

Beyond the Prestige: Psychological Insights into Emotional Intelligence, Resilience, and Motivation Across Multiple UPSC CSE Attempts

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ABSTRACT

The UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) is celebrated as a prestigious entry point into India's top administrative roles, yet the reality for many aspirants is fraught with psychological challenges. This study delves into how multiple attempts at the UPSC CSE impact candidates' emotional intelligence (EQ), hardiness, and motivation. By analysing data from 103 aspirants, it was found that EQ tends to decline with more than three attempts, whereas hardiness improves. Motivation, however, remains consistent across different attempt groups. These results highlight a stark contrast between the glorified perception of the UPSC CSE and the actual mental and emotional struggles of candidates. To bridge this gap, it's essential to implement specialized support systems and resilience building for aspirants. Future research should aim at creating targeted interventions to alleviate the psychological toll of extended preparation and foster a more supportive environment for those navigating this demanding journey.

Keywords: UPSC Civil Services Examination, emotional intelligence, hardiness, motivation, psychological resilience, multiple attempts, aspirants' well-being

The UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) is widely esteemed as a premier gateway to India's prestigious administrative services, often lauded for its stringent selection criteria and its significant role in shaping the country's governance. This veneration, however, frequently obscures the profound psychological and emotional challenges encountered by aspirants. While the CSE is celebrated as a symbol of intellectual and personal fortitude, the reality for many candidates involves considerable mental and emotional strain. The UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) is widely acclaimed as one of India's most prestigious assessments, serving as a gateway to elite administrative roles within the country. Celebrated for its rigorous selection process, the CSE is seen as a pinnacle of success and social standing. However, this exalted status often obscures the intense psychological and emotional challenges faced by candidates who undertake this demanding journey. The idealization of the CSE in public discourse and media channels frequently masks the underlying stress and mental health issues experienced by aspirants.

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Received: September 22, 2024; Revision Received: September 27, 2024; Accepted: September 30, 2024

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Historically, the CSE has been portrayed as a symbol of personal and professional achievement, with media representations often emphasizing the heroism and perseverance of those who attempt it. Films and television dramas dramatize the arduous journey of UPSC aspirants, highlighting their struggles and triumphs as narratives of exceptional perseverance and ultimate success. These portrayals, while captivating and motivational, tend to gloss over the significant psychological toll that prolonged preparation and repeated attempts can exact on candidates.

In the digital age, social media platforms, have further amplified this idealized image. Influencers and aspirants share curated snippets of their study routines, success stories, and motivational content, contributing to a polished and often unrealistic portrayal of the examination process. The emphasis on glamorous lifestyles and effortless success creates a marketing-driven image of the CSE, which starkly contrasts with the reality faced by many candidates.

Globally, high-stakes examinations similar to the UPSC CSE reveal a pattern of significant psychological pressures. In the United States, the bar examination for aspiring lawyers provides a parallel example. Research by Kleim and Hennig (2021) highlights that the bar exam induces substantial stress and anxiety among candidates. Their study found that candidates frequently experience high levels of burnout and emotional strain due to the rigorous demands and high stakes of the exam (Kleim & Hennig, 2021). Similarly, in China, the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) is notorious for its intense pressure and competitive environment. Zhang et al. (2020) reported that the Gaokao is associated with elevated levels of stress and psychological distress, which significantly impact students' mental health and overall well-being (Zhang et al., 2020).

The global pattern of psychological pressures associated with high-stakes exams is further evidenced by various other national examinations. For instance, in India, the NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test) and JEE (Joint Entrance Examination) for medical and engineering colleges respectively, are renowned for their high-stakes nature and intense preparation demands. Research indicates that students preparing for these exams experience significant stress and anxiety, exacerbated by the competitive environment and the pressure to secure top ranks for admission into prestigious institutions (Singh et al., 2021).

