

Title: A qualitative study of perceptions towards suicidal behaviour in relation to academic pressure in university students.

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I hereby declare that the Research Report submitted for the BA Psych Honors degree to The Independent Institute of Education is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another University or Higher Education Institution for degree purposes.

Abstract

Within South Africa suicide is the fastest growing and the second leading cause of death amongst university students (Bantjes et al., 2019). This contemporary increase is notably attributed to the relationship between academic related stress and suicidal behaviour (Banerjee et al., 2016). Research done shows that one of the main causes of suicidal thoughts and action is academic related, and due to high pressure put on the students to perform (Bantjes et al., 2017). The present study aimed to identify whether university students perceived there to be a relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour. The data collection method selected for this research was an in-depth interview, specifically a standardised open-ended interview. This method was used so that an in-depth understanding could be made about the topic and meanings could be uncovered. The findings suggested that university students do perceive there to be a relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour, and these findings can be used to show the prevalence of the issue of suicidal behaviour in undergraduate university students within South Africa.

Table of contents

Title: A qualitative study of perceptions towards suicidal behaviour in relation to academic pressure in university students.	1
Introduction:.....	4
Background/contextualisation	4
Rationale and relevance	4
Problem statement.....	5
Purpose statement.....	6
Research question:	6
Sub Question:	6
Objectives:	6
Literature review	7
Conceptualisation	7
Theoretical foundation	7
The interpersonal theory of suicide	7
Review of previous research.....	8
Introduction	8
Academic pressure and suicidal behaviour.....	9
Depression and mental health issues and services	11
Cultural, economic and social factors	12
Conclusion	13
Research design and Methodology.....	14
Research Paradigm	14
Research Design	15
Population.....	15
Sampling.....	16
Data collection method / Application of data collection method	17
Data analysis method	18
Trustworthiness	19
Results and interpretation of results.....	21

Results.....	21
Contributors to academic pressure	21
Transition from school to university:	22
Parental pressures:.....	22
Contributors to suicidal behaviour.....	23
Anxiety and depression.....	23
Financial pressures.....	24
Discussion	24
Contributors to academic pressure	24
Transition from school to university	25
Parental pressures.....	26
Contributors to suicidal behaviour.....	27
Anxiety and depression.....	27
Financial pressures.....	27
Academic pressure and suicidal behaviour.....	28
Conclusion.....	29
Research Question, Problem, Objectives addressed	29
Heuristic value	30
Ethical considerations.....	31
Limitations.....	32
References	33
Appendix A	37
Appendix B	38

Introduction:

Background/contextualisation

Suicidal behaviour had been a major topic of concern due to the increase in suicide related deaths amongst the global population, specifically the young adult population (Bantjes, Breet, Saal, Lochner, Roos & Taljaard, 2019). According to the World Health Organisation it was estimated that around 1 million individuals commit suicide per annum and that by the end of 2020 the number is estimated to rise to 1.53 million (Bantjes et al., 2019). International as well as South African researchers had been investigating the prevalence of mental health issues among university students, specifically the issue of suicide (Bantjes et al., 2019). Suicide was becoming an overwhelming issue within society and numerous studies show that university students and young adults are the most vulnerable to this issue due to several factors, one of these being academic pressure (Banerjee et al., 2016). The present era was the age of competition where it was increasingly difficult to achieve top results and to keep up with expectations (Banerjee et al., 2016). The student work environment had become more ambitious and ruthless, with students facing more stress due to the pressure to perform and be the best out of everyone within their field (Banerjee et al., 2016). University is a challenging transition and added academic pressure can send one over the edge, leading to unwanted thoughts and behaviours, such as suicidal behaviours (Banerjee et al., 2016). Within South Africa suicide was the fastest growing and the second leading cause of death amongst university students (Bantjes et al., 2019). This contemporary increase was notably attributed to the relationship between academic related stress and suicidal behaviour (Banerjee et al., 2016).

Rationale and relevance

This topic was identified as prevalent in today's society and was worth investigating, as investigating students' perceptions towards suicide and suicidal behaviour was important in navigating a way forward within this issue. The victims within the research conducted were the individuals who showed and experienced suicidal behaviours, as well as the families and friends of those who have committed suicide. This problem had affected the universities within South Africa, as well as the remainder of the students, parents and staff who are all involved with the universities (Bantjes et al., 2017). It was important to note that

whilst previous studies had been conducted on suicidal behaviour at South African universities, none of these studies had placed an emphasis on the direct link between academic pressure and stress upon suicidal behaviour. Therefore, this study focused on university students and their perceptions of suicidal behaviour in relation to academic pressure. Results from the research showed that students do perceive there to be a strong link between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour. This hopefully helped create awareness of the issue and encouraged all stakeholders to understand and accommodate students and the pressures and expectations that they experience, outlining the importance of mental health and aid. Mental health issues such as suicide and suicidal behaviour are within the psychological field which is studied and analysed immensely (Bantjes et al., 2017). This mental health issue was considered to be one of the main psychological struggles which greatly effect individuals overall mental wellbeing and mental health (Bantjes et al., 2017). This issue was chosen for the study as suicide has always been a problem within humanity however in the recent years had increased greatly (Bantjes et al., 2017). Therefore, by having conducted this study more individuals have become aware of the risks and the severity of this societal issue and will take action in helping provide awareness, prevention and aid to those who are suffering.

Problem statement

Amongst the South African university student population, the issue of suicide had become a major topic of concern due to the increasing suicide rates (Bantjes et al., 2017). Not only had there been a major increase within deaths, but also a large increase within individuals expression of thoughts and ideation caused by suicide and suicidal behaviour, as well as many having certain opinions and views on suicide (Bantjes et al., 2017). Within South Africa suicide was the second leading cause of death amongst university students and was recorded that more than 24,5% of students had experienced or were still experiencing forms of suicidal ideation (Bantjes et al., 2017). Research done showed that one of the main causes of suicidal thoughts and action was academic related, and due to high pressure put on the students to perform (Bantjes et al., 2017).

Purpose statement

Therefore, the purpose of this research was to benefit the psychological field to help assist this growing epidemic, which not only affected the individual but society as a whole. As well as to identify whether academic pressure was considered one of the main causes of suicidal behaviour within university students, and if so to aid in finding solutions to help reduce this issue. The motivation behind this specific choice of research was to create awareness and prevent future deaths due to suicide. Mental health was something which was rarely considered a priority, and therefore when suicidal behaviour and mental illness were present in certain individuals they are not sure how to deal with it and where to seek assistance (Bantjes et al., 2019). This was causing some to feel as if their life was worthless and that the only solution is to end it, or at least to attempt to (Bantjes et al., 2019). When academics are involved, especially regarding university work, pressure to succeed is a constant feeling which can have the potential to harm their wellbeing and confidence (Peltzer, Yi & Pengpid, 2017). The reason that a focus has been placed on university students was due to notably high levels of academic pressure and task related stress.

Research question:

Do university students perceive there to be a relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour?

Sub Question:

What are university student's perceptions of suicide or suicidal behaviour?

Objectives:

1. To understand university students' feelings and thoughts towards suicide.
2. To understand whether academic related pressure is perceived to be a primary contributor towards the suicidal behaviour of university students.

Literature review

Conceptualisation

Suicidal behaviour : Thoughts and behaviours connected to an individual intentionally thinking about or attempting to take their own life or severely harm themselves (Hawton, 2010). Suicidal behaviour includes suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and suicide completion (Hawton, 2010). In the context of the study, suicidal behaviour is one of the main themes in relation to academic stress.

Academic pressure : When a student is feeling as if their work is placing them under stress to achieve certain academic goals and aims (Lal, 2014). It is a perceived achievable or non-achievable workload (Lal, 2014). In the context of the study this refers to the possible cause or contributor to suicidal behaviour.

Perceptions: The way in which something is viewed, regarded, understood or interpreted (Westefeld et al., 2005). In the context of the study, the perceptions are those of the university students and their perceptions are what is being collected and identified for the study.

