

Factors Associated With Suicidal Ideation among University Students in Karen, Nairobi County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Suicide poses a significant global public health concern due to its association with not only self-destructive behavior but the loss of life. The objective of this study was to examine factors associated with suicidal ideation among university students in Karen, Nairobi County, Kenya. The study adopted the phenomenological research design, to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of university students regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Participants were selected using purposive sampling technique. A total of 10 participants were recruited from five universities in Karen, with two participants selected from each institution. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. With participants' informed consent and in strict adherence to the ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity, all interviews were audio-recorded. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, and findings were presented in narrative forms. The findings of the study indicate that high academic expectations and heartbreak resulting from romantic relationship were the primary factors associated with suicidal ideation among university students in Karen, Nairobi County, Kenya. The study recommends that university institutions should establish peer mentoring and support groups to encourage open discussions about mental health and provide emotional support students.

Keywords: Suicide, Suicidal Ideation, Public Health, Mental Health, University Students, Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide has been identified as a significant global public health concern due to its association with not only self-destructive behavior but the extermination of life (WHO, 2019). It is noteworthy that a substantial portion of people who attempt suicide, around 76.8%, fall below the age of 30. Suicidal ideations may be seen as the thoughts that a person have about harming or killing oneself prior to committing or attempting suicide. It is a cognitive-based behavior involving hopelessness, pessimism, thoughts and plans of suicide (Chidozie et al., 2023; Klonsky, et al., 2016). Oji et al. (2021) also contend that suicidal ideation is the initial phase of suicide, frequently occurring prior to the act of taking one's own life and possibly serving as a precursor to both attempted and successful suicide.

Suicide occurrence among university students in contemporary times is becoming worrisome, as individuals deliberately end their lives based on their personal existential experience of life. Research conducted across 40 low- and middle-income countries found that 17.2 % of individuals reported having made suicidal attempts, with older adolescents and females being the most affected (Liu et al., 2018). Agrawal and Talapalliar (2019) submit that there are various mental health conditions, including bipolar disorder, sociopathy disorder, anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, chronic depression, and dementia, contribute to the underlying causes of suicidal ideation.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) established that more than 700,000 people die due to suicide every year. The provided figures offer only a partial glimpse into the global suicide concern. Based on the global perspective, suicide ranks as the fourth leading cause of death among young people aged 15-29, the prevalence of suicidal ideation among students in the university ranges from 7.4% (Poorolajal et al., 2018) to 36.1% (Jasso-Medrano & Lopez-Rosales, 2018; Eaton et al., 2011; Randall, 2014). Reports further revealed that university

students in Brazil (9.9%) (Santos et al., 2017), the USA (12.1%) (American College Health Association, 2018) and Colombia (31%) (Macias & Camargo, 2015), Turkey (1.9%) (Canbaz, 2018) and China (22.5%) (Huang et al., 2020). In England, Mortier et al. (2017) did a similar study and noted that 65% of students were at high suicidal ideation. These studies employed the positivists' epistemological stance, which was the quantitative research method, while the present study will employ the constructivist epistemological approach, which will be the qualitative approach.

In Bangladesh, Sara et al. (2024) investigated the prediction of suicidal ideation with associated risk factors among university students in the southern part of the country: machine learning approach. The sample size of the study 584, with 51.5 % of participants identifying as male and 48.5 % female. Most participants were unmarried (78 %). Reports show that factors such as gender, bullying, anxiety, loneliness, financial crisis, academic expectation to do well in exams, socioeconomic status, and past suicidal behavior have been identified as significant contributors to suicidal ideation.

In Brazil, Santos (2017) examined factors associated with suicidal ideation among university students. The study was carried out among 637 students of the Federal University of Mato Grosso. It was found that 9.9% of the students had suicidal thoughts in the previous 30 days. A percentage of 9.9% of the students answered yes and 90.1% indicated the no option with CI: 7.68; 12.47 and 87.52; 92.31, respectively. observed that the alcohol consumption and depressive symptoms variables showed statistically significant associations with suicidal ideation, with $p=0.002$. This study showed significant findings. The study used the quantitative method, whereas, the present study made use of the qualitative method.