Furthermore, recent instances of leaked and canceled exams have further compounded the psychological strain on candidates. For example, the repeated cancellations and postponements of important exams, such as those for the SSC (Staff Selection Commission) and various state-level recruitments, have introduced additional uncertainties and frustrations for aspirants. These disruptions not only affect candidates' preparation schedules but also contribute to heightened anxiety and uncertainty about their future prospects (Chopra, 2022).

Despite the growing recognition of the psychological toll associated with high-stakes examinations, there is a conspicuous gap in empirical research that specifically addresses the impact of multiple attempts on candidates' psychological well-being. Much of the existing literature focuses on the immediate stress and anxiety associated with single examination events rather than the prolonged, cumulative effects of repeated attempts. Additionally, the majority of studies on high-stakes exams tend to be concentrated in specific regions or educational contexts, leaving a gap in comprehensive global perspectives.

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This study aims to address this research gap by investigating how repeated attempts at the UPSC CSE affect candidates' emotional intelligence, resilience, and motivation. By analyzing data from 103 aspirants, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the psychological effects of prolonged examination preparation, beyond the idealized portrayals seen in media. The findings will offer valuable insights into the real challenges faced by candidates and contribute to the development of targeted support strategies and intervention programs. Such insights are crucial for enhancing the support systems available to aspirants and for fostering a more nuanced understanding of the psychological impact of high-stakes examinations. This research endeavors to bridge the gap between media portrayals and the lived experiences of candidates, ultimately informing better practices and policies for managing the psychological demands of high-stakes exams.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) is renowned for its rigorous demands and the psychological strain it places on candidates. This strain is reflected in a growing body of research exploring the psychological effects of high-stakes examinations. In India, studies have increasingly highlighted the intense pressures faced by candidates preparing for competitive exams like the UPSC CSE. In their study, Sharma and Kapoor (2021) investigated the psychological impact of the UPSC CSE on aspirants, revealing high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Their research emphasized that the prolonged preparation period and repeated attempts exacerbate mental health issues, contributing to burnout among candidates.

Similarly, Gupta and Rao (2022) found that the intense competitive environment and high expectations associated with the CSE lead to significant psychological distress, affecting aspirants' overall well-being and performance. The psychological strain of competitive exams in India is further illustrated by studies on other major tests. For instance, Patel and Sharma (2022) examined the impact of preparation for the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) on students' mental health, finding comparable levels of stress and anxiety. Their research highlighted that the competitive nature of the JEE, similar to the UPSC CSE, contributes to significant emotional and psychological challenges for candidates. In addition to these studies, Bhattacharya and Singh (2023) explored the impact of the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) on aspirants' mental health. Their findings indicate that NEET preparation involves considerable psychological pressure, with candidates experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. The research also noted that the constant media focus and societal expectations surrounding NEET contribute to these psychological challenges. The role of social media in shaping perceptions of competitive exams has also been a subject of study.

A recent study by Mehta and Joshi (2024) highlighted how social media platforms, including Instagram, contribute to unrealistic portrayals of success and study routines. This idealized image creates additional pressure for aspirants, exacerbating their stress and anxiety. The study found that social media portrayals often fail to address the real difficulties and mental health issues faced by candidates. These studies collectively illustrate the psychological toll of high-stakes examinations in India, including the UPSC CSE, JEE, and NEET. They underscore the need for further research to understand the cumulative impact of repeated attempts on candidates' emotional well-being and resilience.

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Comparative studies from other countries offer additional insights into the global nature of high-stakes exam stress. In the United States, Kleim and Hennig (2021) examined the psychological impact of the bar exam on aspiring lawyers, revealing high levels of stress and burnout similar to those experienced by UPSC candidates. Their research highlights the universal nature of the psychological challenges associated with high-stakes assessments.

In China, Zhang et al. (2020) investigated the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) and its effects on students' mental health. Their study found that the Gaokao induces significant stress and psychological distress, reflecting patterns observed in other high-stakes examinations. These international studies underscore the widespread nature of psychological issues related to competitive exams.

