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Relation between Suicidal Ideation, Emotional and Academic Competence among College Students in Lucknow City

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Abstract

Suicidal thoughts in college students is a universal public health agenda with complex psychosocial antecedents and protective variables. Emotional competence (EC), an ability to notice, analyze, and regulate emotions are linked to lower suicidal ideation, although the role of intellectual competence is debatable. This study investigates the relationships between suicidal ideation, emotional competence, and academic competence (AICS) in a college sample in Lucknow, India. 300 college students were included for this cross-sectional study with Standardized scales included the Suicidal Ideation Scale (SIS), an Emotional Competence Scale (EC), and the Academic Information Competence Scale (AICS) were used. Categorical associations were checked using chi square statistics with effect size estimates (phi), and independent samples t tests were planned under certain assumptions. The study found a significant correlation between SIS and EC categories ($\chi^2 = 150.792$, $p < .001$, $\varphi = 0.709$), indicating that higher EC was linked to lower suicidal thoughts. There were no significant relationships between SIS and AICS ($\chi^2 = 8.87$, $p = .353$) or EC and AICS ($\chi^2 = 5.903$, $p = .665$). In this study, emotional competence appears to be a strong predictor of lower suicidal ideation, although intellectual competence does not show a meaningful link. The findings suggest the use of emotional skill training into campus mental health interventions.

Keywords: Suicidal Ideation, Emotional Competence, Academic Competence, College Students, Mental Health.

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INTRODUCTION

Suicidal ideation or thoughts of self-harm, is a serious but frequently hidden problem among college students around the world. According to global estimates, a significant portion of college students are having suicidal ideas during their academic careers with non-trivial proportions reporting plans and attempts. Suicide has historically been the major causes of death among youth in India, particularly aged between 15 to 29 years (National Crime Records Bureau [NCRB], 2022; Patel *et al*., 2012, 2019). The contextual causes include academic pressure, transition stress, financial strain, social isolation, and mental health stigma (Deb *et al*., 2015; Eisenberg *et al*., 2007; Guntuku *et al*., 2020). Two characteristics emotional competence (EC) and academic competence are especially important for the prevention of student from suicide. EC is typically defined as the ability to sense, interpret, express, and regulate emotions adaptively (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Saarni, 1999). Higher EC and the related construct of emotional intelligence have been associated to lower depressive symptoms, better coping and decreased suicide ideation in a variety of circumstances (Extremera & Fernández Berrocal, 2006; Ciarrochi *et al*., 2002; Martins *et al*., 2010). Theoretically, EC promotes emotion control, problem solving, and social connectivity, all of which are important protective processes in suicide frameworks like as interpersonal theory (Joiner, 2005) and ideation to action models (Klonsky & May, 2015). Scholastic competence includes scholastic skills, self-efficacy, engagement and performance has more ambiguous associations with suicidality. According to certain studies, higher academic stress, burnout or bad grades are linked with increased suicidal thoughts (Deb *et al*., 2015; Dyrbye *et al*., 2008; Tang *et al*., 2018). Others find that once psychological characteristics such as depression, anxiety, and emotion dysregulation are taken into consideration, pure academic indicators are lesser predictors (Eisenberg *et al*., 2007; Arria *et al*., 2009; Lipson *et al*., 2019). In this sense, EC may serve as a main protective resource, whereas academic competence may be distal or nonspecific.

The Indian literature on EC and suicidality in higher education is very scarce with many research

focused on academic stress or depressive symptoms. It's time for studies that look at EC and academic competence together as predictors of suicide ideation, particularly in metropolitan student hubs such as Lucknow. Objective of this research was to look into the links between suicidal ideation (SIS), emotional competence (EC) and academic competence (AICS) among college students in Lucknow city.

