

# The Role of Social Support and Callous-Unemotional Traits in Predicting Aggression among Undergraduates at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Anambra, State Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined social support and callous-unemotional traits as predictors of aggression among undergraduates in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Anambra State. A total of 153 students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Anambra State were conveniently recruited in this study. In this study, 51 were male, and 101 were female. The participants' age ranged from 17 to 28 with a mean age of 20.47 and a standard deviation of 2.59. Three instruments were used: Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits. Results of hierarchical regression revealed that model 1 which tested what social support contributed to the understanding of aggression was not significant,  $R^2 = -0.022$ ,  $F(2, 150) = 1.66$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . Model II revealed that when callous-unemotional traits were added in model II, the result did not show an increase in  $R^2 = 0.001$ ,  $F(3, 150) = 1.149$ ,  $p = 0.05$ . School should organize a seminar to explain the aftermath of aggression to its undergraduates. This will help the undergraduates not to engage in aggressive behavior. It was recommended that more research be conducted on social support, callous-unemotional traits, and aggression among undergraduates. The current study filed to show the significant effect of social support and callous-unemotional traits on aggression.

**Keywords:** Aggression, callous-unemotional, social supports, traits, undergraduates.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The transition into adulthood brings about significant lifestyle changes for young adults, particularly in terms of their relationships. This developmental period is marked by the exploration of unprotected and independent adulthood, where young adults often engage in aggressive behaviors within their peer groups. The need for belongingness, power dynamics, and social engagement plays a crucial role in their psychological development (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2013). As young adults navigate their way through this transformative phase, they experience self-growth and encounter various psychological needs and frustrations (Birch, 1997). This study aims to investigate the role of perceived acceptance and callous, unemotional traits as predictors of physical aggression among undergraduates.

Aggression encompasses behaviors intended to harm or injure others and is considered negative for both the aggressor and those affected by it. It involves deliberate acts aimed at hurting, harming, or destroying, excluding accidental or well-intentioned actions (Bernstein *et al.*, 2006; Brehm *et al.*, 2005; Myers, 2005). Numerous factors have been identified as predictors of physical aggression among undergraduates, including family variables, perceived acceptance, childhood aggressive behavior, gender stereotypes, and callous, unemotional traits. This study specifically focuses on physical aggression, social support, and callous, unemotional traits as predictors.

Social support is a complex transactional process involving interactions between individuals and their support networks. It encompasses emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support (House, 2017). The presence of social support does not guarantee the absence of aggression; rather, the quality of support, the strength of ties, and the willingness to assist are crucial factors (Pearlin, 2019; Pearlin *et al.*, 2017).

Callous-unemotional (CU) traits are characterized by a lack of empathy, guilt, effort, and shallow emotions. These traits have been associated with psychopathy in adults and are considered significant markers of antisocial behavior in youth (Frick, 2014; Kimonis *et al.*, 2004; Neumann & Hare, 2008). Undergraduates with elevated CU traits exhibit distinct genetic, biological, emotional, cognitive, and social characteristics, suggesting different causal processes for their behavior problems (Blair *et al.*, 2016; Frick, 2014).

Aggression is a prevalent and concerning deviant behavior in society, manifesting in various settings and forms. Aggression can lead to significant harm, damage, and even loss of life from domestic environments to public spaces. Its detrimental effects necessitate a thorough understanding of its causes and predictors. Universities, as centers for teaching and learning, should provide a safe and conducive environment, free from aggression. However, incidents of physical aggression among university students have been on the rise, causing concern among educational stakeholders. This study aims to examine the predictors of physical aggression, specifically focusing on social support and callous, unemotional traits among undergraduates.

Aggressive behaviors are not uncommon in educational institutions, with violence and aggressive acts becoming more prominent in recent years. Physical fights, weapon use, clashes between groups, bullying, and injuries are prevalent among university students. Such behaviors hinder the learning process and create an atmosphere of intimidation, harassment, and insecurity. Addressing physical aggression in universities is crucial for maintaining a conducive educational environment and ensuring the well-being of students.

To effectively combat physical aggression, it is essential to understand its causes and predictors. While several studies have explored this topic, limited research has focused on the role of social support and callous, unemotional traits as predictors of physical aggression. The study's main purpose is to find out how social support and callous-unemotional traits are predictors of physical aggression among undergraduates.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### A. Participants

This cross-sectional study involved a total of 153 students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Anambra State were conveniently recruited in this study. This number of respondents was drawn by using simple random sampling techniques. In this study, 51 were male, and 101 were female. The participants' age ranged from 17 to 28 with a mean age of 0.47 and a standard deviation of 2.59.

