



East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

ejass.eanso.org

Volume 5, Issue 2, 2022

Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285>

ENSO

EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Investigating Psychosocial Predictors of Self-Harming Thoughts among Lagos State University Undergraduates During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Toluwalase Samson Adekoya^{1*}, Pedepo Mark Emmanuel¹ & Taofeeq Aisha Damilola¹

¹Lagos State University, P.M.B 0001, Ojo, Lagos, Nigeria.

*Correspondance ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7031-3406>; email : toluwalase.s.adekoya@gmail.com.

Article DOI : <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.5.2.921>

Date Published: ABSTRACT

29 December 2022

Keywords:

Self-Harming Thoughts, Psychological Distress, Social Media Addiction, COVID-19 Pandemic.

Pre-COVID-19 pandemic, suicide, and suicidal behaviour were serious public health concerns that had a global influence on youth. However, there are concerns about the possible Pandemic-related factors contributing to self-harming thoughts and behaviours. At the same time, the antecedents of self-harm thought have been examined previously; this study aimed at exploring suicidal ideation –the preoccupation to kill oneself — among young adults who are prone to be affected by pandemic-related conditions. This Cross-sectional study investigated the role of sex, psychological distress, and social media addiction in predicting Self-harm thoughts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three hundred forty undergraduates cutting across the various faculties were conveniently selected from LASU to respond to the standardised questionnaire. It was hypothesised that male undergraduate students would be more susceptible to self-harm thoughts than female undergraduate students, and psychological distress and social media will have an independent and joint influence on Self-harm thoughts. The result revealed that there was a significant influence of sex on self-harm thoughts ($t = 2.17$; $df (340)$; $P < .05$). Furthermore, male undergraduate students were more likely to have thoughts of self-harm than female undergraduate students. It was also revealed that psychological distress and social media addiction jointly ($R^2 = 0.89$, $F (2,339) = 16.56$, $p < .05$) and independently predicted Self-harm thoughts. The findings suggested that Clinicians and counsellors, when assessing students with thoughts of self-harm, should consider finding out the extent of usage of social media and its addiction as it should be one of the important aspects to look out for during assessment. Additionally, University management should work on novel and practical approaches to detect early symptoms of psychological distress and advance suicide prevention efforts to secure the precious lives of Students.

APA CITATION

Adekoya, T. S., Emmanuel, P. M. & Damilola, T. A. (2022). Investigating Psychosocial Predictors of Self-Harming Thoughts among Lagos State University Undergraduates During the Covid-19 Pandemic. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 255-262. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.5.2.921>

CHICAGO CITATION

Adekoya, Toluwalase Samson, Pedepo Mark Emmanuel and Taofeeq Aisha Damilola. 2022. "Investigating Psychosocial Predictors of Self-Harming Thoughts among Lagos State University Undergraduates During the Covid-19 Pandemic." *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 5 (2), 255-262. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.5.2.921>.

HARVARD CITATION

Adekoya, T. S., Emmanuel, P. M. & Damilola, T. A. (2022) "Investigating Psychosocial Predictors of Self-Harming Thoughts among Lagos State University Undergraduates During the Covid-19 Pandemic.", *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 5(2), pp. 255-262. doi: 10.37284/eajass.5.2.921.

IEEE CITATION

T. S., Adekoya, P. M., Emmanuel & T. A., Damilola "Investigating Psychosocial Predictors of Self-Harming Thoughts among Lagos State University Undergraduates During the Covid-19 Pandemic.", *EAJASS*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 255-262, Nov. 2022.

MLA CITATION

Adekoya, Toluwalase Samson, Pedepo Mark Emmanuel & Taofeeq Aisha Damilola. "Investigating Psychosocial Predictors of Self-Harming Thoughts among Lagos State University Undergraduates During the Covid-19 Pandemic. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, no. 2, Nov. 2022, pp. 255-262, doi:10.37284/eajass.5.2.921.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 was widely declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 and presented significant health, economic, and social threats to livelihood. Since its advent, COVID-19 has been tagged as the perfect storm of a risk factor for self-harm thoughts and myriads of other mental health issues (Reger et al., 2020). Time-series modelling of the Spanish Flu pandemic, which lasted from 1918-1920, and caused well over 20 million deaths worldwide, led to a modest rise in the national suicide rate in the USA (Wasserman, 1992). Likewise, there is some evidence that previous endemics, epidemics, and pandemics were associated with rises in suicide and suicidal behaviour (Zortea et al., 2020). In Nigeria, the first COVID-19 case was detected on 27 February 2020. With the excessive increase in the number of cases, social gathering regulations, compulsory use of facemasks, and lockdown orders were put in place by the Nigerian government (Amzat, 2020). The widespread news of the adverse effect of contracting the virus, sudden rules and restrictions of movement, compulsory use of face masks and physical distancing rules ushered in a state of emotional discomfort in the general populace.

