

Research Paper

Locus of Control and Existential Concerns: A Comparative Study on First-Generation and Continuing-Generation Students

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ABSTRACT

The present descriptive correlational study examined the relationship between locus of control (LOC) and existential concerns (ECS) among university students. Moreover, it also aimed to discover differences in LOC and ECS between first-generation and continuing-generation students. A sample of 100 students (63 first-generation and 37 continuing-generation students) were collected using convenience sampling and statistical techniques including pearson correlation, independent sample t-test and multiple regression were carried out. The results of these analyses revealed no significant association between LOC and ECS ($r=0.0789$). Furthermore, no significant differences in LOC ($t=-0.31$, $p=0.759$) and ECS ($t=1.94$, $p=0.055$) regarding generation status were found. Although, higher mean scores of ECS among first-generation students ($M=83.33$, $SD=41.03$) than continuing-generation students ($M=67.05$, $SD=31.87$) were observed. Findings of multiple regression indicated that generation status was a significant predictor of ECS ($B=15.762$, $p=0.049$), while gender and LOC did not contribute significantly as predictors of ECS. The overall regression model was not significant ($R=0.047$), $p=0.199$) highlighting that only a smaller proportion of variance ECS was explained. This illustrates that generation status of students has a significant influence on the levels of existential concerns, regardless of the model's lower predictive ability.

Keywords: *Locus of Control, Existential Concerns, First-Generation Students, Continuing-Generation Students*

In the context of university, students going through the transformative phase as emerging young adults are vulnerable mentally to experience existential questioning triggering elevation of existential concerns related to life purpose, meaning and identity (Monti & Dinero, 2025). Moreover, this stage is often attributed in confrontation of big five existential concerns i.e. death, isolation, identity, freedom and meaning (Kretschmer & Storm, 2018). The adjustment process which follows through this is considerably different for in students belonging to different educational backgrounds. The first-generation students who are the first ones to enrol in higher education with none of their parents having a university degree might have differences in adjustment process comparatively to continuing-generation

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students. The parent's education level and socioeconomic status are significant predictors of university retention as well as academic achievement (Gifford et al., 2006).

A study by Gifford et al. in 2006 on first year university students discovered that among students whose parents lack education, locus of control (internal) can act as a significant determinant of academic success. On the other hand, it was observed that students' external locus of control can lead them to belief that achievement is due to fate, hence, resulting in more vulnerable in experiencing psychological distress linked with poor adjustment (Gifford et al., 2006; Monti & Dinero, 2025).

The students with first-generation status might experience the mismatch between the independent norms of universities and the interdependent backgrounds they come from (DU, 2025). Furthermore, the students' parental support, peer support and intentions are significant determinants of academic behaviour where specifically among first-generation students from the above three; intention was the only determinant of academic behaviour discovered in a study by Purswell et. al (2008).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Purswell et. al (2008): A comparative study on 329 college students was carried out by Purswell et al. (2008) for investigating peer support, academic intention as well as parental support as determinants of self-reported academic behaviours. It was discovered that among first-generation students, the academic intention was significant predictor of academic behaviours whereas students' academic behaviours whose parents possessed college degree was significantly determined by peer support, academic intention and parental support. Nevertheless, those students whose parents were having some college experience had academic behaviours predicated by only peer support.

Aspelmeier et. al (2012): Aspelmeier et. al (2012) conducted another study among 322 students based on generation status whose findings revealed that generation status (first or continuing generation) in undergraduate students significantly moderated the associations between their academic outcomes and psychological factors. It was also found that a very strong significant relation existed between them in first-generation students compared to continuing generation.

Burger & Naude (2019): In context of South Africa, an investigation of the students' generation status differences regarding their academic success was carried out. The findings showed that students of first-generation achieved significant lower levels of academic success as compared to continuing generation students, though; they displayed higher physical energy levels in activities and elevated commitment level towards higher education.

Lopez-Tiu, M. (2025): In 2025, Lopez-Tiu carried out phenomenological study among 6 university students using semi structured interviews. The results suggested that emptiness, numbness and other such feelings are aroused from emotions impacted by negative influence of existential crisis among students. Also, existential crisis could probably influence wellbeing and daily life functioning.

Burwell & Lobo (2025): Burwell & Lobo (2025) studied disparities among 62 medical students with respect to their generation status. In first-generation medical students it was

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found that they experienced financial strain, social isolation feelings from peers and higher resilience. It was also observed that these disparities were not eliminated even after providing institutional fellowships to continuing generation (53%) and first-generation (47%) students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Aims

This study aims to investigate the relationship between locus of control and existential concerns along with comparing the levels of these variables between continuing-generation students (whose either one or both parents hold higher education degree) and first-generation students (whose both parents do not hold higher education degree).

