

Academic Stress, Suicidal Ideation and Mental Help Seeking Attitude

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This quantitative study involving 429 participants examines the relationships among academic stress, suicidal ideation, and mental help-seeking attitudes in young adults. Utilizing the Academic Stress Scale, Suicidal Ideation Attributes Scale, and Mental Help Seeking Attitudes Scale, the research reveals no significant link between academic stress and mental help-seeking attitudes. However, it identifies a significant association between self-harm ideation and mental help-seeking attitudes, as well as between academic stress and self-harm ideation. Further analysis demonstrates that both mental help-seeking attitudes and academic stress independently predict self-harm ideation. Additionally, the study observes a significant difference in mean scores of mental help-seeking attitudes between males and females. These findings contribute insights for tailoring mental health interventions and support systems for young adults.

Keywords: Academic stress, Self-harm ideation, Mental help seeking attitudes, Young adults

Emerging adulthood, a life stage between 18-29 years, involves fluid transitions in relationships, academics, and work, fostering identity development but posing challenges and mental health vulnerabilities, which can be emotionally taxing, increasing the risk of psychological distress (Matud et al., 2020). Stress is described as “a specific connection between a person and the environment that the individual perceives as straining or beyond his or her resources” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Young adults face various stressors, including peer criticism, interpersonal issues, living conditions, future concerns, family health, financial issues, high parental expectations, and academic performance worries (Arun et al., 2017). Several studies (Deb et al., 2015; Prabu, 2015; Gill, 2017) have provided evidence that academic stress and exam anxiety are significant problems for Indian students.

While nearly a third of self-injury cases involve thoughts of self-harm, most instances (over 85%) serve as a coping mechanism to manage stress, not end one’s life (Yates, 2004). However, research indicates a concerning link between non-fatal self-harm and increased risk of future suicide attempts (Owens et al., 2002). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2012), nearly one million people die by

suicide each year. Research shows that suicidal youth often seek help from their peers rather than adults, often without informing adults about their intentions. Adolescent girls however are more likely to seek help from adults if they believe a classmate is considering suicide (Kalafat & Elias, 1992; Kalafat et al., 1993; Overholser et al., 1989). This can be informal or formal, with adolescents often prioritizing informal support over formal help (Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996). A growing trend is for individuals to seek help online or through non-face-to-face methods, likely due to increased access to online resources and acceptance of online therapy (Rickwood et al., 2005). However, fear of self-esteem decline and negative judgment (Corrigan, 2004; Hammer et al., 2018) coupled with the stigma surrounding mental health (Corrigan, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 2019) can deter individuals from seeking help, potentially leading to social isolation and discrimination (Corrigan, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 2019). However, the presence of supportive partners, particularly for men, can significantly encourage help-seeking behavior (Tudiver & Talbot, 1999). For young people who value autonomy and self-reliance, internet-based services offer advantages like anonymity and privacy, potentially reducing the stigma associated with seeking help (Stephens-

Reicher et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2011). Lin and Parikh (1999) found that individuals are less inclined to seek treatment for psychological problems when they feel humiliated or perceive themselves to be mentally unstable.

Carlton and Deane (2000) found that young people who had previously obtained professional psychological therapy were more inclined to seek it again if they were facing personal or emotional difficulties, or contemplating suicide. Such findings indicate that acquiring knowledge about counselling services is crucial for commencing the process of seeking help. Women seem to be more prone to seeking support and advice from others for mental health issues compared to men (Rickwood & Braithwaite, 1994). However, this tendency varies significantly depending on the kind of problem and the source of assistance. In contrast, males tend to be more self-reliant and less likely to seek help or acknowledge the presence of a problem (Offer et al., 1991). Compared to international peers, young Indian adults exhibit higher suicide rates, yet research specific to this group remains scarce. To address this gap, investigating the connection between academic stress and suicidal ideation, with a focus on how attitudes towards seeking help influence this link, could be crucial in preventing future suicide attempts.

Hypotheses

- H1: There is no relationship between academic stress and Suicidal Ideation among young adults.
- H2: There is no relationship between academic stress and mental help seeking attitude among young adults.
- H3: There is no relationship between Suicidal Ideation and mental health seeking attitude among young adults.
- H4: There is no difference in mean scores of mental help seeking attitude between males and females.
- H5: There is no impact of mental health seeking attitude on Suicidal Ideation.
- H6: There is no impact of academic stress on Suicidal Ideation.

Method

Sample

The research inculcates cis male and cis female from Urban cities aged between 18-25. The study employs convenient sampling, a non-probability method that selects participants based on their availability or accessibility to the researcher.

