

# African Journal for the Psychological Studies of Social Issues

Volume 29 Number 3, AUGUST, 2026 Edition

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# PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT AS A PREDICTOR OF SELF-ESTEEM AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

*Self-esteem in emerging adulthood has been linked repeatedly to perceived social support, but the evidence base is drawn overwhelmingly from Western, Middle Eastern and East Asian samples, and Nigerian data remain sparse. This study examined the relationship between perceived social support and self-esteem among young adults in a Nigerian university. A cross-sectional survey design was used. Two hundred and twenty-seven undergraduates of Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, completed the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Perceived social support was positively and significantly associated with self-esteem,  $r(225) = .23, p < .01, 95\% CI [.10, .35]$ , accounting for approximately five per cent of the variance in self-esteem scores. Mean perceived support fell within the moderate band of the scale, and mean self-esteem lay above the scale midpoint. None of the demographic variables assessed, including age, marital status and religious affiliation, was significantly related to self-esteem. The direction of the association replicates findings from Turkish, Israeli, Indian and Malaysian samples, although the magnitude is smaller than in several of those studies. The use of a total support score, which collapses family, peer and significant-other sources, is advanced as the most likely reason for the attenuation, and source-disaggregated replication in Nigerian samples is recommended. Practical implications for university counselling provision are discussed.*

*Keywords: perceived social support; self-esteem; young adults; emerging adulthood; Nigeria*

## INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of his or her own worth. It encompasses beliefs about the self together with the affective states, from pride to shame, that attach to those beliefs (Rosenberg, 1965). Psychologists generally treat it as a reasonably enduring characteristic, although short-term fluctuation is well documented, and it has been shown to predict outcomes as varied as academic attainment, relationship satisfaction and psychological adjustment. The link with depression has attracted particular attention, and Orth and Robins (2013) set out the three competing accounts of that link: the vulnerability model, in which low self-esteem is a causal risk factor; the scar model, in which it is a consequence; and the reciprocal model, in which the two influence one another over time. Whichever account is preferred, understanding what raises and lowers self-esteem in young adulthood carries obvious practical weight.

Young adulthood is a demanding period for self-evaluation. New roles are taken on, new expectations arrive with them, and the adjustments that were previously made with the assistance of parents and teachers must now be made independently. Reluctance to seek help, itself often driven by a wish not to appear immature, can leave young adults negotiating these adjustments with fewer resources than they need at precisely the point when the demands are heaviest.

### Social Support and Self-Esteem

Social support refers to the psychological and material resources that a social network makes available to help an individual cope. It takes emotional, instrumental, financial and informational forms, and a longstanding distinction separates perceived support, meaning the recipient's judgement that help would be forthcoming, from received support, meaning the specific acts of assistance actually rendered (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). The distinction matters here because

perceived support is the more consistent predictor of psychological outcomes, and it is perceived support that the present study assesses.

Lahey and Cohen (2000) identify three theoretical perspectives on how support operates. The stress and coping perspective, historically the most influential, holds that support buffers the individual against the effects of stressful events. The social constructionist perspective proposes instead that support influences wellbeing directly, by promoting self-esteem and self-regulation, whether or not stress is present. The relationship perspective treats support as inseparable from the wider relational processes with which it co-occurs. The second of these is the relevant anchor for a study of self-esteem, since it makes the self-evaluative consequence of support central rather than incidental. Mead's (1934) formulation, that the experience of the self is largely a reflection of how one is regarded by others, states the same idea in older language. Baldwin (1992) added the cognitive mechanism: once stable beliefs about the supportiveness of others are formed, subsequent social information is interpreted in their light, so that those who already perceive themselves as well supported find further evidence of support more readily.

Social identity theory contributes a second strand. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argued that group membership is an important source of pride and self-worth, and that identifying oneself within a valued group supplies both meaning and standing. On this account, support is not merely assistance received but evidence of belonging, and belonging is itself constitutive of self-worth.

Empirical findings have been broadly consistent in direction. Ikiz and Cakar (2010), working with 499 Turkish adolescents, reported significant positive relationships between self-esteem and perceived support from family, peers and teachers. Hoffman, Ushpiz and Levy-Shiff (1988) found among Israeli adolescents that maternal support had a strong effect on self-esteem while support from friends mattered chiefly when maternal support was absent, and paternal support had little independent effect once other sources were controlled. Kumar, Lal and Bhuchar (2014) found a positive and significant association among Indian college students, and Teoh (2010) reported the same among Malaysian undergraduates. Friedlander, Reid, Shupak and Cribbie (2007) showed that increases in support from friends, but not from family, predicted improved adjustment to university across a semester. DuBois and colleagues (2002), in a two-year longitudinal study, found evidence consistent with self-esteem mediating the effects of social support on both emotional and behavioural adjustment.