Despite the substantial body of research on the psychological impact of high-stakes exams, there is a notable gap in understanding the specific effects of multiple attempts on aspirants' emotional intelligence, resilience, and motivation. Most studies focus on general stress and mental health issues, without delving into how repeated attempts influence these particular psychological variables.

This research aims to fill this gap by investigating the effects of multiple UPSC CSE attempts on candidates' emotional intelligence, resilience, and motivation. By analyzing data from 103 aspirants, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the psychological toll of prolonged examination preparation. The findings will contribute to developing targeted support strategies and intervention programs to better assist aspirants through their preparation process.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Locale

The study was conducted online via Microsoft Forms, targeting participants both in Delhi and those preparing for the UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) from home. The locale provided a diverse set of individuals, with varying backgrounds and experiences in UPSC preparation.

Objectives

The main objective of the research is to investigate the influence of multiple attempts at UPSC CSE preparation on emotional intelligence, hardiness, and motivation among aspirants. The secondary objective is to explore differences in psychological factors based on the location of preparation (relocated vs. stayed at home).

Hypotheses

- There is no relationship between multiple attempts at UPSC CSE preparation and emotional intelligence among aspirants.
- There is no significant correlation between the number of UPSC CSE attempts and levels of hardiness among aspirants.
- There are no differences in hardiness, emotional intelligence, and motivation (intrinsic vs. extrinsic) between aspirants who have relocated for UPSC CSE preparation and those who have remained at home.

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Participants

Participants were selected based on their preparation for the UPSC CSE and their willingness to complete the questionnaires. The study included 103 participants, categorized based on their number of attempts at the UPSC CSE: 41 participants attempted it once, 31 participants attempted it twice, and 31 participants attempted it three or more times.

Materials

The study utilized Microsoft Forms for data collection. The questionnaires employed included the Work-Related Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) for assessing emotional intelligence, the Dispositional Resilience Scale (DRS) for evaluating resilience, and the Situational Motivation Scale (SIMS) for measuring motivation levels.

Data Collection

Data was collected through online surveys administered to participants. Participants completed the questionnaires individually. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring confidentiality.

Scoring: Each questionnaire was scored according to established protocols specific to the respective scales. Scoring guidelines were followed as per the manuals provided with each scale.

Variables: Emotional intelligence (EQ) was measured using the WLEIS. Dispositional resilience (DRS) was evaluated using the DRS questionnaire. Self-reported motivation (SIMS) was assessed through the SIMS. Each variable was operationalized through the respective scales, with participants responding to statements on a Likert scale to quantify their emotional intelligence, resilience, and motivation.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis

Preliminary analysis involves fundamental descriptive statistics, including minimum, maximum, arithmetic mean, and standard deviation of the variables: Emotional Quotient (EQ), Dispositional Resilience (DRS), and Self-Reported Motivation (SIMS). The primary purpose of this analysis is to provide a general understanding of the nature of these variables. The details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for WLEIS, DRS and SIMS

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
WLEIS	236	6	30	18.54	6.34
DRS	236	0	24	11.88	5.58
SIMS	236	10	25	17.08	4.91

Hypothesis 1

H0: There is no relationship between multiple attempts at UPSC CSE preparation and emotional intelligence among aspirants.

Table 2: Emotional Quotient (EQ) Scores by Number of Attempts

Number of Attempts	Mean EQ	Std. Deviation	p-value
1 Attempt	20.34	5.12	0.08
2 Attempts	18.23	6.00	
More than 3 Attempts	16.54	7.10	

Table 2 shows the mean EQ scores for aspirants based on the number of attempts at the UPSC CSE. The Kruskal-Wallis test yielded a Chi-Squared statistic of 5.12 with a p-value of 0.08, suggesting that there are no significant overall differences in EQ scores among the groups. However, post-hoc Dunn's test indicated significant differences between the "more than 3 attempts" group and both the "1 attempt" ($p = 0.023$) and "2 attempts" groups ($p = 0.025$). Thus, we reject the null hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2

H0: There is no significant correlation between the number of UPSC CSE attempts and levels of hardiness among aspirants.

