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Roles of personality and gender in healthy relationships among undergraduate students

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of gender and personality on healthy relationships among undergraduate students. Two hundred and forty six (246) students of University of Nigeria Nsukka participated in the study. Personality trait was measured with the Big Five Personality Inventory while the healthy relationship scale was measured with the Adaptive Relationship Scale (ARS). Multiple regression was used for data analysis. The results of the study indicated that gender did not significantly predict healthy relationships ($\beta = .042$, $t = .77$, $p > .05$). Of all the personality factors (extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and neuroticism), only neuroticism was a negatively significant predictor of a healthy relationship ($\beta = -.596$, $t = -10.90$; $p < .001$). Hence, the more the neurotic trait, the lower the adaptive relationship. The discussion highlighted the need to consider personality issues when entering a relationship and the need to educate students on how to maintain a healthy relationship to avoid obnoxious behaviour that may jeopardize their life as students.

Introduction

Human relationship is just as old as man and as deep as nature itself. Relationships between two or more persons are important to life as food and water are to the human body.

The enthusiasm with which undergraduate students delve into relationships gives the impression that healthy relationship exists in all their relationships. Study (e.g., Mlyakado, 2013) has revealed that these students are caught up in sexual relationships which eventually cause great problems in their psychosocial development, health, and academics. The present study wants to know if personality and gender have any influence on the healthy relationship among undergraduates because some students maintain good relationships without any negative impact while some end up having serious negative impacts.

A healthy relationship is simply when those that are close to each other feel safe, respect each other, and accept themselves for who they are. If a relationship is unhealthy, people may feel anxious, confused, uncertain, and unsafe. According to Zeigler (2011), an individual's quality of satisfaction in a relationship is a prerequisite for a healthy relationship. Personality traits are influential predictors of outcomes in the domains of education, work, relationships, health, and well-being. Bleidorn, et al (2019) have found that personality traits powerfully predict the outcome of relationships and personality traits are influential predictors of outcomes in the domains of education, work, relationships, health, and well-being. Vingehoes and colleagues (1990) found that personality characteristics that lead people to engage in an unhealthy type of behaviour might also produce the poor habit. This poor habit might be in form of an unhealthy relationship like (a) physical abuse/yelling/beating (b) humiliation/betrayal/sabotage (c) lack of fairness and equality (d) lack of privacy/

lack of respect for each other's friends and family (e) attempts to control or manipulate each other.

Though many works have been carried out on the relationship, there are still many issues that are yet to be investigated. For example, there is a need to investigate how the personality and gender of an individual influence a healthy relationship in the Nigerian context. Personality traits are patterns of thought, feeling, actions that distinguish people from one another, that is, a way of life that is identified by the consistent pattern of behaviour that an individual possesses, which are traits that are exhibited over time (Johnson, 1997). Many studies have supported that personality is a major determinant of behaviour for adults and adolescents (Garcia, 2011; McCrae, 2002). An individual's personality influences his/her decision making which means that the outcome of decision making depends on the person's personality. The decision may have a positive or negative impact on a person's health. The most important influential mode in surveying the personality trait in recent decades is the five-factor model: Extraversion - outgoing, energetic, gregarious (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2011); agreeableness - compassionate, cooperative, good-natured (Buckner et al., 2012); conscientiousness - self-disciplined, responsible, dependable (Buckner et al 2012); openness to experience - enjoying the adventure and new ideas (Greenberg & Baron 2002, Vakola et al 2004); and neuroticism - experiencing negative emotionality (Tosun & lajunen, 2010).

