

Predicting Borderline Personality Features based on Childhood Trauma and Spirituality among Female University Students

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Abstract

Aim: This study aimed to examine the predictive role of childhood trauma dimensions and spiritual intelligence components in relation to borderline personality features among female university students.

Method: A descriptive, correlational design was employed. The sample comprised 150 female undergraduate students from the Faculty of Humanities at the Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, Tehran, during the 2020–2021 academic year, selected via convenience sampling through online academic networks. Data were collected using the Borderline Personality Inventory (Leichsenring, 1999), the Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (King, 2008), and the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein et al., 1997). Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and standard multivariable regression analyses via SPSS 20.

Results: Childhood trauma dimensions accounted for 31.5% of the variance in borderline personality features ($R^2=.315$, $p=.001$), with physical, emotional, and sexual abuse emerging as significant positive predictors. Spiritual intelligence components accounted for 22.8% of the variance ($R^2=.228$, $p=.001$), with critical existential thinking, personal meaning production, and conscious state expansion functioning as significant negative predictors.

Conclusion: Conclusion: Childhood abuse significantly increases vulnerability to borderline personality features, whereas existential and meaning-oriented spiritual intelligence serves as a key protective buffer. University counseling centers should incorporate trauma-informed screening and meaning-centered interventions to strengthen resilience among female students.

Keywords: Borderline personality features, childhood trauma, spiritual intelligence, female students.

Introduction

Adverse developmental experiences can profoundly disrupt adaptive personality development and emotional functioning across the lifespan (Tzouvara et al., 2023). Within the spectrum of personality-related vulnerabilities, borderline personality features—characterized by affective instability, identity disturbance, chronic feelings of emptiness, and interpersonal friction—represent a continuum of impairment evident in both clinical populations and non-clinical community samples (Pour Mohammad & Jahangiri, 2019; Valikhani et al., 2020). Although substantial research has delineated the clinical architecture of borderline pathology, identifying the developmental vulnerabilities and psychological resources that correlate with borderline features in emerging adults remains an essential empirical endeavor.

Childhood maltreatment represents a primary developmental precursor to borderline personality traits. Exposure to developmental trauma severely undermines interpersonal security, self-concept coherence, and adaptive distress tolerance (Bernstein et al., 1997; Garrusi & Nakhaee, 2009). Empirical inquiries consistently demonstrate robust associations between early relational trauma and heightened borderline personality characteristics in both general and high-risk populations (Enfael et al., 2021; Ostad Noroozi & Zemestani, 2021). Specific forms of severe adversity, particularly childhood sexual, emotional, and physical abuse, exert long-term debilitating influences on affect regulation, manifesting as interpersonal hypersensitivity and heightened vulnerability to stress (Alves et al., 2024; Levin et al., 2021; Lotzin et al., 2019). Despite the well-documented detrimental role of childhood trauma, not all individuals exposed to developmental adversity manifest comparable degrees of borderline personality features, highlighting the potential contribution of cognitive and internal regulatory resources.

In this context, spiritual intelligence has emerged as a vital protective construct. Distinct from conventional religiosity or adherence to formal religious rituals, spiritual intelligence represents an integrated set of cognitive and psychological capacities applied to existential problem-solving, meaning production, and consciousness regulation (King & DeCicco, 2009; Sharif Nia et al., 2015). Capacities such as critical existential thinking and personal meaning production enable individuals to extract purpose from adverse circumstances, restructure distress, and counter pervasive existential emptiness—a core component of borderline vulnerability (Aggarwal et al., 2023; Thauvoye et al., 2018). Furthermore, expanded states of awareness and mindfulness foster psychological flexibility, reducing reliance on experiential avoidance and maladaptive emotional suppression (Mohi et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding the theoretical rationale linking early maltreatment and internal resources to personality functioning, empirical investigations examining childhood trauma dimensions and multidimensional spiritual intelligence concurrently within non-

clinical young adults remain scarce. Addressing this empirical gap is particularly salient among female university students, who often navigate unique psychosocial stressors and developmental transitions. Therefore, the present study aimed to examine the predictive utility of childhood trauma dimensions (physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, alongside physical and emotional neglect) and spiritual intelligence components (critical existential thinking, personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and consciousness expansion) in relation to borderline personality features in a non-clinical cohort of female university students. It was hypothesized that childhood trauma subtypes would positively predict borderline personality features, whereas spiritual intelligence dimensions would inversely predict these features.

