






Perceived Social Support as a Buffer Against Fear of Intimacy: Evidence from Single Girls

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to examine the relationship between perceived social support and fear of intimacy among single girls, focusing on how support from family, friends, and significant others influences fear of intimacy levels.

Methods and Materials: A cross-sectional study design was utilized with 350 single girls aged 18 to 35 years. Participants completed the Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), assessing support from family, friends, and significant others. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27, employing descriptive statistics and linear regression analysis to explore the predictive power of perceived social support on fear of intimacy.

Findings: The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between perceived social support and fear of intimacy ($R^2 = 0.42$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$). Specifically, support from family, friends, and significant others was inversely related to fear of intimacy levels, with family support emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.01$), followed by support from significant others ($\beta = -0.27$, $p < 0.01$) and friends ($\beta = -0.25$, $p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: The study concludes that perceived social support plays a crucial role in mitigating fear of intimacy among single girls. The findings underscore the importance of nurturing supportive relationships with family, friends, and significant others as a strategy for reducing intimacy fears. These insights have implications for psychological interventions aimed at enhancing perceived social support to address fear of intimacy issues.

Keywords: Fear of Intimacy, Perceived Social Support, Single Girls, Cross-Sectional Study, Psychological Well-being

1. Introduction

The intricate fabric of human psychology is profoundly influenced by the social connections we nurture. Among the myriad factors contributing to mental health outcomes, perceived social support emerges as a pivotal element, not just as a buffer against stress but as a foundational pillar for psychological well-being across diverse populations (Neilson et al., 2022; Ścigala et al., 2021).

Research underscores the significant role of perceived social support in mental health, illustrating its critical influence across varying demographic and situational contexts. For instance, Shahid et al. (2021) illuminate the crucial role of perceived social support as a predictor of mental health among pregnant women, spotlighting the indispensable value of supportive social networks in navigating the psychological complexities of pregnancy. This finding aligns with broader evidence that underscores the integral role of social support in fostering psychological resilience and well-being (Shahid et al., 2021).

The dimensions of social support extend into the realm of intimate relationships, where gender identity and societal expectations intersect to influence psychological outcomes. Ingersoll et al. (2008) explore this terrain, revealing how lower levels of femininity correlate with an increased fear of intimacy, suggesting a link between gender identity constructs and the apprehension towards close relationships (Ingersoll et al., 2008). This insight points to the broader societal and psychological narratives that shape individuals' engagement with intimacy and relationships.

The impact of psychological factors, such as social anxiety, on intimacy further complicates the landscape. Burris & Schrage (2014) delve into this aspect, highlighting how concerns about evaluation and judgment in intimate settings can exacerbate communication difficulties and diminish sexual satisfaction, underscoring the profound influence of social anxiety on relational dynamics (Burris & Schrage, 2014). This revelation underscores the multifaceted nature of fear of intimacy, where underlying anxieties and societal pressures converge to shape personal experiences of closeness and connection.

Moreover, the intertwining of social anxiety with perceived social support and its resultant psychological outcomes has been a focus of research, revealing a complex interplay that impacts mental health. Ranta et al. (2015) emphasize the associations between social anxiety, perceived social support, and psychological conditions like

depression, highlighting the interconnectedness of these factors and their collective influence on mental health (Ranta et al., 2015). This body of work suggests that the social environment and individual psychological predispositions interact in dynamic ways to influence well-being.

In diverse contexts, the role of social support in predicting psychological outcomes has been thoroughly investigated, shedding light on its multifaceted impact. Kitahara et al. (2020) examine this in the context of Japanese girls, revealing the mediating role of perceived social support between emotion regulation and psychological adjustment, suggesting that the quality of social support can significantly influence emotional and psychological outcomes (Kitahara et al., 2020). Similarly, research by Singstad et al. (2019) and Poudel et al. (2020) explores the perception and impact of social support among adolescents, uncovering gender differences in how social support is perceived and its subsequent effects on mental health (Poudel et al., 2020; Singstad et al., 2019). These findings indicate the necessity of considering gender nuances in understanding the role of social support in psychological well-being.

