

Research Paper

Role of Personal Growth Initiative and Social Comparison on Unemployment Anxiety among Emerging Adults

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ABSTRACT

The present study assessed the relationship between Personal Growth Initiative, Social Comparison, and Unemployment Anxiety among emerging adults, as well as academic stream differences across these variables. A sample of 146 participants aged 18-25 years was drawn from college students of Arts, Science, Commerce, Engineering, and Psychology streams using purposive and convenience sampling methods. Data were collected using standardized questionnaires measuring Personal Growth Initiative, Social Comparison, and Unemployment Anxiety, and were analysed using jamovi with Spearman's Rank Correlation, Kruskal-Wallis's test, and Regression analysis. The results revealed a significant positive correlation between Social Comparison and Unemployment Anxiety, whereas PGI demonstrated a significant negative relationship, acting as a protective factor against Unemployment Anxiety. Regression analysis further confirmed that both Social Comparison and PGI are significant predictors of unemployment anxiety levels. Notably, no significant differences were observed in Personal Growth Initiative, Social Comparison, or Unemployment Anxiety across different academic Streams, suggesting these psychological patterns are consistent regardless of the field of study. These findings highlight the detrimental role of peer comparison and the benefits of PGI on Unemployment Anxiety.

Keywords: *Personal Growth Initiative, Social Comparison, Unemployment Anxiety, Emerging Adults*

Emerging adulthood is a distinct developmental phase characterized by exploration, instability, and identity formation, typically occurring between the ages of 18 and 25 (Arnett, 2000). According to Arnett (2000), this period involves critical transitions in education, career, and personal life, making it a pivotal stage for future-oriented decision-making. For college students, this phase is often accompanied by increasing responsibility and systemic pressure to establish a stable career. In recent years, rapid economic changes, growing competition, and rising educational qualifications have intensified uncertainty regarding employment opportunities (Kumar & Ansari, 2025). Particularly in developing job markets like India, where an exceptionally large number of graduates enter the workforce

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Role of Personal Growth Initiative and Social Comparison on Unemployment Anxiety among Emerging Adults

each year, the stark imbalance between higher education attainment and actual employment opportunities has contributed to widespread psychological distress among youth (Kumar & Ansari, 2025). Consequently, concerns related to employability, occupational security, and career stability have become deeply prominent among students nearing graduation.

Unemployment anxiety has therefore emerged as a significant psychological concern among emerging adults (Gimpelson & Oshchepkov, 2012; Pulgar et al., 2025). While external macroeconomic factors such as labor market conditions and job availability play an objective role, internal psychological factors are equally essential. The way individuals perceive themselves, evaluate their abilities in comparison to their immediate peers, and actively engage in intentional self-development can significantly determine how they experience and cope with employment-related stress (Lazarus, 1991). Among these internal variables, Personal Growth Initiative (PGI) and Social Comparison are particularly relevant. These constructs reflect proactive self-development and evaluative cognitive processes, respectively, both of which may either buffer or intensify unemployment anxiety depending on how they function within the individual (Festinger, 1954; Robitschek, 1998).

Unemployment anxiety refers to the pervasive fear, worry, and distress associated with the possibility of facing job instability or failing to secure employment entirely, encompassing financial insecurity, social expectations, and profound future uncertainty. Early foundations established by Marie Jahoda emphasize that employment fulfills essential manifest (economic) and latent (psychological) functions, such as structured time, social interaction, shared experiences, and personal identity. Under Jahoda's Latent Deprivation Theory, the absence of these benefits during transitions leads to heightened anxiety and dissatisfaction. Similarly, the Vitamin Model proposed by Peter Warr conceptualizes environmental features like job security, income, and social contact as essential "psychological nutrients," the deficiency of which severely diminishes mental health. To explain the cognitive path to anxiety, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) outline the Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Stress. This framework suggests that stress is determined by primary appraisal (assessing if a situation is a threat) and secondary appraisal (evaluating one's resources to cope). In the context of impending graduation, individuals who perceive labor market uncertainty as an existential threat and judge their personal skills as inadequate suffer from heightened unemployment anxiety, whereas those with robust psychological resources evaluate the situation as manageable.

