Exploring the Association Of Emotional Intelligence, Coping Strategies And Suicidal Ideation Among Chinese University Students

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Coping Strategies；Emotional Intelligence；Suicidal Ideation；Chinese University Students	**duction**: With the expansion of university students in China and the increase in the number of students, students with suicidal ideation (SI) is also increasing. Emotional intelligence (EI) and coping strategies (CS) are two important factors influencing suicidal ideation among university students. **Objectives**: This paper explores the levels of EI, CS, and SI among Chinese university students. This paper also explores the relationship between the factors and determines if and how CS can influence suicidal ideation. **Methods**: A convenience sampling method was chosen to collect data through questionnaires from 300 students at a university in Hebei Province, China, resulting in 262 valid responses. The questionnaire included measures of EI, CS, and SI. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and mediation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro with bootstrap methods were conducted **Results**: 74 students (28.24%) reported experiencing SI, with 24 students (9.16%) exhibiting higher levels of such ideation. The mean score for CS was 86.23±21.75, while the mean score for EI was 4.19±1.30. EI was significantly correlated with both CS and SI. Additionally, EI has a negative correlation with SI and a positive correlation with CS. In contrast, CS had a negative relationship with SI. In addition, CS mediated the relationship between EI and SI. **Conclusions**: CS are significant mediators of SI. For university students experiencing SI, adopting appropriate CS can help reduce these thoughts to some extent. Therefore, schools and society should consider these factors when planning interventions and providing mental health support to students. Further research could explore the effectiveness of specific CS in reducing suicidal ideation among different subgroups of students.

1. Introduction

As China's economy and population have grown, the number of university students has been increasing annually. University as an important bridge between high school and society, helping students get ready for their future jobs (Yang et al., 2024). However, research shows that more Chinese university students are having suicidal ideation (SI) each year because of different pressures (Luo et al., 2021). Some studies found that university students have more SI than those who did not go to university (Huang & Saito, 2020; Yang et al., 2019).

There are many reasons why university students have more SI. Studies show that this increase is linked to things like academic stress, performance, motivation, learning problems, psychological resilience, and emotional intelligence (EI) (Altavini et al., 2023; Menezes et al., 2012). This problem is not just in China; similar issues have been found in studies from India and Nigeria (Arun & Chavan, 2009; Okechukwu et al., 2022). Also, moving from the strict rules in high school to the more independent life in university can add to these feelings (Santos et al., 2017). Additionally, the fact that university students are still growing emotionally and rely on their families for money are important factors to consider (Yang et al., 2024).

The development of EI is very important for university students' psychological growth (Arrivillaga et al., 2020). EI includes how students interact with others, control their emotions, and handle their feelings about schoolwork (Goetz & Bieg, 2016). Good emotional management can greatly affect learning and success. EI also helps students cope with academic stress (Enns et al., 2018).

Researchers have noticed different behaviors in students with various levels of EI when they face academic stress (Rivers et al., 2012). Studies show that students with higher EI handle their emotions better and have a more positive view of life. These students also tend to have fewer negative feelings towards their university and teachers (Halimi et al., 2020).

Many studies show a strong link between EI and SI (Abdollahi et al., 2016; Aradilla-Herrero et al., 2014; Arrivillaga et al., 2020). People with high EI usually have fewer SI, while those with low EI often have more. EI helps people manage their emotions in social settings, which is important for reducing SI. Those who are well-connected with their families, schools, or workplaces generally have a lower risk of suicide, even under high stress. (Zhang et al., 2011).

At the same time, EI is key to helping people understand and manage their own emotions, which in turn influences their behavior (Cherniss, 2001). People with lower EI views stressful situations as more challenging to cope with than those with higher EI (Fteiha & Awwad, 2020). Additionally, people with different EI often choose different coping strategies (CS) when deal with stress (Gong et al., 2022). Those with low EI were more vulnerable to emotional problems when faced with negative emotions, which increases the likelihood of experiencing SI (Liu et al., 2021).

Although many studies have looked into suicide among Chinese university students, the specific link between EI, CS, and SI has not been thoroughly examined. This is especially important in the Chinese context, where cultural and societal pressures can have a unique effect on students' psychological health (Xie & Reay, 2019). This study aims to better understand how different levels of EI and CS influence SI among Chinese students. Gaining this understanding is essential for creating effective, China-specific intervention strategies to reduce SI and improve psychological well-being among university students in China.

