The International Journal of Indian Psychology
ISSN 2348-5396 (e) | ISSN: 2349-3429 (p)
Volume 7, Issue 3, DIP: 18.01.092/20190703
DOI: 10.25215/0703.092
https://www.ijip.in | July - September, 2019

The International Journal of INDIAN PSYCHOLOGY

Research Paper

A Study of Mental Health among Competitive Exam Aspirants

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to compare male and female competitive exam aspirants on six dimensions of mental health: emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, security–insecurity, self-concept, and intelligence. A purposive sample of 100 aspirants (50 males, 50 females), aged 18–25 years, was selected from coaching institutes and self-study groups. Data were collected using the Mental Health Battery (Singh & Gupta, 2005). Statistical analysis using the t-test revealed significant gender differences across all dimensions, with female aspirants scoring significantly higher in emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, security–insecurity, self-concept, and intelligence.

Keywords: *Mental Health, Emotional Stability, Overall Adjustment, Autonomy, Security–Insecurity, Self-Concept, Intelligence, Competitive Exam Aspirants, Gender Differences*

Competitive examinations in India, such as those for civil services, banking, defense, and public sector jobs, represent one of the most challenging educational and career pathways. These exams are characterized by high competition, limited success rates, and lengthy preparation periods, often spanning months or even years (Kumar & Singh, 2017). Aspirants are required to demonstrate not only intellectual competence but also sustained motivation, resilience, and effective stress management. The pressure associated with this process has a profound impact on their mental health and overall psychological well-being.

Mental health is broadly defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2004) as a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to the community. In the context of competitive exam preparation, mental health encompasses various psychological dimensions, including emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, security–insecurity, self-concept, and intelligence. These dimensions collectively influence an aspirant's capacity to perform under sustained academic pressure.

Competitive Exams and Psychological Pressure

The nature of competitive exams inherently fosters a high-stakes environment. Aspirants face intense competition due to a disproportionate candidate-to-vacancy ratio, which creates uncertainty and a persistent fear of failure. This is further compounded by societal expectations, family pressure, and personal aspirations. Several studies indicate that aspirants

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Received: September 15, 2019; Revision Received: September 20, 2019; Accepted: September 30, 2019

preparing for such examinations experience elevated stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms compared to peers in non-competitive academic environments (Sahu & Nayak, 2018).

Prolonged preparation often requires individuals to invest significant time in self-study or coaching classes, leading to social isolation and reduced recreational engagement (Verma & Gupta, 2015). The disruption of work-life balance and neglect of leisure activities can negatively affect emotional stability and coping capacity. Research has shown that chronic stress may impair cognitive functions such as memory, concentration, and decision-making, which are essential for exam success (McEwen, 2007).

Gender and Mental Health in Academic Contexts

Gender differences in mental health and coping strategies have been widely documented. Female students, in certain contexts, have been found to exhibit greater emotional regulation, higher social support utilization, and more adaptive coping mechanisms compared to males (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). In academic environments, these traits may translate into better adjustment and resilience during stressful periods. However, gender disparities are not uniform; some studies suggest that males may perform better under short-term performance pressure due to problem-focused coping tendencies (Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992).

In the Indian socio-cultural context, gender roles and expectations can shape mental health outcomes. Females may receive more emotional encouragement from families, while males may face higher expectations regarding financial independence and career success (Rani & Kumari, 2016). These differences can influence psychological constructs such as autonomy, self-concept, and perceived security.

Dimensions of Mental Health Relevant to Aspirants

The six dimensions examined in this study emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, security–insecurity, self-concept, and intelligence are interrelated components of psychological well-being.

1. **Emotional Stability** refers to the ability to remain calm, composed, and balanced under stress. High emotional stability enables aspirants to manage exam anxiety and maintain focus (Zeidner, 1998).
2. **Overall Adjustment** denotes adaptability to environmental demands, including academic, social, and personal spheres (Matud, 2004). For aspirants, this involves balancing study schedules with personal life and social interactions.
3. **Autonomy** reflects self-reliance and independence in decision-making, essential for self-directed learning and consistent study habits.
4. **Security–Insecurity** relates to feelings of safety, support, and assurance in one's environment. Perceived security enhances confidence and motivation (Rani & Kumari, 2016).
5. **Self-Concept** involves self-perception of abilities, worth, and identity. A positive self-concept is linked to higher motivation and academic persistence (Singh & Kaur, 2018).
6. **Intelligence**, in this context, encompasses cognitive abilities such as reasoning, problem-solving, and verbal comprehension, which are critical for competitive exam success (Hyde & Linn, 2006).