University students: A student enrolled in a university or college (Bantjes, Lochner, Stein & Taljaard, 2017). In the context of the study, university students are the participants in the study and the individuals whose perceptions are being explored.

Theoretical foundation

The interpersonal theory of suicide

The interpersonal theory of suicide was developed by Thomas Joiner, a theory which was pioneered in his academic study *Why People Die By Suicide* (Joiner, 2009). This theory aims to explain the reason why people participate in suicidal behaviour and to help recognise people who are at risk of engaging (Van Orden, 2011). The theory is made up of three parts that lead to suicide attempts and completion (Van Orden, 2011). These three parts are; acquired capability for suicide, thwarted belongingness and recognised burdensomeness (Joiner, 2009). The theory states that the concurrent existence of thwarted belongingness and recognised burdensomeness creates the want to commit suicide, suicide ideation or encourages certain suicidal behaviours (Joiner, 2009). However, the want to commit suicide

is necessary but on its own won't singularly result in death by suicide but will encourage more suicidal thoughts as well as certain suicidal behaviours (Van Orden, 2011). The effect of recognised burdensomeness on suicidal thoughts and behaviour is the most studied and tested relationship out of all concepts as the two correlate one another (Van Orden, 2011). In relation to the study, if university students experience recognised burdensomeness which could be due to numerous factors such as not having the confidence in their own ability, feeling as if they a burden to their peers and society, feelings of guilt towards their parents if they don't achieve and feelings of inadequacy which could all occur due to the high levels of academic pressure each student is put under (Mueller et al., 2016). These together with suicidal behaviours could very lead a student to committing or attempting suicide. This theory is relevant to the study as it focuses on reasons why individuals engage in certain suicidal behaviour (Joiner, 2009). It directly links to suicidal behaviour as thoughts are produced from the reasons causing the individual to feel this specific way, and to have this perspective on life during those thoughts which then leads to suicidal behaviour and suicidal action (Joiner, 2009). It further helps to recognise who are at risk, which creates awareness and attempts to prevent the individual from committing suicide, and from gaining those thoughts and adopting suicidal behaviours (Van Orden, 2011). It shows what leads to suicide, which if known can be prevented by future individuals, which will lower suicide and suicidal behaviour rates amongst the university student population (Mueller et al., 2016). One of the key objectives within this theory is the effect these aspects have on forming and causing suicidal behaviour (Joiner, 2009), which is one of the main aims of the research.

Review of previous research

Introduction

Amongst the global university student population, suicide has become a topic of major concern due to steadily increasing suicide rates, and the spread of international awareness via various media platforms (Bantjes et al., 2019). It is considered a worldwide epidemic which not only affects the victims, but their communities, friends, and families (Peltzer et al., 2017). It is a serious public health issue with an estimated 800 000 global deaths annually caused by suicide (Bantjes et al., 2019). Among young adults and adolescence suicide is one of the main causes of death, especially amongst university students (Bantjes et al., 2019). Although it is a universal issue, suicide has become a topic of concern amongst the South African student population, due to increasing suicide rates (Bantjes et al., 2019). There has been a major increase in deaths, suicidal behaviours and attempts, and suicidal ideation within the South African student population, and many having

certain negative perceptions of suicide and suicidal behaviour (Bantjes et al., 2019). Suicidal behaviour can be defined as, thoughts and behaviours connected to an individual intentionally thinking about or attempting to take their own life or severely harm themselves (Bantjes et al., 2019). Within South Africa, suicide is the second leading cause of death amongst university students and it is estimated that more than 24,5% of students have experienced or are partaking in suicidal behaviour (Bantjes et al., 2019). Research shows that the main causes of suicidal behaviour is related to academics and associated pressure to perform well (Bantjes et al., 2016).

Majority of the universities within the country are known for their high academic standards and achievements, and the quality of the alumni who are produced from these various institutions (Bantjes et al., 2017). The pressure to maintain these high academic standards, as well as other psychosocial factors, often causes high levels of stress and may contribute to the development of suicidal thoughts and actions (Bantjes et al., 2017). Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore university students' perceptions of suicidal behaviour in other students and ascertain whether they believe suicidal action or ideation is implicitly linked to academic pressure. This literature review will critically discuss perceptions towards suicidal behaviour in relation to academic pressure, and the hypothesis that academic pressure is a main factor of suicidal behaviour. First, it will discuss academic pressure in relation to suicidal behaviour. Second, it will critically discuss depression as an alternate risk factor for suicidal behaviour in addition to academic pressure. Third, it will discuss the effect of various sociocultural, socioeconomic and sociological factors present.

Academic pressure and suicidal behaviour

The present age is considered by many university students to be the age of competition due to scientific and technological advancement (Tang, Byrne & Qin, 2017). Students feel that this immense progress has caused problems such as academic stress regarding the need to constantly achieve and excel (Tang et al., 2017). In South Africa there is a high population of adolescents striving to be accepted into their university of choice (Bantjes et al., 2017). The pressure to achieve top marks so as to be accepted above the masses permeates throughout their academic career, and pressure to meet demands and compete with peers in their chosen field due to an influx of qualified individuals (Banerjee et al., 2016). Several case studies show that academic stress is perceived by many university students to be one of the main contributors to suicidal behaviour amongst students, due to the fact that it was recorded that suicidal behaviour rates increased during exam periods and periods of heavy workload (Banerjee et al., 2016).

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration National Survey on Drug Use and Health, the students who visited the emergency departments in Virginia from 2009 to 2015 showed that the characterisations of suicidal behaviour included 37% with a plan to commit suicide, 25% had no plan and 11% used suicidal gestures (Torbey, Robinson, Vakkalanka, Holstege & Thomson, 2016). The most common methods used was an overdose which was 28%, cutting (19%) and jumping (10%), most of these patients were admitted for psychiatric hospitalisation 54% followed by a follow up (41%) (Torbey et al., 2016). It was found that the most common stressor was academic stress being 51%, this showing it to be one of the main contributing factors to suicidal behaviour amongst this group of university students (Torbey et al., 2016). Indicating the elevated suicidal risk caused by academic pressure within the contemporary college student population (Torbey et al., 2016).

In addition, in a study conducted across 19 universities within 8 countries an online survey was administered to 13,984 students, the participants were asked where they were ranked academically in relation to their peers within their last year of high school (Mortier, Auerbach, Alonso, Bantjes, Benjet & Cuijpers 2018). The results showed that 5% were at the top and 10% at the bottom and the rest in-between and were further asked what their main reason to attend university was (Mortier et al., 2018). The reasons were categorised into intrinsic reasons, such as; to achieve a degree and to learn, and extrinsic reasons, such as parents wanted them to, friends were going or didn't want to get a job right away (Mortier et al., 2018). Majority gave extrinsic reasons which highlight the underlying factor of academic pressure present, whether it was because their parents want them to achieve, if they felt the need that they had to join the academic world or do something academically centred in order to fit society's expectations were guiding their decisions (Mortier et al., 2018). This highlighting the increasing pressure to conform regardless of the individuals mental wellbeing or true wishes (Mortier et al., 2018).

A study was done by L van Niekerk, L Scribante and PJ Raubenheimer which was conducted across 3 different South African universities, where 874 students from the medical faculty were used (Van Niekerk, Scribante & Raubenheimer, 2012). Results showed that there was a high prevalence of suicidal ideation (32,3%) and suicidal attempt (6,9%). This being nearly three times higher than the general age-appropriate South African population (Van Niekerk et al., 2012). Following this another similar study was conducted on students who were not enrolled in medicine from the University of Pretoria where 8.1% of students had or currently were considering suicide, and 5.1% had made a suicidal attempt

(Bantjes, et al., 2016). From both studies the students results showed a high correlation between suicidal behaviour and academic related pressures such as, the pressure to achieve, burnout from overworking and sleepless nights either due to work overload or mental issues such as, depression or insomnia which most recorded only occurred once they began university (Van Niekerk et al., 2012).

