



CHILDHOOD TRAUMA PREDICTING ATTACHMENT STYLE IN YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract

This study examines the predictive role of childhood trauma on attachment styles in young adults. Cross-sectional survey was utilized while purposive sampling technique was used to select the study population. Data were collected from 278 participants using validated questionnaires and analyzed using simple linear regression to test a hypothesis which was accepted at $p < .001$ level of significance. The result demonstrates that childhood trauma significantly influenced attachment style among study participants, $R^2 = .219$, $F(1, 276) = 28.27$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, the result reveals that childhood trauma independently predicted attachment style among study participants ($\beta = .468$, $t = 5.32$, $p < .001$). The study concludes that childhood trauma is a robust predictor of attachment style in the population of study. The study recommends mental health practitioners should integrate trauma-informed and attachment-based approaches in therapy to address unresolved childhood experiences among young adults.

Keywords: Childhood trauma, attachment style, young adults

INTRODUCTION

Attachment styles show how individuals behave in intimate relationships, especially in terms of closeness, communication, and conflict resolution. There are four types of attachment styles: secure, insecure, anxious, and avoidant. Individuals with a secure attachment style would report higher good relationships with other people (Collins & Feeney, 2018). Individuals with insecure attachment styles would struggle with having good relationships with others (Collins & Feeney, 2018). Individuals with anxious attachment style would be overly dependent on others, seek excessive reassurance, and have fear of abandonment behaviors (Kim & Kim, 2022; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). Finally, the avoidant attachment style individuals tend to suppress their need for closeness, avoid vulnerability, and emotionally distance themselves from other people (Candel & Turliuc, 2020). Therefore, understanding attachment styles in young adults is important for identifying patterns of relationship satisfaction, emotional regulation, and social functioning. In the context of this study, attachment styles provide insight into the ways these early experiences shape their adult relationships and how it would contribute to emotional regulation, relational challenges, and psychological distress (or well-being).

Some factors have been implicated to predict attachment styles such as personality traits, self-esteem, social support, learned helplessness (James et al., 2026; Roberts et al., 2025; Roberts et al., 2026). However, in this study, childhood trauma was investigated. Childhood trauma refers to adverse experiences occurring during the formative years of life (typically ages 0–12), which have the potential to disrupt psychological, emotional, and social development. These traumas may include physical abuse, emotional neglect, sexual abuse, exposure to domestic violence, parental substance abuse, and loss of a caregivers (James et al., 2026). Globally, the prevalence of childhood trauma is high. Hughes et al. (2019) found nearly 60% of the global population has experienced at least one form of adverse childhood experience (ACE) with a significant portion reporting multiple, co-occurring types of traumatic experiences.

Moreover, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) found in its national surveillance data that childhood trauma remains prevalent across all socio-demographic groups in the U.S., with emotional neglect, physical abuse, and parental separation being the most commonly reported. These findings speak to the universality of trauma exposures and the critical need for early preventive intervention. In African countries such as Nigeria, childhood trauma is both prevalent and under-reported due to cultural taboos, stigma, and lack of mental health awareness. For instance, Oginni et al. (2020) found that more than 65% of study participants reported experiencing at least one traumatic event before age 12, with emotional

neglect and physical abuse being the most common. Furthermore, Adeyemi and Olatunji (2022) found a high prevalence of avoidant attachment among participants who reported emotional and physical neglect.

In addition, there is a case of complex childhood trauma which involves repeated and prolonged exposure to traumatic events during early development. Complex childhood trauma affects core attachment systems and neurological development. For instance, Cook et al. (2021) found that adults who experienced multiple overlapping types of traumas during childhood exhibited more severe long-term psychological effects including depression, dissociation, and interpersonal difficulties.

Furthermore, trauma exposure during early childhood has been found to have enduring effects on brain structure and function. For instance, Teicher and Samson (2019) found individuals with histories of childhood trauma often exhibit alterations in brain regions responsible for emotional regulation, threat detection, and attachment behaviors. This neurological evidence supports the link between early adversity and difficulties in adult attachment styles.

