



**STRESS, DEPRESSION AND SUICIDAL IDEATION AMONG
UNDERGRADUATE IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN
CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated stress, depression and suicidal ideation. Two hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. The study adopted a survey research design. The sampling followed a multi-stage procedure (stratified and random sampling techniques). A sample of 1,016 was used for the data. Stress and depression questionnaire (SDQ) and Suicidal ideation questionnaire (SIQ) were the instruments used for data collection. Data collected was analyzed using simple regression analysis at .05 level of significance. The result of the analysis showed that both course load-related stress and self efficacy-related stress has statistically significant influence on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in public universities in Cross River State. Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that University governing councils and school management boards in public universities in Cross River State should take urgent steps to establish comprehensive mental health centers within campuses. These centres should also offer confidential, walk-in services and operate flexible hours to accommodate students' schedules. The National Universities Commission (NUC) and institutional curriculum committees should review and revise existing academic frameworks to reduce excessive course loads that contribute to academic stress and depression.

Keyword: Stress, depression, suicidal ideation, undergraduates, public universities, Cross River State

Introduction

Suicidal ideation is a significant mental health concern that affects individuals across various demographics, particularly among undergraduates who face multiple academic, social, and personal challenges. It represents a spectrum of thoughts ranging from passive considerations of death to active planning of suicide, often influenced by emotional distress, life stressors, or mental health disorders. The transition from adolescence to adulthood, coupled with increased academic pressures, financial struggles, and social expectations,



makes undergraduates particularly vulnerable to such thoughts. While not all individuals who experience suicidal ideation proceed to attempt suicide, the presence of these thoughts indicates underlying psychological distress that requires urgent attention. Anake et al (2026) opined that personality traits can influence deviant behaviour tendencies.

Suicidal ideation has been defined in multiple ways by scholars. According to Klonsky et al. (2020), it refers to thoughts, preoccupations, or considerations about ending one's own life, ranging from passive contemplation to active planning. This definition emphasizes the varying intensity of suicidal thoughts, recognizing that not all individuals progress to attempting suicide. Nock et al. (2021) define it as the presence of self-reported thoughts about death or self-inflicted harm, with or without specific plans to act on them. This highlights the subjective nature of suicidal thoughts and their relationship with personal emotional distress. Van Orden et al. (2022) describe suicidal ideation as a range of self-destructive thoughts, including a desire to die, considerations of the means to commit suicide, and detailed preparations for a suicide attempt. This definition focuses on the progression of suicidal thoughts from vague considerations to detailed planning. Bryan and Rudd (2023) define it as a cognitive state characterized by repetitive thoughts of death, self-harm, or a belief that life is no longer worth living, often influenced by psychological distress and external stressors. Pastoral care influences operational stress among naval personnels (Anake et al 2026). This perspective incorporates both cognitive and emotional dimensions, emphasizing the role of underlying mental health issues.

The prevalence of suicidal ideation among undergraduates varies across different regions of the world. In global studies, it has been reported that university students exhibit a high prevalence of suicidal thoughts, with estimates ranging from 10% to 30% depending on the region and methodological approach. Factors such as academic pressure, loneliness, and financial difficulties contribute to this rising concern, with universities in developed nations implementing mental health programs to address the issue. Despite these efforts, suicidal ideation remains a pressing concern due to persistent stigma surrounding mental health and limited access to psychological support for students.

In Africa, the prevalence of suicidal ideation among undergraduates is similarly high, with studies showing that many students struggle with depression and stress-related challenges that contribute to suicidal thoughts. The lack of mental health resources, combined with cultural and societal factors that discourage open discussions about mental health, exacerbates the problem. Many students experience severe emotional distress without seeking help due to fear of stigma, lack of professional counseling services, and inadequate institutional support structures. The mental health crisis among students in Africa has led to increased calls for improved interventions, but resource constraints and policy gaps continue to hinder progress.

