



Volunteerism among Undergraduates: Examining the Predictive Roles of Perceived Social Support and Self-Esteem

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary landscape of university education underscores the importance of holistic development among undergraduates such as the inculcation of the sense of volunteerism. Over the years volunteerism has emerged as a significant avenue for personal and social growth, particularly within the university setting. Studies have used different predictors to explore volunteerism with varying results. Therefore, this study examined the predictive ability of perceived social support and self-esteem on volunteerism among undergraduates in a Nigerian university. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design while a purposive sampling technique was used to select years 1 and 2 undergraduates. Data were collected from 300 undergraduates using validated scales and analyzed using zero-order correlation statistics and multiple regression analysis to test two hypotheses at a $p < .05$ level of significance. The result showed that perceived social support significantly correlated with volunteerism among undergraduates. Also, perceived social support and self-esteem jointly predicted volunteerism among study participants. Finally, perceived social support independently predicted volunteerism among undergraduates. The study concluded that perceived social support rather than self-esteem is a more robust predictor of volunteerism among study participants. It is recommended that the university authority and other stakeholders should put enabling policies in place to encourage undergraduates to embrace volunteerism as a way of life.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary landscape of university education underscores the importance of holistic development among students, extending beyond academic achievements. Volunteering has emerged as a significant avenue for personal and social growth particularly within the university setting. Volunteerism refers to when an individual is engaged in freely chosen and deliberate helping activities that extend over time, that are engaged in without expectation of reward or other compensation and often through formal organizations, and that is performed on behalf of causes or individuals who desire assistance (Stukas et al., 2016). In a sense, it is one way of the many ways in which an individual can do good for others, the community, and society as a whole. It is an unpaid voluntary activity that provides some services to one or more other people or the community at large. Volunteerism has been reported to have beneficiary consequences to the individual, the community, and the large society (Stukas et al., 2016; Snyder & Omoto, 2008; Wilson, 2012; Shantz et al., 2014). Also, the services of volunteerism are closely related to the positive mental quality of the volunteers (Li & Zhou, 2017; Xu et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007).

Some factors have been implicated in predicting volunteerism among different populations and across different samples. One factor considered in this study is social support which refers to the assistance, care, or comfort that individuals receive from their social networks such as family, friends, or communities (Bruner et al., 2020). On the other hand, perceived social support refers to how individuals perceive friends, colleagues, and family members as available to provide functional and overall support during times of need (Sabra, 2019). Perceived social support has also been described as a psychological resource that would help individuals achieve their goals (Halbesleben et al., 2014), and would stimulate the motivation to volunteer, and thus promote the development of volunteerism (Stukas et al., 2016). Therefore, it encompasses emotional, informational, and tangible support. Studies have found that individuals who scored high on the perceived social support scale would score high on the volunteerism scale (Chen et al., 2020).

The second factor considered in this study to predict volunteerism is self-esteem which is described as an individual personal psychological characteristic relating to self-judgment based on the individual's values about himself and others (Alesi et al., 2012). Self-esteem implies an awareness of one's value system and one's emotional evaluation of one's self-worth (Schunk, 2018). Individuals' self-esteem tends to influence their perception of personal worth and competence which can shape choices such as volunteerism. Self-esteem is one's positive or negative attitude toward oneself and one's evaluation of one's thoughts and feelings overall concerning oneself. Studies have shown that individuals who scored high in self-esteem tend to respond positively toward volunteerism (Kulik, 2018; Veerasamy et al., 2013; Xu, 2019).

Studies that have been conducted outside and within the university environment using different predictors have produced varying results on volunteerism which left a gap, especially in the developing country such as Nigeria. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to re-examine the predictability of perceived social support and self-esteem on volunteerism using undergraduates of the Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo (AE-FUNAI). The research questions answered in this study were: Would perceived social support and self-esteem significantly correlate with volunteerism among undergraduates of the AE-FUNAI? Would self-esteem and perceived social support jointly and independently predict volunteerism among undergraduates of the AE-FUNAI?

The study would help to explain how perceived social support and self-esteem predict volunteerism among undergraduates of AE-FUNAI. Also, the findings of this study would help the government and other stakeholders to design appropriate strategies to motivate and encourage youths to embrace volunteerism as a way of life. Finally, the study would build data for further studies on volunteerism among the youth populations.