In Nigeria, Babatunde (2020) investigated suicidal ideation among undergraduates. The sample size of the study was 203 undergraduate students. The ages of the participants ranged from 18-29 years, with a mean age of 22.53% and a standard deviation of 2.33%. The result from the regression analysis showed that suicidal ideation was not significantly predicted by academic stress, $F(1,196) = -.457, P < .05$. This study by Babatunde (2020) employed the quantitative research method, while present study explored factors contributing to suicidal ideation: a phenomenological study among university students in Karen-Nairobi, Kenya.

In Kenya, a study was carried out by Obinna et al. (2021) on academic stress as a predictor of suicide ideation among university students in Nairobi County. The target population was 128,984 students. The sample size was 398 respondents. Academic stress was one of the significant contributing factors to suicidal ideation among student. It was established that that there was a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.416$) between suicide ideation and academic stress among students. The study did not capture the coping strategies on suicidal ideation among university students and it used the correlational research design, while the present study adopted the qualitative approach.

Mutwiri et al. (2023) examined suicide ideation students in Kenyan universities. It was reported that the prevalence of suicidal thinking was 17.1%, suicidal planning 5.9%, suicidal attempts 7.8% and self-harm 5.5%. Female students and private university students had high frequency for all suicidal behaviors. Equally in Kenya, Nyagwencha (2021) in her study pointed that suicidal behavior (ideation, plan and attempt) among university students in Kenya was at 60.9%. It was also found that students between the ages 20-22 were at 34.1% suicidal ideation. The various studies hardly captured factors contributing to suicidal ideation among students, hence the need for this current study among university students in Karen-Nairobi County, Kenya.

According to the World Health Organization (2021), an estimated 3,214 people died by suicide in Kenya in 2019, with 2,371 (73.8%) being males and 843 (26.2%) being females, indicating that men bear a disproportionately higher burden of suicide mortality, with suicide remaining an important public health concern. Due to limited empirical phenomenological studies conducted among university students in Karen-Nairobi County, This study examined factors contributing to suicidal ideation among students in Karen, Nairobi County, Kenya.

Research Objective

The objective of this study was to examine factors associated with suicidal ideation among university students in Karen, Nairobi County, Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

A research design refers to the systematic plan or blueprint that guides the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data in order to address the research problem effectively. It provides the framework through which research questions are translated into empirical evidence, thereby enabling the researcher to obtain valid and reliable findings (Asenahabi, 2019). This study adopted a qualitative research method, specifically a phenomenological research design, to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of university students regarding the phenomenon under investigation. The study was conducted among undergraduate university students in Karen, Nairobi County, Kenya. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly employed in qualitative research to identify information-rich participants who possess direct experience of the phenomenon being studied. The researcher identified and recruited eligible participants prior to data collection to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the research questions.

A total of 10 participants were recruited from five universities in Karen, with two participants selected from each institution. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, the point at which additional interviews no longer generated new themes, concepts, or insights relevant to the study. Data saturation indicates that sufficient information has been collected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Data saturation was assessed progressively during the qualitative interviews. After each interview, the researcher reviewed the emerging responses, codes, and themes and compared them with information obtained from previous participants. Saturation was considered to have been reached when successive interviews no longer generated new codes, concepts, themes, or substantially different perspectives relevant to the study objective. The researcher therefore concluded that sufficient information had been obtained to provide an adequate and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

In homogeneous qualitative samples, data saturation is often achieved with a relatively small number of participants, commonly between 6 and 12 interviews, depending on the study objectives and the richness of the data (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017). Accordingly, the sample of 10 participants was considered adequate to achieve data saturation.

