Journal Website

Article history:
Received 18 July 2026
Revised 23 October 2026
Accepted 30 October 2026
Initial Publication 31 October 2026
Final Publication 01 January 2027

KMAN Counseling & Psychology Nexus

OPEN PEER-REVIEW

E-ISSN: 3041-9026

Emotion Regulation Difficulties and Suicidal Ideation Among Emerging Adults: A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Psychological Mechanisms, Interpersonal Vulnerabilities, and Protective Factors

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

The Introduction repeatedly refers to psychological distress as a central explanatory mechanism, particularly in the sentence "psychological distress is expected to represent an important internal mechanism connecting dysregulated affect with suicidal cognition." However, the construct remains insufficiently operationalized conceptually. The authors should specify whether psychological distress is conceptualized as general distress, depressive-anxious symptomatology, or a composite of depression, anxiety, and stress. This distinction is important because suicidal ideation is particularly strongly associated with depressive symptoms, and a broad distress construct may obscure disorder-specific mechanisms. The conceptual definition used in the Introduction should also correspond precisely to the instrument described in the Methods.

In the Methods paragraph under "Study Design and Participants," the authors describe the study as an "explanatory sequential mixed-methods design," yet the rationale for choosing this mixed-methods architecture requires greater methodological justification. The manuscript should clarify exactly how the quantitative results informed qualitative participant selection, interview-question refinement, and subsequent integration. For example, the authors state that "selection was informed by quantitative patterns," but do not specify the thresholds or profiles used to identify cases with high versus low

emotion regulation difficulties, suicidal ideation, social support, or resilience. A transparent description of the connecting procedure between phases is essential for establishing that this was genuinely an explanatory sequential design rather than a quantitative study followed by an independently conducted qualitative component.

The participant recruitment paragraph states that "a total of 420 participants were recruited for the quantitative phase through a multistage community-based sampling procedure" and that recruitment occurred through universities, educational institutions, cultural centers, community settings, and online social networks. This procedure is not adequately described as multistage sampling. The authors should identify the sampling stages, the sampling units at each stage, the number of districts or institutions selected, whether selection was random or convenience-based, and how online respondents entered the sampling frame. If probability-based selection was not actually implemented, the terminology should be revised to purposive, convenience, quota, or multichannel recruitment as appropriate. The distinction has direct implications for the representativeness of the Tehran sample and the generalizability of the findings.

The Data Analysis paragraph states that quantitative analyses were conducted "using SPSS and structural equation modeling procedures appropriate to the hypothesized relationships," whereas the reported Findings describe hierarchical regression, bootstrapped mediation, and moderation analyses without presenting any structural equation model. This inconsistency should be corrected. If SEM was performed, the authors should report the software, estimator, measurement model, model-fit indices, and structural coefficients. If mediation and moderation were performed using regression-based procedures such as PROCESS, the Methods should name the software or macro, version, model numbers, bootstrapping procedure, and covariates. The analytic description must correspond exactly to the analyses reported.

Table 1 reports correlations ranging up to r = .66 and concludes that "none approached a magnitude indicative of problematic multicollinearity." Pairwise correlations alone are insufficient to establish absence of multicollinearity. The authors should report formal diagnostics from the multivariable models, including variance inflation factors and tolerance values, and preferably condition indices if appropriate. Because psychological distress, emotion regulation difficulties, burdensomeness, belongingness, social support, and resilience are conceptually related, demonstrating that regression coefficients are not distorted by multicollinearity is essential. These diagnostics should be summarized either in the text or supplementary material.

In the hierarchical regression results, the authors state that demographic variables accounted for 2.1% of the variance in suicidal ideation and that the final model explained 56.7%. However, the rationale for the order of variable entry needs to be theoretically justified. The manuscript should explain why age, gender, employment status, and relationship status were entered first, why emotion regulation difficulties were entered independently in the second block, why mediators were entered in the third block, and why protective variables were entered only in the fourth block. In addition, categorical variables such as employment and relationship status appear to have been modeled using single coefficients, but the coding strategy is not described. The authors should state whether dummy coding, effect coding, or ordinal coding was used and identify reference categories.

