

Cumulative Trauma Exposure and Its Predictive Value on Emotional Intelligence and Self-Esteem in Early Adulthood: Evidence from Youth in Abuja Municipal Area Council (Amac), Abuja

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Abstract

Young adults in urban Nigerian settings are increasingly exposed to multiple forms of adversity, including family instability, economic hardship, and interpersonal stress, which may have long-term psychological consequences. While previous studies have established that early life trauma affects later emotional and psychological functioning, there is limited context-specific evidence within Nigeria examining how cumulative childhood trauma influences emotional intelligence and self-esteem in early adulthood. This study therefore investigated the predictive role of cumulative trauma exposure on emotional intelligence and self-esteem among young adults in Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC). A quantitative cross-sectional design was adopted, involving 400 participants (male and female) aged 18 – 35 years selected through stratified sampling. Cumulative trauma was assessed retrospectively using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF), which is widely used in adult populations to measure early life adverse experiences. Emotional intelligence and self-esteem were measured using the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), respectively. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and multiple regression. Results showed that cumulative trauma exposure was significantly negatively correlated with emotional intelligence ($r = -.41, p < .01$) and self-esteem ($r = -.47, p < .01$). Regression analysis further indicated that cumulative trauma significantly predicted emotional intelligence ($\beta = -.41, p < .001, R^2 = .17$) and self-esteem ($\beta = -.47, p < .001, R^2 = .22$). The findings highlight the enduring impact of early trauma on psychological functioning in adulthood and underscore the need for trauma-informed mental health interventions within the Nigerian context.

Keywords: cumulative trauma, emotional intelligence, self-esteem, early adulthood, Abuja

Introduction

Early adulthood is a critical developmental stage characterized by increased demands for emotional regulation, identity formation, and stable self-evaluation (Agbaje et al., 2021). During this period, individuals are expected to demonstrate adaptive emotional functioning and maintain a positive sense of self-worth. However, exposure to adverse experiences, particularly when cumulative, can disrupt these developmental processes (Aniemeka et al., 2020). Cumulative trauma refers to repeated exposure to adverse experiences over time, particularly during childhood, with effects that extend into later developmental stages (Ossai, 2023). Cumulative trauma is associated with long-term impairments in emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, and psychological wellbeing (Edet et al., 2022; Folley et al., 2020). Unlike single-event trauma, cumulative exposure produces compounding effects, increasing vulnerability to maladaptive behavioural and emotional outcomes. This study is anchored on trauma theory, which posits that repeated exposure to adverse experiences disrupts emotional regulation and negatively shapes psychological development over time (Finkelhor, 2020; Sheffler et al., 2020).

Emotional intelligence, defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions, is central to adaptive functioning. According to emotional intelligence theory (Rachmad, 2022), effective emotional regulation is essential for psychological adjustment. However, exposure to early adversity may impair this capacity, leading to deficits in emotional functioning (Liu et al., 2021). It is indicated that individuals with histories of cumulative trauma often exhibit reduced emotional intelligence, particularly in areas related to emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning (Ugwu et al., 2024). This is because repeated exposure to stress alters emotional processing patterns, making it more difficult for individuals to respond adaptively to emotional stimuli (Merrick et al., 2019). Similarly, self-esteem is a critical component of psychological wellbeing, reflecting an individual's sense of self-worth and personal value. Repeated adverse childhood experiences may weaken self-esteem by reinforcing negative self-perceptions and reducing psychological resilience, particularly among young people exposed to early adversity (Ibighami et al., 2024; Ossai, 2023). In this sense, cumulative trauma may undermine both emotional intelligence and self-esteem by disrupting emotional regulation processes and negatively shaping self-concept over time.

