# It's Not You, It's Me: Testing Romantic Self-Blame as a Novel Mechanism Linking Past Peer Victimization to Emerging Adult Depressive Symptoms

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## INTRODUCTION

- Adolescent peer victimization can have deleterious psychological consequences that extend into emerging adulthood (Brendgen, 2018), but mechanisms underlying the influence peer victimization on later depressive symptoms remain unclear (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015).
- Research implicates self-blame, particularly characterological self-blame (CSB; internal, stable, uncontrollable attributions), as an underlying mechanism linking peer victimization to depressive symptoms during adolescence.
- Victimized youth are likely to blame themselves for the bullying, and CSB elevates risk for short-term depressive symptoms (Graham & Juvonen, 1998).
- During emerging adulthood, as intimate relationships become more developmentally salient (Furman, 2002), self-blame in *romantic* contexts may maintain links between past peer victimization and depressive symptoms.

**Aim 1:** Evaluate construct validity of a new measure designed to capture the novel construct of romantic self-blame
**H1:** A two-factor structure distinguishing between characterological and behavioral romantic self-blame was expected (see Graham & Juvonen, 1998).
**Aim 2:** Test romantic self-blame (characterological or behavioral) as a mediator of the association between retrospective peer victimization and current depressive symptoms and explore if these patterns vary by perceived social support.
**H2:** Characterological, but not behavioral, romantic self-blame would partially explain the victimization-depression association, and this association would be weaker among emerging adults perceiving more supportive social relationships.

## METHOD

**Participants:**
- 350 undergraduate students (80% female; $M_{age}$ =20.06) were recruited for an online survey via subject pool at an urban university in the midwestern United States
- Reported ethnicities: 43% White/European American, 22% Middle Eastern/North African, 12% South Asian, 7% Black/African American, 5% Multiethnic/Biracial, 3% Latinx/Mexican American, 2% East/Southeast Asian, and 2% Pacific Islander; 1% other & 3% not reporting.

**Measures:**
**Past Peer Victimization** (Swearer & Carey, 2003; $\alpha$ = .93)
Retrospective reports of being bullied during adolescence.
- Sum of 11 items; 0 ("Never") – 4 ("Always")
- Sample item: "Called me names"

**Romantic Self-Blaming Attributions**
Novel measure capturing subjective appraisals of a hypothetical romantic stressor, comprised of two subscales:
➤ *Characterological romantic self-blame* ($\alpha$ = .84)
- Mean of 6 items; 1 ("Definitely would not think") – 5 ("Definitely would think")
- Sample item: "If I were more attractive, this wouldn't happen to me."
➤ *Behavioral romantic self-blame* ($\alpha$ = .69)
- Mean of 3 items; 1 ("Definitely would not think") – 5 ("Definitely would think")
- Sample item: "I must have done something wrong."

**Perceived Social Support** (Zimet et al., 1988; $\alpha$ = .89)
Perceptions of social support from friends, family, and romantic partners.
- Mean of 12 items; 0 ("Very strongly disagree") – 7 ("Very strongly agree")
- Sample item: "I can count on my friends when things go wrong."

**Depressive Symptoms** (CES-D, Radloff, 1977; $\alpha$ = .89)
Feelings and behaviors from the past week.
- Sum of 20 items; 1 ("Never") – 4 ("Most of all of the time")
- Sample item: "I felt lonely."