Table 3 presents parallel indirect effects through psychological distress, perceived burdensomeness, and thwarted belongingness, yet the manuscript repeatedly uses causal language such as "mechanism," "pathway," and "through which emotion regulation difficulties become transformed into suicidal cognition." Because all quantitative variables were measured cross-sectionally, mediation coefficients cannot establish temporal or causal mediation. The manuscript should systematically temper causal terminology and refer to "statistical indirect associations," "cross-sectional mediation," or "patterns consistent with mediation." The Discussion should explicitly distinguish the theoretical mechanism proposed from the empirical design actually used to test it.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

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The Methods should provide a defensible sample-size justification for the quantitative sample of N = 420. At present, the manuscript reports the exact number but does not explain how it was determined. Because the analytical strategy includes hierarchical multiple regression, multiple parallel mediation, and two moderation models, the authors should report an a priori power analysis based on the most demanding primary analysis, including anticipated effect size, α level, desired statistical power, and number of predictors. If the sample size was determined by another method, such as an established population sampling formula, that procedure should be reported explicitly. A sample-size justification is particularly important because indirect and interaction effects are typically smaller than zero-order correlations and require adequate statistical power.

The sentence stating that "individuals were excluded when they submitted substantially incomplete questionnaires, demonstrated response patterns indicating invalid or indiscriminate responding, or reported a condition that prevented them from independently understanding the study materials" requires operational detail. The authors should define the percentage of missing data considered "substantially incomplete," describe the statistical or procedural criteria used to identify indiscriminate responding, and report how many participants were excluded for each reason. A participant-flow description should indicate the number approached or opening the survey, the number consenting, the number excluded, and the final analytic N. Without this information, potential selection and attrition biases cannot be assessed.

Given the sensitive outcome under investigation, the ethics and safety procedures require substantial strengthening. The Methods currently state that "information concerning accessible psychological and crisis-support services was made available to participants when appropriate." The phrase "when appropriate" is too vague for research involving suicidal ideation. The authors should describe whether responses to the suicide measure were monitored, whether a predefined threshold triggered a safety protocol, who assessed participants indicating active or severe suicidal ideation, whether immediate risk assessment was available, and what referral or emergency procedures were followed. The manuscript should also report the approving institutional ethics committee, approval code, date of approval, and procedures for protecting participant confidentiality and managing identifiable interview data.

The "Data Collection Tools" paragraph identifies the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale, Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation, Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, but psychometric and scoring details are incomplete. For each instrument, the authors should report the version used, number of items, response scale, possible score range, scoring procedure, interpretation of higher scores, prior evidence regarding reliability and validity in Persian-speaking populations, and reliability estimates obtained in the present sample. This is particularly important for the DERS, INQ, and CD-RISC because multiple versions exist. The exact versions should be named to ensure reproducibility.

The Methods refer to psychological distress as one of the central measured variables but do not identify the instrument used to assess it. This is a major reproducibility problem because psychological distress subsequently appears in Tables 1–3, the regression model, and the mediation analysis. The authors must specify the exact instrument, its dimensional structure, item count, scoring method, validity evidence for the Persian version, and internal consistency in the present study. Moreover, if psychological distress incorporates depressive symptoms, the authors should discuss possible conceptual overlap with suicidal ideation and determine whether any suicide-related items were included in the distress measure, because overlapping item content could artificially inflate the observed association.

The qualitative methodology requires more procedural detail. The manuscript states that "individual semi-structured interviews were conducted until conceptual saturation was reached," but later identifies reflexive thematic analysis as the analytic approach. Because reflexive thematic analysis does not necessarily rely on saturation as a universal criterion, the authors should clarify what they mean by "conceptual saturation" and how it was determined. They should also report who conducted the interviews, the interviewers' disciplinary backgrounds and training, whether they had prior relationships with participants, the average interview duration and range, interview setting, whether field notes were maintained, and whether any participants withdrew or requested transcript removal. These details are essential for evaluating qualitative rigor and researcher positionality.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

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E-ISSN: 3041-9026

2. Revised

Editor's decision after revisions: Accepted.
Editor in Chief's decision: Accepted.

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E-ISSN: 3041-9026