Childhood trauma is a critical construct that significantly affects young adult attachment styles. While studies have examined attachment styles among different populations and samples using different predictors and obtained varied results, there is, however, a gap in knowledge concerning young adults in Rivers State. This study, therefore, examines the predictability of childhood trauma on attachment styles in young adult populations in Port Harcourt metropolis, Rivers State, Nigeria. The study sought to answer the question: Will childhood trauma independently predict attachment styles in young adults in the study population?

The study would provide valuable insights for psychologists, counselors, therapists, and other mental health professionals on how to help young adults suffering from long-term childhood trauma experiences.

Theoretical Construct

The study was anchored on attachment theory. Bowlby (1969) developed attachment theory which was later expanded by Ainsworth (1978). The theory postulates that early childhood experiences play critical roles in shaping an individual's ability to form and maintain relationships throughout life. In the context of this study, childhood trauma predicts the development of attachment styles (Collins & Feeney, 2004). Individuals with a history of trauma would develop distorted social perceptions, leading to difficulties in trust, intimacy, and conflict resolution in adulthood (Fraley & Roisman, 2019). Consequently, their attachment styles, whether secure, anxious, or avoidant, would shape how they engage in romantic and interpersonal relationships.

Empirical Review

Some studies on childhood trauma and attachment styles have been investigated with varied results. For instance, Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) demonstrated that traumatic childhood experiences such as child's neglect, abuse, and exposure to dysfunctional family environments significantly affected attachment styles leading to difficulties in emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships. In a study by Felitti et al. (2018) on the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) which include various forms of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction experienced during childhood among over 17,000 adults in the U.S., found a strong, graded relationship between the number of ACEs and negative outcomes in adulthood such as poor physical health, mental illness, substance use, and relationship problems. The ACE study fundamentally shaped the understanding of how early trauma disrupts development and has long-term consequences on emotional and relational well-being.

In addition, Teicher et al. (2013) who examined Neurobiological Effects of Childhood Maltreatment to determine the structural and functional changes in the brain as a result of childhood trauma revealed that early maltreatment affects areas such as the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex—regions involved in emotion regulation, memory, and executive functioning. These alterations were linked to heightened stress sensitivity, emotional dysregulation, and vulnerability to psychopathology in adulthood.

Moreover, Briere and Elliott (2013) in a Psychological Sequelae of Childhood Abuse study of both male and female participants found that individuals who reported physical and sexual abuse in childhood exhibited higher levels of depression, anxiety, dissociation, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. The study emphasized that childhood trauma often co-occurs with multiple forms of maltreatment (poly-victimization), compounding its effects (Finkelhor et al., 2009).

Extending further, Van der Kolk (2014) who synthesizes clinical observations, neuroscience, and trauma therapy insights found that childhood trauma disrupts the development of self-regulation and interpersonal trust, making survivors more prone to insecure attachments and relational dysfunctions. In another study, Riggs (2010) explored the connection between emotional abuse in childhood and the development of maladaptive attachment systems found that individuals with a history of emotional abuse

often developed insecure or disorganized attachment styles, which negatively affected their romantic and interpersonal relationships. The author emphasized the importance of early emotional experiences in shaping attachment schemas and relational expectations throughout life.

Furthermore, Widom et al. (2008) in a longitudinal study that followed abused and neglected children into adulthood to assess long-term outcomes 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.

Using qualitative interviews, Eke and Azuike (2022) found 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. Finally, Kim & Kim (2022) investigated how early trauma and adult attachment interacted to influence emotional well-being and found childhood trauma to predict adult attachment insecurity. All these studies have linked early childhood trauma to attachment styles among different populations and samples investigated.

The hypothesis tested is: Childhood trauma will independently predict attachment styles among young adults in Port Harcourt metropolis.

