

Research Paper

The Relationship between Loneliness, Adjustment and Suicidal Ideation: The Mediating Role of Perceived Social Support and Perceived Stress in Late Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the complex relationships among loneliness, adjustment difficulties, and suicidal ideation in late adolescents, with perceived stress and perceived social support examined as mediating variables. A total of 60 adolescents (30 males and 30 females), aged 17 to 21 years, participated by completing standardized digital questionnaires assessing all key constructs. Descriptive statistics revealed moderate to high levels of loneliness, adjustment issues, and suicidal ideation. Pearson correlation analysis showed that both loneliness and adjustment difficulties were positively correlated with suicidal ideation and perceived stress, while negatively associated with perceived social support. Mediation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro confirmed that perceived stress significantly mediated the positive relationship between the predictor variables and suicidal ideation. In contrast, perceived social support served as a significant negative mediator. These findings support the interpersonal theory of suicide and the buffering hypothesis, highlighting the importance of enhancing emotional regulation and strengthening support systems in adolescent populations. The study emphasizes the need for early identification and targeted intervention to mitigate suicide risk in young individuals.

Keywords: *Loneliness, Adjustment, Suicidal Ideation, Perceived Stress, Social Support, Adolescents, Mediation, India*

Adolescence represents a pivotal transitional period marked by physiological, psychological, and social transformations (Steinberg, 2014). During this developmental window, individuals navigate evolving identities, autonomy, and increasing social demands. Adolescents are commonly exposed to multifaceted stressors, such as academic pressures, peer dynamics, familial expectations, and the internalized effects of social comparison (Sawyer et al., 2012). When inadequately addressed, these cumulative stressors can contribute to the emergence of mental health challenges.

In recent years, mental health concerns among Indian adolescents have gained significant scholarly attention, given the alarming rise in depression, anxiety, and suicidal behaviors (Malhotra & Patra, 2014; WHO, 2021). Within this context, loneliness—defined as the subjective perception of social isolation or inadequate interpersonal connections—has been

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recognized as a key risk factor associated with emotional disturbances, poor coping, and suicidal ideation (Qualter et al., 2015; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

Adjustment problems, particularly in emotional, academic, or social domains, represent another critical predictor of adolescent vulnerability. Adolescents with poor adjustment are more likely to experience frustration, alienation, and helplessness. According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, individuals' subjective appraisal of stressors—and their perceived ability to cope, determine their psychological outcomes. In adolescence, high levels of perceived stress may magnify these vulnerabilities and contribute to negative cognitive patterns, including hopelessness and suicidal ideation (Cohen et al., 1983).

Joiner's (2005) Interpersonal Theory of Suicide offers a complementary lens, positing that suicidal ideation arises when two psychological states—thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness—coexist. This theoretical model is particularly salient for adolescents, for whom peer acceptance and a sense of contribution to valued relationships are developmentally essential. Conversely, perceived social support—defined as an individual's belief that support is available from family, friends, or significant others—has been consistently associated with improved psychological resilience and reduced suicidal ideation (Zimet et al., 1988; Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Against this backdrop, the current study examines how perceived stress and perceived social support mediate the relationship between loneliness, adjustment difficulties, and suicidal ideation among late adolescents in India. The study aims to provide a culturally grounded, empirically supported framework for understanding these interactions and to contribute to the design of preventive and interventional strategies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Loneliness is a known risk factor for adolescent distress, contributing to emotional dysregulation, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Qualter et al., 2015; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Academic, emotional, and social adjustment problems further increase vulnerability by harming peer relationships and leading to maladaptive coping (Parker & Asher, 1987).

According to Joiner's (2005) Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, feelings of disconnection and being a burden heighten suicide risk, especially without social support. Conversely, feeling supported by family, friends, or significant others reduces anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Zimet et al., 1988).

In India, academic pressure, rigid schooling, and high parental expectations can worsen stress, particularly when support systems or mental health resources are lacking (Malhotra & Patra, 2014). Studying how stress and support affect loneliness, adjustment, and suicidal ideation in Indian adolescents is therefore essential.

