THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT AND DEPRESSION AMONG STUDENTS IN ONE OF THE TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN ESWATINI

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ABSTRACT

Some students experience difficulties adjusting to tertiary institution life due to increased academic demands, independent learning, and having to establish new social relations. The study investigated the relationship between social adjustment and depression among students in one of the tertiary institutions in Eswatini. A descriptive correlational design was used with a total of 71 participants who were selected through systematic sampling. The participants were first-year tertiary students enrolled in one of the campuses at the University of Eswatini. The Social Adjustment Scale Self-Report and Beck Depression Inventory Scale were adapted and used to solicit data from participants. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson Correlation Coefficient. Fifty-six per cent (56%, n=40) were females and 44% (n = 31) were males. The mean age was 21.2 years. Only 22.5% (n=16) of the participants were satisfied with their social life. Most (47.9%, n=34) participants reported not utilising study time efficiently. Moreover, 23.9% (n=17) reported that they thought of killing themselves but would not carry it out. An equivalent proportion (4.2%, n=3) reported that they would like to kill themselves and would kill themselves if they had the chance, respectively. Twenty-three per cent (23.9%, n=17) of the participants had moderate depression, and 8.4% (n=6) had severe depression. Finding academic work difficult was associated with working hard (r=0.283, p=0.017). There was a significant positive (r=0.496, p=0.000) relationship between suicidal thoughts and feeling sad. There is need for psychological services for tertiary institution students for prevention and early diagnosis of depression for improved outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Adjustment, social adjustment, tertiary student, depression, relationship.

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BACKGROUND

Social adjustment to tertiary institutions includes success in coping with the interpersonal and societal demands inherent in university life. However, literature has revealed that some students enrolled in tertiary institutions have a stressful experience and may not successfully cope with the demands, with consequent long-term emotional maladjustment and depression (Esmael, Ebrahim, & Misganew, 2018)

Internationally: Social adjustment and depression among tertiary students

Social adjustment is a challenge among university students internationally. A study was conducted by Clinciu (2015) on adaptation and stress among 157 first-year students of the University of Brasov in Transilvania. The study showed that social adjustment was one of the stressors during adaptation to college. Al-khatib, Awamleh and Samawi (2015) conducted a study on students' adjustment to college life at Albalqa Applied University in Jordan, Asia. The findings indicated that the degree of social adjustment of the students was average, reflecting that social adjustment was a challenge among some first-year tertiary students.

Furthermore, Dawborn-Gundlach and Margetts (2018) measured the adjustment of undergraduate students at the University of Melbourne in Australia with 40 participants. The study revealed that mean scores on social and personal adjustment were generally lower than on the academic adjustment scale. The study showed that tertiary students encountered problems with social adjustment.

Another study was conducted by Pathak (2014) in Manipal University (India) on mental health and social adjustment among college students. The sample size was 90 students, 45 boys and 45 girls. Stratified random sampling was used to select participants for the study. The results of the study revealed that there was a significant relationship between mental health and social adjustment. However, there is little known in Eswatini on the association between social adjustment and mental health among tertiary students.

According to the World Health Organization ([WHO], 2017), depression is the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide, with more than 300 million people living with depression. A study conducted by Arjanggi and Kusumaningsih (2016) in Indonesia which analysed the association between social anxiety and college adjustment, revealed that some of the problems among tertiary students were loneliness, depression and withdrawal from social interaction. Moreover, Cusumano and Riba (2018) reported that depression and anxiety were prevalent problems in United States of America (USA) colleges. Depression may result in suicide among tertiary students. According to Kerr (2017), in the USA, suicide is the second leading cause of death among people aged 15-34 years. Depression and suicide need to be explored systematically in Eswatini among tertiary students aged 20-24, most likely to be affected by depression, as stated by WHO (2016).