Self-harm thoughts -often conceptualised as suicidal ideation- is an act or intent of deliberately wanting to harm oneself through actions such as

burning, cutting, and taking harmful substances to cope with severe emotional or physical pain and distress. This deliberate and voluntary physical self-injury that is not life-threatening and is without any conscious suicidal intent (Borges et al., 1995; Herpetz, 1995) has been a pervasive public health concern and has left extensive impacts on adolescents and young adults globally. According to WHO (2019), suicide is listed as the fourth leading cause of death among 15-19-year-olds worldwide, and every year approximately 700 000 people commit suicide, and many more still attempt it. Empirical studies by Van der Kolk et al. (1991); Simeon and Favazza (2001) have also revealed that self-harm thoughts and behaviour unfolds in Adolescence, which is one of the most critical developmental periods and can become a sustained habit that extends throughout life.

Uncertainty about the COVID-19 epidemic poses a serious threat to people's physical and psychological health and lives, and the inability to tolerate uncertainty may be a risk factor for psychological distress. According to Mirowsky and Ross (2002), Psychological distress is a state of emotional suffering characterised by symptoms of depression (e.g., lost interest; sadness; hopelessness) and anxiety (e.g., restlessness; feeling tense). Mental health conditions are likely to be triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic because it ushers in economic and social threats that may

trigger stress, depression and anxiety and exacerbate existing ones which can lead to self-harm thoughts to avoid emotional discomfort. In addition, the persistent fear of contracting the virus due to its higher perceived risk and the death of a loved one due to the virus makes one susceptible to thoughts of harming oneself.

The emergence of information technology, easy access to the internet, and internet-based social platforms (e.g., Facebook, Tiktok, Instagram) as interpersonal communication is a significant milestone in history. "Social media addiction" refers to a compulsive and excessive usage of internet-based social media platforms (Griffiths, 2000). The rise of new social media platforms (e.g., TikTok) during the pandemic served as an escape and coping mechanism for young adults from the realities of the current happenings surrounding the spread and adverse influence of the virus. However, excessive social media usage also exposes young adults to substances of abuse, including alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana which could lead to potential self-harm and Suicide (Daine et al., 2013). However, there is limited empirical evidence on the effect of social media on Self-harm thoughts and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interpersonal theory developed by Joiner (2005) explains self-harm thoughts as caused by the simultaneous presence of two interpersonal constructs –thwarted belongingness (Loneliness) and perceived burdensomeness (unemployment or family conflicts or psyche ache). Joiner further added one primarily related factor, which he described as the "acquired capability for self-harm". To explain the origination of Self-harm thoughts, Joiner (2005) believes that it starts with perceiving oneself as a burden to others, and thus that others would be better off without them and then the feelings of being alone or not belonging. Considering those above, it is pertinent to note that the loneliness impact of fewer social connections during the pandemic is a risk factor for various psychiatric problems, including anxiety, drug use, insomnia, severe depression, and Self-harm thoughts (Abayomi et al., 2021).

Several studies have also suggested that the rates at which people thought about self-harm or suicide or engaging in self-harming have been higher during

the pandemic than previously (Iob et al., 2020; Czeiser et al., 2020). Also, the lockdown orders have led young adults to the compulsive use of social media platforms which predispose them to widespread misinformation about the unpredictability and evolving nature of the virus and can induce psychological distress and lead to thoughts of self-harm (Yamamoto et al., 2020). Therefore, suicide-related mortalities resulting from COVID-19 are not uncommon (Sahoo et al., 2020), and they have been reported across several countries (Reger et al., 2020). Furthermore, considering the rapidly growing number of social media users globally (Luxton et al., 2012), Self-harm thoughts and behaviour are likely to become a more complex issue during this pandemic.

This current study focuses on investigating the pandemic-induced psychosocial factors that lead to self-harm thoughts during the COVID-19 period. Pre-COVID-19 data suggested that self-harming thoughts may worsen due to the pandemic and may differentially affect vulnerable groups in the population, including children, adolescents, and young adults (John et al., 2020). Therefore, the ongoing pandemic has made it necessary to investigate the factors that cause people to self-harm during this period and update our information on whether the identified psychosocial factors in this study cause people to self-harm.

