

## **Emotional Exhaustion and Academic Stress as Predictors of Suicide Ideation among Undergraduates**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examined Emotional Exhaustion and Academic stress as predictors of suicide ideation among undergraduates at the University of Benin. Three research questions were raised, and their corresponding hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 alpha significance level. This research adopted the correlational survey research design, while the population for this study consisted of all the students at the University of Benin. A purposive sampling of three hundred and fifty (350) was selected and the sample size was 50 students chosen from seven faculties from the University of Benin. The multi-stage random sampling technique was used for this work. The research instrument used was a Questionnaire titled "Suicide Ideation, Academic Stress, and Emotional Exhaustion Scale" (SIASEESQ) with a reliability coefficient of 0.797, 0.695, and 0.768. The data was analyzed using linear regression. The findings revealed that Emotional exhaustion, Academic stress, and their interactions predicted Suicide ideation among undergraduates. It was therefore recommended that the universities should make the learning environment conducive for the students so as to reduce academic stress, by improving on the learning conditions of the classrooms and other basic facilities for learning amongst others.*

*Keywords: Emotional exhaustion; Academic stress; Suicide ideation; Undergraduates*

### **1. Introduction**

The prevalence and impacts of suicidal thoughts and behaviors among youth is on the increase (Halford et al., 2020). Suicide is a growing public health problem that has generated a lot of concern and account, and more than 800,000 individuals die as a result of suicide worldwide every year, every 11 minutes, someone dies of suicide around the world, and for each suicide case; approximately 135 people suffer intense grief, "resulting in 108 million people, annually, who are profoundly impacted by suicidal behaviours". It added that for every suicide, 25 people make a suicide attempt, and many more have serious thoughts of suicide; thus making suicide the fourth leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds worldwide (World Health Organization, 2018). Suicides happen impulsively in moments of crisis with a breakdown in the ability to deal with life stresses, such as financial problems, relationship break-ups, emotional exhaustion, burnout or chronic pain and illness, experiencing conflict, disaster, violence, abuse, loss, hopelessness, stress, and a sense of isolation are strongly associated with suicidal behaviour suicide rates which are also high amongst vulnerable groups who experience discrimination, such as refugees and migrants; Indigenous people and prisoners. Uganda, Botswana, Kenya, Zambia and Nigeria have high

prevalence of suicide ideation among young people (Swahn et al., 2010). Currently, suicide attempts cases are growing among young people, especially those institutions of higher learning (Aloba et al., 2017; Aloba et al., 2018; January et al., 2018).

Suicidal ideation is a thought process in which an individual think about suicide. Every suicide attempt or completed suicide often starts with the thoughts of it and this captures the whole concept of suicide ideation for which Nigerian undergraduates are not exempted. It is also the thought, intent, plan, and imagination of individual concerning their wish to commit suicide (Conner et al., 2001; Lester, 2006). Suicidal ideation is the predisposing factor to suicide, and this has been a rising predicament among students (Bilsen, 2018). Suicide ideation is associated with depression and other mood disorders; life events and family events can increase the risk of suicide ideation. Suicide could be caused by substance abuse, academic failures, psychological disorders, poor social and family relationships, aggression or impulsivity, risky sexual behaviors, and so on (Khan et al., 2014). However, suicide and its thoughts are considered taboo in Nigeria.

Suicide is currently the second leading cause of death among college students (Rosiek et al., 2016; Reynolds, 2015). This is due to the demand placed on students' by themselves, their parents, and society at large to attain higher performance, the students' academics therefore inform the chances of them contemplating or even committing suicide. (Lee et al., 2006). Undergraduates are faced with a lot of challenges which include separation from parents, relationship and sexuality issues, academic expectations, and independence, which makes them prone to diverse psychological conditions. These psychological conditions are at play when they are confronted with stressful experiences like academic stress which often result in emotional exhaustion which they might be unable to control or manage. For university students, academic stress, financial constraints, parental and peer influences can constitute stress, and the consequence may be suicidal ideation (Olaseni, 2018); with inadequate support from the home front and the school environment, students with poor academic performance stand a higher chance of engaging in suicide ideation than their peers (Amare et al., 2018 ; Sharma et al., 2015).

