



A Comparative Analysis Of Five-Factor Personality Traits In UPSC And NEET-PG Aspirants

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Personality traits play a crucial role in shaping an individual's approach to competitive examinations, influencing study habits, stress management, and overall success. This study examines the distinct personality profiles of UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants, two groups preparing for highly competitive yet fundamentally different career paths—civil services and medicine. Using the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (FFI), the study assesses five key personality dimensions: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. The consists of 60 items, with 12 items per personality dimension. The 60 self-report items, each of which is rated using a 5-point Likert scale. The sample (N=135) included UPSC (N=73) and NEET-PG (N=62) aspirants aged between 20 and 50 years, representing various educational backgrounds, coaching institutions, and socio-economic strata. Results revealed that UPSC aspirants showed significantly higher levels of Neuroticism and Openness to Experience compared to NEET PG aspirants. Conscientiousness, Agreeableness and Extraversion were found to be comparable across both groups, with no significant differences. These findings can aid educators, counselors, and coaching centers in developing targeted interventions and support systems. However, the study is limited by its urban sample. Future research should include diverse populations, examine demographic influences, and adopt longitudinal or qualitative methods for a deeper understanding of aspirants' psychological profiles.

Keywords: UPSC, NEET-PG, NEO-Five Factor Inventory

INTRODUCTION

Competitive examinations are designed to assess candidates' knowledge, problem-solving skills, and decision-making abilities in high-pressure environments. These exams serve as crucial gateways to prestigious careers, demanding rigorous preparation over extended periods. Competitive exams assess cognitive abilities, decision-making, and stress management under high-pressure conditions (Zeidner, 1998). Aspirants often experience significant stress, anxiety, and motivation fluctuations due to the competitive nature, high stakes, and uncertain outcomes. High-stakes testing is associated with anxiety, motivation fluctuations, and psychological distress, affecting aspirants' performance and well-being (Cassady & Johnson, 2002).

In India's highly competitive academic landscape, entrance examinations like the UPSC Civil Services Examination and NEET-PG represent more than just assessments. These exams demand not only academic proficiency but also sustained mental stamina, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping strategies. The prolonged and high-pressure nature of such preparation environments often pushes aspirants to their psychological limits, making non-cognitive factors like personality increasingly relevant to performance outcomes. Recent psychological research highlights the critical role of personality traits in shaping academic behaviors such as motivation, perseverance, time management, and response to stress. While cognitive ability remains central, individual differences in traits like Conscientiousness and Neuroticism have been shown to consistently predict academic achievement and well-being under pressure. The NEO

Five-Factor Inventory (FFI), encompassing Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, provides a robust framework for understanding how dispositional tendencies influence both preparation and performance in such contexts.

The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), Civil Services Examination (CSE) is one of India's most prestigious and competitive exams, selecting candidates for top administrative roles such as the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Police Service (IPS), and Indian Foreign Service (IFS). It is among the toughest exams in India, with an acceptance rate of less than 1%, requiring years of disciplined preparation (Mohan & Sharma, 2019). The exam is conducted in three stages:

1. **Preliminary Examination (Prelims)** – An objective test with General Studies and Civil Services Aptitude Test (CSAT) papers.
2. **Main Examination (Mains)** – A written exam with nine descriptive papers, including essay writing, optional subjects, and general studies.
3. **Personality Test (Interview)** – An assessment of decision-making skills, leadership, and emotional intelligence.

The interview stage emphasizes traits like extraversion, confidence, and leadership, making psychological preparedness essential (Kumar & Tiwari, 2021). Conscientiousness and emotional stability are key predictors of success in UPSC aspirants, as these traits support sustained effort, self-regulation, and stress management (McCrae & Costa, 1997). UPSC aspirants often dedicate years to preparation, engaging in extensive reading, critical analysis, and self-reflection. Success in this examination requires high levels of conscientiousness, persistence, and emotional stability, as the selection ratio is extremely low, and failure is common.

The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test for Postgraduate (NEET-PG) is a standardized exam for medical graduates seeking admission to MD, MS, and diploma courses in India. Conducted by the National Board of Examinations (NBE), NEET-PG is a single-stage, computer-based test assessing knowledge across various medical disciplines. It is a high-stakes medical entrance exam, requiring aspirants to master an extensive syllabus while managing performance anxiety (Dyrbye et al., 2006).

The key characteristics of the NEET-PG examination include:

1. **Single-Day Examination** – Unlike UPSC, NEET-PG is a one-time test with multiple-choice questions (MCQs) focusing on medical knowledge.
2. **Time-Pressured Environment** – Candidates must answer 200 questions in 3.5 hours, demanding quick decision-making and accuracy. Time pressure and test-taking speed significantly impact medical students' performance, linking perfectionism and neuroticism to exam-related stress (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).
3. **Clinical and Theoretical Knowledge** – Requires a blend of conceptual clarity and memorization of vast medical information.

NEO-Five Factor Inventory (FFI)

The present study is grounded in the Five-Factor Theory of Personality (FFT) proposed by McCrae and Costa (1996), which is a foundational framework in personality psychology. FFT posits that personality is composed of five broad, heritable domains: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness; each representing a continuum of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive tendencies. Unlike descriptive trait models, FFT proposes that these five basic tendencies are biologically rooted and relatively stable across the lifespan. These traits interact with characteristic adaptations such as personal goals, values, beliefs, and coping strategies which are shaped by environmental contexts including culture, education, and life experiences (McCrae & Costa, 2008). This dynamic interaction influences how personality is expressed in real-life behaviors and decisions. According to McCrae and Costa (1999), the five personality factors are described as follows:

1. Neuroticism (N)

- Definition: Tendency to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and emotional instability.
- High Neuroticism: Individuals may be emotionally unstable, anxious, irritable, vulnerable to stress, and prone to excessive worry.
- Low Neuroticism: Individuals are typically emotionally stable, calm, and better able to cope with stress.

2. Extraversion (E)

- Definition: Tendency to be outgoing, sociable, assertive, and energetic.
- High Extraversion: Individuals are sociable, talkative, enthusiastic, excitement-seeking, and assertive.
- Low Extraversion: Individuals tend to be more introverted, reserved, and prefer solitude or low-stimulation environments.