The relationship is not entirely straightforward. Goodwin, Costa and Adonu (2004), in a four-nation study that included Ghana, found that perceived support predicted self-esteem while personal values predicted perceived support, but that values had no direct relationship with self-esteem. Theories of equity and reactance further suggest that unrequited help can be experienced as threatening, particularly by those already high in self-esteem, which implies that the association may not be uniform across the range.

## **METHOD**

### **Design**

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, with perceived social support as the predictor and self-esteem as the criterion.

### **Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted at Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, a state institution established in 1982 and relocated to its present site in 1999. Participants were 227 undergraduates. Seventy-four per cent were aged between 18 and 25 years and 18.1 per cent

between 26 and 35 years. Christians made up 84.1 per cent of the sample, Muslims 7.5 per cent, and adherents of other traditions the remainder. The great majority, 83.3 per cent, were single. Occupational and prior-qualification data were also collected but are not analysed here because the returns on those items were incomplete.

## **Measures**

### *Perceived social support*

Perceived social support was measured with the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). The scale comprises 12 items distributed equally across three sources: family, friends and a significant other. Responses are made on a seven-point scale ranging from 1, very strongly disagree, to 7, very strongly agree. The instrument has demonstrated good internal consistency, test-retest reliability and a stable factor structure across a wide range of translations and settings, including the Chinese validation reported by Wang, Wan, Huang, Huang and Kong (2017). Item means from 1 to 2.9 are conventionally read as low support, 3 to 5 as moderate and 5.1 to 7 as high. The scale returned a Cronbach's alpha of .90 in the present sample.

### *Self-esteem*

Self-esteem was measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), a ten-item unidimensional instrument that assesses global self-worth through a balance of positively and negatively worded statements. Responses are made on a four-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with items 2, 5, 6, 8 and 9 reverse scored. Higher totals indicate higher self-esteem. Independent studies across varied populations have reported alpha coefficients between .72 and .87. The scale returned a Cronbach's alpha of .70 in the present sample.

### *Demographic information*

Age band, marital status, religious affiliation, occupation and educational qualification were recorded.

A personality inventory was administered as part of the same data collection. It is not reported here because its internal consistency in this sample fell substantially below the conventional threshold of .70, and the findings derived from it cannot be regarded as interpretable.

## **Procedure**

Questionnaires were administered to undergraduates selected at random across departments. The purpose of the study was explained, participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and it was emphasised that no answers were right or wrong and that honesty was preferred to impression management. Two hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed, 232 were returned, and 227 were sufficiently complete for analysis, a usable response rate of 90.8 per cent.

## **Data Analysis**

Relationships among the study variables were examined with Pearson product moment correlation. A confidence interval for the correlation was derived through Fisher's  $r$  to  $z$  transformation. Analyses were conducted in SPSS.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for the two principal variables are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Social Support and Self-Esteem (N = 227)*

| Variable                 | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Item mean | $\alpha$ |
|--------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Perceived social support | 56.22    | 16.07     | 4.69      | .90      |
| Self-esteem              | 29.04    | 5.22      | 2.90      | .70      |

*Note.* Perceived social support was scored across 12 items on a seven-point scale (possible range 12 to 84). Self-esteem was scored across 10 items on a four-point scale (possible range 10 to 40).

The mean item score for perceived social support was 4.69, which places the sample within the moderate band of the scale as defined by its authors, towards the upper end of that band. The mean self-esteem total of 29.04 lies above the scale midpoint of 25, indicating generally favourable self-evaluation in this sample.

Correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Correlations Among Demographic Variables, Perceived Social Support and Self-Esteem (N = 227)*

| Variable                    | 1    | 2     | 3    | 4     | 5 |
|-----------------------------|------|-------|------|-------|---|
| 1. Age                      | —    |       |      |       |   |
| 2. Religious affiliation    | .18* | —     |      |       |   |
| 3. Marital status           | .14* | .09   | —    |       |   |
| 4. Perceived social support | -.05 | -.15* | -.06 | —     |   |
| 5. Self-esteem              | -.04 | -.06  | -.02 | .23** | — |

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Perceived social support was significantly and positively related to self-esteem,  $r(225) = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ . The 95% confidence interval, obtained through Fisher's transformation, ran from .10 to .35, so the association is reliably positive although its precise magnitude is not tightly estimated at this sample size. Support accounted for approximately 5.3 per cent of the variance in self-esteem. The hypothesis was therefore supported.

None of the demographic variables was significantly related to self-esteem. Age, religious affiliation and marital status all produced correlations at or below .06 in absolute value. Religious affiliation was, however, weakly and negatively related to perceived social support,  $r(225) = -.15$ ,  $p < .05$ . Given that the sample was more than four fifths Christian, the two comparison groups were very unequal in size and this result should be treated as provisional rather than as evidence of a substantive denominational difference in support.

