

Effect of Peer Pressure on Suicidal Ideation Among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Suicidal ideation among college students is a growing public health concern, with peer pressure emerging as a critical psychosocial factor influencing mental health outcomes. **Aim:** The present study examined the impact of peer pressure on suicidal ideation among college students and explored potential gender differences. **Methods:** A total of 60 college students (30 males and 30 females), aged 18–25 years from University, Dehradun, participated in the study. Standardized tools, including the Peer Pressure Scale (Revised) and the Suicidal Ideation Scale (SIS), were administered. Data were analyzed using a 2×2 factorial design and two-way ANOVA. **Results:** Peer pressure had a significant main effect on suicidal ideation ($F = 9.14, p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of peer pressure were associated with elevated suicidal ideation. Gender differences were non-significant, and no significant interaction effect between peer pressure and gender was observed. **Conclusion:** Findings highlight peer pressure as a significant predictor of suicidal ideation among college students, underscoring the importance of early intervention, campus-based counseling, and peer support systems. Further research with larger and more diverse samples is recommended.

Keywords: Peer pressure, Suicidal ideation, College students, Mental health, Gender differences

Suicidal ideation, defined as thoughts about taking one's own life, is a serious mental health issue among college students (WHO, 2020). Studies indicate that peer pressure is a crucial psychosocial factor influencing suicidal ideation, particularly among young adults who are highly susceptible to social influences (Joiner, 2005). Peer relationships can be both protective and risk factors, depending on the nature of the influence (Brown et al., 2008).

According to Erikson's psychosocial development theory (1968), young adults in college strive for identity and belonging, making them particularly vulnerable to peer influence. Negative peer pressure can lead to poor mental health outcomes, including increased stress, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008).

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This study aims to examine the role of peer pressure in suicidal ideation among college students and investigate how gender differences influence this relationship.

Objectives

1. To examine the impact of peer pressure on suicidal ideation among college students.
2. To assess gender differences in suicidal ideation.
3. To explore the interaction effect of peer pressure and gender on suicidal ideation.

Hypothesis

1. Peer pressure would have a significant effect on suicidal ideation.
2. Gender differences would significantly influence suicidal ideation levels.
3. The interaction effect of peer pressure and gender would have a significant impact on suicidal ideation.

Sample

A total of 60 college students (30 males, 30 females) aged 18–25 years were recruited from \ University. Inclusive criteria required that participants tell the truth; Using your own expertise and experiences, give accurate information. For each question, select one response: choose only the one that most closely matches your response, unless otherwise noted. Carefully read each question: Before responding, be sure you understand the question. Ask for the explanation if you are unclear.

Tools Used

1. Peer Pressure Scale (Revised) by Sunil Saini & Sundeep Singh – measures the level of peer pressure experienced.
2. Suicidal Ideation Scale (SIS) by Dr. Devendra Singh Pasodia & Dr. Vibhuti Bhatnagar – assesses suicidal thoughts and tendencies.

Procedure

Informed Consent: The student will be made aware of the test's objectives, its confidentiality, and their option to opt out. **Completing the Questionnaire:** The student will complete a peer pressure screening questionnaire, which often consists of multiple-choice questions.

Interpretation and Scoring: The completed survey will be graded in accordance with established standards; higher scores signify a higher probability of experiencing peer pressure symptoms. Suicidal Ideation is measured by the 25-item (SIS-SDVD). You must score each statement on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree in order to finish the questionnaire. **Procedures** Carefully read each statement. Make a decision for each statement. Select the answer that best expresses how you feel. To determine the final score, add up all of the points. Studies have shown the scale's strong test-retest reliability and internal consistency. "It can effectively measure suicidal ideation across different populations, as demonstrated by its use and validation in a variety of cultural contexts."

Research Design

An exploratory study was conducted to examine the impact of Peer Pressure on Suicidal Ideation level among college students. As the present research was having two independent variables each having two levels, therefore 2*2 factorial design was applied. Data were analysed and interpreted with the help of analysis of variance (TWO WAY ANOVA) to meet out the objective and test the hypothesis of the study.

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Statistical Analysis

In this study, two-way ANOVA was utilized to assess the main effect of peer pressure and Gender. The Interaction Effect of these two variables on the Suicidal Ideation was studied. Findings of the study are presented in Table 1.0 as ahead.

Table 1.0: Summary Table of ANOVA for the effect of Peer Pressure and Gender on Suicidal Ideation

Source of Variance	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F-Ratio	Significance
Peer Pressure (A)	105504.27	1	105504.27	9.14	<.01
Gender (B)	112.07	1	112.07	0.000998	Non-Significant
Peer Pressure* gender (A*B)	1.04	1	1.04	0.0000092	Non-Significant
SSW	6283780.56	56	112210.36		
SST	6389397.94	59			

From the table 1.0 it is evident that Peer Pressure main effect was found to be significant ($F= 9.14$, $df= 1/56$, $p< .01$), while as far as gender difference is concerned it was found to be non-significant ($F = 0.000998$, $df = 1/56$, $p> .05$), thereby the findings show Peer Pressure had a significant impact on Suicidal Ideation whereas the gender difference of respondents had a significant impact on the level of their suicidal ideation . However, the interaction effect of both variables i.e. Peer Pressure and gender do contribute significantly to the level of suicidal ideation. The F-value, thus obtained, for interaction effect was found to be significant beyond chance ($F = 0.0000092$, $df = 1/56$, $p < .05$). Thus, from the findings it can be summarized that the interaction effect of peer pressure and gender does not impact the suicidal ideation of college students.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored the effect of peer pressure on suicidal ideation among college students and found that peer pressure emerged as a significant factor influencing suicidal thoughts. Students experiencing higher levels of peer pressure were more likely to report increased suicidal ideation, which suggests that the social environment plays a critical role in shaping mental health outcomes in young adults. This is consistent with previous literature indicating that peer relationships often serve as double-edged swords: supportive peers can act as buffers against psychological distress, while negative or coercive peer influences can heighten vulnerability to harmful behaviors.