Objectives

This study examines the relationships between EI, CS, and SI among Chinese university students, and explores the mediation of CS in these relationships. CS will be hypothesized to mediate the relationship between EI and SI.

2. Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study use a cross-sectional survey method to investigate the association between EI, CS, and SI. Convenience sampling was employed to select participants from a university in China. 300 university students participated in this study, and 262 valid responses were obtained (response rate: 87.3%). The sample included students from their first year through graduate school, representing various academic disciplines.

Participants with depressive symptoms or psychiatric illnesses were excluded from the study, and participants in this study were general university students. Inclusion criteria were physically and mentally healthy current university students. The study sought informed consent from all participants before distributing the questionnaire and ensured the anonymity and confidentiality of participants' responses.

3.2 Instrument

Participants responded anonymously to a self-reported questionnaire using a mobile phone scanner, which included three scales: EI, CS, and SI. The questionnaire also collected demographic information, including gender, grade, household background, only-child status, and religion.

3.2.1 Emotional Intelligence

The Chinese TEIQue-SF has been translated from the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire Short Form (Petrides, 2009) by native Chinese faculty and graduate students proficient in English. The

translation was further reviewed and revised by a psychology professor with 30 years of teaching experience (Feher et al., 2019). The Chinese TEIQue-SF employs a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates complete disagreement or strong disagreement, and 7 signifies complete agreement. The scale comprises four dimensions: well-being, self- control, emotionality, and sociability, totalling 30 items. Among these items, questions 3, 14, 18, and 29 are not specific to any particular dimension; instead, they contribute to the overall scale score.

3.2.2 Coping Strategies

The Chinese-Brief COPE was adapted by Wei and Tang (1996) from the COPE scale and Brief COPE scale (Carver, 1997; Carver & Scheier, 1989). The Chinese-Brief COPE employs a 4-point Likert scale and comprises 28 items across 14 dimensions. Each dimension consists of two items.

3.2.3 Suicidal Ideation

The Self-rating Idea of Suicide Scale (SIOSS) was prepared by (Xia et al., 2002). The SIOSS is a dichotomous scale, it has 26 items and 4 dimensions, optimism, sleep, desperation and dissimulation. The dissimulation dimension is a lie detector dimension and is not included in the total score; a total score of greater than or equal to 4 on the dissimulation dimension makes the questionnaire invalid. The higher the scale score, the higher the SI; a total scale score greater than or equal to 12 is considered SI for the individual, and a total scale score greater than or equal to 14 is considered a high level of SI for the individual.

3.3 Data Collection

The study ensured that each participant was informed about and consented to the study before completing the questionnaire. Participants filled out the questionnaire anonymously by scanning a code on their mobile phones. The anonymized responses could only be accessed by the researcher through a secure platform, where they logged in using their account password, thus ensuring participant privacy. Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants received a small gift as a token of appreciation.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study used descriptive statistical analysis to analyse demographic factors, EI, CS and SI. Relationships between variables were first identified before mediation were determined. For this purpose, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to correlate EI, CS and SI. The mediating effect of CS in the relationship between EI and SI was investigated using Hayes PROCESS macro, modal 4 and bootstrap methods. SPSS 29.0 statistics software was used to analyse Data.

3. Result and Discussion

300 students participated in answering the questionnaire, and since the dissimulation dimension of the SIOSS questionnaire with a score greater than or equal to 4 was deemed to invalid, this part was excluded, leaving 262 valid questionnaires, with a questionnaire validity rate of 87.33 per cent. Among them, 163 (62.21%) were male, 146 (55.73%) had urban household registration, 156 (59.54%) were only children, and 227 (86.64%) had no religious beliefs. Specific data is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 General and characteristics (n=262)

Variables	Category	N (%)
Gender	Male	163 (62.21)
	Female	99 (37.79)
Grade	First year	61 (23.28)
	Second year	49 (18.70)
	Third year	48 (18.32)
	Forth year	66 (25.19)
	Postgraduate	38 (14.50)
Household registration	Urban	146 (55.73)
	Rural	116 (44.27)
Only child	Yes	156 (59.54)
	No	106 (40.46)
Religion	Yes	35 (13.36)
	No	227 (86.64)