Methodology

This investigation employed a descriptive, correlational cross-sectional design. The target population consisted of female undergraduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities at the Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran, during the 2020–2021 academic year. Given the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and campus closures, an online convenience sampling strategy was adopted via official and student-affiliated institutional online channels.

The required sample size was determined through two complementary approaches. First, based on Green's (1991) established rule of thumb for multiple regression ($N \geq 50 + 8k$, where k denotes the number of predictor variables), with three predictors, a minimum of 74 participants was required. Second, an a priori statistical power analysis performed using G*Power (version 3.1.9.7) indicated that for a multiple regression model with three predictors, assuming a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), an alpha level of 0.05, and a statistical power ($1 - \beta$) of 0.80, a minimum sample size of 77 participants was necessary. To account for potential non-response rates and multivariate outliers, a total of 150 eligible female students were recruited and retained, ensuring robust statistical power (> 0.95) to detect meaningful associations.

Participants were selected based on strictly defined eligibility criteria. Inclusion was limited to active female undergraduate students in the Faculty of Humanities who provided informed consent and reported no history of severe psychiatric or neurological diagnoses. Exclusion criteria included (a) withdrawal from the study participation, (b) submission of substantially incomplete data, (c) the onset of severe acute illness during the assessment period, and (d) geographical migration during the data collection phase. By employing mandatory response-validation protocols within the digital survey interface, all 150 returned protocols were fully completed, ensuring 100% data retention and zero post-selection attrition.

All analytical procedures were executed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 20). Descriptive statistics were initially generated, reporting frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and range scores (minimum and maximum), as well as skewness and kurtosis indices to confirm univariate distributional normality, with all values remaining within the acceptable benchmark of -2 to +2. Bivariate relationships were subsequently explored using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients. To predict borderline

personality features based on childhood trauma and spirituality dimensions, a standard (Enter method) multiple linear regression analysis was performed. Before interpreting the regression model, critical statistical assumptions were rigorously evaluated; specifically, multivariate outliers were assessed using Mahalanobis distance at $p > 0.001$, confirming no influential multivariate anomalies, while multicollinearity was examined using Variance Inflation Factor ($VIF < 5.0$) and Tolerance indices (> 0.20) to ensure distinctness among predictors. Furthermore, the independence of errors was verified using the Durbin–Watson statistic, which fell within the acceptable criterion range of 1.50 to 2.50, and linearity and homoscedasticity were inspected visually through standardized residual scatterplots against predicted values. Finally, model fitness was evaluated via the overall ANOVA F-statistic and the coefficient of determination (R^2 and adjusted R^2), while individual predictor contributions were ascertained using unstandardized coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), standardized beta weights (Beta), and corresponding t-statistics at a significance threshold of $p < 0.05$.

Data Collection Tools

The Borderline Personality Inventory (BPI): This questionnaire was designed by Lyrics (1999) to measure borderline personality traits in both clinical and non-clinical samples using a yes/no response format. The questionnaire consists of 53 items, scored as follows: “Yes” = 1 and “No” = 0. For Question 13, Option A is scored as 1 and Option B as 0. The first 20 questions do not represent a separate factor but relate to the four dimensions of the questionnaire. A score above 10 on these 20 questions indicates a likelihood of borderline personality disorder, whereas a score below 10 suggests a lower probability (Lyricneig, 1999, as cited in Mohammadzadeh & Rezaei, 2011). Lyrics (1999) reported satisfactory internal consistency and reliability for this test, with Cronbach’s alpha ranging from 0.68 to 0.91. Mohammadzadeh and Rezaei (2011) further validated the questionnaire, reporting subscale correlation coefficients between 0.71 and 0.80 and internal consistency coefficients of 0.83, 0.83, and 0.85 for three types of reliability. In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha for borderline personality disorder was 0.83, with values of 0.75 for identity disturbance, 0.69 for initial defense mechanisms, 0.80 for reality testing, and 0.91 for fear of intimacy.

