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Resilience: A shield against social dysfunction and comparison among unemployed young adults

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Abstract

The study explores how resilience cultivates emotional strength among unemployed young adults in India, offering insights into fostering strategies amid economic adversity. Using a mixed-method approach with 300 participants (aged 20–35), findings revealed resilience significantly reduces social dysfunction (19% variance explained) and enhances adaptive social comparisons (8% variance explained), underscoring its role in building psychological stability. Qualitative themes emphasized life skills critical for fostering sustainability: emotional strength through mindfulness and cognitive reframing, social unity via supportive networks, empowering young minds through growth-oriented mindsets, and adaptive decision-making by redefining success beyond traditional metrics. Participants leveraged selective social comparisons to maintain self-esteem, aligning with skills for success in navigating uncertainty. Strategies like motivational comparison and prioritizing supportive relationships reflect skills that foster resilience. The findings advocate for policies guiding sustainable growth by integrating psychosocial support with economic interventions. Culturally, India's collectivist values—communal solidarity and familial bonds—emerged as pillars for thriving amid adversity. Programs promoting mindfulness, peer networks, and cognitive-behavioral techniques could empower youth to ignite critical thought and foster resilience to withstand social and psychological challenges. By bridging emotional well-being with societal cohesion, this research highlights pathways to cultivate strength and equip young adults with skills to navigate precarious futures, emphasizing holistic approaches that balance individual agency with collective support.

Keywords: Resilience; Unemployment; Emotional Well-Being and Strength; Coping Skills; Young Adults.

1. Introduction

Unemployment is a rampant issue of concern in the current scenario of the world where the job market opportunities are not able to cater to and catch up with the rapidly growing population and human resources waiting to be employed. Especially in the Indian context where there are approximately 1.34 million applicants seeking employment through the civil service examinations yearly, where only 0.2% are employed through the examination and there are concerns about job security among 46% of private sector employees as evidenced by a survey conducted in 2023 [1] unemployment has become an ineluctable reality.

Unemployment could be a significant motive behind stress, especially for young adults in transitional life stages. It is very closely tied to self-identity and self-worth, feeling of being productive or valuable, particularly in young adults who are still discovering their individuality. Disturbance to this by unemployment can lead to them engaging in negative social comparisons and having low self-esteem, particularly in today's social media-driven world, where peers' successes are highly visible.

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However, some young adults demonstrate resilience and adapt successfully. Sharma stated that resilience, defined as "the ability to bounce back from adversity", has emerged as "a crucial protective factor in the face of unemployment and associated psychosocial stressors" [2]. Individuals with greater levels of resilience are better equipped to utilize and practice problem-focused coping strategies, such as actively seeking reemployment, rather than relying on more maladaptive emotion-focused coping mechanisms. Furthermore, resilience is closely linked to other personal resources, including self-esteem and social support, which can further buffer the negative impacts of unemployment.

Resilience, social comparison, and social dysfunction are key psychological constructs that shape individuals' experiences, particularly in the context of unemployment. Social Comparison Theory posits that "individuals evaluate their own abilities, status, and well-being by comparing themselves to others" [3].

The negative consequences of unemployment can also be understood through Social Dysfunction Theory [4], which examines how disruptions in social structures lead to maladaptive behaviors and psychological distress. Johnson [4] argues that social dysfunction arises when individuals lose access to essential social roles and interactions, leading to isolation, decreased self-worth, and impaired mental health. Unemployment exacerbates this dysfunction by disrupting structured routines, removing sources of social validation, and reducing economic security, thereby increasing feelings of helplessness and exclusion.

Masten's Resilience Theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals adapt to adversity. He describes resilience as "ordinary magic", referring to the adaptive systems that enable individuals to recover from stressors such as unemployment [5]. Resilience functions as a protective factor by fostering coping mechanisms, enhancing emotional regulation, and promoting social connectedness [6].

Multiple studies explore resilience as a protective factor in mitigating the negative effects of unemployment. Wan et al. [7] and Tam et al. [8] demonstrate how psychological resilience can reduce depression, and enhance youth employability, respectively. Resilience also plays a role in helping individuals maintain mental health and assertive job-seeking behaviors, even during prolonged unemployment [9]. These findings suggest that 'resilience is a dynamic process, influenced by individual strengths and external support systems, that can help mitigate the social and psychological consequences of unemployment.'