Objectives

- To measure levels of students' locus of control
- To measure levels of students' existential concerns
- To study relationship between locus of control and existential concerns
- To compare between the continuing-generation and first-generation students concerning locus of control and existential concerns
- To discover whether existential concerns is predicted by locus of control, generation status and gender of students

Hypothesis

1. There is significant relation between locus of control and existential concerns among students
2. There is significant difference between continuing generation and first-generation students with respect to their locus of control
3. There is significant difference between continuing generation and first-generation students with respect to their existential concerns
4. Locus of control significantly predicts existential concerns among students.
5. Generation status significantly predicts existential concerns among students.
6. Gender significantly predicts existential concerns among students.

Sample

This study's sample comprises of students falling in age range of 18 to 29. A total of 100 participants were included which were 63 students of first-generation i.e. students whose both parents do not have degree of higher education and another 37 of continuing generation i.e. students having either one or both parents holding degree of higher education. Convenience method was employed for data collection from students meeting the inclusion criteria and rejecting those meeting the exclusion criteria given below.

Inclusion Criteria

1. Students enrolled in higher education courses
2. Falling in age range of 18 to 29
3. Have basic understanding of English
4. Appropriately defined status of parents' education by students
5. Students who provide complete responses

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Exclusion Criteria

1. Students who are not enrolled in higher education courses
2. Ill-defined status of parents' education by students
3. Do not have basic understanding of English
4. Do not fall in age range of 18 to 29
5. Students who provide incomplete responses

Variables

1. Dependent Variables

- Existential Concerns

2. Independent Variables

- Locus of Control
- Gender
- Generation Status

Tools

- Rotter's Internal-External Locus of Control Scale by Julian B Rotter (1966)
- Existential Concerns Scale (ECS-DUDS) by Upinder Dhar & Santosh Dhar (2024)

Procedure

Data collection from chosen sample was done by using Google form questionnaire distributed to the university students. The respondents were invited to respond voluntarily, and the instructions were provided before participation. The questionnaire involved assessing levels of Locus of Control and Existential Concerns, along with demographic questions on gender and generation status. A total of 100 students completed the survey. Later, data was analysed and interpreted.

Research Design

The present study is quantitative and descriptive correlational. It aims a comparative and correlational approach to investigate the association between locus of control and existential concerns along with comparing the difference concerning the levels of locus of control and existential concerns among students who belong to first or continuing generation with respect to parents' higher education.

Statistical Analysis

Description statistics was computed for all the study's variables including mean and standard deviation. For testing first hypotheses pearson correlation was used and independent sample t-test was used to measure significant differences to test second and third hypotheses. Finally, for examining predictive role of independent variables (gender, generation status, locus of control) on existential concerns, multiple regression was conducted.

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RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Summary

Category		Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	55	55.0%
	female	45	45.0%
Locality	Rural	56	56.0%
	Urban	44	44.0%
Age	18-20	23	23.0%
	21-23	41	41.0%
	24-26	26	26.0%
	27-29	10	10.0%
Generation Status	First-Generation	63	63.0%
	Continuous-Generation	37	37.0%

Note. The sample of 100 were including 63% first-generation students and continuing-generation students were 37%.

Table 2: Correlation between Locus of Control and Existential Concerns

Variables	Existential Concerns	Locus of Control
Existential Concerns	1	0.0789
Locus of Control	0.0789	1

The outcomes of correlational analysis on sample of 100 students revealed no significant relation between Locus of Control and Existential Concerns with $r = 0.0789$. This implies that as the changes in existential concerns level, locus of control does not find to be reliably predict any changes in these levels of existential concerns.

Table 3: Comparison of Locus of Control between continuing and first-generation students

Generation Status	N	M	SD	df	t	p	Level of Significance
First-Generation	63	11.10	2.37	98	-0.31	0.759	Not Significant
Continuing-Generation	37	11.24	2.23				

The comparison of locus of control between first and continuing generation students was analysed using t test whose results revealed no significant differences among students in mean scores of locus of control regarding students' generation status.

Table 4: Comparison of Existential Concerns between continuing and first-generation students

Generation Status	N	M	SD	df	t	p	Level of Significance
First-Generation	63	83.33	41.03	98	1.94	0.055	Not Significant
Continuing-Generation	37	67.05	31.87				

Similar to the comparison locus of control regarding gender status, the students of first-generation and continuing-generation was compared for existential concerns. The obtained

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$t = 1.94$ and $p = 0.055$ suggested that no significant difference was also found between mean scores of existential concerns between first and continuing generation students.

