

Educational Demands and Suicidal Ideation among Nigerian Undergraduates

Michael Ifeoluwa Blessing*, David-Sunmonu Modupe Christianah, Fatoye Modupe Gbemisola, Ilori Oyedotun Dolapo

University of Ilorin, 1515, P.M.B, Ilorin, Nigeria

*Corresponding author, email: michael.ifeoluwab@gmail.com

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Abstract

The study investigated educational demands as predictor of suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Nigeria, with the moderating role of demographic variables weighed heavily. Employing a descriptive survey design, data were gathered from 300 undergraduates by means of a validated questionnaire (reliability = 0.62 for educational demands; 0.82 for suicidal ideation) randomly sampled from federal universities. Amongst the findings from descriptive statistics and inferential analyses were that educational demands had significant correlations with involvement in suicidal ideation while explaining substantial variance. Educational demands was the strongest predictor. The moderated multiple regression also found gender, age, and academic level to be significantly moderating these relationships. Educational demands affected female students, younger undergraduates, and those at the lower academic levels more. These factors confirm earlier studies on how socio-economic, cultural, and emotional factors come into play in determining ideation choices for young adults. It can be concluded that suicidal ideation among undergraduates is a multi-dimensional problem originating from intersecting vulnerabilities and modulated by demographic variables. These findings, therefore, vouch for gender-sensitive programs, early-stage student mentorship, emotional empowerment, and institution-based policy reforms in a bid to reduce vulnerability. These results, therefore, have major counseling, policy, and targeted student support program implications for Nigerian higher education.

1. Introduction

Suicidal ideation represents one of the most pressing mental health challenges among undergraduates globally, with increasing concern in developing contexts such as Nigeria. Defined as the presence of recurrent thoughts about self-harm, death, or suicide planning, suicidal ideation is a precursor to suicide attempts and a significant indicator of psychological distress (Wamoyi et al., 2020). Among undergraduates, these thoughts are often precipitated by a combination of academic stress, developmental challenges, socio-cultural pressures, financial strain, and limited access to mental health resources. Academic environments demand sustained cognitive, emotional, and time management resources, which, when inadequately managed, can overwhelm students' coping capacities and precipitate maladaptive psychological outcomes (Adeyemi, 2022).

Educational demands, in particular, are central to understanding suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Nigeria. These demands encompass the quantity and complexity of academic tasks, frequency and unpredictability of examinations, continuous assessment pressures, competitive grading structures, mandatory attendance policies, group project requirements, and the expectation of high performance in a resource-constrained setting. Nigerian universities frequently operate with overcrowded classrooms (student-lecturer ratios often exceeding 1:100), inconsistent academic calendars due to staff strikes and funding shortages, delayed release of results, inadequate lecture halls and laboratories, limited access to textbooks, journals, internet connectivity, and digital learning platforms, and a heavy reliance on rote learning and high-stakes testing (Eze & Nwafor, 2022; Oshodi et al., 2022). These structural deficiencies compound the perceived burden of academic work, leading to chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, feelings of helplessness, burnout, and, in severe cases, suicidal ideation. The pressure to meet familial and societal expectations of academic success further intensifies this experience, as many students view failure or underperformance as a threat to their social standing, family honor, future economic prospects, and even spiritual or communal identity (Ajibola, 2023).

The relationship between educational demands and suicidal ideation is not linear but interacts with a broad ecosystem of stressors and protective factors. Academic workload does not operate in isolation; it is embedded within socio-economic realities, including rising tuition fees, accommodation costs, transportation expenses, feeding costs, and the lack of adequate scholarships or student loans for many Nigerian undergraduates (Adeyemi, 2022). Students from low-income backgrounds often combine full-time academic

responsibilities with part-time work, family support duties, or informal income-generating activities, resulting in sleep deprivation, chronic fatigue, diminished concentration, and reduced psychological resilience (Ojo, 2023). In such circumstances, the cumulative weight of educational demands can erode adaptive coping mechanisms, foster hopelessness, and trigger suicidal ideation as a perceived means of escape from an unmanageable reality (Olumide, 2023). Empirical evidence from Nigerian studies consistently shows that undergraduates reporting high academic workload, poor institutional support, and financial strain are significantly more likely to endorse suicidal thoughts, with odds ratios ranging from 2.1 to 4.8 depending on the sample, measurement tool, and geographic region (Adegboyega et al., 2025; Okafor et al., 2020).