Although earlier studies have looked into the overall effects of unemployment on young adults, there's a noticeable shortage of targeted research on how resilience specifically affects the link between unemployment, social dysfunction, and social comparison. Additionally, there are few investigations that delve into the dimensions of resilience rather than merely measuring it numerically.

Therefore, this study aims to address and bridge this gap by investigating the role of resilience as a safeguard, shield, and protective factor against social dysfunction and harmful and negative social comparisons among unemployed young adults. Understanding this relationship is key to creating targeted interventions and support systems that can sustain this vulnerable group, helping to maintain their mental health and social well-being during unemployment. This issue is especially relevant today, as youth unemployment remains high, social media amplifies social comparison, and job creation lags behind the growing workforce.

2. Methods

The study employed a mixed-method design focused on young adults aged 20-35 who are currently unemployed in India. The research employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, reflecting the complexity of human experience and psychological states. Ethical considerations were given priority, ensuring participants' anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent, aligning with principles of fairness and cultural sensitivity within India's diverse social landscape.

2.1. Research Design

This study has employed a mixed-method research design.

2.2. Objectives of the study

To investigate the relationship between resilience, social dysfunction and social comparison and to explore the factors contributing to resilience.

2.3. Hypotheses

H1: Higher resilience significantly predicts lower levels of social dysfunction among unemployed young adults.
H2: Higher resilience significantly predicts greater engagement in positive social comparison among unemployed young adults.
H3: Social dysfunction is negatively associated with positive social comparison among unemployed young adults.

2.4. Participants

The study focused on young adults aged 20-35, as classified by the APA dictionary. A total of 300 participants were selected, with the research conducted within India.

2.5. Sample

2.5.1. Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this study included young adults aged 20-35 who were currently unemployed, had been unemployed for at least six months, had not secured a job placement, and could read and comprehend English proficiently.

2.5.2. Exclusion Criteria

The study excluded young adults who were currently employed, enrolled in vocational training for secured placements, had already secured job placements, or were pursuing further education.

2.6. Tools

- ***Semi-structured Interview***: A semi-structured interview was carried out to collect data. The questions for the same have gone through an expert review process.
- ***The Brief Resilience Scale:*** The Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) was developed by Smith et al. [10] to address the need for a psychometric tool that 'specifically measures resilience as the ability to recover or "bounce back" from stress or adversity'. It demonstrates high internal consistency, the test-retest correlations indicate moderate to good reliability over short periods.
- ***Social Dysfunction Rating Scale:*** The Social Dysfunction Rating Scale (SDRS) by Linn et al. [11] is used to 'assess the level of social functioning and dysfunction in individuals, often in the context of mental health, psychiatric disorders, or social maladjustment.' The internal consistency of the SDRS has generally indicated acceptable to excellent reliability. It shows good stability over time, with test-retest reliability periods ranging from a few weeks to several months. In studies where the SDRS is used in clinical settings or administered by professionals, inter-rater reliability has been found to be strong.
- ***Social Comparison Scale:*** The Social Comparison Scale (SCS) is a psychological assessment tool designed to measure 'the extent to which individuals engage in social comparison, a process where people evaluate their own abilities, achievements, and situations by comparing themselves to others'. The SCS was developed by Allan and Gilbert in 1995 [12], rooted in Festinger's Social Comparison Theory [3] which posits that individuals have an inherent drive to evaluate themselves by comparing with others. The scale typically exhibits high internal consistency, and demonstrated good test-retest reliability over time, suggesting that social comparison tendencies are relatively stable.

2.7. Procedure

Participants were selected through purposive and convenience sampling. The data was then collected using Google forms. After collection data, the BRS was scored and participants scoring highest were screened and contacted for a follow-up interview. A one-to-one semi-structured interview was conducted with the selected participants, after which the collected data was analyzed using Jamovi and Thematic Analysis.

2.8. Data Analysis

2.8.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were conducted to summarize the characteristics of the study variables: resilience, social dysfunction, and social comparison. Measures of central tendency (mean, median) and variability (standard deviation, interquartile range, range) were calculated. Additionally, tests of normality were performed using skewness, kurtosis,

and the Shapiro-Wilk test. The Shapiro-Wilk test provided a formal test of normality, with significant results (< 0.05) suggesting deviations from normality. Based on these findings, non-parametric tests were selected for further analyses.