The prevalence and pressure of suicidal thoughts in college students are very high nowadays. Large multi-country projects as the WHO, World Mental Health International College Student (WMH ICS) study report that mood and anxiety disorders with suicidal thinking are widespread among university cohorts (Auerbach *et al*., 2018). Mortier *et al.,* (2018) discovered that the 12-month prevalence of suicide ideation among first-year university students surpassed 10% in several datasets. U.S. and European surveys reflect similar patterns with growing help seeking and distress over the previous decade (Eisenberg *et al*., 2007; Lipson *et al*., 2019). Under detection and stigma are frequently used to discourage disclosure and treatment in low and middle-income countries, including India (Patel *et al*., 2019; WHO, 2021), complicating prevention.

Emotional competency entails appraising and expressing emotions, comprehending emotion-cognition relationships, and managing emotions to promote well-being. Higher emotional intelligence is related with good mental health and stress outcomes, according to meta-analytic research (Martins *et al*., 2010). In university contexts, EC has been linked to decreased depression and anxiety (Extremera & Fernández Berrocal, 2006), increased adaptive coping (Ciarrochi *et al*., 2002), and protective social functioning (Zeidner *et al*., 2012). On the other hand, Emotion dysregulation, has been linked to an increased risk of suicide through negative affect, impulsive behavior and hopelessness (Cha & Nock, 2009). According to ideation to action models, EC may slow the passage from stressors to suicidal thoughts by improving problem-focused coping and social belonging (Klonsky & May, 2015; Joiner, 2005).

Academic competence is linked to motivation, study skills, self-efficacy and achievement (DiPerna & Elliott, 2002). While academic stress and burnout are associated with distress markers (Dyrbye *et al*., 2008; Tang *et al*., 2018), the relationship with suicidality is ambiguous. Multiple studies have found that when depressive symptoms and anxiety are factored in, GPA or perceived competence had lesser correlations with suicide ideation. In India, severe test pressure, competitive selection, and parental expectations add to stress (Deb *et al*., 2015), although academic measures alone may not predict suicidality when controlling for psychological factors.

Socioeconomic variables and service accessibility, India's young encounter multiple variables, including migration from rural to urban educational areas, financial constraints, linguistic changes, and a lack of counselling resources (Patel *et al.,* 2019). Although campus counselling clinics are growing, constraints including as stigma, confidentiality issues and a lack of staff remain (Sharma *et al*., 2021). Evidence suggests that low-intensity, scalable psychological therapies and skill-building programs are effective (Suresh Kumar *et al*., 2020; WHO, 2021). EC-focused therapies (e.g., SEL modules, emotion regulation training, mindfulness-based skills) may be culturally flexible and feasible within university schedules (Galante *et al*., 2018; Kadden, 2019). After combining global and Indian research, the study predicted a strong negative relationship between EC and suicidal thoughts, with ambiguous correlations involving academic capacity. The current study so tested the link between EC and suicidal ideation, the correlation between academic competency and suicidal ideation and the relationship between academic competence and emotional control.

METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional, correlational study was carried out at college students. Lucknow city is a good educational destination for students from various socioeconomic backgrounds around the Eastern Uttar Pradesh and regional areas. A total of 300 college students matched the inclusion requirements (age 18-25, enrolled in undergraduate/postgraduate programs, and given informed consent). Purposive sampling was applied to gather the information from the respondents. The sample size provides sufficient power (>.80) to identify medium chi square effects with α =.05 across 3x3 tables.

Suicidal Ideation Scale (SIS): The SIS evaluated the severity and frequency of suicidal thoughts and was classified for analysis.

Emotional Competence (EC) Scale: The EC categories were Average, Competent, and Highly Competent levels.

Academic Competence (AICS): AICS classifications included Excellent, Good, Average, Unsatisfactory, and Very Unsatisfactory.

The analyses were carried out using SPSS version 26. Chi square tests were applied for categorical variables (SIS × EC, SIS × AICS, and EC × AICS) and reported χ^2, p, and phi for effect sizes. According to standard thresholds, $\varphi \approx .10$ is small,.30 is medium, and $\geq .50$ is high. When assumptions (normality) were met, independent samples t tests were used for mean comparisons. Standard interpretation guidelines were followed, including rejecting H_0 at $p < .05$. The study provided guidance for decision thresholds and hypothesis declarations. The study followed the Declaration of Helsinki's ethical guidelines, and no identifiable information was obtained.