About 74 university students out of 262 participants (28.24%) had SI (SI questionnaire scores of 12 and above), and 24 or 9.16% had higher levels of SI (questionnaire scores of 14 and above). The mean score of EI was 4.19±1.30 (Score range: 1-7). Among the different dimensions of EI, the mean score of emotionality and sociality was slightly higher than self-control and happiness. The mean score of CS was 86.23±21.75 (Score range: 28-140). Among the 14 dimensions of CS, the dimensions with high mean scores were self-distraction, use of emotional support, substance use, denial and venting. The dimensions with the lowest mean scores were humour, behavioural disengagement and self-blame (Table 2).

According to the results, it is clear that there is a correlation between EI, CS and SI. EI was negatively correlated with SI (r=-0.57, p<0.01), EI was positively correlated with CS (r=0.88, p<0.01), and CS were negatively correlated with SI (r=-0.61, p<0.01) (Table 3).

Based on these results, a path diagram was plotted to test for mediating effects (see Figure 1). There was a correlation between EI and CS

Table 2 Levels of emotional intelligence, coping strategies and suicidal ideation (n=262)

Variables	Category	Mean ± SD or n (%)
Emotional intelligence	Emotionally	4.20±1.59
	Self-control	3.97±1.70
	Well-being	4.18±1.60
	Sociability	4.40±1.61
	Total mean score (Score range: 1-7)	4.19±1.30
Suicidal ideation	Optimism	2.50±1.08
	Sleep	2.11±1.02
	Desperation	5.66±1.65
	Total mean score (Score range: 0-22)	10.27±2.18
	More than 12 score	74 (28.24)
Coping strategies	Active coping	6.14±2.56
	Planning	6.07±2.40
	Positive reframing	6.02±2.68
	Acceptance	6.11±2.65
	Humour	5.85±2.65
	Religion	6.10±2.54
	Use of emotional support	6.45±2.60
	Use of instrumental support	6.10±2.54
	Self-distraction	6.47±2.60
	Denial	6.34±2.55
	Venting	6.24±2.61
	Substance use	6.38±2.57
	Behavioral disengagement	5.99±2.56
	Self-blame	5.98±2.55
	Total mean score(Score range: 28-140)	86.23±21.75

(path a), a correlation between CS and SI (path b), and a correlation

Table 3 Correlations among emotional intelligence, dimensions of coping strategies and suicidal ideation

r	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1 Emotional intelligence	1	-0.57**	0.88**	0.56**	0.54**	0.48**	0.53**	0.46**	0.56**	0.56**	0.55**	0.50**	0.41**	0.56**	0.54**	0.61**	0.57**
2 Suicidal ideation		1	-0.61**	-0.38**	-0.41**	-0.41**	-0.29**	-0.20**	-0.39**	-0.44**	-0.38**	-0.42**	-0.13**	-0.35**	-0.42**	-0.37**	-0.35**
3 Coping strategies			1	0.61**	0.62**	0.54**	0.61**	0.52**	0.61**	0.67**	0.58**	0.60**	0.50**	0.64**	0.63**	0.67**	0.65**
4 Active coping				1	0.36**	0.42**	0.39**	0.18**	0.31**	0.43**	0.32**	0.22**	0.22**	0.31**	0.40**	0.29**	0.33**
5 Planning					1	0.39**	0.31**	0.31**	0.31**	0.38**	0.27**	0.35**	0.16**	0.32**	0.34**	0.39**	0.35**
6 Positive reframing						1	0.24**	0.13**	0.30**	0.32**	0.27**	0.30**	0.09	0.28**	0.29**	0.28**	0.25**
7 Acceptance							1	0.26**	0.34**	0.31**	0.28**	0.25**	0.35**	0.32**	0.36**	0.36**	0.35**
8 Humour								1	0.29**	0.52**	0.28**	0.27**	0.18**	0.26**	0.18**	0.40**	0.32**
9 Religion									1	0.39**	0.36**	0.35**	0.21**	0.37**	0.26**	0.31**	0.41**
10 Use of emotional support										1	0.25**	0.32**	0.29**	0.42**	0.35**	0.47**	0.40**
11 Use of instrumental support											1	0.31**	0.19**	0.38**	0.34**	0.32**	0.34**
12 Self-distraction												1	0.33**	0.39**	0.36**	0.38**	0.31**
13 Denial													1	0.21**	0.32**	0.33**	0.27**
14 Venting														1	0.35**	0.41**	0.40**
15 Substance use															1	0.34**	0.40**
16 Behavioural disengagement																1	0.43**
17 Self-blame																	1

