International Journal of Technology and Education Research

https://e-journal.citakonsultindo.or.id/index.php/IJETER

E-ISSN: 2986-0733

Suicidal Ideation Among Undergraduates in Ibadan: Examining the Influence of Depression and Hopelessness

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of depression and hopelessness on suicidal ideation among undergraduates of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The study adopted cross-sectional survey design while purposive sampling technique was used to select the study population. Data were conveniently collected from 200 participants using validated questionnaires and analyzed using zero-order correlation and independent sample t-test statistics and accepted at p <.001 level of significance. The result revealed that depression (r=-.23, p <.00) and hopelessness (r=-.32, p <.001) negatively correlated with suicidal ideation among study participants. Furthermore, both depression [t (197) =-3.65, p < .001] and hopelessness [t(197) = -4.85, p <0.001] significantly contributed to suicidal ideation among study participants. However, there was no gender difference in suicidal ideation among study participants. The study concludes that depression and hopelessness strongly correlated with suicidal ideation among undergraduates of the University of Ibadan. The study recommends that the university authority should have a functional mental health clinic to attend to students diagnosed with suicidal thoughts and other psychological dysfunctions.

Keywords: Depression, hopelessness, suicidal ideation, undergraduates

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INTRODUCTION

Suicidal ideation refers to an individual thinking about ending one's life which ranges from infrequent feelings and wishes to be dead or thought that life is not worth living (Klonsky et al., 2016). It exists in the form of a consideration to act it out. In terms of patterns, suicidal ideation manifests in a wide ranges of specificity, frequency, and intensity. Two types of suicidal ideation have been identified: active and passive. Active suicidal ideation involves an existing wish to die along with a plan on how to carry out the death action(Tucker & Wiesen-Martin, 2015). Besides, it includes a specific plan that is likely to be taken, how an individual intends to kill his/herself and the intention to act on such thoughts. In contrast, passive suicidal ideation encompasses the desire to die but without a specific plan on how to carry out the act. Whether active or passive, suicidal thoughts weaved around the state of helplessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness(Klonsky & May, 2014). Some factors such as socioeconomic factors, school problems, mental difficulties, violence, peer victimization, emotional and mental stress (Ezea, 2025; Olaseni, 2018; Sharma et al., 2015) have been investigated as correlates of suicidal ideation, however, this study considered hopelessness and depression.

Depression is described as a mental disorder characterized with loss of interest or pleasure, decreased energy, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, and poor concentration among individuals. Depression comes with symptoms of anxiety. These symptoms when chronic or recurrent lead to substantial impairments in an individual's ability to take care of his or her everyday activities. When the intensity of has increased, depression lead to suicidal ideation and possibly, death. Some studies have found depression as a correlate of suicidal ideation among different populations and samples. For instance, Roberts et al.(2022) found depression to significantly correlates with suicidal ideation among adolescents. Similarly, Uye et al. (2022) found depression to have significantly influenced suicidal ideation among inmates. They found that inmates who are depressed scored higher on suicidal ideation than inmates who are low on depression. Furthermore, Oladele and Oladele (2016) found depression to significantly correlated with suicidal ideation among 391 students in two Colleges of Education in Nigeria. Other studies have confirmed depression as a significant correlate of suicidal ideation among different populations and samples (Huertes-del Arco et al., 2024; Huong et al., 2025)

The second factor considered is hopelessness which is described as individuals' expectations that future negative events would occur and/or future positive events would not occur, coupled with the belief that individuals are helpless to bring about change in their situation (McCullumsmith et al.,2014). It involves a lack of positive expectations about the

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future. This lack of positive expectations about the future is an important feature of hopelessness, as the future is painted as impossible, bleak, and fundamentally devoid of any positivity (Marchetti, 2023). Studies have associated hopelessness as the causes of suicidal ideation and suicidal death. For instance, Wolfe et al.(2019) who examined the relationship between hopelessness and suicidal ideation among 158 adolescents found hopelessness to be positively correlated with suicidal ideation. In another study, Horwitz et al. (2017) found lack of positive expectations for one's future, as opposed to the presence of negative expectations to be a strong determinant of future suicidal behavior among adolescents. Furthermore, DeCamp and Bakken (2016) reported that adolescents who feel a greater sense of hopelessness are at an increased risk for suicidal. Finally, hopelessness was found to be a strong contributor to concurrent suicidal ideation among adolescents (Ayeni, 2024; Labelle et al., 2013; Rosellini & Bagge, 2014; Wang et al., 2015).

