
The Relationship Between Hopelessness, Self-Esteem, and Suicidal Ideation Among College Students

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Abstract

This quantitative study examined the relationship between hopelessness and self-esteem and suicidal ideation among university students. A total of 112 students were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected using three instruments: the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) together with the Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale (SISE), and the Revised–Suicidal Ideation Scale (R-SIS). Data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis with IBM SPSS 27.0 for Windows. The results revealed that hopelessness and self-esteem were significantly associated with suicidal ideation among university students. Specifically, higher levels of hopelessness and lower levels of self-esteem were linked to greater suicidal ideation. These findings highlight the importance of addressing psychological factors such as hopelessness and self-esteem in efforts to understand and prevent suicidal ideation among university students.

Keywords: hopelessness, self-esteem, suicidal ideation, university students

Introduction

Universities are educational institutions that carry out learning, research, and community service to support student development (Shils, 2008). Students are individuals who pursue education at the higher-education level in public or private universities or equivalent institutions (Siswoyo, 2007). According to Santrock (2012), most university students are in the developmental stage of late adolescence to early adulthood, generally between the ages of 18 and 25. This transitional stage is often characterized by significant psychological, social, and academic adjustments. During this period, students may encounter various challenges, including financial difficulties, academic pressure, limited interaction with lecturers, interpersonal conflicts, romantic relationship problems, and health-related issues (Wurinanda in Mukaromah & Nuryanti, 2020). Such demands and expectations can increase stress levels among students (Beiter et al., 2015; Dyson & Renk, 2006).

Prolonged stress and emotional difficulties may contribute to serious psychological risks, including suicidal ideation. Individuals in early adulthood who are enrolled in university have been reported to experience higher levels of suicidal ideation compared to their non-college peers (Bernard & Bernard in Whatley & Clopton, 1992). Suicidal ideation refers to thoughts, intentions, plans, or urges to end one's life, which may range from passive considerations to more explicit planning (Rudd, 1989). According to Luxton, Rudd, Reger, and Gahm (2011), suicidal ideation consists of two main aspects: suicidal desire, which involves implicit or covert thoughts about death, and resolved plans and preparation, which reflect explicit intentions or planning related to suicide. Suicidal ideation may emerge when

individuals experience overwhelming emotional distress or perceive their problems as uncontrollable, such as family conflict, academic failure, or financial difficulties (Shneidman, 1993). These experiences can negatively affect psychological functioning, including reduced social engagement, decreased perceived social support, and increased feelings of guilt toward others (Joiner, 2005; Klonsky & May, 2015).

Various psychological factors have been associated with suicidal ideation, including depression, impulsivity, perceived failure, low social support, and feelings of hopelessness (Kumar, 2017). One important factor is self-esteem. Self-esteem reflects an individual's overall evaluation of their own worth and abilities (Santrock in Anisa & Asuti, 2023; Santrock in Jempormasse, 2015). Individuals with low self-esteem often experience negative self-perceptions, including feelings of inadequacy, shame, and worthlessness, which may increase vulnerability to suicidal thoughts (Teisman, Joiner, Robison, & Brailovskaia, 2024; Manoa, Mandang, & Kapahang, 2025). Empirical research supports this relationship. For example, Manoa, Mandang, and Kapahang (2025) found that students with higher self-esteem tended to report lower levels of suicidal ideation, indicating a significant negative relationship between these variables.

Another important predictor of suicidal ideation is hopelessness. Hopelessness refers to a negative expectation about the future and the belief that positive outcomes are unlikely to occur (Beck et al., 1974). Individuals experiencing hopelessness often feel powerless to change their circumstances and may lose motivation to pursue meaningful goals (Akhtar & O'Neil, 2015). This condition involves negative expectations about the future, diminished motivation, and the perception that current difficulties cannot be resolved (Beck et al., 1974). Previous studies consistently identify hopelessness as a strong predictor of suicidal ideation among students (Vilhjalmsson, Kristjansdottir, & Sveinbjarnardottir, 1998; Weishaar & Beck, 1992; Sukma & Puspitasari, 2023; Harani, 2024).

