

Childhood Trauma And Social Support Predicting Relationship Satisfaction Among Adult Samples

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Abstract

Childhood trauma and social support are two critical constructs that significantly shape adult emotional health and interpersonal relationships. While studies have used different predictors to examine relationship satisfaction among different populations and samples, one group that has been understudy especially in the Nigerian setting is the young adults. Therefore, this study examines the predictive roles of childhood trauma and social support on relationship satisfaction among young adults in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The study adopted cross-sectional survey design while purposive sampling technique was used to select youth samples from five communities. Data were conveniently collected from 278 participants using validated questionnaires and analyzed using multiple regression to test one hypothesis which was accepted at $p = .001$ level of significance. The result revealed that childhood trauma and social support jointly predicted relationship satisfaction among study participants, $R^2 = .248$, $F(2, 275) = 31.56$, $p = .001$. Furthermore, the result indicated childhood trauma ($\beta = .243$, $t = 2.74$, $p = .007$) and social support ($\beta = .328$, $t = 3.73$, $p = .001$) independently predicted relationship satisfaction among study participants. The study concludes that childhood trauma and social support are robust predictors of relationship satisfaction among young adults in the Port Harcourt metropolis. The study recommends that parents should foster nurturing and supportive environments and actively build and maintain strong social support networks that would help them cope with challenges and enhance their relationship satisfaction.



Keywords: Childhood trauma, social support, relationship satisfaction, young adults, Rivers State/Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Relationship satisfaction refers to the degree in which individuals feel content, secure, and fulfilled in their romantic or interpersonal relationships. Also, it is defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of feelings, thoughts, and behavior associated with romantic partnership (Vasquez et al., 2023). Relationship satisfaction plays a vital role in individuals' mental health, emotional well-being, and overall quality of life (Stahnke & Cooley, 2021; Kernova et al., 2025; Ajala et al., 2025). Several factors such as emotional intimacy, trust and security, communication, shared meaning and values, and compatibility have been identified as predictors of relationship satisfaction (Buehler & Orth, 2024; Sharma, 2025; Wider et al., 2025). However, in this study, two factors: childhood trauma and social support were investigated.

Childhood trauma is described as any event or series of events experienced during childhood that causes significant distress and disrupts normal development. Childhood trauma could be acute which is a single, time-limited event, or chronic which involves repeated exposure to traumatic experiences over a prolonged period of time (Van der Kolk, 2014). Examples of childhood trauma include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence, and the loss of a primary caregiver (Finkelhor et al., 2009). These traumatic experiences have profound and lasting effects on the psychological, emotional, and social development of a child, often affecting their behavior and relationships into adulthood (Briere & Elliott, 2003).

Some studies on childhood trauma and relationship satisfaction have been investigated with varied results. For example, Van der Kolk (2021) found that childhood trauma disrupts the development of self-regulation and interpersonal trust, making survivors more prone to insecure attachments and relational dysfunctions. In addition, Riggs (2010) explored the connection between emotional abuse in childhood and the development of maladaptive attachment systems and found that individuals with a history of emotional abuse often developed insecure or disorganized attachment styles, which negatively affected their romantic and interpersonal relationships. This result emphasized the importance of early emotional experiences in shaping attachment schemas and relational expectations throughout life.

Furthermore, Widom et al. (2008) found individuals with a history of childhood trauma to be more likely to experience difficulties in parenting styles, substance abuse,



and intimate partner violence. The study confirmed the cyclical nature of trauma and highlighted the importance of breaking this cycle through early intervention and support systems. Finally, Eke and Azuike (2022) found in a qualitative study that many adults retrospectively identified their childhood experiences as traumatic only after being exposed to mental health education. Common forms of trauma included parental neglect, excessive physical punishment, emotional abandonment, and exposure to domestic violence.

The second factor considered in this study is social support which refers to the emotional, informational, or practical assistance received from an individual's social network such as partners, friends, family, or community (Zimet et al., 2022). Social support reflects an individual's belief in the availability and reliability of such help, which is often more influential than actual support received. When it comes to romantic relationships, social support from a partner is particularly critical for relationship satisfaction, especially among individuals with insecure attachment styles (Oyeniya et al., 2025).