In the Nigerian context, exposure to cumulative trauma is often shaped by socio-economic challenges, family instability, and limited access to mental health support. Empirical evidence indicates that adverse childhood experiences are associated with psychological distress and emotional difficulties among Nigerian youths (Agbaje et al., 2021; Aniemeka et al., 2020). Emerging Nigerian studies also indicate that adverse childhood experiences are significantly associated with emotional and behavioural difficulties among young people (Ossai, 2023; Ojo, 2025). Childhood trauma, emotional regulation, and self-esteem are important psychological factors in adolescent and youth mental health outcomes (Olibamoyo et al., 2026), while emotional intelligence and distress disclosure have also been linked to trauma adjustment among Nigerian adolescents (Ugwu et al., 2024). However, existing studies have largely focused on adolescents and general psychological distress, with limited attention to early adulthood as a critical developmental stage. In addition, existing Nigerian research has largely examined trauma in relation to depression, behavioural problems, and general psychological distress, with insufficient focus on its predictive relationship with emotional intelligence and self-esteem (Atilola, 2017; Salawu & Owoaje, 2020). More importantly, there is limited context-specific evidence from urban settings such as Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC), where rapid urbanization, socio-economic disparities, and environmental stressors may increase exposure to cumulative trauma. This creates a clear research gap, as the combined predictive value of cumulative trauma on emotional intelligence and self-esteem among young adults in AMAC remains insufficiently established. Against this background, this study investigates the predictive role of cumulative trauma exposure on emotional intelligence and self-esteem among young adults in AMAC, Abuja.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between cumulative trauma exposure and emotional intelligence among young adults in AMAC, Abuja?
2. What is the relationship between cumulative trauma exposure and self-esteem among young adults in AMAC, Abuja?
3. To what extent does cumulative trauma exposure predict emotional intelligence among young adults in AMAC, Abuja?
4. To what extent does cumulative trauma exposure predict self-esteem among young adults in AMAC, Abuja?

Research Hypotheses

H1: There will be a significant negative relationship between cumulative trauma exposure and emotional intelligence among young adults in AMAC, Abuja.

H2: There will be a significant negative relationship between cumulative trauma exposure and self-esteem among young adults in AMAC, Abuja.

H3: Cumulative trauma exposure will significantly and negatively predict emotional intelligence among young adults in AMAC, Abuja.

H4: Cumulative trauma exposure will significantly and negatively predict self-esteem among young adults in AMAC, Abuja.

Method

Design

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed to examine the predictive relationship between cumulative trauma exposure, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem. This design was considered appropriate because the study sought to collect numerical data from a defined group of young adults at a single point in time and determine whether cumulative trauma exposure significantly predicted emotional intelligence and self-esteem. The design also allowed the use of correlation and regression analyses to test the hypotheses.

Sampling

The sample size for this study was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for sample size determination:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

n = required sample size
N = population size

e = level of precision (0.05)

Where: $n = \frac{400}{1 + 400(0)^2}$

$$n = \frac{400}{1 + 0}$$

ing technique was employed to ensure representation across key areas w were randomly selected from the identified locations, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the sample and reducing sampling bias.

Participants

The study comprised 400 young adults (male and female) aged 18 – 35 years residing in Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC), including Wuse, Garki, Maitama, and Asokoro. Participants were selected using stratified sampling to ensure representation across locations.

Demographically, participants varied in gender, educational level, and employment status. Inclusion criteria required that participants be within the specified age range and resident in AMAC at the time of the study.

Instruments

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF)

The CTQ-SF is a 28-item self-report instrument designed to assess retrospective experiences of childhood trauma, including emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and

physical neglect. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Never True*) to 5 (*Very Often True*). The instrument has demonstrated good internal consistency, with reliability coefficients typically ranging from .79 to .94. It is widely used in adult populations to assess early life trauma.

Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT)

The SSEIT consists of 33 items measuring emotional intelligence across domains such as emotional perception, regulation, and utilization. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). The scale has reported reliability coefficients around .87 and has been validated in diverse populations, including Nigerian samples.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

The RSES is a 10-item measure of global self-esteem. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly Agree*). The scale has demonstrated good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha typically above .80.

Procedure

Ethical approval was sought from community leaders within selected areas in AMAC. Participants were approached in public and residential areas and informed about the purpose of the study. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Questionnaires were administered in person, and completed responses were collected immediately to ensure a high response rate.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were used to summarize participant characteristics and study variables. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between cumulative trauma, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the predictive effect of cumulative trauma on emotional intelligence and self-esteem. All statistical tests were conducted at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Correlation Analysis

Table 1 presents the Pearson correlation matrix for cumulative trauma, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem.

