

Research Paper

Comparative Study of Self-Criticism, Perfectionism, and Anxiety among University Students

Suhani Datta^{1*}, Dr. Lakhminder Singh²

ABSTRACT

The present study aims to explore the relationships between self-criticism, perfectionism, and anxiety among university students. A total of 227 students participated in the study. Self-report questionnaires or measures of self-criticism, perfectionism (evaluative and striving dimensions), and anxiety are used to collect data. Preliminary analyses reveal that the data violate the assumption of normality. As a result, non-parametric tests are utilized. Spearman's correlation analysis showcases the presence of positively significant relationships between maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety, self-criticism and anxiety, and maladaptive perfectionism and self-criticism. Mann-Whitney U tests indicate that female students score higher on self-criticism, evaluative perfectionism, and anxiety, whereas male students score higher on striving perfectionism. Additionally, students with high levels of maladaptive perfectionism show significantly higher anxiety than people with lower levels. These findings highlight the role of self-critical and perfectionistic tendencies in the process of developing and experiencing anxiety among university students. The study highlights the need to develop interventions targeting harsh and negative self-evaluation. This supports mental and overall psychological well-being in various academic settings. The study concludes that self-critical thoughts and maladaptive perfectionism increase anxiety among university students.

Keywords: *Self-Criticism, Maladaptive Perfectionism, Anxiety, University Students, Psychological Distress, Evaluative Concerns, Self-Critical Rumination, Mental Health*

A developmental stage that is considered to be of extreme importance involves the time an individual spends in their university. This stage involves academic and life responsibilities, transitions happening in social life, concerns about future growth and success, etc. This is the time when an individual is expected to maintain a balance in their academic, personal, and social lives while also developing independence. Such situations, on one hand, promote autonomy and growth, but, on the other hand, also expose one to extreme psychological distress because of all the societal expectations one is facing in their day-to-day lives. Thus, this is such a phase where students have a higher likelihood to develop mental health difficulties. (Beiter et al., 2014; Bayram & Bilgel, 2008).

¹Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India.

²Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India.

*Corresponding Author

Received: April 16, 2026; Revision Received: June 25, 2026; Accepted: June 29, 2026

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Some of the common symptoms of such difficulty or anxiety include restlessness, excess worry, concentration difficulties, bodily arousal, etc. This phase is characterized by certain stressors such as fear of failure, academic pressure, and future or career uncertainty (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Psychological well-being is affected when anxiety symptoms are present persistently, negatively affecting interpersonal relationships, highlighting the importance of understanding the psychological factors that are contributing to the development of anxiety (Eisenberg et al., 2007).

Self-criticism

As mentioned in various studies, Self-criticism is one of such psychological factors. It means a long-lasting habit or tendency of an individual to have harsh evaluation of themselves, feelings of inadequacy, and heightened sensitivity to perceived failure (Aftab et al., 2025; Pekin & Güme, 2025). High self-critical thinking or harsh negative self-evaluation is linked with anxiety, stress, eating disorders, depression, etc. (Gilbert et al., 2004; McIntyre et al., 2018; Zaccari et al., 2024). People with high self-critical thinking consider themselves worthless if they make any mistake, which in the long run leads to increased emotional and psychological distress (Gilbert et al., 2004). It develops because of blaming oneself, comparing oneself negatively with others, feelings of guilt, and shame. Self-criticism is said to develop from various factors such as unconscious conflicts, negative and harsh thought processes, unhealthy early relationships, receiving criticism repeatedly from others, or the presence of natural threat systems in human beings (Pekin & Güme, 2025). Students who have high self-criticism face an internal pressure to meet the educational standards set by the academic settings, further increasing their vulnerability towards anxiety, especially during examinations and performance feedback sessions (McIntyre et al., 2018; Khizer et al., 2024; Beiter et al., 2014).