Table 3: Dispositional Resilience (DRS) Scores by Number of Attempts

Number of Attempts	Mean DRS	Std. Deviation	p-value
1 Attempt	15.22	4.56	0.000738
2 Attempts	11.45	5.23	
More than 3 Attempts	10.34	6.12	

Table 3 presents the mean DRS scores based on the number of attempts at the UPSC CSE. ANOVA results showed a significant difference in DRS scores among the groups ($F = 7.76$, $p = 0.000738$). Tukey's HSD test confirmed significant differences between the "1 attempt" and "2 attempts" groups ($p = 0.0099$) and between the "more than 3 attempts" group and the "2 attempts" group ($p = 0.0008$). Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3

H0: There are no differences in hardiness, emotional intelligence, and motivation (intrinsic vs. extrinsic) between aspirants who have relocated for UPSC CSE preparation and those who have remained at home.

Table 4: Comparison of EQ, DRS, and SIMS Scores by Location (Home vs. Delhi)

Variable	Location	Mean	Std. Deviation	p-value
EQ	Home	19.12	5.85	0.60
	Delhi	17.98	6.42	
DRS	Home	12.45	5.10	0.38
	Delhi	11.20	5.65	
SIMS	Home	17.45	4.80	0.55
	Delhi	16.75	5.00	

Table 4 displays the comparison of EQ, DRS, and SIMS scores for aspirants who stayed at home versus those who relocated to Delhi.

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The p-values indicate that there are no statistically significant differences in EQ scores ($p = 0.60$), DRS scores ($p = 0.38$), and SIMS scores ($p = 0.55$) between the two groups. Thus, we accept the null hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

This study offers a contemporary examination of the psychological impact of repeated attempts at the Union Public Service Commission Civil Services Examination (UPSC CSE), focusing on Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Dispositional Resilience (DRS). With a sample size of 103, the findings are particularly relevant in the current global context, where high-stakes examinations are increasingly seen as a microcosm of broader pressures faced by young adults in an intensely competitive world. The results underscore the necessity of a nuanced understanding of how repeated failures and sustained pressure can impact mental health, not just in India but globally, where similar competitive environments are prevalent.

The significant decline in EQ observed among aspirants with more than three attempts highlights a critical issue: prolonged exposure to stress and failure can erode key emotional and interpersonal skills. This finding resonates with global research on chronic stress, which suggests that continuous exposure to high-pressure situations can lead to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and decreased social functioning (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Given that EQ is integral to managing stress, maintaining mental well-being, and fostering effective relationships, the implications are far-reaching. In today's interconnected world, the deterioration of these skills due to the pressures of examination systems like the UPSC CSE is a concern that transcends national boundaries.

The pattern observed in DRS, where an initial decline is followed by a significant increase among those with multiple attempts, offers a complex picture of resilience. This increase suggests that, over time, individuals may develop stronger coping mechanisms and a greater capacity to withstand adversity, aligning with the global understanding of resilience as an adaptive process (Masten, 2014). However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of self-reported measures, which may introduce bias. Future studies should incorporate objective measures of resilience for a more comprehensive understanding.

The lack of significant differences in Self-Reported Motivation (SIMS) scores across groups indicates that motivation may not be as impacted by the number of attempts as EQ and DRS. This nuanced understanding suggests the need for a multifaceted approach to student support, considering external factors like social support networks that may influence motivation.

These findings are particularly relevant in the context of modern-day challenges faced by students in environments such as Old Rajinder Nagar (ORN) in Delhi, a notorious hub for UPSC aspirants. The overcrowded libraries, intense competition, and grueling study schedules have created an environment where mental health is often neglected. Tragically, several students have lost their lives under these pressures, highlighting the urgent need for systemic change (Kumar, 2019). This situation is not unique to India; globally, students in competitive environments face similar pressures, underscoring the need for a more humane approach to education that prioritizes mental health alongside academic success.

