



## Research Article

# From defense styles to social approval: Divergent mediating effects of guilt and shame

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This study examines the mediating roles of guilt and shame in the relationship between defense styles – mature, neurotic, and immature – and the need for social approval in a non-clinical Turkish adult sample. A total of 336 participants, predominantly aged 18–25, completed standardized measures assessing defense styles, social approval, and moral emotions. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlations and bootstrapped mediation models with 5,000 resamples. Results showed that mature defenses had no direct effect on social approval; however, guilt significantly mediated the relationship, indicating that these defenses may reduce approval needs through adaptive guilt regulation. Neurotic defenses demonstrated both direct and indirect effects via shame, suggesting that shame amplifies the link between these defenses and higher approval-seeking. Immature defenses also showed both direct and indirect effects, with guilt serving as a significant mediator, reflecting the role of maladaptive guilt in strengthening approval needs. These findings indicate that defense styles influence social approval through distinct emotional pathways, with guilt central for mature and immature defenses, and shame for neurotic defenses. The results highlight the cultural relevance of moral emotions in shaping social motivation in collectivist contexts and suggest that interventions promoting adaptive guilt regulation and effective shame management may help reduce maladaptive approval-seeking behaviors.

**Keywords:** Collectivist culture, defense mechanisms, guilt, mediation, shame, social approval

## 1. Introduction

Human beings exist within a particular societal context, and their desires, needs, and personality are shaped within this social framework. Since antiquity, philosophers such as Aristotle have emphasized that humans are inherently “political animals,” whose well-being and identity are cultivated through their participation in the life of the community (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./1998). The need to interact with and relate to others stems from this intrinsically social nature, as individuals typically fulfill both their physical and psychological needs through the dynamics of the society to which they belong. In this regard, the desire to be accepted and approved by others emerges as a fundamental social motive, often conceptualized in contemporary psychology as the need for social approval (Leary, 2010). This need reflects a tendency to attribute significant importance to others’ expectations, prioritize their evaluations, and engage in harmonious behaviors during social interactions (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

It has been suggested that defense mechanisms, which aim to ensure both internal harmony and congruence between the individual and their environment, are substantially influenced by the need for social approval. Accordingly, individuals with a high need for social approval tend to employ socially acceptable defense mechanisms more frequently (Lobel et al., 1987). While defense mechanisms can protect individuals from negative emotions such as anxiety and thereby reduce the need for approval, excessive reliance on these mechanisms may hinder authentic self-expression. Such overreliance may distort an individual’s self-perception, thoughts, emotions, and experiences, ultimately heightening the need for approval (Bowins, 2004; Cramer, 2008).

Defense mechanisms are the strategies and tools employed by the ego to suppress distressing emotions and anxieties, and to regulate impulsive behaviors and emotions. These mechanisms

function to preserve internal equilibrium and to prevent the conscious emergence of excessive anxiety stemming from either intrapsychic conflicts or conflicts between the individual and their environment (Freud, 1966).

Defense mechanisms are classified into three categories: mature defenses, neurotic defenses (intermediate defenses), and immature defenses. This classification is conceptualized within Vaillant's hierarchy of defenses. According to this framework, mature defenses include behaviors such as anticipation, sublimation, humor, and suppression; immature defenses encompass behaviors such as projection, schizoid fantasy, hypochondriasis, passive aggression, dissociation, and acting out; and neurotic defenses (intermediate) include idealization, undoing, altruism, intellectualization, repression, displacement, and reaction formation (Andrews et al., 1989; Vaillant, 1971, 1976).

Mature (higher-level) defenses are regarded as the defense style that provides the most balanced response to involuntary disruptions in internal and external reality. These defenses integrate and mitigate the conflicting sources of human behavior—such as conscience, reality, interpersonal relationships, and emotions. In contrast, less mature defense styles either deny or distort such conflicts, thereby creating an unhealthy and unrealistic perception of reality (Vaillant, 1971). In this regard, mature and immature defenses differ significantly in terms of adaptability and maladaptiveness, as well as in the distinction between clinical and healthy functioning—favoring mature defenses (Sammallahti & Aalberg, 1995; Vaillant, 1994).

