

The Effect of Psychological and Non-Psychological Support on Relationship Satisfaction In Close Friendship

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Abstract Friendships play a crucial role in university students' well-being, particularly in their relationship satisfaction. This is more prominent when physical distance from family limits access to emotional and practical supports. To explore this phenomenon, a study was conducted to examine the effects of both types of support on relationship satisfaction among close friends in a university setting. A total of 203 undergraduate students took part in this study. Most participants were female ($n=138$, 68%), while the remaining are male ($n=65$, 32%). The study found that both psychological and non-psychological support contributed significantly and positively to relationship satisfaction. The more students received both supports, the more satisfied they were with their satisfaction in friendships. This study showed a combination of empathy, encouragement, and helpful actions contributes to stronger and more fulfilling friendships. The results can help guide peer support initiatives and encourage students to offer and seek various types of support to maintain healthy and satisfying friendships.

Keywords: *Close friends; relationship satisfaction; emotional support; practical support; social support.*

Introduction

Human relationships are vital to human well-being. They provide emotional stability, social integration, and a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Among existing relationship, friendships have an important role in influencing an individual's psychological and social development, particularly during adolescence and early adulthood (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). Friendship offers more than just companionship, but also filling the gap of our neediness. For adolescents, particularly universities students, while venturing the "real world" that take tolls over physical, mental well-being. During difficult times, close friends are a prominent source of support. Asking for support from parents who lived far away might be inconvenient, hence close friends comes in handy. This scenario shows how friendships provide major support for university students moving into independent adulthood, filling the hole created by geographically distant family members (Wilcox & Winn, 2005).

As adolescents grow and mature, their approach to friendship evolves, shaping how they perceive and prioritize on social support. According to Loannou et al. (2019), social support refers to how people perceive friends, family, and other people as potential resources for offering psychological and social support when needed. In this case, individuals in friendships often seek different values and have varying expectations about the type of social support they receive. These preferences can be explained through the two established forms of social support: (a) emotional support, which is conceptualized as acceptance, sympathy, affection, care, love, encouragement, and trust (Li et al., 2014); and (b) instrumental support, defined as the provision of financial assistance, material goods, or services (Nguyen et al., 2016).

For instance, one friend may require psychological support in the form of emotional reassurance, such as simply as "being there" and "as a shoulder to cry on". In other hand, they might be just in need for non-psychological support, as in "can you lend me RM50? I have no money to buy food." or

academic assistance in university. Past study by Boute et al. (2007) and Zatkova et al. (2024) further proven that friends in university provide both emotional support and tangible assistance when needed. Saeed (2023) emphasize that social support is significantly important for academic achievement, which is closely related in university students context. Camara et al. (2017), however, highlighted that adolescence value emotional support more than other needs. Hence, these conflicting needs raise the question of whether adolescence have different preferences for different sorts of assistance.

To understand which type of support is more valued in friendships, this study focuses relationship satisfaction as key predictors. Relationship satisfaction is measured by the level of happiness in the relationship and how often one's expectations are met or fulfilled by close friends. By examining how these two types of social support influence relationship satisfaction, this study aims to provide insights into the effects of psychological and non-psychological support on relationship satisfaction among close friendship at Universiti Malaysia Sabah.

Research Background

Close Friends

There is no fixed conceptual definition in psychology that could explain the degree of term 'close friends', as it is poorly studied in personal relationship (Parks & Floyd, 1996). However, close friends can be generally explained as someone with whom you share a strong, personal connection marked by trust, mutual support, and a high level of closeness. Monsour (1992) expands on the close friend term by defining intimacy as a multidimensional construct in friendships that includes self-disclosure, emotional expressiveness, and unconditional support. Similarly, Becker et al. (2009) and Johnson et al. (2009) emphasize that interdependence, shared activities, and social support, reinforcing the idea that closeness in friendship is

shaped by both emotional depth and reciprocal investment. Hence, disclosing the '*close friend*' phrases to call someone a truly "close friend" indicates that they have a special and significant place in their lives, particularly among college students. This idea suggests that during their time at university, this friend has been a major source of support, whether it be socially, academically, or emotionally.