Measures

Academic Stress Scale (ASS; Kim, 1970): The academic stress scale consists of 40 items. For every question, there were five possible answers, ranging from “No Stress” to “Extreme Stress.” and for each response, there are five possible scores: 0, 1, 2, 3 and 4, respectively. Five categories, each with eight components, are used to classify the items: Personal Inadequacy, Fear of Failure, Interpersonal Difficulties with Teachers, Teacher/Pupil Relationships or Teaching Methods, Inadequate Study Facilities. Academic stress increases with higher score values, and vice versa. The only emphasis of the current investigation is general academic stress.

Suicidal Ideation Attributes Scale (SIDAS): The purpose of the SIDAS is to evaluate the severity of suicidal thoughts and screen community members for the existence of such thoughts. Each of the five items—frequency, controllability, closeness to attempt, degree of suffering related to the thoughts, and influence on day-to-day functioning—targets a different aspect of suicidal thoughts. A 10-point scale is used to rate the responses. Respondents who choose “0 - Never” for the first question skip all other things and get a score of zero. The five criteria, which range from 0 to 50 total scores, are added to generate the overall SIDAS scores. The SIDAS demonstrated a high degree of internal consistency (Cronbach alpha = 0.91). When compared to the Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale, the SIDAS total score showed high convergent validity. Scores ≥ 21 were associated with the specificity of preparations for or attempts at suicide, which had a 94.9% specificity (with 39.6% and 50.0% sensitivity, respectively), and suicide plans, which had a 95.8% specificity.

The Mental Help Seeking Attitudes Scale (MHSAS; Spiker et. al., 2018): The MHSAS is a 9-question survey measuring attitudes towards seeking professional help for mental health concerns. Scores range from 1 (unfavourable) to 7 (favourable). However, for some items, the answer choices need to be reversed before scoring to accurately reflect favorability. To calculate the final score, the reversed scores are added and divided by the number of questions. This score reflects an individual's overall positive or negative view on seeking professional help for mental health challenges. The ultimate mean score should be between a high of seven and a low of one.

Procedure

The current study comprised of 429 participants who responded about Academic Stress, Suicidal Ideations and Mental Help Seeking Attitude, assessed through the following questionnaires- Academic Stress Scale (ASS), Suicidal Ideation Attributes Scale (SIDAS) and The Mental Help Seeking Attitudes Scale (MHSAS), respectively. The data collection was done through google forms, which consisted of the socio-demographic details, consent form and the questionnaires mentioned above. Before that, the participants were made aware about the nature and purpose of the study to develop rapport and trust. Once the data was collected, it was sorted on Google Sheets, to do the scoring. For analyzing the data, SPSS was used wherein correlation, regression and t-test were done.

Results

The current study comprised of 429 participants who completed the google form on Academic Stress ($\bar{X} = 76.01$, $SD = 30.926$), Suicidal Ideations ($\bar{X} = 7.39$, $SD = 11.39$) and Mental Help Seeking Attitude ($\bar{X} = 5.04$, $SD = 1.37$), which were assessed through the following questionnaires- Academic Stress Scale (ASS), Suicidal Ideation Attributes Scale (SIDAS) and The Mental Help Seeking Attitudes Scale (MHSAS). One outlier was found in all the scales and thus was eliminated from the study, leading to total participants from 430 to 429. The subsequent mean and standard deviation obtained have been mentioned above.

Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was calculated to study the association between Academic Stress and Mental Help Seeking Attitude. The results of the correlation between Academic Stress and Mental Help Seeking Attitude was not found to be statistically significant ($r_s = 0.49$, $p = .315$). Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was calculated to study the association between Academic Stress and Self Harm Ideation. The results of the correlation between Academic Stress and Self Harm Ideation was found to be statistically significant ($r_s = .256$, $p < 0.01$). Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was calculated to study the association between Self Harm Ideation and Mental Help Seeking Attitude. The results of the correlation between Self Harm Ideation and Mental Help Seeking Attitude was found to be statistically significant ($r_s = -.140$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for Academic Stress, Mental Health Seeking Attitude and Suicidal Ideation

	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Academic Stress	76.01	30.925	-.157	.126
Mental Health Seeking Attitude	5.04	1.367	.193	-1.059
Suicidal Ideation	7.39	11.389	1.402	.829

Table 2. Correlation Academic Stress, Mental Health Seeking Attitude and Suicidal Ideation

	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1	Academic Stress	76.01	30.93	-	.049	.256**
2	Mental Health Seeking Attitude	5.04	1.37	.049	-	-.140**
3	Suicidal Ideation	7.39	11.39	.256**	-.140**	-

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Regression to predict Academic Stress on Self Harm Ideation

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable		Students	
		Standardized b	T value	Model Summary
Academic Stress	Self-Harm Ideation	.265	5.672	R ² = .070 F = 32.172 Sig = 0.000