3. Openness to Experience (O)

- Definition: Tendency to be imaginative, curious, and open to novel experiences and ideas.
- High Openness: Individuals are creative, open-minded, appreciative of art and abstract thinking, and tolerant of ambiguity.
- Low Openness: Individuals may prefer routine, be more conventional, and exhibit resistance to change.

4. Agreeableness (A)

- Definition: Tendency to be cooperative, empathetic, and compassionate.
- High Agreeableness: Individuals are kind, generous, warm, trusting, and conflict-avoidant.
- Low Agreeableness: Individuals may be more critical, competitive, and less concerned with others' feelings.

5. Conscientiousness (C)

- Definition: Tendency to be organized, responsible, and goal-directed.
- High Conscientiousness: Individuals are disciplined, reliable, punctual, and motivated by achievement.
- Low Conscientiousness: Individuals may be disorganized, impulsive, and lack reliability.

To empirically assess these five dimensions of personality, the present study is based on the NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) developed by Costa and McCrae (1992). The NEO-FFI is a widely used, standardized self-report inventory designed to measure the NEO Five traits as proposed by FFT. It is recognized for its reliability and validity across different populations and cultural contexts. The inventory includes 60 items (12 per trait), allowing for a concise yet comprehensive assessment of personality structure. Given its robust theoretical foundation and empirical support, the NEO-FFI is particularly suitable for this study's objective of comparing personality traits among UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants, who operate in structured, performance-oriented, and high-stakes environments.

Background of the study

While much research has examined cognitive abilities, preparation strategies, and socio-economic factors influencing performance of aspirants, personality traits remain comparatively underexplored in this context. The Five-Factor Theory of Personality (McCrae & Costa, 1996) provides a robust framework for understanding how traits such as Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, Openness, Extraversion, and Agreeableness may influence exam preparation, stress management, and overall performance. The present study investigates the role of these personality traits among UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants, addressing a significant gap in Indian educational psychology research. By linking personality profiles to the distinct demands of each examination, the research aims to provide insights that can guide aspirants, educators, and policymakers toward more effective preparation strategies and support systems.

Statement of the Problem

Although competitive examinations in India are among the most extensively studied educational phenomena, existing research has largely emphasized cognitive skills, preparation strategies, and socio-economic factors. Less attention has been given to personality traits as stable psychological characteristics that may influence exam performance. The UPSC and NEET-PG, while differing in structure and content, both impose intense preparation demands and high psychological pressure, yet it remains unclear how personality profiles of aspirants correspond to the unique demands of each examination. The absence of comparative research in this area creates a knowledge gap with practical implications. Understanding whether certain personality traits are more advantageous in one exam format over another could guide aspirants in tailoring preparation strategies, help educators in providing personalized support, and assist policymakers in designing fairer, more supportive assessment systems.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to assess and compare the levels of total scores on the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) between UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants, and to identify which personality dimensions (among the five NEO-FFI traits) are dominant in each group.

- ### Research Questions
1. Do UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants differ significantly in their overall personality profiles as measured by the NEO-FFI?
 2. Which personality traits are most dominant among UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants?

Hypotheses

H1: There will be a significant difference in the overall personality scores between NEET PG and UPSC aspirants.

H2: There will be a significant difference in the scores on Conscientiousness between NEET-PG and UPSC aspirants.

H3: There will be a significant difference in the scores on Neuroticism between NEET-PG and UPSC aspirants.

H4: There will be a significant difference in the scores on Openness between NEET-PG and UPSC aspirants.

H5: There will be a significant difference in the scores on Extraversion between NEET-PG and UPSC aspirants.

H6: There will be a significant difference in the scores on Agreeableness between NEET-PG and UPSC aspirants.

Significance

It contributes to the growing body of literature on how personality impacts academic performance and preparation styles, especially in high-stakes competitive settings in the Indian context. Insights from this study can be used to design training programs that align with the aspirants' personality profiles. Understanding one's personality profile may help aspirants choose preparation strategies that best suit them, improve time management, and deal better with stress and failure. Results can guide the development of psychological interventions, stress management workshops, or counseling programs that are tailored to the personality traits commonly found in each group.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter examines how personality traits influence the preparation and performance of aspirants appearing for competitive examinations such as the UPSC Civil Services Examination and NEET-PG. The review incorporates key psychological theories: Self-Regulated Learning Theory, Expectancy-Value Theory and Self-Determination Theory. To understand how personality traits influence exam preparation behaviors among competitive exam aspirants, it is essential to explore the interplay between personality and motivation. While the Five-Factor Model provides a foundational understanding of individual differences, several well-established theories offer deeper insights into how these traits translate into academic behavior.

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) Theory (Zimmerman, 2000) explains how learners actively manage their learning through goal setting, self-monitoring, time management, and strategic planning. Personality traits such as Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience are particularly relevant to SRL, as conscientious individuals tend to be organized and disciplined, while open individuals often seek novel strategies and are more cognitively engaged (Komarraju & Karau, 2005). This theory supports the idea that UPSC aspirants, who show high Conscientiousness and Openness, may adopt more effective self-regulation techniques to manage vast syllabi and time constraints.

Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement Motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) posits that a student's motivation to perform a task is determined by two key factors: (1) their belief in their ability to succeed (expectancy), and (2) the perceived value or importance of the task (value component). Personality influences both these components; for example, emotionally stable individuals (low Neuroticism) are more likely to maintain high expectancy beliefs under pressure, while highly conscientious individuals may place greater value on academic success.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation and the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Aspirants with high Openness and Extraversion may show stronger intrinsic motivation due to curiosity and a desire for mastery, whereas those high in Agreeableness may be more driven by relatedness and social validation. SDT explains how motivational orientations, influenced by personality, impact the quality of effort and well-being during long-term exam preparation. For example, UPSC aspirants scoring high on Openness and intrinsic motivation may derive satisfaction from intellectual challenge, while NEET-PG aspirants may be more influenced by extrinsic factors such as parental or societal expectations.

Together, these three theories (Self-Regulated Learning Theory, Expectancy-Value Theory, and Self-Determination Theory) provide a comprehensive framework to understand how personality traits influence not just exam outcomes, but also the cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes that underlie the long and demanding preparation journey of competitive examination aspirants.

