

Does Gender Moderate Relationship Between Peer Acceptance and Suicidal Ideation among Undergraduate?

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Abstract

The study examined the role of gender in the relationship between peer acceptance and suicidal ideation among four hundred and thirty-one (431) first-year undergraduates purposively selected from six departments in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The age range of the participants is 18 to 22 years with a mean age of 19.7, a standard deviation of 1.6 and gender consists of male 211 (49.0%) and female 220 (51.0%). Correlational design and moderated multiple regression techniques available in the Conditional process analysis were adopted for data analyses. Pearson Moment correlation coefficient showed that gender did not significantly correlate with suicidal ideation $r(429) = .06, P < .05$, peer acceptance $r(429) = .07, P < .05$. Suicidal ideation negatively correlated with peer acceptance $r(429) = -.11, P < .05$. Also, multiple moderated regression results showed that gender significantly moderated relationship between peer acceptance and suicidal ideation; gender $\beta = 11.34, P < .05$, peer acceptance, $\beta = .37, P < .05$ and the interaction effect $A*B = -.31$. The researchers, among other things, recommended that to mitigate the colossal danger of suicide, parents and significant others in the life of undergraduate students should constantly monitor their relationships with peers.

Keywords: *Gender, Suicidal Ideation, Peer Acceptance, Undergraduate.*

Introduction

The increasing rate of suicidal action has become a global issue of concern. World Health Organization (2019) reported the global suicide rate at 10.1 million deaths annually. The suicide rate in the US is reported to be well over 35% between 1999 to 2018, while China reported 9.7 and UK reported over 8.9% (WHO, 2019). Unfortunately, most African countries do not have a robust database for annual suicide reports. However, available evidence shows that South Africa in 2019 reported a suicide rate of 11.6%, and Nigeria reported a suicide rate of 9.5% (World Population Review, 2021). Specifically, 46 Nigerians committed suicide in 2019, and others may have happened without record. The number of suicides in Africa that occur unrecorded may be pretty high. The scenario may be related to cultural and traditional practices, which attribute suicide to an evil spirit. Among the Igbo culture, suicide is taboo and attracts stigmatisation. In the past, victims of suicide are not buried but thrown away in the evil forest (Motojesi et al., 2021; Onu, Okoye, Mabilia, Ifedigbo & Babatunde, 2020).

The consequences of suicide cut across persons and the environment. Hopes of family, relatives, friends are shattered when a suicide occurs. Specifically, parents, guardians, siblings and significant others hope on undergraduates that after their graduation, things will become better. Thus, their engagement in self-harm engraves indelible scars in their psych (Pitman, Osborn, King & Erlagsen, 2014). Worryingly, undergraduates were the most reported victims of suicide in Nigeria. Out of the forty-six (46) victims of suicide in 2019, 35 were undergraduates (Daily Trust, 23rd June 2020). Peers are thrown into mourning, especially when the person is perceived as friendly and essential to the group. If a student who is helpful to other students commits suicide, the impact is felt more. Similarly, there is the tendency to imitate siblings of the deceased that suicide is the only escape route in the face of challenges. Hence, it may increase the incidences of the phenomenon among youths.

Suicide does not just happen; it sometimes takes the victims to think about it (Ugwu, Nwafor, Obi-Nwosu & Okoye, 2020). Adolescents' suicidal behaviour may have its root in an already identity crisis laden stage (adolescence) of human development. According to Canetto (1997), adolescents grapple with many challenges ranging from teenager parents' crisis, identity crises, sexual orientation, related academic challenges, relationship

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challenges and other socio-emotional related life events. The trajectory of suicide moves from psychological reactions of withdrawal, critical self-evaluation, a sense of burdensomeness to others, and failure (Joiner & Orden, 2008). The negative experiences of daily hassles, which accumulates and affect individuals' adjustment, pose an existential threat. The negative experiences get in different levels of the psycho-social environment (Bronfrenner, 2009). It is plausible that individuals' protective factors (peer and family acceptance, social support, resilience, socio-economic status, among others) may be threatened by the negative experiences; hence, the tiny spark will trigger suicidal thoughts. Also, the incidents may occur jointly with genetic susceptibility or independently predict self-harm thoughts. The thought is overwhelming and debilitating to the point that victims feel that the only option is to kill themselves (Joiner & Orden, 2008; Klonsky, May & Saffer, 2016).