In Nigeria, studies have shown a significant prevalence of suicidal ideation among undergraduates, with reports indicating that between 15% and 25% of university students have experienced suicidal thoughts at some point during their academic journey. The increasing cases of depression, anxiety, and academic stress contribute to this trend, with many students struggling to cope in a system that offers limited mental health support. Financial difficulties, academic pressure, and social isolation further exacerbate the situation, making Nigerian undergraduates particularly vulnerable to psychological distress. Despite growing awareness and advocacy efforts, the problem persists, highlighting the need for more comprehensive mental health interventions at tertiary institutions.

Stress among undergraduates can stem from various sources. Course load-related stress arises from the pressure of completing multiple assignments, meeting deadlines and preparing for examination, often resulting in burnout and mental exhaustion. The overwhelming academic workload can lead to anxiety, sleep deprivation, and decreased



concentration, ultimately affecting students' overall wellbeing and academic performance (Brown et al, 2021).

Self-efficacy-related stress refers to the anxiety and self-doubt students experience when they feel incapable of achieving academic success or meeting personal expectations. Persistent self doubt can also contribute to emotional distress, including anxiety and depression, which may further diminish students' ability to focus and perform effectively in their studies (Pajares, 2022). Moreover, students with low self-efficacy are more prone to procrastination and avoidance behaviours, which can exacerbate stress levels and create a cycle of academic underperformance. Positive academic performance is tied to competence and skills to achieving results. Ubana et al (2025) opined that harnessing security approach and artificial intelligence (AI) as tools helps combat corrupt/unethical practices. According to Offem & Arikpo (2026) artificial intelligence as a tool for promoting information literacy enhances communication effectiveness among couples. Helen et al (2025) opined that building digital literacy through social work education promotes sustainable development and reduces stress. Andong et al (2025) observed that incorporating digital technology to adult literacy education programmes effectively promote relief. Ubana et al (2024) sees Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a tool for combating unethical practices.

Given these concerns, this study seeks to examine the influence of stress and depression on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Cross River State Universities. Specifically, it aims to explore whether course load-related stress and self-efficacy-related stress could increase the likelihood of suicidal ideation among undergraduate students.

Statement of the problem

Suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Cross River State has become a growing concern, as reports from educational institutions and mental health professionals indicate an alarming increase in students contemplating self-harm or suicide. Observations from university counselling centres suggest that many students struggle with overwhelming feelings of hopelessness, social withdrawal, and emotional distress, which often go unnoticed until they escalate into suicidal thoughts. Parents have also raised concerns about their children exhibiting signs of extreme sadness, isolation, and academic disengagement, with some cases tragically resulting in suicide attempts. Reports from various sources highlight that suicidal ideation is prevalent among university students due to psychological and social pressures. Across higher institutions, many students admit to experiencing suicidal thoughts at some point, emphasizing the urgent need for targeted interventions.

Stress and depression have been recognized as key drivers of suicidal thoughts, placing an overwhelming psychological strain on students that often leads them toward self-harming behaviours. Academic pressure, financial struggles, and social challenges often lead to chronic stress, which, when left unmanaged, results in emotional exhaustion and a sense of helplessness. Depression further intensifies this crisis by amplifying feelings of worthlessness, persistent sadness, and an inability to find meaning in life. Many students suffering from both stress and depression may be at a significantly higher risk of suicidal ideation compared to their emotionally stable peers. As stress and depression interact, they may weaken students' coping mechanisms, making them more vulnerable to negative thought patterns that may lead to suicidal contemplation.

Recognizing the severity of this issue, various stakeholders, including the government, educational institutions, and non-governmental organizations, have made efforts to address suicidal ideation among students. The Nigerian government has launched mental health awareness campaigns in universities to reduce stigma and encourage students to seek help when experiencing emotional distress. Some higher institutions have also established counselling centres and student support programs to provide psychological assistance to



struggling students. Additionally, international organizations have been advocating for improved mental health policies in higher education, promoting early intervention strategies and suicide prevention programs. Despite these efforts, many undergraduate students in Cross River State still suffer in silence, either due to limited access to mental health services or fear of social stigma. Given the persistent nature of suicidal ideation among undergraduate students, how significantly do stress and depression influence students' susceptibility to suicidal thoughts in Cross River State?