According to Hampson (2012), higher conscientiousness is consistently associated with

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better health outcomes. Kern (2014) equally noted that consciousness affects a social relationship. For example, lower childhood conscientiousness predicted a higher likelihood of midlife divorce. Farooqi (2014) reported that higher conscientiousness and lower neuroticism are linked to higher relationship satisfaction. Neuroticism is the most significant Big Five predictor overall, and as such researchers (e.g., Dyrenforth, Kashy, Donnellan, & Lucas, 2010; Finn, Mitte, & Neyer, 2013; Malouff et al., 2010; Mund et al., 2016) found that low levels of neuroticism demonstrate happier, healthier and more reliable relationships while high neuroticism tends to have a contradictory effect. Gonzaga, Campos and Brandbury (2007) have also argued that a healthy relationship has been associated with coherence in partners' overall personality profiles, instead of individual traits

Gender is referred to as the cultural and social meaning and expectation we attach to sexes and these include behaviours and characteristics that society considers as appropriate for both males and females. Gender is another factor that may influence a healthy relationship. The way male and female envisage things may be a strong factor in a healthy relationship. For example, many men according to Sedikides, Oliver, and Campbell, (1994) regard sexual gratification as an important benefit in a relationship while females consider intimacy and self-esteem as more important in a relationship. Research has also proven that varying roles of gender can greatly diminish the psychological and relationship well-being of individuals since personal beliefs and the actual demands of life situations can be conflicting. Connolly, Goossen, and Hjerm (2020) found that gender differences can have a significant influence in healthy relationships either in the form of suppressing or promoting intrinsic differences or even by actually shaping personality through internalization. The role of personality in healthy relationships is well documented. Gender has also been implicated as a significant factor in relationship expectations. However, little is known about how gender combines with the big five personality factors to determine a healthy relationship in the Nigerian context. Based on the review of literature, the following hypothesis were put forward: (1) Extraversion will significantly predict healthy relationship (2) Agreeableness will significantly predict healthy relationship (3) Openness to experience will significantly predict healthy relationship (4) Neuroticism will significantly predict healthy relationship (5) conscientiousness will significantly predict healthy relationship, and (6) Gender will significantly predict healthy relationship, such that personality traits and gender will strongly predict healthy relationship among undergraduates.

Method

Participants in this study consisted of 246 undergraduate students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. These students were drawn from faculties of Arts, Biological Sciences, and Education (First/second/third/final year Music, Science Education, and Botany students). Random sampling was used to select three faculties out of nine faculties in the university and three departments were selected from these faculties as follows: Science Education ($n = 90$), Botany ($n = 66$), and Music ($n = 90$). They were all undergraduates who fall within the age range of

18 to 25 years. Among the 246 participants, 107 were females while 139 were males. Concerning religious affiliation, all the students were Christians and they were all single.

Instruments

Two instruments were used for this study: Adaptive Relationship Scale (ARS) and the Big Five Inventory

The Adaptive Relationship Scale (ARS) was developed by Immanuel (2018). The ARS has 16 items. It measures the extent to which one's relationship is healthy, functional, and builds one up. Items have five response options: "strongly disagree (1)", "disagree (2)", "not sure (3)", "agree (4)", and "strongly agree (5)". However, items that indicate maladaptive interactions are reverse scored. The ARS has two factors: Factor 1 = Maladaptive relationship with 9 items - 3,4,5,6,7,9,10,11,12; and Factor 2 = Adaptive relationship, which has 7 items - 1,2,8,13,14,15,16. Cronbach's alpha for Factor 1 = .90; and Cronbach's alpha for Factor 2 = .77. The full-scale alpha for the ARS was .86 (Immanuel, 2018). The ARS can be used to assess the relationship of persons 15 years and above who are engaged in relationships (friendship, intimate relationship, etc.) other than parental and sibling relationships.

The five personality traits (Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, agreeableness, and Neuroticism) were measured using the 44-item Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI) (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008, John & Srivastava, 1999). The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale format with the number 1 at the negative end of the pole and 5 at the positive end (1 = disagree strongly, 2 = Disagree a little, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree a little, 5 = strongly agree). On each item, respondents reported the level depending on how they evaluate themselves. Sixteen (16) out of 44 items (2,6,8,9,12, 18, 21,23, 24,27, 31, 34, 35, 37,41, 43) are stored in a reversed format so that the participants score higher if responded to a negative item, while direct scoring is used for the rest. John et.al (1991) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .80 and test-retest reliability (3 months) of .85. BFI had a mean convergent validity coefficient of .75 and .85 with Big Five Instruments authored by Costa and Mc Crae (1992) and Golberg (1992) respectively. Umeh (2004) established divergent validity for the BFI among a sample of Nigerian university undergraduates by correlating the subscales of the BFI with the university Maladjustment scale (Kleinmuntz, 1961) and obtained coefficient of .05, .13, .11, .39, and -.21 for Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, agreeableness, and Neuroticism respectively. Eze (2012) reported .67 internal consistency reliability coefficient Cronbach's alpha for the inventory.