Anna Freud emphasized the association of many defense mechanisms with feelings of guilt and highlighted the guiding role of guilt (Freud, 1966). Furthermore, it has been observed that defense mechanisms—closely related to adaptive behaviors toward the environment—also influence the social emotions of guilt and shame (Cavalera et al., 2022; Rajabpour & Omidvar, 2020). Guilt and shame are moral and social emotions with significant functionality in social life (Bastin et al., 2021; Teroni & Deonna, 2008). The social foundations of guilt and shame stem from family, school, peer relationships, and broader social experiences (Hutapea & Suleeman, 2018). In this regard, guilt and shame can be understood as forms of social feedback.

Social approval, on the other hand, functions as a motivational tool that shapes behavior and facilitates social harmony (Salinas-Quiroz et al., 2023). It represents an abstract social reward used to regulate interpersonal interactions (Makowski et al., 2016). Consequently, guilt and shame—through a feedback process grounded in reward and punishment—are directly associated with social approval, both guiding and shaping human behavior (Da Cunha Fortes & Ferreira, 2014). From this perspective, it is reasonable to expect that guilt and shame, as social emotions, will influence social approval, and that this influence will serve as a mediating factor in the relationship between defense styles—which function as a core mechanism of social adaptation—and social approval. Supporting this view, Di Giuseppe and Perry (2021) emphasized that defense mechanisms can protect individuals from emotionally distressing experiences such as guilt and shame, thereby influencing the need for approval.

In light of the literature, a notable theoretical gap emerges: although there is extensive research separately examining defense mechanisms, moral emotions (guilt and shame), and the need for social approval, studies directly investigating the mediating role of guilt and shame between defense styles and social approval remain scarce. Moreover, the present literature does not clarify how each level of Vaillant's (1994) defense hierarchy—mature, neurotic, and immature—operates through moral emotions to shape the need for social approval. Specifically, mature defenses may buffer or attenuate the influence of guilt and shame on approval-seeking, whereas neurotic and immature defenses may intensify these effects by reinforcing externalized self-evaluations (Cramer, 2008). These differentiated pathways require explicit, testable formulation, linking each defense category to distinct moral-emotion processes and associated behavioral outcomes.

This investigation is particularly relevant in collectivist cultural contexts such as Türkiye, where honor-based values, interpersonal harmony, and the preservation of "face" or reputation strongly influence social behavior. In such contexts, shame often takes precedence over guilt as a regulator of interpersonal relations (Gilbert, 2000, 2015; Tangney, 2005). Cross-cultural findings suggest that

collectivist societies foster heightened shame sensitivity, making it essential to explore how this cultural dimension interacts with defense styles in shaping social approval needs. In this context, the present study aims to explore the mediating role of guilt and shame in the relationship between different defense styles—mature, neurotic, and immature—and the need for social approval within a non-clinical Turkish adult sample. By integrating psychodynamic theory, moral emotion theory, and cultural perspectives, this research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how individual coping mechanisms interact with culturally embedded emotional processes to influence social motivation.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Design

The present study aimed to examine the mediating role of guilt and shame in the relationship between defense styles and social approval. To this end, a correlational survey design was employed, which allows for the determination of the degree of association between two or more variables and the extent to which these variables predict one another (Creswell, 2017). The study was conducted as a cross-sectional research design.

### 2.2. Participants

The population of the study consisted of adults aged 18 years and older. The sample comprised 336 participants, selected from the population through a convenience sampling method. Of these participants, 223 (66.4%) were female and 113 (33.6%) were male. Regarding age distribution, 274 participants (81.5%) were between 18 and 25 years old, while 62 participants (18.5%) were above 25 years old.

### 2.3. Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using the Personal Information Form developed by the researcher, the Defense Styles Questionnaire, the Social Approval Need Scale, and the Guilt and Shame Scale.

#### 2.3.1. Defense styles questionnaire

The scale, originally developed by Andrews et al. (1989), was adapted to Turkish culture by Yılmaz et al. (2007). It consists of 40 items rated on a 9-point Likert scale and evaluates 20 defense mechanisms across three subscales: mature, neurotic, and immature defenses. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients reported in the adaptation study were .70 for mature defenses, .61 for neurotic defenses, and .83 for immature defenses. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated as .63 for mature defenses, .63 for neurotic defenses, and .84 for immature defenses.

#### 2.3.2. Social approval need scale

The Social Approval Need Scale was developed by Karaşar and Ögülmüş (2016). It consists of 25 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale and comprises three subscales: sensitivity to judgments of others, social withdrawal, and creating a positive impression. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient reported in the original study was .90. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as .92.