Personal Growth Initiative represents an adaptive, positive psychological resource that enables individuals to actively engage in self-improvement. Introduced by Christine Robitschek (1998), PGI reflects intentional, active efforts toward personal development rather than relying on passive growth. It is a multidimensional skill set comprising distinct cognitive and behavioural dimensions: readiness for change, intentional behavior, and the proactive use of resources (Robitschek et al., 2012). Individuals possessing high PGI take firm responsibility for their professional development, show high vocational self-efficacy, and actively optimize their functioning during stressful life transitions (Weigold et al., 2013). Empirical evidence has shown that early PGI scores predict reduced psychological distress and better vocational identity development down the line (Weigold et al., 2018). Within the framework of career uncertainty, PGI is expected to act as an active protective factor, reducing an individual's vulnerability to anxiety by expanding their perceived sense of control and confidence (Dumitru & Opre, 2025; Van Woerkom & Meyers, 2019).

Role of Personal Growth Initiative and Social Comparison on Unemployment Anxiety among Emerging Adults

Conversely, Social Comparison represents an evaluative process through which individuals assess their skills, opinions, and achievements relative to others. This fundamental psychological mechanism, originally conceptualized by Leon Festinger (1954), operates intensely in the absence of objective physical standards. Social comparison can be divided into downward comparisons (comparing oneself to those worse off to protect self-esteem) and upward comparisons (comparing oneself to those perceived as superior). While upward comparison can occasionally motivate self-improvement, it frequently induces feelings of inadequacy, relative deprivation, and performance anxiety (Festinger, 1954; Wheeler, 1992). In contemporary academic environments, opportunities for comparison have expanded exponentially due to social media platforms, which display curated representations of peer milestones (Servidio et al., 2020). Frequent upward social comparison has been directly linked to increased career decision-making uncertainty and heightened distress among youth (Jin et al., 2021; Li et al., 2017). For unemployed or graduating populations, negative peer comparisons strongly predict lower self-esteem, depression, and clinical anxiety disorders (McCarthy et al., 2022; Sheeran et al., 1996).

While external variables of career anxiety have been explored, limited empirical research has examined the combined interaction of an adaptive internal resource (PGI) and a potentially maladaptive external evaluative process (Social Comparison) on unemployment anxiety, particularly within the Indian emerging adult population (Choudhary, 2019; Kautish, 2021). Regions such as Kerala present a unique socio-economic paradox characterized by exceptionally high educational attainment alongside highly competitive, limited local employment opportunities. This unique landscape intensifies job search anxiety, financial pressure, and the fear of social rejection among final-year university students across all academic branches (Snekha & Arun, 2024; Yalçın, 2022). Investigating how PGI and Social Comparison concurrently impact unemployment anxiety is essential for developing targeted institutional interventions, counselling frameworks, and academic skill-building workshops designed to buffer stress and build psychological resilience.

Hence, the present study was undertaken to examine the relationship between Personal Growth Initiative, Social Comparison, and Unemployment Anxiety among emerging adults, to determine their predictive value on anxiety, and to explore whether these psychological variables differ significantly across various academic streams.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To examine the relationship between personal growth initiative, social comparison, and unemployment anxiety.
- To study differences in Personal Growth Initiative, Social Comparison, and Unemployment Anxiety across different streams of students.
- To determine whether personal growth initiative and social comparison can predict unemployment anxiety.

Hypotheses

- **H01:** There is no significant relationship between personal growth initiative and unemployment anxiety.
- **H02:** There is no significant relationship between social comparison and unemployment anxiety.

Role of Personal Growth Initiative and Social Comparison on Unemployment Anxiety among Emerging Adults

- **H03:** There is no significant relationship between social comparison and personal growth initiative.
- **H04:** Personal growth initiative and social comparison will not significantly predict unemployment anxiety.
- **H05:** There is no significant difference in unemployment anxiety, social comparison and personal growth initiative across different academic streams.

Variables

- **Independent Variables:** Personal Growth Initiative and Social Comparison.
- **Dependent Variable:** Unemployment Anxiety.

Sample (Participants)

The initial sample consisted of 160 college students from various academic streams, including Arts, Science, Commerce, Engineering, and Psychology, with a final sample of 146 participants utilized for active analysis. The participants were emerging adults within an age range of 18 to 25 years. Non-probability sampling methods, specifically purposive and convenience sampling techniques, were applied to recruit participants. Geographically, the locale of the sample was restricted exclusively to college students residing in Kerala, India.

- **Inclusion Criteria:** Emerging adults aged 18–25 years who are currently active college students within the state of Kerala.
- **Exclusion Criteria:** Students enrolled via distance education programs, individuals who resumed their studies following an official career or work break, college dropouts, and individuals pursuing a double academic degree.