The Main Objective is to;

- Investigate the extent to which Sex Influences Self-harm thoughts among LASU students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Investigate the extent to which psychological distress and social media jointly predict Self-harm thoughts among LASU students during the COVID-19 pandemic

The following hypotheses were formulated to test the identified aims and objectives of this current study.

H₁: Male undergraduate LASU students will be more susceptible to self-harm thoughts than Female undergraduate LASU students

H₂: Psychologically distress and social media will have an independent and joint influence on Self-

harm thoughts among undergraduate LASU students

Operational Definition of Terms

Self-harm Thoughts: Self-harm thought is an intentional action aimed at deliberately harming oneself through actions such as burning, cutting, and taking harmful substances to cope with severe emotional or physical pain and distress (Borges et al., 1995).

Psychological Distress: Psychological Distress is a condition of emotional discomfort associated with stressors or demands that are encountered daily (Mirowsky and Ross, 2002)

Social media addiction: This is a compulsive and excessive usage of internet-based social media platforms (Griffiths, 2000)

Young Adults: This consists of individuals within the age range of 16 – 30.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design. This was used to examine different variables at once. For primary data, structured questionnaires were used for data collection, and they lasted for about three weeks. The structured questionnaire was in pencil and paper format. In the study, psychological distress, Social Media addiction, and demographic variables served as independent variables, while Self-harm thoughts served as the dependent variable. This study was carried out at Lagos state university, Ojo, Lagos.

Study Population and Location

The study population included undergraduate students of Lagos state university. A total number of 400 undergraduates were selected, but only 342 properly filled out the questionnaire. Eligible participants had to be undergraduate students of LASU. The participants of this study were selected using convenience sampling techniques. The research was able to identify participants that were easy to reach and readily available to participate in the research. The sampling was not random and,

therefore, is not representative of the LASU population, but the sample is heterogeneous.

Measures

The data was collected using a standardised questionnaire which was divided into four sections.

Demographic variables: This included sex, age, level of study and religion.

Self-harm thought: This was assessed using a 4-item suicidal ideation scale developed by Osman et al. (2001). The scale, through its repeated use, has displayed good discriminant validity, content validity, and test-retest reliability. It is scored on a 5-point Likert scale which includes 1 – Never, 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often 5 = Very often, and scored from 1 to 5. This scale was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 pandemic. The Cronbach alpha coefficient among undergraduate college students was .93.

Psychological distress: This was assessed using ten items Kessler Psychological Distress scale developed by Professor Ronald C. Kessler and Mroczek (1992). The authors reported a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.85. It is scored on a 5-point Likert scale which includes “All of the time, Most of the time, some of the time, A little of the time, none of the time”. The Cronbach alpha reliability of the test for this study is 0.86.

Social media addiction: This was assessed using 29 items. Social media addiction scale developed by Cengiz Şahin (2018). The exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis of this scale has a 4-factor structure accounting which accounts for 53.16% of the total variance. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) coefficient and Bartlett’s test were also significant, respectively, at .96 and $\chi^2=12680.88$ ($p=.00$). The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach’s alpha coefficient) reported on this scale was .93. The scale is a 5-point Likert-type scale consisting of 29 items. The Cronbach alpha reliability of the test for this study is 0.83.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher contacted the research participants in their various faculties, established rapport and sought their content before administering the

questionnaire. The respondents were adequately briefed, assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and informed that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any point if they felt uncomfortable.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using Statistical Product for Service Solutions (SPSS), the 21st version. Descriptive statistics such as the mean (standard deviation) and frequency (percentages) depicted the socio-demographic variables and scores on the study measures. Hypothesis 1 was tested using an independent t-test, and Hypothesis 2 was tested using multiple linear regression. All statistical analyses were 1-tailed, and the level of

statistical significance was set at a p-value less than 0.05.

RESULTS

The participants consisted of 152 males (44.4%) and 190 females (56.66). One hundred ninety undergraduates selected were between the age category of 16-20 (55.6%), 139 were between the age category of 21-25 (40.6%), and 13 were between the age category of 26-30 (3.8%).

Hypothesis 1: Male undergraduate LASU students will be more susceptible to self-harm thoughts than Female undergraduate LASU students. This hypothesis was tested using an independent t-test, and the result is presented in the table below:

Table 1: Summary table of independent t-test showing the influence of Sex on Self-harm thoughts among LASU students

	Sex	N	Mean	Std	Df	t-value	P
Self-harm thoughts	Male	152	1.23	.58	340	2.17	<.05
	Female	190	1.12	.38			

The result shows that there is a significant influence of sex on self-harm thoughts ($t = 2.17$; $df (340)$; $P < .05$). Furthermore, male undergraduate students were more likely to have thoughts of self-harm than female undergraduate students. This accepts the stated hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: The hypothesis stated psychological distress and social media would have an independent and joint influence on self-harm thoughts among undergraduate LASU students. This hypothesis used multiple regression, and the result is presented below:

Table 2: Summary of multiple regression showing the influence of psychological distress and social media addiction on Self-harm thoughts.