Some studies on social support have been carried out with varied results. For example, Feeney and Fitzgerald (2022) found that individuals with strong perceived support networks are more emotionally stable, report fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, and maintain healthier romantic relationships. Furthermore, Garipey et al. (2020) reported that individuals with low perceived support are more susceptible to emotional dysfunction, social withdrawal, and interpersonal dysfunction. Moreover, Wang et al. (2023) found that individuals with strong social networks and supportive relationships were more likely to overcome the effects of childhood trauma, suggesting that trauma-informed care should integrate social interventions which could improve relationship satisfaction. Finally, Eze and Ogbonna (2021) focused on university students in southeastern Nigeria and found that perceived social support from family, peers, and academic mentors was strongly linked to better emotional adjustment and academic performance. This culturally grounded research highlights how social support functions within African contexts and emphasizes the value of collectivist social structures in enhancing youth development contributing to relationship satisfaction in adult life.

Childhood trauma and social support are two critical constructs that significantly shape adult emotional health and interpersonal relationships. While studies have used different predictors to examine relationship satisfaction among different populations and samples, one group that has been understudied especially in the Nigerian setting is the young adults, thus leaving a gap in knowledge to fill. Therefore, this study examines the



predictive roles of childhood trauma and social support on relationship satisfaction among young adults in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The study aims to provide an answer to the question: Would childhood trauma and social support jointly and independently predict relationship satisfaction among young adults in Rivers State, Nigeria?

The study would provide a clear understanding of the effects of childhood trauma and social support on relationship satisfaction among young adults in Rivers State, Nigeria. Marriage counselors and mental health professionals would use the findings of this study to design and implement programs to assist young adults who are relationship challenges.

Theoretical constructs

Two theoretical constructs: Social Exchange Theory and Social Support Theory-guided this study. To begin with, Social Exchange Theory (SET, Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) posits that relationship satisfaction is largely determined by the perceived benefits and costs associated with a relationship. According to this theory, individuals evaluate their relationships based on a comparison between what they give and what they receive. Satisfaction increases when the perceived rewards (such as emotional support, companionship, affection, and validation) outweigh the perceived costs (such as conflict, stress, or unmet needs). Furthermore, the theory explains that individuals compare their current relationship outcomes with alternative possibilities (comparison level and comparison level for alternatives). Individuals would likely feel satisfied in a relationship if it meets or exceeds their expectations based on past experiences or societal standards. Conversely, if the relationship falls short of these expectations or if better alternatives are perceived to be available, satisfaction may decline. Therefore, SET provides a rational framework for understanding how individuals make judgments about their relationships. It emphasizes the importance of mutual benefit, reciprocity, and perceived fairness, suggesting that relationship satisfaction is not only emotional but also a cognitive evaluation of relational value over time.

The second theory used in this study is the Social Support Theory (Stress-Buffering Model) which explores how social relationships and perceived support from others influence psychological well-being, health outcomes, and coping mechanisms. The thrust of the theory is that emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support from one's social network plays a protective role against psychological distress which enhances individuals' resilience to stress and trauma (Thoits, 2011; Cohen & Wills,

4



1985). In the context of this study, social support theory provides a robust understanding of how supportive relationships can influence the psychological consequences of early childhood trauma and modify adult relationship satisfaction.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis tested was:

H1: Childhood trauma and social support will jointly and independently predict relationship satisfaction among young adults in Rivers State, Nigeria.

METHOD

Research Design

The study was a cross-sectional survey design where data were collected using validated scales. The independent variables were childhood trauma and social support while the dependent variable was relationship satisfaction.

Setting

The study was conducted among young adults within Port Harcourt metropolis, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Population of the Study

The population for this study comprises young adults aged between 18 to 35 years residing in the Port Harcourt metropolis, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The study adopted a multi-stage sampling technique. First, purposive sampling technique was used to select five communities within Port Harcourt metropolis: Trans-Amadi, Mile 1, Mile 2, Mile 3, and Mile 4. These communities were selected because of the large number of young adults found therein. The second stage involved the use of a convenient sampling technique to select participants for the distribution of the study questionnaires.