In line with established ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity, the identities of the participating universities were withheld throughout the study. This measure was adopted to protect the institutions from potential stigmatization or reputational harm that might arise from their association with the sensitive issue of suicidal behaviour among university students. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide administered through individual face-to-face interviews. The use of one-on-one interviews enabled participants to share their experiences freely while providing the researcher with opportunities to probe and seek clarification where necessary. The interview guide consisted primarily of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed and meaningful responses.

With participants' informed consent and in strict adherence to the ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity, all interviews were audio-recorded. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure an accurate representation of participants' narratives. The researcher carefully reviewed each transcript through proofreading and editing to correct typographical, spelling, and punctuation errors without altering the meaning of the participants' responses. Thereafter, the transcripts were read repeatedly to facilitate familiarization with the data before conducting a systematic thematic analysis to identify, analyse, and interpret recurring patterns and themes. In addition, the participants in this study comprised undergraduate university students from different age categories, both male and female, and across various levels of study. Table 1 presents a summary of the participants' socio-demographic characteristics.

Table 1

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-22	2	20%
23-27	3	30%
28 and above	5	50%
Total	10	100.0%
Gender		
Male	6	60%
Female	4	40%
Total	10	100.0%
Level of education		
Year 1	2	20%
Year 2	2	20%
Year 3	2	20%
Year 4	4	40%
	10	100.0%

As seen in table 1, the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants indicate that half of the respondents (50%, $n = 5$) were 28 years and above, making them the largest age group. Participants aged 23–27 years were at 30% ($n = 3$), while those aged 18–22 years represented 20% ($n = 2$). In terms of gender, the majority of the participants were male (60%, $n = 6$), whereas female participants comprised 40% ($n = 4$). Regarding the level of education, participants were represented across all years of study. Fourth-year students constituted the largest proportion of the sample (40%, $n = 4$), while first, second, and third year students each were at 20% ($n = 2$). Thus, the sample was predominantly composed of older students, males, and students in their final year of study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section focuses on the findings from the data analysis. In this study, data analysis basically involved a thematic content analysis of the transcribed qualitative interview data gathered from the participants.

Factors Associated with Suicidal Ideation Among University Students in Karen, Nairobi County, Kenya

The objective of this study was to examine factors associated with suicidal ideation among university students in Karen, Nairobi County, Kenya. The researchers identified recurring salient themes from the participants' responses. The following themes emerged: High academic expectations, and heartbreak resulting from romantic relationship.

High Academic Expectations

High academic expectation from parents and institutions have been given a serious attention, and this is felt by the students as pressure, which possibly leads to suicidal ideation. One of the respondents submitted:

Because poor performance, sometimes the parents are expecting this from you, and maybe you've tried your best, but you are not able to achieve that, shame and guilt can lead to suicidal ideation. You can also give the best according to yourself, but it does not reciprocate when it comes to the results in the school, especially with the.... with the outgoing form of education, where performance is key. Like the grade is really key. Anything contrary to what your parents expect, yeah, that one can easily make you think deeply sad. Maybe to also think of the same aspect of performance. Remember when they said first, rejection by the, by the peers, okay, they may reject you because you're not performing or sometimes also performing well, but they are not performing well on your site. So, they reject you from their group. So, they go hand in hand in the group that you're going to be in, because most of the times you will not find somebody who's performing very poorly associating with those who are performing very high and then the parent wants you to associate with those who are performing and making friends with such people is not automatic (Participant 1 Interview, Female, 22 years, 30/5/ 2026).

There was a respondent who also shared a similar sentiment with regards to the expectation to perform well in academics:

I think as a university student, I think one number one factor would be academic pressure, you know, the higher expectations to perform well. And that fear of failing, and the implications that it might bring, and also feel like financial stress, you know, many of us come from humbling backgrounds, so could be struggling with our parents could be struggling with raising fees, and you know, that they're doing their best, but it's also beyond them. And just having that stress, whereby you're not able to pay fees in good time. Or maybe you don't have fees for pocket money or for accommodation. As we know, tuition is very high, the cost is high, and living expenses also high. So, if you don't have any support in terms of scholarship, or it could give you that stress, that can lead to want to want to take their own life (Participant 2 interview, Male, 3/5/ 2026).