Continentally: Social adjustment and depression among tertiary students

Social adjustment in tertiary institutions also affects universities in Africa. Jemal (2012) assessed the major adjustment problems of first-year students at Jimma University, Ethiopia. The researcher used a multi-stage cluster sampling to obtain a sample of 204 participants. The study revealed that 50% of the first-year students in the university encountered social adjustment problems than educational and personal-psychological problems. Esmael et al. (2018) complemented the earlier researcher in a study that assessed the prevalence and associated factors of adjustment problems among first-year

students at Madawalabu University in Ethiopia. The study showed that 30.1% of the participants had adjustment problems. Social adjustment challenges may have adverse effects on the scholar's academic performance. Ababu, Yigzaw, Besene and Alamu (2018) studied the prevalence of adjustment problems and their predictors among first-year undergraduate students in an Ethiopian University. The study revealed that first-year students faced problems in adjusting to university life. Some of the challenges reported in the study included homesickness, difficulties in socialising, managing time, and study skills. Moreover, Sultana-Muchindu (2016) assessed social adjustment among first-year university students and its relationship to academic performance among students in Zambia. The study results revealed a significant positive relationship between social adjustment and academic performance among tertiary students.

A study that determined the association between depression, social and health variables among undergraduate students of Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria found that 7.0% had severe depression and 25.2% had moderate to severe depression (Peltzer, Pengpid & Olowu 2014). Consistent research (Jemal, 2012; Esmael et al. 2018; Mudhovozi, 2017) revealed that African tertiary students experienced social adjustment problems. A study in Zimbabwe by Mudhovozi (2017) showed that first-year students at a university in Zimbabwe experienced diverse social problems. Students relied on social networks and efficacious beliefs to cope with the challenges. These studies support that social adjustment is a challenge to tertiary students, and depression is the most likely outcome of adjustment problems. However, there is limited data on these variables in Eswatini.

A study at the University of Limpopo in South Africa showed that some participants struggled to adjust socially and academically. However, some had positive social adjustment. Positive social adjustment included receiving social and emotional support. In contrast, adverse experiences were related to social isolation, homesickness, financial problems and unmanageable academic workload (Nel, Govender, & Tom, 2016). Furthermore, some of the problems that tertiary students encountered included mental ill health challenges such as stress and depression, which could be a result of difficulties in social adjustment and other adjustment problems (Nel, Govender, & Tom, 2016).

Othieno, Okoth, Peltzer, Pengpid and Malla (2014) conducted a study at the University of Nairobi to determine the prevalence of depression among university students and sociodemographic correlates. The study highlighted that tertiary students experienced depression, with an overall 41.33% of students scoring above the cut-off point of 10 on the depression scale, 35.71% had mild-moderate symptoms, and 5.62% had severe depressive symptoms. These findings showed that depression levels varied according to the year of study. The highest levels were recorded among first-year students. Transitioning from high school to college may be a challenge for some students. It could be possible because most high school students stay in nuclear and extended families who provide social support, yet at college, they usually stay away from family. The above studies support that social adjustment problems exist among tertiary students in the African continent.

Eswatini: Social adjustment and depression among tertiary students
In Eswatini, depression is the second leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds (Mwanjali, 2017). Eswatini is rated 4th in the world in terms of suicide statistics, and the causes are primarily influenced by depression (Mbingo, 2015). However, very little data is available on social adjustment and depression among students in tertiary institutions. Social adjustment has been identified as a problem that is most common among students in tertiary institutions (Keith, 2016). Social adjustment problems are related to life changes at tertiary institutions, including increased academic demands, independent learning, and having to establish new social relations. The inability to cope and adjust to the new setting is associated with depression

(Sarokhani, Delpisheh, Veisani, Sarokhani, Manesh, & Sayehmiri, 2013). According to Sarokhani et al. (2013), depression is prevalent among students enrolled in tertiary institutions as they also encounter a critical transitory period from adolescents to early adulthood. The transitionary period contributes to an increased rate of depression, especially if the scholar cannot establish healthy social relationships. Depression is associated with several consequences, such as a decrease in psychological well-being manifested by poor academic performance, dropping out of school, and suicidal attempts to mention but a few (National Institute of Mental Health, 2017).