Depression and mental health issues and services

In contrast to academic pressure being the main factor towards suicidal behaviour, numerous studies conducted in China displayed results which suggested that the main contributing factor to suicidal behaviour is depression, and that suicidal behaviour is very unusual in the absence of a major mental disorder (Chen, Kang & Lin, 2017). Students were asked what caused them to have suicidal behaviours and many said the existence of a mental disorder such as depression, anxiety or panic disorder whereas others said substance abuse, economic challenges or academic related stress (Chen et al., 2017). The study showed a prominent association between depression and suicidal behaviour, indicating that depression was one of the main contributors (Chen et al., 2017).

Along with suicidal behaviour, mental illness is also becoming an increasing issue globally (Peltzer et al., 2017). In the US a study was conducted across 26 universities which showed that university students experience a vast range of mental health issues (Bantjes et al., 2017). These consisted of 17% suffering from depression, 7% suffering from anxiety, 4% having a panic disorder, 6,3% had suicidal ideation and 15,3% revealed non-suicidal self-injury (Bantjes et al., 2017). Whereas, in a South African study done on university students 12% of the participants were suffering from depression and 24,5% reported some form of suicidal behaviour (Bantjes et al., 2017). This study also showed that 1 out of 6 university students receive less than adequate mental health support and treatment, this being one of the many indicators of the poorly supplied mental health care and support needed by the students within South Africa (Bantjes et al., 2017). Although counselling services are provided within the South African universities, they are very often over subscribed therefore forcing administrators to significantly reduce the amount of accessible care (Bantjes et al., 2016). It was documented that many students feel that these services are inadequate even when accessed (Bantjes et al., 2019). Bantjes (2017) states that, "Although universities are not in the business of providing healthcare, they have a responsibility to create optimal conditions for academic success. This entails promoting psychological health" (p 2)

Bantjes (2017) states that the gap for the need of mental health treatments, particularly for suicide intervention strategies is not only significantly high in the middle to low income countries but also in the high income countries, where only 24% of the students in high income countries receive the adequate care they require (Bantjes et al., 2017). Whereas, in the low- and middle-income countries between 8% and 11% of the students receive care, and most often it is not sufficient (Bantjes et al., 2017). Bantjes states that although providing adequate health and psychological care is expensive for universities, the costs of not providing it may be higher regarding their academic performance rates, student tragedies and drop-out rates (Bantjes et al., 2019). As well as their reputation regarding the overall wellbeing of their students (Bantjes et al., 2019). There is an insufficient amount of data to show exactly what is needed regarding mental health care and the types of services which are effective for each student and their mental health needs (Bantjes et al., 2019). Which is why the proposed study should fill this gap within the literature and provide further and additional insight into this field. Although the main focus of this research is whether students perceive there to be a relationship between academic related stress and suicidal behaviour the service and care aspect is also important to mention within the research as if adequate care within universities was supplied this issue would not be as prevalent as is, and therefore this gap needs to be emphasised along with the relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour.

Cultural, economic and social factors

There are many reasons why it is vital to focus on university students mental health as this developmental period is commonly associated with social, economic and psychological challenges and changes (Peltzer et al., 2017). Such as, milestone transitions, entering into young adulthood, dealing with family, peer and romantic changes, leaving home and entering a new social context, financial responsibilities and challenges as well as an introduction to substances and recreational events where they are exposed to substances (Peltzer et al., 2017). These transitions could partly cause psychological issues and precipitate symptoms of psychopathology which could lead risk factors to suicidal behaviours, more so than academic pressure according to Eisenberg (Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein & Hefner, 2007).

In addition, Pinquart and Kauser state that culture and parenting styles play a large role in suicidal behaviour in relation to academic pressure in the way that the academic pressure is caused by the parents pressure placed on their child to succeed (Pinquart & Kauser, 2018). Which in turn if the child doesn't succeed feels like they have no other

alternative and show some form of suicidal behaviour when they feel severe hopelessness and guilt (Pinquart et al., 2018). A study showed that Western cultures tend to place high emphasis on academic achievement whereas certain collective cultures place less (Pinquart et al., 2018). However, in South African cultures another study showed that the white population, Indian population and certain cultures showed more authoritarian parenting styles, which placed emphasis on academic excellence and achievement, specifically excelling in university or put immense pressure on their children getting accepted into tertiary education (Pinquart et al., 2018).

An in-depth case study was conducted by sociologists Anna Mueller and Seth Abrutyn in the Poplar Grove community (Mueller & Abrutyn, 2016). Interviews and focus groups were used to collect data from university students and young adults regarding the risk factors of suicidal behaviour, and two ways were identified where there were aspects of the community that often are considered desirable however also contribute heavily to young adult suicide (Mueller et al., 2016). The cultural aspects and beliefs present within the community place high importance on academic achievement and excellence, and the participants noted that this caused major stress and pressure to perform as well as unbearable fear of not being able to live up to these high expectations (Mueller et al., 2016). The participants revealed that this academic stress caused them to be less willing to seek mental health care and to feel as if there was no escape from their emotional pain and sense of continuous failure (Mueller et al., 2016). Majority of the participants revealed that these feelings and stress caused self-hatred and suicidal behaviours or thoughts of self-harm (Mueller et al., 2016). This study showed that sociocultural factors can cause academic stress, where the academic stress then can lead to suicidal behaviour within students (Mueller et al., 2016).

Conclusion

South Africa over the past few years has experienced an immense increase in deaths due to suicidal behaviour causing it to become an epidemic (Bantjes et al., 2019). Specifically amongst the university population and young adults with their suicidal behaviour statistics being much higher than other age groups within the country (Bantjes et al., 2016). It is known that it is the second leading cause of death where more than 24,5% of students have or currently still are showing suicidal behaviour (Bantjes et al., 2016). Although there are numerous risk factors, academic pressure is considered by many studies and students to be considered one of the main factors (Bantjes et al., 2017). Due to pressure to perform and achieve, the need to excel and pressure to succeed (whether self inflicted or inflicted

by parents) and during exam periods as well as periods of high academic workload (Banerjee et al., 2016). Several studies also show that depression is considered one of the main factors where it has a high correlation with suicidal behaviour amongst university students (Chen et al., 2017). Following on from this, studies also indicate that cultural, social and economic factors are also considered to be part of the main category due to their correlation with suicidal behaviour whether its direct or indirect (Pinquart et al., 2018). Parenting styles influenced by culture also play a role (Pinquart et al., 2018). These other factors are also considered factors of suicidal behaviour however do not show to be more significant than that of academic pressure's relationship towards suicidal behaviour (Pinquart et al., 2018). It is possible that students perceptions of suicidal behaviour could be linked with these factors, and that certain aspects could possibly affect and encourage academic pressure which in turn stimulates suicidal behaviour (Pinquart et al., 2018). Although numerous studies have been conducted regarding suicidal risk factors there is still a large gap in the literature, as well as the availability of prevention and intervention programs within the universities (Bantjes et al., 2016).

Research design and Methodology

Research Paradigm

For this research an interpretivistic approach was used to understand and describe meaning within the research, and to be used to understand whether university students perceive academic related pressure to be a primary contributor towards suicidal behaviour. The interpretivism paradigm aim is to gain an in-depth understanding as well as to describe and understand meaningful social action and experiences (du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout, 2014). One of the main ideas on which the paradigm is based on is that individuals are essentially dissimilar from objects and therefore individuals cannot be studied in the same way that objects are studied within the natural sciences, because human beings are constantly changing and the environment in which they are in is continually effecting and

impacting them (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014). Unlike the natural sciences in the social sciences, which this topic falls under, the researcher's aim is to describe and study meaningful social action (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014). Their main goal is to understand human behaviour, instead of trying to explain and discover causal relationships (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014). Interpretivism is the most suitable approach as an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of the students regarding the relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour, their environment and the academic pressures they face as well as the reasons behind the academic pressure is needed (Bantjes et al., 2019). The meaning behind the reasons for the causes of suicidal behaviour needs to be identified, and once that meaning is conveyed it can then be used to benefit the research as individuals are the subject of the study. Therefore, they each are different and experience different feelings, emotions and thoughts, and therefore an in-depth understanding of each individual involved in the study and of the study as a whole is necessary (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014).