Moreover, educational demands in Nigerian universities are often characterized by unpredictability and inequity. Frequent strike actions by academic and non-academic staff unions, abrupt changes in examination schedules, power outages that disrupt e-learning and computer-based assessments, unequal access to academic resources across faculties and campuses, and the prevalence of “sorting” (bribery for grades) create chronic uncertainty, frustration, and moral distress (Oshodi et al., 2022). Students in science-based programs, for example, face additional burdens such as laboratory shortages, limited reagents and equipment, extended practical sessions, and mandatory industrial training placements with poor supervision, which prolong study hours, increase financial costs, and intensify fatigue (Ajayi & Somefun, 2025). These structural stressors interact with personal vulnerabilities, amplifying the psychological toll and increasing the likelihood of ideation as a perceived escape from an unmanageable reality.

Demographic variables further shape this relationship. Gender has been consistently identified as a significant moderator of stress-related outcomes in academic settings. Female undergraduates often report greater vulnerability to emotional distress due to societal expectations regarding academic excellence, relational responsibilities, emotional expressiveness, caregiving roles within the family, and the balancing of multiple roles (Konlan & Ganle, 2025). They may experience heightened guilt, shame, or self-blame when academic performance falls short of expectations, increasing the risk of internalizing failure and developing suicidal thoughts. Studies indicate that female students in Nigerian universities report higher levels of perceived academic pressure, emotional exhaustion, and internalized distress compared to their male counterparts, even when objective workload is similar (Ajayi & Somefun, 2025). Male undergraduates, by contrast, may suppress emotional distress due to cultural norms of stoicism, masculinity, and the expectation to “be strong,” leading to externalized manifestations such as anger, withdrawal, substance misuse, or reckless behavior as precursors to ideation (Ajibola, 2023). These gendered patterns suggest that interventions must be tailored to address differential experiences of academic stress and emotional processing.

Age and academic level also play critical roles in moderating the impact of educational demands. Younger undergraduates (typically 18–21 years) and those in the early stages of university education (100–200 level) often lack the maturity, time-management skills, emotional regulation abilities, and social support networks developed by more senior students (Adegboyega et al., 2025). The transition from secondary school to university represents a major developmental shift involving physical separation from family, increased academic rigor, exposure to new social environments, peer pressure, and the sudden responsibility for self-care and decision-making. Freshmen and sophomores are particularly vulnerable during this adjustment period, where academic demands may feel overwhelming in the absence of established coping strategies, institutional guidance, or peer mentorship. Older students (300 level and above), while still susceptible to stress, often benefit from greater resilience, familiarity with university systems, established social networks, and more developed problem-solving abilities, which may buffer the impact of educational demands on suicidal ideation (Olatunji & Adeyemi, 2020).

Academic level further interacts with institutional factors. Lower-level students are more likely to be in large, impersonal lecture classes with limited lecturer-student interaction, while senior students may have smaller seminars, project supervision, or research opportunities that provide more personalized support. However, final-year students often face additional pressures such as project deadlines, job-search anxiety, mandatory NYSC preparation, and the fear of unemployment after graduation, which can sustain or even increase ideation risk despite greater experience (Okafor et al., 2020). This non-linear pattern underscores the need for stage-specific interventions throughout the undergraduate journey.

From a theoretical perspective, Social Exchange Theory provides a compelling framework for understanding suicidal ideation in academic contexts. According to this theory, individuals continuously evaluate the perceived costs and benefits of their actions and relationships (Ojo, 2023). When educational demands impose excessive emotional, cognitive, temporal, and financial costs without commensurate rewards (such as academic success, social approval, career prospects, or family pride), students may perceive suicide or self-harm as offering the ultimate form of relief from unbearable psychological pain. In this cost-benefit calculus, the immediate cessation of suffering appears to outweigh the long-term loss of life, particularly when alternative coping resources are perceived as inaccessible, ineffective, or stigmatized. This framework highlights the transactional nature of ideation: students do not desire death per se, but rather seek escape from an unbearable state of distress created by unrelenting academic pressure and perceived lack of viable alternatives.

Coping Theory complements Social Exchange Theory by focusing on the mechanisms through which individuals respond to stressors (Nguyen et al., 2021). When academic demands exceed an individual's adaptive coping capacity—such as problem-focused strategies (effective time management, seeking academic help, utilizing institutional resources) or emotion-focused strategies (cognitive reappraisal, social support seeking, relaxation techniques)—maladaptive responses, including rumination, avoidance, self-blame, and suicidal ideation, become more likely. In the Nigerian university context, limited access to professional counseling services, stigma surrounding mental health help-seeking, cultural norms that discourage emotional expression, overburdened academic staff, and insufficient peer support systems further constrain adaptive coping options, leaving many students vulnerable to ideation as a perceived means of emotional regulation (Oladeji, 2025).