Psychological and Non-Psychological Support

Social support is an interpersonal process in which a person feels appreciated, cared for, and connected to a network that offers mutual aid. (Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Sarason et al., 1987). Gurung, as cited in Saeed et al. (2023) also mentioned that social support encompasses the feelings of being appreciated, respected, cared for, and loved by others. It involves both psychological and non-psychological forms of support, where psychological support focus on encompassing emotional reassurance, validation, and a sense of belonging, while non-psychological support focus tangible aid such as financial assistance, academic help, or practical guidance (Chen et al., 2015). Individuals often exchange social support through direct contacts, in which they verbally acknowledge difficulties, provide guidance, or lend emotional comfort to mitigate challenges. In terms of university student's context, social support provides well-being, as it helps them to manage their academic pressures, social adjustments, and personal struggles, reinforcing resilience and a sense of belonging in their environment.

Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction is the subjective assessment of the quality and fulfillment gained from a connection. In friendships, it requires emotional well-being, mutual delight, common interests, and good communication. Akin et al. (2016) defined friendship satisfaction as quality of happiness quality that influences individuals' development and adjustment through their interaction. Pezirkianidis et al. (2023) relate satisfaction is closely to emotional support, as these aspects encourage positive interactions and lessen conflict, resulting in greater wellbeing in the relationship. Importantly, research suggests that people who have close friendships and social confidants report better levels of life satisfaction and are less likely to suffer from depression (Choi et al., 2020).

Literature review

Relationship satisfaction are essential components of close friendships, as they affect well-being, mental health, and social stability. While substantial research has been conducted on these aspects in romantic and familial relationships, there is still a lack of understanding regarding their impact in friendships. However, some research highlights (Chen et al., 2015; Howe et al., 2023; Morelli et al., 2015; Petersen et al., 2023; Picton et al., 2017) displays emotional support, instrumental aid, reciprocity, cultural influences, and trust-building mechanisms as a single finding in overall cater the basic friendship needs.

While there is less research that focus on impact of psychological support and non-psychological support together, Morelli et al. (2015), Petersen et al. (2023) and Picton et al. (2017) respectively however focused on how emotional support is needed in friendship to ensure trust and satisfaction, whereby focusing on empathy, responsiveness, and verbal encouragement. Morelli et al. (2015) discovered that emotional support lowers loneliness, tension, and anxiety. It works best when combined with empathy-driven engagement, implying that emotional reactivity maximizes its effects. This also in line with Picton et al. (2017) where they found that emotional

support in friendships improves university students' psychological well-being and learning engagement by lowering stress and increasing confidence. In perceived emotional support, Petersen et al. (2023) identified that adolescents who received high levels of perceived emotional support from friends reported good mental health. In contrast, a lack of friend-based support was associated with poor psychological well-being. These findings indicate that while non-psychological support can improve relationships, its effectiveness depends on the context and accompanying emotional factors.

However, some studies suggest that non-psychological support, such as tangible acts and instrumental aid, can also enhance relationship satisfaction. Howe et al. (2023) generally discovered how tangible act is effective than intangible support. They revealed that small presents are more beneficial than supportive conversation in promoting emotional healing during difficult times. Gifts are viewed as selfless gestures that demonstrate concern, increasing relationship pleasure. Morelli et al. (2015) also observed that instrumental help (e.g., task assistance) only improves relationships when accompanied with emotional engagement. Without this combination, instrumental aid can feel burdensome or transactional.

Previous research has demonstrated that people's perceptions and values of social support in friendships can be influenced by cultural setting. Chen et al. (2015), for instance, discovered that people from collectivistic cultures, like Malaysia, prefer more indirect types of care. This consists of loyalty and practical assistance. However, people from individualistic cultures typically prefer direct emotional support. This finding shows collectivistic societies emphasized relationship quality being more closely related to these indirect support behaviors.

Based on the preceding past studies, Emotional support improves relationship satisfaction, particularly in friendships, by fostering trust, empathy, and well-being. Morelli et al. (2015), Petersen et al. (2023), and Picton et al. (2017) emphasize the significance of emotional support in lowering anxiety, loneliness, and stress, as well as enhancing psychological health and confidence. However, non-psychological support, such as tangible actions or instrumental aid, can also positively impact relationships, as proven by Howe et al. (2023) and Morelli et al. (2015), but it is most successful when combined with emotional engagement. Cultural factors also affect how support is perceived and how effective it is. Chen et al. (2015) showed that collectivistic cultures prefer indirect types of care. These studies highlight the complexity of relationship support and the necessity of combining non-psychological and psychological support to improve relationship satisfaction.