Research Design

A qualitative exploratory research design was used for this study, and was the most suitable as it places emphasis on words instead of numbers in the analysis and collection of data (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014). This allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding and to find and describe meaning (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014). It views reality as being subjective and when working with individuals this is important, as it allows for meaning to be uncovered (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014). As well as for numerous perspectives to be explored, which is important as you can find out about the individuals opinions, feelings and thoughts (du Plooy- Cilliers, et al.,2014). With a topic such as this one it is vital to gain unique perspectives and explanatory information in order to see the full scope.

Population

The population which were used for this research were South African tertiary educational students. The population parameters were that, they must be a full time undergraduate student from a higher educational institute in South Africa, which include universities and private colleges, and they must be currently studying. The target population for this research were, every full-time undergraduate student who attends a higher educational institution such as universities or private colleges within South Africa, who are over the age of 18 and under the age of 25. The population sample used excluded

individuals who are over the age of 25, due to their possible mental maturity and other external factors which include late attendance and repetition of the same year. These factors could have potentially affected the validity and accuracy of the results.

Sampling

The sampling method used for this research is a type of non-probability sampling method and is called snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is where research participants recruit future participants from among their acquaintances (Muijs, 2012). The way in which the sample was chosen was, the first participant was chosen then they proceeded to help recruit other individuals for the research study (Muijs, 2012). These individuals were approached and briefed about the topic, and if they were interested were presented with a consent form in which they were required to sign. This was to ensure that they were at ease, and so that the researcher could confirm that they fitted the population parameters and characteristics (Muijs, 2012). The consent form also informed the potential participants about what the study entailed, the intricacies on the topic, and what was required of them. This method of sampling was ideal for the population as the topic is very sensitive and could of been uncomfortable for some individuals to speak about. Therefore, when the individuals were approached and once they were briefed they could decide whether they felt comfortable to participate, and if they weren't they could refuse. This way no one was made to feel pressurised or forced to participate, it was completely up to the individual whether they wanted to participate within the research study or not (Muijs, 2012). The sampling method used allowed the researcher to have control over who participated and allowed them to ensure that each participant met the specific population parameters and characteristics. This allowed the researcher to find specific relevant information from the small group of individuals who participated (Muijs, 2012). This enables the topic to be fully explored as it has to do with academic issues and the issue of suicidal behaviour which are very personal and specific to certain individuals. It allowed their experiences and feelings to be considered and used as valuable research. The sample was made up of 5 participants who consented to taking part in in-depth interviews on Zoom video calls. These participants within the sample met all the population parameters and had signed the consent forms before they participated. The reason why such a small sample size was used was due to the data collection method used which were in-depth interviews, it made analysing the data less time consuming and ensured that not many individuals had to take part as many may have not wanted to due to the topic.

Data collection method / Application of data collection method

The data collection method selected for this research was an in-depth interview, specifically a standardised open-ended interview. The interviews took place on Zoom video calls where each participant was interviewed separately on a separate call. Each video call was recorded. With this type of interview used the researcher focused on the same set of questions for all the individuals which they used within the interview (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014). This way insured that the individuals were able to be observed and were analysed in an effective manner which made it easier. Standardisation enabled the researcher to compare notes and recordings on the perceptions, feelings and opinions of the participants which will allowed for a more accurate and trustworthy study (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014). This was vital for this research topic as it allowed all the interview responses to be compared equally and with a sensitive topic such as this one within the research, it also assisted in avoiding certain uncomfortable questions for the participants interviewed. It allowed the sensitive topics such as suicidal behaviour and mental-wellbeing to be explored in a gentle manner and ensured that the researcher did not go off topic or ask any further added questions, which could of potentially caused discomfort or lead the participants to have developed unwanted emotions or feelings. This method which was used also aided the researcher with organisation (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014).

The researcher chose their first participant who was an acquaintance of theirs who fitted the specific population parameters and characteristics. Once this participant was selected, they assisted the researcher and found another 2 participants who then each found 1. These 5 participants were briefed and then provided with a consent form which they were required to sign. Within the briefing the potential participants were made fully aware and informed about what was required of them, the nature of the study, what the possible risks were and what information of theirs would be used, recorded and documented. Once the researcher secured the 5 participants, an email was sent out asking which day and time suited them for their interview as well as the length of the interview, and the platform in which it would take place on. It was important that each participant be interviewed on a separate day. Once the participants had replied and a suitable time and day was chosen a Zoom link was emailed to them which was clicked on and allowed them access into the video call. The interviews had to take place on Zoom due to Covid-19 and the lockdown which was put into place, which prohibited interviewing the participants face to face. Each interview took place

for an hour on a Zoom video call where they were recorded. None of the participants felt uncomfortable about the video call being recorded, which enabled the researcher to record each one with given consent. Each participant were asked 10 questions about what their perceptions of suicidal behaviour were and its relation to academic pressure. Throughout the interview the researcher took notes and then wrote down the recorded answers after each interview ended, which were safely stored and ready for the next step which was data analysis. By writing down the answers after the interview and from the recorded call it helped ensure accuracy prohibited time from being wasted during the interviews. The interviews took place across a working day week period where one participant was interviewed per day. This allowed for slight flexibility for the participant as they were able to chose a time during the day or evening which suited them as well as allowed room for sudden change to the interview time or if there were any cancelations. Each participant was interviewed on a separate day and all of them kept to their commitment. These interviews were done from Monday the 17 August to Friday the 21 August 2020..

This method of data collection was suitable for a topic such as this as it allowed certain sensitive questions such as suicidal behaviour and mental health to be carefully asked and thought of as there were set questions that needed to be asked. It also allowed all the different experiences and realities to be analysed which helped ensure an accurate, descriptive result (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014). It also allowed an in depth understanding and meaning to be found, as well as allowed for privacy and anonymity. The method aligned with the paradigm and design which was chosen as, in-depth interviews are a qualitative research type of data collecting method and therefore was also seen from an interpretivistic approach. An in-depth interview was best suited to this research topic as sensitive issues could be spoken about privately, instead of them being discussed within a group situation (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014). It also allowed the researcher to observe and listen carefully as they were able to focus on each participant closely and individually (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2014).

Data analysis method

The data analysis method chosen for this research was a qualitative thematic content analysis. This method was used to explore and determine themes and patterns which were implanted within the text (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2018). This method focused on the distinctive themes which informed the researcher of the different range of meanings of the phenomenon rather than focusing on quantitative methods (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2018). It uncovered the different themes as well as the significant meanings of the data supplied (du

Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2018). This method suited the research as it allowed for an in-depth understanding to be formed and the true meaning was conveyed. Due to the research that was done for this study it required a lot of in-depth understanding as well as honesty and detail, therefore this method allowed together with the data collection method used, which was an in-depth interview to fully explore all meaning and phenomena regarding the data and the topic. These two methods used also allowed the data to be recorded accurately as each interview was recorded and then written out which was the first step of the process (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2018). The second step was to define the coding unit which was analysed which was a way of organising the data into manageable sections. Here the researcher analysed the text closely and decided how they would be separated and what information was relevant or not (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2018). The third step was the creation of a conceptual frame work which was developed, each theme was distinct and did not overlap in meaning (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2018). Testing then occurred which ensured clarity and consistency, and was followed by substantive coding which took place (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2018).