**Analysis:**
Confirmatory factor analysis (MPLUS 8.1); moderated meditation modeling with bootstrap estimates - Hayes PROCESS macro (SPSS 26)
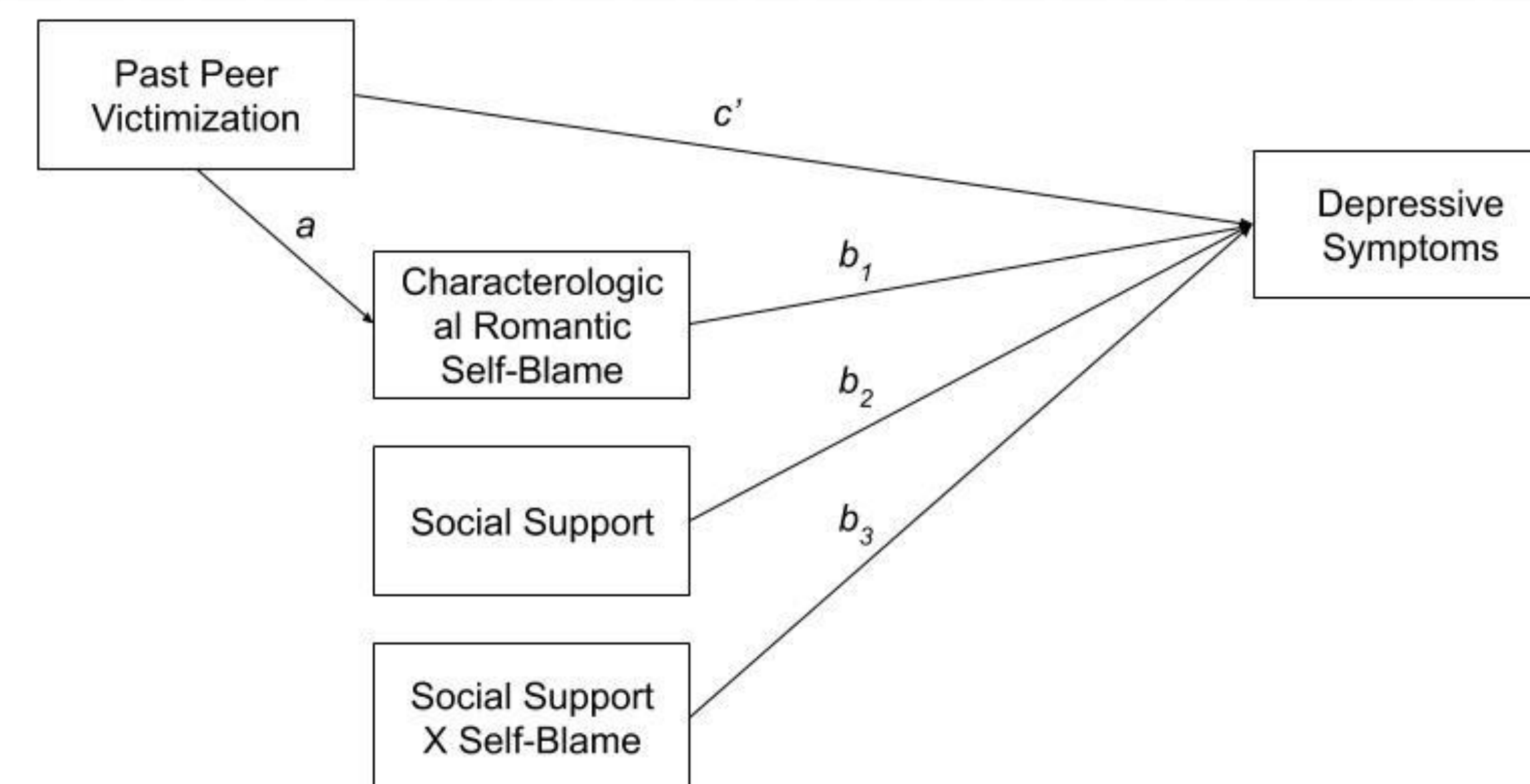
## RESULTS



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized moderated mediation model: peer victimization, characterological romantic self-blame, and depressive symptoms