Personality Traits and Examination Performance: The Role of the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (FFI)

1. Conscientiousness:

Conscientiousness is widely recognized as the most consistent and strongest predictor of academic and examination performance across disciplines and age groups (Noftle & Robins, 2007; Poropat, 2009). This trait encompasses self-discipline, organization, diligence, reliability, and the tendency to plan rather than be spontaneous. Individuals high in Conscientiousness are likely to set clear academic goals, develop structured study routines, and persist in the face of challenges +essential attributes for success in competitive examinations. For instance, UPSC aspirants, who prepare for several years and navigate a multi-phase selection process, require sustained attention, planning, and delayed gratification, aligning well with high Conscientiousness.

Similarly, NEET PG aspirants, who must memorize detailed syllabi and work through time-pressured environments, benefit from this trait through systematic revision and endurance (Farsides & Woodfield, 2003). Meta-analytic findings support that Conscientiousness correlates positively with both Grade Point Average (GPA) and standardized test scores, regardless of intelligence (O'Connor & Paunonen, 2007; Richardson et al., 2012). High Conscientiousness has been associated with higher academic performance and stress resilience (Sharma & Singh, 2019).

2. Neuroticism:

Neuroticism, which includes emotional instability, anxiety, depression, and self-consciousness, is negatively associated with examination performance. High-Neuroticism individuals tend to experience performance anxiety, self-doubt, and test-related stress, which impair cognitive functioning and academic outcomes (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003).

Medical students and aspirants, such as those preparing for NEET PG, often face significant stress due to the vast syllabus, expectations, and fear of failure. High Neuroticism in this group has been correlated with burnout, lower self-efficacy, and maladaptive coping (Dyrbye et al., 2005; Lievens et al., 2002). This anxiety can reduce working memory efficiency and hinder effective retrieval during exams (Eysenck et al., 2007). Conversely, UPSC aspirants who exhibit lower Neuroticism may perform better in subjective exams and interviews that demand composure, reasoning under pressure, and a balanced mindset (Desai & Tiwari, 2020).

3. Openness to Experience:

Openness to Experience refers to imagination, curiosity, aesthetic sensitivity, intellectual engagement, and preference for variety and complexity. While its relationship with performance is weaker than Conscientiousness, it is often associated with academic success in fields that demand abstract reasoning and creativity (McCrae & Costa, 1987; O'Connor & Paunonen, 2007). For UPSC aspirants, who need to integrate information from diverse sources, understand philosophical and sociological perspectives, and write analytical essays, Openness may contribute to performance by enabling flexible and creative thinking (Sharma & Singh, 2019). In contrast, NEET PG preparation, which often emphasizes memorization and rapid retrieval of factual information, may not significantly benefit from high Openness (Singh et al., 2016). Studies show that individuals high in Openness are more likely to enjoy learning for its own sake, engage in metacognition, and apply deep learning strategies (Komarraju et al., 2011).

4. Extraversion:

Extraversion includes sociability, assertiveness, energy, and positive emotions.

Its role in academic performance is complex and often depends on the nature of the learning environment (Furnham & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2004). Extraverts may perform well in oral exams, interviews, or group discussions due to their social confidence and energy. However, in solitary study environments, especially for exams like NEET PG or UPSC, high Extraversion might be a distraction rather than a benefit.

Introverted students may prefer long hours of focused, solitary study, whereas Extraverts may struggle with concentration and seek social stimulation, potentially affecting study discipline (Eysenck, 1992). Nevertheless, during personality assessments or interviews in the final stage of UPSC, Extraversion may be advantageous. Research suggests that interviewers often perceive Extraverted candidates as more confident and engaging (Thakur, 2021).

5. Agreeableness:

Agreeableness involves trust, altruism, kindness, and a cooperative attitude. It has shown mixed results in terms of examination performance. Some studies suggest that agreeable individuals may avoid conflict and seek harmony in group work, contributing positively to cooperative academic environments (Poropat, 2009).

However, in the context of competitive examinations that demand individual performance under pressure, agreeableness may not have a direct impact. Nonetheless, it may influence mental well-being and stress buffering. Agreeable students may experience better peer relationships, reducing isolation and emotional distress during the demanding preparation period (Misra & McKean, 2000). In UPSC interview stages, this trait may contribute positively to perceptions of integrity, empathy, and emotional intelligence—qualities valued in public service roles (Thakur, 2021).

Research Gap

Despite existing studies on the role of personality in academic performance, there is limited research comparing the personality traits of UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants. While some studies have explored general psychological profiles of students preparing for competitive exams, they fail to analyze how specific traits influence career choices and preparation strategies.

While numerous studies have investigated the personality profiles of students across academic disciplines, very few have attempted a direct comparison between aspirants of UPSC and NEET-PG, two of India's most rigorous and competitive examinations. Both groups differ significantly in terms of exam structure, preparation patterns, psychological demands, and career goals. However, the literature has not sufficiently examined how these differences are reflected in their personality traits. A comparative study using a standard instrument like the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) could illuminate meaningful variations and provide tailored guidance for aspirants.

Although there is general evidence that traits like Conscientiousness benefit academic performance and Neuroticism impairs it, no studies have come to the researcher's notice till date that has dissected the differential effects of each of the NEO-Five traits separately for UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants. Such trait-specific, exam-specific analysis is lacking in Indian research and is essential for developing targeted interventions and training programs for aspirants.

METHODS

Research Design

The present study employed a **comparative cross-sectional research design** to examine differences in personality traits between two distinct groups: UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) aspirants and NEET-PG aspirants. The study used the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), a standardized psychometric tool developed by Costa and McCrae (1992), to assess five personality dimensions: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.

Participants

The participants comprised 135 competitive examination aspirants actively preparing for either the UPSC CSE or NEET-PG. They represented diverse educational backgrounds, socio-economic strata, and coaching institutions. The age range of participants was 20 to 50 years. All participants were informed of the study's objectives, provided informed consent, and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants who met the specific eligibility criteria of the study namely, active engagement in preparation for the UPSC CSE or NEET-PG examination. Data was collected both in- person and via Google Forms to maximize accessibility.

Sample Size and Characteristics

A total of **143 responses** were initially collected. After data screening, **8 responses** were excluded due to incomplete information, resulting in a final sample size of **N = 135**.

- **UPSC aspirants:** 73 participants (54.07%)
- **NEET-PG aspirants:** 62 participants (45.93%)

Among these, **16 responses** (14 UPSC, 2 NEET-PG) were obtained via online forms, and the remainder were collected through in-person administration.

