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Intimate Partner Violence, Social Support and Psychological Distress among University Female University Students

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ABSTRACT: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a pervasive and concerning social issue that affects individuals worldwide, transcending various demographic groups. The consequences of IPV extend far beyond the immediate victims, impacting families, communities, and society. Among the most vulnerable groups affected by IPV are university female students. This study aimed to investigate the link between Intimate partner violence, social support, and psychological distress among university female students. The study employed a quantitative approach which was correlational in nature, with a sample of 377 adult female university student as a sample size from Makerere University. Stratified sampling method was used to select respondents where self-report questionnaires were used. Data was collected using a self-report structured questionnaire. Data was entered into SPSSV23 and analyzed using Pearson correlations, for hypothesis 1, 2, and 3, and PROCESS macro by and Hayes was used for hypothesis 4. Results indicated that all the three components of intimate partner violence (severe combined abuse, emotional abuse, and physical abuse) are significantly related to psychological distress ($r=.141$, $p<0.01$; $r=.210$, $p<.000$; $r=.183$, $p<0.05$). Also, results indicated a negative significant relationship between social support and psychological distress ($r=-.314$, $p<0.05$). In addition, results indicated a negative significant relationship between two components of intimate partner violence (emotional abuse; physical abuse) and social support ($r=-.167$, $p<0.05$; $r=-.0185$, $p<0.05$). However, the results indicated a non-significant relationship between severe combined abuse and social support. Lastly, the results showed that social support partially mediates the relationship between intimate partner violence and psychological distress among Makerere university female students. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics of intimate partner violence, social support, and psychological distress among university students.

KEYWORDS: *Intimate Partner Violence, Social Support and Psychological Distres*

I. BACKGROUND

Intimate partner violence (IPV) which is sometimes called domestic violence refers to acts within an intimate relationship that results into physical, sexual, and psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors (Ansara & Hindin, 2010). It is a global public health problem that is increasingly cited as a risk factor for adverse physical and behavioral health outcomes among university female students(Nguyen et al., 2018). It should be emphasized that IPV is a fundamental problem for individuals across the life span. However, when it comes to university female students, the impact or IPV is beyond imaginable, most students have developed long term physical and psychological disabilities such as stress and depression. Due to lack of social support, most female students who are victims of IPV, their academic performance has deteriorated, whereas some develop a sense of hopelessness and later abandon their courses (Choi et al., 2021).

The incidence of IPV is more severe in women compared to men with approximately 30% of women worldwide reporting violence by an intimate partner at some point in their life. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), the prevalence of IPV is higher, with about 37% among females aged 15–69 years(Gubi et al., 2020) . The lifetime prevalence of women experiencing IPV is estimated to be between 15% and 71% among women worldwide (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2006). Female students who report ever experiencing any physical or sexual violence by their current or most recent husband or cohabiting partner range from 18% in Cambodia to 48% in Zambia for physical violence, and 4% to 17% for sexual violence (World Health Organization 2012). In Uganda, IPV is still the highest contributor to Gender Based Violence with a prevalence level of 40% among ever married women in the 12 months preceding the 2016 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS), a rate which surpasses that of the rest of the world (Gubi et al., 2020).

Social Support is the primary potential protective factor that has been studied in relation to the abuse of university female students (Andalibi et al., 2018). Social support may buffer against stress in several ways, such as enhancing self-esteem, influencing perceptions of stressful events, and increasing knowledge of coping strategies(Machisa et al., 2018). To protect themselves during non-disaster circumstances, IPV victims may seek help from informal (friends, family, neighbors, etc.) and formal support, such as courts, police, shelters, and social service providers (Slakoff et al., 2020). Studying rates of IPV among female undergraduate students, is necessary to lead grounded efforts to prevent and address IPV in the university setting. More than physical injury, IPV can also cause deterioration in mental health and even lead to the development of major psychopathology (Musa et al., 2021). IPV is associated with a range of mental disorders including depression, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), anxiety, self-harm, and sleep-disorders.