Despite the high psychological demands of competitive exam preparation, limited empirical research has explored how these mental health dimensions differ across genders in the Indian context. Understanding these differences is important for designing tailored interventions that can enhance coping strategies and mental health outcomes for both male and female aspirants. Targeted mental health programs can help address specific needs such as building self-confidence in males or stress management in females thereby improving academic readiness.

this study aims to systematically compare male and female competitive exam aspirants across the six key mental health dimensions identified in the *Mental Health Battery* (Singh & Gupta, 2005). By identifying gender-specific strengths and vulnerabilities, educators, psychologists, and policymakers can create more effective mental health support systems. Such interventions could include stress management workshops, counseling services, and peer mentoring programs designed to address the unique psychological challenges faced by each gender.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Bhosale and Patil (2018) this study found higher perceived security levels among female teacher trainees, suggesting greater confidence in personal and professional domains. **Choudhary and Yadav (2016)** this study reported significantly higher academic self-concept among female science students, linking this to strong intrinsic motivation. **Deshmukh and Gawande (2018)** this study found a marginal but statistically significant advantage for female aspirants in overall intelligence scores. **Kulkarni and Rao (2017),** this study shown females performing better on verbal and memory tasks, while males excel on spatial reasoning measures. **Kumar and Dhillon (2018)** this study investigated mental health was examined in relation to self-concept and academic motivation. Results indicated that aspirants with a positive self-concept demonstrated higher resilience and better overall adjustment to examination stress. **Kumar and Rani (2014)** this study observed greater emotional autonomy in male adolescents. In competitive-exam contexts, female aspirants' autonomy is often linked to goal-oriented behavior and career aspirations, though findings remain inconsistent due to cultural constraints and varied operational definitions of autonomy. **Meena and Prasad (2015)** this study found no significant gender differences, suggesting that cultural and socioeconomic contexts may moderate these patterns. **Patil (2018)** this study found that female competitive-exam aspirants exhibited higher self-esteem and positive self-concept than males, particularly in verbal domains**. Patil and Deshpande (2017)** this study observed similar trends in a cohort of competitive-exam aspirants, where females demonstrated greater adaptability to academic demands and stress. The authors attributed these findings to higher self-discipline and interpersonal sensitivity in females**Sharma and Kaur (2016)** this study found that female secondary school students demonstrated significantly higher emotional stability scores than males, attributing this to stronger coping mechanisms and social support systems. **Singh (2014)** this study reported significantly higher home, social, and emotional adjustment scores among female undergraduate students. **Singh and Jha (2013)** this study investigated stress and emotional well-being among competitive exam aspirants and found that prolonged preparation periods were significantly associated with increased levels of anxiety and decreased emotional stability. **Singh and Kaur (2015)** this study highlighted that males often report higher self-concept in spatial and problem-solving domains, indicating that gender differences may be domain-specific. **Thomas and Joseph (2015)** this study reported higher exam-related insecurity among female medical aspirants compared to males, linked to performance pressure and societal expectations. These conflicting findings imply that gender differences in security–insecurity are context-specific and sensitive to situational stressors.

Verma and Singh (2016) this study these differences are often small and may reflect sample characteristics rather than inherent cognitive disparities. **Waghmare (2018)** examined the effect of faculty stream on mental health among college students. Using a 3×2 factorial design with 90 participants, findings indicated that commerce students reported higher emotional stability, adjustment, self-concept, and overall mental health, while arts students showed higher autonomy and security–insecurity dimensions. **While Joshi and Shinde (2016)** this study found higher autonomy scores among female postgraduate students.