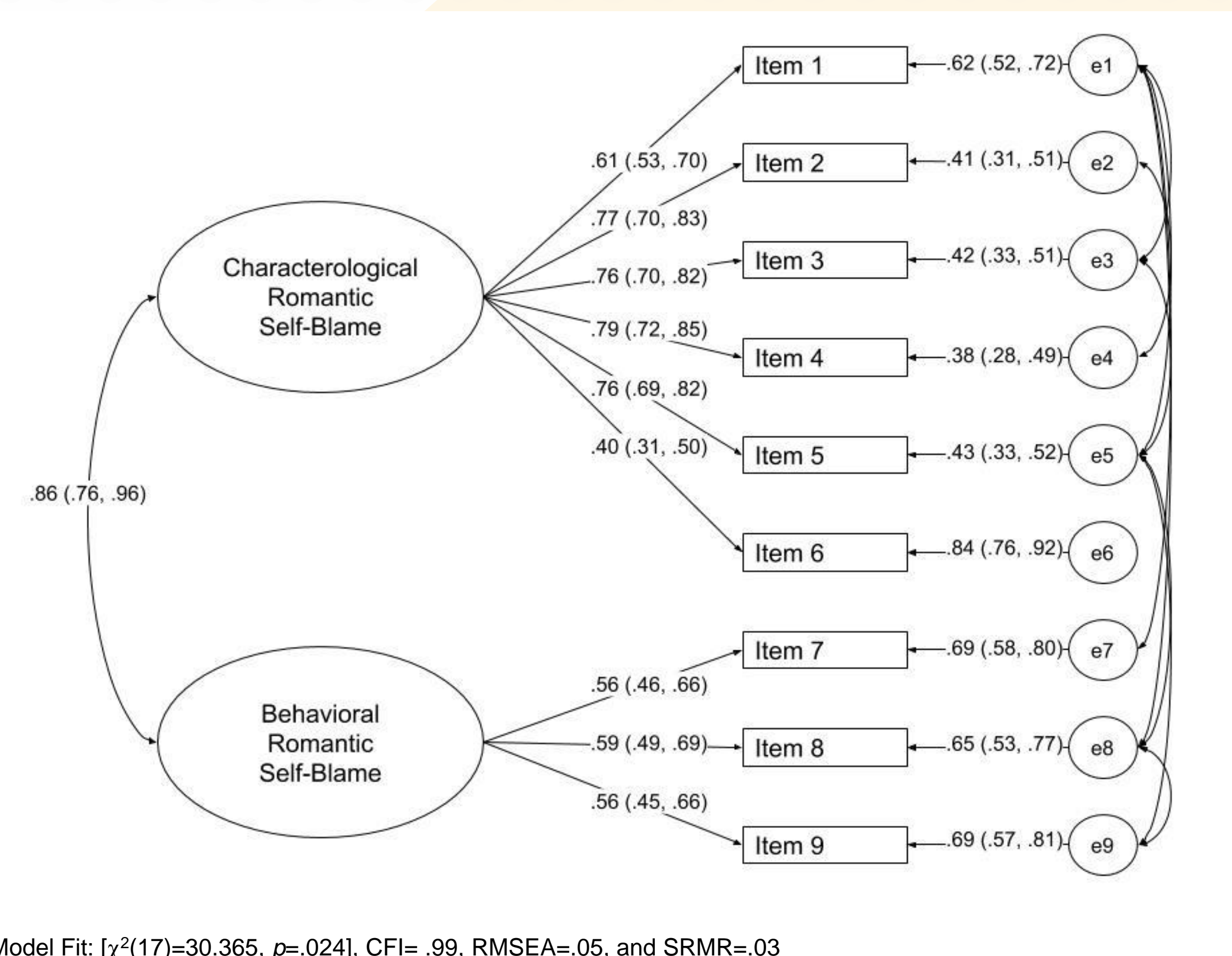Model Fit: [$\chi^2(17)$=30.365, $p$=.024], CFI= .99, RMSEA=.05, and SRMR=.03