In some tertiary institutions in Eswatini, students undergo an orientation process before the commencement of lectures. Some aspects students are oriented to, are adaptation to tertiary life and the general lifestyle. However, there is insufficiently documented literature on the relationship between social adjustment and depression. Suicide in Eswatini is most common among young people, with a crude rate of 34.1 per 100 000 population among those aged between 20-24 years (WHO, 2016). Pietrangelo and Cherney (2017) reported that depression also affected physiological well-being and was associated with an increased risk for cardiovascular disorders. Depressed students also tend to use and abuse substances such as alcohol and drugs, which threaten one's health. According to DeCapua (2017), substance abuse affects the brain by interfering with neurotransmitters and damaging connections within the brain, which creates problems with memory and causes a lack of attention. High alcohol levels are related to kidney and liver damage. The current study, therefore, investigated the relationship between social adjustment and depression among students in one of the tertiary institutions in Eswatini.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative descriptive correlational design was used in this study. The study was conducted at the Mbabane campus of the University of Eswatini. The population in the study were all first-year tertiary students because they were still undergoing the adjustment process to university life. In the current study, systematic sampling was used to get potential participants. The sample size was calculated using Raosoft Sample Size Calculator with a 5% margin of error and 95% confidence level. From a population of 90, the sample size was 74. The Social Adjustment Scale Self-Report (Baker & Siryk, 1989) and Beck Depression Inventory Scale (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996) were adapted and used to measure social adjustment and depression, respectively.

The Social Adjustment Scale has high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha r=0.74) and test re-test reliability (mean Coefficient r=0.80) (Baker & Siryk, 1989). The Beck Depression Inventory reliability is r=0.83 (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). The Beck Depression Inventory Scale has a specific concurrent validity rating of 0.77. The construct validity has a coefficient alpha rating of 0.92 for outpatients and 0.93 for college student samples (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). The questionnaire was self-administered. Descriptive statistics and Pearson Correlation Coefficient were used to analyse the data. To ensure that participants' rights were not violated, the fundamental ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice guided the research process. Ethical clearance was sought and obtained from the Eswatini National Health Review and Research Board.

RESULTS

The data were collected from 71 participants, reflecting a response rate of 96%. Following the presentation of sociodemographic data, findings were presented according to the research objectives.

Sample sociodemographic characteristics
There were more female (56.3%, n=40) than male (43.7%, n=31) participants in the study. Most (62.0%, n = 44) participants were aged between 18 – 21 years, followed by 32.3% (n = 23) who were between 22 – 25 years, and 5.6% (n = 4) were between 26 – 32 years of age. The mean age of the participants was 21.2 years, with a standard deviation of 2.7 years. A majority (94.4%, n=67) of the participants reported that they were single, 2.8% (n=2) were married, and 2.8% (n=2) were cohabiting. Forty-five per cent (45.1%, n=32) were from nuclear families, 40.8% (n=29) from extended families, and only 14.1% (n=10) reported that they were from single-parent-headed families. A large proportion (67.6%, n = 48) reported that they had 0 – 5 friends, and 32.4% (n = 23) had between 6 – 12 friends. The mean number of friends was 4.7, with a standard deviation of 3.3 friends. The study participant's sociodemographic data are summarised in *Table 1*.

Table1: Participant's socio-demographic characteristics (N = 71)

Sociodemographic variables		Frequency(n)/ Mean	Percentage(%)/ SD
Gender	Male	31	43.7
	Female	40	56.3
Age (years)		**21.2**	**2.7**
	18-21	44	62
	22-25	23	32.3
	26-32	4	5.6
Marital status	Single	67	94.4
	Married	2	2.8
	Cohabiting	2	2.8
Family structure	Nuclear family	32	45.1
	Extended family	29	40.8
	Single parent-headed family	10	14.1
Number of friends at University		**4.7**	**3.3**
	0-5		
	6-12	48	67.6
		23	32.4

Associations between sociodemographic variables

There was a significant negative relationship between age and gender (r=-0.386, p=0.001), reflecting that male participants were most likely to be younger compared to females (p≤0.05).

Research objective 1: To describe social adjustment among students in one of the tertiary institutions in Eswatini.
Academic adjustment

Academic goals: A majority (54.9%, n=39) of the participants had well-defined academic goals, and 28.1% (n=20) had interests unrelated to the coursework. In addition, 18.3% (n=3) enjoyed academic work, and 12.8% (n=9) reported that they doubted the value of the highest degree.

Hard work: Thirty-two per cent (32.5%, n=23) reported that they attended classes regularly, while 26.8% (n=19) did not work as hard as they should, 22.5% (n=16) kept up-to-date with academic work, and 18.3% (n=13) were not motivated to study.

Academic performance: Most (47.9%, n=34) participants reported that they did not use study time efficiently, 23.9% (n=17) found academic work to be difficult, and 15.5% (n=11) did not feel competent enough to do coursework. However, 11.3% (n=8) were satisfied with their academic performance, and only 1.4% (n=1) enjoyed writing tests and examinations.