Instruments

Instruments used for data collection were:

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ, Bernstein & Fink, 1998) was used to assess types and severity of trauma including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse as

5



well as neglect among study participants. The scale consisted of 28 items, presented on a 5-point Likert's response format ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Example items include: "I did not have enough to eat" and "I had someone to take care of me and protect me". Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$ was obtained in the current study.

Social Support Index (SSI, McCubbin et al., 1982) was used to determine the level of social support received from family, friends, and significant others by study participants. SSI consisted of 17 items rated on a 5-point Likert's format ranging from strongly disagreed to strongly agree. Sample items include: "If I had an emergency, even people I do not know in this community would be willing to help" and "I feel good about myself when I sacrifice and give time and energy to members of my family". The scale has been widely used among Nigerian samples (Ehondor et al., 2024; Fakorede et al. 2024). Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$ was obtained in this study.

Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R, Wei et al., 2007) was used to measure experience in close relationships. It is a 12-item scale rated on a 7-point Likert's format ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Sample items include: "It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need" and "I find that my partner doesn't want to get as close as I would like". Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$ in this study.

Procedure

The researchers collected a letter from the Department of Psychology, Rivers State University for permission to carry out the study. Potential participants were met in their offices, churches, recreational centers, and shopping malls where they were solicited to participate in the study. They were briefly informed of the purpose of the study and those who agreed to participate in the study were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Importantly, they were informed that they can discontinue filling the questionnaires at any point they want. Questionnaires were given to those who agreed to participate to fill and were collected on the spot. In all, 282 questionnaires were given out and during screening and coding, four were half-filled and were removed leaving 278 used for the analysis.

Data Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 23. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were calculated. The hypothesis was tested using multiple regression analysis and accepted at $p = .001$ level of significance.



RESULTS**Participants**

Descriptive statistics revealed the age distribution of participants to be largely (33%) between 22–25 age bracket, followed by 26–30 years (28%), 18–21 years (22%), and 31–35 years (17%). Gender distribution was equal with 50% males and 50% females. For educational qualification, the majority (62%) of the participants had HND/First Degree, 25% had postgraduate degrees, while 13% had SSCE. In terms of occupation, most participants (47%) were unemployed, 23% were self-employed, while 23% were employed. Furthermore, the data revealed that 70% of the participants were singles, 15% were married, 10% were either widowed, widowers, or divorced, while 5% were separated. With respect to religions, Christianity dominated (90%), followed by Islam (3%) and other religions (7%). This indicates that the participants were mostly young, singles, educated, and Christians.

Testing the hypothesis

Childhood trauma and social support will jointly and independently predict relationship satisfaction among youth samples in Port Harcourt Metropolis. The hypothesis was tested using multiple regression and the results are presented in Table 2a-c.

Table 2a: Model Summary of Childhood Trauma and Social Support on Relationship Satisfaction

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.498	.248	.243	6.513

Table 2b: ANOVA of Childhood Trauma and Social Support on Relationship Satisfaction

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	1615.432	2	807.716	31.56	.000
Residual	4893.568	275	17.795		
Total	6509.000	277			



Table 2c: Coefficients of Childhood Trauma and Social Support on Relationship Satisfaction

Model	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig.
Constant	13.902	1.841	–	7.55	.000
Childhood Trauma	0.214	0.078	.243	2.74	.007
Social Support	0.298	0.080	.328	3.73	.000

Table 2c showed that childhood trauma and social support jointly predicted relationship satisfaction, $R^2 = .248$, $F(2,275) = 31.56$, $p = .001$. This means that the independent variables accounted for 24.8% of variance in relationship satisfaction. This indicates that while trauma may reduce relationship satisfaction, social support provides a buffer that enhances relationship quality. Furthermore, both childhood trauma ($\beta = .243$, $t = 2.74$, $p = .007$) and social support ($\beta = .328$, $t = 3.73$, $p = .001$) independently predicted relationship satisfaction among study participants. Therefore, the hypothesis is supported.

