

## Sensation Seeking and Suicidal Ideation among Emerging Adults

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Suicidal ideation is a significant public health concern, and sensation-seeking may play a crucial role in understanding it. This study explores the relationship between sensation-seeking and suicidal ideation among 225 emerging adults, examining predictive associations and demographic differences. Sensation seeking was measured using the Brief Sensation Seeking (BSSS), while suicidal ideation was assessed using the Suicidal Ideation Scale (SIS-SDBV). The findings of the study revealed that emerging adults exhibit a moderate level of sensation seeking and an average level of suicidal ideation. Notably, a positive correlation exists between sensation seeking and suicidal ideation, with a 6% variance in suicidal ideation predicted by sensation seeking. Furthermore, males exhibit higher levels of sensation seeking than females, and emerging adults residing in semi-urban areas demonstrate high sensation-seeking behaviours compared to urban and rural counterparts. These findings offer insights crucial for drafting targeted interventions and preventive measures.

**Keywords:** Sensation seeking, suicidal ideation, emerging adults.

“Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from late teens through the Twenties”, the title of the book authored by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, who coined the term “Emerging Adulthood” for those aged between 18 and 25, provides a clearer picture of what precisely occurs in this stage of life, which connects the teenage years to the journey towards the twenties and, ultimately, to the major period of life known as adulthood (Arnett, 2014). In emerging adulthood, individuals have to cross many hurdles while they begin their new roles in society, such as stressful educational and working environments (Murray & Knudson, 2023). Consequently, mental health issues are very common among these categories (Bluhm et al., 2014; Kok, 2015). Although protective factors such as family support, secure attachment, high self-esteem, and an easy temperament can buffer against mental health challenges, risk factors like transitional stress, societal expectations, and

interpersonal conflicts may outweigh these protective influences, thereby worsening overall well-being. (Donald et al., 2006; Hussong & Chassin, 2004; Lewin-Bizan et al., 2010). During the transition from adolescence to adulthood, individuals often experience increased autonomy, rebelliousness, and impulsivity, including sensation-seeking behaviours influenced by peer pressure (Keyzers et al., 2020).

One of the serious outcomes associated with mental health difficulties in this emerging adulthood period is suicide. Suicide is the second most common cause of mortality worldwide for emerging adults (15–29 years old) (World Health Organization, 2021). Franklin et al. (2017) found only little improvement in the predictive ability of risk factors, and that the combined effects of multiple factors are rarely examined. While suicidal ideation is a key predictor of behaviour, it does not always lead to an attempt. According to Joiner’s (2005)

Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide (IPTs), suicidal ideation arises from the interaction of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness, and the capability to do so, which can develop through exposure to trauma, distress, or risky experiences (Bender et al., 2011; Joiner, 2005; Kral, 2010; Orden et al., 2010). A study conducted by Anestis et al. (2014) shows the factor that impulsivity can act as a risk factor for the transition from suicidal ideation to suicidal behaviour, and that includes the trait of sensation seeking.

Suicide, a complex phenomenon, is often associated with sensation seeking, which characterises the tendency to seek novel, risky, and intense experiences. Sensation-seeking is typically associated with externalizing behaviors, but emerging evidence suggests its relevance to internalizing behaviors, particularly suicidal ideation and behavior (Ortin et al., 2012a). While suicide characterizes the severe distress and hopelessness, sensation seeking represents a contrasting drive towards stimulation and excitement. Zuckerman (1983) defines the sensation-seeking personality trait as “the need for varied, novel, and complex situations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of the experiences” (p. 35). People who are high in sensation-seeking exhibit high reward sensitivity (Steinberg, 2010) lower levels of anxiety reactivity to physically threatening situations (Blankstein, 1975) and reduced perception of threat (Franken et al., 1992).