Inclusion Criteria

- Aspirants currently preparing for UPSC CSE or NEET-PG.
- Minimum of one year of active preparation.
- Age between 20 and 50 years.

Exclusion Criteria

- Aspirants who have already cleared the exam or have shifted to other career paths.
- Individuals currently undergoing treatment for severe mental health issues.

Instruments

The NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) (Costa & McCrae, 1992) was used to assess five personality dimensions: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.

Reliability: Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for the NEO-FFI is well- established across studies: Neuroticism: $\alpha = 0.86$, Extraversion: $\alpha = 0.77$, Openness: $\alpha = 0.7$, Agreeableness: $\alpha = 0.68$, Conscientiousness: $\alpha = 0.81$ (McCrae & Costa, 2004; Schmitz et al., 2022; McCrae et al., 2005).

Validity: The NEO-FFI demonstrates strong construct validity, with factor structures replicating the Five-Factor Model across cultures (McCrae & Terracciano, 2005).

Structure: The inventory contains 60 items; each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (0) to Strongly Agree (4). However, some items are negatively worded, meaning that agreement with the statement reflects a lower level of the personality trait being measured. To ensure consistency in the direction of scoring across all items, these negatively worded items are subjected to reverse scoring. In

reverse scoring, a response of: 0 is converted to 4, 1 is converted to 3, 2 remains unchanged, 3 becomes 1, 4 becomes 0.

Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection. Participants who met the inclusion criteria were approached either in-person at coaching centers/hostels or via online platforms. They were briefed on the study objectives, procedures, and ethical safeguards before providing written or digital consent. The NEO-FFI questionnaire, accompanied by a demographic form (age, gender, exam type, preparation duration), was administered in a single session. Paper-and-pencil formats were used for in-person administration, while Google Forms were used for online participation. Completed responses were checked for missing data, and incomplete questionnaires were excluded from analysis.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed to summarize the personality trait profiles of each group. An Independent Samples t-test was performed to compare mean scores of the five personality traits between UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants. The t-test was chosen as it is suitable for comparing the means of two independent groups on continuous variables (Field, 2018). Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical considerations. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation, with the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. No personally identifying information was linked to responses. Data was securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of statistical analyses conducted to examine differences in personality traits (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) between UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants.

Analyses were conducted using independent samples t-tests to address the research questions.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive Statistics (including mean and standard deviation) was used to examine the overall personality profiles of UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants. This helped to identify which of the five personality traits (Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, Openness to Experience, Extraversion, and Agreeableness) is dominant within each group.

Inferential statistics

Independent Samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the five personality dimensions between the two independent groups (UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants). This inferential determines whether there are statistically significant differences in the levels of each trait between the two groups.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of aspirants

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Aspirant | UPSC | 73 | 54.1% |
| | NEET | 62 | 45.9% |
| GENDER | Male | 70 | 51.9% |
| | Female | 65 | 48.1% |
| Type of coaching they attended | Offline | 31 | 23.0% |
| | Online | 34 | 25.2% |
| | Self-Study | 36 | 26.7% |
| | Combination | 34 | 25.2% |
| Employment status | Student | 70 | 51.9% |
| | Working professional | 34 | 25.2% |
| | unemployed | 31 | 23.0% |
| Location of residence | Semi-urban | 2 | 1.5% |
| | Urban | 133 | 98.5% |
| Parental educational background | Illiterate | 27 | 20.0% |
| | School level | 34 | 25.2% |
| | Graduate | 43 | 31.9% |
| | Post-graduate and above | 31 | 23.0% |
| Family income | Below 25,000 | 2 | 1.5% |
| | 25,000-50,000 | 4 | 3.0% |
| | 50,000-1,00,000 | 80 | 59.3% |
| | 1,00,000 and above | 49 | 36.3% |
| | | | |

Figure 1

Division of the sample into two groups of aspirants, UPSC (N=73, 54.1%), NEET-PG (N=62, 45.9%)

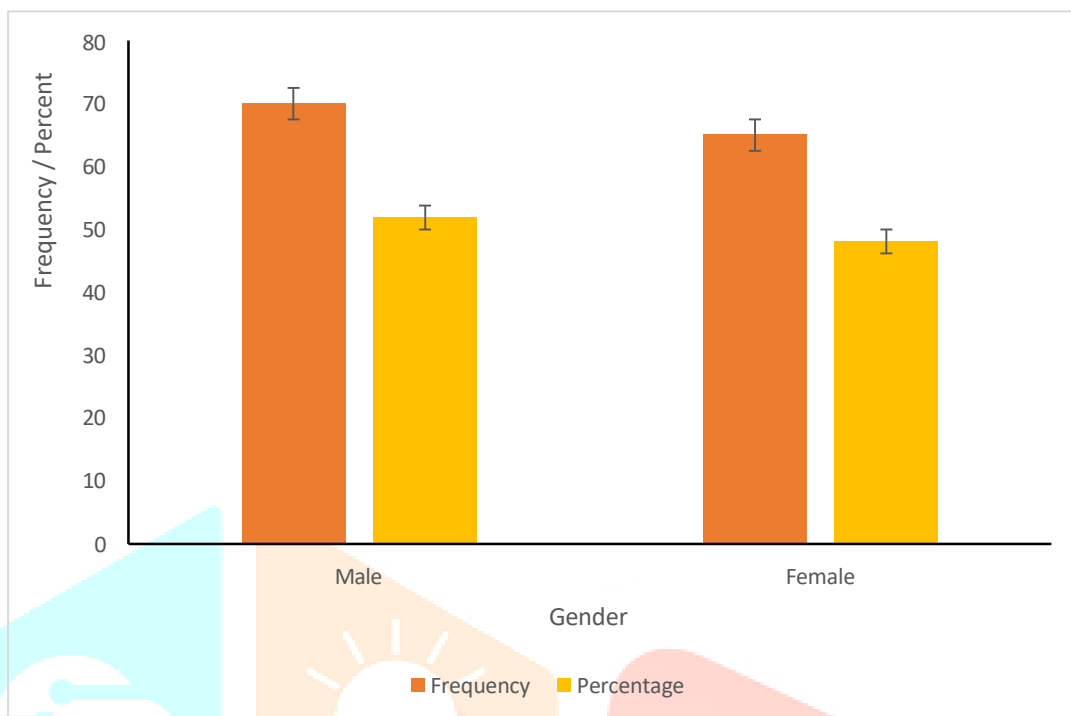


Figure 2

Gender based division of sample (N=135) into 51.9% male (N=70) and 48.1% female (N=65)