With this form of coding which was used, the researcher read over all the text which was written from the interviews and went over it in detail which allowed them to form an overall opinion and judgement of the information, as well as helped them gain an in-depth understanding of the answers (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2018). This process involved categorising, re-categorising data, examining and breaking down as well as conceptualising and comparing the data (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2018). Once this was done everything was rechecked so that consistency was ensured. Following this, the data was interpreted and the themes and meanings were uncovered and analysed (du Plooy- Cilliers, et al.,2018). After this the researcher reported on the process in which they applied in their coding. From all the data which was collected and then was organised into sections it aided the researcher in identifying what the common themes and patterns were which in turn was then used in the study (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al.,2018).

Trustworthiness

This research being a qualitative study used trustworthiness as its purpose supplied an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Korstjens and Moser, 2017). There are four dimensions of trustworthiness; confirmability, transferability, dependability and credibility.

Confirmability refers to how sufficiently the data gathered backs up and substantiates the interpretation and findings of the researcher, and concerns the aspect of neutrality (Korstjens et al., 2017). The inter-subjectivity of the data was secured, and the interpretation grounded in the data as it was not based on the researchers own specific preferences or viewpoints. The findings were based on the participants of the study's responses and not on personal bias or personal motivations of the researcher. This is important especially for such a personal topic such as suicidal behaviour as each individual has have had their own experiences and thoughts, which weren't skewed by the researcher. In order to create confirmability an audit trail was provided for the study which underlined each step of the data analysis, which was constructed to supply reasons for the decisions made. This aided in establishing that the findings of the research correctly portray participants responses, which helped ensure trustworthiness.

Transferability refers to how the research results must be similar if applied to a situation of the same nature (du Plooy et al., 2018). The researcher ensured that a detailed description of the participants and the research process is given to allow the reader to assess whether the findings are transferable to their own situation and environment. The findings will need to be applied to a similar situation where similar results will be delivered. Due to the topic being based on mental health, it is important that transferability was present to ensure trustworthiness as mental health is a topic in which accuracy and trustworthiness is needed.

Dependability refers to the extent to which the study is able to be repeated by other researchers and that that their findings would be coherent (Korstjens et al., 2017). To ensure dependability an inquiry audit was used, where an outside party examined and reviewed the data analysis and research process. By doing so it ensured that the findings could be repeated and are consistent.

Credibility is defined as the researcher interpreting the data with accuracy (Korstjens et al., 2017). The researcher ensured that adequate time was spent with the participants for an in-depth understanding to be formed and gain good insight into their lives. The topic being based on a mental health issue such as suicidal behaviour, it was vital that the researcher spent enough time with each participant in order for them to be accurately portrayed within the study. The more information and understanding the researcher had of each participant the more beneficial it was for the research, ensuring credibility which created trustworthiness. By conducting a member check it allowed the participants to give feedback

on each of their transcripts of the in-depth interview (Korstjens et al., 2017). It enabled the participants to correct the researchers interpretation, and to challenge what they believe to be incorrect interpretations (Korstjens et al., 2017). This ensured trustworthiness as accuracy is given (Korstjens et al., 2017).

Results and interpretation of results

Results

In-depth interviews were conducted individually with each participant to gather the data for this study. 5 participants were used, with participant 1 being a female in first year aged 19 at a public tertiary institution, participant 2 being a male aged 22 in third year at a public tertiary institution, participant 3 being a male aged 22 in second year at a private tertiary institution, participant 4 being a male aged 23 in third year at a public tertiary institution and participant 5 being a female aged 18 in first year at a private tertiary institution. From the research conducted, two major themes were identified as well as numerous sub themes. The first theme is contributors to academic stress which consists of three sub themes which are, the transition from school to university, parental pressures and substance use. The second theme is contributors to suicidal behaviour which is comprised of four themes which are anxiety and depression, financial pressures, and feeling overwhelmed.

Contributors to academic pressure

With regards to the research question and aim, 5/5 participants perceived there to be relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour in undergraduate university students. Participant 1 stated, "I am aware of suicidal rates amongst students, particularly in undergrad due to the pressure of academic achievements and challenges". Participant 2 stated, "I think that academic pressure in relation to suicidal behaviour is a lot more prevalent than a lot of people would think". Participant 3 stated, "I believe that suicidal behaviour caused by academic pressure is common to a large extent". Participant 4 stated, "Academic pressure in university is very high and it could very well lead to suicidal behaviours in certain individuals". Participant 5 stated, "I feel suicidal behaviours in university students are becoming a lot more common, especially due to academic pressure". Participants were asked if they consider academic pressure to be a main contributing factor to suicidal behaviour in university students and 5/5 participants agreed and argued that academic pressure can be considered to be one of the main contributing factors to suicidal behaviour in undergraduate university students. 3/5 participants felt that within university students,

academic pressure could be considered the main contributing factor to suicidal behaviour within undergraduate university students. Participant 3 stated, "in my opinion, academic stress can be considered one of the biggest, if not the biggest contributing factor to suicidal behaviour in university students". Participant 4 stated, "I would say that academic pressure is definitely out of all the issues the biggest cause of suicidal behaviour in university students". Participant 5 stated, "Definitely, I think academic pressure is in many cases the cause of individuals suicidal behaviours". Whereas 2/5 believed that it is one of the main contributing factors however can not be considered the largest one. Participant 1 stated, "In my opinion, I do think that it is definitely a factor, but not the largest factor". Participant 2 stated, "I do not think it is the main reason but I do think that it is one of them". Under this theme three sub themes were detected, the first being the transition from school to university.

Transition from school to university:

From the research gathered, this sub theme became evident as 4/5 participants raised this transition as an area of concern as well as being perceived as a major cause of academic stress in their and other students' university careers. As stated by participant 4 "At school you chased around a lot where at university its sort of up to you and and leaves you to decide for yourself and work in your own time which comes with its own pressures and responsibilities and I think a lot of people get caught in a bit of a trap". Participant 5 stated, "I think the academic pressure in university is a big jump from school, it's a new environment with new academic challenges". The other 2 out of the 4/5 participants both stated that the transition from school to university was a challenging one, especially academically and explained that no one in high school realises how much work you are required to do when you get to university, and the pressures which come along with it. Therefore, it is evident from the research gathered from the participants that the transition from high school to university can be considered a contributor to academic pressure.

Parental pressures:

Another sub theme which emerged from the research conducted is parental pressures, as 5/5 participants believed that parental pressure can be considered a major contributor to academic pressure. Participant 3 stated, "Academic stress is mostly pressure being put on by parents, because most parents believe that academics is the be all and end all". Both participant 1 and participant 2 believed that in many instances parents want their child to be academically successful, even if they may not be that way inclined, and that pressure placed on them often leads to high levels of academic pressure. Participant 4

stated, “Academic stress in my opinion, is mostly pressure being put on by parents”. Participant 5 explained that from their own personal experiences and those of their friends that parental pressure can be very overwhelming and often cause academic pressure which may not necessarily be there if it wasn’t for the pressure their parents put on them to succeed. Therefore, parental pressure is considered a contributor to academic stress which can then lead to suicidal behaviour.

Contributors to suicidal behaviour

Participants were asked what they believed were some of the other contributing factors to suicidal behaviour other than academic pressure these were factors such as anxiety and depression and financial pressure were the most frequently mentioned. Participant 3 stated, “You’ve got academic pressure as a main factor which can then together with some other factors lead to suicidal behaviour”. Participant 1 stated, “In my opinion, factors such as feeling overwhelmed and depression and anxiety can cause suicidal behaviour, as the individual gives up on life”. 4/5 participants felt that the workload in each of their courses was extremely overwhelming and overbearing, and that the pressure from that as well as the pressure of trying to pass and complete all their work created much academic pressure which in their opinions could very easily result in suicidal behaviour in certain students. 5/5 participants perceived suicidal behaviour to also be caused by financial pressure, especially in a socio-economic climate such as South Africa, because many students cannot afford the fees and therefore need high marks to get a scholarship or bursary. Due to this, the financial pressure they themselves are under and their families to educate them can contribute to suicidal behaviour. The first sub theme detected under this theme was anxiety and depression.