II.   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Intimate partner violence (IPV) poses a significant and escalating threat to the well-being of female university students globally (Ozaki & Otis, 2017). This study focuses on Makerere University female students and aims to address a critical gap in understanding by exploring the prevalence and consequences of IPV in this specific context. Current literature acknowledges the rising incidence of IPV among female university students, with reported instances of severe physical abuse, sexual harassment, and emotional coercion within intimate relationships (Tarzia, 2021b). Estimates suggest that 10-50% of university intimate relationships involve physical aggression, 15-25% involve sexual aggression, and emotional or psychological aggression occurs in 50-80% of such relationships (Wood et al., 2020). However, the variation in victimization rates is partly attributed to inconsistent conceptualization and measurement of IPV across studies. It is evident that our understanding of IPV experiences among university students, particularly females, remains incomplete. To strengthen the foundation of this research, it is imperative to incorporate data specific to the experiences of intimate violence among university students in sub-Saharan Africa.

This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the prevalence of physical, psychological, sexual, and cyber forms of IPV among a sample of female identified Makerere University students. Furthermore, it investigates the association between these types of IPV and psychological distress, including heightened risks of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and substance abuse, particularly in cases where victims have limited social support.

III.   Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between intimate partner violence and psychological distress among university female students.
2. To determine the relationship between social support and psychological distress among university female students.
3. To identify the relationship between intimate partner violence and psychological distress among university female students.
4. To find out whether the association between the relationship between intimate partner violence and psychological distress is mediated by social support among university female students.
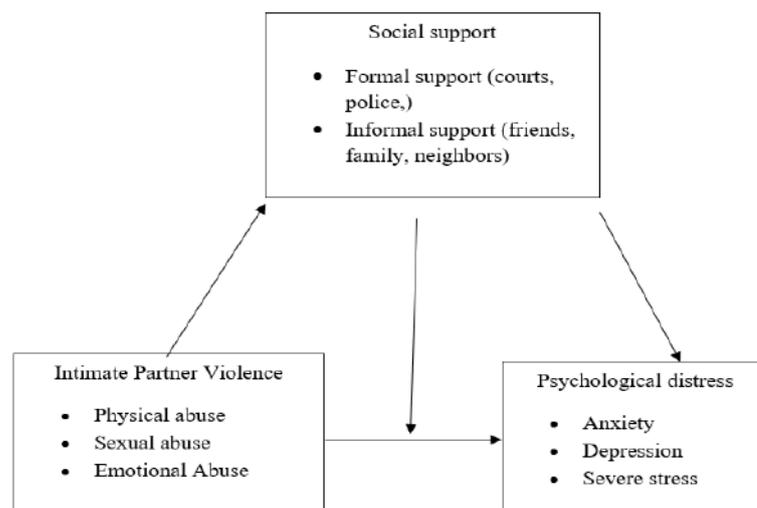
IV.   CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1
A figure showing the relationship between the variables under study.

The figure above represents the conceptual framework which shows the relationship between intimate partner violence, social support, and psychological distress. It ascertains that intimate partner violence and social support among university female students reciprocally affect each other and are transitional to other influences like psychological distress among the university female students. The framework hypothesized that experiencing intimate partner violence positively associates with psychological distress. university female students who experience IPV are more likely to suffer from mental health issues which may compel them to seek social support. Social support plays a mediating role between intimate partner violence and psychological distress. Higher levels of social support may mitigate the negative impact of IPV on psychological distress, acting as a protective factor. However, social support and psychological distress can have a bidirectional relationship. Higher levels of psychological distress may lead to a reduced ability to seek and maintain social support, while lower levels of social support may contribute to increased psychological distress.

V.   METHODS

The study employed a quantitative research approach, specifically utilizing a correlational design, to explore the interplay between intimate partner violence, social support, and psychological distress.

