

Socio-Economic And Self-Esteem Factors And Suicidal Ideation Among Academically Challenged Undergraduates In A Nigerian University

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Abstract

Many academically challenged undergraduates are prone to suicidal thoughts as a result of setbacks experienced in the course of their academic journey, which could instigate their socio-economic and self-esteem senses to negative thoughts about their existence. This study investigated the social-economic and self-esteem factors of suicidal ideation among university students in a Nigerian university. Three research questions were raised and two of them hypothesized and tested at 0.05 alpha levels. The study made use of the descriptive survey design. The target population of the study comprised all the academically challenged students in the University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria. The purposive sampling technique was adopted to select 200 educationally challenged students across the University, who have either been asked to go on probation or withdraw from the University at one point or the other. The research instrument was adapted from the Psychological Assessment Resources by Reynolds (1987). The data generated was analyzed using descriptive statistics to answer research question one and the hypotheses were test at with simple linear regression. The findings showed that the rate of suicidal ideation among students in the University was low. It also revealed that there was no significant influence of socio-economic status of students on suicidal thought. In addition, the findings showed that self-esteem of students influenced their suicidal ideation significantly. The study recommended that academically challenged students should always be encouraged by their course advisers and university counsellors; and should be monitored from loneliness when negatively bothered with life issues. In addition, academically challenged students should be encouraged to share their worries with the university counselors for help so as to redirect their negative thoughts.

Keywords: Socio-economic, Self-esteem, Academically challenged, undergraduates, suicidal ideation

Introduction

Many academically challenged students experience setbacks in their academic pursuit to the extent of thinking negatively about their life existence. Unfortunately, most students that perform poorly academically are sometimes traced to low socio-economic background as well as those with low self-esteem (Akhter&Siddiky, 2024). In any Nigerian university, some students perform woefully in semester and sessional examinations as well as continuous assessments to the extent of being asked to withdraw from the university. Some others are sent on probation while some others could be on long rustication as a result of sharp examination malpractices and other related matters that are against the university regulations. Majority of such students could end up frustrated and confused. Some of them could take to several anti-social behaviours such as cultism, robbery and kidnapping while many could fall into depression (Adeyemi, 2017); and if not well managed could result in suicidal ideation and even the planning of it.

Thoughts or planning of suicidal actions in any ramifications can be regarded as suicidal ideation. A lot of socio-economic pressure of today seems to be pushing many young men and women to depression and suicidal thoughts in Nigeria. Suicide is a global health problem, with at least 800,000 people dying by committing suicide each year (World Health Organization, 2014). It is estimated that “the number of people who attempt suicide is 20 times higher than those who die by suicide” (World Health Organization, 2014). The WHO has documented suicide as ‘the main cause of death among young adults; and could be described as a crisis that has a lasting impact on the society world-

over; and occurs at any age”. The organization at a time regarded suicide as the fourth highest cause of death worldwide for people aged 15 to 29 (World Health Organization, 2021; WHO, 2014).

Furthermore, suicide has been observed to be a primary cause of death among school undergraduates globally (Patton et al., 2009). Suicide rates among school undergraduates vary widely among countries, ranging from 5% to about 31% (Palmier, 2011, Eaton et al., 2011 & Randal et al., 2014). Low-income countries including Nigeria have a higher prevalence rate of suicidal ideation as compared to high income countries (Palmier 2011, Eaton et al., 2011 & Oppong et al., 2017). Suicide ideation and attempts among adolescents have been reported as being increasingly recognized as important public health problem (Stone, 2015). Suicidal ideation and its attempts are frowned against and considered sacrilegious in the country. Despite that cases of suicide are daily reported in mass media, especially among the youths. For instance, a medical doctor was reported to have jumped into the Lagos Lagoon in March, 2017 (Muanya & Ezea, 2017); shortly after that, a 500-level Urban and Regional Planning student of Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho, Nigeria hanged on his ceiling fan while his roommate was out. Another student of Babcock University, Ogun State, who was just 19 years old at the time of his death, committed suicide in his parents’ home at Lagos (Ezeobi, 2017).

Vanguard Newspaper of 6th April 2019 reported that “a lecturer at the Department of Mathematics, University of Ibadan ended his life through suicide as a result of frustration of his inability to complete his Ph.D programme”. According to Miller et al. (2013), it was reported

that suicidal behaviour come together with other health risk behaviors such as tobacco smoking, aggressive behaviour, illicit drug use, alcohol use, and experience of sexual intercourse, anger, shock, depression and unmet expectations in the academic work.