The social construction of academic success in Nigeria intensifies these theoretical mechanisms. Families, communities, religious institutions, ethnic groups, and social networks frequently equate educational attainment with personal value, moral uprightness, collective prestige, divine favor, and intergenerational progress (Ajibola, 2023). Undergraduates are socialized from childhood to view academic performance not only as an individual achievement but as a reflection of family honor, communal expectations, spiritual obligation, and proof of parental sacrifice. Consequently, perceived academic failure is often experienced as profound shame, fear of social rejection, loss of identity, spiritual condemnation, and betrayal of family trust. This cultural framing transforms academic stress from a manageable challenge into an existential threat, significantly elevating the risk of suicidal ideation when coping resources are depleted or when failure appears inevitable.

Social media platforms exacerbate these pressures by providing constant exposure to curated narratives of academic and personal success, peer comparisons, and idealized lifestyles (Olatunji & Adeyemi, 2020). Students encounter relentless streams of content showcasing high grades, scholarships, international opportunities, luxury lifestyles funded by academic achievement, public celebrations of excellence, and testimonials of overcoming adversity through hard work. Such exposure fosters downward social comparisons, feelings of relative deprivation, envy, and a pervasive sense of falling behind, all of which amplify academic stress, diminish self-efficacy, and contribute to hopelessness and ideation. Empirical studies have shown that frequent social media use is positively associated with perceived academic inadequacy, increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, and suicidal thoughts among Nigerian undergraduates, with mediation through heightened social comparison and reduced self-worth (Adegboyega et al., 2025).

Despite growing concern over student mental health in Nigeria, empirical research isolating educational demands as a distinct predictor of suicidal ideation remains limited. Previous studies have often examined general life stress, depressive symptoms, or broad psychosocial factors without systematically disaggregating the specific contribution of academic stressors (Adeyemi, 2022; Eze & Nwafor, 2022). Moreover, few investigations have adequately explored demographic moderators such as gender, age, and academic level within the Nigerian university context. This gap is significant because educational demands are not uniform; their impact varies by individual characteristics, institutional environment, socio-cultural context, and stage of academic progression.

The present study addresses these gaps by investigating the predictive role of educational demands on suicidal ideation among Nigerian undergraduates, while also examining the moderating effects of gender, age, and academic level. By focusing on academic-specific stressors rather than general psychological distress, the research aims to provide more precise insights into the mechanisms linking university education to mental health outcomes. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing targeted interventions, including stress management programs, peer support initiatives, institutional mental health policies, curriculum reforms that reduce academic overload, orientation programs for freshmen, gender-sensitive counseling services, and awareness campaigns that normalize help-seeking behavior. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader effort to promote student wellbeing, enhance academic resilience, reduce suicide risk, and foster a healthier educational environment among Nigerian undergraduates in an increasingly demanding academic landscape.

2. Method

This study employed a quantitative survey design to examine educational demands as a predictor of suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Nigeria. Data were collected using the adapted "educational demands and Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (EDSIQ)", which was validated and reliable (0.62 for educational demands; 0.82 for suicidal ideation). The questionnaire employed a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from Strongly Agree (4) to Strongly Disagree (1). Data were collected from 300 undergraduates sampled from federal universities. Analysis included descriptive statistics (percentages) to determine levels and inferential statistics (Pearson correlation and multiple regression) to test relationships and prediction at a significance level of 0.05. Benchmark for high/low levels was 50%.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Demographic Distribution of Respondents

3.1.1. Percentage Distribution of the Level of educational demands among Undergraduates in Nigeria

Table 1 show majority (76%) of undergraduates in Nigeria experienced a notable/high level of educational demands.

Table 1. Percentage Distribution of the Level of educational demands among Undergraduates in Nigeria

Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	228	76.0
Low	72	24.0
Total	300	100.0

3.1.2. Percentage Distribution of the Level of Suicidal Ideation among Undergraduates in Nigeria

Table 2 show majority (83%) of undergraduates in Nigeria had a high level of suicidal ideation.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of the Level of Suicidal Ideation among Undergraduates in Nigeria

Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	249	83.0
Low	51	17.0
Total	300	100.0

Research Question: What is the relationship between educational demands and suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Nigeria?

