

## The Predictive Role of Social Support on Attachment Styles Among Young Adults

Olubunmi O. James<sup>1</sup>, Emmanuel E. Uye<sup>2\*</sup>, Comfort S. Atota<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>University of Ibadan, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup>Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Nigeria

\*[emmanuel.e.uye@gmail.com](mailto:emmanuel.e.uye@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7867-270X>

### ABSTRACT

This research aims at examining the predictive role of social support in attachment styles among young adults. The study adopted cross-sectional survey using purposive sampling technique to select five communities in Port Harcourt metropolis in Rivers State, Nigeria. Data were collected from 277 using validated questionnaires and analyzed with simple linear regression to test one hypothesis that was accepted at  $p < .001$  level of significance. The result demonstrated that social support significantly influenced attachment styles among young adults,  $F(1,276) = 21.34, p < .001$ . Moreover, the result indicated that social support independently predicted attachment styles among study participants ( $\beta = .421, t = 4.62, p < .001$ ). The novelty of this study is that it is the first time social support has been used to predict attachment styles among the study samples. The study recommends that young adults should actively build and maintain strong social support networks that would help them cope with challenges originating from poor attachment styles.

Keyword: **Social Support; Attachment Styles; Young Adults**

### INTRODUCTION

Attachment style is how individuals behave in intimate relationships, especially in terms of closeness, communication, and conflict resolution. (Ainsworth et al., 1978) identified three types of attachment styles as secure, anxious (ambivalent), and avoidant. A secure attached individual would report higher relationship satisfaction because they can seek comfort from and provide reassurance to their partners. The individuals tend to trust more, handle conflicts constructively, and express emotions healthily (Feeney & Collins, 2015). The anxiously attached individuals would be overly dependent, excessively seek reassurance, and fear abandonment behaviors that result in emotional exhaustion for both partners (Kim & Kim, 2022). The avoidant attached individuals tend to suppress their need for closeness, avoid vulnerability, and emotionally distance themselves from their partners, often leading to dissatisfaction on both sides (Candel & Turluc, 2020). The disorganized attachment which has to do with

exposure to trauma or frightening caregiving experiences (Main & Solomon, 1990) has been identified as the fourth type. Generally, the insecurely attached individuals often struggle with relational functioning.

Some factors have been identified to affect individuals' attachment styles such as early childhood trauma, social perception, family structures, and socio-economic status (Feeney & Collins, 2015). However, in this study, social support is considered as one of such factors that affects attachment styles. Social support is conceived as the perception of or the reality of being cared for and having assistance available from others, which serves as a vital buffer against the negative effects of early attachment challenges (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Social support could be emotional, informational, and instrumental. Emotional support involves empathy, care, and love; informational support provides guidance or advice; and instrumental support entails tangible assistance such as money, shelter, or physical help. These forms are not mutually exclusive and often overlap, reinforcing each other in complex relational contexts. A study revealed that individuals who perceive high levels of social support would display secure attachment styles, better coping mechanisms, and greater relational satisfaction. For example, (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2022) that individuals with strong social support networks would be more emotionally stable, report fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, and maintain healthier romantic relationships. On the other hand, (Garipey et al., 2020) reported that individuals with low perceived support would be more susceptible to emotional dysfunction, social withdrawal, and interpersonal dysfunction.

Social support contributes to attachment of security over time. For instance, Selcuk et al. (2018) found a continued exposure to consistent and responsive support to lead individuals with insecure attachments to develop more secure tendencies. Moreover, individuals with high levels of social support from their social environments tend to experience less relationship-related stress and are more likely to approach conflict with resilience and perspective. For instance, (Li et al., 2020) found external social support to reduce the negative spillover effects of attachment insecurity by reinforcing the individual's sense of self-worth and emotional regulation capacity.

Furthermore, in collectivist societies like Nigeria, where extended family and community structures are deeply embedded in social life; social support from broader networks tend to play a vital role in buffering their emotional distress and thus promote relationship satisfaction. For example, (Eze & Ogbonna, 2021) found young Nigerian adults who perceived strong family and peer support to have

reported better relational outcomes even when they exhibited insecure attachment tendencies.

Social support is a critical construct that significantly shapes adult emotional health and interpersonal relationships. While studies have used different predictors to examine attachment styles among different populations and samples with varied results, one group that has been understudied especially in the Nigerian settings is the young adults. Therefore, this study examines the predictive roles of social support on attachment styles among young adults in Port Harcourt metropolis, Rivers State, Nigeria. The study sought to provide an answer to this question: Will social support predict attachment styles among young adults in Port Harcourt metropolis?

The study would provide valuable insights for psychologists, counselors, therapists, and other mental health professionals who work with young adults dealing with long-term emotional and relational challenges. The study would help in the development of interventions that address attachment issues and enhance emotional regulation, trust-building, and intimacy in adult relationships.

