

# Attachment style and Dark triad traits among Adolescent Females: The mediating role of Emotion Dysregulation<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

**Objective:** to investigate the mediator role of emotion dysregulation in the relationship between attachment styles and dark triad traits in adolescent females. No studies have yet investigated this effect, although emotion dysregulation individuals lose the ability to control behaviors and emotional responses and avoid positive methods when faced with challenges.

**Methods:** 650 third-grade secondary female students in Aswan governorate participated in this study, and the attachment styles scale, the dark triad traits scale, and the emotion dysregulation scale were used to verify the direct and indirect effects between the study variables.

**Results:** The indices of this overall model indicated that the specified set of direct and indirect pathways and corresponding correlations were a good fit with the (Chi-square = 18.105,  $p < .001$ ,  $DF= 3$ ,  $CMIN/DF= 6.035$ ,  $CFI = .98$ ). Moreover, tests of all of the possible indirect pathways between attachment style and dark triad traits were significant.

**Discussion:** Findings suggest that emotion dysregulation may be an important mechanism to consider when examining the association between attachment styles and dark triad traits in adolescent females. these results shed light on the important role that emotion dysregulation may have in predicting dark triad traits in adolescent females. The study recommends the need to pay attention to female adolescents and provide counseling and therapeutic programs to reduce the negative impact of emotion dysregulation and the dark triad traits of personality, in addition to educating their families about the

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seriousness of attachment styles and their negative impact on female adolescents.

### 1. Introduction:

Adolescence is one of the most important stages of development that a person goes through due to its rapid and radical changes, the effects of which are reflected in the aspects of psychological, mental, social and emotional development. Because of these changes, many disorders appear, and attachment styles are among the most important psychological factors that affect adolescents. It may cause emotional and emotional problems and may lead to the emergence of personality disorders.

Attachment styles are considered important for psychosocial functioning and affect the individual throughout the lifespan (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 2015). Attachment styles refer to the schemes for regulating feelings and behavior resulting from attachment (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Adult attachment styles include a set of knowledge and expectations that people have about themselves and their close relationships with others (Fraley & Roisman, 2019).

Attachment styles reflect the individual's future relationships, and determine the individual's attitudes about himself, about others, and about life in general. Early attachment experiences allow cognitive perceptions that the individual forms about himself and others. It is based on all the attachment behaviors that the individual displays during his interactions with others in the stages of adolescence and adulthood (Bowlby, 1984).

There have been many theoretical explanations related to the reasons for the emergence of the attachment pattern, and the theory Bowlby is one of the most widespread and accepted theories in interpreting the attachment pattern, as it confirms that the type of attachment with the caregiver has deep and important implications for a sense of security and the ability to form a relationship full of trust (Bowlby, 1988).

This theory assumes that the interaction is in the form of internal working models that work on the continuity of attachment styles and turn them into fixed assumptions, which are intended as a set of expectations derived from early experiences with the caregiver, related to the caregiver's presence, and the possibility of him providing support during distress and stress so that these become Relationships are geared towards future intimate relationships

in adulthood (Bowlby, 1979; Bowlby, 1988).

Attachment styles are defined as the safe, avoidant, and anxious emotional pattern that regulates the emotions and social behavior produced by the attachment pattern (Al-Hudaybi & Al-Dawash, 2020). There are three attachment styles. First, the secure attachment style, which is characterized by a sense of security, trust, love, fun, exploratory orientation, and sociality; Secondly, the avoidant style, which is characterized by defensiveness, and seeks to maintain closeness while avoiding termination of communication and defensive exploration; Third, the anxious or paradoxical pattern, which is characterized by fear, anxiety, visual observation, and the cue to reconnect, communicate, talk, and fixate (Newell,2020).

In view of the importance of attachment and its continuity over time and its impact on the individual's psychological and social compatibility in the stage of adolescence, (Bartholomew& Horowitz, 1991) developed four methods of adult attachment that organize the mental models operating within two dimensions: the first: distinguishing between oneself and others, and the second: positive-negative, namely secure attachment, refusal attachment, and attachment Busy and fearful attachment.