**Figure 2.** Confirmatory factor analysis supporting a two-factor structure of the romantic self-blame measure
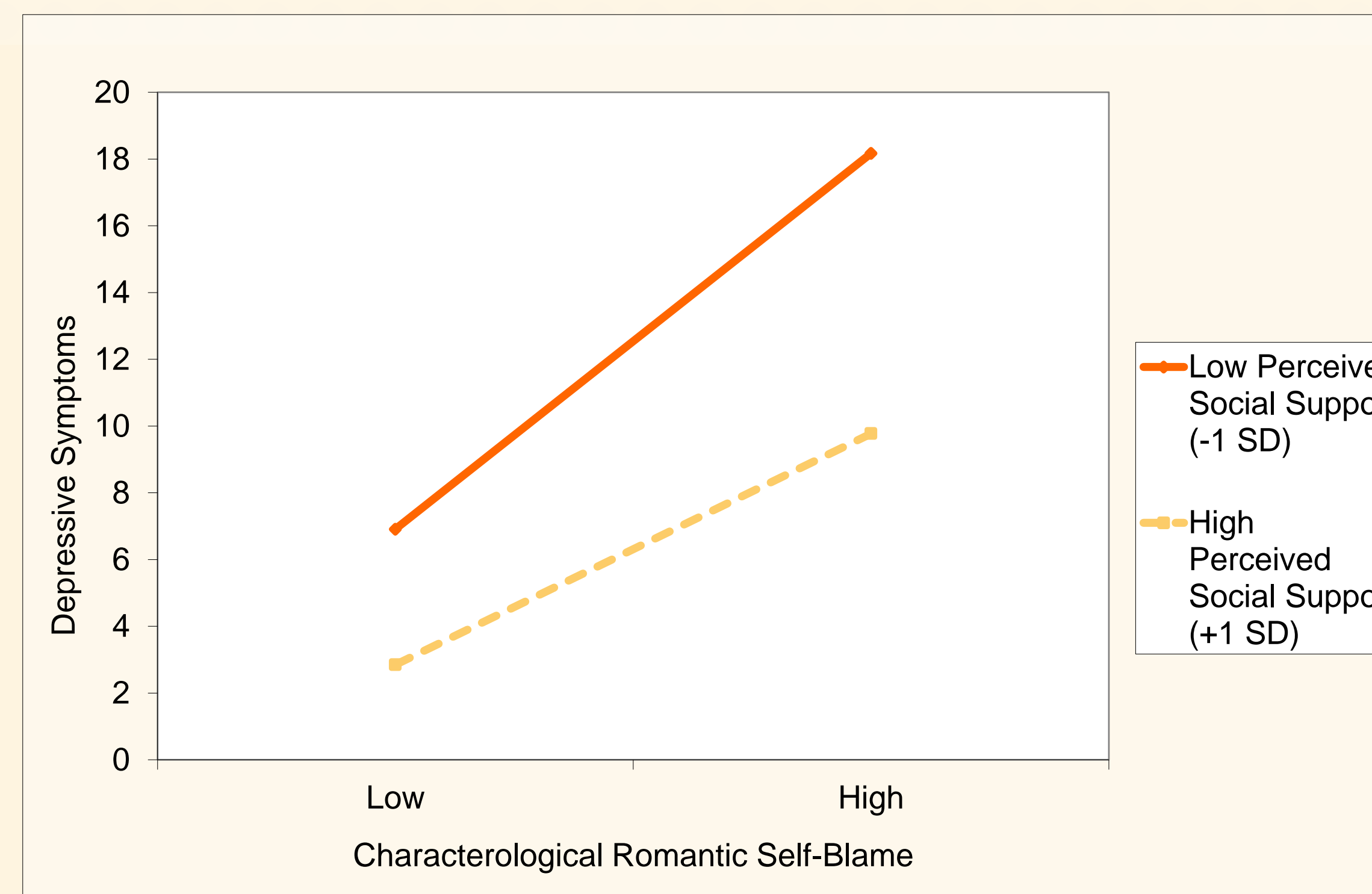


**Figure 3.** Perceived social support moderating the association between characterological self-blame and depressive symptoms.