#### 2.3.3. Guilt and shame scale

The Guilt and Shame Scale was developed by Şahin and Şahin (1992). It contains 24 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale and is composed of two subscales: guilt and shame. Higher scores indicate greater intensity of guilt and shame emotions. In the original study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .81 for guilt and .80 for shame. In the present study, these coefficients were found to be .87 for guilt and .82 for shame.

## 2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards, ensuring the confidentiality of personal data and the voluntary participation of respondents. Ethical approval was obtained from the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Düzce University (Decision No: 2024/333, dated 07.11.2024).

For statistical analyses, IBM SPSS 23.0 software was used. The distribution of the data was examined to determine whether the assumptions for the planned statistical tests were met. Skewness and kurtosis values were calculated to assess normality. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), skewness and kurtosis values within  $\pm 1.50$  indicate normal distribution, while George and Mallery (2003) suggest that values within  $\pm 2$  are acceptable for normality. In this study, skewness and kurtosis values were found to be .246 and .496 for the Defense Styles Questionnaire,  $-.573$  and  $1.422$  for the Guilt and Shame Scale, and .120 and  $-.145$  for the Social Approval Need Scale. These values indicate that the data were normally distributed. Accordingly, parametric tests were applied.

Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationships among variables. To investigate the effect of defense styles, guilt, and shame on social approval, bootstrapped regression analysis (5,000 resamples) was conducted using the PROCESS macro for IBM SPSS 23.0. In reporting mediation results, the classification proposed by Zhao et al. (2010) was followed. Specifically, when the total and direct effects were not statistically significant but the indirect effect was significant, the mediation type was described as "indirect-only mediation" rather than "full mediation," as this terminology more accurately reflects the statistical pattern observed.

## 3. Results

To explore the relationships among defense styles, social approval, shame, and guilt, preliminary analyses were conducted. As a first step, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the direction, strength, and statistical significance of associations between the study variables. This analysis provided an overview of how the main constructs are interrelated before testing the hypothesized mediation models. The results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Pearson Correlation Analysis Results Regarding the Relationships between Defense Styles, Social Approval, Shame, and Guilt*

| Variables                 | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4      | 5      | 6 |
|---------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---|
| 1. Mature Defense Style   | 1      |        |        |        |        |   |
| 2. Neurotic Defense Style | .335** | 1      |        |        |        |   |
| 3. Immature Defense Style | .415** | .548** | 1      |        |        |   |
| 4. Social Approval        | .045   | .234** | .236** | 1      |        |   |
| 5. Guilt                  | .166** | .054   | -.167  | -.070  | 1      |   |
| 6. Shame                  | .013   | .252** | .061   | .196** | .567** | 1 |

Note. \*\* $p < .01$

The findings are presented in Table 1. The analysis revealed a positive and low-level statistically significant relationship between mature defense style and guilt ( $r = .166, p < .01$ ), between neurotic defense style and shame ( $r = .252, p < .01$ ) as well as social approval ( $r = .234, p < .01$ ), and between immature defense style and social approval ( $r = .236, p < .01$ ). In addition, a positive and low-level statistically significant relationship was found between social approval and shame ( $r = .196, p < .01$ ).

Following the correlation analysis, mediation analyses were performed to examine the indirect effects of guilt and shame in the relationship between each defense style and social approval. The first model tested the role of guilt and shame in the association between mature defense style and social approval, and the results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Findings Regarding the Mediating Role of Guilt and Shame in the Relationship between Mature Defense and Social Approval*

| Variables                               | Effect (b) | Std.Error | t      | p     | LLCI   | ULCI   |
|-----------------------------------------|------------|-----------|--------|-------|--------|--------|
| Total effect of X' on Y                 | .0858      | .1032     | .8313  | .4064 | -.1172 | .2887  |
| Direct effect of X' on Y                | .1667      | .1004     | 1.6594 | .0980 | -.0309 | .3642  |
| Total indirect effect of M1 and M2 on Y | -.0809     | .0391     |        |       | -.1585 | -.0023 |
| Indirect effect of M1 on Y              | .0091      | .0466     |        |       | -.0764 | .1128  |
| Indirect effect of M2 on Y              | -.0900     | .0405     |        |       | -.1789 | -.0177 |

Note. X = Mature Defense Style, Y = Social Approval, M1 = Shame, M2 = Guilt.