Hypotheses

1. Course load-related stress has no significant influence on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in public universities in Cross River State.
2. Self-efficacy-related stress has no significant influence on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in public universities in Cross River State.

Literature review

Course load-related stress and suicidal ideation

Course load-related stress and other forms of academic stress can significantly contribute to suicidal ideation among students. When students experience persistent academic pressure without adequate coping mechanisms, they may develop feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and thoughts of self-harm or suicide (Ahmed et al, 2022). The author further explained that excessive academic workload, assignments deadlines, and pressure for academic achievements create psychological strain capable of increasing students' vulnerability to suicidal thoughts among Pakistani undergraduates.

Asante et al. (2020) reported similar results in Ghana, indicating that students facing heavy academic demands were more susceptible to suicide risk. Mbalinda et al. (2021) identified academic stress as a leading factor in suicidal ideation among Ugandan students in nursing programmes. Huang and Zhao (2020) also observed that academic disruptions during the COVID-19 lockdown led to increased suicidal ideation in Chinese universities.

Self-efficacy-related stress and suicidal ideation

Self-efficacy-related stress has been identified as a major psychological factor associated with suicidal ideation among adolescents and university students both in Nigeria and internationally. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his or her ability to successfully cope with challenges, solve problems, and achieve desired goals. According to Albert Bandura (1997), individuals with low self-efficacy often perceive stressful situations as overwhelming, thereby increasing emotional distress, hopelessness, anxiety, and vulnerability to suicidal thoughts. According to Karaman et al. (2019), Turkish university students with low self-efficacy were at higher risk of suicidal ideation. Similarly, Olorunfemi and Asogwa (2021) reported that Nigerian undergraduates with low academic self-efficacy exhibited higher mental health problems.

Fagbenro, Azeez and Olagundoye (2019) found that self-efficacy had a significant negative relationship with suicidal ideation among adolescents. The study revealed that adolescents with low confidence in their ability to manage life challenges experienced higher levels of suicidal thoughts, whereas those with strong self-efficacy demonstrated better emotional adjustment and resilience.

Similarly, Nigerian studies on academic stress and suicidal ideation have shown that poor coping ability and low resilience increase the tendency toward suicidal thoughts among undergraduates. Okechukwu et al. (2022) reported that students with poor coping strategies and reduced resilience were more vulnerable to suicidal ideation under stressful academic conditions. Iweama et al. (2024) observed that depression, hopelessness, and perceived



burdensomeness were strongly associated with suicidal ideation among Nigerian undergraduates.

Wang et al. (2020) revealed that reduced coping self-efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a spike in suicidal tendencies among Chinese students. Olashore et al. (2022) concluded that self-efficacy was a key protective factor against suicidal ideation in a South African university cohort.

Theoretical background

Beck's cognitive theory of depression by Aaron T. Beck in 1967

Beck's cognitive theory of depression was propounded by Aaron T. Beck in 1967. Beck, a psychiatrist and cognitive theorist, developed the theory as an alternative to psychoanalytic explanations of depression. Through clinical observations, he found that depressed individuals exhibited consistent negative thought patterns, which he termed cognitive distortions. His theory suggests that depression is primarily a result of dysfunctional thinking rather than unconscious conflicts. This perspective laid the foundation for cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), one of the most effective treatments for depression today.

Beck's theory is based on three major tenets, collectively known as the Cognitive Triad. The first tenet is negative views about the self, where individuals perceive themselves as inadequate, unworthy, or incapable. The second tenet is negative views about the world, in which individuals see their environment as hostile, unfair, or overwhelming. The third tenet is negative views about the future, where individuals believe that their current suffering will persist indefinitely, leading to hopelessness. These distorted beliefs contribute to self-fulfilling cycles of depression because individuals interpret events in ways that reinforce their negative outlook.