Procedure

Before the administration of the questionnaire to the participants, the first author gathered the participants from each department in a classroom and explained the purpose of the study to them. They were given assurance of confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Besides, the respondents were told that there was no right or wrong answer and they should be as honest as possible in their responses. The researcher was assisted by two research assistants in the data collection. The participants voluntarily

signed the informed consent form before filling the questionnaire.

Design/statistics

The study adopted a cross-sectional design. The statistics used for data analysis was multiple regression

Results

In table 1, there was no significant relationship between extraversion and healthy relationships. Agreeableness, Openness to Experience, and Conscientiousness did not correlate significantly with healthy relationships. Neuroticism was negatively associated with healthy relationships. Gender was positively related to healthy relationships indicating that males had higher scores in a healthy relationship.

Table 1: Mean and standard deviations of personality and adaptive relationship scores

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
ARS	40.44	10.76
Extraversion	7.37	2.65
Agreeableness	6.81	1.59
Openness	6.57	1.68
Neuroticism	4.53	2.14
Conscientiousness	6.98	1.791
Gender	1.43	.50

Table 1 showed the mean scores and standard deviations of the scores on personality and adaptive relationships.

Table 2: Correlations of personality, gender and healthy relationship among undergraduate students

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Healthy relationship	-					
2 Extraversion	.05					
3 Agreeableness	.06	.37**				
4 Openness to Experience	.03	.30**	.46***			
5 Neuroticism	-.59***	-.13*	-.22***	-.09		
6 Conscientiousness	.08	.25***	.53***	.40***	-.16**	
7 Gender	.16**	-.04	-.13*	-.13*	-.19**	-.09

Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; Gender: 1 = Female; 2 = Male

Table 3: Hierarchical linear regression predicting healthy relationship by personality and gender

Predictors	B	SE	β	t	p	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Extraversion	-.00	.23	.00	-.01	.996	-.45	.45
Agreeableness	-.60	.46	.09	-1.33	.186	-1.50	.29
Openness	.06	.39	.01	.14	.886	-.71	.82
Neuroticism	-3.00	.28	.60	-10.90	.000	-3.54	-2.46
Conscientiousness	.23	.38	.04	.61	.546	-.52	.97
Sex	.90	1.17	.04	.77	.440	-1.40	3.20

Note: $R^2 = .12$; $F(6,239) = 22.18$, $p < .001$.

The result in Table 2 showed that among all the personality facets, only neuroticism was a significant negative predictor of a healthy relationship. Individuals with higher neurotic traits had lower ARS scores. All the other personality factors did not significantly predict a healthy relationship. The B showed that for each one-unit rise in neuroticism, healthy relationship decreases by -3.00. Gender did not significantly predict a healthy relationship. All the variables in the regression model accounted for 12% of the variance in a healthy relationship. The F statistics for the regression model was significant, $F(6, 239) = 22.18$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

This study examined the influence of personality traits (neuroticism, openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness) and gender in healthy relationships. Findings of the study indicated that of all the personality factors (extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and neuroticism), only neuroticism was negatively significant influence of healthy relationships. The first hypothesis stated that extrersion will significantly predict healthy relationship. Extraversion did not significantly predict healthy relationship in this

present study. This finding is consistent with the study of Gatti et al (2004) who reported that extraversion had no significant influence on marital quality. The result of this study may be a result of the talkative nature of extraversion. An individual who talks too much may offend his/her friend or partner without knowing and if the partner/friend decides not to complain the relationship may go on well. Contrary to the second hypothesis, openness to experience was not a significant predictor of healthy relationship in the present study. Some studies have reported a significant relationship between openness and healthy relationship (e.g., Donnellan et. al, 2004). It is possible that in the present study, the cultural setting of the present study in Nigeria may contribute to the lack of significant association between openness to experience and health relationships.