The other respondents articulated the same view on high academic expectation, being a possible factor for suicidal ideation among students:

Okay, okay. The first one that I would want to highlight is, is a whole area of the academic demands of, you know, the new the new system, especially for new students who are transitioning from the secondary school or high school level into the university, yeah, where the academic performance and expectations are quite high, most students are not really ready to for this academic expectation, especially in an environment where they have little more freedom and nobody's forcing them to read and all. So, it's a little bit difficult for them to get used to this academic listing expectation from the school themselves and also from the parents. You know every parent wants their school to do better, and the school also would have areas around failing and assignments and meeting up with targets and all that. So, students who are not really used to these expectations and this pressure can lead to mental health issues. (Participant 3 interview, Female, 4/5/2026).

Another respondent further shared:

Academic can be very demanding and parents really expect, like they expect so, so much from me. When I do not meet their expectations in my grades, I usually feel guilty, and at times, I lose my appetite and interest in things due to failing in expectations (Participant 4 interview, Female, 6/5/2026).

Heartbreak Resulting from Romantic Relationship

Heartbreak from romantic relationship can be difficult for students to come to term with the reality. This finding has been a concern among the university students, as a strong factor responsible for suicidal ideation. One of the respondents stated:

Well, heartbreak and rejection, somehow seem too heavy. They also bring up an aspect of loneliness. You see, after heartbreak, you are left alone, you don't know who to share your pains with, because you don't know who to trust. In that case, you find yourself becoming alone. And the moment you start leaving alone, as we say, Idle mind is the devil's workshop. Find yourself be alone in the room, you are alone in school, nobody wants to associate with you. Well, you may also want to grow yourself because of that particular heartbreak. Because you are afraid of what I will get? I find myself in another relationship. And in the process, you are heartbroken again. So, you finally end up to be very lonely. You just want life for yourself and yourself alone (Participant 10 interview, Female, 2/5/2026).

Pertaining separation and romantic relationship she added:

These separation with a girlfriend, the boy had to walk all the way from crying going round like that, wanting to kill himself. He had taken drug and was ready to die on the way on the road, then he was rushed to the hospital. But even if he was rushed to the hospital, they took time to look for him. So, the medicine was too strong. It was not easy for, for the ex-girlfriend also...because she was like he had already written a note. Also, the love from the opposite gender... some, some may give fully themselves to the other person and only to discover that the other person does not reciprocate the love. In that case, you feel like you have been betrayed. Or the other person can also choose to have another love. So, when you are in love with somebody else, and this person had given the self fully to loving can cause someone to think about suicide (Participant 7 interview, Female, 19/5/2026).

One of the respondents made it known that love triangle had been a serious factor that has contributed on suicidal ideation. She articulated:

You know, relationships, unfortunately, yeah, when I say fortunately, unfortunately, in university, the young people have more, more chances and an opportunity to date and to enter into relationships with, you know, with their fellow students of the opposite sex. Okay, so you find out that this is an area for them, an opportunity for them to try looking for the right word here for them to explore. Yeah, the one is to explore in terms of relationships. I know as young people, when we go into relationships, sometimes we have an ideal, perfect way of how we should be, of how love should be, of how people in relationship should behave. Some of us are a little bit naive. We are looking for this perfect love that we sometimes find on the internet, on movies and all that. So, then it's around a situation where young people go into this relationship expecting a lot, then we get there, and then most people experience outbreak. Know that love is not all about how we expect it to be, or how we have dreamed about it. This can create a lot of how they call it, a lot of pressure, but a lot of disappointment. People will feel like they have nothing else to live for because love has not worked out for them the way it should be maybe their failure, or maybe nobody loves them. So, I think this also can lead to the whole area of suicide, maybe, since I'm no longer loved or nobody loves me, or nothing is going right for me, I might take my life or something in that sense for me (Participant 9 interview, Female, 16/5/2026).