Attachment styles reflect Emotion Dysregulation and social behavior produced by the attachment pattern with a history of attachment experiences (Reynand, 2011). There is the significant correlation between attachment styles and attachment anxiety mediated by Emotion regulation (Nielsena, Lønfeldt, Wolitzky-Taylor, Hagemand, Vangkildea, Daniela, 2017). Avoidant adult attachment styles were positively associated with difficulties identifying and describing emotions and regulating negative affect. Attachment fears contribute to Emotion Dysregulation, and should be considered when treating Emotion Dysregulation in those who have attachment concerns (Ferraro& Taylor, 2021).

Emotion Dysregulation is an intense or inappropriate emotional response to a situation, which may be associated with psychological or personality disorders (American Psychological Association, 2015). Emotion Dysregulation indicate the appearance of high levels of negative emotions that are not regulated by consciousness, and are also associated with repetitive behavioral responses that lack conscious cognitive processes, which indicates the influence of strong emotions on the cognitive aspects of the individual (McRae& Zarolia, 2020).

Emotion Dysregulation include emotional patterns that conflict with a

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person's goals and hinder their achievement, such as problem solving, and Emotion Dysregulation stands in the way of long-term developmental goals such as mental health, Emotion dysregulation refers to emotional behavior that impedes the adaptive functions of the individual (Beauchaine & Crowell, 2020).

An individual's emotion regulation strategies are supposed to grow by the quality of the early relationship between the child and his caregiver, and the problem of emotion regulation can be inferred by the presence of increased psychological symptoms such as personality disorders and maladaptive behavior (Ruganci & Gencoz, 2010).

Emotion dysregulation is the common dimension of most categories of psychopathology, and that it is one of the central features of personality disorder that underlies many behaviors associated with this disorder such as intentional self-harm (Gratz & Roemer, 2004), In terms of emotion regulation, people who are more emotionally vulnerable are more likely to be exposed to risky behaviors in an attempt to limit the experience of negative emotions, especially adolescent females (Moradi & Mohammadi, 2020).

Individuals with high scores in Emotion Dysregulation are characterized by high levels of dark triad traits (Walker, Olderbak, Gorodezki, Zhang, Ho & MacCann, 2022). The results of Taha's study concluded that the dark triad of personality can be predicted by some dimensions of the Emotion Dysregulation and moral detachment (Taha, 2022). Emotion regulation was able to predict significant and positive dark personality traits, narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, sadism, and self-destructiveness (Moradi & Mohammadi, 2020).

The Dark Triad traits are considered hated personality traits that consist of three dimensions: Machiavellianism, Psychopathy and narcissism (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013). The first dimension, Machiavellianism that describes a personality trait that focuses on self-interest and personal gain and associated with taking advantage and being self-centered, amoral, and calculating, Basically, Machiavellian individuals seem to be hypocritical, superficial, and manipulative (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006). The second dimension is narcissism, Narcissistic individuals are distinguished paranoid, self-love, dominance, superiority, self-centeredness, self-aggrandizement, and egocentric attitude (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). In contrast, psychopathic individuals lack self-control, they are highly impulsive, adventurous, present deficits in affect Like a feeling of Callousness and interpersonal antagonism

(Del Gaizo & Falkenbach, 2008).

So, the third dimension, Psychopathy, is associated with a tendency to be highly impulsive, adventurous, and cold-blooded and to have low anxiety (Paulhus & Williams,2002). As with Machiavellianism and narcissism, psychopathy is those high on the Dark Triad traits should have emotional deficits (Jonason et al., 2013). The term dark triad has been applied to personality traits (Machiavellianism, psychopathy, narcissism) and these traits are characterized by a lack of empathy for others, exploitation and manipulation of them (Brewer, et al.,2018).

The emergence of the dark triad of personality is due to the bad experiences and attitudes that the child had in childhood, which is represented by rejection and parental cruelty, which negatively reflects on the individual's worldview and sees the world as a hostile, unsafe place, and therefore adopts abnormal behaviors to achieve his goals without regard for others (Garcia& Rosenberg, 2017).