2.8.2. Inferential Statistics

To test the research hypotheses, non-parametric inferential statistical techniques were employed. Correlation analysis was performed to assess the relationships between resilience, social dysfunction, and social comparison, with Spearman's correlation applied due to non-normality. Finally, two separate linear regressions were conducted to examine the predictive effect of resilience (IV) on social dysfunction and social comparison (DVs).

2.9. Research Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from participants before the assessment of research tools, ensuring their right to withdraw without consequences. Confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy were strictly maintained. Cultural sensitivity was considered, recognizing India's diverse population. The interview questions were reviewed by four experts to ensure validity and relevance. Non-maleficence was prioritized to prevent psychological or emotional harm. Fair participant selection and equal treatment were upheld throughout the study.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Analysis

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis for resilience, social dysfunction and social comparison

Variables	N	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Resilience	300	2.89	0.510	-		
2. Social Dysfunction	300	63.3	16.2	-0.412***		
3. Social Comparison	300	60.1	15.3	0.304***	-0.380***	-

Note. *** Correlations significant at 0.001 level (two-tailed)

The table shows the summary of the descriptive statistics and correlation analysis between the three variables. The inverse relationship seen between Social Comparison and Social Dysfunction supports *H3: Social dysfunction is negatively associated with positive social comparison among unemployed young adults,* and therefore this hypothesis is retained.

Table 2 Linear Regression Predicting Social Dysfunction

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Intercept	103.30	4.85	21.31	<.001
Resilience	-13.80	1.65	-8.38	<.001

Note. N = 300. B represents unstandardized coefficients.

Table 3 Model Summary

				Overall Model Test			
Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	df1	df2	p
1	0.437	0.191	0.188	70.2	1	298	<.001
Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=300							

The results suggests that for every one-unit increase in resilience, social dysfunction decreases by 13.80 units, suggesting a moderate negative effect and underscoring the protective role of resilience, and show that the overall model was significant (F (1, 298) = 70.2, p<.001). This *supports H1: Higher resilience significantly predicts lower levels of social dysfunction,* confirming that resilience serves as a protective factor, thereby retaining this hypothesis.

Table 4 Linear Regression Predicting Social Comparison

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Intercept	35.37	4.90	7.21	<.001
Resilience	8.54	1.67	5.11	<.001

Note. N = 300. B represents unstandardized coefficients.

Table 5 Model Summary

				Overall Model Test			
Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	df1	df2	p
1	0.284	0.0807	0.0776	26.2	1	298	<.001
Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=300							

The results indicate that one-unit increase in resilience was linked to an 8.54 point rise in positive social comparison, suggesting that resilience strengthens self-perceptions in social contexts. The tables show that the overall model was significant (F (1, 298) = 26.2, p < .001). The results support *H2: Higher resilience significantly predicts greater engagement in positive social comparison,* indicating that resilience can bolster self-perception and encourage more adaptive comparisons with peers, thereby accepting the hypothesis.

3.2. Qualitative Analysis:

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to resilience factors. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up. Five key themes emerged: Emotional Coping Mechanisms, Social Support Systems, Cognitive Resilience Strategies, Identity and Purpose, and Adaptive Social Comparisons.

Table 6 Theme 1: Emotional Coping Mechanisms

Theme	Sub-themes	Description
Emotional Coping Mechanisms	Acceptance and Mindfulness	Participants practiced acceptance of their situation to manage emotional distress. Mindfulness helped them acknowledge feelings without being overwhelmed.
	Cognitive Reframing	Participants reframed their perspectives, focusing on future possibilities and growth rather than present struggles.
	Emotional Outlet and Reflection	Participants used reflective practices such as journaling, prayer, and reading for emotional processing.

This theme encapsulates the emotional regulation strategies participants used to cope with negative feelings associated with unemployment, such as social inadequacy, envy, and self-doubt.