Suicidal behaviour is still a criminal offense in Nigeria according to section 327 of the country's criminal code and a high course of stigmatization. However, several cases of suicide across Nigeria are either concealed by the affected families for fear of stigmatization or not reported to the Police or the media. The PUNCH Newspapers (20, Nov 2023) observed that in 2022, 79 persons died by suicide in Nigeria, it was further revealed that out of the 79 persons that committed suicide, 70 persons were males while the remaining 9 were females in that particular year. In other related cases, a 500-level urban and Regional Planning student of Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho hung himself from his ceiling fan while his roommate was out. According to Vanguard Newspaper on the 6th of April 2019, a lecturer at the Department of Mathematics at the University of Ibadan ended his life through suicide as a result of frustration of unfulfillment Ph.D programme. Also, there was another report of a 100-level student of Kogi State University, Ayingba who committed suicide after she was reportedly abandoned by her boyfriend.

Emotional exhaustion, burnout, and stress are terms commonly used in the literature about work-related problems (Worly et al., 2019). emotional exhaustion, characterized by feelings of fatigue, depletion, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment, is considered the core component of burnout. It is frequently caused by prolonged stress, particularly when an individual feels overwhelmed or unsupported in their personal life and it is due to high expectations and too much stress and pressure, it gradually depletes

their physical and mental resources over time (Wright, 2015) its signs and symptoms includes but not limited physiological and psychological responses such as chronic sadness or depression, chronic stomach or bowel problems, chronic mental fatigue, chronic physical fatigue, chronic headaches, the desire to “drop out” of society, the desire to move away from friends and even family, and perhaps the desire to commit suicide. studies have indicated an association between emotional exhaustion and symptoms of depression which is key to suicide ideation (Maslach et al., 2001; Brenninkmeyer et al., 2001; Becker et al., 2006). Visoso et al. (2012) conducted research in Mexico whose results indicated high levels of emotional exhaustion and medium levels of depersonalization among undergraduates enrolled at public universities.

The association between school or academic stressors and suicide ideation among young people has been well-documented in research (Rosiek et al., 2015). Thus making it visible that students who attempt suicide are those who often have problems in school (Hacker et al., 2006). Academic stress is pervasive clinical phenomenon that has been linked to health and illness of persons. Academic stress occurs when a student cannot manage the diverse demands of teaching and learning as well as other extracurricular activities in the university environment; it is a product of all academic-related demands that exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual (Kadapath and Viyalaxmi, 2012). academic stress has been found to significantly predict suicidal ideation, especially within the academic context (Venumadhava and Mayuri, 2014; Shim and Jeong, 2018). academic stress has been found to significantly predict suicidal ideation, especially within the academic context (Zhang et al., 2012; Allred and Hogstromthe, 2013; Venumadhava and Mayuri, 2014; Shim and Jeong, 2018).

### ***Objective of the study:***

The main objective of this study is to examine emotional exhaustion and academic stress as predictors of suicide ideation among undergraduates at the University of Benin. Edo State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to examine if age and sex have any contributory factors to the aforementioned.

### ***Research Questions***

- Does emotional exhaustion predict undergraduates’ suicide ideation?
- Does academic stress predict undergraduates’ suicide ideation?
- Do emotional exhaustion and academic stress predict undergraduates’ suicide ideation?

### ***Hypotheses***

- Emotional exhaustion will not significantly predict undergraduates’ suicide ideation
- Academic stress will not significantly predict undergraduates’ suicide ideation
- Emotional exhaustion and academic stress will not significantly predict undergraduates’ suicide ideation.