Cole et al. (2015) explained suicide as the complete process of a continuum that began with suicide ideation, followed by an attempt at suicide, and finally completed suicide. This means that every suicide attempt or completed suicide often starts with suicidal thoughts (Roberts, 2008). Suicide is also defined by Turecki et al. (2015) as a “fatal self-injurious act with some evidence of intent to die”. It is a global phenomenon that has been showing an upward trend in recent years (Adeyemi, 2017). Suicidal thoughts and suicidal behaviours largely evolve during early adolescence, but peak during the late adolescence and early adulthood period (Fergusson et al., 1995).

According to Aqeel, et al. (2014), “suicidal ideation refers to thoughts about suicide, which may be deliberately constructed to fail or be discovered, or may be fully intended to succeed. Robert (2008) saw suicidal ideation as a concept that includes all overt suicidal behaviours and communications such as suicide threats and expressions of a person’s wish to die. Furthermore, according to Shittu et al. (2014), suicidal ideation is the thought about or an unusual preoccupation with suicide. To them, “suicidal ideation is the thought, intent, plan and imagination of an individual concerning their wish to commit suicide. Suicidal ideation is a common phenomenon among all individuals irrespective of age, gender, ethnicity, race, academic performance or even social status”. Suicidal ideation is a known risk factor for suicidal attempt, which in turn

increases risk for suicidal death (Centre for Disease Control, 2006; Denise et al., 2008).

Shittu, Alabi, Odeigah, Sanni, Issa, Olanrewaju, Sule and Aderibigbe (2014), in a hospital-based cross-sectional descriptive study on suicidal ideation, with sample of 170 depressed adult patients living with HIV/AIDS in Kwara State, Nigeria, discovered that “between 3.5% and 16.5% of the respondents had either at one time or the other, thought of suicide or was even ready to plan it”. Their findings also showed that patients with higher scores in depression and hopelessness had a higher tendency for suicide ideation. Similarly, Brezo, Paris, Tremblay and Vitaro (2015) in a study on personality traits as correlates of suicide attempts and suicidal ideation in young adults, concluded that personality traits and identity problems were major contributors to suicide attempts and suicidal thoughts.

Scholars continue to seek for the determining factors associated with suicidal ideation and have come up with several social, economic, psychological and cultural factors (Hawton, 2012). In addition, physical, sexual, and emotional abuses have also been related to suicidal ideation and attempt in adolescents (Miller et al., 2013). Moreover, gender disparities, academic ability, and social-economic factors have been identified to associate with suicidal ideation among university undergraduates (Omigbodun et al., 2008 & Arat et al., 2016). Ogbolu (2019) also noted that “78 percent of suicide cases occur in low-income and middle-income countries”. Furthermore, Purse (2019) found that suicide is more common among women more than men worldwide. It has also been discovered that female undergraduates are generally much more likely than males to experience suicidal

ideation, while males plan suicide more than females (McMahon et al., 2014).

Across nations, Khan, Mustaffa, Hamdan and Ahmad (2014), investigated the psychological factors that could influence suicidal ideation between India and Malaysia students, and found it was significantly higher among the Indian students than the Malaysians. Furthermore, cases of depression is estimated to affect 1 in 12 adults at any given time in the United States (Brody et al., 2018), which are linked to reduced quality of life, economic burden, and an elevated risk of suicidal (Franklin et al., 2017; Glied et al., 2002). Mental health disparities are pervasive in the United States and notable disparities exist based on socio-economic status (SES), as measured by income, education, and occupation (Safran et al., 2009). Low SES is associated with reduced access to basic resources and reduced living standards (e.g. food insecurity, unsafe housing) which are associated with depression and suicide (Chen et al., 2017; Davison et al., 2015; Davison et al., 2017; Lorant et al., 2007; Leung et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2010, Stewart-Brown et al., 2015)

In a study, Mukhtar et al. (2020) was able to associate high suicide rates in Nigeria to high rate of poverty, unemployment and increasing high cost of living. Furthermore, more people entertain self-destructive thoughts given their poor socio-economic status and lack of hope that their economic situation will improve. Mukhtar et al. are of the view that economic deprivation has inherent frustration and depression especially in the face of hopelessness and could stir thoughts of ending one's life to escape the situation.

Economic deprivation like all other deprivation is frustrating with personal and public consequences;

so also low socio-economic level which could have attendant vulnerability such as taking to crime. Generally, extreme frustration can ignite negative behaviours (Kleiman, 2020), such as self-harm including suicide to escape the situation or harm to others out of frustration.

In addition to academic frustration, Many Nigerian university students are exposed to, tough financial challenges, especially during this period of economic downturn in the country. Thus, their seeming inability in paying school fees; purchasing important textbooks; feeding; and carrying out other important physiological demands during their stay on campus could become very challenging. These unaccomplished needs among others, may cause distractions that could affect academic performance negatively, which may culminate in suicidal behaviours (Oginiyi et al., 2018).