Table 5: Multiple Regression predicting Existential Concerns from Locus of Control, Gender and Generation Status

Predictor	B	SE B	95% CI	β	t	p
Constant	49.752	19.859	[10.333, 89.170]		2.505	0.014
Locus of Control	1.325	1.667	[-1.984, 4.635]	0.08	0.795	0.429
Gender	4.042	7.72	[-11.283, 19.367]	0.053	0.524	0.602
Generation Status	15.762	7.917	[0.046, 31.477]	0.199	1.991	0.049

Note. $R^2 = 0.047$, $F(3, 96) = 1.58$, $p = 0.199$. Significant level: $p < 0.05$.

The findings of multiple regression analysis indicated that the generation status is the only strongest determinant of existential concerns as compared to gender and locus of control. Moreover, neither locus of control nor gender was found to have statistically significant relation with the outcome variable. The overall model was also quite weak as the model only explains 4.7% of total variance, demonstrating that there might be determinants other than the above which were not in the present study which are significant in determining the outcome.

DISCUSSION

The present comparative research study was carried out on 100 university students with generation status as focus. Sample of first-generation students (63) and continuing-generation students (37) was collected using online Google forms involving questionnaires of Rotter's Internal-External Locus of Control Scale by Julian B Rotter (1966) and Existential Concerns Scale (ECS-DUDS) by Upinder Dhar & Santosh Dhar (2024). The collected data was analysed using Pearson correlation, t-test and multiple regression. The outcome of correlational analysis demonstrated existential concerns and locus of control yielded no significant correlation ($r = 0.0789$) among university students leading to rejection of first hypothesis which stated there is significant relation between locus of control and existential concern, illustrating that the degree of existential concerns may not be contingent upon individual's perceived locus of control. During emerging adulthood, the existential phenomenology and existential questioning is recognized as a part of normative developmental milestone specifically within the context of university, students actively engage in purpose-seeking and exploring life trajectories (Amett, 2000; Yalom, 1980). Consequently, regardless of whether there is an internal or external locus of control orientation, the students are likely to have existential concern experiences as a function of their developmental phase.

Furthermore, on comparing first and continuing generation students regarding both variables it was discovered that there was no significant difference of mean between students in terms of locus of control ($t = -0.31$, $p = 0.759$) and existential concerns ($t = 1.94$, $p = 0.055$) resulting in rejection of second and third hypothesis. These findings illustrate that both cohorts have a possibility of possessing comparable degrees of locus of control which might be outcome of a uniform academic demands as well as the common exposure to learning educational environments for students of both first and continuing generation. Additionally, the non-significant result for existential concerns may indicate that the issues associated with ontological uncertainty, purpose and meaning are equally distributed among students

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regardless of their generation status. The obtained difference in degree of existential concerns approached near the marginal significance level, however, did not rise to necessary levels to be considered statistically significant suggesting that students' generation status may not be a significant factor.

Findings of multiple regression which aimed to discover whether gender, locus of control and generation status significantly predicted existential concerns among university students indicated that the overall regression model was not significant ($R = 0.047$, $p = 0.199$). This highlighted that only a smaller proportion of variance ECS was explained, in other words the predictors did not jointly explain a significant portion of variance in the outcome variable. Moreover, the generation status was a significant predictor of ECS ($B = 15.762$, $p = 0.049$), while gender and LOC did not contribute significantly as predictors of ECS illustrating that generation status of students has a significant influence on the levels of existential concerns, regardless of the model's lower predictive ability. Hence, fourth and fifth hypothesis were rejected and the sixth hypothesis which stated generation status significantly predicts existential concerns among students. These results were consistent with few previous researches, for instance, in a systematic review study on first-generation students discovered an elevated experience of stress, anxiety along with high depression (especially in social and academic contexts) (Rockwell & Kimel, 2025). Another study by Smith and McLellan (2023) revealed there was a high possibility for first-generation students to face extra challenges in higher education which might impact their psychological as well as emotional experiences.

CONCLUSION

The current study on university students demonstrated that existential concerns is not related significantly to locus of control, however, existential concerns scores were discovered to be higher in first-generation students. The lack of association between locus of control and existential concerns is a distinct domain which needs special attention. Furthermore, higher scores of existential concerns in first-generation students points out vulnerability towards experiencing existential anxiety, though they experience similar beliefs in their own agency as their peers.

Suggestions and Limitations

This study utilized convenience sampling due to this the sample might have captured certain set of participants which were naturally more vulnerable to existential reflections. Additionally, the discovered higher level of existential concerns among first-generation students implies that it could be studied in-depth using qualitative explorations. Moreover, according to the study's findings there might be other predictors of existential concerns other than the ones included in this study. Hence, the future studies could explore more of other predictors of existential concerns.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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