However, there was one of the respondents who speaks about mental health problem as one of the contributory factors to suicidal ideation among students. He postulated:

Mental health issues in general. So, it could be preexisting conditions such as anxiety, depression, and this is the stigma that surrounds mental health. So, this would lead to under reporting and lack of support. actually, some students that I was in some cohort with have actually died by suicide, and it's very painful. Devastating. So, I think that's what I can say (Participant 2 interview, Male, 3/5/ 2026).

Another respondent also shared her experience in breakup:

My boyfriend broke up with me. I couldn't believe he can do that to me. I was the one providing most things in the house, when he was financially down. We shared intimate moments, exchange gifts. One day he texted me that "it is over", I called several times and days, he refuses to pick my calls. I felt the world has ended. No more hope in life. I felt rejected and abandoned. It was the worst experience of my life. I thought of killing myself, because there was no reason to live (interview, participant 6, Male, 13/5/2026).

Ideations can be understood in this study as the process of forming ideas from conception to implementation. Suicidal ideations entail thinking, wishing and dream about the death oneself with a focus on seeking out ways to accomplish that desire and wish. Thus, all the respondents of this study discussed the significant factors contributing to suicidal ideation among university students, including high expectations to perform well academically, financial stress, mental health issues, and lack of support.

The findings of the current study confirm the study by Sara et al. (2024), who investigated the prediction of suicidal ideation with associated risk factors among university students in the southern part of the country. It was found that factor such as academic expectation to do well in exams, financial crisis and socioeconomic status were contributory factors to suicidal ideations among students. The findings of the current study corroborate the findings by Obinna et al. (2021) in Kenya, who investigated academic stress as a predictor of suicide ideation among university students in Nairobi County. The study established that academic stress was one of the significant contributing factors to suicidal ideation among student.

High academic expectations and financial stress can significantly impact students' mental health, contributing to suicidal ideation. Bowers and Whelan (2023) amplify this and they assert that high academic expectations often create an environment of intense competition. Students may feel compelled to achieve high grades, leading to chronic stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. Research shows that this pressure can exacerbate mental health issues and contribute to suicidal thoughts. Based on financial challenge, Eisenberg (2020), maintain that students face significant financial burdens, such as tuition fees, living expenses, and student loans. Financial stress can create a sense of helplessness, particularly when students perceive their academic performance as directly tied to their financial stability. This stress can lead to feelings of despair and suicidal ideation. Both academic and financial stress are linked to various mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. These mental health challenges significantly increase the risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviors among students, underscoring the need for comprehensive support systems (Rudolph, 2022). Thus, addressing the dual challenges of high academic expectations and financial stress is essential for improving student mental health. By fostering supportive environments and resources, educational institutions can help alleviate some of the pressures that contribute to suicidal thoughts among students.

CONCLUSION

Suicidal ideation among students is a multifaceted issue influenced by various interrelated factors. These can be categorized into psychological, social, environmental, cultural, and substance-related factors. Addressing suicidal ideation in students necessitates a comprehensive approach that encompasses mental health education, increased access to resources, and the promotion of supportive environments. By acknowledging and addressing these contributing factors, we can foster resilience and well-being among students, ultimately reducing the prevalence of suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that university institutions should establish peer mentoring and support groups to encourage open discussions about mental health and provide emotional support. campaigns to educate students about mental health issues, signs of distress, and available resources. In addition, workshops and training should be organized for students, faculty, and staff on recognizing and responding to suicidal ideation.

The Universities in collaboration with mental health practitioner may regularly screen students for mental health issues during orientation and throughout the academic year. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can create a more supportive and proactive environment, helping to mitigate factors contributing to suicidal ideation among students and promoting their overall mental health and well-being.

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