Research shows that sensation-seeking predicts illicit drug use among college students (Ayvasik & Sümer, 2010), higher substance use among adolescents (Pokhrel et al., 2010), and increased rates of drunk driving (Arnett, 1990). The evidence from a case-control study revealed that the sole distinction between a suicidal and non-suicidal group of depressive outpatients was

novelty-seeking (Csorba et al., 2010). Abdoli et al. (2022) disclosed that suicide survivors have an elevated score for risk-taking, particularly in thrill seeking, sensation-seeking, and impulsive behaviours. Sensation seekers often make impulsive decisions and engage in risky behaviors without properly considering future consequences (Charnigo et al., 2013). This impulsivity may even extend to suicidal acts, wherein people act on suicidal impulses without adequately considering the long-term consequences (Mann et al., 1999).

Although research directly linking sensation-seeking and suicide remains limited, evidence suggests it promotes risky behaviours that heighten vulnerability to suicidal action/ideation. In this context, sensation seeking may manifest in the pursuit of high-risk situations/methods that align with the individual's ability to self-harm. In line with these, the current study attempts to further clarify the relationship between sensation seeking and suicidal ideation among emerging adults.

### **Objectives**

1. To study the nature and extent of sensation seeking and suicidal ideation among emerging adults
2. To study the relationship between sensation seeking and suicidal ideation among emerging adults.
3. To find out whether sensation seeking predicts suicidal ideation among emerging adults.
4. To study whether sensation seeking and suicidal ideation differ with respect to socio-demographic factors such as gender and area of residence among emerging adults.

### **Hypotheses**

1. There will be a significant relationship between sensation seeking and

- suicidal ideation among emerging adults.
2. Sensation seeking predicts suicidal ideation among emerging adults.
  3. There will be a significant difference in sensation seeking and suicidal ideation with respect to socio-demographic factors such as gender, socio-economic status, place of residence, and family type among emerging adults.

### Method

#### Research Design

The study aimed to discover the relationship between sensation seeking and suicidal ideation and the predictive role of sensation seeking in suicidal ideation. A cross-sectional correlational research design was adopted as it helps in examining the relationships between the variables of interest.

#### Sample

The population of the study is emerging adults aged between 18 and 25. The sample consisted of 225 emerging adults (47 males and 178 females), selected through a convenience sampling method. The mean age of the sample was 20.81.

#### Tool Used

*The Brief Sensation Seeking Scale* (BSSS) is an 8-item self-report scale developed by Hoyle et al. (2002) measuring sensation-seeking through four dimensions: experience-seeking; boredom susceptibility; thrill- and adventure-seeking; and disinhibition. Responses are indicated on a 5-point Likert scale from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5). The BSSS has high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha 0.76).

*The Suicidal Ideation Scale* (SIS-SDBV), developed by Dr. Devendra Singh Sisodia & Dr. Vibhuti Bhatnagar (2011), was used to

assess suicidal ideations among young adults. It consists of 25 statements, among which 21 are positive, and 4 are negative, and each statement has five responses (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). For scoring, each positive item is scored as 5 to 1 for strongly agree to strongly disagree responses, respectively. The reliability of the scale is 0.78 and 0.81 by using the test-retest method and internal consistency method. The scale shows high content validity through external criteria, and the coefficient obtained is 0.74.

#### Procedure of Data Collection

The data collection process involved several steps to ensure comprehensive and reliable data acquisition. A Google Form was meticulously designed in line with the ethical guidelines and the sensitivity of the topic, allowing participants to respond comfortably and confidentially. It began with an informed consent section, outlining the study's purpose and participants' rights. Following this, participants were directed to complete a sociodemographic data sheet. Subsequently, participants proceeded to engage with two pivotal questionnaires: one assessing sensation-seeking tendencies and the other delving into thoughts related to suicidal ideation. The Google Form was distributed across various social media platforms to reach a diverse pool of participants.

### Results

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants (N=225)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	47	20.9%
	Female	178	79.1%
Area of Residence	Urban	108	48.0%
	Semi-urban	57	25.3%
	Rural	60	26.7%

Table 1 summarizes the socio-demographic characteristics of participants in this study. The table shows that most of the participants are female (178;79.1%), while males constitute 47 (20.9%). With respect to the area of residence, 108 participants (48.0%) are from urban areas, 60 (26.7%) from rural areas, and 57 (25.3%) from semi-urban areas.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of sensation seeking and suicidal ideation among emerging adults.