Quality of courses: A majority (43.7%, n=31) of the participants were satisfied with a variety of courses, 22.5% (n=16) were satisfied with the quality of courses, and 21.1% (n=15) reported that they were satisfied with the programme they were enrolled. While 8.5% (n=6) were satisfied with the lecturers, and 4.2% (n=3) were satisfied with the academic situation.

Social adjustment to the tertiary environment: Twenty-eight per cent (28.2%, n=20) reported that they were adjusting well to tertiary, 22.5% (n=16) were satisfied with social life, and 14.1% (n=10) had several close social ties. Approximately 12.7% (n=9) of participants had adequate social skills and 12.7% (n = 9) fitted in well with the tertiary environment. Seven per cent (7%, n=5) reported that they were actively involved in tertiary social activities, and 2.8% (n=2) were satisfied with social participation. The participants' social adjustment to the tertiary environment is graphed in *Figure 1.*
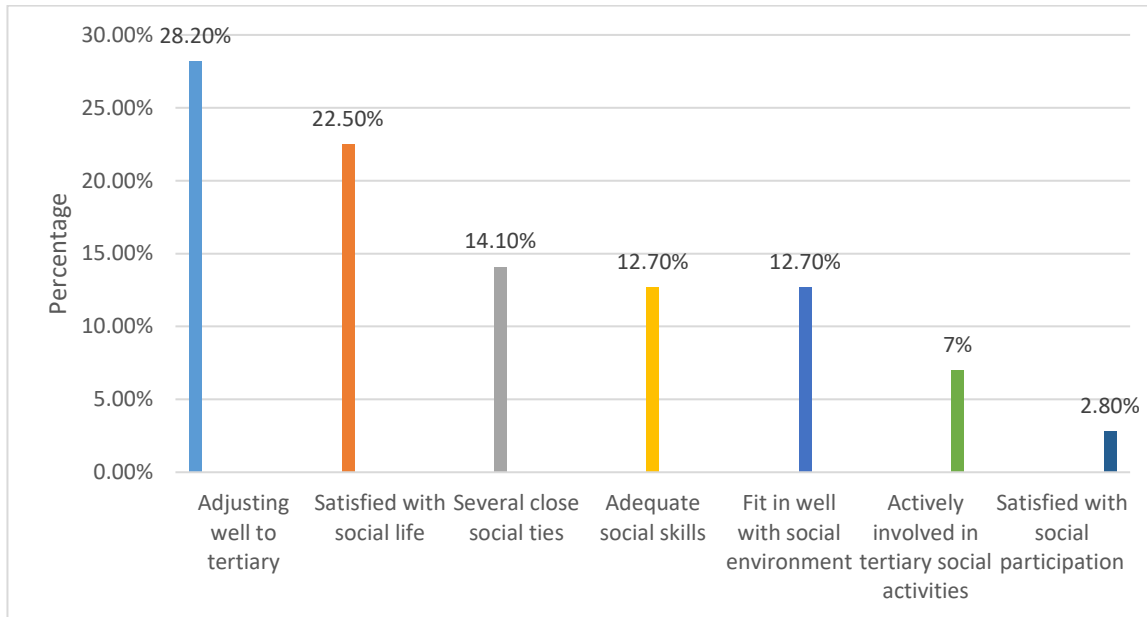
Figure 1: Participants' social adjustment to the tertiary environment (N = 71)

Establishing relationships: Thirty-six per cent (36.6%, n=26) of the participants reported that they got along well with roommates, and an equivalent proportion (18.3%, n=13) made new friends and had good friends with whom they talked about problems, respectively. On the other hand, 14.1% (n=10) had difficulty socialising with others, 8.5% (n=6) felt different from others in undesirable ways, and 4.2% (n=3) did not associate well with the opposite sex.

Loneliness: A majority (43.7%, n=31) of the participants were lonesome, 29.6% (n=21) reported that they would rather be at home, and 26.8% (n=19) felt lonely a lot.

Satisfaction in attending tertiary: Forty-two per cent (42.3%, n=30) were pleased about the decision to attend tertiary, 38.0% (n=27) were satisfied with extracurricular activities, and 19.7% (n=14) reported that they enjoyed living in a dormitory.