- **Sub-themes:**
1. Acceptance and Mindfulness: Practicing acceptance and mindfulness helped participants acknowledge their emotions without being overwhelmed by them.
2. Cognitive Reframing: They actively reframed their perspectives to focus on positive outcomes and future possibilities rather than present challenges.
3. Emotional Outlet and Reflection: Engaging in reflective activities such as journaling, prayer, and reading helped them process emotions constructively.

Table 7 Theme 2: Social Support Systems

Theme	Sub-themes	Description
Social Support Systems	Emotional Support	Emotional support from peers experiencing similar challenges provided a sense of community and reduced feelings of social inadequacy.
	Instrumental Support	Financial and material support from family was essential but sometimes led to feelings of dependency and inadequacy.
	Selective Social Interactions	Participants strategically engaged with supportive networks while avoiding interactions that triggered feelings of inadequacy.

Social support was identified as a critical factor in fostering resilience. Participants relied on emotional support from friends and family, although the level of support varied across social networks.

- **Sub-themes:**
1. Emotional Support: Emotional support from peers in similar situations provided a sense of community and belonging.
2. Instrumental Support: Financial and material support from family members, though sometimes perceived as burdensome, also facilitated emotional resilience.
3. Selective Social Interactions: Participants selectively engaged with supportive social networks, avoiding interactions that triggered feelings of inadequacy.

Table 8 Theme 3: Cognitive Resilience Strategies

Theme	Sub-themes	Description
Cognitive Resilience Strategies	Positive Cognitive Appraisal	Participants maintained optimism by viewing unemployment as a temporary phase of growth and self-discovery.
	Growth-Oriented Mindset	Participants embraced challenges as learning opportunities, which fostered a proactive approach to adversity.

Participants demonstrated cognitive resilience by adopting positive cognitive appraisals and growth-oriented mindsets.

- **Sub-themes:**
1. Positive Cognitive Appraisal: Viewing unemployment as a temporary phase of growth and self-discovery helped them maintain optimism.
2. Growth-Oriented Mindset: They embraced challenges as opportunities to learn and grow, fostering a proactive approach to adversity.

Table 9 Theme 4: Identity and Purpose

Theme	Sub-themes	Description
Identity and Purpose	Redefining Success	Participants moved away from conventional metrics of success (e.g., financial independence) and focused on personal growth and emotional well-being.
	Purpose and Passion	Participants maintained motivation and resilience by pursuing career paths aligned with their passions, despite societal pressures.

Participants reconstructed their identities by redefining success and realigning their goals with personal values.

- **Sub-themes:**
1. Redefining Success: They moved away from conventional metrics of success (e.g., financial independence) and focused on personal growth and emotional well-being.
2. Purpose and Passion: Pursuing career paths aligned with their passions helped them maintain motivation and resilience despite societal pressures.

Table 10 Theme 5: Adaptive Social Comparisons

Theme	Sub-themes	Description
Adaptive Social Comparisons	Selective Comparison	Participants compared themselves to peers in similar situations to reduce feelings of inadequacy and maintain self-esteem.
	Motivational Comparison	Viewing others' successes as sources of motivation rather than threats helped participants maintain a positive self-concept.

Participants engaged in adaptive social comparisons to maintain self-esteem and navigate social interactions.
- **Sub-themes:**
  1. Selective Comparison: Comparing themselves to peers in similar situations reduced feelings of inadequacy.
  2. Motivational Comparison: Viewing others' successes as motivational rather than threatening helped maintain a positive self-concept.

4. Discussion

Earlier studies highlight how resilience buffers against the harmful effects of long-term unemployment, often mediated by coping strategies, such as detachment coping [13].

This study aimed at studying the relationship between Resilience, Social Dysfunction and Comparison among unemployed young adults and what the factors of resilience were if there existed a positive relationship between resilience and positive social comparison or an inverse relationship between resilience and social dysfunction.

As hypothesized resilience significantly predicted lower levels of social dysfunction, confirming that resilience serves as a protective factor, which aligns with theoretical models of resilience that emphasizes adaptive coping and resourcefulness in the face of stress [14]. It was also found that higher resilience predicts greater engagement in positive social comparison, indicating that resilience can bolster self-perception and encourage more adaptive comparison with peers. This is consistent with research showing that resilient individuals are more likely to maintain a positive self-view during adversity [15].