METHOD

Research Design

The study adopted cross-sectional survey design using validated questionnaires for data collection. Childhood trauma was the independent variable while attachment style was the dependent variable. The design established the predictive ability of childhood trauma on attachment styles.

Setting

This study was conducted among young adults in five selected districts in Port Harcourt municipality of Rivers State. The districts selected were: Rumuokoro, Rumuola, Rumuigbo, Rumueme, and Rumuobiakani.

Population of the Study

The population for this study comprises youths aged 18 to 35 years residing in each of the districts selected for the study.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The study adopted multi-stage sampling techniques. First, purposive sampling was used to select the five districts within Port Harcourt metropolis while convenience sampling method was used to select potential participants for the distribution of the study questionnaires.

Instruments

Data were collected using two validated questionnaires. Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ, Bernstein & Fink, 1998) was used to assess types and severity of trauma including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse as 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. Examples of items include: "My parents were too drunk/high to take care of me" and "Someone tried to touch me in a sexual way or tried to make me touch them". CTQ has been used among Nigerian samples with robust psychometric properties (Roberts et al., 2026). Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$ was obtained in the current 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 comfortable depending on other people" and "I find it hard to trust other people". Roberts et al. (2025) used the scale among Nigerian samples with good psychometric property. Authors reported Cronbach's α was between 0.72-0.85, and in this study composite Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$ was obtained.

Data Collection Procedure

Potential participants were approached by the researchers at homes, street gatherings, and recreational centers where they were briefed of the purpose of the study. They were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and all their responses would be treated confidentially. Questionnaires were administered to those who agreed to participate. The filling of the questionnaires took less than 16 minutes and were collected on the spot. All the 278 collected were used for the analysis.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS version 26 was used for the analysis. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were computed. The hypothesis was tested using simple linear regression and accepted at $p < .001$ level of significance.

RESULTS

Participants

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Age	18–21 years	61	22
	22–25 years	92	33
	26–30 years	78	28
	31–35 years	47	17
Gender	Male	139	50
	Female	139	50
Educational Qualification	SSCE	36	13
	HND/First Degree	172	62
	Postgraduate Degree	70	25
Occupation	Unemployed	131	47
	Self-Employed	83	30
	Employed	64	23
Marital Status	Single	194	70
	Married	42	15
	Divorced	9	3
	Widowed	14	5
	Widower	4	1
	Separated	15	5
Religion	Christianity	250	90
	Islam	8	3
	Others	20	7
Total		278	100.0

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic variables of the study participants. The descriptive statistics revealed that more participants (33%) were between 22- 25 age brackets with equal percentage of genders. In terms of marital status, 70% of the participants were singles and the majority (62%) of them were Higher Diploma/First degree holders. Furthermore, 47% of the participants were unemployed and 90% were practicing Christians.

Table 1. Zero-correlation of Study Variables

S/N	Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2
1	Childhood Trauma	3.44	0.66	-	
2	Attachment Style	3.71	0.61	.468*	-

NB: N = 278, * $p < .001$

Table 1 presents zero-order correlation analysis of study variables. The result indicated that childhood trauma positively correlated with attachment styles among young adults ($r = .468$, $p < .001$).

Testing the hypothesis...

H1: Childhood trauma will independently predict attachment style among young adults in Port Harcourt Metropolis. The hypothesis was tested using linear regression analysis and the results are presented in Table 2a-c.