Personal emotional adjustment
Emotional adjustment: Most (46.5%, n=33) participants reported that independence was not easy, and 18.3% (n=13) could not control their emotions well. An equivalent proportion (12.7%, n=9) felt tense and nervous and had trouble coping with tertiary level stress, respectively. While 5.6% (n=4) reported that they got angry too quickly, and 4.2% (n=3) were thinking about seeking psychological help.

Physical health: Thirty-one per cent (31.0%, n=22) of the participants felt tired lately, and 21.1% (n=15) were in good health. However, 18.3% (n=13) of the participants had either lost or gained weight. An equivalent proportion of 11.3% (n=8) had a good appetite and was not sleeping well, respectively. The least (7%, n=5) reported that they experienced headaches a lot. The participants' physical health has been graphed in *Figure 2*.
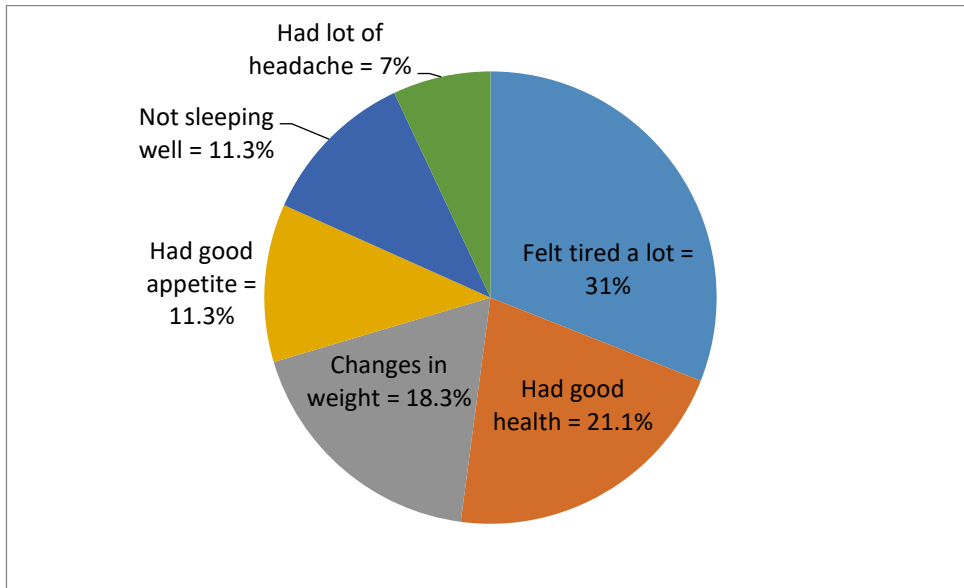
Figure 2: Participants' physical health (N = 71)

Dropping out of tertiary: A majority (73.2%, n=52) of the participants were pleased with the decision to go to a tertiary institution. However, 22.5% (n=16) were considering taking time off tertiary schooling, and 4.2% (n=3) were considering dropping out of tertiary permanently.

Completing degree: Fifty-four per cent (54.0%, n=39) of the participants expected to finish the Bachelor's Degree, 32.4% (n=23) preferred to be at another tertiary institution, and 12.7% (n=9) were pleased about attending tertiary.

Relationships between social adjustment variables

There was a significant positive relationship between academic goals and hard work (r=0.365, p=0.002), reflecting that participants who doubted the value of a degree were not working hard as they should (p≤0.05). Finding academic work difficult was positively associated with working hard (r=0.283, p=0.017), meaning that participants who found academic work difficult were not working as hard as they should (p≤0.05). The data supported a negative relationship between participants who were satisfied with attending tertiary and doubting the value of the degree (r=-0.240, p=0.044), indicating that participants who were satisfied with attending the tertiary institution were not doubting the value of the degree. Moreover, there was also a negative relationship between satisfaction in attending and retention to tertiary (r=-0.257, p=0.030). Participants who were pleased about deciding to attend tertiary level education were not planning to drop out of the tertiary institution at p≤0.05. Additionally, there was a significant positive relationship between retention in tertiary and psychological health (r=0.344, p=0.003), reflecting that participants who felt tense and nervous were thinking a lot about dropping out of tertiary permanently (p≤0.05). The associations between social adjustment variables are summarised in *Table 2.*

Table 2: Associations between social adjustment variables (N = 71)

Variables		Pearson	P-value
Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Correlation (r)	(p≤0.05)
Academic goals	Working hard	0.365	0.002
Working hard	Academic performance	0.283	0.017
Satisfaction with attending tertiary	Value of degree	-0.240	0.044
Satisfaction with attending tertiary	Retention to tertiary	-0.257	0.030
Psychological health	Retention to tertiary	0.344	0.003

Research objective 2: To investigate depression among students in one of the tertiary institutions in Eswatini.