Table 4. Regression to predict Mental Help Seeking Attitude on Self Harm Ideation

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable		Students	
		Standardized b	T value	Model Summary
Mental Help Seeking Attitude	Self Harm Ideation	-.169	-3.540	R ² = .029 F = 12.533 Sig = 0.000

Table 5. T-test to analyze gender differences in Mental Help Seeking Attitude

	Male		Female			
	M	SD	M	SD	t (427)	P
Mental Help Seeking Attitude	4.64	1.238	5.31	1.387	-5.211	.000

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Academic Stress on Self Harm Ideation. A significant regression equation was found ($F(1,429) = 5.672, p < .000$). The results indicate that there is a statistically significant positive relationship between Academic Stress and Self Harm Ideation among Young Adults.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Mental Help Seeking Attitude on Self Harm Ideation. A significant regression equation was found ($F(1,429) = -3.540, p < .000$). The results indicate that there is a statistically significant negative relationship between Suicidal Ideation and mental help-seeking attitude among young adults.

An Independent t-test was performed to compare mental help seeking attitude among males and females. There was a significant difference in mental help seeking attitude among males ($M = 4.64, SD = 1.238, t(427) = -5.211, p < 0.000$) and females ($M = 5.31, SD = 1.387, t(427) = -5.211, p < 0.000$). It indicates a very strong and statistically significant difference in mental help-seeking attitude between males and females, with females being more likely than

males to have a positive attitude towards seeking help for mental health problems.

Discussion

This study explores the link between academic stress, suicidal ideation, and mental help seeking attitudes, finding a positive correlation between academic stress and self-harm ideation, which is also evident in other studies (Banerjee & Chatterjee, 2016; Singh & Singh, 2008). Researchers believe that most suicides among students are caused by fear of failure, family expectations, sudden environmental changes, test results, and batch reshuffle issues ("Correlational Study of Academic Stress and Suicidal Ideation Among Students," 2020). The first study to compare suicidal thoughts in students with and without academic difficulties was conducted recently (Arun et al., 2017). It found that students who typically achieve academically have significantly higher levels of suicidal ideation than students who struggle academically.

The current study also discovered a negative association between mental help-seeking

attitude and Suicidal Ideation, meaning that if Suicidal Ideation rises, mental help-seeking attitude may fall and vice versa; which is in line with earlier research by Carlton and Deane (2000). A qualitative study by Salvador et al. (2023) found that participants who wanted to stop self-harming either minimized it or sought help if they could no longer hide their injuries or if others had discovered their self-harm. Additionally, social media has been found to be a valuable tool for help-seeking and anonymous engagement (Webber & Moors, 2015).

While there was no significant correlation found between Academic stress and Mental Help-seeking Attitude in the current study, previous researchers have found that stress was a common mental health issue among the participants, who often normalized it as a typical aspect of the student experience. This perception of student stress, as highlighted by previous research (Laidlaw et al., 2015; Eisenberg et al., 2007), can act as a barrier to seeking help.

According to the results of the present study, a person's gender has a significant impact on whether or not they seek mental health treatment. Banerjee and Chatterjee (2016) discovered similar findings to ours: even after adjusting for age and socioeconomic position, women are more likely than men to seek assistance. Numerous variables, such as coping methods, stigma, and societal standards, are probably to blame for this. The study also found that a significant proportion of college students experience mental health symptoms that put them at risk, but many do not seek help even though it is readily available on most campuses. Conversely, research specifically examining help-seeking behaviors in the academic realm has yielded conflicting findings (Dueñas et al., 2021). These studies indicate that girls tend to perceive a higher emotional cost associated with seeking help, leading to increased avoidance of help-seeking behaviors. Additionally, Gonzalez et al., (2011) found that college students may avoid seeking help because they feel uncomfortable talking to professionals, or because they fear what the treatment would involve. This is concerning, as mental health problems can have a serious

impact on a student's academic performance, relationships, and overall well-being.

Limitations of the Study

The study relies on self-reported data, potentially biased by participants or the online sample method. Its single-time data collection limits understanding of causality, and excluding other demographics or potential influencing factors reduces generalizability. Additionally, findings from a single country may not extend to other cultures.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the relationship between academic stress, thoughts of self-harm, and attitudes towards obtaining mental health assistance in young individuals.

Suggestions for the Further Research

Future studies should strengthen causal inferences by utilizing longitudinal designs. Incorporating diverse samples and accounting for factors like socioeconomic status, family history, and diagnoses will ensure broader generalizability and a more nuanced understanding, aiding in developing effective suicide prevention interventions for young people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the complex interplay between academic stress, thoughts of self-harm, and attitudes towards seeking mental health support in young individuals. It underscores the critical need to address academic stress and cultivate positive mental help-seeking attitudes among young adults.

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