Considering the increasing psychological challenges faced by university students, it is important to better understand the psychological factors associated with suicidal ideation. Although previous studies have examined the relationships between self-esteem, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation separately, limited research has explored how self-esteem and hopelessness simultaneously relate to suicidal ideation among university students in this context. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between self-esteem, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation among university students. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the fields of mental health, counseling, and student well-being, as well as to assist educational institutions in developing strategies to reduce students' vulnerability to suicidal thoughts.

Methods

This study employed a quantitative correlational design involving 112 university students selected through a non-probability purposive sampling technique, with the criterion that participants were active students. The sample consisted of 32 male students (28.57%) and 80 female students (71.43%). Most participants were enrolled in universities (91.96%), while the remainder were from institutes, polytechnics, and colleges. The participants' ages

ranged from 19 to 25 years, with the largest proportion being 22 years old (33.04%), followed by those aged 21 and 23 years. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. Hopelessness was measured using the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS), consisting of 20 dichotomous items with response options “Yes” (1) and “No” (0), resulting in a total score range of 0–20. The Indonesian version of the BHS has demonstrated good model fit (Chi-Square = 119.69, $df = 98$, $p = 0.06754$, RMSEA = 0.026) in previous validation research (Iswari, 2019). In the present study, item validity ranged from 0.387 to 0.740, with item–total correlations between 0.322 and 0.686, and Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.873, indicating good reliability.

Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) developed by Rosenberg (1965), which consists of 10 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Previous studies report validity coefficients ranging from 0.88 to 0.90 and a reliability value of 0.69. In addition, the Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale (SISE) was used as a supplementary measure of global self-esteem. Although consisting of a single item and therefore not evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha, the SISE has demonstrated acceptable reliability with a Heise reliability estimate of 0.75 and a test–retest correlation of 0.61. Suicidal ideation was assessed using the Revised–Suicidal Ideation Scale (R-SIS), which consists of 10 items adapted from Luxton et al. (2011) and translated into Indonesian by Artissy and Siswadi (2022). Reliability testing reported a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.943, with inter-item correlations ranging from 0.416 to 0.824, indicating strong internal consistency. Data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis with IBM SPSS version 27.0 for Windows.

Result

1. Participant Characteristics

A total of 112 students participated in this study. Of these, 32 participants (28.57%) were male and 80 (71.43%) were female. Most respondents were enrolled in universities (91.96%), while the remainder were from institutes (4.46%), polytechnics (1.79%), and colleges (1.79%). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 25 years, with the largest proportion being 22 years old (33.04%), followed by 21 years (25.89%) and 23 years (18.75%).

2. Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analysis was conducted to examine the distribution of hopelessness, self-esteem, and suicidal ideation among participants. Based on hypothetical score categorization, 53 students (47.32%) were classified in the high hopelessness category, 36 students (32.14%) in the moderate category, and 23 students (20.54%) in the low category. For self-esteem, measured using a 7-point Likert scale, the mean score was 4.83 (SD = 1.98). The categorization results showed that 16 participants (14.3%) had low self-esteem, 85 (75.9%) had moderate self-esteem, and 11 (9.8%) had high self-esteem. Regarding suicidal ideation, 19 participants (16.96%) were categorized as having low levels, 37 participants (33.04%) moderate levels, and 56 participants (50%) high levels of suicidal ideation.

3. Classical Assumption Tests

Prior to hypothesis testing, classical assumption tests were conducted, including tests of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity. Normality tests indicated that the distributions of hopelessness, self-esteem, and suicidal ideation were not perfectly normal. However, according to Hadi (2015), when the sample size exceeds 30 ($N \geq 30$), the data may still be treated as approximately normal for statistical analysis. Given that this study involved 112 participants, the data were considered suitable for further analysis. Linearity testing showed that the relationship between self-esteem and suicidal ideation was linear. Regression analysis indicated that self-esteem significantly predicted suicidal ideation ($B = -0.763$, $SE = 0.334$, $t = -2.29$, $p = 0.024$), suggesting that higher self-esteem is associated with lower suicidal ideation.

