



# Is shame responsible for maladaptive daydreaming among grandiose and vulnerable narcissists? A general population study

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## ABSTRACT

Previous studies suggest that narcissists are tied to fantasies that bolster their self-esteem when they feel threatened. Vulnerable narcissists, in particular, might be at risk of developing maladaptive daydreaming (MD) in that they tend to experience high levels of shame, which turns out to be closely associated with MD. We hypothesized an effect of grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic traits on MD, which was expected to be mediated by shame levels among vulnerable narcissists. A community sample of 357 participants (66.70 % females;  $M_{age} = 32.17 \pm 13.41$ ) was recruited. The assessed structural model produced adequate fit to the data [ $\chi^2 = 230.77$ ,  $df = 100$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.06 (90 % C.I. = 0.05–0.07), CFI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.06]. Vulnerable narcissism predicted MD through characterological shame. Conversely, it seems that bodily shame is not dealt with MD among vulnerable narcissists. Grandiose narcissism was associated with MD to a lesser extent, and MD seems to be a dysfunctional but effective strategy to reduce characterological shame for grandiose narcissists - whilst the opposite seems to be true for vulnerable narcissists. Individuals with vulnerable narcissistic traits may benefit from clinical interventions that address their tendencies to daydream to alleviate feelings of shame.

## 1. Introduction

Narcissism is a dimensional personality trait that consists of a grandiose self-concept as well as behaviors intended to maintain this self-concept in the face of reality (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Grandiose narcissism (GN) reflects traits related to grandiosity, aggression, and dominance, whilst vulnerable narcissism (VN) is marked by hypersensitivity to the opinions of others, an intense desire for approval, and defensiveness (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). Despite these differences, GN and VN share some core traits, such as a sense of entitlement, grandiose fantasies, and the need for admiration (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003), to the point that some authors suggest that overlapping traits prevent distinguishing two forms (especially at higher levels, see Jauk et al., 2022) and highlight the need to assess for a fluctuation between GN and VN (Oltmans & Widiger, 2018). Yet, general population studies show that GN and VN are essentially unrelated and have uncorrelated nomological network patterns (e.g., Wang et al., 2023).

In keeping with this perspective and in accordance with the early psychodynamic view (Kohut, 1971), there is growing empirical consensus that shame (i.e., an affect involving the perception that one has personal attributes or has engaged in behaviors that others will find

unattractive and result in some kind of humiliation; Gilbert, 2000) is a central aspect of VN but a less typical experience among grandiose narcissists, and empirical results firmly support this perspective (e.g., Di Sarno et al., 2020; van Schie et al., 2021). In order to preserve their grandiose image, vulnerable narcissists make efforts to avoid experiences of shame, protect their own self-esteem, and deflect their own attention away from self-inadequacies. For instance, it has been shown that vulnerable narcissists (but not grandiose narcissists) try to hide their own behavioral or verbal imperfections in an effort to avoid experiences of shame (Casale et al., 2016), or attempt to disqualify the importance of interpersonal feedback, which ultimately leads to greater shame (Freis et al., 2015).

Previous studies suggest that, when they are feeling threatened, narcissists are tied to fantasies that bolster their self-esteem (Raskin & Novacek, 1991). Indeed, it has been supposed that narcissists use heroic and achievement-oriented daydreams to cope with their stress, regulate their fragile self-worth and achieve a compensatory sense of entitlement (Schimmenti et al., 2020). Recent studies in different fields have shown that the excessive daydreaming activity might be a dysfunctional emotion regulation strategy that provides the individual with a sort of illusion to manage painful feelings, and in particular shame turns out to

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be an experience closely associated with maladaptive daydreaming (Ferrante et al., 2022). Since disengagement from stress and pain is one of the main maladaptive daydreaming functions (Somer, 2002), maladaptive daydreaming (MD) – i.e., the recurrent and persistent absorption into vivid and complex fantasies that interfere with one's own functioning (Somer et al., 2016) – might represent, especially for vulnerable narcissists, a strategy with which to regulate their feelings of shame. Relative to grandiose narcissists, vulnerable narcissists might be more involved in an excessive daydreaming activity as they need to alleviate distressing feelings, and grandiose daydreaming might help in managing a threatened sense of positive self-evaluation. This might be consistent with studies that have shown that when individuals with higher levels of vulnerable narcissistic traits do not have their expectations met, they tend to respond with behavioral disengagement, i.e., by giving up behavioral attempts to attain goals (Fernie et al., 2016).