Perfectionism

Another important factor is perfectionism. Perfectionism is a concept that has a tendency to impose high self-evaluation along with high personal evaluation standards (Frost et al., 1990). Earlier, only the maladaptive aspect was taken into consideration, which involves harsh self-evaluation, low self-worth, etc. (Flett & Hewitt, 2002), and is associated with indecisiveness, procrastination, and psychological distress, including certain disorders such as personality issues, depression, and eating disorders.

Recent studies considered both the adaptive and maladaptive components. Hamachek (1978) proposed a dual phenomenon of perfectionism. As per this phenomenon, normal perfectionists want to achieve high but realistic goals and be satisfied with it post achieving the goal; on the other hand, there are neurotic perfectionists who want to achieve unrealistic goals, which keeps them dissatisfied for a long period of time.

Based on this concept, Slade and Owens (1998) further proposed maladaptive perfectionism, which involves the presence of a fear of failure, excess worry, and tension about oneself and about peers' and families' expectations, and adaptive perfectionism, which involves goal-directed attitudes and behaviors that help to set realistic standards (Bieling et al., 2004). Kung and Chan (2014) proposed a negative dimension that involves having a fear of mistakes and self-doubt, which negatively affects academic and social life, and a positive dimension that involves realistic goals and standards, which improves the overall academic performance.

Similarly, Evaluation Concerns Perfectionism (ECP) is characterized by fear of mistakes, being overly sensitive to negative self-evaluation, and psychological distress; and Personal Standards Perfectionism (PSP), which is characterized by a tendency to set unrealistic self-standards. (Dunkley et al., 2000; Frost et al., 1993; Stoeber & Otto, 2006)

A multidimensional aspect of perfectionism was developed by Frost and his colleagues in 1990, which consisted of six components. This included concern over the mistakes, which focuses on pathological perfectionism; personal standards and organization focused on achievement-based qualities; doubts about actions, parental expectations, and criticism. This further helped in developing the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale.

Another perspective was given by Hewitt and Flett (1991), involving Self-oriented perfectionism, involving the tendency to set high standards for oneself, other perfectionism, involving the tendency to expect others to be perfect, and socially prescribed perfectionism, which involves a belief that one needs to be perfect to be accepted. This helped in developing the Hewitt Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale.

High levels of stress, anxiety, burnout, and reduced well-being are associated with maladaptive perfectionism, which involves excessive doubts on self, concern over mistakes, and fear of evaluation. (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Stoyanova, 2025). Whereas higher motivation and greater success in academics are associated with adaptive perfectionism, which is characterized by setting high but also attainable goals. (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Naqvi & Anjum, 2025).

Anxiety

Anxiety is considered to be a very common psychological experience that plays a protective role in our lives from danger. It is responsible to develop worries or increased alertness when a threat is sensed by increasing the levels of heart rate, awareness, and attention towards the surroundings or oneself. It is a very useful concept for the survival of a person. But it's considered to be problematic when it is present in an excessive amount for a long period of time, or is not appropriate to what the situation actually demands. Constant anxious symptoms present at an unhealthy level are very difficult to control and may even be present when no danger is present in the environment of an individual. When anxiety is left untreated, it impacts academic and work performance levels, interpersonal relationships, and quality of life and psychological well-being. It also increases the risk of developing conditions like depressive symptoms, burnout, distress, sleep issues, etc. It affects self-confidence and develops unhealthy coping strategies. Studies suggest that anxiety symptoms develop because of the presence of both self-criticism and perfectionistic concerns, as it reinforces various maladaptive cognitive patterns like extreme fear of failure, catastrophizing, etc. (Dunkley et al., 2020; Xiong et al., 2024; Gil et al., 2023)

Evidence suggests that all three factors have an association with each other, but there are very few studies that have examined these factors together among university students, particularly through a comparative framework (Levine et al., 2023; Eva et al., 2025; Sheikh et al., 2025). Various environmental and social factors also affect the development of self-critical thinking and anxiety among individuals. For example, pressure from family to meet academic expectations, adverse childhood experiences, and emotional regulation difficulties have the capacity to develop maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety (Mahmood et al., 2023; Beiter et al., 2014; Khizer et al., 2024), whereas, on the other hand, perceived social support

may have a positive effect on the overall well-being (Bearden et al., 2024; Kawamoto et al., 2023).