Beck also identified cognitive distortions, which are systematic errors in thinking that contribute to depression. Examples include catastrophizing (expecting the worst possible outcome), overgeneralization (believing that one failure defines all future experiences), personalization (blaming oneself for events beyond personal control), and all-or-nothing thinking (viewing situations in extreme, black-and-white terms). These distortions shape an individual's perception of stressors, making them feel insurmountable and increasing vulnerability to depression.

Beck's cognitive theory of depression applies to the present study on stress, depression, and suicidal ideation among undergraduates by explaining how cognitive distortions contribute to mental health struggles. For instance, course load-related stress can trigger negative self-perceptions, where students believe they are incapable of handling academic challenges. This may lead to feelings of failure and hopelessness, reinforcing their distress and increasing the risk of suicidal ideation. If students consistently interpret academic setbacks as personal inadequacies rather than temporary challenges, they are more likely to experience depression.

Similarly, self-efficacy-related stress is deeply connected to Beck's theory, as students with low self-efficacy may develop maladaptive cognitive patterns that amplify distress. When faced with difficulties, they might think, "I will never be good enough," leading to avoidance behaviors and heightened anxiety. Over time, these distorted self-beliefs can evolve into full-blown depression, increasing the risk of suicidal thoughts, especially if they feel permanently incapable of success.

Methodology

The research design adopted for the study was a survey design. Studies that make use of this approach are employed to obtain a picture of the present condition of particular



phenomena. Survey research is, therefore, very useful for opinion and attitude studies. It depends basically on questionnaires and interviews as means of data collection.

The sampling followed a multi-stage procedure. In this study, the population was stratified by institution and faculty to ensure proportional representation from both the University of Calabar (UNICAL) and the University of Cross River State (UNICROSS), located in Cross River State. In the first stage, the population was stratified into two main strata based on the universities: UNICAL and UNICROSS. Within each university, faculties served as sub-strata. From each stratum, five faculties were selected using simple random sampling, ensuring that 50% of the faculties from each university were included in the sample. To ensure objectivity and randomness, the names of all faculties within each university were written on slips of paper, and the researcher, while blindfolded, drew five slips from each university's pool. This process was conducted randomly with replacement, and at the end, five faculties were selected from UNICAL and five from UNICROSS. In the second stage, the selected faculties were further stratified by academic level. Only year-three undergraduate students were targeted for the study. A proportional allocation method was used, whereby 28% of the total population of year-three students across the selected faculties was chosen. This yielded a total sample size of 1,016 respondents. The choice of 28% was informed by the need to balance representativeness with feasibility, ensuring reliable data while maintaining efficiency in data collection and analysis. Simple random sampling was used to select the respondents.

The sample for the study is one thousand and sixteen (1016) year three undergraduates from the two public universities in Cross River State. The 1016 year three undergraduates were made up of (552) from the University of Calabar, and (464) year three undergraduates from the University of Cross River State were selected from each of the two public universities in Cross River State. Two instruments were used for data collection for this study. They are the Stress and Depression Questionnaire (SDQ) and Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (SIQ).

Results

Hypothesis one

Course load-related stress has no significant influence on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in public universities in Cross River State. To test the hypothesis, simple linear regression analysis was employed. In this analysis, the independent variable was course load-related stress, while the dependent variable was suicidal ideation. Both variables were measured on a continuous scale. This is presented in table 1.

Table 1: Simple regression analysis of the influence of course workload-related stress on suicidal ideation among undergraduates (N = 1,016)

Source of variation		SS	df	MS	F-ratio	Sig.
Regression		3268.607	2	3268.607		
Residual		3177.391	1014	4.425	738.612*	.000
Total		6445.999	1015			
Model		B	Std error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant		9.283	.484		19.160	.000
Course	work-related stress	.612	.023	.712	27.177	.000

*Significant at .05 level

$R = .712$; $R^2 = .506$; Adjusted $R^2 = .506$



As presented in Table 1, the result showed a correlation coefficient ($R = .712$), indicating a strong positive relationship between course load-related stress and suicidal ideation. This means that as course load-related stress increases, the likelihood of suicidal ideation among undergraduates also increases. Additionally, the adjusted R-squared value ($\text{Adj. } R^2 = .506$) suggests that 50.6% of the variation in suicidal ideation can be explained by course load-related stress. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) yielded an F-value of 738.612 with a significance level of $p = .000$. Since the p-value is less than the conventional alpha level of .05, the null hypothesis is rejected. The identified equation to understand this relationship was that suicidal ideation among undergraduates equal to $9.283 + .612$ (course load-related stress). Therefore, the study concludes that course load-related stress has a statistically significant influence on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in public universities in Cross River State.