In the current study we speculate that narcissists' already established tendency to daydream and fantasize (Raskin & Novacek, 1991; Somma et al., 2022) might become maladaptive (i.e., so extensive as to interfere with their own interpersonal or vocational functioning) when the individual is overwhelmed by shameful feelings, in that in such cases daydreaming might function as a sort of pathological detachment from reality and absorption in a fanciful retreat (Ferrante et al., 2022) – i.e., a defensive self-protection strategy. This should involve vulnerable narcissists to a higher degree, in that they show a lesser ability to self-enhance and deny negative self-views and greater social avoidance in response to negative feedback as compared with grandiose narcissists. MD might be a way to protect oneself from fully experiencing a deeply embedded sense of shame and inadequacy, since it has already shown that vulnerable narcissists tend to deal with dysregulation by engaging in grandiose fantasies (Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012). This might also be in line with studies that have shown that fantasies concerning ideal alternative life scenarios, with an idealized version of oneself as popular, dominant and the object of favorable attention – i.e., grandiose fantasies – are among the most recurring fantasies among maladaptive daydreamers (e.g., Bigelsen et al., 2016).

The current study aims to integrate results from different strands of research to identify a potential pathway towards maladaptive daydreaming among narcissists. By definition, narcissists – whether they are vulnerable or grandiose and threatened or not – regularly engage in regulatory fantasies of unlimited power, superiority, perfection, and adulation. Indeed, even people with grandiose personality traits have been found to be prone to vivid and intense fantasies (Somma et al., 2022) to gratify their desires for power, dominance, and recognition (Brenner et al., 2022). Yet, the daydreaming of vulnerable narcissists is expected to be more dysfunctional in that it represents a strategy to regulate negative feelings and manage threats to self-esteem (Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012). To the best of our knowledge, the link between narcissism and maladaptive daydreaming tendencies has never been a theme of scientific attention. In the current study, we hypothesized:

- H1.** a positive association between both GN and VN, on the one hand, and maladaptive daydreaming, on the other;
- H2.** a positive association between VN and experiences of shame;
- H3.** a mediating role of shame experiences in the association between VN and maladaptive daydreaming.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Assuming a large-sized effect and an alpha level of 0.01, power analysis results indicated that the recommended minimum sample size necessary to achieve a power of 0.99 would be 288. Data collection was carried out between December 2022 and January 2023 via an online platform and participants were recruited by means of advertisements on

social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram). A convenience sample of 357 participants (66.70 % F), aged 18–71 years ( $M_{age} = 32.17 \pm 13.41$ ), was recruited for the present study. The study was conducted in compliance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and approval was obtained by the University Research Ethics Commission. All participants were informed about the general purpose of the study and that their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained for all participants prior to data collection.

### 2.2. Measures

The Italian version (Fossati et al., 2009) of the *Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale* (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997) was used to assess narcissistic vulnerability. The HSNS is a unidimensional self-report measure containing 10 items (e.g., “My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or by the slighting remarks of others”) rated on a 5-point Likert-type, ranging from 1 (*very uncharacteristic or untrue*) to 5 (*very characteristic or true*). The total score ranged from 10 to 50, with higher scores signifying a higher presence of vulnerable narcissistic traits. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.82.

The Italian version (Fossati et al., 2008) of the *Narcissistic Personality Inventory* (NPI-16; Ames et al., 2006) was used to assess grandiose narcissism. NPI-16 is a unidimensional self-report measure containing 16 pairs of items, each consisting of two opposing statements (one reflecting grandiose narcissism, the other non-narcissistic) which the participants choose according to their beliefs and feelings (e.g., “I know I am good because everybody keeps telling me so” versus “When people compliment me I sometimes feel embarrassed”). The total score is obtained by giving one point for each narcissistic response and ranged from 0 to 16. Higher scores reflect higher levels of grandiose narcissism. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.67.