Finally, gender is considered to influence suicidal ideation. This mean whether an individual is a male or female determined the level of suicidal ideation. Results on gender influence on suicidal ideation have been varied across studies and among different populations and samples. For example, Miranda-Mendizaba .(2019) who assessed the association between gender and suicidal ideation found females to be higher in suicidal ideation than their male counterparts. Moreover, Cheung and Dewa (2006) found suicidal ideation to be higher among female students compared to their male participants. Extant result by Shaffer and Waslick (2002) found that female adolescents were at higher risk of developing suicidal thoughts compared to their male counterparts. However, Roberts et al.(2022) did not find gender differences on suicidal ideation among adolescents.

Although, there has been increasing cases of suicidal ideation among adolescents and young adults including undergraduates in Nigeria, however, studies linking depression and hopelessness as correlates of suicidal ideations among university undergraduates in Nigeria are lacking leaving a gap in knowledge to be filled. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine depression and hopelessness as correlates of suicidal ideation among undergraduates of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

The study would provide valuable insights on the relationship of depression and hopelessness on suicidal ideation among undergraduates of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. In addition, the results of this study would create awareness to the university authority on how to provide psychological interventions to undergraduates having suicidal thoughts and preventing possible suicidal attempt or actual suicide.

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Hypotheses

The hypotheses tested were:

H1: There would be a significant relationship among hopelessness, depression and suicidal ideation among undergraduates of the University of Ibadan.

H2: Undergraduates with high scores on hopelessness scale would score higher on suicidal ideation than those with low scores on hopelessness scale.

H3: Undergraduates with high level of depression would significantly score higher on suicidal ideation than those with low level of depression.

H4: Female undergraduates would significantly show higher levels of suicidal ideation than male undergraduates

METHOD

Research Design

The study adopted cross-sectional survey design using validated questionnaires for data collection. The independent variables were depression and hopelessness while suicidal ideation was the dependent variable.

Research Setting

The research was conducted among undergraduates of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Population

The population comprises all undergraduate students within the University of Ibadan. The eligibility of the potential participants depended on the following inclusion/exclusion criteria. Participants must be undergraduate students of the University of Ibadan. Participants must willingly consent to participate in the study

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Using a sample size determination formula, a representative sample size of 200 undergraduate students of the University of Ibadan was obtained based on the total student populations collected from the record unit. Participants were conveniently sampled from the undergraduate students within the university based on their availability and willingness to partake in the study.

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E-ISSN: 2986-0733

Instruments

Data were collected using validated questionnaires.

Beck Hopelessness Scale This was used to measure hopelessness. It is a 20-item scale rated on true or false response format. Each item is rated on a true or false response. Examples of items include: "I look forward to the future with hope and enthusiasm" and "Might as well give up because I can't make things better for myself". High scores indicate a higher level of hopelessness. Aloba et al.(2015) validated in Nigeria with Cronbach's α = .92, while for this Cronbach's α = 0.86 was obtained.

The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CESDS) was used to assess depression. CESDS is a 10-item scale rated on a 3-point Likert's format ranges from rarely or none of the time up to all of the time. Sample items include: "I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me" and "I felt depressed". High scores indicate higher levels of depression. The CESDS obtained Cronbach's α = .86, and for this study, Cronbach's α = .81 was obtained.

Suicidal Ideation Attributions Scale was used to evaluate suicidal ideation. The scale consisted of 5-item that evaluates attributes of suicidal thought of frequency, controllability, closeness to attempt, level of distress associated with the thoughts and impact on daily functioning. It is rated on a 10-point Likert's format that ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Example of items are: "In the past month, how often have you had thoughts about suicidal" and " In the past month, how close have you come to making a suicidal attempt". Higher scores indicate more severe suicidal thoughts. Cronbach's α = .91, and for this study, Cronbach's α = .89 was obtained.

Procedure

A letter of introduction from the Department of Psychology University of Ibadan was collected for the identification of the researchers. Potential participants were met one-on-one and invited to participate in the study. They were duly informed that participation in the study was voluntary and their responses would be treated confidentially. Only those who agreed to participate in the study were given the questionnaires to fill which took less than 15 minutes. A total of 206 questionnaires were given and collected on the spot. However, during screening and coding, six questionnaires had inconsistent responses and were removed thus leaving 200 questionnaires used for the analysis.