Hypothesis two

Self-efficacy-related stress has no significant influence on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in public universities in Cross River State. To test the hypothesis, simple linear regression analysis was employed. In this analysis, the independent variable was self efficacy load-related stress, while the dependent variable was suicidal ideation. Both variables were measured on a continuous scale. This is presented in table 2.

Table 2: Simple regression analysis of the influence of self-efficacy-related stress on suicidal ideation among undergraduates ($N = 1,016$)

Source of variation	SS	df	MS	F-ratio	Sig.
Regression	3042.941	2	3042.941		
Residual	3403.057	1014	4.740	642.020*	.000
Total	6445.998	1015			
Model	B	Std error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	9.408	.514		18.291	.000
self-efficacy-related stress	.603	.024	.687	25.338	.000

*Significant at .05 level

$R = .687$

$R^2 = .472$

Adjusted $R^2 = .471$

As presented in Table 2, the result showed a correlation coefficient ($R = .687$), indicating a strong positive relationship between self efficacy-related stress and suicidal ideation. This suggests that as self efficacy-related stress increases, suicidal ideation among undergraduates also tend to increase. Furthermore, the adjusted R-squared value ($\text{Adj. } R^2 = .471$) suggests that 47.1% of the variation in suicidal ideation can be explained by self efficacy-related stress. A review of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) table showed a F-value of 642.020 with a significance level of $p = .000$. Since the p-value is less than the .05 significance threshold, the null hypothesis is rejected. Consequently, it is concluded that self-efficacy-related stress significantly influence suicidal ideation among undergraduates in public universities in Cross River State. The identified equation to understand this relationship was that suicidal ideation among undergraduates equal to $9.408 + .604$ (self efficacy-related stress).



Discussion of findings

Course load-related stress and suicidal ideation

The study revealed that course load-related stress significantly predicts suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Cross River State. This implies that the quantity and complexity of academic tasks assigned to students, such as excessive assignments, tight deadlines, and examination pressure, contribute to psychological distress severe enough to trigger suicidal thoughts. Students overwhelmed by academic expectations may perceive themselves as failures or incapable of coping, leading to despair and hopelessness. In academic settings where performance is often equated with personal worth, persistent underachievement can drive students toward extreme mental health outcomes, including suicidal ideation.

Several factors may have contributed to this result. These include poor time management skills, lack of academic support services, high expectations from family or faculty, and minimal rest periods between semesters. Additionally, large student-to-lecturer ratios are common in Nigerian public universities and may reduce individualized attention and increase academic pressure. The Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) supports this finding, positing that individuals evaluate stressors based on personal resources; when students perceive their course load to exceed their coping capacity, distress ensues. The absence of institutional structures for stress mitigation aggravates this situation.

This finding is consistent with previous studies. Ahmad et al. (2022) found a significant link between academic overload and suicidal thoughts among Pakistani undergraduates. Asante et al. (2020) reported similar results in Ghana, indicating that students facing heavy academic demands were more susceptible to suicide risk. Mbalinda et al. (2021) identified academic stress as a leading factor in suicidal ideation among Ugandan students in nursing programs. Huang and Zhao (2020) also observed that academic disruptions during the COVID-19 lockdown led to increased suicidal ideation in Chinese universities. These studies collectively reinforce the critical impact of academic stress on students' mental health.

Self-efficacy-related stress and suicidal ideation

This study found a statistically significant influence of self-efficacy-related stress on suicidal ideation. This means that students who lack confidence in their ability to manage academic and personal tasks are more likely to experience suicidal thoughts. Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations, plays a protective role in coping with stress. When students perceive themselves as ineffective or incapable, they may interpret failures as personal deficiencies, triggering anxiety, hopelessness, and suicidal tendencies.