The Italian version (Casale & Fioravanti, 2017) of the *Experience of Shame Scale* (ESS; Andrews et al., 2002) was used to assess shame-proneness. ESS is a self-report scale comprising 25 items rated on a 4-point Likert-type, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*), intended to measure three different aspects of shame: Characterological (12 items) (e.g., “Have you tried to conceal the sort of person you are from others?”), Bodily (4 items) (e.g., “Have you felt ashamed of your body or any part of it?”), and Behavioral (9 items) (e.g., “Have you tried to cover up or conceal things you felt ashamed of having done?”). Scores range from 12 to 48, from 4 to 16, and from 9 to 36, respectively for Characterological, Bodily, and Behavioral shame. Higher scores indicate higher levels of shame. In the present study, the Cronbach's alphas were 0.94, 0.90, and 0.92 for the Characterological, Bodily, and Behavioral shame, respectively.

The Italian version (Schimmenti et al., 2020) of the *Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale-16* (MDS-16; Somer, 2018) was used to assess the tendency of maladaptive daydreaming. The 16 items were rated on a 11-point Likert-type, ranging from 0 % (*never/none of the time*) to 100 % (*all of the time/extreme amounts*). The MDS-16 assesses a global score of maladaptive daydreaming or two main dimensions of this construct (i.e., Interference with life and Somato-sensory retreat). For the purposes of the study, only the total score, obtained from the average of each item, was considered. A sample item is “Some people feel annoyed when a real-world event interrupts one of their daydreams. When the real-world interrupts one of your daydreams, how annoyed do you feel on average?”. Higher scores indicate higher levels of maladaptive daydreaming. An ROC curve analysis showed that a cutoff score of 51 best discriminated between cases of self-diagnosed maladaptive daydreamers (MDers) and non-MDers controls, with overall good sensitivity and specificity, sufficient positive predictive power, and excellent negative predictive power. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.95.

### 2.3. Data analyses

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between the study

variables were carried out. In order to verify the theoretical hypothesized model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was performed using the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) for the R statistical software (version 4.2.1) with the Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation method. To limit the number of parameters to be estimated parceling was calculated using an empirically equivalent method (Landis et al., 2000), by assigning items in such a way that the parcels will have equal means, variances, and reliabilities. The following indices were examined to test the goodness of fit of the tested models: the  $\chi^2$  test, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) <0.08, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), “close to” 0.95 or higher, and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) “close to” 0.09 or lower (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The indirect effects were tested using the bootstrapping method with 5000 bootstrap samples (MacKinnon et al., 2004).

### 3. Results

Since all the answers were required, the results did not present any missing data. Almost all of the participants were Italian (98.90 %) and the vast majority had a middle or high educational level, with 42.90 % having a high school diploma and 52.90 % a bachelor’s degree or higher. Regarding work status, 30.50 % of the participants were students, 13.40 % were working students, 47.10 % were in a job, 5.00 % were unemployed, 2.20 % were retired, and 1.70 % were housewife/househusband. According to the MDS cut-off, 90 (25.20 %) participants were classified as MDers.

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among the study variables. Significant and positive correlations in the expected direction were found. Both VN and GN were positively associated with MD, and this correlation was moderate and low in strength, respectively. VN but not GN was significantly and positively associated with characterological, bodily, and behavioral shame.

The statistical model was adjusted for age as significant correlations were found between age and all the study variables. The assessed structural model produced adequate fit to the data [ $\chi^2 = 230.77$ ,  $df = 100$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.06 (90 % C.I. = 0.05–0.07), CFI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.06]. The variables in the model accounted for 65 %, 41 %, 56 %, and 51 % of the variance in characterological shame, bodily shame, behavioral shame, and MD levels, respectively. The standardized estimates are reported in Fig. 1. All the indirect effects are shown in Table 2. Overall, the findings revealed that both GN and VN have a direct effect on maladaptive daydreaming (H1 was supported). VN positively affects the three forms of shame (H2 was supported), whilst GN negatively affects characterological and behavioral shame. A significant positive indirect association between VN and MD through the mediation of the characterological shame was found (H3 was supported). Moreover, VN and GN also negatively affect MD via bodily shame and characterological shame, respectively.