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Data Analysis

IBM[R] SPSS version 26 was used for data analysis. Descriptive and inferential statistics were computed. Hypothesis 1 was tested using an independent sample t-test while hypothesis 2 was tested using multiple regression analysis. All hypotheses were accepted at p <.001 level of significance

Ethical Considerations

The study follows due process of ethical procedure when using human participants including voluntariness, confidentiality of responses obtained, non-invasive privacy, threat to life and safety of the participants.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the descriptive characteristics of the participants

Variables	Category	n(199)	%
Sex	Male	96	48.2
	Female	103	51.8
Age	16-19	22	11.1
	20-23	59	29.6
	24-27	53	26.6
	28-31	28	14.1
	Others	37	18.6
Educational level	100L	21	10.6
	200L	38	19.1
	300L	27	13.6
	400L	34	17.1
	Others	79	39.7
Family type	Polygamous	90	45.2
	Monogamous	109	54.8
Who you lived with	as a child		

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E-ISSN: 2986-0733

	Father	23	11.6
	Mother	51	25.6
	Both parents	91	45.7
	Guardian	34	17.1
Marital status	Single	116	58.3
	Married	47	23.6
	Not stated	15	7.5

According to Table 1, more of the participants (51.8%) were females with more of them(29.6%) being between 20 and 23 age brackets and 19.1% were in the 200 level. In addition, 54.8% of the participants were from monogamous families with 45.7% living with both parents and mainly single (58.3%).

H1: There would be significant relationship among hopelessness, depression and suicidal ideation among university undergraduates. This hypothesis was tested using zero-order correlational statistics and the result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Zero-order correlation of study variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3
Hopelessness	5.68	2.97	--		
Depression	9.75	3.90	.47**	-	
Suicidal Ideation	8.65	2.07	-.32 **	-.23**	

**Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 presents the relationship among hopelessness, depression and suicidal ideation. The result revealed that hopelessness and depression had significant positive relationships (r=.47, *p* <.001), implying that the more hopelessness, the greater the level of depression. However, hopelessness (r = -.32, *p* <.001) and depression (r = -.23, *p* <.001) had significant inverse relationship with suicidal ideation, respectively. This relationship implies that an increase in the feeling of hopelessness and depression would lead to increase in suicidal ideation among study participants. Based on the results, the stated hypothesis was supported.

H2: Undergraduates who scored high on hopelessness scale would score higher on suicidal ideation scale compared to those who scored low on hopelessness scale. This hypothesis was

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tested using t-test of independent samples and the result is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Independent sample t-test of levels of hopelessness on suicidal ideation among study participants

Variable	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Hopelessness : High (> =5.68)	90	9.27	2.03	-4.85	197	< 0.001
Hopelessness : Low (< 5.68)	109	7.91	1.88			

Dependent variable: Suicidal ideation

Result from Table 3 shows that there is significant difference between hopelessness and suicidal ideation [t(197) = -4.85, p <0.001] such that participants who scored high in hopelessness scored higher in suicidal ideation (Mean = 9.27, SD = 2.03) compared to those who scored low in hopelessness (Mean = 7.91, SD = 1.88). Based on the result, the stated hypothesis was supported. This implies that those who reported lower level of hopelessness had higher scores on suicidal ideation than those with high level of hopelessness.

H3: Undergraduates with high level of depression would score higher on suicidal ideation than those with low level of depression. This hypothesis was tested using a t-test of independent samples and the result is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Independent sample t-test of levels of depression on suicidal ideation among study participants

Variable	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Depression: High (>=9.75)	86	9.11	2.05	-3.65	197	<.001
Depression: Low (<9.75)	113	8.06	1.96			

Dependent variable: Suicidal ideation

Result from Table 4 shows that there is significant difference between depression and suicidal ideation [t (197) =-3.65, p < .001) such that participants who scored high in depression scored higher in suicidal ideation(Mean = 9.11, SD = 2.05) compared to participants who scored

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low on depression (Mean = 8.06, SD = 1.96). Based on the result, the stated hypothesis was supported.