According to the results presented in Table 2, the total effect of mature defense style on social approval was not statistically significant (95% CI [-0.1172, 0.2887],  $t = 0.8313$ ,  $p = .4064$ ). Similarly, the direct effect of mature defense style on social approval was not statistically significant (95% CI [-0.0309, 0.3642],  $t = 1.6594$ ,  $p = .0980$ ). However, the bootstrap regression analysis assessing the mediating role of guilt and shame revealed that the indirect effect of mature defense style on social approval was statistically significant, as the 95% bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero ( $b = -0.0809$ , 95% CI [-0.1585, -0.0023]). According to the typology proposed by Zhao et al., (2010), this pattern—characterized by a non-significant total and direct effect but a significant indirect effect—corresponds to indirect-only mediation, rather than what is traditionally labeled as “full mediation” in the Baron and Kenny (1986) framework. This terminology is adopted to align with current methodological recommendations (Hayes, 2018). Within this indirect-only mediation, guilt emerged as a significant mediator ( $b = -0.0900$ , 95% CI [-0.1789, -0.0177]).

After examining the mediation model for mature defense style, the next analysis focused on neurotic defense style to determine whether guilt and shame similarly mediate its relationship with social approval. The findings of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Findings Regarding the Mediating Role of Guilt and Shame in the Relationship between Neurotic Defense Style and Social Approval*

| Variables                               | Effect (b) | Std.Error | t    | p     | LLCI   | ULCI  |
|-----------------------------------------|------------|-----------|------|-------|--------|-------|
| Total effect of X' on Y                 | .4319      | .0984     | 4.38 | <.001 | .2383  | .6254 |
| Direct effect of X' on Y                | .3204      | .0993     | 3.22 | .001  | .1251  | .5158 |
| Total indirect effect of M1 and M2 on Y | .1114      | .0512     |      |       | .0239  | .2252 |
| Indirect effect of M1 on Y              | .1357      | .0559     |      |       | .0435  | .2607 |
| Indirect effect of M2 on Y              | -.0243     | .0295     |      |       | -.0877 | .0303 |

Note. X = Neurotic Defense Style, Y = Social Approval, M1 = Shame, M2 = Guilt.

The findings presented in Table 3 indicate that neurotic defense style has a statistically significant and positive total effect on social approval (95% CI [0.2383, 0.6254],  $t = 4.3890$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The direct effect of neurotic defense style on social approval was also found to be statistically significant (95% CI [0.1251, 0.5158],  $t = 3.2269$ ,  $p = .0014$ ).

The bootstrap regression analysis assessing the mediating role of guilt and shame revealed that the indirect effect of neurotic defense style on social approval was statistically significant, as the 95% bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero ( $b = 0.1114$ , 95% CI [0.0239, 0.2252]). According to the classification of Zhao et al. (2010), the pattern of both significant direct and indirect effects indicates *complementary mediation* (partial mediation). Within this partial mediation, shame emerged as a significant mediator ( $b = 0.1357$ , 95% CI [0.0435, 0.2607]).

Following the analysis of the mediation model for neurotic defense style, an additional model was tested to further examine the role of guilt and shame, focusing this time on immature defense style. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

*Findings Regarding the Mediating Role of Guilt and Shame in the Relationship Between Neurotic Defense Style and Social Approval*

| Variables                               | Effect (b) | Std.Error | t     | p     | LLCI   | ULCI  |
|-----------------------------------------|------------|-----------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| Total effect of X' on Y                 | .1613      | .0363     | 4.448 | <.001 | .0900  | .2327 |
| Direct effect of X' on Y                | .1243      | .0363     | 3.420 | .001  | .0528  | .1958 |
| Total indirect effect of M1 and M2 on Y | .0370      | .0176     |       |       | .0080  | .0755 |
| Indirect effect of M1 on Y              | .0128      | .0147     |       |       | -.0121 | .0455 |
| Indirect effect of M2 on Y              | .0242      | .0125     |       |       | .0047  | .0525 |

Note. X = Immature Defense Style, Y = Social Approval, M1 = Shame, M2 = Guilt.

Table 4 presents the analysis results, indicating that immature defense style has a statistically significant positive total effect on social approval (95% CI [0.0900, 0.2327],  $t = 4.4483$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Its direct effect on social approval was likewise statistically significant (95% CI [0.0528, 0.1958],  $t = 3.4208$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The bootstrap regression analysis assessing the mediating role of guilt and shame revealed that the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero ( $b = 0.0370$ , 95% CI [0.0080, 0.0755]), indicating a statistically significant mediation effect. According to the classification of Zhao et al. (2010), the presence of both significant direct and indirect effects indicates *complementary mediation* (partial mediation). Within this partial mediation, guilt was found to have a significant mediating effect ( $b = 0.0242$ , 95% CI [0.0047, 0.0525]).