RESULTS

Table 1: Correlation of Emotional Competence with Suicidal Ideation Scale

SIS Category	Average EC n (%)	Competent EC n (%)	Highly Competent EC n (%)	χ^2	p-value
Very Low Suicidal Ideation	1 (1.1)	0 (0)	86 (98.9)	150.792	<.001
Low Suicidal Ideation	6 (4.5)	12 (9.0)	115 (86.5)		
Average Suicidal Ideation	32 (40.0)	31 (38.8)	17 (21.2)		
Total	**39 (13.0)**	**43 (14.3)**	**218 (72.7)**		

A chi-square test revealed statistically significant and strong association between Emotional Competence (EC) and Suicidal Ideation Scale (SIS), $\chi^2(4) = 150.792$, $p < .001$. The phi coefficient $\varphi = 0.709$ confirmed that this relationship is statistically and practically significant. Put differently, students who reported greater emotional competence were significantly less suicide ideation, whereas students who reported lower emotional competence were more likely to have greater suicidal ideation. This was especially apparent in the Very Low Suicidal Ideation group where 98.9% of students were in the Highly Competent EC category, which strongly suggests that being emotionally competent is protective against suicidal ideation. Whereas, in the Average Suicidal Ideation group, almost 80% of students were in the Average and Competent EC groups, which indicates that mild deficiencies of emotional competence might also raise the psychological vulnerability of a student to suicidal ideation. A clear pattern emerged in all groups with lower emotional competence linked with severe suicidal ideation. Emotional competence is also an important protective factor that universities and mental health practitioners could consider when designing student wellbeing and suicide prevention programs.

Table 2: Relationship between SIS and AICS scale

AICS Category	Very Low SIS n (%)	Low SIS n (%)	Average SIS n (%)	χ^2	p-value
Excellent	11 (12.6)	13 (9.7)	4 (5.0)	8.87	.353
Good	13 (14.9)	23 (17.3)	19 (23.8)		
Average	53 (60.9)	89 (66.9)	51 (63.7)		
Unsatisfactory	5 (5.8)	5 (3.8)	5 (6.2)		
Very Unsatisfactory	5 (5.8)	3 (2.3)	1 (1.3)		
Total	**87 (29.0)**	**133 (44.3)**	**80 (26.7)**		

The chi-square analysis revealed no significant link between Suicidal Ideation Severity (SIS) and Academic Competence (AICS), $\chi^2(8) = 8.87$, $p = .353$, suggesting a student's level of academic competence did not significantly vary based on how serious their suicidal ideation was. The three SIS groups were very similar in terms of academic competence with the largest proportion of each group falling into the Average AICS category (between 60.9% and 66.9%). The proportions in the Unsatisfactory and Very Unsatisfactory categories were small and similar across groups. While severity of suicidal ideation was linked to a little decrease in Excellent academic competence (12.6% to 5.0%) this trend is not statistically significant and presumably due to random variation in the sample. Therefore, these findings imply that academic competence is not related with suicidal thoughts, suggesting academic competence and suicidal thoughts are independent to each other in this cohort.

Table 3: Relationship between EC and AICS scale

AICS Category	Average EC n (%)	Competent EC n (%)	Highly Competent EC n (%)	χ^2	p-value
Excellent	1 (3.6)	3 (9.0)	24 (11.0)	5.903	.665
Good	9 (20.5)	10 (19.2)	36 (16.5)		
Average	26 (66.7)	26 (60.5)	141 (64.7)		
Unsatisfactory	1 (3.6)	3 (9.0)	11 (5.0)		
Very Unsatisfactory	2 (5.6)	1 (2.3)	6 (2.8)		
Total	**39 (13.0)**	**43 (14.3)**	**218 (72.7)**		