**Table 1**  
Descriptives and Pearson’s correlations.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	32.17	13.41	–						
2. HSNS	28.41	7.91	–0.25**	–					
3. NPI	3.20	2.56	–0.15**	0.13*	–				
4. ESS-CS	25.94	9.70	–0.29**	0.62**	–0.04	–			
5. ESS-BOS	9.34	3.90	–0.23**	0.47**	–0.04	0.62**	–		
6. ESS-BS	21.55	7.11	–0.27**	0.56**	0.02	0.79**	0.56**	–	
7. MDS	35.43	23.50	–0.26**	0.51**	0.16**	0.57**	0.32**	0.46**	–

Note. HSNS = Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale; NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory; ESS = Experience of Shame Scale; ESS-CS = ESS Characterological shame; ESS-BOS = ESS Bodily shame; ESS-BS = ESS Behavioral shame; MDS = Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### 4. Discussion

The current study stems from the evidence that the internal life of narcissists – whether they are grandiose or vulnerable – is by definition characterized to a certain extent by heroic and achievement-oriented fantasies and daydreams (Brenner et al., 2022), which are also used to cope with stress, regulate fragile self-worth and achieve a compensatory sense of entitlement (Raskin & Novacek, 1991). Starting from this evidence, the current study hypothesized that GN and VN might be both associated with excessive daydreaming, but to a different extent and because of different motivations. Since grandiose narcissists respond to negative feedback through self-enhancement, dismissiveness, and devaluation of the source of threat, whilst vulnerable narcissists are prone to shame (Di Sarno et al., 2020), tend to use denial and give up as a coping response to this feeling (Fernie et al., 2016), we expected only VN to have an effect on maladaptive daydreaming through shame experiences.

Overall, the results support that both vulnerable narcissists and grandiose narcissists show a tendency to engage in maladaptive daydreaming. Both theoretical speculations and empirical evidence depict narcissists as individuals who frequently resort to private and self-generated thoughts and images as a way to fulfill their grandiose fantasies, their need for recognition, and are prone to use their fantasies as a means for wish-fulfillment for power and dominance (Brenner et al., 2022). A recent study has shown that GN was uniquely and moderately related to fantasy proneness (Somma et al., 2022), defined and measured as the disposition towards experiencing an extensive and deep involvement in fantasy. Our results add to this previous study by showing that this tendency to fantasize among grandiose narcissists might also result in compulsive psychological dependence on dreams. Yet, as hypothesized, relative to grandiose narcissists vulnerable narcissists seem to be more at risk of an “extensive fantasy activity that replaces human interaction and/or interferes with academic, interpersonal, or vocational functioning” (Somer, 2002, p. 199) to find a kind of retreat from shame. The present study highlights a stronger link between VN and maladaptive daydreaming, and also shows that it is mediated by shame experiences, in line with both studies showing the centrality of feelings of shame in this form of narcissism (Di Sarno et al., 2020) and evidence of different ways used by narcissists to protect themselves from fully experiencing a deeply embedded sense of shame and inadequacy (Fernie et al., 2016). Previous studies have reported that MD might have a protective role in terms of enhanced chances of calming down (Bigelsen & Schupak, 2011) and, most relevant to the present study, disconnect from painful situations (Somer, 2002), including shame (Ferrante et al., 2022). In this regard, MD among vulnerable narcissists should be considered as a passive protective response to protect the “secret fragile core that must be warded off from conscious awareness and prevented from discovery by others—and indeed from the self” (Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012, p. 358). This is also consistent with perspectives suggesting that the intensity of daydreaming may reflect a mechanism used to deal with daydreamers’ actual unmet needs.