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that childhood trauma and social support will jointly predict relationship satisfaction among young adults in Port Harcourt metropolis was supported. This finding provides insight into the psychological mechanisms through which early adverse experiences and supportive environments shape later relational outcomes. It shows that childhood trauma and social support interacted to produce robust relationship satisfaction among young adults in the study population. This result aligns with the work of Simpson and Rholes (2012) who found social support as a central mechanism linking early experiences with later relationship functioning. This confirms that the internal working models formed in response to childhood caregiving experiences continue to guide how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to intimacy in adulthood (Eke & Azuike, 2022; Van der Kolk, 2021; Widom et al., 2008). When early experiences are traumatic, these models often predispose individuals toward insecurity, which undermines relationship satisfaction. Conversely, when individuals encounter reliable and supportive environments, these models are more likely to promote security and enhance relationship satisfaction.

Furthermore, childhood trauma independently predicts relationship satisfaction among young adults in the Port Harcourt metropolis. This implies that youths who



experienced childhood trauma are more likely to report dissatisfaction in their romantic relationships. This is expressed in patterns such as mistrust of partners, difficulty in sustaining closeness, and heightened sensitivity to perceived rejection or conflict. Such patterns create relational strain, reducing the overall quality of intimacy and companionship. The result is consistent with the finding by Whisman (2006) who found that individuals with histories of childhood trauma frequently experience lower satisfaction in their romantic relationships. Such individuals often struggle with intimacy, trust, and effective emotional regulation, all of which are crucial to maintaining fulfilling and stable bonds. Trauma survivors would approach relationships with heightened vigilance, fear of abandonment, or difficulty in expressing vulnerability, which undermines the mutual trust and reciprocity necessary for relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Riggs (2010) found that unresolved childhood adversity is strongly associated with conflict and unstable romantic partnerships. Their research showed that the lingering psychological effects of trauma—such as poor emotion management, heightened reactivity, and negative self-perceptions—can manifest in frequent conflicts, miscommunication, and reduced relational stability. Together, these findings illustrate how the scars of early adversity extend into adulthood, shaping not only individual attachment styles but also the quality of intimate bonds.

Finally, social support independently predicts relationship satisfaction among young adults in the Port Harcourt metropolis. The result indicates that when individuals perceive themselves as surrounded by supportive networks, they are better equipped to navigate the challenges of romantic relationships and sustain satisfaction within them. This finding highlights the pivotal role that social support plays in shaping the quality of intimate relationships, particularly during young adulthood, a period often marked by exploration, emotional vulnerability, and the negotiation of long-term relational commitments (Garipey et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). This means that youths who perceive higher levels of social support are more likely to report greater fulfillment and stability in their romantic relationships. This could be attributed to the fact that supportive networks provide not only emotional encouragement but also practical advice, conflict mediation, and affirmation of relational choices. Conversely, the absence of such support may leave youths more vulnerable to stress, misunderstandings, and dissatisfaction in their intimate partnerships. The evidence from this study affirms that social support functions as both a direct and indirect predictor of relationship satisfaction. By fostering security, enhancing positive relational dynamics, and mitigating the effects of stressors, social support increases the likelihood that young adults would experience stable,



fulfilling, and enduring intimate relationships. This finding corroborates the results of Ajala et al (2025) and Oyeniyi et al. (2025) that social support contributed significantly to relationship satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

The study has empirically confirmed that childhood trauma and social support are robust predictors of relationship satisfaction among youths in selected communities in Port Harcourt. The joint effects of trauma and social support highlighted the interplay between adverse and supportive experiences in shaping relationship satisfaction among study participants.

Recommendations

The study recommends parents should foster nurturing and supportive environments for children to prevent the long-term effects of trauma on future relationships. In addition, youths should actively build and maintain strong social support networks that would help them cope with challenges and enhance relationship satisfaction.

Limitations of Study

The study suffers some limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality among childhood trauma, social support and relationship satisfaction among study participants. Further study would benefit from the use of longitudinal and observation designs to compare results with cross-sectional survey design. Moreover, data were collected from participants using self-reported scales which were not free of response bias. Further study should include focus group discussion, key informant interview to triangulate self-reported data. Finally, two independent variables were not exhaustive, further study should include personality traits, resilience, and coping styles on relationship satisfaction.

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