### **Theoretical Construct**

The study was anchored using Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1980), which posits that the bonds formed between a child and their primary caregiver during early life play a crucial role in shaping their personality development and patterns of social interaction across their lifespans. The thrust of the theory is that humans are biologically predisposed to seek proximity to caregivers for safety, security, and emotional regulation, particularly in times of distress. This means that a child who experiences consistent and responsive caregiving would develop a positive model of self (as worthy of love) and others (as trustworthy and available). Conversely, a child who received inconsistent, neglectful, or abusive caregiving treatments would lead to maladaptive "internal models", contributing to insecure attachment patterns.

These attachment styles move from childhood to adulthood and would manifest in romantic and close interpersonal relationships. For instance, securely attached individuals would find it easier to build intimacy, trust their partners, and navigate conflict constructively. In contrast, anxiously attached individuals would often fear abandonment and seek excessive reassurance, while avoidant attached individuals would tend to suppress emotional needs and avoid closeness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019).

### **Brief Empirical Review**

Some studies have directly or remotely been carried out on social support and attachment styles using different populations and samples. For instance, (Li et al., 2020) who explored the interplay among social supports, coping strategies and mental health outcomes in trauma survivors found social support to both directly reduce psychological distress and influenced the choice of adaptive coping strategies. This reinforces the finding that social support both directly and indirectly promotes psychological well-being in individuals with attachment dysfunction.

In a systematic review on the role of perceived social support in trauma therapy, (Schunk et al., 2021) found that participants with higher perceived social support reported better treatment outcomes, including reduced symptoms of PTSD and depression. Similarly, (Zhou et al., 2021) who analyzed the effects of social support during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrated that both emotional and informational support significantly moderated the relationship between stressors and symptoms of depression and anxiety.

In addition, Kim and Kim (2022) investigated how social support and adult attachment interact to influence emotional well-being and found social support to moderate the negative effect of adult attachment insecurity. Importantly, the study revealed that individuals with strong social networks were more likely to develop secure attachment patterns even after experiencing early adversity.

Moreover, (Domènech-Abella et al., 2020) examined the effect of social support on loneliness, anxiety, and depression among older adults using data from a large longitudinal study. The results demonstrated that consistent social contact and emotional support significantly reduced the risk of chronic loneliness and its psychological consequences. This finding underscores the long-term value of social support across the lifespan. Beautifully captured was the study by (Wang et al., 2023) who found social support as a contributing factor to adult attachment style behavior.

Finally in the Nigerian setting, (Eze & Ogbonna, 2021)) found perceived social support from family, peers, and academic mentors to strongly link to better emotional adjustment and academic performance and attachment styles among university students in South-eastern Nigeria.

The hypothesis tested was: Social support will significantly predict attachment styles among young adults/ youth samples.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The study was a cross-sectional survey where data were collected from participants using validated questionnaires. Social support was the independent variable while attachment styles were the dependent variable. The study was conducted among youth populations in five randomly selected communities in Port Harcourt. The communities were: Diobu, D-Line, Mgbuoba, Mgbuoshimini, and Trans-Amadi.

The population for this study comprises youths aged 18 to 35 years residing in each of the districts selected in the Port Harcourt metropolitan area. The purposive sampling method was used to select the five communities in Port Harcourt metropolis while convenient sampling method was used to select the study participants.

### **Participants**

The descriptive statistics demonstrated that the majority (33%) of the participants were aged between 22–25 years, followed by 26–30 years (28%), 18–21 years (22%), and 31–35 years (17%). The gender distribution was equal (50%) with 62% of the study participants who were graduates. In terms of occupation, most participants (47%) were unemployed, 23% were self-employed, and 23% were employed. Furthermore, 70% of the participants were singles while 30% were married, with Christianity being the dominant religion (90%), followed by Islam (3%) and other religions (7%). This demonstrates that study participants were mostly young, singles, educated, and Christians.

### **Instruments**

Data were collected from the participants using two validated questionnaires:

**Social Support Index** (SSI, (McCubbin, H.I. 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); (Roberts et al., 2026). Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.84$  was obtained in this study.

**Attachment Style Questionnaire** (ASQ+SF, Alexander et al., 2001) was used to evaluate attachment style on anxiety and avoidance dimensions. It is a 17-item scale presented on a 6-point Likert's format ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Sample items include: "I feel confident that other people will be there for me when I need them" and "I find it hard to make a decision unless I know what other people think". (Roberts et al., 2025) used ASQ+ SF among Nigerian samples with robust psychometric properties. Authors reported Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was between 0.72-0.85, and in this study composite Cronbach'  $\alpha = 0.82$  was obtained.