The study population comprised of female university students between the age of 18 and above from Makerere University. This was chosen because of its richness in the number of female students from all the different colleges and the ever-increasing cases of Intimate partner violence that need a remedy. The sample size was determined using the Krejcie & Morgan's sample size determination guide (Chaokromthong & Sintao, 2021). According to this guide, a population size of 19,800, a sample of 376 university female students was suggested.

A questionnaire comprising of four sections was used. Section A comprised of the social demographics of participants, section B was the composite Abuse Scale, section C was the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, section D was a psychological distress measurement scale(Courtin et al., 2023).

Data analysis was carried out using Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) version 27 for both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics on background information of respondents were summarized in frequency tables. Hypothesis 1, 2 and 3 was analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient, where the level of significance was observed at $p \leq 0.05$. Hypothesis 4 that examines the mediation relationship of social support was analyzed using Conditional Process macro-V.4

VI.   RESULTS

Table 1

Pearson correlation results of intimate partner violence, social support, and psychological distress

		1	2	3	4	5
1.	Severe combined abuse	1	.787	.572	-.070	.141
			.000	.000	.174	.006
2.	Emotional abuse		1	.737	-.167	.210
				.000	.001	.000
3.	Physical abuse			1	-.185	.183
					.000	.000
4.	Social support				1	-.314
						.000
5.	Psychological distress					1

Table 1 shows the Pearson correlation results between intimate partner violence, social support, and psychological distress among students of Makerere University

Intimate Partner violence and psychological distress
H$_1$: there is a significant relationship between intimate partner violence and psychological distress among students of Makerere University
Results in Table 1 indicated that all the three components or subsets of intimate partner violence (severe combined abuse, emotional abuse, and physical abuse) are significantly related to psychological distress (r=.141, p<0.01; r=.210, p<.000; r=.183, p<0.05). Since all the p values are lesser than 0.05, the alternative hypothesis is therefore retained thus concluding that intimate partner violence is significantly related to psychological distress among Makerere University students. This implies that university students who experience intimate partner violence are more likely to also experience psychological distress

Social support and psychological distress
H$_1$; there is a significant relationship between social support and psychological distress among Makerere university students.
Results in Table 1 indicated a negative significant relationship between social support and psychological distress (r=-.314, p<0.05). Since the p value is less in magnitude than 0.05, the alternative hypothesis is therefore retained thus concluding that perceived social support and psychological distress are significantly related among

Makerere University students. This implies that university students who perceive social support are less likely to experience psychological distress compared to their counterparts.

Intimate Partner violence and social support

H_1: there is a significant relationship between intimate partner violence and social support among Makerere university students.

Results in table 1 indicated a negative significant relationship between two components of intimate partner violence (i.e., emotional abuse; physical abuse) and social support (r=-.167, p<0.05; r= -.185, p<0.05). Since the p values were less in magnitude than 0.05, it was concluded that emotional abuse and physical abuse are significantly related to social support. This implies that university students who are victims of both emotional and physical abuse are more likely to perceive social support than their counterparts.

However, the table indicated a non-significant relationship between severe combined abuse and social support (p=.070, r>0.05). Since the p value was greater than 0.05, it was concluded that severe combined abuse, a component of intimate partner violence, is not significantly related to social support among Makerere university students. This implies that whether students experience severe combined abuse or not, it will not determine or affect their level of perceived social support.

The mediation role of social support on intimate partner violence and psychological distress

H_1: Perceived social support mediates the relationship between intimate partner violence and psychological distress among Makerere university students.