One of the striking findings of this research was that gender did not significantly influence suicidal ideation levels. Traditionally, studies in suicidology have shown that women report higher suicidal thoughts, whereas men are more likely to engage in lethal attempts. However, in this study, both male and female participants exhibited similar levels of vulnerability when exposed to peer pressure. This points toward the possibility that in academic contexts, particularly in Indian higher education, the shared stressors of examinations, career uncertainty, and social acceptance may override traditional gender-based differences.

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The lack of significant interaction effects between peer pressure and gender also suggests that peer influence operates relatively uniformly across both groups. This is an important contribution to the literature, as it indicates that preventive interventions should not be limited to one gender but should target the student community as a whole. In cultures where collective identity and social belonging are emphasized, peer relationships can often outweigh individual differences, making them central to understanding suicidal ideation among young adults.

Another dimension worth considering is the developmental stage of the participants. College students fall within late adolescence and emerging adulthood, a period marked by identity exploration, shifting independence from family, and heightened sensitivity to peer acceptance. During this stage, individuals often measure their worth through social comparisons, and negative peer influences can severely affect their psychological resilience. In this context, peer pressure not only influences academic choices or lifestyle decisions but also penetrates deeper into students' mental health, sometimes leading to self-destructive thoughts.

Thus, the findings of this study add to the growing evidence that peer pressure should not be dismissed as a minor issue but should be considered a significant psychosocial risk factor for suicidal ideation. Addressing it is crucial for suicide prevention strategies, especially in academic institutions where students are in constant contact with peer groups and are vulnerable to social dynamics.

Implications

The findings of this research carry several important implications for higher education institutions, counselors, and policymakers. First, universities must recognize the strong link between peer pressure and suicidal ideation and respond by designing targeted mental health interventions. Programs such as peer mentoring, student support groups, and workshops on resilience-building can equip students with healthier coping strategies to manage social stress.

Counseling services should be made more accessible and approachable, with emphasis on confidentiality to reduce stigma. Many students hesitate to seek psychological help due to fear of judgment, so awareness campaigns and mental health literacy initiatives can play a crucial role in normalizing help-seeking behaviors. Additionally, training peer leaders and student representatives to identify early signs of distress can create a supportive campus environment where students feel understood and less isolated.

At a policy level, the inclusion of mandatory orientation modules on mental health and peer influence could prepare students to handle social pressures more effectively. Faculty members and administrators should also be sensitized to the subtle ways in which peer pressure manifests, so they can respond appropriately when they notice signs of withdrawal, excessive stress, or risk-taking behavior among students.

Finally, given the rising rates of psychological distress and suicidal tendencies in college populations, this study underscores the urgent need for a systemic, multi-level approach to prevention. When institutions take an active role in fostering positive peer relationships and reducing toxic peer environments, students are more likely to thrive academically and emotionally.

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Limitations

Although this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between peer pressure and suicidal ideation among college students, certain limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the sample size was relatively small ($N = 60$) and restricted to a single university. This limits the generalizability of the findings, as the results may not fully represent the diverse cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds of students across India or in other countries. Future studies should incorporate larger and more heterogeneous samples to ensure broader applicability of results.

Second, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or participants' reluctance to disclose sensitive information about suicidal thoughts. Although standardized tools were used, responses may still underrepresent the true extent of suicidal ideation. Incorporating qualitative interviews or mixed-method approaches in future research could provide richer and more nuanced insights.

Third, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to draw conclusions about causality. While peer pressure was found to be significantly associated with suicidal ideation, it cannot be established whether peer pressure directly causes suicidal thoughts or whether other intervening variables (such as academic stress, family relationships, or personality traits) may mediate this relationship. Longitudinal studies would help in tracking how peer pressure influences suicidal ideation over time.

Finally, cultural factors may also play an important role in shaping how peer pressure is experienced and how it contributes to suicidal ideation. Since this research was conducted in a single region of India, its findings may differ in other cultural or educational contexts. Comparative studies across different cultural settings would therefore enhance the understanding of this issue.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that peer pressure is a significant determinant of suicidal ideation among college students, regardless of gender. This suggests that peer influence has a universal impact in the student community, making it a critical factor to consider in mental health research and intervention. By establishing the direct relationship between peer pressure and suicidal ideation, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how social dynamics in educational settings can affect young adults' psychological wellbeing.

The results highlight the importance of moving beyond individual-focused interventions and incorporating group-oriented strategies that address peer networks. Universities and mental health professionals must recognize the powerful role of peers in shaping behavior and provide structured opportunities for students to engage in positive, supportive peer interactions. Preventive strategies such as counseling, awareness programs, and student-led initiatives can mitigate the harmful effects of negative peer pressure.

Future research should build on these findings by including larger, more diverse samples across different cultural and educational contexts. Longitudinal studies could also explore how peer influence evolves over time and whether its impact on suicidal ideation persists beyond the college years. Such research would not only enhance the generalizability of current findings but also guide the development of sustainable mental health interventions.

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In conclusion, this study reinforces that peer pressure is not a trivial issue limited to adolescence but a pressing concern in higher education that can lead to severe outcomes like suicidal ideation. Recognizing and addressing this link is essential for ensuring that students are able to pursue their academic goals in a psychologically safe and supportive environment.

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Conflict of Interest

I would affirm that there are no conflicts of interest related to this research. The study was conducted solely for academic purposes, and no external influence affected the design, analysis, or interpretation of the results.

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