Feeling sad: Sixty-six per cent (66%, n=47) of the participants reported that they did not feel sad, and 21.1% (n=15) felt sad. On the other hand, 7.5% (n=5) revealed that they were so unhappy that they could not stand it, and 5.6 %(n=4) were always sad.

Satisfaction: A majority (43.7%, n=31) of the participants reported that they did not enjoy things the way they used to before enrolling at tertiary. On the contrary, 28.2% (n=20) revealed that they got as much satisfaction from things as they used to. Nonetheless, 21.1% (n=15) did not get absolute satisfaction from anything, and 7% (n=5) were dissatisfied or bored with everything.

Disappointment: Fifty-nine per cent (59.2%, n=42) of the participants did not feel disappointed in themselves, 31% (n=22) were disappointed in themselves, 5.6% (n=4) hated themselves, and 4.2% (n=3) reported that they were disgusted in themselves.

Suicidal thoughts: Sixty-seven per cent (67.6% (n=48) of the participants had no thoughts of killing themselves. On the other hand, 23.9% (n=17) reported that they thought of killing themselves but would not carry it out. An equivalent proportion (4.2%, n=3) reported that they would like to kill themselves and would do it if they had the chance, respectively. The study participants' suicidal thoughts are summarised in *Figure 4*.
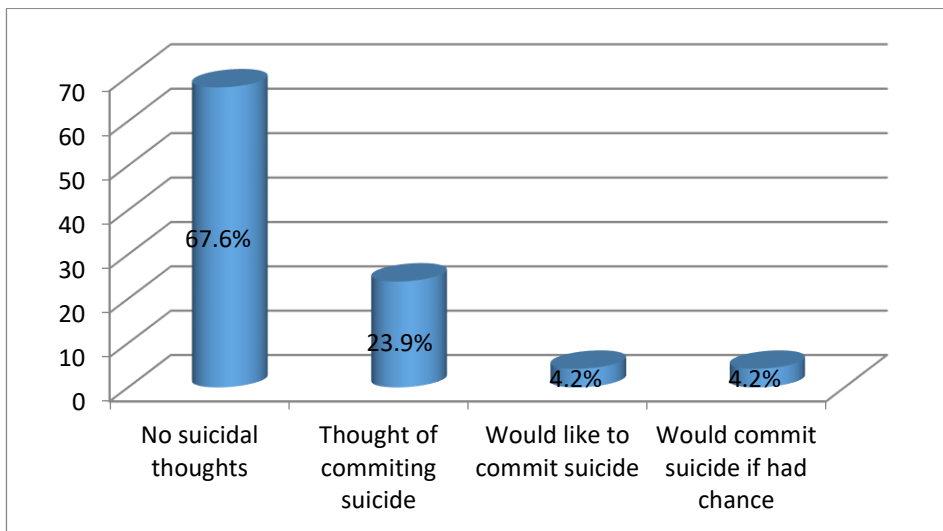

Figure 3: Participants' thoughts about suicide (N = 71)

Sleeping hours: Most (49.3%, n=35) of the participants did not sleep as well as they used to, and 46.5% (n=33) reported that they were able to sleep as usual. However, 2.8% (n=2) woke up several hours earlier than they used to and could not go back to sleep. Additionally, 1.4% (n=1) reported that they woke up 1-2 hours earlier than usual and found it hard to get back to sleep.

Overall depression: Sixty-seven per cent (67%, n=48) of the participants had no depression symptoms, 23.9% (n=17) had moderate depression and 8.4% (n=6) had severe depression.

Relationships between depression variables

There was a significant positive relationship between sadness and satisfaction (r=0.314, p=0.008), meaning that participants who were not sad got much satisfaction from things as they used to, at p ≤0.05. The data also supported a significant positive relationship between feeling sad and disappointment (r=0.478, p=0.001), reflecting that participants who were not disappointed in themselves were not feeling sad (p ≤0.05).