Table 2a: Model of Childhood Trauma on Attachment Styles among young adults

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.468	.219	.216	7.012

Table 2b: ANOVA of Childhood Trauma on Adult Attachment Styles among young adults

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	1390.412	1	1390.412	28.27	.000
Residual	4931.588	276	17.865		
Total	6322.000	277			

Table 2c: Linear Regression Coefficients Predicting Attachment Styles from Childhood Trauma

Model	Standardized B	Std. Error	β	t	p
(Constant)	14.318	1.961		7.30	.000
Childhood Trauma	0.426	0.080	.468	5.32	.000

Table 2a-c presents linear regression analysis of childhood trauma on attachment style among young adults in Port Harcourt metropolis. The result revealed that childhood trauma significantly influenced attachment style among study participants, $R^2 = .219$, $F(1, 276) = 28.27$, $p < .001$. This means childhood trauma accounted for 21.9% variance in attachment style among study participants. Furthermore, the result showed that childhood trauma independently predicted attachment style among study participants ($\beta = .468$, $t = 5.32$, $p < .001$). Therefore, the hypothesis was supported.

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that childhood trauma will independently predict attachment style among young adults was supported. The finding confirms the critical role of early life experiences in shaping relational patterns that extend into adulthood. This means that unresolved childhood trauma increases the likelihood of difficulties in trusting, depending on, and maintaining secure bonds with others. In addition, youths who experienced trauma exhibit heightened fear of rejection, excessive dependency, or avoidance of intimacy as coping mechanisms. The result aligns with that of Mikulincer and Shaver (2019) who found that adverse childhood experiences are strong predictors of insecure attachment styles, particularly the anxious and avoidant dimensions. It further demonstrates that individuals exposed to neglect, abuse, or inconsistent caregiving in childhood are more likely to internalize patterns of fear, mistrust, and emotional withdrawal that manifest in later relationships (Cook et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2026). Moreover, this finding corroborated Teicher and Samson (2019) result that traumatic childhood experiences such as child's neglect, abuse, and exposure to dysfunctional family environments significantly affected attachment styles leading to difficulties in emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships.

These findings align with Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory as a foundational explanation for attachment styles. Bowlby has argued that early traumatic interactions with caregivers such as abandonment, harsh discipline, or emotional unavailability led to the development of negative internal working models. These models function as enduring mental representations of the self and others, shaping expectations about intimacy, trust, and support throughout the lifespan. Once established, they tend to persist into adulthood, influencing how individuals perceive and engage in close relationships.

In the context of the current study, the confirmation of this hypothesis suggests that unresolved childhood trauma increases the likelihood of difficulties in trusting, depending on, and maintaining secure bonds with others. Youths who experienced such trauma would exhibit heightened fear of rejection, excessive dependency, or avoidance of intimacy as coping mechanisms. This is consistent with prior empirical findings which indicates that trauma survivors often oscillate between a longing for closeness and a fear of vulnerability, resulting in patterns of insecure attachment (Felitti et al., 2018). Finally, the finding aligns with that of James et al. (2026) who found that trauma survivors often oscillate between a longing for closeness and a fear of vulnerability, resulting in patterns of insecure attachment.

CONCLUSION

The study examines the predictability of childhood trauma on attachment style among young adults in Port Harcourt metropolis. The result demonstrates that childhood trauma significantly predicts attachment styles among study participants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that parents should continue to nurture and provide supportive environments for their wards to prevent the long-term effects of traumatic experience in their future relationships. In addition, young individuals should actively build and maintain strong social support networks that would help them cope with challenges and enhance relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, mental health practitioners should integrate trauma-informed and attachment-based approaches in therapy to address unresolved childhood experiences among young adults.

Limitations And Suggestions For Further Studies

Some limitations of this study need to be mentioned to be addressed in further study. To begin with, the use of self-reported questionnaires tends to introduce social response bias which accepted the results of this study, therefore, further study would benefit from focus group discussion and documentary evidence

from the mental health practitioners to triangulate data from self-reported questionnaires. In addition, the participants were conveniently sampled from five neighborhoods in Port Harcourt metropolis with sample size of 278 which hindered generalization of study finding, further study should include more neighborhoods and larger sample size. Finally, using only one independent variable was not exhaustive, therefore, further study should include self-esteem, social support and learned helplessness to give deeper understandings of attachment styles among traumatized children.

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