METHODOLOGY

Hypotheses

- **H1:** There will be a significant positive relationship between loneliness and suicidal ideation among late adolescents.
- **H2:** Adjustment difficulties will be positively associated with suicidal ideation among late adolescents.

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- **H3:** Perceived stress will significantly mediate the relationship between loneliness and suicidal ideation.
- **H4:** Perceived stress will significantly mediate the relationship between adjustment difficulties and suicidal ideation.
- **H5:** Perceived social support will significantly mediate (negatively) the relationship between loneliness and suicidal ideation.
- **H6:** Perceived social support will significantly mediate (negatively) the relationship between adjustment difficulties and suicidal ideation.

Objectives

1. To evaluate the relationship between loneliness, adjustment, and suicidal ideation among late adolescents.
2. To investigate whether perceived stress mediates the relationship between loneliness/adjustment and suicidal ideation.
3. To examine whether perceived social support acts as a negative mediator in this relationship.

Sample

The study included 60 late adolescents (30 males and 30 females), aged between 17 and 21 years recruited through purposive sampling from senior secondary schools and colleges in Jaipur, Rajasthan. Eligibility criteria included active enrollment in an academic institution and fluency in either English or Hindi. Participants were briefed about the study's purpose and procedures, and informed consent was obtained in compliance with ethical research guidelines.

Research design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design aimed at examining the relationships among loneliness, adjustment, and suicidal ideation in late adolescents, with a focus on the mediating roles of perceived stress and perceived social support.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics and reliability (Cronbach's alpha) were calculated for all scales. Pearson's correlations assessed relationships among variables. Mediation was tested using Hayes' PROCESS (Model 4) in SPSS 26 with 5,000 bootstrapped samples.

Variables

- **Independent Variables:** Loneliness and Adjustment
- **Dependent Variable:** Suicidal Ideation
- **Mediating Variables:** Perceived Stress and Perceived Social Support
- **Control Variables:** Gender, Family Type and Socioeconomic Status

Instruments

The study employed standardized, validated psychometric instruments appropriate for adolescent populations. All scales demonstrated acceptable to high internal consistency in previous studies and in the current sample (see Table 1).

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1. **Suicidal Ideation Scale (SIS):** Developed by Sisodia & Bhatnagar (2011), the SIS assesses suicidal thoughts in adolescents and adults through 25 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., “Life is not worth living”).
2. **Revised Adjustment Inventory (RAI):** Developed by Kumar (1978), the RAI measures overall adjustment across social, emotional, and vocational domains with 40 “yes” or “no” items. Higher scores reflect better adjustment.
3. **Loneliness Inventory (LI):** Developed by Meenakshi & Krishan (2003), the LI assesses social and emotional loneliness through 19 items where participants indicate agreement (e.g., “I feel isolated from others”).
4. **Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS):** Developed by Zimet et al. (1988), this 12-item scale measures perceived support from family, friends, and significant others on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., “My family really tries to help me”).
5. **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10):** Developed by Cohen (1983), the 10-item PSS assesses perceived stress over the past month, rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate greater stress.

Procedure

After receiving ethical approval, participants were purposively sampled from educational institutions in Jaipur, Rajasthan. The study was explained, and consent was obtained electronically. Collected responses were then checked for completeness and accuracy before analysis.

Data Collection

Data were gathered online via Google Forms, which included study objectives, consent, a socio-demographic survey, and five psychological measures. Standardized instructions were provided, and participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Participants were informed they could withdraw anytime. Completing the form took around 20–25 minutes.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Cronbach Alpha
Loneliness	48.32	8.12	0.87
Adjustment Difficulties	36.45	7.58	0.81
Perceived Stress	28.76	6.23	0.85
Perceived Social Support	55.1	9.31	0.88
Suicidal Ideation	21.89	5.47	0.83

Table 1 shows that late adolescents reported moderate to high levels of loneliness (M=48.32), adjustment issues (M=36.45), and perceived stress (M=28.76). Suicidal ideation scores were also elevated (M=21.89), whereas perceived social support was comparatively higher (M=55.10), indicating some protective effects. All scales demonstrated good reliability, with Cronbach’s alpha values between .81 and .88, confirming the measures effectively assessed each construct.