In the third hypothesis, it was stated that agreeableness will significantly predict healthy relationship. Finding showed that agreeableness was not significantly associated with healthy relationship in this study, but some studies reported that agreeableness has a significant association with a healthy relationship. Donnellan et. al, (2004) reported that agreeableness negatively correlated with negative interaction and positively correlated with a positive assessment of the marital relationship. The present result may be because there may be some persons that may want their partner or friend to be creative and not agree in everything they say. Such persons may want their partner to contribute ideas to build their relationship. In contrast to the fourth hypothesis which stated that conscientiousness will significantly predict healthy relationship, it was found that conscientiousness did not predict healthy relationship. Some studies had found significant positive correlation between conscientiousness and quality of relationship (e.g., Hayes & Joseph, 2003, Malouff et. al, 2010). However this current findings is consistent with the result past research indicating that the personality traits of a husband did not predict the marital quality of women, and the personality traits of a wife did not predict the marital quality of men (Zafer, Yeliz, & Fatma, 2016).

Neuroticism was hypothesized to be a significant predictor of healthy relationship as the fifth hypothesis. Findings showed that neuroticism had a negatively significant influence on healthy relationship. It was the only trait that significantly predicted healthy relationship in the present study. Studies on personality traits have also shown similar findings that higher neuroticism in one or both partners leads to a higher negative marriage outcome and it is positively associated with a high rate of divorce (e.g., Vater & Schroder, 2015, Javanmard & Garegoslo, 2013). Zafer, Yeliz and Fatma (2016) reported that neuroticism negatively predicted relationship quality. Studies have reported that expressing criticism, contempt, and defensiveness in a relationship contributes to greater relationship problems (Malouff et al. 2010). Individuals who are high in neuroticism may experience unhealthy emotions throughout relationship conflicts, and due to their low self-control, might respond with a negative emotion regulation approach such as overt aggressiveness (Vater & Schroder, 2015).

The sixth hypothesis stated that gender will significantly influence healthy relationship. The present study indicated that there was no significant gender difference in healthy relationship among

undergraduates. In this modern society, gender may not influence healthy relationship because the masculine quality and feminine quality exist in each gender. The choice of personal expression to keep a relationship is not one-sided. Studies have shown that masculine and feminine gender feel less understanding, less affectionate and contentment in their relationship (Helms et al., 2006). Relationship without behaviours and characteristics that society considers as appropriate for both males and females may be healthier because modern societies may not attach much to those old traditional ways of considering appropriate behaviour for males and females. Several implications could be drawn from the result of this study. It was found that neuroticism, one of the personality traits is negatively associated with healthy relationship among university students. There is a great need to consider personality issues when entering into a relationship especially neuroticism trait. The researcher suggested that family education should be a general course for all the students and through this means students will be educated on how to maintain a healthy relationship to avoid obnoxious behaviour that may jeopardize their life as students.

The present study has some problems which might limit the generalization of the results. One of the limitations is that data were collected only from only the University of Nigeria students. Data from several universities would have been more desirable since it would minimize common method bias. The study did not look at other variables like parenting styles and cultural belief systems that may have been capable of influencing healthy relationships. Based on these limitations, drawing inferences should be done with caution. Future research should include longitudinal design to further assess the functionality of the big five personality inventory and how it predicts relationship outcomes. Future research should also try to harness and identify alternative factors, other than gender and personality that can influence the outcome of relationships.

Conclusion

This study explored the roles of personality and gender in healthy relationships among undergraduates. The study result indicated that students high in neuroticism had low levels of healthy relationships. Since personality traits are relatively stable over time, they can be used to predict an individual's behaviour in different life situations, including healthy relationships among undergraduates. This implies that among Nigerian undergraduates personality of an individual should be considered if the students want a healthy relationship.

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