## 2. Methodology

A correlational survey design was used for the study. One dependent variable; suicide ideation among undergraduates and the independent variables of Emotional exhaustion and academic stress were involved in the study.

### *Participants*

The population of this study consisted of all full-time and duly registered students pursuing degrees from the sixteen Faculties at the University of Benin. The study adopted the multi-stage random sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to select seven Faculties from the sixteen Faculties of the University from which students who are prone to emotional exhaustion and academic stress would be selected. Random sampling was used to pick fifty (50) students from the underlisted departments making a total of (300) three hundred participants as depicted in Table 1;

**Table 1:** Random sampling

S/N	FACULTY	DEPARTMENT
1.	School of Basic Medical Sciences	Department of Nursing Science
2.	Faculty of Arts	Department of English and Literature
3.	Faculty of Education	Department of Educational Evaluation and Counselling Psychology
4.	Faculty of Law	Department of Law
5.	Management Sciences	Business Administration
6.	Social Sciences	Political Science
7.	Life Sciences	Optometry

### *Instrument*

The research instrument used for this study was a questionnaire titled “Suicide Ideation, Academic Stress and Emotional Exhaustion Scale” (SIASEESQ) adapted from the Modified Scale for Suicide Ideation (MSSI) developed by Ivan, et al(1991), Academic Stress Scale (ASS), and Maslach Burnout Inventory Student Survey (MBISS). From the Modified Scale for Suicide Ideation Questionnaire, the researcher adapted: the suicide ideation question, and 10 items (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10) were formulated. From the Maslach Burnout Inventory Student Survey Questionnaire, the researcher adapted: the emotional exhaustion questions and 10 items (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10). From Academic Stress Scale Questionnaire, the researcher adapted: the academic stress questions, and 12 items (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 12) were formulated.

### *Ethical Consideration*

Ethical approval were obtained from the Deans of the various faculties aforementioned and well as the Head of the various Departments involved. The consent of all respondents was obtained. Participation of all respondents was voluntary. All the respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

### 3. Results and Discussion

**Hypothesis One:** Emotional exhaustion will not significantly predict undergraduates' suicide ideation

**Table 2:** Simple linear regression of emotional exhaustion on undergraduates' suicide ideation

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (P-Value)
Regression	1231.163	1	1231.163	50.795	.000 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	8531.811	352	24.238		
Total	9762.975	353			

Notes: R = .355, R-Square = .126, (.000 < .05). Significant

Table 2 shows the Regression result of Emotional Exhaustion on Undergraduates' Suicide Ideation. From the table  $F = 50.795$ ,  $P\text{-Value} = .000$ . Testing at an alpha level of .05 the  $F\text{-Value}$  is significant (.000 < .05). Hence the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore emotional exhaustion significantly predicted Undergraduates' Suicide Ideation. From the analysis, emotional exhaustion contributed 12.6% (R-Square = .126) to changes in suicide ideation.

**Hypothesis Two:** Academic stress will not significantly predict undergraduates' suicide ideation

**Table 3:** Simple linear regression of academic stress on undergraduates' suicide ideation

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (P-Value)
Regression	2337.623	1	2337.623	110.815	.000 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	7425.352	352	21.095		
Total	9762.975	353			

Notes: R = .489, R-Square = .239, (.000 < .05). Significant

Table 3 shows the Regression result of Academic Stress on Undergraduates' Suicide Ideation. From the table  $F = 110.815$ ,  $P\text{-Value} = .000$ . Testing at an alpha level of .05 the  $F\text{-Value}$  is significant (.000 < .05). Hence the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore academic stress significantly predicted Undergraduates' Suicide Ideation. From the analysis, academic stress contributed 23.9% (R-Square = .239) to changes in suicide ideation.