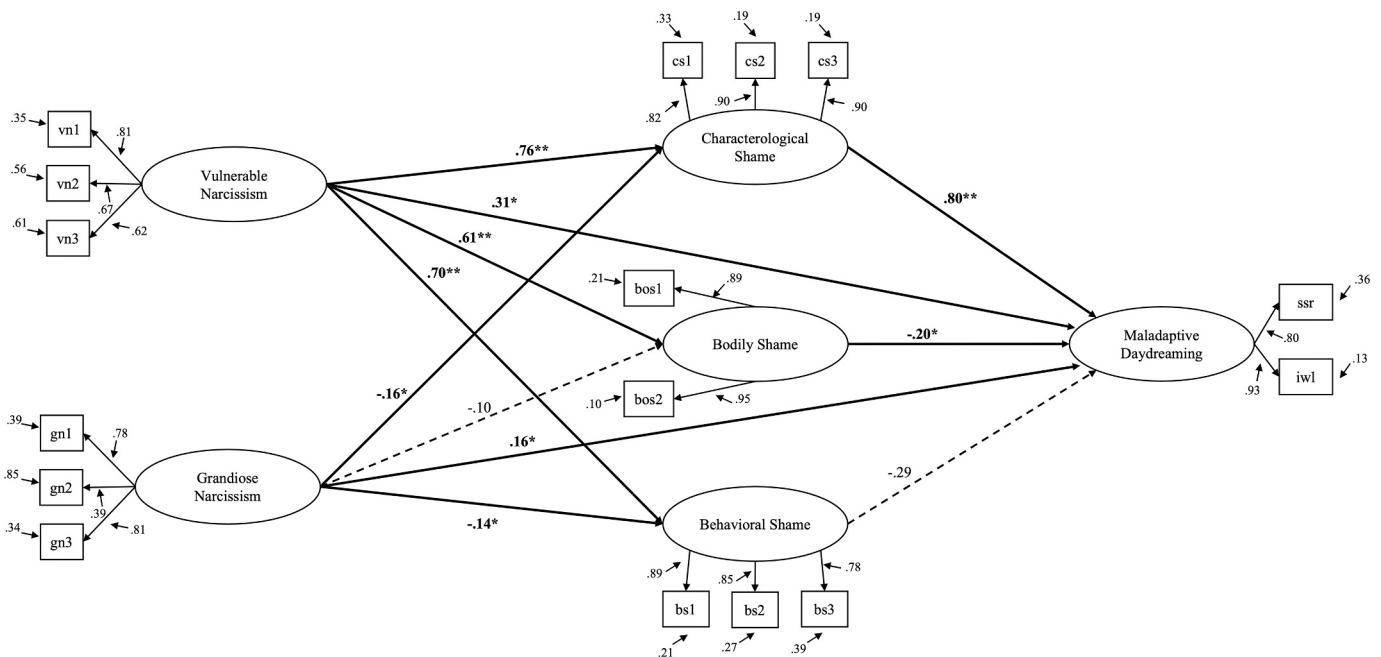


Fig. 1. Results of tested model and its standardized solution.

Note. vn1, vn2, vn3 = Vulnerable Narcissism parcels; gn1, gn2, gn3 = Grandiose Narcissism parcels; cs1, cs2, cs3 = Characterological Shame parcels; bos1, bos2 = Bodily Shame parcels; bs1, bs2, bs3 = Behavioral Shame parcels; ssr = Somato-sensory retreat dimension of Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale; iw1 = Interference with life dimension of Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .001$ .

Table 2  
Indirect effects.

	$\beta$	C.I. 95 %	p
VN → characterological shame → MD	0.61	0.375, 1.304	.001
VN → bodily shame → MD	-0.12	-0.317, -0.040	.018
VN → behavioral shame → MD	-0.21	-0.635, 0.048	.098
GN → characterological shame → MD	-0.13	-0.361, -0.039	.031
GN → bodily shame → MD	0.02	-0.006, 0.078	.195
GN → behavioral shame → MD	0.04	-0.011, 0.157	.174