In some studies, a protective factor is mentioned that is self-compassion. In first-year undergraduate studies, maladaptive perfectionism was positively associated with anxiety, but the presence of self-compassion partially mediated this relationship, implying that students who are kinder to themselves may experience fewer anxiety symptoms despite perfectionistic tendencies (Xiong et al., 2024). It was also suggested that another feature, that is, psychological adaptability, also plays a role in weakening the association between perfectionism and anxiety (Wong et al., 2025).

Studies also reported that female students reported having high levels of self-criticism, maladaptive perfectionism, and anxiety as compared to males (Aftab et al., 2025; Eva et al., 2025). These patterns of behavior are considered to be linked with increased sensitivity to evaluate oneself, high self-expectations, and societal pressures.

Despite the presence of existing literature, various important gaps remain. Very few studies examined the influence of both factors on anxiety whereas, whereas many studies examined the two factors, self-criticism and perfectionism, in isolation (Goswami & Bakshi, 2025). It was also found that anxiety-related outcomes have been explored less as compared to depression and general distress (McIntyre et al., 2018). Certain inconsistencies discovered in the measurement and the process of conceptualization of perfectionism have also shown the importance of having a clear distinction between the adaptive and maladaptive forms of perfectionistic concerns (Brotherton et al., 2025; Tao et al., 2025). Also, there is a lack of research done on university populations, indicating that specific populations need to be studied in more depth.

As a result, the current comparative study seeks to investigate the links between self-criticism, perfectionist concerns, and anxiety symptoms in university students by identifying differences and associations between these variables. The findings may help with early detection, preventative methods, and focused psychological interventions in university mental health services. According to the studies and their findings, the present study aimed to understand the associations present among self-criticism, perfectionism, and anxiety within an integrated structure, as well as to examine the impact of adaptive and maladaptive aspects of perfectionistic concerns on the presence of anxiety among university students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Objectives

- To compare anxiety levels between students with high and low maladaptive perfectionism.
- To compare anxiety levels between students with high and low striving aspects of perfectionism.
- To examine the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety among university students.
- To examine the relationship between self-criticism and anxiety among university students.
- To investigate the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and self-criticism.

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Hypotheses

- Students with high levels of maladaptive perfectionism will report significantly higher anxiety scores than students with low levels of maladaptive perfectionism.
- Students with high levels of perfectionistic striving (adaptive perfectionism) will report lower anxiety scores than students with low levels of perfectionistic striving.
- Maladaptive perfectionism will have a significant positive relationship with anxiety.
- Self-criticism will have a significant positive relationship with anxiety among university students.
- There will be a significant positive relationship between Maladaptive perfectionism and self-criticism.

Participants and Data Collection

Data is gathered using a convenience sampling method. A total of 227 university students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs were included, where 53.3% were undergraduate, 22.7% were postgraduate, and 24% were graduate.

Variables

- **Independent Variables:** Self-criticism and perfectionism
- **Dependent Variable:** Anxiety

Inclusion Criteria

- University students aged between 18 and 30 years who are actively involved in undergraduate and postgraduate courses.
- Willingness to participate voluntarily.

Exclusion Criteria

- Diagnosed with some psychiatric disorder.
- Was undergoing intensive psychological or psychiatric treatment.
- Had a history of neurological disorders or cognitive impairments affecting comprehension of questionnaires.

Research Design

In the present study, the research design is cross-sectional. Descriptive Statistics are used to study the nature and distribution of scores, while inferential statistics, particularly Spearman's correlation and Mann–Whitney U tests, are used to test the relationships and hypotheses among self-criticism, perfectionism, and anxiety.