Anxiety and depression

When the participants were asked what were other contributors to suicidal behaviour in university students, 3/5 participants stated that in their opinion, students who experience anxiety and depression or who develop it while at university have a high chance of participating in suicidal behaviours and developing suicidal ideation. Due to their ill state of mind, and due to the combination of anxiety or depression with academic pressure which could then result in suicidal behaviours. Participant 1 stated, “Well I think with suicidal behaviour depression comes hand in hand with it”. Participant 4 stated “I would say in a situation that’s obviously a very dark mental space that someone would be in, they feel like they have no where to go or no one to turn to and because of this think about taking their life”. Participant 2 stated, “In my opinion, anxiety can end up controlling one’s thoughts which

could then very easily lead them to develop suicidal thoughts and behaviour". These 3 participants felt that there was a strong connection between anxiety, depression and suicidal behaviour, either with academic pressure or without.

Financial pressures

5/5 participants mentioned the financial pressures many families in their opinion face, which could contribute to a student's suicidal behaviour due to the pressure they are put under to perform to secure their bursary. Participant 1 stated, "Some people do not have equal opportunities like the whole fees must fall subject, and students not being able to access facilities or to go to varsity. I think that contributes a lot, and those who get bursaries get put under so much pressure to meet the standard because others weren't able to do so, I think that it is very pressurising that bursary, it is a huge achievement but it's a lot of pressure I can believe to keep up that standard". Participant 4 stated, "Some families are going through serious financial stress, which definitely contributes to suicidal thoughts and behaviours".

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore whether university students perceive there to be a relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour within undergraduate university students in South Africa. Data was collected by using in-depth interviews where 5 participants were interviewed. Thematic coding was used to analyse the data and through thematic coding there were two main themes which emerged, as well as 5 sub themes. The first theme was contributors to academic pressure, with 2 sub themes related to it which were the transition from school to university and parental pressures. The second theme was contributors to suicidal behaviour, with 2 sub themes related to it which were anxiety and depression and financial pressures. This discussion will provide a critical evaluation of the results in the broader context of the research problem and they will be critically and comprehensively related to previous literature.

Contributors to academic pressure

The research question for this study was if university students perceive there to be a relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour, with the sub question

being what are university student's perceptions of suicide and suicidal behaviour. The findings showed that all participants did perceive there to be a relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour, and therefore for the purpose of the study the research question was answered. 5/5 participants perceived the relationship to be a significant one, and all stated that the issue of suicide within university students is an ongoing, serious issue. The second objective of the research was to understand whether academic related pressure is perceived to be a primary contributor towards the suicidal behaviour of university students. This objective was partly met as, 3/5 participants perceived academic pressure to be the main contributing factor to suicidal behaviour, and previous literature from Tang, Byrne & Qin (2017) aligns with these perceptions, as their research describes academic pressure as being a main contributing factor of suicidal behaviour in university students. 2/5 participants believed that it is a contributing factor, however they did not consider it to be the main one. This aligned with Chen, Kang & Lin (2017) research, as they stated that suicidal behaviour in university students can be considered to mostly be caused by mental disorders such as depression and anxiety, as well as other factors. Their research showed that academic pressure is a contributing factor however, can not be considered to be the main factor (Chen et al, 2017). The first objective of the research was to understand university student's feelings and thoughts towards suicide, and by conducting in-depth interviews it allowed each participant to express their feelings and thoughts towards suicide. Each participant spoke in-depth about their feelings and thoughts on suicide which enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding which assisted in answering the research question and objectives. Previous studies done within South Africa in the past 5 years have all discussed the significant relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour in university students. However, the study done by Bantjes, Lochner, Stein & Taljaard (2017) placed emphasis on the different causes of academic pressure and how together or separately they can lead to suicidal behaviour, specifically in undergraduate university students. Regarding this research, the previous literature mentioned substantiated it as it placed emphasis on the significance of the relationship however provided further insight into the factors causing the academic stress which aligned with the results of my research study.

Transition from school to university

Through thematic coding, the transition from school to university emerged as a sub theme of contributors to academic stress. 4/5 Participants described that the changes in

which individuals experience when transitioning from school to university have the ability to impact one negatively. During school these participants described being chased around and having teachers ensure that their work is being completed. The participants explained that moving forward into university students were now faced with a situation where there is no longer someone reminding them constantly what needs to be done. This means many students are either not aware or simply forget the due dates for their projects and tests resulting in increased academic pressure within these periods close to the due date. 4/5 of the participants raised this transition as an area of concern as well as being a major cause of academic stress in their university careers. Previous research done showed that this sub theme was common and that the present university student age is considered by many to be the age of competition due to scientific and technological advancement (Bantjes et al.,2017). This research substantiates this sub theme in my research, as it shows that the academic pressure caused by this transition is not only due to the transition itself but the numerous factors which contribute to its difficulty. Another study done by Banerjee and Chatterjee (2016) showed that the pressure to be accepted into a university and to adapt to the workload caused high levels of academic pressure in university students, this supported numerous perceptions mentioned by the participants from my research study, as these causes were mentioned and spoken about in much detail. Therefore, it is evident from the research gathered from the participants and from previous literature that the transition from high school to university can be considered to be a contributor to academic pressure.

Parental pressures

Another sub theme which emerged was parental pressures. All the participants stated that parental pressure can be considered a contributor to academic stress. Many parents have made numerous sacrifices to ensure their children live good lives and are well educated (Pinquart & Kauser, 2018). In contemporary society, academic competition is high and many parents want their children to be the best, even if they are not academically inclined (Pinquart & Kauser, 2018). The results from the participants showed that they all perceived this pressure to stem from the fact that parents often have high expectations of their children which are difficult or cannot be achieved. Previous research suggests that often parenting styles can affect the way in which parents view the importance of academics, and the pressures in which they place on their children (Mueller & Abrutyn, 2016). Although parenting styles is not a sub theme in this research, it explains

why certain parents are the way they are and why they put pressure on their children. These reasons aligned with the participants from my research study's perceptions as to why their parents and other parents are this way inclined. Another previous research study described academic pressure being a consequence of the pressures put on students to succeed (Pinquart & Kauser, 2018). This aligns with 5/5 participants perceptions regarding parental pressures as a contributing factor to academic stress.

Contributors to suicidal behaviour

The second main theme which emerged was contributors to suicidal behaviour. Participants were asked what they thought were other contributing factors to suicidal behaviour other than academic pressure. From this, 2 sub themes were detected which were anxiety and depression and financial pressures.

Anxiety and depression

The next sub theme which emerged from the data was anxiety and depression. 3/5 participants perceived there to be a strong connection between anxiety, depression and suicidal behaviour, either with academic pressure or without. These participants believed that students who developed anxiety or depression had a high chance of participating in suicidal ideation or suicidal behaviours, due to their ill state of mind and the combination of anxiety or depression with academic pressure, which could then result in suicidal behaviours. Previous research done by Bantjes, Kagee, McGowan & Steel (2016) stated that there is a significantly strong relationship between depression and suicidal behaviour, and that often individuals with either depression or anxiety have a much higher chance of engaging in suicidal behaviours. This previous research however does not mention their relationship with academic pressure, but rather states that academic pressure is a result of depressive or anxious symptoms. Due to this, the findings from my research could be limited but may also contribute to the future research in this field. Therefore, depression and anxiety can be seen as contributing factors to suicidal behaviours, however their relationship with academic pressure is not as significant as I as the researcher previously predicted.