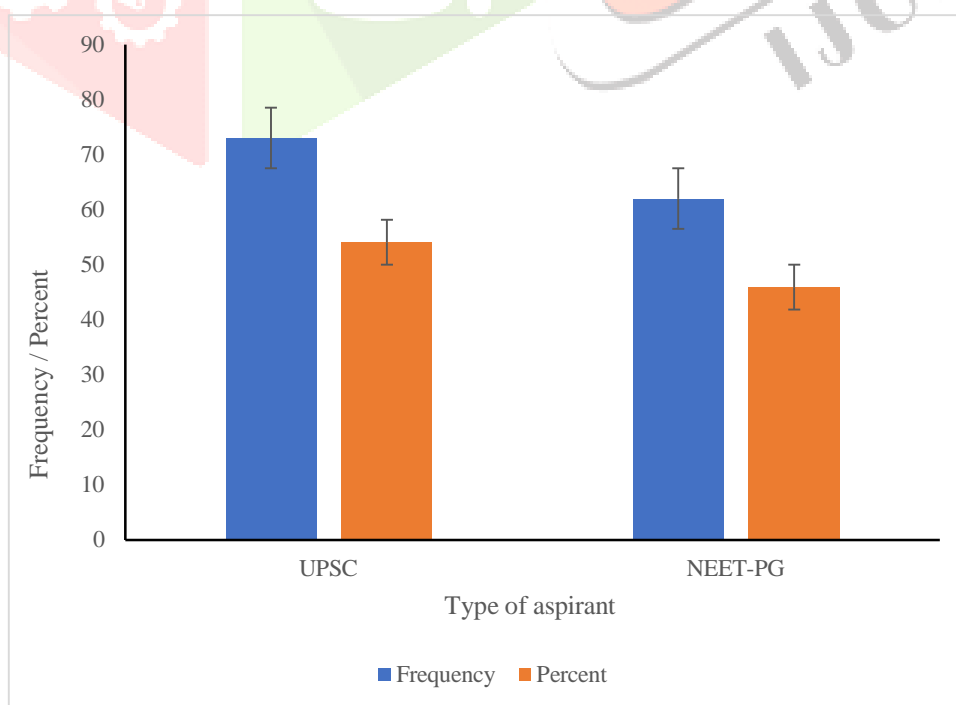


Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Overall Personality Scores for UPSC and NEET-PG Aspirants

| Group | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---------|--------|--------------------|
| UPSC | 124.47 | 11.81 |
| NEET-PG | 119.15 | 10.51 |

Values represent the total personality scores (sum across the NEO-Five traits) for each group. UPSC aspirants (M = 124.47, SD = 11.81) scored higher on average than NEET- PG aspirants (M = 119.15, SD = 10.51), indicating a difference in overall personality profile between the two groups.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of UPSC Aspirants on the NEO- Five Personality Traits

| Trait | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|-------------------------|-------|--------------------|
| Neuroticism | 25.22 | 4.72 |
| Extraversion | 24.15 | 4.46 |
| Openness to Experiences | 25.58 | 3.76 |
| Agreeableness | 24.42 | 4.94 |
| Conscientiousness | 25.10 | 4.69 |

UPSC aspirants obtained a mean score of 25.22 (SD = 4.72) on Neuroticism, 24.15 (SD = 4.46) on Extraversion, 25.58 (SD = 3.76) on Openness to Experiences, 24.42 (SD = 4.94) on Agreeableness, and 25.10 (SD = 4.69) on Conscientiousness.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of NEET-PG Aspirants on the NEO-Five Personality Traits

| Trait | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|-------------------------|-------|--------------------|
| Neuroticism | 23.55 | 4.25 |
| Extraversion | 23.89 | 4.10 |
| Openness to Experiences | 23.42 | 3.83 |
| Agreeableness | 23.81 | 3.78 |
| Conscientiousness | 24.48 | 4.73 |

NEET-PG aspirants obtained a mean score of 23.55 (SD = 4.25) on Neuroticism, 23.89 (SD = 4.10) on Extraversion, 23.42 (SD = 3.83) on Openness to Experiences, 23.81 (SD = 3.78) on Agreeableness, and 24.48 (SD = 4.73) on Conscientiousness.

Table 5

Group (UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants) differences in overall scores of UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants (N=135).

| Group | Mean | Standard Deviation (df) | p | d | |
|---------|--------|-------------------------|------------|---------|------|
| UPSC | 124.47 | 11.81 | 2.47 (133) | 0.007** | 0.47 |
| NEET-PG | 119.15 | 10.51 | | | |

*p<0.05, **p<0.01

t (df)= t statistic with degrees of freedom; p = significance level; d= Cohen’s d (effect size)

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare scores of aspirants.

The results indicated that UPSC aspirants (M = 124.47, SD = 11.81) scored significantly higher than NEET-PG aspirants (M = 119.15, SD = 10.51), t(133) = 2.47, p = .007, Cohen’s d = 0.47, 95% CI [1.45, 9.19]. The effect size falls within the moderate range, suggesting that UPSC aspirants, on average, demonstrate moderately higher overall personality trait scores compared to NEET-PG aspirants.

Table 6

Differences on each trait (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness) in UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants (N=135)

| Group | | Mean | SD | T (df) | p | d |
|---------|----------------------|---------|------|-------------|---------|------|
| UPSC | Neuroticism | 25.22 | 4.72 | 2.143 (133) | 0.03* | 0.37 |
| | Extraversion | 24.15 | 4.46 | 0.35 (133) | 0.723 | 0.06 |
| | Openness Experiences | to25.58 | 3.76 | 3.29 (133) | 0.001** | 0.56 |
| | Agreeableness | 24.42 | 4.94 | 0.80 (133) | 0.423 | 0.13 |
| | Conscientiousness | 25.10 | 4.69 | 0.75 (133) | 0.45 | 0.12 |
| NEET-PG | Neuroticism | 23.55 | 4.25 | | | |
| | Extraversion | 23.89 | 4.10 | | | |
| | Openness Experiences | to23.42 | 3.83 | | | |
| | Agreeableness | 23.81 | 3.78 | | | |
| | Conscientiousness | 24.48 | 4.73 | | | |

*p<0.01, **p<0.05

SD= Standard Deviation, $t(df)$ = t statistic with degrees of freedom; p = significance level; d = Cohen's d (effect size).