One of the protective factors that seem to play a role in suicide protection is peer acceptance. Peer is very critical in the life of children and youths (Gowing, 2019; Brock & Gurung, 1998). The paradigm shift in relationship patterns among undergraduates further engendered the relevance of peer acceptance. When adolescents gain admission into the university and are required to relocate to the campus, they are bound to establish a relationship with other students. Such a relationship fills the vacuum created by leaving home (Gowing, 2019). As mentioned earlier, peer relationships serve as a buffer for developing psychopathologies such as anxiety, depression, critical self-evaluation, emotional deregulation, and suicidal thoughts (Tu & Chu, 2020). One may assert that the stress experience of first-year undergraduates comprises the attempt to cope with establishing a new relationship with fellow students and understanding the dynamics of the environment. While some will adapt quickly, especially students who lived in the dormitory during high school, others may experience some difficulties with the formation and sustenance of friendship.

Furthermore, the importance of peer is hinged on the level of acceptance enjoyed in the in-group (Gowing, 2019; Tu & Chu, 2020). Peer group relationships require formal and informal norms, determining individual members' acceptance or rejection. Conformity with the in-group norms influence perception of membership. Peer acceptance entails the

degree of reception among the peers, which plays critical input in the psycho-emotional functioning of individuals (Vannata, Garstein, Zeller, & Noll, 2009). Peer acceptance has been found to play roles in students' academic performance in secondary and tertiary education, self-evaluation, attachment styles sustenance, future orientation, resilience, social support, goal setting and attainment and marital satisfaction (Tu & Chu, 2020; Vannata, Garstein, Zeller, & Noll, 2009). The impact of peer acceptance has been linked with attachment style formed from the childhood stage (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2011). Also, the effect of belongingness on suicidal thought was aptly summarised by the interpersonal psychological theory of suicide (Joiner & Orden, 2008).

The role of gender in the relationship between suicidal ideation and peer acceptance is worth understanding. Firstly, it will enable researchers to concentrate their studies on gender-specific phenomena. Secondly, it will assist professionals in fashioning intervention and management paradigms.

Gender refers to the classification of an individual as male or female. Some previous studies showed that both genders were affected by suicide precipitating factors (poverty, debt level, stressful daily life, psychological distress, loneliness, parental separation/divorce, posttraumatic stress disorder) (Ibrahim, Amit, Din, & Ong, 2017; Lu et al., 2020; Miranda-Mendizabal, 2019). Specifically, Lu et al. (2020) noted that adverse life events were significant predictors of suicidal ideation among females. Ibrahim, Amit, Din and Ong (2017) reported age as a significant factor in male suicidal ideation, while depression and lack of motivation were related to female suicidal ideation. Similarly, Miranda-Mendizabal et al. (2019) found eating disorders, being a victim of dating violence, depressive symptoms, interpersonal problems and previous abortion to be female-specific suicidal ideation related while hopelessness, friends' suicidal behaviour, access to means of suicide and drug abuse were found to be male-specific factors.

Joiner and Orden (2008) proposed a theoretical explanation of causative and relative factors of suicide. The interpersonal psychological theory of suicide listed perceived burdensomeness, thwarted social belongingness, hopelessness, and acquired capability as critical components of suicidal ideation. The theory further maintained that the processes proceed from experiencing ideation to attempt. Perceived burdensomeness entails individuals' overwhelming thoughts about how others see them as problems. People

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going through this experience erroneously believe that their death will bring relief to their significant others. Also, thwarted belongingness implies the disruption of the relationship patterns of an individual. In this study, peer acceptance may be related to thwarted belongingness. The researchers assumed that gaining admission and subsequently moving from home to live in a school dormitory may interrupt the relationship base of the individual. This is often accompanied by warnings from parents and guardians to the students to be careful on whom they relate to within the campus. Such admonitions confirmed parents' fear of the tendency of newly admitted students in the Nigerian campuses to join gang/cult groups. It was further thought that students who adhere strictly to the warning might develop isolation, precursor suicidal behaviour.

Thus, psychological intervention is critical between ideation-to-attempt timeframe. This is the delicate nature of the period; identification, confrontation, counselling, and follow up to avoid relapse. Identifying an individual with suicidal ideation is tedious due to individual differences in people's reactions to issues (Uchendu, Ijeomone, & Nwachokor, 2019). While some people will be withdrawn, taciturn, depressed, and critical to self when experiencing suicidal ideation, others may be anxious, agitated, and engage in the continuous complaint (Onu, Okoye, Mabia, Ifedigbo & Babatunde, 2020). According to Ugwu, Nwafor, Obi-Nwosu and Okoye (2020), it takes an intimate or professional psychologist to identify an individual experiencing suicidal ideation. Without identification, intervention may likely not be obtained. Regrettably, this issue is compounded by the growing individualism among young Nigerians (Okafor, 2020).