Financial pressures

Another sub theme which emerged is financial pressures. 5/5 participants perceived financial pressures to be a contributor to suicidal behaviour in university students due to the pressure they may be under to perform to secure a bursary. Previous research

substantiates this perception, as in South Africa there is a wide economic divide where many individuals cannot afford to go to university (Bantjes et al.,2017). Therefore, they put immense pressure on themselves to perform. Other financial pressures recently have occurred in many households due to Covid 19 and the financial strain many families are under. Due to this, the participants believed that this added financial pressure could also contribute to suicidal behaviour. There is no previous research regarding Covid-19 and the possible consequences of the financial pressure caused by it, therefore the participants perception regarding this cannot be supported as of yet. Regarding the participants differences in their perceptions of financial pressures, the participants from private institutions placed just as much emphasis on financial pressures as a contributing factor as the participants from public institutions. This showed that financial pressure is a very common factor experienced by many. Therefore, financial pressures can be considered a contributing factor to suicidal behaviour.

Academic pressure and suicidal behaviour

Therefore, the results gathered from the participants showed that 5/5 participants believed that there is a relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour in undergraduate university students. The two main themes which were evident from the research conducted were contributors to academic pressure and contributors to suicidal behaviour, with 6 sub themes all of which fall under the relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour. Therefore, it is clear from the results shown that the participants did perceive there to be a strong relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviours. This answering the main research question.

Conclusion

Research Question, Problem, Objectives addressed

Regarding the research question for this study, it consisted of the research question, one sub question and two objectives. The research question for this study was, “Do university students perceive there to be a relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour?”. From the findings gathered from each participant, evidence suggests that the answer to the research question is that university students do perceive there to be a relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour. 5/5 participants perceived there to be a significant relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour, and that academic pressure can be considered to be one of the main contributing factors to suicidal behaviour in undergraduate university students. The sub question included in the study was, “What are university student’s perceptions of suicide and suicidal behaviour”. The sub question was successfully fulfilled, as each participant gave in-depth information about the topic, and provided detailed accounts of their perceptions of suicide and suicidal behaviour which assisted the research process throughout. The two objectives of the

research were, “To understand university student’s feelings and thoughts towards suicide, and to understand

Through the use of in-depth interviews information was gathered from each participant, which was then analysed where a qualitative thematic content analysis method was used. Through this, the findings were that each participant

Heuristic value

This study added to the existing body of knowledge surrounding suicidal behaviour in relation to academic pressure. The chosen topic for this research was a sensitive one which many individuals experience on a daily basis. Suicide behaviour amongst university students has been an on-going issue which has increased each year not only at South African universities but all around the globe (Bantjies et al., 2017). Due to this the findings of the study aimed to contribute to the knowledge in the ways in which the rate of suicide amongst university students could be lowered or reduced. The findings from the research are an indication to society about the severity of this issue and how a greater effort of creating awareness needs to be made. Mental health is a topic in which immense research has been done, however not many studies have been done on suicidal behaviour in relation to academic pressure amongst university students (Bantjies et al., 2017). There is a large gap in the literature within this field, as more emphasis, energy and time needs to be put into this topic as the country is losing many of their young adults due to this ongoing issue (Bantjies et al., 2017). Therefore, this research study done could contribute to filling this large gap in the literature within the field. Due to this, the research is also relevant to South African universities. The information found is an indication to each South African university, of the consequences their academic standards have on certain students. Due to this, one of the main intentions of the study was to attempt to aid in creating an enhanced understanding of suicidal behaviour and the consequences of academic pressure. This study could possibly also benefit certain researchers who are wanting to conduct studies on mental health issues, as it will be a guideline for some. This study possibly contributed to society’s knowledge on mental health issues, specifically suicidal behaviour.

Ethical considerations

Regarding this research, there were numerous ethical considerations which needed to be considered. The research study was approved by The IIE's Varsity College and the research supervisor so this ensured that the research study was ethically appropriate. The first ethical consideration which needed to be considered was informed consent, this was important as individuals who took part in the study needed to be aware that they were doing so and had to give their consent for their information to be used by the researcher (Connelly, 2014). The way in which this was upheld within the study was when the participant responded to the email saying they would partake they then signed and attached a consent form which they attached to the email before they took part in the study. The second ethical consideration which needed to be contemplated was collecting data from participants. This was vital as when data from the participants was collected their psychological comfort needed to be the priority. Due to the topic being a sensitive one, other participants hearing each others answers needed to be avoided. Therefore, an in-depth interview took place instead of a focus group, this ensured that whatever was said by the participant could not be heard by any one but the researcher. This made sure that the ethical consideration was upheld and that the participants were comfortable and did not feel psychologically threatened or uncomfortable in any way (Connelly, 2014). After the interviews, no one reported that they felt uncomfortable or psychologically threatened. The next ethical consideration which needed to be thought out was dealing with sensitive information. The study was based on a very sensitive topic which many could have felt uncomfortable speaking about if certain measures were not put into place or considered. As the researcher, when the research was conducted and the findings were analysed it was important that the researcher ensured that there was ethicality throughout especially when the participants were interviewed on zoom. The researcher was informed about very sensitive, private information in which they had to protect and keep to themselves. In order to be an ethical researcher, the researcher kept this information private and did not let their own feelings interfere (Connelly, 2014). The researcher found out certain information from the interviews about the participants and did not share this information with anyone, therefore all the information which was received for the study remained private and protected. Another ethical consideration which needed to be thought of was confidentiality vs anonymity because, the protection of the participants identity and their sensitive information needed to remain anonymous to everybody else apart from the researcher, it was the researcher's ethical responsibility to protect their private information and identity and not to share it (Connelly, 2014). All the information which was gathered remained anonymous to everyone

apart from the researcher, and only the researcher had access to it and was aware of that information. This ensured that confidentiality and anonymity were upheld throughout the research process.

Limitations

The limitations of this research study were time, access to information and resources, and sensitivity. Time was a limitation because, each participant had to be interviewed in-depth one at a time on a zoom call, therefore it took a relatively long period of time to gather all the information and to analyse it. Two cancellations took place before two of the interviews which slowed down the process and caused more time to be taken than planned, however there were no internet connection issues. Another limitation is the sample size, as only five individuals were used within the study which does not represent the target population. This is a limitation because it affects the generalisability of the study as it is a qualitative study and therefore represents personal opinion and is unique to each individual. Additionally, there are a large amount of students in South Africa and therefore, only 5 students cannot represent the perceptions of students across South Africa. Another limitation is possible discomfort and sensitivity within the participants, as they discussed their perceptions of this issue and were asked specific questions which had been planned, which may have caused some of the participants to feel uncomfortable or may have made them upset or may have triggered their worries about their academics. Therefore when the interviews were conducted, the researcher made sure that they were approachable and approached the questions in a calm, thoughtful manner which ensured that the participant felt safe and comfortable.

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Appendix A

Research Purpose/Objective	Primary Research Question	Research Rationale	Seminal Authors/Sources	Literature Review-Conceptual Framework	Paradigm	Approach	Data Collection Method	Ethics	Anticipated findings	References
To find that academic pressure is one of the main causes of suicidal action within university students, specifically Varsity College students I want to create awareness and encouragement to start a highly effective plan of action for suicide prevention	Do university students believe that there is a relationship between academic pressure and suicide?	By understanding certain underlying causes of suicidal action it will assist in developing assistance and a plan of action for going forward to help control and better the situation, as well as will help save university students lives and mental wellbeing.	J. Bantjes U. Wallin D. Eisenberg S. Gollust E. Golberstein J. Hefner C. Lochner D. Stein L. Taljaard S. Torbey B. Runeson	Theme 1: Suicidal action Theme 2: Academic pressure Theme 3: Varsity College students	Interpretivism Epistemology: It is seen as knowledge when it feels right to the individuals being studied. Common sense is an important source of knowledge Ontology: reality is fluid and subjective Axiology: Uniqueness is valued	Qualitative Population: - Students from Varsity College, who have never or are currently not experiencing or have experienced suicidal thoughts and behaviours	An in-depth interview will be used	- It is a sensitive topic and can cause one to become upset or overwhelmed - Issues of anonymity and privacy therefore I am the only one who interviews each participant, and each will be interviewed separately.	That there is a strong relationship between academic pressure and suicidal action within university students.	-Bantjes, J., Lochner, C., Stein, D. and Taljaard, L. (2017). <i>Global study aims to unpack mental health issues facing university students.</i> -Wallin, U., & Runeson, B. (2003). Attitudes towards suicide and suicidal patients among medical students.
Research Problem	Secondary Question	Key Concepts	Key Theories			Sampling	Data Analysis method	Limitations	Anticipated contributions	