Statement of the Problem

Competitive exam aspirants often experience high levels of psychological pressure due to intense competition, prolonged preparation periods, and uncertainty about outcomes. Such stress can impact various dimensions of mental health, including emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, security–insecurity, self-concept, and intelligence. While mental health is a crucial factor influencing academic performance and well-being, limited research has focused on how these dimensions vary between male and female aspirants. Understanding these gender-based differences is essential for designing targeted interventions and support systems that promote balanced mental health, enhance coping abilities, and improve overall readiness for competitive examinations.

Objectives of the Study

- To compare male and female competitive exam aspirants on the mental health dimensions of emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, security–insecurity, self-concept, and intelligence.

Hypotheses of the Study

- There will be no significant difference between male and female competitive exam aspirants in the mental health dimensions of emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, security–insecurity, self-concept, and intelligence.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample for the present study consisted of 100 competitive exam aspirants, including 50 males and 50 females. Participants were selected using the purposive sampling method from various coaching institutes and self-study groups in the selected district Aurangabad. The age of the aspirants ranged from 18 to 25 years, with a mean age of 21.95 years and a standard deviation of 2.37 years. All participants had been preparing for competitive examinations for at least six months prior to data collection.

Research Design

The present study used a comparative research design.

Variables

Table No-01 Types of variable, factor and sub factor

Types of Variables	Factor	Sub Factor
Independent Variables	Gender	Male competitive exam aspirants Female competitive exam aspirants
Dependent Variables	Mental Health	1. Emotional Stability 2. Overall Adjustment 3. Autonomy 4. Security–Insecurity

		5. Self-Concept 6. Intelligence
Control Variables		1. Age range: 18–25 years 2. Minimum preparation period: 6 months for competitive exams 3. Selection method: Purposive sampling

Research Tools

Table N0.02- Mental Health Battery (MHB)

Aspect	Name of the Test	Author	Sub Factor	
Mental Health	Mental Health Battery	Singh and Gupta (2005)	1. Emotional Stability 2. Overall Adjustment 3. Autonomy 4. Security–Insecurity 5. Self-Concept 6. Intelligence	**Item-** 130 items **Scoring** "Yes" or "No" response. **Reliability** - 0.67 to 0.88 **Validity** - high

Procedures of Data Collection

The data for the present study were collected using the Mental Health Battery. Prior to data collection, the purpose of the study was clearly explained to all participants, and informed consent was obtained from each individual. The questionnaire was administered to a purposive sample of 100 college students (50 males and 50 females) aged between 18 and 25 years. Participants were instructed to carefully read each item and respond honestly based on their recent experiences. The researcher was present during the data collection process to provide any necessary clarifications. All responses were collected immediately, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity throughout the procedure.

Statistical Treatment

At the initial stage, the data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including the calculation of means and standard deviations, to understand the distribution and central tendency of the Mental Health scores. To test the hypotheses, the t-test was employed to examine the main effects of gender, as well as the interaction effect between these variables on Mental Health levels.

Statistical Interpretation

Table No.03. Show the Mean, SD and F Value of Gender on Mental Health

Factor	Gender	Mean	SD	N	DF	t Value	Sign.
Emotional Stability	Male competitive exam aspirants	42.36	5.18	50	98	3.45	0.01
	Female competitive exam aspirants	46.28	4.62	50			
Overall Adjustment	Male competitive exam aspirants	40.12	4.86	50	98	3.82	0.01

Factor	Gender	Mean	SD	N	DF	t Value	Sign.
	Female competitive exam aspirants	44.06	4.11	50			
Autonomy	Male competitive exam aspirants	35.72	5.26	50	98	4.55	0.01
	Female competitive exam aspirants	40.28	4.67	50			
Security–Insecurity	Male competitive exam aspirants	36.85	5.18	50	98	4.46	0.01
	Female competitive exam aspirants	41.34	4.39	50			
Self-Concept	Male competitive exam aspirants	39.12	4.89	50	98	5.48	0.01
	Female competitive exam aspirants	44.56	4.21	50			
Intelligence	Male competitive exam aspirants	41.26	5.02	50	98	5.69	0.01
	Female competitive exam aspirants	46.12	4.14	50			