The King’s Spirituality and Religion Questionnaire (KSRQ): The King’s Spirituality and Religion Questionnaire, developed in 2004, consists of four items across four subscales: critical existential thinking, personal meaning production, transcendent awareness, and consciousness expansion (King & DeCicco, 2009). Higher scores indicate greater spiritual intelligence. An Iranian study reported a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.88 for this scale. In this study, Cronbach’s alpha for spiritual intelligence was 0.75, with 0.72 for critical existential thinking, 0.84 for personal meaning production, 0.76 for transcendent awareness, and 0.79 for consciousness expansion (Sharif Nia et al., 2009).

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ): Designed by Bernstein et al., the CTQ consists of 28 items on a five-point Likert scale, assessing physical abuse, emotional

abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse. Reliability has been reported between 0.79 and 0.94 (Bernstein et al., 1997). Garrusi, & Nakhaee, (2009) validated the questionnaire using factor analysis. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha for the CTQ was 0.89, with 0.88 for physical abuse, 0.93 for emotional abuse, 0.86 for physical neglect, 0.67 for emotional neglect, and 0.76 for sexual abuse.

Results

The final study sample consisted of 150 female undergraduate students. The majority of participants were aged 18 to 25 years ($n = 89$, 59.3%), followed by 25 to 30 years ($n = 42$, 28.0%), and 30 years and older ($n = 19$, 12.7%). Regarding marital status, 98 participants (65.3%) were single, and 52 (34.7%) were married (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Characteristics (N = 150)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	150	100.0
	Male	0	0.0
Age	18–25 years	89	59.3
	25–30 years	42	28.0
	≥ 30 years	19	12.7
Marital Status	Single	98	65.3
	Married	52	34.7

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Normality Indices of Study Variables (N = 150)

Variable	Mean	SD	M in	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis	Shapiro-Wilk	p
Borderline Personality Features	21.09	4.65	11	37	0.236	-0.943	0.927	< .001
Physical Abuse	13.22	3.44	6	21	0.126	-1.114	0.955	< .001
Emotional Abuse	16.18	4.36	7	23	-0.264	-1.546	0.867	< .001
Physical Neglect	13.98	3.23	5	19	0.090	-1.610	0.883	< .001

Emotional Neglect	17.09	4.98	7	23	-0.291	-1.406	0.900	< .001
Sexual Abuse	8.34	3.33	2	14	-0.103	-0.747	0.955	< .001
Critical Thinking	14.09	3.55	7	23	0.236	-0.929	0.959	< .001
Personal Meaning	9.65	3.34	2	16	0.022	-1.294	0.933	< .001
Transcendental Awareness	13.44	3.54	3	23	0.223	-0.903	0.924	< .001
Mindfulness / Consciousness Expansion	9.34	2.78	3	16	0.155	-1.123	0.927	< .001

Descriptive parameters including means, standard deviations, and distributional properties are summarized in Table 2. In terms of normality assumptions, although the Shapiro–Wilk tests were statistically significant due to sample size sensitivity, both skewness values (ranging from -0.291 to 0.236) and kurtosis values (ranging from -1.610 to -0.747) fell well within the acceptable criterion range of -2.0 to +2.0, establishing satisfactory univariate normality across all investigated dimensions.