Variables	N	Mean	SD
Sensation seeking	225	27.50	6.106
Suicidal ideation	225	55.44	14.761

Table 2 indicates that the participants reported a moderate level of sensation-seeking (M=27.50), suggesting an inclination towards seeking out novel or intense experiences to a certain extent. The participants show an average level of suicidal ideation (M=55.44).

Table 3. Correlation between sensation seeking and suicidal ideation among emerging adults.

Variables	Suicidal ideation
Sensation seeking	.179**

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 indicates a positive relationship between sensation-seeking and suicidal ideation, suggesting that as sensation-seeking tendencies increase, suicidal ideation will also increase and vice versa.

Table 4. Effect of sensation-seeking on suicidal ideation

Predictors	F	P	Beta	t	p	R <sup>2</sup>
Sensation seeking	14.262	.000	.245	3.777	.000	.060

Table 4 shows that 6% of variance in suicidal ideation is predicted by sensation seeking.

Table 5. Difference in sensation seeking with respect to gender among emerging adults

Variable	Group	N	Mean rank	U	sig
Gender	Male	47	138.19	2999.0	.003
	Female	178	106.85		

Table 5 shows that there is a significant difference in sensation seeking between genders among emerging adults, with males having higher sensation-seeking tendencies compared to females.

Table 6. Difference in suicidal ideation with respect to gender among emerging adults

Variable	Group	N	Mean rank	U	sig
Gender	Male	47	121.16	3799.5	.334
	Female	178	110.85		

Table 6 indicates that there is no significant difference in suicidal ideation between genders among emerging adults.

Table 7. Difference in sensation seeking with respect to area of residence among emerging adults

Variable	Group	N	Mean rank	Chi-square	sig
Area of residence	Urban	108	103.88	6.567	.037
	Semi-urban	57	131.11		
	Rural	60	112.23		

Results from Table 7 indicate that there is a significant difference in sensation seeking across areas of residence, with semi-urban participants having higher sensation-seeking tendencies.

Table 8. Difference in suicidal ideation with respect to place of residence among emerging adults

Variable	Group	N	Mean rank	Chi-square	sig
Place of residence	Urban	108	106.39	5.299	.071
	Semi-urban	57	108.15		
	Rural	60	129.51		

Table 8 indicates that there is no significant difference in suicidal ideation with respect to area of residence among emerging adults.

### Discussion

The findings reveal that emerging adults have a moderate level of sensation seeking and an average level of suicidal ideation. These results align with the research hypotheses and are supported by empirical literature. Previous studies suggest that sensation seeking may lead to maladaptive and reckless behaviours, increasing vulnerability among emerging adults (Kim & Kim, 2012; Palacios, 2018). Emerging adults are navigating a period of experimentation and exploration where they try to balance between excitement and maintaining stability (Lanctot & Poulin, 2017). From the present study, emerging adults have a moderate level of sensation seeking, which can be perceived as two faces of a coin, thrill seeking or sensation seeking behaviours, in some cases, may improve life satisfaction (Norbury & Husain, 2015) and also can lower stress levels, but on the other hand, it can sometimes lead to gambling activities, substance abuse, and other undesirable behaviours (Ries et al., 2022; Rimkeviciene et al., 2015).

Apart from moderate sensation-seeking tendencies, emerging adults showed an average level of suicidal ideation. Despite facing challenges related to career building and relationships, protective factors such as social support, job satisfaction, and other personality traits like self-esteem, resilience, and optimism, may buffer against suicidal ideation (Love & Durtschi, 2021; Olatunji et al., 2020). Thus, the results highlight the need for preventive measures for individuals at moderate risk through effective interventions like depression screening, telephone counselling and community-based programs incorporating educational,

occupational and family settings (Okolie et al., 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2016; Walsh et al., 2022). Additionally, mindfulness-based interventions can help reduce the stress levels arising from different phases of life situations (Witt et al., 2019). The coexistence of moderate sensation-seeking and average levels of suicidal ideation calls for tailored approaches to promote well-being and reduce mental health risks among emerging adults.

