 1.21$). Correlation analysis showed that all pairs of variables were positively and significantly correlated: VN-IPV ($r = .544$), AA-IPV ($r = .374$), and VN-AA ($r = .810$).

Moderated Regression Analysis

Table 2. Regression Coefficients for Model 1 and Model 2 (DV = IPV ln)

Predictor	B1	Beta1	B2	Beta2	p2
Sex	0.198	0.054	0.185	0.051	.408
VN (X)	0.074	0.777	0.085	0.886	<.001
AA (M)	-0.011	-0.171	-0.020	-0.302	.009
X by M	n/a	n/a	-0.0007	-0.183	.006

Source: Data obtained from laboratory analysis, 2026.

Note. Model 1: $R^2 = 0.416$. Model 2: $R^2 = 0.443$; delta $R^2 = 0.028$; F change(1,158) = 7.90; $p = .006$.

Vulnerable narcissism was the strongest positive predictor of IPV (beta = 0.886, $t = 8.12$, $p < .001$), even after controlling for sex, supporting H1. The sex covariate was not significant ($p = .408$), indicating that this effect held consistently across genders. Adding the interaction term significantly increased R^2 (delta $R^2 = 0.028$, $p = .006$), supporting H2 as well: anxious attachment moderated the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and IPV. The interaction coefficient was negative ($B = -0.0007$, $t = -2.81$, $p = .006$), indicating a buffering pattern of moderation.

Table 3. Simple Slopes Analysis (Vulnerable Narcissism to IPV ln)

Level of Anxious Attachment	Slope	t	p
Low (-1 SD)	0.104	7.26	<.001
Average (Mean)	0.085	8.12	<.001
High (+1 SD)	0.066	6.45	<.001

Source: Results of the experimental analysis, 2026.

Simple slope analysis showed that the effect of vulnerable narcissism remained positive and significant at every level of anxious attachment, but its slope declined consistently as anxious attachment increased: from 0.104 at the low level, to 0.085 at the average level, to 0.066 at the high level. This pattern illustrates a buffering type of moderation, visible as converging rather than parallel regression lines across levels of the moderator.

Table 4. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Decision
H1	Vulnerable narcissism has a significant positive effect on intimate partner violence (IPV).	Supported
H2	Anxious attachment moderates the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and intimate partner violence (IPV).	Supported (buffering effect)

Source: Protein Content of Analog Rice

The finding that vulnerable narcissism was the strongest positive predictor of IPV supports H1 and aligns with Oliver et al. (2024) and Kjaervik and Bushman (2021). Within the I3 framework, this result confirms vulnerable narcissism as a strong driving force: its ego fragility fuels hostile attribution, which triggers narcissistic injury and culminates in reactive aggression toward a partner (Krizan & Johar, 2015; Sen-Pakyurek & Bariskin, 2022). The consistency of this effect across genders, reflected in the nonsignificant sex covariate, is consistent with Straus's (2004) view that conflict tactics in intimate relationships tend to be bidirectional.

The finding on the direction of moderation runs counter to the common assumption, and to much prior research that positions anxious attachment as a direct predictor that strengthens IPV (Spencer et al., 2021; Velotti et al., 2022). Rather than acting as a strengthening moderator, the present results reveal a buffering pattern. Because this diverges from the initial prediction, it calls for careful interpretation from two complementary angles.

The first explanation is substantive and grounded in the grand theory itself. Anxious attachment appears to function not only as a driving force but also as a source of inhibition. At very high levels of attachment anxiety, fear of abandonment becomes so dominant that a person is instead driven to preserve the relationship and to hold back from behavior that risks damaging it. The characteristic response shifts toward proximity-seeking and appeasement rather than outwardly directed aggression (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This mechanism is consistent with Slotter et al.'s (2012) finding that the motivation to preserve a relationship can restrain aggression toward a partner.