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

In this section, the mediating roles of guilt and shame in the effects of mature, neurotic, and immature defense mechanisms on social approval are discussed in light of the findings obtained and the relevant literature.

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##### 4.1. Discussion of Findings on the Mediating Role of Guilt and Shame in the Relationship between Mature Defense Mechanisms and Social Approval

According to the findings obtained in the present study, mature defense mechanisms were found to have no statistically significant direct effect on social approval. While mature defenses did not exert a direct influence on social approval, they were found to have an indirect effect through guilt and shame. However, mediation analyses revealed that only guilt served as a statistically significant mediator, whereas shame did not emerge as a significant pathway. In other words, the influence of mature defenses on social approval appears to operate primarily through guilt regulation rather than through shame.

Mature defense mechanisms are adaptive strategies that individuals can employ without distorting reality and that function in a manner supportive of social relationships. In this respect, mature defense mechanisms are thought to facilitate the healthy experience of the need for social approval (Békés et al., 2021). Supporting this notion, Di Giuseppe and Perry (2021) state that mature defense styles enable individuals to experience their emotions and thoughts in a more holistic and mindful manner, thereby maintaining a balance between internal and external conflicts. This balance, in turn, provides protection against intolerable emotional experiences such as shame and guilt, potentially influencing an individual's need for approval.

The specific mediation pattern identified in this study aligns with what Zhao et al. (2010) define as indirect-only mediation—a scenario in which the total and direct effects are non-significant, yet the indirect effect is significant. Unlike the traditional “full mediation” concept described by Baron and Kenny (1986), indirect-only mediation highlights that the relationship between the independent and dependent variables is transmitted exclusively through the mediator, with no

independent direct path. This methodological nuance is crucial, as it indicates that mature defense mechanisms may not directly alter social approval needs, but rather do so only via their influence on guilt.

The negative direction of the indirect effect is also noteworthy. This finding suggests that mature defenses may reduce the need for social approval by modulating guilt in a way that fosters internal resolution rather than reliance on external validation. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this is consistent with the role of mature defenses in strengthening the ego (Freud, 1923) and allowing individuals to manage guilt adaptively—as a signal for self-reflection and reparative action—rather than as a persistent motivator for approval-seeking behaviors.

From a theoretical standpoint, attachment theory posits that individuals with secure attachment styles tend to use mature defense mechanisms more frequently and have a lower need for external approval (Bowlby, 1969). Self-determination theory further supports this interpretation, suggesting that mature defenses enhance intrinsic motivation and autonomy, thus balancing the need for social approval (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In the present study, guilt appears to be the key affective mechanism linking these processes.

Culturally, in collectivist societies such as Türkiye, social approval often serves as a core social currency. The ability of mature defenses to attenuate this need through adaptive guilt regulation could represent a protective psychological mechanism, mitigating the potentially restrictive effects of high approval orientation on personal autonomy and well-being. The absence of a significant mediating role for shame also carries cultural implications. In many collectivist contexts, shame is not necessarily maladaptive but may serve as a socially functional emotion embedded in relational harmony (Fessler, 2004). Therefore, its regulatory dynamics may diverge from those of guilt, explaining the lack of mediation in the present findings.

In conclusion, these findings suggest that strengthening mature defenses in clinical settings may be an effective way to help individuals manage maladaptive approval-seeking by reframing guilt as a constructive emotional resource.

#### **4.2. Discussion of Findings on the Mediating Role of Guilt and Shame in the Relationship between Neurotic Defense Mechanisms and Social Approval**

The findings indicate that neurotic defense mechanisms have a statistically significant and positive effect on social approval. Mediation analysis revealed a complementary (partial) mediation pattern (Zhao et al., 2010), in which shame—but not guilt—significantly mediated this relationship. This suggests that, while neurotic defenses directly increase the need for social approval, they also exert an additional indirect influence through shame.

It has been emphasized that while defense mechanisms may become more adaptive in parallel with symptom improvement, neurotic defenses tend to exhibit a more rigid and persistent structure (Bond, 2004). This rigidity is thought to stem largely from their deeply rooted association with shame. Shame, due to its connection with loss of self-esteem, social withdrawal, inability to forgive, anger, and aggression, may substantially influence the need for approval (Carlsson & Shoemaker, 2019; Hosser et al., 2008).