Two theoretical constructs were used to anchor this study.

- (i) Social Capital Theory was used to explain (SCT) perceived social support and volunteerism in this study. This theory was developed by Bourdieu and further elaborated by Coleman which has been improved over the years. The theory provides a sociological framework for understanding how social relationships and networks contribute to individual and collective benefits. The theory has three parts: bonding, bridging, and linking. Bonding social capital is formed between homogeneous groups of people, i.e., people with the same objectives and tasks. For example, people who work in the same organization could bond and form an association. The second, bridging social capital is a type of relationship formed between heterogeneous groups. That is, the mainstream interests could be different, but there could be some commonalities. An example is that of a dance group and a band partnering to conduct a concert. The last one is the linking social capital which is the relationship between a citizen and a government official or a relationship between people at different levels of power hierarchies. When the theory is applied to this study, it explains how the accumulation of social resources within a community can shape individuals' decisions to engage in prosocial activities such as volunteerism.
- (ii) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was the second theory used in this study to explain perceived social support and volunteerism. [Deci and Ryan \(2000\)](#) developed this theory to explain individuals' innate psychological needs and their role in the motivation of human behavior. SDT posits that individuals' abilities to make choices and manage their own lives give them the sense of being in control rather than being influenced by external forces. SDT provides a valuable framework for understanding the motivational dynamics that influence undergraduates to engage in volunteering activities. Recognizing the role of perceived social support in fulfilling basic psychological needs and promoting autonomous motivation, allows researchers and policymakers to design interventions that would enhance the quality and sustainability of undergraduates' volunteerism. This autonomy-supportive environment would foster undergraduates to internalize the value of volunteering activities, thereby contributing to both their personal development and the well-being of society. When the theory is applied to the influence of perceived social support on volunteerism among undergraduates, it provides insights into how the fulfillment of basic psychological needs would contribute to autonomous motivation and, subsequently, engagement in volunteerism.

Longitudinal study to investigate the relationship between peer social support and volunteerism among university students and found a significant relationship between perceived peer support and volunteerism. Undergraduates who reported higher levels of peer support at the beginning of the academic year were more likely to initiate volunteering activities. Further study on the role of mentoring in shaping perceived social support and volunteerism has been done ([Xu et al., 2020](#)) and the result revealed a significant positive relationship between participation in mentorship programs, perceived social support, and volunteerism among study participants. Equally relevant was [Horowitz et al. \(2017\)](#) study when they explored the influence of online social networks on perceived social support and volunteer engagement among college students. They identified a positive correlation

between active engagement on online social networks and perceived social support toward volunteerism.

Chen *et al.* (2020) conducted a cross-cultural study exploring the influence of perceived social support on volunteerism among international undergraduates. The result revealed that perceived social support and volunteerism varied significantly across the cultural backgrounds of the study participants. On their part, Nichol *et al.* (2024) investigated the interplay between perceived social support and volunteering behavior at the community level. The result revealed a positive significant relationship between perceived social support and volunteerism. Bacter and Marc (2016) examined the relationship between perceived social support and volunteers' motivation among college students and found a positive and significant correlation between perceived social support and volunteers' motivation. Students who reported higher levels of perceived social support were more likely to be motivated to engage in volunteerism.

Also, some studies have been executed on the influence of self-esteem on volunteerism among different populations and across different samples. For example, Xu (2019) found self-esteem to significantly correlate with volunteerism among university undergraduates. A similar result was found in a study by Kulik (2018) who found self-esteem to be positively correlated with volunteerism among physically challenged individuals. An earlier study by Veerasamy *et al.* (2013) revealed self-esteem to have a significant influence on volunteerism among healthcare volunteers in Malaysia. Also, Andam (2013) found self-esteem to significantly correlate with volunteerism among volunteer and non-volunteer sports enthusiasts.

Two hypotheses were generated and tested in this study:

- (i) H1: Self-esteem and perceived social support would significantly correlate with volunteerism among undergraduates of the Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo (AE-FUNAI).
- (ii) H2: Self-esteem and perceived social support would jointly and independently predict volunteerism among undergraduates of the AE-FUNAI.