The problem in which needs to be solved is the increasing suicide rates within university students due to academic pressure	What are non-suicidal university students feelings, thoughts and opinions towards suicide and suicidal action ?	- Suicidal action - Perceptions - Academic pressure - University students - Varsity College	The Interpersonal theory of suicide			- Non-probability - Volunteer sampling 30 students	Qualitative content analysis	- The students honesty and accuracy when answering - Their energy levels - Stressors such as work, university tasks etc	This study adds to the existing body of knowledge surrounding suicidal action in relation to academic pressure. As well as will benefit society's knowledge on suicidal action in relation to academic pressure	
Key findings	Key contributions	Recommendations								
All participants believed that there is a relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour	It will add to the body of knowledge surrounding academic pressure and suicidal behaviour in university students	More current literature is needed on this topic								

Appendix B

Interview questions

1. What are your thoughts and opinions regarding suicidal behaviour in undergraduate university students ?
2. What do you believe suicidal behaviour entails and why do you think it occurs within university students ?
3. What is your perception of suicide within your specific institution ?
4. What do you believe goes through one's mind when experiencing suicidal behaviours?
5. Do you consider academic pressure to be a main contributing factor to suicidal behaviour within university students, why ?
6. With regards to academic pressure within your specific course, what aspects do you find overwhelming, if any ?
7. What do you find to be the largest contributor to academic stress ?
8. What do you believe needs to change within the institution regarding academic pressure?
9. With regards to student support structures within your institution, do you feel that they are adequate or need improvement, please explain
10. With the added issues of Covid 19, do you feel this perpetuates suicidal behaviour?

Appendix C



Consent form for participants

I, _____, agree to allow Daniela Redondi to audio record my interviews as part of the research about whether university students perceive there to be a relationship between academic pressure and suicidal behaviour.
This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that:

- My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private.
- The recordings will be stored in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer.
- Only the researcher, the researcher's supervisor and possibly a transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings.

Signature	Date

Explanatory information sheet and consent form for participants

To whom it may concern,

My name is Daniela Redondi and I am a student at IIE Varsity College Cape Town. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr Richard Vergunst about university student's perceptions of suicide and suicidal behaviour in relation to academic pressure. I as the researcher want to understand their feelings and opinions on the issue and to see whether they believe academic pressure to be a main contributing factor to suicidal behaviour within student's. I hope that this research will enhance our understanding of the issue of suicidal behaviour within university students and the perceptions of students regarding the issue and the relationship between suicidal behaviour and academic pressure. By doing such it can attempt to assist in a way forward to help reduce this epidemic within the young adult and university student population. I would like to invite you to participate in my study. In order to explain to you what your participation in my study will involve, I have formulated questions that I will try to fully answer so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any additional questions that you feel are not addressed or explained in this information sheet, please do not hesitate to ask me for more information. Once you have read and understood all the information contained in this sheet and are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

What will I be doing if I participate in your study?

I would like to invite you to participate in this research because (insert reason). If you decide to participate in this research, I would like to conduct an in-depth interview with you where I ask standardised questions regarding your perceptions on suicide and suicidal behaviour in relation to academic pressure.

You can decide whether or not to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you can choose to withdraw at any time or to decide not to answer particular interview questions.

Are there any risks/ or discomforts involved in participating in this study?

Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no negative impact on you. However some questions you may find difficult to answer or may make you feel a bit uncomfortable if you are sensitive to the issue. There are no direct risks or benefits to you if you participate in this study. You might, however, indirectly find that it is helpful to talk about this topic and the current issue your friends and peers may be facing or experienced at some point . If you find at any stage that you are not comfortable with the line of questioning, you may withdraw or refrain from participating.

Do I have to participate in the study?

- Your inclusion in this study is completely voluntary;
- If you do not wish to participate in this study, you have every right not to do so;
- Even if you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without having to provide an explanation for your decision.

Will my identity be protected?

I promise to protect your identity. I will not use your name in any research summaries to come out of this research and I will also make sure that any other details are disguised so that nobody will be able to identify you. I would like to ask your permission to record the interviews, but only my supervisor, I and possibly a professional transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings. Nobody else, including anybody at IIE Varsity College Cape Town, will have access to your interview information. I would like to use quotes when I discuss the findings of the research, but I will not use any recognisable information in these quotes that can be linked to you.

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

Once I have finished all interviews, I will write summaries to be included in my research report, which is a requirement to complete my Psychology Honours. You may ask me to send you a summary of the research if you are interested in the final outcome of the study.

What happens if I have more questions about the study?

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about this research, or if there is anything you need to know before you decide whether or not to participate.

You should not agree to participate unless you are completely comfortable with the procedures followed.

My contact details are as follows:
Daniela Redondi

The contact details of my supervisor are as follows:

30 June 2020

Student name: Daniela Redondi Student number: 17045797 Campus: Varsity
College Cape Town

Re: Approval of Honours in Psychology Proposal and Ethics Clearance
HONOURS ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER

Your research proposal and the ethical implications of your proposed research topic were reviewed by your supervisor and the campus research panel, a subcommittee of The Independent Institute of Education's Research and Postgraduate Studies Committee.

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THE INDEPENDENT INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

HONOURS RESE, RESM and RMET ETHICS CHECKLIST

Dear student

Please complete this checklist and include this in your proposals as an appendix:

Student name: Daniela Redondi
 Student number: 17045797
 Title of the research: A qualitative study of perceptions towards suicidal behaviour in relation to academic pressure in university student's.

	Yes	No	Comment: supervisor/ navigator/lecturer
Are you using human subjects in your research?	X		
I intend to use human subjects • I understand that I will not conduct research with human subjects under the age of 18 and other vulnerable groups. • I understand I can only proceed once I receive an ethical clearance letter.			
Interviews/ Focus groups An example of the <i>written consent form</i> I intend to use is attached.	X		
I will record the interview/focus groups and the sample of the letter where I ask for permission to do so is attached.	X		
I plan to use an interview schedule : The example of my research instrument is attached.	X		
I plan to use a questionnaire : The example of my research instrument is attached.			
I plan to use a gate-keepers letter : The example of my letter is attached.	X		
I plan to do research on an IIE site /with IIE students/staff/artefacts and I filled in the application for permission to do so. The application is attached. I understand I can only proceed once I receive IIE Approval for this.	X		

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order to
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event of
deciding to
your
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methodology in any way, kindly consult your supervisor to ensure all ethical considerations are adhered to and pose no risk to any participant or party involved. A revised ethical clearance letter will be issued.

We wish you all the best with your research!

Supervisor: Dr Richard Vergunst

Campus Postgraduate Coordinator (CPC): Dr Marizanne Grundlingh

GENERAL CONDITIONS TO BE FULFILLED IN RELATION TO RESEARCH

Permission is granted to proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met and may be withdrawn should any of these conditions be flouted.

Please note: The panel has not considered the merits, accuracy or ethical soundness of the research. The only merits examined are the use of The IIE as a sample.

Permission is granted subject to the following conditions:

1. The researcher(s) will need to obtain informed consent in writing from all of the participants in his/ her sample if the study is not anonymous.
2. The researcher(s) may only use the data collected for research purposes and in no other way.
3. Photographs of human subjects may only be taken if relevant to the research, informed consent was obtained, and even with informed consent, the photographs may not be published on any online platforms.
4. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.

5. No names or identifying information of participants may be used within the research and the research must be voluntary.
6. Please make it clear that the information will not be used punitively in any way and participants may in no way be counselled/advised based on this.