The three traits of the dark triad share a number of characteristics such as a mischievous social personality possessing behavioral tendencies towards self-enhancement, emotional coldness, duplicity and aggressiveness (Paulhus& Williams, 2002). High-scoring individuals in the dark triad are characterized by an inflated view of self (narcissism) and manipulate others to achieve their goals (Machiavellianism) without feeling empathy or remorse (psychopathy) (Crysel, Crosier& Webster, 2013).

Dark triad traits people share a set of properties, namely : aggression and deviation (such as anger , bullying, Sadism, violence and irregular lifestyle such as impulsivity, taking risks , and abuse Drugs and sexual problems such as: strange sexual behaviors , delusions , infidelity, Sexual harassment poor psychological well-being such as: depression, loneliness, stress Social and emotional relationships such as feelings of helplessness, lack of empathy, low intelligence Emotional interpersonal problems such as dominance, sense of entitlement, self-amplification And moral problems such as: lack of moral values , lack of moral commitment And antisocial behaviors such as cheating, lying, negative humor patterns (Muris, et al., 2017)

As for the three characteristics of the dark triad traits (Machiavellianism, Psychopathy and narcissism) is a lack of empathy for others, low values of honesty and humility, with a focus on achieving gratification for short-term motives and achieving quick gains in a short time (Szabo& Jonesb, 2019). the characteristics of the dark triad are combined by self-centeredness, emotional

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dullness, manipulation of humans, exploitation and low human sense, where feelings of dullness control them to justify the exploitation of others (Routhmann, & Kolar, 2012).

There were also various studies that examined the relationship of the dark triad traits to Emotion Dysregulation, the results of which indicated the possibility of predicting the dark triad traits through Emotion Dysregulation (Amiri & Navab, 2018; Moradi & Mohammadi, 2020; Pilch, 2020). Insecure attachment styles are also negatively associated with emotional dysregulation (Thompson et al., 2008). People who suffer from emotional dysregulation have many problems related to attachment (Neave, et al., 2016).

The current study examined whether Emotion Dysregulation mediated the relation between Attachment style and Dark triad traits in Adolescent Females. First, the direct association between Attachment style and Dark triad traits was assessed (**Hypothesis 1**). Then the relationship between Attachment style and Emotion Dysregulation was examined (**Hypothesis 2**), followed by an investigation of the relation between Emotion Dysregulation and Dark triad traits (**Hypothesis 3**). The mediating effect of Emotion Dysregulation on the relation between attachment style Dark triad traits was then assessed (**Hypothesis 4**).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

This study was conducted in some public secondary schools affiliated to the Directorate of education in Aswan governorate, Arab Republic of Egypt during the academic year (2023-2024), The sample of the study consisted of (650) third-grade secondary female students, distributed to validation Sample which includes 150 Adolescent Females and Main sample which includes 500 Adolescent Females. The participants were between 18 and 19 years old, participated in this study with an average age of 18.4 (SD = .88) years.

### 2.2. Procedure

The study was conducted on a random sample Composed of (650) female students of the third grade of secondary from some public secondary schools in the city of Aswan, the survey began on October 1 and ended on October 15, 2023; the students participated willingly without any financial consideration, after obtaining approval for their participation in the study by the Directorate of education in Aswan governorate and the dean of the faculty

of education at Aswan University.

### 2.3. Psychosocial measures

#### 2.3.1.Attachment style

Depending on Al-Hudaibi and Al-Dawash (2020) scale for measuring attachment styles, the final scale consists of (20) items, divided into three main dimensions: the secure attachment style which included 6 items, the anxious attachment style which included 7 items, and the avoidant attachment style which included 7 items. The Scale is done in five levels (Always, most of the time, often, sometimes, never) with scores (5, 4, 3, 2 and 1) respectively.

It has shown high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .68, .73, .66$ ) and high test-retest reliability,  $r = .63, .61, .59$  for dimensions respectively (Al-Hudaibi& Al-Dawash, 2020). Internal consistency in this study sample (N = 150) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .75, .79, .81$ ). The results of the confirmatory factor analysis were satisfactory (CMIN/DF=2,718, RMSEA = 0.007, GFI = 0.954, NFI = 0.991, RMR= 0.002).