The Present Study

The present study assessed the role of gender in the relationship between peer acceptance and suicidal ideation among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. The following hypotheses were examined:

- a. There will be a significant relationship between gender and peer acceptance.
- b. There will be a significant relationship between gender and suicidal ideation.
- c. There will be a significant relationship between peer acceptance and suicidal ideation.

- d. There will be significant interaction between gender on peer acceptance and suicidal ideation.

Participants

Four hundred and thirty-one (431) first-year undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka were purposively selected from six departments. Their ages ranged from 18 - 22 years with a mean age of 19.7, a standard deviation of 1.6, and gender consisted of male 211 (49.0%) and female 220 (51.0%). Infinite sample size determination was adopted for participant selection.

Instruments

Two instruments were adopted for data collection: suicidal ideation and peer acceptance scales. Suicide Ideation Scale is a 19 items scale developed by Becks, Kovacs and Weisman (1979). With scoring format of none = 0, Weak = 1, Moderate or Strong = 2. The scale authors recorded the internal consistency of Cronbach alpha = .88, and Cronbach alpha of .85 was obtained for the present study.

Perceived Acceptance Scale is a 12 items friends sub-scale of perceived acceptance developed by Brock and Gurung (1998), used to assess peer acceptance. It was scored in five-point Likert format of 1= strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. The authors reported Cronbach alpha of $\alpha = .89$. A pilot study for the current study found Cronbach alpha of $\alpha = .75$.

The gender of the participants was ascertained by asking them to indicate in the questionnaire whether they were males or females.

Procedure

The approval for the study was obtained from the Head, department of psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The researchers met first-year students in their lecture halls and explained the research and its purposes. Those that indicated interest to participate and filled out consent forms were issued with a copy of the questionnaire. Also, another inclusion criterion is that a participant must be living in the hostel. Living in the hostel somewhat disrupted attachment by students and their caregiver.

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Design and statistics

Correlational design and moderated multiple regression techniques available in the Conditional process analysis (Hayes, 2013) was used to analyse the data.

Results

Table 1, Descriptive and correlation statistics

S/NO	Variables	M	SD	SK	KUR	1	2	3
1	Gender	1.5	.51	-.04	-2.1	1		
2	Suicidal Ideation	7.96	7.32	1.67	2.12	.06	1	
3	Peer Acceptance	39.46	6.1	.44	1.03	.07	-.11*	1

The meaning of the abbreviation M = mean, S.D = standard deviation, SK = skewness, KUR = kurtosis.

Mean score, standard deviation, skewness, kurtosis and correlations of gender, suicidal ideation and peer acceptance. Pearson correlation coefficient Table 1 above showed that gender did not significantly correlate with suicidal ideation $r = .06$, $P < .05$. There was no significant correlation between gender and peer acceptance $r = .07$, $P < .05$ but correlation between suicidal ideation and peer acceptance was significant and negative $r = -.11$, $P < .05$.

Table 2, Moderated regression statistics

Predictors	R^2	Df1(df2)	F	Estimat	SE	T	LCCI	ULCI
Model	.037	3(427)	5.46**					
Gender (A)				11.34**	4.05	2.9	3.39	19.30
Peer Acceptance(B)				.37**	.17	2.2	.05	.69
A*B				-.31**	.10	-3.1	-.51	-.11

Table 2 above showed that gender is significantly and positively related to suicidal ideation 11.34, $P < .05$ such that males are likely to experience suicidal ideation. Similarly, a unit increase in peer acceptance increased the tendency of suicidal ideation .37, $P < .05$.

Further analysis showed that gender moderated the relationship between peer acceptance and suicidal ideation such that significantly and negatively increased the likelihood that peer acceptance will increase suicidal ideation. Gender moderated suicidal ideation such that when gender is male coded as 1, there was no significant increase of peer acceptance on suicidal ideation β .06, $P = .42$. However, when gender was coded as 2, peer acceptance significantly affected suicidal ideation $\beta = -.25$, $P = .00$.