An independent samples t -test was conducted to compare scores of aspirants.

Neuroticism was significantly higher in UPSC aspirants ($p = .034$, $d = 0.37$), indicating a small-to-moderate effect size. Openness was also significantly higher in UPSC aspirants ($p = .001$, $d = 0.57$), reflecting a moderate effect size. No significant differences were found for Extraversion, Agreeableness, or Conscientiousness, with effect sizes in the negligible-to-small range.

DISCUSSION

Hypothesis H1 states that

There will be a significant difference in the overall personality scores between UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants.

Results indicated that UPSC aspirants ($M = 124.47$, $SD = 11.81$) scored significantly higher on overall personality traits compared to NEET-PG aspirants ($M = 119.15$, $SD = 10.51$), $t(133) = 2.741$, $p = .007$. Therefore, **Alternative hypothesis of H1 was accepted**, confirming that the two groups differ meaningfully in their overall personality profiles.

Holland's Theory of Occupational Choice

Holland's Theory of Occupational Choice (Holland, 1997), also known as the RIASEC model, proposes that individuals are drawn toward careers that align with their dominant personality patterns. Civil service aspirants often correspond to the Social and Enterprising types, as their prospective roles demand leadership, public interaction, negotiation, and adaptability to complex socio-political environments. The preparation process for such roles engages and strengthens a wide spectrum of personality traits, particularly extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. In contrast, NEET-PG aspirants are more closely associated with the Investigative and Conventional types, since the medical profession emphasizes analytical reasoning, structured problem-solving, and technical precision within established frameworks.

These demands primarily draw upon conscientiousness and persistence, focusing on accuracy and systematic application of knowledge, rather than the broader set of personality characteristics required for civil service preparation. As a result, UPSC aspirants tend to cultivate more comprehensive personality-related attributes, while NEET-PG aspirants display narrower but highly specialized strengths that are helpful for advanced medical expertise.

Person-Environment Fit Theory

Person-Environment Fit Theory (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) also sheds light on this difference. The preparation environment for UPSC is broad, multidisciplinary, and uncertain. Aspirants must deal with subjects ranging from politics, history, and economics to sociology, ethics, and current affairs. This exposure requires them to be intellectually flexible, open to new perspectives, resilient in the face of ambiguity, and capable of regulating their efforts over long periods. Such conditions stimulate and strengthen multiple personality traits simultaneously, including openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness. In comparison, NEET-PG preparation, while equally rigorous, is more specialized and structured. It focuses heavily on medical knowledge, accuracy, memorization, and technical application. This type of environment primarily activates traits that do not demand intense personality domains. Therefore, UPSC aspirants tend to develop a wider range of personality-related characteristics, while NEET-PG aspirants show concentrated strength in technical and focused traits that suit the demands of medicine.

Trait Activation Theory

Trait Activation Theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) is especially helpful in explaining why UPSC aspirants tend to show a broader and stronger range of personality traits compared to NEET-PG aspirants. This theory suggests that personality traits are not expressed in every situation but are activated when specific environments or tasks provide the right cues. For example, conscientiousness is activated in contexts that demand planning, organization, and persistence, while openness is triggered in situations requiring creativity, flexibility, and learning new ideas. In the case of UPSC aspirants, the nature of the examination and the career it leads to provides a wide variety of trait-activating cues. Preparing for the UPSC requires juggling multiple subjects, analyzing social and political issues, making ethical judgments, and engaging with abstract concepts. This activates not just conscientiousness (through long-term discipline and time management) but also openness (through exposure to new ideas and perspectives), extraversion (through group discussions, debates, and interviews), and agreeableness (through emphasis on public service values). Even emotional stability is tested and strengthened, given the long duration of preparation and the high-stakes uncertainty of the exam. Thus, the environment of UPSC preparation creates constant opportunities for multiple traits to be activated, expressed, and reinforced. Over time, this results in aspirants developing a more rounded and versatile personality profile. In contrast, NEET-PG aspirants encounter a different kind of environment. Their preparation is highly specialized, focusing on medical knowledge, clinical reasoning, and problem-solving under pressure. The cues in this environment strongly activate conscientiousness (through precision, long study hours, and accuracy) and to some extent openness (through learning new medical advancements). However, traits like extraversion, agreeableness, and broader openness are less frequently activated because the preparation does not require diverse social interaction, leadership, or engagement with a wide variety of societal issues. Emotional stability is tested under exam pressure, but the scope of trait activation is narrower compared to the multidisciplinary and socially oriented UPSC preparation. In short, Trait Activation Theory highlights how the UPSC exam context draws out and strengthens multiple personality traits by offering a rich set of cues, whereas the NEET-PG context activates a smaller set of traits, primarily technical and discipline-oriented. This explains why UPSC aspirants, as a group, tend to show stronger and more varied personality characteristics, while NEET-PG aspirants excel in traits that are specialized and technical in nature.

Therefore, Alternative Hypothesis of H1 is accepted. Hypothesis H2 states that

There will be a significant difference in Conscientiousness scores between NEET PG and UPSC aspirants.

The results showed that the mean Conscientiousness score was marginally higher for UPSC aspirants than for NEET PG aspirants; however, as the difference was not statistically significant, **Therefore, Null hypothesis of H2 is accepted.**

Conscientiousness is a fundamental personality trait characterized by self-discipline, responsibility, organization, and perseverance, and is consistently linked to academic and occupational success (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Roberts et al., 2009). The finding that both groups scored highly, despite the absence of a significant difference, indicates that conscientiousness is a shared strength across aspirants. This reflects the structured, demanding, and long-term nature of preparation for both UPSC and NEET-PG examinations. The slightly higher mean among UPSC aspirants may reflect the multidimensional and multi-phase nature of civil service preparation, which requires extensive planning and organization. Thus, while UPSC aspirants showed a marginally higher mean, the non-significant result suggests that conscientiousness is equally vital for success in both professional tracks. The shared high scores reflect the comparable self-regulation and commitment demanded by medical and civil service careers.