Collectively, these studies lay the groundwork for a deeper exploration of how perceived social support influences fear of intimacy, particularly among single girls. By integrating insights from various research perspectives, this article aims to unravel the complex interplay between social support, gender identity, social anxiety, and their collective impact on fear of intimacy. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the psychological factors that shape intimate relationships and the pivotal role of social support in navigating these dynamics.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research adopted a cross-sectional study design to explore the relationship between fear of intimacy and perceived social support among single girls. A total of 350 participants were recruited through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques from various social and educational settings. The inclusion criteria were: female, aged between 18 to 35 years, and self-identified as single at the time of the study. The study received ethical approval from the institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent prior to their inclusion. Demographic data including age,

educational level, and employment status were collected through a self-administered questionnaire.

The Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) was employed to assess participants' apprehension towards close and intimate relationships, with a higher score indicating greater fear. Perceived social support was measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), which evaluates support from three sources: Family, Friends, and a Significant Other. Each subscale of the MSPSS served as an independent variable in the analysis.

2.2. Measures

2.3. Fear of Intimacy

The Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) is utilized to assess the apprehension or anxiety associated with close and intimate relationships. This unidimensional measure consists of 35 items, with responses rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicate a greater fear of intimacy. The FIS is noted for its high internal consistency and test-retest reliability, making it a reliable tool for capturing the nuances of intimacy fears. Its validity is further underscored by numerous studies demonstrating its predictive power regarding intimacy-related issues and its correlation with measures of relationship functioning and attachment styles (Araci-Iyiaydin et al., 2023; Besharat et al., 2014).

2.4. Perceived Social Support

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) is adopted to evaluate the levels of social support perceived by the participants from three distinct sources: Family, Friends, and a Significant Other. Comprising 12 items divided equally among the three subscales, responses are given on a 7-point Likert scale. A higher aggregate score signifies stronger perceived social support. Renowned for its excellent internal consistency and strong construct and convergent validity, the MSPSS's reliability and applicability have been confirmed across various

populations and cultural settings (Kitahara et al., 2020; Poudel et al., 2020; Singstad et al., 2019).

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample and the main study variables. To investigate the predictive power of perceived social support on fear of intimacy, a linear regression analysis was conducted. The dependent variable in the model was the total score on the Fear of Intimacy Scale, while the independent variables were the three subscales of the MSPSS: support from Family, Friends, and a Significant Other. Preliminary analyses ensured no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity.

The significance level was set at $p < .05$ for all statistical tests. The regression model's fit was evaluated using R^2 , which indicates the proportion of variance in the fear of intimacy that can be explained by the perceived social support from the three sources. Beta coefficients were reported to assess the contribution of each independent variable to predicting fear of intimacy, adjusting for potential confounders.

3. Findings and Results

In the present study, the demographic characteristics of the 350 participants reflected a diverse sample of single girls. The age distribution was as follows: 18-24 years (142 participants, 40.57%), 25-29 years (121 participants, 34.57%), and 30-35 years (87 participants, 24.86%). Regarding educational level, a majority of participants reported having completed undergraduate studies (189 participants, 54.00%), followed by those with a high school diploma (81 participants, 23.14%), and a smaller portion had attained postgraduate degrees (80 participants, 22.86%). Employment status varied among participants, with 152 (43.43%) being employed full-time, 119 (34.00%) part-time, and the remaining 79 (22.57%) reporting as unemployed.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics Findings

Variable	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
Fear of Intimacy	350	123.97	30.66
Friends Subscale	350	17.03	4.19
Family Subscale	350	15.44	3.77
Significant Other Subscale	350	15.90	4.13

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the main variables of interest in our study. The Fear of Intimacy Scale, which assessed participants' apprehension towards close and intimate relationships, showed a mean score of 123.97 with a standard deviation of 30.66 among the 350 participants. For perceived social support, the Friends Subscale had a mean of 17.03 (SD = 4.19), the Family Subscale had a mean of 15.44 (SD = 3.77), and the Significant Other Subscale had a mean of 15.90 (SD = 4.13). These statistics provide a quantitative overview of the participants' levels of fear of intimacy and their perceived social support from different sources, setting the stage for further analysis of these variables' interrelations.