From the perspective of attachment theory, individuals with an anxious attachment style are more likely to employ neurotic defense mechanisms, and these individuals tend to have a greater need for social approval compared to those with other attachment styles (Bowlby, 1969). According to self-determination theory, shame fosters external motivation, and a lifestyle dominated by such external motivation increases the use of neurotic defenses, thereby heightening the individual's need for social approval (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The influence of shame on the need for social approval appears to be of critical importance (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Defense mechanisms classified as neurotic—particularly repression and displacement—may significantly amplify the need for social approval when coupled with shame. For instance, an individual experiencing shame may attempt to offset this feeling not by confronting it directly but by seeking social approval in another context. Because shame entails an attribution directed toward the self, it represents a deeply personal and often difficult-to-confront

emotion. It is therefore plausible that the sense of deficiency associated with shame may lead individuals to seek external approval as a compensatory strategy.

Thus, interventions aimed at reducing shame reactivity in individuals who rely on neurotic defenses could potentially lower maladaptive approval-seeking behaviors.

#### **4.3. Discussion of Findings on the Mediating Role of Guilt and Shame in the Relationship between Immature Defense Mechanisms and Social Approval**

The findings indicate that immature defense mechanisms have a statistically significant positive effect on social approval. Mediation analysis revealed a complementary (partial) mediation pattern (Zhao et al., 2010), in which guilt—but not shame—significantly mediated this relationship. This suggests that, while immature defenses directly increase the need for social approval, they also exert an additional indirect influence through guilt.

At this point, the connection between accountability—particularly in the context of social relationships and social life—and guilt appears to be of critical importance. Self-blame, in terms of accountability, is noted to possess a directive force that is often associated with painful experiences (Carlsson & Shoemaker, 2019). Guilt is particularly linked to the devaluation of one's actions (Karlsson & Sjöberg, 2009; Tangney & Dearing, 2002), and under its influence, an individual may focus on a specific act and engage in self-judgment (Jensen & Jensen, 2019). Through these effects, guilt may shape the degree to which an individual feels the need for social approval.

The findings of Cavalera et al. (2022) support the current results, indicating a relationship between guilt processes and immature defenses. Guilt is described as an emotional response arising when an individual performs an act that conflicts with moral norms and internal values. Two types of guilt are discussed in the literature: adaptive guilt, which helps the individual recognize and correct mistakes, and maladaptive guilt, which is excessive, persistent, and undermines self-worth (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In cases of maladaptive guilt, the intensity of the feeling may be so high that mature defenses are insufficient to resolve the conflict, prompting individuals to resort to immature defenses (Leahy, 2015). For example, by employing denial as a defense mechanism, an individual may completely reject a mistake rather than acknowledge feelings of guilt. While adaptive guilt, in conjunction with mature defense mechanisms, can foster supportive social relationships, maladaptive guilt, when paired with immature defenses, may lead to detachment from reality and weaken social connections.

Overall, addressing maladaptive guilt in individuals using immature defenses could help reduce their dependence on external validation for self-worth.

When viewed together, the findings across mature, neurotic, and immature defense mechanisms highlight the distinct emotional pathways—guilt and shame—through which these defenses shape the need for social approval. Mature defenses appear to regulate approval needs primarily by transforming guilt into a constructive force; neurotic defenses amplify approval-seeking through shame; and immature defenses link approval needs to maladaptive forms of guilt. These nuanced patterns underscore the importance of tailoring interventions to both the defense style and the predominant moral emotion involved, with cultural context serving as a critical backdrop for understanding these dynamics.

### **5. Recommendations**

Future research should employ experimental and longitudinal designs—such as emotion regulation training programs or defense mechanism-focused group interventions—to examine how changes in defense styles influence guilt and shame over time. Given the role of specific moral emotions, clinical interventions should target maladaptive shame in individuals with neurotic defenses (e.g., compassion-focused therapy) and maladaptive guilt in those with immature defenses (e.g., cognitive restructuring, self-forgiveness protocols). Culturally sensitive psychoeducation programs should be developed in collectivist societies to help individuals reframe approval-seeking tendencies, incorporating strategies to strengthen mature defenses and promote adaptive guilt regulation. In psychological counseling settings, defense mechanism work



should be integrated into broader social skills and autonomy-building programs, with progress monitored through validated defense style and moral emotion assessment tools.

**Author contributions:** All authors have sufficiently contributed to the study and agreed with the results and conclusions.

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