### Procedure

Potential participants for the study were met at different locations in the metropolis including homes, recreational centers, shopping malls, etc. They were briefly informed of the purpose of the study and asked for their consent. They were duly informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that their responses would be treated confidentially. Only those who gave their consent were given the questionnaires to complete, which took less than 10 minutes. All the 277 questionnaires collected were used for the analysis.

### Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using IBM<sup>R</sup> SPSS version 26. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were conducted. Simple linear regression was used to test the hypothesis which was accepted at  $p < .001$  of significance.

### RESULTS

The study first presents the zero-order correlation statistics of the study variables.

**Table: Zero-order correlation statistics of study variables**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2
Social Support	3.62	0.64	-	
Attachment Style	3.71	0.61	.421*	-

**NB:** N=277, \*significant  $p < .001$

As demonstrated in Table 1, social support significantly correlated with attachment style among young adults in the Port Harcourt metropolis ( $r = .421$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**H1:** Social support will independently predict attachment styles among young adults in Port Harcourt Metropolis. The hypothesis was tested using simple linear regression and the results are presented in Table 2a-c.

Table 2a: Model of Social Support on Attachment Style

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	R	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.421	.177	.174		7.241

According to Table 2a, social support had a significant influence on attachment styles among young adults, with  $R^2 = .177$ , accounting for 17.7% of the variance in attachment styles among study participants. This means that the availability of social support affects how secure or insecure youths' attachment styles are.

Table 2b: ANOVA of Social Support on Attachment Styles

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	1119.812	1	1119.812	21.34	.000
Residual	5202.188	276	18.848		
Total	6322.000	277			

Table 2c: Linear Regression Coefficients Predicting Attachment Styles from Social Support

Model	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized $\beta$	t	Sig.
Constant	15.672	1.852	–	8.46	.000
Social Support	0.389	0.084	.421	4.62	.000

As presented in Table 2b, social support significantly influenced attachment styles among young adults,  $F(1,276) = 21.34$ ,  $p < .001$ . Moreover, Table 2c indicated that social support independently predicted attachment styles among study participants ( $\beta = .421$ ,  $t = 4.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This connotes that a unit increase in social support increases attachment styles by 0.389 units. Therefore, the hypothesis was confirmed.

## **DISCUSSION**

The hypothesis that social support will independently predict attachment style among young adults in Port Harcourt metropolis was supported. This finding highlights the importance of social support as a significant factor in shaping attachment orientations during the transition from childhood to adulthood experiences/stages. This implies that when youths are surrounded by reliable and nurturing social networks, they are more likely to internalize beliefs that significant others could be trusted and depended upon, thereby cultivating secure relational bonds. The result is consistent with that of (Feeney & Collins, 2015) who found that supportive social environments foster the development of secure attachment by reinforcing positive expectations of significant others' availability and responsiveness.

Moreover, the finding lent credence to that of (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2022) who found perceived social support to serve as a protective factor, buffering individuals against psychological distress and enabling them to build and sustain secure attachments. This means that when youths feel supported—whether by family, peers, or significant others—they are more resilient in the face of stress and less likely to adopt maladaptive coping strategies that lead to insecure attachment. In other words, social support not only provides immediate emotional reassurance to this group of vulnerable individuals, it also contributes to the formation of stable internal working models that facilitate closeness, trust, and healthy dependence in relationships (Eze & Ogbonna, 2021); Li et al., 2020).

Contextualizing these findings to the population of study, it implies that youths in Port Harcourt metropolis who reported higher levels of social support are more likely to develop secure attachment patterns, characterized by comfort with intimacy, effective emotion regulation, and trust in others. Conversely, those with limited or inconsistent support systems would struggle with insecurity in relationships, manifesting either as avoidance of closeness or anxiety about rejection and abandonment. The presence of social support thus acts as a mediating mechanism that helps mitigate the negative impact of early adversities and foster healthier relational outcomes.

The implications of these findings extend beyond individual well-being, as secure attachment patterns are central to social cohesion, stable family formation, and effective community participation. In societies where youths are adequately supported through mentorship, family ties, peer networks, and institutional resources, the likelihood of developing resilient and adaptive adults increases. By

contrast, deficits in social support structures would perpetuate cycles of relational instability, mistrust, and vulnerability to mental health challenges. This underscores the need for community-based programs, policy interventions, and counseling initiatives that prioritize strengthening social support systems for youths, particularly in urban centers like Port Harcourt where rapid social changes can strain traditional networks of care.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study examines the predictive roles of social support on attachment styles among young adults in selected communities in Port Harcourt metropolis. The finding supports the hypothesis that social support is a significant predictor of attachment styles among study participants.