**Hypothesis Three:** Emotional exhaustion and academic stress will not significantly predict undergraduates' suicide ideation

**Table 4:** Multiple linear regressions of emotional exhaustion and academic stress on undergraduates' suicide ideation

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (P-Value)
Regression	2342.636	2	1171.318	55.406	.000 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	7420.338	351	21.141		
Total	9762.975	353			

Notes: R = .490, R-Square = .240, (.000 < .05). Significant

Table 4 shows the Regression result of emotional exhaustion and academic stress on undergraduates' suicide ideation. From the table  $F = 55.406$ ,  $P\text{-Value} = .000$ . Testing at an alpha level of .05 the  $F\text{-Value}$  is significant (.000 < .05). Hence the null hypothesis is rejected.

Therefore Emotional exhaustion and academic stress significantly predicted undergraduates' suicide ideation. From the analysis, both jointly contributed 24% (R-Square =.240) to changes in suicide ideation. Thus, showing the separate contribution of each of the independent variables (emotional exhaustion and academic stress).

### ***Discussions***

It was revealed that emotional exhaustion significantly predicted Undergraduates' Suicide Ideation. The researchers as practicing counsellors have overtime observed prolonged stress among undergraduates in which many complain of feelings of being overwhelmed due to lack of support and high expectations from their guidance but not limited to the spike in suicide rate among undergraduate in universities. This aforementioned assertion lends credence to study by Visoso et al. (2012) conducted a research in Mexico whose result indicated high levels of emotional exhaustion and medium levels of depersonalization among undergraduates enrolled at public universities. Also, Maslach et al. (2001); Brenninkmeyer et al. (2001); Becker et al. (2006) had earlier indicated an association between emotional exhaustion and symptoms of depression which is key to suicide ideation.

It was also revealed from the study that academic stress significantly predicted Undergraduates' Suicide Ideation. The researchers are of the opinion that the reason academic stress significantly predicted undergraduates suicide ideation is their inability to manage the diverse demands of teaching and learning within the university. The findings lend credence to Venumadhava and Mayuri (2014); Shim and Jeong (2018); Zhang et al. (2012); Allred and Hogstrom (2013); Venumadhava and Mayuri (2014) and Shim and Jeong (2018). They all found academic stress to be significantly predicting suicidal ideation, especially within the academic context.

Finally, emotional exhaustion and academic stress significantly predicted undergraduates' suicide ideation. The researchers as practicing counsellors have overtime observed prolonged stress among undergraduates in which many complain of feelings of being overwhelmed due to lack of support, high expectations and their inability to manage the diverse demands of teaching and learning within the university. The assertion lends credence to Visoso et al. (2012) conducted a research in Mexico whose result indicated high levels of emotional exhaustion and medium levels of depersonalization among undergraduates enrolled at public universities. Also, Maslach et al. (2001); Brenninkmeyer et al. (2001); Becker et al. (2006) had earlier indicated an association between emotional exhaustion and symptoms of depression which is key to suicide ideation. While Venumadhava and Mayuri (2014); Shim and Jeong (2018); Zhang et al. (2012); Allred and Hogstrom (2013); Venumadhava and Mayuri (2014) and Shim and Jeong (2018). They all found academic stress to be significantly predicting suicidal ideation, especially within the academic context.

### **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study has confirmed that emotional exhaustion and academic stress and their interaction significantly predicted Undergraduates' Suicide Ideation.

### **Counselling Implications and Recommendations**

The ultimate aims of counselling is for adjustment. Counsellors are trained to modify educational behaviour of all categories of persons including helping students or clients who are confused or experiencing educational difficulties develop a positively. Thus it was recommended as follows;

- The university should make the learning environment conducive for the students so as to reduce academic stress, by improving on the learning conditions of the classrooms and other basic facilities for learning.
- Counsellors at the University students' Counselling centre should help educate students on how to manage their emotions to avoid suicide ideations
- Students should be encouraged to regularly visit the counselling centre often when faced with emotional exhaustion and academic stress.
- Regular organize seminars/workshop should organized by Counsellors to create awareness on the need for counselling of undergraduates struggling with suicide ideations.

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