Instruments

- Self-Critical Rumination Scale: developed by Laura et al. in 2016, it consists of 10 items, rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, used to assess the tendency to engage in repetitive, persistent, and negative self-focused thinking following perceived failures or shortcomings.
- Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale – Brief Version (FMPS–Brief): A shortened form of the original Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, developed by Frost et al. in 1990, consists of 8 items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. It primarily focuses on two key components: Evaluative Concerns Perfectionism (maladaptive perfectionism) and Perfectionistic Strivings (achievement-oriented striving).
- Depression Anxiety Stress Scale–21 (DASS-21): Anxiety Subscale: A shortened form of the original DASS, both developed by Lovibond and Lovibond in 1995,

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where responses are rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from did not apply to me at all to applied to me very much or most of the time. Only the Anxiety subscale was used, which consists of 7 items that measure physiological arousal, situational anxiety, and fear-based responses such as trembling, increased heart rate, and feelings of panic.

Data Analysis

Following the process of data collection, scoring is done as per the manuals of the assessment tools used. For data analysis, Jamovi statistical software was utilized. Descriptive statistics are computed to summarize the levels of self-criticism, perfectionism, and anxiety. Inferential statistical techniques are applied to examine relationships among the study variables and to test the proposed hypotheses.

RESULTS

Section 1

In this section, the descriptive statistics of the study variables are presented. Also, preliminary analyses are conducted in order to examine the distributional properties of the data before performing inferential statistical analyses.

Sample Demographics

This study aims to understand self-criticism, perfectionism, and anxiety among university students. A total sample of 227 university students, aged from 18 to 30 years, is collected for the study, which comprises 127 females and 100 males. Out of 227 participants, 53.3% are undergraduate, 22.7% are postgraduate, and 24% are graduate.

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Self-criticism, Perfectionism, and Anxiety among University Students

	GENDER	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
SCRS Total score	FEMALE	127	25.21	7.16	10	40
	MALE	100	23.05	6.35	10	40
FMRS total evaluative score	FEMALE	127	11.09	3.64	4	20
	MALE	100	9.81	3.31	4	19
FMRS total striving score	FEMALE	127	13.26	2.93	5	20
	MALE	100	14.28	2.62	7	19
DASS-21 ANXIETY total score	FEMALE	127	7.06	4.20	0	18
	MALE	100	5.84	4.11	0	19

Descriptive statistics for self-criticism, perfectionism, and anxiety among university students are presented in Table 1. While examining the group means, female students ($n = 127$) scored higher average values on self-criticism ($M = 25.21$, $SD = 7.16$), evaluative perfectionism ($M = 11.09$, $SD = 3.64$), and anxiety ($M = 7.06$, $SD = 4.20$) as compared to males ($n = 100$). Conversely, male participants scored higher on striving perfectionism ($M = 14.28$, $SD = 2.62$) values as compared to females ($M = 13.26$, $SD = 2.93$).

Preliminary Analysis

Preliminary analyses are conducted to examine the assumptions underlying various statistical procedures. The distribution of the main variables—self-criticism, perfectionism,

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and anxiety—was evaluated by examining normality tests as well as skewness and kurtosis values. This step helped determine the most appropriate statistical techniques for subsequent analyses.

Table 2: Tests of Normality for study variables

	Skewness		Kurtosis		Shapiro-Wilk	
	Skewness	SE	Kurtosis	SE	W	p
SCRS total score	0.396	0.162	-0.2997	0.322	0.976	<.001
FMRS total evaluative score	0.179	0.162	-0.5289	0.322	0.981	0.004
FMRS total striving score	-0.372	0.162	-0.0366	0.322	0.977	<.001
DASS-21 ANXIETY total score	0.657	0.162	0.2578	0.322	0.955	<.001

Table 2 indicates that the variables in the study deviated from normality as it is presented in the obtained p-values ($p < .05$). Although the skewness and kurtosis values for all the variables were within the acceptable range of -1 to +1, the significant normality test results indicated non-normal distribution of the data. Therefore, non-parametric analysis using the Mann-Whitney U test was conducted for further group comparisons.