The chi-square analysis did not reveal a significant association between the levels of EC and academic competence (AICS), $\chi2$ (8) = 5.903, $p = .665$. It suggests that the level of emotional competence of a student does not affect or is not a predictor of the level of academic competence. Distribution of academic

competence categories was similar across all EC groups with most students in each group falling under the Average AICS category (Average EC 66.7%, Competent EC 60.5%, Highly Competent EC 64.7%) suggesting most students performed at an average academic level regardless of their level of emotional competence. In the Excellent AICS category there was a little trend with small increases in representation at higher EC levels but this is not statistically meaningful and should not be read too much into. Similarly, students with poor academic performance were evenly distributed throughout all EC groups, which confirms that low academic competence is not related to any particular level of emotional competence. These findings conclude that emotional competence does not automatically correlate with academic strength and that emotional and academic competence seem to be two distinct and independent traits in this student sample.

DISCUSSION

The outcomes of this research have given three major results. First, emotional competence (EC) exhibited a significant and strong negative correlation with suicidal ideation; that is, students with higher emotional competence had substantially lower odds of suicidal ideation. Second, no association between academic competence with suicidal ideation, showing that a student's academic performance directly not linked with their experience with suicidal ideation. Third, emotional competence and academic competence were independent of each other. Emotional competence, does not necessarily make a student more academically competent, and vice versa. Taken together, these findings clearly show that emotional competence is the more important aspect in comprehending suicidal thinking among students, and that academic ability seems to have little to no direct impact. These findings are consistent with previous research worldwide. Research has repeatedly indicated that students possessing higher emotional intelligence or competence tend to exhibit improved mental health, lower stress levels and reduced risk of suicide, due to their enhanced ability to acknowledge, control and deal with unpleasant emotions. Further, the lack of a strong relationship between academic competence and suicidal ideation is consistent with past studies indicating that academic achievement is a less powerful predictor of suicidality after emotional and psychological elements are considered. Academic pressure can be stressful, but the more direct psychological processes that drive suicidal ideation are feelings of hopelessness, loneliness and being a burden to others, which are more closely associated with emotional competence than academic performance.

These results are very relevant in the Indian education system. The college experience for Indian students involves extreme academic rivalry and high family expectations, but also the strain of leaving the small places they grew up in for big cities, and all of this comes from a society where getting help for mental health is still heavily stigmatized. This makes it all the more important that institutions embrace preventative, skills-based approaches which could be easily be incorporated into the daily life of students. Training in emotional competence through social-emotional learning programs, mindfulness practices or short emotion control modules provides a pragmatic and scalable answer. Results of this study suggest that teaching students to improve their emotional competence may be a far more effective approach to reduce suicidal ideation than just focusing on academic improvement. Therefore, colleges should focus on creating emotionally supportive campus environments as a core part of student mental health and wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

This study was carried out to find out the relationship between emotional competence, academic competence and suicidal ideation among 300 college students of Lucknow, India. The results clearly demonstrated that students with higher emotional competence were significantly low suicidal ideation with a strong effect size indicating that this association is statistically and practically meaningful. In contrast, academic competence was not significantly related to suicidal ideation and was not significantly related to emotional competence, suggesting that these constructs function as unique and independent dimensions of student functioning. Collectively, these findings underscore emotional competence as a salient psychological protective factor against suicidal ideation among university students and suggest that academic performance alone is not a sufficient lens through which to understand or address student mental health risks. In view of these findings, it is strongly recommended that universities apply approaches based on emotional competence for the promotion of mental health and prevention of suicide on campuses. Such approaches should include universal emotional literacy programs embedded within the regular curriculum, targeted emotion regulation skill-building for students identified as being at higher risk, and well-structured referral systems that connect students to professional mental health support when needed. Such efforts are additive, rather than substitutive, to existing academic support structures. We recognise that emotional factors, as well as academic factors, influence student wellbeing and that these factors operate in parallel. As higher education expands in India and caters to increasingly diverse student populations, embedding mental health skill-building into campus life is not just a student success strategy but it is a broader public health imperative that institutions are positioned to act on with both opportunity and responsibility.

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