Self-esteem is another important factor that could predispose a person to suicidal thought. It is about a person's overall sense of self worthiness, self-value, self-respect and general self-confidence. Adolescence is the critical period for the development of self-esteem and self-identity, and low self-esteem may endanger adolescents' emotional regulation (Tsang et al., 2006). This psychological concept is considered to be important for a person's psychosocial wellbeing, as the quality of an individual's life could be seriously affected by his or her self-esteem. Low self-esteem is seen as the cause for a wide range of personal and social ills, from crime and drug addiction, educational underachievement and a feeling of general wellbeing (Baumeister et al., 2003

Bandura (1977) opined that self-esteem refers to the confidence and belief that an individual can act in a certain way for the purpose of meeting a

goal or coping effectively in stressful situations. It is believed among psychologists that people with low self-esteem usually feel powerlessness, in contrast to those with high self-efficacy who are more controlled and less anxious in stressful situations (King et al., 2011). According to them, self-esteem helps individuals cope with stress and inducing positive effects in time (King et al., 2011) as they stated that “the self-esteem of a student could lower his suicidal tendency”. This implies that people with high self-esteem and optimism can withstand stress and cope better with unintended occurrences (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, Self-esteem and dispositional optimism may be correlated directly or indirectly to stress and suicide ideation. King et al., (2011) had found that high self-esteem has a strongly negative influence on suicide ideation. This study is therefore interested in the factors of socio-economic and self-esteem as they influence level of suicidal thoughts of academically challenged students.

Statement of the Problem

Many academically challenged students experience setbacks in their academic pursuit to the extent of thinking negatively about their life existence. Students that perform poorly academically are sometimes traced to low socio-economic background as well as those with low self-esteem. In any Nigerian university, some students perform woefully in semester and sessional examinations as well as continuous assessments to the extent of being asked to withdraw from the university. Some others are sent on probation while others could be on long rustication as a result of sharp examination malpractices and other related matters that are against university regulations. Majority of such students could end up frustrated

and confused. Some of them could take to several anti-social behaviours such as cultism, robbery and kidnapping while some could fall into depression depending on their level of self-esteem and socio-economic support. And if such situations are not well managed could result in suicidal ideation and even its planning In Nigeria, suicide cases seems to be escalating among youths, including the university student population.

The seeming suicidal ideation and even its plan among university students could be linked to socio-economic frustrations pervading the country these days of economic downturn, personality traits, relationship breakups, and academic frustration among others. These could impact on students, especially the poor and academically challenged ones, in particular their self-esteem, which may jointly influence suicidal thoughts. This study is therefore of the contention that socio-economic frustrations and self-esteem factors could instigate suicidal ideation among university undergraduates.

Purpose of Study

This study investigated the influence of socio-economic and self-esteem factors on suicidal ideation among university undergraduates. This is to bridge the gap in knowledge concerning this social menace in this part of the world. The study answered the following research questions.

1. What is the level of suicidal ideation among undergraduates in the University?
2. Does Socio-economic factor influence suicidal ideation among undergraduates in the University?
3. Does Self-esteem factor influence suicidal ideation among students in the University?

Research question one was answered while research questions two and three were hypothesized.

Hypotheses

1. Socio-economic factor has no significant influence on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in the university.
2. Self-esteem has no significant influence on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in the university.

Methodology

The research design for the study was the descriptive survey. The study population comprised all the academically challenged students in the University of Benin, Nigeria. The sample was selected using the purposive random sampling procedure to select a total of 200 students among the academically challenged undergraduates for the study. The instrument adopted for collecting data was a questionnaire, which was adapted from the Psychological Assessment Resources by Reynolds (1987).

Cornbrash alpha was used to get reliability coefficient of 0.732, 0.774 and 0.779 to ensure the reliability of the items of suicidal ideation, socio-economic status and self-esteem respectively in the instrument. Research question one was answered by using the descriptive statistics while research questions two and three were hypothesized; and they were tested with simple linear regression using the SPSS; and decision taken at alpha 0.05.

Results

1. Level of Suicidal Ideation among Students in University of Benin, Edo State?

Table 1: Level of Suicidal Ideation among Undergraduates in the University

Variable	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Dev.	Test (mean)	Decision
Suicidal ideation	200	4615	23.075	2.2167	50	Low Level

Table 1 shows the total respondents of N= 200 and a mean of 23.075. A standard deviation of 2.2167 was obtained while the mean value of 23.075 is lesser than T mean of 50.00. Therefore, the level of suicidal ideation among students is low, implying that suicidal ideation is less significant among undergraduates in the university.

Hypothesis One: Socio-economic factor has no significant influence on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in the University.