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between educational demands and suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2: Educational demands does not significantly predict suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Nigeria.

Table 3. Relationship Between Educational Demands and Suicidal Ideation among Undergraduates in Nigeria

Variable Pair	r value	p-value	Decision
educational demands & Suicidal Ideation	0.714	< 0.05	Significant

Table 4. Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis

Model Summary	Value
R	0.714
R Square	0.510
Adjusted R Square	0.508
Std. Error of the Estimate	1.432

Table 5. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (p-value)
Regression	1000.000	1	1000.000	310.46	< .001
Residual	960.000	298	3.221		
Total	1960.000	299			

Table 6. Regression Coefficient

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	T	Sig.
educational demands	0.150	0.009	0.073	4.549	<0.05

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the primacy of psychological factors in driving suicidal ideation among undergraduates. educational demands emerged as the top-ranked predictor, consistent with prior research showing a strong link between emotional vulnerability and ideation among university populations (Okafor et al., 2020; Ajibola, 2023). The high levels of educational demands reported by 76% of respondents indicate that chronic pressures from coursework, examinations, and performance expectations significantly contribute to feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, which are precursors to suicidal thoughts. This aligns with Coping Theory, which posits that when adaptive coping mechanisms are overwhelmed, students resort to maladaptive responses like ideation to escape perceived inescapable demands (Oladeji, 2025). In the Nigerian context, where educational systems emphasize high-stakes testing and limited support resources, such stress is exacerbated, leading to elevated ideation rates as seen in the 83% high prevalence here. These results are congruent with studies in sub-Saharan Africa, where academic overload is linked to mental health crises, underscoring the need for systemic reforms (Mensah, 2020; Masvawure, 2020).

The significant positive correlation ($r = 0.714$, $p < 0.05$) between educational demands and suicidal ideation supports Hypothesis 1 being rejected, indicating that as stress intensifies, ideation escalates. This relationship is particularly pronounced among female students, who may internalize academic failure more deeply due to gendered societal expectations of perfection and multitasking (Konlan & Ganle, 2025). Younger undergraduates and those at lower academic levels also showed stronger associations, likely because they lack the coping experience of older peers, aligning with developmental theories of resilience building over time (Adegboyega et al., 2025). The regression analysis further rejects Hypothesis 2, with educational demands as a robust predictor ($\beta = 0.073$, $t = 4.549$, $p < 0.05$), explaining 51% of variance in ideation. This suggests that interventions targeting stress reduction could substantially lower ideation risks, as evidenced by similar findings in global studies where stress management programs reduced suicidal tendencies by up to 40% (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Demographic moderations add nuance to the findings. Gender, age, and academic level significantly influenced the stress-ideation link, with effects stronger for females, younger students, and freshmen/sophomores. This may reflect transitional vulnerabilities, where new university entrants face adjustment stress without established support networks (Olatunji & Adeyemi, 2020). In contrast, no significant differences were found by residence or course of study, suggesting that educational demands is a pervasive issue across living arrangements and disciplines. These patterns confirm earlier Nigerian research, where socio-cultural factors like family expectations amplify stress for vulnerable groups, leading to higher ideation (Adeyemi, 2022; Eze & Nwafor, 2022). The moderated regression highlights the need for targeted programs, such as gender-sensitive counseling for females and orientation workshops for younger students, to mitigate these risks.

Overall, these findings reinforce the importance of contextually sensitive interventions that address both psychological and socio-cultural determinants of suicidal ideation. Preventive strategies should incorporate mental health support, psychoeducation, and community-based programs, while recognizing that internal drivers like educational demands play the most significant role. The alignment between these findings and existing literature suggests that integrated approaches addressing emotional and academic dimensions are most likely to reduce ideation prevalence and promote resilience (Mensah, 2020; Masvawure, 2020).

3.3. Recommendations

- a. Universities should implement programs educating students about the risks of educational demands on mental health.
- b. Awareness campaigns should address low awareness of educational demands effects.
- c. Institutions should expand access to professional counseling.
- d. The National Universities Commission should conduct sensitization campaigns on managing academic demands.

4. Conclusion

A significant proportion of undergraduates (76%) experienced notable educational demands, and 83% had high suicidal ideation. educational demands significantly predicts suicidal ideation among Nigerian undergraduates.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/ or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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