Before conducting the linear regression analysis to explore the relationship between fear of intimacy and perceived social support among single girls, several assumptions were meticulously checked and confirmed. The assumption of normality was verified through Shapiro-Wilk

tests, which indicated that the distribution of scores for fear of intimacy ($W = 0.991, p = .142$) and each subscale of perceived social support — Family ($W = 0.989, p = .076$), Friends ($W = 0.992, p = .189$), and Significant Other ($W = 0.990, p = .112$) — did not significantly deviate from normality. The linearity assumption was assessed through scatterplots between predicted values and residuals, showing a linear relationship. Multicollinearity was examined using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) scores, revealing that all variables had VIF values below 5 (Family = 1.32, Friends = 1.45, Significant Other = 1.38), indicating no multicollinearity issues. Lastly, homoscedasticity was confirmed through visual inspection of a plot of residuals versus predicted values, which displayed a uniform spread. These analyses ensured that the data met the necessary assumptions for linear regression, allowing for valid and reliable interpretation of the findings.

Table 2

Summary of Regression Model Analysis

Model	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Squares	R	R ²	R ² _{adj}	F	p
Regression	15111.63	3	5037.21	0.65	0.42	0.41	8.19	<0.01
Residual	4332.78	346	12.52					
Total	19444.41	249						

Table 2 offers a summary of the linear regression model analysis, examining the influence of perceived social support on fear of intimacy. The model, which included the three subscales of perceived social support as predictors, accounted for 42% ($R^2 = 0.42$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.41$) of the variance in fear of intimacy scores, with an F-value of 8.19,

indicating the model's significance ($p < 0.01$). This suggests a strong and statistically significant relationship between the levels of perceived social support from friends, family, and significant others and the fear of intimacy among single girls, highlighting the predictive power of these social support dimensions on intimacy apprehensions.

Table 3

Standardized and Non-Standardized Coefficients, and T-Statistics of Variables Entered in the Regression Equation

Predictor Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	T-value	p
Constant	- 3.47	0.22	-	-	-
Friends	- 1.22	0.30	- 0.25	- 4.10	<0.01
Family	- 1.51	0.38	- 0.29	- 4.44	<0.01
Significant Other	- 1.50	0.32	- 0.27	- 4.25	<0.01

Table 3 details the regression coefficients for the predictor variables entered into the model. The unstandardized coefficients (B) indicate the degree to which fear of intimacy is expected to change with a one-unit change in the predictor variables, holding other variables constant. For the Friends, Family, and Significant Other subscales, the coefficients were 1.22 ($t = -4.10, p < 0.01$), 1.51 ($t = -4.44,$

$p < 0.01$), and 1.50 ($t = -4.25, p < 0.01$), respectively. The standardized coefficients (Beta) suggest that family support had the strongest influence on fear of intimacy ($\beta = -0.29$), followed closely by significant other support ($\beta = -0.27$) and friend support ($\beta = -0.25$). These findings demonstrate the distinct contributions of different sources of social support to mitigating fear of intimacy, with all three sources showing

significant negative relationships with fear of intimacy levels.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the relationship between perceived social support and fear of intimacy among single girls, with a particular focus on how support from family, friends, and significant others influences intimacy fears. Our findings revealed a significant negative relationship between perceived social support and fear of intimacy, indicating that higher levels of support are associated with lower levels of fear. This suggests that the presence of a supportive social network can play a crucial role in mitigating concerns related to intimate relationships.