### B. Instruments

Three instruments were used for this study:

#### 1) Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ)

BPAQ is a 29-item scale developed by Buss and Perry (1992) to measure physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. The questionnaire uses a 7-point scale format and includes subscales for Physical Aggression (9 items), Verbal Aggression (5 items), Anger (7 items), and Hostility (8 items). The total score ranges from 29 to 145. The scale has been normed, with average scores of 56.44 for students and 66.52 for working-class individuals in an American sample. Various studies have reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the BPAQ subscales. Buss and Perry (1992) reported coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.89, while Fossati *et al.* (2003) reported coefficients ranging from 0.53 to 0.81. Abd-El-Fattah (2007) reported coefficients ranging from 0.80 to 0.83, and Evren *et al.* (2011) reported coefficients ranging from 0.59 to 0.93 for the Turkish version of the BPAQ. Stability coefficients, indicating test-retest reliability, have been reported as 0.72 to 0.80 over a nine-week interval by Buss and Perry (1992), and 0.54 to 0.84 over a two-week interval by Evren *et al.* (2011). In Nigeria, Ezeokana *et al.* (2014) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.93 for the BPAQ.

## 2) Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

These twelve (12) items scale will be used to measure perceived social support. MSPSS measures the three sources of social support; family support, friends support, and significant others support (Zemet *et al.*, 1988). MSPSS was scored on a 6-point Likert format ranging from 1 “very strongly disagree” to 5 “very strongly agree”. Items 3, 4, 8, and 11 measure family support; items 6, 7, 9, and 12 measure friend support while items 1, 2, 5, and 10 measure significant other support. Sample items on the scale include “My family tries to help me”, “I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows”, and “There is a special person who is around when am in need”. The validity of the scale was obtained by Onyishi *et al.* (2012) by reporting that the factor loading of the items was relatively high. Reliability of the scale was obtained by Onyishi *et al.* (2012) by reporting internal consistencies of the subscales (Cronbach’s alpha) were: Family, 0.78, friends, 0.76, and significant others, 0.70. Onyishi *et al.* (2012) reported a predictive validity of  $p < 0.01$  by using MSPSS to predict life satisfaction of prison workers.

## 3) Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU)

The ICU scale was developed by Frick (2004) and contained 24 items and four subscales: Careless, Uncaring, Callous, and Unemotional which are rated on a four-point Likert scale from 0 (Not at all true) to 3 (Definitely true). The alphas ranged from 0.67 to 0.76 for the carelessness scale 0.78 to 0.84 for the Uncaring scale, from 0.71 to 0.88 for the Callousness scale, and from 0.55 to 0.60 for the Unemotional scale. The subscales were moderately correlated with one another with correlations of 0.29 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and 0.23 ( $p < 0.001$ ) between Uncaring and Callousness, and Uncaring and Unemotional, respectively, and 0.17 ( $p < 0.01$ ) between Callousness and Unemotional.

## C. Design and Statistics

Correlational design was employed for the study because the study's objective is to establish the relationships between variables of interest (acceptance, callous-unemotional traits, and physical aggression). Hierarchical Multiple Linear Regression was used in testing the variables in the study.

## III. RESULTS

TABLE I: SUMMARY OF ZERO ORDER CORRELATION OF AGGRESSION, SOCIAL SUPPORT AND CALLOUS-UNEMOTIONAL TRAITS

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
Aggression	1				
Family	-0.143*	1			
Friends	-0.042	0.515	1		
Sign	-0.042	0.515	1	1	
Callous	0.026	0.088	0.252**	0.252**	1

\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ .

Note. Family: Family social support; Friends: Friends social support; Sign: significant others social support.

TABLE I: SUMMARY OF HIERARCHICAL MULTIPLE LINEAR REGRESSION OF AGGRESSION, SOCIAL SUPPORT AND CALLOUS-UNEMOTIONAL TRAITS

Variables	R <sup>2</sup>	df <sub>1</sub> (df <sub>2</sub> )	F	SE	B	T
Model I	.022	2(150)	1.66	5.54		
Family					-0.166	0.082
Friends					0.042	-0.515
Sign					0.044	0.644
Model II	0.001	3(150)	1.149		0.032	0.381
Callous						

\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ .

Note. Family: Family social support; Friends: Friends social support; Sign: significant others social support.

Results of hierarchical regression to step model revealed that Model I, which tested what social support contributed to the understanding of aggression, was not significant,  $R^2 = -0.022$ ,  $F(2, 150) = 1.66$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . Model II revealed that when callous-unemotional traits were added in model II, the result did not show an increase in of  $R^2 = 0.001$ ,  $F(3, 150) = 1.149$ ,  $p = 0.005$ .