Although some studies discuss satisfaction in the context of life satisfaction or overall well-being (e.g., Amati et al., 2018; Bakalim & Taşdelen-Karçkay., 2016), less studies specifically focus on relationship satisfaction within the friendship as a primary outcome variable in relation to both psychological and non-psychological support. While psychological support, particularly emotional support, is widely recognized as a key factor in fostering relationship satisfaction (Morelli et al., 2015; Picton et al., 2017; Petersen et al., 2023), some studies suggest that non-psychological support, such as instrumental aid or material support, may be equally or even more effective in strengthening interpersonal bonds (Howe et al., 2023).

However, research findings on the relative importance of these two types of support in friendships remain inconsistent. Research results on the relative significance of these two forms of friendship support, however, are still mixed. According to

Morelli et al. (2015), without emotional involvement, instrumental assistance by itself may come off as transactional, which might affect overall relationship satisfaction. The importance of non-psychological support in preserving close relationships was highlighted by Howe et al. (2023), who discovered that simple material actions, such as providing gifts, had a greater effect on emotional recovery than verbal reassurance. Furthermore, cultural characteristics might influence how assistance is viewed and appreciated. For example, collectivistic cultures place greater importance on indirect, concrete gestures of caring, whereas individualistic cultures encourage direct emotional expression (Ah Gang & Stukas, 2015; Chen et al., 2015). Mathieu et al. (2019) also argued that emotional support gives a bigger impact on relationship satisfaction than providing tangible acts.

Given these conflicting perspectives, it remains unclear whether psychological support plays a more significant role in fostering relationship satisfaction in friendships than non-psychological support, or whether both contribute equally depending on context. This gap in the literature raises a key research dilemma, which type of support has a stronger effect on relationship satisfaction in close friendships? Understanding the effects of psychological and non-psychological support on friendship satisfaction and trust might provide useful information on the factors that contribute to the strength of these relationships. Hence, this study aims to investigate the effect of psychological and non-psychological support, along with length of friendship on trust and relationship satisfaction in close friends.

Research Instruments

This study aims to investigate the effect of psychological and non-psychological support on relationship satisfaction in close friends. To conduct, a quantitative research design is implemented. It involves using a survey-based method to gather numerical data for statistical analysis. The total number of items for the overall questionnaire consists of 38 items. A set of questionnaires consisting of three parts was used to measure all variables in this study. A non-probability purposive sampling technique is utilized to select participants who match the following inclusion criteria: (1) ages between 18 to 30 years old, (2) having one close friend for at least six months, (3) is an undergraduate student from University Malaysia Sabah and (4) be willing to participate. This methodology provides objectivity and enables the discovery of significant effects between variables.

Demographic scale

This section assessed participants' background using six items, which examined gender, ethnicity, religion, age, year of study, faculty and length of friendship.

Psychological Support

Psychological support was measured using the Significant Other Subscale and Friends Subscale of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al., 1988). These subscales consist of 8 items all together assessing perceived emotional availability in friendships. Items were modified to fit the friendship context, where the term 'special person' and 'friend' will be changed to 'close friend' to fit the research aim. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Very Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Very Strongly Agree). Sample items included: "There is a close friend in my life who cares about my feelings (Item 10)." and "I can talk about my problems with my close friend (Item 12)."

Non Psychological Support

Non-psychological support was assessed using the Tangible Support Subscale of the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL) – Shortened Version. This measure is a shortened version of the original ISEL with 40 items (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). This subscale consists of 12 items measuring practical and material aid provided in friendships. The terms 'someone' in each question will be replaced by 'close friend' to fit the research purpose. However, only 4 items related to Tangible Support Subscale were used in this study. Participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Definitely False) to 4 (Definitely True). The scale includes three subscales: Appraisal Support (e.g., receiving advice, "I have a close friend that I can turn to for advice about handling problems with my family"), Belonging Support (e.g., shared activities, "If I wanted to have lunch, I could easily find my close friend to join me"), and Tangible Support (e.g., practical help, "If I were sick, I could easily find my close friend to help me with my daily chores"). Sample items also include reversed items, which consist of items 1, 2, 7, 8, 11 and item 12. Sample items include: "If I wanted to go on a trip for a day (for example, to the country or mountains), I would have a hard time finding my close friend to go with me. (Item 1)".

Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction was measured using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) (Hendrick, 1988). This seven-item measure evaluates general satisfaction in friendships, with items adapted to fit the friendship context. The terms 'partner' for each question will be replaced by 'close friend' to fit the research purpose. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Poorly) to 5 (Extremely Well). Sample items include: "In general, how satisfied are you with your friendship?" and "To what extent does your friendship meet your needs?". Items 4 and 7 are reverse scored. Sample items include: "How many problems are there in your friendship? (Item 7)".

Results

There were 203 undergraduates' students from various faculties in Universiti Malaysia Sabah who took part in this study. Most of them are female, 138 (68%) and the remaining are male, 65 (32%). The mean age is 22.54 (SD=1.195), ranging from the age of 20 until 26 years old. Other demographic information can be referred to Table 1.

Table 1

The Demographic Profile of Participants (N=203)

Variables	Number	Percentage (%)
Race		
Malay	35	17.2
Chinese	24	11.8
Indian	5	2.5
Bumiputera Sabah	120	59.1
Bumiputera Sarawak	16	7.9
Others	3	1.5
Religion		
Islam	106	52.2
Christian	79	38.9
Buddha	15	7.4
Hindu	2	1.0
Atheist	1	.5
Year of Study		
Year 1	39	19.2

Year 2	28	13.8
Year 3	116	57.1
Year 4	20	9.9
Faculty		
Faculty of Psychology and Social Work	45	22.2
Faculty of Education and Sport Studies	11	5.4
Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy	39	19.2
Faculty of Engineering	19	9.4
Faculty of Computing Informatics	13	6.4
Faculty of Social Science and Humanities	24	11.8
Faculty of Science and Natural Resources	15	7.4
Faculty of Islamic Studies	6	3.0
Academy of Arts and Creative Technology	14	6.9
Faculty of Tropical Forestry	8	3.9
Faculty of Food Science and Nutrition	7	3.4
Faculty of Medicine and Health Science	2	1.0

Before the analysis was conducted, the reliability value for each were examined. This is to ensure that each scale measure the variables as intended. The reliability scale for each subscales in instruments Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL) – Shortened Version and Relationship Satisfaction Scale (RAS) is examined by internal consistency reliability Cronbach Alpha. Based on Table 2, each subscale shows reliability ranging from 0.57 to 0.97.

Table 2

The Reliability Values of Each Scale and Subscales in The Study

Scale & Subscales	Number of items	Reliability values
Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)	12	.95
Psychological Social support Subscale (i.e. Significant other and Friends' Social Support)	8	.97
Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL)	12	.85
Non-Psychological Support (Tangible Support) Subscale	4	.57
Relationship Satisfaction Scale	7	.81

To investigate the effect of psychological support on close friend relationship satisfaction, a simple linear regression was used. A total of 203 participants were included in the study. Due to missing values in the independent or dependent variables, 197 participants were retained in the regression analysis using listwise deletion. In this analysis, the independent variable was psychological support, and the dependent variable was relationship satisfaction, as evaluated by their respective average scores. The regression analysis revealed that psychological support strongly

influenced relationship satisfaction. The psychological support showed a significant positive effect on relationship satisfaction, ($\beta = .55$ (1,197, $t=9.25$), $p < .001$), accounting for 30% of the variance in relationship satisfaction.

Table 3

Simple Linear Regression of Psychological Support Predicting Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship Satisfaction	R squared	Beta	t value	Significant value
Psychological Support	.30	.55	9.25	< .001

A second simple linear regression was also conducted to examine the effect of non-psychological support on relationship satisfaction among close friends. In this analysis, the independent variable was non-psychological support (measured using the Tangible Subscale), and the dependent variable was relationship satisfaction. The non-psychology support showed a significant positive effect on relationship satisfaction, ($\beta = .48$ (1,197, $t=7.66$), $p < .001$), accounting for 23% of the variance in relationship satisfaction.

Table 4

Simple Linear Regression of Non-Psychological Support Predicting Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship Satisfaction	R squared	Beta	t value	Significant value
Non-Psychological Support	.23	.48	7.66	< .001

Discussions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of psychological and non-psychological support on relationship satisfaction among close friends. The findings supported the hypothesis of whether practical or emotional support, are crucial in enhancing the quality of friendships by showing that both forms of support significantly increased relationship satisfaction.