H4: Male undergraduates would score higher in suicidal ideal compared to their female counterparts. The hypothesis was tested using independent samples t-test of and the result is presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Independent samples t-test of gender differences in suicidal ideation among study participants

Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Male	96	8.92	2.12			
				197	1.74	>.05
Female	103	8.41	2.00			

Dependent variable: Suicidal ideation

Result from Table 5 shows no significant differences among male and female participants [t(197) = 1.74, p >.05] where male undergraduates scored marginally higher (Mean =8.92, SD= 2.12) than female undergraduates (Mean = 8.41, SD= 2.00) on suicidal ideation. This implies that no significant difference in participants' gender on suicidal ideation. Based on this result, the hypothesis was rejected.

DISCUSSION

The study investigates the correlates of depression and hopelessness on suicidal ideation among undergraduates of the University of Ibadan. Four hypotheses were tested and accepted at p < .001 level of significance.

The hypothesis that there would be significant relationship among hopelessness, depression and suicidal ideation was accepted. The result reveals that depression and hopelessness had significant positive relationship on suicidal ideation. This implies that the higher the levels of hopelessness and depression, the higher the levels of suicidal ideation among study participants. However, hopelessness and depression had significant inverse relationship with suicidal ideation, respectively. This relationship implies that an increase in the feeling of hopelessness and depression would lead to increase in suicidal ideation among study participants. These findings mirrored those from previous studies which confirmed hopelessness and depression as key variables in understanding suicidality among youths (Ayeni, 2024;

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DeCamp & Bakken, 2016; Groholt et al.,2006; Horwitz et al., 2017). Specifically, the higher the levels of hopelessness, the higher the level of suicidal ideation (DeCamp & Bakken, 2016).

Moreover, the result reveals that depression and thoughts of suicidal positively and significantly correlates with each other. It means that by increasing these factors, the suicidal thoughts also increases which is in line with the results of the previous studies (Ayeni, 2024). Depression was found to affect the individual's daily performance and social relationships.

In addition, the study supports that undergraduates with high level of hopelessness would score higher on measures of suicidal ideation than those with low level of hopelessness. This implies that those who scored higher on hopelessness had higher scores on suicidal ideation than those who scored low on hopelessness scale. This finding support previous studies where hopelessness was found to be a risk factor for suicidal ideation (Ayeni, 2024; Horwitz et al., 2017; May & Klonsky, 2016; Wolfe et al., 2019). This findings connotes that hopelessness relates to suicidal attempts to the extent it relates to suicidal ideation, but does not predict suicidal outcomes beyond ideation. This finding is in partial contradiction with theories of suicide which implicates hopelessness as the primary factor in suicidal ideation (Liu et al., 2015; Beck et al., 1990).

The hypothesis that undergraduates participants with high level of depression would significantly score higher on measures of suicidal ideation than those with low level of depression was supported. The result show a significant difference between high level of depression and low level of depression on suicidal ideation. This implies that those who reported lower level of depression had higher scores on suicidal ideation than those with high level of depression. These findings are in line with results obtained by previous studies that individual with high level of depression would show higher tendency toward suicidal ideation (Dunlay et al., 2015; Oladele & Oladele, 2016; Roberts et al., 2022; Uye et al., 2022).

Finally, the hypothesis that females would report higher level of suicidal ideation than their male counterparts was not supported. This implies that no significant difference in participants' gender on suicidal ideation. This finding supports result obtained by Roberts et al.(2022) where there was no gender difference in suicidal ideation among their study participants. However, the study contradict others results where females were found to report higher level of suicidal ideation compared to their male counterparts (Miranda-Mendizaba et al., 2019; Cheung & Dewa, 2006; Shaffer &Waslick, 2002). This finding could be interpreted as the results of cultural differences among study participants.

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CONCLUSION

The study provides answers to the hypotheses that hopelessness and depression correlate with suicidal ideation among undergraduates of the University of Ibadan. Specifically, both hopelessness and depression show inverse relationship with suicidal ideation among study participants. Finally, there was no gender differences in suicidal ideation among study participants.

The study recommends that the university authority should have functional mental health professionals such as school psychologists, behavior analysts, and professional counsellors to attend to the needs of potential students with suicidal ideation.

Limitations of Study and Suggestions for Further Studies

The study is limited because only undergraduates from one university with 200 participants were investigated which hinders generalization of findings. Further study should include more universities and more participants to achieve generalization of study findings. Because of the sensitive nature of the study, the use of self-reported questionnaires was not devoid of response bias which can be improved by using in-depth interviews and records from the University Counselling Unit to triangulate data from self-reported questionnaires. Finally, the two independent variables were not exhaustive, therefore, further study should include psychosocial factors such as age, coping strategies, cultural differences, and personality factors.

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