Table 2

The mediation role of social support on the relationship between intimate partner violence and psychological distress

Predictors	Psychological distress					
	B	Se	T	P	CI Interval) LLCI	(Confidence ULCI
Constant	1.527	.737	2.072	.039	.078	2.976
Intimate partner violence	.312	.009	32.997	.000	.293	.330
Social support	-.018	.011	-1.608	.109	-.041	.004

Mediation analysis summary

Relationship	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Confidence interval		Conclusion
				Lower bound	Upper bound	
Intimate Partner violence>social support>Psychological- Distress	0.314 (0.00)	0.312 (0.000)	0.003	0.000	0.006	Partial Mediation

The fourth objective of the study focused on assessing the mediating role of social support on the relationship between intimate partner violence and psychological distress. The results revealed a significant indirect effect of Intimate partner violence on psychological distress (b=0.003). Furthermore, the direct effect of intimate partner violence on psychological distress in the presence of the mediator was also found significant (b=0.314, p<0.001). Therefore, a conclusion that social support partially mediates the relationship between intimate partner violence and psychological distress among Makerere university students was reached at

VII. DISCUSSION

This section entails an explanation of the research findings. It discusses the findings from the four objectives and hypotheses that guided the study. In hypotheses 1, 2 and 3, a significant relationship was observed between the study variables while hypothesis 4 of the mediation relationship, social support significantly mediated the relationship between Intimate partner violence and psychological distress among university female students.

Intimate partner violence and psychological distress

The first hypothesis states that intimate partner violence and psychological distress are significantly related. Findings of the study indicated that a positive significant relationship between the three components of

Intimate partner violence (i.e., combine severe abuse, physical abuse emotional abuse) and psychological distress exist among Makerere university students. The findings suggest that students who experience IPV may be more likely to suffer from psychological distress compared to those who do not.

The study findings agree with previous studies which have examined the impact of intimate partner violence on psychological distress among college students. For example, a study conducted by Johnson. (2019) found that intimate partner violence significantly predicted levels of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder among college students. The study highlighted the need for interventions and support services to address the psychological consequences of intimate partner violence among this population.

Social support and Psychological-Distress

The second hypothesis stated that social support and psychological distress are significantly related. Findings of the study indicated a negative significant relationship between social support and psychological distress among Makerere university students. The negative significant relationship found in the study suggests that higher levels of perceived social support are associated with lower levels of psychological distress among Makerere University students. This implies that when students feel supported and understood by their social networks, they are less likely to experience mental distress.

The study findings agree with a systematic review study by Gulliver et al., (2018) which synthesized findings from numerous studies conducted globally and indicated a strong negative correlation between social support and psychological distress. The results suggested that individuals with higher levels of social support tend to experience lower levels of psychological distress. Thus, the findings from Makerere University students align with the broader literature in this field.

Intimate Partner violence and social support

The third hypothesis stated that there is a significant relationship between intimate partner violence and social support among Makerere university students, the results indicated a negative significant relationship between two components of intimate partner violence (i.e., emotional abuse; physical abuse) and social support hence the negative significant relationship between intimate partner violence and social support highlights the adverse impact of abusive relationships on the students' support networks. When students experience emotional or physical abuse in their intimate relationships, they may face challenges in seeking or receiving support from their social circles. Importance of addressing intimate partner violence on university campuses and providing comprehensive support systems for students facing such challenges. Implementing proactive and supportive measures can create safer and more nurturing environments for all students.

The study findings agree with previous studies, for example, a study by Yalch & Levendosky, (2018) revealed that Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a public health problem worldwide with detrimental effects on the victims' mental and physical health and quality of life. People experiencing abusive relationships have disrupted social ties and sometimes are socially isolated as a result of the abuse (Tarzia, 2021a). Conversely, increased social support may help IPV victims to cope with their critical situation. Social support entails receiving information that enables individuals to believe that they are part of a reciprocal network where they feel valued, loved, and cared for (Andalibi et al., 2018). Moreover, elevated social support levels positively affect the individual's quality of life. Social support has a relevant role in mitigating the impact of IPV on the mental and physical health of victims (DIas et al., 2018).

The mediation role of social support on intimate partner violence and psychological distress

The fourth and final hypothesis examined whether the relationship between Intimate partner violence and psychological distress was moderated by social support. Findings from this study showed that social support partially mediates the relationship between intimate partner violence and psychological distress among university students. The results imply that social support provides individuals with emotional, instrumental, and informational resources to cope with stress and adversities. When students experience intimate partner violence, having supportive relationships can act as a buffer, mitigating the negative impact of the violence on their psychological well-being. Supportive relationships can offer comfort, validation, and practical assistance, helping students cope with the distress associated with IPV.