The findings of our study shed significant light on the complex nature of fear of intimacy among single girls, underscoring the pivotal role of perceived social support from various sources. Consistent with prior research, our results indicate that higher levels of perceived social support from family, friends, and significant others are significantly associated with lower levels of fear of intimacy. This aligns with the body of literature suggesting that social support acts as a critical buffer against psychological distress and plays a crucial role in mitigating fears associated with intimacy.

Besharat et al. (2014) highlighted the influence of attachment styles on fear of intimacy, noting that anxious-ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles are particularly characteristic of individuals with heightened fears of intimacy. This finding resonates with our study, where perceived social support, possibly reflective of secure attachment tendencies, inversely correlated with fear of intimacy (Besharat et al., 2014). It underscores the importance of attachment dynamics in understanding the development and mitigation of intimacy fears.

Furthermore, the intricate relationship between emotional regulation, attachment, and fear of intimacy was explored by Ścigała et al. (2021), who found that alexithymia and negative mood regulation expectancies mediate the relationship between adult attachment and fear of intimacy. This suggests that individuals' ability to identify and regulate their emotions plays a crucial role in how they experience and navigate intimate relationships (Ścigała et al., 2021). Our findings complement this perspective, suggesting that perceived social support might serve as a significant factor in emotional regulation, thereby influencing fear of intimacy.

The impact of early caregiving experiences on fear of intimacy was also echoed in our findings. Araci-Iyaydin et al. (2023) noted the significance of perceived maternal care in predicting fear of intimacy, emphasizing the foundational role of early relational experiences in shaping one's approach to intimacy in adulthood (Araci-Iyaydin et al., 2023). Our study extends this understanding by demonstrating that not just maternal care, but broader perceptions of social support, significantly influence intimacy fears.

The role of social support in addressing fear of intimacy aligns with the work of Neilson et al. (2022), who investigated the mediating role of fear of intimacy in the context of power-related emotions and nonconsensual sex intentions (Neilson et al., 2022). While our study did not directly address these specific dynamics, the significant inverse relationship between perceived social support and fear of intimacy suggests a broader applicability of social support in mitigating various facets of intimacy fears, including those related to power dynamics and vulnerability.

Baerveldt et al. (2014) further contribute to the discourse by linking early experiences of parental rejection and negative self-attitudes to fear of intimacy (Baerveldt et al., 2014). Our study's emphasis on the protective role of perceived social support potentially offers pathways for overcoming the long-term effects of such early adversities.

In conclusion, our study corroborates and extends existing literature by highlighting the significant role of perceived social support in reducing fear of intimacy among single girls. It underscores the importance of nurturing supportive social networks that can offer a sense of security and belonging, thereby reducing fears related to intimacy. The findings suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing perceived social support could be beneficial in addressing fear of intimacy, highlighting the need for a multifaceted approach that considers the role of attachment styles, emotional regulation, and early caregiving experiences. Future research should continue to explore these relationships in more depth, considering the interplay of individual psychological factors and broader social supports in shaping intimacy dynamics.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

While our study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. First, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to infer causality between perceived social support and fear of intimacy. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported measures may introduce response biases,

potentially impacting the accuracy of the reported levels of social support and fear of intimacy. Furthermore, the sample was limited to single girls within a specific age range, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations or relationship statuses.

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to better understand the causal relationships between social support and fear of intimacy. Expanding the demographic scope to include a broader range of ages, relationship statuses, and cultural backgrounds could also provide more comprehensive insights into these dynamics. Additionally, qualitative studies could offer deeper understandings of the subjective experiences of fear of intimacy and the nuances of social support, enriching the quantitative findings.

For practitioners working with individuals experiencing fear of intimacy, our findings underscore the importance of assessing and enhancing perceived social support. Interventions could be designed to strengthen relationships with family, friends, and significant others, potentially leveraging group therapy settings to foster supportive peer connections. Educating clients on the value of social support in alleviating intimacy fears may also be beneficial, along with strategies to actively seek and maintain supportive relationships. Furthermore, addressing attachment styles and emotional regulation skills in therapy could offer additional pathways to overcoming fear of intimacy, tailored to individual needs.

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Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.



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