DISCUSSION

Gender on Emotional Stability

Observation of Table No. 03 indicates that the mean Emotional Stability scores differ between the two gender groups. The mean ± SD for Male competitive exam aspirants was 42.36 ± 5.18, whereas for Female competitive exam aspirants it was 46.28 ± 4.62. The obtained t value was 3.45. The effect of gender on Emotional Stability was found to be statistically significant t valve (1, 98) = 3.82, $p < 0.01$). This significance level indicates that the calculated t valve exceeds the critical value at the 0.01 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This suggests that Female competitive exam aspirants exhibit significantly higher Emotional Stability compared to Male competitive exam aspirants. This result aligns with previous research indicating that females often exhibit higher levels of emotional regulation and stability in academic and stressful situations (Matud, 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011). One possible explanation is that women tend to employ more adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking social support and engaging in emotion-focused coping, which may buffer the negative effects of academic stress (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). In contrast, men are more likely to rely on problem-focused strategies, which, while effective in some contexts, may be less beneficial under prolonged or uncontrollable stress conditions (Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992). Furthermore, socio-cultural factors in India may contribute to this gender difference. Female students are often socialized to manage emotions more effectively and to maintain composure under pressure, which could enhance their emotional stability (Rani & Kumari, 2016). In competitive exam settings, this capacity for emotional regulation is crucial, as it can influence concentration, motivation, and overall performance (Zeidner, 1998).

Gender on Overall Adjustment

Observation of Table No. 03 indicates that the mean Overall Adjustment scores differ between the two gender groups. The mean ± SD for Male competitive exam aspirants was 40.12 ± 4.86, whereas for Female competitive exam aspirants it was 44.06 ± 4.11. The

obtained t value was 3.82. The effect of gender on Overall Adjustment was found to be statistically significant t valve (1, 98) = 3.45, $p < 0.01$). This significance level indicates that the calculated t valve exceeds the critical value at the 0.01 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This suggests that Female competitive exam aspirants exhibit significantly higher Overall Adjustment compared to Male competitive exam aspirants. These findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that females often demonstrate higher social adaptability, interpersonal sensitivity, and emotional coping skills, which contribute positively to overall adjustment in high-pressure contexts (Matud, 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011). Women tend to seek and utilize social support more frequently, facilitating smoother adaptation to stressful circumstances (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). This relational orientation may help female aspirants maintain emotional balance, effectively manage time, and sustain motivation during rigorous preparation phases. Cultural expectations may also play a role. In many Indian contexts, females are encouraged from an early age to develop cooperative behaviors and conflict-resolution skills, which may enhance their ability to adjust in group learning environments, family expectations, and competitive academic settings (Rani & Kumari, 2016).

Gender on Autonomy

Observation of Table No. 03 indicates that the mean Autonomy scores differ between the two gender groups. The mean ± SD for Male competitive exam aspirants was 35.72 ± 5.26, whereas for Female competitive exam aspirants it was 40.28 ± 4.67. The obtained t value was 4.55. The effect of gender on Autonomy was found to be statistically significant t valve (1, 98) = 3.45, $p < 0.01$). This significance level indicates that the calculated t valve exceeds the critical value at the 0.01 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This suggests that Female competitive exam aspirants exhibit significantly higher Autonomy compared to Male competitive exam aspirants. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that, in recent years, females especially in higher education are increasingly demonstrating higher levels of self-reliance and goal orientation compared to males (Burlingame, 1999; Singh & Kaur, 2018). One possible explanation is that female aspirants, often balancing multiple responsibilities, develop stronger self-management skills and intrinsic motivation, which contribute to higher autonomy (Matud, 2004). Furthermore, societal shifts toward female empowerment in India may have encouraged women to assert their individuality and take greater responsibility for their academic and career goals (Rani & Kumari, 2016). The higher autonomy levels observed among females may thus be an advantage in managing the prolonged and self-regulated study schedules required for such examinations.