*p<0.05; **p<0.01

between EI and SI (path c). In addition to this, it is known that there is a positive correlation between EI and coping

strategies (path a), while both CS and EI are negatively correlated with SI (paths b and c).
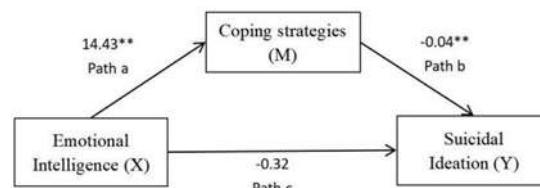

Figure 1 The Path Diagram

According to Table 4 it can be seen that CS has a fully mediating effect in the relationship between EI and SI. EI had a direct effect on SI (B=-0.87; β=-0.52; 95%CI: -1.04, -0.70). When CS intervened as a mediator, the effect of EI on SI became insignificant (B=-0.32; β=-0.19; 95%CI: -0.64, 0.01). In contrast, the effect of EI on SI via CS was significant (path a: B=14.43, β=0.87, 95%CI: 13.38, 15.48; path b: B=-0.04, β=-0.39, 95%CI: -0.06, -0.02).

Discussion

This paper explored the EI, CS, and SI of Chinese university students and analysed the associations among these variables. It also examined the mediating effect of CS in the relation between EI and SI. The results indicated that while university students exhibited moderately high levels of EI, they also showed high rates of SI. The results of this study are consistent with previous findings that although Chinese university students generally have moderate EI, they experience higher SI due to various factors such as academic and employment pressures (Chen & Liu, 2013; Kwok, 2014; Sojer et al., 2021). In other words, as the number of university students in China continues to rise, so does the pressure they face, which stems from multiple sources. When confronted with stressful events and problems, these students often struggle to cope effectively and manage their emotions (Gong et al., 2022).

Table 4 Testing the mediation effect of coping strategies in the relation between emotional intelligence and suicidal

	Model 1 (DV: SI)						Model 2 (DV: CS)						Model 3 (DV: SI)					
	B	t	p	β	LLCI	ULCI	B	t	p	β	LLCI	ULCI	B	t	p	β	LLCI	ULCI
Constants	12.27**	14.96	0.00		10.66	13.88	31.87**	6.27	0.00		21.86	41.88	13.50**	15.75	0.00		11.81	15.19
Gender	-0.10	-0.46	0.64	-0.02	-0.52	0.32	-2.04	-1.53	0.13	-0.05	-4.67	0.58	-0.18	-0.85	0.40	-0.04	-0.59	0.24
Grade	0.07	0.90	0.37	0.04	-0.08	0.22	-0.13	-0.27	0.79	-0.01	-1.04	0.79	0.06	0.86	0.39	0.04	-0.08	0.21
Household registration	-0.79**	-3.58	0.00	-0.18	-1.23	-0.36	1.37	0.99	0.32	0.03	-1.34	4.07	-0.74**	-3.42	0.00	-0.17	-1.17	-0.31
Only child	-0.06	-0.26	0.79	-0.01	-0.49	0.37	1.24	0.89	0.36	0.03	-1.42	3.90	-0.01	-0.05	0.97	0.00	-0.43	0.41
Religion	1.56**	5.09	0.00	0.24	0.96	2.17	-3.64	-1.92	0.06	-0.06	-7.38	0.10	1.42**	4.73	0.00	0.22	0.83	2.01
EI	-0.87**	-10.11	0.00	-0.52	-1.04	-0.70	14.43**	26.95	0.00	0.87	13.38	15.48	-0.32	-1.92	0.06	-0.19	-0.64	0.01
CS													-0.04**	-3.93	0.00	-0.39	-0.06	-0.02
R2			0.42						0.78						0.45			
F		F(262)=30.49, p=0.000						F(262)=146.68, p=0.000						F(262)=29.82, P=0.000				

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; EI Emotional intelligence; SI Suicidal ideation; CS Coping strategies; DV Dependent variable

The findings of this paper indicated that Chinese university students have higher mean scores in the social dimension of EI compared to the other three dimensions. Similarly, the mean score for the use of emotional support was also higher among the different dimensions of CS. This suggests that interpersonal relationships play a more significant role in university life. As noted in a study by Xie and Reay (2019), the transition from high school to university represents a shift from an individual-focused life to a more collective one. This change encompasses not only a new living environment but also alterations in academic, economic, and social contexts. Such a big change presents a serious challenge to students' psychological health and EI.