Discussion

This study examined the moderating role of gender on the relationship between peer acceptance and suicidal ideation. The result of the moderated regression showed that gender and peer acceptance significantly predicted suicidal ideation. The results were in tandem with the theoretical assumptions of the Interpersonal psychological theory of suicidal ideation (Joiner & Orden, 2008), which served as a theoretical framework for the study. The proposed that thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, hopelessness and acquired capability are responsible for suicidal ideation and action. Previous findings showed that gender was significantly related to suicidal ideation (Canette, 1997; O'Beaglaich, McCutcheon, Conway, Hanafin & Morrison, 2020; Olaseni, 2017). Specifically, Canette (1997) reported that suicidal ideation was more prevalent among female adolescents in the United States than males. However, females were less likely to die of suicide-related behaviour than their male counterparts.

Additionally, peer acceptance has shown its importance further in human existence by its outcome. This result conforms to our assumption that given the tendency of adolescents to drift from parents to peers in search of identity and independence, disruption in peer relationships may become catastrophic to adolescents cognitive and socio-emotional well-being and functioning. Poor peer relationships, victimisation, and bullying have been related to suicidal ideation among adolescents (Cui, Cheng, Xu, Chen & Wang, 2010; Fotti, Katz, Afifi & Cox, 2006). It equally supports the interpersonal psychological theory of suicide (Joiner & Orden, 2008), which postulated that thwarted belongingness is critical to suicidal ideation. Belongingness here entails the acceptability of adolescents in peer's in-group relationships. According to Bacete, Tinoco, Perrin, & Ramirez (2021), belongingness mirrors relevance and conformity. Thus, once it is affected in adolescents, a sense of failure sets in.

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The moderation results also revealed that the interaction effect of gender and peer acceptance was negatively significant β -.31, LLCI -.51 to ULCI -.11. Itani, Fischer and Kraemer (2018) found a significant positive relationship when gender moderated poly-victimisation and suicidal ideation among United Arab Emirates adolescents. The finding is in tandem with the interpersonal psychological theory of suicide.

The implication of the study

The study outcomes showed the relationship among the study's variables. An increase in one variable influenced the increase in the other variables, as presented in table 2 (moderation table). Thus, it implied that gender and peer acceptance were critical to suicidal ideation.

Theoretically, some previous studies examined the relationship between peer acceptance and suicide (Canette, 1997; Cui, Cheng, Xu, Chen & Wang, 2010; Fotti, Katz, Afifi & Cox, 2006; Itani, Fischer & Kraemer, 2018; O'Beaglaioich, McCutcheon, Conway, Hanafin & Morrison, 2020; Olaseni, 2017). However, the present study adopted moderated approach of gender on the relationship between peer acceptance and suicidal ideation. This adventure was to expand the frontiers and related factors of gender on the relationship with the thought of self-harm. Thus, it has provided additional empirical data to the literature and closed the observed research gap.

Practically, the results have implications for youths' well-being and concentration of psycho-social interventions. Based on the moderation results, while males were shown to tend to engage in suicidal ideation, females were implicated in experiencing higher suicidal ideation when peer acceptance and relationships were disrupted. As a sequel to the findings, peer relationship is an indispensable factor in the well-being, adjustment and stability of the female gender. Therefore, parents, guardians and teachers should teach harmonious interpersonal relationships throughout the human developmental trajectory. Given that the male gender tends to engage in suicidal behaviour, the charge is for collective actions to eliminate related factors capable of predisposing and precipitating self-harm thoughts and improving the psycho-social environment to be suitable for wholesome flourishing.

Recommendations

Given the rising cases of suicide, especially among undergraduate students in Nigeria, the threats deserve urgent intervention. The researchers, therefore, recommended as follows:

- To mitigate the colossal danger of suicide, parents and significant others in the life of undergraduate students should constantly monitor their relationships with peers.
- Environment factors that play a role in exposing the male gender to suicide should be adequately put in check permanently.
- The home and school environment should be imbued with a conducive atmosphere to promote cordial interpersonal and intrapersonal peace.

Conclusion

The study's findings corroborated the theoretical postulations of the interpersonal psychological theory of suicide, which emphasised the role of thwarted belongingness, hopelessness, perceived burdensomeness and acquired the capability to engage in suicidal behaviour. The study unravelled the impact of gender and peer acceptance on suicidal ideation. The interaction outcome showed the gender differences in the relationship between peer acceptance and suicidal ideation among the 431 undergraduate participants.

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