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Physical Abuse	1									
2. Emotional Abuse	.435**	1								
3. Physical Neglect	.398**	.432**	1							
4. Emotional Neglect	.325**	.334**	.235**	1						
5. Sexual Abuse	.432**	.432**	.299**	.342**	1					
6. Critical Thinking	-.224**	-.297**	-.198**	-.300**	-.287**	1				
7. Personal Meaning	-.432**	-.235**	-.299**	-.213**	-.412**	.300**	1			

8. Transcendental Awareness	- .297**	- .356**	- .308**	.208**	-.287**	.379**	.418**	1		
9. Mindfulness	- .373**	- .234**	- .287**	- .398**	-.509**	.369**	.309**	.436* *	1	
10. Borderline Features	.236**	.266**	.309**	.235**	.289**	-.237**	-.409**	- .347* *	- .32 7**	1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Bivariate Pearson correlation analyses revealed that all dimensions of childhood trauma were significantly and positively correlated with borderline personality features ($p < .01$). Conversely, dimensions of spiritual intelligence demonstrated significant inverse relationships with borderline personality features ($p < .01$) (Table 3).

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Borderline Personality Features from Childhood Trauma and Spiritual Intelligence (N = 150)

Model & Predictors	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p	β	t	p
Model 1: Childhood Trauma	.562	.315	.291	13.24	< .001			
Physical Abuse						.356	3.756	< .001

Emotional Abuse						.321	3.422	.001
Physical Neglect						.124	1.432	.154
Emotional Neglect						.148	1.776	.078
Sexual Abuse						.289	3.126	.002
Model 2: Spiritual Intelligence	.478	.228	.207	10.71	< .001			
Critical Thinking						-.300	-3.320	.001
Personal Meaning						-.276	-3.009	.003
Transcendental Awareness						.142	1.508	.134
Mindfulness / Expansion						-.231	-2.542	.012

Note. β = standardized regression coefficient; t = t -statistic; F = F -ratio; p -values without leading zeros per APA style.

As presented in Table 4, the multiple linear regression model for childhood trauma significantly predicted borderline personality features ($R^2 = .315$, $F(5, 144) = 13.24$, $p < .001$). Physical abuse ($\beta = .356$, $t = 3.756$, $p < .001$), emotional abuse ($\beta = .321$, $t = 3.422$, $p = .001$), and sexual abuse ($\beta = .289$, $t = 3.126$, $p = .002$) were significant positive predictors, whereas physical neglect ($\beta = .124$, $t = 1.432$, $p = .154$) and emotional neglect ($\beta = .148$, $t = 1.776$, $p = .078$) were not. Regarding spiritual intelligence ($R^2 = .228$, $F(4, 145) = 10.71$, $p < .001$), results showed that critical thinking ($\beta = -.300$, $t = -3.320$, $p = .001$), personal meaning ($\beta = -.276$, $t = -3.009$, $p = .003$), and mindfulness/consciousness expansion ($\beta = -.231$, $t = -2.542$, $p = .012$) were significant negative predictors, while transcendental awareness ($\beta = .142$, $t = 1.508$, $p = .134$) was not significant.

Discussion

The present investigation aimed to elucidate the predictive utility of childhood trauma subtypes and spiritual intelligence dimensions in relation to borderline personality features within a non-clinical cohort of female university students. Bivariate and multivariable evaluations revealed a distinct conceptual pattern: early maltreatment experiences emerged as significant vulnerability factors, whereas higher capacities across core dimensions of spiritual intelligence functioned as salient protective resources. Crucially, the focus of this study was restricted to non-clinical borderline personality features rather than diagnosed clinical psychopathology, necessitating a dimensional and non-etiological interpretation of the observed statistical relationships.

A central finding of this study is the pronounced role of active maltreatment—specifically physical, emotional, and sexual abuse—in predicting borderline personality features. These findings align with extensive empirical literature highlighting the enduring

consequences of developmental trauma on personality organization and affective regulation. Ostad Noroozi and Zemestani (2021) demonstrated that early relational adversities markedly differentiate personality functioning and exacerbate pathological traits. Similarly, Pour Mohammad and Jahangiri (2019) underscored that developmental maltreatment and disrupted attachment significantly heighten borderline personality features in non-clinical cohorts. The present observations are further supported by Enfael et al. (2021), who delineated the substantial contribution of adverse developmental environments to borderline personality profiles.