#### 2.3.2.Dark triad traits

Depending on Jones and Paulhus (2013) scale for measuring Dark triad traits, the final scale consists of (27) items, divided into three main dimensions: Machiavellianism which included 9 items, Narcissism which included 9 items, and Psychopathy which included 9 items. The Scale is done in five levels (Agree strongly, Agree, neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Disagree strongly) with scores (5, 4, 3, 2 and 1) respectively.

It has shown high reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77, .71, .80$ ) Machiavellianism, Narcissism and psychopathy respectively. Internal consistency in this study sample (N = 150) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77, .83, .82$ ). The results of the confirmatory factor analysis were satisfactory (CMIN/DF=3,034, RMSEA = 0.093, CFI = 0.834, RFI = 0.808, IFI= 0.836).

#### 2.3.3.Emotion Dysregulation

Depending on Gratz and Roemer (2004) authors prepared a scale which contains (36) items, divided into six main dimensions: Nonacceptance which includes 6 items, Goals which includes 5 items, Impulse which includes 6 items, Awareness which includes 6 items, Strategies which includes 8 items, Clarity which includes 5 items, The Scale is done in five levels (Always, most

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of the time, often, sometimes, never) with scores (5, 4, 3, 2 and 1) respectively.

It has shown high internal consistency, good test–retest reliability, and adequate construct and predictive validity. Internal consistency in this study sample (N = 150) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ). The results of the confirmatory factor analysis were satisfactory (CMIN/DF= 2.801, RMSEA = 0.067, CFI = 0.895, RFI = 0.951, IFI= 0.886).

**2.4. Statistical analysis**

The current model (see Fig. 1) was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) in Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). Full information maximum likelihood (FIML) was used to account for missing data. The overall fit of the model was considered adequate the comparative fit index (CFI) was N .98, the goodness fit index (GFI) was N .99, the incremental fit index (IFI) was N .98, the normed fit index (NFI) was N .97.

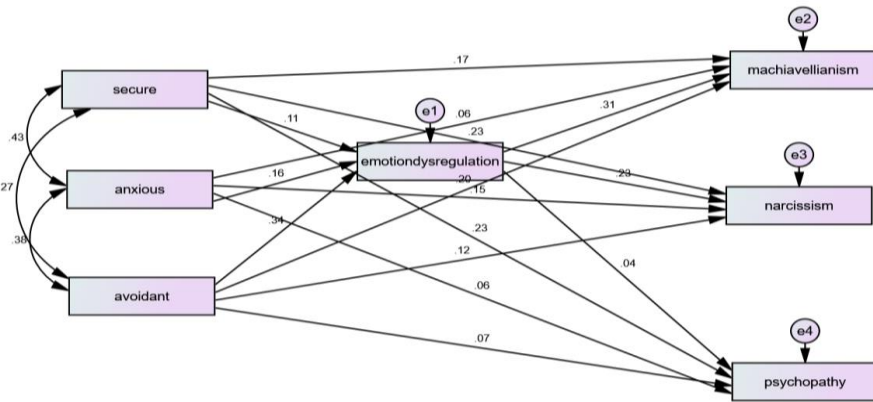


Fig. 1. Model of relation of attachment styles, emotion dysregulation, and dark triad traits. standardized parameter estimates (SE), are reported in this figure, Chi-square = 18.105,  $p < .001$ , DF= 3

**3. Results**

**3.1. Descriptive data and correlations**

Five hundred female students of the third grade of secondary from some public secondary schools in the city of Aswan have participated to check the study hypothesis (mean age of 18.8, SD = .73) years, Means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis of all study variables



correlations among study variables are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and among all study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Secure Attachment	1						
2. Anxious Attachment	.34**	1					
3. Avoidant Attachment	.27**	.38**	1				
4. Machiavellianism	.33**	.31**	.40**	1			
5. Narcissism	.39**	.37**	.34**	.35**	1		
6. Psychopathy	.29**	.20**	.17**	.19**	.27**	1	
7. Emotion Dysregulation	.27**	.34**	.43**	.46**	.40**	.15**	1
N	500	500	500	500	500	500	500
Mean	22.06	19.08	22.01	21.83	22.45	18.42	142.34
SD	3.80	3.52	3.44	3.60	4.23	3.42	13.63
Skewness	-.04	-.15	-.34	-.11	.76	.19	-.48
Kurtosis	-.15	-.16	1.16	-.18	6.39	-.06	.22

\*\* P<.001

### 3.2. Overall model fit

A single model (see Fig. 1) was specified to test all hypotheses. Indices of overall model fit indicated good overall model fit (Chi-square = 18.105,  $p < .001$ ,  $DF = 3$ ,  $CMIN/DF = 6.035$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.100$ ,  $CFI = .98$ ).