Section 2

In this section, independent samples t-tests are conducted to examine differences between self-criticism, perfectionism, and anxiety among university students. In addition, Spearman correlation analysis was carried out to determine the relationship between the variables.

H₁: Students with high levels of maladaptive perfectionism will report significantly higher anxiety scores than students with low levels of maladaptive perfectionism.

Table 4.3 Independent Samples t-Test comparing maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety among university students

		Statistic	P	Mean difference
DASS-21 ANXIETY TOTAL SCORE	Mann-Whitney U	5222	0.021	1.00

A Mann–Whitney U test is conducted to examine differences in anxiety scores between students with high and low maladaptive perfectionism. The results indicate a significant difference, $U = 5222$, $p = .021$, with a mean difference of 1.00, showing that students with high maladaptive perfectionism reported higher anxiety than those with low maladaptive perfectionism. Thus, the research hypothesis is supported.

H₂: Students with high levels of perfectionistic striving (adaptive perfectionism) will report lower anxiety scores than students with low levels of perfectionistic striving.

Table 4 Independent Samples t-Test comparing adaptive perfectionism and anxiety among university students

		Statistic	p	Mean difference
FMRS total striving score	Mann-Whitney U	4955	0.004	-1.00

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An independent samples test (Mann-Whitney U) is conducted to examine whether students with high perfectionistic striving differed from students with low perfectionistic striving on anxiety scores. The results indicated a significant difference between the groups ($U = 4955$, $p = 0.004$, mean difference = -1.00). This suggests that students with higher striving scores reported lower anxiety compared to students with lower striving scores. The finding supports the hypothesis.

H₃: Maladaptive perfectionism will have a significant positive relationship with anxiety.

Table 5: Spearman correlation between maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety among university students.

	FMRS total evaluative score	DASS-21 ANXIETY total score
FMRS total evaluative score	—	
DASS-21 anxiety total score	0.426***	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

To examine the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety among university students, Spearman's correlation analysis was conducted. As shown in Table 4, evaluative maladaptive perfectionism (FMRS total evaluative score) is positively and significantly correlated with anxiety (DASS-21 total score), $r = .426$, $p < .001$. These results indicate that higher levels of maladaptive perfectionism are associated with higher anxiety among students. These findings further support the hypothesis.

H₄: Self-criticism will have a significant positive relationship with anxiety among university students.

Table 6: Spearman correlation between self-criticism and anxiety among university students.

	SCRS total score	DASS-21 ANXIETY total score
SCRS Total score	—	
DASS-21 ANXIETY TOTAL SCORE	0.491***	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Spearman's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between self-criticism and anxiety among university students. The results indicate a significant positive correlation between SCRS total score and DASS-21 anxiety total score ($r = .491$, $p < .001$). This suggests that higher levels of self-criticism are associated with higher levels of anxiety. Therefore, the research hypothesis was supported.

H₅: There will be a significant positive relationship between Maladaptive perfectionism and self-criticism

Table 7: Spearman correlation between maladaptive perfectionism and self-criticism among university students.

	SCRS total score	FMRS total evaluative score
SCRS total score	—	
FMRS total evaluative score	0.534***	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Spearman's correlation analysis is conducted to examine the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and self-criticism. The results show a significant positive correlation between FMRS total evaluative score and SCRS total score ($r = 0.534$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of maladaptive perfectionism are associated with higher levels of self-criticism. Therefore, the research hypothesis is supported.

DISCUSSION

The focus of the present study is to explore the relationship among the three variables: self-criticism, perfectionism, and anxiety among university students. Certain gender related variations are also studied as per the findings. The results help us to understand the relation between maladaptive cognitive tendencies and anxiety among university students.

According to the findings, a positively significant correlation is found between evaluative perfectionism, which includes maladaptive perfectionistic concerns, and levels of anxiety. This showcases that individuals are more likely to experience high anxiety when they are worried about failures and unrealistic living standards (James et al., 2015; Mandel et al., 2015).