Hypothesis H3 states that

There will be a significant difference in Neuroticism scores between NEET PG and UPSC aspirants.

The study revealed a significant difference in neuroticism between UPSC aspirants ($M = 25.22$, $SD = 4.72$) and NEET PG aspirants ($M = 23.55$, $SD = 4.25$), with UPSC candidates scoring significantly higher, $t(133) = 2.14$, $p = .03$. Therefore, **Alternative hypothesis of H3 is accepted.**

Neuroticism involves emotional instability, anxiety, and vulnerability to stress.

Individuals high on this trait often experience mood fluctuations, worry excessively, and have lower stress tolerance. Costa and McCrae (1992) emphasize that neuroticism is one of the most predictive factors for psychological distress. The higher Neuroticism among UPSC aspirants may reflect the competitive uncertainty, prolonged preparation periods, and unpredictable nature of the civil services examination. This aligns with findings from Sharma and Saini (2020), who reported elevated emotional instability in aspirants for occupations with longer, more uncertain selection processes. The significantly higher neuroticism scores among UPSC aspirants may stem from the unique psychological pressures associated with civil services preparation. The UPSC exam is considered one of the most competitive in India, with long preparation cycles, high social expectations, and often unpredictable results. These factors can intensify feelings of uncertainty, leading to heightened emotional volatility and stress-related symptoms (Kumar & Bhukar, 2013). Additionally, the preparation often involves prolonged periods of isolation, broad academic coverage, and subjective evaluations (e.g., essay writing, interviews), which may elevate anxiety and insecurity. In contrast, NEET-PG preparation is comparatively structured, with more objective evaluation formats (MCQs), potentially offering a clearer preparation path and reducing emotional volatility comparatively. This finding aligns with Matthews and Deary (1998), who noted that individuals high in neuroticism are more reactive to evaluative situations, particularly those involving long-term goals and high societal stakes. Therefore, the higher neuroticism among UPSC aspirants may not only reflect individual disposition but also the systemic emotional challenges embedded in the civil service examination ecosystem.

Hypothesis H4 States that

There will be a significant difference in Openness to Experience scores between NEET PG and UPSC aspirants.

A significant difference was observed in the openness to experience scores, with UPSC aspirants ($M = 25.58$, $SD = 3.76$) scoring higher than NEET PG aspirants ($M = 23.42$, $SD = 3.83$), $t(133) = 3.29$, $p = .001$. Hence, **Alternative hypothesis of H4 is accepted.**

Openness to experience encompasses imagination, curiosity, and a preference for novelty and variety. High scorers are more inclined toward intellectual exploration, cultural interests, and creative thinking (McCrae & Costa, 1987). These traits are particularly relevant to UPSC aspirants, whose preparation spans a wide range of subjects including history, polity, ethics, environment, and current affairs.

UPSC exam demands interdisciplinary thinking, abstract reasoning, and opinion-based writing. Candidates must critically engage with diverse perspectives and demonstrate originality and clarity of thought—hallmarks of high openness. In contrast, NEET-PG preparation is more structured, focusing heavily on clinical knowledge, syllabus memorization, and procedural accuracy, which may not demand the same level of abstract or creative engagement. This finding is consistent with research by DeYoung (2010), who linked openness to success in tasks requiring divergent thinking and integration of multiple knowledge domains. It also aligns with Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham's (2003) assertion that openness correlates positively with academic performance in fields requiring creativity and conceptual learning. UPSC aspirants are required to clear papers like Ethics, which test their ability to think creatively and propose well-reasoned solutions to complex, real-life situations. Additionally, the UPSC mains examination demands a deep understanding of diverse subjects and the capacity to integrate conceptual knowledge across domains. As a result, individuals who choose the UPSC path are often those inclined toward abstract thinking, intellectual curiosity, and imaginative problem-solving—hallmarks of high openness to experience. This personality trait aligns well with the evolving role of civil servants, who must not only follow procedures but also innovate, adapt, and make nuanced decisions in a rapidly changing administrative landscape. Therefore, it is plausible that aspirants with higher openness are naturally drawn to the UPSC, as the demands of the exam and the responsibilities of the role resonate with their personality strengths when compared to the NEET-PG aspirants.

Hypothesis H5 states that

There will be a significant difference in Extraversion scores between NEET PG and UPSC aspirants.

Extraversion scores were nearly the same for both groups, UPSC aspirants ($M = 24.15$, $SD = 4.46$) and NEET PG aspirants ($M = 23.89$, $SD = 4.10$), with the difference being **not statistically significant**. Hence, **Null hypothesis of H5 is accepted.**

Extraversion refers to sociability, assertiveness, activity, and the tendency to seek stimulation in the company of others (Costa & McCrae, 1992). In the present study, no significant difference was observed between UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants, suggesting that this trait is not differentially influenced by the type of examination being prepared for. One possible explanation is that both groups of aspirants are engaged in highly demanding and largely solitary study processes, where preparation involves long hours of reading, memorization, and practice, often in isolation. Such academic environments may limit opportunities for extraverted behaviors to be expressed, thereby neutralizing potential group differences. This explanation is consistent with the findings of Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham (2003), who reported that extraversion is less predictive of performance in academic contexts compared to conscientiousness or openness. Moreover, research by Furnham, Nuygards, and Chamorro-Premuzic (2013) indicates that while extraversion can enhance performance in collaborative or interactive tasks, its role is diminished in independent, high-stakes study environments.

In the case of UPSC and NEET-PG aspirants, the similarity in extraversion scores reflects the comparable demands of solitary preparation, structured schedules, and limited social engagement, which do not provide trait-relevant cues for differential expression. Therefore, the non-significant finding suggests that extraversion may not be a distinguishing factor in predicting academic engagement or success in competitive examination contexts, unlike other traits which showed more pronounced group differences.

Hypothesis H6 states that

There will be a significant difference in Agreeableness scores between NEET PG and UPSC aspirants.