### 3.3. Hypothesis 1: effects of Attachment styles on Dark triad traits

Secure Attachment had a significant positive direct effect on Machiavellianism ( $B = .17$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Secure Attachment had a significant positive direct effect on narcissism ( $B = .23$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Secure Attachment had a significant positive direct effect on psychopathy ( $B = .23$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ), anxious Attachment had a significant positive direct effect on narcissism ( $B = .15$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ), avoidant Attachment had a significant positive direct effect on Machiavellianism ( $B = .20$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ). No other direct effects Attachment styles on Dark triad traits were significant in this mode. (see Fig. 1).

### 3.4. Hypothesis 2: effect of Attachment styles on Emotion Dysregulation

Both anxious Attachment and avoidant Attachment had significant positive associations with Emotion Dysregulation ( $B = .16$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and  $B = .34$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $p < .001$ ) respectively. (see Fig. 1).

### 3.5. Hypothesis 3: effects of Emotion Dysregulation on Dark triad

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### traits

Emotion Dysregulation had a significant positive association with both Machiavellianism and Narcissism ( $B = .31$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and  $B = .23$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ) respectively. (see Fig. 1).

### 3.6. Hypothesis 4: mediational effects

All possible indirect pathways were significant in this model, Table 2 shows the Standardized indirect effects of attachment styles on Dark triad traits mediated by emotion dysregulation.

Table 2

mediational effects

	Secure Attachment	Anxious Attachment	Avoidant Attachment
Machiavellianism	.034	.051	.106
Narcissism	.025	.038	.078
Psychopathy	.004	.006	.013

## 4. Discussion

The current study examined pathways that link Attachment styles to dark triad traits in Adolescent Females. Cross-sectional path analyses revealed that emotion dysregulation was an important underlying mechanism linking Attachment styles to Dark triad traits, Overall results suggest that attachment insecurity may increase the risk for emotion dysregulation and dark triad traits. These results suggest that reducing emotion dysregulation in Adolescent Females, potentially through psychosocial interventions, may Distance Adolescent Females from dark triad traits.

A closer investigation of the results shows that the anxious and avoidant attachment styles are directly related to emotion dysregulation because attachment styles by their nature are emotional links that control behavior and psychosocial, cognitive and affective development, anxious attachment the person is unable to use the caregiver as a safe base so he seeks to get closer before the separation occurs and grieves when separated with a feeling of contradiction and anger in a way that no stranger can easily calm him down. A person with avoidant attachment is confused/erratic, has certain behaviors when the caregiver returns, such as stiffness or freezing, or issues frightening behaviors such as interference, withdrawal, passivity, which clarifies and explains the direct effects of attachment styles on emotional dysregulation, This is result consistent with the results of Ferraro and Taylor (2021) study.

By looking at the results of the study, we find that adolescent females who

are exposed to certain experiences such as (the experience of loss, abandonment or deprivation) and when intimate relationships between them and their family members end, they experience loss anxiety and enter into a state of hurt and narcissistic pain to feel humiliated and ashamed, therefore we find the attachment styles associated with the dark triad traits, the results of the current study indicated the Association of secure attachment with the three traits of the dark triad, and that secure attachment allows individuals high social interaction and to have a warm and intimate relationship with others, which may entail the occurrence of many crises and the psychological problems and disorders that pave the way for the Traits of the dark triad of personality.