The second explanation is methodological. The strong correlation between vulnerable narcissism and anxious attachment ($r = .810$) raises the possibility of a suppression effect,

which is also reflected in the reversal of the sign of the main effect of anxious attachment, from positive at the bivariate level ($r = .374$) to negative within the model ($\beta = -0.302$). When two predictors share most of their variance, the remaining unique variance of one predictor can end up associated in the opposite direction with the outcome. It is worth emphasizing that the bivariate correlation between anxious attachment and IPV remained positive, consistent with the literature; the negative direction appears only in the unique effect, after vulnerable narcissism is controlled for. These two explanations are not mutually exclusive, and both point to the same conclusion: the relationship among these three constructs is far more complex than a simple linear strengthening model, which calls for replication using instruments that are more conceptually distinct.

An Important Caveat: A Buffering Effect Does Not Mean a Healthy Outcome

The finding that anxious attachment weakens the pathway from vulnerable narcissism to IPV is the result most vulnerable to misinterpretation, and it deserves to be stated plainly. This weakening should not be read as a sign that high attachment anxiety is a healthy condition, let alone one worth cultivating. Its root cause is not emotional maturity or a sense of security in the relationship, but rather an intense fear of abandonment that leads a person to hold back in order to preserve the relationship. What is observed is not the disappearance of violence, but a change in its direction, from aggression that might once have been directed outward toward something a person carries and absorbs internally. This shift often comes with a heavy psychological cost. Individuals with high attachment anxiety tend to internalize their distress, blame themselves, silence their own needs, and remain in relationships that harm them, simply to avoid separation. The dampening of outward aggression is also never complete: the same fear of loss can resurface in other forms that still damage a relationship, such as excessive jealousy, a compulsive need to monitor a partner, and demanding, controlling behavior.

CONCLUSION

This study arrived at two main conclusions. First, vulnerable narcissism had a positive and significant effect on IPV among emerging adults in dating relationships and was the strongest predictor in the model. Second, anxious attachment moderated this relationship in a weakening direction: the effect of vulnerable narcissism on IPV remained significant across all levels of anxious attachment but became weaker as attachment anxiety increased. The finding that vulnerable narcissism was the strongest predictor suggests that a critical red flag in romantic relationships may not always appear as overt problematic behavior but may instead be concealed behind vulnerability and insecurity. At the same time, the finding that higher attachment anxiety reduced outward expressions of violence highlights another aspect of this phenomenon: the absence of visible violence does not necessarily indicate a healthy relationship and may instead reflect internalized distress experienced by the individual.

Theoretically, this study supported the usefulness of the I3 Model (Instigation–Impellance–Inhibition) as an integrative framework for understanding IPV. Vulnerable narcissism was confirmed as a strong impellance factor, while anxious attachment demonstrated a potential inhibitory role by reducing overt aggressive expression. These findings extend the application of the I3 Model by demonstrating that relational factors may operate through inhibitory mechanisms rather than solely through aggression-enhancing pathways. Furthermore, this study contributed to addressing inconsistencies in previous

vulnerable narcissism–IPV research by demonstrating that the association between these constructs is conditional and influenced by attachment patterns.

This study had several limitations. First, the final sample size ($N = 163$) was smaller than the initial target sample size (204) due to the strict application of inclusion criteria, which may have reduced statistical power for detecting the relatively small interaction effect. Second, all variables were assessed through self-report measures using similar response formats, creating the potential for common method bias, although Harman's single-factor test suggested that this bias was not a dominant concern. Third, the strong correlation between vulnerable narcissism and anxious attachment ($r = .810$) suggested substantial conceptual overlap between the constructs, which may have affected the estimation of their unique effects and introduced potential suppression effects. Fourth, the cross-sectional design limited the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the relationships among variables. Fifth, the prevalence of several severe violent behaviors in this sample was higher than typically observed in community-based samples, suggesting the possibility of careless responding among some participants.

Future research should consider using conceptually distinct measurement instruments or latent variable approaches to reduce construct overlap and common method variance. Studies should also incorporate multi-source assessments, such as partner reports, include attention-check procedures and response-quality screening, adopt longitudinal designs to examine causal relationships, and achieve adequate sample sizes to ensure sufficient statistical power. From a practical perspective, IPV screening instruments should consider narcissistic vulnerability as a potential risk indicator. Intervention programs should emphasize emotion regulation, healthy relationship skills, and the development of secure attachment patterns. In addition, public psychoeducation regarding concealed warning signs in young adult dating relationships should continue to be strengthened to promote early recognition and prevention of IPV.

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