Another important correlate of anxiety is Self-criticism. Individuals with high self-critical thinking with harsh self-judgements were the ones who showcased high levels of anxiety. Chronic self-criticism can lead to emotional and psychological difficulties as it increases self-doubt in people. This suggests that being extremely self-critical acts as a risk factor for feeling extremely anxious (McIntyre et al., 2018).

A significant relation is also found between the evaluative aspect of perfectionism and self-criticism. Individuals with great perfectionistic concerns engaged in high self-critical thinking (Sheikh et al., 2025). People with high negative perfectionism tendencies have unrealistic standards set for them, and any failure in achieving them leads to negative self-evaluation (Kiaei & Kachooei, 2022).

Whereas the striving aspect of perfectionism has no significant link with anxiety. This shows that the mere presence of high and achievable standards does not predict psychological distress. Anxiety is more closely associated with the self-critical and evaluative components of perfectionism (James et al., 2015).

Theoretical Implications

The results have implications for multidimensional theories of perfectionism by putting emphasis on both the healthy and the unhealthy aspects of perfectionism (Fekih-Romdhane et al., 2023). It shows that maladaptive perfectionism has a strong connection to anxiety by highlighting that harsh self-evaluation has a link to anxiety (James et al., 2015; McIntyre et al., 2018). Overall, it suggests that people get emotionally distressed when they constantly face extreme negative thinking patterns. (Mandel et al., 2015).

Practical Implications

Implications of the findings are relevant to mental health interventions in a university setting. Interventions focused on reducing anxiety among students must focus on lowering the levels of unhealthy perfectionism and high self-criticism (Hamedani et al., 2023). Teaching certain skills, such as Cognitive restructuring, self-compassion, and stress management techniques, is considered to be beneficial for the formation of balanced self-evaluations. Moreover, special interventions focusing on females would help to reduce the high levels of anxiety and self-criticism found in them (Amir Sheikh et al., 2025).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the value of the current study, there are some limitations that should be noted. The current study was done at one point in time, i.e., has a cross-sectional design, which makes it difficult to establish the cause-and-effect relationships among the variables (McIntyre et al., 2018). The usage of self-report questionnaires may be subject to response biases and may not be fully accurate. Also, the study only focused on university students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other age groups or populations.

Future studies may use longitudinal designs to follow people over time and examine the influence of perfectionism, self-criticism, and anxiety on one another. Further studies can also focus on various potential mediating or moderating variables that might provide information about the relationships (Talebkah et al., 2024). Moreover, further research can also include people from various age and cultural groups and clinical populations to increase the applicability of the findings (Fekih-Romdhane et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine the relationships among self-criticism, perfectionism, and anxiety among university students. The evaluative aspect of maladaptive perfectionism is likely to develop anxiety among individuals. Such students constantly worry about negative evaluation by others, fear of mistakes, set unrealistic standards, and face high psychological distress. Self-criticism is also likely to increase anxiety levels. It leads to harsh self-judgment when goals are not attained. The evaluative aspect of perfectionism enhances self-criticism. Whereas the striving aspect of perfectionism is unrelated to symptoms of anxiety, as realistic goals do not lead to emotional distress. Having high standards is not necessarily problematic; it is the rigid, self-critical, and judgmental interpretation of performance that seems to be the source of psychological distress. Female students are highly likely to experience maladaptive perfectionism, self-criticism, and anxiety. This gender difference helps us understand that the way people evaluate themselves can be different for both genders. Reducing the levels of self-critical thinking and maladaptive perfectionistic levels helps to improve the quality of overall well-being.

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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.

How to cite this article: Datta, S. & Singh, L. (2026). Comparative Study of Self-Criticism, Perfectionism, and Anxiety among University Students. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(2), 3329–3340. DIP:18.01.303.20261402, DOI:10.25215/1402.303