As for the positive effect of anxious attachment on narcissism, this can be explained by looking at the features that relate to the self, because anxious attachment makes the individual demand more intimate relationships but afraid of rejection from the other party, and narcissists are characterized by anxiety, emotional instability and self-centeredness; The Association of avoidant attachment with Machiavellianism is also a logical and realistic result, because Machiavellianism refers to an individual's resistance to the influence of others and indifference to consolidating personal relationships with others, and this is consistent with the features of avoidant attachment, which feels discomfort in intimate relationships and moves away from them and prefers to emotionally separate from others, as in Nickisch, Palazova and Ziegler (2020) study.

The emotion dysregulation had two roles in this study states the first is the direct effect on the dark triad traits and the second is the mediator and indirect role through which he linked attachment styles and the dark triad traits, where the current study indicated the effect of emotion dysregulation on Machiavellianism and narcissism, two traits based on the loss of empathy and emotional rigidity, as they feel emotional emptiness, depression, emotional and mood swings, indicating the role of emotional dysregulation, which includes conflicting emotional patterns and negative emotions not regulated by consciousness.

The results of (Burr, Dvorak, Kramer& Ochoaleyva, 2023) study also supported the full mediation effect of emotion dysregulation in the correlation between the study variables, as narcissism was positively associated with the study variables by emotion dysregulation, In the current study, emotion dysregulation affected the relationship between attachment styles and dark triad traits in different proportions, therefore, because emotion dysregulation refers to emotional behavior that hinders and harms adaptive functions and includes emotional responses that are unusual and inappropriate for the

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context in which they occur (Beauchaine & Crowell,2020).

### 5- Recommendations

In light of the results of the study, it is possible to recommend the need to plan family awareness programs to identify attachment styles and the psychoeducational vision of Raising Adolescents with educational methods based on understanding, acceptance, security and appreciation to avoid abnormal attachment styles.it is also possible to recommend attention to holding seminars to discuss adolescents with regard to emotional regulation and emotion management. it is also possible to recommend the preparation and design of counseling and therapeutic programs to reduce the dark triad traits and emotional dysregulation in adolescents.

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## الدور الوسيط لصعوبات التنظيم الانفعالي في العلاقة بين أنماط التعلق وسمات الثلاث المظلم لدى المراهقات

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### المخلص :

يهدف البحث إلى التحقيق في الدور الوسيط لصعوبات التنظيم الانفعالي في العلاقة بين أنماط التعلق وسمات الثلاث المظلم لدى المراهقات وللتحقق من التأثيرات المباشرة وغير المباشرة بين متغيرات البحث ، وتكونت عينة البحث من (٦٥٠) طالبة من طالبات الصف الثالث الثانوي بمحافظة أسوان، وتم تطبيق مقياس أنماط التعلق إعداد الحديبي والدواش (٢٠٢٠)، ومقياس سمات الثلاث المظلم (Jones & Paulhus (2013) ترجمة الباحثة، ومقياس صعوبات التنظيم الانفعالي (Gratz & Roemer (2004) ترجمة الباحثة، وأشارت النتائج إلى وجود مجموعة من التأثيرات المباشرة وغير المباشرة ومجموعة من الارتباطات المقابلة بين المتغيرات كما جاءت مؤشرات النموذج العام متطابقة بشكل جيد وتم قبول النموذج، علاوة على ذلك، جاءت نتائج جميع التأثيرات غير المباشرة بين أنماط التعلق وسمات الثلاث المظلم دالة احصائياً، كما أسفرت النتائج إلى أن صعوبات التنظيم الانفعالي له دور وسيط يجب مراعاته عند فحص الارتباط بين أنماط التعلق وسمات الثلاث المظلم لدى المراهقات، وتشير هذه النتائج إلى الدور المهم لصعوبات التنظيم الانفعالي في التنبؤ بسمات الثلاث المظلم لدى المراهقات، ويوصي البحث بضرورة الاهتمام بالمراهقات وتقديم برامج إرشادية وعلاجية للحد من التأثير السلبي لصعوبات التنظيم الانفعالي وسمات الثلاث المظلم للشخصية ، بالإضافة إلى تثقيف عائلاتهن حول خطورة أنماط التعلق وتأثيرها السلبي على المراهقات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صعوبات التنظيم الانفعالي، أنماط التعلق، سمات الثلاث المظلم، المراهقات.