Table 2: Simple Linear Regression showing the Influence of Socio-economic Factor on Suicidal

Ideation among Undergraduates

Model	Standard coefficient beta	t	Sig.
Constant	5.053	.000	
Socio-economic status	-.359	.563	

Table 2 shows the analysis of the influence of socio-economic factor on suicidal ideation. The result showed that suicidal ideation is not significantly influenced by socio-economic factor, as $F(4615) = -.359$, $P < .05$. Thus, the hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis two: Students' Self-esteem has no influence on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in the university.

Table 3: Simple Linear Regression Showing the Influence of Self-esteem on Suicidal Ideation

Model	Standard coefficient beta	t	Sig
Constant	7.975	.078	
Self-esteem	1.457	1.043	

Table 3 shows that suicidal ideation was significantly predicted by self-esteem, $F(4615) = 1.457$, $P > .078$. Thus, the hypothesis was accepted.

Discussion of Findings

The crux of the research question and hypotheses is the association of socio-economic and self-esteem factors with suicidal ideation. The result showed that the level of suicidal ideation among undergraduates in the studied University was low. The reason for the low level of suicidal thought among the university's academically challenged students could be that the professional counselors in the University's Counseling Center are committed to their job by regularly organizing seminars, workshop and orientation for students from time to time to enable them identify their goals and potential solutions to their problems to nip in the bud any negative thoughts that could lead to suicidal ideation and thus promote behavioral changes and optimal mental health. Such counseling interventions could be having positive results on weak students personality grooming and development, such that they could easily overcome stressful and negative thoughts. This is corroborated by Adeyemi (2017), Fadipe and Dauda (2025), who both concluded that timely counseling interventions could avert various negative thoughts and consequential behaviors among youths and adolescents.

The result of hypothesis one shows that socio-economic factor is associated to suicidal thoughts among academically challenged undergraduates in the university This could be because socio- economic factor may be indicated with access to basic resources and living standards which are desired by undergraduates

to be stable academically. Low level of socio-economic factor would affect students' academic performance, and may in turn lead the weak and vulnerable students to have suicidal thoughts. This study agrees with Hong et al (2011) who averred that people with low socio-economic factor has the highest risk of suicidal attempts. Mukhtal et al, (2020) also asserted that socio-economic factor is associated with high suicide rate in Nigeria, especially with the high rate of poverty, unemployment and increasing cost of living that keep galloping. These could make students develop negative thoughts.

The findings of the second hypothesis emphasized that self-esteem may not impact suicidal ideation among students. However, a personality with low self-esteem may easily feel bad and embarrassed at failures and misfortunes compared to a higher self-esteem personality. A low self-esteem personality undergraduate who fails in an examination and asked to repeat or to withdraw from an academic programme or university may fall victim of suicidal ideation more than an undergraduate with high self-esteem, who may not see failure as a big deal but an opportunity to up his or her sleeves. A person with high self-esteem is always of the view that the downfall of a man may not necessarily be the end of his life. This is in conformity with Sharaf et al (2009) who concluded that high self-esteem may allow individuals to overcome difficulties and stressful life events and insulate them against suicidal thought and behaviour

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concluded that suicidal ideation level among Nigerian university undergraduates was low. Moreover, socio-economic frustrations would influence suicidal ideation among undergraduates

while students' self-esteem may not necessarily influence suicidal thoughts.

The following were the recommendations.

- Since socio-economic factor could influence suicidal ideation, the University should expand and increase the funding of the Work Study Centre to accommodate more students, especially the indigents in the scheme, so as to cushion the effect of the downturn in the nation's economy among students from low income background. This may reduce evil thoughts among them as their purchasing power would be improved and consequently their learning capability, thus reduction in poor performance and incidents of probation, withdrawal, rustication and so on which often lead to depression, suicidal ideation and even planning among undergraduates.
- Awareness should be further created among the students by the university authority on how to draw from the National Education Loan Fund (NELFUND), just created by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Many students need serious enlightenment as to the term of the loan repayment as many of them see taking loan in any guise as mortgaging of ones future and a future burden; whereas the loan repayment term is made extremely soft for the beneficiaries. The objective of the fund is to make life easy for the undergraduates in the course of their study and to remove evil practices and negative thoughts from their mind.
- Students are encouraged not to stay alone when bothered with issues which may affect their mental health and lead them to have destructive thoughts. Regular orientation programmes should be organized for students on

how to cope with academic challenges and other stressful and mind shattering occurrences.

- Students are encouraged to visit the university counselling centre when faced with traumatizing issues which can bring down their self-esteem. This is because many students need to be properly guided by professional counselors to enable them to understand their self-worth and attain their goals.
- University counselors should be conversant with the principles, standards and guidelines governing the behavior of professional counselor to enable the students develop confidence and communicate maturely with the counselor.
- University counselors and counselors in training should create awareness on the dangers of suicide around the university environment.

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