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Table 2: Pearson Correlations among Study Variables

Variable	Loneliness	Adjustment Difficulties	Perceived Stress	Perceived Social Support	Suicidal Ideation
Loneliness	1	0.62	0.65	-0.58	0.68
Adjustment Difficulties	0.62	1	0.59	-0.55	0.63
Perceived Stress	0.65	0.59	1	-0.6	0.7
Perceived Social Support	-0.58	-0.55	-0.6	1	-0.64
Suicidal Ideation	0.68	0.63	0.7	-0.64	1

Table 2 indicates that loneliness was strongly linked to higher suicidal ideation ($r=.68$), adjustment problems ($r=.62$), and perceived stress ($r=.65$), but inversely related to social support ($r=-.58$). Perceived stress correlated positively with suicidal ideation ($r=.70$), while social support showed a negative correlation ($r=-.64$), highlighting its protective role. All correlations were significant ($p<.01$).

Table 3: Mediation Analysis Results

Path	Indirect Effect (B)	SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Significant ($p < .05$)
Loneliness Perceived Stress Suicidal Ideation	0.28	0.07	0.15	0.43	Yes
Adjustment Perceived Stress Suicidal Ideation	0.22	0.06	0.11	0.34	Yes
Loneliness Perceived Social Support Suicidal Ideation	-0.25	0.06	-0.37	-0.12	Yes
Adjustment Perceived Social Support Suicidal Ideation	-0.2	0.05	-0.31	-0.09	Yes

Mediation analysis (Hayes' PROCESS, Model 4) showed perceived stress significantly mediated links between loneliness or adjustment difficulties and suicidal ideation ($B=0.28$ and $B=0.22$, respectively; $p<.05$). Perceived social support also acted as a significant negative mediator in both cases ($B=-0.25$ and $B=-0.20$; $p<.05$). All indirect effects were significant, with confidence intervals excluding zero.

The present study explored how loneliness and adjustment difficulties relate to suicidal ideation in late adolescents, considering perceived stress and social support as mediators. Results supported all six hypotheses and aligned with existing research on adolescent mental health risks and protective factors.

Descriptive analysis showed moderate to high levels of loneliness, adjustment issues, stress, and suicidal thoughts, but relatively strong perceived social support, indicating some resilience. The scales used demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha > .80$). Correlations revealed loneliness and adjustment problems were strongly linked to higher stress and suicidal

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ideation, confirming prior findings that loneliness predicts emotional distress and suicidality (e.g., Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Qualter et al., 2015). Perceived stress was positively related to these risks, consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress appraisal, while perceived social support was negatively associated with suicidal ideation, supporting Cohen and Wills' (1985) buffering hypothesis. Mediation analysis showed perceived stress significantly explained the link between loneliness or adjustment difficulties and suicidal ideation, suggesting stress amplifies these risks. Conversely, social support reduced the impact of loneliness and adjustment problems on suicidal thoughts, aligning with evidence that supportive relationships protect against internalizing negative emotions (Zimet et al., 1988) and Joiner's (2005) theory of suicide.

Overall, these findings underscore the complex causes of suicidal ideation in adolescents and highlight the importance of addressing stress and strengthening social support to reduce suicide risk.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that loneliness and adjustment issues are strongly linked to suicidal thoughts in late adolescents, with perceived stress and social support significantly mediating these relationships. These findings underscore the importance of integrating stress management and relationship-building strategies into adolescent mental health programs, especially in India's high-pressure academic and cultural environment.

Interventions should focus on peer support, parental engagement, and tailored school counseling to address loneliness and adjustment difficulties while fostering supportive connections. Although limited by its cross-sectional design, the study provides valuable insights for prevention efforts. Future research using longitudinal methods and larger, diverse samples could further clarify these relationships. By highlighting both risk and protective factors, this work offers a solid framework for understanding and reducing adolescent suicide risk.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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