Possible reasons for this result include past academic failures, lack of mentorship, unrealistic academic expectations, and social comparisons with high-performing peers. When compounded by institutional competitiveness and minimal counseling services, low self-efficacy can develop into chronic stress. Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1997) explains that belief in one's capabilities affects how one approaches goals, tasks, and challenges. Thus, undergraduates with diminished self-efficacy interpret stressors as threats rather than manageable challenges, making them more vulnerable to suicidal ideation.

The findings agree with several empirical studies. Karaman et al. (2019) found that Turkish university students with low self-efficacy were at higher risk of suicidal ideation. Olorunfemi and Asogwa (2021) similarly reported that Nigerian undergraduates with low academic self-efficacy exhibited higher mental health problems. Wang et al. (2020) revealed that reduced coping self-efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a spike in suicidal tendencies among Chinese students. Olashore et al. (2022) concluded that self-efficacy was a key protective factor against suicidal ideation in a South African university cohort.



Summary/conclusion

Stress and depression are major psychological factors associated with suicidal ideation among adolescents, youths, and adults. Suicidal ideation refers to thoughts, plans, or desires to end one's life. Researches have shown that individuals experiencing persistent stress and depressive symptoms are more likely to develop hopelessness, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of worthlessness, which may increase suicidal thoughts.

Stress arises when individuals perceive that the demands placed on them exceed their coping abilities. Academic pressure, financial difficulties, relationship conflicts, unemployment, family instability, and social expectations are common sources of stress. Prolonged exposure to stress can negatively affect mental health, reduce emotional resilience, and contribute to psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety.

Students, in particular, may experience stress from heavy academic workload, poor academic performance, and uncertainty about the future, thereby increasing vulnerability to suicidal ideation. Depression is a mood disorder characterized by sadness, loss of interest, hopelessness, low self-esteem, fatigue, and difficulty concentrating. Individuals suffering from depression often experience feelings of helplessness and emotional pain, which can lead to suicidal thoughts when not properly managed. Depression has consistently been identified as one of the strongest predictors of suicidal ideation across different populations.

According to the cognitive theory of depression proposed by Aaron Beck, negative thinking patterns and hopelessness contribute significantly to suicidal tendencies. Studies conducted both internationally and in Nigeria indicate a significant relationship between stress, depression, and suicidal ideation. For instance, academic and social stress among university students has been linked with increased depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts. Similarly, individuals with severe depression are more likely to report suicidal ideation than those without depressive symptoms. Depression may also mediate the relationship between stress and suicidal ideation, meaning that stressful experiences can trigger depression, which in turn increases suicidal thoughts.

Furthermore, lack of social support, poor coping skills, substance abuse, stigma surrounding mental health, and limited access to counselling services may worsen the effects of stress and depression. Protective factors such as strong family support, counselling interventions, stress management techniques, religious involvement, and positive coping strategies can help reduce suicidal ideation.

In conclusion, stress and depression are interconnected psychological conditions that significantly contribute to suicidal ideation. Early identification, effective counselling, mental health awareness, and supportive environments are essential in reducing the prevalence of suicidal thoughts and promoting psychological well-being among individuals.

Recommendations

1. University governing councils and school management boards in public universities in Cross River State should take urgent steps to establish comprehensive mental health centers within campuses. These centers should also offer confidential, walk-in services and operate flexible hours to accommodate students' schedules.
2. The National Universities Commission (NUC) and institutional curriculum committees should review and revise existing academic frameworks to reduce excessive course loads that contribute to academic stress and depression.
3. Student affairs departments in conjunction with university bursaries and scholarship boards should design and implement targeted financial assistance programs for economically disadvantaged students.



4. University counseling units and directorates of student development should organize periodic campus-wide awareness campaigns and workshops that address the emotional impact of romantic relationships on mental health.
5. Student union bodies, departmental associations, and residence hall committees should work collaboratively to strengthen peer support structures and encourage inclusive campus engagement.

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