Instruments (Materials & Scoring)

- **Personal Growth Initiative Scale-II (PGIS-II):** Developed by Christine Robitschek et al. (2012), this scale serves as an operational measure of an individual's active and intentional involvement in self-development across four distinct dimensions: readiness for change, planfulness, intentional behavior, and use of resources. The tool is a 9-item standardized instrument demonstrating good psychometric internal consistency, with reliability coefficients ranging from 0.78 to 0.90, alongside established construct validity. Items are scored on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (Definitely disagree) to 6 (Definitely agree). Individual item responses are summed to yield an absolute total raw score spanning from 9 to 54, where elevated numbers signify superior levels of proactive personal growth initiative.
- **The Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM):** Developed by Buunk and Gibbons (1999), this measure is used to evaluate social comparison orientation across ability-based and opinion-based comparison dimensions. The instrument comprises 11 items evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Psychometric reliability for the scale spans from 0.78 to 0.85, supported by verified construct and criterion validity. Total raw scores are obtained by calculating the structural sum of all items, producing a score range between 11 and 55. Reverse scoring protocols are applied strictly to Item 5 and Item 11; higher baseline scores reflect an increased internal cognitive tendency toward peer social comparison.
- **HeWi's Unemployment Anxiety Scale (HUAS):** Utilized to operationally assess unemployment-related psychological distress, this scale explicitly quantifies fear of joblessness, career future uncertainty, and perceived absence of marketplace

Role of Personal Growth Initiative and Social Comparison on Unemployment Anxiety among Emerging Adults

opportunities. The scale contains 26 structured items evaluated via a 5-point Likert response design spanning from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree). The psychometric scale possesses established content validity and demonstrates strong internal consistency with a reported reliability coefficient of 0.822. Cumulative scoring is executed by summing responses across all items, with reverse-scoring adjustments meticulously implemented for Items 2, 11, 12, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, and 26. Elevated total raw scores signify higher contextual levels of unemployment anxiety

Procedure & Data Collection

Primary quantitative data collection was conducted via digital administrative deployment utilizing online Google Forms. Prospective participants were fully briefed regarding the specific overarching academic purpose of the study, and individual informed consent was successfully obtained digitally prior to tool presentation. The three standardized psychological evaluation questionnaires and a sociodemographic detail form were completed entirely online. The field data collection phase was executed systematically over a timeline spanning from October 2025 to December 2025 within the state of Kerala through google forms.

Statistical Analysis

Empirical data processing was executed using Jamovi statistical software packages. Preliminary distribution characteristics and data normality were formally verified using individual Shapiro-Wilk tests. Because the Personal Growth Initiative ($p < .001$) and Social Comparison ($p = .002$) raw data displayed significant statistical deviation from normal distribution patterns, non-parametric statistical computations were selected for these variables. Structural relationships among the variables were measured using Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficients. Cross-sectional differences across the five distinct academic streams were analysed utilizing Kruskal-Wallis tests for the non-normal variables. Finally, simultaneous linear regression modelling was carried out to assess the exact predictive influence of the independent variables on total unemployment anxiety scores.

Ethical Considerations

The execution of the research design adhered strictly to standard psychological ethical codes to preserve participant safety, legal rights, and personal dignity. Subject participation remained completely voluntary throughout, and individuals retained the right to terminate participation or reject requests without penalty. Confidentially and full anonymity protocols were maintained by avoiding the collection of any personal identifying entries such as names or explicit contact details. Collected empirical datasets were preserved within secure storage media, restricted from unauthorized access, used solely for university academic purposes, and compiled without data fabrication or manipulation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Personal Growth Initiative, Unemployment Anxiety, and Social Comparison

Variables	N	Mean	Skewness	Kurtosis	Shapiro-Wilk p
PGI	146	37.5	-0.837	1.02	<.001
SC	146	31.2	-0.459	0.825	.002
UA	146	72.8	-0.0861	0.329	.423

Role of Personal Growth Initiative and Social Comparison on Unemployment Anxiety among Emerging Adults

The mean score for Personal Growth Initiative (PGI) was 37.5, Social Comparison (SC) was 31.2, and Unemployment Anxiety (UA) was 72.8. An assessment of the data's distribution revealed slight negative skewness for both PGI (-0.837) and SC (-0.459), indicating a tendency for participants to score on the higher side of these measures. In contrast, Unemployment Anxiety (-0.086) was approximately normally distributed. Kurtosis values for all three variables (PGI = 1.02, SC = 0.825, UA = 0.329) were within acceptable limits, suggesting no severe deviation from normality. However, formal normality testing using the Shapiro-Wilk test demonstrated that PGI ($p < 0.01$) and SC ($p < 0.05$) significantly deviated from a normal distribution, whereas UA ($p > 0.05$) met the assumption of normality.