The findings that psychological support has a significant effect on relationship satisfaction are consistent with previous research. Psychological support, which frequently includes empathy, encouragement, and emotional presence, directly addresses the emotional needs that are essential for developing and maintaining close friendships (Morelli et al., 2015). In a university setting, where stress from academic obligations and life transitions is high, emotionally supportive behaviors, such as listening, providing encouragement, and demonstrating empathy help individuals feel understood and valued (Boute et al., 2007). This emotional reassurance increases feelings of connection, which leads directly to relationship satisfaction. These findings are consistent with past studies (Morelli et al., 2015; Picton et al., 2017), who found that emotional support not only reduces stress but also strengthens interpersonal bonds.

However, the significant impact of non-psychological support, while slightly weaker, should not be overlooked. Tangible acts like helping with tasks or providing physical assistance also contribute to relationship satisfaction, particularly when such actions are interpreted as signs of care

and dependability. This is supported by Howe et al.'s study (2023) that small material acts can have a positive impact on emotional health, particularly when they show deliberate attempts to attend to a friend's needs. These findings imply that by providing outward signs of dedication and presence, practical support which enhances emotional support.

The distinctive cultural context of Malaysian adolescence, where collectivistic values continue to influence interpersonal dynamics, may also be reflected in this finding. Nonverbal and action-based support such as lending a hand without asking directly may be particularly significant in these cultures. This is further supported by Ma'rof et. al (2024), where collectivistic culture does significantly impact pro-social actions as it demanded in social expectation and maintaining cohesiveness in relationship. Even if it does not directly discuss specifically on friendship, it offers insight on how individuals are culturally conditioned to express care and support in indirect, socially appropriate ways. As a result, tangible aid may have symbolic value that subtly and culturally appropriately raises satisfaction, even though emotional support may have a deeper psychological resonance. This aligns with Chen et. al (2015) that Malaysian prefers indirect support rather than emotional to shows their effort in relationship.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings support key principles of Interdependence Theory, which emphasises that relationship quality is determined by mutual responsiveness and perceived benefits. Friends exchange emotional reassurance or practical assistance to promote trust, stability, and satisfaction. The fact that both types of support had a significant impact on satisfaction suggests that emotional and practical interdependence work together to strengthen friendships.

Conclusions

This study aims to examine the effects of psychological and non-psychological support on relationship satisfaction in close friendships. By conducting it quantitatively, the study is able to find empirical evidence on whether different types of support contribute towards friendship satisfaction. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the necessity of holistic support in friendships, emphasizing that both emotional and practical contributions are required for relationship satisfaction. The findings are consistent with previous research, indicating that while emotional support has a profound impact on relationship satisfaction (Morelli et al., 2015; Picton et al., 2017; Petersen et al., 2023), non-psychological support, such as practical help and tangible aid, also contributes significantly, especially when delivered in culturally appropriate ways (Chen et al., 2015; Howe et al., 2023). However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, participants may have struggled to differentiate between type of support, leading to misconception that could reduce the clarity of the measured effects. The study also relies on self report measure that may have introduced social desirability bias, particularly in the Malaysian cultural context, where individual may assume that giving or receiving support is solely about maintaining positive self-image (Nurumov et al., 2022). Furthermore, dyadic data, in which both members of a friendship report their experiences was not taken into consideration in this study. The results might not accurately reflect the reciprocal nature of support in relationships because only one aspect of the friendship was measured. A more accurate picture of how support affects relationship satisfaction could be provided by future research employing a dyadic approach, which would more accurately evaluate how friends perceived and actual support on each other (Mey-Bajens et al., 2022). The study also did not account for relationship turning points, such as conflict or crises which

may significantly alter the nature and perception of support regardless of its quantity. Future study could address these limitations by using qualitative or mixed method approaches to acquire a better understanding of how various sorts of assistance are perceived and conveyed. Including dyadic viewpoints from both members in the friendship would provide a more complete picture of mutual support and relationship dynamics. Furthermore, considering contextual factors such as cultural background, friendship duration, and individual differences in support preferences can assist to illustrate how different types of support influence relationship satisfaction in different circumstances.

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