Predictors	B	T	P	R	R ²	F	P
Psychological Distress	.248	4.74	<.05	.298	.089	16.56	<.05
Social media addiction	.131	2.50	<.05				

The result from the table showed that psychological distress and social media addiction jointly predicted Self-harm thoughts ($R^2 = 0.89$, $F (2,339) = 16.56$, $p < .05$). Psychological distress and social media addiction accounted for 9% of the change observed in self-harm thoughts among undergraduate students in LASU, Nigeria. Furthermore, psychological distress ($\beta = -.248$, $t = 4.74$, $p < .05$) and social media addiction ($\beta = -.131$, $t = 2.50$, $p < .05$) were also significant independent predictors of self-harm thoughts. The stated hypothesis is thereby accepted.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that sex influences self-harm thoughts. These results further showed that male undergraduate students were more likely to have thoughts of self-harm than female undergraduate students. This finding is in line with the study finding of Rhodes et al. (2014), who in their work on antecedents and sex/gender differences in youth suicidal behaviour, found that suicide rates are typically higher in males than females. This also confirmed a study by Oyetunji et

al. (2021) which revealed that males are more likely to die by suicide than their female counterparts. Male predominance in self-harm thought can be explained by a few factors, which include having a sense of masculinity which makes them ignore the need to seek help for mental health or less likely to seek and accept help or treatment whenever they are going through life challenges because they interpret it as being weak.

The result of the second hypothesis also shows that psychological distress and social media addiction jointly predicted Self-harm thoughts among LASU undergraduate students during COVID-19. Psychological distress and social media addiction also accounted for a 9% change observed in self-harm thoughts among undergraduate students in LASU during COVID-19. Furthermore, psychological distress and social media addiction were also independent predictors of self-harm thoughts. This is in line with the findings of Yamamoto et al. (2020), who found that the widespread misinformation about the unpredictability and evolving nature of the virus can induce psychological distress and lead to thoughts of self-harm.

Additionally, the findings have implications for mental health services. Clinicians and counsellors, when assessing students who have thoughts of self-harm, should consider finding out the extent of usage of social media and its addiction. This emphasises the importance of social media usage and addiction as one of the most important aspects to look out for during the clinical assessment of students with self-harm thoughts. Also, the benefits of social media should be exploited by the University management, stakeholder, and Health professionals to create awareness on how to detect self-harm thoughts, recognise warning suicidal signs, and create support for students having self-harm thoughts. In addition, findings from this study have necessitated the need for the University management to work on a novel and practical approach to detect early symptoms of psychological distress and advance suicide prevention efforts to secure the precious lives of Students.

LIMITATIONS

This study is not without its limits. One of the limitations is that participants were not randomly selected and, therefore, not representative of the LASU population. Therefore, future studies should be carried out using a larger sample size and randomly selected participants. Additionally, future studies should explore other predictors of self-harm thoughts among undergraduate students during the third (3) wave of the pandemic. In addition, the geographical location of this study is Lagos State University; future studies should investigate self-harm thoughts in other locations to strengthen the findings of this study.

Data Availability Status

Data are available on request due to privacy and other restrictions. The data that supports the findings are available on request from the corresponding Author (Adekoya Toluwalase Samson).

Funding

This research was self-funded, thus the reason why the sample size is small (342)

Conflict of Interest

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding authors state that there is no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Abayomi, A., Odukoya, O., Osibogun, A., Wright, O., Adebayo, B., Balogun, M., . . . Abdur-Razzaq, H. (2021). Presenting symptoms and predictors of poor outcomes among 2,184 patients with covid-19 in Lagos State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, 102, 226-232. doi:10.1016/j.ijid.2020.10.024
- Amzat, J., Aminu, K., Kolo, V. I., Akinyele, A. A., Ogundairo, J. A., & Danjibo, M. C. (2020). Coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria: Burden and socio-medical response during the first 100 Days. *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, 98, 218- 224. doi:10.1016/j.ijid.2020.06.067