The agreeableness scores were slightly higher for UPSC aspirants ($M = 24.42$, $SD = 4.94$) than for NEET-PG aspirants ($M = 23.81$, $SD = 3.78$), but this difference was not statistically significant. Hence, **Null hypothesis of H6 is accepted.**

Agreeableness includes traits such as kindness, trust, altruism, cooperation, and empathy. Individuals high on agreeableness tend to maintain social harmony and exhibit prosocial behavior (John & Srivastava, 1999). In theory, one might expect UPSC aspirants to show higher agreeableness due to the civil service's focus on public service, ethical governance, and societal leadership. Although it is assumed that UPSC aspirants might score higher on Agreeableness due to their orientation toward public service, ethical governance, and people-centric administration, the absence of a significant difference suggests that medical aspirants too exhibit comparable levels of this trait.

This finding is understandable when one considers the interpersonal demands embedded in both professions. Doctors must demonstrate strong empathetic skills, bedside manners, and team collaboration, especially in high-stress, multidisciplinary clinical environments (Neumann et al., 2011). These demands cultivate and reinforce agreeableness as a necessary disposition. Similarly, future civil servants are expected to work in diverse social settings, requiring high levels of patience, diplomacy, and ethical interaction with the public. This shared relevance of agreeableness in both professions may explain the statistical closeness of their scores. While their professional roles differ, both are service-oriented and involve regular human interaction and emotional labor, which can foster or attract individuals with moderately high agreeableness.

The non-significant result thus does not indicate low levels of the trait but rather highlights its near-equal importance in both domains. In line with trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), the environments of civil service and medicine may activate similar agreeable tendencies, leading to comparable personality outcomes.

In summary, the results show

1. UPSC aspirants scored significantly higher than NEET-PG aspirants in overall personality scores, hence, **Alternative Hypothesis of H1 is accepted.**

2. **Traits:**

1. **Conscientiousness**

UPSC aspirants had a slightly higher mean score in Conscientiousness ($M = 25.10$, SD

$= 4.69$) compared to NEET PG aspirants ($M = 24.48$, $SD = 4.73$). However, the difference was **not statistically significant**. Hence, **Null hypothesis of H2 is accepted.**

2. **Neuroticism**

UPSC aspirants scored significantly higher in Neuroticism ($M = 25.22$, $SD = 4.72$) than NEET PG aspirants ($M = 23.55$, $SD = 4.25$). The difference was **statistically significant**, $t(133) = 2.14$, $p = .03$. Therefore, **Alternative hypothesis of H3 was accepted.**

3. **Openness to Experience**

UPSC aspirants ($M = 25.58$, $SD = 3.76$) had significantly higher scores in Openness to Experience compared to NEET PG aspirants ($M = 23.42$, $SD = 3.83$). The difference was **statistically significant**, $t(133) = 3.29$, $p = .001$. Thus, **Alternative hypothesis of H4 is accepted.**

4. **Extraversion**

Extraversion scores were nearly the same for both groups—UPSC aspirants ($M = 24.15$, $SD = 4.46$) and NEET PG aspirants ($M = 23.89$, $SD = 4.10$)—with the difference being **not statistically significant**. Hence, **Null hypothesis of H5 is accepted.**

5. **Agreeableness**

UPSC aspirants scored slightly higher in Agreeableness ($M = 24.42$, $SD = 4.94$) compared to NEET PG aspirants ($M = 23.81$, $SD = 3.78$), but the difference was **not statistically significant**, $t(133) = 0.82$, $p = .41$. Therefore, **Null hypothesis of H6 is accepted.**

Implications

The implications of this study are both practical and theoretical. On a practical level, the findings suggest that coaching institutes, mentors, and policymakers should consider the distinct personality profiles of aspirants when designing support systems. For UPSC aspirants, who demonstrated higher levels of openness and neuroticism, interventions may focus on stress management, resilience-building, and structured mentoring to channel intellectual curiosity productively while reducing the psychological strain of prolonged preparation. For NEET-PG aspirants, who displayed comparatively lower openness and neuroticism, coaching strategies may emphasize fostering creativity, adaptability, and reflective thinking to complement their strong technical focus and clinical reasoning. In both groups, the absence of differences in conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion highlights the importance of leveraging shared traits such as discipline, cooperative behavior, and persistence when creating peer-learning models or group-based study programs.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study highlights how competitive exam preparation contexts shape personality expression and activation. It provides evidence that traits like openness and neuroticism are more sensitive to the demands of the examination type. Furthermore, it underscores the value of

incorporating personality assessments into career counseling and educational psychology research, particularly in societies where competitive examinations significantly determine professional trajectories.

Limitations

One key limitation of the study is its exclusive focus on aspirants from urban areas, which may not represent the personality profiles of those from rural or semi-urban backgrounds. Additionally, the use of a self-report measure like the NEO-FFI may be susceptible to social desirability bias. Finally, variables like motivation level, coaching support, and academic background were not explored in-depth, which might have influenced personality expressions.

Further studies

Future research can explore how demographic variables such as number of attempts, parental income, age, and previous qualifications may influence personality traits and coping patterns among competitive exam aspirants. A longitudinal approach could assess how personality traits evolve across multiple exams attempts or academic years. Further studies can include a more diverse sample covering rural and semi-urban populations, as well as aspirants from other professional domains like engineering or management. Variables like motivation level, coaching support also can be studied for an in-depth understanding.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore and compare the personality profiles of aspirants preparing for two of India's most competitive examinations, UPSC (civil services) and NEET-PG (postgraduate medical entrance) using the NEO-Five-Factor Inventory. The findings revealed significant differences in certain traits, highlighting the distinct psychological makeup of these two groups.

UPSC aspirants scored significantly higher on Openness to Experience, suggesting a greater inclination toward intellectual curiosity, creativity, and a broader range of interests traits possibly fostered by the diverse and interdisciplinary nature of civil services preparation. They also showed higher levels of Neuroticism, indicating greater emotional sensitivity and vulnerability to stress, which may reflect the uncertainty and pressure associated with repeated attempts and prolonged preparation cycles.

In contrast, NEET-PG aspirants exhibited comparatively lower levels of Openness and Neuroticism, suggesting a more structured, focused, and emotionally stable profile, likely influenced by their scientific training and clinical exposure. No significant differences were observed in Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness, implying that both groups share similar levels of sociability, discipline, and cooperative behavior.

These results underscore the psychological diversity among competitive exam aspirants and emphasize the need for tailored mental health support, mentoring approaches, and coaching strategies that align with their distinct personality profiles. Overall, this study contributes to the growing understanding of the role of personality traits in shaping academic and career trajectories in high-stakes environments.

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