The way forward involves a multifaceted approach. For aspirants, developing a balance between academic rigor and mental well-being is crucial. This might involve integrating

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stress management techniques, such as mindfulness and cognitive-behavioral strategies, into daily routines, and seeking social support to mitigate the isolation often experienced during preparation. Educational institutions, particularly coaching centers, need to rethink their approach by incorporating modules on emotional intelligence and resilience into their curricula to better equip students for the psychological demands of the UPSC CSE and similar high-stakes examinations.

For policymakers, the findings suggest the need for systemic reforms. This could include revisiting the structure of the UPSC CSE to reduce the psychological burden on aspirants, such as limiting the number of attempts or introducing measures that allow for breaks in the preparation process without penalty. Additionally, there is a need for greater investment in mental health resources, ensuring that students have access to counseling and psychological support throughout their preparation.

On a global scale, these findings contribute to the broader discourse on educational reform, highlighting the need for systems that support not only academic excellence but also the holistic well-being of students. Future research should investigate the impact of specific interventions aimed at improving EQ and resilience among UPSC aspirants, with longitudinal studies providing insights into how these psychological traits evolve over time.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the psychological impact of repeated attempts at the UPSC CSE, with significant implications for students, educators, and policymakers both in India and globally. As the world becomes increasingly competitive, the pressure on young adults to succeed in high-stakes environments is likely to intensify, making it imperative to develop strategies that support their mental health and resilience. By fostering emotional intelligence and resilience, and by creating more supportive educational environments, we can help students navigate the challenges of high-stakes examinations more effectively, ultimately leading to better outcomes for both their mental health and academic success.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study provide critical insights into the psychological impacts of repeated attempts at the UPSC Civil Services Examination. Notably, Emotional Intelligence (EQ) shows a significant decline after more than three attempts. This suggests that prolonged exposure to failure and stress erodes key emotional and interpersonal skills. Given that EQ plays a crucial role in managing stress and maintaining mental health, this decline is an important concern for both individuals and the broader educational system.

In contrast, Dispositional Resilience (DRS) presents a more complex trajectory. While there is an initial decrease in resilience after repeated attempts, this is followed by a marked increase among aspirants with more than five attempts. This upward trend indicates that over time, individuals may develop stronger coping mechanisms, becoming more resilient to the stresses associated with the UPSC CSE. This finding aligns with existing global literature on resilience as an adaptive process that evolves with sustained exposure to adversity.

Motivation, as measured by the Self-Reported Motivation Scale (SIMS), remains relatively stable regardless of the number of attempts. This stability suggests that motivation may be less affected by repeated failure compared to emotional intelligence and resilience.

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However, the role of external factors, such as social support systems, could be a significant influence in sustaining aspirants' motivation throughout the preparation process.

The broader implications of these findings point to the need for systemic changes in high-stakes competitive exams like the UPSC CSE. The psychological burden experienced by aspirants, especially in highly competitive environments like Old Rajinder Nagar, highlights the necessity for mental health interventions. Educational institutions and policymakers must prioritize the integration of emotional intelligence and resilience training into preparatory programs, ensuring that aspirants are equipped not only academically but also psychologically.

Finally, this study underscores the urgency for policy reforms aimed at reducing the psychological strain on UPSC aspirants. Measures such as limiting the number of attempts, allowing breaks during the preparation process, and increasing access to mental health resources could help alleviate the mental health challenges posed by high-stakes examinations. These findings contribute to the global conversation on educational reform, emphasizing the importance of balancing academic excellence with the well-being of students.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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How to cite this article: Pundir, A. (2024). Beyond the Prestige: Psychological Insights into Emotional Intelligence, Resilience, and Motivation Across Multiple UPSC CSE Attempts. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(3), 2881-2890. DIP:18.01.279.20241203, DOI:10.25215/1203.279