## A. Summary of Findings

The study's analysis of different social support factors, encompassing family, friends, and significant others, revealed no statistically significant associations with aggression. Similarly, the examination of callous-unemotional traits did not yield significant predictive power for aggression. These results underscore the intricate nature of aggressive behavior's determinants, indicating that neither the evaluated social support dimensions nor callous-unemotional traits independently account for variations in aggression. The outcomes of this study emphasize the need for further exploration to elucidate the intricate interplay of multiple factors influencing tendencies toward aggression.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

This study looked at social support and callous-unemotional traits as predictors of aggression among undergraduates in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Anambra State. The first hypothesis of the study was not confirmed. This does not align with the observation of Alrdaydeh and Alorani (2017) that aggression had a direct positive relationship with perceived social support and the highest indirect positive relationship with age, and the highest direct and indirect positive relationship with education and social support. Also, mental health and aggression had a direct negative relationship with satisfaction with life and an indirect negative relationship with social support, and both a direct and indirect negative relationship with perceived support. Possibly that is why Hou *et al.* (2020) asserted that indirect social support impacts aggression and mental health via resilience. Perhaps this emerged because of intense psychological distress produced by perceived rejection from peers, and lecturers, and academic stress that did not tamper with the social support these undergraduates are from the people around them.

Consequently, it may be reasonable enough to say that the aggression displayed by these undergraduates could be due to factors that are likely to feel ever-increasing anger, resentment, and other destructive emotions that may become intensely painful. As a result, many rejected undergraduates close off emotionally to protect themselves from the hurt of further rejection. That is, they become less emotionally responsive. In so doing they often have problems being able or willing to express love, and knowing how to or even being capable of accepting it from others (Rohner *et al.*, 2005).

The second hypothesis was rejected. This is not in line with Zumbach *et al.* (2021) who believed that high-risk undergraduates demonstrating high rates of callousness and uncaring combined with weak emotional knowledge/empathy and social competence are prone to aggressive behavior. This makes Giroux and Guay (2022) to confirm that CU traits and affective empathy remain contributing factors to aggressive behavior in a unique way. Their study showed that positive correlation between PA and RA, oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, and CU traits, as well as a negative correlation between PA and affective empathy. The variation with this present study finding could be that the need to become more complex and differentiated to include the desire (consciously recognized or unrecognized) for intimacy, feeling close, and valued by the people with whom one has an affectional bond of attachment might have orchestrated callousness unemotional traits not predicting aggression. Since, people who can best satisfy this need may be parents for undergraduates, significant others, and non-parental attachment figures. For internal, psychologically felt wish or yearning for emotional support, care, comfort, attention, nurturance, and similar behaviors from significant others have ways of reducing callous-unemotional traits and aggression (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2002).

#### V. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present findings will make undergraduates understand the link between social support, callous-unemotional traits, and aggression. In as much as social support and callous-unemotional traits did not predict aggression, they will through this study understand how to manage their emotions and appreciate every social support they receive from others without taking it for granted. The university community will benefit from this study, possibly by looking into other factors that could trigger aggression among undergraduates. Since social support and callous-unemotional traits were not predictive factors.

#### VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Schools should organize a seminar to explain the aftermath of aggression to their undergraduates. This will help the undergraduates not to engage in aggressive behavior.
- 2) More research ought to be conducted in the area of social support, callous-unemotional traits, and aggression among undergraduates. The current study fails to show the significant effect of social support and callous-unemotional traits on aggression.
- 3) The creation of programs that will facilitate knowing aggressive undergraduates is needed. This will serve as a vehicle for understanding undergraduates who bottle up their aggressive tendencies in pretense at the cause of any study of this nature.

#### VII. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The first issue to consider as a limitation is that the questionnaires are self-report measures and the desire to appear good may have influenced the responses of the participants. The use of self-report measures only for data collection could limit the generalization of the study results. Furthermore, the population for the

study are only a few undergraduates in Anambra State, which invariably affects the generalization of the study.

## VIII. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

This study suggests that researchers should conduct similar studies to contribute to the body of literature and the theoretical understanding of aggression among undergraduates. Future studies can also take on a qualitative method to get an in-depth understanding of aggression among undergraduates. Furthermore, it is recommended that future studies should use a larger sample extending to other provinces in the country that can lead to the generalization of results and contribute to the development of intervention and prevention strategies.

## IX. CONCLUSION

This study examined social support and callous-unemotional traits as predictors of aggression among undergraduates in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Anambra State. Based on the hypotheses, the study revealed that social support factors (family, friends, significant others) and callous-unemotional traits did not predict aggression significantly.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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