**Table 1.** Unstandardized path estimates for the hypothesized moderated mediation model depicted in Figure 1.

| | Path | Coeff. | SE | 95% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Mediator: Characterological Romantic Self-Blame** | | | | |
| Past Peer Victimization | $a$ | 0.18 | 0.07 | **(0.05, 0.31)** |
| Gender | | -0.02 | 0.14 | (-0.30, 0.26) |
| Age | | -0.10 | 0.04 | **(-0.17, -0.03)** |
| Relationship Status | | -0.23 | 0.11 | **(-0.45, -0.01)** |
| **Outcome: Depressive Symptoms** | | | | |
| Past Peer Victimization | $c'$ | 2.54 | 0.67 | **(1.24, 3.85)** |
| Characterological Romantic Self-Blame | $b_1$ | 9.71 | 2.24 | **(5.29, 14.12)** |
| Perceived Social Support | $b_2$ | -0.36 | 1.24 | (-2.81, 2.09) |
| Gender | | 5.52 | 1.41 | **(2.74, 8.29)** |
| Age | | 0.43 | 0.36 | (-0.28, 1.14) |
| Relationship Status | | 0.70 | 1.16 | (-1.58, 2.97) |
| Characterological Romantic Self-Blame X Perceived Social Support | $b_3$ | -0.96 | 0.42 | **(-1.80, -0.13)** |
| **Mediator: Behavioral Romantic Self-Blame** | Path | Coeff. | SE | 95% CI |
| Past Peer Victimization | $a$ | 0.12 | 0.07 | (-0.01, 0.25) |
| Gender | | 0.21 | 0.14 | (-0.06, 0.49) |
| Age | | -0.12 | 0.04 | **(-0.19, -0.05)** |
| Relationship Status | | 0.07 | 0.11 | (-0.14, 0.29) |
| **Outcome: Depressive Symptoms** | | | | |
| Past Peer Victimization | $c'$ | 3.03 | 0.72 | **(1.61, 4.44)** |
| Behavioral Romantic Self-Blame | $b_1$ | 6.12 | 2.61 | **(0.99, 11.26)** |
| Perceived Social Support | $b_2$ | -1.20 | 1.71 | (-4.56, 2.17) |
| Gender | | 4.96 | 1.54 | **(1.94, 7.99)** |
| Age | | 0.15 | 0.39 | (-0.62, 0.92) |
| Relationship Status | | 0.13 | 1.26 | (-2.34, 2.60) |
| Behavioral Romantic Self-Blame X Perceived Social Support | $b_3$ | -0.77 | 0.49 | (-1.73, 0.18) |
| **Index of Moderated Mediation** | | -0.18 | 0.09 | **(-0.37, -0.02)** |

## CONCLUSION

**Aim 1:** A two-factor structure distinguishing between characterological and behavioral romantic self-blame provided a good model fit.

**Aim 2:** Elevated characterological, but not behavioral, romantic self-blame partially accounted for the link between retrospective peer victimization and current depressive symptoms.
- Peer victimization in adolescence may contribute to the maladaptive attributions that implicate one's self (e.g., characterological romantic self-blame) for negative social experiences.

The indirect effect of past peer victimization on depressive symptoms via characterological romantic self-blame became weaker as perceived social support increased.
- Social support may attenuate depressive symptoms for those with a history of adolescent peer victimization and maladaptive attributional patterns.

**Limitations:** Despite theoretical precedence for the sequence of our hypothesized path model, the cross-sectional design prevents any temporal conclusions. Relatedly, retrospective peer victimization measures may be prone to bias, and the gender imbalance of our sample limits generalizability.

**Implications:** Romantic self-blame is a promising measure for understanding how adolescent peer victimization may continue to interfere with emotional well-being during emerging adulthood, a time when romantic relationships become more developmentally relevant.