## DISCUSSION

The study examined whether perceived social support predicts self-esteem among young adults in a Nigerian university. It does. Students who judged that help would be available to them from family, friends and a significant other evaluated themselves more favourably than those who did not. In direction the finding replicates a well-established pattern. Ikiz and Cakar (2010) in Turkey, Kumar et al. (2014) in India, Teoh (2010) in Malaysia and Hoffman et al. (1988) in Israel all report positive associations, and DuBois et al. (2002) demonstrated the relationship prospectively.

Extending this to a Nigerian undergraduate sample matters because the assumption that findings from support research travel intact across cultural settings has rarely been tested here, and because the structure of support differs. Where extended family obligation and congregational membership make certain forms of assistance close to expected, the psychological significance of receiving them may not be identical to its significance where support is scarcer or more discretionary. In magnitude, however, the association is modest. A correlation of .23 is smaller than several reported in comparable studies, and the five per cent of variance accounted for leaves the great majority unexplained.

Two readings deserve consideration. The first concerns measurement strategy. The present analysis used the total support score, which aggregates across family, friends and significant other. The evidence suggests that these sources do not operate equivalently. Hoffman et al. (1988) found maternal support dominant and support from friends influential chiefly where maternal support was lacking, and Friedlander et al. (2007) found that support from friends predicted improved adjustment while support from family did not. If sources differ in this way, and in particular if one source relates positively to self-esteem while another is neutral or negative, a total score will attenuate the true association. Source-disaggregated analysis is the obvious next step and can be conducted on data of exactly this kind. The second concerns the distribution of support itself. The sample's mean item score of 4.69 sits high within the moderate band, and 84 per cent of participants reported a religious affiliation implying congregational membership. In a setting where perceived support is generally abundant, its variance is compressed, and a compressed predictor cannot correlate strongly with anything. A ceiling of this kind is a plausible feature of Nigerian student populations and would apply to future studies as much as to this one.

The theoretical reading favoured here is the social constructionist one described by Lakey and Cohen (2000). Support appears to bear on self-evaluation directly rather than solely through the buffering of stress, which the present design did not assess. Baldwin's (1992) account supplies the mechanism, and Tajfel and Turner's (1979) argument that group membership supplies pride and standing supplies the complement: perceived support is evidence of belonging, and belonging is not separable from self-worth.

That none of the demographic variables predicted self-esteem is itself informative. It suggests that within this population self-evaluation is more responsive to relational circumstances than to structural position, which is encouraging from an intervention standpoint since relational circumstances are the more tractable of the two.

## **Implications**

University counselling and student affairs units are the natural point of application. Programming that strengthens the perception of available support, through structured peer mentoring, small-group orientation for new entrants and visible signposting of help-seeking routes, addresses the variable this study found to matter. The emphasis should fall on perceived availability rather than on the volume of assistance actually delivered, since it is the former that the support literature consistently links to psychological outcomes. Given the reluctance of young adults to seek help for fear of appearing unable to cope, provision that normalises help-seeking is likely to be more effective than provision that merely makes help available.

## **Limitations**

The findings are subject to several constraints. The design is cross-sectional, so the direction of influence cannot be established; the reciprocal model that Orth and Robins (2013) describe for self-esteem and depression is at least as plausible here, with favourable self-evaluation attracting

and sustaining supportive relationships as much as the reverse. Data were collected at a single institution in Ondo State and from a sample that was overwhelmingly single, young and Christian, which limits generalisation. All measures were self-reported and administered together, so common method variance may have inflated the observed association.

The analysis used the total support score rather than the three subscales, for the reasons given above, and this is the most consequential analytic limitation. The alpha of .70 for the self-esteem measure sits at the lower edge of acceptability and will have attenuated the correlation somewhat. Personality data collected alongside these measures proved unreliable and were excluded, which removes a set of variables known to relate to self-esteem and which could have been used as covariates. Finally, the modest proportion of variance explained means that the substantive drivers of self-esteem in this population remain largely unidentified.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Three lines follow directly. Analysis distinguishing family, peer and significant-other support in Nigerian samples would establish which sources carry the association and would test whether the pattern reported for Israeli and Canadian samples holds here. Longitudinal designs would allow the directional question to be addressed. Studies incorporating reliably measured personality variables alongside support would permit the mediational question of whether personality bears on self-esteem partly through the support a person accumulates, a model the present data suggest but cannot test.

### **Conclusion**

Perceived social support significantly predicts self-esteem among young adults in a Nigerian university, replicating in direction a relationship established in several other settings while indicating a more modest magnitude than has typically been reported. Demographic characteristics were unrelated to self-esteem. The findings support attention to the perceived availability of support in university wellbeing provision, and they identify source-specific analysis as the most promising route to a fuller account.

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