Additionally, there was a significant positive relationship between suicidal thoughts and feeling sad (r=0.496, p=0.001), indicating that participants who were not feeling sad did not have thoughts of killing themselves (p ≤0.05). There was also a positive association between sleeping hours and suicidal thoughts (r=0.491, p=0.001). Those participants who could sleep well did not have thoughts of committing suicide (p ≤0.05). The identified associations between depression variables are abstracted in *Table 3.*

Table 3: Associations between participants' data on depression (N = 71)

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	p-value (p<0.05)
Satisfaction and feeling sad	0.314	0.008
Disappointment and feeling sad	0.478	0.001
Feeling sad and suicidal thoughts	0.496	0.001
Suicidal thoughts and sleeping hours	0.491	0.001

DISCUSSION

The study showed that most participants were single, consistent with Esmael et al. (2018). Such a finding could mean that most tertiary students are fresh from high school and have not yet established long-term relationships and families. Being single could facilitate the student's focus on education. On the other hand, having social commitments, such as family, can potentially distract one from learning, negatively impacting academic performance. The findings indicated that the mean age of the participants was 21.2 years. This finding is also consistent with Esmael et al. (2018), who reported that the mean age of participants in their study was 21.42 years with an age range of 18-22 years. This finding reflects that most students who enrol at tertiary are relatively younger.

In harmony with a study by Dawborn-Gundlach and Margetts (2018), the findings showed that only a few participants were satisfied with their social life. Transitioning from high school to tertiary involves disconnecting from close relationships and established social networks and support systems. Some students may have difficulty detaching from their previous relationships and adjusting to the new academic and social life. Being away from home for the first time, making new friends and facing academic hurdles could all be reasons that lead to less satisfaction with social life in the tertiary setting. However,

these findings were contrary to Esmael et al. (2018), whose study showed that most participants did not have difficulties with social life.

Consistent with Ababu et al. (2018), the findings indicate that most students had academic adjustment problems, which included the inability to use study time efficiently, finding academic work difficult, and not being capable enough to do coursework. It could be possible that new tertiary students experience problems in adapting to the new ways of teaching-learning, which in most instances are slightly different from the ones applied in high school. There is a need to strengthen peer counselling and psychosocial support programmes, which could assist new tertiary students.

However, the findings from Sadoughi and Hesampour (2016) at the University of Kashan in Iran contradict the current study's findings. Sadoughi and Hesampour (2016) reported that there were higher scores on the academic adjustment scale, reflecting higher academic adjustment, motivation, academic achievement and motivation among the students. The differences could be due to the students' solid social, supportive networks like family and friends. It is evident from the results that students with social support had increased levels of academic adjustment.

The current study's findings were consistent with Lang and Klonsku (2018), who reported that the prevalence of suicidal thoughts among first-year undergraduate tertiary students was 35.6 %. Probably, some tertiary students struggle with adaptation to the new lifestyle, to the extent that they experience psychological imbalance and develop intense feelings of sadness, resulting in considering ending their own lives. Strengthening psychological support for tertiary students, particularly first-year students, is critical. It is believed that such services will facilitate a smooth transition from high school to the tertiary environment.

Furthermore, the study's findings were consistent with Sarokhani et al. (2015) who reported that the overall prevalence of depression among the students was 33%. Wanyoike (2015) further supports the findings by reporting that the rate of depression among university students in a study conducted at a University in Kenya was 39%. There seems to be a dire need for psychological services for tertiary institution students for early diagnosis of depression and improved outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nursing Practice: Nurses deployed to tertiary institutions in collaboration with the Student Affairs office should provide psychological services to students, particularly first-year students.

Nursing Education: In order to empower students, the tertiary institution curricula should introduce or strengthen the mental health component. Knowledge on mental health may assist in self-diagnosis and seeking early intervention.

Nursing Policy: Nurses qualified in mental health should be deployed to tertiary institutions, where they will serve as counsellors for all tertiary students as a preventive measure and facilitate early diagnosis of mental health disorders.

Nursing Research: There is a need for large-scale research to determine the contributory causes of increased depression among tertiary students to develop focused intervention strategies.

Strengths and limitations
A stronghold of this study is that it used a quantitative approach which is based on principles of objectivity. The study was however, conducted among tertiary students in only one setting. Findings may be inferred beyond this setting with caution.

CONCLUSION

The study results showed that some tertiary students have poor social adjustment, depressive symptoms and suicidal ideations.

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