Additionally, an inverse relationship was found between social dysfunction and positive social comparison, revealing that participants with higher social dysfunction tend to engage less in positive social comparison. These findings align with the notion that individuals with social anxiety often engage in social comparisons regarding social skills. Those with low self-evaluation of their social abilities and frequent ability comparisons may perceive their social skills as markedly inferior, leading to increased social anxiety and social dysfunction [16].

The thematic analysis revealed five key themes influencing resilience among unemployed young adults:

1. Emotional Coping Mechanisms – Acceptance, cognitive reframing, and reflective practices helped process negative emotions.
2. Social Support Systems – Emotional and instrumental support systems were crucial, along with selective social interactions.
3. Cognitive Resilience Strategies – Positive cognitive appraisals and growth-oriented mindsets fostered proactive coping.
4. Identity and Purpose – Redefining success and pursuing passion provided a sense of purpose and motivation.
5. Adaptive Social Comparisons – Selective and motivational comparisons maintained self-esteem and positive self-concepts.

These themes provide a comprehensive understanding of how unemployed young adults navigate social and emotional challenges using resilience strategies.

The combined quantitative and qualitative results offer a comprehensive perspective on resilience among unemployed young adults. Quantitative data robustly support the hypotheses that resilience is inversely related to social dysfunction and positively related to adaptive social comparison. These findings echo those of Southwick et al. [17] and Windle [18] who highlight resilience as a buffer against stress and a facilitator of adaptive coping.

5. Conclusion

The study confirms that resilience significantly mitigates social dysfunction and enhances adaptive social comparison among unemployed young adults. These results align with resilience theories [14, 15] emphasizing resilience as a process shaped by cognitive flexibility, social resources, and emotional regulation. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data illustrates that resilience is not static but evolves through intentional strategies and external support, enabling individuals to navigate unemployment challenges effectively.

5.1. Implications

- *Theoretical Implications*: The findings reinforce resilience frameworks that emphasize adaptive coping and resource mobilization [17]. The inverse relationship between resilience and social dysfunction supports stress-buffering models [6] while the role of adaptive comparisons aligns with social comparison theory [12].
- *Practical Implications*: Interventions for unemployed youth should prioritize resilience-building programs, such as mindfulness training, cognitive-behavioral workshops, and peer support networks. Implementing resilience-building programs for unemployed youth is essential to enhance their emotional strength, equip them with skills for success, and promote peace and harmony within communities. Such interventions align with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8, which aims to "promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" [19].

Equipping unemployed youth with technical, digital, and soft skills improves their employability. Programs should include digital literacy, entrepreneurship, financial management, and leadership training, alongside internships, apprenticeships, and mentorship programs [20]. These initiatives foster self-efficacy, adaptability, and problem-solving skills, enhancing resilience. Such programs create sustainable employment opportunities, reducing reliance on traditional job markets.

Strengthening social ties reduces isolation and reinforces a sense of belonging. Community resilience hubs can offer mental health support, networking, and personal development workshops. Engaging in volunteer work and faith-based activities also fosters moral values and emotional stability, reducing mental health risks [21].

Some limitations identified in the study were that its cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences, highlighting the need for longitudinal research to examine resilience trajectories over time. Second, reliance on self-reported measures introduces the possibility of response bias. Lastly, the study's focus on an Indian population limits the generalizability of findings. Societal norms, gender roles, and unemployment challenges unique to India, such as high youth unemployment and familial financial dependence, may shape resilience strategies differently. For instance, collectivist values may enhance the role of social support, while unemployment stigma could intensify social dysfunction. These cultural nuances may not apply to individualistic or economically distinct settings.

Recommendations for future researches are that researchers should explore resilience through longitudinal studies to assess its stability and predictors over time. Additionally, examining the influence of cultural and socioeconomic factors on resilience across diverse populations is crucial. Mixed-methods designs can provide deeper insights into the complex interactions between resilience and contextual variables. Further, gender-specific stressors, such as societal expectations and access to support, should be investigated to clarify resilience disparities. Cross-cultural comparative studies can help identify differences in resilience mechanisms between Indian populations and Western individualistic societies. Finally, research should explore how specific cultural factors in India, including familial expectations and caste dynamics, shape resilience and social comparison processes.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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