The study makes the following recommendations: To begin with, parents should foster nurturing and supportive environments for their children to prevent the long-term effects of trauma on future relationships. In addition, young people should actively build and maintain strong social support networks that would help them cope with challenges originating from poor attachment styles. Furthermore, mental health practitioners should design attachment-based therapy to address unresolved childhood experiences emanating from unresolved attachment issues. Finally, governments, NGOs, educational institutions should design policies and programs that provide accessible counseling services, youth mentorship, and community support groups to mitigate the negative effects of poor attachment styles an individual would have experienced during childhood.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies**

The study has some limitations that need to be addressed in further study. Since data were collected using self-reported questionnaires, social desirability was introduced. Therefore, further study would benefit using focus group discussion and in-depth interviews to triangulate data from self-reported questionnaires. Moreover, the use of five communities in one Local Government Area (LGA) within Port Harcourt metropolis with the sample size of 278 hindered generalization of study findings, hence further study should include more LGAs with increased sample size. Finally, one social support was investigated in this study which was not exhaustive. Therefore, further study should include personal traits, self-esteem, and learned helplessness to explore attachment styles.

## REFERENCES

- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and loss: Sadness and depression*. Basic Books.
- Candel, O. S., & Turluc, M. N. (2020). Adult attachment, perceived partner responsiveness, and relationship satisfaction: A dyadic approach. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 37(3), 827–846.
- Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98(2), 310–357. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.98.2.310>
- Domènech-Abella, J., Mundó, J., Haro, J. M., & Rubio-Valera, M. (2020). Anxiety, depression, loneliness and social network in the elderly: Longitudinal associations from The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA). *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 274, 231–238.
- Ehondor, E. G., Taylor, O., & Uye, E. E. (2024). Personality traits and social support as predictors of entrepreneurship preferences among students in higher institutions in Ibadan, Oyo State. *Covenant Journal of Entrepreneurship*, 8(1), 25–34.
- Eze, J. E., & Ogbonna, C. M. (2021). Perceived social support and romantic relationship outcomes among Nigerian youth. *African Journal of Psychology*, 7(2), 88–102.
- Fakorede, K. J., Obosi, A. O., & Uye, E. E. (2024). Coping style, social support, and resilience as predictors of quality of life among combatant officers in Nigeria. *Nigerian Psychological Research*, 9(1), 102–110.
- Feeney, B. C., & Collins, N. L. (2015). A New Look at Social Support. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 19(2), 113–147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868314544222>
- Feeney, J. A., & Fitzgerald, L. A. (2022). The relational regulation of support in intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 123(2), 451–468.
- Garipey, G., McQuaid, R., & Menzies, R. (2020). The impact of social support on mental health: A review of current evidence. *Social Science & Medicine*, 260, 113137.
- Li, H., Dong, C., Chen, W., & Liu, Y. (2020). , Li, W., & Yan, Y. (2020). Perceived social support, depressive symptoms, and inflammation: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 77(8), 824–832.

- Li, Y., Zhang, L., & Wu, Y. (2020). Perceived social support and romantic relationship quality in Chinese emerging adults: The mediating role of self-esteem. *Journal of Adolescence*, 83, 11–20.
- Main, M., & Solomon, J. (1990). *Procedures for identifying infants as disorganized/disoriented during the Ainsworth Strange Situation*. In M. Greenberg, D. Cicchetti, & E. Cummings (Eds.), *Attachment in the preschool years: Theory, research, and intervention* (pp. 121–160). University of Chicago Press.
- McCubbin, H.I., Patterson, J., & Glynn, T. (1982). *Social Support Index (SSI)*. In H.I. McCubbin, A.I. Thompson, & M.A. McCubbin (Eds., 1996), *Family assessment: Resiliency, coping and adaptation-Inventories for research and practice* (pp. 357-389). (H.I. McCubbin,, A.I. Thompson, & M.A. McCubbin, Eds.; Eds., 1996). University of Wisconsin System.
- Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2019). Attachment orientations and emotion regulation. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 25, 6–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.02.006>
- Roberts, E. R., Atota, C. S., Ufeh, E. N., & Uye, E. E. (2026). Childhood trauma and social support predicting relationship satisfaction among adult samples. *International Journal of Economics, Business, & Innovation Research*, 5(2), 1–13.
- Roberts, E. R., Obisesan, O. A., Atota, C. S., & Uye, E. E. (2025). Attachment styles among young adults: Does childhood trauma and social support counts? *International Journal of Technology and Education Research*, 4(1), 64–75.
- Schunk, R., Thome, J., & Hennings, A. (2021). The role of social support in trauma therapy: A systematic review. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 12(1), 1891732.
- Wang, Y., Wu, X., & Wang, W. (2023). Social support, resilience, and trauma recovery: A moderated mediation model. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 329, 47–55.
- Zhou, Y., MacGeorge, E. L., & Myrick, J. G. (2021). Mental health and social support during COVID-19: A moderated mediation model of depression and anxiety. *Journal of Health Communication*, 26(3), 158–168.