Theoretically, early exposure to direct abuse undermines emotional security, impairs basic trust, and disrupts the development of adaptive distress tolerance and affect regulation (Tzouvara et al., 2023). Within chronic invalidating or threatening developmental contexts, the individual develops hypervigilance and interpersonal hypersensitivity, foundational characteristics of borderline traits (Levin et al., 2021; Lotzin et al., 2019). The salient contribution of sexual abuse observed here corresponds with systematic evidence documenting the profound trauma-related sequelae of sexual violations across developmental stages (Alves et al., 2024; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020), as well as broader recognitions of the detrimental psychological impact of boundary violations across varied settings (Harrison et al., 2025). Interestingly, neglect dimensions did not maintain independent statistical contributions when modeled alongside active abuse subtypes. This pattern indicates that within non-clinical student samples, direct violations of interpersonal integrity exert a more acute destabilizing influence on personality equilibrium than passive omissions, or that shared variance between maltreatment subtypes is largely accounted for by active abuse domains.

Regarding spiritual intelligence, the findings demonstrated substantial negative associations between core spiritual components and borderline personality features. Specifically, critical existential thinking, personal meaning production, and consciousness expansion operated as meaningful inverse correlates. These results corroborate the multidimensional framework of King and DeCicco (2009), illustrating that spiritual intelligence comprises cognitive and self-regulatory capacities beyond traditional religiosity. These findings are also consistent with systematic evidence demonstrating that spirituality- and meaning-based resources significantly mitigate affective vulnerabilities and psychological distress among young adults (Aggarwal et al., 2023; Thauvoye et al., 2018).

From a regulatory standpoint, critical existential thinking enables individuals to reappraise catastrophic thoughts and rigid cognitive patterns, thereby counteracting the

emotional lability typical of borderline vulnerability (Valikhani et al., 2020). Concurrently, personal meaning production provides a coherent framework of purpose, directly buffering against the chronic feelings of emptiness and identity diffusion characteristic of borderline features. Furthermore, consciousness expansion and mindful presence diminish reliance on experiential avoidance and maladaptive suppression, promoting adaptive acceptance and distress tolerance under interpersonal strain (Mohi et al., 2021). In contrast, transcendental awareness did not emerge as an independent predictor in the multivariable analysis. This distinction suggests that abstract metaphysical awareness may be less functionally proximal to emotional and interpersonal regulation than pragmatic, self-reflective capacities such as meaning-making and reflective critical thought.

Several methodological limitations must be considered. First, the cross-sectional design precludes drawing definitive inferences regarding temporal ordering or directional causality. Second, reliance on retrospective self-report inventories introduces potential recall inaccuracies and social desirability biases. Third, the study examined a non-clinical sample of female undergraduate students from a single institutional setting, which restricts generalizability across genders, other educational institutions, and formal clinical populations diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. Future investigations should employ multi-wave prospective longitudinal designs, integrate multi-informant assessments and structured clinical interviews, and examine affective mechanisms such as emotion regulation and experiential avoidance that may mediate these relationships over time.

Conclusion

The evidence indicates that childhood abuse dimensions represent critical vulnerability correlates for borderline personality features, whereas cognitive and meaning-oriented dimensions of spiritual intelligence offer substantial protective benefits. Mental health services within university counseling centers should adopt trauma-informed assessment protocols. Preventative and supportive psychological interventions would benefit from cultivating existential meaning-making, reflective reappraisal skills, and mindfulness-based emotion regulation to reduce affective vulnerability in emerging adults.

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Conflict of interest

This study did not have any conflict of interest for the authors

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Ethical considerations

The study protocol was conducted in strict compliance with the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. Prior to administration, written electronic informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Participants were fully briefed regarding the study aims, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without negative consequences. Strict confidentiality and data anonymization were maintained, with no identifiable personal credentials stored. Clear instructions were provided, no financial remuneration was involved, and all procedures aligned with local socio-cultural and religious frameworks.

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