The study found a positive relationship between sensation seeking and suicidal ideation. Individuals high in sensation seeking may engage in risky behaviours, increasing their exposure to factors that elevate suicidal ideation. This can be seen in the studies conducted by Ortin et al. (2012b) and Lee et al. (2016), where sensation seeking is greatly associated and can contribute to suicidal thoughts. In emerging adults, this can have an indirect influence on risk-taking behaviour and also peer pressure that negatively contributes to suicidal ideation. Peer pressure can take various forms, among which alcohol intake can have a greater impact (Palacios, 2018; Ries et al., 2022). Sznitman and Engel-Yeger (2017) found that sensation seeking is significantly related with adolescent alcohol usage, mediated by unstructured peer groups. Moreover, people with alcohol usage are prone to several emotional and behavioural problems, and impaired decision-making, increasing the risk of impulsive and life-threatening acts (Keyes et al., 2015; Rahoof et al., 2021). Sensation seeking can also serve as a coping mechanism for individuals experiencing emotional distress, providing temporary relief. Such coping can intensify stress, eventually leading to feelings of despair or hopelessness (Massah et al., 2014). Although high levels of sensation seeking contribute to suicidal risk, this contribution is found to be relatively small.

Consistent with existing literature, the study found that males exhibit higher sensation-seeking tendencies than females, showing a greater willingness to engage in novel or intense activities (Evans-Polce et al., 2018; Keyes et al., 2015; Rahmani & Lavasani, 2012). This may be associated with biological factors like physical strength, muscular distribution, and testosterone levels (Fink et al., 2010; Harden et al., 2018). However, recent trends indicate a narrowing gender gap in sensation-seeking, as more females engage in novel and adventurous activities (Frick, 2021). Moreover, studies such as Hromatko & Butkovic (2009) and Schroth (1995) reports that there is no significant gender difference in sensation seeking.

The findings regarding the difference in sensation seeking with respect to area of residence indicate that emerging adults residing in semi-urban areas have high sensation seeking compared to urban and rural areas. Individuals living in semi-urban areas are exposed to a blend of urban and rural influences where they lack the strict, structured urban routines, but at the same time are open to novel experiences similar to rural areas.

The results on the gender disparity in suicidal ideation are more conflicting. While previous studies have found that there is a significant gender difference in suicidal ideation (Faraj, 2023; Hu et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2020) no statistically significant gender difference was observed in the present study. This finding aligns with research conducted by Yousaf et al. (2016), indicating that there is no significant difference in suicidal ideation with respect to gender. This suggests that variations in suicidal thoughts cannot be solely attributed to gender differences. The results also indicated that there is no significant difference in suicidal ideation with respect to area of residence. These findings

are contradictory to the findings of Fontanella et al. (2015) and Barry et al. (2020), reporting high suicide rates in rural areas compared to urban areas. Casant & Helbich (2022) in their literature review reported that the associations between suicide and urban-rural areas are not universally found. The study holds important implications for suicide prevention among emerging adults. Early interventions targeting sensation-seeking behaviours, such as personality-focused interventions, including cognitive behavioural techniques and psycho-education, may help reduce suicidal ideation. The findings also emphasize the need to develop comprehensive youth suicide prevention strategies.

The present study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the use of convenience sampling and small sample size restricts the generalizability of results. Second, the sample displayed uneven representation across certain sociodemographic variables which may have influenced the associations observed. Future research should consider longitudinal and qualitative approaches to examine mediators like coping and emotional regulation, and explore neurobiological factors underlying these behaviours.

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that emerging adults exhibit moderate sensation seeking and average suicidal ideation, reflecting a complex interplay between exploration and vulnerability. The positive association between these variables highlights the need for early identification of maladaptive risk-taking behaviours. Promoting adaptive coping mechanisms and integrating mindfulness and community-based programs may foster resilience and well-being.

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