Table 2 Correlation Matrix of Personal Growth Initiative, Social Comparison, and Unemployment Anxiety

Variables	PGI	SC	UA
PGI		-0.069	-0.422***
SC			0.276***
UA			

Table 3 Regression Analysis Predicting Unemployment Anxiety

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	75.495	4.695	16.08	<.001
PGI Total	-0.438	0.085	-5.13	<.001
SC Total	0.437	0.102	4.29	<.001

Correlation analyses revealed a significant negative relationship between PGI and UA ($\rho = -0.422$), whereas a significant positive relationship was observed between SC and UA ($\rho = 0.276$). The relationship between PGI and SC themselves was non-significant ($p > 0.05$), suggesting these two mechanisms operate independently. A linear regression analysis demonstrated that the overall model explained 25.1% of the variance in unemployment anxiety. Both variables emerged as significant predictors: PGI was a negative predictor ($B = -0.438$

) And SC was a positive predictor ($B = 0.437$) of UA.

The findings illustrate that unemployment anxiety among emerging adults is simultaneously shaped by internal coping resources and external evaluative stressors. Consistent with Lazarus's Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Stress, PGI acts as a vital protective factor; active engagement in self-improvement fosters a sense of control and preparedness that buffers against employment uncertainty (Weigold et al., 2013). Conversely, aligning with Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, SC operates as a potent risk factor. Frequent peer comparisons, particularly upward comparisons common in competitive environments, exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and career-related distress (Jin et al., 2021).

Table 4 Group statistics across Streams of Study

Groups	N	Mean of PGI	Mean of SC	Mean of UA
Arts	30	35.9	31.8	75.1
Science	28	36.8	30.3	72.2
Commerce	30	35.9	31.8	75.1
Engineering	26	37.5	30.8	73.2
Psychology	32	40.1	33.4	71.3

Role of Personal Growth Initiative and Social Comparison on Unemployment Anxiety among Emerging Adults

Table 5 Differences Across Streams of Study

Variables	Test	Statistic	df	p value
PGI	Kruskal–Wallis	$\chi^2 = 7.33$	4	.119
SC	Kruskal–Wallis	$\chi^2 = 6.41$	4	.171
UA	Kruskal–Wallis	$\chi^2 = 3.34$	4	.503

The statistical analyses led to the acceptance of the null hypotheses, indicating no significant differences across academic streams for any of the measured variables. Specifically, students from different disciplines showed no statistically significant variance in Personal Growth Initiative, Social Comparison, or Unemployment Anxiety scores ($p > 0.05$).

The lack of significant differences across academic streams suggests that employment-related concerns—and the internal psychological mechanisms used to process them—are widespread and universal among emerging adults. These findings are strongly supported by recent literature. Kumar and Ansari (2025) noted that unemployment-related psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, is a common experience for educated youth irrespective of their specific academic disciplines. Similarly, Snekha and Arun (2024) identified that fundamental stressors such as financial pressure, fear of rejection, and uncertainty drive job search anxiety across all fields of study. These findings demonstrate that employment-related stress and the psychological mechanisms used to process it are universal experiences among emerging adults, rather than being unique to specific fields of study. Because these psychological patterns exist uniformly across all academic disciplines, practical implications highlight the necessity of university-wide career counselling and psychological interventions designed to simultaneously enhance personal growth initiative and reduce maladaptive social comparison.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that unemployment anxiety among emerging adults is significantly influenced by psychological factors, with Personal Growth Initiative acting as a protective factor and Social Comparison as a risk factor. Student's academic stream does not significantly influence their levels of Unemployment Anxiety, Personal Growth Initiative (PGI), or Social Comparison.

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Role of Personal Growth Initiative and Social Comparison on Unemployment Anxiety among Emerging Adults

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Role of Personal Growth Initiative and Social Comparison on Unemployment Anxiety among Emerging Adults

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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