2. METHODS

The study was cross-sectional survey research using validated questionnaires to gather data from the potential participants. The independent variables were self-esteem and social support while the dependent variable was helping behavior. The study was conducted among year 1 and 2 undergraduates of the Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo (AE-FUNAI). A purposive sampling technique was used to select years 1 and 2 undergraduate students for the study. A simple random sampling technique that involved simple balloting was used to select the participants for data collection.

A formal letter of introduction was collected from the Department of Psychology, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo (AE-FUNAI) to introduce us to the potential participants. Consent was sought from each participant after explaining the purpose of the study to them. They were duly informed that participation was voluntary. Potential participants were undergraduates who were met in their General Studies (GST) lecture halls across the seven faculties in the university. A list of numbers was generated from 1 to 1000 and randomly distributed to them. Those who picked an even number were given questionnaires to fill out. A total of 306 questionnaires were distributed to the undergraduates of AE-FUNAI and were collected on the spot. It took each participant less than 18 minutes to complete the questionnaire. While screening the questionnaires, six questionnaires were partially filled and were discarded thus leaving 300 used for the analysis.

Three instruments were used for data collection.

- (i) Perceived Social Support was measured using the Multidimensional Perceived Social Support Scale (MPSS) developed by Zimet *et al.* (1988). It is a 12-item scale presented on a 7-point Likert's format that ranges from 1=Very strongly disagree to 7 = Very strongly agree. The scale has three subscales: family (FAM), friends (FRI), and significant other (SO). The potential scores range is 12 to 84; the higher the score, the more social support is seen. Sample items include: "There is a special person who is around when I am in need", "There is a special person with whom I can share joy and sorrows", and "I get the emotional help and support that I need from my family". The MSPSS has been validated for use among Nigerian samples by Bello *et al.* (2022) with Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 while in the present study, Cronbach's alpha of 0.79 was calculated.
- (ii) Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES). The RSES is a 10-item scale presented on a 4-point Likert format that ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Sample items include: "I can do things as well as most other people", "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself", "I feel that I have many good qualities", and "I can do things as well as most other people". RSES has been validated for use among Nigerian samples by Oladipo *et al.* (2014) with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76, while in the present study, Cronbach's alpha of 0.71 was calculated.
- (iii) Helping Behavior was determined using the Helping Attitude Scale (HAS). HAS is a 20-item about participants' beliefs, feelings, and behaviors associated with helping. The scale is presented in a 7-point Likert format that ranges from 1: Extremely Unimportant to 7: Extremely Important. Sample items include: "When given the opportunity, I enjoy aiding others who are in need", "If possible, I would return lost money to the rightful owner", and "I would avoid aiding someone in a medical emergency if I could". The scale has been validated for use among Nigerian samples by Balogun and Shenge (2001) with Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, while in the present study, Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 was reported.

SPSS version 23 was used to analyze the data collected. Detailed information for the use of SPSS is reported elsewhere (Fiandini *et al.*, 2024; Afifah *et al.*, 2022). Both descriptive and inferential statistics were computed. Hypothesis 1 was tested using zero-order correlation statistics while hypothesis 2 was tested using multiple regression analysis. All hypotheses were accepted at $p < 0.05$ level of significance.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. H1: Self-esteem and perceived social support would significantly correlate with volunteerism among undergraduates of the AE-FUNAI.

The hypothesis was tested using zero-order correlation statistics and the result is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1 shows the zero-order correlation statistics among study variables. The result showed a marginal relationship between perceived social support and volunteerism among AE-FUNAI undergraduates ($r = .13$, $p < .05$). However, there was no significant relationship between self-esteem and volunteerism among AE-FUNAI undergraduates ($r = .09$, $p > .05$). Therefore, the hypothesis was partially supported.

Table 1. Zero-order Correlation of the Study Variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
HAS	21.47	2.3	-		
RSES	1.56	0.49	0.092	-	
PSS	3.76	0.52	0.133*	0.150**	-

Note:

HAS = Helping Attitude Scale, RSES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, PSS = Perceived Social Support, SD = Standard Deviation

*Significance at $p < 0.05$

3.2. H2: Self-esteem and perceived social support would jointly and independently predict volunteerism among AE-FUNAI undergraduates.

The hypothesis was tested using multiple regression analysis and the result is presented in **Table 2.**

Table 2. Multiple Regressions Showing Self-esteem and Perceived Social Support as Predictors of Helping Behavior among AE-FUNAI Undergraduates.