Multicollinearity testing showed a tolerance value of 0.996 and a VIF value of 1.00, indicating no multicollinearity between the predictor variables. In addition, the heteroscedasticity test using a scatterplot showed that the residuals were randomly distributed around zero, indicating that the regression model met the assumption of homoscedasticity.

4. Hypothesis Testing

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between hopelessness, self-esteem, and suicidal ideation. The results indicated that both predictors significantly contributed to the model. Hopelessness showed a significant positive relationship with suicidal ideation ($F = 104.52$, $p < .001$), while self-esteem showed a significant negative relationship with suicidal ideation ($F = 6.58$, $p = .012$). Further regression analysis showed that hopelessness was positively associated with suicidal ideation ($t = 10.223$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher hopelessness is related to higher levels of suicidal ideation. Conversely, self-esteem was negatively associated with suicidal ideation ($t = -2.565$, $p = .012$), indicating that higher self-esteem is related to lower levels of suicidal ideation. These findings support the research hypothesis that hopelessness and self-esteem are significantly related to suicidal ideation among university students.

Discussion

The results of the multiple regression analysis indicate that hopelessness and self-esteem are significantly associated with suicidal ideation among university students. Specifically, higher levels of hopelessness were linked to higher suicidal ideation, whereas higher self-esteem was associated with lower suicidal ideation. These findings confirm the study hypothesis and demonstrate that hopelessness and self-esteem jointly contribute to suicidal thoughts.

The significant role of hopelessness aligns with Beck et al. (1974), who proposed that individuals who perceive their future negatively or feel powerless to change adverse circumstances are more prone to suicidal ideation. Consistent with previous studies (Vilhjalmsson, Kristjansdottir, & Sveinbjarnardottir, 1998; Harani, 2024; Weishaar & Beck,

1992), students with high hopelessness in this study may be facing substantial academic and psychological burdens, contributing to pessimism about their future.

Similarly, the negative relationship between self-esteem and suicidal ideation supports prior research (Teisman, Joiner, Robison, & Brailovskaia, 2024; Manoa, Mandang, & Kapahang, 2025). Students with low self-esteem often experience feelings of incompetence and worthlessness, which may exacerbate suicidal thoughts. In contrast, students with higher self-esteem tend to have better emotional resilience, allowing them to manage stressors more effectively and reducing the risk of suicidal ideation. The findings also reflect the developmental challenges of university students aged 18–25, as described by Santrock (2012). Academic pressures, interpersonal difficulties, and future uncertainty can increase feelings of hopelessness and lower self-esteem, thereby intensifying suicidal ideation. In this study, 50% of participants were classified as having high suicidal ideation, underscoring the prevalence of psychological distress in this population. This aligns with Joiner's (2005) motivational theory of suicide, which highlights the role of perceived failure, emotional burdens, and social disconnection in the formation of suicidal thoughts.

Interestingly, self-esteem did not significantly predict hopelessness in this sample, suggesting that these variables may operate independently. While some theories link low self-esteem with hopelessness, contextual factors—such as academic and environmental pressures—may lead to high levels of pessimism even among students with moderate self-esteem (Akhtar & O'Neil, 2015). These findings highlight the importance of promoting psychological well-being among university students. Early identification of students experiencing hopelessness and low self-esteem is critical. Intervention strategies may include counseling programs, emotional regulation training, peer support, and skill-building activities aimed at enhancing self-worth, resilience, and coping capacity. Limitations of this study include reliance on self-report measures, which may introduce response bias, and a sample dominated by female students, which may limit generalizability. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and additional variables such as social support, personality traits, coping strategies, and family functioning to provide a more comprehensive understanding of factors influencing suicidal ideation.

Conclusion

Hopelessness and self-esteem are jointly related to suicidal ideation among university students. High hopelessness and low self-esteem increase the likelihood of suicidal thoughts, whereas low hopelessness and high self-esteem reduce this risk. Practical implications include the need for timely emotional support from family, lecturers, and counseling centers. Interventions should focus on fostering self-esteem, resilience, and adaptive coping strategies to mitigate the risk of suicidal ideation. Future studies should expand on these findings by exploring additional psychological and environmental factors, incorporating diverse student populations, and employing longitudinal approaches to better understand the development of suicidal ideation over time.

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