Additionally, the average scores for self-distraction, denial, venting, and substance use are higher compared to other coping methods. This may mean that modern Chinese university students are more likely to distract themselves from stress rather than directly face and solve their problems. This behavior might be influenced by their current environment: students born between 2001 and 2005 grew up during China's rapid economic growth. In the past 20 years, rising job pressures have led many young people to deal with stress by avoiding it (Lew et al., 2019).

According to the data analysis, EI is negatively related to SI among Chinese university students. This means that students with higher EI usually experience less SI, while those with more SI generally have lower EI. This is the same as the results from Halimi et al. (2020), who found that university students who handle interpersonal relationships and academic stress well tend to have less SI. Students with higher EI are better equipped to employ various CS to alleviate their stress and anxiety or to find solutions to stressful situations (Chen & Liu, 2013; Kwok, 2014; Sojer et al., 2021).

EI is linked to less SI, and the same is true for CS. Students who scored higher on CS demonstrated less SI. Students who used more effective CS had less SI. This matches what Asghari et al. (2013) and Steiner et al. (2002) found. However, this study showed that many students chose avoidance and detachment as their CS, which is different from what Li et al. (2017) and Vergara-Lopez et al. (2014) reported. This showed how new university students are changing their ways of handling stress.

The mediation analysis showed that CS completely explain the link between EI and SI. This is the same as earlier studies, which highlight that CS are the key in affecting SI among university students. Suicide stress theory suggests that poor coping can lead to suicidal behavior (Zhang et al., 2011). The data shows that today's university students are more likely to handle their negative emotions by improving their relationships, seeking emotional support, or distracting themselves. This is different from what Wang et al. (2013) found. Nowadays, students focus more on managing their emotions in response to stress, often choosing emotional self-management over problem-solving.

This paper explored the relationships between EI, SI, and CS, and developed a mediation model with CS as the mediator. The results suggest that for Chinese university students, seeking emotional support and employing avoidance strategies, such as distraction and detachment, are more effective in

alleviating their tension. This differs from some previous studies, which have suggested that active CS might be more beneficial (Chen, 2016). However, for students experiencing SI, emotional and mental detachment might be more effective in relieving their distress than actively addressing the problem. This finding could provide a basis for future intervention research on SI.

This paper also has some limitations. Firstly, there was a gender imbalance, with a slightly higher percentage of male students among the participants. Therefore, analyzing the problem from a gender perspective is not recommended. Secondly, due to the vast and widely distributed population of university students in China, the researcher's resources were limited, preventing the collection of a larger sample size. However, this does not imply that the sample is not representative.

SI and mental health issues among university students are not only personal challenges but also reflect broader issues within China's education system and society. As future intellectual leaders, university students play a crucial role in the country's development. Factors influencing students' SI extend beyond EI and CS to include other elements such as psychological resilience and social support. The results of this paper will aid schools and society in understanding the origins and influences of SI among Chinese university students, and will help to the develop effective intervention policies in the future.

4. Conclusion and future scope

This paper provided preliminary insights into the relationships between EI, CS, and SI among Chinese university students. The results showed that EI was associated with both CS and SI. Specifically, CS fully mediated the negative correlation between EI and SI. This study helps to enrich the existing knowledge of psychological health among Chinese university students and has the potential to be extended to other populations or contexts.

Meanwhile, the results of this study provide a research basis for intervention programs aimed at addressing SI among university students. These programs should focus on improving students' ability to choose effective CS to alleviate their stress. Schools, in their support services for students' mental health, should help students develop skills in managing interpersonal relationships, strengthening self-discipline, handling personal emotions, and selecting appropriate CS in response to stressful events. This approach can contribute to decrease the popularity of SI among students. Future research will focus on developing such programs, evaluating their effectiveness, and ultimately enhancing the mental health of Chinese university students.

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