According to several research (Beeble et al. 2009), IPV affects poor mental health by depleting social and personal resources. In fact, IPV is linked to poorer support perceptions. In a comparison study of women who had experienced IPV and women who had not, Katerndahl et al. (2013) discovered that women who had experienced IPV had weaker and more limited social support systems. As a moderator or buffer, social support for battered women may lessen the negative effects of violence on mental health (Beeble et al. 2009). For instance, Coker et al. (2002) discovered that women who had IPV had a lower probability of poor perceived mental and physical health, anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms, and suicide attempts when they had more social support. Although the buffering benefits of social support are highest at lower degrees of abuse, social support does in fact have primary, mediating, and moderating impacts on wellbeing (Beeble et al. 2009). For

instance, Goodman et al. (2005) discovered an interaction between social support and history of violence such that social support did not work as a protective factor for women who had suffered the most severe violence.

VIII.   CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study examined the associations between intimate partner violence (IPV), social support, and psychological distress among university female students in significant relationships. The findings shed light on the prevalence of IPV, the role of social support in mitigating psychological distress, and the complex interplay between these variables.

The study revealed that a considerable proportion of university female students in significant relationships experienced IPV. This includes various forms of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse perpetrated by their partners. The presence of IPV was found to be strongly associated with higher levels of psychological distress among the participants, indicating the detrimental impact of IPV on mental well-being.

However, social support emerged as a crucial protective factor. The study demonstrated that higher levels of social support were associated with lower psychological distress among female students experiencing IPV. This highlights the importance of fostering supportive networks, including friends, family, and other sources of support, in mitigating the negative psychological consequences of IPV

IX.   RECOMMENDATIONS

The University should provide educational programs that raise awareness about IPV, its impact on mental health, and available support services. Offer information on recognizing signs of abuse, safety planning, and seeking help, this can be through offering individual counseling or therapy to support survivors of IPV and help them cope with psychological distress. Provide a safe and confidential space for discussing experiences, emotions, and coping strategies.

Promote the development of supportive networks by organizing support groups, peer mentoring programs, or online forums where survivors can connect with others who have experienced IPV. Foster a sense of belonging and understanding. They can get relationship skills programs that focus on healthy communication, conflict resolution, and boundaries. Provide information on building respectful and non-violent relationships.

Establish comprehensive institutional policies and protocols to address IPV on campus. Ensure clear guidelines for reporting, investigating, and responding to incidents of IPV. Train faculty, staff, and administrators on recognizing signs of abuse and providing appropriate support.

Establish on-campus advocacy centers or offices that provide confidential support, counseling, and resources for survivors of IPV. Train specialized staff members to offer guidance and assistance throughout the reporting and recovery process.

Institutions of higher learning should collaborate with local organizations that specialize in IPV prevention and support services. Develop partnerships to provide referrals, resources, and community-based support networks for survivors. Nevertheless, these institutions should also conduct awareness campaigns that challenge societal norms, myths, and stigmas surrounding IPV. Promote community-wide education on healthy relationships, consent, and bystander intervention.

It is recommended that the University should design and implement awareness campaigns on intimate partner violence tailored to the Makerere University context. Utilize various communication channels such as posters, workshops, and social media to ensure widespread dissemination of information.

Student-led initiatives that focus on creating a culture of support and awareness encourage and support should be encouraged. Student organizations and clubs could play a key role in organizing events, workshops, and discussions on the topic of IPV.

Advocate for the development or enhancement of university policies addressing intimate partner violence. This could involve working with university administrators and policymakers to ensure that policies are comprehensive, responsive, and effectively implemented.

It is recommended that training for university staff, including security personnel and frontline personnel, on crisis intervention and how to respond effectively to instances of intimate partner violence should be provided. This ensures a coordinated and supportive response system within the university.

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