Yet, not every form of shame might put the vulnerable narcissist at risk of engaging in maladaptive forms of daydreaming: our study shows that characterological shame significantly mediates this link, thus showing that vulnerable narcissists may resort to fantasies as a way of coping with shame for their dispositional characteristics (e.g., personal habits and abilities) rather than for doing something wrong (i.e., behavioral shame) or feeling ashamed of their body. This might be interpreted by considering that characterological shame is a more stable and global disposition compared to behavioral and body shame (Andrews et al., 2002), which are by their very nature more transient and specific negative affective states (i.e., limited to specific and discrete areas of the self). This might imply that their regulation does not need a pathological detachment from reality and the absorption into a fanciful retreat, both of which characterize maladaptive daydreaming. Indeed, it seems that vulnerable narcissists do not deal with body shame by entering into an altered state of consciousness, but perhaps look for other less defensive and more active strategies (i.e., the indirect effect of VN on maladaptive daydreaming via body shame was significant but negative). Still, since VN predicts all the three shame dimensions in this and other studies and it has been shown that specific negative self-attitudes may generalize in the context of adversity (e.g., at times of increased stress; Brown et al., 1986), future studies should not neglect the potential negative effects of less dispositional shame among narcissists.

An unexpected result that deserves attention is the indirect negative effect of GN on maladaptive daydreaming via characterological shame.

As shown in Fig. 1, the effect of GN on characterological shame is negative whilst the effect of the latter on maladaptive daydreaming is positive. A possible explanation is that maladaptive daydreaming is a dysfunctional yet effective strategy to reduce characterological shame for grandiose narcissists – whilst the opposite seems to be true for vulnerable narcissists since the indirect effect via this form of shame was positive (i.e., MD might not be effective to reduce shame). This is not surprising since, as said, shame is a central and pervasive aspect of VN.

The current study is limited by the fact that the direction of the links was invoked based on theory and the design was cross-sectional. This implies that no causal inferences can be drawn. A recent longitudinal study (Wen et al., 2022) has shown that individuals who daydream to cope with negative memories and feelings were found to experience more negative emotions following the daydream, thus suggesting a bidirectional effect between shame and MD – and, consequently, a potential vicious cycle for vulnerable narcissists. Interestingly, this same study has shown that individuals who daydream about rewarding past-times and as a means of wish fulfillment typically experience more positive emotions. In our line of reasoning, MD is both a dysfunctional coping strategy to protect the self from painful experiences and is a last resort to repair a damaged self through specific daydream themes of success. That is, we would expect vulnerable narcissists to daydream to cope with negative emotions through rewarding past and future times as a means of wish fulfillment – we do not expect VN to be only related to daydream themes of escape. As it is already established that narcissism is related to daydreaming serving wish fulfillment and featuring themes of idealized versions of the self (Brenner et al., 2022), it might be worthwhile for future studies to longitudinally investigate whether, in this specific population, MD is more related to escape or grandiose themes and is associated with positive or negative emotions (or both).

Our sample was mainly composed by young people from Italy and was not well-balanced for gender, so future studies should involve a more representative sample. Our results are also not supposed to be extended to clinical populations with a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder, as it has been shown that trait measures of grandiosity and vulnerability are unrelated only at low levels of grandiose narcissism (Jauk et al., 2022) and narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability are



often concurrently expressed in treatment-seeking narcissistic patients (Pincus et al., 2014). Even if this distinction is not useful when it comes to clinical populations, it might be plausible to suppose that shame (and, consequently, MD levels) might be particularly enhanced when narcissistic patients initiate contact with providers since narcissistic grandiosity inhibits treatment-seeking (Ellison et al., 2013) whilst vulnerable states tend to motivate towards the search for professional help (Pincus et al., 2014). Nonetheless, this study provides some initial practical implications. Interventions with vulnerable narcissists should target shame not only for its well-known detrimental effects on well-being, but also as it is closely related to maladaptive daydreaming, which, in turn, is associated with psychiatric problems spanning a range of DSM-5 disorders (Somer et al., 2017).

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

SC designed the study, and GF contributed with relevant theoretical inputs. SG collected the data. SG conducted the statistical analyses under the supervision of GF. SG and SC wrote the first draft of the article. SC wrote the final version of the article. All authors contributed to and approved the final manuscript.

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### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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