<i>Model Summary</i>						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate		
1	0.152 ^a	0.023	0.016	0.52019		
a. Predictors: (Constant), PSS, RSE						
<i>ANOVA^a</i>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1.897	2	0.949	3.506	0.031 ^b
	Residual	80.367	297	0.271		
	Total	82.264	299			
a. Dependent Variable: HAS= Helping Attitude Scale						
b. Predictors: (Constant), RSES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, PSS = Perceived Social Support						

Tables 2 and 3 depict the result of multiple regression analyses of self-esteem and social support predicting volunteerism among study participants. The result revealed that self-esteem and social support jointly predicted volunteerism among AE-FUNAI undergraduates [$R^2 = .023$, $F(2, 297) = 3.506$, $p < .05$].

Table 3. Coefficient calculation results.

<i>Coefficients^a</i>					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	β		
1 (Constant)	3.243	0.215		15.105	0.000
RSE	0.086	0.068	0.074	1.269	0.206
PSS	0.063	0.030	0.122	2.108	0.036
a. Dependent Variable: HAS= Helping Attitude Scale					
b. RSES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, PSS = Perceived Social Support					

Also, the result indicated that perceived social support independently predicted volunteerism among study participants ($\beta = 0.122$, $t = 2.108$, $p < 0.05$). However, self-esteem

did not independently predict volunteerism among study participants ($\beta = 0.074$, $t = 1.269$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, the hypothesis was partially supported.

3.3. Discussion

This study investigated perceived social support and self-esteem on volunteerism among undergraduates of the Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo (AE-FUNAI). Two hypotheses were generated and tested at a $p < .05$ level of significance.

The hypothesis that self-esteem and perceived social support would significantly correlate with volunteerism among undergraduates of the AE-FUNAI was partially supported. The result reveals that perceived social support significantly correlated with volunteerism among study participants. This result is in line with the findings by [Xu et al. \(2020\)](#) who found in their study that perceived social support significantly correlated with volunteerism among their study participants. However, self-esteem did not correlate with volunteerism among study participants.

The result of the hypothesis that self-esteem and perceived social support would jointly predict volunteerism among AE-FUNAI undergraduates was supported which marginally accounted for a 2.3% variance in the volunteerism. This means the interaction of self-esteem and social support predicts volunteerism. Several studies have strongly supported the predictability of perceived support for volunteerism among different populations and across different samples ([Chen et al., 2020](#); [Nichol et al., 2024](#)). However, self-esteem did not independently predict volunteerism among study participants. This finding negates the findings by [Xu \(2019\)](#) and [Kulik \(2018\)](#) who found self-esteem to be a significant predictor of volunteerism among their study participants.

The implications of this finding of perceived social support and self-esteem on volunteerism is a clarion called to the various stakeholders such as academic researchers, educators, policymakers, and community development organizations to inculcate into the undergraduates the values of volunteerism for the betterment of the individuals, the community and the society at large.

The university community would consider developing robust social support programs that would foster social connections and promote positive self-esteem that would encourage or motivate undergraduates toward volunteerism.

Educators would incorporate the result of this study into activities that promote social support and self-esteem within the curriculum which would lead to increased volunteerism among undergraduates. Community organizations would use the study's findings to refine their recruitment strategies that would foster social support and positive self-esteem among volunteering undergraduates. Policymakers may use the study's insights to inform the development of policies that encourage and recognize volunteerism among undergraduates. Researchers would be inspired to conduct longitudinal studies to explore the dynamic nature of social support, self-esteem, and volunteerism over time.

4. CONCLUSION

The study investigated perceived social support and self-esteem as predictors of volunteerism among undergraduates of AE-FUNAI in South-south, Nigeria. Two hypotheses were tested. The results show perceived social support as a robust predictor of volunteerism among undergraduates. A positive perception of social support was associated with increased participation in volunteering behavior among the participants. However, the study has some limitations that need to be addressed in further studies. First, data were collected using a self-

reported questionnaire which was not free of response bias. Further studies should include the use of observational methods to triangulate data that would be collected with other methods. Second, only years 1 and 2 undergraduates were sampled for the study which would not allow for the generalization of the study finding. Further studies should include undergraduates at other levels. Third, only two independent variables were investigated. Further studies should include learned helplessness and personality traits.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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