- Borges, G., Anthony, J. C., and Garrison, C. Z. (1995). Methodological issues relevant to epidemiologic investigations of suicidal behavior of adolescents. *Epidemiol. Rev.* 17(1): 228–239.
- Czeisler, M. É., Lane, R. I., Petrosky, E., Wiley, J. F., Christensen, A., Njai, R., ... & Rajaratnam, S. M. (2020). Mental health, substance use, and suicidal ideation during the COVID-19 pandemic—United States, June 24–30, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 69(32), 1049
- Daine, K., Hawton, K., Singaravelu, V., Stewart, A., Simkin, S., & Montgomery, P. (2013). The power of the web: a systematic review of studies of the influence of the internet on self-harm and suicide in young people. *PLoS one*, 8(10), e77555.
- Griffiths, M. D. (2000). Internet addiction: Time to be taken seriously? *Addiction Research*, 8, 413–418. <https://doi.org/10.3109/16066350009005587>
- Herpertz, S. (1995). Self-injurious behaviour psychopathological and nosological characteristics in subtypes of self-injurers. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 91(1), 57-68. doi:10.1111/j.1600-0447.1995.tb09743.x
- Iob, E., Steptoe, A., & Fancourt, D. (2020). Abuse, self-harm and suicidal ideation in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 217(4), 543-546.
- John, A., Pirkis, J., Gunnell, D., Appleby, L., & Morrissey, J. (2020). Trends in suicide during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Joiner, T. E. (2005). *Why people die by suicide*. Harvard University Press.
- Kessler, R., Colpe, L., Hiripi, E., Mroczek, D., Normand, S., Walters, E., & Zaslavsky, A. (2002). Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress. *Psychological Medicine*, 32(6), 959-976. doi:10.1017/s0033291702006074
- Mirowsky, J., & Ross, C. E. (2002). Depression, parenthood, and age at first birth. *Social Science & Medicine*, 54(8), 1281–1298. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536\(01\)00096-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(01)00096-X)
- Luxton, D. D., June, J. D., & Fairall, J. M. (2012). Social media and suicide: a public health perspective. *American journal of public health*, 102(S2), S195-S200.
- Oyetunji, T. P., Arafat, S. Y., Famori, S. O., Akinboyewa, T. B., Afolami, M., Ajayi, M. F., & Kar, S. K. (2021). Suicide in Nigeria: observations from the content analysis of newspapers. *General psychiatry*, 34(1).
- Reger, M. A., Stanley, I. H., & Joiner, T. E. (2020). Suicide mortality and coronavirus disease 2019—A perfect storm? *JAMA Psychiatry*.
- Rhodes, A. E., Boyle, M. H., Bridge, J. A., Sinyor, M., Links, P. S., Tonmyr, L., & Szatmari, P. (2014). Antecedents and sex/gender differences in youth suicidal behavior. *World journal of psychiatry*, 4(4), 120.
- Sahin C. Social media addiction scale-student form: the reliability and validity study. *Turk Online J Educ Technol-TOJET*. 2018 Jan;17(1):169e182.
- Sahoo, S., Mehra, A., Suri, V., Malhotra, P., Yaddanapudi, L. N., Puri, G., & Grover, S. (2020). Lived experiences of covid-19 Intensive Care Unit Survivors. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 42(4), 387-390. doi:10.1177/0253717620933414.
- Simeon, D., and Favazza, A. R. (2001). Self-injurious behaviors: Phenomenology and assessment. In Simeon, D., and Hollander, E. (eds.), *Self-injurious Behaviors: Assessment and Treatment*. American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc., Washington, DC, pp. 1–28.
- Wasserman, I. M. (1992). The impact of epidemic, war, prohibition and media on suicide: United States, 1910–1920. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 22(2), 240–254.
- World Health Organization. (2019). *Suicide in the world: global health estimates* (No.

WHO/MSD/MER/19.3). World Health Organization.

van der Kolk, B. A., Perry, J. C., and Herman, J. L. (1991). Childhood origins of self-destructive behavior. *Am. J. Psychiatry* 148(12):1665–1671.

Yamamoto, T., Uchiumi, C., Suzuki, N., Yoshimoto, J., & Murillo-Rodriguez, E. (2020). The psychological impact of ‘mild lockdown’ in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic: a nationwide survey under a declared state of emergency. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 17(24), 9382.

Zortea, T. C., Brenna, C. T., Joyce, M., McClelland, H., Tippett, M., Tran, M. M., & Platt, S. (2020). The impact of infectious disease-related public health emergencies on suicide, suicidal behavior, and suicidal thoughts. *Crisis.chiatr. Scand.* 91: 57–68.