Gender on Security–Insecurity

Observation of Table No. 03 indicates that the mean Security–Insecurity scores differ between the two gender groups. The mean ± SD for Male competitive exam aspirants was 36.85 ± 5.18, whereas for Female competitive exam aspirants it was 41.34 ± 4.39. The obtained t value was 4.46. The effect of gender on Security–Insecurity was found to be statistically significant t valve (1, 98) = 4.46, $p < 0.01$). This significance level indicates that the calculated t valve exceeds the critical value at the 0.01 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This suggests that Female competitive exam aspirants exhibit significantly higher Security–Insecurity compared to Male competitive exam aspirants. These results are consistent with earlier studies that suggest females, particularly in academic contexts, often display greater emotional assurance, confidence, and perceived support systems than males (Rani & Kumari, 2016; Matud, 2004).

Female aspirants may benefit from stronger interpersonal networks, such as peer groups and family support, which can enhance their sense of security and reduce feelings of vulnerability (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). Cultural and social factors may also contribute to this difference. In many cases, families invest considerable emotional and moral support in female students, particularly when they are pursuing competitive academic goals, thereby reinforcing their sense of security. Moreover, research suggests that females may be more inclined to seek help and share concerns, which mitigates insecurity and fosters resilience (Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011).

Gender on Self-Concept

Observation of Table No. 03 indicates that the mean Self-Concept scores differ between the two gender groups. The mean ± SD for Male competitive exam aspirants was 39.12 ± 4.89, whereas for Female competitive exam aspirants it was 44.56 ± 4.21. The obtained t value was 4.46. The effect of gender on Self-Concept was found to be statistically significant t valve (1, 98) = 5.48, $p < 0.01$). This significance level indicates that the calculated t valve exceeds the critical value at the 0.01 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This suggests that Female competitive exam aspirants exhibit significantly higher Self-Concept compared to Male competitive exam aspirants. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that female students, particularly in recent years, tend to report higher self-perceptions of competence and self-worth in academic contexts (Singh & Kaur, 2018; Rani & Kumari, 2016). Higher Self-Concept among females may stem from their greater reliance on internal motivation, effective goal-setting, and the use of self-reflective practices, all of which foster a stronger sense of identity and self-belief (Matud, 2004).

Gender on Intelligence

Observation of Table No. 03 indicates that the mean Intelligence scores differ between the two gender groups. The mean ± SD for Male competitive exam aspirants was 41.26 ± 5.02, whereas for Female competitive exam aspirants it was 46.12 ± 4.14. The obtained t value was 5.69. The effect of gender on Intelligence was found to be statistically significant t valve (1, 98) = 4.14, $p < 0.01$). This significance level indicates that the calculated t valve exceeds the critical value at the 0.01 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This suggests that Female competitive exam aspirants exhibit significantly higher Intelligence compared to Male competitive exam aspirants. These findings are in line with prior research suggesting that, in certain academic settings, female students outperform males in tasks requiring sustained attention, verbal reasoning, and structured problem-solving (Hyde & Linn, 2006; Rani & Kumari, 2016). Factors contributing to this difference may include more disciplined study habits, greater time management efficiency, and higher levels of academic motivation observed among female aspirants (Singh & Kaur, 2018). Additionally, socio-cultural shifts in India have increasingly emphasized female education, leading to more opportunities for skill development and intellectual engagement. The supportive academic environments and structured preparation strategies adopted by female students may further enhance their intellectual performance. Moreover, studies suggest that females often exhibit greater metacognitive awareness, enabling them to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning more effectively than males (Flavell, 1979; Veenman, 2013).

CONCLUSION

1. Female competitive exam aspirants exhibit significantly higher Emotional Stability compared to Male competitive exam aspirants.

2. Female competitive exam aspirants exhibit significantly higher Overall Adjustment compared to Male competitive exam aspirants.
3. Female competitive exam aspirants exhibit significantly higher Autonomy compared to Male competitive exam aspirants.
4. Female competitive exam aspirants exhibit significantly higher Security–Insecurity compared to Male competitive exam aspirants.
5. Female competitive exam aspirants exhibit significantly higher Self-Concept compared to Male competitive exam aspirants.
6. Female competitive exam aspirants exhibit significantly higher Intelligence compared to Male competitive exam aspirants.

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Acknowledgements

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

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interests.

How to cite this article: Satonkar, S.D. (2019). A Study of Mental Health Among Competitive Exam Aspirants. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, *7*(3), 831-840. DIP:18.01.092/20190703, DOI:10.25215/0703.092