Table 1

Correlation Matrix of Study Variables (N = 400)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Cumulative Trauma	—		
2. Emotional Intelligence	-.41**	—	
3. Self-Esteem	-.47**	.52**	—

Note. $p < .01$

Cumulative trauma was significantly negatively correlated with emotional intelligence ($r = -.41$, $p < .01$) and self-esteem ($r = -.47$, $p < .01$). Emotional intelligence was positively correlated with self-esteem ($r = .52$, $p < .01$).

Decision: H1 and H2 were supported. This indicates that cumulative trauma exposure had significant negative relationships with emotional intelligence and self-esteem.

Regression Analysis

To test the predictive role of cumulative trauma, two separate simple linear regression analyses were conducted.

Table 2

Regression Analysis Predicting Emotional Intelligence from Cumulative Trauma

Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	62.45	2.31	—	27.04	< .001
Cumulative Trauma	-0.38	0.04	-.41	-9.02	< .001

Model Summary: $R^2 = .17$, $F(1, 398) = 81.32$, $p < .001$

Cumulative trauma significantly predicted emotional intelligence, accounting for 17% of the variance.

Decision: H3 was supported. This indicates that cumulative trauma exposure significantly and negatively predicted emotional intelligence.

Table 3

Regression Analysis Predicting Self-Esteem from Cumulative Trauma

Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	28.67	1.12	—	25.60	< .001
Cumulative Trauma	-0.29	0.03	-.47	-10.60	< .001

Model Summary: $R^2 = .22$, $F(1, 398) = 112.45$, $p < .001$

Cumulative trauma significantly predicted self-esteem, accounting for 22% of the variance.

Decision: H4 was supported. This indicates that cumulative trauma exposure significantly and negatively predicted self-esteem.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that cumulative trauma has a significant negative impact on both emotional intelligence and self-esteem in early adulthood. This supports previous research demonstrating that repeated exposure to adversity disrupts emotional regulation and self-concept development (Liu et al., 2021; Olibamoyo, et al., 2026).

The observed negative relationship between trauma and emotional intelligence suggests that individuals with higher trauma exposure may experience difficulties in emotional awareness and regulation. Similarly, the effect on self-esteem aligns with studies indicating that trauma contributes

to the development of negative self-perceptions and reduced self-worth (Dye, 2018; Sheffler et al., 2020).

These findings are particularly relevant within the Nigerian context, where trauma experiences are often under-recognized (Ugwu, Onishi & Steger, 2024). The results underscore the importance of trauma-informed psychological interventions aimed at improving emotional functioning and self-esteem among young adults.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that cumulative trauma is a significant predictor of emotional intelligence and self-esteem among young adults in AMAC, Abuja. Individuals with higher levels of trauma exposure were more likely to exhibit lower emotional intelligence and reduced self-worth, highlighting the enduring psychological impact of repeated adverse experiences.

Beyond establishing these relationships, the findings emphasize the importance of early identification and intervention. Addressing trauma at both individual and community levels may play a critical role in improving emotional functioning and strengthening self-esteem during early adulthood. In practical terms, this underscores the need for trauma-informed mental health services, psychoeducational programmes, and supportive environments within educational and community settings.

While the study provides valuable context-specific insights, it is limited by its cross-sectional design, which does not allow for causal inferences. Future research may adopt longitudinal approaches to better understand how cumulative trauma influences psychological outcomes over time. Additionally, exploring moderating variables such as social support and resilience may further enrich understanding in this area.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on trauma and psychological development, particularly within the Nigerian context, and highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions aimed at promoting emotional wellbeing among young adults.

Recommendations

- i. Mental health practitioners should adopt trauma-informed interventions that strengthen emotional awareness, regulation, and coping skills among young adults.
- ii. Counselling and psychoeducational programmes should include strategies for rebuilding positive self-concept and reducing internalized feelings of inadequacy among trauma-exposed young adults.
- iii. Community-based mental health awareness programmes should be encouraged to improve recognition of trauma-related emotional and self-esteem difficulties among young people.
- iv. Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to examine how cumulative trauma influences emotional intelligence and self-esteem over time.

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